

The
Song of Sherwood
Trilogy

Edward Philip White

Omnibus Edition

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Omnibus Dedication

For my father and grandfathers

Book One

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Song of Sherwood – Book One
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For Alexis and Isabella
You will fly, and you will be free, and I will always love you

Special thanks to Kara for her patience, for listening and for contributing ideas.
Big thanks also to Candy and Nancy for creative and editorial help.

-Scriptural references-
American Standard Version, Zondervan

-The Ash Grove-
Welsh Traditional

Prelude

England, 1199

Tears of joy turned to tears of sorrow as they spilled from the archer's eyes. There had been more problems during Marian's second pregnancy, but he thought that somehow everything would have worked out. It always had for them before.

As he looked down upon his perfect newborn baby girl, Robin could see a glimmer of his wife's expression in the tiny features, even as the light faded from Marian's eyes and her spirit flew.

"We knew so much love, your mother and I," Robin choked out as the sobs racked his frame. He tried to say more but could not. John and the Merry Men surrounded him and the baby, saying nothing, but sharing in the tears.

Robin gently stroked the little shock of dark hair that covered her tiny head. After a time, he spoke again. "My Raven; that is what I shall call you," he whispered to the sleeping infant. "And you will fly, my love. And you will be free. And I will always love you."

The news from France arrived only hours later, but they did not tell Robin right away. He was given three days to mourn Marian before they told him that the King had died as well.

Verse One – Call to Crusade

England, 1215

The missive from Pope Innocent III was read aloud in the center of Nottingham to cheers of hallelujah and boasts of great deeds to come. Many men made their commitment to the Fifth Crusade official by having a red cloth cross pinned to their shirts.

“What is happening in Nottingham?” Raven frowned as she watched another group of farm boys scurry past. “I smell war...”

“Surely not,” John retorted. “Dear Raven, the bards of old could not match your flair for the dramatic.”

“True,” James piped in. “Yet today is no market day. We should see for ourselves.” He bolted toward town after the farm boys, leaving Raven and John no choice but to follow. By the time they arrived, most of the crowd had dispersed to begin preparations. The army was to sail from London in six weeks.

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Raven was furious with her father and brother. Robin had seen this fire in his daughter a thousand times before; he knew this would be a long battle. “Try to understand, my darling. I need you here to help manage the estate.” Robin spread his arms in pleading. “And if you left me, who would fill the halls of Locksley with sweet song?”

“Let Roger stay and sing for you!” Raven snapped. “Will I never see any world beyond Nottinghamshire?”

Robin lowered his head and stood silent for a time. “The world beyond holds many wonders indeed, my sweetheart. But the dangers...”

“Yet you will allow Roger simply to stroll off to Jerusalem.”

“He is four years your elder.”

“And he is only a boy at heart.”

“Ladies are not highly regarded in many lands on the road to Jerusalem.”

“You don’t trust me!”

“I don’t trust the world!”

The back and forth continued for over an hour until both father and daughter were angry and exhausted. After several more days of the same, they finally reached a settlement. Raven could go with Roger and his band of minstrels as far as London. After seeing them safely to their ship, she and her accompaniment would return to Locksley without argument or delay.

*

During the days of preparation everyone worked extra hours. The loss in manpower would be great and every crusader, from nobleman to poor peasant, wanted to put his house in order. In the evenings the minstrels gathered in Sherwood and, though weary from the day's work, would fill the wood with the melodies and rhythms that made their hearts soar.

John and James Little were always the first to arrive at these informal rehearsals. They prepared the practice area, which was really only a clearing in the woods with a crude lean-to for shelter should rain come. The structure was a remnant from the time before any of them were born, when Good King Richard's usurper brother had driven their fathers into hiding after they had refused his tax. The forest encampment of the Merry Men had become a playground for their children.

The Little brothers, like their father, were very inappropriately named. Though quite young, they each towered above any other man in Nottinghamshire by at least a head. To the misery of their poor mother, they had both become enamored with drumming as mere toddlers. Affectionately known as the Sons of Thunder throughout the area, they could weave endlessly unfolding rhythms long into the night without ever wearying their hands or hearts.

They began each evening by gathering dry leaves, twigs and branches to fuel a small campfire. Once lit, they sat on the soft, needle covered ground and launched a slow rhythm on their drums. The beating served to quicken the steps of the others as they approached through the forest.

While they waited for the others and warmed up their arms for playing, John and James did some of their best and most experimental drumming. They played games. To the average listener it just sounded like a complicated call and response. But any bard or minstrel would know that the ability to anticipate and even predict the other's musical next moves reflected a level of communication and understanding between the Little brothers that approached telepathy.

During the day, Michael Tuck worked in the gardens and barley fields that surrounded his home church near the forest, so he usually arrived next, piping his way through the woods in step with the drums.

Michael was a bit younger than the others and a bit of a mystery. One morning, fourteen summers ago, he had appeared on the doorstep of the good Friar's church in a tiny basket. The Friar had feared that the poor sleeping baby was dead, but with the help of the maidens and widows who frequented the church, the baby was revived, adopted by the Friar, and grew up as well cared for as any boy of nobility.

Michael excelled at playing the church's small pipe organ, but was happiest when the musical wind originated from within his own slender frame. Neither a trumpet, nor a flute was ever far from his reach, and he played both as if to herald the coming of a king.

His wisps of bright yellow hair flipped and played in the slightest breeze and led some to speculate that his true parents were magical fairy folk, while other more level heads held that they were probably merely Danes.

By the time Michael reached the clearing, other young townsfolk were usually arriving as well. Mostly farm boys and maidens from Nottingham, crowds always came to watch and hear the Merry Minstrels sing the songs of old. Tales of Argonauts, Camelot, Viking raids, summer days, Constantine, kings and queens, the Holy Grail and wild dreams filled Sherwood and the hearts of her people.

Roger spent the days hunting or assisting his father with the running of the estate. Though he would deny it to the end, he was the Minstrels' leader, and not owing merely to his status as Robin of Locksley's son. His command of the bow on the strings of his fiddle held musical authority that none would question.

And every evening, moving in step behind him, was Raven: his sister, his shadow. She was much smaller of physical frame than her older brother, but consistently matched his wit, wisdom, and winsome nature. As a result, she was adored and admired by the townspeople nearly as much as Roger.

When not playing her fiddle, Raven oversaw her father's looming operation. She had become an accomplished seamstress and created fabrics and clothing that had been sold as far away as London. She was also a clever chef, a skilled gardener, and a voracious reader. Like Roger and all the Minstrels, she was a thoughtful student of Holy Scripture, and she even served one day a week in the Nottingham orphanage, teaching and caring for the children. She generally sang as much or more of what she had to say throughout the day as she spoke.

Raven actually had surpassed Roger's musical talents at about age eight, but she quickly learned that flaunting her prowess would only lead to trouble. She grew up always holding a part of herself back, fearing that Roger would lead the other boys to reject her if she threatened his sense of status or superiority.

Yet neither Raven's fear, nor any of the other sibling rivalries between the son and daughter of Robin of Locksley, could prevent them from soaring across the heavens together on the wings of songs. And Raven always let her brother take the lead, simply happy to be a part of the music. Sherwood's band of Merry Minstrels, even with the Locksley and Little children and Michael Tuck, was simply incomplete, however, without the son of Allan a' Dale.

Cuthbert a' Dale worked as an apprentice carpenter in Nottingham and often had to stay late cleaning. In any event, he always came late to Sherwood, with the evening's festivities usually well under way when he arrived. And yet it always seemed to be after his arrival that the music truly began to flow.

Wearing a shock of fiery red hair atop his head, Cuthbert had never known a day without a lute or a mandolin in his hands. The ease with which his fingers danced across the strings showed his natural talent, as well as the countless hours he had spent either alone or with his father mastering the instrument.

The Minstrels' normal repertoire was centered mostly on either praising Their Maker for the wonders of nature or lamenting love and all its follies. But since most of the townsfolk, the men and boys at least, that came to these gatherings would also be heading for Jerusalem in a few days, the Minstrels focused on songs about heroes and great deeds in Ancient Days in order to help build crusading spirit and courage.

The opportunity to serve as minstrels for the English crusader army had held too many temptations for the five young men. Even the disastrous failures of earlier crusades did little to dampen their hope, their belief, that somehow God would deliver Jerusalem into English hands, and that they could be there to witness the glory of God's will performed on earth.

The prospect of bringing back treasures and delights of the eastern world was deeply motivational as well. The stories and songs that their fathers repeated at every feast certainly helped fuel their crusader fire, as if young men need a special reason to pursue an impossibly difficult, recklessly foolish, and undeniably dangerous adventure.

The Minstrels played and ate and sang. The townsfolk ate and sang and danced. Some of the townsfolk always brought barrels of ale or food to share, but as spring had only just begun, the revelry did not extend very long into the night. The dark brought the cold, and the crowd, Minstrels included, dispersed in time to return home and get a decent night's sleep before another hard day's work.

These evenings in the forest began to take on a fierce energy and solemn tone as the players sought out rhythms, harmonies and words that would inspire their countrymen to acts of courage, and perhaps even frighten the pagan enemies. The sounds of their rehearsals rolled over the hills of Nottinghamshire and the preparations of the crusaders hurried to match the driving pace of the Song of Sherwood.

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Finally, they departed for London: the five Merry Minstrels, Raven, and two servants from the Locksley household to act as porters. The journey south was wet, though otherwise uneventful. Each musician kept his instrument packed inside padded watertight skins during the rains. Raven had not brought her fiddle. She had lost the desire to play, and resigned herself to looking after her brother and her friends for as long as she could.

Seventy-five Crusaders left Nottinghamshire, including the five minstrels. Yet by the time they reached the outskirts of London, the army had grown to over three thousand. To call it an army, in the traditional sense, was somewhat of an overstatement. No real central command existed. The various groups of Crusaders moved at their own speed, each composed of friends, brothers and neighbors.

They approached London still a few days ahead of the anticipated ship launch. After cresting a small hill, the Nottingham group entered a large open field in the center of which stood a small cluster of older men. They were arguing vehemently, and Roger hailed them as the group drew near.

“London’s that way,” one of the old men gestured, casting a weary expression at another batch of crusading youth.

“Is all well here?” Roger lingered even as the bulk of his townsmen shuffled past, eager to reach the city and rest.

“Better than that, good sirs,” chirped another grandfatherly figure. “The very spot where you’re standing was only very recently the backdrop to deeds of profound greatness and words of great profundity.” The stubby man wrinkled his face with delight and seemed near to bubbling over in his excitement.

“Is that so?” Raven slid into place alongside her brother.

“Yes, Milady,” continued the first arguer, “But not where you are standing I’m afraid; eye witness accounts clearly place the event there.”

The entire group of minstrels turned their heads in the general direction indicated by the man’s shaking finger. Only the slightest rise in the ground suggested any difference between the two sections of the field. John and James were both shuffling their feet impatiently.

“What nature of event, whether remembered here or there, is of such great note?” Michael Tuck inquired.

“Well...” The plaintiff lowered his finger.

“The king was humbled before the people!” The second man interrupted with glee.

“The people, he says!” snapped the reply. “On again about the day of the common man; was a power grab by the nobles and nothing more!”

“In either case, King John still sits upon his throne, does he not?” Roger sought to calm the quivering combatants.

“Ah, yes.” The more antagonistic one went on. “But things will never be the same. The king signed the Great Charter – the *Magna Carta*.” He folded his arms, and allowed a grin of satisfaction to ripple across his face.

“What did the charter say?” Raven wondered aloud.

“That the king is under the law, like you or me; England is no longer ruled by the might of the sword, but by the might of ideas, of truth, of justice!” Tears welled into each of the old men’s eyes as the first speaker found his stride and began orating unstoppably. “Never again shall tyranny stalk our fair isle! Never again will the caprices and fancies of a mortal man carry the weight of supreme authority. All men, from highest to low, must bend their knees and hearts to a higher authority and must submit their actions to the unchanging and pure law that flows from the throne of God alone!”

The Minstrels were speechless, but becoming increasingly anxious to rejoin their group. “You are clearly wise men.” Roger moved toward resolving the conversation. “We heed your wisdom. Even now we are venturing toward

Jerusalem, where God willing, we will drive out the heathens so that the very law and truth you speak of shall reign again throughout the Lord's own precious city."

"Then good journey to you," the quieter of the men proclaimed. "May God bless your travels; may He watch over you and protect you."

"Thank you." Raven smiled at the old men as the Minstrels began walking back toward the road.

*

Their welcome in London was not what they had imagined. No throngs of cheering townsfolk greeted the Crusaders. People hurried about their daily business with no special regard for the thousands of young men with red crosses sewn onto their shirts or capes. Any attention they did receive was an occasional glance of disdain or fear.

The city smelled. Waste management appeared to be a major problem. As they passed through the city streets, they witnessed residents pouring their waste and garbage out of second story windows from where the refuse splashed onto the streets and sidewalks.

Grimy children foraged for treasure, and Raven guessed for food as well, in piles of trash that overflowed out of back alleyways. Disgusting fat birds waddled to and fro, attempting to gather the best forage in advance of the children. The dumb birds were oblivious to the steps of humans or horses and would crowd so thick that the Crusaders occasionally had to pause and redirect their path to avoid tromping on the hapless pigeons.

Wealthy merchants and absentee nobles cruised through the dirty streets in clean and high carriages or on horseback. They seemed to occupy an entirely different world than the mass of poor and filthy city folk and to be as oblivious to the plight, or even presence of these others, as the pigeons themselves.

Raven wondered how a people who professed to live in the light of the Living God could permit such squalor, depravity and hopelessness among so many of their own. *Perhaps Locksley is an island of privilege and wealth in England*, she thought.

She had always imagined that London would be even greater and wealthier and more refined than her back-water world near Nottingham, and she was overwhelmed by the sense of disillusionment.

Finding remotely adequate accommodations in the city itself seemed quite impossible, so the entire Nottingham contingent marched on to the waterfront, boarded a ship and spent the night there. The thirty crusader transport ships moored along the bank of the Thames had been paid for by the Pope and were manned by crews from many lands.

The Nottingham ship, smaller than many of the vessels, was owned and operated by a tiny brown skinned Venetian man and his equally tiny

crewmembers. Their Venetian dialect was incomprehensible to the Minstrels, even with their strong command of Latin. So they communicated with the captain mostly through gestures and nods.

The sleeping arrangements looked comfortable enough. Fifty cubby-like enclaves lined the inside of the ship's hull. This meant that only about half of the men would be able to sleep at any given time, while the others would be available to assist the ship's crew as needed, or simply to sit on deck.

Raven and the two porters stayed on the ship as well, both for safety and to have as much time together with the others as possible. The captain was most hospitable toward Raven, especially after he learned that she would not be continuing on with them; he even offered her his own quarters which she gratefully accepted.

Finally out of the rain, the Minstrels were able to delight their townsmen with many of the old and dear songs. The companionship was warm and spirits were high. The men were especially glad to hear Raven sing. As they set out on a journey they knew could last for years, the sweet qualities of her voice soothed and comforted them. And her words painted pictures in their minds of the great deeds of heroes from ages past.

Not knowing the surety of the ale supply on the path to Jerusalem, the men drained several barrels in the course of their first evening aboard. The revelry continued for a second day and night, which the captain made clear would be their last before sailing.

John and James never held their drink well and soon became sleepy each night. Michael did not drink spirits, instead occupying himself with endless fluting for the dancing taking place above deck. Cuthbert and Roger, when they became too inebriated to play their instruments well, took to dancing among the other men, inspired by the particularly strong batch of lager.

When near midnight Cuthbert engaged Roger in a duel of dancing feet, the two leapt clumsily atop a table board that had been assembled for the efficient dissemination of drinks. The men roared their approval and hollered unintelligible wagers as to who they believed would prevail in the flailing of their bodies to the rhythm of Michael's relentless piping.

Raven watched the two buffoons battling for the adoration of the crowd, and her heart at once leapt for joy and despaired. *There are my two favorite men in the world* she thought; *my big brother and my best friend.*

She thought back to the time, years ago, when she had been walking alone through Sherwood. She was about seven years old and had strayed from her brother and Cuthbert to pursue a butterfly.

As she entered a small clearing, she stood just feet from a very angry looking wild boar. The boar aimed its sharp tusks at her and charged. Raven escaped by hopping over a log and diving behind a tree. Thinking that she had eluded the beast, she skipped back down the forest trail toward where she remembered leaving the others.

The boar cut off her retreat. She turned to bolt in the other direction, and her ankle became twisted in an exposed tree root. She crumpled to the ground in a heap and covered her head hoping to protect herself from the onrushing animal.

She raised her head as she heard a wild whoop and saw a spear flash across the trail glancing off the boar's back. The wound was far from fatal, but it was sufficient to stop the animal's charge. Then from the other direction, a rock flew and thudded into the side of the boar's face.

Cuthbert cheered and taunted the creature. "Here little piggy!" He danced and jumped around calling as much attention to himself as possible. The boar took the bait, and Cuthbert led the animal on a winding chase through the woods.

Roger scooped up his little sister, who clung tightly to him, and ran with her all the way back to the safety of Locksley where her ankle was attended, and her wandering nature reprimanded. Cuthbert returned hours later, exhausted and wearing an array of tiny scratches from diving through brambles and briars, but he was otherwise intact.

This memory and a thousand like it were stored in Raven's heart. As she sat watching them dance and sing, she ached with her love for them: for all of the Merry Minstrels.

They are so full of life and spirit, and I may never see them again. Raven thought. *They may never come back.*

She hung her head and wept, unnoticed by anyone else, into her hands.

She happened to look up just as the table board gave way.

Cuthbert was launched into the air, but landed like a cat and rolled to safety, stopping with a dull thud against the rail of the ship. Roger plummeted straight down, and Raven heard the snap. She raced to his side and shoved away the drunken onlookers who stood over his writhing body, gaping with curiosity.

Raven winced in sympathetic pain when she saw the shape of her brother's leg. At the same moment she realized the music had stopped, she noticed Michael kneeling next to her over poor, broken Roger. Wasting no time, the blond bard grabbed Roger's foot and jerked it hard to the left. The sickening crunch and wail of agony caused several of the onlookers to vomit. Roger followed suit, and then lost consciousness.

*

"You have to go," Roger hissed between clenched teeth. The sun was rising over the horizon of the river casting a golden streak all the way to their ship. "They will need you."

No one, other than Roger, had slept very much. His screams, even when made unconsciously, were enough to wake the entire ship.

"That's the medicine talking. You know that father would have your head, and mine too if I ever returned. We must all go back." Raven could not

believe that she was actually arguing against going on crusade, after she had fought so vehemently with her father in favor, but that was before Roger had been hurt.

“But the men...the soldiers...they will need all...” Roger had another surge of pain from his leg and stopped talking so he could bite on his towel again.

“He’s right, Raven,” James had awoken and ambled over to Roger’s makeshift gurney. “If we abandon our men, who will lift up their hearts on the wearying crusade trail and uphold their courage in battle?”

Raven glared at him. “You are not helping, James. Roger could die if we do not take him back to Locksley right away for proper care.”

Roger tried to roll his eyes but abandoned the attempt mid-way when another spasm of pain rocked him.

“He will not die.” A strange voice spoke.

The Minstrels turned their heads to behold a small crowd of men dressed in bright colors. The Venetian sailors were scurrying to help them with their gear.

“Greetings friends,” James addressed the crowd. “Are you on crusade as well?”

“Aye,” answered the original speaker.

“I see that you have no cross on your cloak.” James pressed.

The speaker smiled, and the light sparkled in his glad eyes. “You see well,” he answered. “But we are servants of the cross nevertheless.” He paused and glanced around at his men. “And we have these.” At that moment all fifteen of the new arrivals aimed their right shoulders at James and lifted their sleeves to reveal blue circle crosses that appeared to be permanently painted into their skin with woad.

“Are you Celts?” Raven asked.

“Aye, miss. My name is Dunleth. My men and I travel at the request of Rome.”

“I am Raven,” she returned. “This is James, and my brother Roger.” She gestured toward his slowly writhing body that looked paler than only moments earlier.

“May I speak to your brother?” Dunleth asked.

“You may,” Raven answered. “Though I do not know how well he will hear you.”

The other Celts went about their business while Dunleth stepped over and knelt beside Roger’s leg. He held his hands over the break but did not touch it. Raven and James watched intently, and Michael joined them at that moment equally interested.

John and a repentant looking Cuthbert arrived a few moments later as Dunleth closed his eyes and began to sway slightly while emitting a barely audible hum. Raven was about to speak when Dunleth opened his eyes.

“The bone was set well.” He looked directly at Michael. “It will heal. But it must be splinted and bound if you plan for him to ever leave this ship.”

“Can you help us?” Raven sighed, beginning to feel her exhaustion.

“It appears as if he already has.” Michael gestured toward Roger who was sound asleep and breathing normally. His color had returned, and his face wore an expression that betrayed no pain.

*

On Raven’s instructions, the two Locksley servants ventured into the city to purchase a small wagon. By the time they returned, the Celts had finished bandaging Roger who was conscious again and speaking with greater ease.

“So you will go then?” Roger looked hopefully at his sister.

“What will you tell father?”

“I’ll have time to think about that on the way back.” He stared into his sister’s eyes. “Maybe this was meant to be. Maybe you have some destiny that cannot be left undone. What if...”

“Roger,” Raven looked down at her feet. “I don’t believe I am saying this, but maybe father was right. What if the road to Jerusalem is no place for a lady?”

“And what if it is?” Roger ignored her dismissive look. “I remember Friar Tuck saying that most of the disciples who traveled with our Lord to Jerusalem were women. Sure the inner circle of apostles was all men, but who do you think did the ministering to the poor and needy? Look at me, Raven. Take my fiddle. Lead our Merry Minstrels. They need you and so do the other men.”

Raven did not speak, but he knew she was softening to the idea.

The Minstrels all stared at her expectantly.

“I will go then,” she finally agreed.

“Good,” Roger declared as the others returned bearing his essential belongings. “It is decided. There is one more thing I must give you first.” He reached into his bag and retrieved a small cloth bundle. Raven did not need to open it to know what lay within; her father’s silver dagger.

Raven knelt over her brother and hugged him tightly, careful to avoid jostling his leg. She slipped the dagger into her belt. “Thank you,” she whispered.

The Venetians were visibly anxious to be underway, so John and James quickly but carefully carried Roger off the ship and loaded him into the waiting cart. Raven helped make him as comfortable as possible. They said their farewells and prayers, and the two porters trundled away in their small pickle cart with Roger laid out in the back.

And so Roger began his slow and painful journey back to Locksley while his sister and friends re-boarded the ship. The brisk wind blowing out of the west

pushed them quickly down river, and they were soon in open sea. The captain turned the ship south and set sail for the Holy Land.

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The weather stayed clear as they crossed the channel, and only a few light rains came during their course along the Norman coast.

Raven was outwardly somber, though internally she admitted her happiness in finally having what she had wanted all along. Adventure, fortune and fame awaited her. All of the delights and dangers of her father's stories were beginning to unfold before her. The sensation was overwhelming and she felt as if she was in a waking dream. She joined in the music when the others played, but she did not sing.

While also sorry for Roger, the others were thrilled to have Raven along. They had all grown up together and could scarcely remember a day in their lives without at least some of it spent with her. Each in his own way loved her very deeply, and they continually reassured her that she had done the right thing by coming with them. They also pledged individually and as a group to protect her with their lives.

By the time their ship finally turned south into the open Atlantic, Raven's mood began to turn and she started singing again. The wind picked up so all passengers stayed below deck. The Celts, who had spent most of the time apart and who slept out on deck under the stars, eventually mingled a bit more and seemed to relax their aloofness.

Dunleth conferred with the Minstrels regularly. As the most visible and outspoken members of the Nottingham group, the Celts naturally viewed Raven and her boys of Sherwood as the leaders. The rest of the company readily accepted this state of affairs, and so by no action or even willingness of her own, Raven woke up one morning to find that she was approaching the coast of Aquitaine at the head of a small army.

*

Robin Hood's heart sank when he saw the two porters driving a pickle cart and no sign of Raven. He raced across the field to meet them, shouting and pleading for information. The frightened servants pointed frantically into the back of the cart.

When Robin finally viewed the contents of the cart he was at once relieved, enraged, baffled and inconsolable. "Roger!" he roared at his son. "What are you doing here? Where is your sister? What have you done to yourself?"

After some time, Robin wearied of asking questions long enough to allow some of the answers to come forth from his wounded son. Soon, the

physician in Nottingham was sent for, and food, drink and a comfortable bed were all swiftly arranged.

The assurance that Roger would survive and heal began to settle over Robin, but was eclipsed as the implications of his presence at Locksley sank in. The sun was long down when Robin finally stopped his denial of the truth and accepted that his baby girl was on crusade.

Only a single sleepless night was necessary to lead Robin to his decision. After two days of preparations and arrangements, he departed for London with Little John and Friar Tuck as traveling companions. He left Roger to heal in the capable hands of the Locksley staff, and to administer the estate as best he could as he convalesced. Robin intended to find a ship, find Raven, and bring her back.

Verse Two – Onward to Marseilles

Raven stood at the bow of the ship watching the dark clouds gather in the west. Her long, dark and wavy red hair scattered behind her. Enough of the afternoon sun was still shining to make the occasional red-gold strands in her hair blaze to life.

Cuthbert approached and stood beside her. “The captain has asked James, John and me to stay on deck and help route the ship through the storm. You should go below soon.”

She stared at Cuthbert and said nothing. She smiled despite the sickening sky she saw strangely mirrored in her friend’s green eyes.

“What?” Cuthbert gave in.

“Since when have you become a sailor, Cuthbert a’ Dale?”

“I navigated many highland lakes with my father on our fishing trips.” The Minstrel attempted to defend his skills.

“This is no lake.” Her smile vanished. “Be careful, all right?” She stepped forward and hugged him. Cuthbert felt like his chest was going to explode for joy, but he managed to display no outward reaction.

“Don’t worry, Rave,” a voice boomed from behind them. John bounded over to them. “We’ll look out for each other, right Bert?” The big Little winked and nudged his friend with his oversized shoulder. The nudge nearly sent Cuthbert overboard, but John grabbed his arm in time. “See Rave, nothing to worry about.” The little giant beamed.

Raven shook her head, patted John on the back, and went below deck just as the first drops of rain began to fall. Michael was already waiting below. The captain and crew strongly advised keeping anyone with medical skills safe inside the ship during the storm, including all of the Celts, arguing that their services after the storm could prove more valuable than their help during.

When the first big wave came, those below deck were unprepared. Quite a few hit the floor hard. The Celts, however, seemed delighted with the storm and even worked up an impromptu sea chantey, which Raven had to admit lifted the spirits.

As the vessel continued to lurch and heave, everyone held on tightly. Raven and Michael huddled together around a wooden beam, both praying fervently for their friends and the ship’s crew.

On deck the rain was hard and cold, lashing the men’s faces like an icy whip. They had tied up the sails and turned the bow into the wind, allowing the waves to break across the keel. The Venetians were miserable, more used to the calm and balm of the Mediterranean than the kind of punishment the North Atlantic can bring. Nevertheless, they flew to their work protecting the ship and keeping her as steady as possible.

The storm lasted through the night. As the sun rose, the clouds broke apart allowing them to survey the damage. The main mast had fallen, and one of

the Venetian sailors had lost his life as a result. Another Venetian was missing, as was one of the Englishmen who had been chosen to work on deck. Nearly everyone aboard had some kind of injury, though none were debilitating.

The Nottingham men were upset over having lost their first crusade casualty and having not yet even reached Spain. The man lost overboard was named Peter, and his brother Jack was still onboard. The two had lost their parents as very young boys and had grown up together in the Nottingham orphanage where Raven saw them regularly.

Raven and Michael sat down to speak with Jack. Raven started out by leaning over and hugging the pale, thin boy whose eyes were red and swollen, but were dry at the moment.

“I’m sorry, Jack,” she offered.

Jack nodded.

“Your brother was a good man, and even now he is celebrating in the presence of our Lord. And you will see him again in due time,” Raven comforted.

Jack nodded again.

“And he will never again feel pain or sorrow,” Michael added. “The joy of the Lord is upon him.”

Jack started to cry again.

“It’s all right Jack.” Raven took him back into her arms.

“We should gather the men and at least say something,” Michael tried.

“Would you like to speak to the men?” Raven asked Jack gently.

Jack thought for a moment. “Would you do it for me, Lady Raven?”

“Of course,” she told him, though she had no idea what she would say.

*

Later, as the other Minstrels gathered the men out on deck, Raven approached Michael for advice.

“You should be speaking to the men,” she insisted. “I know nothing of eulogies and homilies and such.”

“But the fallen man’s brother asked for you,” Michael replied. “Just speak from your heart, and you will be fine.”

Raven went before the men and stood on a crate so they could all see her. *What can I say to comfort these boys who have only just left home and already tasted the bitterness of death?* She agonized at her lack of knowledge and wisdom. *O, Lord, please help me!* She cried silently.

The men were all staring at her, waiting for some sense to be made of the senseless tragedy. Finally, she opened her mouth and words started coming out.

“You might ask,” she began. “How could our loving and caring Lord allow the loss of one of our brothers when we have hardly even begun our journey? And we are making this journey in His name and for His glory. You

might ask, as I already have, is your hand not upon us Lord? Have we sinned in your sight?" She hung her head and was silent for a moment.

"But then again," she continued. "You might say that the Lord *has* been protecting us. Then you could ask, 'if the hand of the Lord had not been upon us, then what?' Perhaps the entire ship would have been torn asunder beneath the waves. Perhaps we would have been flung and smashed against sea rocks and crushed completely. Perhaps He is still with us.

"But we are not like God. We cannot understand his ways or his plans. This, however, I know." She found Jack in the crowd and fixed her eyes upon him. "This is not His final plan. Our Lord works all things toward good for those who love Him."

The Nottingham Crusaders nodded and some shouted, "Ay!"

Raven asked them to go in peace and in the mercy and grace of God. The men then left the gathering to set about the hard work of assessing the damage to the ship and helping with repairs.

Even with the collapsed main mast, the ship was still seaworthy. It had been blown into an estuary known as Gironde to the Franks, and they were within sight of the mouth of the Garonne River.

The captain and the crew were in despair over their lost mates and refused the idea of making quick repairs and putting back out to open sea right away. Dunleth suggested making for the river with oars and then heading upstream toward Bordeaux.

There the ship could be safely repaired, and the captain could contact the church for financial support. The Crusaders would continue on foot past Toulouse and eventually reach Marseilles, where they could find another ship willing to take them onward. Raven was skeptical of the river route, but decided not to argue.

The course up the river was difficult and slow. The oars barely held their own against the current, and teams of ten or twenty men had to take turns walking the riverbank and hauling the ship using long ropes. Supplies began to dwindle, and tempers grew short. When the ship finally reached the town and tied up to port, the Englishmen raced to disembark, some even kissing the dry land.

The Celts agreed to guard the ship so the Venetians could set about their necessary business, and so the English could pour into the local taverns and set about their drinking. To their surprise and delight, they encountered several other British groups that had been in the town for months. Most of them also claimed to be on crusade, but with no intention of journeying to the Holy Land.

"Where are you heading to then?" James asked a Norman lad from Sussex.

"Why, nowhere," replied the boy. "We've been fighting the Cathari, and are only here resting until help arrives."

“Who are the Cathari?” James continued, while Raven and the other Merry Minstrels listened intently.

“Servants of the devil, my lord,” The boy seemed assured in his answer. “They eat their babies and so they grow their numbers by luring the weak minded into their heresy.”

“And whose arrival do you await in order to help you defeat these barbarians?” Raven asked with much curiosity.

“The Templars are coming!” The boy squealed with glee. “They will know what to do. They will find a way to sack the Accursed Stronghold. And we will be there to share in the spoils!” The boy thought for a moment. “And give glory to God,” he added and appearing satisfied, returned to his canister of mead.

*

Robin had become so frustrated trying to find an agreeable ship captain in London that he finally purchased outright a small sailing sloop. Big John Little had agreed to make one last journey abroad with Robin to help him find Raven before anything could happen to her. An older, but still seaworthy Friar Tuck had come along as well. Both Little John and Friar Tuck planned to give their boys an earful and perhaps a whipping for allowing Raven to take her brother’s place on the crusade.

Between the three men, they were able to manage the tiny ship. After waiting out a bad storm, and stocking as much food and water as the vessel could hold, they set out, crossed the channel near Calais, and hugged the coast line making good time to the south and west.

*

After two days of ship repair and re-supplying, and two nights of drunken revelry, Raven was ready to move the Englishmen along. She awoke early and sought out Dunleth to consult with him on travel plans. But Dunleth and his cohorts were nowhere to be seen. She did not believe it at first, but accepted the situation when Cuthbert assured her.

“It’s true, the Celts have vanished,” he said. “I just spoke with the Captain, and it doesn’t look like they are coming back. All their gear and equipment is gone.”

Despite the mysterious disappearance of the Celts, whom Raven and the others had come to enjoy quite a bit, the Nottingham group was in good spirits. The Merry Minstrels took up their instruments again as the overland journey commenced, and spirits soared even higher.

John and James set the pace on their drums, and the Crusaders seemed never to tire so long as the drums kept thundering. Raven alternately fiddled and

sang, and Michael likewise moved between his flute and silver trumpet. The changes helped to break the monotony of foot travel and the sweet sounds brought a joy to the hills around Toulouse that seemed conspicuously absent from the blighted countryside.

Cuthbert held the Minstrels together musically with the strumming of his lute. His chording outlined the intertwining melodies spun by Raven and Michael in a fantastic web of counterpoint and compelling harmony. In the same way, Cuthbert's right hand never broke stride with the drums as he strummed the strings with effortless energy.

The small army more closely resembled a festive parade than a conquering force, and the peasants and yeomen from the hills looked on with wonder as the Crusaders danced, strutted, laughed and sang their way across the south of France.

*

Still a week or more outside of Marseilles, the Nottingham Crusaders made camp in a thin grove of ash trees at the side of the dirt road they traveled. The moon was full and bright, lighting up the late summer sky. Warm breezes comforted the road weary pilgrims as they settled into the cool dry grass to hear the minstrels play.

Fresh ale had been purchased, and the cups were passed around. James and a few of the soldiers had left the group two days before and returned early that evening with two fully cleaned and carved deer. James had not been chosen for his hunting ability, but for his brute strength.

They arrived in the camp with the two sacks of deer meat slung over James' capable shoulders, to the cheers of the men. Within minutes, the entire grove was submerged in mouth watering smoke. The men looked on wide-eyed as the meat bubbled and browned, and then fell to like wolves.

Cups were refilled, and the shouting started. "Raven! Sing us a song!" A roar went up. "A song of Sherwood, Raven!" The clanging of cups was added to the din, and eventually the stomping of feet.

There was a moment of concern when Raven could not be found. She had gone down the hill to a stream and bathed during the dinner, returning to camp clean and fresh with her hair wet and loose around her shoulders. She was wearing a man's white tunic that fitted her like a dress. It was tied at the waste with a leather belt that held her dagger. Her dark green cape was draped over her shoulders for extra warmth.

She would have liked most of all to disappear into a tent and get some much needed rest. But when she saw the men waiting and cheering for her, she gladly handed her cape to Cuthbert as he handed her the fiddle. Cuthbert tossed the cape over a low tree branch, grabbed his lute and began strumming a familiar pattern.

James was still basking in the juicy, delicious meats of his labor. John was busy distributing food and drink. Michael had last been seen playing host to a group of young ladies from the local area, and was not immediately found. So Cuthbert and Raven proceeded as a duo.

Rather than bow her fiddle, Raven held it the same way Cuthbert held the lute. Hooking the bow onto her belt next to the dagger, she plucked with the fingers of her right hand and played the notes with her left.

She plucked out a curious melody that intricately outlined the tones Cuthbert was playing. The notes from her fiddle seemed to dance in the spaces between his, and they both had to concentrate to keep their melodies distinct. To the men it sounded like a single player who possessed an amazingly complicated instrument.

Then, letting her fingers fall into a simpler version of the melody, Raven opened her mouth and breathed warm music that poured out across the grove like the smoke from the roasts had earlier. The men stopped their activity and listened.

*I remember the song of Sherwood Forest
And the rose that you gave to me
We walked out on a springtime misty morning
In the light coming through the trees*

*And you held me close
By the stream that flows
On its way to the
Cold and lonely sea*

*Take me back to the oak trees and the briars
Where my heart will forever be*

Cuthbert's fingers strummed lazily, but in perfect rhythm, as if making time itself wait to hear Raven's next words. The Crusaders simply stared at her as if in a trance.

*In the long, hot and hazy days of summer
As the sun lingered in the sky
We slept under the mighty trees of Sherwood
And let cares of this world pass by*

*Days were happy then
I remember when
We would talk, laugh and
Sing and even cry*

*When the tide turns we'll take the ship together
And to Sherwood our hearts will fly*

The men howled, stomped and clapped their approval. Raven gave Cuthbert a nod, and he readied himself to sing a verse. Compared to Raven's high and soft voice, his was hard-edged, but still deeply resonant.

*As the trees burned in blazing autumn colors
Like the sunset upon your hair
And we promised our love to last forever
In the cool of the forest air*

*Oh, we had our dreams
Plans and brilliant schemes
To go places that
Angels wouldn't dare*

*And as cold night descended on the forest
We still had warmth and light to share*

The men knew what was coming. They had heard Raven and Cuthbert do this before. Next they would sing together, and the harmony of their voices would intertwine, creating something more than what each was on its own. They knew it was coming and yet unable to resist, some of the men - especially those nearest the barrel - began to cry before the next verse even began.

*When the cold blowing winter comes to Sherwood
Dressing all of the trees in snow
And the nights seem to go on with no ending
In my heart I'll forever know*

*Though it's cold outside
In your arms I'll hide
Til the flowers of spring
Begin to grow*

*And the love that we found in Sherwood Forest
Will remain with us ere we go*

They sang until every man in the camp, other than the night watchers, was asleep. Then Cuthbert retrieved Raven's cloak, draped it around her shoulders and walked her to the small tent that she occupied alone. They stood in

front of the entrance, staring awkwardly at each other far longer than was comfortable. Finally, Cuthbert gave her a polite kiss on the cheek, brushing her now dry and wavy hair away to do so and tucking the extra behind her ear.

She smiled, staring into his eyes as she ran her fingers down his cheek. Then she turned and disappeared into the tent. Cuthbert stood there for a moment, looking up at the stars. He touched the place on his cheek where her hand had last been, and then walked over to the center of camp, collapsed near the fire, and went to sleep.

*

The morning sun was hot and bright, rolling away the dew. The Crusaders packed up the tents and supplies at a leisurely pace, and bread was passed around to fill their stomachs. They were about to set off to Marseilles when the rumbling started.

Raven saw the dust cloud on the horizon. She had an uneasy feeling and called for Michael to get his trumpet. After she had the men's attention, she called for spears at the ready – just in case.

The rising sun illuminated the white riders coming out of the west. They moved at an incredible speed, leaving a plume of white dust rising slowly in their wake. As they neared, the red crosses on their chests became visible. Both horses and riders were clad in the heaviest of armor, polished to a high sheen and gleaming white; save for the crosses.

The white riders slowed as they approached the English camp, and a glance from Raven told the men to stand easy. Twenty four riders in all came to a stop at the edge of the trees.

“Greetings in the name of our Lord Christ, good knights,” Raven called out.

Two of the riders removed their helmets revealing faces and hair that sorely lacked the polish and shine of their armor. Raven had to check herself from recoiling at the sight of the dirty rat faced Franks that leered at her before they began speaking in tortured English.

“Look Jean-Pierre, the English have a dame general,” the first one croaked from his guttural throat.

“Oui, Jean-Claude, I guess there are some things that never change,” Jean-Pierre snickered. The company of knights twittered and snorted along with their horses.

Raven looked bored and glanced around at her seventy Englishmen with long spears. For emphasis, John and James stood on either side of her with Michael and Cuthbert right behind. The knights took their turn looking unimpressed.

Raven decided to skip the posturing and try to learn what she could from the white knights. “We come from Nottingham in Britain on crusade to free

Jerusalem from the heathen,” she declared. “We are honored to travel the same road as knights of such quality as you sirs.” Raven nodded humbly.

The knights seemed to relax their posture slightly, so she pressed on. “May we kindly ask you your quest and what lord you serve?”

Jean-Pierre and Jean-Claude looked at each other and sneered, which Raven was beginning to suspect was their nearest expression to a smile.

Jean-Pierre spoke at last. “We are the Knights of King Solomon’s Temple, and we serve none other than his holy Excellency Pope Honorius III.”

The knights stared silently ahead and Raven noted that they had made no mention of their quest or mission. She decided to keep trying. “You and your men must be hungry. We have bread to share and plenty of water for you and your horses.”

“Thank you lady,” said Jean-Claude. “Your kindness will not be forgotten, though we have yet to hear your name I believe.”

“Raven of Locksley,” she answered directly. “And these are the Nottingham Crusaders. Pray tell, have you ever been to Jerusalem?”

The knights stared shrewdly at her. They did not appreciate being probed for information by a woman. “We go where the will of Honorius leads,” Jean-Pierre barked at last.

Then James jumped in to help relieve the pressure on Raven. “You serve Honorius. Forgive me sirs, but when we received our calling to crusade, it came in the name of Pope Innocent.”

“Yes,” Jean-Claude said dismissively. “Innocent joined the heavenly host nearly two months ago. We are proud to serve his successor Honorius, a true man of God – a brilliant thinker.”

“And does Honorius still support this crusade?” James asked.

“Of course!” Jean-Pierre gaged with a thoroughly disgusted look plastered on his bony face. “But the strategy has changed, thanks to the wisdom of Honorius.”

“And yet Jerusalem is still the objective, yes?” Raven pushed.

“For some,” Jean-Pierre kept on. “Wise Honorius has sought and received the assistance of the Kings of Hungary and Austria. They are assembling a Grand Army to conquer and permanently seize all of Palestine as a Christian Kingdom. True men of France have been called by his Excellency at this time to continue their aid for the kings of Castile and Aragon.” The knight paused and scanned the crowd with his eyes. “And to find and destroy those enemies in our midst,” he let the words hang in the air.

“Do you feel you have many enemies in your midst good knights?” Raven sought.

Most of the Templars had their helmets off by now and were eating the Englishmen’s bread. “Certainly not at the moment, Raven of Locksley, but rest assured, there is no end to the threats from the Enemy here in the West, whether

they come through the onslaught of the camel-backed Mohammedans or from the accursed Cathari,” John-Claude spouted.

“We have heard of the Cathari.” John entered the exchange. “English kinsmen of ours told us that your arrival in the west would spell the doom of these heretics. Surely your mission was a success?”

“Of course,” John-Pierre rasped again. “By the power of God we crushed the walls of their fortress and sent them back to hell from whence they came.”

The Frenchman spat to emphasize his feelings on the matter.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Raven,” Jean-Claude concluded. “We will water our horses in the stream rather than deplete your supply. God go with you!”

The Templar horses clomped slowly down the hill to drink from the stream, and the Nottingham Crusade marched onward, careful to step over the dung heaps that the horses left strewn across the road.

*

Robin and his two shipmates enjoyed good weather and strong winds as they flew past Aquitaine and headed around the Spanish coast. In a cove along the shores of Galicia they encountered a straggler crusade ship. Like the Venetian vessel, they had been badly damaged in the storm. They had just finished repairs and were headed out into open water as the English sloop floated by.

They ran close enough to the ship to communicate and found out that they were likely nearly a month behind Raven. They slowly pulled ahead of the more heavily laden crusader ship and lost sight of it later that day. The good sailing conditions held and the small group reached Gibraltar a week later.

*

If the Englishmen and their minstrels had been underwhelmed by their reception in London, their arrival in Marseilles was near depressing. The smell of the crusade camps was nauseating. Any large concentration of unattended men has the tendency to produce strong odors, and the army camps outside the port area were no exception.

The unpleasant atmosphere was offset though by both the expansive variety of goods for sale by local merchants, and the fascinating company. Raven took it all in. Never could she have imagined such an astounding array of Christian military forces.

The majority of the men were Franks, but they also heard Teutonic languages and Spanish. A company of Burgundian crossbowmen, each wrapped head to toe in chain mail armor, was having target practice on the edge of the woods. A squad of Irish spearmen was cooking a variety of delicious meats and

selling or trading them to hungry passers by. Raven marched the men all day, passing beyond the central cluster of camps until reaching a small hill where they pitched tents under an open sky, but with relatively fresh air.

At the first light of dawn, Michael mustered the men with trumpet revelry and the work began. John, James and about half of the men headed north, where they had heard rumor of a quality blacksmith who sold armor and weapons at a fair price. The Englishmen had left their island with spears only. Since the next ship ride would likely land them in hostile territory, they decided to add to their fighting equipment.

Twenty men volunteered to guard the camp, while Raven, Michael, Cuthbert and a dozen others set out in search of food. The grocery shopping went very well. The harvest was underway and prices were low. One of Raven's gold coins bought the fifteen travelers all the salted meat, hard cheese, fresh bread, bad wine, dried fruit, carrots, flour, oil, salt and basil they could carry in sacks.

They not only acquired a few weeks worth of food, but made two new friends as well. Henri was a local man of many talents. Though he never had managed to secure a profession in Marseilles for any notable length of time, he survived by finding niches in the ever changing circumstances of his world.

"What you need my lady," Henri explained to Raven after properly introducing himself, "Is a guide, an interpreter, and a friend to help you make the most of your time in Marseilles. I would be honored...no," Henri made a spectacle out of his search for the right word. "*Privileged* to serve you in these ways my lady, for both the honor of your presence and perhaps any reward you would wish to bestow upon me." He bowed.

"Thank you, Henri. I am sure we will be good friends," Raven accepted. "What are our prospects for passage on a swift and sure vessel?"

Henri groaned. "Not good, my lady..."

"Call me Raven."

"The ships in port are loaded full with harvest goods, Raven. They might take a few seamen on, but a group the size of yours may not find a ship to hold you all for a month...or more. The Papal Port Authorities will issue you a stamp, for a fee, that will help you secure your place waiting in line for passage, but it is not guaranteed. There can be...other fees," Henri explained.

"You know about the rest of our men. Have you been watching us?" Raven tested to see how he would answer.

"Certainly when the most...musical army in France passes through town it will draw some notice, no?" Henri smiled. "And rumor of the red-haired Crusader Queen preceded your arrival by two days."

Raven blushed at her fame, but smiled back. She always experienced a bad feeling when she met someone with ulterior motives, but she sensed nothing sinister in their new friend.

“Henri, what if we abandon Marseilles and march further to the east; what word have you of our prospects for swift passage from Genoa or Venice?”

The beady little Frank marveled at the worldly knowledge of one he perceived as a semi-feral British warrior princess. “The Italian Principalities are in dark times, my la...Raven. The cities are stalked by plague and corruption. Power is wielded unwisely.”

Henri lowered his voice. “And there is something else. Rome has unleashed men more dangerous than any mounted knight. Beware of those known as Inquisitors.”

The tone of Henri’s voice sent a shiver down Raven’s spine. Just then a dog barked, and Raven spun around to see a medium size, but overly thin yellow mutt loping toward her. It stopped at a cautious distance and panted a series of whines that sounded remarkably like begging. She absently plucked a chunk of meat from her bag, and threw the piece into the grass a few feet in front of the dog. He devoured the meat in a very short time and proceeded to check Raven’s fingers for any traces of more.

Henri laughed. “You have fed a stray dog of Marseilles! Oh, my Raven, he will be with you for the rest of his life!”

*

The weapons shoppers, following the Sons of Thunder, also did well. The workmanship was very simple, but the weapons were solid and made to last. The long swords were so expensive though, that they struck a bargain to make a bulk purchase of forty short swords; stocky iron daggers in the old Roman style.

They would be at a disadvantage against longer weapons, but in close combat could prove extremely effective. They also took twenty short bows, complete with fully stocked quivers, and ten large, metal coated, wooden shields – enough at least to make a shield wall to protect the archers. Nearly every Nottingham soldier now had either a secondary weapon or shield.

*

When everyone was reunited at the camp they held a small feast. The other minstrels were considering playing when Michael came running. “Raven,” he said. “It’s Jack – he has taken quite ill and has requested seeing you.”

They ran to his tent. Raven entered and knelt beside him. “Oh, Jack,” Raven exclaimed. He looked paler and thinner than she had ever seen anyone. His breathing was labored and he could barely open his eyes.

Jack smiled weakly. “I’m cold, Raven.” A shudder coursed through his body.

“I do not know what has befallen him,” Michael helped. “It is not the plague. There are none of the signs.”

“How can he be cold, Michael?” Raven laid her hand on Jack’s forehead. “His skin feels like it is on fire.”

Raven just held Jack’s hand for awhile, not knowing what else to do. At one point Jack’s eyes, that had been growing dim, gained back a touch of sparkle. “Raven,” he started and a coughing fit tore through him.

“Jack, what is it? I’m right here,” she soothed.

“Raven, will you sing me a song?” he whispered.

Still kneeling over the dying Englishman, Raven wept and sang. A slow, soft melody poured out of her, and the company feasting outside subdued their activity. Michael bowed his head.

*Have mercy on me, O God
According to your endless love*

*According to your great compassion
That blots out my transgression*

*Wash away my iniquity
And cleanse me from my sin*

Friar Tuck had helped all the minstrels, as children, memorize vast tracts of the Psalms by setting them to music. Raven let this Psalm of David roll out of her soul and take liquid form, falling from her eyes. Her tears made lines on Jack’s face. She sang on.

*Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean
Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow*

*Let me hear joy and gladness
Let the bones you’ve crushed rejoice*

*Hide your face from my sins
And blot out my iniquity*

Raven and Michael stayed in the tent through the night, and Jack died a little before dawn. After saying a final prayer over the already ghost-like body, they stepped out of the tent for air.

“What if this is my fault?” Raven asked.

“Jack?” Michael looked at her.

“Jack, his brother, the storm, even Roger; what if our journey is cursed?”

“Raven, you are exhausted, as am I. You surely cannot think such a thing,” Michael dismissed.

“What if I was not meant to take Roger’s place? What if disaster follows us all the way to Jerusalem because I have stepped outside of the order of things and gone where I do not belong?” She worried.

“First of all,” Michael put a hand on her shoulder. “If God wanted Roger here instead of you, He would have shattered your leg and sent your dancing fool of a brother on crusade. Secondly, the order of this world is not the same as the Divine Order, and in that sense, every follower of Christ who lives in this world has wandered where they do not belong. You are no more out of place than I am, for we are all pilgrims and sojourners in this dark and fallen world.

“Jack is now with his brother and with God. The Lord has called another one of His own home to heaven, and if this is the extent to which we are cursed today, then we are blessed indeed.”

“Thank you, Michael,” Raven smiled at her yellow haired friend.

*

Robin decided that if they raced along the North African coast, and the weather held, they might be able to overtake the main crusader fleet before it entered the dangerous eastern Mediterranean, where robbing Saracen pirates competed for dominance with Byzantine war galleys.

They had restocked with food and water in southern Spain, and made good time until they passed Algiers. That afternoon they first saw the black sails.

The swift galley of the Barbary pirates overtook them as the sun went down and the three Englishmen surrendered without a struggle. The pirate captain made clear his intentions to kill them, on the charge of being infidel English crusaders, with words spoken in surprisingly fluent English.

After being looted, the small sailing sloop was set ablaze and cast adrift. The men had their hands bound behind their backs, and were given a choice of execution styles. They could fall onto the pirates’ swords, or walk the plank into the deep waters with land out of sight.

As Robin and Big Little John debated their chances of successfully swimming to Africa without the use of their hands, Friar Tuck called out a lament. “You brigand swine - this is no fit end for Robin of Locksley!”

The pirate captain whirled on his heel. Tuck thought that he was preparing to smite him for the remark. But a sly smirk grew on the captain’s face. “Who is Locksley?” he demanded.

“I am,” Robin said.

“Robin of Locksley? Robin of the Hood?” The captain narrowed his eyes. “I have heard of you.”

*

Raven was completely exhausted, both emotionally and physically, but felt unable to lie down and sleep as Michael had gone to do. She looked into her bowl of breakfast porridge and stirred it, but never actually ate. Cuthbert sat next to her and offered silent companionship.

“What will we do with Jack’s body?” Raven finally broke the silence.

“That is a good question. I will find Henri and ask his advice.” Cuthbert stood up. “Let me handle this, Raven. You need to rest. Go to your tent and I will take care of Jack honorably.” Cuthbert walked away and Raven reluctantly turned and entered her tent.

*

But as Cuthbert was preparing to depart along with James and four other men to help with the burial, Raven appeared in her boots and cloak ready to accompany them.

“I thought we agreed you were going to get some sleep.” Cuthbert frowned at her.

“Did we?” Raven looked annoyed. “Don’t fight me, Cuthbert. I’m coming with you. I need to see this through.”

“Henri told me of an Englishmen’s graveyard a little to the north and west of the city. He says that traveling swiftly on foot we can reach it in half a day. But that’s also half a day back; not to mention the time it takes to dig a grave with our swords since we have no shovel,” Cuthbert cautioned.

“Then we had better be going.” Raven started off toward the north and west, and the men did their best to carry Jack and keep up with her.

When they found the graveyard, they selected a plot and the men began tearing into the earth with their short swords and scooping the dirt away with their hands. Raven sought out a stream where she refilled all of their water skins. On the way back to the gravesite she gathered flowers.

When she arrived back, a tiny Frank was observing the progress of the dig. He had come to collect a fee for the use of the land, but after taking a gold coin from Cuthbert, the man did nothing to help.

The earth was soft and they soon had Jack buried. They bowed their heads and gave their last respects.

The sun was setting, and Raven was near collapse as they finally reentered the Nottingham camp. Once again, she crawled into her tent, but this time she stayed there and slept. The next morning she emerged somewhat grumpy and irritable.

All of the Minstrels sat around her, though they remained quiet as Raven shook off her sleepiness. After a bowl of oats, two apples, some cheese and a cup of diluted wine, Raven recovered most of her composure and normal easiness of spirit.

Finally she spoke. "We have lost two men already, and have not even left France. We have pushed hard, and we will pay an even greater price if we push harder. I think we should take Henri's advice and winter here." She looked around at the faces of her friends seeking approval.

"I agree, but we cannot stay on this hill all winter, exposed to the elements," James advised.

"Henri spoke of a land owner he knows, just a few days to the east of camp. He has barns that we can rent and use as barracks. We will be a tight fit, he says, but we will be able to build hearths and stay warm and dry. We can just wait a few months there, and as soon as spring begins to show we will cross Tuscany and try to join with the Teutonic Crusade. Perhaps they will have made contact with the English fleet and can help us reach them." Raven laid out her thoughts. "What say you all?"

The Minstrels nodded their assent, but before any could speak the beggar dog from Marseilles ran into their camp, barked his approval, and madly licked Raven's toes, making her laugh. The Minstrels rewarded the dog's lightening of her mood by giving him food and attention.

"You need a name." Raven patted down the dog as he enjoyed the Minstrels' generosity with their breakfast leavings.

"You know...Jack...he never had any sons or other brothers beside Peter," Michael informed the group.

"Jack. I like that. His name will live on in you for a little longer." She scratched the puppy's neck. "And be told of in a few more adventures."

Having settled that, she took Jack with her down the hill to the nearby river. After several hours of scrubbing the dog using her own soap and brush, Jack emerged from the water much less yellow – almost a crème, and ready for another feeding.

Verse Three – Inquisition

The coldest part of winter passed quickly and the time was well used. The Englishmen spent ten weeks from Yuletide to late-winter practicing with their new weapons, re-organizing supplies for efficient transport, drinking and wrestling. At any opportunity, the men also fawned over the landowner's three petite, but courting-age daughters. All of them, that is, except Cuthbert, who stayed close to Raven.

The other minstrels gently chided their red headed brother, but were all pleased to see the two growing closer. Nevertheless Raven and Cuthbert each felt strongly, and made perfectly clear to each other, that the Crusade road was no place for romance, and that any such feelings should be kept to oneself, certainly until after the Crusade objective was accomplished.

After a week of sunny and above freezing weather had melted the snow and dried the ground, they set off to the east. The men were rested, refreshed and in good spirits. They hoped to pass through the countryside of northern Italy and into Austrian territory before the warmth and rains of spring increased the risk of plague.

Tuscany was beautiful in the early spring and they traveled happily through the hills. Everyone had pinned their red crosses back on in noticeable places. Henri left them with the advice of appearing as pious as possible, as the best method of avoiding the dread Inquisitors. The idea of also keeping a low profile by limiting their musical expression never occurred to them.

They were approached in a field outside of Brescia. The Inquisitor brought two scribes who flanked him carrying writing tablets on which their pens hardly ever stopped moving, and thirty brightly armored gendarmes with red feather plumes atop their helmets. A group of thirty armored crossbowmen with swords and red chest sashes stood well outside the camp, and a small company of horsemen could be seen on the near ridge, each holding a spear with a red flag waving on the end.

Reports of a red haired Celtic Witch leading a troop of British mercenaries were swirling across northern Italy, according to Antonio Zola, Prelate of Milan and Executor of the Will of the Holy See. He glared at Raven with a look of rank disgust.

"As you can see, honorable bishop, we also are about the business of our Lord." Raven waved her hand toward the red cross of her shoulder. "We are crusaders, not mercenaries, and we seek nothing more than peaceful passage through this country so that we may serve in the liberation of the Holy Land."

Zola rolled his eyes at Raven. "Even the devil can use our symbols," the Inquisitor proclaimed. "I am afraid you must come with me for questioning."

Raven looked around at her men. She could tell they were ready to fight for her, but loudly assented to the Inquisitor's demand. "I will gladly answer any

questions you have.” She raised her voice even louder. “Surely though you would not deprive me of a single escort from among my men...for the sake of decorum.” She stared dully at the churchman, as his face grew a livid red.

“Why, of course not,” Zola fumed.

“Cuthbert, shall we?” Raven said lightly as if they had planned a picnic lunch.

He looked at Raven in disbelief. Jack growled.

“Let us allay the bishop’s concerns, so that we may pass through his jurisdiction well thought of and under the covering of his kindness and protection,” Raven reassured.

Zola stared icily at Raven.

“Stay another night men, and rest,” Cuthbert shouted. “We shall return to you tomorrow and proceed together on our quest.”

Zola showed no expression.

The Vatican troops led Raven and Cuthbert away, allowing them to walk unbound with dignity. Jack had to be physically restrained, but calmed again after they passed over the ridge out of sight and earshot from the English camp. Not long after, the troops bound the two prisoners and threw them inside a small horse drawn covered wagon that they had stashed in a thicket earlier. The wagon door swung shut like a trap, and one of the gendarmes locked it from the outside. A water skin was tossed into the wagon through a small window.

Michael and John watched the whole event, hidden in a small grove of trees well away from the road. They followed the wagon, from a distance, all the way to San Sebastiano where Zola owned a remote mountain castle that he used as a prison and for his most special interrogations.

*

The pirate captain introduced himself to Robin as Hussein al-Jakari, known to some as the Jackal. “Your King Richard told me about you. He said you were one of his own men, loyal and true – that you had protected his kingdom from deception and corruption while he was away at war.

“I saw him right before he died.” The old captain watched for Robin’s reaction. “Yes. I can see that you loved him like a father, and he told me that he thought of you as a son. After battling Christian enemies in France, he turned south toward Spain to face a horde of Mamelukes that had defeated the King of Aragon and was seeking to invade the south of France. He fought valiantly, but was hopelessly outnumbered...”

Robin examined the face of the Jackal and tried to ascertain why he might be lying, and could think of no reason. “What led him to confide in you?” Robin asked.

“That was not the first time your king and I had met, Robin of Locksley.” Al-Jakari grinned, shining his gold tooth. Robin raised a wondering eyebrow.

“It was at Acre,” Al-Jakari continued. “Your Richard had defeated Saladin’s horde in a fair fight, but Saladin double crossed the Lion Heart. After promising to deliver Jerusalem into English hands, Saladin did not hand over the city, but instead slaughtered the Christian prisoners and barred the city gates.

“Richard was forced to execute his prisoners in response, but spared me. Yes. I was there; a young idealistic Holy Warrior defending Arabia from Christian aggression. Richard took mercy on me, sparing my life if I promised to deliver a message to Saladin. He set me loose and weeks later, I fulfilled my promise to your king by saying the words he had instructed me to say before the Sultan.

“I said to the Sultan that Richard planned to bring vengeance upon his treachery, but that he would spare the Arabs if they would but hear the gospel of his Lord Christ preached one time. How they responded to it was to be left a matter for their own souls.”

“And how was the offer received?” Friar Tuck inquired.

“I was beaten just short of death,” al-Jakari explained. “And I was banished forever from Palestine. It does not matter that I still to this day follow faithfully in the path of the Prophet Muhammad. I said the words and was declared as guilty as if I had written them for King Richard myself. My message was in vain, in any case, because Richard had left the Holy Land and returned to England because of the...” al-Jakari cleared his throat. “...problems with his brother.”

“Then how did you happen to meet him in France before his death?” Robin was piecing it all together.

“Fate, I suppose,” shrugged the pirate. “I was en route to Barcelona from Marseilles when I heard that a British King had been mortally wounded, and I was curious, so I made my way through the English camp, close enough for him to see me. He recognized me, called me to his bedside and told me that since I owed him my life, I should repay his mercy if the chance ever came. He mentioned you by name, and a few others as well; all men of renown who had served him well in his lifetime.”

“And because of your debt to King Richard, you will let us go now, is that it?” Robin attempted.

The Jackal threw back his head and laughed. “Ah, the life of a pirate has made me shrewd good Sir Robin. You shall not bargain with me so easily.”

Robin looked at John and Friar Tuck. They stared resolutely at the pirate.

“No, my English friend,” al-Jakari bellowed. “The mercy that I received had conditions attached that almost cost me my life. And it will be much the same for you and your friends. Serve me in a mission that I will describe to you, even at the risk of your own lives, and if you succeed I will grant you your freedom. Do you accept?”

Zola tortured Raven physically only on occasion. He wanted her mind. He would have her awakened at random hours of the night, sometimes by others, though mostly by himself. He questioned her about her relationship with Satan, about the source of her dark powers and about British druidism.

She knew nothing about any of these things, and so had little to say. This frustrated Zola, and when she would try to make up answers to appease him, he screamed that she was a liar and whore and worse things, then had her whipped and thrown back into her dark isolated dungeon cell.

In his angrier moments he would whip her personally with leather straps, soft ones that stung bitterly but left minimal marks. Occasionally he would burn her as well, but again, only enough to hurt. He seemed intent on keeping her alive and essentially intact. This continued for months.

Cuthbert's treatment during this time was much more straightforward. He was beaten daily, usually with stiff wooden poles. After each session he was offered a document and a pen, and asked to sign. The document was a pre-composed confession that Zola used in most of his cases. Cuthbert earned a nightly blow to the ribs or back for his ongoing refusal to sign.

Zola seemed much less interested in Cuthbert's long term survival though, and kept his food and water rations to an absolute minimum so that he remained weak and unable to heal his wounds.

At night Cuthbert meditated on the suffering of Christ. If God had allowed his own Son to be tortured and eventually killed, Cuthbert reasoned, what right did he have to avoid suffering likewise? The fact that the source of his torment was from within the Lord's establishment on earth, the Mother Church, burned Cuthbert at the core. Yet he did not blame God, in fact he allowed every beating, every flogging and every humiliation to draw him closer to the Lord, both through identification with His suffering and simply out of necessity. He had nowhere else to go.

Prayer, faith and full reliance on God not to abandon him upheld Cuthbert through the long months of misery. He also knew what was happening to Raven, and he did all he could to uphold her spirit as well.

The dungeon cells that held the two unfortunate Minstrels were not far apart, but the guards became angry at any attempt they made to speak to each other. Occasionally, they could whisper short conversations late in the evening, when the guards were drunk from dinner. One night in August, Zola was away on one of his excursions. The guards had feasted exceptionally well, and the two prisoners were able to whisper to each other for hours.

Their conversation, which was usually centered on reassuring and uplifting each other for the trials of the day to come, turned more philosophical and reflective after a time. They talked about Sherwood and their friends; they

even sang together for a very short while. They stopped though, because it started making Cuthbert cough.

“Why did we do this?” Raven asked in a whisper. “Why are we here? We should have just stayed in England.”

“God has some purpose for us, Raven. We wouldn’t still be alive if God did not still have some use in mind for us.”

“Why do you think he is this way – Zola? Why does he do this?” Raven wondered aloud. “How can the church we are fighting for do this? What have we done wrong? When will someone come for us?” She was crying again. The sleep deprivation, poor food, isolation, darkness and the constant hostile questioning all combined to send her into a deep depression.

Cuthbert let her crying be the only sound for awhile and then, very softly, sang a Psalm to her there in the dark, dreary dungeon.

Raven stopped crying so she could hear the words.

*Why are you downcast, O my soul
Why so disturbed within me
Put your hope in God
For I will yet praise him
My Savior and my God*

*My soul is downcast within me
Therefore I will remember you
From the land of Jordan
The heights of Hermon
From mount Mizar*

*Deep calls to deep
In the roar of your waterfalls
All your waves and breakers
Have swept over me*

*By day the Lord directs his love
At night his song is with me –
A prayer to the God of my life*

Cuthbert coughed twice and was silent.

“Stop it,” Raven whispered. “Thank you for comforting me, but you are hurting yourself. Stop it.” She paused. “I love you.” There was silence. “And I don’t want you hurting yourself.”

“I love you too, Raven.”

More silence.

“I always have,” he continued. “Even as children...” He trailed off.

"I've always loved you, too – even when you were mean to me."

"When was I ever?" Cuthbert whispered.

"When you were eight and I was six, you were mean to me that whole year," she reminded him.

"Yes. Sorry about that," he sighed.

"It's all right."

More silence.

"I wonder how the others are doing," Raven spoke.

"Bloody sore from climbing stone walls for the last three days," a voice whispered.

"Cuthbert?"

Silence.

"We are going to get you out," the voice spoke, and then there was silence again until they heard the two thuds.

*

While spring and summer had passed with agonizing slowness for Raven and Cuthbert, Robin and his men barely had time to think. After agreeing to al-Jakari's scheme, they landed near Tunis, hired protection for the ship, and rented a fleet of twenty camels.

The three Englishmen and the twelve pirates set out the next day on camel back, with five of the camels dedicated solely to hauling supplies, mostly water and a little food. At times, the pirates made the Englishmen ride blindfolded, so they would be unable to navigate the return journey on their own.

The Englishmen did not eat much while riding through the desert. The stink of the camels was sufficient to suppress the heartiest appetite, but they were further nauseated by the relentlessly blazing sun.

Al-Jakari possessed a map that showed a series of way stations, each with access to some kind of drinkable water that would enable them to survive the journey across the endless Sahara. Not until they were deep into the desert, did the Jackal reveal his plans for the Merry Men.

"There are legends and tales told in parts of Africa," the old pirate began, "about a land far across the sea, to the west – a land of limitless wealth and beauty – a Paradise!"

"Is that where you're taking us?" Robin quipped.

"I'm afraid not, Robin." Al-Jakari went on. "No ship that has ever crossed the western horizon has been seen again. The legends are many – sea monsters, whirlpools at the ends of the earth, scorched lands inhabited by fire breathing dragons. I've never tried the journey myself." His gold tooth glinted in the late afternoon sun.

"Yes, the Normans of England and their Viking kin hold to similar tales of strange western lands over the sea," Robin added.

“There must be some element of truth to these tales,” al-Jakari proposed, “because of the Heart of the Jaguar”

Robin raised an eyebrow. Little and Tuck pulled their camels up closer to hear.

Al-Jakari did not need to be asked to continue. The expectant looks on their faces was enough encouragement. “A fabulous and mighty jewel...” The Jackal grew wide eyed and his voice was reverent. “A ruby of magnificent depth and splendor, the size of a man’s fist,” he held his up. “The size of a Jaguar’s heart – it is said that he who possesses the Heart cannot be killed in battle.”

“And this talisman, it originated in this mysterious land across the sea?” Friar Tuck asked.

“Yes,” al-Jakari shifted in his saddle. “It was brought to Egypt in the Ancient Days, as a gift from an Emperor across the western sea, whose name is unknown, and given to a Pharaoh, whose name I do not remember. Passed down through the lines of Egyptian kings for centuries, it was lost in a war against the Kings of Ethiopia, not long after a time when disaster befell Egypt; a series of strange plagues, including one which killed the first born sons of every Egyptian household.

“The Jaguar Heart moved around Africa from kingdom to kingdom, inevitably leaving destruction in its wake over the centuries. The name of its most recent possessor is Mobatu. He is a powerful king, but also a madman. He rules by fear over a wide stretch of the Western Sahara, and has influence over the pirate kingdoms of the West African coast. His fortress palace is built into a mountain near a mysterious city of wonders named Timbuktu.

“Raiders in Mobatu’s employ captured the Heart during a massacre that occurred, some will say, near Morocco when the giant ruby was once again on the move. They delivered the prize to Mobatu who has used it in the years since to consolidate his power and punish his enemies. Fortunately for the broader world, Mobatu has little vision for his Empire. If he had the desire, he could extend his power into Europe and even the world of Islam.”

“He’s that mighty?” Robin interjected.

“Yes,” al-Jakari said gravely. “But you are going to break into his heavily guarded mountain fortress, steal the Heart, and then we will all get away with it back across the desert.”

“And then you will share the wealth of its sale with all of us?” Robin teased.

Al-Jakari laughed. “Oh, dear Robin, what greater wealth could I give to you than your freedom – the freedom to find the daughter you wish to reach?”

“There is one slight problem, al-Jakari – that fact that our mission is most likely quite impossible, and none of us will leave Timbuktu alive, much less successfully cross the desert again,” Robin assessed.

The Jackal laughed again.

“That is why I am so fortunate that Allah has sent to me Robin of the Hood – the greatest thief in England!”

Verse Four - Escape

After a few days John, James and Michael had decided that Raven and Cuthbert would not be coming back without help. James led the English Crusaders onward to the east, both to move them out of harm's way and to make Zola think they had given up on their friends.

The Minstrels decided that a very small force might succeed where a larger one would fail. For two months Michael and John slept in the woods by day and spent the night crawling around the base of Zola's castle looking for some sort of way under, over, around, or through the wall.

The duo began to despair. John suggested going onward to Austria, retrieving their army and attacking the castle by force; even though a direct assault by lightly armored men on foot seemed suicidal at best. That evening, they began packing up to leave their camp in the woods, when a familiar friend appeared.

"Jack! What are you doing here?" John received the dog into his arms and had his face licked.

Jack had been sent away with the main army, but had fled after a few weeks and followed the trail to join back up with the two seeking Raven. It was Jack who finally discovered a way in. As the sun disappeared below the horizon, he led them back toward the castle following the scent of a tiny rivulet: nothing more than a shallow ditch. The trail ended at a small shrubbery sitting at the foot of a large rock, quite apart from the castle.

The dog dove into the shrub as if making the kill on a rabbit or other small meal. He emerged without a prize, but he had disturbed the shrub enough for Michael and John to see the prize they sought – hope.

They used John's wood carving file to wear away at the iron grating that guarded the castle drain pipe. The work was excruciating in the cramped pipe entrance. Their arms throbbed. They removed their clothing while inside the pipe to use as padding for their knees. Their clothes became soaked in sewage from the castle and stank even after rinsing in a stream. This went on for days, until John's file was a useless ribbon of shredded metal. They had cut only four of the necessary twelve iron bars.

Michael traveled halfway to Milan before finding a blacksmith to rob. He took four files so he would not have to come back. He also helped himself to a small wheel of cheese, much of which he brought back to share with John. As for the blacksmith; he awoke with a splitting headache and a nasty bump on the back of his head.

Michael begged the Lord for forgiveness all the way back to the fortress at San Sebastiano.

*

For nearly four months, Robin, his Merry Men, and their pirate captors flew across the sands of the Sahara on camel back, moving from oasis to oasis, from spring to well, and from outpost to palm grove. Staying alive was a full time and serious business, but the pirates were well equipped.

The full oppressive heat of summer was beginning to set in when they finally reached their destination – Timbuktu! Never could Robin and his men have imagined such sights as they saw when they entered the exotic city. Giant elephants strode through the streets bearing platforms with multiple riders and drivers aboard. Children, dogs and other small creatures darted swiftly through and around their legs.

Flowers and trees of unimaginable complexity and beauty were layered throughout the endless terraces of dwellings, marketplaces and workshops. They saw variations of colors that they had never seen before. The scents were equally new and unclassifiable. The smells of flowers, cooked meats, animal excrement, incense, and many mysterious things swirled around them as they entered the city gates and the comforting coolness of the shaded streets.

Monkeys screeched from balconies; camels brayed and spat in street-side stalls nestled in between shops and houses. Elaborately arrayed maidens with rich dark skin twirled and danced under flowery overhangs and tent canopies. The men lounging in the tents smoked from giant hookahs, sipped from goblets of wine and stared longingly at the dancing girls.

Other men could be seen bearing tremendous burdens like pack animals, while still others hawked wares, picked pockets, sang for a meal, or carried platforms of elite citizens on their shoulders. The amount of activity was dizzying. And the union of civilization with wildness was complete. In one tent lounge's entryway, a trained orangutan even collected the modest entrance fee.

When the pirates and Merry Men rounded one street corner on their search for lodging in Timbuktu, they saw a vast open plaza and were stopped in their tracks. Thousands of giant black skinned Nubian axe-men stood in countless rows. In response to their leader, a thoroughly feathered, olive skinned man standing on a pedestal in the center of the plaza, the tall, heavily muscled soldiers swung their large headed bronze axes in unison. The sound of their practice swings was chilling, as if the very fabric of creation was being torn and shredded. The pirates' crew backed away slowly, and made for a nearby alleyway.

They eventually found suitable lodging, in a large public inn along one of the many roadways that fed into the city's main plaza. They spent the first few days inside, recovering from their sunburn, dehydration and exhaustion. After about a week, everyone was feeling strong and mostly pain free. They started fanning out in small inconspicuous groups to find out how the land was laid; listening to conversations, asking subtle questions.

By piecing together their information at night, a frightening picture began to emerge. Mobatu ruled Timbuktu with absolute power, and it had bent

his mind as it eventually does to all men who try to wield it. Every aspect of life in the city was centered on the personality of this man. Collective activities and civic projects had Mobatu as the main subject. Statues, murals, monuments, parades and festivals were all in his honor.

Mobatu had spent years, fortunes and many innocent lives building up this self-serving cult – and he used his power to kill, rob, rape and torture his own people for nothing more than the satisfaction of his momentary whims.

The aspiring thieves spent a lot of time investigating life in the city's main super plaza which was as alive with activity as the rest of the city. Residents drew water from each of the four corner fountains and pools, and when the sun receded, ventured into the central square for singing, dancing, feasting and nightly revelry – all extolling the virtues of Mobatu.

At the far end of the plaza, the entrance to Mobatu's fortress towered like a frowning giant. Ludicrously large gatehouses held an impossibly thick iron portcullis in place. Guards stood at attention throughout the day and night, ready to pour boiling oil and shrapnel on any would be invader or thief. The other three sides of the fortress were hemmed in by sheer cliffs, prone to deadly landslides. Four towers protruded from the roof of the fortress, nearly doubling its total height. One tower stood out above the rest.

One morning, the Merry Men sat in the shade by one of the corner fountains nearest the fortress. Al-Jakari and a handful of the pirates waited on them. They were all wrapped in desert turbans and robes, and were thus indistinguishable from the rest of the populace.

"You know, there are no castles like this in England," Robin remarked.

"But I know you will think of a way," al-Jakari sounded ominous. "You want to finish this mission and reach your daughter, after all. And remember, Hood, you will never survive the trek back across the desert without me and my men. Only we know the desert paths."

"Thank you for reminding me," Robin dismissed. "So, what say you, John?" The archer turned to his faithful friend.

"It doesn't look good, Robin," John surmised. "Maybe we could find a drain tunnel or something like that..."

"Or perhaps an escape tunnel," Robin whispered quietly. The others stared at him, and he continued. "Think about it. A man of Mobatu's arrogance and paranoia must have a secret escape route from his fortress, in case his situation should ever sour."

"So you're saying," John reflected back to Robin, "that we just find the sword up his sleeve and use it to trump his hand."

"Precisely, John!" Robin affirmed.

"Well now that that's all settled," Friar Tuck injected sarcastically, "all we'll have to do is find the secret tunnel, break into it, find the Jaguar Heart, steal it, avoid Mobatu and his endless legions of highly trained and heavily armed

warriors, and high tail it across one thousand miles of unforgiving desert in the heat of summer. We should be back in Sherwood in time for oats.”

“Oh my skeptical Friar,” Robin clucked. “Have a little faith.”

*

The night before they broke through the iron grating, little John Little traveled on foot through most of the night to a farm several miles from San Sebastiano. He snuck up on the night watchman, bound and gagged him, and quietly made off with two fine horses. John crossed back and forth through a stream at several different locations in order to fully water the animals, and to thwart any attempt to follow him with hunting dogs. He had the horses hidden in a grassy clearing of the woods outside Zola’s fortress before the sun rose.

John raced back to the drain entrance where Michael had just broken through the sewage grating. Both of them had lost a lot of weight during their quiet siege. Jack helped keep them supplied with small animals to eat, but apart from those they depended on bark, certain leaves and the occasional insect. Their unwanted weight loss turned into a blessing, however, when they had to squeeze into the narrow, smelly drain and squirm their way up into the bowels of the Inquisitor’s castle.

Jack opted to stand sentry at the drain’s exit, and they promised him a quick return. In actuality, they wandered the castle innards for several hours before finding a closet through which they could safely emerge into a storage area of the keep.

After discretely raiding the food stores, they napped behind some barrels. Soon they were back up though, assessing the defenses and developing a plan for the remainder of their rescue mission.

Michael guessed that Cuthbert and Raven were locked somewhere in the dark tower that dominated the castle’s inner courtyard, and in this he would eventually be proven right. They decided that a two pronged attack would be most effective, with light and agile Michael finding a way to scale the tower, subdue the guards, and open the prison cells. Meanwhile, mighty but lumbering John would set about arranging a distraction to be ready at the right moment, and also deal with the issue of finding a way back out.

When Michael finally reached Raven’s cell window, and interrupted her lover’s conversation with Cuthbert, he was exhausted beyond reason. Hearing Raven’s voice, however, gave him a last burst of strength as he swung down from the roof onto the balcony, landed on one guard, got up, socked the other in the face, grabbed the spear out of his hands and used it to give the first guard the what for across the back of his head.

Michael quickly bound and gagged the two napping guards, took their key ring and had Cuthbert’s cell door open in a matter of seconds. “Good Lord!” he whispered when he saw what was left of Cuthbert. The poor bard was a

shadow of the young man that had left England. His body was very thin and his skin a rainbow of colors from yellow to blue to black in the various stages of bruising. He looked up at Michael from behind vacant eyes.

Still Cuthbert's mouth spoke, "What took you so long? I thought you were supposed to be part elf or some sort of magical..." He gave up coughing.

"Can you walk man?" Michael knew he lacked the strength to carry his friend. John's whereabouts were unknown, and he had not even seen what condition Raven was in yet.

Cuthbert struggled to his feet, took a step and stumbled into Michael's arms. Michael embraced his friend and the sensation of holding the bony half corpse filled him with an overwhelming emotional mix of pity, revulsion and rage.

He handed Cuthbert the guard's spear as a leaning pole and it kept him up. Michael then dashed down the hall to Raven's cell. She was on her feet and waving him onward. He unlocked the door and swung it open. They quickly embraced and returned to Cuthbert's post in a flash.

Raven was shocked when she saw her love. She wondered how he had the strength left to sing, much less stand. Putting Cuthbert between her and Michael, and grabbing the spear in her free hand she led the three together out of the cellblock.

Michael stopped them on the balcony, cupped his hands over his mouth and made the bird sound that he always used with John to signal *ready*. Nothing happened at first. They decided not to wait for a response and headed down the stairs. They were half-way down toward the level of the main courtyard when the screaming began.

"Fire!" The calls came from several directions.

John had started the fire in the main storehouse several minutes earlier using a torch from the nearby gateway. A guard had caught him in the act, but John took care of the unfortunate Italian with a hard swift punch to the nose. The guard collapsed.

John took the bow and two arrows the man had been holding and ran around the base of the dark tower toward the castle's front gate. As he came within view of the gatekeepers, John paused and put one of the arrows to the bowstring. He aimed at the nearest gatekeeper and let fly. The arrow found its mark right between the poor guard's ribs just as he was passing in front of the gate lever. His body slumped across the lever and the gate started to rise.

John saw the others coming down the stairs then. He ran over to them, handed the bow and one remaining arrow to Michael and scooped up Cuthbert like he would a small child. He ran headlong for the gate with Raven and Michael keeping pace.

The other gatekeeper struggled to remove the body of his former partner from the lever. It took him a moment too long, and the Minstrels ran beneath the heavy iron gate a split second before it came crashing down behind them.

The gatekeeper ran to the outer parapet, shook his fist at the escaping prisoners and cursed them. While still running away from the castle, Michael turned his torso back toward the gate, loaded the remaining arrow and shot the guard in the neck. Troops poured into the courtyard and shouted for the gatekeepers to open the gate, but their calls went unanswered.

As the Minstrels crossed the open field toward the woods, Jack joined up with them, took the lead and guided them through the dark and fog to the exact location of the two horses that John had stolen the previous night. The search party looking for the stolen horses never came close to San Sebastiano, reasoning that a thief would have to be mad to hide in the shadow of an Inquisition stronghold.

John untied the horses and hopped onto one. He hauled Cuthbert up into the saddle in front of him, held an arm around the withered frame of his friend, and steered the horse out toward the open field. Michael mounted the other horse and helped Raven climb on behind him. She hugged Michael around the waist as he grabbed up their hunting spears and then launched the horse after John's.

They were well underway by the time Zola's troops finally reopened the gate. And in the chaos caused by the fire in the storeroom, no one had thought to saddle horses for a pursuit.

As a result, the Minstrels were able to put a great distance between themselves and Zola's castle with no indication that they were being followed.

*

Two weeks of listening, watching, prowling and lurking yielded no information about any secret escape route from Mobatu's fortress. The pirates were growing impatient.

"Maybe I was wrong," Robin confessed one night. "Perhaps there is no tunnel. The drains we found were tiny – too small for any man. No secret passages, there is nothing higher up to swing or jump from, and tunneling through the granite foundation would be impossible. I'm beginning to think that we have a major problem here and that we might want to..."

Robin was cut short by a serving boy the pirates had hired, who entered with a bowl of fruit, set it on the table and walked out again. Robin stared after the boy deep in thought.

"What is it, Robin?" John asked.

"Where is Tuck?" Robin queried back.

"Guarding the door," John looked puzzled.

"Then how did that boy get in here?" Robin was growing agitated.

"It was just a serving boy, Rob. What's gotten into you?"

The archer began pacing their room. "Yes. Yes. That's it!" Robin was nearly leaping out of his tunic.

“Oh no,” John waved his friend away, “I’ve seen that look on your face before. You’re cooking up a scheme that’s going to get us both into trouble.”

“Never you worry, John Little.” Robin bounced around with a youthful energy he had not shown in a long time. “When you hear my plan, all your fears will be allayed.”

*

Al-Jakari looked skeptical. “So you plan to walk up to the gate and announce yourselves as guests of Mobatu?”

“Precisely...or even more precisely, as emissaries,” Robin agreed. “And when we find the Jaguar Heart, we will relieve him of it, regroup with you, and enjoy a pleasant three month dash across the scorching desert.”

“And just how do you plan to ‘relieve’ Mobatu of his most treasured possession?” The Jackal leered at Robin.

“Easy,” Robin winked. “We’ll improvise.”

“Do what you must, Robin of the Hood, but if things go wrong do not expect to see us. We will be long gone.” Al-Jakari threatened.

“Thanks for the encouragement chum,” Robin patted the Jackal’s shoulder and led his men away.

Al-Jakari frowned, and whispered after them. “The stories I have heard about you had better be true.”

*

Raven, Cuthbert and their rescuers put a great distance between themselves and San Sebastiano in two nights of travel. Jack continued to provide valuable scouting services to the group, and the tough farm horses held up well despite having double riders. Occasionally, Michael and John slowed the horses and would walk alongside to relieve the pressure. The open air and the strong horse beneath her lifted Raven’s spirits a little, but Cuthbert was getting worse.

“We need to stop and let him rest properly,” Raven decided, though dawn was still over an hour away.

So they entered a thick grove of trees and shrubs and constructed a makeshift hidden camp with a tent made out of branches and leaves, both for camouflage and to dim the sunlight for daytime sleeping. Not far from the grove was a small but clear stream. John watered the horses and filled his water skin. He used the entire contents for Cuthbert to drink or be gently washed with, before returning to refill it for the others.

Cuthbert could barely move. The jarring from the fast riding had rattled his battered frame the last two nights. The others collected berries, apples, herbs and bark as they found them, and Cuthbert was at least able to keep down the food. This gave them all hope.

Trusting in the quality of their camouflage, they all slept soundly that second daytime of freedom. As the sun was setting, they awoke and quietly began striking camp. Cuthbert was able to sit up and have a small breakfast and drink of water. Raven was relieved to see it. She knelt behind him, very gently putting her arms around his. She kissed the back of his neck; one of the places that looked relatively un-bruised. For a few minutes, she prayed in a whisper over him and cried tears that passed through the collar of his tattered shirt and ran down his aching back.

After the sun was fully down, and while the others were preparing the horses, Raven took a moment to slip down to the stream with Jack for a quick drink and wash before they took to the night trail again. She hung her cloak on an outcropping of a large boulder that stood between the stream bank and the woods, and rolled up what remained of her sleeves. After drinking his fill, Jack headed back toward the others. Raven drank deeply, scrubbed her hands and neck, and finished with a splash of water over her face.

As she wrapped back up in her cloak, the image of Zola's face flashed through her head. She froze and shuddered to remember all the insults, mockery, evil curses and physical torture he had heaped upon her. She could still feel the stripes on her back that Zola had given her with his own whip.

The burns were even worse. At least she had always been awake for the whippings. Zola had often held burning objects to her flesh while she slept, shocking her nervous system and terrorizing her dreams. She became extremely fearful of fire. He would laugh and tell her that she was only receiving a brief glimpse of the eternal fire and pain that she would experience in hell for not confessing her witchcraft to him.

The worst part of all, however, was that under the pressure of Zola's persuasive arguments, her sleepless and frightened mind actually had begun to accept his claims. She wondered still if perhaps she was in fact a cursed soul; an unwitting agent of the devil's ploys, and an abomination – not because of what she'd done, but simply because of who she was. Zola was most insistent on these points, and he quoted both Holy Scripture and the writings of the early Church fathers to back up his claims.

During long stretches of her captivity, Zola had actually been away from San Sebastiano on other church business. But even during his absences, she struggled with the gnawing doubts, fears and horrors that he had planted in her mind.

Raven stood there by the stream, absorbed in these disturbing thoughts, and trying to make some sense out of the confusion in her mind. She was too distracted to notice the soft brushing of horse hooves on the nearby grass. The light thud of the rider landing on the ground alerted her to the intruder's presence and she spun around. Her heart stuck in her throat and she gasped in horror.

Zola himself stood just paces from her. The vision and thoughts in her mind had been a premonition! The Inquisitor had heard about the Minstrels'

escape on his way back to San Sebastiano, and had set off immediately in the direction that the English crusaders had gone. He searched the countryside for two days in the company of three dozen fully armored mounted knights.

One oddity about Antonio Zola of Milan, Grand Inquisitor, was that he placed an extremely high importance on privacy; particularly when relating to the matter of certain bodily functions, namely defecating. In fact, the idea of being caught by another person in the act of this most normal of events, filled the beady little bishop with an awesome dread. So when he saw Raven standing there in the place where he had planned to seek his so longed for solitude, Zola literally felt his rage in his innermost being.

Zola overcame his surprise first and used the advantage to close the distance between them. As he stepped forward, a vicious leer grew across his lips, and he reached into his cloak to withdraw a weapon. It was her dagger. The silver dagger that Zola had confiscated from her after her capture, the dagger that had once saved her father's life, and that her brother had bestowed upon her as a farewell gift, was now poised to plunge into her chest.

Hateful words and curses seethed from the Inquisitor's mouth. "Foul enchantress bitch!" he hissed. "You escaped me once, but you will not escape from hell!" he shrieked as he lofted the dagger up and prepared to strike down Raven, who was still standing frozen in utter shock.

The dagger's blade glinted in the light of the rising moon, and something else flashed white in the corner of Raven's eye. Zola's shrieking increased dramatically in both volume and pitch and then turned to a low gurgling sound as Jack came flying out of the woods, leaped through the air and fastened his powerful jaws around Zola's throat.

The commotion drew the attention of the two knights that had accompanied Zola on his search for a private place. They had remained on the other side of the boulder, within earshot, but still well out of the way. By the time they came charging around the boulder on their horses, John and Michael had arrived from the woods bearing spears.

Zola's twisted and blood soaked body trembled one last time and lay still. His facial expression looked surprisingly serene, and Raven noted that he had thoroughly soiled himself during the attack. Overall, the image of Antonio Zola in death was as frightening and terrible as he had been in life. The knights, shocked by the sight, hesitated as they faced two spearmen, and what appeared to them as both a mad dog and a mad woman.

The knights had left their armor at the camp, bringing only their swords for this particular assignment. They turned horses to sprint back to their camp for help, and Michael and John let fly with the spears. Each found its mark in the center of the knights' backs, and the unfortunate guards tumbled from their saddles, dead before they hit the ground.

Michael and John retrieved the horses and their spears, and made for the woods. On the way, Michael grabbed the arm of a still frozen and stunned

Raven. "Come on, Raven. These horses are tired, but we will still make better time if we each have our own."

Raven came to her senses. "Cuthbert can't ride alone," she managed to sputter.

"He'll ride with me on one of the fresh horses, and John on the other. You won't be a burden to this one," he said, handing her the reins of the best looking of the three captured horses. "We'll bring these two and you can switch between them. Let's go. There are surely more where these came from..."

After gathering Cuthbert, the four minstrels, five horses and one bloody, but much appreciated dog fled the woods and took to the open fields. They raced across the northeast of Italy, and headed for the foothills of Austria.

*

Mobatu's interpreter called out the introduction, first in a strange unknown tongue, and then in Arabic. An attendant standing next to Robin then translated from Arabic to Latin, which Robin could understand. "Our majestic lord and master, his excellence the supreme Mobatu: we humbly present to you emissaries from the northern wasteland called Britannia; Sir Robin Earl of Devonshire, and Sir John the Duke of Cornwall. They bring gifts as tribute and wish to bow before your throne in submission to your greatness."

Mobatu flicked his hand and a group of Nubian Axe-Men shoved the Englishmen forward. They stumbled awkwardly into the great hall of the fortress, and were able to see Mobatu for the first time.

He was a thick, tree trunk of a man whose skin and hair were white as snow. His reddish eyes darted about suspiciously. Mobatu's robes were shimmering waves of gem embroidered fabrics; gold and green with deep red trim layered over his house-like frame.

Robin and John noticed none of that about him. They were focused squarely on Mobatu's crown – a marvelously ostentatious symbol of kingship run amok. Rising out of the gold helmet an entire extra head length, was the upper portion of the head of a lion.

The head appeared to once actually have been a lion's head, before the lower jaw had been removed and the rest dipped into liquid gold. Nestled inside the space underneath the lion's upper teeth was the largest and most fabulous red ruby the Englishmen had ever seen.

"There it is," Robin whispered to John. "We could take it now."

"Escape route first, remember?" John hissed back.

"Right, right you are," Robin quietly assured his friend.

Their gifts, really just trinkets that al-Jakari had acquired, were taken by attendants and Mobatu spoke unintelligibly for quite awhile. The message trickled back down through the interpreters, and the one finally speaking Latin grew pale.

“Mobatu wishes to inform you,” the interpreter croaked. “He scoffs at your ignorance and foolishness. You have been observed since entering Timbuktu, and your affiliation with pirate scum is known. Since you cannot therefore be true noble emissaries, you are now the prisoners of Mobatu.”

John looked nervously at Robin who stared impassively ahead. “Please, allow us to explain,” he began. A pack of Nubian spearmen ushered them from the hall, and they were never given the opportunity to speak further.

Robin and John were both beaten, and then thrown into a prison cell together to await Mobatu’s final judgment. They were given water and bread once daily for two days, and had no other contact from the outside. They were approaching despair when the cell door opened and a new prisoner was thrown in with them.

“Tuck?” Robin exclaimed. “What have you done? What of al-Jakari? What about Mobatu?”

“Relax, Robin,” the old friar appeared to have earned a few blows from the guards as well. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Well I’m glad to see you Friar, just not under these circumstances.” Robin sat back down. “Though I look forward to hearing how you come to join us here.”

The Friar plopped next to him on the floor. “An interesting story indeed,” he started. “I was naturally concerned when you did not emerge that first day or the next or today, and al-Jakari appeared to no longer be maintaining a presence in Timbuktu.” Tuck winced as he tried a spot on his forehead with his fingers, discovering another bruise. Nevertheless, he continued on. “The Jackal had expressed some concern to me over your whereabouts the night before, and that was actually the last time I heard from him. So I decided to take matters into my own hands and rescue you myself.”

Robin glanced at Little John who stared doubtfully at the well meaning Friar. “We truly do appreciate your effort, Tuck; truly. However, I’m afraid that you are now as urgently in need of rescuing as us.”

“The Lord works in mysterious ways, Robin of Locksley.” The Friar smiled.

“What have you done?” Robin narrowed his eyes at Tuck.

“It is not what I have done; it is what I know.” The Friar held his grin.

“Oh please,” John entered the fray. “Enlighten us, Friar.”

“Save your sarcasm, John Little.” The Friar frowned. “One thing I know as an absolute certainty is that our Lord will never leave us nor forsake us. He has given His Word on this, and we would do well to remember that.”

“You are right, of course, Friar,” Robin replied.

“Furthermore,” Tuck went on apace. “I have noticed during the considerable span of years I have enjoyed as a part of God’s creation, that our Creator seems to allow bad things to happen, only to turn them for good at the

last moment. I don't understand why exactly this is the case, but something about it really seems to please Him."

"Well observed," Robin nodded along.

"So," Tuck suggested. "'Twas with great humility and full trust in the plans of the Goodly Wise that I sent myself into the den of the lion, the mouth of the viper, the gaping maw of the..."

"You're here – we got it," John fumed.

"Yes, quite." Tuck shifted uncomfortably. "In any case, I am pleased to report to you that I have discovered the means by which we will escape from this fortress."

"Now this is interesting," Robin nudged John.

"Do tell," John acquiesced.

"Fly, my friends." Tuck beamed triumphantly. "We shall fly."

Verse Five – Flight to Austria

Raven and her friends flew into the Austrian hills, and as they did, the looming specter of the Inquisition seemed to fade. They stayed on an easterly course. James and the crusaders had made for Austria after Raven and Cuthbert's arrest. The plan was to meet up with them there, and hopefully engage with the Austrian Crusade for support, information and transportation.

After entering the hill country, they stayed camped for two days in the same place and worked on readjusting their bodies to daytime living. The rest was good for both people and animals, but they were all very hungry, penniless and desperately in need of new clothing. Cuthbert needed to be off the road, in a real bed, and receiving medicine.

Raven was understandably reluctant to rely upon the mercy of the Church, after her treatment at the hands of its representatives in Italy. But having already seen several monasteries from the road, they decided that for Cuthbert's sake they would stop at the next one, and prayed that it would have no affiliation with the Inquisition.

The next monastery happened to be run by a small group of mendicant Franciscan Friars. For beggars though, they were surprisingly well stocked with supplies and equipment. They also had a high level of medical knowledge, and after three days of almost constant sleep and care in the Friars' hands, Cuthbert appeared visibly better. He was still bedridden when he made his first attempt since the escape to sing.

One afternoon, while only half awake, the deeply wounded bard let a Psalm softly pour out of his chest in a weak and barely audible voice.

*My heart is not proud, O Lord
My eyes are not haughty
I do not concern myself with great matters
Or things too wonderful for me*

*But I have stilled and quieted my soul
Like a weaned child with its mother
Like a weaned child is my soul within me*

He paused to breathe for a moment before attempting to sing the last line. Raven, who was curled up on a hay pallet in the corner, had lifted up her head and was listening to the whisper of a melody. Cuthbert worked his lips again, but nothing came out. He was still bruised at the core. So Raven finished for him.

*O Israel put your hope in the Lord
Both now and forever more*

Cuthbert did not even try to turn his head, but she could see his lips making a slight grin. John and Michael entered the room then.

"We heard some music," John boomed. "You must be feeling better, eh Bert?"

Cuthbert gave a twitch that could well have been a shrug.

"Friar Tuck always says that music heals," Michael added as he scanned the room. "What say you?"

"Perhaps we should just let him rest," Raven suggested. They had all been sullen during the days on the road. And while the comfort and safety of the Franciscan monastery lifted John and Michael's spirits, Raven did not appear to be pulling out of her deep depression.

Michael and John looked at each other and hesitated. "Sure, he can rest. We'll sing for you," John insisted.

"And look what the Friars gave us," Michael teased before stepping out the door and re-entering with his hands behind his back. With a jingle he swung them around to the front revealing a colorful and oddly shaped lute in one hand, and a large tambourine with golden cymbals in the other. He tossed the tambourine to John sending a shower of sparkling sound around the room. Then Michael held the lute and made a chord with his fingers on its three strings. He was an awkward string player, but Cuthbert had shown him enough basics back in Sherwood that he could at least carry a tune.

They sang songs from home; happy songs about the hills, fields, forests and rivers. Cuthbert drifted in and out of consciousness, but in any case the music did not seem to bother him. For her part, Raven looked alternately annoyed, anxious, angry and morose.

John and Michael kept at it though. They relentlessly assailed her with their sweet notes, warm voices and witty words until finally, after quite some time she began to relax a little. Michael was sure he saw her foot tapping at least once, and John caught her moving her lips, silently sounding out words that she was not quite ready to sing again. He smiled at her and she was unable to resist smiling back.

As the sun dipped low in the evening sky, the Minstrels decided to play one last song before all getting some rest. They had just begun when a commotion was heard near the monastery entrance. A few moments later they heard the door open and footsteps growing nearer. From her vantage point, Raven could see out the door of Cuthbert's room and down the hallway.

Her heart stopped as she saw the hooded figure approaching in measured steps down the hall. "No," she whispered.

"What's that?" Michael stopped playing when he saw the look of dread washing over her face.

"You should not have played music." She started to weep. "They have found us. We are dead."

“What’s going on?” John glanced out the window and saw the building surrounded by heavily armed horsemen.

Cuthbert was asleep.

As the cloaked figure came closer, they saw large men wielding axes appear in the entryway and approach the room as well.

Raven ceased breathing, ceased feeling, and ceased thinking. She instantly turned back inside of herself to the lonely place deep in her mind she had found to escape Zola’s torment; a place where she could not be hurt, but where neither could she feel.

With cold, vacant eyes she watched as the tall thin traveler approached the doorway and the hood fell away. A cascade of long black hair, curled in tight ringlets, spilled out over the cloak. The light from the window revealed a face, framed within the ringlets, of exquisite beauty. Raven was nearly as impressed as her two conscious male companions who gaped wide eyed at this mysterious and unexpected visitor.

The young woman’s face featured deep dark eyes that exuded both cleverness and calm. Her straight nose tapered to a perfect ending right above her full and perpetually pouting lips that were curled in a curious grin.

“Forgive me, gentlemen and my lady,” the young woman began speaking Latin in a voice that lightly bubbled out of her like a tiny mountain spring. “I heard your music and was curious. My name is Theodora Angeloi. I am traveling from Constantinople to Vienna, and will be staying the night here in the monastery hostel. A little music I think might be good for my soul, though I do not wish to impose upon you.”

Raven breathed, but was still wary.

So was Michael. “Do you always travel with such a...significant entourage?” Michael nodded toward the axe wielding giants in the hall.

Theodora blushed and smiled. “Again forgive me,” she replied. “I am Princess Theodora Angeloi of Byzantium.”

Michael and John each went down on one knee. Raven stood and bowed. Cuthbert remained asleep.

“Thank you. You are very kind.” The Princess motioned for them all to rise. “And forgive me once again. I sense that I startled you. These two are never far from me.” She waved her hand toward the axe men. “And the others,” She motioned toward the two dozen horsemen carousing in the courtyard, some of them having dismounted to play with an enthusiastic Jack. “Well, my father would not allow me to leave the city without them.”

Raven smiled and thought of her own father. *If only I had listened to him, we would all have been spared so much hardship.* Raven wondered where he was, and if he was angry with her, or worried. She had thought so little of home or of her father and Roger lately because it pained her so much to remember how life had been before she had joined this fool’s crusade.

A flood of emotions overwhelmed her tense and fragile composure, and she started to sob. Theodora crossed the room in a few quick strides and gripped Raven by the shoulders. "What is it? What have I said?"

Raven collapsed into her arms.

*

"So let me understand what you are saying, Tuck," Robin clarified. "Mobatu has built a ship that will sail through the sky."

"Yes."

"Well then," Robin smiled. "We have your escape route, I'd say, John." John frowned at the enthusiastic archer and friar.

"It's simple," Robin reassured his skeptical friend. "After taking the gem from Mobatu, we'll rush the door we saw behind his throne. It was unguarded, right Tuck?"

The friar nodded sagely.

"We'll find our way to the top of the tower, and we'll escape from Mobatu in his own flying craft!" Robin was ecstatic.

"Simple," John mumbled. "But there's just one question I have, Friar. What if the rumors you heard about the flying craft are not true?"

"A valid question, Mr. Little," Tuck allowed. "However, I believe that we lack any alternatives."

John was quiet, though the thought of flying through the air like a bird left him with a severe sense of unease.

*

The morning soon came when Mobatu was ready to pronounce judgment upon his prisoners. The three Englishmen were led out into the main court where they had first entered. Groups of axe carrying guards blocked every doorway that led out of the fortress. But just as they remembered, the wooden door at the end of the court, behind the throne, was not guarded.

"It makes sense," Robin whispered to John. "A man of Mobatu's paranoia and cowardice would not have an armed guard stand behind him. But he would still want a back door to escape through in a crisis."

"I hope you know this madman's mind as well as you think you do, Robin," John uttered back.

Their conversation was cut off as Mobatu began roaring unintelligible declarations to the assembled crowd. The majority of the observers, who were not guards, appeared to be lackeys, hangers-on, and other self seeking well wishers attempting to curry Mobatu's favor through their groveling. *Mostly harmless folk*, Robin thought, *unfortunate to have such a ruthless and arbitrary ruler.*

After Mobatu's sayings made their way down the line of translators, Robin and his men realized that they were expected to approach the throne, kneel before Mobatu and beg forgiveness for their offenses. They knew full well that such a display would only serve to entertain the audience and that their executions were inevitable and imminent.

As the translations continued to come forth, they also realized that a special event was being prepared for the one Mobatu referred to as the Fool's Preacher. A group of the Nubian guards arrived shortly thereafter bearing a large cross made of wood.

Friar Tuck was not the first Christian preacher to have reached Timbuktu. In ages past, early Evangelists had crossed all of Africa and spiritual descendants of theirs lived throughout the land still to Robin's day.

Mobatu, however, was fiercely hostile toward Christians. They terrified him, even more than the fears of scorpions and poisoned food that kept the cowardly strong-man of Timbuktu awake at night. He was morbidly fascinated with the idea of a dying god, and even more interested in knowing more about his own prospects for rising from the dead. Details like love, forgiveness, everlasting joy and humility before the Creator, did not find lodging in the petrified chambers of Mobatu's heart.

Upon his arrival in the fortress, Tuck had attempted to preach to Mobatu, mostly out of his continually growing sense that he had little left to lose. Tuck had preached well and in the Spirit, but to no avail. Although one of the translators remarked to the Friar as guards were leading him away to the dungeon, that no other Christian Preacher had ever held Mobatu's ear for so long.

As a young man, Mobatu had paid his pirate mercenaries handsomely to deliver captured followers of the Son of the Living God, so that he could enjoy feeding them to lions in the old Roman style which he had studied at length. But in his later years, Mobatu found the simplicity, and irony, of crucifying Christians to be one of his greatest delights.

Friar Tuck's hands were unbound by a guard who used a long machete to slice the leather straps. The translation finally arrived that Mobatu intended to have the English Nobles grovel at his feet first, and that the hanging of Tuck from a tree would be used as a grand finale to the morning's entertainment.

A plan quickly formulated in Robin's mind. What the plan lacked in intricacy and cleverness, it made up for in its bold simplicity and forthrightness. As Robin and Little John reached the dais that held Mobatu's throne, they were hurled to the ground by Nubian guards.

Mobatu stood, raised his scepter in the air and bellowed a victory whoop which was left un-translated. At the moment when the tyrant's lungs were fully empty, but had yet to begin inhaling again, Robin leapt to his feet and delivered a lightning fast kick of his foot upward into Mobatu's groin.

The supreme and unquestioned power of Mobatu in the city and environs of Timbuktu had been longstanding. No one would so much as disagree with

him, much less confront him and very much less attack him. After all, it would be suicide. As a result, and to the great benefit of the Englishmen, the entire assembly, including the guards, was momentarily shocked and awed into inaction.

The force of impact from Robin's boot not only crushed Mobatu's unprotected scrotum, but was also enough to propel the dictator's lion-head crown high into the air. John reached up and grabbed the crown, and the Ruby within, on its way down. Stowing the trophy under his arm, he bolted for the back door. Meanwhile, Robin snatched up Mobatu's fallen scepter and gave the hurting king a solid whack on the back of the head with it as he passed by close on John's heels. The kneeling, moaning heap of a strongman collapsed and was silent.

While all this had been happening, Friar Tuck, who was silently but fervently praying, yelped out a great "Hallelujah!" using the monastic breathing technique which allowed hymns and psalms to be sung at an exceptionally loud volume by relaxing the diaphragm and drawing breath from the lower reaches of the torso.

His shout echoed wildly in the roomy great hall, and further dismayed the already shocked onlookers. Then with a burst of strength that he would later attribute to Divine intervention, Tuck grabbed the cross that was to have been the apparatus of his execution and swung it in a mighty arc that floored the four guards around him, leaving them all laid flat with broken ribs and arms. At the end of the swing he let the cross fly into the crowd, and the chaos in the chamber was complete.

Tuck sprinted as fast as he could toward the doorway with Robin and John just ahead of him. The Friar reached the door and stopped to swing it shut behind him before following his friends up the tower steps to an unknown fate. The last thing he saw out in the hall as the door swung shut was a horde of fifty screaming Nubian axe-men racing toward him.

*

A good meal did much for Raven's spirit. The friars had slaughtered and prepared a cow that day, and the entire group of Byzantines, English folk and Franciscans enjoyed the feast together. They also savored hot buttery cakes made of barley-meal, greens with olive oil, lemon juice and salt sprinkled all over, a variety of cheeses, hot chicken broth with chopped garden vegetables, and red wine. For dessert the friars produced bowls of fresh fruit and still more cheese.

To this course Theodora added a box of sumptuous sticky pastries made with honey and crispy layers of chopped nuts and a kind of thin breading. She also brought out a bottle of reddish after-dinner liquor that left anyone who partook feeling warm and a little tipsy.

Theodora and Raven sat eating and talking quietly, while John and Michael regaled the soldiers of the Byzantine company with stories from their journey across Western Europe. They played their temporary musical instruments and sang portions of the tale using improvised rhymes.

The soldiers were thrilled. Even Theodora's two Varangian Guards loosened a little and came dangerously close to enjoying themselves. They tore through their steaks, and then demanded beer refills from the Friars with increasing frequency.

Raven swallowed her second cup of the Princess' red liquor, and rolled her neck to help ease out the tension that had so long lingered there. "Thank you so much." She smiled.

"For what?" Theodora wondered.

Looking around at the troops and her friends entertaining them she answered, "This is the first time in a long while that I have felt safe, and it feels very good."

"I am glad for that." Theodora smiled back. "And you will be safe for as long as we travel together. These men are my Pronoiar Allagion; they serve me in anticipation of gifts of land to reward their loyalty. They are mostly Hunnish and grew up on horseback with a bow in their hands. They are no less fierce with their lances and swords. No soldiers on God's earth could challenge these men, save for my father's own Kataphraktoi, by whom these men were trained for this duty."

Raven started crying again, but still smiled. "I'm sorry." She wiped her cheeks on the backs of her sleeves. "So much has happened...I have questioned everything I thought I believed." She looked up at the ceiling, unable to go on.

"Your friend," Theodora interjected. "He is special to you." She did not phrase it as a question.

"Cuthbert, yes," Raven smiled again, but with a pained look. "His injuries are my fault. I should not have demanded that he come with me..." She looked on the verge of tears once again.

Theodora took her hands. "I know you did not cause his injuries yourself; he will live, and he will heal. Remember, these men you fear hold no power in Byzantium or Vienna. And when we arrive in Vienna you and your friends will be safer still; my fiancé will see to that."

"Who is he?" Raven asked.

"Leopold," Theodora happily answered, but Raven noticed a hint of anxiety in her voice. "King Leopold VI of Austria"

"Oh my," Raven was genuinely impressed.

"He is an amazing man and king. Many wonderful works have been wrought by his hand with many more in the making. He has inspired Austria to a greatness it has never known before. He is dashing, thoughtful, generous, well proportioned..." She trailed off with a wink.

“But?” Raven pressed, sensing an underlying nervousness in her new friend.

Theodora blushed. She whispered. “It’s just that he’s more than twice my age.”

“Oh my,” Raven blurted again. “How old is he?” She whispered.

“Forty,” the Princess covered the side of her mouth when she said it.

“How old are you...if I may?” Raven pressed.

“Seventeen,” Theodora held the back of her neck and looked down.

“You’re only seventeen...I thought you were older than me,” Raven wondered.

“How old are you...if I may?”

“Seventeen”

“I thought you were older than me!”

They giggled and then were silent for a while.

After one more drink, they decided to go check on Cuthbert. Raven fixed a small plate of easy to eat food and they retreated to his room with the two Varangians in tow. Cuthbert’s eyes were open and he smiled upon seeing Raven, who presented Princess Angeloï to him. Theodora came and stood over his bed. She prayed a prayer for healing in Greek, and then helped hold him upright while Raven fed him.

“Leopold’s doctors in Vienna will be able to help,” Theodora promised. “Please come there with me. We will protect you and help you all recover and heal until you are ready to continue your quest.”

“I do not see how we can refuse you at this point,” Raven agreed.

“You can’t.” Theodora smiled.

Just then a morsel of beef temporarily gagged Cuthbert, and he had a coughing fit. Theodora could feel his bones rattling as his frail body heaved. She knew there was more wrong with Cuthbert than the surface wounds.

“We must leave first thing in the morning,” she decided. “We will make space for him in my supply wagon. We should reach Vienna in three more days, and not a day too soon.” The Princess motioned out the window. Raven turned and saw the first snow flurries of the season in the glow of the gate lanterns.

*

After another good night’s rest they were ready to move. The good friars helped put together a gurney for Cuthbert. They double wrapped him in wool blankets and helped Michael and John carry him to the wagon. He was made comfortable and a box was set in place that could be used as a seat by whoever was watching over him.

Michael took the first turn sitting in the wagon. John rode one of the horses on which they had arrived, and Raven on another alongside Theodora.

The three horses that had been taken from the dead Inquisitor and his guards were left as gifts to the monastery.

They bid fond farewell to the friars and rode off to the northeast. The traveling went well; Cuthbert at least did not worsen. The countryside was calm and peaceful, and Raven and Theodora enjoyed the time talking. They never seemed to tire of it. The more they went on, the more similarities they discovered between their likes, dislikes, characters and pasts. Raven was convinced by the end of the first day's ride that this mysterious Greek Princess was in some way linked to her spiritually.

Raven shared some, but not all, of the details of her captivity in San Sebastiano with her new friend. Theodora said that she had heard rumor of the Inquisition, but had thought it to be only an internal disciplinary tribunal for church leaders, and not a general hunt for heretics.

The Princess was horrified at the treatment Raven described receiving from Zola, and she suggested that he must have been a rogue bishop acting without the knowledge or blessing of the Pope. This comforted Raven; she had found herself questioning the holiness of the Church itself and by extension even her own faith in God because of the ordeal.

As the sun began to set, the caravan was within sight of another monastery at which they planned to seek lodging. Theodora, the two Varangians, the Minstrels and Jack went on ahead to make arrangements with the monks. Meanwhile, the Pronoiai Allagion headed downhill to the river so they could water their horses without having to backtrack later or deplete the monastery's water supplies.

When the vanguard party entered the central square of the monastery, all was quiet. *Too quiet*, thought Raven. Michael called out greetings in Latin and Greek. The reply came in the form of a single set of footsteps. The sharp clicks on the cobblestones grew louder until a black robed figure emerged from the shadows. The light revealed an old man wrapped in the robe with a cruel skull-like face and wispy white hair.

Two mace wielding thugs then appeared on either side of the old man, and another four behind. They advanced, and another dozen soldiers appeared behind them. Then from across the square another twenty armed men emerged, and then another twenty. Before the travelers even had time to think, they were nearly surrounded by close to one hundred hostile soldiers.

The old man approached the group, but stopped about ten feet away from Theodora and Raven's horses. He visually examined the entire group, but kept refocusing his piercing gaze on Raven, who felt like icy water was flowing through her veins. *They've found us after all*, she thought, *and Theodora's horsemen are not here to save us.*

The old man parted his withered lips and spoke in a creaking voice. "I see that we have found the British Witch who has been spreading terror and death across Christendom." Turning to Theodora he went on. "Do not believe any lies

she has told you! This woman is a deceiver, and a murderer!" Jack let out a low growl, and John hopped out of the wagon to restrain him as several of the soldiers brandished their weapons menacingly.

"If you have any evidence of your claims, I should like to see it now," Theodora replied coolly.

"How dare you question me woman?" the old man shrieked. "Are you my judge? I answer to no one save for his Holiness Honorius in Rome – and certainly not to any woman!" The old man's face was growing red with rage.

"And surely a man of such stature and wisdom as to serve the honorable Father in Rome directly would not make the rash, and dare I say dangerous, error of condemning an innocent person without first displaying proper evidence and personally seeing that every element of fair criminal procedure is strictly and obediently observed." Theodora was just stalling.

The old man was livid. "You will hold your tongue if you wish to keep it!" He hissed with spittle flying from his twisted mouth. "I see that this vile English enchantress has clouded your minds. I am afraid I have no choice but to place you all under the arrest of the Inquisition!"

There it was. Theodora at least knew who she was dealing with, and decided to return the favor. "Your concern is ill placed, good bishop," Theodora nearly shouted, trying to delay further. "The one speaking to you now is none other than Princess Angeloi of Byzantium, and I can assure you that my mind has not been clouded by the woman you see beside me, and that she is wrongly blamed for the crimes you describe.

"If you are genuinely interested in arriving at the truth of the matter, which I know you must be as a servant of the Church, then I am afraid that you must face the unpleasant reality that the guilty party in the events to which you refer may in fact be one of your very own order."

The elderly Inquisitor screamed in his rage. "I will have you flogged here in this square for your...*impertinence*...you wretched...*bitches*!"

With that the two Varangian Guards dismounted, stepped forward and stood on either side of Theodora brandishing their broad axes. The Inquisitor snorted at them and shouted his command to the small army that encircled the travelers.

"Kill the Vikings! Bind the others! And bring me the two witches, stripped and ready for the whip!"

The circle of soldiers slowly tightened. Michael moved his horse right beside Raven's. Raven moved her hand down to the silver dagger at her waist. Inside the wagon, Cuthbert gripped the knife that John had left with him. The two Varangians stomped their feet and groaned; they were calling up the Berserker Rage of their kind.

Theodora made one last attempt at buying time by shouting, "Wait! There is something you do not know!"

The Inquisitor sneered. "Do not attempt your tricks on me, foul demoness!"

"It's not a trick!" Theodora desperately sought for words. "Do you not know that the Living God will punish you for wrongly wielding your power within the church? Do you not realize that you will be held to account for your actions by the King of Kings, all the more so because you have acted in His Holy Name? Can you not see that justice waits for you and you are knocking on its door?" She cast her stern glance across the crowd of soldiers and they hesitated at her ominous words.

"Enough!" The Inquisitor was hysterical. "Attack!" he raged at his soldiers. They surged forward, and the ground shook. In fact, it shook quite a bit; more trembling than would be expected from a mere one hundred foot soldiers.

"Allagion!" Theodora wailed from her belly.

At the sight of the swiftly approaching horses, the Inquisitor bellowed new commands to his troops. "Form a line!" he shouted repeatedly.

The footmen were able to assemble a wall of shields and spears before the horses closed the gap, but they may as well have set up a protective barrier of warm butter. The Pronoiai Allagion loosed a swarm of arrows as they approached and then readied their lances for impact.

Their heavily armored steeds swept through the ranks of foot soldiers like a fire through dry kindling, utterly destroying them. The first pass lasted only a few seconds, but left nearly a third of the Papal troops dead or mortally wounded. The remaining two-thirds threw themselves on the ground and begged for mercy.

The most immediate problem after the very short battle had ended was how to calm down the two Varangians. Between them they unnecessarily killed six more Italians before Theodora was able to calm them. In the milieu, the Inquisitor disappeared.

Theodora granted the remaining enemy soldiers their lives in exchange for their solemn promise to travel to Rome and deliver a note she quickly composed to the Pope. The note demanded action against rogue Inquisitors and that restitution be paid to the victims of these religious predators.

The defeated troops, after digging a mass grave for their dead, were allowed to camp near the monastery and tend their own wounds. Only a minimal guard was necessary; the Italians were completely terrified after having witnessed even an abbreviated *Beserker*gang.

A very nervous group of Dominican Monks emerged after the killing was finished and helped with the wounded, which included only two riders of the Allagion. The travelers spent a restless night in the monastery and moved on first thing in the morning.

The next two days of travel were uneventful. Raven and Theodora passed the time talking and getting to know one another better.

“Tell me about Britannia,” Theodora requested.

“Well, the part of the islands that I come from is called England. And the part of England I come from is called Nottinghamshire. Nottingham is the city there, but Locksley is the name of my father’s estate where I lived,” Raven explained.

“Your father is a noble, yes?” Theodora verified.

“Yes.”

“You are noble through and through,” Theodora assessed. “I knew it from the moment I met you.”

“This dress you have given me no doubt helps with that point of view.” Raven blushed as she looked down at the blue Byzantine embroidered dress and cape that Theodora had shared with her.

“It does fit you quite well.” Theodora looked Raven up and down. “But your nobility is evident in your face, your deportment and your gentility. And your friend Michael, he is noble as well?”

“Why do you say that?” Raven looked at the Princess.

“For the same reasons I see in you,” Theodora answered.

Raven pondered the issue for a moment. “I do not know. He was a church orphan, but he grew up with me and the others in Sherwood.”

“This Sherwood, you have mentioned it before. Is it another estate?” Theodora wondered.

Raven smiled. “Of sorts,” In her mind she could see and smell the damp forest floor in the morning dew. “Sherwood is a forest; a grove really, not much larger than the valley we are in now. But it is thick with old, old trees; giant oaks and ash, birch, and some pine. Endless shrubs and brambles make it a veritable labyrinth unless you know the way.”

“It sounds like a wonderful place to have grown up.”

“It was,” Raven answered. “It is.”

*

Friar Tuck kept a good pace charging up the tower steps. Forty years of twice daily climbing his church belfry to sound the noonday and eventide tolls had made him a strong stair climber, with solid endurance. Nevertheless, the axe men were gaining.

When Little John reached the top of the steps he turned, and after prying loose the Jaguar’s Heart and swapping it to Robin for the scepter, hurled the golden lion’s head crown at the lead Nubian. The heavy crown smashed into the approaching soldier’s head and sent him careening backwards. The other

soldiers shoved him against the wall and forged onward, but the delay allowed Tuck to regain his lead.

By the time the Friar made it to the top, Robin and John were already out on the roof of the tower, where the mysterious flying machine rested on a long thin platform. The body of the craft looked like the hull of a very small boat, but only the frame without the outer shell. The wood was dark, shiny and thin. Planks across the bottom offered just enough seating for the three men.

Spanning the width of the tower top were thin fabric wings that looked to be of a stretched hide that was so well oiled it was almost translucent. The very thin framing that held the hides was folded in on itself, suggesting that the wings were capable of expanding.

As Friar Tuck barricaded the door to the stairwell, John raced to undo the chains that kept the craft moored in place, using Mobatu's scepter as a hammer to dislodge the chain anchors. Meanwhile, Robin, after stuffing the Jaguar's Heart inside his shirt, had leapt inside the craft and was analyzing the controls.

He observed a complex web of thin cords and tiny pulleys that networked throughout the wings. Two levers near the front of the craft appeared to control the wings, and were mounted on either side of the only actual seat. Another lever in the back linked to a similar mechanism of cords, pulleys and stretched fabric that looked remarkably like a bird's tail feathers.

Robin surmised that if they could somehow slide the craft off its platform into the air, the wings might unfold and provide enough lift for the ship to stay airborne. The alternative was grim as the axe men made short work of the thick wooden door and charged out onto the roof.

Tuck dove inside the wooden hull while Little John began shoving the craft from behind. It slid easily along the smooth platform, and John was at a full run by the time they came to the end of the tower's roof. Robin slid into the front seat and positioned himself to wield the controls with the greatest possible leverage.

In the instant before the craft slid over the edge, Tuck reached out a hand. John grabbed it and threw his body forward while Tuck exerted all his strength to haul his large friend inside. All three men gripped the frame and held their breath, as the ship seemed for a moment to hang in the air.

Robin let out a crazed yodel, while his two partners in peril closed their eyes and felt their stomachs rise into their hearts as the strange bird they clung to pitched forward and plunged straight down toward the city streets far below.

The whirr of flying axes buzzed right over their heads as some of the angry Nubian guards flung their weapons in a final attempt to kill the pale and brazen intruders. Though all of them missed, the hard stone streets below Mobatu's high tower were poised to finish the job in just a few heartbeats.

Verse Six – Winter in Vienna

The last night before reaching Vienna, the travelers camped under the stars. From the open hilltop, they could see a great distance in every direction. Riders of the Pronoiai Allagion rotated throughout the night on watch duty, but there was no sign of anyone following them.

Nevertheless, the Minstrels played no music and they kept the campfires very small. Raven could not sleep. She was terrorized through the night by visions of Zola and his white haired successor. Sometimes she dreamed of being chased and hunted; other times of being caged and tortured.

Theodora slept most of the night, but was occasionally awakened when Raven would let out a stifled scream. Each time, Theodora comforted her and urged her to try and rest.

Cuthbert was not sleeping either, but because of a different kind of pain. His skin and bones and muscles were still damaged, but had improved as more days went by without being beaten. And yet a more insidious enemy had found him. Diseases that he normally would have defeated before ever knowing they were there, because of his weakened condition were able to gain a foothold.

He felt hot then cold and then hot again. His stomach churned, and his appetite for food was slackening. His body was stiff and the slightest touch pained him. The depth of the agony that consumed him as he lay helpless in the back of the royal supply wagon was greater even than the torture he had received during his long imprisonment.

Cuthbert invoked the same method he had used all along to deal with the pain. He prayed. The only trouble was, the pain so clouded his mind that he could scarcely formulate words with which to entreat his Savior and Almighty. While in prison, his silent cries for help and rescue had gone unanswered for so long that he had given up on thinking such things.

Instead the tormented minstrel, always a bright lad and with the memory of a True Bard, leaned his mind completely on the unchanging rock of God's own words.

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth*

He let his mind recall the scriptures that brought him peace.

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled
Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.*

As he drifted near the edge of consciousness, however, even the mental task of recalling memorized words became too difficult.

Cuthbert let out a tiny groan so insignificant that it did not even reach his own ears. He wept inwardly at his helplessness, at the meaninglessness of his pain, and for his broken body that was slowly losing its flame of life.

A few moments later, there was a slight breeze and a stirring in the dust under the supply wagon. Cuthbert felt the back of the wagon dip momentarily as if someone had jumped inside with him. He lacked the energy to open his eyes and satisfy his curiosity, and yet was certain that someone was now sitting alongside him.

Cuthbert lay silent, slowly breathing in and breathing out.

Finally, the voice spoke. It was a man's voice, deep and clear and yet so quiet Cuthbert held his breath to listen.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

The surprise gave Cuthbert the strength to part his eyelids. He looked up at the large man leaning toward him. In the flicker of fire and starlight from outside, Cuthbert could see a dim outline of the figure. Though he could not see the man's face, Cuthbert did not sense any aggression or threat from him.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God," the voice continued, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Cuthbert opened his mouth and tried to ask a question, but the only sound to emerge was as if an owl had called from miles away, "Who..."

The man leaned in, and his face became visible. His eyes shone with unspeakable joy. Cuthbert felt the man breathe on his face, and the pain began to seep out of his body. He felt as if clear clean water was passing over and through him, inside and out, washing away the sickness and the pain.

"Lord?" Cuthbert whispered, and then he fell asleep.

Raven stirred, and feeling the need to relieve herself, stepped out of her tent. Returning from the woods, she had just rounded the side of the supply wagon when the large man jumped out of the back. At first she thought it was John.

"Oh," she said when she realized it was not. Although she had never seen the man before, she did not feel frightened at his sudden appearance. Even when the man reached out a hand toward her, she did not flinch. He placed his strong hand on her shoulder and gripped it gently but firmly. When he spoke her legs lost their strength, but his hand steadied her and kept her from falling.

"Raven, do not be afraid. I will always be with you," the man promised.

She lowered her eyes and started to cry. The man's presence was so overwhelming; she could not even look at him.

"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world," the man spoke and then removed his hand from her.

Raven remembered nothing else until she awoke inside her tent at sunrise. Theodora was already outside organizing the men for departure. They left within the hour and by late afternoon Vienna was in sight. Cuthbert slept the rest of the journey with Raven at his side. She longed for him to awaken so she could tell him about her encounter, but as time went on she started telling herself that she had only dreamed it.

*

Mobatu's airship plunged straight down toward the streets of Timbuktu. Robin struggled against the relentless forces of wind and gravity, gripping and pulling on the control levers with all his might. Friar Tuck screamed, "Kyrie Eleison!", as he saw the tiny people below rapidly growing larger. Little John did his best to hold on and keep from losing his breakfast.

Just seconds from impact, a blast of desert wind righted the ship's attitude. The membranous wings unfolded on their own and caught the air currents. Robin applied every muscle in his body to the task, and the levers moved resulting in a mighty flap of the ship's wings. The airship whooshed forward onto a course parallel to the ground.

Frightened onlookers on the roofs of houses dove for cover and screamed as the great and terrible bird buzzed overhead, just feet from some of the taller buildings. Both Robin and Tuck whooped with joy and delight as they took flight across the city outskirts.

As they passed over the outer walls, John lost his struggle against nausea and sprayed his morning meal out through the bottom of the ship's hollow frame. A group of Nubian axe men on the upper parapets were showered in his smelly vomit and shook their weapons in rage.

The great bird swooped away from the city and Robin, who was beginning to gain a better sense of the controls, leveled its flight and guided the bird into a northerly course. They flew over the hot morning Sahara sands at an increasingly rapid speed. Robin beat the wings steadily by slowly moving the levers back and forth.

Tuck grabbed hold of the tail controls and followed Robin's orders for making turns. John maintained his death grip on the ship's frame and served as ballast. Robin flew them as close to the ground as he dared. He knew that if they crashed, there would be no re-launching the bird.

After an hour of flight, they spotted a camel caravan running across the desert. Before he could even see their faces, Robin knew it was al-Jakari and his pirate's crew. Reaching into his tunic, Robin pulled out the Jaguar's Heart and held it outside the ship's frame. The sun gleamed through the facets of the giant gem and it glowed with a brilliant red light.

"Throw me the Heart!" al-Jakari yelled; jumping up and down and madly waving his arms as the bird drew close.

Robin flew so low that the pirates fell from their camels into the hot sand out of fear of being clipped on the head. The Merry Men waved to the Jackal as they howled laughter. Robin promptly slid the Ruby back inside his shirt and the bird shot away over the northern horizon. The sound of the Englishmen's laughter and celebration rang in al-Jakari's ears for some time.

Already strained by the heat, the old Pirate's mind snapped and he began raving about the manifold layers of revenge he planned to wreak upon Robin, his household, England, and all of Christendom at that. His men finally calmed him enough to continue their long desert trek, but the seething coals of rage burned hot in the belly of the Jackal.

Having had their fun with the pirates, Robin and friends settled in for the long flight ahead. When their laughter finally had receded to an occasional twitch, Friar Tuck brought up a point that had been weighing heavily on his mind.

"You will have to let it go," Tuck screamed against the wind.

"What's that, Friar?" Robin strained to hear.

"The Heart – you have to let go of it! It holds too much evil spirit!" the Churchman wailed.

"What's he saying John?" Robin asked his friend who was closer by.

"You have to pitch the Ruby, Robin," John bellowed.

Robin pulled the gem out of his shirt again and marveled at its beauty and size. He shouted back to John. "You mean I spend half a year of my life running around Africa with the two of you and a gang of pirates, become imprisoned in an impenetrable fortress, and nearly killed, and I don't get to keep this prize?"

John relayed his argument to Tuck.

The message came back. "It has to be hidden where no one will ever find it!"

"Any suggestions?" Robin responded.

No response came back immediately.

After passing over several giant shifting sand dunes, Little John shouted to direct their attention to a large sweeping valley ahead and to the right. Tuck steered the craft appropriately, and soon they saw what John was thinking. They were just moments away from flying over a desert sinkhole.

Sand rushed from all directions toward the ravenous pit. Robin knew there would never be a better opportunity to rid the world of this red idol that had been used for such evil. And yet doubt gnawed at him.

Could the talisman not also be used for great good? A man who could not be killed in battle could be the ultimate champion of the poor and oppressed!

Little John did not wait for words from the Friar. He screamed at Robin. "Do it!" John did not see action from his friend so he tapped him on the shoulder with Mobatu's scepter. Robin peered back at John who waved the scepter and grinned as he said, "Besides, we still have this!"

Robin saw Friar Tuck wink at him.

Just before they passed over the upper rim of the valley, Robin lobbed the giant ruby backward over his shoulder. The idol streaked red through the air and slid down the sliding sandy slope. Friar Tuck turned and watched as the mighty Sahara swallowed up the Heart of the Jaguar.

Throughout the rest of that long scorching day, and then the cold windy night, the three Englishmen stayed awake, stayed in control of the ship, and raced through the air at a break neck speed. By the time a full rotation of the Earth passed, they had crossed one thousand miles of desert.

As the sun rose up over the eastern sands, the Atlas Mountains came into view. Badly dehydrated, burned from the sun and wind, and exhausted beyond endurance, they gently steered the creaking and moaning air ship toward the northeast, hoping to land somewhere near Tunis.

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Upon reaching Vienna, the first order of business was taking Cuthbert to the king's hospital. Leopold employed three veteran Knights Hospitaller as his personal medical staff. Michael stayed with Cuthbert as the doctors took over his care. John stayed with Raven as her escort and Theodora took them to the palace to clean up before meeting the king.

John was treated like royalty by the male attendants, who also provided comfortable kenneling for Jack. Meanwhile, the ladies of Leopold's court made the Princess and Raven as comfortable, clean and refreshed as was humanly possible.

I have not been taken such good care of since leaving Locksley, Raven pondered.

"What are you thinking about?" Theodora asked as both she and Raven had their scalps oiled and their hair brushed and braided.

"My home," Raven replied.

"Not even the glory of victory in battle can match the joy in the comfort of home," Theodora suggested.

"It is odd," Raven agreed. "All my life I wanted to venture out; to see the world. Yet, the more of it I see, the more I long for the place I was before." She paused as all four of her limbs were taken over by attendants performing simultaneous manicures and pedicures.

The young ladies continued enjoying their luxurious treatments and philosophical musings for nearly an hour. By then the king had heard of their arrival and was asking to see them.

Theodora was put into a green silk dress with long sleeves. All of the trim was real gold, including the tiny bells and sequins that adorned the hems and cuffs. An elegant dark green cape was draped around her shoulders. For Raven, they chose a deep blue dress that brought out her eyes and a simple light blue

cape. After a quick perfuming and moisturizing of their lips, the court ladies finally consented to send the Princess and her new friend before the king.

King Leopold was an impressive sight. Nearly as tall as John, he was muscular and much more handsome than Theodora had described. Dressed in black pants and coat, his red cape flowed out behind him as he quick stepped across his great hall to greet Theodora and her companions. Dismissing kingly procedure, he swept up his fiancé and spun her around before setting her back on her feet.

They kissed politely and the Princess introduced Raven and John. The king nodded to the younger Son of Thunder, and then came to Raven. He took his time and was very deliberate in the way he kissed the back of her hand. Theodora acted as if she did not notice.

Theodora briefly explained about the unfortunate treatment that Raven and Cuthbert had received at the overzealous hands of the Italians. She told Leopold about their defeat of the Inquisitor's horde and flight to the safety of Vienna. The king did not appear surprised to hear of the Inquisition's long arm.

"Any friend of Theodora is a friend of Austria!" Leopold declared. "Your companions will of course receive the best medical care we can provide, and if there is anything further that I can do, you need only to say the word. I would move mountains to please my bride to be!" He grinned, surveying the group.

"If I may, your majesty," John hesitated.

"Yes, lad," the king encouraged.

"My lord, before we were waylaid in San Sebastiano, we traveled with a company of seventy other Englishmen. My brother was among them. We know that their intent was to join with the Teutonic Crusade, but that they would not leave for the Holy Land without us." John paused to breathe and formulate his request.

"Say no more," Leopold interrupted. "If they are still within a thousand miles of here, I will find word of them." The king called for a scribe to take more information about James and the Nottingham Crusaders, and to arrange for messages to be sent. When John was finished with the scribe, he made his way back to the hospital.

The three Hospitallers had forced Michael to submit to medical care, and did the same to John when he arrived. Though neither of them was nearly as damaged as Cuthbert, they had been through a lot. All three of the mangled Minstrels spent the rest of the week recuperating in the hospice, and Cuthbert remained bed ridden until the week before the Christ Mass.

Though she prayed and broke fast every morning in the hospital with Cuthbert, much of Raven's time during the days was occupied assisting Theodora in her plans and preparations for her wedding. Although the anticipated nuptials were not scheduled until late in the coming summer, Theodora reasoned that the entire time span would be necessary for the preparations to be handled correctly.

She was thrilled to have Raven, another young lady of nobility, at her side to share in the giddy joy of shopping, fussing and agonizing over the never ending parade of decisions, both large and small. The Princess spent liberally out of her deep Byzantine purse, and the merchants of Vienna became exceedingly fond of her, and Raven as well.

As the spirit of the Christ's Mass settled over the snowy city, Raven became overwhelmed with joy and happiness. Her deep spiritual wounds from the Inquisition began to heal.

Her time with Theodora was filled with laughter and lightness, though they also spent many hours, often late into the night, sharing secrets and dreams and stories. They even prayed together. In a very short time, each became for the other the sister they had always longed for, but never truly had.

Raven also prayed frequently by herself, virtually any time she was alone, pouring out her heart in thanks giving to God. She thanked him for her friends, for sparing her life, for His forgiveness of her many sins. She also prayed for her father and brother, as well as James and the men.

By the time Yuletide arrived, Cuthbert was on his feet with the help of a walking-stick. This answer to her most fervent of prayers delighted Raven, and she was also very pleased to see John and Michael looking as hale and hearty as she remembered them in England.

The celebrations of the Christ Mass in Vienna were always warm and filled with love. Music filled the streets, and food overflowed the tables of homes and inns. On the eve of the Mass, Leopold gathered his entire court for a lavish feast. Raven was given a very honorable seat right next to Theodora, just two seats from the king. Michael and John ate in one of the side rooms so that Cuthbert could recline.

After the Lord's blessing was requested by the king, the palace staff began entering from every direction, each with a pitcher of red wine in one hand and white in the other. As the first servers exited, another wave entered bearing platters full of stacked cups and water pitchers. Then the first batch returned with overflowing baskets of hot bread with melted sweet butter drizzled on top.

The steady stream of activity continued and the tables were soon covered in delicious fare; both green and ripe olives stuffed with cheese and fish, bowls of steaming garlicky broth, strips of salted ham wrapped around a variety of juicy fruits, discs of eggplant flash fried in oil and wine, and tiny hot sausages with a plethora of tangy dipping sauces.

And those were just the aperitifs. The platters of meat for the main course were legion. Every manner of fish, fowl and four legged food was present. The centerpiece was a trio of choice roasted lambs. Clear juices hissed and the hall was bathed in the mouth-watering smell as servants peeled off strips of succulent roast.

The diners cooled their palates after gorging on the hot and spicy meats with crispy vegetables splashed with berries and vinaigrette. Later, bowls of

nuts, honeycombs, chocolates and tiny raisin cakes were set about for munching and the crowd became increasingly festive. The wine never stopped flowing.

Leopold employed two Paduan Troubadours that added to the atmosphere with upbeat instrumental music during dinner. One sat and played a large harp with uncanny precision. The other stood and bowed an Italian Viol da Gamba, like a fiddle but so long that one end rested on the ground. The Viol made a low and mournful sound in complete counterpoint to the high and bright tones emanating from the harp. The combination was rich and full sounding and very satisfying to hear.

Raven enjoyed the music as much as the wonderful feast. She also enjoyed watching Leopold. He overflowed with a joyful exuberance that energized his followers. The Viennese loved their king, and Raven could see why Theodora was willing to look past their age discrepancy and enjoy her relationship with this dynamic leader.

The Princess had revealed the musical nature of their English guests to Leopold. The king was eager to hear music from far off Britannia and periodically hinted so to Raven. The spirit of the Christ Mass slowly worked in Raven and eventually she slipped away from the table to visit with her friends in the side room.

They were way ahead of her. When she entered, Cuthbert was standing unaided with a lute strapped over his shoulder; his fingers working the strings. Vitality seemed to be cascading back into Cuthbert's body with every moment he held the instrument in his hands. John was already tapping his fingers on the tambourine, and Michael was wetting the end of a simple reed flute that one of the Hospitallers had given him as a gift.

"Will you help us praise the birth of our Lord, my lady?" Cuthbert asked Raven as she stood gazing at him.

She ran across the room and almost crushed the lute hugging him. "Oh, Cuthbert," she sighed into his neck, "Are you really strong enough to play?"

"I have never felt better," he lied.

"You look so much better." She touched his left hand and he stopped playing. They stared at each other for a moment. "Yes," Raven finally answered his question. "Let us praise Him indeed."

At a pause in the music, the quartet walked out together to the side of the king's table and began to play. The Troubadours watched and listened to them curiously for a few moments, observing how the English communicated and cued each other musically before they joined in.

Raven had chosen one of the few Nativity hymns that she knew in Latin to begin with, and the crowd was elated. With the amount of wine they had imbibed though, the carols that Raven performed later in English and Gaelic were equally well received.

Singing again with loved ones around her, and without fear, was a healing balm to Raven's soul. The subtle qualities of her voice transmitted the

indescribable comfort she found in this to the listeners. Those guests at the feast that had been feeling depressed suddenly felt renewed and happy, and those that had been happy were nearly delirious with joy.

The Troubadours were thrilled by the musical company, and beckoned with their hands for the others to stand with them. Six all together, the musicians played into the night creating a celebration that Vienna would talk about for years to come.

By the end of the night, Cuthbert had been transformed. Through the act of playing music, his body remembered how it was supposed to function at its best.

*

From the Christ Mass onward, Cuthbert's healing accelerated. He gained weight. His color and posture were restored, and he soon began walking unaided for longer and longer distances.

Raven continued starting every day alongside Cuthbert all through the winter. She made a point of always being there in his room when he first opened his eyes in the morning. On those occasions when he had awoken earlier, Cuthbert pretended to be asleep until after she arrived.

Michael and John continued working with Cuthbert as well, exercising together and gently pushing him to build his body back to full strength. They realized that a long Crusade road still lay ahead, and wanted their friend to be ready for whatever might come.

Even during the cold and snowy short days of winter, Leopold kept busy. He was simultaneously overseeing the construction of half a dozen monasteries in the countryside surrounding Vienna. He supported a variety of monastic orders including Franciscans and Dominicans, as well as a number of convents, abbeys and orphanages. Within Vienna itself, he was putting the finishing touches on a series of hanging gardens that he wished to be ready for spring planting.

On the political front, Leopold regularly hosted both Papal emissaries and ambassadors from the Holy Roman Empire in the north. He had made himself a mediator between the two spheres of power and had gained a great deal of power for himself in the process. His alliance with the Hungarian Kingdom was solid, and his impending marriage to Theodora would cement his relationship with Byzantium.

He loved her deeply and independently of the political advantages. This was evidenced by the amount of time he spent with her. On all of his errands and missions around the area, Leopold brought Theodora along, and by extension, Raven. They would sail across the snowy Austrian hills in the king's horse drawn sleigh, often just Leopold and the two ladies snuggled under fleeces.

They alternated bringing the Pronoiai Allagion and the king's own horsemen as a military accompaniment on these outings, so that both sets of troops would remain reasonably rested. The king gave the Varangians his personal guarantee of Theodora's safety, and they grudgingly allowed themselves to be integrated under the command of the palace guard for the duration of her stay.

Cuthbert became anxious about the amount of time that the king kept Raven's company, but as he was indebted to the king for his healing he kept his thoughts to himself. His worries were ill founded anyway. Raven was happy for Theodora, and she saw Leopold as much more of a father figure.

He had many qualities in common with Robin, including his active concern for the less fortunate, his salty interests in humor, adventure and music, and his leadership style that encouraged and built up those around him.

Nevertheless, Cuthbert, and all of the Minstrels including Raven, were relieved and ecstatic to receive the news that arrived in late winter. James and the Nottingham Crusade had been located, informed of Raven's well being, and were awaiting their arrival only six days journey to the south at the Hungarian port city of Zara.

At Leopold's suggestion, Raven and her three companions met alone in a room at the palace to discuss their plans for departure and what their material needs would be. At this meeting, Raven opened the letter that James had sent back with the king's messenger and read it aloud to the others.

Greetings Friends,

God be praised that you are all alive and well! Though we have missed you all, our company has been blessed mightily during our separation. After the arrest near Brescia, I led the men east, bypassing the stink of Venice, into Austria. Hordes of Teutonic Crusaders were traveling south and we followed them to Zara, as this was known to be the gathering place for their fleet.

While keeping eyes and ears open for news of you, we were not idle these past months. Far from it! We joined company with an army of Hungarians, many of whom speak a passable Greek. These men are unparalleled soldiers and they have been most generous in sharing their marshal skills and expertise with us.

Likewise, we have benefited from the benevolence of the Austrians, I believe sponsored by your own Leopold. They generously bestowed new armor and shields upon us asking nothing in return, and let us use their sharpening stones for our swords and spears. They even left us with several wine skins and enough grain to last weeks!

The men have become formidable warriors, but God willing you will see that for yourself within just a few days. I anxiously await your arrival –

minstreling for an army is not an easy job to do alone! (I have all your instruments. They are waiting for you!)

Stay to the road on your journey to Zara. There are reports of rogues and bandits stalking the countryside; some of them Mohammedans! Yet certainly the good God who has brought you so far will see you safely here, and see us all onward to His glory in Jerusalem!

We have secured passage on one of the nearly three hundred Teutonic ships anchored in the harbor, but they will wait until you arrive. The enormity of the fleet will astound you. Our fleet that left London would seem like a small band of fishing boats by comparison.

The Austrian messenger who found us could tell me little of your condition. He spoke of the red-haired noble lady from the west and her band of minstrels, so I can only assume he was referring to Cuthbert. Pardon my jest. In any case, I trust you are all well and will be with me and the men within a fortnight.

Be wise on the road and prepare your hearts for the next portion of our great adventure together!

*With love,
James*

“We will see each other again,” Theodora assured Raven.
“I can feel it.”

Raven nodded and fought back her tears.

“I cannot tell you how much you have blessed me,” Theodora continued.

“Thank you, sister,” Raven answered. “But how can you say such a thing? You have done nothing but bless me over and over again since the moment we met. You have protected me, showered me with gifts, and because of you I have seen things no one else from England will ever see. You certainly have been a blessing; I dare say that you are a gift of God. Yet I have done nothing but receive of your kindness and grace, and I am unable to offer anything to you in exchange for all you have done for me and my friends.”

Theodora smiled. “I have never met a woman braver than you, Raven of Locksley, or more caring, or more true. You have a fire inside; your music, your voice. You have these abilities and powers that I do not even understand. I have done nothing, other than being born, to deserve my wealth and pleasures, and so to share it with others is the very least I can do.

“But what you share with others, with me, is your very self. The evil churchmen, those wolves in sheep’s clothing that attacked you, wished to snuff out your light. They came close, but did not succeed, and you are stronger for it my sister, my friend.

“You will go on now to Jerusalem, or wherever our God takes you, and you will be a blessing to those who cross your path. Never forget me, and stay

close to the Lord in your thoughts and prayers. Let me give you one more gift.” Theodora pulled a ring from one of her own fingers. It bore the Imperial Insignia.

Theodora slid the ring onto Raven’s finger and it fit perfectly.

Raven was speechless.

“Wherever the power of Byzantium is still heeded,” Theodora explained. “This ring will protect you from harm and those who are loyal to the Emperor will honor you as they would me.”

They clasped hands.

“Thank you,” Raven could think of nothing else to say. “Thank you.”

Leopold approached then and said his farewells to the group. He outfitted the Minstrels with four new freshly shod horses, each bearing a saddle bag overstuffed with food and supplies. John and Michael both wore their spears across their backs, while Raven and Cuthbert each had daggers in their belts. They were given a map, water skins, and camping gear.

Finally, Leopold handed Raven a small bag. She could tell from the weight that it was full of solid gold coins. She knew the king well enough by then to understand the futility of argument with him. So she tied the bag inside her hooded robe and then mounted her horse.

For his part, Jack was eager to return to the open road and he circled frantically at the city gates. There at the gates, four riders of Theodora’s Allagion joined the Minstrels. Again, Raven could not bring herself to argue against her friend’s insistence, and she accepted the bodyguard. Theodora instructed the men to protect Raven with their lives, and to return to Constantinople after they reunited her with the Crusade.

After a last round of farewells, the party of eight riders and one dog sallied forth on the road south. The day was fair and they moved swiftly along the dirt road. Leopold and Theodora stood together at the gates, still watching and praying as the riders disappeared over the horizon.

Verse Seven – One Last Rescue

The small grove of palm trees looked like as good a place as any to Robin for crashing the air ship, so he flew the bird straight into the leafy treetops. The craft mostly disintegrated on impact, and the three weary riders were tossed a good thirty feet, landing with an enormous triple splash in the center of a small oasis lagoon.

As soon as they stopped flailing, they realized that the lagoon was shallow enough to stand. They spent the balance of that day, and the entire day following, drinking water, bathing their scorched bodies, sipping milk from many of the hundreds of coconuts that their crash had scattered on the ground and resting in the protective shade of the coconut grove.

“Does this oasis seem familiar to either of you?” John asked.

“I was just thinking that, John,” Robin affirmed. “Apart from the trees we knocked down, I would say this oasis is identical to the first one we visited at the beginning of our long journey to Timbuktu.”

“I think you are right,” Friar Tuck agreed, “in which case there is a village just a short walk that way.” He motioned toward the horizon.

“Then we will rest one more night here, and head north in the morning with all the coconuts we can carry,” Robin decided. “I only wish we had something other than coconuts to trade for more supplies.”

John produced the stolen scepter, and that evening they carefully worked on prying loose the various tiny gems that studded the wand. When they set out on foot the next morning, they had a handful each of rubies, emeralds, sapphires, diamonds and amethysts in their purse.

John discarded the stripped scepter in the lagoon, and by noon they reached a fairly large village where they were able to take a leisurely afternoon in the shaded streets first selling some gems and then bargaining for supplies.

The earnings from the rubies alone purchased three camels, water skins, food, new tunics, cloaks, sandals, a tent, staves for them all and a small hunting bow with a full quiver of arrows for Robin.

They reached Tunis in three more days, sold the camels and began looking for passage by sea. In a crowded, smoky tavern near the port they met a ship captain who provided them with valuable information.

The small brown-skinned Venetian seaman informed them that the English crusader fleet of the previous year had not proceeded all the way to Palestine. To his knowledge, the thirty ship fleet had been intercepted by Papal Galleons bearing instructions from Rome.

The Pope had requested that, rather than landing directly in the Holy Land and being overwhelmed by the Saracens, the English Crusade detour and join forces with the gathering Teutonic Horde. Their ultimate success and glorification of God would be all the more assured, the Pope reasoned.

The sea captain reported that the English Crusaders had obediently turned their ships north into the Adriatic Sea and made for Zara, the Hungarian port city.

“Then we can catch up with them while they are still in Europe! God be praised!” Robin cried.

“Then you wish to sail with us to Venice?” The sea captain grinned.

“How close will that place us to the port of Zara?” Robin asked.

The captain thought. “If you can afford good horses,” He scratched his head. “You will make it there in two or three days.”

“How soon can we leave Tunis?” Robin was grinning now.

*

Raven’s small group proceeded south. Their riding order stayed the same for most of the journey; two Allagion took the lead, Raven and Cuthbert rode second followed by John and Michael, and the other two Allagion held the rear.

They were mostly quiet, but in high spirits. The hospitality and help that they had received in Vienna boosted their confidence in the purpose of their mission, and the exciting prospect of finally reuniting with James and the others drove them onward.

Good weather continued to favor them, and the lengthening days and warming winds were a great encouragement as well. The four Minstrels ached to have their own instruments back, but contended themselves on the road with singing. They had learned a few new songs from Leopold’s Troubadours, and these provided hours of entertainment as they pushed south.

Just two days outside of Zara they plodded down the road as the sun began to sink behind the trees. They were starting to think about setting up camp, and everyone had their eyes out for a suitable location. Jack was running out in front of the horses as he liked to do, scouting the way ahead.

Suddenly there was a snap and a quick whooshing sound. Jack let out a terrified yelp and every head turned to see him lifted off the ground and swung into the air inside a thick rope net. Faithful Jack had sprung a snare.

The Allagion riders all reached for their swords, but were cut short in their tasks as a dozen arrows whizzed out of the woods from every direction. Fired from heavy crossbows, the iron tipped bolts penetrated the horsemen’s armor and all four of the riders fell from their horses, either dead or soon to be.

Twelve bandits, leaving their crossbows in the woods, emerged from the trees and blocked the road in both directions. They brandished a variety of weapons, from maces and clubs to spears and axes. The leader twirled a broad axe as his men closed the circle around the four Minstrels.

As they drew closer, Raven could see their dark skin and eyes. “Highwaymen,” she whispered to Cuthbert. She wondered if there was any hope of bargaining.

“You will be making a terrible mistake if you kill us,” Raven tried.

The crowd of thieves stopped in their tracks. In the gathering dark, they had not realized that Raven was a woman until she spoke, and the revelation left the bandits extremely agitated.

“Was it something I said?” she whispered.

Cuthbert made no reply but kept his gaze fixed on the bandit leader.

The leader stepped forward quickly, seized Raven by the hair and threw her on the ground. Cuthbert punched the man squarely in the nose, breaking it nicely.

The other bandits howled with rage and fell upon the minstrels. They struggled briefly, but at three to one they were simply outnumbered and overpowered by the tall dark men. All four travelers were disarmed, had their hands bound, and were placed on their knees in a row.

After the leader finally stopped his nose bleed, he lit a torch and paced back and forth in front of the captives, spitting threats and curses in an unrecognizable tongue. When he had finished this display of bravado, the bandit leader stood in front of Raven and said something that made his men laugh. Then he held the torch so close to her face that she had to close her eyes and strain backwards.

Jack finished gnawing through one of the net ropes, and began on another.

Then the bandit pulled the torch back and moved his own face close to hers. Pure hate had twisted the man’s features into grotesque shapes made all the more horrifying by the streaks of drying blood. He spat bloody spittle into her face, earning another round of laughter from his crew.

Finally, the madman decided on a form of execution, at least for Raven. He moved the torch back around behind her head and placed the flame just under the end of her braid. The hair started to smolder, and the bandit howled laughter. The stink of burning hair permeated the area instantly. Raven could feel the heat on the back of her neck.

Suddenly, the bandit’s peals of laughter took on a gurgling sound and the torch fell away from Raven’s hair. Raven instinctively threw herself backward, pinning her smoldering ponytail between her back and the earth. The fire was instantly suppressed.

She looked up and saw fresh blood pouring out of the bandit’s still grinning mouth. The bandit fell to the ground, and Raven noticed the arrow protruding from between his ribs. The arrow’s tail feathers had been trimmed to a unique shape that she had only ever seen before in one place: home.

Father? Her last coherent thought came before total chaos erupted.

More arrows came and three more bandits fell before the remaining eight huddled behind the three male captives and held them up as living shields. A moment later, a great crashing sound came from the trees and Robin, Little John and Friar Tuck burst into the clearing armed with quarter staves. They moved quickly, closing more distance between themselves and the hostage takers, before three of the bandits produced long curved knives and held them at the captives' throats.

Raven remained flat on the ground watching the stand-off above her. Tension mounted rapidly. Every player in the unfolding drama stood silently for a moment. Eyes darted back and forth. Fingers twitched. Sweat poured.

Finally a snapping sound was heard and Jack let out a howl as he began to spill from the net. The struggling animal's back legs became caught up in the netting and he swung precariously in the air. The spectacle provided a sufficient distraction to allow for a break to the impasse.

Cuthbert, Michael and John dropped to the ground and rolled away from their captors who had all glanced over to see the hanging, howling dog. Robin and his men took the opportunity to charge the thieves and a hand to hand melee ensued.

Raven curled her knees up to her chest making her body into a tiny ball. From this position she was able to slip her legs through her wrist bindings so that her hands were at least in front of her. Michael saw her move and imitated it.

Cuthbert and John also witnessed Raven's trick, but were unable to do it themselves because of their longer, lankier frames. So Raven and Michael used their front-bound hands to loosen the straps on Cuthbert and John who then returned the favor once they were free.

While this was happening, Robin and Friar Tuck each wrestled two of the bandits, and Little John kept the other four busy as they tried unsuccessfully to pull him down. The pile of eleven flailing men looked like a cyclone of arms and legs in the swirling dust. Seeing the unfair match-up of numbers, the four Minstrels raced across the road to gather their confiscated weapons so they could end the conflict for good.

None of them saw the thirteenth bandit lurking in the dark of the woods. He was the real bandit leader. The one who had tried to burn Raven had been his son. The old man pulled a round clay ball from his bag. A tiny rope stuck out of one end of the ball. The man held a small red hot chunk of smoldering incense to the end of the thin rope and it began to hiss.

No one saw the ball full of explosive Naphtha oil skidding across the road and coming to rest right in front of the brawling men, but Robin's ears caught the hissing sound as it drew near. He glanced down just in time to see the wick disappear into the bomb.

Thinking only of saving his friends, Robin grabbed two of the bandits by their necks and threw them down onto the bomb with himself on top. All three disappeared in the flash and fireball.

The Minstrels rushed into the smoky area where the blast had occurred. The six bandits who survived the explosion panicked and fled in all directions through the woods. The old man slipped away as well.

Little John and Friar Tuck were on the ground, but apart from being dazed, and a little deaf, they were unharmed. Raven freed Jack's legs from the netting, lowered him to the ground and then went to find her father.

Robin had been thrown into a tree. His body was intact, and not even badly burned, but a trickle of blood ran out of the corner of his mouth and he was unable to speak. On the inside he was utterly shattered. John helped up his father, and Michael went to the Friar as Raven and Cuthbert examined Robin.

Raven knew immediately that he was mortally wounded. The vacant expression on the old hero's face revealed the sad truth that he was already half gone. The others gathered around as Raven spoke through her streaming tears.

"Father," she gasped. "You came for me! You saved me! O, father..."

Robin glanced at his daughter and moved his lips but nothing came out.

Raven looked up at the still dazed Friar. "Tuck, what can we do?" she sobbed.

The Friar knelt down beside Robin and watched the light fading from his old friend's eyes. "Robin, you have done well my friend. We have Raven and she will be safe. Go to Marian now. See King Richard. Be with our Lord. You have run the race well, good and faithful Robin," Tuck was now weeping too. "We will see you again soon enough my friend, soon enough. Be at peace, Robin."

The dying archer turned his head to the Friar and saw Little John standing behind him. "At least we had one last adventure, my Mighty Men," Robin whispered in a distant sounding voice. Turning his head back toward Raven he met her eyes and continued, "And I got to see you one last time, and say I love you." His voice evaporated on the last word.

Raven put her hand on the side of his face. "Oh, papa...papa...I love you. Thank you, papa, for everything. And I'm sorry...for everything. Papa...papa..."

He was gone.

*

The woods were quiet around Raven and her five remaining protectors as they all wept over Robin's body. After a time, Tuck and Little John set to wrapping up the body for transporting, while the other four gathered horses and made preparations to leave.

Within the hour they had buried the four Pronoiai Allagion in shallow graves and removed their Imperial Insignias. Then they firmly strapped Robin's body to one of the Allagion horses, and the six weary and sad travelers rode on through the night and all the next day, racing to reach Zara.

The mix of emotions was overwhelming at the Minstrels' reunion with the Nottingham Crusade. The joy of seeing old friends, of Little John and Tuck seeing their sons, and of being together again as a Crusader Body was suppressed, as word spread throughout the camp that the corpse on horseback was indeed Robin of Locksley.

Nearly all of the English soldiers' lives had been affected by the Lord of Locksley in some way. Some of their fathers had been Merry Men. Robin's generosity and benevolence had touched nearly every family in the vicinity of Nottingham, both during the time of the usurper king and since.

The men hung their heads as they wept and prayed. After a while, Friar Tuck climbed atop a wagon and addressed the camp. Torchlight played on his haggard features as he searched his mind for an appropriate scripture, but could think of nothing. Tuck breathed in and breathed out, clearing his mind and opening his heart to the guidance of God's Spirit.

King Solomon's words from the Book of Ecclesiastes began to flow from his lips.

*I have seen something else under the sun:
The race is not to the swift
Or the battle to the strong,
Nor does food come to the wise
Or wealth to the brilliant
Or favor to the learned;
But time and chance happen to them all.*

*Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come:
As fish are caught in a cruel net,
Or birds are taken in a snare,
So men are trapped by evil times
That fall unexpectedly upon them*

Tuck bowed his head and all was silence for a time, until he began praying out loud, "Our Great and Gracious Lord, we thank you for the life of Robin of Locksley. Our loss of him here on earth is heaven's gain, and we praise you Lord, knowing that he will live in joy and comfort with you until we are all called to join you, or if you choose not to tarry Lord, when you mightily return.

"Receive Robin's soul, Dear Father. Lift him up to your mighty bosom on the wings of angels, and give us the strength to carry on without him. Give us strength, Lord, and guide us in your own True Path with your Holy Light. Amen."

Friar Tuck left the wagon to consult with James about the availability locally of embalming ointments for Robin's body. James felt confident that no

city closer than Venice would have sufficient quantities for sale. As the body was now a full day dead and Venice was at least three or four days away, they decided to burn Robin and carry his bones back to England for burial.

They went to Raven for approval. She agreed with the plan, and she asked to address the men as the others worked on setting up the pyre. She climbed atop the wagon where the Friar had stood. The men all watched her intently as she raised her tear streaked face in the moonlight.

Like water, her clear and cool voice washed over the men who had not heard such a sweet sound in many months. "Let it be known," Raven began. "That my father gave his life saving me and his friends. He was killed with a coward's weapon by a foe whose face was never shown. And he willingly sacrificed himself..." She was swiftly losing her composure.

Cuthbert, who had climbed up behind her, steadied Raven with a comforting hand on her shoulder. She went on. "In the words of our Holy Lord-

*Greater love has no one than this,
That he lay down his life for his friends*

She scanned the English camp with her eyes, and for the first time since their arrival that night, she noticed the changed appearance of the men. As they stood around the fires and waited on her every word, she saw that they bore almost no resemblance to the gang of boys with hunting spears that had sailed from England.

The deprivation of the Crusade Road had made them lean, tough and hard. Their weapons training and skirmishing had made them skilled and confident. They stood with poise and readiness at all times. On most of them, the ropy farming muscles of their arms and legs had been transformed into bulging warrior's limbs. Fair English skin had been tanned and weatherworn into firm leathery hides.

Most dramatically, woolen tunics and cloaks had been overlaid with bronze and leather armor. With their short swords, small shields, and overall fierce appearances, the Nottingham boys appeared to Raven as she would have imagined a detachment of Centurions from Roman times, or perhaps something even more ancient, like a small army of Spartan Hoplites on their way to defeat another grand horde from Persia.

She stared and wondered at them for so long that Cuthbert whispered, "Come", behind her, as he started to step down from the wagon.

"Wait," she whispered back.

He paused, and she turned and addressed the soldiers again.

"Sons of Nottingham," she shouted, "two years ago we left fair England to seek the will and Glory of God as His instruments of righteousness and justice in this dark and fallen world. We sailed from London on a dream and a prayer,

and I was but a lady among boys.” She smiled inwardly as many of the soldiers’ faces blushed red.

“And yet as I look at you all tonight,” she continued, “I see *men* before me. You should be proud of what you have become. You are an honor to your families and to England. And I trust the Lord to bless you as you journey on to victory and glory in the Holy Land. But alas I will not be going on with you.”

The men let out a collective but quiet gasp.

“I must take my father home,” she explained in tears. “God be with you.” She jumped past Cuthbert, ran from the camp and hid among some trees.

She came back as they lit the funeral pyre, and the light from her father’s burning body shined on Raven’s face. She watched for awhile and then crawled into her tent and cried herself to sleep. She slept through the rest of the night and did not dream.

*

At sunrise, the camp was abuzz with activity and Raven emerged from her tent to find Little John, the Friar and all of the Minstrels gathered nearby. They surrounded Raven, and Cuthbert handed her a cup of hot broth.

“What’s going on?” She blinked her eyes and took the cup.

“There is a consensus among the men,” James explained. “They will not be willingly separated from you again, Raven, nor will I. If you are going to accompany your father’s ashes back to England then the Nottingham Crusade will accompany you. It’s a settled matter.”

Raven was exasperated. She looked to Little John and the Friar for help, but they only stared at her.

“But my father came here to bring me back, did he not?” Raven asked them. “He died trying to stop me from going further on his Crusade, right?”

Friar Tuck sighed and looked down at his feet. “That was the intent we had when we set sail after you almost two years ago,” he consented. “However, I have to think that if he had only had a little more time to see the woman you have become, Raven; how you carry yourself, how the men look to you...”

“There is much of your father in you, Raven,” Little John added. “I think that he would understand. Just like you have seen a change in your soldiers, there has been a change in you. You are no longer a little girl playing in Sherwood. You’ve become a leader, and these men will go where you go. If you bring them home now, they will find work, find wives, and lead happy lives in Nottingham. But if you take them onward, maybe just a little further, you can bring them back with stories; like the stories that raised you all.”

“Raven, even with all you have been through and with all you have suffered, you have come this far, and you have survived,” Friar Tuck jumped back in. “Perhaps God is not finished with you and this mission.”

She looked at all of their faces and at the soldiers efficiently working to put the camp in order. *What is the right thing to do?* She thought. *What would my father want? What does God want? How can I know?* Her head swam with confusion and indecision.

“There is something else you need to know,” James interjected.

Raven looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

“If we sail with the Teutonic Fleet, we will not go directly to Jerusalem,” James explained.

“Where would we go?” Raven was curious.

“Egypt,” James answered. “The strategy has changed. Rather than overrunning Jerusalem once again, only to be driven out again in turn by the Mamelukes, the Teutonic Generals have devised a strategy that will be more effective in the long-term for containing Islam and protecting Christian Europe.”

James had everyone’s attention.

“Going for the throat,” James clarified. “We will attack the Muslim Caliphate at the very center of its power – in Cairo!”

“But to what end?” Raven wondered. “Would we stay and occupy them? Could we rule the Egyptians?”

“The intent of the Teutons is not to subjugate or control the Arabs, but to crush them, at least at the center of their power,” James explained. “Then a Christian Kingdom in and around Jerusalem could be built to last.”

“And what would our prospects be for reaching Jerusalem ourselves?” Raven’s mind was racing to consider all the possibilities.

“On our own,” James shook his head. “There is little chance we would survive more than a day in Palestine, at least from the stories I have heard. Journeying along with the Teutonic Crusade is our best chance for survival and success. Besides, once Cairo falls, we will be only a stone’s throw from Jerusalem.”

Raven sipped thoughtfully from her cup of steamy broth.

Turning back to Little John and Friar Tuck she asked. “If I were to continue on with the Crusade, you do not think it would betray my father?”

Friar Tuck and Little John looked at each other.

Turning back to Raven, the Friar answered, “Answer me this, Raven. Think of everything you ever knew about your father: his stories, our stories. Think about the fire in his blood that drove him to be more than he was – the fire that lives on in you. And then you think of the fame, fortune, adventure and glory that could lay ahead on this Crusade for you, and for all these men that have come this far with you, and you tell me what your father would want; not what he would say, Raven, but what we both know was in his heart.”

“Let us old men take his bones back to England. We’ll lay him next to your mother - where he would most want to be,” Little John assured her.

“Like our Lord Christ said,” Friar Tuck declared. “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.” He winked at Raven.

"I need to think about this," she decided.

"There is one other consideration, Raven," James added.

She sighed.

"We need your decision by tonight," James said. "The plans have been accelerated. The fleet sails for Cairo in the morning."

*

Raven retreated to her tent for the afternoon to pray. She ended up napping, and dreamed. In her dream she was standing in the open Austrian hills with Theodora.

"Where do you want to go?" Theodora asked with her lips curled in her eternally charming smile.

"Home, with Cuthbert and the others," Raven replied.

"How will you get there?" Theodora looked serious.

"I do not understand," Raven said.

Snow flakes began to fall on Theodora's face, flashing like dying stars before the crystals melted on her skin and the light faded. "Can you return by the way you have come, my friend? Do not forget what they did to you. And the Inquisition only grows."

"Then how can I get home?" Raven sobbed, but the cries were those of a little girl. She looked around in the dream, and she was standing among the trees of Sherwood. Theodora had vanished, but Raven looked up and saw another figure approaching her, wearing a robe with a hood.

"Raven, enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow is the road that leads to life and only a few find it," the hooded speaker advised before disappearing among the trees.

She ran after the hooded figure, not knowing what else to do. After passing through the familiar forest paths for some time, she came to a large clearing that she did not remember ever having seen before. On the other side her father stood smiling with a woman in his arms.

"Mama?" little girl Raven asked.

The woman smiled. She was beautiful, much like Raven.

Suddenly, Raven noticed the hooded figure standing beside her. He lowered his hood, and Raven was sure she had met him before, but could not remember where.

"Their work is done." The man gestured his hand toward the far end of the clearing. "And they have been rewarded. Your work is only beginning, my child. You have much to do while there is still light. Soon enough the night will come."

Raven awoke as the rays of the setting sun peeked in through her tent flap. She roused herself and emerged to see Cuthbert standing nearby, leaning against a supply wagon.

She approached him and spoke quietly. "I want us to go on. I want to tell the men."

"Then come with me." Cuthbert walked away.

Raven wondered why he was walking away from the camp. They reached a nearby stream, and Cuthbert turned toward her and pulled his knife from its scabbard.

"What are you doing?" Raven gasped.

"I'm giving you a haircut," Cuthbert insisted. "Your hair smells absolutely dreadful."

She laughed and acquiesced to his demands.

After doing the best he could with his blade, he left her to wash in the stream.

"This will help." He held out his hand as he turned to leave.

Raven took the small chunk of soap from him. "Where did you get this?"

"I bought it from one of the men." Cuthbert shrugged.

"Bought it with what?" She smiled.

"Ah...I may have had to dip into the purse Leopold gave you." Cuthbert looked guilty.

Raven laughed. "You have done well. And I had actually forgotten all about the purse."

"Meet me back by your tent when you are done. We have more for you." Cuthbert bounded off through the woods leaving Raven exasperated, but happy to be free from her burned hair.

When she returned from her bath, the Minstrels were all gathered around. Cuthbert approached her first and draped a light colored, almost white, robe around her. The hooded robe kept away the evening chill, but was light and breathable.

"Your father wore this in the desert," Cuthbert told her.

"The desert?" Raven frowned. "What do you know of his whereabouts these past two years?"

Cuthbert shrugged while placing a bronze clasp above her breasts, pinning the robe together. "Not much; the Friar and Big John said it was too long of a story to tell here, but that they would enlighten us when we return home."

"Interesting," Raven remarked.

Michael approached her next. He buckled her belt around her waist the way a squire would for a knight. Her father's dagger was in place in its scabbard. The fair minstrel said nothing, but stepped back and bowed to her respectfully.

Then came the Sons of Thunder, John bearing a small bow and a quiver with seven arrows remaining. He handed the weaponry to Raven.

“This is the very bow that saved you from the fire,” John said, “and these arrows your father never loosed. May they fly as true for you as they would have in his sure hand.”

“Thank you.” She strapped on the equipment. “Thank you all so much, I...”

“We are not finished,” James cut her off.

From behind his back he produced a small object wrapped in a cloth.

Raven gasped as the cloth fell away.

“My fiddle!” she squeaked.

“I took good care of it,” James assured.

She cradled the instrument and let her fingers fly across the strings. A quick flourish of notes resulted. They sounded good, and something inside Raven that had long been dormant reawakened.

“I want to speak with the men,” Raven announced.

“If we see any around here, we’ll let them know...” Cuthbert jibed.

Dismissing her red haired friend with a quick whack of the fiddle bow, she walked away from her Minstrels and climbed on top of the wagon. Most of the men appeared to be finishing up with dinner. She sat down and waited until she saw no one left eating. Then she made a flourish of her bow across the fiddle strings. It rang across the camp and the men turned to see the source of the sound.

Having their attention, she spoke. “Mighty Men of Sherwood, lend me your ears! Forgive me for wavering in my commitment to our Holy Quest. Great deeds await you, and your bravery and strength will not go unsung.

“If you will have us, my Merry Minstrels and I will uphold you and bear witness to your courageous and mighty acts. Let us sail together in the morning. We will take the righteous battle to the enemy – for Sherwood; for England; for Glory!”

The soldiers erupted in enthusiastic shouting.

When they quieted, Raven encouraged them once more. “Last night we mourned my father, and I thank you for honoring him. Tonight, let us honor him in the way he would most desire; let us celebrate! Tomorrow we sail into another world, a world more dark and dangerous than any place we have yet seen. Let us be shrewd as snakes! But not tonight; tonight let us celebrate as English kinfolk and fellow servants of God.”

*

The Nottingham Crusaders sang along with the Minstrels, together and whole for the first time in nearly a year. Everyone’s spirits were lifted, and they all went to bed tired but hopeful for the journey ahead.

In the morning, Friar Tuck and Little John made their farewells. They left on horseback with Robin’s bones strapped onto their supply donkey. Before

going, Friar Tuck blessed Raven and the Crusade. Little John kissed Raven on the forehead and handed her a small leather pouch.

Only after they had boarded their ship and the Teutonic Crusader fleet was well out to sea, did she think to open the pouch and discover it to be full of diamonds.

Verse Eight – Siege at Damietta

Three hundred galleons with red crosses emblazoned upon their sails made an intimidating spectacle, and other ships fled as soon as the fleet came within sight. Thus the voyage was fairly uneventful.

Michael, John and James spent most of their time on deck. The Sons of Thunder were indescribably glad to be together again. They expressed their joy in the way that always suited them best; drumming. The soldiers drilled and exercised to the beat.

Michael added melody as he gleefully became reacquainted with an old friend, his silver trumpet. He blasted bright tones that sailed across the waters on those warm spring days sailing south through the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

Minstrels and Troubadours on other ships, some near some far, responded. A chorus of sounds blended and shimmered across the clear water, engulfing the fleet in an atmosphere of nearly euphoric excitement.

The Crusader Fleet became like a single living body, surging over the water, its men unified in singleness of mind. The Minstrel music carried the power of purpose in the hearts of the men out into the air for all of nature to witness and fear.

Finally underway, nearly three years and two Popes since its conception, the Fifth Crusade was mind-numbingly vast and frightfully arrayed. The majority of the armies, thirty thousand strong, were made up of men from Austria, Hungary and the Teutonic states of the Holy Roman Empire to the north.

Englishmen, Franks, Norsemen, Armenians, Greeks and Spaniards were also among those on the more than three hundred ships. Almost all of the three thousand Englishmen with whom they had originally left London remained in the Crusade, making the English by far the largest contingent apart from the Central Europeans.

The growing excitement and energy was lost on Raven who stayed below deck. Cuthbert stayed with her. When no one else was in the vicinity, she showed him the diamonds. They decided to store them in a small hollowed out space inside the handle of Cuthbert's knife; a knife that otherwise looked to be of little value.

Apart from taking care of the diamonds, they did not speak much the first day at sea. Raven was only now truly getting a chance to mourn. She just laid in a corner, holding Jack, while Cuthbert sat at a table nearby, quietly waiting on her. After another night's sleep, however, they started talking.

"You have to eat." Cuthbert knelt in front of her holding out a loaf of bread and cup of butter.

She hesitantly took the food, placing the bread first into the butter and then into her mouth. As she chewed, Cuthbert sat down at her side and watched.

"What?" she mumbled through her bread.

"I do know what you are going through," he said gently.

She looked down and kept chewing.

Cuthbert continued, "I was only nine, but I remember well when my father died. I think the hardest thing for me to grasp was the permanence of it; that he would not be getting better, that he wasn't coming back."

Raven swallowed and then looked away.

Cuthbert reached over and tenderly turned her face back toward him with his hand. He wiped the tears from her cheeks while he held her face. "But I always have known that I will see him again, in heaven."

"How can you be sure?" Raven sniffed.

"God would not have led us to believe it were it not true. He promised that He is preparing a place for us. That is our Blessed Assurance; that we will spend eternity with our Lord and all those who have trusted in Him," Cuthbert soothed.

"It just hurts so much," she wept.

"I know."

"Does it ever get better?"

"You get stronger."

They sat in silence for awhile before Cuthbert began speaking again. "And neither of us ever knew our mothers."

"They both died delivering us," Raven finished his thought with a far away sounding voice. "Gave their lives..."

Cuthbert chuckled. "We have quite a lot in common, Raven of Locksley. We have each lost both of our parents, both been brutalized by a mad bishop, are both on a ship headed toward a land war in Africa, and we even have a mutual interest in music."

She laughed.

"It makes me wonder what would happen if we had children," Cuthbert said almost under his breath.

"What was that?" She stared hard at her grinning friend.

"Um," Cuthbert blushed terribly. "It must be because we grew up together...as children," he stammered. "Why we have so much in common...that is..."

"Funny," Raven laid her head on his chest and shifted until she was comfortable, "I thought you said something else."

They held each other, and Jack wove himself into their embrace, helping them mourn and heal. He also licked their faces as often as he deemed necessary.

They laid there in that dark corner, listening to the growing swell of martial music swirling above deck and the steady stomping of the soldiers' feet as they readied their bodies, hearts and minds for battle.

*

Michael came below to retrieve them when land was finally sighted. At first just a ribbon of grey on the horizon, the walls of Damietta rose higher and higher above the narrow beach head as the ships slowly eased in to the harbor. The Egyptian vessels lining the shores quickly disappeared down the coast or up the Nile.

No resistance to the fleet's presence, either on land or at sea, immediately showed itself. Still, the cautious Greek crew manning Raven's ship dropped anchor well away from land. They all watched intently as the Teutons' flagship entered the mouth of the Nile and prepared to sail up the river, in between the walls that stretched out from both banks.

Again, no resistance appeared. The rowers on the lead ship doubled their pace and the heavy galleon quickened its crawl past the walls. Just when it had nearly disappeared from their view, the Minstrels saw the Crusade's lead vessel burst into flames. Seconds later the sound reached their ears; like the roar of some ferocious beast, the terrifying sound of fire pots being launched from catapults carried over the waves.

They could see more explosive fire pots arcing through the air over the city walls. Dozens of them smashed across the ship and the main mast fell, incinerated by the heat. The captain called to abandon ship and the soldiers and crew that were still alive dove into the water, forsaking even their weapons and armor.

The ships that had been following the lead vessel made quick turns, and after throwing down ropes to retrieve the survivors, they raced as fast as they could away from the mouth of the Nile. Raven watched as the superstructure of the doomed Teutonic ship collapsed, and it quickly sank beneath the waves leaving only a plume of black smoke to mark its watery grave.

The Greek sailors looked at each other nervously, but no one spoke for a moment.

"Well, that was not the most auspicious beginning," James assessed.

"What happens now?" John wondered.

"Look!" They all followed Michael's pointing finger.

Austrian and Hungarian vessels near the beach were already unloading. Mounted knights swarmed the dunes, combing for traps or signs of ambush, while foot soldiers unloaded crates of supplies and equipment. Still other groups of men went to work digging trenches, assembling shelters and sending semaphore signals to ships further out.

Since the Greek sailors seemed comfortable with their ship staying where it was, the Nottingham soldiers lowered the ship's two long row boats into the water and began making trips back and forth to unload. After three full days of slowly traveling between ship and shore, they completed the task.

By that time they had also built a workable camp on the thin strip of coast between high tide and the projectile range of the watchtowers and minarets along the wall. The Nottingham camp consisted of fifteen tents in three rows of

five, starting just past the high tide line. They also built a small fire pit and a lean-to latrine.

They supplemented their food supplies with large amounts of fish from the coastal waters. Anything they could spear, hook or catch by hand ended up roasting over the hot coals of their fire pit. Along with seaweed, crabs, grain from their stores and a variety of foods that Raven bought from other Crusader groups, they ate well.

“So this is a siege,” Cuthbert mused as he flipped a splayed fish over to roast its other side. “Although I prefer a bit more tree coverage, all in all this is not so bad.” He ground a sprig of dried basil that Raven had purchased between his fingers so the sprinkles of spice fell into the roasting juices of the sizzling snapper.

“And yet a great problem remains before us,” James advised. “The walls of Damietta must somehow be breached, as the river route has shown itself unreliable.”

“I don’t see anything on this beach that could make a dent in those walls,” John lamented.

As if in answer to his complaint, the sound of hammering rang in their ears from further down the beach. Saw and axe grinding, and the distinct ring of hammer on anvil joined the chorus shortly. While the Nottingham troops enjoyed their ongoing fish fry and bathing in the hot African sun, the Teutons had set about the serious business of sacking this coastal city which blocked their access to Cairo proper.

Raven was staggered by both the creativity and engineering skill of the Teutonic Knights. A sort of competition emerged between the various factions of Crusaders to see who could design the siege machine that would do the greatest damage to the city walls. Not to be left out of the fun, Cuthbert put his carpentry training to work and led a group of Nottingham men in designing a simple stone thrower.

The payload could be no larger than a cabbage, but they were able to hit the wall. After some tweaking, they were even able to send smaller stones over the wall. The Teutons in the next camp praised Cuthbert’s work, which was high quality, although mostly ineffective. The Nottingham group simply lacked the manpower and resources of the larger Teutonic hordes that designed some of the more interesting and deadly contraptions.

A Hungarian army, on the far west end of the siege beach, built a rolling siege tower that drew a lot of attention. It was so heavy that one hundred men were needed to provide locomotion. They rolled it incredibly close to the gates, hoping to tempt the Saracens into riding out, while soldiers on top of the tower waged a fierce archery battle against Saracen guards on the parapets of the wall.

The Egyptians tried to bring down the tower with more Greek fire, but the Huns had cleverly overlaid the front of the siege tower in several layers of

fabric taken from ships' sails which they kept drenched with water. They repelled three fire pots before the Egyptians gave up and opened the gates.

The Egyptians sent out three hundred camel riders with long spears. The nearly two hundred Huns, both in and on the giant siege tower, waited inside and let the camels surround them. In a flash the wily Huns broke the ballast supports and let their tower topple over. In addition to crushing scores of camels and their riders, the tower scuttling raised a huge dust cloud which provided the Huns with adequate cover to begin slaughtering the remaining Saracens wholesale.

When the dust settled, the Huns were already racing out of arrow range back toward the beach. Every Crusader group began launching their various trebuchets and catapults to provide cover for the heroic Huns. A company of Flemish archers charged forth and let fly a series of volleys that helped suppress the arrow fire coming from the top of the wall. Cuthbert and his crew sent a few rocks over the wall, and in an additional show of support John and James gave the fleeing Huns a drum salute.

Almost daily, some new skirmish or siege craft creation would make news along the beach. A small team of Spaniards earned great acclaim one afternoon with a tall and slender sling shot trebuchet. They had completely disassembled their ship and used the mast as the sling arm, and wood from the hull to make a large rolling platform.

After positioning the trebuchet, they started hurling large stones hauled in from the sea. A few hours of target practice paid great dividends when the Spaniards scored a direct hit on a mosque minaret far inside the wall. The tower crumbled.

A wail of earth trembling volume rose up from the city. The sound of Islamic fury raged outward from the city to the beach and reached the Crusaders as the clerics and Imams rallied the population to anger. The sound chilled Raven, and yet the Spaniards completely ignored the cries of rising hate and strutted around like peacocks basking in the adoration of the Austrians and Huns.

Before dawn the next day, the Saracens attacked. Three hundred heavy Mamelukes rode out backed by two thousand desert archers. A group of two hundred mounted Teutonic Knights quickly organized and rode out to confront them. The camel horde approached along with the wind and this positioning proved devastating to the Teutons. The European horses quailed at the smell of the camels, some even throwing their riders.

The Mamelukes smashed the knights and rode straight for the Spanish trebuchet. They torched the weapon and its platform while the desert archers rained arrows on the Spanish camp. Every time a force of Crusaders charged out to challenge the camels, they shifted down the beach, with the desert archers discouraging pursuit.

Before long, quite a number of the ingenious siege crafts that lined the Crusader beachhead had been knocked down or burned. The Crusaders had not only misunderstood the significance of attacking the mosque minaret, they

simply had not anticipated the Saracen counterattack. For months the Egyptians had been content sitting behind their walls and absorbing the siege. The Crusaders had been unprepared and were now paying for it.

When the Mamelukes reached the Nottingham section of the beach they looked at first as if they intended to ride past. At the last moment, however, the horde turned and headed for Cuthbert's stone thrower. Unlike the groups that had been attacked first, the Nottingham men had plenty of warning of the Mamelukes' approach.

They were armed and ready, and made a spear and shield line twenty men wide and three deep in front of the stone thrower. The Minstrels and the other soldiers stood behind the siege weapon, with arrows on their bowstrings.

John and James banged out battle formation music on their drums while Michael issued a shrill call to arms on his trumpet, hoping to rally help from the neighboring camps. The sound signals were effective. Nearly all of the three hundred Teutons camped next to them answered the call and charged the Mamelukes on their left flank, swords swinging.

From the other direction, another company of Englishmen about two hundred strong rushed the right flank throwing javelins and stones. Since no horses were involved, the camels' smell brought no advantage to the Mamelukes this time. Facing the first truly organized resistance against their sortie, the harried camel riders wavered but continued their charge at the Nottingham line.

Just before the camels hit, the rear row of Nottingham soldiers hurled their spears and threw all their weight into bracing their comrades in front for impact. The spear toss removed several riders from their camels, and the Mamelukes wasted much of the force of their charge in running over their own front line. This anti-cavalry defensive technique was one of many tricks James and the men had learned from their Hunnish tutors during the past summer.

James grinned inwardly as he saw its effectiveness in real battle. Then making a quick change in the tempo of his drumming, he indicated to the men that they should break from their defensive stance and counterattack. John picked up the cue and so did the soldiers. They lurched forward as one, pumping and thrusting with their spears. The Mamelukes fell like grain before a reaper.

A dozen of the charging camels, however, were able to sidestep the Nottingham line. They circled around the stone thrower and charged the Minstrels. Raven loosed three of her father's unused arrows as the camels approached and two Mamelukes fell. Cuthbert and the other archers fired their own arrows bringing the number of remaining attackers down to six.

The Minstrels and archers scattered as the camels overran their line. Cuthbert pulled one rider down, took his sword, killed him with it, and then threw the sword into the back of another rider. Michael grabbed two spears and used them to remove another two of the Mamelukes. The remaining two that had breached the line chased Raven down onto the beach.

The camels ran past her, one on each side, and their riders swung low with giant curved swords. Raven ducked and rolled in a somersault, hearing the wind from the sword swings just above. As they circled around to charge her again she sent two consecutive arrows into the torso of one rider, ending his charge.

The other Mameluke bore down on Raven. Jack saw her distress and flew after the camel, barking like mad. Panicking, the camel turned and ran straight into a crowd of onrushing Teutons who cut the beast and its rider to shreds with their long swords. Cuthbert and Michael arrived seconds later and gathered around Raven as she stood trembling on the beach.

Meanwhile, the main Mameluke horde, now decimated, pulled away and began their retreat back to the city walls. The Teutons chased after to rout them, but were discouraged by the desert archers that still lurked close to the wall. Finally, a company of Austrian light cavalry took the field and chased the tired archers inside the gates. Thus was ended the first major Egyptian counterattack of the Damietta siege.

Miraculously, only six of the Nottingham men had been killed in the battle, although the entire front line had been injured, and some badly. The wounded men were taken back to the ship where Raven and Michael set up an impromptu hospital. They had both learned much from the doctors in Vienna, and did their best to treat each man's wounds. Despite their efforts, three more men eventually died from their injuries. This brought the Nottingham Crusade down to fifty-nine soldiers, plus the Minstrels and Jack.

All nine of the men who died, as a result of the battle to save the stone thrower, were burned on a pyre set up by the seaside. Their bones were washed in sea water and then individually wrapped in small bundles, along with their short swords. The bundles were placed in a storage crate on the ship for eventual return to England.

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The days Raven spent out on the hospital ship were good for her soul. She still mourned for her father, but her healing ministry to the wounded men blessed her, and certainly kept her mind occupied. She changed bandages, administered food, water, wine and medicine, cleaned up after and encouraged them.

And of course, she sang songs to them; mostly psalms and hymns to lift their spirits, but also the old Gaelic ballads that stirred memories from deep inside their very bodies. The recovering men started calling her their Angel or Valkyrie, but as each became fit for the field again, she sent them back to the beach with the others.

After about a month, only the ten worst cases remained on the ship. They all had various broken bones from being hit by tumbling camels. Raven worked with each soldier individually, rehabilitating his muscles and movement.

During this period, the Crusade had become enough of a fixture along the Egyptian coast that merchant vessels began weaving their way in amongst the harbored fleet to trade. Raven, conveniently located with her bag of gold near the outer edge of the fleet, became a favored customer.

In this way she was able to send fresh supplies and even some luxuries to the Nottingham men every time she sent a healed soldier back to duty. This allowed each recovered soldier the chance to be the bearer of gifts upon his reunion with the army, and each soldier's return resulted in a small feast in the Nottingham siege camp.

Cuthbert and the men had achieved a certain level of fame for their successful defense of their stone thrower against the Mameluke horde. While the Teutons showered them with praise, and occasionally beer, there was little room in a siege economy for gifts of food, and so Raven's aid was all the more appreciated.

By day, Cuthbert's crew continuously lobbed small rocks over the Damietta wall in a show of defiance. By night they played music, sang and feasted huddled close around their fire pit, before retreating to their tents away from the cold night winds.

John and James joined Cuthbert in showing off their culinary skills. With delicacies like olive oil, cheese, dried herbs, and salted meats that Raven delivered to them, they concocted hearty and satisfying meals for their men.

John's specialty was a meat and cheese medley rolled and roasted inside a thin flour wrap that he made from scratch and hardened over an open flame. When cooked they shrank and could rest easily in the palm of a man's hand, but they burst open with greasy and spicy fullness of flavor when bitten.

They made the supplies go farther by making pots of soup out of leftovers. The soldiers took turns dipping a cup into the broth and downing its nourishing goodness. When available, a barrel or two of Teutonic ale was kept buried in the cool beach sand underneath the tall grasses hanging over the tide line. After swigging their soup, the men would often jump down to the beach; cooling their throats with ale before returning to the back of the soup line.

As wonderful as these late summer feasts on the beach were for the Nottingham men, they were nothing compared to the culinary masterpieces that Raven assembled for her wounded soldiers. She kept out the choicest ingredients, not for herself, but as a way of doing all she could for these men that had been hurt protecting her and the others.

With the eager approval of the Greek sailors, Raven and Michael moved the ship's galley out on deck and did a great deal of open air grilling. With her silver dagger, Raven sliced vegetables and meats, combining ingredients to make healthy and delicious meals for the injured.

Michael, who had grown up doing much of the kitchen work at the church, was a fine helper and they worked well together. There was always enough left over for the Greek sailors to partake, and through her overflowing food ministry Raven earned their steadfast loyalty.

From their vantage point at the edge of the fleet, Raven and Michael watched many ships come and go as they roasted their healing meals. In addition to Palestinian, Barbary and Greek trade vessels, Austrian transports arrived regularly, loaded deep with stale food, fresh weapons and sometimes even reinforcements.

Raven also noticed an occasional Byzantine ship entering the harbor. She recognized them as such because the symbol on their mast heads matched the Insignia Ring she had been given by Theodora. The vessels would pull up alongside the Teutonic ships near Raven's and she saw them unload lumber, weaponry and even horses, before they would slip quietly away. This was odd, the Greek captain explained with a wink, because the Emperor in Byzantium had recently signed a peace treaty with the Egyptian Caliphate.

But even these were not the oddest visitors to call upon the Crusader fleet. One evening after dinner, while Michael and Raven were enjoying a nightcap out on deck, a small Arabian dhow pulled alongside the Greek vessel, and the half dozen dark skinned sailors aboard hailed the medical Minstrels.

The Arabians wore colorful, light and silky clothes that played in the breeze. Their appearance was remarkable swarthy, but they carried themselves with an air of gentility and charm that disarmed their hosts.

The leader begged to be allowed aboard, and the Greeks assented. Raven could not understand their speech, but the Greek captain translated for her. The old Arabian man had a variety of specialty products that he wished to sell. Raven politely but firmly refused his offers of jewels, perfumes and linens. Although she did purchase wine, spices, a box of scented soaps and two dozen pairs of sturdy sandals; all they had for sale.

At the conclusion of their business transactions, the Arabians invited Raven, Michael and the Greeks to participate in a ritual of theirs which demonstrated goodwill and harmony. They produced a water filled hookah from their ship and passed the mouth piece around the group.

When Raven's turn came, she hesitantly placed her lips around the end of the flexible tube and pulled the sweet acrid smoke into her lungs. A wave of calm and a sensation of oneness with all things swept through her body, and she inhaled another large puff before forwarding the hookah to Michael, who politely refused and passed it to the Greek captain.

As the Arabians prepared to depart, Raven asked to purchase the hookah and their entire supply of the reddish green leaf that fueled it. The old man made clear that the hookah was not for sale, but he gave Raven a small smoking pipe made of fired clay for free, and he sold her a sizeable bundle of the herb.

Michael stared at her with disapproving raised eyebrows as she waved farewell to the Arab merchants.

“The smoke from this plant is remarkable at relieving pain. You should try it.” Raven sounded defensive.

Michael continued to stare at her.

“It’s for the men...” She rolled her eyes and went below deck to offer the comforting smoke to the wounded soldiers.

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The next day all the men who had partaken of Raven’s pipe boasted of the best night’s sleep they had enjoyed since the battle on the beach. One of the soldiers felt so much better he asked to return to the beach and they sent him on his way with the new wine and spices. Michael rowed the boat in to shore with the soldier, but did not return until mid afternoon.

When the row boat finally returned to the ship, Michael had the three other Minstrels with him.

“We’ve come to pay you a visit, Raven,” John shouted as they pulled alongside.

Raven threw ropes to them. “And to what do I owe this honor?”

“We missed you, and we wanted to see your hospital of miracles that we keep hearing about,” James answered.

They tied up the row boat and climbed aboard.

Cuthbert leapt over the rail and landed in front of her. “And we wanted to thank you for the manna from heaven that you keep raining upon our beach. How have you done these things?”

“I always fare well in the market place,” Raven quipped before turning and walking over to the cooking area, so that she could expand the scope of their dinner preparations to accommodate the additional guests.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Cuthbert chased after her. He grabbed her and with John and James’ help carried her kicking body to a bench along the edge of the deck. They forced her to sit down and accept their offer to prepare the meal. They ordered Michael to rest as well and served the two caretakers as if they were patients themselves.

John and James went to work at the grill, slicing, roasting and promptly serving up steaming platters of meat and vegetables. Cuthbert, who had been entertaining the men with a song while the food cooked, helped John and James serve it below deck. It was not of the same caliber as Raven’s cooking, but the men were still grateful, as were Raven and Michael for the evening off.

As night set in, the Minstrels sat in a circle out on deck in the midst of torchlight. They sipped wine and the clay pipe emerged stuffed full of Raven’s medicinal plants. The smoke had the same calming effect on Raven as it had the

night before, and it affected John and James in the same way, making them quieter than usual.

Cuthbert, on the other hand, became extremely giddy causing himself to laugh at every available opportunity. After over an hour of haranguing and pestering, he finally convinced Michael to smoke, and before long the blond haired purist was as punchy and silly as Cuthbert, laughing until he was short of breath.

At one point, after he inhaled a large gulp of the smoke, a thoughtful and reflective expression grew across Michael's face. Cuthbert accidentally sprayed Michael with spittle as he erupted in fresh peals of laughter in response to Michael's dramatic change in facial expression.

Michael ignored the slobbery assault as he seemed to be searching the depths of his mind for some memory. Finally, after exhaling a puff of smoke through his nose, he remarked, "You know it has just occurred to me, the smell of this leaf is somewhat reminiscent of that peculiar smell in Friar Tuck's personal study. Do you not think?"

Cuthbert lost all control. Spilling out of his chair onto the deck and convulsing with heaves of laughter, he took some time to regain his composure. And yet his hilarious antics with Michael continued until their stomachs ached and their faces seemed as if they would be permanently flushed red.

The only break in their tomfoolery came when Raven produced a packet of honey cakes which the Minstrels devoured with unusual ferocity. When they all finally went below to sleep, Michael and Cuthbert were still snickering and sputtering laughter, so Raven forbade them from any future involvement with the funny herbs.

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The next morning, the Minstrels and the remaining wounded men had a meeting below deck where they decided to disband the hospital and return everyone to shore. Back on land the men would be able to move around more freely, get more fresh air and hopefully speed the rebuilding of their bodies.

Fear of another Saracen counterattack subsided. The Mamelukes had attempted to ride out several more times, but the Austrians and Huns were prepared and easily drove them back to the gates on each occasion. Cuthbert had stopped sending stones over the wall, mostly because stones were running in such short supply.

In fact, the entire siege beach had been stripped completely bare; all trees, shrubs, grasses, sea life, and even insects had been swept away for use by the Fifth Crusade. Anything that could not either be used in building siege craft, or eaten, was burned as fuel. Allied supply transports and merchant vessels could not keep up with the ravenous demands of the Christian armies.

A major attraction of the long summer's siege warfare came late in August. And yet this grand weapon was nowhere to be seen on the beach - because it floated in the harbor. An Englishman from Bristol, who was employed by the Teutons, was its architect. And since the architect had heard about the quality of the Nottingham stone thrower, he hired Cuthbert who spent nearly a week in early August out in the harbor working on the project. The Teutons called it Dreadnought.

Essentially, it was two small battleships lashed together about twenty feet apart by ladders, poles, ship masts and other long pieces of wood, creating a solid platform between the two vessels. A heavy catapult was built onto the platform, and the cup of the catapult was lined with pounded iron sheeting so that it could hold heated shot. Taking a cue from the success of the Huns' siege tower, defensive barriers were erected on the front and sides of the craft with wet sails draped over them to snuff out incoming fire attacks.

Cuthbert was back at camp for several days before the Dreadnought launched, but he remained tight lipped about his work, insisting that everyone would have to wait and see for themselves. On the morning of the launch, the Nottingham men were waking to their usual fish fry when a stir of excitement rippled down the beach.

Ships in the harbor had parted to make a wide path toward the mouth of the Nile, for the Dreadnought cruised ahead at an alarming speed. Each of the two ships that made up its base had a full complement of oars, and as a result the vessel was both fast and highly maneuverable, despite its enormous size.

The Minstrels played a celebratory song as the massive ship flew by. They modified an Old Irish Sea chantey adding a more aggressive rhythm and playing it at a faster tempo. The music fanned the flames of excitement among soldiers in the nearby beach camps and various armies began to let out mighty battle cries in their growing frenzy.

The Saracens interpreted the activity as a sign of an impending assault on the wall by land. By the time they saw the Dreadnought surging upriver past the wall, the hordes of desert archers, Mamelukes and fire throwers were all positioned near the gates, and there were simply no Egyptian forces near the river to confront the siege ship.

The Dreadnought fired its first launch: a single heavy stone that had required one hundred men to haul it out of the ocean floor using ropes and chains. The stone arced over the empty city plaza and crashed into a four story building that happened to be a barracks for the Mamelukes. The building swayed and buckled, and finally the roof collapsed downward, burying hundreds of Mameluke soldiers.

The launch caused the Dreadnought to bob severely in the water, but the pontoon design kept it from flipping. As soon as the motion subsided sufficiently, the Teutons reset the catapult and reloaded its cup. This time they added an assortment of different sized rocks, including many that were quite

small. They poured oil all over the rocks and lit the cup with a torch the moment before launching.

By the time the second launch was ready, the Saracen desert archers had cooperatively raced toward the river and stood on the shore and in the plaza, harmlessly flinging their arrows into the Dreadnought's defensive barriers. The launch of loose, flaming debris from the catapult sprayed across the entire area. Few of the Saracens were killed outright, but hundreds of them were burned and bruised.

The Dreadnought continued fulfilling its awful purpose well into the afternoon, firing load after load of stone and debris until both ships were emptied of ammunition. In addition to the terrible damage it wrought upon the interior of Damietta and the Saracen forces, it also drained the defenders' resources by absorbing thousands of flaming enemy arrows and dozens of fireballs, none of which succeeded in setting the craft ablaze.

As the sun descended in the west, the Dreadnought turned and left the Nile to rejoin the Crusader fleet. Damietta had been badly bruised, and the Teutons had avenged the loss of their flagship at the onset of the siege.

The Dreadnought would require days of repairs and reloading with ammunition to be ready for another sortie, so the beachfront armies settled in for another week of normal siege activity. The Nottingham army spent the time, when they were not frying fish, drilling tactical moves and exercising on the beach.

They worked to reintegrate the men who had been injured by the camel horde earlier that summer and to keep all of their bodies and skills honed for the battles that were sure to come. Being a much smaller army than nearly all the other groups, they were also able to practice more intricate and dynamic battle tactics, drawing attention and earning respect from the other soldiers up and down the beach.

Rumors started circulating through the Teutonic camps about the so called Nottingham Knights who allegedly kept company with a team of Druidic Bards and a healing witch, and who could not be defeated in battle. The Minstrels found their fame humorous, and yet continued to draw more attention by playing music nightly to the delight of the nearby camps and to the great aggravation of the Saracen guards on the wall who despised the western musical style and sound.

*

As summer faded, the siege armies began growing restless. Though the Dreadnought made a few more deadly runs upriver, the damage it did brought the armies no closer to finding a way through the city wall. The armies were also falling further and further behind in finding ways to feed and supply themselves.

The Minstrels gathered at the water's edge one morning to discuss their outlook.

"How long do we simply wait here and watch our supplies dwindle?" Michael challenged.

"We can always buy more supplies, right Raven?" John asked.

Raven looked around nervously at them all.

"What?" Cuthbert wondered.

"Of the gold purse Leopold gave us, we have only three coins left." Raven confessed.

"How can that be?" Cuthbert sputtered.

"How do you think it is that you have been the best fed army on this beach?" Raven charged. "We also had to purchase a fair quantity of medical supplies." Her tone became defensive. "And for that matter..."

"It's all right," James stopped her. "It's not your fault, Raven. You have taken splendid care of us. Michael is right. We have been here too long without a decisive victory over the Saracens."

"And yet to abandon the siege now, after all we have been through, would be a foolhardy waste," Cuthbert reasoned. "The Teutons will find a way to bring down the wall. Think of the damage they have wreaked with the Dreadnought."

"By the original plan," Michael countered. "We should have brushed past Damietta, sacked Cairo and been well on our way to Jerusalem by now."

"This is war," John argued. "Things will rarely proceed according to plan."

"And when did you become an expert on running a war?" James snapped at his brother.

"Not one of us is an expert, which is why we should trust the Teutons..." Cuthbert tried to finish his sentence, but all three of the other male Minstrels began speaking at once.

Raven attempted to listen to all of them at the same time, but the effort made her head hurt. Finally, she shouted at them. They stopped bickering and looked down at their feet in shame.

"That's better," Raven proclaimed. "Now, we have another option if we can all simply..." She trailed off.

"Yes?" Cuthbert looked quizzically at her. "Do tell."

Ignoring Cuthbert, Raven pointed her finger down the beach at a small group of men that was quickly approaching on foot. "Do they look at all familiar to any of you?" she asked.

"Great heavens!" Michael exclaimed. "It's Dunleth! It's the Celts!"

Verse Nine – Woad Raiders

The Celts were barefoot and shirtless, but wore bright blue and green striped pants. The blue crosses tattooed onto their shoulders gleamed in the morning sun. They ran incredibly fast, although the gliding motion of their feet more resembled skipping than running. In their arms, and strapped to their backs, they carried a bizarre array of equipment; long poles, shovels, short metal tubes, pick-axes, clay jars and small wooden boxes.

Raven could hear shouts coming from the nearby English camp. Words that made little sense to her carried on the breeze.

“The sappers have arrived!”

“Look – the Woad Raiders!”

“God’s Hammer!”

The Teutonic camp was equally excited, though she could not understand their remarks at all.

Through it all, the Celts made their own sound which grew louder as they approached. “Roo-hah, roo-hah,” they repeated continuously in rhythm with their leaping strides.

The strange chant became the greatest sound in Raven’s ears as the Celts passed through the Nottingham beachhead and briefly slowed their pace. Raven noticed that there were only twelve Celts in the group, though fifteen had left London with them.

Dunleth stopped altogether. “Gents,” he said as he bowed low and deliberately to the Minstrels, “and milady.” he smiled and winked at Raven, his teeth glinting white in the morning sunshine. “I am pleased to see that you are all still alive and together.”

“Thank you, Dunleth,” Raven answered. “We are glad to see you as well. Although we never had a chance to say goodbye in France...” She smirked at the glistening Celt.

“Urgent business, milady,” Dunleth explained, bowing again. “Such is the life for men of our...particular talents.” As quickly as he had arrived, Dunleth sprinted onward after his men, gradually catching up with them as they cruised down the beach drawing applause and shouts from the Austrian and Hun camps before disappearing out of sight.

“Curious,” Michael commented.

“Most,” Raven agreed.

“My lads,” Cuthbert beamed, putting his hands on James and Michael’s shoulders. “I think the tide of this siege may soon begin to turn!”

*

With a renewed sense of hope, the Minstrels rejoined the morning fish fry, and quietly watched both the beach and the Damietta wall, but saw no signs of action or even battle preparations.

As Raven sat and chewed her fried piece of fish, she absentmindedly ran her fingernails back and forth through Jack's coat. Her thoughts drifted to the early days of the Crusade, when they had been so naïve, so unprepared, and so innocent.

How naïve was my faith then? Raven asked herself. *I think I believed the Lord would meet us on the way to Jerusalem, and we would only to have followed him into the city, victorious. I thought you would always be with us, Lord.* She complained silently.

"I am," a voice spoke.

Raven looked around, but everyone was either eating or resting quietly. A chill coursed down her spine.

O Lord, how naïve is my faith even now? She cried inside her mind. *You were with us, and you always have been.* Tears started to form in her eyes. *But I was so angry with you, Lord. And I still am.* The tears rolled down her cheeks. *Because you left me; you left me in the hands of the evil man. You left me alone...*

"Not alone," the voice came again.

At that instant Cuthbert looked up at her and spoke. She saw his lips move, but did not hear his words.

She shook her head. "I beg your pardon?" she said.

"Are you all right?" he repeated.

"Yes," she said, wiping her cheeks with her hands. "You know me." She smiled.

"I always think I do." Cuthbert smiled back and then returned to the grill to flip more fishes.

Raven closed her eyes and continued to pray in silence. She asked God to forgive her hollow faith and her selfishness. She begged for protection for herself and her friends. She prayed for Roger and those back home in Sherwood and Locksley. She interceded for the other armies there on the beach and the fleet in the harbor.

She heard no more of the Voice, but her continued prayer and supplication brought a serene peace upon her. She felt ready to face whatever lay ahead and to accept God's Sovereignty in the unfolding of events.

From the depths of her silent reverie, Raven did not notice Jack becoming increasingly agitated. The frisky dog twitched and twittered as he tracked the nearby movements of a desert rat. The rat knew that he was being watched and hesitated over whether to turn back toward his hole or flee across the open sands.

Jack sensed the momentary lapse in the rat's judgment and pounced, and in less than a heartbeat, cut off the rodent's retreat. The small animal was left

with no choice but to bolt away from the beach into the no man's land in front of the city wall. The fever of the hunt fell upon Jack as he raced after the terrified scavenger.

Raven had relaxed her limitations on Jack as they had grown more and more accustomed to life on the beach. Whereas at first she had kept him confined to the camp or nearby beachfront, by late summer she was allowing him to roam freely, even visiting other camps on his own. So his running away did not disturb Raven and she paid no attention to Jack's hunt. Instead, she concluded her prayers and got in line for soup.

She had insisted all along during the Crusade that the men not give her special treatment because of her femininity, and so she had to wait some time to be passed a cup. Just as she was finally placing the cup of hot fishy broth to her lips, she heard Jack yelping like he was in pain.

Raven dropped the cup, grabbed her bow and two remaining arrows from where they lay next to her tent, and raced up the dune to get a better view. As she reached the top of the slope, her jaw dropped in exasperation as she quickly perceived what was happening to Jack.

The wicked Saracen archers atop the wall had watched while the poor dog unwittingly followed his prey well into the range of their arrows. For a moment, Raven thought that they were trying to shoot Jack for sport, and that they were just terrible shots.

She soon realized though that their intentions were even more sinister; they were purposefully overshooting the dog in order to trap him near their wall. By firing flaming arrows over his head they set up a semicircle ring of fire around Jack. The Saracens wished to terrify the Crusaders' dog and make it suffer before ending its life.

The Minstrels were vaguely aware of a dog barking, and Cuthbert stood up to look around. He caught a glimpse of Raven's white cloak billowing out behind her as she flew over the dune and out into the no man's land. She easily leapt over rocks and crags in the broken earth as she sped toward the fire circle that held her dog captive.

Her hood whipped away in the wind allowing her long dark hair to tumble out in the wake of her head. The sunlight turned her hair into a halo of flame, illuminating the wavy strands with a deep red glow. Crusaders all along the beach watched as the semi-famous Nymph Princess of Nottingham raced toward the Damietta walls alone.

In frustration and rage at the cruelty of the Saracens, she loaded one of her arrows, aimed high and let fly at the archers on the parapets. The arrow fell short, shattering harmlessly against the mighty stone wall. The Saracens howled laughter and derision at her pathetic attempt to stop their fun.

Still at a full run, she leapt high over the rows of arrows that stood burning in the sand. The back of her cloak caught fire, and with a swift motion of her hand, she undid the bronze clasp and let the cloak fall away. With only a

tunic covering her slender frame, the Saracens quickly recognized her movements as those of a woman.

The howling laughter of the Arabs turned into screams of rage and scorn. Thousands of Muslim voices rose in a chorus of hatred and mockery for the foul Christian Dog-men who would send a little girl to fight their war. The Saracens reloaded their bows and lit fires on their arrow tips, preparing to end the existence of the abomination they saw before them.

As Raven approached Jack, she realized that she would have to pick up and carry the terrified dog to free him from the fire circle. As she would require both arms to do so, she prepared to discard her bow and last arrow.

The image of her father's face flashed through her mind. Rather than dishonor the memory of her father by wasting his last unused arrow, she decided to fire away with it. She placed the arrow on her bowstring and pulled back until the bow felt ready to snap. At the last moment before release, she twisted her torso skyward and fired straight up into the air. She threw the bow and ran for Jack.

Thousands of eyes, both on the beach and atop the wall, watched the arrow sail into the heavens, nearly disappearing from view. A sea breeze caught the arrow, and by the time it began its long descent back to earth, it had flown inland by close to one hundred paces. The arrow came down upon the top of the wall's parapets and bored deep into the chest of a very surprised Saracen.

The desert archer fell backward and died as he hit the stone floor on the top of the wall. This event alone was quite a shock to the Arab archers, who had hitherto felt fairly secure atop their fortifications. However, as life left the unfortunate archer's body, his arms relaxed and unintentionally completed the task they had been preparing to achieve only moments earlier.

The flaming arrow released from the Saracen's bow as he fell, but instead of sending the arrow outward toward Raven and Jack, the archer's backward fall caused the arrow to shoot straight skyward.

This event caused further distress to the other archers on the wall, because one of their own flaming arrows was now soaring upward above their heads and they anticipated its return to earth with great angst.

Fortunately for the fallen archer's comrades, however, the very same sea breeze that had moved Raven's last arrow inland with deadly accuracy carried the flaming arrow inside the wall as well. The arrow missed the wall on its descent by a good thirty paces. And yet, what was good fortune for the Saracens on the wall, turned out to be a major problem for the Mameluke soldiers below.

The ill launched flaming arrow zoomed downward into a covered wagon parked just inside the gates. The wagon was surrounded by hundreds of Mameluke riders on camelback who had gathered near the gate awaiting orders to raid the beach. Even more importantly, the wagon itself was filled with large barrels, each full to the brim with highly explosive Naphtha oil. The arrow punched through the wagon's canopy and disappeared inside.

Meanwhile, Raven had scooped up Jack and was running full speed back toward the fire line. She sensed a shadow growing over the land, and looked over her shoulder to see the sky darkening as thousands of Saracen arrows took to the air, dimming the light of the sun.

She hurled Jack with all her might, tossing the surprised dog over the flaming fence of arrows that had blocked his escape. Jack hit the ground running, making a puff of dust, and he charged toward the beach in a flash of white fur.

Raven knew that, lacking the speed of her four legged friend, she would never be able to run clear of the arrow swarm in time. So she took the only remaining option, sprinting toward the wall. In the instant before the arrows began landing around her, she dove forward into the lee of a long flat rock. She rolled once and then squirmed to wedge herself as far underneath the rock as she possibly could.

She tucked her arms over her face and held her breath as dozens of arrows clanked off of the rock. The earth around her became an inferno that from her vantage point on the ground looked like a wild fire in a forest of dead and bare trees. She shoved sand onto the nearest arrows to douse their flames and to stop the heat of the fires from scorching her.

Because Raven was pressed tightly against the ground, she felt the shockwave when the Naphtha wagon exploded. Liquid fire spread far and wide across the plaza just inside Damietta's wall. Over one hundred of the Mamelukes and their camels were incinerated outright, and most of the rest were knocked senseless from the impact of the vaporizing blast.

Several of the Saracen archers were thrown forward from the upper parapets and died hitting the ground, while many more were laid flat and unconscious. Raven had no idea what had happened, but as soon as she realized that the arrows had stopped falling, she popped her head out from under the rock and took a look around.

From this moment in time onward, rumors began spreading both on the beach and within the city about Raven. The Teutonic Crusaders told stories about Raven of the Hood, the Britannic Holy Warrior Princess that God was using as a scourge to punish the Infidels. The Egyptians, by contrast, told of the Fire-Breathing Dragon Witch of the Northern Realm who wielded black magic against their holy warriors. In any case, the stories soon took on lives of their own.

And yet no one, in or around Damietta, was as immediately concerned with the status of Raven as were Cuthbert and the other Minstrels. While she had been liberating Jack and single handedly wiping out the crème of the Egyptian forces, the Minstrels had taken up their instruments and were rallying the Nottingham men to readiness.

The nearly sixty strong force of English shock troops responded instantly to the drums of the Sons of Thunder. John and James hit a marching rhythm and the men entered battle formation and climbed the dune.

At the same time, Michael and Cuthbert took off running down the beach in opposite directions. Michael blew shrill notes of alarm out of his trumpet, and Cuthbert used his powerful singing voice to project his impassioned call to arms over and over again in every language he knew.

By the time of the Naphtha explosion, their message had reached most of the armies, and a mass mobilization was underway. Thousands of men had personally witnessed Raven's selfless and heroic acts, and even if they could not breach the city walls, the Crusaders intended to march out and rescue their Warrior Princess.

The Egyptians were so busy suppressing the fires inside their wall and removing their wounded soldiers that they did not at first even notice the entire thirty thousand strong army of the Fifth Crusade surging forward toward Damietta. The full scale assault included foot soldiers, cavalry, and siege weapon crews; all that the Christians possessed, and all inspired by witness or word of Raven's deeds.

Neither did the Egyptians, nor many of the Crusaders, notice that in addition to the armies moving overland, the Dreadnought was heading for the mouth of the Nile.

And yet there was one other development taking place during Raven's rescue that would play a significant part in the unfolding of the day's events. Dunleth and his Woad Raiders, blessed by the unplanned distraction that Jack and Raven caused, had been able to set up their equipment much more quickly than usual.

In fact, they were so far along in setting their explosive charges underneath the wall when the Naphtha wagon exploded that Dunleth thought, for a heart-stopping moment, that something had gone wrong and they had blown themselves to bits. Once he and the other Celts realized the explosion had come from the other side of the wall, they started breathing again and hurriedly finished up their fearsome work.

Raven thought she was hallucinating at first as she stared through the smoke filled air. The sight of threescore Roman Legionnaires skimming across the battlefield to her rescue was impossible; like reliving the memory of a different time. She checked, and seeing no signs of activity atop the wall, she leapt onto the rock that had been her shield so she could have a better view.

Then she recognized her own men and was awed afresh by the excellence of their form and disciplined movement. She glanced both ways down the beach, and again questioned her own sanity when she saw the apocalyptic power of the entire Fifth Crusade on the move.

Her first instinct was to crawl back underneath her rock-shield and bury her face until it all went away. Yet before she was able to choose whether to

remain on the rock or not, she was thrown to the ground by a new explosion. All eyes watched as a thirty foot section of the Damietta wall crumbled to dust.

Raven picked herself up and jumped back onto the rock. She turned and saw that her men were just moments away from reaching her. She began waving her arms and pointing to the opening in the wall.

“Damietta is breached – ‘tis breached!” Raven’s strong and high voice cut through the rumble of the armies and reached the men’s ears. “Sally forth men of Nottingham! For God and Glory! The city is yours – take it!”

The Nottingham Knights were the first to pass through the breach, even ahead of the mounted soldiers. John and James came to where Raven stood, jumped upon the rock with her, and from there continued hammering their drums with charging rhythms.

After passing through the wall the Nottingham men saw a dread sight gathering in the city plaza. A force of two thousand desert archers had been assembled and began showering the Crusaders with arrows as they came through the gap in the wall. As the Nottingham men were quick and few, they were able to dart down a narrow alleyway and avoid the killing rain.

The Austrian light cavalry that came through next was not so fortunate. They were decimated by the hail of deadly darts. Corpses of horse and man filled the gap in the wall and the armies coming in from the beach were bottlenecked outside. The Nottingham troops were pinned down with no escape.

Raven knew something was wrong when the armies started to slow down around them. But out of the corner of her eye she saw a glimmer of hope. The Dreadnought had just passed beyond the curtain wall.

“Press on!” she wailed. “March onward, Christian men!”

The armies trudged ahead into the gap.

The surviving Austrian horsemen fled along the side of the plaza and headed for a wide avenue that would take them out of the archers’ range. Row upon row of Teutonic footmen entered next. Their shields were solid, but too small. Their casualties were even higher than the Austrians’. The Teutons stomped ahead, attempting to charge the archers, but were unable to form a solid line as more and more of their men fell.

Raven could hear the screams of dying men and horses. She heard the Lord’s name called upon in a number of tongues. The bottleneck of armies in the gap looked to be totally unmoving.

Michael and Cuthbert arrived just then on the run, and sorely winded. Raven jumped from the rock and ran to them.

“Michael, can you blow your trumpet?” She asked in a panic.

He nodded, though he gasped for air.

“We must call for retreat,” Raven insisted.

“Wait,” Cuthbert suggested.

Raven turned and watched the gap. The insides of the walls were red and glistening with flowing blood.

“They’re being slaughtered!” she cried.

“Listen,” Cuthbert said.

They stopped John and James and there was a moment of quiet that was soon replaced by distant sounding screams. But they were not the screams of Crusaders. In a moment, the bottleneck in the gap broke through and the armies began to move again.

After moving upriver past the wall, the Dreadnought had continued beyond the point in the river at which it normally stopped and lobbed debris, and it ran right up onto the shore. The ship’s defensive barriers fell forward and became bridges for the disembarking cavalry aboard.

Out of each side of the Dreadnought rode one hundred heavily armored mounted Teutonic Knights. They streamed onto the shore and formed battle lines as they swiftly climbed the embankment. Bursting out onto the city’s plaza they caught the desert archers unaware.

The hooves of the heavy war horses rode down countless Saracens while the Knights swung their broadswords in great arcs, severing limbs and heads from the fleeing Arabs. Seeing the archers thrown into confusion, the Nottingham infantry charged into the fray, spearing archers by the dozens.

Saracen reinforcements came running from all directions, but too many Crusaders had already poured through the breach and into the plaza. The city defenders were crushed and pushed back at every turn. Damietta had fallen to the Fifth Crusade, and the Crusaders fanned out through the streets burning, looting and killing.

The sack of the city continued throughout the day and into the night. On the morning of the second day, the Teutons took control of any government buildings and other prominent locations in the city that had not been destroyed. Everything of value was taken away to the beach.

The Minstrels had gone back to the beach camp to spend the night, and they had a fire going when the soldiers started returning just before dawn. The Nottingham men carried four large trunks, with six men holding each like caskets. They brought the trunks into the camp and showed their loot to Raven. The financial worries of the Nottingham Crusade were over.

They had paid for the new wealth with seven more men, bringing their Crusade contingent, including Minstrels, down to fifty seven. Of the seven Nottingham soldiers lost in the sack of Damietta, two had been killed in street fighting as the Crusade swept through the dangerously narrow corridors and alleyways of Damietta’s Kasbah.

The men had fallen during running battles and no one had been able to recover their bodies. The five other fallen soldiers, all from arrow fire, were brought back to the beach and burned like those lost in the first battle. Their bones were placed on board the ship with the others after being washed and wrapped.

Nearly everyone was injured, but the wounds were generally less severe than they had been after the first battle. The twenty least injured soldiers along with John and James stayed ashore to hold the siege camp.

Meanwhile, Raven, Michael and Cuthbert reopened the floating hospital for the other thirty-two men, and Raven spent their last three gold coins on food and medical necessities.

“What happens when these supplies run out?” Michael asked as they rested on deck after the first day’s work. “Will we start spending the treasure that the men captured from Damietta?”

Raven and Cuthbert looked at each other.

“What is it?” Michael frowned.

“Take no worry for tomorrow, Michael; for what you will eat or what you will wear. The lilies of the field do not toil, neither do they...” Cuthbert propounded.

“Don’t quote scripture at me, Cuthbert a’ Dale!” Michael interrupted, folded his arms. “You two aren’t telling me something.”

“Cuthbert, just show him,” Raven whispered.

Cuthbert unscrewed the end of his knife handle and carefully poured the contents out into the palm of his hand. “We do not want this widely known,” he explained.

“Oh my,” Michael gasped. “Are those what I think they are?”

Cuthbert nodded.

“Where did you get them?” Michael was astonished.

“Little John gave them to me before he left with my father’s bones,” Raven said.

“And where did he get them?” Michael wondered at his friends’ blank stares. “Let me guess. We’ll have to wait until we’re back in England to hear the story.”

Raven nodded.

“Perfect,” Michael fumed.

“Perhaps, God willing, we will be back in England before long,” Cuthbert suggested.

“What are you saying?” Raven shook her head.

“Raven, the men are worn out,” Cuthbert began voicing the concerns that had been on his heart for some time, “They have seen great battles and earned great treasure. They have struck a blow against the infidel and served Mother Church well. But we have lost a quarter of the men with whom we left England. Let us not dishonor the fallen by pushing on beyond what we can...”

“I can not believe what I am hearing,” Raven cut him off. “Are you telling me that we left England, lost eighteen men, risked our own lives time and again, have spent whole fortunes...for this?” She waved her hand toward the broken Damietta wall. “Is this miserable strip of sand what we set out for? Will

the Lord be pleased that we have conquered this dreadful Egyptian port, while Jerusalem still suffers under the heel of her pagan oppressors?”

“Believe me, I understand what you are saying, Raven,” Michael attempted. “Nothing has gone according to our plan. We did not plan for the storm on the ocean that separated us from our fleet. We did not plan for the two of you to be captured by a lunatic bishop. We certainly did not plan on the bandit raid north of Zara.”

Raven looked away.

“But perhaps there is a lesson in all of it,” Michael continued.

“And what is that?” Raven asked angrily, still looking away.

Michael fidgeted. “Perhaps God is trying to tell us that He is in control, and that our plans are but dust in the wind. Perhaps He is telling us that we must accept His Sovereignty. If He wishes to free Jerusalem, the Lord has the power to do so at any moment. Perhaps we as mere humans can only influence history up to a point...”

Raven looked down. She knew what Michael was saying was true, but she was too angry to accept it.

“But we are so close...” Tears were forming in Raven’s eyes.

“We have some big decisions to make. John, James and the other men should be a part of the discussion. Let’s sleep on this, and we will talk further in the morning,” Cuthbert said.

The others agreed and went below to sleep, but Raven could not. She was restless and anxious. Returning to the deck, she received a halfhearted nod from one of the Greek sailors who sat on night watch duty.

The sea was calm and a light breeze made the late summer night pleasant and cool. Raven breathed the fresh air in and out. She watched the stars spinning imperceptibly around the heavens and began to formulate a plan.

Surely some of the other armies have tired of this God-forsaken beach, she reasoned. We can approach the other English groups, or perhaps even the Huns. James can communicate with them well enough. If we can just gather a sufficient force, we could sail to Jerusalem. After a few well fought battles, news of our success would spread and inspire other Christians to rally.

Yes, Raven thought. That is God’s will for us – that we spearhead the liberation of Jerusalem just as we did the sack of Damietta. That is why God brought us here to this shore – to prepare us for the real battle to come; the one that really matters.

Cuthbert and the others will come around. Once they’ve had a few more days to rest from the battle, they will remember why they have come this far. They will see how we cannot return now; not yet.

Raven was so deeply immersed in her planning and scheming that she did not hear when the Greek watchman was knocked out and dragged to the aft of the ship. Nor did she hear the soft footsteps approaching behind her.

In fact, she knew nothing of what happened next until she awoke the following day. By then she was already miles away from the Greek ship and her friends.

Verse Ten – Pirates

The morning sun hung blood red over the eastern horizon. John and James had held their own consultations the night before with the twenty camp guards. The men wanted to go. They had seen enough of the Crusade life and were ready to begin the long journey home.

James had asked the last watch of the night to wake the men an hour before dawn. They quickly breakfasted and struck camp. They were already on their way to the Greek ship with the first load of supplies from the beach when Cuthbert and Michael confirmed that Raven was gone by finding and interviewing the still disoriented night watchman.

When he finally accepted that she was missing, Cuthbert stripped to a loincloth and jumped overboard. He swam rapidly to the nearest Teutonic ship, where the sailors threw him a rope. Once aboard Cuthbert used the bit of Germanic speech he had picked up working on the Dreadnought to communicate about Raven. The Teutons knew nothing about her abduction.

Cuthbert thanked the crew and leapt back into the sea. He swam, a little less quickly, to the next closest vessel. The Austrians aboard produced a groggy night-watchman who remembered seeing an unknown Arabian ship after midnight, but he had presumed it to be a merchant who had stayed and done business well into the night. Cuthbert interrogated the nervous Austrian lad for any detail he could remember of the ship.

“The only thing that I can remember about it was its most unusual prow,” the yellow haired boy recollected.

“What was so unusual about it?” Cuthbert demanded.

“It looked like a mad-dog of some kind...maybe even a wolf...” the boy said.

“Good. That’s good.” Cuthbert smiled and reassuringly placed his hands on the trembling boy’s shoulders. Casually massaging the boy’s muscles Cuthbert leaned in with one more question. “Now, tell me please; which way did the ship go?”

Cuthbert’s gentle smile did little to mask the insane rage behind his eyes. The terrified young Austrian raised his arm and pointed to the northern horizon.

“They went that way, I...I think,” he quailed.

“You think?” Cuthbert forced through his clenched teeth.

“I’m sure of it,” the boy resolved.

Without another word, Cuthbert flew over the side of the ship and into the cool water once again. He was swimming even more slowly and began to flail as he approached the Greek ship.

Fortunately, while Cuthbert had been talking to the Austrians, John and James arrived with the first wave of supplies from the beach. Michael quickly explained the state of affairs to them, and they launched one of the row boats out

to meet Cuthbert. James held the boat steady while John dragged the exhausted swimmer out of the water.

"Excellent timing, as always," Cuthbert said as he hugged his friends. "Arabians have taken her! They've gone north. Their ship has a hound on the prow. That's all I know..." he gasped for breath.

"Michael told us," James explained.

"Don't worry, Bert," John added. "We'll get her back."

"We have to sail north." Cuthbert was trembling with rage, "Now."

James stood in the boat and cupped his hands around his mouth.

"Michael! Get the ship ready to sail. Thomas!" he aimed his voice at one of the men still in the other rowboat, "Go back to shore! Bring back the other men and only the supplies you can carry. Leave the rest! Move fast now!"

Leaping to the rear of the boat, James grabbed an oar and started to steer the boat away from the Greek ship. "What are you doing?" Cuthbert roared. Then he saw. James and John were rowing him into the open water north of the harbor where a small Byzantine trading vessel was coming toward them from the north. "I see." Cuthbert understood. "Perhaps they have seen this Arabian ship."

*

"I did not see the woman you speak of," the Byzantine captain explained. "But, yes, the ship I would have known anywhere. It was that swine, the Jackal. God save your lady friend."

"Who is the Jackal?" Cuthbert hastened.

"Hussein al-Jakari," the Captain answered, "one of the most despised among the pirate villains and cut-throats that ply these waters."

"A pirate, you say?" James queried. "Does he have a known hide-out or base?"

"He is the head of a pirate guild based on the island of Cyprus. Their hidden cove, even if you could find it, is not a place I would recommend visiting. I am sorry to say that if your friend has been taken there, she is not likely to leave the place alive." The captain looked grave.

"You have been most helpful. Thank you," John offered to the Byzantines over his shoulder as he raced to catch up with Cuthbert and James who were already in the boat and turning it back toward the harbor.

*

Michael had been busy. He had the Englishmen organized so that the most injured were secured for the voyage, the most able bodied were deployed to help the Greeks, and those in between were given duties according to their abilities. The anchor had been raised, as had the sails, by the time the last dozen Nottingham troops came within sight in the rowboats.

They had abandoned their position on the Damietta beach to the great disappointment of their crusading neighbors. But in the hearts of each Nottingham Crusader the objective was no longer Cairo or Jerusalem, but a young lady. They were on a rescue mission, plain and simple. And they intended to succeed.

The Greek sailors, who had come to love Raven as well, were just as eager to pursue the quest. They helped the Minstrels pull the last few men and bundles of supplies aboard. The camp guards had left all of the tents bundled on the beach. In the interest of speed, they only brought their weapons and other personal effects, and a few of the more cherished relics from the camp, like the grill and the cooking pots.

Once all the soldiers were aboard, they set sail and raced to the north. The wind was favorable and they made good time, but caught no glimpse of the Jackal's ship through that day or through a long and anxious night. Near the end of the second day, the shores of Cyprus came within view.

*

After her capture Raven had been taken directly to al-Jakari's ship where she was stored, bound and gagged, in a dark closet below deck. She was left there alone the rest of that terrible night and through most of the first day. At sunset one of the pirates entered the closet with a clay pot full of water and a cup of cooked millet.

He set them down and drew a knife from his belt. The pirate held the knife right in front of Raven's eyes and then slid the cool steel along her cheek, pressing the blade lightly into her skin. She closed her eyes but showed no other reaction.

Suddenly the pirate slid the knife underneath her mouth gag and snapped it off with a flick of the blade. She gasped as the cloth fell away. Opening her eyes, Raven looked up at the pirate who sneered down at her in contempt with crooked and filthy teeth. He motioned to the food and water with the knife and then disappeared, slamming and locking the door behind him.

Raven consumed the food and most of the water, saving a little aside for later. When she finished the water that night she used the pail as a chamber pot and set it in the far corner away from her. In the morning the ship came to rest and the same man brought her a fresh water pot and a crust of bread. He grudgingly took the old pail and cursed her with words she did not understand.

At midday the ship began moving again. Shortly thereafter, the man returned to the closet. He appeared agitated and looked around nervously before coming inside and closing the door behind him. The room was dark as always, but Raven's eyes had grown accustomed. She did not need to see to recognize the feel of the pirate's dagger against her flesh.

The scoundrel held the knife against her throat and made hand signs for her to stay quiet. Then he started tugging roughly on her tunic with the obvious intent of removing it. Raven panicked and reached out her hands for something to fight with. Her fingers closed over the rim of her urine pot.

In a flash she shattered the clay jar into the side of the pirate's head leaving nasty gashes along his temple and cheek. Just as painfully, for the pirate, the contents of the bucket splashed into his eyes. The acidic urine stung and blinded him. He dropped his knife and flailed wildly in the small closet injuring himself further.

Still the enraged pirate did not scream, but wiping the liquid from his face, looked around for his knife. During the confusion though, Raven had grabbed it. Holding it between her bound hands, she plunged the blade into the top of the increasingly panicked pirate's foot.

Finally he screamed. After slowly climbing to her feet, Raven gave her wailing attacker, who was bent over holding his foot, a solid kick to the face sending the unfortunate seaman's body hurtling into the closet door which came free of its hinges.

The door and the pirate landed with a crash. Looming above the wrecked body of his crewman, the Jackal stood staring at Raven, a grievous frown smeared across his features.

"What is it about you people from Locksley?" al-Jakari asked rhetorically.

"What do you know of my people and my lands?" Raven hissed from behind the veil of matted hair that covered her face in a mess of blood and urine.

"I know your father," the Jackal proclaimed.

Raven was silent.

"And I am afraid that your father owes me a very great debt." The Jackal stepped aside as two other crewmen worked at collecting their semi-conscious mate. "You see, he took something of great value to me." He hacked out a forced laugh. "But now I have something of great value to him; something for which I am sure he will be willing to negotiate."

"Whatever you think my father took from you, I recommend that you become accustomed to life without it. My father is dead. There will be no negotiation." Raven turned her face away, but not so quickly as to miss the genuine expression of regret on the pirate captain's face.

"I see," al-Jakari let out before taking a turn at silence. The Jackal began to pace and mutter under his breath. Finally he stomped his foot and let out a howl of rage.

"It is decided then!" the Jackal bellowed. "Since your father deceived and robbed me, and since he has fled my justice in this world, I will seek restitution from his offspring! Though you are worthless compared to the treasure that Robin of the Hood stole from me, I will recover some of my loss by selling you – his precious daughter!"

The Jackal grinned at her horrified expression as he continued his tirade. “Yes, my sweet lady, you should bring a fine price when I trade you to a...customer I know; a powerful Sultan who enjoys collecting...ah...rare and unusual selections for his harem. Yes, you will certainly entertain for a time, and when he tires of you...” The old pirate walked away and left his sentence unfinished, save for his cackling laughter.

*

Another full day passed and Raven received no more food. She was weak and disoriented when they pulled her from the cargo hold and carried her to a small rowboat. It was the dead of night. A sliver of moon hung low in the sky like a grinning madman.

The Jackal and five other pirates guarded her. Her hands were kept bound and her feet were tied together as well. The men had seen what she did to their overly aggressive crewmate, and even in her weakened condition, they thought better than to give her any edge. They had heard the legends about Raven of the Hood, and each was secretly afraid that she would somehow loose her powers upon them.

At al-Jakari’s order, however, they tied a rope around her waist and threw her overboard into the sea. Tugging together on the rope the men yanked her cruelly back into the boat. Most of the filth from her confinement was washed away, but the pirates dunked her twice more for good measure. After the third time she spat up sea water and lay shivering, nauseous and near fainting in the bottom of the boat.

Seeing how easily she was humiliated and abused, the pirates relaxed and began joking among themselves. The Jackal prodded her with the tip of his boot until she looked up at him. The look in her eyes was pure rage, but the Jackal laughed dismissively and leaned over to speak.

“Half a year of my life I spent burning in the hot sand and wind of the Sahara – and for what? I spent a king’s ransom planning and preparing for the Robbery of the Ages, and who should come my way and ruin it all? Yes, that’s right – your father, Robin Hood, the greatest thief in England!”

“Who are you? And when did all this happen?” Raven whispered with all the voice she had left.

“Who I am is no concern of yours. This all happened when the fool was searching for you. I suppose he never found you...” The Jackal watched her.

“He did find me. He died saving my life,” she said defiantly.

“Is that so?” the Jackal marveled.

“And there are many more that will come after me now. You have erred greatly captain.” Raven found her voice again. “Do you realize that an English army is bearing down on your trail even now?” She laughed loudly. “You’re doomed!”

“Save your curses, witch!” al-Jakari barked. He grabbed her by the hair and dunked her head underwater repeatedly until she went limp. Raven remained unconscious until she awoke inside a small room at dawn. The wailing sound of the Islamic morning prayers drifted in through a small, barred window.

*

The Greek ship pulled into the first major harbor they came upon. Cuthbert sold two diamonds and spread around enough of the wealth to loosen a few local tongues. The Minstrels soon learned the location of al-Jakari’s pirate cove and then resumed sailing immediately.

Cuthbert stood at the prow, scanning for any sign on the horizon that could give them hope in their search for Raven. Michael approached and placed his hand on his friend’s shoulder reassuringly.

“We’ve been through a lot. She knows how to take care of herself,” Michael tried to help, but Cuthbert was unreachable as he scanned the horizon for any sign of the dog-headed ship.

Michael settled in next to his friend standing shoulder to shoulder with him. The blond trumpeter pulled the small clay pipe from a fold in his tunic. It was packed with the very last of the healing weed.

Cuthbert shook his head. Michael lit his tinder and made a fiery cherry in the pipe’s core. After a few nudges Cuthbert relented and inhaled. He could feel the tension seep out of his body and was grateful for the gesture. The two stood quietly, listening to the slapping of the waves as the ship raced toward a darkening horizon.

“You love her.” Michael’s voice seemed to rise up out of the waves.

“Everyone does,” Cuthbert granted.

“You know what I mean.”

The waves were slowly growing larger and a cool breeze cut through the hot summer air.

“Why?” Cuthbert asked.

“Why what?” Michael answered.

“Why does it take losing her to make me realize how much...” he could not finish. “Why has God allowed this? He has been with us until now...”

“He has plans that we cannot understand; things too wonderful for us to know.” Michael looked at his friend.

Cuthbert had no reply.

*

The storm was mild throughout the night, but the sunrise was blunted by a dense fog. The Greeks slowed the ship and all eyes were watchful for rocks,

ships or other dangers. James had taken up position in the crow's nest and stared intently through the fog with his sharp eyes.

By midmorning the fog was beginning to break apart. James caught a fleeting glimpse of another ship on the eastern horizon. He communicated his discovery and the ship's course was adjusted accordingly. The men began to gather their armor, shields and weapons.

When they were all ready for battle, they hid. Under blankets, boxes, barrels and bags they crouched silent and motionless. James had the Greeks raise a white flag and then joined his brother hiding behind the port rail. Cuthbert took the spot in the crow's nest and Michael stood among the sailors. The Greeks played well their role of terrified victims, cowering as the black sailed vessel approached.

The two ships were within shouting distance when the fog seemed to vanish altogether. The clear view showed what all the Englishmen were looking for: a hound headed prow on a pirate ship. The only sounds as the two vessels drew together were the lonely creaking of the ship's wooden beams and the gentle lapping of the ocean's waves.

"At least two dozen pirates," John whispered to James as he interpreted Michael's slight finger movements, "long swords, but no armor and few shields."

James formulated a plan and it was quickly circulated by whisper.

The pirates threw grappling hooks as the ships ran along side each other. Both vessels lurched in the water and slowed. Several of the pirates were shouting in Arabic. Michael watched and waited, his hand wet with sweat as it held his silver trumpet behind his back.

Michael licked his lips nervously and glanced skyward. Cuthbert was standing in the crow's nest. The wind whipped his long and shaggy red hair into a wild mane. Yet the pirates did not see him because to look for him they would have had to gaze too close to the late morning sun, now burning hot through the clearing skies.

Michael moved the trumpet to his lips as he saw Cuthbert draw his dagger and place it between his teeth. The Red Bard let out a length of rope from the high sail riggings and in a flash leapt from the crow's nest swinging in a swooping arc through the air between the ships.

The pirates felt his shadow pass over them, but looking up they saw only a dangling rope. Cuthbert had already released and was flying unfettered. He grabbed the dagger out of his mouth with his left hand and prepared to roll onto his right side as he came careening toward the deck of the pirate ship. Michael accompanied Cuthbert's brief flight with a double blast of the hunting call on his horn.

Cuthbert intended to call out the name of his beloved as a battle cry, but managed only to belt out "Rave!" before smashing into a stack of barrels, several of which broke open spilling fresh drinking water all over the deck. The pirates were sufficiently awed by Cuthbert's attempt at heroism that they noticed far too

late the two lines of Nottingham spearmen forming on the supposedly surrendered Greek ship.

The first line charged. They gained speed running across the deck, and then leapt. Without breaking stride they planted their feet on the rail in unison and used their powerful Crusade cultivated leg muscles to leap again, soaring high into the air and flying.

As they crossed the distance between the two ships' decks, the Englishmen drew their arms and legs in tightly, almost making themselves into balls behind their shields. The tips of their spears flashed in the sunlight as the deadly blades dipped downward toward the bewildered pirates who had very little time to wonder how they had gone so quickly from attacking to defending.

The impact of the first wave of spearmen was preceded by a moment of strange quiet, as if the world had drawn in a deep breath and was holding it. But this sensation was obliterated with a mighty cracking sound that carried like thunder as spears and shields struck the pirates and shattered their bones.

The Nottingham men drew short swords then and went to work. The ship's deck was already slick with blood when the second wave of Crusaders leapt aboard. Screams for mercy went up from the surviving pirates and the battle was over just moments from its beginning.

Wasting no time, the men bound the pirates' hands behind their backs and lined them up in a row on their knees. Cuthbert approached the nearest one and asked, "Are you the Jackal?"

The man shook his head.

"Where is he?" Cuthbert demanded.

The man looked around nervously but still said nothing.

"Perhaps someone else will tell me." Cuthbert said as he raised his dagger over his head, preparing to strike down the unhelpful sea urchin.

"Stop!" a voice bellowed. "Enough blood has been spilled this day!"

Cuthbert ran down the line of captives to the other end where the speaker was struggling to stand. "You are the Jackal then?"

"So I am!" the aging captain barked.

Cuthbert planted a kick to al-Jakari's hip sending him to the deck hard. "Where is she?" he roared, leaping onto the pirate and grabbing his neck with one hand while brandishing the dagger in the other.

The Jackal gasped as his air supply dwindled. He struggled in vain to remove the Englishman's death grip. "I don't know what you are...aaagh...talking about..."

For that lie, Cuthbert grabbed one of al-Jakari's wrists, pinned his hand to the deck and stabbed right through the palm into the wood below. Had the wind been more favorable, the pirate's screams might have been heard in Lebanon.

Cuthbert pulled out the blade and walked away. Michael, who had leapt over onto the pirate ship moments earlier, picked up an open barrel of water and

splashed it over the shrieking captain's hand. Grabbing some clean looking towels nearby, Michael swiftly wrapped the Jackal's hand and the bleeding was contained.

"If you lie to me again, the next thing you see will be my dagger entering your skull between your eyes." Cuthbert squatted in front of the Jackal and looked directly into his face. "Do you believe me?"

Grinding his teeth against the pain, the old pirate nodded.

"Where is she?"

"In Sidon – turn to the south and sail along the coast." Al-Jakari hissed. "You will reach it in less than a day."

"Oh no," Cuthbert replied. "*We* will reach it. You will be our guide."

The Englishmen wrecked the pirate ship's main mast and rudder and set their prisoners adrift in the hands of fate and the sea; all except for the Jackal who was exceptionally well cared for on the Greek ship. As Michael explained to the pirate, until Raven was found, he was probably one of the safest people in the world.

They sailed south and approached Sidon late at night when the moon was already low in the sky.

Verse Eleven – Road to Damascus

Raven looked out through the bars of her window at the lowering moon. She had been treated well. Not since Vienna had she known such comfort and succor. As much rich and nourishing food as she could eat was provided, as well as water and wine.

She had been carefully bathed and scrubbed by a team of women. They attended to even the most minor of her wounds with a variety of medicines and ointments. Her hair was brushed out and braided, and while this was being done, the nails of both her hands and feet were shaped, filed and painted.

A waxy substance was applied to her lips that left them feeling extra soft and smooth. Finally her face was lightly painted and powdered, and she was slid into a crimson robe with gold trim. Tiny bells hung from the fringes that jingled with the slightest movement.

Despite the pampering and rest that she was given, Raven had never felt more miserable. She had already decided that the events unfolding around her were God's punishment upon her for the Crusade's wanton destruction and pillaging, and for the lack of attention given on any of the Crusaders' parts to freeing Jerusalem.

The more time that passed since her abduction, and the further from Damietta she had come, the more her hope of being rescued dwindled. Her friends would have no way to find her, no path to follow.

I am truly lost. Raven lamented. I will never go home, and I will never know peace again.

She wondered if a celestial voice would reassure and comfort her as had happened on the beach just before the epic battle. No voice came. She thought about Jack, her fool dog that almost led her to death, but instead in the end, to glorious victory.

If I had only brought him on deck with me that night, he would have raised an alarm.

She thought about Cuthbert, and tears started to roll down her cheeks. The moon's light reflected in the teardrops and each became like a tiny falling diamond. Involuntarily, Raven's mouth opened and she softly sang from the Song of Songs.

*All night long on my bed
I looked for the one that my heart loves
I looked for him but did not find him*

*I will get up now and go about the city
Through its streets and squares
I will search for the one my heart loves
So I looked for him but did not find him*

*The watchmen found me
As they made their rounds in the city
“Have you seen the one my heart loves?”*

Of all the words in Scripture, none save for the words of the Lord himself brought her as much comfort as those in Solomon’s Song. Yet this night, her heart felt nothing. The prospect of spending the rest of her life as a curiosity and a toy for some sick and powerful madman was beyond her mind to imagine.

She knew that Cuthbert and the men would never give up, and yet this only gave her over to greater despair. *I will be the cause of their downfall. They will search far and wide in these Arab lands, but they are only fifty. That is why we turned from the path to Jerusalem in the first place. We were too weak, and they are now even fewer...*

Her morose thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the Sultan’s emissary. One of the attendants opened the door and the seven foot tall Abyssinian man entered, his height augmented a further half foot by his turban. He was accompanied by two eunuch handlers and six men-at-arms.

A short, weasel-like man scurried among the troops. Raven had never seen him before, but he came straight to her wearing a wide simpering grin. The Abyssinian came alongside as well, and the two began speaking in Arabic while examining Raven much as one would a horse for sale.

At one point the weasel motioned frantically for her to display her teeth. Too defeated in spirit to even consider resisting, Raven complied and the emissary seemed pleased with what he saw. The deal was concluded. The eunuchs each took one of her arms and they exited the building.

*

“I tell you this because you have ordered me to speak the truth. You will not regain your companion by strength of arms,” al-Jakari counseled the Minstrels as the Greek ship slid quietly into the bay. “Your men succeeded against my pirates because you had greater strength and because surprise was on your side. Neither of those will be the case here in Sidon.”

“What do you recommend?” Michael asked.

“Salah-ad-Din drove the Franks out of Sidon and this entire area when I was but a boy and you all were not even born. You will be afforded no protection because of the fear of Western forces here, or anywhere you may roam on these shores. Unlike you Christians, however, my people are at least tolerant of pilgrims, merchants, or any who come with peaceful purposes.”

The Minstrels accepted the Jackal’s admonishment and remained quiet so he would continue.

“If you want to succeed, only a small number of you should go – two or three at most. You must forsake all weapons. Only walking sticks will be permissible. You must appear to all eyes as harmless pilgrims, peacefully seeking the holy places with no intention of crusading or conquering.

“I will act as your guide, but you should try to avoid involvement with people on the streets. We will go directly to the place where I last saw her. You...ah...will of course require the means to bargain for her return. I would offer my wealth to the cause, but unfortunately, you set my ship adrift on the high seas and with it my fortune.” The Jackal frowned.

The Minstrels noted al-Jakari’s suggestions and followed them to a point. But rather than three men in the rescue party, Cuthbert took fifteen. Michael came along in case medical help was needed. Al-Jakari, of course, accompanied the group with James as his personal escort. And twelve of the healthiest and fiercest Nottingham men were handpicked by Cuthbert to provide any other necessary support.

John grudgingly agreed to stay behind and oversee the security of the ship along with the Greeks, Jack, and the other forty soldiers.

“Our rescue and escape will be of little effect if we are unable to sail away from here when the time comes,” James assuaged his brother. “Besides, you got to go along for the San Sebastiano rescue.”

“Maybe, if you’re lucky, you’ll get to inch your way up a slimy sewage pipe, too,” John replied sarcastically.

“One can only hope,” James dismissed. “Now, you have got to keep a low profile. Be conservative with our treasure stores. Buy only what you absolutely need. Whatever you do – don’t draw any attention to the ship or to yourselves!”

“Thank you, mother,” John was becoming irritated with his well meaning brother. “We’ll be fine. Just bring her back.”

Cuthbert’s away team climbed over the side of the ship and slid down ropes into the waiting rowboats. Although they had dressed themselves to look like humble and defenseless Christian pilgrims, they bore a significant arsenal of weapons – knives, darts, daggers, iron hooks, and fire making materials – all hidden underneath their pilgrim’s cloaks, strapped discreetly to the insides of their legs or under their arms. Yet, even with only the wooden poles and staves that they carried openly, they would have been a formidable force.

Not knowing how long they would be away on land, each man took a small bag of grain and a wine skin from the ship’s supplies. They pushed the boats away from the larger ship and began rowing briskly toward shore.

“Be ready,” Cuthbert called back to John, “you do not know the hour at which we will return.”

*

Out in the alleyway, Raven was shoved into a covered transport wagon. There was a small area inside strewn with plush pillows, amongst the many boxes and baskets no doubt filled with other luxury goods for the Sultan's pleasure. The eunuchs tied a rope connecting Raven's bound wrists to the central post that upheld the canopy. Lacking any alternative, she made herself comfortable for the journey.

The horse drawn wagon set off at a good pace. The emissary's men-at-arms took to camel back. One rider flanked each side of the wagon, while two rode behind and two rode in front with the emissary. They quickly disappeared out of sight.

Cradling his new bag of gold like a beloved child, the weasel-man slithered back inside his compound. After stashing the gold behind a secret brick in his cooking hearth, the man settled into his favorite chair with a pipe stuffed to overflowing with dried and shredded tobacco leaves.

In his mind the man congratulated himself for making such a tidy profit, with a remarkably quick turnaround time, buying and then selling the Celtic wild-woman. He exhaled a billow of smoke and was chuckling aloud over his good fortune when the icy edge of Cuthbert's knife blade slid into place along his throat.

"Where is she?" Cuthbert spoke the only thought that really occupied his mind anymore. The Jackal translated for the weasel, and added a warning on his own about the minstrel's temper.

"Gone," the reply arrived.

"Where?" Cuthbert applied enough pressure to the blade for a tiny trickle of blood to issue from the weasel's neck.

"Damascus," the answer came, "at least, it is near Damascus. She has been sent to live in a citadel to the north of that city. But you will not find it without a map or a guide. He will give you a map but asks that you spare his life in exchange," the Jackal concluded on behalf of the frightened weasel.

"Tell him that he will be our traveling companion, just as you are, until she is found safe. And tell him I am already counting toward twenty, and when I reach it he must be prepared to either walk or be carried – for we are leaving." Cuthbert stood and sheathed his knife as al-Jakari explained the terms to his new fellow captive.

The weasel jumped out of his seat, nodding and bowing gratefully. He scuttled over to a drawer, opened it, reached in, and placed a few small objects into a nearby satchel. In a flash, he withdrew one of the objects and threw it into the fire.

The entire room was instantly filled with thick white smoke. The Englishmen were temporarily blinded, and though they swung their arms around furiously, they could not grab a hold of the quick little Arab.

When the smoke had cleared enough to see, James called everyone's attention to the open trap door in the ceiling. Cuthbert jumped for the opening,

pulling himself up through it and onto the roof. Michael followed him while James, al-Jakari and the men flooded out onto the street, scanning the rooftops for the escaping prisoner.

They caught sight of him bounding between rooftops already two buildings away. The tiny weasel had no trouble clearing the short distances, and the men could barely track him as they ran through the narrow alleyways of the city's Kasbah.

Cuthbert and Michael were gaining on him though. The weasel looked over his shoulder and panicked when he saw how close behind they were. Misplacing his foot, the little man slipped and went careening toward the street below, cracking his head loudly on the hard roof tiles as he fell.

The two Minstrels on the roof climbed down carefully and reached the weasel's broken body just as James and the others arrived. The weasel was dead, and the pool of blood around his head was growing just as quickly as the crowd of curious Arabs.

Seeing the Christian pilgrims, a few of the onlookers began shouting, clearly upset. Al-Jakari's translation confirmed their worst fears, and at Cuthbert's shouted command the Englishmen turned as one and bolted down a narrow alleyway.

They were not pursued for very long, but continued running until the buildings started to thin. After a good run they were well outside of the city and they stopped, exhausted, under the thick branches of a date grove. They drank from their wine flasks and caught their breath.

"What do we do now?" Cuthbert asked. "We've lost our guide and we have no map."

"We could go back to the weasel's house and find the map," James suggested.

"Could you find your way back there?" Michael asked rhetorically.

"I could," the Jackal contributed. "But I strongly recommend against returning into the city tonight or anytime soon. You will be noticed, and we may not be so fortunate next time."

"Can you find this citadel?" Cuthbert asked al-Jakari.

"I can lead you to Damascus," the Jackal assured them. "After that, you know that the citadel is to the north of the city. Perhaps Allah will favor you in your search from there."

Cuthbert's brow was furrowed with concentrated thought. "We need to stay moving. Let's head for Damascus. At least we'll still be gaining ground."

"Cuthbert," Michael whispered. "The men haven't slept at all and the sun will be up before long. Let us take a rest."

"Raven is on her way to...God only knows what fate. And you wish to rest!" The Red Bard hissed.

James placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Michael's right. You will do her no good if you arrive to rescue her only to collapse at her feet."

Cuthbert wavered.

“May I suggest we move a little farther away from the city before day break?” the Jackal added.

To the others’ relief, Cuthbert accepted the compromise and they prepared to make one last run to the east before dawn. Just as they were preparing to set off though, a young boy came jogging into the date grove. He was completely winded and collapsed, dropping a large leather bag as he tumbled. They let him breathe for a moment and Michael gave him a swig of water.

“What is your hurry boy?” al-Jakari asked the youth in his own tongue.

“Koot-ber,” the lad answered.

“What are you saying?” the Jackal pressed.

“Koot-ber!” he tried again.

“Cuthbert?” asked Cuthbert.

The boy nodded enthusiastically.

“I am Cuthbert.” He pointed to himself and nodded back.

The boy reached into his shirt and pulled something out, holding it up in the palm of his hand for Cuthbert to see. Taking the ring between his fingers, Cuthbert at once recognized the Imperial Byzantine insignia.

“Was that the ring given to Raven by Princess Angeloi?” Michael wondered.

“Ask him if he’s seen her! Ask him if she’s all right!” Cuthbert begged the Jackal.

“She is alive.” The translation seemed to take ages to Cuthbert’s frantic mind. “A caravan left with her not long before you arrived. She gave him the ring yesterday, and made him memorize your name. He says you were not difficult to follow. All the more reason, I might add, that we should be...”

“We’ll leave soon enough!” Cuthbert barked, cutting off the Jackal. “Ask him what is in the bag?”

“It is full of maps,” the translation explained. “He took them from the house of our recently deceased companion. He wants to know if you will look through them and should you find the one you need, if you will reward him for bringing it.”

Cuthbert unscrewed the end cap of his knife handle and poured out a diamond. Placing it into the boy’s hand he said to the Jackal, “Tell him we will take them all.”

*

The heat of the day set in not long after dawn. The inside of the wagon was sweltering. Raven ached from both the continual jarring of the bumpy ride and the inability to stretch out her body. Throughout that long day’s journey, and the next, she slipped further and further into depression and despair.

Her mind searched the depths of itself for something to hold on to, something for which to hope. Heaps of broken images tumbled across the landscape of her inner vision. It was the trees that caught her wandering attention. She recognized Sherwood as she sailed above the treetops in a waking dream.

Then suddenly she swooped down below and was inside Friar Tuck's tiny wooden church. She was only eleven years old.

"I don't understand," she complained; her voice echoing from across the years. "How can God make people get hurt and die if He loves them so much?"

The Friar's warm face glowed in the afternoon light as he smiled, wondering how many times he had been asked that same question.

"God does not wish for those bad things to happen, my dear," the good Friar explained.

Raven shook her head. Her brow was furrowed with concentration. "But that does not make sense," she challenged the preacher. "You said yesterday that the Lord is all powerful. If He can do anything He wants, then why does he not put a stop to it?"

The Friar sighed and sat down so that he was closer to eye level with his student.

"God wishes for us to be happy and safe and comfortable, 'tis true," he reasoned, "But above and beyond all of that, He wishes for us to love him. And He does not simply wish for us to say we love him, but that we really do – and that we behave like it."

"What is your point?" Raven asked with the bluntness only a small girl can get away with.

"I'm getting to it," the Friar forgave her impatience. "He certainly has the power to make us behave as if we love him, whether we do or not. When you make your marionettes to entertain the other children, you can pull on their strings from above and make them do anything you want. The Lord could do that with us if He wished. But while a puppet can be a pleasure to watch for awhile, it will never love you the way your father, or your brother, or your friends, or I do." He tweaked her nose for emphasis.

"I see where you are going with this," Raven declared proudly.

"You do?" Tuck raised his eyebrows in alarm.

"Yes."

"Then tell me," the Friar encouraged.

"God cut our strings," she beamed.

"To what end?" the Friar guided her mind.

"He cut us free and brought us to life, so we can move about on our own and decide what we would or would not like to do," she thought aloud.

"And why is that important?" the churchman knew they were getting close to it.

“So if we decide to love Him, then it’s special because...” she was struggling to put it together. The Friar held his peace, letting her come to it on her own. “...because, I suppose, we could have decided not to love Him.” The end of her sentence went up in pitch making it sound more like a question.

“That’s precisely it, my brilliant one!” The Friar was elated.

“So,” Raven pushed onward, “is it the deciding that is the important thing?”

“Yes,” he answered after a moment’s thought. “Yes, it is – and the fact that we are given a choice in the first place. He gives us freewill, even though He had to give up His own life to do so. And that is why we must trust in Him and in his eternal plans for us, even when things seem to be going badly.”

“I don’t understand.” She hated the way he always seemed to be changing the subject slightly.

“We do not decide to follow the Lord based upon a feeling or a whim. Rather, it must be a sober and well reasoned choice. You do not decide to do your chores for your father because you always like doing them, or because they bring you happiness in themselves. You do them because you love your father and you want to please him. Am I right?” Tuck asked.

She folded her arms in frustration. “And because I do not wish to be punished...” she pouted.

“And it is much the same state of affairs with our Lord,” Tuck concluded.

“Aha!” Raven thought she had found a chink in the Friar’s theology. “So sometimes He does wish us harm!”

“He no more wishes it than your father wishes to harm you when he corrects you. I suspect that more times than not, when my Sir Robin puts a switch to your backside it is because you have wandered too far, taken too great a risk, or in some way endangered yourself. And he corrects you the way a shepherd corrects a wandering sheep. It may hurt, but he does it to keep you on the path and in the fold,” Tuck argued.

Raven knew he was right but she still fidgeted as she tried to think of a way to keep the argument going. “It’s just that my father can be so unfair sometimes and...well...”

“You can say what is on your mind, child,” Tuck assured her.

“Well...all right...it just seems that the Lord can sometimes be that way, too.” She blushed, already regretting questioning God’s intentions so directly.

Tuck smiled. “I will tell you a secret, Raven. I have felt that way myself many times.”

She looked at him wide eyed.

“Here is the important thing to remember though. You are absolutely right about your father. As truly wonderful of a man as he is, he is far from perfect and he will be the first to say so. So you are right. I am sure he is often

unfair to you, and your brother. And I know it must be quite exasperating that you have to love him anyway, in spite of his flaws.”

“It is.” She squirmed.

“But that is the difference between your earthly father and your Heavenly Father. Our Lord is perfect. We may not understand His ways, but He is never unfair. If He were, He would not be God. The trouble is, we are so flawed that we cannot even see His perfection, let alone understand it.” The Friar could see that she was close to having had enough for today.

“Will we ever understand?” she asked.

Tuck smiled again. “When we reach our end and stand in His presence, we will understand enough to know that He never treated us unfairly. In fact, we will be amazed beyond measure with the mercy and love that He has poured out upon us; well more than we ever could have deserved.”

Raven came to herself in the back of the wagon as it passed close to Damascus. She was shocked by how real her memory of that childhood conversation had seemed. Flipping onto her other side and curling herself into a tiny ball, she struggled to regain the reality of that other time and place, but it had dispersed like a puff of smoke.

One thought lingered for a moment though. She remembered on that rainy afternoon long ago, Tuck had recited the twenty-third Psalm to her. She had memorized it years before, but never tired of hearing its assurances.

Raven’s lips began to move, and in a whisper she spoke those words that the bard of all bards, King David, under the direction of God’s Spirit had written so long ago and yet so close by to where she now traveled.

*The Lord is my shepherd
I shall not want
He makes me lie down in green pastures
He leads me beside still waters
He restores my soul*

“What of my soul, Lord?” Raven whispered as the slave wagon rolled on. “What will become of it in this place where I am going? Will I remember you as the years of my captivity unfold? Will I be remembered?”

She wrenched her mind away from despair and tried to refocus on the Psalm. The size of the battle to do so was for Raven, in the Spirit Realm, on a scale that would make the siege at Damietta seem like a mere street brawl.

*He restores my soul
...my soul...*

She bit her lip and strained to focus.

*He guides me in the paths of righteousness
For his name's sake*

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
I will fear no evil
For you are with me*

“It is true,” Raven spoke in a hushed gasp. “You have been with me. You brought me through the Inquisition. You brought me out of Egypt alive. But why Lord? Why did you bother? How could it serve you to send me into a life of subservience and slavery? How will I survive?”

She did not want to go on with her recitation of scripture. The words of love, once so soothing and serene, tasted bitter in her mouth and made her empty stomach clench and groan.

But she kept hearing Friar Tuck repeating time and again from the distant hallways of her memory the encouragement that pain and trouble and suffering and heartache were all blessings, because God would use them to draw us closer to Him.

She set her jaw in determination and forced the words out.

*Your rod and your staff
They comfort me*

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies
You anoint my head with oil
My cup overflows*

*Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord
Forever*

After the last word, Raven wept.

The two eunuchs were lying among some boxes, one near the front of the wagon and the other in back. The one in back was taking his turn at sleep. The one in front was resting as well, but his eyes were wide open.

He understood English, though he was not English himself. Raven's words stirred something deep within him that had been long dormant. From that time on, he kept his eye on the new prisoner.

*

The Abyssinian emissary led his captive through the outer gates of the Sultan's citadel just before sunset after two long days of travel. Raven had, by

this time, resigned herself. Whatever would happen would happen. If the opportunity ever came she would try to escape, but she would not spend her energy hoping for rescue.

She felt as if God was punishing her. That was the only explanation she could accept. She made a covenant with herself at that time that she would strive, as much as was within her power, to live out her days in this place, no matter how nightmarish they might be, in accordance with God's principles and laws as best she could understand and keep them.

She decided that she should not add to her heap of sins any further. God had punished her at the hands of the Church for stepping out of her bounds and going on Crusade in the first place. He took away her father in a meaningless battle because of her disobedience. He took away more good men in Damietta as a chastening for the fool's quest they had set out on with the Teutons.

Raven finally accepted that her own sinful choices had brought her to this place; that it was her fault, not God's, and that God had done all He could to help her, that is, without taking away her freewill altogether.

Perhaps, she thought, if I repent and turn from my sinful ways, and if I trust that the Lord will be merciful to me, then I may at least look forward to death. When it comes, perhaps then I will know peace again.

Verse Twelve – By the Willows

The wagon rolled to a stop after crossing a large outer courtyard covered in flat light grey stones. The eunuchs removed Raven from the back of the wagon and set her on her feet. They caught her as her legs buckled and she nearly collapsed. With a eunuch supporting each arm she was able to walk, gingerly, inside the next gate as the emissary was leading her to do.

The temperature dropped several degrees as they passed from the outer courtyard, so recently baked by the afternoon sun, into a canopied tranquil garden. Giant willows joined their weeping branches creating a lofty rolling rooftop that diffused the sun's fury into a gentle green glow.

Peacocks, ducks and a variety of strange birds strutted from fountain to fountain enjoying their lazy lives and growing fat on the scraps of the people. Water trickled and fell everywhere, and its abundance brought a comfortable humidity that was starkly absent in the world outside.

"This is the Outer Court," the emissary explained to Raven, though in her dazed and half sleeping state she had trouble understanding his thick and semi-archaic Greek. "Some men may enter here."

Raven noticed however that the men-at-arms had fallen away after the sunny outer courtyard. Only the emissary and the eunuchs still guarded her. They walked along the shaded paths and Raven saw a number of women, mostly older than she. None of them appeared to be engaged in any kind of task, but rather observing a time of quiet contemplation. They appeared to her neither happy nor upset.

A breeze filtered through as they turned down another pathway and the sweet floral smells it carried caused Raven to close her eyes and briefly savor the delight. She wondered how many fresh breezes were in her future.

They came to a small wooden door.

"I go no further," the giant Abyssinian croaked. "Do as you are told, and keep your eyes open and you will do well."

With that he turned and marched back the way they had come.

The first eunuch then opened the wooden door and entered. Raven followed him inside, and the second one came last, pulling the door shut behind them.

Although they had stepped inside they were, at least temporarily, more outside than they had been before. An open veranda let in the last piercing red rays of the sinking sun. A lively breeze helped to dissipate the heat rising up from the polished stone floor.

Passing under a row of billowing white silk canopies, they returned to a shaded area covered by a hard tile roof. The only light came from small windows high in the walls or through the few open doorways.

The next room they entered was a very long, but narrow hallway. Many doors lined each wall, though most were shut. Their footsteps echoed eerily

against the dark shiny marble walls. She shuddered at the sudden sense that she had entered a tomb. They moved slowly down the hall along the smooth floor.

Raven stole a glance through each open doorway they passed, but saw no signs of activity. With every step, the loneliness and gloom of the place tightened its stranglehold on her senses.

She took in her surroundings more as impressions than images, almost as if in a dream. The idea occurred to her that she was dreaming, but the physical discomfort in her body was too real compared with any dream she had ever known.

The notion that she had died at Damietta, and was now in the outer chambers of hell also crept into the confused melee of her thoughts. She pushed the thought away and, out of necessity, concentrated on moving one foot in front of the other.

At one doorway, a burst of excited whispering caught Raven's ear. She turned to look and saw the three whisperers, or at least their eyes. The rest of them were wrapped in ornately colorful robes from head to toe. Only their eyes were uncovered. All six eyes grew wide in turn as they made contact with Raven's, after which each quickly looked down.

As Raven passed beyond the doorway and turned to follow the lead eunuch down a new hallway, she heard a shrill giggling coming from behind. It sounded unnatural and made her stomach turn.

"We are in the Middle Court," the lead eunuch said quietly to her. She did not know if he meant to comfort her by speaking, but he did. They turned one last corner and stopped. At the end of the hall there stood two enormous dark skinned guards.

Each guard was clothed in shiny scale armor and wielded a long pike in addition to the curved sword on his hip. On the opposite hip, each wore a large battle horn. Even if they were unable to stop an invader, they could certainly call widespread attention to his presence.

"That is the Inner Court," the talkative eunuch explained in a surprisingly fluent Latin. "To be on the other side of that door means you are in favor with the Sultan. This should be your goal as it is your best and only possibility for survival."

Raven looked at him but said nothing.

"You are off to a good start," the eunuch affirmed. "The Sultan does not like talkative women. We will take you to your chamber."

They turned away from the guards, walked back down the hallway they had come, turned down a new hallway where they had not yet been, and finally came to a small door that was slightly ajar.

"Rest," was the only additional word spoken to her before the door was pulled shut and locked from the outside.

Night had come, and the small window gave little light. Raven stood still, listening in the darkness. As her eyes adjusted, she could see a small bed in the corner and a wash basin with a bucket.

She sniffed the water in the bucket, drank some, and then splashed her face with some more. Ignoring the eunuch's instruction to rest, she spent some time pacing, stretching and exercising.

For some time Raven struggled to work out the soreness and stiffness from the wagon ride. Massaging the muscles in her neck, she took a series of deep breaths and finally started to relax. Then the tiredness came and she plopped onto the bed, falling instantly asleep.

*

Next morning, a soft rap on the door brought her out of a deep, dreamless slumber. She sat up on the side of the bed and watched a woman enter with a tray. Raven accepted the tray when offered, admiring the honey glazed cakes of barley, the bowl of thick purple grapes, and the clear glass carafe of pulpy, just squeezed grapefruit juice with sprigs of mint floating on top.

The woman motioned for her to eat and Raven did with all of the politeness she could manage in her extreme hunger. She wondered if her caretaker was one of the women that had laughed at her, but did not truly care if she was. The woman watched her eat, which Raven disliked but did nothing about.

After the meal, Raven followed the woman down a series of hallways that led to a wondrous waterworks. Pools of all dimensions and contents dotted the vast expanse of the cavernous chamber. Steam, incense smoke and flower pollen combined to form an intoxicating and soothing perfume that hung heavily in the air.

Dozens of women luxuriated at the various stations, while scores more attended to their needs. Some of the attendants scurrying about seemed quite young, and a handful of crones sat about the complex at strategic locations directing activities and imparting wisdom.

Raven's treatment began with the removal of her robes. After she was stripped, she was dipped into a hot water pool. She had never been submerged in water so hot before, and the experience was both frightening and exhilarating. For a moment she wondered if she was to be cooked and eaten, but her body eventually adjusted to the water and she was sorry when they pulled her out.

Then the scrubbing began. Much more thorough than the ladies in Sidon, these women left no part of her un-scoured. She was raw and pink when they finished and dipped her into a much, much colder water pool. A flutter went among the women when Raven did not gasp or panic at the cold water shock.

"You shall have to visit England sometime," she said in English, earning scowls of disapproval from the women.

Next they covered her in a sweetly scented ointment, and another brief moment of concern overcame Raven when some of the women approached her with small daggers. She trusted their reassuring hand motions and allowed them to begin gently scraping the surface of her skin with the knives. Their aim seemed to be leaving her completely hairless, save for her head.

When they had accomplished all that Raven would easily allow, they bathed her one last time in a comfortably warm bath, focusing this time on the washing of her hair. Rather than braiding it afterward, they simply brushed it through and left it to dry into its natural waves.

None of the face painting and ornamenting that she had received in Sidon was done. They placed her into a thick white linen robe, with a hood that completely covered her head, and she was led for some time through the winding halls until they reached the green haze of the Outer Court.

A large, colorful rug had been rolled out next to one of the smaller water fountains and arrayed with plush pillows. Raven took the cue to lay down on them, and there she waited, watching the noon day sun send down the scourge of its blistering rays to no avail against the willow canopy.

Before long, a man she had not seen before arrived along with the helpful eunuch who carried a lunch platter. After the eunuch signaled for her to begin, Raven partook of the delicious figs, lentil soup and bread.

She also drew heavily from the pitcher of cool water on the tray. Refreshed and comfortably drowsy from her morning overhaul, she reclined and awaited instructions from the stranger.

“What is your name?” the eunuch translated from the man’s Arabic.

“Raven”

“Where were you born?”

“England”

“Are your parents of nobility?”

“Yes”

“Would they wish to ransom you?”

“They are dead.”

The man duly noted all of her answers on a papyrus stretched across his lap atop a stiff wooden board.

“How do you feel?”

The question was unexpected and caught her off guard.

“Um...” She could not think of why the answer might matter, but answered truthfully nonetheless. “I feel fine...but also homesick.”

Raven had to wait for the translation, but she knew it would not be good based on the angry demeanor that fell over the note-taker.

“You must give up all thoughts of the outside world! You will never leave here and no one will ever come for you. The entertainment of the Sultan is your sole purpose and delight. Accept this now, or I will have you whipped until you do. Answer now!”

“I accept this,” Raven said immediately when the eunuch finished speaking.

The man seemed placated but continued to scowl at her for the remainder of their interview which went on all afternoon. When it was over, the man had filled his entire writing tablet and knew most of what there was to know about Raven of Locksley.

She was exhausted and collapsed on the bed when she was finally placed back into her chamber. She rested only a few minutes before a new veiled woman arrived and led her back to the water-works.

A much abbreviated freshening treatment was performed. She was perfumed and two of the women argued briefly about her hair which, in the end, they left alone. The white robe was replaced by a fantastically colorful one. The basic color was green, but rich blue and gold swirls leapt and played all over it in a strange design.

Finally, a gold necklace was clasped around her neck which dangled a large red ruby. The gem brought out her lips and the red in her hair. Thin gold bracelets were fitted onto her wrists, and ear rings were clipped to the upper backs of her ears dangling shiny white gold threads which completed her adornment.

Raven was absolutely gorgeous, and her beauty did not go unnoticed. The other ladies throughout the waterworks whispered jealous jibes behind their hands and veils. Raven did not hear them, nor would she have understood their words. Nevertheless, she felt the coldness of her company – far chillier than any icy wading pool.

They led her out, down yet another new hallway, to a large dining hall that seemed to glow red from the low, polished cherry wood tables, the red curtains and seating cushions, and the reddish burnt hue in the very marble of the walls, floor and vaulted ceiling. The sight was striking and Raven, already exhausted and bewildered by her first day, was completely awed by the opulence and grandeur that surrounded her. She was shown to the largest of the low tables where she sank into a sea of red pillows and, once again, waited.

Before long, frenzy erupted from the entryways at each of the room’s four corners. Fully robed and veiled servers dashed in wielding large silver trays, pitchers and bowls. The selection of foods and beverages set before Raven was a near wonder of the world.

The sizzling whole roasted calf and greasy dripping half rack of lamb were centers of attraction around which bowls of all kinds and colors of ripe fresh fruits glistened. Chopped, cooked vegetables; everything from carrots and beets to okra and spinach lay heaped generously over mounded tiny beads of pan seared couscous. Small decorative trays piled high with sweets, pastries and candies were tucked in and among the larger platters. A cup, a long two-tined fork, three small plates and a dainty napkin were all placed before her as well.

A wide rimmed bucket filled with crushed ice was set next to her containing a dozen unique bottles of spirits and several carafes of water half submerged in the freeze. She was too overcome with surprise to wonder where the ice had come from.

Raven stared at the splendor arrayed before her fingertips and her mouth watered. Despite the two good meals already that day, her body still craved nourishment from its deprivation while on the pirate's ship and on the road to Damascus. She waited, however, sensing that she was not supposed to begin yet.

Finally, the Sultan entered. He was a tall man with broad shoulders and a trim waist. Wrapped in a black robe with a dark red flowing cape billowing behind him, he strode confidently across the chamber. Stopping opposite the table from Raven, he stood, staring down past his long, royal nose and thick mustache at the tiny red haired Brit girl.

His skin was dark, though whether from the sun or his siring she could not tell. On his right cheek, a finger length scar gave him an air of severity and dangerousness. The Sultan's pomposity in the way he carried himself, as in every aspect of his palace's décor and staffing, was beyond imagination. Raven recognized that flattering this man would be a prerequisite for her survival.

"Welcome to my palace retreat, Raven of Sherwood." The Sultan's English was nearly flawless, and when he smiled he oozed charm that was not altogether resistible. She wondered why he had referred to her home as Sherwood rather than Locksley, but she remained silent since she had not been asked a direct question.

"I will be your servant, and perhaps...guide, in your new life; one that will be spent in the relentless pursuit of your happiness. This is my wish." As he stepped closer, Raven could see that despite his scar and monumental arrogance, the Sultan was actually quite handsome; strikingly so. Though she could not be sure, she guessed his age to be at least twice hers. Still she held her peace.

The Sultan lowered himself into a reclining position on some pillows off to the side, close to Raven, but still more than an arm's length away. "Tonight I ask only that you enjoy my hospitality, savoring to the fullest from the humble selection I have placed before you. Please, begin. What would you have first?"

Raven knew she was being tested. She surveyed the fabulous table for a moment before reaching out her hand, taking hold of the empty cup and holding it out toward the Sultan.

"Please, my lord, fill this cup so that I may toast in thanks to your generous hospitality and overflowing consideration for my every comfort since I arrived."

The Sultan was visibly pleased. He took the cup from her, selected a bottle from the ice bucket and filled the cup with red wine.

"I accept your toast, Raven." The Sultan smiled as he filled another cup. "And allow me also to propose a toast to your truly remarkable beauty!"

The evening was filled with such gracious exchanges as well as delectable nibbles from the table. Raven understood quickly that the Sultan wished to live a lie; to pretend that she was a guest and not a prisoner. She played his game as best she could, until finally he stood up and stretched.

"The hour is late. Forgive me for keeping you awake. You will be returned to your quarters for rest, but in the morning you will receive new quarters more appropriately fitting your nobility and graciousness," the Sultan explained. "Also in the morning, you will be given a lady in waiting to personally attend to your every need and desire. A lady of your quality deserves nothing less."

"I am speechless, my lord," she demurred.

He stepped closer until he was standing face to face with her. "Your eyes say enough," he whispered before kissing her lightly and quickly on the forehead. With that he turned and flew out of the room. Raven stood bewildered, more confused than ever about what was happening to her.

Looking around the red room, Raven noticed the icy stares of the lady attendants. She also felt confident that their whispers were not the nice kind. Soon though, an attendant came and led her away.

She lay in bed for hours before falling asleep. The thought kept turning over in her mind and she did not know how to answer it or to make it go away.

What if this is the rest of my life?

*

Breakfast was the same as the day before. Afterward, the frowning delivery woman led her past the waterworks, and down several new hallways, to her new suite. The room was about four times the size of her previous chamber. The bed, much larger and more ornately designed, was centered along the far wall.

Raven stepped inside and saw a tall wardrobe and lounging sofa occupying the near corner to the left of the entryway. Peeking around the door, she saw another, smaller bed in the right corner. Sitting on it was a small Arabian girl. She stood and bowed as Raven looked at her. With a final glare of disdain, the delivery woman pulled the door shut on her way out, leaving the two alone.

Raven continued to examine the, all in all, pitiful creature standing in front of her. The girl's eyes were fixed downward, her shoulders slumped. She was to the eyes a broken soul.

"Do you understand any English?" Raven wondered aloud.

The girl looked up, but showed no other sign of understanding.

"Do you understand Latin?" Raven asked in Latin.

The girl nodded.

From then on that is what they spoke, though continually teaching each the other's home language in small ways.

"My name is Raven. What is yours?"

"Shahar," a silvery voice trickled out of the girl like a last rivulet of water escaping from a dried up fountain.

"I have seen eighteen years of this world pass by, Shahar, and you?" Raven asked.

"Sixteen," Shahar whispered.

Raven had thought her to be even younger, as she was both short for her age and thin for her frame. Shahar's hair was completely black and straight. Her eyes were large pools of swirling darkness. Her skin, smooth and obviously seldom exposed to the outdoors, was no darker than Raven's, so recently kissed by the fierce Egyptian sun.

Shahar's thin nose came to its end atop a curiously small mouth, whose lips seemed always on the verge of a smile; a smile lost in deep waters but desperately seeking the surface.

"How long have you been here?" Raven asked her.

"Four years"

Will I be as subdued and broken in four years as this girl? Raven asked herself. *Will I last that long?*

"Where did you live before?" Raven continued.

Shahar looked down.

"Right," Raven muttered under breath, "no thoughts of the outside." She walked over and put a hand on the girl's shoulder. "Forgive me."

Shahar looked puzzled. "May I please show you the rest of your chamber?"

"It is *our* chamber if we are living together in it," Raven corrected, causing Shahar to look even more confused. "Please, show me."

There were two small rooms off the main sleeping area. The closest to the door was a miniature waterworks. Shahar demonstrated the use of a lever in the wall that controlled the strength of a small waterfall which could be shut off completely or allowed to run out from a pipe in the ceiling, making a wide spray. A giant basin below, about the diameter of a man, collected the falling water which disappeared down another pipe set into the floor.

"Marvelous," Raven exclaimed.

Shahar then showed her the chamber pot; a permanent structure with a comfortable seat. When the user was finished, the simple pull of a lever loosed a bucket full of water perched above the seat. The water raced down a pipe and into the chamber pot, washing all away through yet another pipe set into the floor. The bucket was then refilled from a source unseen.

"Truly marvelous," Raven was impressed.

The room also included a small table arrayed with hair-brushes, a mounted mirror, and two comfortable chairs. In the other small room there were

shelves stocked with soaps, perfumes, and soft linen towels, as well as another chair and a small table holding a washtub and scrubbing board.

Raven went ahead and tested the waterfall on full strength. The water was even nicely warmed. She then coaxed a reluctant Shahar into having her own shower. Afterward, they lay on Raven's bed wrapped in multiple towels talking until lunch time.

Raven asked endless questions about life in the Sultan's harem. She did this not only to find out more information that could help her own survival, but also to draw the frightened and sad girl out of her shell in the hopes of getting to know her.

After a time, Shahar left the suite to fetch lunch for them and quickly returned with a full tray. Although she tried to insist on waiting until Raven had eaten to feed herself, Raven turned the tables by refusing to eat until Shahar would join her.

Shahar gave in and they munched together on roasted fish, hard bread, plums and oranges. Raven made certain the girl ate a good portion. When they were finished, Shahar returned the tray and brought back a water pitcher for the afternoon.

They continued their conversation until evening and learned much about each other, though at times slowly because of their language differences. For a brief spell in the late afternoon, Raven napped. She had laid down her head and fallen asleep talking. Shahar placed a light sheet over her and sat down on her own bed, staring at the strange western woman that had just come into her life; if a life it could be called.

*

Dinnertime came. Shahar hurriedly helped Raven get washed, perfumed and dressed and then stayed in the suite while Raven was led back to the red dining room. She reclined on the same pillows as the night before and waited once again. The same flurry of servers brought out a comparably sumptuous feast as the first. The Sultan arrived, poured wine, and they renewed their charade of pleasantries and idle banter.

"I understand that you are skilled in the ways of music, sweet Raven," he cooed, "and simply to hear you speak is like hearing the voices of angels spinning sweet melodies. The...delicacy with which your lips frame the words and the softness of the air passing between them are like cool water to a weary traveler."

She said nothing, but looked straight at him.

"Perhaps I can persuade you to favor me with a song; perhaps a song from your homeland." The Sultan flashed his disarming smile and tilted his head toward her in a mockery of reverence.

Raven was silent.

“Are you ready?” he seemed genuinely puzzled by her inaction.

“I am sorry, my lord. But I cannot sing,” she said.

“And why not?” he smiled relentlessly.

“I...I am afraid that...I do not feel well,” she lied poorly.

“Raven, my dear,” he droned in a disturbingly relaxing tone. “I understand that you are intimidated by me; by being here.”

He waved his hand at the luxurious surroundings. “You do not need to fear me. Please, take your ease. Just sing out what is in your heart. I assure you in advance that I will be very pleased.”

“I am sorry...” she began.

“Do you refuse me?” The volume and intensity of his voice raised a degree, and the lady attendants voiced their concern with barely audible gasps.

Raven looked down.

“You must tell me why you do this?” The strongman was near hyperventilating.

“I do not feel well...” she tried to speak again.

“Lies!” he roared, leaping to his feet. “I want the truth! How can you refuse me, after all that I have provided to you?”

Something deep inside Raven snapped like a dry twig in winter.

“The truth?” she looked up at the towering madman who glared down at her with insane rage burning in his eyes. “The truth is that you have brought me here as a captive! You have brought me to this place where I will never see my family and friends again, and now you want me to pretend as if I can be happy? You want me to do something I cannot do. You want me to sing of the land I love but will never see again. How can I?” She was pouring tears.

The Sultan was frozen into inaction by his overwhelming anger. So he simply stood over her, shaking, while she lay there sobbing into one of the red cushions.

“But you were bought for a price...” he said more to himself than to her. She stopped crying, and instead started to laugh.

“What is this?” the Sultan bellowed.

Raven took a moment to enjoy the first good laugh she had experienced in many days. “You cannot buy people,” she said slowly, as if explaining a new concept to a small child.

The Sultan inhaled, and kept inhaling. Raven was sure he was going to explode. The lady attendants, and even the eunuchs, all promptly fled the chamber.

He finally let his breath out, but not before turning several shades of red. Then he did nothing. Raven wondered how long he would continue to just stand there, not saying or doing anything other than breathing and changing color. She could not even bear looking at him.

Finally he spoke in a very calm, almost pleasant voice. "You are a very spirited young lady, Raven. And yet, not all spirits are good. I think that you are very great in your lack of understanding about the world and your place in it.

"And your ignorance has left you vulnerable to the influence of foul spirits; spirits of disobedience and rebellion. But rest assured, sweet Raven." He crouched in front of her so their eyes were close. "I will not let you suffer at the hands of these, your tormenters."

He stood again.

"I have never failed to drive away such abominations and restore the balance to a woman's soul through means that may seem cruel, but which I must do only because I, in fact, care so much," he explained while walking across the room.

When he reached the far side, he opened a drawer in one of the chests along the wall and pulled out a long leather bullwhip.

In her mind, Raven suddenly flashed back to the months she spent tormented by the Inquisitor Zola. In the blink of an eye, she relived that excruciating and seemingly endless time of physical, mental and worst of all, spiritual torture by the rogue bishop.

Then in her mind she saw the shocked expression on the bishop's face as he lay defecating and bleeding to death with his throat torn open by Jack's powerful, but normally harmless jaws.

The images and memories flashing through her mind were stark in their horror, suddenly seeming so recent.

Shaking her head to shoo away the buzzing flies of dark memory, she came back to herself and saw the Sultan standing there with his cattle whip. She considered the prospect of being flogged for refusing to sing. The ridiculousness and irony of the entire situation overcame her increasingly fragile instinct to behave and she burst into full laughter again.

"And what do you find so humorous now?" he shrieked, punctuating the question with a crack of the whip.

When her rolling chortles subsided enough, she explained.

"I have been tormented at the hands of men far more cruel and sickly hateful than you could ever dream of...here in your pillow lined halls! God himself turned a blind eye while his own servants took me and filled my days with sorrow surpassed only by the wicked agony of my nights!" She was now yelling. "I have been to hell, my gracious host, so do your worst and see if I am impressed!"

The Sultan lapsed into another, but thankfully shorter fit of breathing and fuming. When his equilibrium was once again restored he spoke. "It is I who am impressed, truly. You are without a doubt the bravest woman I have ever met."

He stood staring at her, and she stared back.

“Please, take your time and finish eating – have whatever you like.” He waved his hand at the mostly untouched food and then, carrying his whip, stormed out of the room leaving her alone.

She ate nothing else, but only sat in silence wondering what would happen next. Eventually one of the lady attendants entered the dining hall. Though her mouth was veiled, her eyes betrayed the sly smirk that she wore underneath. She motioned for Raven to follow, and then led her back to her suite.

She entered the room and in the pale lamp light saw Shahar spread out on the bed face down. Her bare back was crisscrossed with bloody gashes. She had been whipped.

Raven flew into the supply room and came out with an armful of towels and the wash bucket. She spread a towel across Shahar’s back and laid over her, lightly applying the pressure of her own body weight to suppress the bleeding. The red stains in the towel finally stopped growing.

Moistening the towel for removal, Raven peeled it away slowly and then poured more water over Shahar’s back to remove the excess blood. Having a better look at the damaged skin, Raven could see that the cuts were not deep. She could also see from the maze of thin scars that Shahar had been whipped many times before.

“Can you sit up?” Raven asked.

Shahar said yes, and did.

Raven raced back into the store room and spent a moment searching the shelves. She returned with a jar of olive oil that she poured over Shahar’s cuts to sooth and seal them. Taking the thin sheet from Shahar’s bed, Raven tore it into long thin strips and used them to gently but firmly wrap up her serving girl’s slender torso.

Satisfied with her work, Raven came around to kneel in front of Shahar. The girl’s face was streaked with tears, though she had not made a single sound of crying since Raven had entered.

“I am sorry.” Raven broke into tears herself.

Shahar was confused. “It is I who am sorry. I have failed you...”

“What do you mean?” Raven raised an eyebrow.

“They said that you were disappointed with me, so they had to punish me,” she sobbed.

They? Raven thought. *The coward could not even torment a young girl without the help of others...*

Raven held Shahar’s head between her hands and looked her straight in the eye. “They lied.” She would not let Shahar look away. “You are the kindest and gentlest person I have ever met! You could never disappoint me. This all happened to punish me! It is I who disappointed the Sultan. I would not do what he wanted, but he could not use fear against me because I did not care if he hurt me. So he hurt you, knowing it would hurt me because I *do* care about you!”

“You care...about me?” Shahar whispered.

“Yes.” Raven kept their gazes fixed. “I do.”

“But...why?” Shahar truly wondered.

Raven shook her head in disbelief. She had no words for the anger and the frustration and the sadness and the horror that she felt over how Shahar had been treated. She did not know what to say.

How can I convince this poor, broken girl that she matters? Raven prayed silently in desperation. *God, I don't know what to do. Help me!*

“Tell her about my Son,” the Voice came.

Raven instantly broke a sweat and started to shake. All of her sins flashed before her mind's eye. She was ashamed. And she was sorry. In her heart, she surrendered then to God. She opened her mouth and let the words come.

“You are one of God's creatures, Shahar. You are a beautiful girl, created in God's image. And Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, suffered and died on the cross just as much for you as he did for me or anyone else. And he rose again and reigns in heaven, and if we just believe in Him he will snatch us up when we die and keep us safe there with Him. And everyone we ever loved will be there too and we will always be together and happy and we will never die again.” Raven paused for air.

Shahar's jaw had dropped and she sat staring at Raven in amazement. The battered girl reached up her hands and grabbed onto Raven's arms like she was holding on to the edge of a cliff.

Shahar quivered as she tried to speak. Finally a whisper found its way out of her tiny mouth. “You know about Jesus?”

*

When dinnertime came the following night, Raven was led back to the red cushions. Her mind was swimming with all that Shahar had told her. In her injured and vulnerable state, the Arabian waif finally opened up to Raven about her past, and all the darkness that it held.

Raven learned that Shahar was a Christian, at least to the extent that the confused and lonely girl could understand the belief. Her entire family converted when she was eleven years old, after her father had befriended an Italian missionary priest. The priest taught them all Latin and even provided them with a transcription of the New Testament.

Shahar had only acquired a very rudimentary understanding of her new faith when her father and entire family were slaughtered by a mob of angry Muslims in their home city of Samarra. All of her family's wealth was confiscated and Shahar, the sole survivor, was sold into slavery. She had lived in the Sultan's harem ever since, and was degraded and forced to do menial tasks during most of her waking life.

Raven's rumination on the revelations about Shahar's past was interrupted by the arrival of the Sultan. No flurry of activity preceded his arrival. A single servant placed a plate of plain food and a water jar on the table. The Sultan came and stood over her menacingly.

"What is your pleasure?" The Sultan flicked his hand at the meager plate of food.

Raven gathered all her strength and used it to suppress any last vestige of pride that she could possibly feel. She stood and faced the Sultan.

"My lord," she said sweetly, "my pleasure is that you would take your ease." She motioned to the cushions. "And if you would permit me, I should wish to fill your magnificent halls with a song; something from my homeland. Though I do not think myself worthy of entertaining one as knowledgeable and mighty as your majesty, and would probably serve as little more than a mere amusement to your sensibilities." She bowed, tightening the muscles around her throat in an effort to hold back the bile.

The Sultan brightened at once.

"You are showing yourself to be more than worthy. Perhaps you have gained a better...appreciation for the effect your decisions can have on those around you."

Raven looked down repentantly. "Thank you for your firm guidance, my lord."

The Sultan was ecstatic. He dropped into the cushions and clapped his hands sharply two times. A cupbearer materialized with a bowlful of wine and another servant scrambled to set up a small hookah next to the gloating tyrant.

"Ignore them." The Sultan waved dismissively at the servants. "You may begin whenever you feel moved to." His toothy grin was glowing in the candlelight.

Raven considered grabbing the fruit knife from the table and ending the life of her tormenter, but knew that the inevitable result would be her own death soon following. So instead, she breathed deeply to settle her nerves, opened her mouth and sang with all the spirit and inflection she could muster.

*The ash grove, how graceful, how plainly tis speaking
the harp wind through it playing has language for me
Whenever the light through its branches is breaking
a host of kind faces is gazing on me*

*The friends of my childhood again are before me
each step wakes a memory as freely I roam
With soft whispers laden its leaves rustle o'er me
the ash grove, the ash grove again alone is my home*

*Down yonder green valley where streamlets meander
when twilight is fading I pensively rove
Or at the bright noontide in solitude wander
amid the dark shades of the lonely ash grove*

*Twas there while the blackbird was cheerfully singing
I first met that dear one, the joy of my heart
Around us for gladness the bluebells were springing
the ash grove, the ash grove that sheltered my home*

*My laughter is over, my step loses lightness
old countryside measures steal soft on my ears
I only remember the past and its brightness
the dear ones I mourn for again gather here*

*From out of the shadows their loving looks greet me
and wistfully searching the leafy green dome
I find other faces fond bending to greet me
the ash grove, the ash grove alone is my home*

The words that she loved so much tasted bitter as they flowed from her lips. Her stomach ached with remorse at the awfulness of the lie she was living, but she was willing to live it - for awhile at least - to protect her Christian sister.

Verse Thirteen - Eye of the Needle

The Sultan did not even touch his wine or his hookah. He was completely enraptured by the sound of Raven's song. When she finished, he stood and raced over to her, touching his hand to her face.

"You cannot know how deeply you have delighted me, Raven of Sherwood." He was nearly breathless. The smiling Sultan seemed to be searching for something special to say. Finally, he stepped back and rapidly triple clapped his hands.

A small army of servants rushed the hall and formed a line, standing at attention.

"Tonight, Raven of Sherwood has become my most honored guest and my most highly preferred companion!" he proudly announced to the crowd of wide-eyed lady attendants and eunuch slaves. "I wish for her to take up immediate residence in the Master Suite of the Inner Court!"

A twitter went among the assemblage.

"Furthermore," the Sultan continued, purposefully oblivious to the jealous rage growing among the harem women. "I want the fulfillment of her every desire to be for each of you the consuming passion of your every waking thought!" The Sultan seemed as if he was finished before adding, "And find three young virgins of exceeding beauty and virtue to be her hand maidens!"

"What about Sha..." Raven blurted. "What about the serving girl you have already given to me?"

"You deserve so much better, my sweet Raven. Let her trouble your thoughts no more." He ignored the expression of fury that was growing on her face and came over to stand right in front of her again.

"I am very much looking forward to discovering with you all the ways in which we can find further delight...together." The Sultan smiled leeringly.

Turning back to the servants he shouted his afterthought, "and bring her a proper dinner – for the love of Allah!"

*

Cuthbert and his men were dirty, smelly, and most of all, tired. They had been searching the desert for days. They were low on water and completely out of food. And the coming of autumn to the lands around Damascus brought little comfort from the continued scorching of the sun.

"All right Jackal," Cuthbert whispered as the group laid flat on their bellies, observing the Sultan's citadel from a far ridge to the south. The sun was setting pink and purple in the west. "How do we get in?"

"It is not that simple," al-Jakari hissed back. "You cannot simply walk into a..."

“Oh, come on man!” Michael rebuked the pirate. “We gained entry to a major Christian fortress in Italy through a mere drain pipe. Every building has some weakness.”

The Jackal thought for a moment. “Arabian walled cities like this do sometimes have a feature – something called the ‘eye of the needle’. After the gates are closed and sealed for the night, a late coming merchant or traveler can deposit his goods through a small window-like opening somewhere in the outer wall. Then he can set up his tent and sleep outside the walls without fear of bandits.”

“That’s perfect!” Cuthbert declared. “One of you can deposit me through this window, I’ll find Raven, and we’ll be on our way.”

“I shall join you,” Michael said enthusiastically. “One should never raid a mysterious fortress alone. James?”

“Yes?”

“Coming?”

“Oh, forgive me.” James had been lost in thought. “No, I am afraid not. After all, I will be boosting the two of you through the opening. After that, our guest and I will eagerly await your return.” James slapped al-Jakari on the back, and then raised his voice slightly to address all the men. “Who has flint and steel?”

Four of the twelve soldiers raised their hands.

“Perfect. Now, here is the plan,” James began.

*

Neither the sweeping beauty of the hanging willow gardens, nor even the wondrous delights of the harem’s water works could have prepared Raven for the pomp and luxury of the Inner Court. Every sight soothed the eyes while dulling the mind; from the milky white walls subdued by dancing shadows to the slick super-polished marble floors that forced one to walk slowly and exuded the same ghostly glow as the walls. Everything appeared, and if touched would feel, either smooth or soft.

Hanging silk banners, translucent to the pale glow of dim torchlight, divided spaces in the large open chamber. Billowing wildly, they played in breezes that came from places unseen. Smoke swirled in rising spirals that favored the fortunate nose with a whiff of jasmine or sandalwood. Bubbling fountains, distant chirping birds, and the leisured giggles and sighs of feminine preening mixed to create a quiet hum that induced both serenity and titillation.

In many ways, the Inner Court matched the mental picture of heaven that Raven had imagined since she was a small child; flowing whiteness and calm, gentle delights wherever one turned. But in the circumstances that had trapped her, Raven wondered more often if perhaps she really was in hell.

A pair of hostesses led Raven to the far end of the chamber and into the Master Suite. The luxury of everything was beginning to sicken her. *At the loss of whose blood did the Sultan gain such a hoard of wealth?* She wondered.

The hostesses left and Raven set about exploring the rooms of her new housing upgrade. There were six in all; a master bedroom larger than her previous suite, a bedroom presumably for the handmaidens with three small beds, a small waterworks, a steaming room, and two storage closets. It was impressive, but Raven became all the more downcast.

For the first time in her life she consciously entertained the idea of suicide. *I may be able to stall the Sultan for a time, but a man with his insane lust for power...he will eventually want all of me – and probably sooner rather than later,* she reasoned sadly.

I am sorry God, but I cannot live this life you have left me to. I cannot be that. She collapsed onto the floor near the bed, weeping bitter tears. *Don't you care, Lord?*

Her prayer was interrupted by the arrival of her three new handmaidens. Each of the girls was at least a few years younger than Shahar. They stood together and stared at Raven smugly. She returned their stares and greeted them in every language she knew.

The girls hid their hands behind their faces and giggled at her, snubbing her attempt at courtesy.

"I could have you whipped," Raven remarked in English, simply for her own entertainment. The girls did not understand, but at least stopped giggling. Raven waved them away with her hand. They comprehended the gesture and shuffled back out.

Raven wondered why they were so overly confident and dismissive toward her, whereas Shahar had been so subservient. She wondered what would happen to her next. She sat down on the edge of the bed thinking about these and many other thoughts in the whirlwind that her mind had become.

Before long the lights outside her room were dimmed. She grew drowsy, and crawling up onto the bed, fell asleep.

*

With dawn not far away, the twelve Nottingham soldiers fanned out around the citadel in teams of three; one team along each wall. They had made small firebombs to lob over the citadel walls, hoping to cause a significant distraction of the security forces so Cuthbert and Michael could make their search unhindered.

The bombs were merely small rocks with dry grass, twigs and fabric tied about. In a patch of desert near the road to Damascus, the Englishmen had come across an oozing Naphtha oil pit and filled two of their wine flasks. Each of the

rock bombs had a fair dousing in the black stuff and they had no problems lighting them.

However, once the bombs were lit, the most urgent order of business became getting rid of them. One member of each team worked the flint and steel for the other two; both of them holding a bomb in each hand. Sixteen firebombs in all whipped over the citadel walls when James gave the owl hoot signal. Half of the bombs started significant fires.

James, the Jackal, Cuthbert and Michael ran from their hidden ditch as soon as they saw the tower watchmen turn to investigate the shouting caused by the fires. They bolted for the wall with the eye of the needle and stationed themselves directly underneath the small opening. The other three made a small human pyramid of themselves, which Cuthbert began to climb.

*

Word of Raven's rare beauty, her hypnotic singing voice and her strange western charms had preceded her arrival in the harem. The other women residents, and particularly the former most favored guest who had been evicted from the Master Suite to make way for Raven, were not pleased and had no plans to make friends with the western witch. Quite on the contrary, they planned to kill her before the dawn of her first morning in the Inner Court.

Raven's sleeping nightmares turned into a waking one as she was dragged out of bed by a pair of strong hands, one of which cupped her mouth so she could not scream. She flailed uselessly and finally went limp. The man dragged her out of her suite, down a hallway, through a door, and down another long hallway before stopping and setting her on the floor.

Then she saw the identity of her attacker – it was the helpful eunuch. He signaled for her to remain quiet and brought his face down close to hers.

"They have ordered me to kill you! They will kill me if I do not," he whispered. "But I will not do it!" He added much to Raven's relief.

"Who are *they*?" she whispered back.

"The other women of the Inner Court are sickly jealous of you. They have plotted your death since the moment you arrived. They ordered me to break your neck and make it look like you fell trying to escape," the eunuch hurried to explain it all.

"Why do you spare me if your masters have ordered me dead?" she asked warily.

"I heard you praying – on the road to Damascus. I used to pray to the same God as you, but no more. He does not hear prayer. But I heard you, and I can at least remember when I was like you. I at least have that," he mourned.

"What do you mean you were like me?" she wondered at the strange man as he seemed to agonize over his very thoughts.

“I was young, and a Christian and a Westerner just like you. I came from the south of France with the Third Crusade. While in Antioch, I was captured by a band of Mohammedans and charged with a crime I did not commit. They accused me of forcing myself upon a young Arab girl, but they were mistaken. I never did. I was still a virgin when they turned me into a eunuch and sold me to the Sultan. I am innocent, but nevertheless God turned his back on me!”

It was the first time in his decades of pain, humiliation and confinement that the eunuch had the chance to pour out his heart to someone.

Raven touched his face with her hand. “I am sorry,” she whispered. “I am so sorry.” She did not know what else to say.

“I have lived long enough this way,” he said. “I do not want to grow old. Will these people care for me? No, my time is coming. And I will maintain my innocence until I stand before God. I will not kill you and lose my innocence.”

“What are you going to do with me?” she asked.

Before he could answer, they heard footsteps coming. Ducking through a doorway, they looked around frantically for a place to hide. The room was bare though, except for a small hand-woven carpet.

Moments later, as the approaching guards neared the doorway, the eunuch emerged lugging a rolled up carpet under his arm.

“What are you doing with that?” one of the guards demanded.

“It is for the Sultan,” the eunuch answered.

The guards did not believe him, but did not feel like risking their lives over it.

“Take it where it needs to go, and then hurry to the front plaza. A fire has broken out. You will need to make yourself useful!” the other guard ordered.

“Right away!” the eunuch chirped as he bolted down the hall carrying his burden. He ran for a long time before he stopped to rest, gently setting the carpet on the floor.

“Where are we?” the carpet whispered.

“We should be getting close to the outer wall. There may be a way that I can get you out of the citadel. But after that you will be on your own. Run away, stay hidden, and follow the sun west until you reach the sea. If God is with you, perhaps you will once again reach the land of the living. Remember me if you do, and light a candle for me if you should ever come to a church again.” The eunuch’s voice sounded ominous.

“What are you going to do?” Raven was worried, especially since she was still tightly bound inside the increasingly itchy rug.

“I will do my best to set you free,” the eunuch assured. “Then I will seek that one thing that remains for me in this world. And it will bring no loss of innocence upon me, because there is no innocence in this place. I will seek the one thing that can set *me* free – *revenge!*”

Raven did not know what to say, so she said nothing as the eunuch picked her back up, still inside the carpet, and marched on down the hall.

*

The twelve English soldiers sprinted away from the citadel back toward the south ridge. James had ordered them to return there after releasing the fire-bombs and to await their return with Raven. No one had asked what to do if things went wrong.

However, things were not going well at the eye of the needle. The human pyramid collapsed when the old Jackal lost his footing. The four men landed painfully in a heap, and in his frustration, Cuthbert got up and added a kick to al-Jakari's ribs as a payment for the trouble.

Cuthbert stomped around in a circle shaking his fists in rage. Finally, though, he let the wave of anger pass through him and fell to his knees in surrender.

"Oh, Lord," he softly cried, bowing down his head, but lifting his hands up toward the dark heavens. "Lord, please show us the way. Give us the strength my God!" Sweat ran down Cuthbert's face, stinging his eyes as his body trembled with fervor. "Please help me, Lord. Please help her...please," Cuthbert whispered.

Cuthbert wept tears of anguish as the other three men picked themselves up off the ground. James leaned against the wall recovering the wind that had been knocked out of him. Michael helped steady and upright the Jackal, and was about to ask if the others wanted to give it another try. He opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted when Cuthbert was struck by a flying carpet.

None of the men were looking up to see the carpet roll as it was shoved through the eye of the needle. Cuthbert's body broke the carpet's fall, and his hands raised in pleading to God prevented the carpet from breaking his neck. After striking Cuthbert, the carpet landed dully on the ground next to him and began to unroll.

The men were truly awed and bewildered as Raven popped up out of the Persian style rug, especially as she was dressed in the finest colored silks any of them had ever seen. She was so shocked to see the man she loved standing next to the man who had kidnapped her, she started to wobble on her feet and would have fainted outright, but Cuthbert grabbed her arm and steadied her.

"You're alive!" the words escaped Cuthbert's mouth riding on a wave of relief.

"You're here!" Raven's did the same.

"We need to continue this conversation elsewhere," James interrupted.

"The men have already returned to the south ridge!" Michael noticed.

"Come on, let's go."

The group ran swiftly to the south as the sky showed the first signs of lightening for the coming dawn. Raven, by far the most well fed and well rested among them, easily outpaced the others. As she approached her waiting kinsmen, she saw that they were all smiling to see her alive.

Drawing closer, she noticed that some of them were looking past her, back toward the citadel gates. Their smiles melted away like wheat before a reaper. Still running, Raven glanced back over her shoulder and saw the source of their horror.

Scores of camel riding warriors poured out of the citadel and began assembling in a loose swarming formation in front of the gates. By the time all of the Minstrels had reached the group on the south ridge, several hundred more camel warriors had joined the horde.

The seething mass of camels and men surged across the land heading south. They were the Sultan's elite guard. Swift and fierce, these Mamelukes had trained in Egypt and they all had seen battle before. The Sultan himself had rallied them to attention the moment he learned of Raven's escape.

*

"Do you wish for the western girl to be returned unharmed?" the Mameluke captain had asked as they were riding out.

"No," the Sultan had replied without any hesitation. "Just kill them all."

*

The sixteen English folk and the Jackal ran south west, staying along the ridge. They were trying to put more distance between themselves and the horde, while forcing the camels to run up a fairly steep incline in order to pursue them by the shortest route.

"Come on!" Raven shouted as her tired and starving countrymen began to slow in their near total exhaustion.

"How many would you say, James?" Cuthbert panted as they trudged along. The men had already discarded their wineskins and walking sticks as they struggled to gain distance from the horde.

James looked back toward the citadel, still running, "at least three hundred."

"There is no way to win this battle. We have to surrender!" Michael continued to put one foot in front of the other, even as he made his case for giving up. "A prisoner can be set free, but not so for dead men."

"Surrender?" James was baffled.

Yet, before he could strengthen his own side of the argument, James had the wind knocked out of him for the second time in as many minutes. The Jackal gave him a swift elbow to the gut and shoved him hard. James staggered,

gasping for air, but did not lose his balance. He turned to give chase to the old pirate, even though he lacked the oxygen to do so. Cuthbert reached out his hand and stopped the angry Minstrel.

“Let him go,” Cuthbert ordered. “He has fulfilled his purpose for us.”

They watched as Hussein al-Jakari raced toward the onrushing flood of camels, frantically waving his arms and shouting unintelligibly in Arabic. The Minstrels continued moving away, but they all looked back just in time to see.

Horribly illuminated in the first red rays of the rising sun, the Jackal, that old pirate, ran screaming and shouting toward his kinsmen, praising them for his salvation from the cruel Christian captors. The camels never stopped.

Perhaps their riders did not hear the message of his shouts over the rumble of hooves, or perhaps they simply cared nothing for any obstacle that stood in the way of their mission. In any case, the Jackal was no more.

The gap between the fleeing English and the charging Mamelukes was quickly disappearing. Yet in the heat of the chase, neither the Mamelukes nor the English had noticed the bright shining light coming out of the west.

The light grew rapidly; a swiftly flying white hot blaze that scorched across the desert sands in the morning sun, skimming over the ground and raising up a dark plume of dust that provided a stark backdrop to its brilliance. The English folk saw the light when they reached the high point of the ridge.

Stunned by the vision, and for the most part too exhausted to go on anyway, the Nottingham group stopped at the peak. James picked up a small rock from the ground and shouted for the others to do the same, urging them to score at least one more hit against the enemies of God before they stood in His Holy presence.

“James,” the quiet voice was Raven’s.

He recognized it and turned toward her. Having been so focused on the notion of making a last noble stand, James only then noticed the gleaming entity that raged toward them out of the west at a speed so fast, it made little sense.

“Something is about to happen.” Raven was actually shouting, but her voice sounded so distant in the growing din.

For a moment, the glowing white wonder looked set to overrun the English. As it neared, they could see the shining mass coalesce into individual units. They were men on horseback. Both horse and rider were covered in a combination of silvery metal and white cloth. Moments later the red crosses on their chests and shields became visible.

“The Knights of the Temple!” Cuthbert hollered to the others, but his words were lost in the onrushing thunder.

Then suddenly, like a flock of birds, the Templars instantaneously changed direction in perfect unison. They poured over the ridge, just missing the terrified children of Sherwood, and plunged toward the Mameluke horde at full charge.

The Templars were outnumbered by the lurching camel warriors at odds of greater than three-to-one, but the Christian Knights had the deadly dual advantage of higher ground and supremely superior armor.

The collision between the two mounted lines was explosive. Chunks of camel and camel-rider flew in every direction as the Templar Knights gored their way relentlessly through the Mameluke lines. Their red cross emblems vanished as the shiny white tunics of the warrior monks became drenched in blood.

Simultaneously thrusting with their long lances and hewing with their heavy swords, the Servants of the Temple carved up the enemy with the precision of a butcher and the efficiency of spiders. Rather than expend their entire kinetic advantage and end up downhill, and downwind, from the two hundred camels that still lived, the Templars turned and cut a swath through the horde's right flank.

After running clear of the thick of the camels, the Templars turned as one and charged right back into the fray, leaving the Mamelukes no time to reorganize. From the English vantage point on the ridge, not a single Knight appeared to have been lost in the charge. Two were pulled from their horses during the second sortie, but they both continued fighting on the ground; deflecting the mighty but predictable sword swings of the Arabs while hacking off the skinny unarmored legs of camels that passed by.

Dust swirled and dimmed the struggling dawn as the roar of hooves gave way to the screams of dying men and nauseatingly mournful bellowing sounds as the camels were mercilessly slaughtered. The rhythmic swinging of straight Christian-style swords from amidst the flying dust and carnage showed the shocked observers that the Templars were easily dominating the battle.

From the cloud of death that billowed beneath the south ridge, two blood stained riders emerged. They trotted lazily back up the ridge to the Nottingham position. Though they did not sheath their swords, the two Knights did not otherwise behave aggressively; and so the English stood at ease.

Stopping just a few strides away, the riders removed their helmets. Raven was stunned at the sight.

"Greetings, Raven of Locksley," Jean-Claude snorted, his accent not having improved at all. "Tell us. Are the rumors true that we hear? Is it you that led the sack of Damiatta, calling down fire from Heaven to smite the hordes of Egyptian Mamelukes?"

"Yes," Jean-Pierre added enthusiastically. "Word has it that the Teutons killed their thousands, but Raven Hood killed her tens of thousands. Is this so?"

"The stories you have heard may be slightly exaggerated." Raven winked at the bloody Templars. "If I were capable of such things, my men and I would not have needed your rescuing just now. Thank you, by the way."

"Oh, no, no, no, Raven," Jean-Claude honked. "Thank you! You see, we have been watching the Sultan's citadel for days, hoping for an opportunity to catch his troops outside the walls."

“And we have been observing your movements as well, ever since you passed north of Damascus.” Jean-Pierre said to the men. “You gave us the opportunity we had been seeking.”

“In any case,” Jean-Claude shifted impatiently in his saddle as he looked back over his shoulder and saw that there were still some Arabs that had not been killed, “we are pleased to see that you are still alive, milady. Now if you will pardon us,” he began to turn his heavy horse around, “we will be busy today until every last soul inside the citadel has been sent to face God.”

“God wills it!” the Knights screamed in unison.

“Wait!” Raven screamed louder.

The Templars scowled at her as if she were the devil’s own.

“Wait!” she repeated, sprinting toward them, “there is a Christian girl still inside the citadel.” Surprising everyone, but none more than Jean-Claude, she leapt onto the back of his horse and gripped him around the waist. “You have to save her!” she yelped.

“I...uh...” Jean-Claude blubbered.

“Are you a Christian Knight?” Raven roared.

“Oui!” Jean-Claude barked back.

“Then what are you waiting for? A damsel is in distress!” Raven was frantic.

“Wait!” The voice was Cuthbert’s and he was running down the slope. Surprising everyone, but none more than Jean-Pierre, Cuthbert leapt on to the back of the other Templar’s horse and echoed Raven’s sentiment. “Let’s go! The sooner we do this, the sooner we can all leave.”

The Knights trusted the wisdom of the red bard regarding Raven’s tenacity, and they began rumbling their doubly burdened horses toward the citadel gates.

“Besides, I am never going to lose you again!” Cuthbert shouted to Raven once they were underway.

She looked over at him as they bounced along holding tightly to their host Templars, and she believed him.

*

A group of Templars was already stationed at the citadel gates by the time Raven and Cuthbert arrived. The ingenious Knights had made the most of scarce resources by beheading the Arab gatekeepers and wedging their skulls underneath the gate lever, keeping it in the open position. As a result of their gruesome tactics, Templar control of the citadel gatehouse went unchallenged.

Raven ignored the mounting horrors of the day. Focused on her mission, she guided the Templars across the grey stone courtyard and into the green haze of the willow gardens. All of the women that usually populated the area had

been evacuated and Raven was chilled by the empty green eeriness of her so recently escaped prison.

Two other mounted Knights joined up with them under the willows and they rode together as far as the horses could go indoors and still have reasonable maneuverability. When they reached the first set of steps, they all dismounted. Raven led Cuthbert and Jean-Claude through the maze of hallways, while Jean-Pierre and the two other Knights stayed to guard the horses.

She found the suite where she had last seen Shahar, but it was empty. She led them onward to both the waterworks and the red dining hall, but they also were deserted. Finally, not knowing her way to any other place, she took them into the Inner Court.

The guards were absent from their post at the entrance. The three rescuers pushed open the tall and heavy doors and stumbled upon the scene of a massacre. At least thirty badly mutilated bodies lay strewn about the harem, some half rolled and twisted into the torn and bloody fabric of the silky wall hangings.

Guards, harem girls, eunuchs and the Sultan himself were among the macabre corpses. In the center of the bloodbath lay the eunuch that had ejected Raven through the eye of the needle. He was very close to death. A pool of dark blood grew around his horribly lacerated body.

"Revenge..." he whispered in a gurgle of blood as Raven came and carefully knelt over him.

"You have delivered God's justice where it was long overdue," Raven assured him. "The Master has prepared a reward for you, good servant. He will take you into his bosom in heaven and restore you to wholeness, body and soul. And you will have peace. Just believe in Him. Believe again as you did before. He will not forsake you!"

"Thank you..." the dying eunuch gasped.

"Can you tell me...?" she was interrupted by the eunuch's bloody coughing. "Can you tell me where is Shahar, my first servant girl?"

"Shahar..." he whispered weakly. "The pit..."

"Where is the pit? What is it?" Raven hurried.

"Out the door I took you...left...left...down...left...left... down..." The eunuch's voice was fading.

"We go down twice? Do you mean steps?" Raven tried to clarify, but the light of life disappeared from the eyes of that tortured soul. His body heaved and then was still.

"Let us follow his directions as best we can. Come quickly." Cuthbert urged.

They exited the bloody chamber through the back door, ran down the left hallway, and then turned left again. Coming to a winding spiral staircase, they descended deep underground. The walls became cool to the touch, and damp.

Reaching a lower hallway, they moved by a dim light that came from an unseen source above. Two more left turns brought them to a large wooden door. It was unlocked, but heavy. They slowly swung it open and looked into total blackness.

Raven called out and the echo revealed the space beyond the door to be cavernous. "Shahar, are you in here?" The echoes played in the dark.

After the echoes faded, they heard only silence.

"Shahar, it is me, Raven. Christian Knights have come. They have taken control of the citadel and the Sultan is dead. I have friends with me who will help us leave this place behind forever."

More silence.

They turned to leave.

"Raven?" a tiny voice emerged.

"Shahar, where are you?" Raven gasped.

"Left, left, down, left, left, *down*, the man had said." Cuthbert helped.

"The pit..." Raven murmured as she fell to the ground and reached out over the ledge into the darkness below. She grabbed a pebble from the floor and tossed it over the edge to gauge the drop distance. The ground below was not too far. "Grab my feet, Cuthbert, and lower me down."

"I say," Cuthbert said to Jean-Claude. "Would you be so good as to...?"

"I will not let you fall," the Templar assured him abruptly.

They lowered Raven into the pit.

"Reach for my hand, Shahar," Raven instructed. "Follow the sound of my voice." She stretched downward as far as Cuthbert would let her go.

Finally, their fingers met.

Raven lurched downward, almost pulling in Cuthbert and Jean-Claude, and grabbed Shahar's wrists with a vice-like grip. The Templar used his great strength to haul Cuthbert back from the edge, and the human chain held until Shahar was out of the pit.

"Oh..." Raven could manage no other words when she saw how badly beaten Shahar was. The poor girl could hardly move with all of the bruises covering her body. She had a black eye and her right ankle was swollen and discolored.

"Nothing will get better as long as we are here," Cuthbert advised.

Putting his advice into action, he slung Shahar over his shoulder as gently as he could and moved quickly back toward the surface. Raven followed closely with Jean-Claude covering their retreat.

They reunited with the three knights and their horses. The blood dripping from Jean-Pierre's sword suggested that they had not been waiting idly for the group's return. They settled Raven, holding Shahar in front of her, onto one of the horses. Cuthbert rode with Jean-Claude, and Jean-Pierre doubled up with one of the other Knights.

They blasted their way back through the willow garden and out into the heat and sunshine of the main plaza. There the Templars had assembled groups of prisoners as well as captured horses. They were preparing to slaughter both men and beasts.

“Wait!” Raven shrieked, tiring of having to do so. They did not appear to heed her, so she yelled it again in French. They paused.

“Let us buy these horses, please.” Raven pleaded.

“What do you offer?” Jean-Claude bargained.

“Cuthbert?” Raven turned to her friend.

He drew his dagger, unscrewed the end cap and knocked the last two diamonds out into his hand. Raven gathered them and gave one to each of her Templar friends. The Knights quickly stuffed the diamonds away inside their tunics and shouted orders for the horses to be spared. There were two dozen horses in all, each a swift and healthy product of fine Arabian breeding.

Outside the citadel walls, heaps of camel and man flesh began to stink in the morning sun. Raven and Cuthbert, with the help of some of the Templars, herded the captured horses in a wide arc around the foul battlefield to the top of the south ridge where the Englishmen dutifully waited. Shahar rested unconscious, leaning back against Raven as they rode.

The men were thrilled to see the horses, and even more wonderfully pleased when Jean-Claude ordered his men to hand over their field rations and water flasks to the English. The hungry rescuers gratefully filled their bellies with dry bread crusts and lukewarm water.

The Englishmen all thanked the Templars profusely as they handed back the empty water flasks and mounted their new horses. These horses happened to be the finest and fastest in the world at that time, as they would soon discover.

Raven, knowing she would be unable to hold Shahar securely throughout the entire desert journey, asked Michael to hold her with him on his horse – at least for their first shift of riding. He ended up holding Shahar with him the entire way to Sidon.

They did stop once around mid-day at a spring fed oasis within sight of the Lebanese mountains. In addition to providing welcome shade and much needed water for everyone, the oasis also boasted a small grove of orange trees. Every last orange was picked and eaten before the travelers moved on.

Once during the late afternoon, Shahar blinked open her eyes, squinting against the red sun blazing angrily in front of them as they pushed westward through the heat. In the hazy dreaminess of the afternoon, flying over the ground at a fantastic speed on the powerful horse, the bruised and tormented girl turned her head to the side and leaned it back so she could see the face of her carrier.

“Am I dead?” Shahar asked without presupposing one possible answer above the other. “Are you an angel?”

“Far from it on both counts,” Michael grinned at her. “They call me Michael. I am a friend of Raven’s.”

Shahar seemed satisfied and soon lost consciousness again.

Apart from these events, their journey back to the coast at Sidon passed incredibly quickly and without incident. As the sun sank into the Mediterranean that evening, they entered the city and headed straight for the waterfront, bestowing a gift of two dozen fine horses upon an elated harbor master. John was still aboard the ship watching and waiting for them just as he had promised.

Verse Fourteen – Constantinople

The reunited Nottingham Crusade departed from the port at Sidon immediately and continued straight westward through the night. The Little brothers, together again, stayed up late talking and helping the Greeks keep watch for nighttime dangers.

“So let me see if I have this right,” John was livid, “I spend a half of a year of my life wandering northern Italy only to crawl up inside a smelly waste spout and nearly be crushed by the portcullis on the way out? While you, when it’s your turn to rescue Raven, simply walk up to the castle walls, hold out your hands, and she magically appears flying through the air on a carpet?”

“Actually, it was Cuthbert who held out his hands, and she was more *in* the carpet than on it,” James responded coolly, “and did I mention the part where we were almost trampled by an unstoppable, raging horde of camels?”

Raven, meanwhile, after enjoying a thorough face licking from Jack and cheers from all the men, had taken Shahar below deck and set up impromptu private quarters for them both. Though they badly needed it, neither of them could sleep that night.

“Where will this ship take us?” Shahar whispered to Raven so as not to wake the sleeping men.

“England,” she answered, even though she had not discussed plans with anyone further than the goal of reaching and then quickly leaving Sidon. In her heart, Raven had surrendered Jerusalem over to God’s stewardship with no view to more assistance forthcoming from the Nottingham Crusade, which she supposed meant that they were no longer a Crusade at all. “At least, that is my hope.”

“Will you take me to England?” Shahar asked.

“I will take you wherever you want to go. You are completely free now,” Raven replied.

Shahar looked at Raven for awhile before saying, “I want to go with you, wherever you go.”

“I was hoping you would say that.” Raven smiled.

*

The next morning, Cuthbert woke Raven up before she was ready.

“What is it?” she asked groggily.

“We have been hailed, and will soon be boarded by an Imperial ship,” Cuthbert explained. “I thought we might benefit from your diplomatic skills.”

“Perhaps if I was awake...” she complained as her hand instinctively went to the empty spot on her finger.

“In all the excitement yesterday, I neglected to return your ring.” Cuthbert held it up between his own fingers. “The young Arab boy you employed did well.”

Raven grinned. “I hope you paid him fairly.”

“He need never work again,” Cuthbert laughed. “May I?” He held the ring near her hand.

“Of course,” Raven answered.

He gently slid the ring onto her finger and adjusted it into place.

“You did that well.” She smiled coyly.

Cuthbert blushed. “We should go above deck.”

They rushed up the ladder, leaving Shahar and Jack asleep in the cubby.

By the time they emerged to open skies, the gigantic Byzantine war galley had pulled along their port side and some of its sailors were grappling the ships together. The Byzantine captain and a half dozen of his soldiers swung aboard from their higher deck. Scores more of heavily armed soldiers were assembled and prepared to follow them if needed.

“Who is in charge of this ship?” the captain yelled.

“This vessel belongs to these Greek sailors.” Raven motioned to them.

“But I am their employer at this time.”

“What is your business?” the captain shrieked.

“We have been on Crusade against the Enemies of the Cross. If you serve Byzantium, as your masthead suggests, then we have common cause in Our Lord Christ and we are at peace with one another,” Raven reasoned.

“Is this ship registered in Constantinople?” The captain softened his tone slightly.

“This is an independent merchant vessel which was first hired by the Teutonic Crusade and then by me,” she explained.

“And who are you?” the captain came to it.

“My name is Raven of Locksley. I am sorry, I missed yours.”

The captain turned red. “I am Captain Isaac Botaneiates of the Imperial Fleet. If you have no registration we must presume you to be pirates and impound this ship.”

“Pirates!” Raven shouted, burned by the irony of the accusation. “Why would you possibly think such a thing?”

The Captain pinched his face into a sarcastic smirk. “Let us examine the facts.” He began to pace back and forth. “You are clearly not from this part of the world, which means you are here to profit either by theft or trade – and since you seem to have plenty of troops, but little else of value...”

Raven stared coldly at him for a moment before replying. “We are no pirates.”

“Then I suppose if we searched your ship we would find no loot?” Botaneiates scoffed.

“You might,” Raven answered. “You might also find next to it the bones of our English kinsmen who died in battle against the Mamelukes from whom our spoils were fairly won in open war.”

“You admit to having loot! And you admit to being from England – a land of none other than rogues and pirates if the stories are true.” The Captain seemed almost to be searching for a fight.

“Enough of this!” Raven raised her hand in the air, showing the ring.

“Where did you get that?” the Captain hissed.

“From a friend with whom you would not trifle,” Raven announced proudly. “In the name of Princess Angeloi, I ask that you release us and then escort us safely to the boundaries of your dominion.”

The Captain looked furious. “You have only served to confirm my suspicions with this...display.”

Raven never broke eye contact with her accuser. “If you doubt my claims, then take us to Princess Angeloi. I appeal to her judgment.”

Botaneiates was visibly wroth. “Only out of respect for the ring that you hold I will...delay my own judgment against you.”

“Then you will escort us to Zara or Venice, and from there on to Vienna?” Raven asked hopefully.

The Captain looked confused. “What business have we in those backwaters? You have appealed to the Princess – to Constantinople you shall go!”

The Byzantines climbed back aboard their ship while the Greeks made preparations to change course.

“A pity that Pictish hen had to call parley with an Imperial Insignia ring; I would only have charged them a fee in the end,” Botaneiates chuckled to his first mate once back aboard.

*

In just a few days they arrived in the great capital, still sailing under the watchful eyes aboard Botaneiates’ battleship. The Minstrels and their Mighty Men were awestruck by the grandeur of Byzantium’s jewel. Majestic domes, towers, spires and flags flew high above the imposing stone walls that rooted down into the very sea.

Both ships slowed as bustling sea traffic thickened closer to the docking bay. Captain Botaneiates returned to the Greek ship with ten guards as the water became too shallow for his ship to continue providing escort. After the Greek vessel was secured to a dock and thoroughly registered by the port authority, the Captain called for Raven.

“May I bring my own escort?” she asked.

“Three and yourself should suffice,” the Captain relented. “Yet, your main force shall remain in their ship, under watch, until this matter is resolved to my satisfaction.”

Raven chose Cuthbert, John and James to accompany her into Constantinople. Michael agreed to take his turn staying back with the men, and to watch over a still bedridden Shahar. The blond bard had to restrain Jack who whimpered as once again Raven went away.

Botaneiates led the way while the ten soldiers flanked Raven and her personal bodyguard as they marched inward and upward through the great city’s winding streets. At several points they passed through gates. At each the Captain had the necessary credentials to pass, until they reached the Palace Gate.

Through that point he did not have authority to enter. They passed through nonetheless when Raven presented her ring to the magistrate that stood with the guards. Another group of guards replaced those that had come from the war galley, leading the Captain and his four charges into a waiting room that boasted an extremely large oblong table surrounded by plush chairs.

None of them sat though as they waited for the next response from the Palace. Soon, a short man entered the room. He was dressed in ornamental battle gear, the shininess of which accentuated the fact that it was a little too large for its wearer. After surveying the group and making a few notes on his writing tablet he asked who it was that sought the Princess.

“Captain Isaac Botaneiates,” he said. “Should it please her majesty, my ship intercepted these pirates lurking in Imperial waters. I would not have troubled her majesty with such matters, but the pirates’ woman leader presented one of her majesty’s personal rings and demanded parley with her majesty by name.”

“I see,” the tiny soldier replied. “Are you the pirates’ leader?” he asked, turning to Raven.

“Yes.” She shook her head flustered. “No! I am not a pirate! My men and I have been on Crusade at the behest of Rome. We were on our way back home to England with our rightfully won bounty when we were mistaken for pirates by the good Captain. I appealed to the Princess because she told me to do so if such an event were ever to occur.”

“I see,” the little man repeated. “And what is your name?”

“Raven of Locksley”

“I see.” The man turned to leave. “Wait here,” he said and left the room.

In just a few moments, the shadow of a figure appeared behind one of the muslin drapes that hid the room’s side exits and softened its corners. The figure emerged into the light.

“Theodora!” Raven shouted.

“Raven!” the Princess shrieked. “Thank God and Christ you are alive! Oh, I feared the worst when my four Allagion never returned. But praise God in

heaven you are alive!” Theodora seemed set to squeeze the life out of her recovered friend.

“I...I...” Raven stammered. “Where do I begin? I have too much to ask – too much to tell you!”

“First, let us settle the confusion that has come upon us,” Theodora turned to the extremely humble, nearly cowering sea captain. “Captain Botaneiates, I praise you and your crew for your diligence. You have done the Palace a great service by bringing these travelers to me. Give yourself and your men a one week paid leave in Constantinople beginning today. I will write the Admiralty myself to authorize this. Tell your men to enjoy this time with their wives and children.”

“Your majesty...” The Captain was speechless.

“You are dismissed, Captain.”

“Thank you, your majesty!” The trembling seaman bowed and shuffled backward until he disappeared from the room.

“Now, then,” Theodora turned back to Raven who was weeping with joy. “We have much to discuss indeed, but let me not neglect your loyal companions.” Theodora strode over to the men and began by embracing Cuthbert. “You look the best I have ever seen you,” she told him.

“Thank you...I think.” He made the Princess laugh.

She moved on to John and reached up to place her hands on his shoulders. “Big John Little – the largest man I have ever seen who has not served as one of my Varangian Guards,” she smiled up at John and made him laugh.

“And you must be Brother James,” the Princess concluded, moving to the well muscled Minstrel and taking up his large hands in hers. “I have heard many wonderful things about you.”

“And I many more about your highness,” James bowed.

“I am so very glad to see you all.” Theodora surveyed the group and was overflowing with giggles that lightly shook the hundreds of tiny black ringlets in her hair; which was at least two hand-widths longer than when they had seen her last. “What is the state of your Crusade?” she asked, turning serious.

“Michael is with us. He is on board our hired ship. We had heavy losses fighting in Egypt alongside the Teutonic Crusade, but we still have over fifty men in our company,” Cuthbert explained while Raven recovered from the tidal wave of emotions that had swept over her. “We also had a bit of an adventure in the Levant and out of it managed to rescue a young maiden from enslavement by the Turk. She remains in our company as well, and would certainly benefit from any doctors you could provide to attend her.”

“I will send for them at once.” Theodora motioned to a page standing in one of the curtained doorways. “Tell me, did you reach Jerusalem?”

“That did not seem to be in God’s plan for us,” Cuthbert answered while Raven looked down.

“And will you return now to England?” Theodora asked, causing the three men to look expectantly at Raven.

“Yes,” Raven answered. “We have been gone a long time.”

“How will you get there?” the Princess was curious.

Raven looked at Cuthbert.

“I had supposed we would sail between the Pillars of Hercules and then north through the Great Atlantic,” Cuthbert offered.

“I do not advise that course,” Theodora spoke with her usual frankness.

“Theodora,” Raven interrupted. “Where is Leopold?”

“He is well and in Vienna,” the Princess answered.

“Your wedding...did you?” Raven was still flustered.

“Yes,” Theodora laughed. “Oh, I have so very much to tell you. Let us send for Michael. We can all recline in my own quarters and have some wine while we share our adventures. I regretfully cannot host all of your men in the palace at the moment, but I can arrange rooms at inns for them near the waterfront. Come; let me make you as comfortable as I can.”

*

While the Minstrels and an Imperial magistrate went to the waterfront to retrieve Michael and find lodging for the soldiers, Theodora and Raven washed and then left the palace. At Raven’s request, they went to the nearest church.

Theodora obtained a lit candle from one of the monks and passed it to Raven. After lighting a new candle from it in the prayer alcove, Raven placed the original candle in an empty holder nearby. Theodora saw a single tear roll down Raven’s cheek.

“Who was that for?” Theodora asked directly.

“An innocent man,” Raven left it at that.

*

When the group reconvened in Theodora’s private quarters, the Minstrels had all washed and were feeling more relaxed than they had in months. Theodora embraced Michael and then passed around fruit and cups of cold water to all of her friends.

“Your Highness,” Michael began after sipping from his icy goblet.

“Again you come to our rescue. Yet, you do so now as Queen of Austria, yes?”

In a rare moment, Theodora blushed.

“Forgive me if...” Michael began, now blushing himself.

“It is all right, Michael.” Theodora smiled. “I do not think it ever came up when we were together in Vienna last winter.” She paused. “I am not the first wife of King Leopold II.”

“What happened?” Raven asked.

“She died of the pox, as did the daughter they had together,” Theodora answered somberly. “And so, by Austrian tradition, as both a foreigner and a second wife I cannot receive the title of queen, nor could I ever assume the throne. I shall remain Princess Angeloi with the rank, in Austria, of Consort to the King.”

The group was silent.

“Such details are of little concern to me though,” the Princess reassured her sullen companions. “My birthright of Imperial Authority has been undeniably traced to the ancient Emperors of Rome – and even to Constantine the Great, who was crowned Emperor not far from your own homes.”

Hearing the Princess once again speaking in her spellbinding style, and seeing the sublime movements of her hands and facial expressions, no one could doubt for a moment that her claim to an ancient lineage of imperial sovereignty was absolutely true.

“What is of great concern to me, however, is the well being of you and your soldiers, and your safe return to your homes,” Theodora concluded.

“Earlier, you were advising against sailing the Mediterranean passage,” Cuthbert reminded the Princess.

“With every part of me,” Theodora emphasized. “The Inquisition that trapped you in Italy is growing in fervor and reach. Your proposed course would take you too close to its dark heart.”

“Forgive me, but what alternative have we save for traveling overland at even greater risk of capture?” Raven interjected.

“There is another passage to the North Sea and England; a northern river route through the lands of the Kievan Rus and the Slavs. These lands are under the Church Authority of Byzantium, with no allegiance to Rome.”

“That sounds like our only hope of reaching England,” James urged.

“There is one other consideration, however.” Theodora paused.

“What is it?” Raven asked anxiously.

“You have come too late in the season and will never be able to cross the vast steppes of the Rus before the brutal snows of its chilling winter arrive with force.”

“Then what are we to do?” Raven despaired.

Theodora’s sly smirk curled her lips. “I am afraid that you have no alternative but to winter with me – you and all your men on a small but lovely island I have in the Aegean Sea. My compound of villas there will comfortably house your fifty road weary soldiers and you. There is a feasting pavilion on the beach, fruit falling from the trees in orchards overlooking the sea, and even a small amphitheatre should you wish to entertain your men there.”

“I do not see how we can refuse you at this point.” Raven smiled.

“You can’t,” Theodora agreed.

*

The Minstrels and the Mighty Men enjoyed a wonderful week taking in the sights, sounds and smells of fabled Constantinople while Theodora saw to the preparations for their island sojourn. They all sailed out together on the Greek ship, for which the Princess had taken over the rent.

Shahar made good progress during those days. Her various wounds were all on the mend, she was eating a little more each day, and when the time had come to board the ship she did so walking alone and unaided.

Theodora had been uncomfortable when she first learned of Shahar's Arabian heritage. But with Raven's reassurance of Shahar's Christian heart and sisterhood, the watchful Byzantine Princess agreed to accept the wounded girl as a friend and assist personally in her healing.

Most of the time Shahar simply sat and listened as the Lady and the Princess caught up on the events of their lives. Raven told of the bandit ambush and the death of her father, the long summer siege in Egypt, and her captivity in the east.

Theodora was awed, but also had her own tales of danger and intrigue to tell. She told of her beautiful wedding and honeymoon with King Leopold – a honeymoon during which they fended off two separate assassination attempts. Fearing the attacks were inspired by a vengeful Inquisition, Leopold had sent her back to the relative safety of Constantinople, hoping the whole affair would soon blow over.

"But I have reason to believe that some of those seeking my harm may come from closer round and about than Rome," Theodora whispered to her two lady companions as their ship skipped over the waves propelled by a crisp playful breeze.

"There is something else." Raven stared at the Princess.

"What do you mean?" Theodora was taken aback.

"Something is bothering you other than the attempts on your life," Raven probed.

"Is that not enough?" Theodora retorted angrily.

Raven was silent.

"Forgive me," Princess Angeloi requested. "You are right. You know me well, Raven of Locksley." She looked down at her hands. "I have been sick in the mornings," she whispered.

"You mean..." Raven started.

The Princess nodded.

"Oh my," Raven muttered. "Does Leopold know?"

She shook her head this time.

"Are you happy?" Shahar jumped into the conversation to Raven's delight.

"That is a very good question, Shahar," Theodora replied. "But I do not know if I know the answer. Of course it is a blessing..." The other two ladies

nodded along with the Princess as she sorted through her feelings. "But how can I bring a child into a world that is trying to snuff out me and my bloodline? And will the baby ever see its father if I am unable to return to Vienna?"

She began to cry.

The three ladies huddled together praying until the gorgeous island retreat of the House of Angelos came within sight.

As the men enthusiastically gathered their things in preparation to disembark from the ship, Raven found Cuthbert. "May I ask you something?" she asked.

"Anything, my sweet"

"What were you doing four days ago around high noon?" She stared at him.

"Is this a test?"

"I saw you leaving with Theodora. Where did you go?" She was genuinely curious; all the more so because she had waited so long to ask.

"I was returning to her the four Insignia pins which belonged to her horsemen that died the same night as your father. John had found them stored among the ship's supplies while we were in the desert, but he forgot about them until four days ago. I did not tell you because I did not wish to stir the painful memories," Cuthbert explained.

"Thank you," Raven said warily. "Then tell me this. Why did I see you leaving her quarters alone two evenings ago?"

"Raven of the Hood, I do believe you are jealous of me!" Cuthbert enjoyed a good laugh.

"Well?" She was becoming angry.

"I was discussing our instruments with her," Cuthbert said with confidence.

"What about our instruments?"

"Well, they were all quite a bit Crusade worn," Cuthbert explained. "I had hoped the Princess might have some artisans on retainer who could help with the repairs - and as it turns out, she did. We discussed the needs of the various instruments. I had hoped to surprise you with them when we reached the villa, but once again, your relentless curiosity has altered my plans."

"And that is all you were doing there?" Raven was still frowning.

"Yes."

"All right"

Still skeptical, she let Cuthbert alone and followed Jack as he bolted for the firmness and expansiveness of beloved dry land.

*

For weeks a very happy Jack feverishly explored the fragrant olive, lemon and apple orchards as they began to turn dormant for winter. He found

further delight in the mazes of hillside juniper shrubberies, along the pink sandy beach and amidst the endless rows of pale potted and planted flowers that decorated the small compound of hillside villas; flowers chosen for their radiant appearance in the light of the moon.

The afternoons were still comfortably sunny and warm, but the mornings and evenings had grown chilly and windy. They passed these times huddled in the villas with the fireplaces lit; drinking, singing, and retelling their stories of battle and adventure with ever evolving hyperbole.

On the warm and dry days, the entire Nottingham Company would migrate to the amphitheatre – a small seaside open air auditorium carved out of the rocky cliffs. Crashing waves in the grotto below boomed dully, sending their ocean spray foaming into the air.

The refurbished instruments were delicious to the ear as their sound waves bounced around the rocky chamber. The Englishmen, with full bellies and fuller wine cups, leapt and danced for joy at the sweet sounds.

Cuthbert wrung every last drop of sound from his upgraded lute using all the strength in his hands and fingers. Theodora's expert craftsmen, in just two days, had replaced the lute's rusty nickel wrapped strings with new strings hand wound in the thinnest imaginable strips of pure gold. They had repaired a number of small cracks in the lute's curved wooden body and polished the entire instrument with a protective sealant. The frets they cleaned, polished, and where necessary, tweaked to ring with Pythagorean purity.

The Little brothers' hand drums were likewise polished and fitted both with new leather shoulder straps and fresh heads made of stretched and oiled antelope skins imported from Ethiopia. The skins were fitted with precision to insure they would pound out complimentary tones to each other.

Michael's flute and trumpet were also cleaned and polished, and the dents in the trumpet bell were hammered back into proper tune and form.

Yet the true masterpiece was Raven's fiddle. The craftsmen removed the face plate to fill and reinforce a long crack on the instrument's underside. They resealed the face with strong wood glue made from the hooves of retired Kataphraktoi steeds. Gold wound strings like Cuthbert's replaced the old strings that had lost their tone and resonance.

Her bow was completely re-haired with tail hairs, again, from the most elite battle horses of the Empire. Once installed, the hairs were lightly rosined with dried pine sap to give the bow maximum playability.

Finally, the artisans provided light but durable casings to enclose the instruments during travel so that they would maintain their quality all the way back to England.

The Minstrels played to the men and the tides as winter quickly approached. Raven played her fiddle passionately and to the delight of all, and the other Minstrels composed ballads to record the great deeds of the Fifth Crusade. So enraptured were the men by such new songs as *The Mighty Stone*

Thrower of Cuthbert a' Dale, Assault On the Slave Ship of the Dread Pirate Jackal, and Bloody Sunrise - The Desert Ride of the Templar Knights, they hardly noticed the fact that Raven did not participate in any of the singing.

*

One morning, on the eve of the Yuletide Feast to be precise, word circulated around the villa that there was to be a gathering in the amphitheatre. Raven was surprised as the day was fairly cold. She saw John and James hurry past. They had recently washed, shaved their faces, and in a surprise move for the Sons of Thunder, combed their thick brown manes.

“Are you going to bring your drums?” Raven asked.

They looked at each other.

“We are not playing today.” James seemed a bit nervous.

“The Princess has asked everyone to come though,” John added.

Raven noticed that the rest of the men were pouring out of their villas and heading toward the grotto.

“What is going on?” Raven was bewildered and somewhat annoyed.

“We had best be off,” Cuthbert’s voice came from behind her.

Raven knew something sinister was afoot when she saw her untamable Cuthbert a’ Dale even more properly groomed than her drummers. Michael appeared then too, his long blond hair pulled into a tight ponytail. Shahar walked with him.

She looked beautiful in a dress that Theodora had given to her, which Raven had re-hemmed to fit properly. Shahar had not worn it before though, except to try on.

Raven burned with curiosity and became steadily more convinced that something was being kept from her as they quickly crossed the island and made their way down the large steps cut into the rock face of the island’s cliffs. By the time they arrived in the amphitheatre the men were all seated, though Theodora was nowhere to be seen.

The Minstrels and Shahar sat down in the front row of seats nearest the stage. They had not waited long before a loud drumming boomed from behind the boulder that hid the backstage area. Theodora’s two Varangian guards appeared from either side of the rock. They had John and James’ drums looped over their shoulders and were using them to keep a simple but solid marching beat.

Raven looked over at the Little brothers who demonstrated no surprise at seeing their instruments in the hands of the Vikings. The Guards were in full battle array with their shiny broad axes strapped to their backs. They made an impressive sight, but became as mere ornaments when their master appeared.

When Theodora emerged from behind the boulder, all breathing in the amphitheatre was temporarily put on hold. She walked with the gracefulness and

power of purpose that only a true royal princess can display. She wore a white silken dress tied around her waist with a golden cord. A thick purple robe, the ultimate symbol of Imperial authority, billowed behind her in the rising sea breeze.

Strapped to her hip with a leather belt that ran beneath her golden braid, was a long scabbard. The sword hilt that emerged from the top of the scabbard was richly jeweled in rubies, emeralds and sapphires set into pure platinum. Hanging from the gold braid and against her opposite hip, dangled a small glass vial which was filled with Holy anointing oil.

The black glossiness of her tightly curled hair shone in the late morning sun, and the mounds of ringlets that framed her face and cascaded over her shoulders bounced with each strong and determined stride of her legs. She stopped at the center of the stage and stood surveying her assembled crowd of English guests.

The Varangians finished their ceremonial drumming with a quick flourish, and silence descended over the theatre as the echoes finished their course around the grotto and flew out to sea. Theodora then began to speak.

“Men of Nottingham, men of England; lend me your ears!” Her voice was warmly resonant. “On behalf of the Holy Byzantine Empire, Defender of Christendom and Instrument of God’s Will on Earth, I lift you up before our Lord and Creator and commend you for your heroic deeds in the service of the Church.

“Let no man ever attempt to diminish the importance of what you have done. You struck a mighty blow against God’s enemies at the core of their earthly power. Your deeds led to the fall of a fortress of darkness in the Levant that was thought to be impenetrable. And most importantly, you rescued the innocent from captivity.” She nodded toward Raven and Shahar.

“God has a plan for the liberation and peace of Jerusalem that is mightier and more wonderful than we can know. Your work and sacrifice has surely been a part of this grand unfolding. Each of you, keep your mind on the Lord and keep your hearts true, and you can all look forward to the day when you will hear Him, and not only me, saying, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.’ And you will be rewarded for your courage, chivalry and faithfulness.”

The Princess laid her hand on the hilt of her sword. She drew it out, making a metallic ringing sound that shimmered in the air. Holding the naked steel blade toward the sun, it shone with blinding brilliance.

“Ye that be Men of Faith, rise up!” the Princess shouted. In a moment, only Raven and Shahar remained seated. “By the power vested in me through God and the Divine Right of Kings, I declare each of you to be Knights of the Order of the Byzantine Empire! I acknowledge your brave deeds and loyal service in the past, and I exhort your continued fealty to righteousness, justice and good.

“Kneel!” Theodora yelled.

Fifty-six knees hit the ground. She passed the shadow of her sword over them all while she chanted something in a tongue that none of them understood. Though the skies were clear, the wind picked up. The surf boomed in the grotto, and it sounded as if there might be thunder in the distance.

“Rise, Mighty Men,” she finished with a smile. “And those among you that are called Minstrels come forth.”

Cuthbert, Michael, John and James stepped up onto the stage in response to Theodora’s beckoning.

“Kneel, once again,” she said quietly to them. They did and she raised her voice to address all. “Because of your particular talents with which God has blessed you, your undying loyalty to the Lord, to me, and to my friends, and your uncommonly brave spirits, I elevate the four of you; Cuthbert a’ Dale, Michael Tuck, John Little and James Little to royal nobility.

“You are now members of the Schola Protectores Domestici,” she explained as she returned her sword to its scabbard, drew out the anointing oil, and dabbed a drop on each of their foreheads. “You hold the rank in the Order of the Byzantine Empire of Chevalier with all of the rights and responsibilities to which that rank entitles you. Your everlasting loyalty first to Our Lord, then to His True Church, and then to me, is expected. Your defense of and service to Christendom, the Royal House of Angelos, and all of those gathered here today is required. If you accept this title and duty, let it be known by saying ‘I do.’”

The foursome said the pledge in unison.

“Now rise again.” The Princess was glowing in the sunlight. “When the shadow of the waterside pavilion reaches the grass on the shore this evening, we shall feast together to celebrate your well deserved honors. I will be honored by the presence of each of you. Until tonight then...” Princess Angeloi grinned at the awestruck crowd, turned and disappeared from the stage.

Raven approached Cuthbert as the others began filing back up the main steps. “What has happened here today?” she asked in her stunned bewilderment.

“Follow me,” was Cuthbert’s only reply.

*

Raven and Cuthbert crossed the island together and he led her into one of the small apple orchards which were all bare for winter. At the far side, near the cliffs overlooking the sparkling turquoise sea, laid a small blue blanket spread open with a large basket on top, and next to it a wooden cutting board.

“Is this your great secret – a picnic lunch?” Raven chided.

“Is it wrong for me to want to dine with my best friend after I have been made a Knight and a Noble all in one day?” Cuthbert quipped back.

He dropped to his knees and began unpacking the basket, laying out on the board a wine bottle and two glasses, some cheeses, breads, tiny cold sausages, assorted fruit, and a small knife.

"I am your best friend?" Raven whispered as the wind played with her hair.

Cuthbert stood and walked over so he was directly in front of her, with only a hand-width separating their faces. "You always have been," he whispered back.

A tingling sensation traveled Raven's spine with such force that she became dizzy.

"Ever since we were small," Cuthbert continued. "I have known in my heart that you were..." he trailed off.

"That I was what?" Raven was shaking as the implications of everything he was saying and everything that had happened began to come clearer to her. Even though the day was crisply cool, fine beads of sweat broke out on her nose and forehead and around her mouth. She inhaled and waited for a response.

"You see, I had always had this problem." Cuthbert, as he so often did, changed the subject.

"A problem?" Raven exhaled, and then quickly inhaled again between trembling lips.

"Yes," Cuthbert lamented. "I truly believed that I was destined for a long life of hanging on in quiet desperation."

"Why?" She shook her head and looked concerned.

"Because I could never solve this problem – I could never think of a way that a poor carpenter's apprentice, the son of an itinerant musician, could rightfully ask for the hand of a lady whose father was a noble and whose mother was cousin to the King," he finally explained.

"Cuthbert," Raven began as calmly as she could, "if you are doing what I think you are doing, will you please just do it right now, because I really cannot take any more of this?" she pleaded.

Cuthbert, without further delay, reached back into the picnic basket one last time and retrieved a small wooden box.

Raven covered her mouth and nose with her hands as she both laughed and cried.

Cuthbert knelt before his true love. "Raven of Locksley, my love for you is stronger than the mightiest oak of Sherwood. I will gladly spend the rest of my days working to please you and provide for you. There is nothing else I want more." He licked his dry lips and went on. "If you will have me as your servant, your best friend...your lover, you will make me the happiest man who has ever walked this green earth. Will you stay together with me for all the days of our lives? Will you be my wife?"

"Yes!" she sobbed joyfully, "oh, yes!"

Cuthbert held her hand steady and gently slid the golden promise ring into place.

"You are so good at that," she moaned. In a flash she reached down, grabbed his shirt and pulled his face back up in front of hers. Unwilling to allow

the procrastinating bard any more delays, she dove into his lips with her own and would not let go until they fell down together onto the blanket.

Before Raven had even recovered from the impact, Cuthbert was on top of her, kissing her lips and her face and her neck and her shoulders and...

Suddenly he was propelled upward and away. Raven panicked and threw her lover off the blanket and into the soft grass.

"What on earth was that for?" he cried.

"We have to do this right!" Raven panted. "Let us go to Theodora – she can send for a priest. He could be here by tomorrow night..."

"If we are going to do this right," Cuthbert began as he brushed himself off. "First, I need to go for a lengthy swim in the cold sea." He made Raven laugh. "Then we need to get back to England. I will need to get permission from you brother. We can have Friar Tuck preside. And most importantly, we will know that everyone is back home safe – that we followed the Crusade through to its completion – not by reaching Jerusalem, but by returning home."

"You are right of course." Raven was sullen. "But we will have to wait half a year!" she complained.

"We have lasted that long through worse," he recalled.

"I do not know about that..." she objected with a sly grin.

In the end they agreed to wait until returning to England to marry and consummate, but in order to help manage their suddenly very immediate needs, they spent the rest of the early afternoon together on the blanket tasting all the fruits that were available, as well as the flowing wine.

*

Raven and Cuthbert arrived at the waterfront feast that evening to cheers, howls and applause from the men.

"Did everyone know but me?" Raven slapped Cuthbert hard on the shoulder.

"I have not yet told the Greek sailors. They have been staying aboard their ship, and..."

Raven simply walked away from him. She saw Theodora, standing under the pavilion beaming, and headed over to confront her.

"Forgive me," Theodora called as Raven approached. "I am from Constantinople. I cannot resist a good conspiracy."

Raven tried with all her might to maintain a stern look, but by the time she reached the Princess they had both broken down into laughter, hugging and fawning over the ring.

"Oh, it looks perfect on you!" Theodora approved.

"But of course you have seen it before," Raven jabbed.

"I only helped him with the size," the Princess assured her friend, "the knotted design in the engraving was all his idea, and he provided the gold and a fair labor fee to my artisans on his own; in fact, he insisted."

"I am impressed," Raven was. "And whose idea was knighting everyone?"

"Mine," Theodora confessed as she winked and took a sip from her water goblet.

They were interrupted as a series of trumpet blasts rang across the beach. Michael had, at Cuthbert's request, gained the attention of the whole group.

"Men of Sherwood!" Cuthbert began. "As you may already know, I am madly in love with Raven of Locksley!"

A roar of delight rose from the crowd.

"What you may not know is that in addition," Cuthbert paused. He was fairly inebriated, but was doing well. "I have recently discovered that she, actually, feels something quite similar toward me."

The men howled and stomped their feet.

"And it is with great joy that I invite you all to attend our wedding, which will be held as soon as we return to England!" Cuthbert continued speaking after that, but nobody heard what else he said.

John and James had let loose on their drums, which the Vikings had grudgingly surrendered back. Michael switched to flute and joined in, and the prolonged toast of the happy suitor was drowned out by yelps of joy and celebration as the men danced and the feast began.

The three servant families that lived on the island year round had prepared a sumptuous array of culinary pleasures. All of Theodora's personal favorites were included, and at the collective request of the Englishmen, a large number of fish were grilled over open flames right there on the beach.

Raven, Theodora and Shahr rested underneath the pavilion and had things brought to them. After all the pain and heartache of the last few years, Raven had not thought she would ever again have felt as happy as she did that night.

She watched Jack, noticeably plumper than when they had arrived, ranging among the men in his never-ending search for scraps and attention. She watched her men, safe and enjoying the well deserved fruits of their efforts. She watched Cuthbert, overflowing with happiness at being able to let his true feelings out into the open. She felt the wellsprings of love within her soul burst forth with new life, as if a dam had been broken above a desert valley.

Thank you. She prayed silently to God. I am so sorry. I do not know why I ever doubted you. Please Lord, let me not only praise and trust you when life is wonderful as it is tonight. Let me rest in you always – as I will in the strong and tender arms of the one you have given to love me.

Raven continued to pour out the overflowing gratitude in her heart to the Lord, not in actual words, but with indescribable spirit. Then at the very moment she thought that her joy could grow no higher, she looked to her left and saw a sight she had never seen before.

There sat Shahar.

She was surveying the dancing and feasting and music and noise and love all around her – and she was smiling.

Verse Fifteen – The Forests of Russia

As winter faded, the English company prepared to return home. Theodora met them on the deck of the Greek ship for one final goodbye.

“This has been the most wonderful time of my life,” Raven exclaimed. “I do not know how we can ever sufficiently thank you for all that you have done for us...again!”

“The pleasure of having you and your friends with me is all that I could ever ask,” Theodora answered. “May your journey home be peaceful and may Our Great Lord bring our paths together again as it suits His purpose. Raven of Locksley, I will miss you, my dear friend.” She turned to Cuthbert. “But I will rest well knowing that I send you away in very capable and caring hands.”

Cuthbert bowed to the Princess. “I shall take good care of her, your majesty.”

“Oh, I imagine you will.” She favored Cuthbert, first with her intoxicating smile and then with a kiss on his lips.

Next Theodora addressed the other Minstrels. “Should any of you one day return to the East, whether seeking for adventure, fortune, or whatsoever purpose, I encourage you to seek for me as well. Men of your quality, my Schola, could be of great service to the Empire, and to me.”

John, James and Michael bowed humbly.

Then Theodora began moving among the English soldiers, making sure that she touched each of their hands before their final departure. As she did so, she placed a solemn charge upon them.

“Good Christian soldiers, a new battlefield now lays before you. Your weapons and your shield might be none other than your hands and your heart. Your enemies could be as unseen and silent as indifference or resentment. And the day of victory may come long, long after you have departed to Our Father’s heavenly estate.

“Go home.” The Byzantine Princess laid out the strategy for them. “Take wives. Have many children, and raise them in the love and admonition of the Lord. Plant and build and sing. Gain wealth for yourselves, and share it with those around you. Build your homeland of England into a Citadel – a bastion of peace and prosperity, backed by the blessing of God and by the God-given strength of her people.

“For the day may come and sooner than you might imagine when the dark forces held at bay by the Byzantine Empire will gain their foothold in the west! My great city of Constantinople has guarded the frontier between civilization and barbarism for a thousand years, but nothing on this earth lasts forever.” Theodora cast her gaze gravely upon her assembled disciples.

“A day may come when your remote island becomes the center of the storm. When the winds blow and the thunder rages against it – will your people

be prepared? Will you hold the line in your time?" the Princess made her challenge.

The soldiers shouted their promise to return home and dedicate the balance of their lives to building England's might.

They finished their chanting with three rousing cheers of, "Long Live the Angelos!"

Theodora lastly stood before Shahar. "Your eyes have seen much sadness and hurt," she began softly. "But, not too much..." The Byzantine grin appeared on her face. "Not enough to stop the great and wonderful purpose that God has for you. Your freedom was bought at the price of much blood. Let not fear nor the acts of any mortal man keep you from your purpose, or ever again rob you of your God-granted freedom.

"Take care, my sister." Theodora hugged her.

"Thank you for everything," Shahar whispered through her tears.

Theodora paid the Greeks to take her fifty-eight friends upriver as far as Kiev, and to help them secure river passage through the shallower northern reaches. Then she headed down the gangplank toward the dock where her Varangians awaited.

Raven ran out and stopped her halfway down. They hugged one last time. Crying, with their foreheads together, they whispered their parting promises.

"I will pray constantly for you and for..." Raven did not know how to refer to the growing life inside Theodora.

"Him," the Princess smiled, "I really think it will be a boy."

Only Raven and Shahar knew her secret. The men all remained blissfully ignorant to the swelling abdomen that Theodora's ample breasts helped keep hidden beneath her flowing robes.

"I want to meet...him, someday," Raven cried softly.

"Our destinies are intimately linked, Lady of Locksley. You know this is true." The slyness of Theodora's grin was dampened by her quivering lips and watering eyes. "I know that somewhere, somehow, we will see each other again."

*

The sailing north along the Black Sea coast was quick and enjoyable in the lively breezes of spring. Though sad to leave behind the beautiful life upon Theodora's island, the spirits of the Minstrels and their Mighty Men were high.

Once they entered the mouth of the Dneipr River, Byzantine trade traffic thinned – and their progress slowed to a crawl. Their sails were useless against the heavy current, forcing them to drop oars. In shallows and rapids even rowing was not enough, and thirty men at a time would have to jump ship and haul along the shore with ropes.

They trudged onward though, knowing that each step brought them a little closer to England's fair shores. Summer was nearly upon them when they finally reached Kiev and parted ways with the Greek sailors. Raven kissed each of them on their cheeks and thanked them for their loyalty. She also tipped them out of the Crusade treasure chests in addition to the extra pay Theodora had provided.

The Greeks waved and blew kisses as they floated off downstream. As they rounded the bend, the Englishmen could hear them singing one of the songs they had learned that winter at the amphitheatre; the epic ballad, *Hooded Raven's Hound Rescue and Hellfire Revenge*.

*

Splitting into three groups of about twenty each, the Nottingham Company boarded the three small Viking longboats they had hired to continue northward along the Dneipr. The longboat crews were comprised of agreeable Nordic youths who all appeared to be related, though the Englishmen never established exactly how.

All the men still had to contribute to the rowing, but it was much easier in the lean and shallow Viking vessels, for initially they only had to walk and haul a few times. Then, in a land called the White Rus, where the Dneipr curves toward its source in the mountains to the north and east, they pulled the long boats from the river and began the most difficult part of the journey.

Their goal was the Dvina River which empties into the Baltic at the Livonian port city of Riga. The journey between the two rivers could normally be accomplished in two very long days on foot. Carrying three longboats, however, the journey took two very long back-breaking weeks.

One morning, while camped at about the halfway point, Cuthbert had a brilliant idea. "What if, instead of continuing this tiresome process of rolling these boats along on logs, we were to somehow affix a semi-permanent wheel or two underneath their hulls?"

"How would that work?" Michael asked, quite interested.

Cuthbert dashed from the campground to a nearby birch tree and peeled free a large section of the paper-like bark. Mixing a concoction of John's not-quite-right stew and dirt into dark mud on the ground, he carefully sketched a drawing of his idea using a thin twig dipped in the brown ooze.

The other Minstrels and the Viking lads gathered around and marveled at the red bard's ingenuity.

"An admirable idea," James conceded, "but there is one problem."

"A problem?" Cuthbert asked disdainfully.

"The rubbing on the axle will soon wear it through – if not set it ablaze!" James made a good point.

“Good point!” Cuthbert agreed. “Animal fat should do the trick. James, my friend, I believe you have just volunteered for the hunt!”

“Then you are coming with me,” James frowned.

“Not so, Mr. Little,” Cuthbert winked. “I will have to stay here and direct the woodworking, and I shall need your brother’s strength here as well.”

“Michael?” James asked.

The blond bard jumped to his feet. “When are we off?”

James stood slowly and dramatically. “Bring me my spear.”

*

Four of the soldiers volunteered as well, and the team set off into the haunting and endless depths of the great birch forest. There were other trees as well; ash, maple, and a good number of large pine trees.

It was high up in the sticky branches of a very full and tall pine that James made his hunting nest for the day. He had chosen the location because the branches hung over a deer trail that led down the hill to a small stream. *Surely at dusk some fresh meat will pass by below*, James thought as he struggled to stay awake in the lazy warmth of the late afternoon summer sun.

Michael and one of the soldiers were stationed in a shrubbery further down the trail; ready to finish off the prey if James should only wound it. The other three men had set up a similar gambit on another deer trail. The plan was to wait until sunset, and if they had not caught anything by the time the sun was fully down, they would return to the main camp by the light of the rising full moon.

As the sun sank beneath the tree line, the long eerie shadows of the thin and tall birch trees turned the forest floor into a patchwork of dancing shadow and light that played tricks with the minds of the eager hunters. Several times James raised his spear, preparing to bring down a stag or small bear, only to realize at the last moment that nothing was there.

Just after one of these false alarms he heard a crashing sound. Something was bounding through the woods – and fast! He peeked through the pine needles and saw a flash of white. The crashing sounds grew louder. Something – many things – were pursuing the white stag, or whatever type of creature it was.

James laid back and waited. As much as he wanted meat for himself and greasy lard to lubricate Cuthbert’s latest machine, he did not want to tangle with wolves or wildcats over their dinner. As the predators cornered their prey just below James’ perch he saw the kind of beasts that they truly were.

Six men, wearing crude furs and armed with clubs had finally caught and surrounded the young unarmed maiden, who was panting with exhaustion. James could hardly believe his eyes. She was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

Her wild and wispy yellow hair glowed golden in the day's last light. Her cheeks were red from exertion, but otherwise her skin was white as snow. He guessed her to be his age, if not younger, and his stomach lurched as he realized what was about to happen to her.

Damn it all. James said to himself. *I simply wanted a little taste of roast, and now I'm in the thick of it. Well, if it ever reached Princess Angeloi's ears that I had abandoned a damsel in distress; she would surely revoke my nobility.*

With that he plunged his spear down into the shoulder of the nearest rogue. The villain was dead before he hit the ground. But before even that happened, James had flown from the tree with a whooping yell and brought down two more of the scoundrels by hand. The remaining three pounded mercilessly on James' head, back and legs with their clubs.

They would have killed him, but something else whooshed through the woods sounding like a blast of wind or a tree falling. James sensed a pause in the blows to his body, so he rolled hard to the right hoping to take himself, at least momentarily, out of harm's way.

The last thing he saw before losing consciousness was the fair maiden tumbling onto the ground next to him. Their eyes briefly met and then, for each of them, went black.

*

When James opened his eyes again, everything was dark. Night had fallen in the vast Russian forest. Michael and the other four men were there though, as James saw when his eyes finally adjusted. Their presence did little to assuage the thundering pain in most parts of his body.

"What happened?" James groaned.

"I do not know exactly what happened to you, but somehow before it did you managed to free this young lass from her attackers – at least, I assume that is why your spear is in one of them, and the rest are dead," Michael granted him.

"They are all dead?" James was baffled.

"All four," Michael answered.

"Four?" James head was splitting.

The maiden opened her eyes and spoke then, though none of them could understand what she said. She looked at Michael curiously for a moment as if she thought she might know him, before looking around at the others.

She was visibly unnerved, and understandably so as she struggled to comprehend how her six predators had turned into six, rather friendly looking young blokes with no apparent intentions of ravaging her.

The men tried every language known among them but were unsuccessful in finding one that worked for the girl. Finally, James pointed to one of the rogues' corpses and then out to the forest from whence they had come.

Her nod confirmed what the fearful expression on her face already suggested; yes, there are more of them out there.

“Shall we?” James held out his hand to the maiden. She took it, and he helped her stand up. “James,” he said pointing to himself.

“Zorina,” she placed her fingers on her chest.

“Enough already,” Michael rolled his eyes. “Let’s move.”

*

Back at camp, the news was ominous. The main group had experienced their own confrontation with the rogues. The gang that had approached the camp was about thirty strong. They accosted the Nordic sailors who were standing outside the camp smoking their pipes, and attempted to rob them.

John had noticed the melee and called out the men. The gang of rogues wavered and then fled into the forest when they saw fifty English troops pouring out of the camp, all wielding short swords, to defend their fair-haired employees.

“This happened right at sunset – I suppose so we would not pursue them,” Raven finished explaining the evening’s events to James and Michael. Cuthbert and John were still patrolling the perimeter of the campground.

“We have had our own adventures,” James responded to Raven. “And our hunt was productive, though not in that for which we had set out.”

Raven stepped forward, and peered behind James where Zorina huddled warily.

“And who is this?” Raven asked in amazement.

“Her name is Zorina,” James explained. “But that is about all we know of her, and her tongue is unknown to us. Another, smaller band of rogues attempted to assault her and I tried to fight them off. I do not understand how, but apparently I was successful.”

“Raven,” she pointed to herself and held out her hand to the newcomer.

Zorina accepted the hospitality as well as a seat by the fire and a drink. Raven introduced her to Shahar and the three began a mostly wordless conversation employing many gestures, facial expressions and even drawing in the dirt with sticks.

Meanwhile, James pulled Michael aside. “Michael, I have to ask you something.”

“Yes?”

“You said that I had killed all four of the rogues.” James furrowed his brow.

“That’s right,” Michael confirmed.

“Are you sure?” James asked. “I know I counted six at the beginning.”

“Interesting...” Michael murmured.

“What is it?”

“None of the other men saw it, and I cannot be sure that I did. The dancing shadows at dusk were playing with my mind.” Michael strained to think back. “But for just a moment I thought I saw two bodies, these missing men perhaps, being dragged away far off in the darkening woods.”

“What was dragging them?” A cold breeze made James quiver as he spoke the words.

“That’s the oddest thing.” Michael shook his head. “And that is why it was all probably just a trick of the shadows. But it looked...well...almost like a bent old crone.”

“An old woman?” James was confused.

“As I say,” Michael laughed nervously. “Probably all just a trick of the light...”

*

They stayed watchful through the night, but saw no more of the wandering rogues. At first light, they struck camp and pressed onward as they had been with the rolling logs. Though they had to abandon Cuthbert’s idea in the interest of immediately leaving the area, the Nordic sailors kept his sketches in their treasure chest.

For the rest of their journey to the Dvina, they were followed and watched. Sometimes crunching sounds in the forest and darting shadows were the only indications of their stalkers’ presence. At other times they could see small bands of about ten or twelve rogues running together on the horizon.

“Fortunately, they are not very well organized,” James commented after dinner one night.

“Unless that is what they have been doing – organizing and planning their attack,” Michael cautioned.

Suddenly, Raven entered their tent.

“What have you found out from Zorina?” Cuthbert asked her.

Raven sighed and sat down. “Not much; it is slow going.”

“Does she have any family or friends we could take her to?” John asked.

Raven shook her head. “That is the saddest part. I drew a stick drawing of a family in the dirt; two large people and a crowd of little people. I identified one of the little people as her and then pointed to the mother and father. She burst into tears. Finally though, I convinced her to take the drawing stick. She drew a group of very large figures, clearly the rogues, and then she drew...well...let me just say that I do not believe she has any surviving family.”

“Who are these marauders?” James questioned. “Does she have any idea?”

“Shahar was able to communicate with her using some words that they both seemed to understand, but I did not. Shahar explained their exchanges to me, but none of it made much sense. She spoke of a growing fear, of mighty

kings in the east, and of entire cities that have vanished. I do not know what this all means,” Raven admitted.

“It sounds as if these rogue barbarians that have plagued us may actually be refugees from the onslaught of a greater and more terrible barbarian force coming out of the east,” Michael suggested.

“That would explain their haphazardness,” James agreed. “They are probably just looking for food and supplies, and destroying as they go.”

“Did you learn anything about Zorina’s people? Do you think she is really the last of them?” John queried.

“I truly fear that is the case,” Raven answered and everyone else looked down. “Yet there is some cause for hope.” They all looked back up at her. “I made a small cross out of sticks and used grass for binding. When I showed it to her she cried afresh, but not with the same despair she had earlier. She pointed to the sketches of her slaughtered family in the dust, then pointed to the cross, and then pointed to the sky.”

“They were believers?” Michael was hopeful.

“They used to be believers.” Cuthbert pointed out wisely. “But now they know.”

*

On the day they reached the flowing Dvina, the men gratefully rolled the longboats back into the water where they belonged. Everyone quickly loaded aboard and they cruised rapidly down stream. The current and the wind provided more than enough speed, and the men were finally given a much needed rest from rowing, pulling, carrying and hauling. They were also happy to leave behind the realm of the wandering rogues.

The floating journey down river was beautiful. The late days of summer in Livonia were warm and pleasant and the men enjoyed fishing in the fresh water, cooking under the open sky and singing for joy as they made good time. Some of the men, while tied to ropes, would swim between the three ships simply for sport.

In Riga, they stopped briefly to stock up on fresh food and water before making the final run across the Baltic and the North seas. There they had their last encounter with the great Crusades before returning home.

A good sized contingent, nearly eighty cavalry men, had just arrived at the port. They had sailed in from Prussia. They were Teutonic Knights.

Cuthbert approached them and conversed for awhile, mostly in Germanic speech. He learned that the Knights had intended to join up with the Crusade in Egypt the year before, but had been reassigned by the Holy Roman Emperor to come north and fight against pagan aggressors. Cuthbert assumed this meant people like the rogues they had encountered.

“Thank God, someone has sent troops to help stabilize this region,” James exclaimed, as they discussed Cuthbert’s findings.

“I do not know how much stability they will bring,” Cuthbert replied. “They look well prepared to fight, but what happens after the fight?”

“What do you mean?” John asked.

“Well,” Cuthbert collected his thoughts. “Perhaps it is as Theodora told us. Perhaps the battles that really matter do not involve finding out how much we can destroy, but rather seeing how much we can build and create. A different kind of warfare to be sure...”

“Let’s get on the ships, boys.” Raven shooed them all along. “We still have several weeks of sailing during which you can talk to your hearts’ content.”

*

And talk they did, in addition to singing, dancing and drinking. The men eagerly took to the oars whenever necessary to speed the journey, and the winds were not unkind. In a few cases, the time was even used productively.

Zorina demonstrated her eagerness to learn English and was a quick study. She never once suffered from a shortage of volunteers from among the men for partners in practicing her speech. The road weary soldiers were more than happy to listen to her smooth, soft voice try time and again to repeat their words just right. They also enjoyed the full attention she gave to every word they said.

As time went on, however, she devoted more and more of her attention to James. The Hungarian speech he had learned while stationed in Zara had some similarities to her Slavic tongue, and he was remarkably adept at understanding the unspoken nuances of her language. Zorina also felt instinctively drawn to the elder Little brother, as her mind had imprinted upon the image of his face as a rescuer and friend during her time of extreme duress.

Likewise, Shahar found the time aboard the longboats very useful. Already quite adept at English by the time they sailed from Riga, she spent more and more time with Michael discussing increasingly abstract and complicated matters of theology and religion. She was drawn to the subject and was always hungry to understand more. Michael appreciated the thoughtfulness of her questions, though he was humbled by how seriously she took his answers.

John, with the exception of when he drummed, was fairly quiet during much of the journey – often with a look on his face as if he was trying to recall something.

Raven and Cuthbert, on the other hand, used the time to discuss, often loudly, their thoughts on both the wedding and the marriage to follow. These discussions, though always begun amicably, more often than not ended in disaster with the two hot-blooded Minstrels not speaking until the next morning.

The other Minstrels and the Englishmen surmised that the couple was suffering from nearly two decades of stored tension in their relationship, and that they simply would not be fully functional individuals again until they were finally able to marry and have at each other.

They were collectively wise enough, however, to keep their thoughts and observations on the fiery couple to themselves.

Verse Sixteen – Return to Sherwood

The Nordic longboat crews sailed them straight into the Wash, the swampy inlet midway up England's east coast. They arrived at high tide and the shallow longboats cruised through the marshes, finally beaching on the grassy dunes.

The Englishmen poured out of the longboats like Viking Raiders of centuries past, kissing the soil and shouting thanks to God. As the day was still young, Raven paid the Nordic sailors, bade them farewell and rallied the men to set off. Only fifty miles still separated them from home.

Carrying four heavy chests full of Egyptian treasure, two chests full of their fallen comrades' bones, and a full complement of weapons, shields and musical instruments, the returning Nottingham Crusade moved slowly, but joyfully, across the wonderfully familiar English countryside.

They decided to split the journey into three days so they would arrive early enough on the third to enjoy their reunions with loved ones and still get a decent night's sleep. All along their overland journey, people in the towns and villages they passed took notice of the well armed and mighty warriors.

Word of their arrival preceded them, as it so often seemed to. At sunrise on the third day, three horsemen approached rapidly out of the west. Raven screamed and started running forward when she saw Roger riding toward her, with Friar Tuck and Little John riding on either side.

The three Merry Men stopped and dismounted. Roger had barely steadied himself on the ground when Raven smashed into him.

"Roger!" she wailed. "Oh, Roger!" Raven burrowed her face into her brother's shoulder and wept.

"Thank God you are alive!" he whispered to her. "Thank God you are safe!"

Soon they were utterly mobbed as the other Minstrels and men ran forward and everything became a confusion of hugs, laughs and tears for some time. They still managed to reach Nottingham by early afternoon.

The men dispersed to seek out their friends and kinsmen, but not before promising Raven that they would gather with her that evening at sundown, at the Locksley Keep.

Meanwhile the Minstrels, along with Little John and Friar Tuck, continued on to Locksley for greetings and to wash. Excited townsfolk from Nottingham helped them carry the treasure and bone chests to the Keep for temporary storage.

While the Crusade had been away, Roger had taken a wife. Her name was Margaret, and together they had a beautiful baby girl who was nearly two when Raven finally met her.

The child, Maegan, took an instant liking to her Aunt Raven and the feeling was certainly mutual. The tumbling toddler was a little more wary of the Merry Minstrels, at least until after they had been washed and groomed a bit.

*

Later that afternoon, Raven and Roger rode out together to Friar Tuck's chapel on the edge of Sherwood. They knelt before their father's grave and wept together.

"Are you angry with me?" Raven asked after they had been silent for a time.

"Are you asking me?" Roger asked.

"Yes, you," she frowned at her brother, "do you blame me for father's death?"

"What?" Roger frowned back, "why would I? If I had not fallen like a great fool, he would not have followed you like a greater one."

"So you are angry," Raven concluded.

"I am."

"With me?"

"No."

"Good."

They knelt in silence for awhile longer.

"I am happy for you." Raven nudged him.

"Why?"

"Margaret is sweet and lovely. And Maegan is precious beyond words. You have done well. I am proud of you." Raven was all smiles.

"What?"

"I just cannot believe you married the Sheriff of Nottingham's daughter, that's all," Raven giggled.

"Why not?"

"Well, you have to admit tis a bit ironic – what, with all the business between him and father in the old days." Raven grinned.

"The Sheriff has calmed down greatly with age. You know that. And besides, I did not marry him. I married his beautiful daughter, and we have a beautiful daughter together, and we may soon have a..." Roger stopped suddenly.

"Is Margaret?" Raven gaped, open mouthed.

"It is not a secret. We were simply waiting a little longer to tell, just to be sure." Roger smiled. "But, yes. She is."

*

As evening fell, the Crusade gathered one last time in the courtyard of the Locksley Keep. Scores of townsfolk joined them to hear what would be said of the great adventure.

Lord Roger and Lady Margaret climbed halfway up the front steps of the Keep, and Raven could see the stiffness in her brother's leg as he moved slowly up the stairs. She did not mind surrendering the role of leader back to her older brother; in fact, she felt a wonderful wave of relief wash through her tired body and soul.

Raven stood at the back of the crowd, holding Shahar in one arm and Zorina in the other. The other Minstrels surrounded them.

Even from the far side of the courtyard, they could easily hear Roger's clear and resonant voice. It occurred to Raven as he gathered the crowd's attention how much he looked, sounded and acted like his father.

"My good people," Roger shouted. "we have been richly blessed this day by the return of our brave Crusade!"

The crowd applauded and chanted agreement.

"Let us first give thanks where thanks are due!" Roger announced. "Good Friar!" he shouted.

Tuck came forward hugging a small barrel of wine. Big Little John marched alongside, a cloth sack slung over his shoulder.

"Lend a hand, lads," Tuck exhorted the Minstrels as they approached. "We have a lot of people here."

Michael, Cuthbert, and all the Little men helped Friar Tuck administer the Lord's Supper to the assembled crowd. Once everyone held a piece of bread that had been dipped in the red wine, they ate together; praying silent, but fervent, thanks to God from their hearts for the return of their sons, brothers, lovers and friends.

After a time of silence had passed, Roger spoke again.

"Tonight," he said solemnly, "let us remember those who have not returned. Let us honor them with our faithfulness and love toward one another. But for the elements we have just eaten; let us eat no more this night. Let us fast and pray in remembrance of those who gave their lives in the service of England and the Church; our kinsmen, who have gone to their reward.

"Let us give this night to them. We will bury their bones in places of honor," Roger laid out the plan, "and tomorrow we shall feast, in celebration of the living!"

By sundown the following day, most of the residents of Nottinghamshire could be found somewhere on the Locksley estate, and most of them were nearing a vibrant level of drunkenness.

Roger slaughtered two dozen cows, and the feast that ensued would be spoken of in the region for three generations. He fed and watered his people

well, and he oversaw the fair distribution of the Crusade treasure, taking none for himself, but seeing that an ample portion was directed to the area poor.

For her part, Raven was focused on the care and assimilation of Zorina and Shahar to English climate and life. Her two exiles from the east quickly adapted to their surroundings and were loved and cared for by all those around them.

Cuthbert, Michael, John and James formed a quartet in the courtyard and played their hearts out. The soldiers danced, and enjoyed the attention that their homecoming generated among the young ladies of the area. Raven helped the process along by whispering in the ladies' ears about the strength, courage and battle prowess of specific soldiers.

As the night went on, Cuthbert noticed more and more of the revelers pairing off. He also noticed the effect that many consecutive cups of ale were having on his ability to play and sing in tune. Finally, he stopped trying and started following Roger around attempting to ask his permission to marry Raven.

Roger dodged and avoided the red bard, knowing full well his intentions, but wishing to torment him nonetheless. Whether this behavior sprang from Roger's jealousy over having been left behind from the Crusade, his protectiveness of his little sister, or his lifelong tit-for-tat ego driven feuding with Cuthbert a' Dale, no one ever knew for certain.

Long after midnight, Cuthbert finally cornered his lover's brother. "Roger, I need to speak with you."

"Good, good," Roger put his arm around Cuthbert's shoulder. "Yes, we do need to talk."

"Roger, I ..."

"Cuthbert, I think I know what this is all about."

"You do?"

"This is about what happened while you were away on Crusade, is it not?" Roger led his friend along a garden pathway.

"Yes, it is," Cuthbert answered eagerly. "Has Raven spoken to you?"

"I do not need to hear from anyone else what I can plainly see for myself. Your feelings are painted all over your face. I knew it from the moment you returned," Roger smiled knowingly.

Cuthbert was unnerved, and before he could think of how to go on, Roger went ahead and spoke for him.

"I understand you're feeling guilty, Cuthbert," Roger condescended.

"Guilty?"

"Of course," Roger was enjoying every minute of torturing his sister's suitor, "we fell together from the drinking table. I was injured. You were not. You went on the expedition. I stayed here and looked after the land and the people by myself. During each of the last three autumns, we have struggled to bring in the harvest, being short over seventy men."

Cuthbert opened his mouth to protest.

"But today, my friend, is your lucky day." Roger had imbibed a legendary amount of ale as well.

"It is?"

"Oh, yes."

"And why, may I ask, do you say that?"

"Because I offer you, Cuthbert a' Dale, a chance for redemption," Roger burped.

"Indeed," Cuthbert was wary.

"All will be forgiven, and grace shall be restored if you will do for me, and for Nottingham, this one thing I ask."

"What is it?" Cuthbert readied himself.

"Bring in the harvest of Locksley and Nottinghamshire." Roger ominously announced.

"Roger, I have been a carpenter, and a musician, and a soldier and a sailor, but I have never been a farmer!"

"Not to worry," Roger grinned. "I am sure you will find plenty of good strong backs willing to help you."

Cuthbert stared at the Lord of Locksley in disbelief.

"Was there something else?" Roger smiled.

"Actually..."

"Do not let it trouble you. Whatever else is on your mind will have to wait until the harvest is brought in. That is the task before you, my friend. I have urgent business that must be attended to, and I need you to oversee this harvest for me. I know I can count on you!" Roger looked into Cuthbert's eyes, patted him on the shoulder, then turned and strode away.

"What was that all about?" Raven interrupted Cuthbert's shocked silence as she left the crowd and walked over to the garden, carrying Maegan who had recently fallen asleep.

"I am to bring in the harvest," Cuthbert whispered in dismay, as he stared out at the endless fields of wheat and barley glowing in the moonlight.

"All of it?" Raven asked casually.

"I believe so."

"Hmm," she squeaked dismissively. "Well, I would of course help you, but as you can see I already have my hands full. And besides, Zorina and Shahar need me."

Cuthbert did not turn to look, so he did not see the two foreign beauties standing inside a crowd, with everyone laughing at the tom-foolery of the Little brothers as they fed each other from ten paces apart, each throwing food into the other's mouth.

"Of course," Cuthbert assented.

"Well," Raven chirped, purposefully exasperating her fiancé. "You should probably go lie down and get some rest."

“Yes, of course.” Cuthbert trudged off to bed, bewildered at the turn events had taken.

*

Before the cock crowed the next morning, Cuthbert was up. He ate a hearty breakfast for strength and did not bother washing. He gathered equipment and supplies until sun up, and then set about the task of generating support for his cause. It was slow going, however, since most of the able bodied men of Sherwood were hung-over, exhausted, or both.

Almost nothing was accomplished that first day. John, James and Michael were not available to help, having been called away by their respective fathers for assistance with tasks that went unsaid. Roger, likewise, was called away on urgent business with little explanation.

In the end, Cuthbert had to spend nearly his entire share of the Crusade treasure motivating the former Crusaders to work harder and faster. He himself worked as if the whip of a cruel slave driver was cracking upon his back. Still, the harvesting lasted fourteen days. The barns, towers and bins were all stuffed to overflowing. They could not sell the surplus fast enough and so started giving it away.

The bounty of that autumn’s harvest, the sudden influx of wealth and manpower into the region, and the return of the Minstrels combined to create a great enthusiasm and instant prosperity among the people of Nottinghamshire. Roger soon returned and announced another feast to be held the following day.

*

Early in the morning on the feast day, two large men burst into Cuthbert’s sleeping quarters in the loft above the Carpenter’s shop. They dragged him out of bed, down the ladder, out the door and through the woods to the stream.

“What the...?” Cuthbert yelled as John and James tossed him into the babbling brook. They hurled a bar of soap and a scrub towel at him and ordered him to get cleaned up. James left a sharpened knife on a rock near the stream, with instructions for the red bard to lose the red beard.

Before long, Cuthbert was headed back toward his home, fully scrubbed, shaved and wrapped in a towel. His body was ablaze with pain from the previous two weeks’ hard labor, but washing in the crisply cold stream had taken the edge off the pain and left him feeling invigorated and refreshed.

Michael met him along the way.

“Why don’t you come with me to Tuck’s?” the blond bard asked.

“I should like to get some proper clothes on before going to church,” Cuthbert hesitated.

“No worries.” Michael took his friend by the arm and led him away, still dripping spring-water.

Michael took him in through the back door, directly into the Friar’s private office. Several candles were lit, and it smelled predominantly like beeswax.

“There you are!” Friar Tuck exclaimed, taking Cuthbert into his closet and handing him a pile of clothes to put on. Soon Cuthbert’s long red locks were spilling over the shoulders of a deep dark green jacket of finely spun and shiny material. A gold belt surrounded the jacket at the waist and highlighted his thin, yet muscular frame.

Black trousers and boots connected him to the floor. A red boutonniere matched the blaze of his hair, just as his eyes shined a soft and inviting green in the reflected glow of his cutaway.

“Is this what I think it is?” Cuthbert was dizzy.

“Seeing that you gave away all your treasure to speed the harvest, we decided, why wait any longer?” Michael laughed at his friend, and ducked into the closet.

“Has everyone known about this but me?” Cuthbert was stunned.

“That was Raven’s doing,” Friar Tuck chuckled. “You shall have to take up your grievances with her I am afraid.”

“I intend to,” Cuthbert winked. “And besides, I did not give away all my treasure. I still have this.” He pulled on the thin silver chain around his neck, and a tiny gold ring hanging on it tumbled out onto his chest. It was encircled with sparkling inlaid miniature rubies of the richest red.

“Well done,” Friar Tuck affirmed.

“Well, Friar, is it to the altar then?” Cuthbert steeled himself.

“Yes, for you,” the old Friar laughed. “But not for me...”

“Shall we?” Michael emerged from the closet wearing a brown robe, and led Cuthbert to the door.

“Are you...?” Cuthbert stared at Michael.

“That is where we have been this past fortnight,” Friar Tuck explained. “Michael and I rode to York, and we had him consecrated. In case you have not noticed, I am getting rather old. It is high time we cultivated some fresh talent around here. You will be in good hands.”

Michael had Cuthbert follow him through the door into the small chapel. James and John stood at the front by the altar, neatly dressed in dark green tunics with silver belts. Big John Little stood with them in a blue tunic, and all of them in black trousers.

Michael anointed the groom with oil and they all laid hands on him and prayed for his marriage to Raven. Then the six men marched out together into Sherwood Forest.

“Now you shall see where we have been these last days,” Big Little John explained to Cuthbert, slapping his two sons on their backs.

They came into the clearing then; the one where they had always played and practiced their instruments. But the clearing had been completely transformed.

The leafy forest floor had been swept and covered in fresh crisp hay. A small stage had been constructed on the far side out of wood, and it was topped by a large white cloth canopy. Braided vines were draped across the low branches around the perimeter of the clearing and each held fresh yellow and red flowers in swirling patterns.

Through the crowds of people filing into the clearing, and beyond them through the trees, Cuthbert could see a large white tent set up just a stone's throw away.

"She's in there, isn't she?" he nudged Michael.

"Whether she is or not, she will not appear until we are all in place."

They had reached the stage area and Michael began to shepherd people into their proper locations.

Finally, Michael took his own position atop the stage. Cuthbert stood just below with John and James behind him. The clearing was now packed with soldiers, servants and townsfolk. Cuthbert's only view was down a narrow corridor where the press of people had parted at the insistence of Friar Tuck and Big Little John.

Michael double played his part as both a priest and a musician. He let loose a triumphant melody from his golden flute that rang sweet and bright among the trees of Sherwood. As if in response, the wind picked up and a cooling breeze soothed the highly anticipatory crowd.

Cuthbert was just beginning to get nervous when a flutter of activity finally came from the area around the white tent. The sounds of small feet crashing through the woods and children's laughter rang throughout the clearing as the bridal procession took form just beyond his sight.

Finally, he saw a beautiful face emerge at the end of the corridor of guests. But it was not Raven. He, like all the other men, was stunned by the radiant beauty of Shahar as she preceded her rescuer, sister and friend in her walk of joy.

The shy Arabian lass smiled coyly, the sunshine twinkling in her dark eyes and making her jet black hair shine. She stepped through the crowd and stood across from John when she reached the front. She stared down at the bouquet of flowers in her hands and the crowd turned to watch the next wave of beauty.

Zorina's bright golden hair was piled atop her head in a maze of curls and tight braids, revealing the alluring curves of her pale neck and shoulders. Her radiant and sparkling blue eyes darted around at the adoring crowd and squinted against the bright sunlight filtering through the still green leaves of early autumn.

She moved through the crowd and stood across from James. Both of the bridesmaids wore beautiful dresses of robin's egg blue, which Raven had made for them herself.

No one though, and least of all Cuthbert, was prepared for the striking, almost magical appearance of Raven of Locksley when she emerged next, holding tight to Roger's arm.

Her dark reddish hair was loose and flowing except for two strands of braids, one on either side, tied together behind her head in the Celtic fashion. The little girl that the folk of Nottingham and Sherwood had known, the dainty daughter of Robin Hood, had returned from her adventures in the far country a grown woman.

Her face had thinned of its baby fat, and her lips, like her breasts and hips, were more pronounced than before. The shining white dress, stitched perfectly to match the flowing curves of her body, gleamed in the filtered light and all eyes were fixed upon her.

And there was something else about her; a level of calm and a confidence that had never been present before. She walked slowly in step with her brother, allowing the assembled onlookers plenty of time to drink in her inspiring visage.

Cuthbert was delirious with delight as he watched her move through the horde of family and friends. Her smile could have melted the hardest of hearts, and it made Cuthbert's knees wobble. At one point, James even reached out a hand to steady him when it looked like he might fall.

Raven kissed her brother, and he passed her hand into Cuthbert's. The two lovers climbed the steps to stand in front of Michael, whose facial expression had grown unusually serious.

After welcoming the assemblage into the presence of God, Michael proceeded with the usual homilies and exhortations that must be made to set the tone of solemnity for the vows.

Then, when the moment was just right, Cuthbert began to recite the vows that he had written himself.

"My dearest Raven, how deeply I do love thee. No greater joy could I know than to spend the rest of this life with you as your husband. Grant me this one thing, and the fulfillment of all your needs and desires will flow from it like cool streams from the mighty mountains. I will protect you and care for you, and our children, with all my strength. I will worship you with my own body as the goodly helpmate and companion that God has given to me; though of this blessing I am not worthy." Cuthbert paused.

Tears were streaming down Raven's face, and most of the assembled guests were already crying or on the verge.

"Stay with me forever, my Raven, my true love. Be my wife. Will you?" he asked, gazing into her eyes and already knowing the answer.

"I will!" she nearly shouted.

Cuthbert slid his last earthly treasure onto Raven's finger.

"Raven," Michael suggested when the noise of applause and cheers had subsided. "You may say your vows now."

She wiped her cheeks with her hands, sniffled, straightened her back, took a deep breath, and then burst out crying again.

Michael leaned forward. "It won't be that bad," he quipped to Raven in mock reassurance.

The crowd erupted with laughter, and the loosening of the tension allowed Raven to go on with what she had to say.

From the far end of the clearing, Friar Tuck nodded approvingly.

Raven swallowed hard and tried again. "My dear, wonderful Cuthbert, I love you so much. I loved the boy you were, but I love the mighty man you have become even more. You have been my strength in the darkest of times, and my joy in all others. Everything you set your hands to is made better somehow. I look forward so hopefully and joyfully to the rest of my life as you take me in your hands and make me better. I too will worship you with all of my self. May our love together give us a taste of the pure and true love that awaits us in eternity; you, me, and all those gathered here that are bound together with us by His Holy Love. May our love be a beacon in a dark and fallen world, and may it always be so; for us, our children, and our children's children."

She quickly inhaled and then continued. "Will you always protect me, always come for me, always comfort me, and always be faithful? Will you be my husband forever?"

"I will!" Cuthbert exploded.

"You may kiss now," Michael needlessly reminded his friends.

The lovers kissed and only stopped so they could move on to the next part of the celebration and get one step closer to being alone.

*

The feasting, dancing, singing and celebrating at the Locksley Keep went on all afternoon, throughout the evening and into the night. Shahar, though she abstained from drinking, thoroughly enjoyed herself. She praised God from her heart for delivering her to this new home, a place where she could be free.

Then at the very moment she thought her joy could grow no higher, she turned her ear toward a sound she had never heard before.

There stood Raven. She was lightly strumming her old fiddle as she swayed to the music of her Minstrels – and she was singing.

*

After darkness had fallen, Roger found the newlyweds and led them around to the back of the Keep. Two magnificent white horses were tied up

there. Roger loosed their reins and handed one to his sister and the other to his friend.

“Ride out over yonder hill.” Roger pointed. “Look for the old, abandoned granary – at the base of the hill by the stream.”

“What will we do there?” Raven asked skeptically.

“Time has not only gone on for you travelers. We have done much work here while you were away on adventure, and things might not all be the way you remember them.” Roger winked to her, and then turned to face Cuthbert. “I suppose deep down I always knew you two would end up together.” Roger laughed. “You take good care of her, or you shall have me to face, Cuthbert a’ Dale.”

“Thank you for everything, brother,” Cuthbert said, and the two clasped arms.

The newlyweds mounted their white horses and quickly disappeared over the hill. Jack raced after them and, despite his overfilled belly, managed to keep up. They slowed as they neared the river and the old mill. A mounted torch at the entryway provided light.

Cuthbert dismounted from his horse and assisted Raven from hers, a gentlemanly act that Cuthbert had never done for his most beloved childhood companion in his life. But now, as he held the young woman she had become in his arms, and gazed lovingly into her eyes, his chivalric instincts were on heightened alert.

Lighting a small lantern that had been left just under the torch, they explored the storage building and realized that it had been completely refurbished into a serviceable home. While the durable outer stone walls remained, all new woodworking bedecked the interior. Lighting a candelabrum inside revealed a spacious great room with a loft boasting a large hay stuffed bed.

Below, a cooking stove in the corner could be used to prepare meals and to heat the interior. The main area also had two windows of real glass, several thick fur rugs, a wash basin with a privacy screen, two chairs, and a small table.

“This is all a gift from my brother.” Raven said in amazement as she read the note Roger had left on the table for them.

“This will be a wonderful home for us to start our family in,” Cuthbert shared her joy.

“Our family...” Raven loved the way that sounded.

“We should start right away. If you become pregnant now, then you will not have to endure the baby inside you during the summer heat,” Cuthbert reasoned.

“How very thoughtful of you,” Raven was trembling. “And I suppose that if you insist on starting this family...project immediately, that I, as your obedient new wife, must fully comply with your wishes.”

“You must,” Cuthbert panted, already halfway out of his wedding clothes. “And you must continue complying until the morning comes.”

He scooped her up in his arms, carefully carried her up the ladder, and threw her onto the soft piled straw covered in cottony sheets and quilts. The two friends that had grown up together, come of age together, faced down death and worse together, now melted together into a bubbly pool of liquid love.

Though they already knew each other's minds and souls better than most people will ever know another, they explored each other's bodies with a passionate enjoyment of both the shocking newness and the wonderful familiarity of the other's intimate touches and embraces.

As promised, Cuthbert made love to his bride until the first light of dawn when they collapsed in each others arms and slept until mid-day. The flame of their love, and the total unification of their bodies, destroyed any last walls of separation between their souls. They truly became one flesh, and their burning desire for each other secured a bond of mutual passion between them that would last for the rest of their lives.

Just like the intertwining vibrations of their voices and instruments created new and distinct musical overtones, the physical harmony between them created something new – something that was not there before.

In fact, though she did not know it at first, Raven was pregnant by the end of their first night together.

As they would remark for years to come, their adventures together had only just begun.

Postlude

England, 1220

Though Friar Tuck still lingered in his back office much of the time, he was having Michael take on more and more of the church duties, including ministering to the poor, looking after the widows and the fatherless and even preaching sermons on Sundays.

Michael's ministrations therefore brought him regularly to the Nottingham orphanage where Shahar had taken up permanent residence as a caregiver for the children. They all loved her and she felt completely at ease among the innocent youths.

In the morning, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, Michael came to entertain the children. He always brought treats which the children enjoyed while he told them stories of high adventure. The stories were generally from the Old Testament, but the children held staunchly to the belief that Michael had been personally involved in all the tales he told.

He had fallen in love with Shahar, truly ever since spending the winter on Theodora's island. He savored the time with her during his visits, yet because of his commitment to the church and her deeply wounded soul, he never reached out to her romantically. Nevertheless, their friendship grew and they became intimate on many other levels.

*

John was lost. He moved from place to place, doing odd jobs for Roger for a bit; later helping Cuthbert on a project, or sometimes making ministry rounds with Michael. Unlike nearly every other returning Crusader, he did not quickly find a suitable female mate soon after his arrival.

Something was nagging at him, as if he had lost a precious object while on Crusade and wished to retrace his steps to find it. When the tales of Crusade glory were told and retold around the dinner hearth, he grew pensive and morose. Raven noticed, but she did not know what to do for him.

*

Cuthbert's financial worries did not last long. In addition to providing a fully furnished and stocked house, Roger paid Cuthbert a sizeable dowry for taking the responsibility for Raven off his hands. And there was, of course, Raven's share of the Crusade treasure; though she set most of that aside to help support Shahar and the orphanage.

Moreover, Cuthbert soon found himself earning a tidy income as a carpenter. All of the Crusaders that came back found themselves suddenly with plenty of money and good prospects for growing their families and fortunes.

This required living space, and that required a carpenter. As Cuthbert's Master was getting on in years, he elevated Cuthbert to the level of Journeyman and gave him nearly all of the jobs and most of the pay as well.

They excitedly watched and waited as Raven's belly began to swell. Cuthbert saw to it that no need or desire of hers, no matter how unreasonable or late at night, went unmet. And he did it all with his usual good spirit and aplomb.

Raven walked in Sherwood Forest often, even as the weather turned cold. She sang to the fledgling life inside of her, softly, letting her voice resonate within.

Then she would come home, and Cuthbert would have a fire in the woodstove. He would feed her and massage her, and keep her cup full.

They still made love, but he took extra caution to be gentle. They still played music, and would still meet with the other Minstrels in Sherwood, though not as often as they all would have liked. All in all though, Raven had never been happier.

*

To no one's great surprise, James asked Zorina to marry him only two month's after Raven and Cuthbert's wedding. She said yes.

None of the rigors and deprivations of the Crusade trail, nor even the most epic of his battles, left poor James Little as sore as did his honeymoon. The mysterious Slavic nymph loved with overwhelming ferocity. Though they could speak and understand each other with great fluency, they exchanged few spoken words for that month spent at a cousin's summer home near Glastonbury.

They returned to Sherwood in the early spring, completely exhausted and pregnant. Cuthbert, and a large number of the former soldiers, helped them quickly build a new home on the edge of Nottingham.

James, like his brother, kept afloat by doing a variety of odd jobs for friends and neighbors. However, the old Sheriff of Nottingham was set to retire soon, and James was widely accepted as his logical replacement.

*

On the eve of the Yuletide, the former members of the Nottingham Crusade gathered at the Locksley Keep to praise God and feast together. They danced and sang and drank and cheered, thanking God for the blessings of home; in a free land, surrounded by kin, safe and full of joy under the protective wings of God-ordained peace and prosperity, and above all, love.

Together, the Mighty Men of Sherwood, their noble wives, and their happy children lived, worked hard, loved, honored their past, and dreamed of the future adventures of their dawning new generation. They were blessed indeed.

And even when dark times would come, the Mighty Men of Sherwood, like the oaks under whose branches they roamed, would face them firmly rooted in their faith in God and the promises of His Anointed One.

And God's love for them, shown through the comfort and care of friends and family, inevitably would reassert His Love's dominion, as tears of sorrow turned to tears of joy.

Book Two

The Quest for Prester John

Edward Philip White

The Quest for Prester John – Book Two
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For my mother and grandmothers
There is no doubt that yours was the greatest feat

Special thanks to

Kara, for listening

Scripture references

The NIV Study Bible, 10th Anniversary Edition
New International Version, Zondervan, 1995

The letter from Prester John

The Realm of Prester John by Robert Silverberg
Doubleday, 1972

Prelude

Cyprus, 1220

“Is he alive?” the servant girl whispered.

“I fear not,” the midwife whispered back.

The newborn lay motionless in her hands. He had emerged from his mother still in the amniotic sack. The midwife had worked quickly to free him, but it took some time.

“Bring him to me,” the mother panted from across the room. “Let me hold him.”

The maidens looked at each other and hesitated.

“Bring him now!” the mother shouted with the little breath she could draw.

“Your highness,” the midwife began, hesitantly moving closer to the bedside, “I fear...”

The mother reached out, nearly tumbling from the bed trying to reach her son. The midwife relented and placed the baby on his mother’s chest. She enfolded him in her arms and craned her neck down so that her lips were right above his ear.

“Constantine,” she named her son with a whisper, “Arise, my love.”

The baby coughed, then sputtered, then at last began to cry. The serving women sighed their relief, and tears of joy flowed freely. They finished cleaning the baby, let him try a first feeding and laid him in a bassinet where he promptly went to sleep as evidenced by his tiny whistling snore.

“Thank you,” the mother told the midwife as she began drifting off toward some much needed sleep of her own.

“I did what I could, your highness,” the midwife blushed, “but there is no doubt that yours was the greatest feat this day. You rest now, Princess Angeloi. I will watch over him for a spell.”

Verse One – A Long Awaited Friend

England, 1237

Constantine flew across the English countryside on his nearly exhausted horse. He knew there was not a moment to lose; that the killer could already be in Nottingham. Like his horse, the Prince was achingly tired. His wandering thoughts drifted back over the events of the previous few months.

He had not set out to find his mother's friends, but rather to acquire a letter. Rumors about the letter had been swirling around the Mediterranean world for years. Though originally addressed to the Byzantine Emperor, the letter from Prester John had eventually found its way to Rome.

As with all the special knowledge it possessed, the Papacy kept the information in this letter secret and tightly controlled. Four Swiss halberdiers, and one well-deserving bishop, lost their lives trying to prevent Constantine from leaving the Vatican.

One week later, in a smoky tavern near the port in Naples, the young Prince overheard a conversation that would drastically alter his plans for the letter. In a dark corner of the tavern, a Roman priest handed a small bag of gold to the murderer.

"There will be another bag twice this size when you return with Raven of Locksley's head," the priest said casually, as if sending an errand boy to the market.

When the rogue boarded a ship to London the next morning, Constantine was already on board, posing as a hired sailor.

*

As Constantine approached from the south, Maegan of Locksley was riding toward Nottingham from the north and east. For three years she had been living and studying at a convent in Lincoln. No one expected her to become a nun, but her father Lord Roger of Locksley felt very strongly that she would benefit from the good sisters' guidance, as in fact she had.

Maegan had always loved the Lord with all her heart. She had great difficulty, however, in practicing obedience. Since the first day she spoke, she had hardly ceased to argue with her father and mother. She had achieved the ability to outrun both of them by age six, and so for most of her life had operated under the assumption that she could, at least temporarily, get away with saying or doing almost anything.

She had departed to the convent an awkward, gangly and mischievous young imp. Yet, the young lady that now returned home had blossomed like the noblest of flowers. With her tall slender frame, hair so fair it seemed to glow, and the inheritance of her father's blazing blue eyes, she would be noticeable in a

crowd of thousands. The change in her character matched the transformation of her body. She was substantially more thoughtful and calm, though the sparkle of mischief in her eyes had not died.

Her brother, Randol of Locksley, rode alongside. Two years younger, he still fancied himself the dominant sibling. And so he was horrified by his sister's rapid growth and maturation while she had been away. Her wit, sharpened by the tutelage of the good sisters, readily suppressed even the cleverest of his snide brotherly remarks.

Her cousins Edric and Alfred, the twin sons of Sir Cuthbert and Lady Raven Allendale, rode along as additional protection. They did not feel nearly so threatened by Maegan's emergence as a young lady and enjoyed bantering with her during the long ride to Locksley.

"I do appreciate each of you for coming to rescue me from the convent," Maegan smiled at her companions as their horses trotted over the green fields, lush from the springtime rains.

"Glad to be of service," Edric winked.

"Yes," Alfred agreed. "And thank you for requiring an escort, for tis you who has rescued us from our father's woodshop."

"He still keeps you pressed into service?" she asked.

"Aye," Edric lamented, "we shall soon become much more than carpenters though. You shall see."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Next year," Alfred explained, "God willing, we shall travel to London and compete for a place in the King's Regiments."

"Our father has given us his blessing, and your father is sponsoring our candidacy," Edric elaborated.

"What if one of you is chosen and the other is not?" Maegan had missed toying with the twins.

"Not likely," Alfred dismissed.

"You are not the only one who has learned greatly and increased in stature these last few years, dear Maegan," Edric reminded his fair cousin.

"Both before and after our shop duties, we have been training dutifully in Sherwood," Alfred continued his brother's thought. "The forest clearings that rang with our parents' music now ring daily with the clashing of our swords and the thudding of our arrows at target's center!"

"I am in good hands," Maegan agreed. "Grandfather Robin would have been proud."

They rode quietly for a moment out of deep respect for their nearly legendary progenitor.

"And what word of your sweet little sister?" Maegan asked eventually.

"Angela?" Edric asked, sounding mildly annoyed.

"Little perhaps," Alfred acquiesced.

"Sweet, hardly," Edric concluded.

“How can you say such a thing?” Maegan gasped, over-dramatizing slightly.

“Suffice it to say she has come into a full inheritance of her mother’s independent spirit,” Randol piped in.

“She is quite difficult to keep track of,” Edric agreed.

“Always in some sort of trouble,” Alfred lamented.

Maegan sighed, “I have missed her.”

*

Jonas Little was supposed to be running errands for his father, but he had taken a detour through Sherwood Forest. Hoping to quickly pluck a fish from the stream as a contribution to the supper table, he had actually fallen asleep leaning comfortably against a tree.

Despite his brief lapse in vigilance, Jonas possessed the same instinct for detecting trouble that made his father such a fine sheriff, and so he awoke when he heard the murderer’s footsteps not far away. Not knowing he was a murderer, Jonas watched the hooded man go by with only mild interest.

The second man who passed through Sherwood was the one who captured his curiosity. Clearly stalking the first man, the man in black crept noiselessly through the forest underbrush. He moved with superb gracefulness, ducking and weaving to prevent the thorns and branches from snagging on his black cape. His long, black and wavy hair swung with his movements, obscuring a good view of his face.

Jonas knew something sinister was afoot and began hunting the hunter. He kept his distance. Even at the tender age of seventeen, Jonas was one of the largest men in the Nottingham area. Add to that the bright golden hair he had received from his mother, and he was a fairly easy man to spot.

He followed the man in black out of the forest and over the next hill toward Locksley. Jonas considered fetching his father, but he knew that by the time he reached Nottingham, the drama unfolding before him might well reach its conclusion. His mounting curiosity turned to outright concern when the man in black and his quarry turned off of the road leading to Locksley Keep and headed down the hillside toward the Allendale estate.

Good Lord, Jonas thought, the twins are away escorting Maegan home, and Sir Cuthbert has ridden to Manchester. Angela and her mother are alone!

Then he heard the screams. Calling upon the Lord for swiftness of stride, Jonas bolted down the hill and rounded the corner of the old millhouse.

There stood the man in black. Even in the shadows of twilight, there was no mistaking the slick substance dripping from his hands as other than blood. The hooded man was crumpled at his feet. Angela was on her knees just a few steps away, hands covering her mouth and eyes wide with horror. Her water bucket lay overturned in the grass.

Grabbing a walking stick that leaned against the doorpost, Jonas quickly inserted himself between the man in black and Angela. "Death welcomes you to take but another step," he threatened the man, waving the stick menacingly.

"Please," the man in black responded, "I come in peace." His accent was thick and unfamiliar.

"I wonder what he would say about that." Jonas motioned to the bloody body on the ground.

"You do not understand..." the stranger started.

"Silence!" Jonas shouted. "Angela, are you alright?" he asked over his shoulder, never turning his eyes away from the man.

"She is well." It was her mother's voice.

"Good, you are here." Jonas was relieved to hear Lady Raven. "You ladies head for the Keep, and send for my father. I will hold this man here until you return."

"Jonas," Raven came and stood next to him. "I would like to hear what this man has to say."

Raven's face glowed with wonder. She looked as excited as an expectant child opening a package of sweets at the Yuletide hearth as she considered the young man's distinguishing features.

"But..." Jonas attempted to argue.

"Who are you?" Angela interrupted to ask the man in black as she came and stood alongside Jonas and her mother.

"Forgive me for this fright," the stranger began slowly. "I never had hoped that our first meeting would be this way." He looked down at his crimson soaked hands, then at the man on the ground, then back at his three curious yet wary observers.

"Answer the question." Jonas barked impatiently.

"Again, forgive me." The man in black adjusted his posture and there was no denying that the way he carried himself was somehow reminiscent of royalty. "I am Constantine of the Byzantine House of the Angelos. I bring my mother's greetings and good wishes to you, Raven of the Hood."

He bowed toward her and when he straightened, a curious grin had emerged upon his lips. Raven started forward, arms outstretched to embrace the bloody man.

"Hold," Jonas suggested, grabbing her by the arm. "If he is who he claims to be, then he will not mind answering a few more questions to verify his identity." Jonas and Constantine stared hard into each others' eyes. "And he will explain to us why a dead man lays at his feet."

"Very well," Raven agreed, blushing at her own impatience.

"Whoever he is," Angela interjected, "he saved my life."

Everyone turned to look at her.

"The hooded man approached me while I was coming up from the stream," Angela explained. "He drew a blade from his cloak, and I had no doubt

as to his intentions. I screamed and dropped my bucket as he raised the dagger above his head. Then out of nowhere, this man appeared. He turned the attacker's own blade against him, and the rest you have seen with your own eyes." Her explanation was surprisingly clear and calm for a lady who had just survived a murder attempt.

"First of all, thank you." Raven smiled at Constantine. "We are in your debt. Now, to settle any uncertainty, answer for me these questions three. What is the name of your father? What is the name of my husband? And why does a dead man lay at your feet? What say you?"

With no hesitation at all, Constantine answered. "My father was Leopold of Austria with whom you wintered some twenty years ago. Your husband is Cuthbert a' Dale of the fiery red hair, who plays on the lute music fit for angels. They last parted when you left Vienna and took the fateful road to Zara.

"As for this man at my feet, he was a rogue hired by the Roman Inquisition to murder you," Constantine stared at Raven. "By God's grace and serendipity I stumbled upon the plot. Securing passage on the same ship as the rogue, and by befriending him during the voyage, I learned much of his plans.

"I had intended to turn him over to your local authorities, but he craftily disappeared when we reached London. With all my strength I raced to reach you in time." He turned to Angela, "I suppose you satisfied the description of your mother well enough for the rogue. Forgive me for not reaching you more quickly."

"Constantine, son of King Leopold VI of Austria and Princess Theodora Angeloi of the Byzantine Empire," Raven said in a tone that pronounced the matter settled. "Forgive us. We will have you think better of English hospitality. Jonas, please accompany our long awaited friend to the stream and help him wash away the stains of his saving heroism. Angela, go inside and prepare a cup for a son of the royal house after which you were named. I will go to Locksley Keep and ask them to make ready for a guest of honor."

*

Private family feasts in Locksley Hall were quite rare. Just like his father, Lord Roger opened his table boards to all. And he took personal responsibility to see that no one left his property without a thoroughly stuffed belly.

Since this particular feast was to celebrate the return of his daughter, he spared no expense. The butchers, cooks and stewards had been working for days with little rest. Lord Roger made the extra effort worth their while, naturally.

Jonas arose early that morning, even though he had been up late the night before. He had returned to the Allendale estate with his father to help bury the church sponsored murderer, and he could have used more rest. Nevertheless,

after a quick breaking of the fast, he was on his way to the Nottingham orphanage for a day of service.

“Master Little,” Shahar smiled when she saw him coming. “Just the sight of you brightens my day. Have you eaten? May I fix you something?”

“Thank you, no Mum,” he answered her with the same nickname that most of the orphans used, “I broke fast heartily just now, and beside, I want to save a little room for the feast tonight.”

“I suppose your appetite will return after splitting those,” she motioned to the pile of logs at the side of the building.

He bowed to her and then went around back to fetch the axe from the cellar. Though mighty Jonas Little made short work of the wood pile, he did not escape from the orphanage for several more hours.

Mistress Shahar kept him at work; making repairs, liming the walls and scrubbing the floors until he was ready for a feast indeed. Only when the Nottingham orphanage was shining clean and bright like the polished armor of a Templar Knight, did Shahar release Jonas to Locksley and the feast.

*

Jonas took the shortcut through Sherwood Forest, mainly so he could wash away the grime and dust from his labor in one of the clear flowing forest streams. He reached the Keep well before sundown and was able to partake from the chilled barrels of mead that Lord Roger had set about the courtyard to encourage the feasting spirit among his guests. The thick brown mead helped stave off hunger while he watched in mouthwatering awe as the head table was served.

Lord Roger and Lady Margaret presided at the center of the table. At Lord Roger’s right hand sat Constantine. Jonas marveled at the features of the mysterious prince. Well cleaned and groomed with the help of the Locksley staff, he was almost unrecognizable as the previous night’s man in black.

Further to the right sat Sir Cuthbert and Lady Raven with Angela in between them and the twins at the table’s end. To the left of Lady Margaret sat Maegan and Randol. Of the two remaining seats of honor at the high table, one was given to Jonas’ father, Sir James Little the Sheriff of Nottingham, and the other barely held up a rather aged and broad framed Friar Tuck.

When the high table had been served, Friar Tuck stood and blessed the assembly. The servants soon returned with platters of food for the table boards. Lord Roger looked out at his people and smiled as they reacted to the frenzy of servants carrying steaming baskets of brown bread, piles of juicy roasted meats and overflowing jugs of sweet wine.

Jonas dove in, soaking his bread plate in the juices of the venison and lamb chops. The guests made the transition well from mead to wine and even with the help of a hearty meal began to feel the effects of all their merriment.

When the guests had eaten all they could manage, Lord Roger sent for a cask of his best wine and made rounds throughout the feasting hall, personally topping up goblets whether the bearers appeared to need more or not.

Soon the tipsy guests began whispering.

“Who will sing tonight?”

“Who will play?”

For a feast in Locksley Hall was never complete without music.

Jonas could hear all of the speculation and was beginning to wonder if there really would be music. Then Angela approached him.

“Master Little?” She reached up to tap him on the shoulder.

“Angela,” he responded after turning around to face her. “You are well this evening I trust.”

“Quite, thank you,” she smiled. “Could I impose upon you for a few moments of private conversation?”

“Of course,” he followed her outside of the gates and into the cool night air. They rounded the first tower, remaining just in sight of the main gate.

“Jonas,” Angela’s face displayed her inner fear, “have you spoken with anyone about last night’s terrible events?”

“No,” he answered, “except of course for my father. Your mother said not to. And beside, I think I am still sorting through it all in my mind,” he explained.

“As am I,” Angela nodded, “but to no avail. Events are spiraling now, and I know not what to do...” She looked on the verge of tears.

“What do you mean?” Jonas asked her, placing a hand reassuringly atop her shoulder.

“Jonas, we are leaving the Allendale estate! My parents believe that more attacks will come if we stay. They plan to take refuge, somewhere in the north. They will not say just where. They wish for me to live in Maegan’s convent, and for my brothers to move into the Keep, at least until they leave for the King’s Regiments. I dare say that the rogue may as well have killed me, for he has succeeded in ending my life!”

Jonas sighed and smiled, “Angela, your life is only beginning. Everyone is in a panic, and understandably so. Just give this a little time. You shall see; everything will return to normal soon enough.”

Angela smiled and then sighed, “You always make me feel better, just as you were there for me last night.”

“A little late to be your hero...” Jonas winked. “I say, have you found out any more about our Byzantine Prince?”

“You were worried about me, and you took charge until the true nature of things was known,” she refused to let him change the subject so quickly, “and no, I have not spoken with Constantine since last night. He was alone much of the morning, and this afternoon he met privately with my father, your father, Lord Roger and Friar Tuck.”

“Interesting...” Jonas murmured.

“Are you alright, Angela?” A voice spoke.

“Is he bothering you?” A remarkably similar voice asked.

Jonas quickly removed his hand from Angela’s shoulder and turned to face her twin brothers.

“Careful there how you comfort our little sister,” Edric warned with a sly grin.

“Yes,” Alfred snickered. “Remember she is bound for the nunnery.”

“Let me be! I can take care of myself, you...” Angela searched her mind for a description that would sufficiently sting her arrogant brothers.

Before she could think of anything, they were interrupted by the sound of harp music floating on the air from within the Keep. Without another word, they walked back inside and joined the crowd, mesmerized by the rhythmic plucking and strumming.

As a child, Maegan had only dabbled in string music. In the more leisured environment she had enjoyed at the convent, she had practiced much and her artfulness had soared. Pure notes bubbled from her harp like a lively mountain spring, bursting forth with clear and refreshing water.

The combination of her music and her beauty made Maegan the instant center of everyone’s attention. When she then opened her mouth and began to sing a psalm of David, a song for the ascent to Jerusalem; hearts melted.

*How wonderful it is, how pleasant,
When brothers live together in harmony
For harmony is as precious as the
Fragrant anointing oil
That was poured over Aaron’s head,
That ran down his beard
And onto the border of his robe*

*Harmony is as refreshing
As the dew
From Mount Hermon
That falls on the mountains of Zion
And the Lord has pronounced his blessing,
Even life forevermore*

The crowd was silent until the last bouncing vibrations from the harp were absorbed into the thick stone walls of the Keep. When the ringing had fully stopped, the crowd erupted with applause and cheers. Lord Roger was giddy that his plan had worked and his daughter had returned such a refined young lady. She sang a few more songs, and when she was finished the crowd began to disperse to seek their own beds.

*

The next morning, not long after the cock crowed, the ringing of steel against steel frightened all the birds from the clearing in Sherwood Forest. Edric made a thrust, and Alfred took a step back, dodging his brother's sword.

Crouching low, Alfred took a swing at Edric's lower legs. Edric easily leapt over the swing while simultaneously lifting up his sword to bring it down on his brother's head as he returned to earth. Alfred managed to miss the sword swing by a hair as he somersaulted away.

The twins continued leaping and twirling around the clearing for quite some time until they were out of breath. They were covered in small scratches and bruises, though neither one had succeeded in landing an actual sword blow.

Randol arrived before the dew was fully dry. He took a turn at swordplay with each of the twins before they switched to bows.

"Nice one," Randol commented as Alfred struck the target's center again, "Perhaps we should set you further back a bit."

"Fine by me," Alfred shrugged.

"Have you discovered any more about our Byzantine guest?" Edric interrupted.

"I thought you would never ask," Randol quipped as he sent an arrow into the target's outer ring. "He is holding palaver tonight in my father's hall. I have been invited and so are you."

"A palaver?" Edric was curious.

"What about?" Alfred was too.

"He did not say," Randol explained, "though he was adamant that I bring the two of you. Some sort of adventure is afoot, my cousins and friends. I can feel it."

*

Meanwhile, at Friar Tuck's request, Jonas was making rounds throughout Nottingham, checking on the widows and elderly. He would stay a short time, do a few chores to help out, and pray with them before leaving.

Jonas emerged from a second story flat in the center of Nottingham at midday. He had endured the unenviable task of cleaning up after the Widow Urlaffson's multitude of pet cats. While smelly, the felines managed to keep the entire neighborhood free from rats and their plagues.

Enjoying the sunshine and relative fresh air, the tall lad marched through the center of town, proud to be a part of the Lord's work. He was greeted by Prince Constantine when he stopped to rest and drink from the well at the city's center.

"Master Little," Constantine hailed as he approached.

“My liege,” Jonas bowed.

“Thank you,” the Prince smiled, “but please know that I come to you in all humility. Our confrontation the night before last has left me with nothing but respect for your diligence and bravery. I know that you are a blessing to this town and her people, and I should never wish to part you from your duties. Nevertheless, I have a request to make of you.”

“Anything, my lord,” Jonas assented.

Though no one else was right around them, the Prince moved in close and whispered, “Come at sundown to Locksley Hall, where a small group is gathering to hear about matters of great importance to all of Christendom. A new hope has arisen, and a time for action has come.”

“What new hope?” Jonas asked.

“A small hope, like a mustard seed, that will require much watering to grow into fullness.” Constantine remained elusive. “Until sundown then...” He turned and strode away, leaving Jonas bewildered but excited as he moved on to finish with his duties.

Verse Two – Prester John

The sun was deep red on the horizon when Jonas entered the gates of Locksley. A steward quickly shuffled him across the main hall and into a small side room. Once inside, he saw the rest of the invitees sitting about a round table.

One of the guests was his father, the Sheriff of Nottingham. “Will you close and bar the doors, son?” he asked Jonas.

Jonas did as his father asked and then, following Lord Roger’s hand motions, sat down at the table. Randol, the twins, and Prince Constantine were already seated along with Lord Roger, Sir Cuthbert, Friar Tuck and James the Sheriff.

Friar Tuck stood and asked the Lord to be with them in the days ahead and for His covering of protection. Lord Roger stood next and thanked everyone for coming. He asked that everyone swear a vow of secrecy regarding all they were about to hear. Everyone assented to the oath and Lord Roger returned to his seat.

Then Constantine stood.

“Gentlemen,” he began, “Darkness has fallen in the east. My empire of Byzantium is but a shadow of its former glory. Lawlessness and brutality reign in the northern hinterlands, and the Holy Land has again fallen captive to the Egyptian Hordes. Only through a small network of Templar strongholds is any Christian presence maintained in Outremer. Saracen pirates dominate the southern seas, and in Hispania there is little hope of turning the tide against the Moorish onslaught.

“In short, Christendom is threatened on all sides. As free men and servants of God, we are obligated to act. England has sent aid in times past for the battles against barbarism raging in the east. King Richard the Lionheart is still remembered well in many lands, just as the deeds of the great Fifth Crusade will not soon be forgotten.

“Yet I ask you not to raise a great crusading army of Englishmen as in times past. Rather, I ask for a Quest; a small band of men to boldly journey beyond the known realms. We will not travel to Jerusalem; at least, not at first. We will seek neither glory nor gain for ourselves. No, we will seek for an ally! For a great Christian King lives in the east, beyond the River Styx!

“The Papacy is too proud to acknowledge that another great sphere of Christian power might exist anywhere on earth, and so it has sought to suppress knowledge of Prester John; known also as John the Presbyter. In a deadly irony, the Roman church may be ignoring its best hope for survival against the endless Islamic onslaught.

“We cannot, we *must* not ignore this chance to join forces with one greater than ourselves. I propose a journey to the east to find the court of Prester John and to seek an alliance with him to save the Holy Land and all of western

Christendom. Of this eastern king's existence I have no doubt. As for his greatness, hear not mine but his own words."

Constantine proceeded to pull a small scroll from his cloak. He unrolled the stiff parchment and began to read the letter from Prester John:

To Manuel Comnenus, the Emperor of Byzantium: If indeed you wish to know wherein consists our great power, then believe without doubting that I, Prester John, who reign supreme, exceed in riches, virtue, and power all creatures who dwell under heaven. Seventy-two kings pay tribute to me.

I am a devout Christian and everywhere protect the Christians of our empire, nourishing them with alms. We have made a vow to visit the sepulcher of our Lord with a great army, as befits the glory of our Majesty, to wage war against and chastise the enemies of the cross of Christ, and to exalt his sacred name.

Our magnificence dominates the Three Indias, and extends to Farther India, where the body of St. Thomas the Apostle rests. It reaches through the desert toward the place of the rising of the sun, and continues through the valley of deserted Babylon close by the Tower of Babel. Seventy-two provinces obey us, a few of which are Christian provinces; and each has its own king. And all their kings are our tributaries.

In our territories are found elephants, dromedaries, and camels, and almost every kind of beast that is under heaven. Honey flows in our land, and milk everywhere abounds. In one of our territories no poison can do harm and no noisy frog croaks, no scorpions are there, and no serpents creep through the grass. No venomous reptiles can exist there.

During each month we are served at our table by seven kings, each in his turn, by sixty-two dukes, and by three hundred and sixty-five counts, aside from those who carry out various tasks on our account. In our hall there dine daily, on our right hand, twelve archbishops, and on our left, twenty bishops, and also the Patriarch of St. Thomas, the Protopapas of Samarkand, and the Archprotopapas of Susa.

If you can count the stars of the sky and the sands of the sea, you will be able to judge thereby the vastness of our realm and our power.

Constantine rolled up the scroll and the room remained in silence for some time.

Lord Roger arose. "Lads, finding Prester John is about more than finding an ally against the Islamic Horde. Proving the existence of a great Christian King in the east will instantly debunk the Vatican's claim to complete dominion over the earth. This would surely help cure the power-drunken sickness that has befallen the Church, and led to the madness of the dreaded Inquisition.

"If any of you are to accept this mission, you must clearly understand that the dark powers of the corrupted church, the Islamic Empire, countless

barbarian hordes and the devil himself are arrayed against you. Your journey would last a minimum of three years; one to reach the east, one to find and befriend this king, and one to return. Naturally, it could take much longer...

"While your friends back home are taking wives and planting their fields, you will be wandering lands of unknown dangers, far from home and exposed to fierce elements. Death is an entirely possible outcome of your journey, though standing together with your combined skills and strengths you have great chances for success.

"The reward of success is more than fortune, pleasure or fame. This is about the course of history, lads. This is about the survival of God's people! God is turning the tide – and you are standing on the shore. Will you head for the hills or take to the waves? In this moment of destiny you are all free men and must make your own decisions. Please know Randol, my son, that if you decide to join your mighty sword and shield along with Prince Constantine and this Quest, you have my blessing."

Lord Roger sat down and Sir Cuthbert took his turn. "Clearly God is on the move. The arrival of the Prince – the son of an old friend – in time to save my daughter from the agent of an old enemy! Much troubling news from abroad these last few years, but then this letter of hope when times seem darkest – tis too much to disbelieve...

"God likely has purposes for you and for this Quest that we cannot even imagine. Edric, Alfred, your swords and your bows could bring down the mightiest of foes, and would be a welcome addition to any traveling band. The King's Regiments will always be there. Why not go on adventure, see the world a bit? If you choose to join the Quest, you have my blessing."

Sir Cuthbert sat down and James the Sheriff of Nottingham stood.

"Jonas," he looked at his son, "we Littles have helped look after Nottingham and the House of Locksley since your grandfather's day. Look at the mighty young man you have become! I would not allow the others to leave the city without your accompaniment. Your mother will not be pleased, but you still have my dearest blessing."

Finally, Friar Tuck spoke to them all, "Solomon spoke with great wisdom when he proclaimed that a braid of three cords is not easily broken. A band of five then should endure well indeed. You boys have grown mightily. Tis time that you seek the wonderful destiny Our Lord has planned for you, and you have my blessing."

The blessings complete, Lord Roger stood alongside Friar Tuck and made the exhortation to adventure, "spring is well spent and those who will go must go soon. From this moment onward, things will move quickly. If there be any among you who doubt or fear, you may leave now with no loss of honor, though you may never speak about any of this again. The Quest has been proposed; what say you?"

Randol stood, "I accept."

"I as well," said Edric as he arose.

"And I," Alfred added.

"Tis an honor," Jonas bowed to the Prince who had also stood.

"Five young men," Friar Tuck concluded, "The Quest for Prester John. We ask the Lord to bless this adventure, to protect each of these young men by the power of His Swift Sure Hand, and most of all, that His Will be done."

The five newly inducted adventurers and the four elders bowed their heads for a moment of silent contemplation. Suddenly, there was a noise outside the door.

Lord Roger's hand went to his hip and quickly, but quietly, drew out his sword. Sir Cuthbert removed one of the torches from its wall mounting and took up position in front of the doors with Roger. They raised their weapons high, prepared to smite down whatever spy or rogue lurked in the hall.

James the Sheriff gently lifted away the crossbeam that barred the door and handed it to Jonas. Gripping the door knobs firmly in his hands, James threw open the doors jumping backward as he did.

The entire group was beset by varying degrees of relief and outrage as they watched Maegan and Angela tumble into the midst of their no-longer-secret meeting. The two ladies landed in a heap on the floor.

"You were supposed to be with your mothers!" Lord Roger growled at the girls as soon as he was able to compose himself.

"Well, we were..." Maegan began as she struggled to stand.

"They sent us on an errand," Angela tried to help explain.

"We were just on the way back and well..." Maegan trailed off.

"We became a bit side-tracked," Angela finished.

"How much did you hear?" Sir Cuthbert replaced the torch into its wall sconce.

"Nothing!" the cousins said in unison.

Everyone stared at them.

"What?" Angela was growing nervous.

"Look," Maegan suddenly became angry, "were you all just going to leave and not say anything to us?"

"So you have been listening," Randol sneered.

"No matter," Lord Roger decided, "this changes not the plan. But you two," he thrust his finger at the girls, "must keep your lips sealed! Do you understand?"

They nodded obediently and the meeting dispersed as quickly as it had begun.

*

Later that night, Maegan confronted her father.

“How can you send your one and only son away on a long journey without someone to serve as a physician?” Maegan argued.

“And who would that be?” he dismissed.

“Father!” she was growing exasperated, “I learned more from the Good Sisters about healing and medicines than I ever did about music. Do you not see? I was meant to return at this time – to be a part of the Quest! They will need me, and you cannot deny it without denying your reason!”

“And I thought these last three years had taught you *how* to reason, but now I can see that you still have far to go!” Lord Roger was nearly shouting at his daughter.

They called a truce not long before midnight and resumed the argument early the next morning. By that time, however, Maegan’s aunt Raven had arrived to take up the cause for her niece.

*

“Roger,” Raven scolded her older brother, “you all but forced me to go on crusade in your stead. And she is older now than I was then! She will bring along so much more than healing abilities – her judgment, language skills, accuracy with a bow and her...”

“Enough!” Roger barked. “I do not doubt my daughter’s ability to take care of her own safety and others’ as well...” He did not know that Maegan was in the hall, listening and smiling. “My concern is the attention she would inevitably draw to the Quest. Beautiful young Christian ladies cannot simply wander the continent without beckoning the interest of dark forces...as if you need reminding...”

Raven looked at the floor.

“I am sorry,” Roger said quietly.

“Do not be,” Raven retorted, “for I am not.”

Roger gave his sister a puzzled look.

“Even the very worst things that ever happened to me on the Fifth Crusade are a part of the person I am today,” she explained, “and I love who I am, so if there were a need I would do it all over again. And there is a great need. We shall be wise to heed Prince Constantine’s reports of a growing shadow in the east.”

Lord Roger paced about the hall as he considered all the news of these last days.

“What about Angela?” he finally asked.

“What about Angela?” Raven was taken aback.

“Shall she be allowed to join the Quest as well?” The Lord of Locksley hinted at a grin.

“No, of course not,” Raven replied instantly.

“Why not?”

“Oh no,” she shook her head and waved her arms, “No, we are talking about two completely different situations!”

“How so?” Roger was relentless.

“Maegan is four years older!” Raven argued.

“I was four years your elder when you went on crusade in my stead,” he winked.

“Maegan has had discipline and training,” she tried.

“Angela has had her brothers, she is an ever ready voice of reason, and no soul in the Midlands can outpace her on foot,” he folded his arms.

Raven wavered.

“No, stop it.” She turned and walked away. “This discussion is over. Not another word!” She marched out the door.

*

Jonas Little knelt before his weeping mother. “Mama, please. This is just a few years of my life, and the rewards could last for a lifetime!”

“Oh, my Jonas,” Goodwife Little cupped her son’s face. “You are so brave, just like your father. But the lands back beyond the sea to the east are full of darkness and danger. I do not remember much of my childhood there; I just remember that I was always afraid.”

“Yet that is the purpose of our adventure, mother, to change the world so there will be no need to live in fear. God is bringing great forces together from the ends of the earth, and I could be a part of it! I could be a part of God’s plan!”

“Oh, my son,” she inhaled deeply and when she exhaled, her tears had stopped. “Of that I have no doubt at all.” She wiped her cheeks dry. “If you must do this, promise me three things.”

“Of course”

“First, remember that I will be praying for you every day and every night. Second, come back home to me alive. And third...” She reached into a pocket in her cloak. “...never take this off.” She placed a silver ring on his right hand. It bore a series of runic inscriptions that he could not read.

“I promise all three as God allows. What do these mean?” he asked, running his finger over the runes.

“Tis a spell of protection,” was all she would say.

*

After their son left again on errands in preparation for the journey, James Little held his wife in his arms. “He is strong and pure of heart, Zorina. You need not fear.”

She said nothing.

“My love,” he looked into her eyes, “speak to me.”

“What can I say?” she stared crying, “I am torn apart inside! I could not bear it if I lost my son, but he has the same spirit of adventure that is in you! If not for that, you never would have rescued me and I would have no son! So what am I to do? The Lord chose for only one of my precious sons to live to be a man, and now that he is a man he is to be taken away. How can I bear it, James? How can I?”

By the end she was not only sobbing, but also striking the Sheriff of Nottingham with her fists upon his chest. He permitted his much smaller wife to vent her mostly harmless frustration and rage upon him until she was worn out.

*

That evening on the other side of Nottingham, Mistress Shahar had finally finished herding her many children into their beds. She retreated to the front parlor of the orphanage and settled into one of the padded chairs for a few moments of much needed rest before setting about her nighttime tasks.

She heard the footsteps approaching, but remained seated as the dark figure entered through the front door.

“Prince Constantine,” she said after lighting a lantern to reveal his striking facial features, “I had wondered when you would come. What news of your dear mother?”

“Greetings Mistress Shahar,” the Prince bowed to her, “my mother is well and sends her love. She will be well pleased when I report to her how kind the years have been to you.”

Shahar smiled, “Such a handsome and sweet prince. Have you eaten? May I fix you something?”

Constantine, who had been traveling about on foot nearly the entire day gratefully replied, “Aye, Mistress. That will be wonderful.”

Sitting together in the kitchen, Shahar watched the Prince consume three bowls of chicken soup, each with its own chunk of brown bread. Thoroughly sated, the Prince produced a small pipe from his cloak and began puffing away.

“We have met once before, but I doubt you will remember,” Shahar stared at him.

Constantine raised his eyebrows.

“You were still inside your mother’s blessed womb. I placed my hand upon her hard and swollen belly and you kicked me!” she said with a laugh.

“Forgive me,” he smiled.

“Your mother said it was the first time you had done that,” Shahar explained, “and so I always believed there must be a special connection between us, and God would have a plan for us to meet again.” She paused, and staring out the window at the first twinkling star of the night asked, “Yet I do not sense you will be staying here very long?”

“You are right,” he answered.

“And you will not be leaving alone?” she gave voice to her inner fear.

“No.”

They sat silently for a moment.

“Mistress, I have seen Michael Tuck,” he finally let out the truth he had been aching to tell her.

The look in her eyes revealed her many questions.

“Twas in my namesake city, the great Constantinople,” the Prince explained, “he was there with your old friend, John Little. I was but a boy and they were in the service of my mother, not long after my father had died.

“When my mother once again was forced to flee the great city, John accompanied her. At that time, Michael departed for the farther east. I have not heard word of him since.”

Shahar continued staring at the brightest star in the sky, “and now you will journey into the farther east...”

“I understand your fears. And the challenges ahead shall be great indeed. Yet I will walk in mighty company! Randol of Locksley, the Allendales and Jonas Little have joined my Quest. And if we complete our mission, the world will know greater peace than it has in the last thousand years.”

“You sound like Michael,” Shahar allowed a tear to roll down her cheek.

“He told me something about you,” Constantine whispered.

She finally looked away from her star to search his face.

“He told me, before he departed to seek his adventure, that no glory, no gain would be his, unless God’s winding path brought him someday back to you. He loves you, and as much more than only the best friend he has ever had.”

Shahar had to gasp for air after nearly choking on the torrent of tears that had been bottled up within her for so many years.

When she had finally composed herself, she made the Prince promise that if by God’s grace he should encounter Michael during his eastern journey, that he would tell him to come home; that she was waiting for him, and that she loved him too.

*

Constantine departed soon thereafter, but Mistress Shahar was not alone. Someone was lurking silently in the shadows where the cellar stairs emerged near the back of the kitchen.

“Pardon me,” the visitor spoke quietly, causing Shahar to let out a startled gasp. “Forgive me, Mum,” Angela emerged into the light. “I meant not to eavesdrop; truly I did not,” she blushed in the lantern glow, bringing her flaming red hair to life all the more.

“What are you doing out after nightfall, my dearest girl?” Shahar walked over and hugged Angela, as much to comfort herself as the young lady.

“We had meat and bread left over from my cousin’s feast that will not be eaten in time, but I wanted to wait until sundown to bring it here. I left it all in the cellar chest,” Angela explained. “And I was hoping to speak with you, but when I came to the stairs you were already speaking with the Prince. And I am so sorry for startling you...”

Shahar led Angela to the table and calmed her with the remaining soup that Constantine had not eaten.

“Thank you, that is just what I needed,” Angela sipped the last drops of soup into her bread.

“Now, dearest girl, what did you wish to speak with me about?” Shahar held the hands of the girl whose mother had reached down into Hell and pulled her free.

“I need some good advice,” Angela began, “and you have always kept my confidence.”

“Could it have something to do with this prince that has come into our lives so suddenly?” Shahar smiled, “For there is a sparkling in your eyes that I have not seen in a little while.”

“No!” Angela panicked. “Well...he certainly has something to do with it. Oh Mum, our parents are sending Maegan and me to the convent. All the boys are going on this grand adventure, my parents will be who knows where, and I will be left stifled and suffocated in some nunnery on the northern moors!”

“What is it that *you* want?” Shahar stroked Angela’s hair.

Angela looked down at their hands and whispered, “I want to go with them. I want to follow the Prince and find this...Priestly John. I want to help save the world!”

“Then you should go,” Shahar answered to Angela’s shock.

“What?”

“Go with them.”

“But I came here for you to talk me out of it!” Angela exclaimed.

Shahar laughed, but soon grew serious again, “The Light is in you, just as it is in your mother, and your father. There are many people in this world held in deep darkness. That will never change until someone comes bearing the Light. You cannot hide it under a bushel, my dearest girl. And the truth is...”

“What?”

“The truth is,” Shahar whispered, “I will worry very much less for the boys if you are looking after them.”

They laughed together.

“What about my parents?” Angela asked gravely, “When they discover I never reached the convent, they will go mad with rage.”

“Perhaps I can speak with your mother,” Shahar winked.

*

A master blacksmith was summoned all the way from Wales to give special attention to the weapons that would accompany the Quest for Prester John. Lord Roger had dealt with this man before and viewed his work as second to none outside of Damascus or Toledo. Randol, Edric and Alfred each had their swords sharpened, balanced and polished.

Their fathers provided them with new custom daggers, useful in close combat and also effective when thrown. Each of the lads was further outfitted with a brand new and super powerful re-curved bow. And they each received a quiver holding forty iron-tipped arrows with shafts made from burnished white oak and guide feathers harvested from abandoned falcon aeries.

They were equipped with water and wine flasks, bundles of dried provisions, cloaks, boots, flint and steel, tents, a map, cookware, changes of clothes; and at the insistence of their mothers, bars of soap.

Randol selected a small oaken shield that the blacksmith plated with a thin iron coating. Edric and Alfred preferred fighting without shields, although they brought along light vests of fine and flexible chain-mail for which their father was more than willing to pay the blacksmith's high price.

Jonas was permitted free choice from his father's arsenal that he had accumulated over the years as Sheriff of Nottingham. Jonas selected two weapons; a long hunting spear and a heavy woodsman's axe. He reasoned that in addition to offering significant protection, the two implements could provide the group with food and firewood as well.

He kept his provisions simple; a large water-skin and a sack that his mother had stuffed with sausage logs, cheese wheels, salted fish and dried fruit. He sported high soft boots, a light tunic and a thick woolen cloak; but no real armor.

For his part, Constantine was the lightest traveler of all. The others discovered that the Prince did not carry weapons. He had taken some sort of religious oath against them, and as evidenced by his handling of the Roman rogue, he had no need of them.

He was eerily adept at turning the force of an attack back against the attacker. The Prince explained that he had learned this ability as a youth, practicing under the tutelage of a master warrior from the farther east whom his mother had hired.

Constantine brought nothing in his hands. Over his shoulder was slung a single saddle bag with his personal effects, which included a sizable sum in gold coins. For protection, he wore nothing more than his black shirt, trousers, boots and cape.

The horse he had ridden on from London was retired to the Allendale pastures to live out his life in ease, having paid his dues. The group decided to forego pack animals entirely and carry all their own things. They reasoned that feeding themselves could prove enough of a challenge, particularly at sea.

*

With the summer solstice not far away, the Quest gathered at Locksley Hall early on the morning of departure and an extended prayer session was held. Friar Tuck led them, but Lord Roger, Sir Cuthbert and Sir James also prayed out loud. Their respective wives and daughters cried quietly but held their peace otherwise.

Maegan and Angela had seemingly resigned themselves to their parents' wisdom regarding the safety of the convent, and so the Quest was to have as its first task the depositing of the two young ladies there. After hugs and farewells with their parents, the fledgling Quest and their two charges set out in high spirits.

Not an hour outside of Nottingham, Maegan and Angela launched their coup. They insisted on joining the Quest with great fervor, and Constantine, the de facto leader of the group, began arguing their side with them. Jonas soon joined the rebellion, leaving the twins isolated in their opposition.

Edric and Alfred felt that the presence of their cousin, and worse their little sister, would compromise the purity of the Quest as a young men's adventure. Finally, Constantine recommended the Greek-born balm of democracy to solve the impasse.

The pivotal vote fell to Randol.

For the rest of his life, Randol would insist that Maegan's healing arts and Angela's knack for languages were the decisive reasons that he sided against the twins. Valid though those reasons were, there was still some part of Randol deep down that was simply glad to have his big sister along.

*

The twins fumed for the rest of that first day, but after a night under the stars they accepted the situation and began warming to the idea of the extra company. They made amends with the ladies and promised to observe at least the rudiments of chivalry.

The Quest, now seven strong, traveled east until they reached the port town of Boston, perched on the shore of the North Sea. They spent a few days there at a waterside inn, searching for an amicable ship captain and celebrating their independence from parental oversight.

When a suitable ship finally arrived, it happened to let off a short and stout friar named Barnabas. The little man belonged to the same order as Friar Tuck, an obscure British sect that observed a minimalist approach in its dealings with Rome.

Barnabas befriended the members of the Quest while they ate next to each other in a seaside tavern. He helped them make favorable arrangements for

sea passage with the Nordic longboat crew that had delivered him to England from Sweden.

The Quest took to the sea on the morning of summer's first day, and Friar Barnabas continued on his journey west. The Good Friar reached Sherwood Forest late the next day.

Verse Three – Rendezvous in Denmark

Lord Roger placed cold cups of frothy mead into the hands of Friar Tuck and his visiting colleague.

“Please, take your ease. We are very glad that you have joined us this night, and I understand you crossed paths with my son and his friends on your journey toward Nottingham!” Roger exclaimed.

“Ah yes, and Randol was so small when I had last seen him. How magnificently he has grown and what a fine young man of distinction he has become!” Barnabas glowed in his delight for the wonder of youth. “You must be exceedingly proud of him.”

“Yes, we are.” Roger sighed his satisfaction.

“And your wonderful daughter; only for her lack of wings did I ever doubt your dear Maegan to be an angel. You are truly blessed.” Barnabas concluded.

“Ah, so you traveled through Lincoln?” Roger grinned.

“Pardon me?” Barnabas blinked.

“Lincoln...the convent...”

“I am sorry, no,” Barnabas explained, “I sailed into Boston all the way from the Baltic Sea...and,” he watched the shadow growing over Lord Roger’s face. “My lord, are you quite alright?”

“Friar,” Roger’s breathing was paced, “when did you last see my daughter?”

“Why, I suppose...” Barnabas answered in a quivering voice as he watched the Lord of Locksley begin to perspire, “I suppose twas when she boarded the ship with the others...Randol, the four other lads, and the younger lady too...”

“Pardon me,” Roger carefully set down his cup, stood slowly, and walked out of the room without another word.

*

The winds were favorable and the Viking boatmen needed no assistance from their passengers, so the seven adventurers sat in a semi-circle near the back of the boat and talked.

“I have a question for the Prince,” Angela began after Edric and Alfred had finally finished probing Constantine for more information about his extraordinary self-defense techniques.

“Please,” the Prince interrupted her, “you must call me Constantine. I am a prince by birth, tis true, and yet I have lived in exile outside of my empire since I was a small child. And even so, I feel very strongly that we are all equals on this Quest. We should call each other by our Christian names alone. Do you all agree?”

"This bodes well for my part," Jonas, the lowest ranked socially of the group, piped in with a wink. Everyone participated in a round of laughter.

"Forgive me, what was your question, Angela?" Constantine returned the conversation to her.

"Well...Constantine," she blushed, "how do you think the hooded man knew where to find me...or my mother?"

"That is a good question," he nodded. "The Vatican in Rome has detailed maps of all known lands and cities. In addition to gold, I am guessing the rogue killer was provided with information and advice."

"It makes so little sense," Maegan entered the discussion. "Why would the Church wish us harm?"

A chill breeze blowing off the North Sea matched the new tone in their words.

"I have long suspected," Randol suggested, "that there were certain parts in the story of your parents' great crusade that we were never told."

The twins looked at each other.

"What is it?" Angela was becoming agitated.

"Have they spoken about the soul destroyers...the Inquisition?" Constantine asked quietly.

They all looked down.

"Only in whispers," Maegan said finally.

"The quest for power in the hearts of men breeds all manner of madness," Constantine declared, "and despite the claims of the Roman Pontiff, no man who has ever walked this earth, save for our Lord Jesus Christ, can hold dominion over the souls of other men, or women."

"Yet how could God allow His church, the instrument of His will on earth," Alfred questioned, "to become so corrupted and filled with hatred?"

"You are right," Constantine responded, "the church *can* be an instrument of His will. Yet so can a pagan, or a wild beast, or even unfeeling elements. The church is not like a sword in His hands that He will wield and control. We are like a child who He will allow to roam free, and to stumble, and even to fall. This is not to harm us, but to encourage us to grow so we can become more like Him."

"Then why does He not punish the wrong-doing, like all parents do?" Edric, who had been quietly watching the sea, interjected.

"He will," Constantine answered, "He is coming."

*

Ironically, the one most upset over the girls' escape was Lady Raven, whereas Sir Cuthbert was mildly amused by the whole turn of events. Two decades of marriage, however, had taught him to at least act concerned whenever his wife became so panicked and distraught.

“Do remember that she is in good hands,” Cuthbert tried to calm his wife, “Alfred and Edric would never let harm come upon their little sister.”

“That is part of my fear,” Raven argued. “She is the only person I know of who can get underneath their skin and make them lose their focus. She will be a dangerous distraction to them.”

“You *distracted* us straight on to wealth and glory in the Fifth,” as Cuthbert referred to the crusade of their youth.

“And was it worth the men we lost? Was it worth you being beaten to the threshold of death’s door?” she asked quietly.

“The men we lost are in Paradise, watching us carry on our fool’s quests and wallow in our earthly sins. Surely God has rewarded them one-hundred fold,” Cuthbert took her hands in his own, “and as for our unpleasant little holiday in San Sebastiano; it drew you and I closer together, so how can I complain?” he kissed her.

She hesitated.

“If,” she folded her arms, “even if, we were to allow such a thing – they are woefully unprepared! Maegan took along nothing but her harp and medicine bag. And Angela is completely empty-handed!”

“Then we will catch them,” Cuthbert said.

“What?”

“Not to bring them back, mind you,” he explained, “but to arm and equip them like we did for the lads, and likewise to bless them properly.”

“How would we even catch them?” Raven began to face the sobering reality.

“Now that’s easy,” Cuthbert smiled and hugged her. “All we have to do is find a faster ship.”

*

Dark clouds in the west threatened with thunder and lightning, but their headwinds kept the longboat in front of the storm with a full sail. By nightfall, the storm had drifted away to the north after showering them with nothing more than a light mist.

“I have a question for the lady,” Constantine attempted to rescue Angela from the steady stream of criticism that seemed to flow toward her from her brothers.

“I thought we were to use Christian names only, Constantine,” Angela teased.

“When I say lady, I speak not of peerage, but of preciousness. My chivalric duty toward you supersedes concerns of rank,” Constantine charmed.

“Then may I call you Prince again? To be sure, not out of regard for your royal birthright,” Maegan interrupted, unable to resist the opportunity to rail

against the injustice of men's double standards, "but rather because you are simply... well... adorable." She stared coolly at the Byzantine.

"You misread Scripture, Maegan of Locksley, if you think that being the weaker vessel means you are somehow inferior." Constantine fought back. "Look at creation. That which is most wondrous is always complicated and fragile, like a crystal of falling snow or a flower in full bloom."

"Are you not defeating your own argument?" Maegan flipped her hair so the wind would keep it out of her face. "After all, what could be weaker – that is, inferior in strength – than snowflakes and flower petals?"

"True," Constantine granted, "and yet when gathered in force, snow can wipe whole villages from the face of the earth, and flowers can alter the visage of an entire mountain range."

To the surprise of all, Maegan was temporarily speechless.

"Was there a question for me?" Angela reclaimed her place in the conversation.

"Ah, yes," the Prince gathered his thoughts, "my question was meant not to address matters of title, but rather the proper name of your father's estate."

"What do you mean?" Angela asked.

"My mother always spoke of your father as Cuthbert *a' Dale*, and yet you are known by all as Angela *Allendale*. I simply wondered why this is so," he explained.

"I do not know," Angela was genuinely baffled, "that is just who I have always been; the only daughter of Sir Cuthbert Allendale."

"The reason for the change has to do with the schemes of English peerage," Alfred added from the bottom of the boat, where he lounged.

"You see, the Imperial titles granted him by your mother had little hope for recognition by our King Henry without the additional influence that arises from holding land," Edric contributed.

"And so Uncle Roger gifted a portion of the Locksley Estate to our parents, allowing them to retain their titles of Sir and Lady," Alfred concluded.

"And this led to your father's change in surname?" Constantine inquired. The twins hesitated.

"Our Good King Henry," Randol helped articulate the matter; "holds to the belief that those of a more Celtic persuasion should leave the weightier matters of leadership and governance to those who happen to be of a more Germanic persuasion."

"I see..." Constantine nodded, "and so *a' Dale* became Allendale; more pleasing to the ear of your king?"

"Our father's father was Allan *a' Dale* who minstrelled in the time of the Third Crusade," Edric answered. "The name honors his memory as well."

"Of course," the Prince bowed his head. "And you are all cousins through the great Robin of Locksley, yes?"

"Yes," the five said in unison.

Jonas scratched his head.

“Do not feel left out, Jonas Little,” a sly grin emerged from Constantine, “in a very real sense you too are linked to someone aboard this ship through family ties.”

“I always will hold fast the loyalty of my fathers to Locksley, and Allendale,” Jonas said humbly, “for the power in their stories runs deep. Yet, with all due respect, this is not the same as blood ties.”

Maegan smiled at Jonas as he professed his allegiance to her household. When he noticed her, he promptly turned beet red.

“I am not speaking of Locksleys or Allendales,” Constantine proclaimed. Jonas’ eyebrows revealed his curiosity.

“Yes, you and I,” the Prince winked.

All heads spun toward Constantine, and the ladies gasped.

“What are you saying?” Maegan was wide-eyed.

“My mother forbade me from speaking of it in front of your parents, fearing good Lady Raven’s wrath over missing the event,” Constantine continued, “but you and I, Jonas Little, became as cousins in God’s eyes on the day not long ago when my mother and your Uncle John were joined together in holy matrimony.”

*

“Ah, Buck, good to see you again old chap!” Cuthbert strode toward the towering Viking with outstretched arms.

Rather than a fond embrace, the Viking gave Cuthbert a swift punch to the face. Cuthbert teetered and then fell backward into the dust.

The Viking then approached Raven and took up her hands in his own.

“Begging your pardon, milady,” he rumbled, “I just cannot bear to see your husband without remembering how he neglected to invite me to your wedding. I will forever regret having missed the chance to see you as a bride, and the stories I have heard of your radiant beauty on that day only serve to sharpen my pain.”

“I understand Bucky,” Raven patted the Viking’s shoulder reassuringly, “but please try to be gentle with him. He does not heal as quickly as he used to.”

“Ho, ho,” the Viking heaved with laughter as he lent Cuthbert a helping hand. “He is a sturdy one. You will be just fine. Is that not so, my good Sir Allendale?”

“No harm done,” Cuthbert stood slowly while massaging his jaw. “I think...”

“Greetings, Master Jorgensen!” Roger arrived just then with Lady Margaret on his arm.

“My lord,” Buck bowed to him.

“All is well here in your fine city, I trust?” Roger asked.

“Aye, my lord,” the Viking nodded his gigantic blond mane, “though tis a struggle these days for a purveyor in custom seafaring vessels of the finest quality. Folks are not taking to the seas as they were wont when we were lads, eh?” he nudged Cuthbert, “and if they do, they are settling for the leaky washtubs sold out of Aquitaine or Bristol just to save themselves a farthing or two.”

“We would settle for nothing less than your master craftsmanship,” Cuthbert assured him, “you see, we desire to traverse the North Sea with the speed of a falcon in full flight.”

“Our daughters’ lives are at stake,” Roger explained. “We need to cross the sea by yesterday!”

“Yesterday, eh?” Buck grinned. “That is beyond my power.” He turned and began walking away from them. Heading across the road toward a seaside tavern, Buck called back over his shoulder, “but we can come close.”

*

After quickly rounding up his eight sons and enough food to sustain them, Buck Jorgensen led his friends aboard his masterpiece ship, personally assisting the Ladies Raven and Margaret to their places.

The ship was a narrow Viking-style longboat, equipped with double large sails and oars. The hull’s design reflected a lifetime of study and experience, and the result cut effortlessly through the choppy North Sea waves.

Roger and Cuthbert joined the eight fair-haired lads at rowing, while Buck steered the ship and regaled his two lady guests with tall tales of his many adventures at sea. With ten oars in the water and a gusty wind out of the west, England quickly disappeared from sight behind them and they flew across the water like a falcon indeed.

*

Jonas speared a large herring by dawn’s early light and they all enjoyed the roast that followed. Dry biscuits and wine helped round out the meal.

And so they were already in fine spirits when the Nordic boatmen began crying, “Land ho!”

Pulling close to the sandy shore, everyone began packing up their things to spend a night on dry land before continuing onward.

Maegan sat next to her brother as he gave attention to his weaponry.

“The Prince has taken quite a liking to our little cousin, would you not say?” she whispered.

“Who does not?” Randol mumbled back. “Do I rightly perceive a hint of envy in your voice, dear sister?”

“What?”

“I have watched you watching him.”

“Please...” she dismissed, “I suppose you think I would simply be swept away by the tall, dark and mysterious stranger that appeared so suddenly.”

“He is not precisely a stranger,” he reminded her, “and you *have* been swept into an unexpected journey with the Prince as its nominal leader.”

“Do not play the fool, dear brother. I am not following after Constantine as though I were some sort of lost puppy. I have only come on this journey for the good of the rest of you, and so you can see for yourself that Angela and I will weather the trail just as well as you boys.”

“Whatever you say, sis,” Randol returned to polishing his blade.

On the other end of the ship, Jonas climbed over next to Angela.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes,” she smiled weakly, “perhaps though a bit shaky.” She held her hand out flat and it was trembling slightly.

“The night on shore will make you well.”

“Aye,” she took in a deep breath and then let it out.

They sat for a moment without saying anything.

“Jonas?”

“Yes?”

“Do you think I have made a mistake?”

“You mean coming along?”

“What else?”

Jonas pondered the question before answering, “I do not think that one decision shall determine your destiny, but rather all of the decisions that each of us make along the journey’s path – good or bad.”

Angela smiled at him.

“What?”

“You are quite profound,” she said not entirely sarcastically, “just like your princely cousin,” she giggled.

“You certainly have taken quite a liking to my new cousin,” he said, sounding not entirely annoyed.

“Do I detect perhaps a hint of envy, Master Little?”

Jonas turned beet red again, as he always did when Angela tormented him, and he was momentarily unable to articulate a response.

“Do not let it trouble you,” she whispered to him, “I do not especially care for dark-haired men.”

“Is that so?” he frowned at her teasing.

Just then the boat struck an underwater sandbar; nothing damaging, but everyone was jostled slightly. The Nordic lads leaped overboard into the cold chest-deep water and began shepherding their ship toward a safe landing on the beach.

*

By the time the others had assembled the tents and built up a large campfire, Edric, Alfred and Jonas returned with a small but juicy wild pig. The sailors produced a hitherto unopened barrel of wine, and a grand evening was enjoyed by all under the twinkling northern stars.

In fact, they were each so groggy the next morning; no one noticed the approaching ship until it had reached the shore and the Vikings aboard poured out onto the sand.

“Dear God,” Angela gasped as she shook Maegan to wake her, “do you hear that?”

“What?” Maegan could barely open her eyes against the bright morning sun filtering through the fabric of their tent.

“Tis your father’s voice!” Angela gripped her cousin in fear.

“But that is not possible!”

“Listen!”

Footsteps thudded toward them through the sand. They came to a stop right outside the tent.

“I suggest you come out now,” Lord Roger used his most terrifying tone of voice.

Angela popped out first begging, “Please do not think the worst of us...”

“This is all nothing more than a grand misunderstanding...” Maegan cut her off, emerging right behind.

The boys came on the run, offering up a cornucopia of excuses, distractions, and outright lies.

The four parents stood together, arms folded, listening to the growing chorus of panicked repentance. The two longboat crews merged, forming a semi-circle to watch the unfolding intergenerational drama.

The sun had moved visibly in the sky by the time the youngsters wearied enough from their diversionary tactics to pause and allow their parents an edgewise word.

“Are you finished?” Sir Cuthbert asked them.

“Please, father,” Angela begged, “I am not like Maegan. I shall wither and die in the confines of a nunnery. Please do not make me go back. Please...”

“We have discussed this all at great length,” Lady Raven said.

“You ladies are free to join the Quest,” Lord Roger added.

Silence reigned momentarily.

“I...but...you...” Maegan stuttered.

“The fact remains that you disobeyed us,” Lady Margaret reminded the girls, causing them to stare humbly at their feet.

“And you boys were apparently willing accomplices,” Sir Cuthbert frowned.

“Actually,” Edric began, “we were opposed from the very...” he stopped as his twin nudged him, shaking his head.

“We have not come here to stop you, or even to punish you,” Lord Roger informed the group. “Rather, we wish to properly arm and equip you ladies, as we did for the lads. In that way, you shall be full members of the Quest, with our blessing, and not a burden to the others.”

“Oh, father!” Maegan exclaimed, throwing her arms around him.

Even the hired longboat men took part in the leaping, hugging and cheering that ensued.

*

Angela and Maegan were outfitted with bows and full quivers that matched, if not exceeded, the quality of their cousins’ ranged weapons. For close combat Maegan received a highly polished oaken staff that was as tall as she was, but still light and easy to wield. Angela was given a dagger.

Though heavy, the dagger did not appear to be of any great quality. Only when Sir Cuthbert showed her the secret chamber inside the handle, and the neat stack of small gold coins within, did Angela understand the true reason for this particular gift.

The mothers gave their daughters bags containing changes of clothing and a small variety of feminine items. For the use of the entire group, the parental envoys also bestowed a two week supply of foodstuffs and wine.

Using both ships, they all traveled together to the south along the coast of the Danish Mark. After coming upon a small port town, Lord Roger decided to rent rooms in the seaside inn so the youngsters could enjoy one more night in proper beds before continuing their journey.

They broke fast together at dawn and after holding one last prayer session, the parents decided to take their leave. Before departing, however, each mother took a moment aside with her daughter.

“Promise me, Maegan dear,” Lady Margaret stared into her eyes, “that you will heed my warning. Swear to me that you will listen now.”

“What is it, mum?”

“I would not have you venture any further a field in the slumber of naivety.”

“And of what do you think I am naïve?”

“Men”

“Mother! What are you saying?”

“I speak not of carnal knowledge, my child,” Lady Margaret put her arm around her daughter. “I am speaking of how men see you. As you journey from here and on into the far country, you shall cross the paths of many men who may not hold you in high regard as do your companions. Or they may not regard you at all.”

“Are you saying I must keep in my rightful place?” Maegan frowned.

“That is what I fear.”

“Mother, you are confusing me.”

“Your rightful place,” Lady Margaret smiled at Maegan, cupping her face, “is as the co-bearer of God’s image. You are more than a lady; more than a noble. His Word is in you, and His Spirit is in you. You are an emissary from the Kingdom!”

“Why are you saying all this?”

“Because the world will hate you, just as it hated Him. And I do not want you to be naïve about this and fall into discouragement. No matter what happens on your path ahead, you must remember who you really are,” Lady Margaret pleaded. “You must hold the truth in your heart, but you must be cautious too!”

“And I shall be!” Maegan hesitated before asking, “But then what say you of men?”

“You are radiant, my love, and you shall capture their eyes whether you desire to or not. If they know the Lord, they will see Him in you and love you as a sister. If they do not know Him, they shall wish for one of two things. They shall wish to possess you, and should they fail at that...” Lady Margaret was close to tears, “to destroy you.”

“You are frightening me.”

“Good,” Lady Margaret replied, “then you are ready.”

“What is to be done?” Maegan asked. “How then shall I defend myself?”

“Your oaken staff is strong, but it is nothing compared with the power of the Sword of Truth, that is, the Word of God. On the road that awaits you, lean fully upon the rock of the Lord and His scriptures. He can shine a light upon you even in the midst of your darkest hour. And He can reveal to you a path, even when there seems to be no escape.”

Further down the beach, Lady Raven and Angela walked together. Raven’s words of advice for her daughter were much more succinct.

“Let no one; not king, peasant or pope, separate you from the others. If you must maim; maim. If you must kill; kill. This earth crawls with evil men. Do not be taken by them. Do you understand me?”

Angela nodded as her eyes spoke her reply.

*

The parents sailed westward.

“Where are we off to next, my lord?” Buck Jorgensen asked Roger as they left the coastal waters for open sea.

“Home, yes?” Margaret raised her eyebrows at her husband.

“We *could* return directly to Sherwood...” Roger said slyly.

“Although,” Cuthbert added, “the harvest is still months away, our estates are in good hands, the children are off on adventure, and considering recent events; we might be wise to change our summer routine a bit...”

They all looked at Raven.

"I am listening," she said.

"Then where shall we?" Margaret nudged her sister-in-law, "Calais? Normandy? Aquitaine?"

Roger rubbed his chin, "Perhaps," he mused, "but then why not further onward to sunny Spain?"

"Brilliant!" Cuthbert agreed, "We shall have sand, surf, shellfish and sunshine to our hearts' content! And what's more, the Spaniards have always seemed to be a level-headed lot. I do not expect we shall come across the Inquisition there!"

Verse Four – Gilgamesh’s Tavern

The Quest for Prester John entered the mouth of the Elbe River. The steering of the longboat was handed over to Maegan and Angela so that each of the men could take up an oar. Even with all hands rowing, and a strong west wind, the steady downstream flow of the river proved a formidable adversary.

The ladies in no way luxuriated either. Steering even such a small vessel became increasingly complicated as traffic on the river thickened. They decided to stop just outside of the bustling river city of Hamburg to rest and seek news.

The pier district was as extensive as London’s, and the frenzy of activity exceeded anything that any of them, except for Constantine, had ever seen before. Sagging wagons were lined up waiting to reach the docks. On many, the wheels looked on the verge of collapsing underneath the burgeoning weight of early harvest goods bound for countless North Sea ports.

Bundles of grain, barrels of wine, wheels of cheese, racks of meat, piles of fabric, metal tools, wooden furniture, and all manner of specialty goods from throughout the Holy Roman Empire were being efficiently packed into waiting merchant vessels of varying shapes and sizes.

Constantine treated the entire group to dinner in a riverside tavern. The ham and sausages were juicy and delicious. Along with the freshly hearth-baked bread and foamy cold mead, everyone was left satisfied and heartily full. They each kept their eyes and ears open for clues on what the journey east might bring, but the conversations they overheard, and understood, had only to do with trading and profits.

*

The summer in Germany was warm and pleasant. Each day they made a little progress upstream, rowing until early afternoon and then resting through the evening on into morning.

Constantine was particularly interested in reaching the city of Brandenburg, further upstream. He explained though that after Brandenburg they would have to leave the river – and the Holy Roman Empire – and begin the overland portion of their journey.

Still a few days before Brandenburg, they reached a town named Havelburg and docked to search out food and drink.

“Gilgamesh’s Tavern?” Alfred read the sign.

“Interesting,” Randol commented.

“What do you think?” Edric directed to the ladies.

“Looks pleasant enough,” Maegan assessed.

Angela nodded hungrily.

Constantine held the door open and they filed in.

The room was smoky and dim. It was also quite crowded, mostly with large German men. The group crept to the back of the tavern and found an available eight-top table board.

Fortunately, from a seating perspective, the Nordic longboat men had stayed aboard the vessel to guard the ship and its supplies. Constantine and company promised to bring them back some dinner.

Unfortunately, this arrangement prompted the diners to leave all of their weapons stowed safely onboard the ship. So in addition to being tired, hungry, and in an unfamiliar place; they were completely unarmed.

Soon after they were seated, a hefty Teutonic barmaid materialized out of the smoke and exhorted them to place drink orders. She rubbed her ample bosom against Constantine as he attempted to communicate with her, though whether this was because he was holding the purse or in response to his Greek god-like looks, no one could be certain.

The Prince managed to fend off her aggression and even order a barrel of dark mead for the group. The wench returned quickly, and a helper maiden was with her carrying cold tin cups for everyone as well as a basket of warm rolls. The mead proved thicker than the bread itself, and their stomachs soon became pleasantly full.

“Filling, yes,” Edric assessed.

“But somehow...unsatisfying,” Alfred finished his thought.

“A little slice of lamb would top it off nicely,” Randol mused.

Alfred scoffed, “I do not think these people have heard of lamb, much less a nice mutton chop, steeped in the dripping juices of baked apples.”

Edric and Randol let out low moans of theoretical pleasure.

“Why are you tormenting yourselves?” Maegan challenged.

“Be content that your stomachs are full,” Angela further rebuked them.

“I could go see if they have any sausages for sale,” Jonas tried to help.

Edric groaned again, but this time in disgust rather than longing.

“I agree,” Randol proclaimed. “If I never see another greasy German sausage again, it will be too soon. If only we could find a little something, like...” he trailed off.

“Like that,” Alfred nodded toward a group two tables over that was feasting upon a tray of juicy sliced beef tenderloin cutlets.

“See,” Edric winked at Maegan and Angela, “there are always alternatives. Apparently the Germans are not completely uncivilized.”

“You ate half a basket of bread!” Maegan was exasperated. “Are you not at all sated?”

“Naturally you cannot appreciate the toll that all-day rowing takes upon even a young man’s bones and muscles,” Randol upbraided his sister. “There occasionally comes a time when a man simply must have a proper cut of meat. Now, I will ask our Teutonic neighbors where they were able to find such a nice looking roast, and then we will merely follow in their footsteps.”

“You do not even speak the Germanic tongue!” Maegan would not let up on her brother.

“Lads,” Randol responded by putting his hands on each of the twins’ shoulders. “You can make yourselves understood to the Saxons, yes?”

“Why sure,” Alfred nodded, looking serious. The effect of the strong mead was taking hold.

“Tis hardly distinct from the King’s English,” Edric thought out loud, “just different word endings...and a few...” He burped quietly and left his sentence unfinished.

“There, you see!” Randol’s eyes were twinkling. “We shall return directly.” The three sodden travelers stumbled away from the table.

“Are you not going to do something?” Angela looked at Constantine, who had been quietly sipping from his cup. “They are no doubt heading down a dangerous path.”

The Prince finished sipping and slowly set his cup on the board. “A little taste of lean would be deeply satisfying,” he said with the distant sound of longing in his voice.

“Unbelievable,” Maegan whispered as the ladies both shook their heads.

“Put on your hoods,” Jonas whispered suddenly to them. He had been watching the room and took notice of how many of the guests had taken notice of the red and golden hair, and delightfully slender figures, of his fair companions.

It was too late. From the nearby table boards populated by local Germans, to the Venetian sailors in the booths near the door, to the Dutch merchants perched at the bar; everyone had noticed the ladies and was discussing their individual qualities with varying degrees of blatancy.

To make matters much worse, the mission of the meat-seeking trio was going extraordinarily badly. The root of their problem was the mead. The twins’ judgment was impaired and the result was a slight mistranslation.

What Edric had intended as *I say, may you tell us where we could find some of that for ourselves* came across in Germanic as *See here, I am telling you that we are taking that for ourselves*.

From that point onward, there was no real hope for a peaceful resolution. There would forever be disagreement over who threw the first punch. The truth is; it was Alfred. To his credit, he had not intended to break the nose of one of the Germans, as he was actually swinging at Edric.

Thinking that laying his brother flat with a punch might assuage the offended Germans, Alfred took a healthy swing at his twin. Yet, knowing instinctively that the punch was coming, Edric easily dodged the blow. The unprepared German behind him sprayed blood through his nose and went straight down to the floor.

Somehow still hopeful of salvaging the situation, Randol uttered a series of vaguely Germanic sounding words. Once again, the English charge against

the language barrier failed miserably, and every German within earshot bellowed their rage at this latest, albeit unintentional offense.

The second punch could have come from any of the dozens of Germans who proceeded to fall upon Randol, fists swinging. Randol disappeared beneath the Germanic avalanche as chairs, stools and tables tumbled away.

Standing back to back, the twins were able to prevent themselves from being overwhelmed and brought down, but it took a concerted effort just to hold their own. A sustained routine of blocking and punching proved sufficient to fend off attackers, as they slowly worked their way toward Randol in the hopes of offering aid.

Meanwhile, another batch of Germans had surrounded Constantine, Jonas and the ladies.

“How dare you come to our village and insult our ways!” One of the larger Germans grumbled in rudimentary English. “You must leave now, but the ladies stay with us!”

Jonas leapt up and bumped chests with the speaker. Even with his own considerable size, Jonas had to look upward to see the anger burning in the eyes of the aggressor.

“Step aside, boy,” the German rumbled ominously.

Seeing that diplomacy had already failed for Randol and the twins, Jonas responded by swiftly bringing his knee into the man’s groin. Shoving hard on the chest of the groaning bully, Jonas sent him tumbling backward into the arms of his companions.

Constantine appeared unconcerned by the total collapse of order in the tavern as he tipped back his cup to drain the remaining contents down his throat. When finished, he firmly set down the empty cup on the board and nonchalantly wiped the mead froth from his upper lip with the back of his sleeve. He did not succeed though in wiping away the hint of a sly grin upon his lips.

Maegan and Angela stood up from the table and backed away toward the relative safety of the wall. Jonas kept an uneasy space around them by swinging an upturned chair at any who approached.

Seeing that the twins were making little progress, and that Randol could not take much more of the pounding he was receiving; Constantine decided to finally make his move.

He leapt on top of their table board, cupped his hands around his mouth, and shouted a message toward the bar in Dutch. Turning toward the booths near the door he shouted again, though this time in a Venetian dialect.

The Dutch seemed to hesitate, but whatever had been said, it caused the Venetian sailors to charge immediately into the fray. The short and dark-haired boatmen began peeling Germans from the pile atop Randol of Locksley and pummeling them with rapid kicks and punches.

After a flying mead cup hit one of the Dutch traders in the face, they engaged in the scuffle too; though without a clearly defined enemy, their greatest contribution was merely in adding to the overall state of confusion.

Having delivered his mysterious message, Constantine flew from the table board and landed in a sliding dive on the smooth stone tile floor. As he slid across the floor toward a German, Constantine parted his legs so that one went out on either side of the spot where the German stood. Snapping his feet together as they surrounded the German's legs, Constantine made them buckle and the man came crashing down.

Leaping over them though, another German charged Jonas, his head down like a bull. Jonas smashed the chair across the man's back, but the attacker already had enough momentum to send Jonas into the wall. With the wind knocked out of Jonas, and Constantine becoming entangled in the milieu surrounding the twins, Maegan and Angela prepared to defend.

Stooping to retrieve a leg from the shattered chair, Maegan stayed down while bringing the wood hard into one of the German's knees. He tipped and fell, clutching at his knee. She stood and brought the wood down onto the collarbone of another attacker, crumpling him.

Angela, whose agility had been forged in the fires of her brothers' bullying, kicked high. She smashed one of the German's jaws with the tip of her boot and turned to take down another. The second attacker had been paying attention and grabbed her foot on its way up.

Turning her own mistake to an advantage, Angela let the man's hold on her foot serve as leverage for a leap high into the air. While up there, she used her other foot to deliver a swift kick to the face of a Dutchman who had become confused and charged at her.

The man holding Angela's foot realized his mistake and followed it with another. He panicked and let go of her foot, so as she prepared for her descent back to earth, she was free to kick him in the gut. He doubled over, and she brought down her elbow on his back as she landed, guaranteeing he would leave her alone.

By then, Jonas had recovered his breath and reentered the fight with a vengeance. He advanced through the crowd, felling Germans with single blows. Maegan and Angela moved behind him, covering his back.

With Constantine's help, Edric and Alfred had broken up the mob surrounding Randol, but moments too late. A group of Germans holding Randol by his arms and legs had already reached the far side of the tavern where they proceeded to fling Randol outside through an open window.

He landed in a mud puddle with a resounding splash. Picking himself up out of the ooze, Randol let out a scream of rage and bolted away from the tavern toward the waterfront.

Edric and Alfred were getting tired and each already sported an array of bruises and small cuts. Constantine was with them though, and finally Jonas and

the ladies reached them as well. The six stood together to face down the remaining Germans.

The Venetians and the Dutchmen had fled the tavern after being beaten back by the angry mob. Their interference though had bought much needed time for the Quest to regroup. They paused to breathe and assess their injuries as the remaining two dozen German combatants did the same.

Letting out a collective battle cry, the small Germanic horde charged in the direction of Maegan and Angela. Jonas hurled a table board that hit the lead attackers and took much of the force out of their charge. Constantine threw a piece of debris into the candelabrum hanging above the main group and they were showered in harmless, but still surprising hot wax. The ladies and the twins further repelled the onslaught by whipping pieces of furniture and tin cups into the crowd.

Still the Germans came on, and hand-to-hand combat quickly resumed. In the course of the ensuing battle, the Germans were finally able to isolate and surround Angela; arms down to protect themselves from her fearsome kicks. She screamed as one of them grabbed her hair and started to pull her down.

Constantine appeared and made a chop at the man's arm that left it an odd shape. From the other direction, Jonas plucked two Germans from the group and sent them both into slumber by knocking their heads together. A German who had been playing dead behind him leapt up and onto Jonas' back. Jonas turned his back toward the wall and fell into it, smashing his foolish attacker.

The twins were trying to protect Maegan, but became so caught up grappling with Germans of their own; they were unable to come between her and the largest remaining aggressor in the tavern. More than a head taller than Jonas, the blond barbarian sneered as he lunged for Maegan, attempting to grab and crush her in a bear hug.

She side-stepped and punched him hard across his temple. The beast shook his head, roared and lunged again. He managed to get his hands around her throat that time, but before he could break her neck, she sent a quick chop of her hand into his throat. He promptly let go of her and they both took a moment to gasp for breath.

Maegan recovered her senses too late though and the giant caught her with a glancing blow of his fist. She went down to the floor, seeing stars. He stood over her, gloating and bellowing sick laughter. Lifting up his leg to bring down a killing stomp upon Maegan of Locksley, the German left himself exposed to, and within reach of, Angela's foot.

She got him, and that was effectively the end of the fight. Some of the Germans refused to surrender, but after a muddy Randol returned moments later wielding his sword; no further aggressive moves were made.

Constantine led the retreat out of Gilgamesh's Tavern, followed quickly by Maegan, Angela, and the twins who bore between them a large platter of juicy

tenderloin that had somehow weathered the fighting intact and unspoiled. Jonas and Randol, his sword flashing its silent warning, brought up the rear.

After boarding the ship, they quickly crossed to the other side of the river. The longboat men were thrilled to share the choice meat and hear the tale of how it was acquired.

Everyone except for Angela was visibly injured, including Maegan around whose eye was growing a nasty black circle. But all of them, even Maegan, were strangely giddy. They realized they had faced the first great challenge in their Quest, and they had passed the test.

*

“If you would only sit still...” Maegan scolded her little brother.

“If you would take care not to...ah...” Randol winced again as she dabbed his cuts with cooking wine.

“Tis a blessed miracle not one of your bones was broken. You have angels watching over you, Randol of Locksley,” Jonas commented as he diced the beef remnants for a stew.

“Tis a miracle you are not a stain on the floor of Gilgamesh’s Tavern,” Angela chided her cousin.

“Bah,” Randol dismissed her with a flick of his hand, “tis not as if that was my first tavern brawl. And not one of them was sober, mind you.”

“And you were?” Angela shook her head. She stirred Jonas’ stew, dipped a ladle, blew on it and tasted the broth. She nodded to Jonas and he dumped in the rest of the meat.

“The mead *was* quite fierce,” Constantine reminisced. “We should be more cautious as we proceed into the wilder lands of the east.”

“I believe it is called sobriety,” Maegan chastised as she finished up her treatment on Randol. “You boys should try it.”

Normally Randol would have come back with a quick and witty retort, but having just received much needed medical attention from his sister, he left her alone. The other lads were too sore and tired to fight, and so her remark went unchallenged.

“That reminds me, Prince,” she pressed ahead, turning her gaze in Constantine’s direction, “what exactly was it that you called out to the other patrons during the tavern brawl? You employed strange tongues I could not discern, and yet your words seemed to have quite an effect on the level of excitement in the room.”

Constantine shifted his feet and looked unusually uncomfortable. Maegan raised one of her eyebrows slightly.

“Twas nothing,” he was blushing now, “pure babble to stoke the crowd.”

“Do you believe him?” Maegan asked her cousin.

“No,” Angela replied, staring smugly at the Prince.

Maegan fought back a grin as she shook her head at him. "What shall we have to do to get at the truth?"

"Careful, man," Randol cautioned, "they can be ruthless."

Constantine laughed out loud. "The truth?" he searched the sky as if he might find the right words there.

Maegan increased the arch in her eyebrow.

"Very well, I cannot lie to you, Maegan of Locksley," Constantine bowed his head, "I shouted 'The blond will leave with whoever wins the fight'."

The high-pitched rushing sound as Maegan gasped air into her lungs frightened Constantine far less than the prospect of what might imminently proceed from her lips.

"Explain your words," was her icy and only reply.

"Very well", Constantine assented. "First of all, I was never in doubt that the only possible outcome was the blond, you, leaving with us, the winners of the fight. I would have accepted no other result, and to that end, in the midst of a rapidly deteriorating situation, I made a decision to create more enemies for our enemies, true, by appealing to their lusts for you, but in the end, to protect you from the same."

"A clever tactical move," Alfred praised, earning a spear to the chest in Maegan's imagination.

"Quite," Edric added, earning several more.

"And second of all?" she pressed her offensive on Constantine, mentally brushing aside the annoyance of her cousins.

"Secondly," he wrinkled his forehead as he tried to think quickly, "apart from the tactical aspect, what I said was really nothing more than a truism."

"A truism?" she nodded along incredulously.

"Yes," he nodded back, ignoring her skepticism. "You see, to suggest that you would leave with the winner was really only to suggest that when you left, you would in fact, leave."

"I do not understand," she shook her head.

"I have never held any doubt of your ability to prevail in whatsoever situation we might encounter on this Quest," Constantine continued his exploration for a way out of trouble, "and your stellar performance in the tavern brawl only reinforces the notion that no man could ever possess you as some sort of mere object. The suggestion is absurd, and was only effective in exciting the other tavern guests because they knew of you only what they could see; though I suppose they discovered the hard way at least a taste of the depth of your courage, abilities and prowess."

Everyone stared at Maegan to see how she would respond.

"Not too bad, Prince," she nodded at him with a twinkle in her eye. "That will do, I suppose. I forgive you."

A few days later, Brandenburg came into sight.

"You have taken wonderful care of us," Randol announced to the Nordic longboat men after they successfully steered the boat into a shallow eddy on the eastern bank of the Elbe, "but now the overland portion of our journey begins, and I am afraid we must part ways..."

The Nordic lads shook their heads and waved their arms in protest. They understood English very well, but were unskilled at articulating all of its sounds and structures.

"Sorry chaps," Edric came to his cousin's aid, "but unless this boat can sail across the green earth..."

The sailors grinned and nodded enthusiastically.

"We wait the surprise to you," one uttered in a fair attempt at English.

"Come for to see," intoned another.

Everyone disembarked and worked together to turn the ship and drag it fully onto shore with long ropes. Water and river flotsam splashed away from the hull, revealing three pairs of small wooden wheels affixed to the vessel, well below the water line.

"Brilliant!" Alfred exclaimed.

"Then you are coming on with us?" Angela asked the sailors.

"Ja," they all chanted happily.

*

While the sailors, the Allendales and Jonas began rolling the ship around the outskirts of Brandenburg to camp on the eastern edge of the city, Maegan and Randol accompanied Constantine on a brief errand into the city center.

"Who or what is 'Ira the Ferret'?" Randol asked curiously.

"He was a friend of my birth father, King Leopold. He served my father well for many years as an emissary to the Holy Roman Empire. After my father's untimely death, Ira settled here in Brandenburg, where I hope he still lives," Constantine explained.

"Will he help us in some way?" Maegan wondered.

"Of that I have no doubt," Constantine answered.

*

"Here," Angela handed bowls of soup to her brothers, "'tis not much, but it *is* nice and hot." Summer was fading and the evening was cool and breezy.

"Thank you," they said in unison.

Jonas was helping the sailors secure the ship for nighttime, and Angela realized that this was the first time while on adventure that she had actually been alone with her brothers.

“Are you both mending well?” she asked.

“Aye,” they said unenthusiastically. They each still wore a number of bruises at different stages of coloring.

“And you?” Edric asked her.

“Oh,” she hesitated, “aye.”

“We saw you, you know,” Alfred nudged her.

“What do you mean?” she wondered.

“You were good; very good,” Edric winked.

“What do you mean?” she looked back and forth at them.

“In Gilgamesh’s Tavern,” Alfred explained, “you did as much if not more for our cause than any of us. Obviously, we were unable to watch you the whole time, but the portions we saw were really quite impressive.”

She was speechless.

“Constantine said as much to me; he was so amazed by your actions that I suspect he may have been uncomfortable speaking to you about it directly,” Edric continued to astound their little sister. “And for my part, I am glad you came along. We are stronger for it. We are proud of you, sis.”

“Aye,” Alfred affirmed.

“Well,” Angela said without breath, “thank you...”

She proceeded to excuse herself on the pretence of nature’s call.

Actually, she sat down behind a tree in the cold, dark woods and quietly wept into her hands; all tears of joy. She could not remember the last time her brothers had openly praised her.

*

Constantine’s knock on the thick wooden door produced no immediate results. They waited awhile and Maegan tried a louder version using her staff.

“Perhaps the tavern keeper gave us poor directions,” Randol suggested, as he looked up and down the dark and narrow cobblestone alley.

Just then a shuffling noise came from inside, and a metallic ringing sound as from a bolt sliding. Several more metallic thuds followed, each producing a distinct ringing tone. Finally, the door creaked and swung open.

A short and stubby older man stared at them from behind thick glass spectacles that were precariously balanced atop his long hooked nose. A small mane of grayish-white hair framed his features, which at first displayed no sign of recognition.

“Greetings, Ira the Ferret,” Constantine said quietly and bowed, “it has been far too long.”

“Constantine the Phoenix!” Ira’s facial expression instantly changed from wariness to exuberance as he remembered his good friend’s son.

Maegan and Randol looked at each other, wondering after this new title for their companion.

“And who is this?” Ira looked upon Maegan. “Has an enchantress come to my door this night?”

“You see before you the British nobles, sister and brother, Maegan and Randol of Locksley,” Constantine introduced his friends. “We journey to the farther east and have come to seek your wisdom for the path ahead.”

“Locksley, eh?” the old man wrinkled his brow. “Now why does that name sound familiar to me?” He paused. “Well, any friend of the Angelos is a friend of mine. Come in, will you? Please, come along.” He practically pulled them inside before shutting and thoroughly bolting the door.

Ira the Ferret led the three youths through his narrow row house and into the small stone kitchen attached at the back. On the way, the travelers’ eyes could not take in all of the strange and rare objects that cluttered the front two rooms along every wall from floor to ceiling.

Books, bottles, tools, house wares, a few weapons, paintings, small statues, musical instruments, maps, strange mechanical devices, shields, unusual pieces of armor, riding tack, crafts, stained glass, mirrors, clothing, bowls of candy, gems, silver jewelry and hats were among the unique items that lined the interior of the Ferret’s storefront and home.

Once he had his guests seated around a small wooden table, he began rummaging in his cupboards for food to share. He soon had dry flat bread, figs, a small block of hard cheese, salted fishes and cups of wine arrayed before them. Lighting a nearby candelabrum to illuminate their dinners, he encouraged them to start eating.

“Now then...” Ira continued to hover, but trailed off when he finally saw the remnant of Maegan’s black eye in the candlelight. He cast a sorrowful glance at Constantine as if to ask; *how could you let such a thing happen?*

Maegan perceived his thoughts and explained, “We ran into a spot of trouble in a town downriver called Havelburg.”

“Oh, Havelburg,” disgust was evident on the Ferret’s face. “Never go to Havelburg!” He began coughing in his exasperation. “Please, do not let me even start about Havelburg...” The old man clutched at his chest in his angst.

“Tis a relief to know we are not the only ones to have had difficulty there,” Randol thought out loud.

“No, my lad,” Ira shook his head, “and you will surely not be the last.”

“What news of the lands to the east?” Constantine inquired. “What has come to your ears, wise Ferret?”

A shadow grew over old Ira’s face. “These are dark times, my young adventurers,” he answered at last, and his chin began to tremble as he sought for his next words. “I have a nephew. He had been serving for years in the court of a mighty Muscovite Prince, but he appeared on my doorstep only last month. My poor nephew; not much older than you all, yet his hair is now whiter than mine.”

“What happened to him?” Maegan asked.

Ira hesitated, simply shaking his head for awhile. "At first, he could not even speak to me," he remembered, "but after I fed him, his tongue loosened. Then I could not stop his talking, though much of it was babble. I could scarcely make sense of it all. He spoke of a vast horde, more endless than the sea, of hell-born horsemen that swept over the land leaving nothing in their wake but smoke and dust.

"He spoke of mountains...pyramids of skulls; men, women, children, even horses and dogs," Ira's voice became even more wavered. "He said that this all happened only last spring when remnants of the winter snow still lingered on the northern steppe. According to my dear nephew, not a single spot of white snow was left where the horsemen passed, for all the earth was red with blood."

The old man's frightening words were punctuated by the ringing of the eventide tolls in the nearby church.

"Who were these dark riders of doom?" Randol broke the silence that followed the tolling of the bells.

"He did not know for certain," Ira answered.

"Might they be a new branch of the Turkish hordes that have plagued Byzantium for so many years?" Constantine wondered.

"Perhaps," said Ira, "though some whisper that Attila has arisen again, or someone even more ancient and terrifying, like Nimrod."

"Might they not be fearful barbarians driven forth by Prester John?" Maegan asked. "Have you heard of him?"

"Now that does sound somewhat familiar," Ira mumbled as he scratched his head and adjusted his spectacles. "Where did I hear that name?"

"Perhaps you have heard of his kingdom in the farther east, even beyond the wide steppe of the Rus," Constantine offered.

"Hmm..." Ira rubbed his chin. "You do not mean John the Presbyter?"

"That may be a name he is called," Constantine acknowledged.

"No," Ira shook his head, "now that I think of it, this could not be the same person. This man was no king, and he did not dwell in the farther east."

"Who was he?" Maegan asked.

"He was a hermit I met once that lived deep in the Bavarian hills," Ira reminisced. "He was a preacher of your Christian God-Man, but he lived in hidden isolation, shunned and even hunted by the Roman church. Though I must say, for a supposed madman, I found his ideas to be as clear as any I have heard. And I have heard many over the years."

"You do not believe in the God-Man; in Christ Jesus?" Randol asked.

Ira winced. "I have heard the legends," he explained, "and they are interesting to be sure. But answer me this, Christian! If the Messiah had come, why are we not saved? How can the world still be full of such violence and hatred? Would the Son of God not set it all at right? How could he come and then leave, and not set it all at right?"

No one had a quick answer for him.

"I am sorry," Ira took a deep breath. "Forgive an old man. I do not mean to disturb your faith, but I cannot look at the world as it is and still share what you believe. I just cannot."

"I understand," said Constantine. "No offense is taken. And we will heed your warning of danger in the east. Our goal is to reach Kiev on the Dnepr before the snows come so that we may winter there. We shall stay alert as we proceed to the east, watching for any distant early warning signs of this great horde's approach."

"Your Quest is bound to succeed, for God is surely with you," Ira patted Randol and Constantine on their backs while he winked at Maegan. "Now, is there anything that I can do to help you?"

"Do you still keep your birds?" the Prince asked.

"Of course," a sparkle grew in Ira's eyes, "follow me."

He led them up a narrow spiral staircase that they accessed through a barely noticeable closet door. They climbed for some time and emerged onto the rooftop which provided a wonderful view of the surrounding city. In a small enclosure opposite the stairwell were three large cages. Two were empty, but the third held a beautiful white gyrfalcon. The bird leapt obediently onto Ira's arm after he had donned a glove and opened the cage door.

"Do you have something ready?" Ira asked.

Constantine answered by handing him a miniature scroll.

Ira slid the little note into a small metal tube attached firmly to one of the bird's legs.

"Do you know what to do?" Ira asked the gyrfalcon.

The bird squawked a reply that sounded remarkably affirmative in tone. With no further delay, the gyrfalcon lifted itself into the sky and disappeared into the night.

Maegan and Randol had by then sufficiently accepted the mysterious nature of their Byzantine comrade so that they probed him only briefly about the white gyrfalcon after it became clear he was either unwilling or unable to explain the purpose of its flight.

At Ira's insistence, the three visitors accepted sleeping arrangements for the night in his home. Constantine had warned the others this might happen, so those guarding the longboat did not worry. Early the next morning, after breaking fast with Ira the Ferret, Constantine and the Locksleys thanked him for his hospitality and left to rejoin the others.

During the next week, they pulled the rolling longboat onward to the banks of the Oder River. Taking to the water, they again began the arduous process of rowing upstream. As they did, they left behind the realm of the Holy Roman Empire and entered the western reaches of the Kingdom of Poland.

Verse Five – The Pack of the Wild Hunt

“All hail!” the herald cried and blasted his horn as Prince Kazimierz thundered through the open gates of the outer bailey. His horse was foaming so he headed straight for the stable and water trough. Close on his heels, as always, rode the enormous Jagielon Premyslyd, his faithful friend and bodyguard.

Leaving their exhausted beasts in the stable master’s care, the duo marched slowly up the hill toward the main fort. Their legs were unsteady from a night in the saddle, and their hearts were heavy because of their inability to stop the wolf raids.

“We cannot keep this up,” the Prince finally admitted, “and these wolves are cagey. We will never catch them!”

“Yes,” Jagielon agreed, “by the time we hear word of a raid; they have already disappeared into the forest.”

“I shall not allow my people to suffer one more lost lamb. We will drive off this wolf pack or die trying!” Kazimierz raged.

“If we are going to die, we at least should try to get some sleep first,” Jagielon grinned at his captain.

“Fair enough,” the Prince slapped his friend on the shoulder. “Let us arise at midday then, and we will think of a way to thwart these beasts.”

*

They waited a few nights to let the wolves grow hungry and brave again. Leaving a ewe in a shallow ditch near the edge of the woods, the Prince and his aide hid with their horses behind an enormous hay stack. The wind was favorable, coming out of the northwest.

“They should catch no scent of us,” Jagielon assessed, “at least, not until it is too late for them.”

“And the Ogitziahs understand what they are to do?” the Prince checked for the third time.

“They are ready.”

The brothers Boleslaw and Pakoslaw Ogitziah had grown up on a nearby farm. Bigger than boys, though still not quite men, the fighting potential of the rough and tumble lads had caught the Prince’s eye soon after his arrival that spring. He immediately hired them into his royal retinue, thereby doubling the size of his army to its current level of four. The brothers waited behind another small hill of fresh hay, prepared to ride out at the Prince’s signal.

They did not have to wait long. The same three wolves that had been seen in the area all summer soon emerged from the forest, slowing creeping toward the stranded ewe that glowed white in the light of the full moon. Kazimierz had dismounted and was laying flat on the ground watching them, keeping perfectly still while he prepared to hunt down the hunters.

The wolves kept low too; slowly circling and tactically crisscrossing paths. Convincing themselves that they were safe to pounce, they tightened their circle around the ewe pit. The wooly creature remained frozen and silent in her utter terror.

Not until the wolves stood poised at the very edge of the pit did the Prince whistle his birdcall signal, and the four horses flew. Spears pointed down, the Polish horsemen devoured the gap between themselves and the three wolves like a flash of summer lightning. Abandoning their best hope for dinner, the wolves aimed straight for the protection of the trees.

“They are going to make it!” Jagielon seethed, seeing that the wolves were moments away from disappearing into the thick wood.

In their impetuous lust for the hunt, the Ogitzia brothers hurled their spears just before the wolves vanished. Pakoslaw’s sailed right over the back of the largest wolf and bored into the trunk of a birch tree. Boleslaw’s spear caught the rump of the slowest wolf causing it to hit the ground and roll. Jagielon rode his horse over the beast without losing any distance in the chase.

“Do not stop!” Kazimierz bellowed. Though conventional wisdom forbade a mounted foray into the forest after sundown, the Prince was earnest in his pledge to accept death as the only alternative to failure.

The riders smashed their way into the thick old growth. Kazimierz and Jagielon led the way with the Ogitzia brothers right behind. With no time to retrieve their spears, the brothers were now armed only with stocky short swords, which they drew and held at the ready.

Even through the thick forest canopy, the combination of moon and star light allowed them to track the flickering shadows of the fleeing predators. The wolves led them deeper and deeper into the forest. The riders were paying for their tenacity with an ever increasing number of scrapes on their faces and the parts of their extremities not covered by their padded leather armor.

The trees and shrubs seemed to thicken the further in they chased, and the agile wolves were gaining more distance. Then suddenly, they disappeared.

“In the light of day we might follow their trail,” Jagielon panted, “but at least we got one. It is a fair beginning.”

“It is not enough,” the Prince was overcome by the fever of the chase. He bolted in the direction they had last seen the wolves, and the others demonstrated the depth of their loyalty as they followed him into the blackness of the deep forest.

After an unseen thorn branch tore a sizeable gash in Kazimierz’s cheek, he at least slowed to a trot. The other three hunters stayed close, eyes wide and heads down.

They heard the wolves before they saw them. The low growl was unmistakable, but there was another sound as well. Amidst the welling rumble of the adults, they could hear the eerily human sounding cries of cubs.

“It’s the lair!” Jagielon yelled, “God help us!”

The two wolves appeared in the path looking much larger than they had from afar. The horses reared up, frantically kicking their hooves and snorting steam. Then two more wolves appeared beside the first; and then another two.

Jagielon stopped counting after that and threw his spear. The hulking grey wolf did not dodge quickly enough and was pinned to the ground. It let out a piercing howl that shook the horsemen's souls.

"Ride for your lives!" Prince Kazimierz bellowed. Now alone possessing a spear, he led the charge attempting to break out of the swiftly closing ring of angry wolves.

Meanwhile, in another part of the forest...

"You must have heard that!" Alfred stood and grabbed his bow.

"You are right," Edric nodded. "Something comes this way!"

Constantine added wood to the campfire, while the ladies quietly picked up their bows and put arrows to the strings.

"That sounds like horses," Jonas twirled his spear.

"And something else," Randol drew his sword and slid on his shield.

The sounds of snapping branches and crunching hooves grew to a roar before the bloodied horseman appeared and charged into the range of their campfire light.

He spilled lifelessly from his horse, plunging headfirst into a low juniper bush just as two giant grey wolves materialized out of the night and pulled his horse to the ground. A third large wolf revealed itself and leapt for the fallen man. A volley of arrows thudded into its torso, bringing it down.

Constantine came on the run; yelling wildly and brandishing a small burning log. Jonas and Randol joined him in a screaming charge, and the other two wolves gave up their claim to the dead horse. The men advanced quickly to the fallen rider. Beyond him amidst the trees, they could see the blazing yellow eyes of the advancing wolf pack.

"Take him near the fire!" Constantine roared.

Jonas scooped the man up and ran with him back toward camp. Edric and Alfred passed him on the way as they sped toward Randol and Constantine who were becoming surrounded and cut off. Jonas laid the man on one of their blankets near the fire. When Maegan caught a glimpse of his injuries in the firelight, she dropped her weapon and ran to him.

Angela continued sending arrows into the night; two dozen by the end. Though no one could see the results in the total blackness beyond the camp, five of her shots produced searing howls of pain from out of the darkness at various distances. Later, her brothers would criticize the ratio of wasted arrows. At the time, however, they were grateful for the cover as they retreated to camp.

Maegan was soon confident that she had stopped the loss of blood at all the necessary places on the stranger's body. From that point she focused on

keeping him motionless and warm, while she made gentle attempts to have him take liquid or show signs of awareness.

At one point during that long, dark and watchful night, the wounded man did open his eyes. Maegan was looking away at the time and did not see, but before drifting into a deep unconsciousness that would last for several weeks, Prince Kazimierz looked upon the English noble lady, and convinced that she was an angel sent to bring him to heaven; he said a silent prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mother, asking her intercession for the forgiveness of his sins, and he resigned himself to die.

*

Finally, the sun came. They were all stiff and sore from the sleepless night on constant high alert, but no wolves remained to be seen in the morning's bright yellow blaze.

Kazimierz lived, but would not awaken. So Constantine and the twins went on an expedition to look for clues as to who the wounded man might be, and where he might belong. The trail left by the man's dead horse was not hard to follow and led them to a tall pine tree at the edge of a small clearing.

Up in the tree's highest boughs they sighted the two strangest looking birds they had ever seen. Presently, the birds began sliding down through the thickly needled branches. Then the search party realized they were not looking upon birds at all, but two young men.

The brothers Ogitziaak had become covered, first in pine sap, and then in white and brown feathers from the multiple nests they disturbed in their haste to flee the wolves. They had been too afraid to come down until they saw other humans on the ground.

Constantine greeted the birdmen in a half dozen tongues, but to no avail. Finally, he motioned with his fingers; *three of us, two of you*.

The brothers shook their heads and each held up four fingers. They looked at each other then and suddenly bolted across the small clearing, diving into a thicket. They emerged moments later, staggering and weeping.

Running to the thicket, the other three peered behind it and saw the remains of the once mighty Jagielon Premyslyd. Constantine gave his cloak to the twins for wrapping up the body, then went to the Ogitziaaks, hugged them and prayed with words they did not need to understand.

They were ready to leave that place and return to camp when voices cried out, sounding remarkably human. Edric and Alfred followed the sounds to their source and found the two tiny wolf pups. They were clearly in need of food and care, and did not resist as they were gently scooped up by the twins.

The Ogitziaaks wanted to kill them on sight; but Constantine calmed the jittery brothers, encouraging them instead to take charge of their fallen comrade's body and accept the pups as spoils of war. The brothers relented and bore

Jagielon between them, while the brothers Allendale each cradled a pup, and Constantine led the way.

Angela fell in love when she saw the pups. Her remorse at having killed off their guardians, albeit in self-defense, made her concern for them all the more at the forefront of her thoughts.

The feathery Ogitziahs fell on their knees at the side of their Prince and looked anxiously at what they assumed to be a white woodland witch. Maegan, with Constantine's help, communicated through gestures that Kazimierz was alive. The brothers rejoiced and helped build a gurney to carry their wounded lord back to his fort.

The slow-moving party emerged from the shadowy forest into open field at high noon under the warm autumn sun. Free from the tangle of trees, and with the fort in sight, they moved briskly.

The herald at the gates blasted an alert with his trumpet upon seeing the manner of his master's return. Peasants, household staff and even the hired artisans all came running and surrounded the group. Flightlessly flapping their arms, the Ogitziahs vouched for the friendliness of the strangers that bore the motionless Prince.

The mob permitted the travelers to enter the fort at which time Maegan effectively seized control of the Polish Principality of Krakow, directing the household staff and converting Kazimierz's own quarters into an infirmary that would have impressed the Hospitaller Knights. She was determined that he not die and kept a near constant vigil, ministering to the utmost of her ability.

With a comparable tide of compassion, Angela worked day and night to feed and nurture the pups. She had trained and housebroken two generations of offspring sired by her childhood dog, Jack. This experience served her well as she domesticated the fur balls that would soon become deadly hunters.

Weeks passed before Prince Kazimierz showed even stirrings of awareness. The presence of his newfound friends, however, served his fledgling administration well during his convalescence. In their own ways, each of the journeyers made great contributions to the strength of the fort settlement to which Kazimierz had been appointed by his father, King Wenceslaus, at the beginning of that very year.

A stern and austere king, Wenceslaus had stationed his many sons in small frontier posts. Rather than positioning them over established towns, or in the palace, the shrewd king expected his own sons to build mini-kingdoms of their own from humble beginnings just as he had.

The youngest of eleven boys, Kazimierz was the last of his brothers to be sent away to a remote boarder outpost. Each of his older brothers had so far demonstrated great success in building up his resources, hiring laborers and soldiers, and spreading royal influence in the surrounding countryside.

Kazimierz therefore felt enormous pressure to do the same, and for this his overreaching against the troublesome wolf pack was partly to blame. Yet the

same strangers who saved him from his error also boosted his prospects for both the immediate and more remote future.

While Maegan and Angela practiced their healing and nurturing arts, the men set to various tasks. After becoming fast friends with the stable master, Randol, Edric and Alfred rode out almost daily, rain or shine, for game hunting. Their regular quarries of deer and wild pig kept the entire community strong with good meat and with a hearty supply of salted flanks for the long winter as well.

Jonas took his heavy axe to the edge of the forest each morning and his rhythmic hacking became an accepted background noise for weeks on end. Returning six or seven times daily with a full cartload of chopped firewood, the mighty Little stocked the fort with enough fuel to keep the hearth blazing through that winter and possible the next.

For his part Constantine went fishing, but not for fish. He was catching men. Riding the low hills and misty vales of the countryside with the Ogitzia brothers, the Byzantine Prince sought out the rogues, bandits and highwaymen who had been appearing more frequently ever since the demise of the wolf pack.

Yet rather than confronting these hard men who lurked in the shadow of civilization, or simply running them down, Constantine appealed to their instinctive desire for safety and food. With linguistic help from his local companions, he approached each band of vagrants with the respectfulness of an imperial emissary.

While many refused the offer to be hired into royal service and fight for Kazimierz, some did see the appeal of daily bread and soup, a roof and a fire, and membership in something larger than themselves. Before Prince Kazimierz was even well enough to stand, Constantine had built him a royal retinue fifteen horsemen strong.

*

Dreams and visions tumbled across Prince Kazimierz' distant flickering consciousness as he lay at the threshold of death's door. He heard animals speaking. He saw childhood friends standing alongside his new companions; out of place and out of time. He saw himself, but it was not really him. Something had changed. And then there was the music...

The sound of it, dripping with tone and resonance, rang through his ears, filled his head and shimmered downward all the way into his fingers and toes. The music warmed him and made his suspicion that he was actually in great pain feel more like an absurd fantasy.

Whenever the music would stop, he left the place where he could be aware of having a body and hid in the deeper parts of his mind. But he came back to the edge of the world each time the music would begin again. And then one evening, something new happened.

A distinct pattern emerged from the melody, though still following its theme. As the two patterns grew increasingly independent, the pure ringing of their harmony became stronger. This time the sound did not feel like it entered him through the ears, but as if it originated from the inside of his chest.

The Prince had never heard such a sound before, yet he was somehow sure he had known the song intimately his whole life. The words made sense to him, though they were sung in an exotic and strange language.

*May the Lord answer you when you are in distress
May the name of the God of Jacob protect you
May He send you help from the sanctuary
And grant you support from Zion
May he remember all your sacrifices
And accept your burnt offerings*

Then as suddenly as it had come, the new sound vanished. The original melody remained, however, and continued with an increasing frequency of flourishes, building to a crescendo of blissful vibrancy before collapsing back into an even more quiet and subdued version of itself.

The Prince knew that the other sound would return soon. He could feel it coming, and the sense of anticipation made the hairs on his neck tingle. The sensation brought him to a renewed awareness of his relationship to his body. The revelation was disturbing as he became reacquainted with true pain, but exhilarating nevertheless.

*May He give you the desire of your heart
And make all your plans succeed
We will shout for joy when you are victorious
And will lift up our banners in the name of our God
May the Lord grant all your requests*

*Now I know that the Lord saves his anointed
He answers him from his holy heaven
With the saving power of his right hand
Some trust in chariots and some in horses
But we trust in the name of the Lord our God*

*They are brought to their knees and fall
But we rise up and stand firm*

*O Lord, save the king!
Answer us when we call!*

On hearing the words, *save the king*, Prince Kazimierz opened his eyes. Maegan saw him, stopped playing and smiled.

“Am I dead?” he asked in High Church Latin. “Am I in heaven?”

“Not yet,” she explained. “You must still have work to do.”

*

That afternoon, while Maegan welcomed the Polish Prince back to the land of the living, Angela walked the two rapidly growing wolf pups in the high grasses beyond the fort’s outer bailey. Constantine met up with the tumbling threesome under the warm autumn sun.

“Could you use some help?” the Byzantine laughed at Angela’s struggle to keep up with the antics of the miniature hunters. Every grasshopper, fly or blowing leaf sent the pair into a raging tumult of predatory enthusiasm.

“You are not riding out today?” she squinted against the sun as it sat just over Constantine’s shoulder.

“Not today,” he marveled as the light transformed her hair into a blazing red halo. “The Ogitziahs had to attend their own family.”

She nodded.

They followed the pups far across the field walking at a leisurely pace, only speeding up if needed to keep the bumbling grey balls of fur within sight.

“Tis not strange to think that our being here together, right now, owes so much to a chance encounter between our mothers so many years ago?” she pondered to the Prince.

“You do not really believe it to be mere fortune do you?” he winked.

“What do you mean?” she plucked a sheave of wheat and waved it in front of her as she walked.

They paused as the pups gave up their pursuit of a beetle and attacked each other.

“There are rivers of purpose that flow throughout history, twisting and weaving, parting and rejoining again.” Constantine looked at the sky, “And I believe that lives and friendships, even across generations are the same way.”

“Perhaps you are right,” she allowed. Angela plucked the head of wheat from the end of its stalk, rubbed the grain into loose seeds in her hand and then blew them away on the breeze. “May I ask about you; about your past?”

“You may,” the Prince stared at her, somewhat unnervingly.

“And I know that you must deal with many princely concerns and should I delve too deeply into matters political, or personal, I ask only that you...”

“You may delve,” he interrupted her. “Just know that as one delves, so one must be prepared to be delved in return. Tis the way of things.” His grin had grown considerably.

“Very well,” she looked down, blushing. “Where do I begin? I want to ask about your boyhood. What was it like? Were you happy? You know of

words and ways from more lands than I have dreamed of; have you traveled your whole life? Do you have a home? Where is your kingdom? What is your kingdom? And just how is it that you can be so..."

She trailed off as their eyes met. He arched his eyebrow to show his interest in learning just what exactly he was. She did not even notice though as she was alternately trying to avoid staring too long into his eyes or at his maddeningly confident smile, or at the black curly locks of hair that framed his chiseled Mediterranean face.

"So..." he took a step closer and she could feel his warmth as the evening breezes lapped at their faces.

"So infuriatingly perfect..." she had actually meant to say to herself, silently; in her mind. But she let it out in a whisper as well, and he heard her.

"I could say the same of you, Angela Allendale," he said so closely to her face that she could feel his breath.

Good Lord, she thought, he is going to kiss me! This cannot be happening. I just wanted to walk the pups. I did not even ask for his company, and here the Prince comes along, turning everything upside down as he always seems to and now that he has me alone...could it be that his eye is for me? Surely his heart is fixed on Maegan. They have had eyes for each other since England. What am I going to do? I have to stop this! My brothers would experience beserkerang and what Maegan would say, not to mention her brother... and Jonas...oh, dear God, help me!

She was sure he was leaning further in toward her and could not stand the pressure anymore. Angela closed her eyes and resigned herself to whatever might come.

"Now, as for your questions," he suddenly stepped back as if nothing had been happening and began rattling off his answers in the sequence that she had asked for them. Confused torrents of relief, disappointment, anger and thoughts of revenge swirled through Angela's emotions so rapidly she might have swooned, but for that she would not allow the Prince such satisfaction.

"Ah, yes," she replied with all the steadiness and blasé she could muster.

"My boyhood was richly blessed," Constantine began, "from as far back as I can remember until I reached the age of twelve, I lived well-cared for and well trained in all manner of skill and art under the supervision of my mother on a small, remote island in the Mediterranean Sea.

"Having all of my creature needs provided for, I was able to devote extraordinary amounts of time to learning and letters; languages and logistics. With vast financial resources and many friendships, my mother was also able to, and did, provide me with access to sages and leaders in various arenas of life whenever there was an opportunity.

"And yet Our Lord himself declared that 'To whom much is given, much will be expected'", Constantine confessed, "and so was I happy as a boy? Yes, I suppose I was. I always understood how blessed I have been, and I am grateful

for it all. And yet on some part I have always felt an enormous pressure to make a difference; to do something extraordinary, perhaps trying to justify all I was given while so many in this world survive with so little.”

“I understand,” she nodded.

“After turning twelve, I began my travels which have continued ever since. I could tell you enough stories of strange lands and stranger people to fill a room with scrolls, but do I have a home? I do not know that I do. There are people that I care about, and if I am with them then I feel at home. But there is no one place for me.”

“What about your kingdom?” she reminded him.

He laughed. “Actually, it is an empire.”

“What about your empire?”

“The story is a sad one and began many years before we were born, so let us turn back toward the fort as I tell it to you. The sun will be down soon.”

They started walking back and the pups eagerly followed since they were getting hungry.

“It all began in the Fourth Crusade,” Constantine continued, “While the first three crusades had succeeded in driving the Saracens out of the holy cities, the Fourth went tragically wrong. Rather than carrying the battle to the Saracens, or even against the Turk, the Frankish and Teutonic Knights instead turned their fury against their fellow, though non-Papist, Christians.

“For easy wealth and plunder, they sacked my great Constantinople, looted its holy relics and destroyed the city’s heart in a maelstrom of murder, rape and burning. My mother was only a little girl at the time and escaped with my grandfather Isaac Angelus when he was dethroned and forced into exile. Only two loyal Byzantine provinces remain in the east. Yet even to this very day, Nicaea and Trebizond have kept themselves unencumbered by Papal authority.

“When my mother was grown, and by the time that your parents stayed with her, she had become a powerful figure in the Papal usurper administration, mostly to keep an eye on them. Though after she had become pregnant with me, the tide turned when the sitting Emperor was assassinated. His replacement wished to purge any elements of the rightful Imperial line, and that is why my mother has been in hiding for all of my life.”

“I am beginning to understand your distaste for the Roman Church,” Angela acknowledged.

“The Byzantine Empire has served throughout the centuries, not only as a bulwark against the eastern barbarian hordes, but also against the monopoly of earthly power regarding heavenly matters. Some Christians might follow Rome, some Constantinople, but they were all Christians who knew they must answer to God in the end.

“But with my great city held captive by Rome, there is no organized government left that can effectively challenge the Roman Pontiff’s claim to

supremacy over all Christian lands on earth. This has led to abuses of power, as you know.”

“Are you hoping that this Prester John will help restore you to your rightful place in the Empire?” She squinted into the sun.

“I had not thought of that,” Constantine laughed. “I shall be content if he will come to our aid against the Saracens.”

Angela was preparing to ask another question when she saw her brothers coming on the run.

“What is it?” Constantine asked as they arrived breathless.

“Come and see!” Alfred exclaimed.

“Kazimierz is awake!” Edric declared.

*

“I owe you a debt that can never be repaid,” Prince Kazimierz addressed his new company of friends as they stood around his hearth. The warmth of the raging fire made them all the more able to appreciate the beauty of the season’s first snowfall outside.

Kazimierz turned his face toward the firelight, and the still healing scar across his cheek made him look fierce in the orange glow. He continued, “At the very least you must allow me to host you for the winter. As the snows have begun, you would face great peril if you attempt to reach Kiev before spring.”

“How then can we refuse?” Maegan ask him rhetorically.

“You cannot,” he bowed to his healer and friend.

*

The whole group, including the Ogitziahs and most of Prince Kazimierz’ personal staff attended the brief but moving ceremony that was held just before Yuletide in honor of the memory of Jagielon Premyslyd. As a side project, when not on the hunt, Randol and the twins had engraved and erected a modest standing stone at the edge of the trees where Jagielon had entered the forest for the last time.

Following the Ogitziah brothers’ advice regarding Prince Kazimierz’ appreciation of simplicity, the Englishmen had chiseled only three words to be known by the memorial stone’s readers in ages to come:

Jagielon Premyslyd
Hero

Maegan played her harp and sang a few mournful dirges in Church Latin so they would sound familiar to the Poles. Constantine recited several passages

from Ecclesiastes, again using the High speech of Rome for the benefit of those who felt the loss most keenly.

Kazimierz said nothing, but everyone kept a long respectful silence as he did so. Finally, he laid a flowered wreath in front of the stone, turned, and walked back into his fort. His retinue followed, all except for the Ogitziak brothers who threw themselves in front of the stone, wailing, ripping at their own clothes and hair, and beating their chests.

“Why do you mourn so much for one your Captain has already laid to rest?” Jonas asked when he returned later to check on the brothers.

The Ogitziahs paused and thought.

“Our Prince will not cry for a true hero like Jagielon,” Boleslaw answered. “So we are mourning on his behalf as well as our own.”

“Moreover, Jagielon died so that we may live,” Pakoslaw explained.

“This makes him like Christ, so we are mourning His suffering and death, too.”

“Should you not also then celebrate Jagielon’s place in heaven, where he lives on with Our Resurrected Lord?” Jonas tested their faith.

The brothers looked at each other.

“Come back to the hearth,” Jonas urged them. “We shall drink a round to Jagielon, and you can tell me the stories of his greatest battles and deeds.”

The Ogitziahs hesitated, but finally followed Jonas back inside. The round of drinks became a feast that lasted until Yuletide. The entire population of the Polish outpost settlement, and their English guests, celebrated heartily and gave a bounty of thanks to God for the revival of Prince Kazimierz, and with him their hopes for the future.

*

The winter was brutally cold but the Polish fort was sturdy and warm on the inside. As the snows finally did begin to melt, Constantine grew increasingly anxious to continue the Quest.

“I wish that I could convince you to stay for another year,” Prince Kazimierz made eye contact with everyone in the group except for Maegan, “but I know that your hearts are fixed upon your Quest. I can only thank God ten thousand times more for sending you,” he finally did look at Maegan, “but at the very least you must permit me to escort you to the edge of my lands, and to send with you as much meat, bread and wine as you can carry.”

“Agreed,” Maegan smiled at her friend and former patient.

In the end, Kazimierz sent them away with much more than provisions and a temporary escort. On the morning of their departure, the Polish Prince presented them with seven dappled horses of fine breeding; not heavy war-steeds, but lean and patient long-distance runners. For endurance and steadiness, they were unparalleled in the region.

The combined mounted parties rode together for two full days, whereupon they reached the edge of Kazimierz' authority. On the morning of the third day, the group split and parted ways. Prince Kazimierz, who had assumed control of the land just a year before with the aid of only three retainers, would return to Krakow in command of a company of royal knights, nearly twenty strong, and with the added companionship of two large tamed wolves.

The wolves were no happier that Angela was leaving than Kazimierz was to lose Maegan. The former licked their trainer, and in many ways mother, until she was soaked. The latter contented himself with a polite kiss on the back of Maegan's hand.

They all exchanged blessings and thanks before the Quest for Prester John rode due east into the rising sun and the royal Polish company traveled west back to their home.

Taking Kazimierz' advice, the Quest soon turned northward though to avoid the steeper hill country in the southern stretches of the Volyhnian march. After months of tedious river travel and the long winter cooped up indoors, they were overjoyed to race across the rich open countryside in springtime for several days on end.

Yet the further they traveled into the lands of the Kievan Rus, the more thickly covered the land became in ancient and towering trees. Eventually, as the trees grew closer and closer together, the riders were forced to dismount and lead their horses by hand through the thick growth of the Great Russian Forest.

Each day grew warmer and the woods provided plenty of small game and forage to eat. Spirits in the group were high and all of the travelers faced the unknown adventures that awaited them with optimism and readiness; all that is except for Jonas Little.

Perhaps tis merely mother's voice in my mind, Jonas told himself repeatedly. All her stories of danger in the eastern lands have left me without a level head. Surely, there is nothing a man with a sturdy axe like mine need fear amidst a forest of trees.

Verse Six – The Forests of Russia

“Ham,” Edric proposed, “smothered in summertime honeycomb, slowly turning around and around on the spit. You use your bread plate to catch the drippings, but you do not eat it right away.”

“No?” Constantine sounded concerned.

“No,” Alfred explained, “set it aside. Patience is of the essence.”

“When the honey ceases to drip, the readiness of the ham draws near, but its time has still not yet fully come...” Jonas joined the chorus praising the virtues of a good British pig roast to Constantine’s delight, mostly because it was exasperating the women.

“Not yet?” the Prince shook his head, frowning mildly.

“Hardly,” Randol did his part, “for you see, the time for action has then arrived! You draw your sword!” He drew his for drama, and the usually resonant ringing sound of the blade pulling against the scabbard evaporated into the hollow and misty depths of the thick forest around them.

“Are you going to kill another imaginary pig?” Maegan asked, disrupting their daydreaming.

“Then,” Edric led the others in ignoring her remark, “hold your bread plate steady by placing your thumb and two fingers at its center, and make a cut through the bread horizontally.”

“This sounds simple enough, but the slightest deviation in the sword’s path can result in disaster,” Alfred warned.

“And yet if the cut is true,” Randol advised, “you will be left with two bread plates just like the original, only each half as thick.”

“Yet surely,” Constantine played along, “such thin bread plates would hold no meat!”

“In the hands of the uninitiated, perhaps,” Jonas allowed, “but soon you too will know our secret.”

Angela made sure that Jonas was looking when she rolled her eyes.

“What is that?” Alfred asked.

“Can you hear it?” Edric whispered.

“Shh,” Jonas motioned for silence.

A quiet hissing sound emanated from somewhere nearby.

“Oh Lord,” Maegan was becoming agitated, “what is that?”

“Tis ready,” Jonas whispered ominously.

“What?” Maegan gasped.

“The ham,” Randol explained nonchalantly and proceeded to grin at his sister as he performed an amplified version of his hissing ham impression, not altogether unlike the sound of a snake, or perhaps a large angry rodent.

She swatted him repeatedly for his chicanery and saved a smack for Jonas Little, too. They all walked on, explaining to Constantine in excruciating

detail how the thin strips of ham are peeled from the roast and carefully laid out in between the thin bread plates.

"And then," Randol concluded, "the final stroke comes. Bringing your sword down upon the upper plate once, twice" he demonstrated in the air, "at last you have a nicely quartered hamloaf, as we like to call it."

"We need to tell him about the dipping sauce," Jonas began when Edric grabbed him by the shoulder and motioned for everyone to freeze.

"Oh no," Maegan shook her head, "you fooled me once..."

Edric gave her a look that assured he was serious.

"I see it," Alfred whispered.

"Allow me, lads," Randol was already putting an arrow to his bowstring.

"What is it? I cannot see," Maegan strained her neck and eyes.

"The end of the fantasy," Randol murmured as he steadied and aimed his bow, "and the beginning of a real roast chicken dinner."

"Are you sure..." Jonas started to whisper, but the arrow had already flown; and though they never heard a sound, a bright and colorful flurry of feathers briefly plumed in the filtered light of early evening, showing the spot where Randol's arrow had found its mark.

"Well done," Alfred assessed, "but hitting the mark is only half the battle. Now you must find and retrieve your quarry, and before sundown."

"Very well," Randol replied, "who is with me?"

After days of plodding through thick forest on foot, no one was keen for extra walking before dinner. Randol frowned at his unresponsive companions.

"My mother always says you must never venture alone in a strange wood," Angela said after she could stand the silence no longer.

"Thank you, my loyal cousin and friend," Randol beamed.

"I shall go too," Jonas decided, "you know what Friar Tuck always says about a braid of three cords."

"Splendid!" Randol exclaimed, slapping Jonas on the shoulder. Turning to the others he added, "Prepare a fire, for we shall return directly."

*

Darkness had come, and the chicken retrieval party was still not back.

"We must act," Maegan was near panicking, "'tis been far too long!" She shouted each of their names again, and her voice pierced into the dark spaces between the towering birch trees glowing sickly greenish white in the full moon.

"They must have become turned around," Constantine worried as more stars appeared beyond the moon's halo, "and traveled away from rather than toward us."

"We shall go look for them," Edric stood, followed by his brother.

"They can not have gone far," Alfred wagered.

"I do not think we should divide any further," Constantine objected.

“Then we shall all go and look for them,” Maegan insisted.

“Hopefully, they accepted being lost quickly and are settling in somewhere comfortable for the night,” Constantine cautioned her, “for if we go stumbling in the darkness after them, we could become as lost as they are. We shall serve them better by remaining a fixed point. At dawn they may retrace their steps easily enough by following their own trail backward.”

After arguing half-heartedly for a spell, Maegan accepted Constantine’s reasoning and agreed to stay put. She never slept though through that long and dark night.

*

“We should really just stay put and try to make ourselves comfortable for the night,” Jonas finally sighed in exasperation after another branch whacked him in the face, concealed by the dense fog until it was too late. “Perhaps by morning’s light we can find the...”

Jonas realized then that he could not hear any other footsteps.

“Angela?” he called out, “Randol?”

He yelled their names again even louder, but only the rustling of leaves answered. In a last effort, Jonas cupped his hands and bellowed with all his might. Even the shivering trees seemed to fall silent, but no voice arose to fill the black void.

“Bother,” Jonas gave up, leaned against a thick, smooth tree trunk and slid down to the ground. Laying down his spear and axe on either side of the tree, he writhed until finding something approaching comfort leaning back against the living wood.

“Please do not forsake me, Lord,” Jonas whispered skyward, “and more than that, please watch over the others and keep them safe. And if you are willing, my Lord, bring us back together again soon. Please, God!”

He closed his eyes and repeated his prayer time and again until he left the world and entered the realm of dreams.

*

Opening his eyes, Jonas’ first thought was surprise at how clearly he could see.

“My eyes must have grown accustomed...” he trailed off when he realized that a nearby light source was also aiding his vision.

“Hello?” he said to himself and slowly struggled to his feet, straining in vain to see the source. Kneeling back down, Jonas felt around for his spear and axe but could find neither. He crawled around looking on his hands and knees, but to no avail.

“Not good...” he mumbled.

The wind picked up a bit causing the lad to pull his cloak around tightly and don the hood.

Perceiving no alternative, he slowly crept through the dark woods toward the distant flickering glow, trying not to make any noise. Taking long steps with his gangly legs, Jonas traversed the forest with surprising speed. The light grew, and he became increasingly confident that it must be a campfire.

While the thought gave him some hope, he refrained from calling out just in case the proprietors of the campfire turned out not to be his friends, and perhaps then the ones that made off with his weapons.

Keeping a large shrub between him and the light, Jonas stalked on foot as near as he dared before dropping again to hands and knees for the final approach. The fire was in a clearing closely shrouded by thick bushes and old gnarled trees whose low hanging branches interwove with the ground cover to form a macabre dome of sorts.

Coming to within a stone's throw of the fire, Jonas could see the outline of a hut situated in the shadows beyond the glow. It appeared to be sitting atop four thick stilts, one at each corner. This prompted him to think that a stream might flow somewhere near the camp and the thought made him yearn for a sip of fresh water.

His thirst overcame his fear, and Jonas stepped into the fire's glow.

Lowering his hood, he called out, "I come in peace."

The flames shivered, though he felt no breeze.

"Is anyone here?" he cried out.

There was no reply.

Jonas walked around the fire, and to his amazement, saw no logs inside the ring of stones. The flames seemed to rise up directly from the earth.

"What manner of sorcery..." he whispered, but was cut off by a loud creaking noise, as if a tree was falling. He spun around, searching the darkness but saw nothing move.

Too weary to care for his fear any longer, Jonas peered into the hut but saw no signs of life inside.

"Is this a dream?" he wondered aloud.

"Is it?" an old woman's voice crackled from across the clearing.

Jonas spun around shouting, "Who goes there?"

"You have come to my land," she laughed eerily, "so tis for me to ask first who you are."

"My name is Jonas Little, son of James, son of John," he answered quickly, still trying to see the shape of the woman who lurked behind the fire, just out of his sight. "I am passing through and mean you no harm. You may show yourself."

"You wish to see me?" the crone wailed, "then it must be that you wish to die!"

Suddenly, the flames amidst the circle of stones flared up in a great colorful plume. Jonas raise up his hand to shield his eyes from the brightness, and his rune ring shined in the flickering light.

The woman let out a startled gasp, and as quickly as they had arisen, the flames were almost completely suppressed. The clearing was plunged into darkness as only a pale blue ring of fire remained inside the circle.

“So, the time is at hand,” the old hag’s face showed various mixtures of rage, sorrow and utter terror in the shivering blue light.

“What do you mean?” Jonas stared at the withered old woman.

“You are both my greatest hope...and the harbinger of my destruction,” she croaked ominously, “but come and sit by my fire. There is much we have to talk about.”

*

“I never thought we would see the sun again,” Angela exclaimed to Randol as they marched onward through the morning mists.

“Surely some warmth will be a welcome thing,” Randol exhaled and watched his breath combine with the cold and clammy fog.

“We must move slowly and stay alert for any sign of Jonas or the others,” Angela said.

Randol’s groaning stomach answered first. “Until we find something to eat, I doubt I shall have the strength to move other than slowly,” he added.

“How can you be thinking of food when we are lost in this endless forest and are hopelessly separated from the others?” Angela complained.

“That is precisely why I am thinking of food,” Randol scolded his cousin, “there is always hope; but not for those who have died of hunger!”

Angela did not feel like arguing anymore, so she went back to occasionally calling out the names of their lost companions.

“You are going to scare away any game we might come upon,” Randol mumbled after her shouts repeatedly brought no response.

“Fine,” Angela relented, “let us find you something to quiet your belly, and perhaps the smell will attract the others better than our voices.”

As the fog burned away in the rays of the rising sun, the two weary hunters walked with arrows at the ready. Angela refrained from calling out for their friends.

“There is something,” Randol whispered and motioned to a tiny patch of white in a shrub at the very edge of their vision. He drew back his bowstring and took his time aiming.

“Wait, Randol,” she held up her hand.

He relaxed the tension in his string.

Before he could ask what she was waiting for, Angela darted through the forest toward the shrub. Randol followed her, and to his surprise, nothing emerged from the shrub at their approach.

"Jonas!" Angela screamed as she reached the shrub and parted it to see his body lying underneath.

Randol arrived a few moments later.

"He is alive," Angela sighed shakily over her shoulder to Randol.

"Dear Lord!" Randol exclaimed, "Thank God in heaven you stopped me from letting loose!"

"Tis alright," a voice seemed to come from nowhere, "even a target my size is likely to evade your aim this early in the morning." Jonas opened his eyes and the slightest grin hovered on his bluish lips.

"Damn it, Little!" Randol stomped around the clearing.

"Oh, Jonas," Angela exclaimed, throwing her arms around him.

They helped Jonas to his feet, and his color slowly returned as they walked onward.

"Are you all right? What happened to you? Where did you go? Where are your weapons?" Angela assailed Jonas with her questions.

"I am not quite sure what happened," Jonas seemed a bit dazed, "but I think I will be all right. My weapons were lost; I know not how..."

"I do not suppose you found the chicken," Randol quipped.

"No," Jonas shook his head.

"If you are all right, that is all that matters," Angela shot an angry glance at her cousin. "Have you seen or heard anything of the others?"

"No," Jonas looked all around as if he had just realized they were lost in a deep forest. Then suddenly, he fell to his knees and gripped his head in pain.

"What is it, Jonas?" Angela cried, but he could not hear her.

Inside Jonas' head raged a thundering cacophony like the roaring of the tides in a jagged sea grotto. Eventually, the tempest withered into a dull ringing in his ears. He opened his mouth then, and to his companions' surprise spoke a curious rhyme; all the more so because he declared it with such an authoritative, almost bardic tone.

*A golden shimmer on waves of sand
Proud princes humbled and fallen
The forest shivers in shadow land
When long lives come to dark end*

*From cousin glade on misty isle
Lost noble son doth tread
Against false brethren and beguiled
Unto the day of dread*

*Whilst shadows grow still hope remains
For light has come to earth
The fallen sun shall rise again
To mark a blessed birth*

*Leviathan shall be let loose
Philistia will shudder
The destroyer there shall find its doom
'Neath clouds of blackened thunder*

“That was frightening, but beautiful,” Angela said, emerging from a stunned silence.

“What does it mean?” Randol asked.

Jonas shook his head, “I do not know.”

*

“Three days have passed,” Edric reviewed, “perhaps they have journeyed on to Kiev, hoping to rendezvous with us there.”

“Tis the most likely explanation,” Alfred agreed, “and we can be confident that nothing...unfortunate has happened to them, for surely there would have been some sort of sign.”

“Are you ready to move on?” Constantine looked at Maegan.

“I suppose we must,” she assented.

They turned east and headed into the golden blaze of the rising sun. Maegan rode alone, and the three young men each rode on one horse while also guiding one of the spares left by their three friends’ disappearances.

They rode briskly, but still slowly enough to stay watchful for any signs of their missing companions. Summer was coming, and the warm and bright rays of the sun provided some comfort to their heartbrokenness over the separation.

Wild berries and cold stream water filled their bellies at midday, and in the hazy late afternoon the twins each put an arrow into a fleeing rabbit from a group that scattered on their approach. Constantine saw to the fire, and Maegan prepared the meat along with some wild greens.

They were set to begin feasting when they heard the rhythmic stomping of rapidly approaching feet. Due to the dense woods, they did not see the approaching soldiers until they came close enough to converse.

“Peace,” Constantine shouted in five languages.

The troops halted their advance but none spoke. All of them wore long woolen cloaks with hoods that shrouded their faces in evening’s shadow. They all carried long thick iron-tipped spears and round wooden shields. One of the warriors standing in the forefront wielded a large hunting horn in lieu of a shield.

“How many would you say?” Alfred whispered.

“I count eighty,” Edric whispered back.

“Close,” Alfred clucked, “but there are eighty-one.”

“I thought that too,” Edric winked, “but twas just a fold in one’s hood.”

Suddenly, the one with the horn whooped a few vaguely Germanic sounding phrases. The words were indecipherable, but the tone was unmistakably unfriendly.

“In any case,” Alfred continued whispering to his brother, “You can put me down for thirty.”

“Thirty?” Edric gasped.

“Too many?” his twin prodded.

“No,” Edric frowned, “certainly not.”

“Constantine?” Alfred nudged him.

“Yes?”

“Are you good for twenty?” Edric asked the Prince.

“Twenty?” Constantine was thinking.

“Twenty-one,” Alfred corrected.

“I am telling you...” Edric started to argue.

“Can you boys set aside your battle lust for one moment,” Maegan hissed at her companions. “Let us discover if they have seen or heard any trace of the others before we race to the slaughter!”

“You are right, of course,” Alfred blushed.

“Sorry,” Edric followed suit.

The horn holder yelled again, and a small detachment of troops raced forward, seized a few of the horses and attempted to take them away. The hooded brigands were clearly not experienced horsemen and fled after the horses began kicking and whinnying in fright.

Constantine stepped forward, hoping to seize upon his adversary’s embarrassment and negotiate an agreeable settlement to the encounter. Maegan grabbed his arm and stopped him.

“I will be all right,” Constantine assured, “let me speak with them.”

“No,” Maegan shook her head, but never took her eyes from the horn holder, “I will speak with them.”

The twins wordlessly scoffed their disapproval with quiet snorts.

“Trust me,” Maegan stepped past them, “there is something unusual about this army.”

*

“Better?” Angela smirked at Randol as he reclined against a tree, burping and loosening his belt.

“Oh...” was all he could manage in response.

“That was the finest pork I have ever tasted,” Jonas stared into the flames of their campfire.

“Tis good,” Angela remarked as she picked another piece from the spit and tossed it into her mouth.

“We should go back,” Randol said suddenly.

They both looked at him but neither knew what to say.

“Look,” Randol explained, “time is still on our side. Summer has only just begun. We can head north and reach the Baltic Sea by river easily enough, and then secure passage to England. The others are likely to do the same. We are not strong enough apart.”

“Yet before the separation, Kiev was the goal. We must at least travel that far and look for them first,” Angela argued.

“Jonas,” Randol turned toward him, “what say you – return to Nottingham or onward to Kiev?”

Jonas pulled off a small piece of the roast to chew while he considered the matter.

“The vote falls to you, Master Little,” Randol pressured him.

“We go on,” Jonas exercised his power.

“Are you sure?” Angela pressed.

He nodded.

“Very well,” Randol tipped his cap down over his eyes, “to Kiev we shall go.” He was asleep and snoring in just a few moments.

Angela shook her head at her cavalier cousin. She turned and looked at Jonas as he continued staring into the fire. *Something has changed in him*, she thought, *since that night alone in the forest...*

“What is it?” Jonas suddenly realized she was staring at him.

“May I ask you something?” she replied.

“Sure.”

“Have you remembered anything else from the other night?” she asked with some caution.

He looked down at his feet and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Tis all right...” she began to retract her question.

“Pieces come to me like the day after a dream,” he tried to explain at last. “And just like the memories of dreams; the harder I try to think about them, the more they melt away.”

“I think I understand...” she reached over and squeezed his hand.

“But this I am sure of,” Jonas looked into Angela’s eyes and whispered, “I was not alone.”

She watched him for a moment to see if he might be jesting her, but saw clearly enough that he was not.

“Who were you with?” a shiver ran down her spine.

“She was a...” he began.

“She?” the tone in Angela’s voice was distressed enough to make Jonas smile on the inside.

“Was a very old woman,” he finished with a grin.

“You met an old woman while lost in the forest?” Angela was in disbelief. “Who was she? Where is she now?”

“I do not know...”

“Well, could you speak with her?” Angela was becoming slightly agitated. “She might have seen the others!”

“This may sound a bit strange,” Jonas struggled to find the right words, “but she seemed to be almost...well...as if she were a part of the very forest itself.” He looked up at her expecting to see puzzlement or dismay.

Instead, Angela’s eyes had grown wide and her lips trembled slightly as they parted to draw in more breath.

“Say something,” he begged.

“That is not completely strange,” she offered, “my father used to tell me stories about a man that came from the trees. He was a tree, I suppose, but he pulled up his feet from the earth and strode about. He was good, I remember, but still to be feared; though I cannot remember quite why.”

“So you do not think me mad?” Jonas blushed.

“I have known you were a madman for years, Jonas Little,” she teased him, “but, that some wizardry was afoot in the forest that night I have no doubt. You were right in front of me, and then you were gone. How else could that be?”

“You are right,” Jonas nodded.

They sat silently for a moment while Angela poked purposelessly at the campfire with a stick.

“So this old woman of the forest,” she asked again, “did you speak with her? Was she friendly?”

“She is afraid for the trees,” Jonas intoned with an echoing sound as if from far away, “she believes that they are in great danger; that a destroyer is coming who will chop and burn them all.”

“Good Lord,” Angela exclaimed in a whisper, “that is terrible.”

“There was more...much more,” Jonas paused and rubbed his temples, “but as I say; the harder I try to remember, the more it melts away...”

*

Maegan came within a few paces of the mysterious army and lowered her hood. Her wavy blond hair cascaded forth and glowed in the light of the moon. In response, one of the hooded soldiers stepped forward and stood in front of Maegan.

Constantine watched with great interest and the twins could not prevent their arrow fingers from twitching in anticipation of a collapse in Maegan’s

diplomacy. They were frozen in awe though, as the lead soldier's hood fell away revealing a young lady with hair even brighter, though straighter, than Maegan's.

The three young men nearly fell over in amazement when the other eighty soldiers followed suit and showed themselves to be an army entirely composed of women. At last the lads understood Maegan's advantage in leading the peace talks and they tried to stay quiet while she worked.

"What do you make of it?" Alfred whispered eventually.

"These are strange days indeed, brother," Edric shook his head slightly.

"Too true," Alfred agreed, "fighting against a brazen and mighty foe is one matter, but how would one confront such a...delightful enemy?"

"A sticky problem to be sure..." Edric concurred.

"Here she comes," Constantine cut them off.

Maegan was striding back over to them.

"Are you all right?" Constantine asked as she neared.

"Of course," she dismissed the Prince. "As far as I can tell they are Swedes; possibly Finns. I am not sure. They were hard to understand; and quite a bit distressed."

"What are they doing?" Edric asked.

"Where are their men?" Alfred added.

"If I understood rightly," Maegan winced in advance of what she had to say, "Their men were slaughtered in an ambush by marauding Muscovite horsemen. Their crops and buildings were burned, and I suspect that some of them may have been..."

"Just go on," Constantine put a hand on her shoulder.

"They are hunting for revenge!" Maegan was wide-eyed with horror.

"They have a view to kill any Russian they come upon, and the fullness of their hope seems to be in dying. They plan to kill until they are all dead."

The twins looked at each other with grim faces.

"So," Maegan looked around at her friends, "do you want to hear the good news?"

"Good news?" Constantine seemed tired.

"Please," Alfred encouraged her.

"The good news is they do not think we are Russians," Maegan smiled, "so they have decided not to kill us."

"That is wonderful," Edric said what they all were thinking.

"There are a few other considerations, however," Maegan warned, "namely; they would like our horses, your weapons, and to share in our humble food and supplies."

"Sounds reasonable," Constantine assessed.

"Our weapons," Alfred scoffed. "What about your weapons?"

"She did not say anything about those," Maegan looked at him.

"She?" Edric wanted elaboration.

“Their leader is named Arika,” Maegan explained. “I think we had a meeting of the minds. This could all turn out for the best.”

“I suggest we fight our way over to the horses, hop on, and leave our new friends far behind,” Alfred recommended.

“That plan holds several advantages over the first,” Edric was enthusiastic, “most prominently that we would keep our weapons. What say you, Constantine?”

The Prince rubbed his chin, “I think that both of you rely too heavily on your blades and arrows. Strange times have come upon us indeed, but let us respond like water instead of fire.”

“You are actually suggesting that we surrender?” Alfred frowned.

“Did you not see their fear of the horses?” Edric shared his brother’s incredulity. “We could easily run them off if we just come up with a quick plan and act together.”

“Look cousins,” Maegan folded her arms, “I want to be free just as much as you – free to find the others and to continue our Quest – but what if this is the path God has placed before us? He has already shown us that we are not in control by separating us from the others. Shall we start listening to Him now, or see what further measures He will use to acquire our attention?”

Constantine opened his mouth to back up Maegan’s case for surrender, but she kept going without him.

“And either way,” Maegan had found her stride, “you would be wise not to underestimate what we are up against here. I have seen them up close! Do not think, and do not dare say, that we have less to fear because our enemies are so fair. An iron tipped spear will run you through just as well if it is delivered by a woman as if by any man.”

“You make a point,” Alfred winked.

“So,” Edric wondered, “does this mean we are being robbed and abandoned, or are we joining the Great Russian Hunt as unwitting participants?”

“I believe we are going with them,” Maegan answered. “I think Arika has taken quite a liking to me, actually.”

“Splendid,” Edric sighed.

“I am sure you shall get along famously,” Constantine smiled, “and you are right, Maegan of Locksley. This could all turn out for the best. After all, the Russians live on the borderlands of the eastern steppe. If we find some, they may be able to tell us more about Prester John.”

Verse Seven – Aleksandr

Bright blue banners carried high by the lead riders snapped in the wind born of the thundering wave of horses. The forty horsemen swept past lush ripening wheat fields under the warm early autumn sun. Riding five abreast and eight rows deep they snaked over the hills, racing home toward their citadel.

The soldiers wore fine chain-mail underneath solid steel breast and shoulder plates. Their heads were capped with white plumed silvery helmets, and their hands with silvery gauntlets that rose to the elbow.

Each horseman carried a small arsenal of weapons; a short bow worn over the chest, a quiver of arrows on the right hip, a sword on the left, a small round shield on the left forearm, and a long spear held up in the right hand. The elite royal palace guard of Prince Aleksandr of Novgorod rode out with only the finest weapons and armor.

Highly trained and ready for the battlefield, these noble knights were forced by circumstances to split most of their time between chasing away rogue bandits and collecting heavy taxes from the farmers, merchants, and artisans under their dominion. Trade income had nearly vanished after Muscovy had been destroyed the year before by the Golden Horde.

Cresting the last hill they rallied for the finish, spurred on by the crystal ringing of silver trumpets and the vision of the citadel with her blue standards lofted high at the pinnacles of the many towers, spires and cupolas. Storming over the drawbridge and into the main courtyard, the horsemen were surrounded and mobbed by their fiercely loyal people.

Maidens threw flowers from a balcony and some pipers played a stirring tune. The riders dismounted and stewards made away with their horses, while squires took care of their weaponry. They proceeded into the grand hall where table boards awaited. The weary riders drank and feasted heartily, for they knew that soon they would be riding out again.

*

“How will we ever collect enough to meet the tribute demands of the Golden Horde?” Prince Aleksandr bemoaned to his trusted friend Lord Natan, “I am beginning to wish we had fought and died with the Grand Alliance, for what is the gain in living if our surrender and tribute mean only that our people starve with the coming winter?”

“You are right, perhaps,” Natan grumbled. “The Golden Horde seeks to crush the life from us one way or another. If we are to die, better to die with a shout on the field of battle, than with the whimper of starvation, eh?”

“If we only had more forces...” the Prince clenched his teeth in frustration. “Perhaps we could send emissaries. Yes! We shall reach out to Kiev

and the Poles and even Constantinople. We shall build a new alliance, and stand against these bloodthirsty horsemen.”

“But what if no one else sends armies?” Lord Natan served his master by testing him, “Will you stand alone against the Golden Horde?”

“If we cannot produce the tribute, we may not have a choice,” Aleksandr reasoned gravely.

“Then you must do what you must do. Lean harder on the peasants,” Natan suggested. “Make them tighten their belts a little.”

“I will not take the bread out of my people’s mouths or the blankets from their beds. They have bent far, but they may break if I push them any more.”

“Well, my lord,” Natan laughed and put his hand on Prince Aleksandr’s shoulder, “at least you have this; things cannot get much worse.”

“My liege!” a page appeared in the doorway and approached them on the run. He fell to his knees upon reaching the Prince, and delivered his message as ordered. “Your majesty, your scouts have reported. A band of Swedish raiders has been sighted entering the western marches. There are at least eighty of them. They are on foot, though they have pack horses. They are armed with spears and wooden shields. If they have armor, it is well concealed under heavy cloaks. If they continue their course, they should sight the citadel in two days. That is all, your highness.”

“You were saying?” Aleksandr gave his friend a wry look.

Lord Natan turned a bright shade of red and shifted uncomfortably.

“Find the sergeant-at-arms and tell him to rally the royal guard,”

Aleksandr instructed the page. “Go, now!”

The page bolted away.

Aleksandr sighed.

“Word must have reached Skandia of Muscovy’s doom,” Lord Natan snarled. “And the Swedes are coming like vultures to feed upon the remains of Greater Rus.”

“Who knows?” Prince Aleksandr could come no closer to a smile than the sarcastic smirk he wore. “Perhaps they have come to help. Perhaps they are bringing to us some great treasure.”

*

“I understand what you are saying,” Arika looked at Maegan in the dancing light of their several small campfires. “I too believe in one father god ruling over all, that is, until the end.”

“What do you mean *the end*?” Maegan asked.

“Ragnarok,” the Swede stared at her.

“What is that?” Maegan shivered.

“The end of all things will come when the world has grown old enough,” Arika explained, “and the forces of darkness will come crashing down, crushing the gods and all that is good.”

Maegan was silent as she considered the implications of her captor’s theology. “What then is there for which to hope?” she asked at last.

Arika’s green eyes brightened as she answered, “Our hope lies in a valorous death; to fall in blazing glory on the field of battle, standing strong and defiant until our last breath.”

“You are very brave,” Maegan said with admiration, “but what would you say if I told you that when that dark end comes, there is a way through the darkness to a light on the other side; light and eternal life?”

“I would say you must tell me of this way,” Arika insisted.

“I will,” Maegan moved closer to her. “And the way – the only hope – for reaching the other side is indeed through a valorous death, but not yours.”

Arika shook her head, “Then whose?”

“The God I speak of is the true Father of all,” Maegan declared. “He was never created because He has always existed. In ancient times, He set aside a special people unto himself in a land far to the south, even beyond Byzantium. And over a thousand years ago He sent his own Son to be their king. The Son came and healed the sick, fed the hungry, and made the blind see. But even so they rejected him and killed him by nailing him to a wooden cross.”

“How is that a valorous death?” Arika did not understand.

“As the Son of God, he could have stopped his slayers at any time by calling down legions of angels to wipe his enemies from the face of the earth. But instead, he laid down his life of his own accord; bearing the burden for all the evils of mankind for all time. It was Ragnarok, as you might say, but just for one man.”

“But if he died,” Arika struggled with the new ideas, “then what hope can he offer, even if he was the son of God?”

“*Because* he is the Son of God,” Maegan smiled, “even death could not conquer him. He rose again, and He lives! And He is preparing a place so that when the end comes, all whom He saves can live there with him in peace and comfort and joy forever.”

“What then must I do to be saved?” Arika was wide-eyed.

“Just believe in him,” Maegan said. “His name is Jesus.”

“I believe you are telling me the truth,” Arika looked shrewdly at her captive, “but what deeds must I do to be worthy of this eternal life.”

“There is nothing that you can do,” Maegan explained, “but to accept that God, the Father of all, loves you dearly. His love for us, not our deeds, is what makes us worthy of saving in His eyes.”

They sat quietly while Maegan allowed Arika to digest these new and earthshaking revelations.

“I want to know more about this king,” Arika said finally, “this...?”

“Jesus,” Maegan gladly repeated his name.

Just then Edric and Alfred charged to the edge of the camp astride two of the Polish horses. They hopped to the ground and ran toward the others.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Edric bowed.

“The Russians are coming,” Alfred delivered their warning.

*

Aleksandr’s cavalry slowed as they neared the reported site of the Swedish camp. The wily Prince split his force with the aim of outflanking the foot soldiers and attacking them from two sides, throwing them into confusion and panic.

Hoping to circle around behind the camp unseen, Aleksandr led his twenty horsemen through a narrow valley hemmed in by steep rocky slopes on either side.

“Look,” Lord Natan exclaimed as they rounded a bend in the valley, “there is their camp!”

“Yes,” Aleksandr said as he halted their march with a hand signal, “but where are...”

Too late they realized that a ring of spearmen was closing around them, quickly depriving the mounted soldiers of any space for maneuvers. The hooded raiders emerged from behind boulders and shrubs, and out of ditches and crags. They held their shields before them and kept their spears cocked in throwing position, well aware of the arrows quivered upon the horsemen’s hips.

Seizing the moment in the tense stand-off, Constantine entered the circle made by the hedge of spears. Edric and Alfred flanked him with their bows pulled back hard and their arrowheads unmistakably trained on Aleksandr.

“Greetings, Prince of Novgorod,” Constantine bowed as he introduced himself using Greek, “I am Constantine of Byzantium. These Swedes seek redress for crimes committed against their people by soldiers of the Rus. If they spare your life, will you provide them with compensation?”

“We have nothing to do with the Swedes,” Aleksandr answered. “Only the Muscovites have sent raids into Skandia, and you can tell these men that any justice they may feel entitled to already has been served. Muscovy was wiped from the earth this past year; utterly destroyed by the Golden Horde.”

Just then Constantine noticed something moving in the reflection on Aleksandr’s shiny steel helmet. He turned and, seeing the other twenty cavalry fast approaching, perceived the stratagem of the Russian Prince.

“Ready?” Constantine whispered to the twins.

They gave barely perceptible nods.

“Now!” Constantine shouted in Swedish.

The Swedes began stomping their feet, pounding their spear shafts on the ground, and shouting. Arika placed the battle horn to her lips, and aiming it

skyward, blasted a shrill tone into the air. Constantine matched the sound in a strangely harmonic way with his own wailing voice, and the resulting dissonance created vibrations that were not merely heard, but felt.

Meanwhile, Alfred hit his mark underneath the stone Constantine had carefully placed near the top of the cliffs the prior evening. Alfred's arrow knocked the support log free and the stone began to roll down hill. Edric sent a pair of arrows skimming into a patch of small pebbles high up the slope on the other side. Soon a raging rock slide was pouring into the valley from both sides at the same time.

With a bone-rattling rumble they crashed together, sending up a swirling plume of grey dust. The other half of Aleksandr's force was cut off, and at the point of a Swedish spear, the Russian Prince agreed to discuss terms of surrender with Constantine.

*

"You are truly amazing," Maegan looked into Constantine's bright blue eyes as a wild pink and purple sunset simmered behind him on the horizon.

"Why do you say that?" he asked with a sigh.

"We are here because you so impressed Aleksandr that he not only agreed to help the Swedes, but he has given to us his finest accommodations, with this unbelievable visage."

She waved her hand at the scene before them. From their tower suite balcony high above the streets of Novgorod, they looked out over the pinnacles of banner-clad watchtowers, scores of cross-topped steeples, and endless row upon row of sturdy wooden homes.

Then beyond the mighty outer walls, they saw the farmlands; ripe in the fullness of summertime. The long shadows and eerie evening light thrown by the falling sun made the barley and millet fields all around look like cascading waves upon the sea.

In the far distance, the bleakness of the steppe bled seamlessly into the black night descending in the east. The fading embers of daylight still held on in the west as Constantine considered Maegan's comment.

"All that I did was to communicate the true nature of the situation to our host," Constantine demurred. "The miracle, as I see it, was that you were able to convince Arika and the other Swedes to give up their hatred and vengeful bloodlust. What did you say to them anyway?"

"Ah, there you two are!" Alfred interrupted, brushing and patting his plush crimson dinner coat provided by the Novgorod Prince.

"You should have changed already," Edric similarly preened his new apparel with great delight.

"Ask me again later," Maegan whispered to Constantine, and he nodded to her as they parted ways, going to their own chambers to prepare for the feast.

Soon after, as the four guests entered the Great Hall of Novgorod's citadel, they were momentarily speechless.

Royal blue banners, richer in color than those outside, lined the interior walls at regular intervals. Each bore at its top Aleksandr's personal standard, a golden screaming eagle pressed into the blue fabric with real gold.

Massive beams vaulted the ceiling to an impressive height, though their thick dark wood still gave the room a feeling of warmth and coziness. Bronze ornamental shields crossed underneath by silver-tipped ceremonial spears hung over entry ways. Heat pouring from the main hearth was complimented by the fires in smaller baking ovens throughout the building.

The room was filling up with the regular court gentry as the new guests were guided to their seats at the head table. Sitting at Aleksandr's right hand, the foursome bowed their heads along with everyone else while giving thanks to the Lord. Then they began to sip from the hot bowls of cabbage soup placed on the boards before them.

"This is dreadful," Edric whispered.

"You shall eat it and you shall like it," Maegan shot back without even moving her lips. She smiled as Aleksandr looked over at her a moment later.

"My lady," he gained her attention using Latin as they had agreed upon. "Forgive me if I pry, but it has been brought to my knowledge that you carry a strumming harp with you upon your journey. Perhaps you could be persuaded to join my court minstrels for a song or two?"

"Perhaps," she took a sip from her goblet, "though I have not practiced in quite some time." She thought back to the healing music she had poured out upon Prince Kazimierz during those weeks the year before. Since then, she had not even thought much about her harp.

"Oh, my Lord," Alfred gasped quietly.

"What is it?" Edric croaked softly after forcing down another swallow of the sour stew.

"Look," his brother pointed with his eyes.

Edric followed the path of his twin's gaze until his own eyes fell upon the large cutting board being carried toward them; a board carrying an enormous side of well roasted beef.

"Tis reassuring to see that proper civilization extends this far out into the eastern wild lands," Alfred mused.

"After that long summer of marching on foot," Edric agreed, "I think tis fair to say we have earned this."

So enraptured by the succulent meat were the twins, and Constantine as well, they did not notice Maegan had slipped away until music began bouncing around the great hall, lifting faces, feet and spirits. The dull roar of conversation faded, allowing the clear and bright music to fill the place.

Maegan's harp brought an interesting counterpoint of tone and tonality to the instruments wielded by Aleksandr's two regulars. The physical appearance

of the two male instrumentalists only made Maegan stand out all the more. They were short and stocky with straight black hair, golden skin and dark eyes that appeared perpetually squinted.

Although she could not communicate with them using words, they were quite agreeable to her musically. Letting the guest take the lead, they quickly adjusted their playing style and selections of notes to match with hers until the three distinct instrumental sounds ceased straining against each other and began to relate in a way that made sense and pleased the ear.

One man used a stick to beat upon a drum that was held together by a web of cords. He held the entire contraption under his arm and by alternately squeezing and releasing the interwoven strings, he could change the notes he banged on it to have nearly any tone that could be imagined.

The other held a long wooden stick high into the air. Three vibrating strings attached to the top end of the stick ran all the way down to a gourd that rested on the man's thigh. The other ends of the strings were firmly secured to the underside of the gourd. The sound it brayed forth was a mixture of metallic twang and a low droning hum.

The addition of the harp made the collective sound into something much grander than the three alone could deliver. Maegan gently steered and coaxed the musical progression out of its exotic and strange origins into a simpler pattern. The Russian gentry in the hall were well pleased as they showed through their dancing and celebrating. She came close to singing several times, but never felt quite the right place to begin.

The music came to rest on its own before long and the crowd lauded the improvisatory trio with applause and cheers. Maegan returned to the table where she was again congratulated and adored.

"Your powers over sound and mood are extraordinary," Aleksandr was amazed. "I have never heard anything like tonight."

"You are too kind," Maegan blushed. "I have been blessed in that musical ability seems to emerge frequently in my family line."

"Yet I suppose for your cousins, bows of a different kind are the instruments of choice, eh," Aleksandr said loudly enough to gain the twins' attention, "even if their song is less than soothing."

"If you speak of archery, my lord," Edric had discarded Maegan's advice on strict sobriety for the evening, "you shall find none finer in any land than my own brother here." He put his arm around Alfred and hugged him.

Alfred looked wary.

"Ah, is that so?" Aleksandr smiled.

"Actually..." Alfred began.

"Yes it is, my lord," Edric went on. "He once got a rabbit, at night, from three leagues away."

"Killing a rabbit?" Aleksandr scoffed. "Is this some great deed?"

"Oh, he did not kill it, my lord," Edric winked. "He set it free."

“No more wine for this one!” Aleksandr shouted, drawing laughs from his knights that heard him.

“You see, my lord,” Edric was undeterred; “it was his pet rabbit.”

Aleksandr raised an eyebrow.

“A nighthawk stole it and I suppose would have eaten it,” Edric recounted with horror, as if considering the bird’s intent for the very first time, “but my brother would have none of it. He sent an arrow after them into the clouds. There was a piercing shriek, and we ran until winded to find the rabbit, terrified and a little bloody, but alive.”

Aleksandr blinked a few times.

“You should know, my lord,” Edric assured him, “that the rabbit recovered and lived a long and full life.”

Aleksandr threw his head back and howled laughter for quite some time. He then stood, walked over to Edric, gripped the Englishman by his head, and delivered a quick kiss to each of his cheeks.

“I say!” Edric gasped.

“Thank you,” the searing blue eyes of the Russian Prince sparkled. “That was good. Too long have I lived without a good laugh. So,” he turned to Alfred, “is it true? Are you skilled enough to rob the quarry from a bird of prey?”

“Well...” Alfred began again.

“No matter,” Aleksandr interrupted, “we shall see for ourselves, eh? Come to my stables at first light. You can hit your marks standing on the ground well enough, but tomorrow we shall see how you fare from horseback!”

*

Even before daybreak, Constantine arose and quietly slipped out of the palace tower. He was not even sure where he was going. The little sleep he found that night had been troubled by restlessness and alarming dreams.

Quietly striding through the dark streets of that great northern city, his normally sharp senses grew to an even greater, almost feverish intensity. A street rat scurried nearby and its tiny scratches sounded to him like a bull tromping through dried leaves. Likewise, the faint sweet odor from a nearby sewage channel made his stomach roll and gurgle.

Constantine began to perspire, trembling slightly as well. Pausing on a small bridge, he gripped the hand rail and tried to vomit over the side, but his empty stomach would not cooperate.

Determinedly placing one foot in front of the other, he forged on. He had already passed, and ignored, several large and impressive churches, when a quick sideways glance down a narrow alleyway revealed a very small and unimpressive building.

It caught his attention though, because despite the grayish haze of early dusk that still blanketed the land, the golden cross atop the building glowed with

a warm and inviting light. Quickening his pace, the wandering Byzantine was soon upon the doorstep of the humble chapel.

The heavy wooden door creaked loudly, but offered little resistance as Constantine pushed it aside and entered. A lone candelabrum near the tiny altar shed pale dancing light around the room.

“Hello?” Constantine tried in Greek, but no answer came.

He walked to the second pew from the front and sat down. Dawn was beginning, and its first rays illuminated a stained glass window behind the altar that had been invisible in the darkness. The scene portrayed in the glass was of a knight on horseback using a spear to confront a large red dragon. The knight wore a white tunic emblazoned with a red cross on the chest.

Constantine noted dawn’s progress as the colors in the glass grew in brightness and definition. Soon the room was sufficiently well lit for him to see the small crucifix mounted on the wall above the window in a shadowy nook. On the miniature cross was a figurine of the suffering Christ, bloody and torn by Roman scourging.

The Byzantine Prince stared at the depiction only briefly before lowering his head, closing his eyes, and beginning to pray silently within his mind.

My Lord, he began, please forgive me. Forgive my creeping pride that never sleeps but always seeks to insert itself between us. Thank you for leading me here and reminding me that all I am, all I have, and all I could ever hope for is in you, through you, and because of you. Selah.

After a time of meditation upon that last thought, he went down onto his knees, clasped his hands together and began to pray again with increased fervor.

Please keep your covering of protection over us Lord, and especially upon Angela, Jonas and Randol. Wherever they are, please, please be with them. Keep them safe, and if it be thy will, let us rejoin with them soon.

Be with all those in England who await reunion with them as well. Be with my mother, and Father John. Be with free women and men everywhere who do your will. I ask all of this only so that you may receive more glory, my God. And as for the path ahead, let your holy light shine down upon it and make it true. Thank you for hearing a wretch like me. Amen.

Constantine sat back up in the pew and noticed that his nausea and fatigue had passed. He nearly swooned, however, when he looked once again at the stained glass behind the altar. He was certain that the red dragon in the scene had been reared up for battle. Yet the scene in the glass was now different. The dragon lay smitten on the ground, impaled by the knight’s spear.

“Perhaps this is some trick of the light...” he whispered, trying to make sense of it.

“This whole world is but a trick of the light,” a creaking voice advised. “Swirling dust and shadows are all we are truly made from,” the owner of the voice emerged from behind a curtain off to the side of the altar. A heavily wrinkled and bearded old man shuffled toward him, lame in one leg.

“Forgive me,” Constantine was not sure how he should respond, “I came in here to pray.”

The old man continued shuffling toward him. As he neared, he opened his mouth into a wide grin revealing the sad state of his few remaining teeth.

“How delightful to see such a young man praying,” the elder said at last. “These days, men seem to wait until they are near to meeting God before they will earnestly speak with him.”

The two looked at each other during a brief awkward silence.

“But you are not from here, are you?” the old man asked rhetorically.

“No,” Constantine answered, “I am Byzantine, and I have journeyed here with British companions.”

“Byzantium! Britannia!” the old monk exclaimed, “you have traveled far indeed. Are you any closer to finding what you seek?”

Constantine considered the question before answering, “I believe we are. Perhaps you can help. We are seeking a great Christian king in the farther east. He is known to us by the name of Prester John. Have you heard of this man?”

“Oh, most certainly,” the monk nodded. “Great earthly power he wields. But why do you seek for him?”

“Western Christendom is on the brink of collapse,” Constantine explained. “Dark forces close in from all sides, as you surely know. We seek Prester John so that we may appeal for his aid.”

“You have already appealed to God,” the monk argued, “what more do you need?”

“Perhaps Prester John is the way God will answer our prayers, but only if we do our part,” Constantine argued back.

The old man chuckled. “A clever one you are! But know this you must,” the monk leaned in so close that Constantine could smell his oddly familiar breath, “when you find the one you seek, you may also find the one you truly need. Stay watchful therefore Constantine of the Angelos, and never forget that our Holy Lord has plans we cannot understand; things too wonderful for us to know.”

Constantine glanced over the monk’s shoulder just then, and to his amazement saw that the image in the stained glass had changed further. The dragon that had appeared fatally wounded had risen again and was lashing out at the mounted knight, whose horse was reared up in panic.

The sight so alarmed the Byzantine Prince that he released a shout. Sitting up in bed, he felt his clothing drenched in sweat and realized that he had been dreaming.

*

Edric and Alfred had the time of their lives that day learning about the subtleties of steppe warfare from Prince Aleksandr.

"I cannot believe you have never even heard of Parthian tactics," the Prince teased them.

"Sorry," Alfred really was not, "but you see, we come from a very small island, full of rivers, hills, forests and streams. There are few, if any, open spaces as vast as those we see in your lands."

"Tis true," Edric added, "where we come from, large sweeping armies of cavalry would have little advantage, for even a few well-armored knights could hold them at bay with the help of natural cover."

Aleksandr laughed. "This England of yours sounds like a wonderful place, but unfortunately as you can see, we are afforded no such protections here, and so we must rely solely upon our weapons and horses."

"And Parthian tactics are a part of this, yes?" Alfred reminded their teacher of his lesson.

"Yes," Aleksandr grinned, "and you have shown yourselves worthy enough at mounted archery, that I think you are ready. Now, riding forward while shooting is well and good, but that is only half the battle. What good are your arrows once you have overrun your enemies' lines, or if you are forced to retreat, unless you can also shoot behind you? This is the essence of Parthian tactics. While riding in one direction, you turn your upper body back the other way and continue to send arrows against the enemy; effectively doubling your opportunities to do damage."

"Sounds thrilling," Edric was genuinely enthusiastic.

"What shall we use as targets this time?" Alfred inquired.

Aleksandr's grin grew. "To truly capture the sensation of using Parthian tactics in real battle, we only have one worthy target – each other!"

The twins raised their eyebrows in unison.

"Do not fear, my English friends," Aleksandr dismounted and walked over to where his bag of supplies lay open on the ground, "we shall use these!" The Prince held up a quiver of arrows and pulled one out to show them. Instead of a pointed metallic arrowhead, the arrow was tipped with a small round sack made from sheep innards.

"That is a strange looking arrow," Edric frowned.

"Indeed," Aleksandr handed one to each of them so they could feel the weight and balance. "They are not meant to penetrate, but only to leave a mark. These sacks are filled with blue dye. They will explode upon impact, leaving an unmistakable record of their users' accuracy. In this game I have devised, you must strike between your opponent's knees and shoulders to receive a point."

"How do we begin?" Alfred asked.

"I will challenge you one at a time. We shall begin one hundred paces apart and ride toward each other building speed. Your bow must remain around your chest until we pass each other. As we do, reach out your hand and slap mine. After the slap, you are free to take up your bow and fire at will, while continuing to ride in the other direction. A round is concluded when we pass

beyond arrow range from each other. The rider who scores the most points wins the round. Are the rules clear?" Aleksandr remounted.

The twins nodded.

"Excellent," Aleksandr exclaimed, "but to sweeten the competition, I suggest a wager!"

"We would love to," Edric explained, "although as we have been traveling for quite some time, we have little to offer up for ante."

"How about this," Aleksandr rubbed his goatee, "if either of you can best me, I will personally slaughter my fattest hog for you this very night! However, if I should best both of you, then you shall influence your fair cousin to provide me with but a single kiss! What say you?"

The twins looked at each other.

"We can promise to try," Alfred offered.

"But you shall find that our dear cousin is actually quite fierce in her independent mindedness," Edric elaborated, "and any influence we have with her may be limited."

"Your best effort is all that I ask," Aleksandr winked.

"Fair enough," Alfred accepted the wager for both of them.

*

That night, the twins dove into their succulent pork platter with their usual enthusiasm.

"Well done, my friends," Constantine praised the twins as he shared in their success.

"This meat is remarkably tender and juicy," Maegan agreed as she pulled another strip onto her bread plate. "I am curious though. Had you lost your little game with Prince Aleksandr, what would you have been obligated to give to him as a prize?"

Edric, who had been taking a draught from his water stein, sprayed his drink outward through his nose. Similarly, Alfred nearly choked to death on a piece of ham.

When they concluded their sputtering, Alfred answered, "Why should it matter? We never had any doubt of the outcome."

"Actually," Edric helped try to find them a way out, "I do not think that it ever came up."

"Come to think of it," Alfred nodded along nervously, "I do not think that it ever did."

Constantine was grinning from ear to ear.

By contrast, Maegan was wearing a scowl and her eyes had narrowed as she looked back and forth at her cousins.

"Oh my," Edric stretched and yawned, "I am exhausted."

“Yes,” Alfred joined him, “that was quite a day. Well, I suppose we must get some rest.”

“Who knows what tomorrow has in store?” Edric pushed his stool back from the table board.

The twins nearly fell over each other in their haste to exit the room.

After their departure, Maegan turned to Constantine. “What do you think came over them?” she asked.

“I can only imagine,” he answered, trying hard to suppress his grin.

“Oh well,” Maegan shrugged as she pulled another piece of pork roast, “more for us.”

*

The unforgiving Russian winter came early that year, and the travelers were forced to spend it in Novgorod, much as they had been in Krakow the year before. Despite his best efforts, Prince Aleksandr did not succeed in conjuring a kiss from his fair English guest, in large part because of the growing closeness between Maegan and Constantine.

The Russian Prince did succeed, however, in meeting the initial tribute demands of the Golden Horde. As a result though, his people experienced a very hungry winter. The advent of springtime brought little relief, as even the earliest harvestable foods would not be ready for months. In some areas the Russians had to sustain themselves by eating snow, bark, insects and other less than delectable alternatives.

Adding humiliation to hunger, a barbarian emissary arrived in early April. He delivered word to Prince Aleksandr that the leader of the Golden Horde, one known as Genghis Khan, demanded his presence. The Great Khan wished for the Russian Prince to come to his court and bow before him.

“Poverty can be ignored,” Aleksandr fumed as he paced back and forth across his royal court. “Hunger can be accepted. But bow the knee to these steppe barbarians – no – this I cannot do. I shall sooner die!”

“What about your people?” Constantine challenged him.

“My people are proud,” Aleksandr went to the window and looked out over his city. “They will understand. They will follow me even unto death.”

“Perhaps,” Constantine acknowledged, “but there is no pride in the grave. And there is no glory in having your head upon a pike. You know what happened to Muscovy and the other principalities of the alliance.”

Aleksandr said nothing.

“Consider the history of Byzantium, my friend,” Constantine put a hand on Aleksandr’s shoulder. “When the Seljuk Turks first came, the Empire was reduced to nothing but its capitol city. Yet we survived, time went on, and in the centuries since, much that was lost has been regained. The return of Russian glory may not come for generations, but it will never come if you are wiped out.”

Aleksandr remained silent, but Constantine could see that his words were taking hold.

“And there is something else to consider,” Constantine said quietly.

“What is that?” Aleksandr said between clenched teeth.

“This Golden Horde,” Constantine began his own pacing back and forth, “why have they appeared now? Wherever they came from, why did they leave? And why are they lashing out so fiercely?”

“How should I know the mind of a barbarian?” Aleksandr retorted.

“I believe they are being driven forth by one even greater,” the Byzantine stopped and folded his arms.

“Your Prester John,” Aleksandr nodded thoughtfully.

“Yes,” Constantine’s eyes blazed. “It is the only explanation! The night is always darkest before the dawn, and the wind calmest before a storm. If you bow the knee to this Khan, you are not surrendering – you are buying time.”

Aleksandr sighed and stared out the window again for awhile before declaring, “I will ride out in two weeks for the court of this Great Kahn. Yet I shall spare my noble knights the sight of their Prince in submission. I shall do this deed alone.”

“Not alone,” Constantine shook his head, “we are going with you.”

*

While Aleksandr spent the two weeks making arrangements and putting his affairs in order; Maegan, Constantine, and the twins used the time to pay a last visit to their former captors, Arika and the Swedes.

They rode for three days, beyond the scene of their initial confrontation with the Russians, until they found the small river valley that Aleksandr had granted to the Swedes as part of his agreement with them. The Swedes’ first winter there had been no easier than it was for the tribute-burdened Russians. But they had survived and even built a durable, if rudimentary, small town.

Most importantly, for their long-term prospects, the Swedes were no longer exclusively a group of expatriate females.

“Where did these men come from?” Maegan asked when she and Arika had finally concluded their hugging and weeping for joy at seeing each other once again.

“They are Swedes, too,” Arika explained. “They were captured years ago as mere boys by the Muscovites and made into slaves. When Muscovy was razed, they were among the few that escaped. They had been wandering the countryside, much as my group was when we met you.”

“How did you find them?” Maegan was astonished.

“They found us,” Arika smiled. “It all happened just as you said it would. I cried out to the God-King you told me about – the one named Jesus who died but now lives. I asked Him for a sign that we belonged here; that we were right

to settle in this valley. And the very next day, he brought men to us so that we will live on here and not fade away.”

“He is an amazing God,” Maegan felt sure her heart was going to burst with happiness, “and He seems to specialize in turning wrongs into right.”

“I did not understand before,” Arika confessed, “but now I can see why we need no other gods. How can I ever thank you for telling us about Him?”

“That is all He really asks of us,” Maegan explained, “that we tell others about Him, so that His family of love will grow. Just pass along this Good News to your children and to all you meet.”

“That is all?” Arika was bewildered, “that I was planning to do anyway.”

Verse Eight – The Black Sea

The Franciscan Friar and special Papal Emissary Giovanni di Plano quietly entered Kiev on the seventh day of April in the year of the Lord, 1239. Though he had taken a vow of poverty long ago, he still possessed a number of silver coins, one of which he used to buy food and beverage at a local tavern.

Skilled in many languages, he discretely eavesdropped on some of the nearby conversations. The one occurring at the very next table in English particularly fascinated him, and eventually he was unable to resist joining in.

“Pardon me if you will,” he had stood up and approached the two men and one woman as they dined upon cold chicken, hard cheese, black bread, and blacker ale, “but I could not help overhearing your remarks about your journey to the farther east and your interest in finding one John the Elder. You see, I have just returned from the steppe lands, and may be able to save you from much unnecessary toil and heartache.”

Randol, Jonas and Angela looked at each other nervously. During that long winter in Kiev, they had grown overly confident that they could speak privately, even in public, by using their native tongue.

“Please join us,” Randol spoke for the group and motioned to the one empty chair at their four-top table. The Friar accepted and, though he had already eaten his own meal, began helping himself to some of their remaining chicken without even asking.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” Randol continued, “I am Randol of Lo...,” recognizing the man’s Italian accent, and noticing the cross necklace he wore, Randol guessed rightly that the man was an agent of Rome and thought better of revealing his true estate, “Randol of Loughborough,” he finished after pretending to cough.

“This is my sister,” he motioned toward Angela, “Angelina of Loughborough, and our bodyguard, Joseph Linden.”

Jonas and Angela exchanged a glance that wordlessly conveyed their appreciation of Randol’s cautious gambit.

“A pleasure, a pleasure,” bits of chicken flew out of the Friar’s mouth as he spoke, “and I am Giovanni...di Carlo,” the Friar was equally cautious. “I am but a humble man of God. Years ago I set out on foot to preach the Gospel of our Lord far and wide. I have seen many wondrous and strange things in my travels, but perhaps none more wondrous and strange than the court of this great eastern king. Tell me, friends,” di Plano pursued his real purpose of probing them for information, “what have you heard of this man?”

“Very little,” savvy negotiation was one of the skills Randol had inherited most strongly from his father, “mostly rumors and legends. The true purpose of our quest is to reach the great Constantinople, and to explore the interest of potential customers for copper and tin from our father’s mines in

southern Britain,” Randol had found his stride and was letting the tall tale take on a life of its own.

“Yet, as we have traveled further east,” Angela could not resist getting in on the game, “whispers of this... Elder John... as you say, have come to our ears with increasing frequency, if not with greater clarity.”

Believing Britons to be simple and ignorant folk incapable of intrigue, the Friar swallowed their story whole. Further believing that such provincial characters could have no significant part to play in international politics, he began hemorrhaging information to them. This was due both to the profound loneliness and depression he had experienced traveling alone across the vast Russian steppe in late winter, and the rare beauty of Angela, which had an exaggerated effect on the mental state of the celibate Friar.

He explained his theory that ‘Elder John’ was a mispronunciation of the king’s true name – Genghis Khan. He claimed to have reached the Great Khan and preached the Gospel to him, but that the barbarian king was incapable of understanding its subtleties.

In reality, di Plano had been sent directly by the Pope to convert the Mongols and to instruct them in their subservience to Roman authority. As the head of the most powerful army on earth at the time, the Khan had simply become confused by the suggestion that he submit to another.

He instructed di Plano to return to Rome and gather a payment of tribute from the Christian Pontiff. This suggestion equally baffled the Friar, and in the end, no real understanding occurred between the two spheres of power.

None of this, however, would have interested the English threesome nearly as much as the Friar’s tale of what happened after he had left the camp of the Golden Horde. During the long months that he marched alone across the endless steppe, he encountered only one other traveler.

“He was a Prince,” di Plano explained, “from the northern hinterland of the Novgorod Rus.”

“Fascinating,” Randol tried to sound enthusiastic. Like his companions, he was growing tired of hearing the Friar drone on about his lonely adventures.

“And he had with him a most interesting entourage,” di Plano went on, “a dark haired man, Greek would be my guess, and an exceedingly lovely young lady with hair as fair as gold filings in sunlight.”

The three English travelers exercised every ounce of self-control in their souls to keep from leaping off their stools.

“That *is* interesting,” Angela said with nearly supernatural calmness, “were there any others with them?”

“Yes,” di Plano looked thoughtful, “now that you mention it. That was perhaps the oddest part of all. Two young lads, probably about your age, rode along with them.”

“Why is that odd?” Randol’s heart was thundering within his chest.

“Never in my life,” the Friar explained, “have I seen two people that looked more like each other.”

Angela excused herself from the table, exited the tavern, and proceeded to weep joyfully with the knowledge that the others were alive and well.

“Is she quite alright?” di Plano wondered after her.

“I am sure she is,” Randol bit hard upon his tongue to keep from shouting out loud for joy himself. “You know women.”

“Of course,” di Plano said disdainfully.

“What a strange sounding band of travelers,” Jonas finally entered the conversation, unable to hold in the question that burned in each of their minds. “Do you have any idea where they were going?”

“I tried to warn them that their journey was mere folly,” the Friar grinned smugly, “but they seemed to be determined in making their own pilgrimage to cross the Volga River and attempt negotiations with the Golden Horde.”

“Hmm,” Randol sounded patently uninterested, “well, we certainly have appreciated hearing about your adventures. I am afraid though that the hour is growing quite late. If you will excuse us, we wish you all the very best on your journey home.”

*

The three giddy travelers were on the next ship that left Kiev for the downriver voyage to the Black Sea; the speediest way they had determined to reach the Volga River and the purported encampment of the Golden Horde.

The small cadre of Byzantine traders they sailed with was based out of Trebizond, which the English recognized as one of the loyal eastern provinces Constantine had mentioned. They asked the sailors about the exiled Prince, and they had heard of him.

“Eh, you hear that lads?” the ship’s captain shouted to his men after hearing that Constantine was alive. “The Phoenix has risen once again!”

The sailors let out a rousing cheer. Angela and Jonas looked confused, but Randol seemed to understand what this all meant.

“Can you sail us to the Volga?” Angela deferred her curiosity and kept focused on the search for their lost companions.

“Not quite,” the captain explained. “I can take you as far as the trading outposts on the Crimea, but you will have to journey overland from there. And I would be more than happy to take you that far, although,” the pragmatic captain cleared his throat with a distinct lack of subtlety, “we will fall behind in our trading schedule.”

“Not to worry,” Randol assured him. “We shall make the detour more than worth your while.”

“Randol,” Angela whispered and nudged her cousin, “I have precisely two gold coins left.”

“Not to worry,” he whispered back, “we shall work something out.”

The captain looked at him warily. Randol offered his biggest and best grin, and they sailed on.

*

Following the ship captain’s advice regarding the character of the Crimean trading posts, Angela disembarked wearing a hooded robe that obscured her face. Jonas and Randol planned to speak on her behalf as needed, and to explain to anyone who asked that she – or for purposes of the ruse, he – was a young religious acolyte that had taken a vow of silence.

Ironically, as they soon discovered, Jonas was the one they would have been wiser to conceal from view.

While browsing in a seaside market for something decent to eat, the threesome was approached by a pair of Egyptian merchants who proceeded to examine Jonas as if he was a horse. One of them even began making monetary offers to Randol, who politely declined to sell his friend to them.

“What on earth was that about?” Angela whispered once they reached a location where they could speak privately.

“I do not know,” Randol shook his head, “but I have a strange feeling about this place. Something is terribly wrong here.”

“For once, Locksley,” Jonas was still reeling from the shock of being bargained for, “I could not agree with you more.”

Asking around a bit in a few local taverns and inns, they soon gained a better understanding of just how dark a place they had stumbled upon. The entire region to the north, it seemed, had been overrun recently by a barbarian tribe known as the Bulgars. The native Slavic population, to which Jonas appeared to belong owing to his mother’s influence, was being systematically brutalized and destroyed.

The Bulgars were imposing a fairly straightforward program of population resettlement upon the locals. The elderly and very young were killed outright. The women were raped first and then killed, unless they looked young and innocent enough to bring a good price in the Turkish harems to the south.

Finally, the boys and younger men were being rounded up and loaded onto any of the hundreds of Egyptian trading vessels that lined the beaches to the east of where the Trebizond sailors had landed them.

“What about men of fighting age? Where are they?” Angela asked Randol when he finished relaying his discoveries.

“I do not think there are any left,” Randol explained, “which is why these Bulgars appear to have free reign.”

“We need to leave this place – and now!” Jonas asserted his interest in self-preservation.

“For once, Little,” Randol nodded, “I could not agree with you more.”

They hastened through the dirty streets of the port district back toward the location of the Trebizond trading vessel as the sun was setting over the western beaches. Their ship had just come into sight, when they were surrounded by two dozen swarthy and fully armed men.

“Let me guess...” Jonas sighed.

“Bulgars...” Randol finished his thought.

Unfortunately, to better play the part of a harmless monk, Angela had left her weapons on the ship. And as Jonas had lost his somewhere in the vast forests of Russia, Randol was left alone to look after their defense. Even so, the young Lord of Locksley might well have scattered the barbarians, had their partners on a nearby rooftop not succeeded in plunging a heavy fishing net over the threesome.

The gang of ruffians spent a brief period of time pummeling their catch with kicks and clubs and, as soon as they managed to extract Randol’s sword from out of the net, simply dragged the three prisoners away.

*

Darkness had fully come by the time they reached the center of the main Bulgar camp. Even the moon and stars were blotted out by the thick clouds that dripped cool mist over the land.

Scores of barbarians formed a circle around the motionless lumps inside the fishing net. They dragged the bruised and bloodied prisoners free, only to bind their hands and feet tightly with ropes – or in Jonas’ case – with chains.

In the process, Angela’s hood fell away revealing her true nature. A strange momentary silence was followed by an explosion of howls, taunts and laughter as the rogues celebrated the capture of a beautiful young lady.

A series of indiscernible arguments soon erupted over who she belonged to, but before long the matter was apparently settled and Angela was dragged away in the direction of the main tent. Jonas and Randol watched helplessly as she disappeared from view. Thunder rumbled ominously in the distance, matching the boiling rage in each of their hearts.

Suddenly, the two men were separated as well. The main body of the crowd closed around Randol, while a dozen armed rogues marched Jonas, at the point of a spear, back toward the waterfront. He was loaded onto one of the countless Egyptian slave ships, and thrown below deck where he landed with a dull thud accompanied by the metallic rattling of his chains.

Exhausted beyond measure and with pain ringing throughout his entire body, still Jonas struggled to move his limbs or even merely to see. Neither act was possible in the total blackness of his cramped confinement. Before long, he was overwhelmed by fatigue and fell into sleep.

Back at the camp, Randol once again was beaten with clubs and spear shafts. The crowd suspended the torture when a translator finally arrived. The

small, quivering man – clearly a prisoner himself – stood before Randol and winced in horror at the sight of the blood-soaked Englishman.

“They say you carried the sword of a noble,” the little man stuttered in broken Latin. “They want to know where you are from, and if you would be worth ransoming.”

Randol glared at the man through the one eye he could still open.

The man shivered and looked down at his feet.

“Tell them that I come from the Island of the Mighty,” Randol struggled simply to breathe, “and that if they return my sword I will show them exactly what I am worth.”

“Please,” the translator begged, “give me real answers or they will kill both of us!”

“England is the land I speak of,” Randol decided to help his fellow captive, “and yes, my father would give all he had for my return.”

The translator did his work, but grew pale as he heard the angry shouts that followed from the crowd.

“I am sorry,” the little man looked sick, “but they have never heard of England.” He shook his head. “I am sorry...”

The translator was led away, and Randol was shoved beyond the edge of camp until he stood before a bare, twisted stump of a tree. They threw him up against the stump and secured him to it with more ropes. In the flickering light of the mob’s few torches, Randol could see the skulls and bones of the stump’s former tenants scattered about on the ground.

After a few last kicks and punches, the crowd left Randol to his slow death by starvation or exposure – whichever came first. One last thought swam through his muddled mind before he lost consciousness.

Not like this, Lord. Not like this...

*

“Damn it!” The Trebizond ship captain struck his fist on the rail again. “Surely they have been taken. We should never have let them off here!”

“We had no way to know the Bulgars had come,” his first mate reasoned. “You cannot blame yourself. And if we do not leave now, we are likely to share their fate.”

“It just burns all the more,” the captain was close to tears, “knowing they were friends of the Phoenix.”

The first mate did not know what to say as their ship slipped away upon the choppy waves of the Black Sea.

*

In the darkest hour of the night, a slender hand reached out and tapped sleeping Jonas Little on his shoulder three times. He did not respond, and so the action was repeated. With a low moan of agony, Jonas parted his eyes and glanced up at the figure kneeling over him.

“Who are you?” Jonas croaked softly.

“That is not nearly as important as who sent me,” the visitor replied in excellent English, though with an unknown accent.

“Who sent you?” Jonas played along.

“Quick! Get up!” was the reply.

Not understanding how he had the strength to do so, Jonas stood. The chains fell off his wrists, landing in a heap on the floor without making a sound.

Jonas was sure he was dreaming.

“Follow me!” was the next instruction, and Jonas obeyed.

He was led through the darkness to a hatch that he was able to push open with almost no resistance. Suddenly above deck, Jonas inhaled the fresh air and felt a surge of strength. Without a thought, he leapt overboard and swam with all his might toward where he hoped to find shore.

Just as he was ready to give up and sink beneath the waves, he let his legs drop and his knees hit sand. He crawled onto the dark and deserted beach and collapsed, struggling for some time to catch his breath.

He stood when able and staggered further inland, keeping a cautious eye out for anyone who might have noticed his escape. Covered in sand, seaweed, and still dripping water, he leaned against a tree and wondered what to do next.

Then he saw his emancipator again, suddenly standing just paces away and appearing as dry as a bone. Lying between them on the ground was a sight that made Jonas confused, hopeful, and afraid all at the same time. His long lost hunting spear and woodsman’s axe formed a cross on the ground and each looked in as good, if not better condition than when he had left England.

He stooped to retrieve them and when he stood again, he was completely alone on the shore. Feeling the heavy wooden spear shaft in his left hand, and the smooth polished axe handle in his right, he wondered how a mere dream could offer such vivid detail and sensation.

“This is no dream, son of James, son of John,” the rescuer’s voice came one last time from an unseen source. “Go quickly, now! You have much to do.”

Without further delay, Jonas ran off into the night.

*

The enormous viper slithered slowly through the mud. Probing a discarded human skull, it emerged from one of the empty eye sockets and continued its winding path in search of prey.

Randol had been watching it with only mild interest.

At least a venomous bite would finish me off more quickly, he thought with grim acquiescence.

The snake paused and seemed to be sizing up the dying Englishman.

“What are you waiting for?” Randol whispered to the serpent. “Come and get me.”

The viper seemed to take his advice, advancing once again. Soon it came within striking range. The thought suddenly occurred to Randol that death by venom might not be quick either, but as there was nothing he could do to prevent it, he simply kept his eyes shut and began repeating a prayer for God’s mercy over and over again.

He heard the quiet squishing of the snake gathering itself for a strike and felt the rush of wind as the viper head launched toward him. A wet thudding sound followed, but the fangs never met his flesh.

Hesitantly peeking out from under his right eyelid, Randol looked upon the viper’s head. It was smashed into the earth by the head of a large spear. The rest of the serpent briefly shivered a silent death spasm and then lay still.

Randol’s blurry gaze followed the spear shaft upward to the hand that gripped it, and then followed the attached arm until he was looking upon the face of his friend.

Jonas was looking down at the viper and gave his spear a quick twist to make sure the creature was dead.

“You have impeccable timing, Master Little,” Randol rasped. “Is that really you?”

“Someone has to keep you Locksleys out of trouble,” Jonas winked.

Quickly slicing through the ropes with his axe, Jonas caught his companion before he tumbled over. Slinging Randol over a shoulder, he grabbed up his two weapons in the opposite hand and headed away from the Bulgar camp as fast as his feet could carry them.

*

Angela had been stripped of her hooded robe, splashed with water and thrown into a large bed. The barbarians had decided to make the unusual beauty a special prize for their leader who was due to return to camp the following day.

Her hands and feet were left bound, and six men were selected to guard the tent where she wallowed, drifting in and out of consciousness during that long, dark night.

As the night wore on, and the guards drank more and more of their fermented beverages, they gradually grew less interested in pleasing their leader and more focused upon their own immediate satisfaction.

They finally agreed upon a plan. After each enjoying a turn or two with the feisty wench they would simply kill her and then claim she had died in an

escape attempt. Since their leader had not been expecting a prize anyway, they reasoned to each other that he would not likely be too upset over the loss.

Drawing the longest straw, the first guard went to the bed. Angela appeared to be fast asleep. Leaving her hands tied, he undid the foot bindings. The man never knew his mistake as Angela kicked his head so hard that his neck snapped and he fell over dead.

The other five had been watching though, and quickly fell upon her. Even the masterfully agile Angela Allendale was no match for the five much larger men with her hands bound and so little room to maneuver.

Four of them used their overwhelming strength to keep her immobilized, while the fifth punched her hard in the nose. She saw stars and quit struggling enough that the fifth man felt safe in proceeding.

She looked up at him as he raced to undo his leather belt and tunic. The man was foul and hairy with only a handful of black, uneven teeth. She felt the urge to vomit and starting thinking frantically for a way to provoke them into killing her outright, but there was nothing she could do.

Angela closed her eyes. She thought of praying, but was so angry and afraid that she had nothing to say to Him. Her only remaining thought was a sickening sense of sadness at the idea of how disappointed her mother would be that she had failed to guard herself.

Expecting with horror for the vile beast to fall upon her at any moment, she instead listened, eyes still shut, to a series of strange sounds. A whoosh of air and a dull whack were followed by a trickling noise. It reminded her of the water fountain in the center of Nottingham, and she opened her eyes to find out what it could possibly be.

The barbarian still stood over her, but two aspects of his appearance had changed. His trousers were now down around his ankles, and his head was nowhere to be seen. He continued to stand there spurting a fountain of blood high into the air, however, for what seemed to Angela like an eternity.

At long last, his body finally toppled to the side. There, behind where he had been, stood Jonas. The look of primal fury upon his face would have terrified her, had she not been gladder to see him than she had ever been to see another person in her life.

The four remaining Bulgars let go of her and stood to confront the crazed yellow-haired axe-man.

“Close your eyes again, my love,” Jonas whispered. “I do not want you to see this.”

*

Jonas led Angela far away to the thick grove of trees where he had stashed Randol, reaching it not long before dawn. His adrenaline surge finally expired and he collapsed hard.

Even after all that had happened, Angela had the presence of mind during their escape to grab a pair of water skins from the tent. She used one to minister to her rescuer.

“Take a little more, Jonas,” she whispered, pouring the life-giving fluid into his mouth.

“Thank you,” he said after swallowing.

“Those are my words,” she smiled and stroked his hair, ignoring the blood caked within its strands, “and I shall never ever tire of saying them to you. I owe you my life.”

“I cannot let myself be upstaged by some wandering Byzantine Prince,” he smiled weakly, recalling the event that preceded the launch of their adventure.

“You needn’t worry,” Angela assured him. “You will forever and always be my hero.”

“Truly?” he looked into her eyes.

“Truly,” she kissed him, “and how many times must I tell you, I much prefer men with fair hair anyway.”

Jonas fell asleep smiling.

Angela laid her head on his chest and followed him into slumber.

Randol continued lightly snoring nearby.

*

The chief of the Bulgar Horde was less than pleased to discover that not only had his prize vanished, but the interior of his personal tent was strewn with blood and body parts.

He sent search parties in every direction to find and bring back the trio of prisoners that had wrought so much damage. The grove of trees where the three English escapees were hiding was one of the first places they looked, but they did not succeed in finding them.

Remaining unseen amidst trees was a particular talent that each of them happened to have inherited in spades.

Even so, they did not leave the area right away.

For one thing, Randol was at first in no condition to travel. He required several days of quiet rest for his awful wounds to begin subsiding. Jonas foraged out in the dark hours to steal food, replenish the water skins, and keep an eye on the Bulgars.

After a week had passed, they appeared to call off the search. Randol was looking and feeling worlds better, and the trio began to talk about their strategy for moving on.

“The path ahead will not be easy,” Randol assessed. “We are penniless, only minimally armed, on foot, and several days – if not weeks – from anything resembling proper civilization.”

“We at least would not have been penniless,” Angela thought out loud, “if I had thought to grab the treasure box from inside the tent, instead of merely these bloody water skins.”

She instantly regretted her off-hand comment when she saw the wheels turning in her cousin’s head.

“Treasure box, eh?” Randol stared at her, “Just what exactly do you mean by that?”

“No,” she shook her head, “do not dare play the fool, Randol of Locksley. I can see your thoughts, and you can just forget about it. We were blessed and lucky to escape with our lives!”

“What about this treasure box?” Jonas chimed in.

“Not you, too,” she looked helplessly back and forth at her companions as they stared at each other, silently scheming.

“Look,” Randol sounded annoyed, “these Bulgars, or whatever they are, gave us quite a time. All I am suggesting is that we should be entitled to a bit of compensation. What say you, Little?”

“He makes an interesting argument,” Jonas grinned slyly at Angela.

“Oh dear Lord,” Angela bowed her head in a prayer that while earnest toward God, was also meant to subdue her cousin and his accomplice. “Please grant wisdom to my two foolish companions. Please help them see the folly in their thinking, and above all Lord, please get us out of this dreadful place as quickly as Your Will allows.”

She opened her eyes and looked at them. The giddy grins on their faces did little to assure her that her prayer had resulted in much earthly effect.

Verse Nine – The Golden Horde

Constantine paid the ferryman, and the five emissaries slid across the wide Volga River on a pontoon raft. Mongol scouts had been watching them for days, but they were simply too small of a group to sustain the interest of the unfathomably powerful Golden Horde.

During their southward journey, Aleksandr and company had witnessed the effects of this awesome power first hand. Villages, towns and principalities that had chosen to defy the Mongol yoke no longer existed. Blackened swaths of earth were all that remained to mark their folly.

Once the travelers reached the eastern shores though, they witnessed life and activity on a scale none of them had ever imagined. The tent metropolis stretched away from the river bank in every direction as far as they could see, but to call the sprawling settlement a camp would do it no justice. The great and mighty Golden Horde was a mobile nation.

Thick dust appeared to be a normal part of the atmosphere as everywhere men moved to and fro on horseback. The union between horse and man was uncanny in its perfection. Constantine thought of the legends of centaurs he had heard growing up amidst the Greek islands.

“I am beginning to understand how the Muscovite Alliance was defeated,” Aleksandr confessed as they rounded another mountain of stacked lumber. In a nearby field, huge and frightening contraptions were being assembled out of the wood by multiple teams of engineers, each hundreds strong.

“Look at that,” Maegan pointed to a faraway valley. “What a strange forest! Why the trees look as if they are...moving.”

“Those are no trees, cousin,” Edric aimed his eyes toward the valley, using his hand to shield them from the bright afternoon sun.

“Those are horses,” Alfred finished for his brother.

*

The group rode for two more days before they reached the heart of the Golden Horde’s settlement. They knew they had arrived when they finally set eyes upon the tent of the Great Khan. Larger than some castles they had seen, the peak of the structure was beyond sight, and its dimensions of width and breadth could not be perceived from the ground.

Thick and tightly woven fabric formed its outer walls. Once close to white, the fabric had turned to light brown from its endless exposure to windborne dust and debris. Numerous entrances were spaced at regular intervals around its perimeter, but the one that mattered was unmistakable.

A mere pair of ceremonial soldiers stood guard, one on either side of the main opening. Their presence was augmented by golden statues of larger-than-

life horses whose jeweled eyes glowered at all comers from over their fist sized flared nostrils.

The horse, they had realized early in their visit, was at the center of the Golden Horde's existence. The creatures seemed to enjoy a status that rivaled, if not exceeded, most of humans they saw. The four Polish steeds that the westerners still possessed, and even Aleksandr's heavy steppe horse, looked like mere ponies against the massive products of Mongolian husbandry.

As the group drew nearer to the main entrance, they finally garnered the first serious attention since their arrival. About sixty foot soldiers suddenly surrounded them, some shouting indecipherable instructions.

"I believe we are to dismount," Constantine suggested, and the others quickly complied.

More hand motions followed from the Mongolian hosts, and even the twins saw the expediency in handing over their weapons without debate. Seeing them up close, the ferocity and dangerousness of the steppe barbarians became all too clear.

Verbal communication with them went nowhere until they produced a Persian translator and Constantine was able to explain the purpose of Prince Aleksandr's visit. The idea of a humbled Russian Prince seemed to appeal to the entire Mongol crowd that had gathered around, and they promptly ushered the travelers through the main entrance of the great tent.

Expecting a huge cavernous interior to match the vastness of the outside, the group was surprised to find themselves in a very small chamber upon entry. They were led through countless additional small chambers formed by cloth subdivisions of the interior space. In one such room, they were ordered to remove their boots.

"We are probably nearing the inner court now," Constantine quietly advised his companions. "When we reach it, avoid looking the Khan directly in the eyes. Keep your head lowered, and speak only if prompted. Whatever you do, be sure not to turn your backside toward him."

The others nodded their understanding.

"I will likely take the role of translator," Constantine turned to Aleksandr, "which will give you a little time to consider what is said. Yet each time I complete a translation, you must begin your answer immediately to any questions that are posed. Any delay in responding may give a sense that you are being deceitful."

"What about the rest of us?" Edric asked.

"Stay behind us, as though you are just an entourage," Constantine whispered quickly as they reached a curtained entryway, and turning to Maegan added, "and try not to draw any attention."

Before anything else could be said, the curtain was pulled aside, and the five weary travelers slowly walked forward into the court of Genghis Khan.

Jonas knocked one of the Bulgar night watchmen across the head with the blunt end of his axe. Meanwhile, Randol used Jonas' spear shaft to similar effect on the man's partner. Having passed the first challenge of their mission, the two thieves made for the tent where Angela had been kept for most of that terrible night the week before.

They reached the rear of the tent unnoticed. Jonas lifted a section of the thick fabric from the ground and Randol slid underneath on his belly. He looked around the dark interior, and seeing no inhabitants, took his turn holding up the tent bottom so Jonas could join him.

The two waited in silence while their eyes adjusted to the absence of light from the stars or moon. After a time, a tiny glint of sparkle caught Randol's keen eyes from the far side of the tent.

They crawled toward it on hands and knees, and discovered the reflection had come from an open sack full of gold coins. They completely disregarded this discovery, however, when they opened the small wooden chest next to it. Inside were untold numbers of diamonds, rubies, emeralds, amethysts, pearls and sapphires; but mostly diamonds.

"Great heavens above," Randol whispered. "Tis the ransom of a thousand kings."

"I should say at least two thousand," Jonas stared in amazement at the box of wealth.

"I do not believe it..." Randol trailed off.

"Believe it," Jonas grinned at him.

"Not the gems," Randol reached over the treasure chest into the shadows. His hand closed around something, and a barely audible metallic ringing shimmered in the dead night air as he drew his hand back.

"Good Lord," Jonas struggled to suppress the volume of his voice. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Today," Randol looked up and down the blade of his sword, "is a good day. The sword of a noble indeed..."

"What are you saying?" Jonas was confused.

Before Randol could explain his statement, they both whirled to find out what had caused the rustling noise behind them. They were shocked to see a fair young maiden just paces away. She had risen from a bed and was holding up a sheet to cover her nakedness. Even in the dark, the look of terror and brokenness in her pale blue eyes told them she had met the foul fate that Angela had so narrowly escaped.

"Kyrie eleison..." Randol whispered.

"We have to help her," Jonas whispered back.

"This was not our mission, you know..." Randol protested.

"I know," Jonas held out a hand toward the maiden, "but we cannot leave her in this place."

For a moment, it seemed as if the maiden wanted to accept their help. In the end though, her fear of the Bulgars won out. She fled naked through the tent entrance, and once outside began screaming loudly enough to wake the dead.

"My sympathy for her is starting to wane," Randol frowned.

"Let's get out of here," Jonas' words were touched with sorrow.

"Treasure box," Randol reminded, as his own hands were now fully occupied; one with his recovered sword, the other with his borrowed spear.

Jonas slammed the box lid shut and scooped it up under his left arm. In his right hand he grabbed his axe and then followed Randol out the entryway.

At first the panicked maiden appeared to have gained no attention, yet as they rounded the tent, thirty sleepy but very angry looking Bulgars blocked their exit from the camp.

"Jonas, my friend," Randol began, "I believe it is time we returned a bit of the hospitality we were shown upon our arrival. Are you with me?"

Gripping the treasure chest even more tightly, Jonas answered with a twirl of his axe. He could see Randol's grin growing in the moonlight.

Moving the blade of his sword close to his lips, Randol whispered, "Thirsty, love?" Then he walked slowly into the crowd of waiting barbarians.

*

Anticipating a dazzling spectacle of pomp and regal finery, the Novgorod delegation was surprised to see that Genghis Khan looked essentially just like all of the other Mongol warriors surrounding him. He was perhaps a few inches taller than average, but otherwise he would have been difficult to identify in a crowd.

A mere two dozen guards, and about as many slave attendants, populated the great Khan's court. The five visitors came forward when beckoned, but paused before reaching the dais that held the Khan's simple wooden throne.

The Khan stared at the strange looking visitors, seeming to weigh their countenance. As advised by Constantine, they stood humbly with eyes lowered, permitting the Mongol leader ample time to size them up.

Finally, the Khan spoke in a gruff voice. His words came down through a string of translators. Constantine understood the greetings and warnings when they reached Arabic, but he showed no signs of recognition until they were turned into Greek. He used the extra time to do some sizing up of his own. Clearly to Constantine, the Khan was boundlessly proud and arrogant.

"The Khan welcomes you," Constantine said quietly to Aleksandr, "and is pleased that you have chosen obedience over the folly of Muscovy and the so called Grand Alliance. He eagerly awaits your display of loyalty, which in order to prove you need only to bow the knee and declare your allegiance aloud."

Aleksandr looked sadly into the eyes of his Byzantine counterpart.

"You bend your knee, not your heart," Constantine added, "and the Lord knows the difference."

The proud Russian Prince fell to his knees then.

Forsaking Constantine's earlier advice, he looked the Mongol ruler straight in the eyes and said, "Today the winds of fortune have filled your sail. Yet someday, the tide will turn. We may both be long in the grave, but make no mistake; your descendants shall grovel in this way before mine. So enjoy this moment, for the fleeting vapor that it is."

Edric and Alfred, having become well versed in Aleksandr's native tongue, bit hard into each of their own to keep from shouting defiance along with their kneeling friend. For his part, Constantine worked hard to suppress his own grin and warned Aleksandr that he would likely soften the translation slightly.

"Say what you must, Byzantine," Aleksandr answered bitterly.

Constantine sent a much more palatable and diplomatic response up through the chain of translators, and despite the small delay and bold directness on Aleksandr's part, the Khan seemed well pleased. He motioned for Aleksandr to arise and then stood from his throne as well.

The Khan bellowed another series of utterances. As their meaning became clear, Constantine turned pale.

"What?" Aleksandr pressed, "What is it?"

"He wants you to double your payment of tribute this coming autumn from the amount last year," Constantine said slowly. "He says that your army must fight for him upon demand. And..."

"There is more?" Aleksandr had lost most of his color as well.

"He wants you to step forward," Constantine turned and looked at Maegan, unable to keep the fear out of his voice.

*

"Oh my God," Angela gasped when Jonas and Randol returned to their grove of trees, "How much of that blood is yours?"

"Not too much," Jonas looked back and forth at his and Randol's crimson soaked tunics.

"Show her," Randol exhaled, still breathing quite heavily.

Jonas leaned his dripping axe against a tree, set down the treasure chest and opened it. Dawn was on the way and the first pinkish rays brought the gems to life with an eerie radiance.

"They are beautiful," Angela marveled.

"For once cousin," Randol slammed the box shut, "I could not agree with you more. Yet, I am sure the Bulgars are equally enamored of this treasure and will not stop looking for it any time soon. We need to leave quickly."

Without another word, the trio took up their few possessions and left the safety of the trees. Moving as fast as their feet would take them, they headed out over the open steppe. With the rising sun to their backs, they marched westward, hoping to reach the Dnepr River before the Bulgars could find and catch them.

*

“I have conquered all the lands from the place of the rising of the sun to the shores of the Black Sea. I have ridden down men in the snows of the Rus hinterland and dipped my lance in the salty waters of the southern oceans,” Constantine issued forth the translation of Genghis Khan’s claims.

“The exotic and strange women I have known number ten thousand or more, whether in my private chamber or on the edge of the battlefield as they lament for their slain husbands, brother and sons,” he went on, “and yet until today, I have never seen one quite so fair; quite so interesting. And I would very much like to know your name and the name of the lands from which you hail.”

“Just tell him,” Maegan looked at Constantine.

“I think he would like to hear you say it yourself,” he answered uneasily, “and let the meaning arrive in due time.”

“Very well,” she frowned at her friend, and imitating Aleksandr’s boldness, looked at the Khan straight on. “My name is Lady Meagan of Locksley, lands that are a part of the Kingdom of England in the green and pleasant Isles of Britain.”

“Ah,” the Khan roared, not waiting for a translation, “Angolan – Britannica!” He laughed out loud, “Island of der Mighty!”

“Did he just say what I think he said?” Alfred whispered to everyone and no one in particular.

Before anyone could reassure Alfred of his sanity, the Khan continued bellowing; but his words were once again indecipherable. A slave attendant near the Khan, however, promptly bolted from the court in response to the new orders.

As the translation approached, Constantine’s olive Mediterranean skin turned even a shade paler than it had been a moment earlier.

“What now?” Aleksandr sighed.

“Perhaps I have misunderstood,” the Byzantine Prince trembled, “but they are saying he has summoned the Archangel...”

“An archangel...?” Edric voiced their collective disbelief.

Constantine turned to face his entire group. Maegan was the only one who did not look especially frightened.

“Yes,” Constantine explained. “He has called down Michael Militant.”

*

For several days, Angela and her two thieves saw no one following them. They began to relax a little, though they did not slacken their pace of travel. One night, they finally decided to risk a small campfire. Having refilled the water skins, and with some wild greens and a few captured rodents, they sat down for the closest event to a feast they had experienced since landing in the Crimea.

"I do not like this," Randol continued complaining and trying to wave away the smoke from the fire, "and this atrocious meat, if one could call it such, is hardly worth the risk."

"Tis awful," Angela agreed. "Yet the alternative is no better."

"What alternative?" Jonas asked hopefully.

"Nothing!" she shook her head at him, "unless you would like some more of this bitter herb."

"I'll take it!" Jonas helped himself to another mouthful of groundcover.

"Blah!" Randol pulled a small rat-bone from his mouth and discarded it into the fire, "that does it! I am going to look around and make sure we have not drawn any attention with this futile attempt at cookery." He stalked away, carrying his sword and Jonas' spear.

"Fine," Angela was too tired to argue any more, "I shall douse the flames." She did and darkness closed in around them. With just the twinkling stars above and the deep red glow of dying embers below to light their camp, Angela slid over so she was sitting right next to Jonas.

They were quiet for quite some time.

"How are you?" she asked him finally.

"All right," he swallowed his final attempt at nourishment for the night, "and you?"

"I am beginning to understand how Friar di Plano nearly went mad traveling across the steppe?"

"Nearly...?" Jonas made her laugh.

"Jonas," she began after pausing to savor the first good laugh she had enjoyed since Kiev, "may I ask you about that dreadful night...in the tent?"

"Do you really want to speak about it?" he looked at her face covered in shadows, but still bright somehow.

"Not really," she realized, "but for one thing..."

He stared at her.

"When you rescued me," she looked down, "well, you told me to shut my eyes, so that I would not see what happened."

"I remember."

"And you said something else," she looked back up at him. "You called me...", she hesitated, "you called me...your love."

Jonas looked away, but she could tell he had turned red, simply by the changing hue of his neck.

"I..." he started to say.

"Tis alright," she began speaking for him, as she would do sometimes.
"Of course I realize twas a very strained situation, and..."

"Angela," he turned back toward her and picked up her hand in his own,
"that was not a mistake. I meant what I said."

"You did?" she whispered.

"I did," he answered, "and I do."

"You do?"

He replied by putting his arm around her shoulders, and holding her tightly against himself.

They sat there quietly for a few moments more, neither sure what to say next. Their dilemma was solved when they heard Randol running back toward the camp.

"Big problem..." were the only words he could get out with so little breath at his command.

"Good Lord," Angela stood up, "What have you done this time?"

"Tried to stop him..." Randol panted. "Injured him, I think..."

"Who, man?" Jonas looked hard into the darkness.

Randol took a deep breath and then another one before clarifying, "I am fairly certain he was a Bulgar scout."

*

A slender figure wearing a white robe and hood emerged from an unseen part in the tent fabric and came to stand alongside Genghis Khan. After bowing respectfully to the Khan, the apparition seemingly glided down the dais steps. The white hood fell away as the distance between the visitors and the purported Archangel evaporated.

"My dear Maegan," the angel spoke, "you are a woman!"

"Uncle Michael?" she cried in disbelief. "Is it really you?"

The twins had stepped forward and stood on either side of Maegan. Their jaws had dropped in comically similar expressions. Neither could speak.

"Friar Tuck the Younger," Constantine stepped forward as well. "Tell us that this is not a dream. Tell us that you are really here."

"So I am, dear Constantine," Michael's blue eyes shone with joy as he placed his hand upon the Prince's shoulder, "so I am. And look at you! You were just a lad the last time I set these eyes upon you. And you two!" He pulled the speechless twins forward and hugged them both at the same time. "Just look at the two of you! With no doubt at all, you are your father's sons...ah, but I see before me two pairs of Raven's eyes!"

"Uncle Michael!" Alfred exclaimed. "What in heaven and earth are you doing in this place?"

"All these years," Edric shook his head, "have you been here with this Golden Horde?"

“Oh my lads, and my lady,” Michael Tuck reached out and touched Maegan’s cheek; “I have allowed too much time to slip away.”

Tears began to roll out of Maegan’s eyes as she looked upon her favorite childhood mentor. He was just as she had remembered him, save for his hair. The long straight strands had turned from their once golden brightness to a dull silvery grey. Still, but for the folds around his eyes when he smiled, his face was that of a young man.

“And I have so much to tell you,” Michael completed his thoughts with a whisper, “but first we must escape from here as soon as we can.”

*

Michael Tuck used his substantial influence with Genghis Khan not only to have the group’s boots, weapons and horses promptly returned, but also to negotiate a much more favorable settlement on behalf of Novgorod. The annual tribute payments would remain at their original level, and Aleksandr’s troops would only be expected to maintain order within his domain.

Retrieving his own horse, a shiny black stallion of exceptional lineage, Michael rode with the others back to the east bank of the Volga. Along the way, he inadvertently dashed the hopes that had driven Constantine and the others onward these last few years.

“In the time since leaving your namesake city, and the service of your mother,” Michael explained to the Byzantine Prince, “I traveled far and wide seeking for my place in this lost and fallen world. From the frozen wastes of the north to the hot and steamy jungles south of the Indus River; from the desert pathways of the Great Silk Road to the snowy peaks of the highest mountains on earth, I sought out the secrets of nature and mankind.

“And you are right, my Prince. Beyond the desert and the mountains there is another land of unimaginable vastness and wealth; richer in myth and legend than your own Greeks, more logistically advanced than the Teutons, and more populous than all the Muslims of Persia, Arabia, Egypt and the Maghreb combined.

“Ruled by the Emperors of the Great Sung Dynasty, this land extends all the way to the eastern sea, from which the morning sun rises. Yet the people of this land are farmers, miners, artisans and poets; not the vast horde of warriors for which you seek. Nor are they Christian, for they worship strange gods or, in some cases, no gods at all.

“I have seen and heard of more kingdoms and dominions than I could have ever believed existed, even after my adventure on the Fifth Crusade. And I tell you, though it pains me my Prince, that there simply is no Prester John.”

Everyone rode in silence for a moment.

“What about his letter?” Maegan inquired on behalf of Constantine, who looked unlikely to speak as he dwelt somewhere between anger and misery, “who wrote the letter then?”

“Many would have an interest in motivating a resurgence of the dying Crusader spirit by offering the enticement of an alliance,” Michael explained. “Perhaps the Holy Roman Emperor had a hand in it, or the Armenians, or the Knights Templar...”

“Yet why build upon a false hope?” Prince Aleksandr asked. “Where is the lasting value in such a stratagem?”

“Hope is never false,” Michael argued, “particularly when it inspires great deeds that otherwise would have been left undone.”

“What do you mean?” Maegan pressed.

Michael sighed as he looked around at each of the five youngsters, “From the brief summary the twins told to me while we retrieved the horses, your Quest has not been in vain; no, not by any means.”

“And what would you have us say upon our return to England?” Constantine spoke at last, though with biting sarcasm. “We apologize most sincerely, but it turns out that there is no hope of a second front against the Saracens and Turks, no hope of a voice of reason to weigh against the excesses of Roman persecution, and that the rich lands beyond the sweeping deserts and the great mountains are not possessed by fellow Christians, but by a powerful and vast nation of heathen.”

“I understand your disappointment, my Prince,” Michael stared at him as they rode, “for I have long shared your hope for each of those things. In fact, those are among the reasons that I joined my destiny to that of the Golden Horde so many years ago. You see, I truly believed – perhaps beyond reason – that Genghis Khan *was* Prester John. I desired it to be true so greatly, that I allowed myself to be drawn toward many dark and unholy deeds. This is the path that I must now escape from, and your coming has shown me that my time to do so is indeed at hand.”

“Uncle,” Maegan interjected, “I have never known as kind and caring a soul as yours. Of what dark and sinister deeds could you possibly speak?”

“Let me show you something,” Michael replied.

They rode a bit further, past the lumber yards and siege workshops they had seen at their arrival to the camp of the Khan’s Horde. After passing the rows of engineers’ tents, they arrived at a medium size dwelling set apart from the others atop a small grassy knoll.

“This is my own dwelling...and workshop,” Michael explained.

The six riders dismounted at the foot of the knoll and, leaving their horses to graze; entered the tent. A smoke hole at the peak provided dim light which Michael augmented by lighting an oil lamp.

Strewn about the tent’s interior were all manner of tools, gadgets, weapons, and armor. Clearly though, what Michael’s projects appeared to lack

in the grandeur of those designed by the siege engineers in the nearby fields, they made up for in their intricacy.

"This is the culmination of an entire year of careful study and work," Michael began as he pulled the sheet away from the waist-high object it covered.

"What manner of device is this?" Edric asked.

"In the land of the farther east," Michael hesitated as he considered how to explain his creation, "knowledge exists of a dark powder. When touched by a flame, the powder unleashes the fury of hellfire. And if channeled somehow, it can propel objects through the air faster and with greater effect than even the most well sent arrow."

"Is it accurate though?" Alfred asked skeptically.

"That matters not, I am afraid," Michael said with sadness in his voice, "for in great enough numbers, the iron balls flung by its power can cut down whole armies of men. Horses, even armor, are of little protection against its deadly hail."

"Uncle," Maegan sounded fearful, "is that what this is for?" She motioned to the shiny bundle of metal tubes before them, mounted upon a thick wooden rolling cart.

"I am not proud of what I have done...of what I have become," Michael stated, "but what matters now is making certain that my creation is taken far and away from the Golden Horde, as quickly as it can be moved. You see, the Khan does not know about this organ gun, as I have named it."

"How did you make this?" Aleksandr asked suspiciously.

"I was afraid you would ask me that," Michael looked down. "I was there. I was there when Muscovy fell. Riding alongside the Khan, I watched as the Princes of the Grand Alliance were utterly crushed in the Ryazan Fields. I saw what happened to the women...to the babies..."

Maegan put her hand on his shoulder and tried to comfort the weeping Friar by suggesting that the things he saw had been beyond his control.

"I want so much to believe that," Michael straightened himself. "However, the true measure of the depths to which my soul descended was shown not during the battle, but afterward. In the smoldering ruins of an obliterated Russian cathedral, I found the remains of a smashed and ruined church organ.

"As a source of music, it was no more, but the metal pipes were mostly unspoiled. I collected them, not knowing quite for what purpose. My mind though I think had snapped at Ryazan. I had been overtaken by the darkness around me, and within months, this creation had taken essentially the form you see before you this day.

"That is why we must leave very soon," Michael looked around at the others, "before they learn of what I have made, and turn it to their deadly purposes – and before the Khan should decide to send for you..." he looked at Maegan with a fearful gaze.

“Then we shall leave immediately,” Constantine declared, finding his voice of authority again for the first time since leaving the tent of the Great Khan. In a strange way, Michael’s tale of sin and sorrow lessened the Byzantine Prince’s own pain over what he perceived to be the miserable failure of his mission to the east.

*

They crossed the river again, and rode for several days at great speed. Having disassembled the organ gun and distributed its various components among the riders in their group, no one horse was overly burdened by its weight.

Blazing across the steppe, they reached Possos on the Don River on the autumn equinox and there parted ways with Prince Aleksandr.

“I am indeed grateful to God for you,” the Prince of Novgorod declared to Michael Tuck as they clasped arms. “Your intercession on my behalf with the Khan could well mark the difference between life and death for my people.”

“Much more I would need to do for you and the great people of the Rus were I to hope for redemption or forgiveness,” Michael lamented, “but perhaps there is some glimmer of hope in our meeting and in the events that have unfolded these last days.”

Aleksandr left it at that and moved on to Constantine.

The two princes stared into each other’s eyes briefly. Wordless messages passed between them, and when Constantine finally bent his knee to Aleksandr, something shifted irreversibly in the course of history itself. Deep in his heart Constantine knew that a torch of light and hope had been passed into the northern land when he spoke his only parting words to the proud Russian.

“Hold the line,” the Byzantine whispered and then walked a few paces away with his back to the others.

Seeming to find Constantine’s words not strange, Aleksandr moved unfazed to stand in front of Maegan. She did not speak to him at all, but rather held his head in her hands, kissed one cheek, then the other, and finally delivered a slow and full kiss to his eager lips.

Edric and Alfred turned and were relieved to see that Constantine was still looking away. Michael smiled knowingly at them.

“What was that for?” Aleksandr whispered.

“That was for a man who humbled himself to save his people,” Maegan smiled at him. “Good journey to you, Aleksandr of Novgorod. My God bless you and keep you.”

“And you fair lady,” Aleksandr bowed once again.

Finally, Aleksandr stood before the twins.

“Yes, this England must be quite a place,” he grinned at them. “Do not forget your Parthian tactics!”

Without another word, Aleksandr leapt onto his horse and rode away into the northern steppe.

After crossing the Don at a shallow point, the group of five continued their westward flight. Disillusioned and heartbroken over the ending of the Quest for Prester John, they wished only to reach Kiev with all haste.

As the last goal of their Quest before it had divided unwittingly in the forests of the Kievan Rus, they hoped that in that city they might find some word or sign of their long-lost friends.

Verse Ten – The Last Ride of the Immortals

Angela, Jonas and Randol had been walking a brisk pace all day and were growing weary as the sun lingered straight ahead, low in the western sky. Their spirits were revived though when they crested a hill and saw before them the sight they had been desiring for weeks; the wide flowing Dnepr.

“Praise the Lord!” Randol cried.

“Indeed,” Angela spoke, falling to her knees and continuing to pray silently with her head lowered and hands raised up toward heaven.

Jonas set down the heavy box of gems and simply laid himself flat in the grass, breathing and shaking the throbbing soreness out of his arms.

“Come on then,” Randol attempted to rally them after a brief rest. “Night shall fall before long. We should at least try to reach the riverbank. Perhaps that grove of trees there will suffice as lodging for this night,” he pointed to the thick pines lined up at the water’s edge and a bit downstream.

“I cannot feel my arms,” Jonas complained.

“Randol, you should carry the box for awhile,” Angela admonished her cousin, “I can hold the weapons, and then Jonas may enjoy a well deserved rest.”

“Fair enough,” Randol agreed, “though I hope you have some strength left to wield your spear when we reach the river, Little. A roasted fish or two would certainly provide a nice ending to the day.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Jonas agreed, “yet are you willing to risk another campfire...after what happened the other night?”

Angela and Jonas stared at Randol, each of them wondering why he would not answer. He just stood there, gripping the treasure box to his chest, with a vacant expression in his eyes.

“Is the box too heavy?” Angela teased him.

“The box is fine,” the tone of Randol’s voice had turned dramatically from its usual playfulness and taken on an ominous edge, “but I am afraid we may have to delay our plans for the fish fry.”

Finally, Angela and Jonas turned to follow the direction of Randol’s faraway gaze. Their eyes widened as they witnessed the sight that had so stunned their friend.

Dozens of Bulgars poured over the distant ridge into the valley the weary trio had just traversed. As they watched in horror, dozens turned into scores and scores soon became hundreds.

“They have found us,” Angela spoke the obvious.

Suddenly finding a little strength left in his arms, Jonas grabbed up his spear and axe. Angela carried Randol’s sword and the water skins so that he could manage the heavy box.

They ran down the gently sloping hillside toward the river as fast as they could. The sun was now shining its red-golden glow directly at their eyes, but

their heads were aimed down anyway to watch for rocks, holes, or other obstacles to their progress.

When they finally reached the river, Randol fell to his knees and let the treasure thud down onto the ground in front of him. They all turned their heads back toward the ridgeline from which they had descended, and the Bulgars were already there.

“How did they cross the valley so quickly?” Angela was amazed.

“Some devilry drives them onward...” Jonas panted.

“We do not have long,” Randol assessed. He stood then and though still breathing hard, pried his sword out of Angela’s hand. “Leave me your spear as well, Jonas. Take your axe if you can swim with it, and both of you take all the gems you can carry. The rest I shall deposit in the river...”

“What are you saying, Randol?” Angela gasped.

“I will delay them,” Randol steeled himself, “and take a few more of them with me!”

“There are at least three hundred angry Bulgars coming down that hill,” Angela argued, “we will not leave you to face them alone.”

“Better one of us should perish than all three,” Randol seemed set in his decision, “and at least you will live on to tell my tale.”

“He is right, Angela,” Jonas said to both of their surprise, “you go. I will stand with you, Locksley, and we will bring more than a just few of them down with us.”

“Quit trying to be heroes!” Angela screamed at them. “Leave the bloody gems and your precious weapons and swim with me, for God’s sake!”

“I...” Randol began.

“What?” Angela was getting frantic as the Bulgars were closing the distance. “What is it?”

“I cannot swim,” Randol confessed.

They both looked at him in disbelief.

“What do you mean, you cannot swim?” Angela shook her head.

“I mean my father tried to teach me when I was small, but he eventually gave up in frustration because I was so bad at it,” Randol looked down in shame.

“But you are English...as in from England...the land surrounded by water...” she would not let up.

“Look, I am not proud of it, but this is just the way I am,” Randol was growing angry. “Now are you going take some gems and go, or are we all going to just...”

A piercing scream interrupted him, and he looked up into the evening sky to find its source. A white gyrfalcon sailed above, heading toward the grove of pine trees that stood several hundred paces downriver.

With an enormous grin smeared across his face, Randol looked back and forth at his companions.

“Why on earth are you smiling?” Angela put her hands on her hips.

“Was it that bird?” Jonas asked. “What does it mean?”

“It means there is still hope,” Randol answered.

Before either of them could ask him for an explanation, another unexpected sound rang forth. The shrill call of a trumpet blasted a rallying tone that cut through the loud roaring and rumbling from the rapidly approaching Bulgar Horde.

The sound came from the direction of the pine grove where the gyrfalcon had disappeared. Nothing happened at first. Moments later, however, the three frightened and exhausted Britons each questioned their own sanity when suddenly, out of the trees, emerged a single golden unicorn.

A golden rider sat upon its back, holding a long steel lance straight skyward. Two other riders emerged from the trees similarly arrayed atop unicorns of their own. A steady stream of identical beasts and riders followed until forty of them were assembled in a tight formation just a stone’s throw from the fleeing threesome.

The Bulgars had by now noticed the unicorn company as well, and slowed their downhill charge substantially. They still crept toward the riverbank, and their stolen treasure box, but were exceedingly cautious regarding the magical looking cavalry whose intentions were as yet unknown.

Then the unicorns began to march. They moved slowly, but straight at the Bulgar Horde. The leaders amidst the lightly armored foot soldiers called out an all-stop, and the Bulgars nearest the unicorns nearly fell over their comrades in an effort to start backing away.

The unicorns feigned a charge and the Bulgars finally did begin to shift backward away from the river. Several more false advances were successful in pushing them back onto the more elevated slope away from the water.

“They appear to be protecting us,” Randol commented.

“Who – or what – are they?” Angela asked, not expecting an answer.

Something caught Jonas’ eye. He turned his head to look upstream and saw a ship moving on the distant horizon.

Along with the others, his attention was sharply refocused as the unicorns commenced their deadly game of cat and mouse with the Bulgars. Outnumbered nearly eight-to-one by the footmen, the heavy cavalry could not afford to be surrounded and swarmed. On the other hand, the Bulgars had no hope of resisting a directed charge by the golden riders.

Through a continued series of false charges and quick retreats, the unicorns made their way steadily up the slope to higher ground. While gaining this tactical advantage, they also managed to keep the hundreds of Bulgars huddled together and essentially motionless. The Bulgars either did not realize they were being outflanked or did not know what to do about it.

Angela, Jonas and Randol stood still as well, watching the brilliant maneuverings of the unicorns with ever increasing awe and respect. Yet as soon as the riders finally reached a point directly uphill from the Horde, they did

something none of their observers expected. They turned and rode away up the slope as if fleeing the Bulgars.

“Where are they going?” Randol wondered.

“Wait for it,” Jonas advised with a slight grin on his lips.

The Bulgars seemed to collectively hesitate, unsure whether to turn and finish their race to the river that they had originally embarked upon, or to pursue the golden cavalry that appeared to have lost their nerve. Before they could decide, the riders stopped, turned and lowered their lances.

The repeated feigned charges had given the Bulgars an overdeveloped sense of security. By the time they realized that the cavalry had truly committed, it was too late for them.

Something else happened as the unicorns rapidly accelerated to a speed they had not yet displayed. The sun touched the western horizon line on its descent into the shadow of the earth. Blazing red rays of light, striking against the swirling dust storm raised by the churning of hooves, transformed the golden steeds and their riders. Reflecting red-gold light, they took on the countenance of hellfire as the ground shook beneath the rolling thunder of their pounding and relentless strides.

The Bulgars turned as one and fled down the hill, but their slow and clumsy human feet were overtaken in no time by the cavalry’s lightning fast approach. The first lines of the Horde to be overrun simply vanished as the unicorns advanced over them. From the English trio’s viewpoint at the river bank, they appeared consumed in the onrushing avalanche of flame.

As the riders raced down their deadly path through the crumbling bodies of the Bulgars, the frightened onlookers were frozen in place by the stark vision of the unicorns’ overwhelming power. Set to repeat the error of the Bulgars, they realized too late that the fleeing Horde would soon be upon them. Even as the riders rode down the barbarians by the dozen, there were just too many of them.

“Dive into the river!” Jonas shouted.

“We will help you!” Angela added in response to Randol’s look of dread.

All three turned their backs to the death and destruction rolling down the slope toward them, but instead of jumping into the water, they jumped sideways into the swampy reeds to avoid the oncoming longboat that Jonas had seen upstream earlier.

They looked up and were more amazed by what they saw than they had been even at the sight of their rescuing unicorns. At the helm of the ship stood Maegan of Locksley, her unmistakable mane of golden hair flying back in the wind. She jerked the rudder wheel hard to the left and the very familiar looking Viking longboat surged out of the water, propelled by its own inertia up onto the shore. An instant wall was formed by the ship’s hull in between the charging Bulgar remnant and the terrified trio.

Before the ship came to rest in the soft earth and thick grass, Edric and Alfred leapt from its side-rail adding the forward motion of the ship to the power

of their own skyward leaps. Before returning to earth, they sent between them a dozen arrows into the crowd of Bulgars, with every arrow bringing down a man.

Upon hitting the ground, the twins let their bows fall away and drew their swords. Even with all the damage wrought by the still oncoming cavalry charge, nearly two hundred barbarians still raged toward the shore. The twins knew they would not be able to fend off such an army.

They turned back toward the ship and looked to Constantine. He nodded at them wearing a grave expression like none they had ever seen before, and they threw themselves onto the ground.

With Michael Tuck at his side ready to feed additional ammunition into the deadly weapon, Constantine drew away the sheet that covered the organ gun, aimed the shiny metal tubes at the thick of the nearest wave of onrushing Bulgars, and began to turn the crank.

Fire, smoke and crackling thunder erupted from each of the rotating tubes in turn. Frightening whizzing noises made by the metal balls ripping through the air were almost instantly followed by the sickening wet rending sounds as the balls tore through the bodies of the already shocked barbarians.

Arms and legs flew away from their owners and the Bulgars toppled over each other, slipping on the blood-soaked grass. Any last semblance of organization or discipline evaporated from the Bulgar Horde. They broke ranks and ran in every direction, fleeing for their lives.

The unicorn riders, after turning away to the side when the organ gun let loose, circled around and rode down any of the hapless Bulgars that still lingered in the vicinity of the beached ship. Only when the whirring and thundering from the organ gun subsided to echoes and ringing did Constantine realize that he had been screaming with all his might.

The twins got up and ran around to the riverside of the ship to check on the others, while Maegan, Constantine and Michael Tuck leapt overboard to join them. For quite some time all was a wonderful confusion of hugs, tears, shouting and laughter. Though a year and a summer had passed, all the original members of the Quest for Prester John were together again.

*

When the group finally emerged from behind the ship, all of the Bulgars that had not escaped were dead. The unicorn riders had dismounted and were standing nearby in a semicircle, waiting patiently.

On seeing Prince Constantine, they each fell to one knee shouting in unison, "Hail Phoenix! Hail Angelos!"

The English folk all looked at him.

"That is the third time I have heard you called the Phoenix," Randol frowned at the Prince. "Are you going to tell us what this means?"

"I will," Constantine laughed, "but not yet. Darkness is descending. Let us make our camp for the night and there will be time for at least some of the many tales we all must have to tell. First though, let me introduce you to some old friends..."

With a slight flick of his hand, Constantine caused the horsemen to rise.

"Stand at ease, Immortals!" he commanded them.

They began taking off their helmets, and to the surprise of the English, they were just ordinary men.

"Adrian!" the Prince called when he could finally recognize the leader of the cavalry. He ran to him and hugged the metallic man. After kissing him on each cheek, Constantine moved about, touching the hands and faces of the others.

"Come," he instructed the golden knights, "you must meet some very dear friends of mine."

While their unicorns chewed grass and lapped water from the river, the riders surrounded the reunited Quest.

"You see before you this day," the Prince explained, "the Immortals. These men are the last of the true and loyal Kataphraktoi, serving the rightful but exiled House of Angelos. You may search far and wide across God's green earth, but you will not find their equals among mounted knights; no, not in the west or the north, the east or the south. They are the flower and crème of Byzantine authority – the best of the best."

"After what we have seen here in this field today," Randol assessed, "there is no room for argument. We are grateful to you for our lives."

Angela and Jonas nodded their agreement.

"And to you, Phoenix," Randol grinned, turning to Constantine, "for I know not what manner of sorcery you unleashed upon our foe, but you are just as responsible for our salvation as your loyal knights. Without your intervention, we would surely have been driven into the river."

"God forbid..." Angela teased her cousin.

He silenced her with his icy stare, and they all walked downstream to the pine grove from which the Immortals had emerged.

*

Jonas speared fifteen large bass from the bountiful river and they enjoyed a sizzling and delicious fish fry after all. While the other men prepared and cooked the fish, and Michael Tuck slapped together a mound of pancakes from the flour and oil supply of the Immortals, Maegan and Angela stepped to the edge of the trees to converse privately.

"You look well," Maegan examined her younger cousin, "perhaps a bit too thin. That we can remedy easily enough, but of far greater import, how standeth your spirit?"

Angela looked down and replied, "Surely the Lord has been watching over us. We were captured by these same barbarians that you saved us from today in the dark land of the Crimea. 'Twas worse that the worst nightmare I have ever had and it would have become worse still, but..."

"What happened?" Maegan asked gently.

"In the midst of my darkest hour, somehow the Lord loosed Jonas from the bonds in which he had been placed. He rescued me, Maegan, like a knight errant from the old stories. He saved me and..."

"Go on," Maegan urged.

"He told me," Angela let out a tear remembering, "that he loves me."

Maegan encircled Angela with her arms and laughed.

"What?" Angela cried.

"I only wonder that it took this long," Maegan stepped back and held her cousin at arms length, "he has always loved you, you know."

"I suppose."

"Did you tell him that you love him too?"

"No," Angela said after a moment's thought, "I never really had the chance. We have been a bit busy..."

"You need to tell him."

"Well, what about you?" Angela turned the tables on her cousin. "Has the Prince made known his feelings for you?"

"Not in so many words," Maegan looked down. "We have been quite busy as well and yet..."

"What is it?"

"Even after all we have been through, I am worried about him," Maegan said with exceeding sadness.

"Worried about our perfect Prince?" Angela teased, instantly regretting making light of Maegan's concern.

"I am," Maegan sat down on a fallen tree trunk.

Angela sat next to her. "I am sorry," she offered. "Did something happen? Has something gone wrong?"

"The Quest is over," Maegan whispered. "Prester John was just a dream. This is the truth we discovered upon our reunion with Uncle Michael. He has traveled the lands of the farther east for most of our lifetimes, and the legendary Christian Kingdom of the east is just that, a legend. The Golden Horde, led by the barbarian Genghis Khan, is the great power that sweeps westward out of the steppe. Mongols they are also called. And mighty are these Mongols indeed, but they are no Christians..."

"Even if it was just a hope – just a dream – we had to try, right?" Angela was in mild shock. "At least we tried to save the world, and surely some good has come from our efforts."

"I believe that some has," Maegan nodded, "but I am afraid that Constantine's heart may be broken over the loss of the dream. And then what happened today..."

"If you are speaking of the thunder weapon on board the ship," Angela held Maegan's hand, "there is no other way, without the hand of God coming down, that we could have been saved from the barbarian flood. Surely he must realize that, or he would not have..."

"Broken his vow?" Maegan whispered.

"Do you mean the way Christ himself broke the rigid rules of the Sabbath to heal those he cared about?" Angela challenged. "People are always more important than rules. I believe you taught me that!"

"You are right," Maegan smiled, "and I know that Constantine cares about me very much, yet nevertheless, I do not know if he is, or soon will be, ready for love."

*

At sunrise, the Immortals set about the grim work of gathering up the many bodies of the Bulgars they had slain and burning them so they would not defile the land and the river. Randol and Maegan helped their spiritual uncle disassemble the organ gun. They stood at the water's edge and threw the various heavy metal pieces into the river.

"Tis a pity," Randol lamented as he watched the air bubbles from the organ pipes burst open upon the surface of the water. "That could have certainly come in handy again in a tight spot."

"Always a pragmatist," Michael Tuck put his arm around the lad, "just like your father. Hopefully though, my invention will never be replicated and the knowledge of its inner workings will die with me. I would fear greatly for the entire world if the use of such machines was ever to become widespread."

Meanwhile, across the field, Angela walked with her brothers to examine the unicorns up close. Though she did not show it, she was disappointed to find that they were actually just mere horses.

"Look at that," Edric stooped to pick up one of the shiny bronze horse helmets, complete with a single golden horn protruding from the forehead plate.

"The craftsmanship is exquisite," Alfred shared his brother's appreciation for the horses' armor that functioned well both as protection and for the purpose of shock and intimidation.

"Yesterday in the midst of the battle," Angela said softly, "one could almost have believed they were..."

"They were real?" Alfred looked at her.

"Well," she sounded defensive, "with the sunlight, and the dust..."

"Oh dear sister," Edric shook his head, "we have missed your imaginativeness. You might find unicorns in Africa, or perhaps the three Indias,

but there have not been unicorns in Europe since before Trojan times. Everyone knows that.”

She blushed and held her peace, trusting in the expertise of her knowledgeable older brothers.

When Constantine passed nearby moments later, she excused herself and left Edric and Alfred to their meticulous review of the various pieces of Kataphraktoi armor. The Prince did not appear to hear when she first called to him, but she easily closed the distance with a quick sprint.

“Constantine!” she called as she came along side him, hardly winded at all. “Did you not hear me?”

“I am sorry,” he said.

“Forgive me if I am disturbing you,” she blushed anew. “You seem perhaps to be lost in thought.”

“You do not disturb me,” he smiled. “I am well pleased to see you again after all this time.”

“And I you,” she curtsied slightly.

They continued walking upstream toward the beached ship where the others had gathered.

“I have so many questions...” Angela began.

He interrupted her with laughter.

“What?”

“I am glad to see you have not changed too greatly,” he winked at her.

“Well, one question shall suffice for now,” she playfully shook her head at him, “if I may?”

“You may.”

“How in heaven and earth did you ever find us? How did you know we would need rescuing? How did your loyal horsemen come to be here at just the right time? How did you...”

“You are already up to three questions!”

“Sorry.”

“Tis all right,” the Prince stared at her for a moment. “I can answer all three with one single statement, though you may wish to cover your ears.”

“Cover my ears? But why would...”

Not waiting for her to comply, he turned toward the pine grove along the riverbank, cupped his hands around his mouth, and let out a piercing screech.

She gasped in surprise.

He grabbed her shoulders, not to comfort her, but to turn her around so she was facing the trees. Just then a streak of white emerged from the high boughs. The gyrfalcon from the day before took flight and headed right for them.

The bird circled twice and then came down slowly and gently to land on Constantine’s forearm. He stroked the beautiful creature lovingly, though it displayed no response to his affection. Dazzled by the gyrfalcon’s majestic

countenance, Angela did not notice the small metal tube attached to one of its legs until the Prince pointed it out to her.

“Ah, I am beginning to understand,” she smiled. “You have a messenger of sorts.”

“Precisely”

“But you have been traveling to the very ends of the earth,” she exclaimed. “How does your feathered friend know where to find you?”

“My friend here is an example of falconry’s finest, in terms of both breeding and training,” he answered. “No creature in land, sea or sky is a better tracker. He could spot a field mouse frozen still in chest deep grain.”

“I am impressed,” she looked at him, “as always.”

By then they had reached the ship where the now unarmored Immortals awaited words from their Prince. Maegan, Randol and Michael Tuck stood nearby as well.

“Brave Immortals!” the Byzantine Prince shouted in their native tongue, “For many years you have served the Angelos well with your courage, honor and faithfulness. Against Bulgars and Saracens, Turks and Mamelukes, you have held the forces of darkness at bay so that the light of our Great City can shine before men, calling all to peace and civilization.

“Yet the great and terrible events that unfolded last evening are a harbinger of the end of this age. The majesty and glory of the company of mounted knights is fading from this world’s realm. The valor of the lone chivalric fighter too is passing into memory. For the foe which shall presently bear down upon us shall prevail not because of his discipline and training, nor shall his strength of heart tilt the battle’s outcome.

“The armies of the age to come shall seek victory by sheer numbers and by hurling their missiles from farther away than their adversaries. They shall not even see their enemy’s eyes...”

The loyal Kataphraktoi issued derisory snorts at such a cowardly fighting style. “What then is to be done?” Adrian, the Immortals’ captain added. “How then shall we fight?”

“That I leave to each of you individually, for your conscience and your hearts to decide,” Constantine said sadly. “Friar Tuck,” he turned then to Michael, “you have ridden with these barbarians who are destroying the old ways; forcing the world to move on. What can we expect? When the Mongols come, how shall the battle begin?”

Michael Tuck took a deep breath and stepped forward away from the Locksleys. Jonas and the twins had just arrived on the scene and they awaited Michael’s wisdom along with all the others.

“The battle has already begun,” he said after a long silence. “You see, the Bulgars have not been acting randomly or of their own accord. In fact, they came to this place with a very clear and single-minded purpose – to retrieve a treasure that was taken from them.”

Randol and Jonas grinned at each other from across the circle of gathered listeners. Angela noticed them and silently sighed.

“Yet they were driven on not by a lust for diamonds, rubies and emeralds, but rather by their even more compelling interest in self-preservation. The Bulgars recently accepted the Mongol yoke. The treasure chest was their tribute payment to Genghis Khan – a payment, I might add, that is now overdue.”

“Then have we not doubly served the interests of the West?” Randol asked hopefully, “both by depriving the Golden Horde of a substantial war chest and by setting them at odds with their barbarian vassals?”

“I hope to God that it is so,” Michael responded, “but keep in mind that compared with the military might of the Golden Horde, the Bulgars are like straw men standing in a field. With or without their vassals, the Mongols will advance. And the Khan has long had his eyes fixed upon Kiev.”

“What have they against Kiev?” Maegan inquired.

“Nothing more than any of the other cities they have destroyed, but that it stands along their relentless path toward conquering the world,” Michael answered ominously.

“We believe that is where their next strike will come,” Constantine elaborated. “They might have sent the Bulgars as a vanguard, and perhaps now they will not, but they will come either way. I know that many of you have family and dear friends in Kiev. For that reason, and because you have more than amply fulfilled your duty to me, I hereby declare the Immortals disbanded!”

There was a collective but quiet gasp.

“You are free to choose your paths from henceforth,” the Prince announced. “You may journey to Kiev and help evacuate your loved ones. You may return to the relative safety of Constantinople. Or you may choose another path, wherever it may lead. May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you!”

The stunned Kataphraktoi spent the rest of that day gathering their belongings and discussing their options with each other. In the end, twenty-three of the forty rode north along the river, taking Constantine’s advice to save what could be saved from the storm that would soon befall that proud river city of the Kievan Princes.

From among the others, eight asked to be ferried across the Dnepr so that they could ride overland to their homes in the Great City. The nine that were left asked to remain with Constantine and his English friends and to travel alongside them as bodyguards and companions, having bestowed their mighty steeds upon the group returning to Constantinople.

They set sail downriver the following morning under grey skies, heading swiftly for the open waters of the Black Sea.

Verse Eleven – Mediterranean

A cold wind sliced through the air as the travelers bounced over the choppy waves in the creaking longboat. They huddled underneath blankets and furs, and took turns rowing to speed the journey.

Winter was coming quickly, and they hoped to reach England via the warmer waters of the Aegean and beyond that, the Mediterranean Sea. Just two weeks after the epic battle on the banks of the Dnepr, they sailed within sight of the Bosphorus Straights and the mighty city of Constantinople.

Everyone stared in awe at its massive sea walls, looming towers, endless parapets, and deep purple imperial banners. Everyone, that is, except for the Prince who carried the great capital's name. Constantine had taken ill at sea. The normally hale and hearty Prince was racked by fever, chills, nausea and fierce trembling.

They built a tiny makeshift tent around him to keep away the worst of the gale force winds and salty sea spray. Maegan held a perpetual vigil at his side, but with few healing supplies there was little tangible treatment she could provide. And so she prayed without ceasing.

*

Docking at a trading port near Athens, Jonas, Michael and six of the former Immortals stayed to guard Constantine and the ship. Maegan led the others ashore in a search for medicine, food and fresh clothing.

Jonas and Michael walked down the beach a bit to stretch out their legs. Standing on the shore they watched a fleet of Egyptian trading dhows flying past at great speed.

"It would seem the Byzantines have once again made a peace treaty with the Caliphate in Cairo," Michael said cynically, knowing the cold pragmatism that drove Imperial politics.

"If that is so," Jonas shook his head, "then the Emperor is complicit in the enslavement of thousands of innocents – the very peoples that I descend from on my mother's side."

"How do you know this?" Michael was surprised.

"But for the grace of God," Jonas said gravely, "I would have been among the enslaved."

Michael stared at him.

"We did not simply sail to the Crimea, steal the Bulgars' treasure box and then leave," Jonas explained. "When we first arrived there, we were merely seeking supplies so we could continue our journey to the east in the hopes of finding the others. But we were captured by the Bulgar Horde, badly beaten, and separated. Randol was led to a tree stump and left to die by a crucifixion of sorts.

Angela was taken to the main Bulgar tent to await an even worse fate, if you can believe that is possible.”

“And you?” Michael’s face had grown stern.

“They perceived me to be from among the local population and threw me, bound in chains along with many other fair-haired lads, into the belly of a ship just like one of those,” he motioned to the vessels cruising past them.

“How did you escape?” Michael marveled.

Jonas looked down at his feet and kicked some sand as he tried to think of the right words. He had hardly spoken with Angela and Randol about the experience, both because they had been on the run ever since and because he was still sorting through it all.

“I have seen many strange and mighty wonders over the years,” Michael put his hand on Jonas’ shoulder. “You needn’t worry about unsettling me.”

“Uncle Michael,” Jonas said finally in a wavering voice, “I believe an angel visited me. I believe I saw the hand of God upon me that dark and terrible night. Do you think me mad?”

Michael smiled as he answered, “I saw the hand of God upon you when you were born, and as a tumbling little lad in Sherwood, and I see it still upon you this day.”

Jonas looked at him and was speechless.

“Think it not strange when God shall visit you in the midst of your darkest hour,” Michael continued. “Sadly, that is often when we are most open to His Spirit and guidance.”

“He did not merely guide me,” Jonas argued. “He ripped away the iron chains that shackled me; he brought me safely into shore though I had no strength to swim...”

“Should these things be difficult for the One who created all things?” Michael kept his hand on Jonas.

“There is more...” Jonas inhaled.

“Yes?”

“Something else happened next, after I was set free,” Jonas closed his eyes. “My spear and my axe appeared before me, lying on the ground.”

“Yes?”

“Uncle Michael,” Jonas opened his eyes and licked his dry lips; “I had lost them both a year before, in the forests to the east of the Polish Kingdom.”

“Is that so?”

Jonas closed his eyes again and rubbed his temples with his fingertips.

Michael noticed the ring on his hand as a ray of sunlight poked through the clouds and flashed upon it.

“I see that your mother gave you one of her special rings for your journey,” Michael said softly.

Jonas said nothing.

“Did something else happen in the forest, when your weapons went missing?” Michael probed.

“Tell me once again the tale of my parents’ first meeting,” Jonas answered indirectly.

“You saw her didn’t you?” Michael’s eyes had grown wide. “You met the forest spirit who delivered your mother and your father from the barbarians that assailed them.”

“Tis too much for my mind...” Jonas seemed near tears. “A forest spirit takes away my weapons, and an angel of the Lord returns them to me...how could this be? Why would the Lord work in collusion with a pagan spirit?”

“Consider the Scriptures, Jonas Little,” Michael grinned. “He never said ‘there are no other gods’, but rather ‘you shall have no other gods *before me*.’”

“What are you saying?”

“I am saying that there are many powerful forces at work in this world; some for good and some for evil,” he elaborated, “and the Lord said at one point ‘he who is not with me is against me’, but remember at another point He also said that ‘whoever is not against us is for us.’ In times past, God spoke through a burning bush; a donkey...the Lord said that if the people’s tongues were stilled, even the rocks and stones would cry out at His triumphal coming!”

“So you are saying that the Lord can use anyone, or anything, to His purpose?” Jonas nodded, understanding at last.

“Precisely, my lad,” Michael patted his shoulder. “I suppose He could even use wretches like you and me.”

*

With the help of some of the men, Maegan was able to get Constantine into a warm and dry woolen tunic. He seemed to rest more easily afterward, and Maegan added treatment with medicine, wine and water to the bastion of prayer she continued to build around him. Still he remained with fever and showed few signs of awareness. Maegan never left his side.

The foul weather lifted at least as they rounded the southern shores of Greece, passing near the western tip of the island of Crete. As they sailed along, the others used the time to catch up on their various adventures in the east while they had been separated.

“This Prince Aleksandr sounds like quite a man,” Angela said as her brothers lounged in the bottom of the longboat, regaling the group with stories of their time in Novgorod. “It makes me sad that I may never meet him.”

“Tis probably for the best,” Edric smirked.

“That is true,” Alfred explained. “You see, the Russian Prince became a bit obsessed with our cousin, and he likely would have been even more taken with you, dear sister.”

“Why do you think so?” Angela was naturally curious.

"I believe her feisty and independent spirit captured his attention as much, if not more than her fairness," Edric offered.

"You think I am feisty and independent?" she asked as if somehow surprised by the idea.

Her brothers held their sides as they laughed. Jonas tried not to join them, but was unable to resist. He forced himself to stop though when Angela shot him a frightful warning glance.

"One thing I still do not understand," Jonas interjected, desperately hoping to move the conversation forward. "What did Constantine do or say to turn Prince Aleksandr so quickly from foe to friend?"

The twins looked at each other.

"That is a good question, Little," Edric answered at last. "Though I am not sure we ever found out precisely."

"They walked around for awhile, just the two of them," Alfred added. "We tried to listen, but they were using an archaic form of Greek that was hard to follow. I suspect though that he appealed to Aleksandr's rather well developed sense of chivalry."

"You mean because the army of Swede soldiers that had captured you was entirely composed of women?" Angela could not resist the opportunity to needle her brothers.

"Quite," Edric frowned.

"Although," Alfred sought to clarify, "twas less of a capture, and more of a...joining of forces."

"Funny," Angela would not let go, "that's not exactly the way of it that Maegan described to me."

"In any case," Edric cleared his throat, "all is well that ended well."

"I should say so," Alfred glared at their little sister.

"Uncle Michael," Jonas again sought to smooth over the bristling tension between the Allendale siblings, "we should like to hear more about your adventures as well. Will you tell us more about your time in the farther east, and of all the years that passed since you left Nottingham?"

Michael was staring out at the sparkling blue waters of the eastern Mediterranean and at first seemed as if he had not heard the request.

Jonas opened his mouth to repeat his query when Michael finally turned back to them and smiled.

"It all began not far from where we are right now," Michael explained. "You all were quite young when John and I left England again. You see, the Fifth Crusade, for all its glory, failed not only to recapture Jerusalem, but also to satisfy the longing for adventure that we both felt in our youth.

"We sought out and were fortunate enough to find Constantine's mother, the Byzantine Princess Theodora Angeloi, whom we had befriended years earlier while on crusade. As she had before, she took us under her wing, adopting John into her private Varangian Guard and graciously allowing me to serve as a

counselor and messenger. Working in this capacity, I would eventually travel to the very ends of the earth.”

“Soon after we left England ourselves,” Angela interrupted his tale, “Constantine told us that his mother and Uncle John had recently married. Did you know of this?”

“I did not,” Michael’s eyes sparkled, “but I am pleased to hear it and not in the least bit surprised. Constantine’s birth father, the Austrian King, had died right around the time we entered his mother’s service. The Prince was quite young, just as you all were back then; and I watched as John quickly became a father-figure to him.

“As for me, I heard and followed the call of distant lands. Traveling with a band of Ishmaelite merchants, I walked for thousands of miles along the Great Silk Road that leads to the farther east. I saw deserts made of nothing but salt, lakes as vast as the sea we sail today, dromedaries and other beasts that defy imagination. Like the wandering tribes that crisscross the endless steppe, my home became both everywhere and nowhere.

“In the thick and rainy forests far to the south, past the roots of the Mighty Mountains, I witnessed strange and frightening tribes of people. They worshipped a greater variety of idols and spirits than I could have ever imagined in my wildest and darkest dreams. And yet I found true believers there as well! One group even showed me a tomb in which they claimed lay the body and belongings of Saint Thomas the Apostle.

“I forged on, ever eastward, until I reached the sea from which the morning sun arises. No words have I to explain the size and vastness of the civilization there. If you gathered all the men, women and children of England into a single valley, you might begin to gain a sense of its seething populace. Yet, with each new valley in turn, you would find as many people all over again. And these valleys stretched on and on. Years, if not decades, would be needed to pass through them all on foot. For two years I tried to explore it all – tried to apprehend its size and secrets, but with each new valley I became only more convinced that such a task could never be done.

“Then one day, on the remote outskirts of these lands, I met a woman. Her eyes, like her hair, were as black as the night. Her skin though was pale and smooth like cream, and when she moved...”

The others watched in silence as Michael’s eyes filled with moisture, and a single tear slid from each of his eyes.

“Her husband had died, you see,” Michael explained after dabbing his eyes with his sleeves. “She was alone there in this wasteland, struggling with her young children each day to gather enough food from the barren countryside to live on and do the same again the next day. My heart went out to her...to them. I meant only to stay a little while; just to help them a bit. But I fell in love with her. I explained Christ to them, as best I could. They believed, and that is my only consolation for letting them perish.”

“What do you mean by that?” Angela asked when she could stand the quiet no more.

“I was away, hunting,” Michael said so softly they could barely hear him. “Winter was coming, and I wanted only to provide them with a little meat for strength. I suppose I will never know if I would have been able to stop the raiders – probably not, judging by the number of hoof prints in the dust.

“They were all dead. All that is, except for the oldest son; and his wounds were fatal. He died in my arms soon after I returned. We had never communicated very well, but I knew enough of their language to understand when he told me that the Muslim Uyghur tribe was to blame. And I understood all too well the last word that trickled out of him along with the last of his blood.”

“What was it?” Jonas asked when it seemed as if Michael would not say it on his own.

“Vengeance...” he whispered.

The day was warm and sunny, but no one listening to the way he said that word was spared from a chill in their spines.

“Twas not long after,” Michael said sadly, “that I came into the service of a new master; one whom some of you have met.”

“Genghis Khan,” Alfred guessed correctly.

“Yes,” Michael nodded gravely. “The Khan employs counselors and aides from every corner of the world, but he had never met an Englishman before, and he took quite a liking to me. For my part, I was able to convince him that the Uyghurs were interested in usurping him, even plotting to build a coalition of tribes to overthrow his authority.

“I rode alongside the Khan himself as we entered the Uyghur’s territory and the killing began. It went on for days on end. Their army only lasted one day, but more time was needed to round up the women and children...even their animals. Before leaving and riding back to our tents, two more things were done. We gathered the skulls of men and beast alike, and assembled them into giant pyramids. They likely stand to this day – testaments to the folly of any who oppose the Khan.”

“What was the other thing?” Edric asked, not really wanting to know.

“We rode our horses through their fields of crops, broke the irrigation dykes, and even spread sea salt across the land. All of this was done to fulfill the Khan’s promise that because of the Uyghurs plotting and defiance, nothing would ever grow again where they had lived.”

Angela stood, stepped over toward Michael, threw her arms around him, and began weeping into his chest.

“I am sorry,” she cried. “I am so sorry that you lost your family that you had loved.”

The way she said it broke open the floodgates of sadness and regret within the wandering Friar, and he wept uncontrollably for quite some time. Before he was able to stop, everyone else had joined him in the shedding of tears.

Finally, they decided that they would all likely feel better if they ate something. Angela and Jonas quickly assembled a simple meal from their supplies. Randol visited Constantine's miniature infirmary and would not accept his sister's refusal to come out and join them for some sustenance. Before returning to the Prince's bedside, she ended up eating more than anyone else.

*

Strange dreams seemed to plague almost everyone on board the boat that night. The morning sun revealed the island of Malta far away on the southern horizon, though they decided to avoid it when they noticed Papal Galleons lurking in its coastal waters.

Instead, they turned to the northwest. Stopping on the western tip of Sicily, they were able to purchase fresh supplies from the Norman traders that had established a series of outposts in that coastal region.

The good food and continued fair weather helped melt away the gloom from Michael's sad tale. Before long the usual sensation of lightness returned to their conversations.

"I have a question," Angela declared one afternoon following a hearty feast to which Jonas had contributed by spearing three large red snapper.

"Now that is a wonder indeed," Randol quipped, beating her brothers to the punch.

"Would you not also like to know," she rebuked her cousin, "how the others managed to escape from the Golden Horde. Did you simply ride away from the most powerful army on earth with no one giving you so much as a sideways glance?" she directed at the twins.

They looked at each other and grinned slightly.

"The short answer to your question is yes," Michael answered before Angela could pounce upon her brothers and pursue the reason for their smiles. "The Golden Horde functions and perceives on the scale of armies and nations. In their eyes, and more importantly, in the eyes of the Great Khan; mere individuals are of little consequence, as they are not thought capable of having a significant effect of the outcome of a battle or other major event."

"So you do not think you were missed after leaving?" she was baffled by the idea.

"Certainly not in the same way anyone aboard this ship would be missed by the others if they were to part ways," Michael explained. "I imagine the Khan may be aware of my absence, but his focus is on the broad and sweeping goal of eventually taking over the entire world. Concern over just one man has no place in such a wide-set vision. That is a factor I was counting on when we made our escape. Nevertheless, we did not leave the Khan's realm entirely without harassment, but I suppose there are others here whose thunder I would be stealing if I were to tell that tale myself..."

The twins were now grinning ear to ear.

“Good Lord,” Angela sighed. “What sort of trouble did you two get into this time?”

“No trouble,” Alfred dismissed.

“No trouble at all,” Edric elaborated, “rather just a tiny bit of excessive vigilance on the part of several of the Golden Horde’s frontier outpost guards.”

“A minor problem easily resolved,” Alfred added, “with the help of Parthian Tactics.”

“What may I ask,” Randol perked up right away, “are Parthian Tactics.”

“Ah,” Edric condescended, “for the average Englishman unschooled in steppe warfare, they would certainly be an unfamiliar stratagem.”

“We shall have to train you at our next opportunity,” Alfred reassured Randol, reveling in the rare chance to lord something over their socially higher-ranked cousin.

“Just tell me,” Randol looked out to the sea, suddenly pretending to be less uninterested.

“Very well,” Edric accepted. “We had recently crossed the Don River, which is actually quite sparkling and lovely in early autumn.”

“We passed the Horde’s last border outpost,” Alfred stepped in, fearing that his brother was planning to lengthen the story unnecessarily, “and four Mongol riders set after us in hot pursuit.”

“What did they want?” Jonas wondered aloud.

“We never thought to ask,” Edric seized the tale again. “By that point we had received the message, via gyrfalcon, that you all were plodding your way overland toward the Dnepr and we wanted to reach you with all haste.”

“Who sent you the message?” Angela was amazed.

“I did,” the normally quiet Adrian of the Immortals piped in from across the boat. “Our scouts, like the Bulgars’, had been following you since not long after you departed the camps in the Crimea. Though we had never seen you before, you fit Prince Constantine’s description well enough.”

“I trust that an explanation of Parthian Tactics will emerge somewhere in this story,” Randol revealed his impatience.

“We were just coming to that,” Alfred winked. “To give them due credit, the Mongols are unparalleled horsemen, and we had little hope of outrunning or outmaneuvering them.”

“However,” Edric interjected, “the general success of their archery attacks is based purely upon the sheer numbers of arrows they send into the air when gathered in a large force, and not necessarily upon their skill level as individual bowmen.”

“That is why,” Alfred explained, “when we employed Parthian Tactics, we were able to overcome this small group of Mongols, actually quite quickly and with very little effort.”

The twins stared dully at Randol, wondering if they could provoke his impatient curiosity any further. The future Lord of Locksley did not bend.

"The tactics in question," Edric finally gave up and surrendered the information, "simply involve turning one's torso back toward a pursuing enemy and firing arrows at them while riding in away in the opposite direction."

"That's it!" Randol frowned. "That sounds easy enough!"

"Tis a bit tricky," Alfred sounded defensive.

"It does require *some* practice," Edric declared.

"I think it sounds fascinating," Angela comforted her brothers as Randol abandoned the conversation and went back to picking at the leftover fish. "And I do have another question..."

"We shall tell you anything you wish to know, sis," Alfred smiled.

"Very well," she looked thoughtful. "Not that it matters tremendously at this point, but how did you ever come to possess this ship? And where are the Norse boys who sailed us away from England in it?"

"That is an easy one," Edric answered. "When we reached Kiev, the Norse lads were already there. They had run the river route from Riga one last time and unloaded a cargo of Scandinavian furs in Kiev."

"Why was it their last time?" Angela wondered.

"I believe they were getting out of the business," Alfred shrugged. "In any case, they were more than eager to accept our offer of five excellent horses, Maegan's weapons, some of Uncle Michael's maps, and a neat stack of gold coins in exchange for the ship."

"A fair trade, I suppose," Angela shrugged too, "but why did Maegan give up her weapons?"

"Another good question," Edric nodded, "though you will have to ask her. We never really discussed the matter as we were in a considerable hurry to reach you all."

"And for that we are quite grateful," Angela stared at her brothers realizing how much she really had missed them.

"What?" they said in unison after she had stared too long.

"Nothing," Angela blushed as she stood, "I am going to go check in on Maegan and her patient."

*

Constantine seemed a little better and would occasionally awaken to look wordlessly up at Maegan. Mostly though he slept, and often during that long sea voyage he experienced a recurring dream.

In the dreams his location would vary, but every time he eventually would see the white messenger gyrfalcon approaching. The bird soared high in the air, riding the wind currents.

He knew that it carried an important message, not only for him, but vital to the lives of many others as well. Yet, before the bird would ever reach him, it fell from the sky and disappeared behind a hill, or buildings, or trees.

Constantine ran in the frustratingly slow way of dreams to find the bird, but only ever came upon a burning town or sometimes a huge bonfire. He could feel the heat from the flames and the sting of smoke in his eyes.

Then without fail, sparks and cinders would spew forth followed by a fiery flare. From the flames emerged a great bird, but it was never the gyrfalcon that had been lost. Sometimes it was a great eagle; at others an owl or a swan. Whatever form it took, the new bird would fly in circles around him.

Then, looking down into his hand, Constantine could see a tiny scroll; the message for which he had been waiting. Yet, every time he unrolled it to read what it said, he awoke suddenly and the dream vanished.

*

Trying to simultaneously avoid the pirate coasts of North Africa and the Papal coasts of Italia, they sailed the longboat further north and west into the calm Tyrrhenian Sea on a direct course for the remote and sparsely inhabited island of Sardinia.

The fair weather that had blessed their journey ever since Greece finally gave way however, and the usually docile sea grew increasingly choppy. Clouds moved in, blocking the stars at night and turning navigation into a matter of guesswork. The wind likewise worked against them, and at some points they had to drop oars just to keep from drifting backward.

As the storms grew in intensity, they wondered frequently about the longboat's integrity and just how good of a bargain they had received from the Norse sailors. Water started seeping in, adding to the wetness from the waves splashing over the sides and pouring down on them from the skies above.

With dry land continuing to linger always somewhere just out of sight, despair began seeping into their souls as well. The former Immortals had never been on such a long sea journey and even their steely nerves were fast becoming frayed. Randol was understandably the most nervous of all, though he worked hard to keep up a front of calm composure.

*

In the darkest hour of the night, a mighty crack resounded even above the roar of wind and wave, as the boat struck a sea rock. The hull was shattered and all seventeen souls on board were tossed mercilessly into the cold, salty tempest.

Angela had been sitting with Maegan and her patient. Before their section of the hull sank, she used her knife to cut the thick woolen tunic away

from the Prince making him considerably easier to uphold. The two ladies worked as one to keep his head above the water.

Jonas likewise helped Randol stay up until they were both able to grab a large piece of wood floating by and use it as a kickboard. Randol had no choice but to let his sword and other possessions sink into the sea. They shortly came upon the twins who also shared a floating wooden board.

The brothers Allendale, however, had kept their bows and quivers strapped onto their bodies despite the difficulty the equipment added to the task of swimming. The foursome stayed together and searched for the others in the tossing waves but to no avail.

Michael and the nine Immortals were nowhere to be seen, and though they thought they heard the ladies' shouts at one point, they never actually set eyes on them.

When dawn finally came, it brought them blessed light and a break in the storm as well.

"Look!" Alfred shouted.

"There is land! We are saved!" Edric announced.

The twins abandoned their board and swam freely until they reached the white sandy beach of a tiny but mountainous island. Jonas patiently pulled Randol, who clung to his floating board with a death grip, in toward the shore.

When they finally arrived, Edric and Alfred were still laying in the warm sand panting for breath. Jonas and Randol trudged ashore through the foamy surf and joined them in their labored breathing.

The late autumn day remained chilly even as the sun continued its ascent, and it was mid-morning before the four young men had regained enough strength to set out in search of the others. They came first upon three of the Byzantine riders who were similarly exhausted, but alive.

Not long after, Randol shouted as he caught sight of the two ladies. The seven men ran toward them and found Angela and Maegan dripping wet and shivering, and huddled over what appeared to be Constantine's corpse.

The Prince's skin was a sickening bluish-grey and his lips were somewhere between blue and purple. He showed no signs of life even as Maegan frantically rubbed upon his chest and arms, occasionally pausing to put her ear to his cold skin and listen for any sign of hope. Angela gently slapped his cheeks and cradled his head in the hopes of transferring to him some of the little warmth she possessed.

The three horseless Kataphraktoi fell to their knees, loudly chanting strange Greek words in unison. They wept but never broke the rhythm of their prayers as they alternately raised their hands to heaven and pounded them down into the dry sand.

Not knowing what else to do, the four Englishmen joined them. They fell to their knees, completing a circle around Constantine and prayed fervently in their own tongue.

None of their desperate prayer and supplication, however, seemed to have any effect on the lifeless Prince. Purely out of frustration, Maegan pounded her fist against Constantine's torso.

"How dare you!" she screamed, hitting him again. "I love you! How dare you leave me?"

The others stopped praying and silence took over.

She struck him a third time. Suddenly a convulsive wave coursed through his body. The Prince spewed forth an unimaginable volume of sea water from his nose and mouth. Another convulsion sent forth a much smaller amount of liquid. But afterward they all heard the unmistakable and wonderful sound of air rushing back in.

"Constantine!" Maegan wailed. "Tell me you are alive! Tell me I did not just dream that!"

Another seemingly eternal moment of silence passed before the Prince coughed lightly and let out a barely audible moan.

The three Immortals leapt to their feet, shouting hoorahs and dancing. Jonas and the twins joined them.

Randol just stood there, arms folded and shaking his head. "A Phoenix indeed," he sighed. "As soon as he revives," he muttered to nobody in particular, "I shall have to have words with him for upsetting my sister so."

Verse Twelve – A Hidden Kingdom

On a nearby beach, Michael Tuck gathered together the other six soggy Immortals and led them on an upward march into the island's mountainous interior. He hoped that by reaching a high point, they would have a better view for spotting any other survivors.

"We are fortunate that any of us live," Adrian commented as they slowly navigated their way through a thick labyrinth of pines, junipers, brambles and hanging vines.

"Fortune you say?" Michael laughed. "No. Only God could have brought us through such a trial."

"Then I hope God was with the others as well," Adrian said somberly.

"I am sure that Heeeee..." Michael trailed off with a scream as the ground underneath them gave way.

The seven wet and weary men landed in a pile at the bottom of a deep pit. After a few moments of grunting, groaning and disentangling themselves from each others' limbs, they looked around to take stock of their situation.

"Is everyone alright?" Adrian asked.

Each man in turn nodded or voiced his affirmation.

"Is this a cave or some sort of sinkhole?" asked one of the Immortals.

"I would that it were," Michael replied, running his fingers along the smooth dirt wall, "but I fear gentlemen, that we have been taken in by a trap!"

*

Randol fashioned a long, thin and dry branch into a staff and used it to lead his group toward the interior with the same hope that had driven forth Michael and his men. Whacking away branches and vines, Randol forged a path for Jonas, the twins and the three Immortals who bore Constantine between them like a dead man, though he lived.

Angela and Maegan brought up the rear, keeping watchful eyes on the Prince's color and complexion. Out of the cold sea, he had been turning steadily less blue, though he remained pale and barely conscious.

"Where are you leading us?" Maegan shouted to her little brother in her frustration at not being able to see the path ahead.

"Onward and upward," Randol answered dismissively as he continued marching. "If I were on my own I might indeed seek the shortest path, dear sister. Yet for the sake of our company, I am attempting to choose a way that will not result in excessive injury."

"Forgive me," she replied from behind. "Please just be careful. I have a strange feeling about this island."

"Thank you, sis," Randol barked over his shoulder, "but all is quite well in hand. Now, if you will all please just continue to follow meeeee..."

Suddenly Randol, along with Constantine and his six carriers, was swept off the earth and into the air. They struggled and writhed but were unable to escape the thick rope net that had engulfed them. Angela and Maegan were far enough behind to avoid the hidden snare, yet for a moment they could manage only to stare at their captured friends in fearful wonder.

They grew even more frightened and bewildered as a loud, booming laugh rang forth amidst the thick foliage. Each of the ladies picked up nearby dead branches as the only available means of self-defense. Standing back to back, they steeled themselves for the coming confrontation with their still invisible adversary.

Just then, in a maelstrom of leaves and debris, an enormous man plunged to the ground from his hidden perch in the tree above them. The ladies screamed and swung their branches. Maegan's branch shattered against the man's head, while Angela's cracked hard upon his midsection.

"Good Lord!" the man cried in remarkably fluent English as he leaned against the nearest tree trying to regain his balance. "Is that the greeting I get after all these years?"

The two ladies stood there with jaws dropped.

Maegan worked her mouth, but nothing would come out.

Eventually, Angela was able to squeak out the two words they were both thinking, "Uncle John?"

"At your service, my ladies," he bowed, and finally succumbing to the effects of his head wound, fell over with a dull thud.

"Uh," Randol wheezed as he attempted to speak with the weight of seven men upon his chest, "we would gladly be of service too, if you could..."

Before he could even finish, Maegan had followed the rope line, found the ballast support and kicked it free. The net plunged downward and the trapped men spilled out with a collective shout of relief mingled with pain.

As the others slowly stood, Maegan ran to Constantine. Kneeling over him she lightly kissed his forehead. He stirred, opened his eyes, and muttered a barely audible, "Where are we?"

"Oh, my love," her tears let loose, streaming down her face and onto his, "you are alive and we are together! We could be upon the moon for all I care!"

Meanwhile, Angela had torn away a portion of her already ragged tunic and was gently applying pressure to her godfather's bleeding temple. The young men ambled over toward them, forming a loose circle around the fallen giant.

"What in heaven and earth is Uncle John doing here?" Jonas wondered. "And what have you done to him?"

Angela offered only a disdainful frown in answer to his questions.

"Hopefully, we can revive him," Edric jumped in.

"I should say so," Alfred nodded. "After all, Constantine was difficult enough to carry."

They did revive John, and he was able to lead them through the tangled woods without springing any more hidden traps. They moved higher and higher up the mountainside, and the plant growth became increasingly thick.

"I see you have succeeded in transplanting many of the best secrets of Sherwood," Jonas commented to his uncle as John guided them past another snare. "But why pay such keen attention to security here on this remote island?"

"Life is never as it seems, nephew," John winked, stopping in front of a massive juniper shrub. "And there is much here that I wish to protect." With that he pulled aside a large branch, and the others noticed that instead of darkness underneath the low-slung canopy of the shrub; there was light coming through from a tunnel to the other side.

"Clever," Edric nodded.

"Quite," Alfred agreed.

Constantine, who was upright only by virtue of his arms slung around each of the twins' shoulders, raised his head slightly in what might have been a nod of agreement.

"After you," John motioned for them to go in.

While everyone else hesitated, Angela dove through. She crept low and emerged into a bright and beautiful clearing. Soft green grass blanketed the earth, and flowers of nearly every imaginable color bordered the entire area.

A cluster of small and simple, yet extraordinarily sturdy looking dwellings stood at the far end, past a tranquil water fountain that trickled over rocks and pooled in a clear basin near the tree line. The sun, now directly overhead, bathed the clearing in its warmth.

The size of the hidden encampment was much larger than seemed possible to Angela, having just come from the cramped confines of the trail outside the shrubbery. Yet, apart from her shock at the expansiveness of the clearing, all of the beauty of its other features was momentarily eclipsed and outshone by the striking loveliness of the woman standing in front of her.

Old enough to be her mother, though with a sparkle in her eye that conveyed her perpetual youthfulness, the woman wore only a white Grecian-style wrap. Angela stared in amazement, speechless as Maegan and Randol came through the tunnel and stood on either side of her.

They stepped aside to make room for Jonas as he emerged next, followed soon thereafter by the twins who half-carried, half-dragged Constantine along with them.

"Greetings, dear mother," the Prince whispered with a weak voice. "You look well."

"Oh, my son – you live!" Theodora gasped as tears formed in her eyes and she threw her arms around Constantine.

Finally, the three Immortals emerged from the shrubbery, followed by John who carefully replaced the branch that hid the entrance.

"So long and fervently have I prayed for this day, when you would once again return to me," Theodora wept over her son, keeping him tightly bound in her motherly embrace.

When she had sufficiently soaked him with kisses and tears, she stepped away, looking back and forth and back again at the twins. John took over the task of upholding Constantine's weakened body, and she took up one of each of the twin's hands with her own.

"You have the mighty hands of carpenter's sons," she assessed, "and yet why then do I suspect your passions reside more with the sword, bow and on the field of battle than in the woodshop?"

"You judge well, your highness," Edric bowed his head.

"And yet the tales we grew up hearing of your exceeding beauty offer no justice to you," Alfred bowed as well.

She grinned, "I see that not only your father's strength, but likewise his charm has become your inheritance. And you..." She turned and looked into their sister's eyes.

Angela looked down, overwhelmed by the countenance of their royal Byzantine hostess.

"My child," Theodora lifted Angela's chin, continuing to stare at her in wonder. "How can this be? 'Tis as if the Raven I knew stands before me at this very moment. You are your mother through and through, and yet you are very much your own. Say something, sweet Angela a' Dale, that I may hear perhaps a whisper of your mother's voice."

"I..." Angela trembled, "I do not sing the way she does." She did not know quite what to say.

"Ah," Theodora winked, "but the sweetness is still there. You are more precious than words, and I am more honored and humbled than you can know that you carry my family's name."

John proceeded to introduce his wife to the Locksley children and Jonas, with each of whom she exchanged similarly pleasant greetings and salutations. She ended by welcoming each of the Immortals by name, apparently having worked with them before.

Next, she led them across the clearing, past the small and sturdy villas, and down a terraced pathway toward a large stone patio nestled in the woods. There around a number of small round tables lounged Michael Tuck and the other Immortals.

"Ah, there you all are," Michael stood, grinning.

"Here *we* are!" Maegan was exasperated. "We thought you all had drowned just as we almost did!"

"God was surely with us," Michael nodded, "that not a single soul should have perished in the shipwreck."

"I am sure you are right, Michael," Theodora agreed, putting her arm around her son again. "And I am so grateful as well to my Constantine for leading you all to this secret place."

"Mother," he answered quietly, "I am afraid that I had no part in it. You see, I had been sick with a terrible fever for weeks. Sailing into the Black Sea is the last thing I remember before awakening here."

"Then who led you to our shores?" his mother wondered.

"For the last few days," Randol answered, "I would say twas the storm that chose our course."

"He does work in mysterious ways," John smiled at Theodora.

"Indeed," she grinned back at him.

*

For days on end, Theodora and John succored their guests with food, drink and every other creature comfort that they, or their small staff of servants, could provide. They listened intently as the youths poured out their tales of high adventure. They told of the bar brawl in Havelburg, their rescue of Prince Kazimierz from the wolf pack, the mysterious separation in the Russian forest, and of their other exploits from Novgorod to the Crimea and beyond.

Randol concluded the epic saga with a stirring rendition of the last battle against the Bulgar Horde on the banks of the Dnepr. Several of the former Immortals were brought to tears by Master Locksley's passionate retelling of their heroic deeds.

Michael had his eye on Constantine during the story, and could see that the memories of the horrifying violence he had unleashed with the organ gun still pained the Prince. So the sensitive friar quickly sought to change the subject.

"And not long after, we boarded that very ship upon which we traveled here and..." he began.

"Wait one moment," John interrupted, oblivious to Michael's intentions. "Where did the other Byzantine riders go? And what became of the white messenger gyrfalcon? And where is the stolen treasure box?"

"Ah yes," Michael frowned at the not so savvy John Little, "some of them traveled northward to Kiev to help defend against further Bulgar attacks that are sure to come. The gyrfalcon went to Constantinople in the care of the other riders who chose to return to their homes in that great city. Sadly, the tribute gems are likely deep in the mud at the bottom of the sea."

"But then..." John went on.

"In any case," Michael took a turn at interrupting, "the adventures of our young friends have indeed been marvelous beyond imagination. Yet I suppose they might wish to hear something about you and your story, dear John. I had ample opportunity aboard the ill-fated longboat to relay some of my exploits in

the farther east, but surely they would like to know how you have spent the many years since leaving Nottingham.”

“Oh please do, Uncle John,” Angela exclaimed. “Tell us how the two of you fell in love.”

“Yes, Uncle John,” Maegan joined in, “when did you know that you loved Constantine’s mother?”

“From the very first time I set eyes upon her,” John answered without a moment’s thought.

Michael smiled to himself, knowing he had succeeded in changing the course of the conversation.

“And yet,” Theodora reached over and held John’s hand, “things were a bit complicated back in those days.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, my Byzantine Princess,” he kissed her hand. Maegan and Angela giggled at how boyish their old Uncle John appeared when it came to expressing his affection for his wife, even after many years of marriage and togetherness.

“Though I had only respect for your true father,” John nodded to Constantine. “He was a great man and king, and so I waited a year and a day to honor his memory before proposing to your mother.”

“I always considered you my true father, John,” Constantine replied. “The son of kings and queens I may be, but I am the man I have become in large part due to your guidance and the model of being a loyal and loving man that you showed me. I am proud to call you father.”

“Well...” John’s chin was trembling as he sought for words to answer his step-son’s praise, “I...” he swallowed hard to keep from letting out the tears that had welled up behind his eyes. “Tis an honor,” was all he could manage before excusing himself to help the servants bring out more food.

After he had left the clearing, Theodora continued the tale for him. She told how he had returned to the east after the Fifth Crusade was over, how he had joined her Varangian Guard, and how he had become her chief protector even before King Leopold had died.

“If I may,” Angela queried, “since the forces of Rome are among those who have wished you harm, why have you and John lived your years of exile on this island that, unless I am wrong, is so close by to Rome itself?”

“You ask excellent questions, my Angelina,” Theodora smiled.

“She gives herself plenty of practice,” Randol mumbled under his breath, earning a quick punch to the ribs from his cousin. Jonas bit down on his tongue to keep from laughing aloud.

“We came to the western Mediterranean,” Theodora ignored the boys and continued her conversation with Angela, “first and foremost to avoid my political rivals in Constantinople – a far more dangerous assortment of characters than any Papists I have known. As for Rome... the safest place for prey may sometimes be right underneath the hunter’s shed. Does this make sense?”

“I am not sure...” Angela was honest.

“When we rescued your mother from the Inquisition castle near Milan,” Michael explained to her, “we hid our stolen horses in a grove of trees within sight of the castle itself. T’was the one place the search parties never looked. After all, who would be foolish enough to hide stolen horses in the shadow of a Papal fortress?”

“I see,” Angela nodded, “no one would likely come looking for you on an island so near to the city that had made itself your rival.”

“Precisely, my sweet one,” Theodora winked.

“Have you ever become lonely living in hiding,” Angela wondered, “or missed the excitement and intrigue of Constantinople?”

“We have kept busy building our little hidden kingdom here,” Theodora answered. “And your Uncle John, he may not be complicated or stately or full of schemes and intrigue, but that is part of why I have grown to love him so much. He has shown me over the years that love – simple love – is more than enough. And I know that he loves me with all of his heart. What more could I ask for?”

Angela looked over at Jonas, who was already looking at her. They both quickly looked away and turned red.

At about the same time, Maegan and Constantine conducted a very similar exchange of awkward glances.

Theodora watched it all and sipped from her cup of wine, mostly to hide the grin on her face.

*

A few days later, John and Michael led nearly the entire group of guests back down to the shore for a day of fishing. Constantine sat in the cool of the hidden clearing, finally enjoying a moment alone with his mother.

“You look so much better than when you arrived,” she cupped his face in her hands. “I am so pleased that you have healed and recovered your strength.”

“I feel wonderful,” Constantine said. “Of course, your care has always had that effect on me.”

She smiled. “And yet your heart is still heavy, is it not my son?”

He looked down, remaining silent for awhile.

“I have failed, mother,” he looked up with tears in his eyes. “I was a fool! There is no Prester John. The letter...the legend...all of it was just a dream. Michael Tuck has been to the eastern sea and from north to south and back again. Only godless barbarians and idol-worshipping thralls inhabit the wide steppe and the lands beyond. There is no great and powerful Christian king to come to aid the west. My hope and quest was pure folly and what’s worse...”

He hesitated.

“Just speak out the troubles of your heart, my love,” she held his hands.

"I..." he shook his head and drops of sweat fell from his forehead, "I broke my vow, mother. I took hold of a terrible and dark device and killed men by the hundreds!"

"I know," she said soothingly.

He looked at her in surprise.

"Michael spoke with me about it," she explained.

Constantine looked down in shame.

"He told me," she went on, refusing to let go of his hands even as he tried to pull away, "how you used the weapon to save your friends. I know there was no guile or malice in your heart, my son. When you took up the weapon, you were making a choice. You chose the lives of your friends over your own pride and honor. I know what those things mean to you – they are your life and you nearly died of grief at having lost them. But greater love has no one than this; that he lay down his life for his friends."

He nodded and took a deep breath.

"I have needed to hear those words so badly," he finally let out the tears.

She waited a moment before continuing.

"And as for Prester John...you may have lost your hope, but what about the hope you gave to others?" she stared into his eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"You brought hope where there was so little to the fledgling principality of Kazimierz in Poland. You helped save the lost army of Swedes from their path of certain doom. You turned Aleksandr of the northern Rus from his own road to destruction." She would not let him look away. "My son, the hope you gave to all those people was real, even if you came into their lives seeking only for a dream. And there is something else..."

"What?"

"There *is* a powerful Christian King in the east," she declared, "and Michael Tuck knows it, though he may have lost his own way for a time. The King is in the east and the west; the north and the south. And He is coming, and he will save the west and more."

Constantine bowed his head, ashamed once again.

Theodora paused and waited.

"How faithless have I become?" Constantine lamented. "I set out to find on earth what can only come from heaven. And perhaps, by God's grace, some good did come of it all. But I was wrong and prideful to think I could forge an alliance that would free Jerusalem – that I could somehow save the world..."

"You already have made such a great difference, my son," she whispered, "and your work has only just begun. Take away this lesson from your quest; that you can and must help those that God brings to you along your path, but saving the world is for Him and Him alone."

Constantine nodded.

“And so,” Theodora grinned at her son, “all you have to decide now is where to begin your next adventure.”

“I do not know where to begin,” he admitted.

“Let all of your concerns for the world melt away,” she suggested, “and what is left in your heart? What is left that you care about?”

He sat silently for a moment, looking down at his feet.

They both turned to seek the source of the rustling sound coming from across the clearing.

Maegan of Locksley emerged from the secret tunnel. She looked around, squinting at the brightness of the late morning sun pouring down from the sky.

“As I said, my son,” Theodora whispered, her perpetual grin touched with sorrow, “all you have to decide now is where to begin your next adventure.”

*

Theodora disappeared into one of the villas, and Constantine walked over to where Maegan stood.

“Did the fishing not suit you today?” he asked.

“The fishing is fine,” she sighed. “My brother and male cousins are the ones not suiting me this day.”

“Never having had a sibling of either gender, or cousins that I knew for that matter, I can only imagine how they might wear upon one’s nerves from time to time,” the Prince sympathized. “If you should like to be alone...”

“No,” she answered immediately. “That is...we could talk, if you wish.”

“I do.”

They walked together down the steps to the secluded stone patio. Constantine reached out and took her hand. She blushed and smiled as he helped her down the last few large steps.

“Your chivalry is quite refreshing,” she commented as he took a seat.

“Is it true chivalry merely to assist one who already has done more for me than I could ever repay?” he responded.

“What do you mean?”

“I have heard from all quarters how well you cared for me during my sickness at sea,” Constantine explained. “Surely the Lord worked through you for my healing and recovery.”

“Glory to God,” she bowed her head humbly.

“Indeed,” he smiled, taking up her hand once again and lightly kissing where her fingers began, “and mighty praises to Him for creating such a fair and faithful servant.”

“You seem,” she paused to look over his face, “exceptionally happy on this day.”

“Do I?”

“Perhaps I have simply grown overly accustomed to Prince Constantine of the royal bearing and calm comportment in the face of any storm,” she concluded looking around at his various other facial features, settling in upon his eyes, “yet if I did not know better, I might almost describe you as giddy.”

“You may not be far from the mark, sweet Maegan,” his smile grew some more, “for the hope of a new adventure had dawned within my heart.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” a thin line of perspiration emerged on the Prince’s forehead. “And I believe that this adventure holds more promise than the search for a thousand mythical kings.”

“I wonder,” she leaned in slightly, “if you would have any need for a companion on this new adventure with modest skills in the healing arts, among other things.”

“Oh, Maegan of Locksley,” he shook his head slowly, “without someone like that, there would be no adventure.”

For a few blissfully tense moments, neither of them said a word. Yet their faces continued to edge closer and closer to one another until they were sharing the same breath.

“Maegan, I...” he took up both of her hands and their fingers instinctively interlaced.

She blinked her eyes a few times, but otherwise waited patiently for him to continue.

“I love you,” he concluded simply.

She closed her eyes and rocked slightly, as if a gentle ocean swell had just washed past. When she opened them, Constantine’s face wore such an expectant look, she felt badly for making him wait any time at all.

“Oh, I love you too,” she fell forward into his embrace and held on tightly. After a few moments more, she began to laugh.

“What is it?” he held her at arms length and looked concerned.

“I have...” she shook her head and wiped the tears of joy from her cheeks with her fingertips. “I have wished so long for you to say that.”

“I have felt it ever since first setting eyes upon you,” he whispered and pulled her back to him so they were pressed together once again; but this time he put his lips to hers as well, and they enjoyed a long, slow and wonderful kiss.

Maegan’s heart was already pounding in her chest when the Prince finally took a step back, reached into his tunic, and with something concealed inside his hand, went down on one knee.

*

Angela had tired of Randol and her brothers’ antics as well soon after Maegan retreated back to the hidden clearing. Jonas sat for a moment and

watched Angela walking away down the beach before he worked up the courage to follow after her.

“Mind some company?” he called out as he drew near.

“Pardon me?” she had been lost in thought.

“Would you mind some company?” he repeated.

“Yours I would not mind,” she shot a perturbed glance back down the beach at the threesome of lads splashing around in the waves.

“They mean no harm,” Jonas followed her gaze, “though I doubt they will catch many more fish on their own.”

“Perhaps if they stay at it,” Angela muttered, “Randol will at least learn to swim.”

Jonas laughed, “There is always hope!”

They walked along quietly until the others were out of sight. Though the late autumn day was pleasantly warm, a crisp breeze blew in from the sea that made them both shiver. Jonas seized the opportunity to place his arm around Angela as they walked, and she did the same to him.

Coming upon a cozy sheltered enclave where the tall grass met the beach, they huddled together in the dry white sand. The sun returned from behind a billowy cloud and they were soon comfortably warm.

“Better?” Jonas asked.

“Much,” she agreed, though she still burrowed against him as if she needed the warmth.

The breeze picked up and roared around their hidden alcove, but they remained protected from the blowing sand and debris.

“Jonas,” she reclined against his chest, “may I ask you something?”

“Of course,” he looked down at her and could not resist running his hand over her red and wavy locks of hair.

“What do you imagine you shall do when we finally return to Nottingham?” she mused.

“Tis a good question.” He sighed, “I have been thinking about that quite a bit, actually.”

“And what have you concluded?” she took his hand and drew his arm over her like a blanket.

“Well,” he looked up into the sky, “since your brothers will likely proceed with their original plans to join the Regiments, or at least undertake some sort of militant endeavor, it occurred to me that your father might be in need of an apprentice.”

“Are you being serious?” she sat up and looked at him straight on, an expression of mixed excitement and confusion on her face.

“Why not?” he retorted. “After all, your father often says that when it comes to carpentry; good strong hands are half the battle.”

“And that you surely have,” she slid her relatively tiny hands into his, where they quickly disappeared as he enfolded them. “I just never knew you had

an interest in woodworking.”

“Surely I could learn,” he blushed and looked down at their hands. “Yet I should confess something.”

“And what is that?” she smiled.

“While I am certain I would grow to enjoy the work,” Jonas looked back up and into her eyes, “the apprenticeship would in large part be a ploy to draw close to the master’s daughter.”

She stared back into his eyes. “Truly?” she whispered.

“Truly,” he answered. “In fact, for that reward, I can think of no task or feat I would not undertake.”

She pulled her hands out of his and threw her arms over his shoulders. With their noses so close they were almost touching, she whispered, “Jonas, you should know by now, after all we have been through together and all that has been said already between us, that if you want to be with me, you do not need to *do* anything! You need only ask me a question.”

“Very well,” he whispered.

Jonas slid his hand into the fold of his tunic where he had hidden the ring Uncle John has given him shortly after their arrival. He pulled out the tiny band of gold firmly pressed between his fingers. He swallowed hard and shifted in the sand so he was on his knees.

*

By early evening, everyone had returned to Theodora and John’s hidden clearing. The double dose of good news came as no real surprise to anyone, but nevertheless, a fervent celebration ensued. In fact, the celebration lasted so long that before it was over, Yuletide had come and the celebrating continued apace.

The brief Mediterranean winter passed quickly, with only a few mild storms that rolled in from the sea. Lengthy discussions were held, especially on those few stormy days, regarding the details of the two weddings that were both planned to be held in England.

Randol, Edric and Alfred tolerated Maegan and Angela’s endless fretting over this or that arrangement that would need to be made. Yet, the trio of bachelors continually offered condolences to Constantine and Jonas as if their funerals, rather than their weddings, loomed on the horizon.

In mid-march, the entire group set sail aboard a pair of small sloops that Theodora and John kept in a secluded cove at the northern tip of their little hidden kingdom. The former Immortals stayed behind to look after the villas and the resident servants, but Theodora was not about to miss her son’s wedding.

The party of ten, five to a vessel, sailed away toward the coasts of Valencia and Aragon. They traversed the western Mediterranean Sea without incident and made good time under sunny skies.

Verse Thirteen – The End of the World

“Look!” Alfred shouted.

“Land ho!” cried Edric.

“Thank God,” Randol murmured. His knuckles were white from gripping the ship’s rail.

John skillfully steered the boat toward a small rivulet, hoping to make gentle landfall. Theodora stood at his side, remaining silent so her husband could focus fully on his task.

He did well, and the ship beached in the soft sand tipping only slightly to one side. They disembarked and looked out at the sparkling sea where the second and slower boat, piloted by Michael Tuck, still lingered on the horizon.

“There should be a town just over those dunes,” Theodora pointed the way. “Why do you lads not seek out the lay of the land, while John and I prepare a meal for you and the others when they arrive?”

“Very well,” Randol strapped on the short sword John had given him to replace the one he lost in the shipwreck, “I should not mind stretching out my legs a bit. Are you with me?” he asked the twins.

They nodded and likewise strapped on their bows and quivers. The trio soon disappeared over the dunes, while John and Theodora built a small fire on the beach and began assembling a humble meal.

*

Michael did an equally superb job of gently bringing his boat to rest on the sand. The two happy suitors leapt overboard and aided their fiancées to the ground, just as the threesome returned from their explorations.

“Perfect timing,” John welcomed the arrivals from both land and sea with portions of unleavened bread, each holding a generous serving of salted fish. Theodora passed around a jar of ripe olives and a skin full of sweet white wine, and everyone enjoyed the much needed sustenance.

“So,” Jonas began after a hearty draught from the wineskin, “what did you find inland?”

“The name of the city is Tarragona,” Edric offered.

“A pleasant enough place by the look of it,” Alfred continued.

“Tis firmly Christian, I should say,” Randol elaborated, “with no sign of the Moorish threat.”

“Splendid,” Constantine took a turn with the wine, “perhaps we should visit the local cathedral. Quite some time has passed since any of us have visited a proper church, and we would do well to dedicate a span of time to thanking the Lord for bringing us this far.”

“I like the sound of that,” Maegan held to his arm, smiling at her love.

*

Having already satisfied their curiosity, and their desire to walk, the three bachelors stayed back with Michael Tuck to guard the boats. The three couples, having far superior language skills between them, hoped to gather more news and information from the locals than the first explorers had gleaned.

They found the town's small cathedral easily enough, but they were far from alone. An immense crowd had gathered, filling the cathedral and most of the central town square as well.

"What is happening?" Angela wondered.

"I do not like this," Jonas responded. "Something is wrong."

The closer they drew to the cathedral, the more grim became the faces of those who had recently emerged from the church or the others nearby who heard them repeating the message coming from within.

"Can you understand them?" Maegan looked at Constantine.

"Not very well," he shook his head, "My Castilian was never strong and they are using a strange dialect."

"We are close to Aragon, and the tongues have blended," Theodora assessed. Her voice sounded tense. They all turned to look at her and saw that she had grown unusually pale.

"Are you all right," John gripped her arm. "What is it? What on earth are they saying?"

"The end..." she whispered. "The end has come."

They pressed forward into the crowd until they could both see and hear through the open doorway the preacher of doom who stood in front of the church altar. Dressed all in black with a wide brimmed hat, the Dominican Friar continuously repeated his message to the shocked crowd.

"Out of the east..." Theodora did her best to translate. "They come in waves...no mercy...no one can stand...only fire and dust remain..."

The four young lovers looked around at each other.

"Do you know what this means?" John had been watching their evolving facial expressions.

Constantine grabbed a man from the crowd. "Of whom does he speak?" he repeated to the man in several Castilian variations.

"Los Angeles de Muerte vienen," the shaking man replied, "Se llama la Horda Dorada!"

"What did he say?" John pressed. "What did that mean?"

"The Angels of Death are coming," Constantine translated. "They are called the Golden Horde..."

*

Regrouping back on the beach, they discussed the news over more flatbread and wine. The sun disappeared behind the purple western hills, and a brief silence fell upon them.

"All of this is my fault," Angela proclaimed suddenly.

"Come again?" Jonas raised an eyebrow.

"Think about it!" she stood and began pacing a circle around their campfire. "If I had not so foolishly come ashore in the Crimea, you would not have needed to rescue me from the Bulgars. We never would have known about the treasure box and would not have taken it only to lose it in the shipwreck."

"What does any of that have to do with this Golden Horde?" John asked.

"The treasure we took was likely tribute the Bulgars were planning to use to appease the Mongols," Randol explained.

"And to save their own skins," Constantine elaborated, "the Bulgars may have created a tale for their overlords blaming the West."

"And so the Mongol scourge is advancing," Jonas asked, "and others are paying the price for our crime?"

"Trust me," Michael interjected, "nothing that any of us have done, or ever could do, would either cause or prevent the Mongols from striking out conquering and to conquer."

"Having seen them first hand," Maegan added, "I have to agree with you. War and destruction seem to be at the very heart of their civilization."

The twins nodded along with her.

"I have seen what they can do with my own eyes," Michael said ominously. "They are not just another barbarian tribe from the steppes. Nothing quite like the Golden Horde has ever ridden forth upon this earth..."

"What are you saying?" Angela was trembling.

"I am saying," Michael looked old and tired in the flickering firelight, "that the preacher in black may be right. We may be seeing the gathering for the battle on the great day of God Almighty. We should prepare our souls for the coming of the Lord!"

"I agree, Michael," Theodora stood next to Angela and held her shaking hands, "for our souls should be ever ready for His return. Yet, we must not allow a spirit of fear to overtake us. If this is indeed the end, then paradise is at hand – but if it is not – then we still shall have much work to do. Let us pray and settle our souls for rest. Then in the morning, we shall return to Tarragona and see what the new day brings. False preachers of doom have gone forth before, and we should seek news from other quarters before we decide our next moves."

They all took a collective deep breath after listening to Theodora's calm and reasonable words. At her request, Maegan led the group in quiet and thoughtful prayer and despite the troubling news of the day, they all slept well that night under the stars.

Next morning, John, Theodora, and the twins stayed on the beach. Michael and the other five youths ventured back into Tarragona. The town square was crowded again, but not as thickly as the day before.

“Perhaps some of them have headed for the hills,” Randol commented.

“Can you blame them?” Angela countered rhetorically.

“Look over there,” Jonas pointed while peering from his vantage slightly above the crowd. “Something is happening on the other side of the cathedral.”

They crossed the town square, carefully striding over the smooth flat rock pavement. Upon rounding the side of the small cathedral, they joined with scores of curious onlookers already waiting eagerly to hear the words of the small company of Templar Knights that had just dismounted. By their appearance, they had been riding for quite some time.

“Greetings in the name of Christ!” one of them shouted in a raspy voice, using the universal Latin of the Church.

Two villagers came running with a large water bucket. The Templars gathered around and drank their fill, rewarding the thoughtful Tarragonians with hearty pats on their backs.

“We have ridden from Venice, stopping only long enough to deliver our message in each city along the way,” the leader declared in a much smoother voice than before, “and the word we bring is of terror and death!”

The crowd gasped to hear their fears confirmed. A lone preacher was one thing, but these were Knights of the Temple.

“Hear me now and mark my words!” the Knight cried out. “The far eastern city of Kiev is no more! This came to pass last autumn. The first waves of invaders were Bulgar mercenaries, driven forth out of the wastelands.”

Randol, Jonas and Angela all looked at each other, but said nothing.

“The Kievan Princes routed them,” the Knight continued, “but were no match for the numberless ranks of Mongols when they rode out of the steppe, consuming all in their path like a sandstorm in the desert.

“The age-old barrier against Scythian incursions – the Dnepr River – was not enough to stop the tide of horsemen. The Horde brings with it craftsmen and masons from the ends of the earth. Tis said that they bridged the river in three days...some have even said that they used the women and children of Kiev as mortar to hold fast the stones...”

The crowd was silent.

“The cold, blowing winter hardly slowed their advance. They entered the realm of Poland next. The Princes of that realm gathered, only to be crushed completely on the fields near Krakow,” the Knight droned on without emotion, having repeated the ominous words many times during their westward ride.

“Word has it that not one man of fighting age remains in the Polish realm.”

“Kazimierz!” Maegan gasped, covering her mouth and beginning to cry.

Constantine held her, but had no words of comfort. And the Templar's tale went on.

"The heaviest of the snows brought a brief reprieve. Refugees from Kiev and Poland and other Slavic lands had been arriving in the Holy Roman Empire for weeks. The Emperor heeded their dire warnings and sent out word to every corner of his lands.

"When springtime came, so did the Golden Horde. But the Emperor was ready...or so he believed. It happened in the fields just east of Leignitz," something changed in the Templar's tone; a sadness that would not fade even with so many retellings of the story. "Gathered there in those green fields, twenty-thousand Teutonic Knights sat upon their horses.

"These were no conscripted farm hands mind you. These were the strongest and bravest elite riders; the best men of the northern realms. These Knights made up the heart of Christendom's might and were the very flower of European chivalry."

The crowd stared in horrified silence as the Templar seemed for a moment unable to go on. The town square of Tarragona had grown so quiet, even those standing in the back heard when the Knight half-whispered, half-choke his next words.

"By the end of the first day, all twenty-thousand had perished."

Silence held sway until a Spaniard in the crowd wailed *Kyrie eleison*; then falling upon his knees, tore his clothing and threw dust from the ground over his head.

"Indeed," the Templar Knight commented.

Another Templar stepped forward then and relieved the burden on his brother-in-arms by taking over the telling. He began by shouting, "Were that the story had ended there! The Golden Horde remained near Leignitz for six days, burning, looting, killing the innocent and worse.

"Then as quickly as they had arrived, they turned and rode to the south. The villages of Silesia and Bohemia felt the Mongol wrath. Rumors began reaching the Papal realms that those slain by the Horde never knew they were about to die. Word has it that the swarms of Mongol arrows reach their victims before the horses' hooves can even be heard. Death falls silently from the sky with no warning.

"Yet, all of this you have heard thus far is only the beginning of sorrows, for all of the death and destruction wrought throughout Poland and the Bohemian hills and the Empire was but the work of a small wing of the Golden Horde's power. That is why they were riding south – to rejoin with the main Mongol force gathering in the outlying lowlands of the Hungarian Kingdom!"

The crowd let out a collective moan of despair at the realization that the terror in the Templars' story was to grow worse yet.

"All the men and horses and siege craft of the Hungarian King was assembled. Aid had been called for, and some had come. Austrian cavalry,

Greek spearmen, Genoese archers, Swiss halberdiers, and Bavarian arbalesters all came alongside the Hun's resistance. T'was all for naught...

"The Golden Horde is too vast, too swift, and too terribly fierce. Once again, the Christians armies were crushed by the enemy and driven before them like grain beneath a reaper. By the time we rode from Venice, the Golden Horde had reached the Adriatic Sea, where it is purported that the King of Hungary dove into the water and swam for his life. Only Venice itself, with its modest town militia was left standing between the Horde and the Italian peninsula. For all we know, Rome itself may already lay in ashes and dust!"

"What can be done?" someone in the crowd screamed.

"Why has the Lord forsaken us?" wailed another.

The two speaking Templars looked at each other.

"Perhaps this is God's will," the first suggested.

The crowd murmured its bewilderment at the idea.

"Perhaps Judgment Day is upon us," the other shouted. "Repent therefore of your sins and remain watchful with your eyes toward the sky. The Lord shall come upon the clouds!"

"God wills it!" the Templars all shouted in unison as they prepared to remount their horses.

Surprising the others, Randol ran toward the Knights. Michael followed him, while the two couples held their ground amidst the slowly dispersing crowd.

"Good sir knights," Randol panted as he reached them. "Where do you travel next?"

The Templars all glared at him momentarily, perturbed by the presumptuous Englishman who spoke such poor Latin.

"If you must know," the original speaker replied when he could see that Randol was not planning to get out of the way, "we go onward to Valencia – the last city where we shall deliver our warning."

"What about the rest of Spain?" Michael wondered.

"You mean the Moorish lands?" the second speaker snickered. "They shall have to fend for themselves, I am afraid."

"And if the Lord tarries," Randol pressed them, "where shall you make your stand against the Golden Horde?"

A sparkle emerged in each of the Templars' eyes.

"Since you ask," the first speaker grinned, "we have ships waiting for us in Valencia. From there, we shall sail east. For when the armies of darkness have consumed the West, there is only one place left for them to go."

"And that is the place where we shall make our stand," the second Knight finished.

"Jerusalem," Randol read their minds.

"The lad is a bright one," laughed one of the Templars.

"Do you know how to use that sword you have on your hip?" another teased Randol.

“Before their Mongol overlords came, I slew Bulgars by the dozen with my sword while journeying in the east,” Randol blurted out defensively.

“So you have been to the east and live to tell the tale?” the original speaker stared shrewdly at the young nobleman.

“Tis a family tradition,” Randol winked at the Templars.

“If you can reach Valencia before we sail, there is room on our ships for a few more good fighters,” the second Knight declared. Then without another word, the Templars raced out of the town square, heading for the open road.

*

Back on the beach, John had caught, cleaned and cooked a few shore fish while Edric and Alfred sat and responded to a flood of questions from Theodora about their mother and her life since the Fifth Crusade.

When the others returned, they updated John and Theodora with the terrible news the Templars had delivered. Randol, meanwhile, pulled the twins aside and spoke with them privately. The threesome soon came back to camp and announced their decision to head for Valencia and the Templar ships.

“If this truly is the end,” Randol explained, “then we will be there at the Holy City when the Lord cometh riding in with his angelic hosts. We shall make our stand against the onrushing forces of darkness and hold the line until the return of our King.”

“You never knew your grandfather Robin,” John responded, “but I did. You sound very much like him. I know that all three of you would have made him quite proud. If you feel called to sail away with the Knights of the Temple, so be it. You have my blessing.”

“Aye,” Michael added, “what John says is true. A calling to noble destiny flows in each of your veins. We could not hold you back from its pursuit any more than we could hold back the wind. When they are ready to move though, the Templars will not wait. You must go quickly.”

John and Theodora went to work assembling small bags of supplies and provisions for the three lads – all that they could spare. Constantine, Jonas and Michael stood aside while Meagan and Angela each had a private moment with their respective siblings.

“Were I just a bit younger,” Michael shook his head staring after the lads, “I would be more than a little tempted to join them.”

“You speak of a noble destiny for them, but I could say the same about you,” Constantine confronted Michael, “though yours lies along a different path.”

“What do you mean?” Michael wondered.

“In the midst of all our adventure, then my illness, and then my focus on Maegan,” the Prince explained, “I have neglected to deliver you the message I have carried in my heart since leaving Nottingham on the Quest for Prester John.

You must return to England with us, Michael Tuck, and especially if we stand upon the precipice of the end of the world.”

Michael raised his eyebrow.

“Someone is waiting for you in Nottingham,” Constantine explained.
“She loves you and she wants you to come home.”

*

Randol walked along the beach with his big sister.

“I am glad for you and Prince Constantine,” he told her.

“Truly?” she asked.

“Of course,” he answered. “I always knew that none of the noble lads in the midlands would do for you.”

“And why not?” she laughed.

“Can you really tell me you would have been happy with Oliver Stafford of Newark, or Percy Bolingbroke of Coventry...or Stuart Longshanks of Derby?”

She laughed again thinking of the young lords she had met as boys.

“Well?” Randol pressed, now laughing himself.

“Alright,” Maegan relented, “I suppose not.”

“I truly hope that this is not the end,” Randol suddenly grew serious.

“And if the world does go on, I hope that you and the Prince have lots of babies and live happily hereafter. And I will return. I promise. But forgive me if a bar scuffle with drunk Teutons, a tussle with some wild dogs, and being chased across the steppe by a few barbarian Bulgars has not satisfied my longing for a real adventure!”

Maegan sighed. “Just be careful, will you?”

“You as well, sis,” Randol winked and gave her a hug.

They soon circled around and returned to within earshot of the others.

“And you,” Randol directed his gaze at Constantine, “if you are indeed going to marry my sister, I want you to get out of this phoenix business for good. No more dying on her – is that clear?”

“I shall do my best,” the Prince promised, gripping arms with Randol.

*

Angela approached from the other direction walking in between her two big brothers.

“We always knew you and Master Little would end up together,” Alfred commented with a wry smirk.

“You did?” she marveled.

“Certainly,” Edric affirmed. “He has had eyes for you ever since you...”

“Since I what?” she frowned.

Alfred cleared his throat. “Um, since you began exhibiting such, uh...”

“Lady-like qualities...” Edric helped his brother.

“Oh,” she blushed.

“And a fine young lady you have become, dear Angela,” Alfred continued. “We could not be more proud of you – even if you may turn us into old crotchety uncles before our time.”

“Tis hard to imagine either of you as old and crotchety,” she laughed.

“None of us will be,” Edric said sorrowfully, “if the end is truly here.”

They all looked down.

“I suppose then,” Alfred looked up, checking the sky, “that is why we must make the most of whatever time remains.”

“True,” Edric nodded. “For us that means heading for Jerusalem. And for you...”

They were coming back toward the camp where Jonas and the others were waiting.

“You take good care of our Master Little,” Alfred said to his sister while grinning at Jonas.

“That is right,” Edric concurred. “We shall hear of it, if he is not well looked after.”

“I shall do my best,” Angela smiled at Jonas, before hugging each of her brothers and rejoining the rest of the group.

*

In order to speed the journey, John went ahead in the faster sloop with the three adventurers. Ignoring the dangers of sailing in darkness, they took turns steering the boat throughout the night so they would not have to stop. The others followed behind in the slower vessel, planning to meet up with them in Valencia.

With the rising of the sun the next morning, Valencia came into sight.

“We are too late!” Randol shouted. “The Templars have set sail!”

Three enormous Venetian galleons slid across the harbor. The triple sails on each were billowing in the feisty west wind, making their red cross emblems ripple and shimmer in the bright morning sunlight.

“If I have learned one thing in this brief life, my lads,” John grunted as he leaned hard on the rudder wheel, “tis that it’s never too late – so long as you refuse to give up!”

He aimed his tiny boat on an intercept course, and the wind blessed them. As they neared the lead Templar vessel, Randol and the twins began shouting and waving their arms. Even so, from their ship’s deck high above, the Templars almost did not notice.

Finally, one of the Knights who had spoken with Randol leaned over the rail for a look.

“Aha,” he cried, “the Englishman of Tarragona!”

“I say,” Randol cupped his hands and shouted. “We would like to join you! Would you be so good as to throw a rope?”

The Knight did not respond, but moments later a long rope appeared dangling over the side of the galleon, almost to the water line.

Randol gave John a worried look.

“If I had not been away all these years,” John clapped him on the back, “I surely would have taught you to swim! No worries though. I can get you a little closer.”

John edged the sloop as close as he dared.

“Thank you Uncle John,” Randol hugged him, and without another word he leapt overboard catching the rope in mid-air. After pulling himself up a bit, he was able to plant his feet against the hull and begin scaling upward.

Edric and Alfred, with supply bags, bows and arrows all dangling from their torsos, said their own quick farewells and followed their cousin up the side of the ship.

John watched each of them in turn disappear over the rail to the safety of the ship’s deck. The three young men stood high above, waving and shouting to John as the galleon pulled out into open water. John waved back with one hand and held on tight with the other as his little boat bobbed up and down in the larger ships’ wakes.

*

Several Templar Knights surrounded the threesome once they finally turned away from sending their farewells back to John. The lead speaker from Tarragona stepped forward from among them.

“I must say I do not entirely believe my eyes, nor did I know you would bring companions,” he frowned at Randol, who for a moment thought they might have made a terrible mistake. “But since you have chosen to join us, if a bit late, then at least introduce yourself and your friends.”

“Thank you for allowing us on board,” Randol bowed politely. “We pledge to serve the Lord and your company to the very best of our abilities. With me I bring the free men and experienced warriors, Alfred and Edric Allendale. As for me, I am Randol of Locksley.”

A slight murmuring came from the small crowd of Knights.

“Locksley, eh?” the lead Templar grinned. “Well, welcome aboard lads, I am sure we shall have much to talk about.”

*

Once the Templar ships were out of earshot, John worked to turn his sloop around and slowly maneuver it back toward the shore. By the time he

reached the Valencian beachhead, the three galleons had vanished into the misty eastern horizon.

Just before high noon, his other companions arrived. They paused briefly to rearrange passengers and to pray the Lord's safety and guidance for Randol, Edric and Alfred. Then they continued sailing south, heading for the straights of Gibraltar and the great Atlantic Ocean.

For several days, the only difficulties they encountered were a few brief rain showers. These were actually blessings, however, for though their progress was slowed, they were able to replenish their fresh water supplies without stopping altogether.

Off the coast of Granada, they saw a number of Moorish vessels coming and going, but none seemed to pay them any attention. They quickly passed through the straights and into the gulf of Cadiz.

Soon after dawn the following day, a ship with black sails appeared far behind them. Theodora, John, Maegan and Constantine were sailing aboard the lead sloop, while Michael piloted Angela and Jonas a bit further behind.

They lost sight of the threatening ship briefly while rounding a rocky outcropping, but it was clearly gaining on them. In fact, by late afternoon, the Moorish pirates had overtaken the slower boat.

They pulled alongside and threw grappling hooks. Once they had the tiny boat under control, the pirates swarmed aboard to seize the sloop and its passengers. The rogues tried the hatch that led to the small dwelling compartment inside the boat, but it was firmly locked.

After a lengthy struggle, they finally managed to force open the hatch. Peering into the darkness, the pirates saw no sign of their captives. They did, however, eventually notice the strange gurgling sound coming from below.

By the time they realized that the sloop was sinking, they were barely able to make it back to their own ship. In the end, the pirates frantically used their swords to cut off their grappling ropes in order to prevent their own ship from capsizing when the sloop went under.

During the brief moments when they had been out of the pirates' sight, Michael and Jonas had weakened the hull, and rigged a chain to booby-trap the slower sloop so that a break would occur when the hatch was forced open. By the time the pirates recovered from the surprise, the other sloop with all seven passengers aboard had long since disappeared from view.

The rest of their journey up the Iberian coast was cozy, but with a little wine still left, they enjoyed the time together with no other sightings of Moorish pirates – or even rain clouds.

Verse Fourteen – Knights of Santiago

Sailing around the tip of Galicia, they turned eastward heading toward the Bay of Biscay. They hugged the coastline and kept their eyes open for a hospitable looking town where supplies could be purchased for the final push along the coast of France and across the channel to England.

In the late afternoon on midsummer's eve, an awesome spectacle came within view. Coming down from the north, thirteen large caravels sailed at an impressive speed. Their sails bore the red lion standard of the English royal House of Plantagenet.

"That is either King Henry," Maegan assessed as she and Constantine sat on the bow of the sloop, watching the English fleet moving on the horizon, "or his brother Richard."

"Perhaps they are setting out to aid in the war against the Golden Horde," Constantine thought aloud.

"Perhaps," Maegan nodded. "I wonder if they have the same idea as my brother and cousins for a last stand at Jerusalem."

Overcome by curiosity, John agreed to leave the relative safety of the coast and strike out into open water where the fleet would pass by. They pulled dangerously close to one of the outer ships and Maegan called forth a greeting and asked about their mission. Her strong and high-pitched voice cut through the roar of the waves and reached the other ship.

The sergeant aboard the royal ship bellowed a reply with his lower-pitched but equally strong voice, "We have eight-hundred royal knights under Richard, Earl of Cornwall! We are sailing for Jerusalem! Pray that God grants us victory over the barbarians!"

The seven tired and hungry travelers aboard the sloop let out a rousing three cheers before turning away from the fleet and returning to coastal waters.

"At least we know the boys and the Templars shall not stand alone in the Holy City," Michael pointed out.

"Tis a sign of hope in another way too," Maegan added.

"Why do you say so?" Theodora asked her daughter-in-law to be.

"If Richard is leading the expedition with eight hundred knights,"

Maegan explained, "that means King Henry and the main army are likely still in England. If the King is staying to protect the homeland, he must believe there is hope for the future."

"You are blessed indeed," Theodora turned and said to her son. "You are betrothed to a very wise young lady."

Maegan looked around and noticed everyone smiling at her. She made a valiant, but unsuccessful effort to hide her blushing cheeks behind the cascade of her long and golden hair.

“What a gorgeous land!” Angela exclaimed looking up at the green hills of Asturias and beyond them, the misty grey mountains of the Cantabrian range. Her dark red hair glowed brilliantly under the early evening sun.

“It almost reminds me of Wales in a way,” Jonas commented while embracing her.

“Take us in, Michael,” Theodora instructed. “Do you see those fishermen? Surely there is a town beyond the dunes.”

Michael completed his turn at the helm by steering them in toward shore. The breeze picked up and the waves became choppy, so he took his time with a slow and steady approach.

The pair of fishermen stood in the light brown sand with their trousers rolled up past the knee. As the boat drew near, they dropped their nets and walked out into the water, seeming to ignore the waist-high battering of cold frothy ocean waves.

The duo stared intently at the boat and raised their arms in greeting. Angela instinctively responded with a wave of her own.

At that the fishermen began to jump up and down in the surf and shout. Their words were mostly indecipherable, but for one. Everyone on board the sloop was sure they heard the name *Raven* shouted time and again.

“Do they think...?” Angela trailed off.

“You do look remarkably like her,” Constantine winked.

“But when would she ever have...?” Angela was too befuddled to finish her questions.

“We shall find out soon enough!” Theodora shouted as the surf roared around them and their little boat pitched forward onto the sand.

The fishermen scrambled over to them and helped the ladies down onto the beach, while the four men leapt over the rail. The six men working together pushed and pulled the boat further in so it would not be taken by the tide.

Next, the two locals motioned for the visitors to follow them to their small campfire that smoldered not far away. The fishermen hospitably passed around wine and dry bread to the group.

While the guests enjoyed the refreshment, the friendly fishers gathered a few pieces of dry drift wood to keep the flames alive. Neither of the locals ever completely took their eyes off of Angela, and Jonas’ gradually expanding frown seemed to have little effect.

Finally though, when the newcomers overall appeared sufficiently refreshed and relaxed, the Asturian men launched a slow, but fascinating conversation that would end up going into the night.

*

“So, let me see if I have this right,” Jonas was still frowning the next morning, having fallen asleep and missed much of the talk. “Your and Maegan’s parents all came here together after seeing us away at the Danish Mark?”

“Yes,” Angela nodded, “I suppose they desired a bit of a holiday, and understandably after all the anxiety we caused them, sneaking away and all. And of course, they were attempting to avoid any more agents of the Inquisition, by stepping away from their usual duties.”

“But you just said they encountered the Inquisition anyway, did you not?” Jonas was confused.

“You did not absorb any of this last night, did you?” Angela put her hands on her hips.

“Sorry. I was quite tired.” Jonas shrugged.

She sighed. “Alright, I will explain it all again – but only because it’s you.” She giggled. “And because tis actually a bit humorous...”

Jonas plopped down in the sand and waited patiently.

Angela sat down next to him and began, “so for several days, the four of them and their hired sailors all enjoyed fishing and swimming and each others’ company, right here on this very beach. They befriended our hosts, who apparently took quite a liking to my mother. Everything was going along swimmingly until Brother Velasco de Zaragoza arrived.”

“Brother Velasco,” Jonas nodded.

“Quite,” she dismissed his interruption. “Now, Brother Velasco had recently arrived in Navia – the town over the dunes – and was charged with the duty of enforcing moral purity, or pure morality, or something like that. In any case, he became deeply offended at the behavior of my parents and their company, that is, that they were enjoying themselves and were not at the local cathedral praying and offering tithes as he felt they ought to have been.”

Jonas raised his eyebrows in a silent request for more of the story.

“You see, Brother Velasco was a freshly enlisted Inquisitor,” Angela obliged. “Perhaps it was this lack of experience that led him to make a pair of glaring errors. First, he assumed that as English folk, my Uncle Roger and Auntie Margaret – and more to the point, my parents – would have had no experience dealing with the Inquisition, and would not expect any trouble. Naturally, he was wrong.”

“And what was the second error?” Jonas, now that he was awake, was utterly fascinated.

“Brother Velasco’s second error,” Angela explained, “was a simple lack of observation. Had he watched his prey for any time at all before moving in for the kill, he would have realized that the two couples had not sailed in on their own, and he likely would have brought more than a mere six men-at-arms to arrest them. Needless to say, Buck Jorgensen and his eight sons...well, you met them. They are rather large men, much like you. So when they returned from

their fishing expedition further down the beach and found their friends in distress...well, twas not a good night for Brother Velasco.”

“What happened?” Jonas was nearly frantic. “How did it end?”

“The men-at-arms, who had surely just been following orders, were relieved of their weapons and armor, and left to their own devices. And as evening was approaching, my parents and company soon thereafter decided to cut short their holiday and sail back to the safety of England and Sherwood.”

“What about Brother Velasco?”

“Brother Velasco was discovered the next morning, a little further down the coast in the town center of the village of Luarca. Apparently, the locals had little experience in undoing a firm English hog-tie – complete with a large red apple in his mouth, naturally – and quite some time was taken in setting the Inquisitor free.”

Jonas threw his head back and howled until tears rolled down his cheeks. When he finally regained his composure, he asked whether the Inquisitor had returned with a greater force to punish the locals.

“I do not believe that ever happened,” Angela wiped away the tears she had shed from joining in with Jonas’ laughter. “As far as our hosts knew, Brother Velasco, having lost much of his credibility in the local area, quietly requested a transfer from the Church, and was sent to work in a monastery somewhere in the Pyrenees Mountains.”

*

Their stomachs still aching from laughter, Jonas and Angela volunteered to stay with the boat while the others ventured into Navia for supplies. The fishermen seemed surprised that this was the extent of their mission.

“They thought we had come for the Gathering,” Theodora translated.

“What is the Gathering?” John wondered.

After taking a few moments to confer with the fishermen again, Theodora clarified, “Knights, nobles and free men from throughout Christian Spain – and beyond – are pouring into Asturias. As word has reached the towns and provinces about the shadow of doom rising in the east, many are coming here for the last stand.”

“Why here?” Michael asked. “Why not make a stand somewhere either more glorious like Jerusalem, or more remote and defensible, such as England?”

Theodora relayed the question, and tears formed in her eyes as the fishermen stood particularly straight and gave a very long-winded answer. She thanked them and led the others away from the beach and onto the road before granting the translation.

“What were they saying?” John asked as they marched along.

Theodora took a deep breath before explaining, “The story goes back many ages, even to Roman times. The Visigoths were originally a peaceful

people of the steppe, much like the poor Slavs driven forth by the Bulgars and the Mongols of our day. The Romans made a bargain to protect the Visigoths from Attila and his Huns. But then the Romans betrayed them and abandoned them to be slaughtered.

“The Visigoths, however, had a shrewd leader – and they escaped! They followed the path of vengeance all the way to Rome, which they burned to the ground. In desperation, the Romans granted them these lands you see before you, Hispaniola, where they mixed with the native Celtic folk and once again lived peacefully for centuries – until the coming of the Moors.

“In the eighth century, the Prophet Mohammed unleashed the fanatical Islamic sect that has plagued the world ever since. The seething hordes of camel-riding conquerors overran Hispaniola more than five hundred years ago and would have wiped Christian civilization from the peninsula – but for this thin crescent of land; the provinces of Asturias and Galicia, protected by the tall and mighty Cantabrian mountains and moreover by the might of the land’s God-ordained inhabitants.

“The men, and women, of these regions have clung to their tiny holdings with both the grim determination of soldiers and the joy of saints. For five long centuries and over twenty generations, they have bravely withstood the endless onslaught of the merciless Moors that pour out of the African wastes with the ravenous bloodlust of desert scorpions.

“Noble to the core and courageous beyond imagination, these people have provided a last refuge time and again when the Christian Kings of Castile and Aragon, to the south and east, have fallen into retreat and required a bastion, a living keep, from which to forge back across the peninsula in a seemingly never-ending cycle of re-conquest and defeat.

“This is why they come now – from Castile, Aragon, Navarre, Gascony, Aquitaine, Brittany, Valencia, Provence, Cordoba, Burgundy, and even from the Norse lands, and the Mediterranean islands like we did. These lands have never fallen. These people have never given up. And a stand can be made here that will last until Christ himself comes to set things at right.”

The others were quiet, and for a few moments the only sound was the crunching of their footsteps in the rocky uphill road.

“The fishermen told you all of this?” Constantine looked skeptically at his mother.

“Well,” she grinned slightly, “I may have added bits and pieces from my own studies of the past, but yes, that is the story they told.”

“If we did not have England to go home to,” Maegan said, “I would be proud to face the end here.”

“Aye,” Theodora agreed. “The same Spirit that has upheld my own Constantinople against the raging Islamic hordes for so many centuries is strong here in these hills. I can feel it.”

As if in response to Theodora's declaration, a rumbling sound began. They all turned to look. Coming up the road, twenty enormous armored knights rode atop twenty equally gigantic horses. The plate-mail armor on both horse and man looked impossibly thick, and not a single inch of flesh could be seen. Even their faces were completely hidden behind the metal faceplates of their plumed helmets, and likewise their hands were covered in heavy iron gauntlets.

The foot travelers stepped off the road just in time as the knights thundered past. After waiting for the dust cloud to settle, they returned to the road and continued marching into town.

*

The gathering in Navia was underway indeed, and word among the locals held that even greater assemblies of warriors were occurring in Luarda, and Tineo and Oviedo.

"Supplies may be hard to come by with so many travelers in town," Michael worried, "we may have to..."

Before he could finish, loud shouting began across the town square. They all turned to look and saw some of the heavily armored knights from the road – still concealed inside their helmets – pushing and shoving with some much more lightly armored Frankish foot soldiers.

The Franks had clearly offended the knights somehow, and curses and obscenities that would be understandable in any language were now flying freely.

From another direction, the leader of a company of swordsman called, "The Knights of Santiago are abusing our Frankish brethren! Let us arise to the challenge, men of Gascony!" The company drew their swords and quick-stepped across the square, trying to insert themselves into the scuffle.

"Scum of Aquitaine," rumbled the head of a group of crossbowmen from Extremadura. "Load your bolts and be ready to let fly, boys!"

"This is not good," John assessed, shaking his head.

"Perhaps we should take cover," Theodora concurred. "This situation may become much worse before it gets better."

"Something has to be done!" Constantine looked frantic. "We cannot let Christian soldiers tear each other apart just when their strength is needed most!" With that, he raced into the heart of the fray, reasoning and pleading with the various groups of fighters using his best guess as to their native tongues.

The indignant shouts and comments rising out of the chaos regarding his efforts were not encouraging.

"Out of the way, foul Byzantine!"

"Shut your trap, you Greek pansy!"

"Where is your sword, lover boy?"

Maegan was distraught. "We have to get him out of there!"

John and Michael, against their better judgment, began shouldering their way through the outer edges of the rapidly deteriorating street brawl. They soon vanished in the swirling dust, and the chaos only grew worse.

“No,” Maegan shook her head. “We did not face peril through hill and forest, over steppe and sea for this! No! When barbarian hordes and the final doom are crashing down upon us, it shall not end like this – brother against brother. No, I say!”

“We have no weapons, and little strength compared with these men,” Theodora looked at her. “What is to be done?”

Maegan looked around. “Is there a higher place?”

“What?” Theodora wondered what she meant.

“I need something to stand on,” Maegan shouted, “so that I can be seen above the crowd.”

Theodora joined her in looking around before pointing and shouting, “There, do you see it?”

Maegan did, and ran around the outskirts of the fray until she reached the side of a small tavern. Theodora helped her roll out the barrel they had spotted and then helped Maegan climb up on top of it. Theodora stood back, looking up at Maegan and wondering what she would do next.

For a moment, nothing happened. That is, nothing appeared to happen outwardly. In her mind, Maegan found a place where the noise and confusion and swirling violence faded away. She breathed deeply, and prayed in silence for God’s Spirit and anointing to fall over her.

She was only vaguely aware of her own voice, as if remembering a dream, when moments later her mouth opened and she began to sing.

*

After being bitten on the arm by a Florentine spearman, Constantine had given up diplomacy and joined the others in throwing punches and kicks. He was even making a little progress, when he heard a very familiar, yet still somehow unusual sound.

Throwing the Valencian archer who was grappling with him to the ground, the Prince turned and saw his bride-to-be. She appeared to be hovering above the flailing mass of soldiers as if by some strange magic. Her hair was shining bright and golden in the morning light, flipping and playing in the cool breeze descending out of the Cantabrian range.

And yet it was the sound of her voice that most firmly held his attention, while progressively gaining the attention of more and more of the combatants as well. Men turned and watched her in awe, pausing with their arms still cocked back in preparation for another swing.

Few of the road-weary and lonely soldiers had seen a beautiful woman in many weeks, and many had never seen one like Maegan in their entire lives.

Gradually, chokeholds and death-grips were released as the men forgot what they had been fighting about and tuned their ears to the sweet melodic song and the strikingly familiar words pouring forth in universal Church Latin.

*I rejoiced with those who said to me
“Let us go to the house of the Lord”
Our feet are standing in your gates
O Jerusalem*

*Jerusalem is built like a city
That is closely compacted together
That is where the tribes go up
The tribes of the Lord*

*To praise the name of the Lord
According to the statute given Israel
There the thrones for judgment stand
The thrones of the house of David*

*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem
May those who love you be secure
May there be peace within your walls
And security in your citadels*

*For the sake of my brothers and friends
I will say “Peace be within you”
For the sake of the house of the Lord our God
I will seek your prosperity*

The resonant echoes of her voice danced around the town square before fleeing into the nearby hills. Maegan’s song, her beauty, and the Truth in her words had succeeded in gaining and holding the attention of all the fighting men. They stared at her enthralled and continued to stare even as silence fell.

“You have their ears,” Theodora whispered from behind the barrel.
“They wait upon you now. You must give them direction or chaos may return.”
Wonderful, Maegan thought sarcastically. I only wished for them to stop fighting. That was my only message. What else can I say?

She looked up at the sky. She looked out at the expectant, even hopeful looks on the men’s faces. She turned and glanced at Theodora who gave her an encouraging nod.

Then Meagan heard a quiet voice that said, *lean fully upon the rock of the Lord and His scriptures.*

She looked quickly back at Theodora once again, but it had not even been her voice.

The rock...Maegan thought. Of course!

She took a deep breath and began reciting, as best she could remember, the Apostle Peter's letter of encouragement regarding the Living Stone.

"As you come to him," Maegan's voice rang out clear and bright just as well speaking as it had in song, "the Living Stone – rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

She watched the crowd. All eyes were still fixed upon her, and no one had moved a muscle. She took this as a good sign and continued.

"For in Scripture it says: *See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.* Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, *the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone, and, a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.* They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for.

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."

For the first time in her sermon, she met Constantine's eyes. Beside her obvious relief at seeing he was alive and only moderately bloodied, she was uplifted by seeing him as entranced and interested in her words as all of the other men. Again, she breathed deeply and pushed on toward her conclusion.

"Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men; whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king."

Maegan had recited all the scripture she could recall, so she took one more deep breath before attempting to make her final exhortation. She briefly exchanges glances with Michael Tuck. He winked at her, and she could not entirely contain her grin.

"Brave knights and warriors, hear this now!" she raised up her arms for the ending. "Do not therefore fight amongst one another. Whether against the

Moors or the Mongols or the very legions of Mephistopheles, you shall surely have opportunity in the days to come to put your swords and arrows and axes and spears to proper use. But not today! Do you accept God's calling to live in Christian fellowship?"

The men cheered, "Hurrah!"

"Do you vow to stand united against any and all enemies of the cross?"

"Hurrah! Hurrah!" they roared.

"Then go now in peace and brotherhood, and save your strength for the battles ahead!"

With that she leapt down from the barrel, and to her supreme relief, the crowd began to disperse.

Constantine, John and Michael began making their way over to Maegan and Theodora. By the time they arrived, so had the twenty Knights of Santiago. The metallic men surrounded the group, then suddenly and in perfect unison, all dropped to one knee and bowed their heads toward Maegan.

She blushed awfully and looked to Constantine for help, but he only stared at her wearing an amused grin.

"Arise, good knights," she said hesitantly, "for I am your fellow servant of the Lord."

They slowly clanked and rattled back into standing position. Then, again in unison, they removed their heavy helmets, revealing faces that were, to a man, young and strikingly handsome.

"Surely God sent you here to rebuke our foolishness and set us back upon the straight path," one of them spoke. "If I may be so bold, who are you?"

"My name is Maegan of Locksley," she curtsied. "I travel in the company of both fellow Englishmen and Byzantine royalty."

"Tell us, Maegan of Locksley," another of the knights spoke, "any deed that we may do for you, and know that it shall be done."

She looked around at her companions. John patted his stomach, wordlessly symbolizing the hunger that they all shared.

"We are returning to England from a very long journey," Maegan explained. "Any food, water or wine that you could supply to help us reach home would earn our eternal gratitude to you."

*

After loading the tiny boat with all the supplies it could reasonably hold, the Knights of Santiago still had the better part of a wagon load to offer. So they contributed the excess to a feast which was shared by all that evening, and into the night, right there on the beach.

The two fishermen watched from afar, humbly leaving their new friends in the company of the noble knights. This impasse was remedied only by

Theodora retrieving the fishermen and leading them by their hands into the midst of the celebrating.

In addition to being formidable warriors, the Knights of Santiago proved to be experts in the culinary delights as well. They passed around salty strips of codfish, saltier strips of ham, dry shredded pork that reconstituted nicely in a stew, fresh bread, and a wide variety of fresh and juicy fruits grown to fullness of flavor in that warm Spanish summer.

The Knights also possessed several small barrels of both sweet sherry and dark honey mead. As a result, the travelers' plans for sailing away at sunrise did not come to pass. The sun was well up in sky before the Knights of Santiago; their armor stashed safely away from the water, surrounded the small sloop and pushed it out into the waves.

The knights, and the fishermen, stood in the sand waving farewell to the English and their Byzantine friends as the sail on their little boat caught the breeze and began to carry them away to the north and east.

Strong summer winds blowing off the Atlantic pushed them rapidly along the coast of France, across the channel and into the Celtic Sea. After rounding the extreme southwestern tip of England, they sailed into the Bristol Channel heading toward the mouth of the Severn River.

After landing near Newport, John traded the leaking sloop for a pair of donkeys to carry what remained of their provisions. Only a week on foot separated them from their much anticipated reunions with family and friends in Nottingham and Locksley.

Verse Fifteen – Return to Sherwood

The soft English rains of late summer cooled the travelers, soothing their sunburned skin and filling their cups. Their food supplies were nearly gone when they crested a hill early one afternoon and saw a blessed sight.

“Praise the Lord!” Jonas declared. “We have reached Nottingham!”

They entered the city soon after, leading the unburdened donkeys down the main road.

“You have been away a long time,” Theodora said to John. “Do you feel strange being back?”

“The strangest part is that when I left,” John answered, “I never dreamed I would return with the most beautiful woman in the world on my arm.”

She smiled and was about to respond, when a loud voice called out from behind them, “Halt! Who goes there?”

They all spun around.

“Father!” Jonas shouted, rushing to embrace him.

“My son, you have returned! Thank God!” James, the Sheriff of Nottingham shouted. “Oh, your mother shall be more relieved than I can say!”

Looking over his son’s shoulder, James saw his little brother holding hands with the Byzantine Princess he remembered from the Fifth Crusade, two decades ago.

“John?” James nearly swooned. “Princess Angeloi?” He tried to say more but was momentarily speechless.

“Greetings, James the Sheriff,” Theodora smiled as she approached with John. “I have brought your brother home, safe and sound.”

“Hello James,” John said quietly, gripping his brother’s arm, “tis been far too long.”

“Are you two?” James’ head was spinning.

John smiled.

“Yes we are,” Theodora answered for them both.

“Well...congratulations,” James smiled as well.

“You are looking well, Sheriff,” another voice called from behind them.

“Michael Tuck!” James gathered up the wandering friar in a bear hug.

“And where on earth have you been all these years?”

“Tis a long story,” Michael winked.

“Angela, dear Angela,” James scooped her up next, “how your parents shall rejoice...and Prince Constantine, tis wonderful to see you again...”

Finally, James stood before Maegan. “Look at you, young lady of Locksley. A woman you have become...but...” he looked around, “where is your brother? And where are the twins?”

“They are alive and well,” John sought to calm the panic he saw emerging on his brother’s face. “They were not quite ready to stop the adventure, just as Michael and I were not quite ready, all those years ago.”

"I see," James allowed himself to breathe again.

"Father," Jonas took Angela by the hand and they stood together in front of him. "Uncle John is not the only one returning home along with his true love."

"Well," tears came to James' eyes as he looked at Angela glowing with joy to be with his son, "I cannot say I am surprised. You two have always been good friends, and that is as any couple should be. Yet, having just arrived, surely you have still to gain the blessing of Sir Cuthbert and Lady Raven."

"That very thing, as well as seeing mother, is at the forefront of my thoughts," Jonas acknowledged.

"I just left your mother to a much needed nap," James explained, "so go now to the Allendale estate. They should be there! When you have made it all official, come back home where I shall meet you. We will doubly bless your mother with the news of your return and the joy of the love you have found!"

"With your leave, Sheriff," Constantine interjected, "I shall escort Maegan home to Locksley, where I likewise will seek the blessing of the Lord and Lady of the keep for their daughter's fair hand."

"Good heavens!" James laughed. "It seems as if everyone has found love on the course of your adventure!"

Michael looked down.

James noticed and struggled to think what to say next.

Before he could, Michael said, "Also with your leave, Sheriff, there are those I imagine who might be offended if I did not promptly visit, having been away for so long."

"I imagine you are right," James nodded. "Godspeed, Michael Tuck."

With that, Michael and the two younger couples departed in three different directions, leaving John and Theodora in the Sheriff's custody.

"So," John began, "Madam Zorina is well then I trust?"

"Yes," James nodded hesitantly, "she struggles a bit, as I suppose we all do as the years take their toll. But, yes, she is well. Thank you."

"James," John said with a wavering voice, "Jonas told me that father..." He could not finish.

James looked down, nodding. "It was not long after mother had passed, and you had journeyed back to the east."

"I am sorry," John let a teardrop roll out of each eye. "I should have been here..."

"Nonsense," James straightened himself. "He was ready to go. He had no desire to live on without mother. And I have no doubt at all, that if he were here right now, and saw how well you have done for yourself," James smiled at Theodora, "he would agree that you did absolutely the right thing."

"Thank you, brother."

*

Sir Cuthbert Allendale was in his woodshop. He carefully blew away a bit of sawdust and then ran his finger along the edge of his latest creation.

"Not bad," he whispered to himself, "not bad at all."

He was reaching for his wood file again when he heard his wife screaming. Grabbing an axe instead, he came flying out of the shop and rounded the side of their house like a bolt of summer lightning.

After taking a moment to absorb the scene in front of him, he dropped the axe in the grass and ran laughing to join his wife, daughter and Jonas Little in their joyful embracing. After the initial euphoria of reunion had passed, the inevitable question came. Jonas and Angela worked together trying to allay the parents' and especially Raven's fears and worry over her twin sons.

"They sailed east in the company of many Templar Knights!" Angela explained. "And we witnessed none other than the King's brother sailing after them – with eight hundred knights more!"

"After all that we faced during our quest," Jonas added, "no one could doubt that your sons and Randol can take care of themselves quite well."

Lady Raven still was not happy, but as there was nothing she could do about her sons at the moment, she finally allowed her joy at Angela's safe return to overwhelm her thoughts.

"Thank you for escorting Angela home," Sir Cuthbert said to Jonas after they had all talked some more. "Have you seen your mother and father yet?"

"We encountered my father upon our arrival in Nottingham," Jonas answered, "but I was waiting to go see my mother."

"What are you waiting for?" Lady Raven was confused.

"Well," Jonas looked at Angela who smiled back at him, "I wanted to be able to tell her the good news, but first I must ask the two of you something."

"Oh my," Lady Raven was piecing it all together.

Jonas bowed before Sir Cuthbert, and humbly made his request.

"Is this your wish?" Cuthbert turned to his daughter.

"Oh, yes father," Angela stood next to Jonas. "Please say yes!"

Cuthbert and Raven looked at each other, then at Jonas and Angela, and then back at each other.

"Just how do you plan to provide for her?" Cuthbert narrowed his eyes, deciding to be difficult.

"Actually," Jonas grinned, "that was going to be my next question."

"What do you mean?" Cuthbert frowned.

"Well," Jonas looked at Angela who again encouraged him with her glowing smile, "I...that is...we were wondering if you might consider taking on an apprentice."

"Are you being serious?" Sir Cuthbert asked.

Both Jonas and Angela nodded enthusiastically.

Cuthbert pulled Raven aside for a moment to confer.

"Just say yes," Raven whispered. "You know what a fine lad he is."

"I had to go though quite a bit more than this to win approval to marry you, as you may recall," Cuthbert whispered back.

"That was different," Raven answered. "Why must you be so difficult?"

"I am not being difficult," Cuthbert said defensively. "Honestly, I am just reeling. I never thought I would be so fortunate as to gain a son and an apprentice all with one fell swoop."

"Quit delaying then, and secure the deal," Raven nudged him.

The parents walked back over and stood before the anxious youngsters.

Jonas had actually broken a sweat.

"We have discussed this," Sir Cuthbert began sternly, but finally breaking into a smile finished, "and welcome to the family, Jonas."

They all laughed and hugged briefly before Lady Raven shooed them off to go and see Jonas' mother.

*

At Locksley Keep, Maegan and Constantine faced similar hard work in reassuring Lord Roger and especially Lady Margaret that Randol would be alright. Eventually though, just like the Allendales, Lord and Lady Locksley allowed Maegan's homecoming to fill their hearts with joy.

"Tell me then," Lord Roger began after things had calmed down somewhat, "was your quest a success? Did you find that for which you sought?"

Maegan and Constantine looked at each other.

"Not precisely," Constantine began. "Yet, along the path of our great adventure, many other unexpected adventures came to pass."

"Perhaps that is as the Lord intended it to be," Lord Roger smiled at them knowingly.

"Undoubtedly," Constantine agreed.

"But what word of Prester John?" Lady Margaret asked. "Did you find this king?"

"Well," Maegan furrowed her brow, "we found *a* king."

"What do you mean?" her mother pressed.

"Actually, he is called not a king, but Khan," Maegan explained.

"Genghis Khan – and the great power advancing out of the wild steppe is his. His endless legions of mounted soldiers call themselves the Golden Horde, though they are also known as Mongols."

"Sadly though," Constantine elaborated, "they are not the saving Christian allies for which we had hoped, but rather a wild and unpredictable force bent on destruction. They have laid waste to vast regions of the east, from the northern Rus nearly all the way to Rome itself, the last we heard. I am afraid that our hope in Prester John was little more than a dream."

"And this Golden Horde," Roger sought to clarify, "it is beyond reasoning with?"

“Michael Tuck traveled with them for several years,” Maegan answered, “and we even met their ruler, the Great Khan, face to face. I would say there is as much hope in reasoning with the wind or the sea.”

“During our return journey,” Constantine added, “word was sweeping the continent of the Horde’s merciless advance. We heard witnesses – Templar Knights even – tell of the destruction wrought by the Horde across the eastern lands, even as nearby as the Holy Roman Empire. Has no word of these tragedies reached England?”

“There have been rumors of war,” Lord Roger acknowledged. “Honestly, some of the claims we have heard were so outrageous, we did not believe them. But I am beginning to fear, with all you are telling us, that these dreadful tidings could be true.”

“For all we know,” Maegan said gravely, “the Golden Horde is still heading this way. Many we met on the continent believed that their unstoppable advance marks the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. That is why Randol and the twins made for Jerusalem. If the end is upon us, they wished to see the Holy City of Jerusalem and stand up for her defense unto the last day.”

Lady Margaret began to weep.

“Fear not,” Lord Roger embraced his wife. “King Henry has sent out no call for a levy of soldiers. And even if these Mongols still approach, the sea will serve us well as a natural defense, just as it always has.” He held his wife’s head in his hands. “And you know our son. Whether our Lord Christ returns tomorrow, or in a thousand years, Randol will not come home until he has had his fill of adventure. He needs to do this, and we could not stop him if we tried.”

She nodded and dried her eyes.

They all retired to the balcony above the gates of Locksley Keep. The sun was dipping behind the trees of Sherwood Forest.

“Lord Roger,” Constantine began once they were all settled with cups of wine, “though the original objective of our quest went unfulfilled, there were many smaller victories and triumphs that were found along the way. Throughout our travels, we were blessed with opportunities to help those around us, in ways both large and small.”

“I was much older than you, Prince Constantine” Lord Roger beamed proudly, “when I finally learned and accepted that our own plans in life are but a shadow of the wonderful and marvelous plans the Lord has for us, and that if we narrowly pursue our own agenda without opening our hearts to all that He has in store for us, we may miss the very best that life has to offer.”

“Such was very much the case for me, not so long ago,” Constantine confided. “After we discovered the hope that had driven our quest forward to be empty, I fell ill with a broken heart and spirit. Surely I would have perished at sea, but for the vigilant care of your daughter.”

Maegan bowed her head and blushed.

“Then we were right to let you join the quest,” Lady Margaret reached out and stroked Maegan’s hair.

“I have no doubt,” said Constantine, “that I owe my life to that decision. And that is why, tis with all humility and the utmost respect that I ask you to grant me the chance to spend the rest of my life repaying your daughter as best I can for the care and kindness she has shown to me.”

Lord Roger and Lady Margaret both began looking back and forth between the Prince and their daughter.

Maegan was still looking down, but they could see the smile on her lips.

“Lord Roger,” Constantine stood and set down his cup, “our quest did succeed, in that it led me to a true understanding of my destiny. For as long as this world remains, there is nothing from Nottingham to the ends of the earth that I desire more than to serve and love your daughter. Will you grant me her hand in marriage?”

Roger looked at Margaret, and she gave a barely perceptible nod.

“Is this your wish?” Lord Roger asked his daughter.

“More than anything,” Maegan said quietly.

“So be it!” Roger stood and embraced the Prince, whispering to him, “And you take good care of her.”

*

Even after all the years that had gone by, old Friar Tuck and his adopted son Michael conversed as if they had been together the day before. Rather than try to cover all that had happened, they talked about the present moment and the two impending marriages of their friends.

“Naturally,” Michael offered, “I will do anything I can to help.”

“Many, many weddings have I performed in my time,” Friar Tuck chuckled. “I should be able to manage a few more.”

“Of course,” Michael began. “I only meant...”

“I know, I know,” Friar Tuck sighed. “I am quite aware of how old I look. But let me assure you, my dear lad, that I look not half as old as I feel!”

Michael laughed and looked down.

“Tell me, son,” the old Friar rasped, “why are you here?”

“Well,” Michael thought for a moment, “when Maegan and the others found me in the tent of the Great Khan, I felt that...”

“No, no...” Friar Tuck waved his arms slowly back and forth. “I am not asking why you came home. I am asking, now that you are home, why on earth are you sitting here bantering with your old dad?”

“Father, I...”

“Is there not anyone else you might wish to see more?” Even at his ripe old age, the Friar’s eyes still had their sparkle. “Perhaps someone who loves you,

and whom you love too, but you were both always too stubborn and scared to admit it?"

"Have you always known?" Michael asked.

"Everyone has always known!" Friar Tuck coughed several times from raising his voice.

"I have been the king of fools," Michael lamented softly.

Friar Tuck took a sip of water, "Now that is a title for which you will likely find a great deal of competition in this world."

Michael sighed.

"Well," Friar Tuck barked at him, "are you going to sit here all day, crying about it? Or are you going to go find her, and tell her how you feel?"

"Very well," Michael stood and headed for the door. He paused in the doorway, turned, and came back to Friar Tuck to give him an enormous hug. "You do not look that old!" he said, adding, "And tis good to see you again."

"Off with you, then," Friar Tuck waved him away.

After Michael had left, the old Friar sat shaking his head and mumbling to himself for awhile before leaning back in his chair and taking a little nap.

*

"So you *did* receive the box I sent," John double-checked.

"Yes, yes," James answered, "and I paid the messenger handsomely just as you instructed in your note."

James led John and his Byzantine bride into the outer room of the single-celled Nottingham prison, which thanks to James' preventative approach to his work, generally sat empty.

"You are not going to lock us away are you?" Theodora asked playfully.

"Only if you get out of hand," James played along, and then added, "a little help, John?" He motioned toward a thick oaken table in the corner of the outer room.

The Little brothers slid the table out from the wall, revealing a small trapdoor in the floor. James knelt, selected a small key from his key-ring, and soon had the trapdoor perched open.

"I never knew about that door," John frowned.

"Oh, dear John," James clucked his tongue, "we would need months to review all of my secret tricks of the trade."

John folded his arms and deepened his frown.

"I shall return directly," James promised as he disappeared through the hole in the floor.

Quite a bit of time passed.

"He is coming back?" Theodora whispered to John.

Just then a shuffling noise and a few loud clunks came from beneath the floor. Suddenly a box appeared, coming up through the hole.

“A bit of help, please?” James grunted from down below.

John ran over, grabbed the box, and hoisted it onto the oaken table. He then ran back over to the hole and helped pull his brother up from below. James was covered in dust and cobwebs.

“I suppose I have not been down there in a while,” he coughed while brushing away the dirt from his clothes. “Anyway, what is in the box, John?”

“Are you honestly telling me you never looked?” John smirked.

“You did not say that I could,” James said sincerely.

“Such integrity – no wonder they made you the Sheriff!” Theodora winked at James.

“Well, now you shall find out!” John returned to the box and tried unsuccessfully to pry off the lid with his bare hands.

“Try this,” James offered his brother a short sword.

With the added leverage, the lid came off easily. The three of them gathered around and gazed at the mound of solid gold coins inside.

“No wonder it was so heavy,” James sighed.

“We knew we would be coming to England sooner or later,” John explained to his brother.

“And we did not wish to be a burden to anyone during our stay,” Theodora completed his thought.

*

After helping Theodora and John secure excellent accommodations at Nottingham’s finest inn, James hurried home to awaken his wife in advance of Jonas and Angela’s arrival. He preceded them by just a few moments, but Zorina was already up and about.

“Oh, James,” Zorina shook her head wearily; “you know I have never enjoyed surprises.”

“Today will surely be an exception,” James smiled, as he moved aside revealing Jonas and Angela standing in the doorway.

Zorina gasped and then started to cry. “Is this real?” she repeated several times, even after Jonas was holding her in his own arms.

“Yes, mother,” Jonas answered, “this is really me, and I am really home, and I am really all right.”

She took a step back to look at him again, and started laughing. “Forgive me, my son. I have just prayed so long for this day.” She saw Angela then, standing behind him. “Oh dear Angelina, how wonderful it is to see you too!” Zorina walked over and hugged her.

“Angela,” James asked his future daughter-in-law, “would you be so good as to help me with a few drinks?”

“Of course,” she answered, following the Sheriff into the stone kitchen out back in order to give Jonas a few moments alone with his mother.

“You look well, mother,” Jonas commented as they sat down together, though he worried to see how thin and gaunt she had become.

“You are kind,” she said, “as you always have been.”

They both looked at the rune ring on his finger.

“Mother,” Jonas began, “there are things that happened on our journey that I do not understand; that I do not think I will ever understand.”

“That is all right, Jonas,” she smiled, “this is how God made us, to always fall a little short of knowing and understanding. All that matters is that you are alive and home where you belong. And if you have done even a little good along the way, then praises be to God.”

“You are right, of course,” Jonas smiled at her.

Angela returned moments later with a tray holding cups, a water carafe, and some dry snacks. She set the tray down in front of Jonas and Zorina. James returned then as well and after saying a brief prayer of thanks, invited everyone to enjoy some of the refreshments. The four of them relaxed and exchanged light conversation for just a little while until the setting sun peeked in through the western window of the house.

“Jonas,” James spoke up as he realized the hour was growing late, “you should soon be seeing Angela home, as I am sure her own parents would like some time with her.”

“Of course,” Jonas stood, and Angela came to his side, “but first we have an announcement to make. During the course of our adventure, the long-standing friendship between Angela and I has grown considerably. Upon our return, we did briefly pay a visit to the Allendale estate, and I am overjoyed to say that Angela’s parents have agreed to grant me her hand in marriage.”

James and Zorina stood and showered the two young lovers with hugs and congratulations.

Zorina pulled Angela aside to tell her how truly happy she was for both of them, though adding, “I cannot say I am truly surprised.”

“You are not?” Angela asked.

“Not at all,” Zorina winked. “A mother knows these things.”

*

Michael arrived at the Nottingham orphanage as the sun was setting. He hesitated outside for a moment before entering through the main door. The front entryway was empty, though he could hear many scurrying footsteps upstairs.

He stood there waiting patiently as the number of footsteps faded. Darkness had fallen by the time a single set of footsteps came down the stairs, and Shahar emerged through the doorway.

“Hello, Shahar,” Michael said quietly.

She gasped and the empty clay pitcher she carried fell from her hands, breaking into shards on the wood floor. Instinctively, she immediately knelt and began gathering up the broken pieces.

Michael rushed to her, stooped, and tried to help. Her hands were shaking so badly, two pieces of clay fell out for every one she picked up. She eventually let them all go and knelt there staring into Michael's eyes, her own eyes still wide with disbelief.

He took her hands in his own and together they stood up straight, facing each other above the mess on the floor.

"Are you alright, mum?" a young boy asked from halfway up the staircase, making every effort for his voice to sound like a man's.

"Yes, Peter. Thank you," she answered, smiling at him. "I am alright. This is...an old friend. You go back to bed now."

The boy stared, frowning at them for a moment before turning and going back upstairs.

Shahar turned back to Michael and opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

"You..." Michael was struggling for words as well. "You have only become more beautiful."

She looked down.

He lifted her chin until their eyes met again.

"I am sorry," he whispered. "Sorry for leaving, sorry for staying away so long. I have lived an entire lifetime, wandering...lost. If I could only..."

She stopped him by putting a finger to his lips.

"No more regrets, Michael," she whispered back. "For I too have lived a lifetime in the shadow of the past. Yet now you are here, and I have for you only one question."

"What is it?"

"Are you here to stay?"

Looking into her dark eyes, he answered, "I will never leave you again."

She leaned her head against his chest and sighed deeply.

He wrapped his arms around her, as if the wind might lift her away.

They stood in silence for awhile simply enjoying the warmth of each other's embrace.

Suddenly, Michael took a step back and looked into her eyes again. Stepping over the broken pottery shards, he led Shahar to a soft chair across the room. She sat down in it, and he knelt before her.

She gasped again as he pulled a small golden ring from his tunic.

"My dearest Shahar," he began; his voice a little shaky. "When I first set these eyes upon you, your body was broken and bruised. I did not know if you would even live as I carried you unconscious across the desert sands. Even so, I loved you at first sight.

“Then over the years, I watched you grow stronger and wiser. I saw so many lives touched by yours. So many hearts you have healed and turned toward the Lord.

“A friend like you I have never known. And the more I grew to know you, the more I yearned to discover in the depths of your being. You give to others the most pure and simple love, and yet within you are mysteries that ten thousand books could not begin to describe.

“You are right. Let us leave behind regret and sadness. Let us make the most of the time we have left. Dearest Shahar, my sweet angel, will you make my heart complete? Will you marry me?”

She answered with both nodding and tears for several moments before she was actually able to produce a clear and resounding, “yes!”

Michael struggled to place the ring upon her, as both of their hands were trembling terribly. Once it was on, he helped her to stand and they both stared into each other’s eyes, smiling and laughing in their joy.

He leaned in to kiss her when suddenly they heard a shuffling noise from across the room. They spun around and saw all twenty-one of Nottingham’s orphaned children lurking in the hallway and upon the staircase. Having been discovered, the children gave up their efforts at silent stalking and burst into laughter, clapping and cheers.

“You all would have been the first to know, anyway,” Shahar declared with her hands on her hips and wearing a completely unconvincing frown. “Peter, as ringleader, you may have the honor of cleaning up what is left of my water pitcher. And the rest of you little squirrels, back to bed with you this very instant! I am sure that tomorrow shall be a very busy day...”

*

Friar Tuck agreed that as Michael and Shahar had been waiting far longer than the other couples to marry, their wedding should come first. The bride and groom were likewise willing to forego extensive preparations, and so their wedding did, in fact, take place that very next day.

Due to the rain, they decided to hold the event in Friar Tuck’s little chapel at the edge of Sherwood Forest. Though a carpenter by trade and a string-player by nature; Sir Cuthbert did an adequate job playing a processional on the church’s small pipe organ. Lady Raven and Lord Roger also brought their fiddles and played a stirring duet for special music leading up to the service.

All nine of the girls who resided at the orphanage were made flower-bearers, and the boys were temporarily deputized by the Sheriff of Nottingham to stand as an honor guard for the day. Theodora and John, with help from the two younger couples, set up a large canopy off the side of the chapel and furnished food and drink to be enjoyed underneath.

By early evening, everything was in order. Michael stood at the front of the chapel with John Little at his side. As Cuthbert resolved the organ prelude, the doors swung open and the nine little orphan girls preceded Shahar down the aisle. James the Sheriff symbolically gave her hand to Michael, and the two lovers turned to face Friar Tuck.

"Well," the old Friar sighed, "you two must be ready to finally get this over with."

Several of the boys in the honor guard snickered audibly.

"Quite," Friar Tuck shot a warning glance in their direction. "Now then, we are gathered here this day to join in holy matrimony Michael Barnabas Tuck and Shahar al-Zaid Qadira al-Samarra. I trust there are no objections?"

Tuck glanced all around the chapel.

No one spoke.

"Excellent," Tuck went on. "Then do you, Michael, take this precious young lady as your wife, promising to love, cherish, honor and obey her for the rest of your days?"

"I do."

"And do you, Mistress Shahar, likewise take this dear young man as your husband, promising to love, cherish, honor and obey him for all of your days?"

"With all of my heart"

"Very good," Friar Tuck sounded relieved. He coughed quietly, removed his spectacles, set them down gently on the lectern, and leaned forward to address the crowd saying; "Now I realize you want to see the rings and the kissing and all of that, so you can get outside in the fresh air and have something to eat. But this is the wedding day of my one and only son, so you must bear with me for a moment."

The crowd chuckled.

"Michael and Shahar," the Friar looked back and forth at them, "I pray that you realize how radiantly God is smiling upon you at this moment. Surely the Lord is pleased whenever two loving hearts are joined together, and yours is a special case indeed.

"As individuals, both of you have known such loneliness and sorrow, yet this has only made you all the more compassionate and caring toward others. Now, if God was able to transform your grief into such goodness, how much more abundantly shall He deal with your joy in union with one another?

"Enjoy this love and the happiness that God has granted you. You do have the rings, don't you?"

After the wedding bands were in place, Friar Tuck took a step back, raised his arms, and declared, "And now what we have all been waiting for!"

Michael leaned in. After twenty years of friendship, he finally kissed the love of his youth upon her lips for the very first time.

It was worth the wait.

Angela and Jonas were next. Theirs too was a humble event, quickly brought together only a week later. The date coincided with the autumn equinox, and the day itself was both warm and dry. They gathered therefore at the side of the crystalline stream that flows through Allendale, a stone's throw downstream from the old millhouse and within sight of the outer trees of Sherwood.

An even smaller affair by design, on Angela's side stood only her parents and several members of the Locksley household. Maegan came alongside Angela as her maid of honor and personal attendant for the day.

Jonas' side was even lighter and included just his parents, and John and Theodora. Prince Constantine stood up as best man.

Friar Tuck, however, was in full form; unleashing his entire arsenal of advice, warnings, homilies, quotations, good-sense, and words-to-the-wise upon the young lovers who really just wanted to be alone. Angela and Jonas persevered though, and finally the part they had been waiting for arrived.

"I understand you have written your own vows?" Friar Tuck sounded mildly perturbed. They nodded. "Very well, you may proceed."

"Angela," Jonas began, "what a blessing to find my best friend in all the world standing before me, ready to become my wife and helpmate. You and I have traveled to the ends of the earth, but if we never again venture further afar than the edge of Nottingham, I shall be content provided you are with me.

"Angela, your spirit and the light within you are like a lamp showing me the path ahead. I would be lost without you. If you promise to stay with me always and be my loving wife, I shall give everything I have and everything that I am to you, though I know that even this is so little compared to what I will receive back again – in good measure, pressed down, shaken and overflowing.

"Will you trust me with your heart, knowing that I promise to guard it as my own? Will you be mine for all your days remaining?" he asked.

"Aye, Jonas" she smiled. "I will, and I do."

"Ah, well done," Friar Tuck mumbled as if he had lost his place for a moment, "and now for your vows, our dear Angela."

"Jonas Little," she declared. "You are my friend and the man of my sweetest dreams, indeed. But you are even more than these. You are my hero who saves me and my teacher who helps me see things as they truly are. You are my comforter in danger and sorrow, and the captain of my heart when its sails are full of joy.

"In all of these ways, you point me toward our Lord. What more could any woman ask of any man? And yet I never need to ask for you to listen or to wait upon me, for you are there already, knowing what I need and want often before I can see it. So I ask only this; that you promise to live with me for the rest of our lives that our love may grow together. Will you become and always remain my faithful husband?"

“Yes, and so I am,” he smiled at her.

Friar Tuck guided them through the latter portions of the ceremony, and they reached the conclusion right at midday. A feast to which a wider circle of friends and acquaintances had been invited was scheduled for later in the afternoon. While the parents departed to oversee the last minute preparations, the newlyweds accompanied by Maegan and Constantine strolled lazily upstream through the woods of Allendale.

“Would you like to see your wedding gift?” Jonas asked as they neared the top of the hill.

“But I did not get anything for you!” Angela panicked.

“You are all I want,” Jonas reassured her with a kiss.

“Alright then,” Angela relaxed. “Where is it?”

“Right over here,” Jonas led her away by the hand. “Close your eyes!”

They left the thick woods and entered a clear area overlooking a bend in the stream.

“Open them!” Jonas instructed.

Angela looked around, but all she could see was a large dug out area directly in front of them. The soft soil had been removed all the way down to the underlying rock.

“You’ve given me a hole in the ground?” Angela was confused.

Maegan and Constantine doubled over with laughter, but Jonas simply looked annoyed.

“Not a hole,” he explained, “but rather a foundation. This will be my first project with your father – building a new house for us to live in!”

Angela looked dubiously at her new husband.

“Trust me,” Jonas leapt down into the hole, and ran around it explaining where each room and feature would be.

Finally, Angela leapt in with him. “I love it!” she hugged him; “even if it still needs a little work.”

*

In contrast to the two preceding weddings, the ceremony for Maegan and Constantine was an exercise in pomp and extravagance. Lord Roger went completely overboard for his only daughter, and Locksley Hall was steadily transformed over the following weeks into a veritable royal palace.

Theodora only added to the tumult by spending liberally on clothing, supplies and gifts. She fast became a favored customer among the merchants and artisans of Nottinghamshire, and poor John Little was reduced to functioning as little more than a pack mule as his wife’s adventures in purchasing went forward at a breathtaking pace.

More than a month passed into the autumn season while the preparations unfolded. The two other newlywed couples had already returned from their

respective honeymoons when the third wedding was held, this time at Locksley on the twenty-fourth day of October in the year of the Lord, 1240.

Nearly every soul within a two-day journey from the Keep was invited to the celebration, and the turn-out was impressive. Maegan glowed in her white dress, veil and cape. Her groom looked stately, but in a subdued manner that appropriately kept all the attention fixed upon her.

Friar Tuck gave perhaps the finest performance of his career, and if all the tears that were shed that day were collected together, they might have formed a small pond.

When the moment came for the Prince to kiss his bride, the entire hall held its breath. Every other young maiden of Nottinghamshire silently wished that she was the one to be taken up in his arms, leaned back slightly, and overwhelmed by that moment of perfect passion.

A cacophony of cheering and applause followed as Friar Tuck declared, "I give you Prince Constantine and Princess Maegan of the royal Byzantine House of the Angelos!"

The lovers rode away early the next day on swift horses, heading for a family friend's woodland retreat somewhere in the Yorkshire Dales. They stayed for a month, still leaving ample time for a return to Locksley before the Yuletide feasting began.

By then the new home for Jonas and Angela was complete and furnished, and none too soon as Angela was already beginning to show. They anticipated that arrival around the end of the coming spring.

When everyone was gathered together at Locksley on Christmas day, joy overflowed as both Maegan and Shahar opened their gifts from their husbands, and both packages contained tiny knit booties.

Throughout that long and cold winter, hearths and hearts radiated warmth as lovers, both old and new, quietly kept each others' company and looked forward to greeting the new lives that were on the way.

No word reached Nottingham of approaching armies or coming doom, and so they believed with hopeful hearts, and for the sake of their growing families, that the world might continue on after all.

Verse Sixteen – Dawn of a New Day

Old Friar Tuck quietly departed for heaven during the coldest part of the winter. All of Nottinghamshire mourned but also accepted that the time for his reward had come.

Michael was grateful that he had returned in time to see and spend those last days with the only father he had ever known on earth. His marriage to Shahar and expectation of a new son or daughter also helped to keep him from falling into despair.

With the coming of springtime, traveling merchants began to reappear in the area, but none could supply any clear information regarding the war on the continent or the whereabouts of the Golden Horde. Folks went about their planting and building and trading and family life. With all the work to be done, there was little time left over for being fearful and worrying.

A good six to eight weeks ahead on her pregnancy, Angela became an advisor of sorts to Maegan and Shahar. They came to her for wisdom and counsel despite both of them being older than her in years.

As the months went on, however, Jonas found his wife to be – at least toward him – increasingly moody and volatile. Her belly became disproportionately enormous compared to her very petite physical frame, and the perpetual discomfort frayed her nerves. No matter how kind and understanding poor Jonas Little tried to be, he would still find himself in the midst of a severe verbal lashing from time to time.

These sessions usually ended with him making apologetic overtures to his wife for, in her words, *having done this thing to me*. Sir Cuthbert tried to help the lad by pouring on extra carpentry assignments. Jonas was grateful for the work and the time alone to collect his thoughts.

*

Maegan's taller frame absorbed the changes more easily. As Constantine so wisely pointed out at every opportunity, she became more graceful and serene with each passing stage in their unborn child's development. The Locksley staff helped out a great deal as well by seeing to Maegan's every comfort.

Theodora tried to balance her desire to help with her realization that she should not appear as an overbearing mother-in-law. By listening closely for Maegan's true feelings beneath the surface of her polite upbringing, Theodora was able to effectively walk that line.

By late spring, however, no kind words or deeds could do much to sooth the burden Maegan was feeling. Even walking became a source of agony, and the physicians finally restricted her to bed rest.

As she had done for him the year before during his illness at sea, Constantine kept perpetual watch over her. Unable to do much more, he prayed without ceasing for a hedge of protection around his wife and their baby.

*

Shahar, most likely because of her age, had the most difficult time of all. She experienced great discomfort, especially during the last few months. Volunteers were found from among the women of Nottingham to share in the responsibility for overseeing twenty-one orphaned children, as this duty soon became too much for her.

Theodora and John visited her regularly, helping in any way they could. Eventually, they moved Shahar and Michael into a ground-floor room at the same inn where they were staying, in order to keep a more constant vigil. The physicians that served at Locksley were brought by regularly as well, though they were at a loss to explain many of the problems Shahar was having.

She went on full-time bed rest even before Maegan; and with Michael as the lead builder, a fortress of prayer was similarly constructed around Shahar.

*

By the beginning of summertime, Sir Cuthbert, Lady Raven and Jonas had reached a consensus. Agreeing that Angela looked as if she might explode at any moment, they convinced her to allow herself to be brought to Locksley Keep where more staff and resources were available for her care.

Her water broke as she crossed the threshold into the building.

During the thirty-six hours of labor that followed, Jonas lived in utter fear for his life. There was no corner of the Keep sufficiently remote for him to escape the echoes of his wife's ominous threats that she screamed with ever increasing frequency and fervor.

Sir Cuthbert, Lord Roger and Prince Constantine all did their best to uphold Jonas' spirit with encouragement, companionship and whiskey. Nothing worked, though. By the time Jonas entered the delivery chamber to meet his remarkably large baby boy; he was a quivering bundle of nerves.

Angela though had been almost magically transformed. Once the gigantic baby was actually out of her body, a serene peace fell upon her. She, like the baby, mostly slept for the next few days. Even when she was awake, however, she bore the same kind, gentle, and loving countenance of the woman Jonas remembered marrying.

In fact, she seemed to hold no memory of any of the cursing and threatening dread that she had for so long directed against her husband. So glad was he to finally have his wife back, and to have a brand new son, that Jonas very wisely just let it all go.

*

Three days went by before the baby received his Christian name. This had been another source of tension in the Little household during the preceding nine months. While Angela and Jonas had agreed almost instantly on a name for if the baby had been a girl, a name for a male child consistently eluded them.

All four grandparents tried to help resolve the impasse, but soon gave up in frustration. Eventually, Theodora was brought in to mediate. She had the parents each make a list of their ten favorite boys' names. Then in an orderly fashion, she had them take turns eliminating choices.

Every time, the exercise ended with each parent holding fast to a choice that the other found completely unacceptable. This process repeated multiple times until even the perpetually calm and rational Theodora Angeloi found herself partaking from the men's stash of medicinal whiskey.

On the morning of the third day, however, a miracle occurred. Theodora awoke early, and after eating a hearty breakfast in the Locksley kitchen to suppress her whiskey headache, vowed to make one last attempt with the persnickety new parents.

She collected all of the parchments with their previous lists and threw them into the fire. Next, she brought them fresh parchments and quills and directed them to produce new lists from scratch. Then in a change of strategy, once their lists were completed, Theodora switched them.

"Now," she charged them, "can you find one name of the other's list that is at all acceptable?"

Jonas and Angela each looked the other's list up and down for a few moments, frowning and fuming.

Suddenly, at the exact same moment, they both looked up saying, "You wrote Jared, too!"

Theodora smiled.

Having finally settled that, the interim friar from Nottingham was summoned and Jared was promptly christened.

*

Another new arrival came the very next day, but of a different kind. Three Celtic monks entered Nottingham and inquired after Friar Tuck. They were quite saddened by his passing.

"As we all are," the Sheriff of Nottingham told them. "The Archbishop has sent an interim friar to help watch over us, if you would perhaps like to speak with him."

"Thank you, kind Sheriff," one of the monks began, "but we did not seek Friar Tuck on church business, rather our interest in visiting with him was of a more personal nature."

“In that case,” James said after thinking for a moment, “would you wish to see his son?”

The three looked around at each other before one answered, “That would be wonderful!”

James led them to the inn where Michael and Shahar were staying. John and Michael were outside, speaking together underneath the shade of a large walnut tree. After introductions all around, the conversation between the three Englishmen and the three Celts continued well into the afternoon, taking all manner of unexpected twists and turns.

The three monks it seemed had recently returned from an epic quest of their own. They had traveled from their home monastery on a remote Scottish island all the way to the great city of Constantinople. They had sought an audience with the Byzantine Emperor for reasons that were hinted at, but never precisely explained.

“The journey was ultimately a bit of a disappointment,” one of the monks lamented. “We had very much looked forward to the...perspective that the Byzantine Emperor might provide regarding our relationship with the church authorities in Rome.”

“How unsettling,” one of the other monks added, “to discover that the Emperor of great Byzantium was not quite whom we expected him to be.”

“How do you mean?” Michael asked.

“Apparently,” the third and quietest of the three monks responded, “for many years now, the rightful Emperor and all of his family have lived in exile. And the Emperor who currently sits upon the throne in Constantinople is himself a disciple of the Roman Pontiff.”

“How fascinating,” John remarked, looking over the monks’ shoulders and seeing that Theodora was now watching them intently through a part in the curtains of Shahar’s room.

“Tell me this,” James changed the subject. “In all of your travels in the eastern lands did you come into contact with, or hear word of a barbarian scourge known as the Golden Horde?”

“Oh, most assuredly,” the first monk answered. “In fact, during our return journey, through the Kingdom of Hungary and the Holy Roman Empire, we witnessed vast areas of destruction and blight. The few locals with whom we were able to communicate claimed that the devastation had been wrought by this Golden Horde. Though some of these places we saw, if they truly had been cities at one time, were so utterly annihilated, tis hard to believe it was the work of mere men.”

“And what word of the Golden Horde itself?” James pressed. “Where are they now?”

“That is perhaps the most amazing part of the story,” the quiet monk nodded. “The Golden Horde came out of the east clearly bent on conquest, and none were able to even slow their merciless advance. After devastating the

Teutons and the Huns, it is said that they reached as far as the Adriatic Sea. And then they were gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?” Michael frowned.

“Tis said,” the first monk explained, “that one day they were riding forward, conquering with all haste, and the next day they turned and rode away – back into the endless steppe from which they had come. Tis said they never looked back over the destruction they had left.”

“Do you have any idea why this may have happened?” James wondered.

“Another man of God we met near Brandenburg said he believed the leader of the Golden Horde had died, and that they had ridden back to their homeland in order to choose a new one. Yet whether or not this is the truth of it, how could we know?” the monk in the middle shrugged.

Michael wandered a few paces away from the others as if in a trance.

“Are you alright, Michael?” John called after him.

“I could not be better, John Little!” Michael spun around and his face was transformed. “Do you not see? The Khan is dead! It was his personality – his leadership that had built the warring tribes of Mongols into the unstoppable force of the Golden Horde. Upon the death of the Great Khan, every warrior is bound by Mongol law to return to their tribal lands and await the emergence of a new Khan!”

“So what are you saying?” John was confused.

“I am saying,” Michael was nearly leaping out of his tunic, “that we are saved! The selection of a new Khan could take years with much internal strife between the Mongols. God willing, my son – or daughter – will come into a world that is not facing imminent destruction!”

*

Maegan began her labor as the sun set on a hot midsummer’s evening. Everything was ready and the Locksley staff flew into action wetting towels, fanning her, and sending riders out to fetch the physicians and the midwife.

Constantine did not want to leave the room, but finally bowed to tradition and sat down outside. Lord Roger joined him and they commenced that long night’s prayer vigil.

Maegan did not bring her cousin’s level of drama to the delivery chamber. She actually remained quite calm as the waves of pain and pressure came and went. Inevitably though, her suffering became more intense.

Constantine had fallen asleep for just a few moments when at dawn, his wife’s piercing screams snapped him back awake. One of the physicians emerged from the chamber a little later.

Constantine asked him how Maegan was doing.

The physician nodded and said she would be fine.

“How much longer do you think,” Lord Roger followed up, “until the baby comes?”

“The baby...?” the physician trailed off.

“Yes,” Lord Roger was tired and impatient, “the baby; the reason we are all here!”

“Yes, of course,” the physician looked ill. “The baby has come...”

Constantine grew instantly pale and whispered, “Then why do we hear no crying?”

Not waiting for a reply, he shoved the physician out of the way and entered the birthing chamber. The other physician, the midwife, her maiden helpers and Lady Margaret were all gathered around the bed.

The only sound in the room was Maegan’s soft weeping. When she saw Constantine approaching the bedside, she burst into full tears.

“Forgive me,” she cried. “Please, forgive me...”

The Prince saw then the tiny body of his son. He had been stillborn.

Constantine joined Lady Margaret in stroking Maegan’s hair and offering soothing words. Lord Roger sent forth a rider with instructions to summon the town friar for the performance of the infant’s last rites.

Before long, the blessing of sleep came over Maegan. She rested peacefully and the extra staff was dismissed. While Lady Margaret stayed to watch over her, Constantine spoke with the physicians.

“Losing a first child is common, is it not?” the Prince sought for some hope to cling to, “and surely we may try again in time, yes?”

The physicians looked at one another.

“Praise the Lord that your wife lives,” one of them responded, not answering his question. “There is no reason that she should not live a long and fulfilling life.”

Constantine pressed his question with the look in his eyes.

“You must resign yourself, and help your wife to understand,” the other physician explained, “that now only an act of God could bring you a child.”

The Prince nodded and walked away without looking either of the physicians in their eyes again.

*

The rider did not return until mid-morning. He entered Locksley Hall looking pale and haggard.

“Where have you been? Where is the friar, man?” Lord Roger barked at the rider.

“I am afraid...” the man was shaking, “I am afraid there has been a terrible turn of events in Nottingham as well, my Lord. The good friar has been delayed, though he is not far behind.”

“What has happened?” Lord Roger’s anger turned to apprehension.

“Good mistress Shahar began her travails around the same time last night as your daughter, my Lord,” the rider told what he knew. “And...I am afraid that it was all just too much for her, my Lord. You see, when the sun came up today, good mistress Shahar was gone.”

“Gone?”

“Gone to her reward, my Lord”

“What about the baby?” Roger gasped, staggering over to a pillar to lean himself against.

Before the rider could go on, the doors to the Keep flew open and Theodora entered walking hurriedly. She carried a small bundle in her arms, and the new friar scurried behind her, trying to keep up.

“Oh Roger, thank God,” Theodora exclaimed. “Roger, I am so sorry for your loss, and for the pain that your daughter and my son must now share.”

“Theodora,” Roger was trembling, “on this dark day, Maegan has lost her child, and I have just heard word of poor dear Shahar. Can you tell me why the Lord has forsaken us this day?”

“That I cannot say,” Theodora answered, “for in this moment of darkness I know only that a tiny and helpless life rests in my arms, and he desperately needs your daughter.”

Just then the baby began to wail.

*

Maegan opened her eyes and immediately started sobbing.

“Oh, mother,” she cried, “I just dreamed he was alive. I just dreamed I could hear him crying. Surely my mind is breaking with grief! What can I do mother? How can I ever bear this pain?”

“We shall bear it together, my darling,” Lady Margaret squeezed her hand. “But as for the crying of a baby – that was no dream, for I heard it too!”

Moments later, Theodora, Roger and Constantine all appeared in the room. They explained the situation to Maegan as quickly and as gently as possible. Though her heart broke anew at the loss of Shahar, she did not hesitate to take the infant into her arms and nurse him with all the love she had been so ready to give her own.

The other adults all stood aside for a moment, while Maegan negotiated a comfortable feeding position with the little baby boy she had just met.

“Mother,” Constantine began, “where is Michael?”

She looked down and sighed deeply.

“Mother?” he pressed.

“Do you remember the story of your birth?” she asked her son.

“Of course,” he replied, and for the benefit of the Lord and Lady explained, “the midwives at first believed me to be stillborn, but I was revived – as you can plainly see.”

“This is much like what happened last night with the child your wife now holds in her arms,” Theodora concluded the tragic tale. “Poor, poor Michael believed he had lost them both. We thought he had merely stepped outside for air, but when we searched for him he was gone. John is still searching for him, looking in all the places he might go. But our fear...”

She could not finish.

“Do you think he may have fled away from Nottingham in his grief?”

Roger whispered.

Theodora nodded.

“Could it be,” Margaret looked around at all of them, “that out of these deep, deep sorrows some hope could yet arise? Is not our Lord the God of turning wrongs into right?”

They all turned to look at Maegan in her bed. She was taking a break from trying to teach the baby boy to suckle, and simply holding him close to her face. Though her own cheeks were still lined with the tracks of tears, her eyes were sparkling as she whispered things to the little life she held, and he sputtered and cooed in response.

Constantine answered, “Perhaps He already has.”

Postlude

Cyprus, 1241

“Good news!” Randol came running. “Richard is sailing out in the morning – and there is room for us on board one of the caravels!”

“Excellent!” Alfred agreed.

“Too bad we must leave the Templars behind,” Edric remarked. “They have been quite enjoyable companions.”

“Entertaining though they may be,” Randol responded, “they seem endlessly content to wait upon this island, while all the adventure is happening just to the east in Outremer.”

“I have to agree,” Alfred added. “Though wintering here with them has been most grand; now that spring has come, we should proceed to where the action is!”

*

The next day, the three young men sailed away with Richard’s eight-hundred royal knights. The Earl of Cornwall had picked up an auxiliary force of six-hundred Norman mercenary foot soldiers in Sicily, as well as fifty experienced Genoese sailors along with their eight small but sturdy vessels.

No reports had come of further Mongol activity since the preceding summer, but according to the Templars and other Christian sailors in the area, there was still plenty of work to be done securing the Crusaders States that remained along the Levantine coast against Arab and Turkish aggression.

The expeditionary force landed at the Crusader port city of Acre where their arrival sparked the enthusiasm of other newcomers. As a result, three-hundred French knights under Theobald of Champagne and seven-hundred French spearmen joined up, in addition to twenty extremely heavily armored Hospitaller Knights, their squires and attendants, and a small number of fanatical monks who carried no weapons, but seemed fairly dangerous nonetheless.

The Crusading army, nearly three-thousand strong, marched straight for Damascus for a confrontation with the Ayyubid Sultan. His own forces recently depleted by skirmishes with Turkish raiders, the Sultan sent emissaries to meet with Richard and negotiate a peace settlement. And so, without a drop of blood being spilled, the Earl of Cornwall added Galilee and Mount Tabor, including a castle overlooking Lake Tiberias, to the Crusader realm.

*

“Think of it!” Edric was ecstatic as he shed his boots and waded out into the warm water of Tiberias in summertime. “Our Lord walked upon these very waters! The Apostles Peter and Andrew fished upon these very shores!”

“Tis an honor to have been a part of the reclaiming of these lands for God’s people,” Alfred nodded, looking out over the shimmering lake.

“But we did not *do* anything!” Randol complained. “All we did was to march out here, and the Saracens panicked and handed the lands over. Do you not think they will simply overrun them again when we have left?”

The twins looked at each other.

“What is to be done?” Edric waded back onto land.

“Shall we spend the rest of our lives here, guarding this strip of land?” Alfred challenged.

“Of course not,” Randol dismissed, “yet a decisive victory or two would be nice, so that we know we have left a more lasting legacy here.”

*

Their opportunity soon came when Richard decided to march southward. Encouraged by his easy success against Damascus, he planned to confront the Sultan of Cairo in the hopes of gaining similar concessions of territory.

The first minor clashes came just south of the Templar castle at Ascalon. Richard’s mounted knights overran the Egyptian border outposts along the Gaza coast with almost no resistance. As they continued across the Sinai, a two-thousand strong horde of camel-riding Mamelukes came against them.

The twins were instrumental in the early stages of the conflict, helping to thwart the enemy’s flow of information by using their bows and arrows to pick off scout riders that came too close. When the two armies finally met in full force in a desert valley, the Crusaders had the upper hand in positioning as well as in sheer numbers.

With very few losses on his side, Richard smashed the Mamelukes’ forward lines and decisively routed the main force of camel-riding swordsmen. The Mamelukes soon turned and rode over the hill in full retreat.

Despite several of his advisors’ recommendation to call it a day and rest, Richard wished to press his advantage and ordered his tired army to pursue the fleeing camels. The Crusaders raced over the hilltop where, in the next valley, they soon found themselves surrounded by the real Egyptian army.

The remaining one thousand Mamelukes turned back upon the Crusaders with the support of ten-thousand Nubian spearman, six-thousand Arab archers, and two thousand axe-wielding Abyssinian guards – all of whom had been camouflaged and hiding in the dunes.

The Hospitallers led a charge to break out of the trap which proved successful for all of the Crusaders who rode upon horseback, including Richard,

Earl of Cornwall. The mounted Knights fled back to Ascalon, leaving the nearly two-thousand foot soldiers to fend for themselves.

Up against over ten times their own number, the trapped Crusaders threw down their weapons and pleaded for mercy. The Egyptians responded by beheading all of the soldiers who appeared too small, weak, or severely injured. The rest were beaten, bound in chains, and marched off to the dungeons of Cairo to await the slave market. Randol, Edric and Alfred fell into this latter category.

*

The Egyptian Sultan's palace stood on a precipice overlooking the fortress where the slave dungeons were located. The Sultan looked out across the endless buildings of Cairo, while he listened to his advisors warn of the danger lurking in the northern realms.

"No one knows where the Golden Horde turned after destroying the eastern cities of the Franj," urged a robed wise man. "We must remain vigilant and seek to learn more about them."

"They are said to be invincible in battle," remarked another sage in flowing robes, "but every creature under the sun has some weakness – if it can only be found..."

"Time is not on our side," cautioned a third wise man. "Scythian slaves who witnessed the Golden Horde subdue the northern Rus have said they come like lightning, without warning – and without mercy!"

"Interrogate all foreign prisoners," the Sultan commanded. "Find any who have first-hand knowledge of the Golden Horde and bring them before me. And mark my words – the Turks have come against us, the Franj have come against us, time and time again. Do any of them stand in Egypt today? Where are they now? We will be ready when this Golden Horde rides out of their wastelands, and may the Nile flow red with their blood!"

*

"I wonder if all Egyptians eat this well," Randol fumed as he prepared to sip another mouthful of thin and sour gruel from his small wooden bowl.

"If you no like," a Norman prisoner nearby grunted in broken English, "you give to me!"

"That's quite alright, but thank you for offering to help," Randol forced down another sip.

"We in here," the Norman continued, "for your English Richard run away and leave us!"

"If he had stayed behind," Randol surmised, "the only difference now merely would be him taking up valuable space in here."

"You no care your king leave you?" grumbled another nearby Norman.

“He’s not really a king,” Randol explained, “and none of this will likely matter anyway when the Golden Horde comes.”

“What is Golden Horse?” the first Norman looked puzzled.

“Golden *Horde*,” Randol corrected, “the Mongols – when they are through destroying Christendom, surely will turn their wrath upon Egypt.”

“We hear about Mongols,” the other Norman said, “but why you know so much about them?”

“My friends here,” Randol motioned to the twins who simultaneously frowned at him for involving them, “not only met the Mongol leader face to face, they even killed several of the barbarians while escaping from their army.”

“So,” the angrier Norman barked, “you English think you mighty!”

“Good Lord, let it go, Randol,” Edric whispered.

“As if we haven’t gotten into enough trouble already,” Alfred added.

“If you knew,” Randol ignored them and retorted to the Normans, “all the places we have been and the things we have done and seen; you would understand indeed the might of true Englishmen!”

The Normans, eight of them in all, stood up. On average, they measured a head taller than Randol.

“We no believe you!” one of them shouted. “You show us how mighty!”

“Well done, cousin,” Alfred shook his head.

“I suppose you expect us to help?” Edric wondered.

“If you lads can each handle three,” Randol calculated, “I shall take the two large ones.”

“They all look fairly large,” Alfred stood.

“I was just thinking that,” Edric stood alongside him.

Before the three young Englishmen could discuss their plans any further, they were fallen upon by the crowd of large and angry Normans. Fists and feet flew, but initially the threesome held together quite well. By sheer size and numbers, however, the Normans began to gain the upper hand.

The three lads surely would have met their end in that dark and dreary dungeon that day. Yet suddenly, the gates to the dungeon flew open and a dozen Saracen guards, armed with long shiny scimitars, rushed in and began to beat the Normans back with the dull ends of their weapons.

A foolish Norman, in the midst of his battle frenzy, turned and attacked one of the guards. The Saracens turned their scimitars around and used the blades to cut the man apart. The fist fight promptly ended.

“You, you and you,” the leader of the guards came forward and pointed to Randol, Edric and Alfred. “Follow me, now.”

Not sorry at all to leave behind the Normans, the bloody and bruised trio obeyed and walked out of the dungeon with scimitars at their backs.

“You boys fight well,” the head guard commented using flawless English as he led them down a long, dimly lit corridor.

“How long were you watching?” Randol asked.

“Long enough,” the guard stared at Randol with a suspicious look, “to have heard you speaking about the Golden Horde. Do you truly have first-hand knowledge of them?”

“Yes,” Randol exchanged a glance with his cousins, “quite a bit of contact, actually.”

“You will tell everything you know to the Sultan,” the guard ordered.

No one spoke for a while, as they needed all of their breath to climb a seemingly endless series of staircases. They traveled higher and higher, and through the occasional window or over periodic parapets, the three prisoners began to catch glimpses of the sprawling grandeur of Cairo.

Their legs were shaking from exertion when the steps finally ended and they continued walking down another hallway. The splendor and opulence of the décor was unlike anything the Englishmen had ever seen. They finally came to a stop outside two enormous doors that were plated in gold and ornamented with all manner of gems and precious stones.

“You will not look the Sultan directly in the eyes, but rather keep your gaze fixed upon the floor near his feet,” the guard gave them their final instructions. “You will speak only when spoken to, and then without any hesitation so that you may have no time to formulate lies. Answer only what you are asked as fully as you can, and then fall silent to await further instructions. Any failure to obey these rules and you will be instantly beheaded. Is this clear?”

The three nodded.

“Excellent,” the guard paused and looked at them for a moment, the slightest grin forming upon his face. “Yes, you fight quite well. Let the peace of Allah go with you.”

With that, the guards pulled upon the golden doors. The three tired, hungry and battered Englishmen shuffled forward into the court of the great Sultan of Egypt to meet an unknown fate.

Book Three

The Fountain of Goliath

Edward Philip White

The Fountain of Goliath – Book Three
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For Kara
We certainly share great reasons for hope

Scripture references

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Prelude

Alamut, 1259

The burning tower crashed down with a terrifying roar. Ashes, dust and fiery cinders poured through the crumbling fortress walls and cascaded over the steep rocky mountainside.

Two hundred thousand horsemen swarmed in the valleys below. Among them stood scores of gigantic catapults that hurled a steady barrage of flaming rocks and boulders.

An iron-capped battering ram made from an eight-hundred year old tree quickly turned the main gate into a pile of debris. Mongol foot soldiers with spears and wide curved swords rushed in through the gap.

The Order of the Assassins had erred greatly by killing Hulegu Khan's brother. Hulegu had allowed his brother's wife to pronounce the judgment for the fortress at Alamut.

Death for all had been her icy reply.

Hulegu's troops fanned out through the corridors and catacombs of the fortress, enforcing the widow's desire.

Near the south wall, a small fifteen year-old boy struggled desperately to free his leg from heavy rubble. Kiran had been raised by the Assassins, and soon would have become a full member of the Order.

"Tonight I shall dine in Paradise," Kiran tried to comfort himself as he watched the Mongols draw closer.

"Not tonight," a quiet voice said.

Kiran watched in awe as a slender old man, with hair as white as snow, materialized out of the shadows and worked quickly to remove the fallen stones and timbers.

"Is this how it happens?" Kiran wondered. "Are you my death angel?"

"That depends," the old man answered. "Do you want to live?"

"Yes."

"Then come with me," he turned and led Kiran back into the shadows.

They disappeared through a hidden passage and were soon outside of the fortress walls. The smoke from Alamut's destruction rose up to heaven, blocking out the light of the full moon. Under the cloak of darkness, the two escapees fled deep into the mountains.

At one moment, the billowing clouds of smoke parted and a sliver of moonlight struck the old man's face, revealing many years of pain and sadness.

"Who are you?" Kiran asked.

"I have been called by many names," the old man answered, "but the one I remember most dearly is Tuck. Michael Tuck."

Verse One – Antioch

Ovsanna arose before dawn. She had just a few moments to clean and dress herself. Soon the princess would awaken, and all would need to be ready. Princess Sybilla became quite cross if her breakfast and flowers and music and clothes were not prepared and arranged perfectly to her liking.

The princess rarely struck Ovsanna, her hand-maiden of over four years, but she had other ways of punishing mistakes or tardiness. She could see to it that the girl's meals were reduced in size or quality, or forgotten altogether for a night or two. She also could, and often would; pile on a heap of menial and meaningless tasks to Ovsanna's already demanding daily workload.

Somehow though, the girl never grew bitter or spiteful. She held on to her hope and faith in a brighter future by praying and praising God during each tedious chore and through every hungry and lonely night. Like a mountain flower constantly exposed to chilly and blustering winds, Ovsanna grew stronger day by day.

Each morning she waited patiently and in silence for Princess Sybilla to finally open her eyes, frown, and begin her day. Ovsanna would absorb the litany of complaints about breakfast, nodding meekly and apologizing from time to time.

Then the ordeal began of fitting Sybilla into her corsets and gowns. Though far more petite than the princess, Ovsanna had developed an uncanny strength in her arms and fingers from all her labors and she never failed to accomplish this feat.

Princess Sybilla spent most afternoons and evenings flitting and socializing with visitors to the royal palace. Occasionally her husband-to-be, King Bohemond of Antioch, would take her away on a journey to Tripoli or Edessa or Anatolia. Most evenings though, the princess returned alone to her suite and called upon Ovsanna to sooth her frayed nerves with music.

This was the one part of the royal routine that the poor hand-maiden actually enjoyed, though she did not let Sybilla know how much. Yet inwardly, Ovsanna smiled every time she pulled her long wooden flute from its carrying bag and prepared to play.

She would run her fingers along the smoothness of the flute's polished cherry wood surface and think of her mother. She had taught Ovsanna to play the instrument as a young girl, and gave it to her to keep when King Hethoum declared that she was to accompany his daughter Sybilla to Antioch.

Ovsanna often wondered if she would have been taken away from her mother at such a young age, had her father still been alive. She could barely remember him, but the feelings she had in her heart were just as fond for him as for her mother.

Without even looking, Ovsanna placed her fingers correctly over the sound holes in the flute. She held the end in front of her lips, and as she began to

push air over the opening, all her cares and worries flew away like a flock of frightened birds.

The calming and soothing effect of Ovsanna's music was something she was more than glad to share with the princess. Often Sybilla would fall asleep to the sweet sounds, and Ovsanna could enjoy a bit of time to herself.

She would walk out onto the balcony and watch the stars shining down over the mighty walls and towers of Antioch. She would hold her flute to her chest and remember the happy childhood she had left behind. Sometimes her eyes would catch a falling star, and she wondered if someone might ever come along and change her destiny.

Then one night, someone did.

*

"Working late again, are you?" the portly kitchen matron took the tray of cups and cutlery from Ovsanna.

"Aye," she smiled back, "always a bit more to be done I suppose..."

"Too true," the matron began scrubbing at one of the saucers with her wet rag.

"Can I be of any help to you?" Ovsanna thought nothing of going the extra mile for a fellow servant.

"You could carry these leavings out to the refuse pit for me, that is, if the dark does not affright you overly," the matron stared at her.

"I shall be glad to," Ovsanna gathered the trash and headed out the door.

"You watch your step, dear," the matron called after her, "springtime is upon us and there may be street rats!"

"I shall be careful!" Ovsanna called back over her shoulder as she disappeared into the dark alleyway.

She walked slowly, letting her eyes adjust to the dim light of the waning crescent moon. Finally reaching the edge of the refuse pit, she turned over her basket and let the contents pour out into the darkness.

Ovsanna gasped and jumped backward when she heard an unmistakably human exclamation.

"Is someone down there?" she whispered.

Silence answered.

She ran back to the kitchen, but hesitated at the door.

Anyone foraging in the refuse pit must be at the end of despair, she thought. *And the cry I heard might well have been a child's.*

Knowing she would not sleep that night without at least trying to pursue the matter, Ovsanna waited until the kitchen matron finished her tasks and departed. At great risk to herself, the hand-maiden snuck a roasted leg of lamb from the meat cellar. Wrapping the meat in a clean towel, she returned to the

edge of the pit and set it down. After whispering her invitation to dine into the blackness below, she hurried upstairs and went to bed.

*

The next day, after successfully launching Princess Sybilla on her afternoon's exploits, Ovsanna returned to the refuse pit to observe it in the light. The daytime stench made her wonder if any person, no matter how desperate, would go searching for scraps in its depths. The meat and towel were both missing, but she reasoned that a bird or other animal might have made off with them during the night.

She walked slowly back to the kitchen, cursing herself for wasting choice meat and taking such a risk only to assuage her overactive conscience. Then as she began a silent vow never to behave so foolishly ever again, something caught her eye.

The towel was lying on the ground, folded neatly just underneath the entryway. She ran and picked it up. Unfolding the towel, she found nothing inside except for a bone that had been licked completely clean.

That night, well after dark, she repeated her experiment. A slice of barley bread and two figs was all that she could safely procure, and she left them once again at the edge of the pit wrapped in a towel.

The morning after, she found the towel back in the same spot. This time, however, a small shiny rock was inside.

For seven days, the game continued. Ovsanna accumulated several more small trinkets in return for her help. Finally, she could stand her new friend's anonymity no more. So on the seventh night, she brought a handful of cold shredded chicken, a wheat muffin and a few grapes all wrapped up in a towel.

After setting them at the edge of the pit, she sat down as well and waited. She was grateful for the warm breeze blowing at her back, keeping away the smell from the pit. For quite some time, nothing happened.

"I am not leaving," she said finally in her native tongue and then again in her adopted Latin. After the second utterance, she heard a soft scraping noise. She turned to her right and beheld a boy, about her age, limping toward her out of the shadows.

He was wearing only torn rags to cover his emaciated frame. His eyes were dark and sunken, and his face expressed great fear. He held his hands up and out to show that he was unarmed and as he neared, he bowed humbly before his mysterious keeper.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

With a thick and unfamiliar accent he replied, "My name is Kiran."

"Where is your home?"

Kiran flinched.

“Forgive me,” she said. “You are here and you need my help. That is all that matters right now. My name is Ovsanna. Will you let me help you?”

“You already have,” he tried to smile, “but why?”

She thought for a moment before answering, “I hope someone would help me if I was lost and tired and hungry.”

He nodded.

“I know a place,” she continued, “where you can wash yourself without being seen. Would you like that?”

He nodded again.

Ovsanna started walking back toward the palace, but soon noticed that her guest was not following. She returned to the edge of the pit, picked up the meal inside the towel and handed it to him.

“You may eat first if you like,” she smiled.

Kiran promptly descended to a sitting position on the dusty ground, unfolded the towel, and inhaled the food inside as if it were a mere vapor. He took a deep breath, refolded the towel, stood, and held it out to her with an ashamed look on his face.

“I will find something else while you are bathing,” she assured him.

Without another word she led him quietly into the deserted kitchen, and he obediently followed.

*

Kiran bathed in the hot springs deep underneath the mountain palace of Antioch. Royals, nobles and wealthy merchants normally would have populated the steaming hot pools and cold rinsing waterfalls. Yet in the darkest hours of the night, Kiran had the entire place to himself as he washed and relaxed by the light of a single candle.

Shortly after he finished and donned the clean robe Ovsanna had found for him, she returned with another towel full of food. She sat with him while he ate it, more slowly this time. As he finished the last bite, she happened to look down at his feet and gasped in horror. With the many layers of dust and grime removed, she could see the terrible blisters, scrapes and splinters adorning Kiran’s red and swollen feet.

“I shall return!” she declared and bolted from the chamber, leaving him with no choice but to sit and wait for her in the flickering candlelight.

He had lain down on the cool stone floor and was dozing when she came back with a sack full of supplies.

First she offered him a flask of wine to numb the coming pain; however, he steadfastly refused the drink.

“At least then take this,” she held up a small swatch of leather.

“What is that for?” he was dubious.

“To bite on,” she explained and demonstrated, “to bear the pain.”

“Pain does not concern me,” he proudly announced.

“Very well,” she acquiesced and began to work.

He appeared to be telling the truth about his ability to ignore pain. He did not speak again though until it was all over, seemingly retreating to some secret place within.

Ovsanna, on the other hand, talked the entire time. She told him about her life in the palace serving Princess Sybilla. She talked about the unfairness and oppression she suffered, and compared it all to the freedom and happiness she had known as a child.

Palace politics in Antioch being what they were, she was delighted at the chance to speak her true feelings about her situation to another – one she felt confident would not someday turn the information against her. This feeling was reinforced by her increasing perception as time went on that Kiran was only listening to her in the vaguest sense.

The candle was almost gone by the time she had finished with both of his feet. All of the splinters, sand and cinders were removed. She had cleaned each individual cut and scrape with the wine he refused to drink. Then she gently applied soothing olive oil to the soles, toes and elsewhere as needed. Finally, after wrapping his feet to the ankle in strips of clean, white linen; she declared him ready to walk again.

They left the underground springs and slowly climbed a number of staircases. She quickened their pace after they reached the surface and she realized that dawn was not far away. At last they reached a small wooden door at the end of a dark and remote hallway.

“What is this place?” Kiran asked as she pushed open the heavy door and led him inside.

“You will be safe here,” she answered. “The king stores all of his books and scrolls in this room, but no one ever visits.”

With the door propped open, they had enough light to move about. They worked together to clear off a padded bench in the back of the room that was just long and wide enough to hold Kiran. It was a little dusty, but still the most comfortable thing he had slept on in weeks.

“Stay here and stay quiet,” she warned. “I will come with water and food as soon as I can.”

He said her name and touched her arm as she turned to walk out.

She stopped and stared at him.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“I am just glad we finally met,” she smiled; and for the first time saw him do the same.

*

Ovsanna brought a water pitcher and a chamber pot by mid-morning, though she did not even speak with Kiran. She simply set the two containers inside the door and raced back to her duties, praying that her brief absence had gone unnoticed.

She returned after nightfall with an entire basket of food and more water. After he had eaten his fill, Kiran led her to a nearby table where he had unrolled several dusty scrolls.

“What are these?” she asked, carefully setting her lantern nearby.

“Maps,” he answered.

“They are beautiful,” she ran her fingers over the ornately detailed drawings of various terrains. “I have never seen anything like them.”

“Now I can show you where I came from,” he pointed to a spot on the map just south of the Caspian Sea.

“I grew up in the mountains, too,” she stared intently at the map for awhile before placing her finger down where the words *Armenian Kingdom* were inscribed over another mountain range.

“Why did you come to Antioch?” he wondered aloud.

She sighed, “After my father died, my mother and I became very poor. She could not even pay our taxes and appealed to the king for mercy. He forgave her debts and even promised to support her, in exchange for my loyal service to his daughter.”

“So you serve out of love?” he looked at her.

She nodded.

“You are noble and kind to endure such sorrow out of love for another,” he declared.

She shook her head and smiled, “My life here is not so bad. I am given food and clothing and a place to lay my head. I am content.”

“I suppose you are right,” he nodded.

“What about you?” she looked down at where his finger had been. “What brought you here all the way from the...Albruz Mountains?”

“My life has been a strange one,” Kiran began after taking a deep breath. “I never knew my parents, though it is said they were good people. They perished in a plague when I was an infant, yet somehow I survived and was raised in the care of a...religious order.”

“You were raised by the Church?” she was fascinated.

“Not precisely,” he stared at her, “I was not brought up in this...Christian Way.”

She raised her eyebrow.

“I am a Shia Muslim,” he explained, “and I was raised by and for the Order of the Hashishin...”

She gasped and took a step back, but as she continued to stare at him, a smile emerged upon her lips. “You are truly an Assassin?” she marveled.

“Well...” he hesitated, “my training was not fully complete, but yes. Is this so hard to believe?”

“I...” she furrowed her brow. “I do not know what to believe. I thought the legends of the Assassins were just that...stories told to scare children into behaving, or rumors spread to keep crusading knights on their guard. But you certainly are not the fierce and merciless beast that I would have expected.”

“That is what the stories say?” he grinned.

“They say that,” she frowned, “and things far worse.”

He laughed before asking, “Would you have helped me if you had known what I really was?”

“Probably not,” she answered honestly, “unless I also had known *who* you really were.”

“Thank you,” he bowed slightly. “In the same way, you defy all the stories I have ever heard about Armenians.”

“Like what?” she turned red.

He winced, “I probably should not say...”

“Perhaps not,” she agreed.

“In any case,” he cleared his throat, “the only family...the only world I had ever known, was completely destroyed only a few months ago.”

“What happened?” she asked and then watched as he returned his finger to the map, pointing first to his home mountains, and then tracing a line into the northeastern wastelands.

“They came out of the steppe,” he answered, “conquering any who would not submit. The Turkmen, the Uzbeks, and the Khazars – all of them fell like grain on the threshing floor. Great cities toppled, one after another. The Horde swept over Samarkand; her mighty walls availing nothing. At Bukhara one hundred thousand men perished in a vain defense. The destruction of Herat was so thorough that no scavenger birds came. There was nothing left...”

“The kings of Persia did not even fight. They surrendered to the Mongols without a drop of blood spilled. They had heard of these events and did not wish to suffer the same fate. So they have become slaves; vassals to the will of Hulegu Khan.”

“This...*Hulegu...Kahn*,” Ovsanna struggled with the strange sounding name, “he rules this Mongol Horde?”

“Yes,” Kiran replied, “just as did his grandfather, the infamous Genghis Khan. And just like his grandfather, he is bent on conquering the entire world. Genghis came close many years ago. Though, whereas Hulegu’s eyes are fixed upon the wealth and splendor of the Islamic world, grandfather Genghis wished to snuff out the pride and arrogance of Christendom.

“His armies overran many of the Christian lands in the west, yet they fell into disorder and brutal power struggles the moment he died. You see, a horde as vast and as fierce as the Mongols cannot stand without a single, unquestioned and all-powerful ruler.

“And so my people, the Assassins as you say, believed that perhaps our special talents might succeed where grand armies had failed time and again. We did not have thousands of horses, or swarms of archers, or great siege weapons. But if we could kill Hulegu...”

“You would cut off the head of the beast...” Ovsanna whispered her understanding of the Assassins’ gambit.

“Precisely,” Kiran answered, “and we could have spared the entire Islamic world from destruction.”

“But something went wrong?” Ovsanna guessed rightly.

“You could say that,” Kiran lamented. “The three greatest of the Hashishin were sent to find and enter the tent of the Khan. They were each masters of movement and cunning – the best of the best. They reached the Khan’s tent, entered it unseen, and their poisoned darts found their marks.”

“Then why...” Ovsanna began, confused.

“The man in the Khan’s bed was not the Khan,” Kiran explained.

“Who was he?”

“His brother,” Kiran continued. “Hulegu had heard whispers that the Hashishin were coming, and this had been among his many precautions. The rage of the Khan knew no bounds. He mustered vast armies from the ends of his empire, and they descended upon our stronghold at Alamut without mercy.”

She watched the shadows dancing upon Kiran’s face as he remembered. For a moment, she thought he looked like an old man.

“Fire...” he thought aloud. “Fire was everywhere, and ashes, and death. Blood was flowing in streams as the walls crumbled around me. I was trapped, and they were coming. Their giant swords dripping with blood, they came...”

“How did you escape?” she asked and held her breath.

“An angel appeared,” he watched for her reaction.

“An angel...?” she was amazed.

“That is what I believed at first,” he smiled, “until he convinced me he was just a man.”

“Who was the man?”

“His name was Michael Tuck,” Kiran said the name with a tone of profound respect. “He loosed my trapped leg and led me out of the fortress by a secret way even I did not know existed. As we fled into the mountains, I looked back. Alamut was no more, reduced to dust and ashes upon the mountainside.”

“I am sorry,” she whispered.

He was silent for awhile before continuing, “For weeks we journeyed through the mountain passes, heading slowly toward the south and west. Brother Michael told me countless tales about his life, his adventures, his sorrows, and his triumphs. He was an amazing man...”

“We reached the Ayyubid Kingdom and the great city of Baghdad just three days ahead of the Mongol Horde. I begged Michael to come with me, but his heart was set upon staying. He wished to fight for the defense of the city,

though he knew as well as I did, better probably, that there was no hope. He felt a need to atone for deeds he had done long ago. I could not sway him."

"What became of Baghdad?" Ovsanna was almost too afraid to ask.

"It is gone," he answered.

"I do not understand," she was trembling.

"By the time I reached the city of Aleppo," he explained, "many merchants and emissaries were already there, telling the awful tale. The Ayyubid field armies only lasted two days. The city walls held for two more. Yet after they had gained the city, the Mongols spent eight full days killing and looting and raping and burning."

Ovsanna had grown pale.

"Some claimed the dead numbered eight-hundred thousand. Others placed the toll much higher," Kiran shook his head. "I know Brother Michael was among them. I can feel it..."

"Can nothing stop these Mongols?" she wondered.

"That is not my concern now," Kiran declared.

"How can you say that?" she was almost in tears.

"I have an oath to fulfill," he told her, "and I intend to keep my word."

"Can you tell me your oath?" she was more than curious.

"The land Brother Michael was raised in," Kiran unrolled the map scroll a little further, "is far away to the north and west, at the very edge of the great western sea." He traced his finger across Europe. "I promised him that I would travel there, to the land called Britannia. There dwell some old and dear friends of his, and I must deliver a message to them. He saved my life, and only death shall stop me from fulfilling my debt to him."

"Then you must go," Ovsanna was surprised by how sad she was at this prospect, nevertheless she added, "and I will help you."

"I cannot ask for any more than you have already done for me," Kiran shook his head. "Out there in the world, you and I are enemies, Ovsanna. You are risking your life by helping me."

"All the more reason that I should send you on your way," she argued. "Just give me a few more days."

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I am going to find you a ship."

*

A week later, all of the arrangements finally had been made.

"You have never been in any kind of boat at all?" Ovsanna was somewhat worried.

"I have seen boats sailing across the Caspian Sea," Kiran offered.

"Well," Ovsanna thought back, "the captain's only firm demand was that you be strong and fit to work."

“And that I am,” Kiran smiled. “For this I owe you a great debt.”

“Then you shall owe me a bit more still,” she reached for the large canvas bag she had brought.

“Ovsanna...”

“Shh...” she quieted his protests. “You may need this where you are going.” She unrolled a large woolen cloak with a hood that fit him perfectly and could double as a bedroll.

“Thank you,” he said.

“And these...” she produced a pair of simple yet sturdy leather sandals. Motioning for him to sit down, she knelt before him and used a small sharp knife to remove the bandages from his feet. They were still a little red, but the swelling was gone and the blisters had healed over.

Kiran slid his feet carefully into the straps and stood. He took a few steps across the room and then returned.

“They are perfect. I do not know what to say...”

“One last thing...” she placed a small cloth bundle in his hand.

He opened the drawstring and counted five shiny silver coins.

“No,” he tried to hand it back. “This I cannot accept.”

“You need to,” she insisted. “The captain will provide you with only the most basic rations. But if you are working hard, you may need more to sustain yourself. You must reach your destination and fulfill your promise, and you are likely to need every bit of strength to do so.”

“Why does this matter so much to you?” he wondered.

She thought for a moment, “God placed you in my care. And when I stand before Him one day, I must be able to say that I did all I could to help.”

He shook his head, and tears formed in his eyes as he marveled at the purity and hopefulness of his unlikely friend.

“I owe you a great debt, Ovsanna of Antioch,” he bowed to her. “Until I can repay you, and as long as I am alive, you can at least know that somewhere in this world is an Assassin who is on your side.”

“What more could a girl ask for?” she smiled.

*

They crept through the dimly lit corridors of the castle, moving as fast as they could. The ship was to sail at dawn, and there was not much time to spare.

As they reached a lower level, two gendarmes nearing the end of their night watch shuffled past. Ovsanna and Kiran dove into a shadowy alcove and huddled motionless. They did not breathe again until the guards were completely out of sight.

“I must confess something,” Ovsanna whispered after gasping for air.

Kiran looked at her curiously.

“I think I am enjoying this.” Her eyes were sparkling in the faint flickering torchlight.

“Perhaps you should consider becoming an Assassin,” he winked.

“Do you think they would let me in?” she feigned excitement.

“Probably not,” he tried to frown.

“Let’s get you to your ship,” she sighed and shook her head.

They ran in silence for a while until reaching the wall that surrounded the palace grounds. Kiran began to climb.

“Do you remember the way to reach the waterfront?” she asked.

“I shall not forget anything you have told me,” he turned and looked down at her. “And I shall never forget you.”

“Nor I you,” she fought back tears.

They heard the rapid clicking of footsteps.

Ovsanna spun around.

Princess Sybilla stood there, a scowl fixed upon her face.

“There you are!” she shrieked. “Where have you been? What are you doing out here?”

“I...” Ovsanna swallowed. “I could not sleep, your highness...I was just out having a stroll.”

“Having a stroll?” Sybilla was shaking with rage. “I heard voices! Who were you talking to?”

“No one,” Ovsanna glanced through a nearby arrow slit and saw Kiran, already two levels below, disappear into the fog. “No one at all...”

Verse Two – Baybars

The Sultan of Egypt was having a bath. He luxuriated in the warm scented water while his wife, the Sultana Shajar al-Durr, operated the sponge. Nearly any man alive would have found this an exhilarating experience worthy of his undivided attention. Yet, the Sultan hardly noticed the exquisite and intimate details of his wife's tender care.

He could not stop thinking about General Baybars. While the Sultan had ruled Egypt for only seven years, Baybars had headed the Egyptian army for twice that long. The leading officers, the rank-and-file soldiers, and even the teeming masses of peasants in the surrounding countryside all loved and trusted General Baybars.

The Sultan knew that without Baybars and the army, his rule would not last a day. Only fear and active military suppression kept a Turkish Sultan on the throne in Cairo. He needed the General, but at the same time was insanely jealous of his popularity and charm.

And worst of all – there were Baybars' Mamelukes. Numbering over one-hundred thousand, the Mamelukes were the elite fighting force of Egypt and they were loyal to Baybars alone. Not Egyptians themselves, the Mamelukes were men that had been kidnapped years earlier as boys and trained in the military arts. They had come from slave markets the world over, but the vast majority of the Mamelukes had started life in Slavic communities on the wide Steppe of the Kievan Rus far to the north of Egypt.

Barbarian tribes had conquered these peaceful people of the Steppe. Most of the native population was killed off, with the exception of the young boys. These youngsters were sold to Egypt as slaves, but not to toil or to serve in fields or in households. The single-minded purpose of the Mameluke slaves was to fight and kill, and they fulfilled their purpose with unnerving efficiency.

For slaves and foreigners, the Mamelukes wielded substantial political power in Egypt. Their military strength was only a part of this equation. The Mamelukes were unique in offering a merit-based system of advancement. Smarter, stronger and savvier slaves could rise quickly through the ranks. As they did, they could even accumulate great wealth and responsibility, though in Egyptian society they officially had no status.

The Sultana removed her robes, exposing the alluring curves of her womanhood. She slid into the bathwater to continue her cleaning and grooming efforts. The Sultan stared at the designs on the ceiling, seemingly unaffected.

He was worried. His agents had caught and killed many times the usual number of spies and infiltrators during the past month. Before dying, the spies had revealed bits of information that, taken together, were weaving an ominous tapestry of threats.

Egypt's enemies seemed to be circling like hungry desert wolves. The scouts' reports were endless: unrest in Ethiopia, more attacks by Bedouin

raiders, sightings of Berber pirates, broken promises by the sheiks of Arabia. Then there were the ever-present problems of the Abbasids, the Byzantines, and of course the filthy and vile Crusaders.

The Sultana filled her sponge with bathwater and then squeezed it out over his shoulders and on the back of his neck. She rubbed and caressed the tense muscles there, trying to sooth her husband. He was oblivious.

Perhaps the weightiest matters on his heart were the rumors of war coming out of the east; out of Persia. Emissaries and merchants told frightening tales of the Mongol Horde. This great fighting force had swept forth from the eastern wastelands and, according to the stories, could not be stopped.

Yes, I need Baybars, the Sultan thought. *If these Mongols come south and try to cross the Nile, I will need him more than ever – and his Mamelukes!*

The Sultana reached down into the water, in between the Sultan's legs, in one last attempt to gain his attention. She quickly discovered just how small of an effect she was having on him.

He merely grunted and shoved her to the other side of the bathing pool.

"You cannot even look at me," she began to scold her husband, "and yet you have enjoyed the new serving girl! You seem to find time for her!"

The Sultan flicked his hand dismissively. "She is young. You are old," he told his loyal wife of thirty years in a tone one would use with an imbecile.

She shook with rage, sending small ripples across the water, but she shed no tears. She had none left.

The Sultan ignored her and reclined back so only his head, neck and shoulders remained above the water line. He closed his eyes and sighed heavily.

The Sultana had tried for decades to restore the passion of their youth. She had withstood the pain of childbearing and the loss of sons in the Sultan's many wars. She had absorbed his anger and abuse over many years, and allowed him to treat her shamefully of many occasions. Yet to be discarded like garbage when she no longer charmed – this she could not bear.

She saw the small fruit knife lying on a cutting board. It was easily within reach. She hesitated, but only for a moment. Soon, the knife was in her hand. She held it under the water and felt the blade. It was sharp.

Suddenly the Sultan opened his eyes and asked, "What are you waiting for? Finish washing me!" He shut his eyes and sighed once again.

"Right away, my Excellency," she slid toward him through the water and plunged the knife into the side of his neck.

He screamed, but only a low gurgle came out as his windpipe filled with blood. He grabbed wildly at the Sultana, but she was already out of the water. She looked down into his terrified eyes and spat into them.

The Sultan finally closed his hands around the knife blade and he managed to pull it free. This only accelerated the bleeding, however, and a fountain of blood spewed from the wound. The Sultan dropped the knife at the

edge of the pool and soon sank into the bathwater. The water quickly turned red, causing the floating rose petals to become invisible.

A shriek of horror rang out from across the chamber. The Sultana whirled around and saw her nine year-old stepson, whom the Sultan had fathered through another wife.

The boy saw the red bathwater, the blood on her hands, and the bloody knife at her feet. He made his judgment and grabbed a ceremonial spear from the wall. Screaming, he charged straight at her.

She easily dodged the spear, but slipped on the wet soapy water at the side of the pool. Her head cracked against the pool's edge on the way down, and she fell into the water with her husband.

The boy stood there, spear in hand, staring at the red water. The bubbles coming from below the surface slowed in frequency and then stopped altogether.

He did not realize or care that he had just become the ruler of one of the most ancient and powerful empires in the world.

*

General Baybars marched across the main sanctuary of Cairo's Grand Mosque. At the entrance to the high minaret tower, he met with his three most trusted agents and bodyguards.

"Report!" he barked at them as he turned and began charging up the tower steps, expecting them to follow.

"The boy has been safely delivered to Luxor, my lord" Isam declared. "The clerics there shall treat him well, but will not allow him the option of leaving until he comes of age."

"What happens then?" Baybars paused on the steps.

"He shall then become a full member of their order," Isam answered, "and full members are forbidden from ever leaving the grounds of the Rabat. And the penalty for leaving is death."

Baybars nodded and continued his upward climb. Isam noticed the hint of a grin on the General's face before he turned around.

"Early reports from your emissaries are encouraging," Zaid offered his news. "Twenty thousand Nubian spearmen are already on the move. Add to these ten thousand archers promised from Cyrenaica, five thousand swordsmen recruited from the Red Sea ports, and one thousand heavily armored camel riders coming from the Alexandria garrison."

"That is a good beginning," Baybars grunted. "Send forth more emissaries...and more gold."

"Of course, my lord," Zaid bowed without breaking stride on the steps.

His brother Rashid quickened his pace, drawing close to Baybars for the final portion of their report.

“We have confirmed that Baghdad is laid waste,” Rashid said solemnly. “Estimates of the Mongol Horde’s size range from two-hundred thousand to three-hundred thousand mounted troops. This does not include auxiliaries. We have also confirmed that they are in league with the Armenians.”

Baybars snorted at the mention of those he referred to as mountain rats.

“How many men can King Hethoum field these days?” Baybars asked.

“Forty thousand at best,” Rashid answered. “His army was decimated by the Khwarizm Turks. In fact, after finishing Baghdad, the Mongols turned north to aid the Armenians in their struggle. It seems Hethoum has found ways to keep up his tribute payments, and so the Mongols are obligated to act against Khwarizm. This delay likely gives us at least another year.”

Baybars continued climbing steps for awhile without saying anything. Suddenly he paused, turned, and looked Rashid in the eyes, asking, “What about the Crusader Kingdoms? How are they taking advantage of this situation?”

“They seem to be lying low at the moment, my lord,” Rashid told what he knew. “Acre and Antioch are quiet. The Venetian ships are no more numerous than at any other time, and the Templars hardly have been seen at all this past year.”

“That last part worries me,” Baybars mumbled into his beard.

“Excellency!” a beady little cleric scurried down the steps toward them. “All is ready. Oh, what a glorious day this is. Praises to Allah – God is great!”

The cleric led them up several more long flights of spiral stairs. The higher they went, the louder became the wailing voice of the Imam in their ears. He was stirring up the passions of the multitudes below.

When they finally reached the landing at the top of the minaret, even the voice of the Imam seemed quiet compared with the thunderous roaring from the assembled masses. The Imam turned and bowed humbly when he saw Baybars.

Turning back again to the crowd, the Imam held a tin horn in front of his mouth to amplify his voice as he bellowed, “Egypt – behold your ruler and king! BEHOLD SULTAN BAYBARS!”

The earth shook with the stomping and clapping and shouting.

The General, now Sultan, looked down upon his people. Nearly one million revelers surrounded the Grand Mosque. The one-hundred thousand Mamelukes stood front and center, easily distinguishable both by their fair hair and the fervency of their celebration.

Isam, Zaid, and Rashid stood behind Baybars as he basked in the adoration of the mob. They looked at each other with a mix of fear and hope in their expressions. Against the din of the crowd, they did not even try to speak. Yet, their eyes spoke to one another their understanding that this unexpected turn of events held equal chances of leading to their freedom or to their deaths.

*

The calling to mid-day prayers droned across Cairo under the sleepy warmth of the sun. Isam, Zaid and Rashid unrolled their prayer mats and prostrated themselves into the appropriate position as they had been trained. Facing east, they rocked quietly and recited pre-determined words.

This habit, like their other daily customs and even their names, had been imposed upon them from the outside. Yet the prayers of their hearts could be dictated by no man. And so even during nearly two decades of enslavement, occasional torture, and frequent danger of being discovered; these three Englishmen in a foreign land held fast the faith of their fathers.

Only a few of the other Mamelukes and some local Coptic Christians knew their secret. The three men never would have climbed up through the Mameluke ranks to serve as Baybars' personal guards if their faith in Christ Jesus had been made public.

As they had to carry on their faith in the absence of a community of fellow believers or even written scriptures, they became liturgists and priests for one another. To uphold their basic beliefs and focus their minds on these Truths, they created and memorized rhymes that could then be recited in secret.

Since they lacked the bardic tendencies of their parents, their poetry was somewhat rudimentary; but it worked.

*Christ who came
Christ who taught
The stone the builders
Set at naught*

*Christ who died
Christ who lives
Christ who loves
Christ forgives*

Edric Allendale, as he was once called, finished his whispered prayer and nodded to his brother to take a turn.

*Fishers' nets
Upon the sands
Nails in feet
Nails in hands*

*King of Glory
Left to die
He rose again
Unto the sky*

Alfred looked at the man who was once known as Randol of Locksley and nodded for him to contribute another rhyming prayer. Randol paused, listening to the ululations of the Imams and clerics for a moment. He shook his head to refocus and then began speaking.

*Humble infant
Righteous king
Shepherds watch
Angels sing*

*Healed the lepers
Fed the poor
Holds the key
To heaven's door*

Suddenly, they heard footsteps out in the hallway. They instantly resumed rocking and chanting vague praises of God in Arabic. The footsteps had paused, and they heard nothing else until a knock came upon the door.

Randol arose and went to answer. First, he peered out through a tiny peep hole they had drilled in the door.

"Tis only Masood," Randol half-whispered, half-mouthed to his cousins.

The twins looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

"Ah, Isam, there you are!" Masood began shoving his way in as soon as the door was ajar. One of Baybars' many messengers, Hakim Masood felt entitled by his position to snoop, spy, lurk and linger to no end.

"Greetings, Masood," Randol stepped aside and waved him in. "To what do we owe the honor of your visit?"

Recognizing the sarcasm in Randol's voice, Masood shot him a perturbed glance before bowing, with his own air of sarcasm, to the twin brothers of Allendale.

"Zaid...Rashid..." Masood believed that twins carried special powers and was accordingly polite, but also wary of them. "I bring orders from the Sultan. The three of you have been granted a mission of the utmost urgency and certain danger."

"What more could we ask for?" Edric asked rhetorically.

"You are to hand-select and lead a company of five hundred Mamelukes to Al-Kubra," Masood ignored him. "There has been unrest in that city, and our sources indicate an extreme likelihood of an uprising there before year's end. The Sultan wishes to act before the rebels have a chance to organize."

"Who is leading them?" Alfred wondered aloud.

"That matters not," Masood snorted. "The entire southwestern quarter of the city is complicit. They have created a haven for thieves and they have

shamefully treated our tax collectors that were merely attempting to carry out their duties.”

“Are we to simply ride through then and make a show of force?” Randol questioned the messenger.

“You are to crush any resistance,” Masood clarified the mission, “and burn the southwest quarter to the ground.”

“Surely not every soul in that quarter is a rebel,” Edric complained.

“They are complicit,” Masood reiterated, “and only a mighty show of force will suppress the ambitions of other like-minded rebels.”

“Yet surely the women and children...” Alfred kept up the fight.

“They will burn like all the rest!” Masood shouted. “These are the Sultan’s orders. Shall I tell him you do not accept?”

“Tell him he has nothing to worry about,” Randol smoothed things over. “And we shall carry out his will as always.”

“Very well...” Masood shot his suspicious glance around the room at each of them. “God is great!” he muttered and turned to leave the room.

“God is great,” the trio called after him in unison.

*

Late that night, as a sliver of moon dipped low in the smoky sky, Randol made his way alone through a dark and deserted alley. Wrapped in black, he crept like a shadow until he came to the backdoor of a small Coptic church.

Reaching into a pocket, he retrieved the small bronze key that the monks had entrusted to him. After quietly turning the bolt, he pushed open the heavy wooden door and quietly slipped inside.

“Hello, Isam,” a voice floated on the darkness.

“Father Zareb?” Randol strained his eyes.

The monk answered by lighting a small oil lamp, “Tis good to see you again my son – you whom the Lord favors like Joseph of ancient times.”

“What do you mean?” Randol wondered.

“Brought to Egypt as a slave, you have risen to the right hand of the Pharaoh himself!” the monk’s eyes grew wide.

“I had never thought of it that way...” Randol paused. “Alas, there is no time for musings, father! I have come to bring a warning. In two days, the Mamelukes will ride out. When we reach the southwest quarter of Al-Kubra it shall be laid waste – with no mercy!”

The flickering shadows emphasized the horror on the old monk’s face as he gasped, “The Coptic ghetto lies in the very heart of the southwest quarter! What is to be done?”

“Send messengers right away and with all haste,” Randol explained.

“Tell them to flee immediately, but not to draw any attention to themselves.

They must go west to Damanhur. There are safe-houses there; arrangements have already been made.”

“Damanhur...” Father Zareb repeated, nodding slowly.

“And may God have mercy on us all,” Randol was already heading back out the door.

“Isam,” Father Zareb stepped to the door and put his hand on Randol’s shoulder, “thank you, my son.”

Randol looked into the monk’s eyes, nodded slightly, and then slipped away into the shadows without another word.

Father Zareb stepped out into the alley, took a deep breath and looked up at the crescent moon.

“And as Pharaoh’s right hand,” he whispered to the sky, “Joseph was able to save his brothers...”

Grinning slightly, the old monk retreated back inside, bolting the door behind him.

*

The Mamelukes rode out before dawn. Bouncing and lurching on the backs of their camels, they moved slowly to the north. In their hands they carried long lancing spears and small round iron plated shields. Strapped to their hips were wide curved swords that could be thrown to break a defensive line or used to deadly effect in close combat.

Just before sunset, the village of Al-Kubra came within sight. The Mameluke horde began to circle around toward the southwestern edge of town. The rebels knew they were coming. They had stacked debris and refuse in the roadways and, in some places, set the piles ablaze.

Only one entrance to the southwest quarter was left open, and over two-hundred heavily-armed rebel fighters were tightly assembled there. Many rows deep, the men were wielding spears, axes, clubs and a variety of sharpened farming implements.

The Mamelukes paused a good distance away. Randol and the twins conferred briefly, after which the twins took twenty of the men and rode back the way they had come.

Randol waited a while, allowing darkness to fall over the town. Then he began sending several small groups of the Mamelukes – fifty or so riders in each – to make false charges toward the rebels’ defensive line. The groups swarmed in and out among each other, but always pulled away at the last moment without actually engaging the enemy.

After performing this complicated dance for some time, Randol signaled for all of the Mameluke groups to fall back into a single formation. The rebels cheered and shouted derision, thinking their ingenious defenses had caused the Sultan’s troops to waver and retreat.

Randol waited a bit more, ignoring the taunts and curses emanating from the darkened village streets. Finally, after the rebels became tired of shouting, an eerie silence fell over the area. Then Randol gave a new signal, and the entire horde began to march forward.

The camels clomped slowly in the dry dirt. As they moved, they reorganized from a tight rectangular battle formation into a line-busting shock pattern, shaped like an arrowhead. Randol led at the very tip. Silently and slowly they crept ahead.

Then suddenly, the rebels grew loud again – but not with shouts of mockery. Instead, howls of pain and terror cut clearly through the night air.

While Randol and the main Mameluke horde were distracting the rebels with feigned charges and retreats, the twins and their small task force had snuck into the town, taken up positions on the roof of an empty building, and begun peppering the rebels with arrows from the rear.

The rebel line of spears and shields wavered and broke as those in the back fell down dead, and the rest tried to determine where the arrows were coming from and defend themselves.

In a flash, Randol brought the main horde up to full charging speed and they cut into the ranks of fleeing rebels like an ocean wave crashing down and washing away a castle made of sand. The organized resistance of the Al-Kubra rebels was over, and the Mamelukes fanned out through the streets and alleys running down anyone foolish enough to get in their way.

Edric, Alfred, and their men made their way back to ground level in order to assist in the mopping up of resistance – and to avoid being caught deep within the town when the burning started. On their way back out of the deserted building, a shadow moving in an otherwise empty room caught Alfred's eye.

He motioned for Edric to follow him, and the brothers cautiously approached the room to investigate. Inside was a small boy who looked almost as terrified as the cat he held in his arms.

"What are you doing?" Edric asked the boy.

"I came back for my cat," he answered.

"You came back?" Alfred asked, after signaling to the other Mamelukes to go on without them. "Are you one of the Coptics that were warned to leave?"

The boy did not respond. He seemed paralyzed with fear.

The twins looked at each other.

"We fight for the Sultan," Edric explained quickly, "but we are Christians too, though a different kind."

"You can tell the truth," Alfred assured him, "and no harm shall come to you from either of us."

The boy looked back and forth at them, and finally answered, "We left in such a hurry. And my parents would not let me take my cat, but then I heard someone say they were going to burn the town, and I could not bear the thought of...so I snuck away and came back for him."

“You are a brave young man,” Edric nodded approvingly at the boy.

“We shall return you to your people,” Alfred promised. “Follow us, stay close, and whatever you do – hold on to your cat!”

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When Randol heard the twins’ explanation for where they had been the last two days, he was livid. “I was sure the two of you had been killed somehow and burned to ashes with the rest of Al-Kubra,” he paced back and forth across the main room of their quarters, “and now you are telling me that you put me through all of this worry over a bloody cat!”

“Perhaps we became a bit sidetracked,” Alfred feigned humility.

“Although we did manage to soften up the rebel defenses for you quite a bit beforehand,” Edric argued. “And mind you, it is not terribly easy sneaking into a heavily guarded rebel town without drawing any attention!”

Randol hissed and grunted and paced around for a few more minutes. Finally, when his anger had subsided sufficiently, he stopped and stared at them.

“What?” Edric asked when he could stand the Locksley glare no longer.

“Bah,” Randol finally cracked a smile and waved his arms dismissively at them, “I likely would have done the same had I faced a similar situation.”

The twins sighed in unison.

“And yes, you did well breaking up the rebel mob for me,” Randol confessed. “As a matter of fact, we only lost seven men and fifteen camels for the entire night’s work.”

“And is Baybars pleased?” Alfred asked the pivotal question.

“Very,” Randol nodded. “And despite your antics, he has no idea about the escape of the Coptics.”

“Why should it have mattered anyway?” Edric wondered. “They had no part with the rebels.”

“You know the Sultan does not see things that way,” Randol sat down and stretched out his legs. “He is not interested in sifting out the hearts of men, punishing only the troublemakers and saving the loyal. If a city has gone bad, in his eyes, he would rather just wipe it out and start anew.”

“He is in no danger of running out of Egyptians,” Alfred shrugged and sat down as well.

“Too true,” Randol reclined slightly, “and beside, there are greater concerns looming on the horizon than a few armed bands of local malcontents.”

“Has there been fresh word on the Mongol threat?” Edric slid down and joined them on the floor.

“Rumor has it,” Randol filled them in, “that they may already be skirmishing with the Khwarizm.”

“Two enemies fighting each other,” Alfred shrugged again, “tis hard to imagine a better strategic gambit.”

“Let us hope it lasts,” Edric agreed.

The three men were quiet for a few moments, as each played host to a variety of wandering thoughts.

“From Damanhur you two easily could have reached the coast,” Randol mused, “and in just days you could have been in Cyprus.”

“You know our agreement,” Edric frowned at him.

“Go home together,” Alfred repeated their mantra, “or go home never.”

“I know,” Randol looked down.

They were silent a little more.

“I miss it too,” Edric whispered at last, “the greenness and the soft rain, pine and oak trees – anything other than these blasted palms would be nice – and snow...I really would like to see snow again someday...”

“I would like to see mother,” Alfred added, “and father. And I suppose even Angela...”

The other two laughed.

“Yes,” Edric nodded, “even Angela...that would be nice, perhaps for a brief visit...”

They all laughed again.

“And we will,” Randol said after awhile. “Our time will come.”

“We have been saying that for eighteen years,” Alfred reminded his hopeful cousin.

“This is true,” Randol grinned, “but some things have changed.”

The brothers looked at him.

“For many of those years we were in chains...or worse...” Randol reminisced. “But now we ride with the head of the mightiest army in the world. Oh yes, my friends, our time is coming.”

“Do you really think we are the mightiest in the world?” Edric asked.

Randol did not answer.

“I suppose we had better be,” Alfred said at last, “for the Mongols are most definitely back. And if we cannot stop them, then who will?”

Verse Three – The Rightful Heir

Francesco Velia ruled the port town of Solenzara on the eastern shore of Corsica with an iron fist. He seized a hefty portion of any passing trade goods through arbitrary taxes and fees. All of the locals paid him burdensome tribute for protection, though there was no one to protect them from him.

Over the years, a few brave men had made a stand against this local tyrant, yet the brutal deaths of these men only served to solidify Velia's grip on the town. Surrounded by an ever-present entourage of thugs, he left the honest residents of Solenzara with little choice but to submit and get by with less.

Then one warm spring day, a ship arrived. It was a small Genoese vessel manned by a mere dozen sailors. While the crew was still tying the ship to the pier, the captain leapt overboard landing in dry sand. Without breaking stride, he marched up the beach and into the town.

The captain was dressed humbly, wearing only a simple tunic tied at the waist with a thin rope. His long black hair was pulled back tightly into a ponytail. On his feet were soft leather sandals, and a small iron dagger rested against his hip. His dark brown eyes took in everything.

The townspeople, eyes cast down, ignored the ship's captain. He stopped a few of them to ask for information, but they seemed reluctant to speak. Finally in a tavern, with the help of a silver coin, the captain received directions on where to go to negotiate trade.

The captain arrived at a fortified villa resting upon a hilltop and announced his presence. Five guards emerged bearing wooden clubs. They confiscated the captain's dagger and led him inside the compound. He was ushered into a mostly empty great hall with a smooth stone floor and vaulted ceiling, and compelled to sit on a small stool in the center of the room.

There he waited for some time, until three men entered and sat down behind a table that stood on an elevated dais. All three glared wordlessly down at the captain, until the one in the middle asked, "Who are you?" and "Why have you come here?"

"Greetings," the captain answered with a smile, "my name is Michael di Angelo, and I have come with a ship full of exquisite silks and spices which I seek to sell or trade."

The three men looked at each other. Those on either end grinned slightly, but the one in the middle remained stone faced.

"Silks and spices, eh?" the stone faced one pressed. "And just where did you acquire such rarities?"

"Such delights are not rarities at all, but quite readily available in the Crusader ports of Outremer," Michael answered. "But this is surely not unknown to a man of your stature and wisdom...Francesco Velia."

Velia stared shrewdly for a few moments in silence. "So you have heard of me?" he responded at last.

“Your reputation reaches up and down the Corsican coast,” Michael stared back.

“Then you must know,” Velia finally cracked a grin, “that I only negotiate on my terms.” His eyes darted to the section of the room behind Michael and his stool.

Michael turned his head slightly and saw that at least fifteen additional guards had joined the original five. He turned back toward Velia and continued staring at him.

“Are we beginning to understand each other?” Velia had stood and was smirking with satisfaction, as if threatening overwhelming force was somehow a new and noteworthy idea.

“I am afraid not,” Michael looked genuinely confused. “You have yet to list your available trade goods, or should you lack any of interest to me, whether you prefer to pay for your spices in gold or silver.”

Velia hesitated for a moment before howling forth raucous laughter. When he did not seem likely to stop soon, his men began joining in until the hall was filled with a nearly deafening rumble.

Finally, the cacophony subsided and Velia wiped a tear from the corner of his eye.

Without further instructions, the small horde of ruffians surrounded Michael and bound his wrists behind him with leather straps. They shoved him outside and along the path back toward the waterfront, occasionally slapping and punching at him merely for the fun of it.

“You are erring greatly, Velia!” Michael shouted as they neared the beach. “The Merchants Guild of Genoa shall hear of this!”

For that remark, the brutes tripped him so he landed flat on the ground and gave him a brief beating with their clubs. When they lifted Michael back to his feet, Velia was standing face to face with him.

“This is my town,” Velia whispered with foul breath into Michael’s face. “You show the Guild your bruises, and tell them they can have some of the same if they want to interfere with me. Can you remember this, or do you need a few more as reminders?”

“I think you have made your point,” Michael winced against the pain.

Velia nodded, his face set in a sick grin, and his rogues continued shoving Michael along toward the water.

When they reached the ship, Michael’s sailors were sitting on deck, securely tied up with their own ropes. More of Velia’s henchmen had just finished loading the last of the ship’s cargo onto the pier. Dozens of barrels and a few boxes were neatly piled in a small pyramid.

Francesco Velia cackled as his men tossed Michael back on board his ship, hands still bound. He landed hard on his side and moaned from the pain.

“Thank you for these gifts,” Velia taunted. “You may bring me more anytime you wish.”

With that Velia's men slashed the ropes that kept the ship secured to the pier. They shoved hard against the vessel, and the small ship began drifting slowly out to sea with the tide, helped along by a brisk west wind.

"Let us not send our friends away empty-handed," Velia bellowed, now delirious with his victory. "Let us give them something to keep warm on those cold nights at sea!"

His henchmen knew his sick mind well enough to need no more prompting. One of them removed an unlit torch from its mounting on the side of the pier, while another frantically struck flint and steel together to light it. As soon as the torch burst into flames, the first man ran to the end of the pier and hurled with all his might.

The torch struck the deck and its sparks singed some of Michael's men. A black streak was left where the torch skidded, and flames began to lick up the side rail where it came to rest.

Overcoming instinct, Michael rolled toward the fire. He held his wrists into the flames, bearing the agony until the leather bindings cracked and fell apart. Leaping to his feet, he ran across the deck and retrieved a hidden spear from underneath the rail.

Tearing a strip of cloth from his own tunic, he quickly wrapped it around the spearhead. He placed the bundle into the core of the fire, making sure to absorb some of the remaining oil from the torch.

Velia and his men did not notice Michael's actions, as they were busy gathering around their stolen merchandise and celebrating. They desperately wanted to look inside the barrels to see and touch their new spices and silks, but the lids were fastened quite firmly.

A few of the brutes finally succeeded in prying open a barrel using the dagger they had confiscated from Michael. One of them dipped in his hand and sniffed the exotic powder.

"My lord," the rogue called out to Velia, "this spice smells worse than rotten sheep dung!"

Velia wheeled around toward the still drifting ship. Even though he only had a moment to perceive Michael's flaming spear flying straight toward the pyramid of stacked barrels, he knew already that he was doomed.

The last words that Francesco Velia ever heard flew over the water just ahead of the spear, reaching his ears a moment before he was consumed in a massive ball of fire.

"The Merchants Guild of Genoa sends its regards!"

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A week of rest, with frequent bathing in the cold sea water, alleviated most of Michael di Angelo's discomfort from his bruises and burns. He and his men sailed north along the Corsican coast, fishing and foraging for supplies.

They kept a leisurely pace, knowing that when they reached Genoa, another dangerous mission would surely await their attention.

Michael had served the Guild for nearly three years, and in that brief span he had encountered many scoundrels like Francesco Velia. The sea lanes of the Mediterranean never ceased to produce unscrupulous predators that were more than willing to take advantage of the weak.

The Guild employed Michael, and a few others like him, to deal with the worst offenders. The aim of the Guild was not an altruistic pursuit of justice or a longing to champion the oppressed, but rather to eliminate individuals and organizations that stood in the way of free and profitable trade. Nevertheless, in most cases, they ended up contributing to the greater good.

Michael knew that there were deeper rivers of purpose flowing through life than the mercantile interests of Genoa. His parents had helped instill in him an abiding love for God and Christ, and Michael often wondered whether a higher and brighter destiny awaited him on this earth.

That warm spring day, however, his thoughts were firmly fixed on the mundane, yet difficult task of spearing a fish. He had been tracking a particular fish for quite some time as it swam parallel to the shore. The fish had led him far away from camp, but none of his sailors had even noticed. They were mostly napping, though a few were attempting to fish with nets further out in the surf.

Michael stalked on the tips of his toes, leaving almost no prints in the wet sand. He sped up slightly to keep pace with the fish and raised his spear behind his shoulder. Just as he was preparing to throw the spear, something appeared in the outer arc of his vision.

Another ship was resting on the sand at the far end of the beach. Like Michael's it was a small vessel, but the design was unfamiliar to him. He could see no crew at all and became nervous immediately. In confirmation of his wariness, a rustling sound came from the thick shrubs just past the high tide line.

Michael turned his back to the sea and faced the shrubs. He was armed only with his fishing spear, and armored in nothing more than a loin cloth.

"Who goes there?" he called to the shrubbery.

Only a faint echo from the inland cliffs answered.

Michael knelt and drew in the sand lazily with his finger, subtly scooping a small rock into his palm at the same time. Then in a sudden flash, he leapt to his feet and whizzed the rock into the shrubs. An unmistakable metallic ringing sound pinged and echoed.

The shrubbery shook and three armored men charged forth into the sand. To Michael, they looked much like his imaginings of Centurions from the old times. Their thick sandals were tied with crisscrossing leather straps almost to the knee. They wore studded leather breast pieces and flexible leather battle skirts. Their forearms were bound in bracers and each man wore a metal helmet with a Spartan-style nose protector that obscured a good look at his face.

The soldier in the middle sported the additional features of a white plume atop his helmet and a crimson cape clipped at his shoulder with a large bronze ornamental clasp. All three carried spears and small round shields, and each of them wore a stocky short sword upon his hip.

“Ah,” Michael leaned casually on his spear, “so I was not alone then after all.”

The three soldiers glared at him for a moment before the middle one stepped forward and asked, “Are you di Angelo?”

“Perhaps,” Michael demurred. “I am sorry. I must not have been paying attention when you told me your name.”

The leader removed his helmet. His dark curly hair was wet with sweat and was not much longer than his beard. His facial features expressed an attitude of severity and suspicion, though there was a sparkle of merriment in his dark eyes. His long straight nose came to a narrow ending that made him look somewhat bird-like.

“You see before you General Alexios Strategopolous of the free Byzantine Empire,” the man introduced himself. “Now tell me, are you Michael di Angelo or not?”

“Indeed, I am,” he answered, “though I can only wonder at what business or authority the Eastern Romans feel they have this far from Asia.”

“What authority?” Strategopolous smirked. “That, I suppose, is a question for you.”

“You speak a riddle?” Michael frowned.

“Not at all,” the General began pacing back and forth in the hot dry sand. “I speak of birthright. I speak of destiny. I speak of justice. Surely among these there is no place for games and riddles.”

“What is it you want from me?” Michael watched the General move back and forth in front of him and had the dizzying sensation that he was in a dream.

“You desire plain speaking, then so be it,” Strategopolous stopped pacing and stared into Michael’s eyes. “A prophecy has existed for nearly one thousand years. It states that the Great City of the Empire shall fall into the hands of false brethren. This happened in the Year of the Lord 1204 when wayward Crusaders stormed Constantinople, deposed the rightful Emperor, and installed a puppet regent loyal to Rome.

“The prophecy also states that when the remnant of the loyal Eastern Empire shall fall under the rule of a child, then shall the time come for the return of the true line of Emperors. From the royal house of the Angelos shall rise up the man of the ancient words – and he shall be called *Paleologus*. That time has now arrived.”

“Why exactly are you telling me these things?” Michael narrowed his eyes at the General.

“So you really do not know?” Strategopolous grinned slightly. “I know your father is Constantine of the Angelos. And I know that your mother is of high British nobility, which only strengthens the legitimacy of your claim...”

“You know nothing,” Michael turned his back on them and waded out a few steps into the foamy waves, “and I make no claims.”

For a few moments, the lapping of the tide was the only sound.

“Perhaps we were wrong,” the General shouted sarcastically. “Perhaps he is not the man we seek for after all. Surely a mere soldier-of-fortune for the Genoese would have no interest in restoring the light of Christendom at the Imperial seat of Our Lord’s earthly dominion. Come along men; let us leave behind the only hope for the west and the true champion of the east. Let us leave him to his...fishing...” With that Strategopolous ceased his taunting and departed with his two companions.

Michael continued to stare out at the sea. A gull cried and he turned his head slightly. He whirled around, bringing his spear up just in time to deflect a thrust from one of the General’s guards. The three Byzantines had not left, but instead had crept up on Michael in a sneak attack.

Retreating further into the surf, Michael deflected simultaneous thrusts from their three spears. He was far more agile in his near nakedness than the three soldiers with all of their armor and equipment, so after recovering from the surprise, he had no trouble holding them at bay.

Then, one by one, he took away their spears using the hook on the head of his long fishing spear. Each time, he tossed their shorter fighting spears into the surf where they were drawn away by the undertow.

Once this was accomplished, the fight reached a plateau for awhile. The three aggressors could not get in close with only their short swords, and yet Michael had to be careful not to overextend himself and risk having his spearhead chopped off. Prolonging the fight, however, again worked to Michael’s advantage since the other three began to tire more quickly under their additional burdens.

The break to the impasse came when Strategopolous finally did manage to crack the head off of Michael’s spear, although he did it using his shield rather than his sword. The two guards saw their opportunity and charged in. Michael knocked one out cold by shattering the remaining spear shaft across the side of his helmet.

Seeing Michael was now completely weaponless, the other guard became emboldened and leapt forward. Michael stepped backward, allowing the guard to overextend his balance. Gripping the guard’s sword arm in one hand and grabbing onto his leather breast piece with the other, Michael rolled onto his back and flipped the guard through the air and into the water.

A reverse somersault left Michael sandy and wet, but also standing upright to face down Strategopolous. They circled each other for a moment. Then suddenly, the Byzantine swung his short sword. Michael ducked. In fact,

he went all the way back down to the sand, spinning around and sending his leg out in a wide swooping arc as he fell.

He succeeded, not only in kicking the General's feet out from under him, but in doing it with such force that his sword went into the air. Somehow, by the time Strategopolous was able to open his eyes a moment later; Michael was already standing above him, holding the sword to his neck.

"I am curious General," Michael panted, "do you always try to kill those whose help you seek."

"I had to know..." Strategopolous gasped, feeling his own sword tip pressing against his windpipe.

"Know what?" Michael kept the pressure on.

"That you really were the one..." he hissed in reply, "and now that I know – I will gladly die at your hand. For I would rather die, than return to Nicaea without hope for our people."

Michael took a step back and threw the short sword. It bored deep into the sand right next to the General's head. Strategopolous looked over at the vibrating hilt and then back up at Michael, who was extending a hand.

"What does this mean?" the General was amazed.

"Any man who is willing to die for a mere hope deserves at least to be heard out in full," Michael grinned. "Come back with me to my camp. Perhaps my men have had better fishing than I, and we can get something to eat."

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The Genoese sailors had done better, and they all enjoyed a meal of sizzling sea bass with flatbread. The ship's supply of wine was exhausted, however, leaving water as their only beverage.

The two Byzantine guards were still a bit dazed, but grateful for the unexpected hospitality. Strategopolous, in his imperial finery, was the center of the sailors' attention. They loudly discussed his appearance in their native dialect, which fortunately he could not understand.

"Tell me;" Michael turned to the General after quieting the sailors with a slight movement of his hand, "you spoke of the Empire falling under the rule of a child. How has such a thing come to pass?"

"While the Great City still suffers under Roman oppression," Strategopolous answered, "two Byzantine provinces in Asia remain free. These are Trebizond and Nicaea. 'Tis a great irony that these independent principalities continue to protect the West from Turkish and Saracen aggression, just as Byzantium always has – even while the forces of the West continue to plunder and defile the Great City!"

Michael listened intently, but did not comment on the General's clearly angry rhetoric.

“For her part,” Strategopolous went on, “Trebizond is officially governed by a provincial king, but he is weak and ineffectual. The real power is held by a merchants council, much as in your chosen home of Genoa. Trebizond has little influence beyond its city walls, and only avoids Turkish conquest through an uneasy alliance with the Armenians. Of course the Armenians only avoid Turkish conquest through an uneasy alliance with the Mongol Horde.”

“The Mongols have returned?” Michael asked.

“Ah, so you know of them,” the General nodded.

“I have heard stories,” Michael explained, “yet both their sudden emergence and their abrupt vanishing took place before I was even born. The legends say that their thirst for conquest was insatiable while they rode the earth. Are you certain these are the same dark riders as in the days of our fathers?”

“I am not so much younger than your father!” Strategopolous retorted with a grin. “Now as for the Mongols, yes, we know it is them. No other nation could have wrought such destruction over the last few years. The great Kings of Persia were overrun. The shadowy Order of the Assassins was crushed and their hitherto impenetrable fortress obliterated. And the last we heard, the Horde’s eyes were set upon the Abbasid capital at Baghdad. Though I shall not shed a tear for any justice that crashes down upon the Abbasids...foul butchers...”

Suddenly Michael shivered, as if from a cold wind. None of the others seemed to feel it though, and the day actually had grown quite warm.

“Hopefully,” the General declared, “the Horde’s alliance with Armenia shall dissuade them from proceeding west toward the Empire.”

“Where would they go then instead?” Michael shook his head, pulling his mind away from the dark and unexplained thoughts that had beset him.

“Our hope,” the General said quietly, “is that they shall ride to the south against Egypt.”

“Why do you say that?” Michael wondered.

“Two enemies fighting each other,” Strategopolous shrugged. “What more could one ask for?”

Michael nodded and then sat quietly for a few moments before asking, “And what of Nicaea?”

“Ah, yes,” the General returned to his original tale, “Nicaea is the heart of loyal Byzantium. All of the great cities of the early Church are there: Smyrna, Ephesus, Philadelphia, Pergamum, Sardis, Thyatira, and Laodicea. The people are hardworking, loyal and faithful. The land is hard, but fruitful in its season.

“For more than fifty years, since the exile of the House of the Angelos, free Nicaea has been ruled by a line of steward kings; high nobles from the House of Laskaris. They have ruled justly and, in spite of threats from all sides, prevented the loss of any more land.

“Then this past winter, Theodore Laskaris lay down to sleep one night and did not awaken the next morning. He was a good man; a good king. His son

John will also grow to be a good man, but alas he has only seen nine spring-times. He is not ready to ride into battle, much less to rule a nation.

“And so the prophecy is coming to pass. We knew we must seek the return of the Angelos, and the one who shall be known as the Paleologus. And so I came looking for you.”

Michael looked up at the sky and a slight grin played upon his lips. The Genoese sailors watched him expectantly, not having understood many of Strategopolous’ words. Michael noticed and gave them a summary which caused them to look around at each other with worried expressions.

“I have more questions,” Michael said to the General over the hum of the sailors’ murmurings.

“Of course,” Strategopolous nodded.

“For one – how did you find me?” Michael narrowed his eyes slightly.

“My father served under yours, many years ago,” the General resumed his storytelling. “He was a member of an elite order of Imperial Knights; mounted Kataphraktoi known as the Immortals. They served your father’s house for many years, and even after the order was disbanded, my father Adrian continued to serve the exiled Angelos.

“Through my father, and later through me, secret contact has been maintained between the royal Angelos and free Nicaea. Your father knew this day would come, and so when the time was right, I visited him and he told me of your mission and where I might begin to search for you.

“Of course, you were not all that difficult to find. Particularly after the way you handled the notorious thief Francesco Velia, it was hard to find a ship’s crew anywhere in the Tyrrhenian Sea for which you were not the main topic of discussion this past week.”

Michael poked at the campfire with a stick, again not entirely able to keep his grin from being seen. Strategopolous paused, allowing Michael to absorb all of the new information.

“If my parents knew of all this – free Nicaea, the prophecy, this...Paleologus...as you say; why did they never tell me? Why would they keep such important matters secret?” Michael jabbed hard at one of the logs in the fire. It shifted and fell over, sending a plume of sparks and ashes into the air.

Strategopolous sighed. “I know they would not seek to deceive you. Surely your protection was one consideration. Knowledge can be dangerous, especially if it comes too early. What better way to keep you disentangled from the intrigues of Byzantium than not to tell you about them?

“More importantly – and this I do know from speaking with your father – was his desire that you choose your own destiny. Your father’s wish for this day was that you make your decision as a free man. Whether you choose to sail east with me and seek the fulfillment of the prophecy, or to return to Genoa and the life you know, the choice must arise from your freewill and not as a part for which you were groomed.”

“And yet you had no hesitation with trying to influence my destiny at the point of your spear!” Michael grinned at the General.

“Sometimes, we must give destiny a little nudge,” Strategopolous winked, “to free the wheels from the well-worn tracks in the road...so to speak. And think not that I did so without hesitation!”

Michael stood up. “Walk with me,” he said to Strategopolous.

The General stood and the two men walked together a short distance away from the others.

“There is something you may not know,” Michael said quietly, looking out at the rolling waves.

Strategopolous raised his eyebrows.

“I am not the true son of my father,” Michael stared into the General’s eyes. “I was adopted, and so his blood does not flow in my veins.”

“I know.”

“And this changes not your belief in my destiny?”

Strategopolous grinned. “This confirms my belief in your destiny.”

This time Michael’s eyebrows went up.

“Consider the cases throughout Scripture,” the General began pacing as he had when they first met. “Isaac’s birthright belonged to Esau, and yet it went to Jacob...that is, Israel. Jonathan was the son and heir of King Saul, and yet even he knew that the kingdom belonged to David. Christ Jesus was the son of God, and yet the Gospels begin by telling the genealogy of his adoptive father Joseph. And as believers in the Church Age we are all adopted – grafted in as it were – but not by our blood. Are you and I Jews? No; yet just as Abraham was justified by his faith, so we are made part of the family of God by the desire to know and to love and to serve Him; a desire that God has placed in our hearts. This is not by our earthly lineage.”

“You make an interesting case...” Michael watched Strategopolous move back and forth.

“I am no theologian,” the General stopped and shrugged, “but clearly when it comes to choosing His servants, God is not restricted to following the branches of a particular family tree. In fact, He seems to take some sort of delight in confounding the schemes of kings and princes with their fixed plans for inheritance and primogeniture. Perhaps He does this to remind us that He alone is the true King, and that He alone is in control.”

“You seem to know quite a lot about the Scriptures...for a general...” Michael folded his arms.

Strategopolous threw his head back and laughed. “All the best stratagems and field tactics are described in Scripture!”

Michael knelt and picked up a small flat rock. He sent it skipping over the water. The rock bounced three times and disappeared in a swelling breaker.

The two men began walking slowly back toward the camp.

“And what exactly is this great destiny, anyway?” Michael asked. “What is it that you hope I can accomplish that some other could not?”

“Rallying the free peoples of Byzantium, retaking the Great City of your father’s namesake, and restoring the Empire to the fullness of its glory as a bastion of light and civilization, protector of Christendom, and scourge against barbarian aggression,” Strategopolous answered casually, as if providing the recipe for a stew.

“That is all?” Michael frowned.

“That is all.”

Michael sighed. “And what are our assets?”

“The standing Nicean army consists of seven regiments,” the General explained. “The centerpiece of each regiment is a company of twenty heavy Kataphraktoi. These mounted men have an irresistible charge and are vulnerable only if completely surrounded. Each mounted company is supported by approximately one-hundred professional swordsmen and one-hundred skilled archers, along with their auxiliaries.”

“That is fewer than two-thousand men all told!” Michael worried.

“At your word, a draft could be called up from the countryside,” Strategopolous offered. “At best, however, this would fortify the ranks with another three-thousand spears.”

“I have heard that fifty-thousand is not enough to breach the great walls of Constantinople. Do you truly believe that the mission you describe can be accomplished with fewer than five-thousand?” Michael stopped and stared.

“Probably not,” the General nodded. “We will need allies.”

“And who might our allies be?” Michael wondered.

“Why are you asking me?” Strategopolous laughed. “You are the emperor. I am only a general.”

“Perfect,” Michael sighed as they approached the camp. “And what would young John Laskaris think of me usurping his title and throne?”

“Little John?” the General paused. “Oh, I imagine he shall be quite relieved. The fate of civilization is really more than a nine-year-old should have to bear.”

*

Michael requested a night to sleep on the matter, so General Strategopolous and his two guards returned to their ship further down the beach. Michael had a restless night troubled by strange and ominous dreams.

When he awoke the next morning he knew that if he was to set aside this chance to fulfill a great and foretold destiny, he would forever regret his inaction. While breaking fast with the Genoese sailors, he explained his decision to them.

The sailors were not happy, but they understood the sense of urgency – and of a higher calling – that Michael was feeling, and so they grudgingly

accepted his choice. Michael turned command of the Genoese ship over to his first mate, promoting him to captain with an extremely brief ceremony.

Michael exchanged hugs and kisses on the cheeks with each of the sailors; his friends and companions for the last three years. He instructed them to return to Genoa and explain the circumstances to the Merchants' Guild as best they could.

To help smooth over any misunderstandings from the Guild's leadership, Michael wrote a quick note on parchment authorizing access to his holdings at the Templar bank in Genoa. Nothing worked quite like gold as a remedy for hurt feelings among Guild members.

Finally, at mid-morning, Michael shouted a last farewell to the Genoese sailors and ran down the beach toward the Byzantine vessel. He wore only a cloak with a hooded cape, and sandals. For supplies he carried only a skin full of water, a spear, and a small pouch of silver coins.

Strategopolous leapt for joy at his arrival. "You are coming then?"

"Either I have finally lost my mind," Michael muttered, "or this is going to be the adventure of my life."

"Only time will tell," the General smiled and pulled him aboard the ship. The small crew of Byzantines made fast preparations, and the ship was soon out in open water.

"Before we set sail for the east," Michael asked the General, "could we make one quick stop?"

*

When the Byzantine ship reached the small and remote island, only Michael and the General disembarked. They made their way slowly upward, ascending into the island's heavily forested interior.

At last they came upon a thick shrub. Pulling aside one of the low hanging branches, they entered a hidden tunnel. On the other end of the tunnel, they emerged into a bright and beautiful clearing.

"Oh, my dear son – you have returned!" Lady Maegan of the Angelos shouted and ran toward him. She threw her arms around him and by the time she finally let him go, Constantine arrived and embraced his son with equal fervor. Strategopolous bowed to the Lord and Lady, and accepted their warm greetings as well.

"Since you are here together," Prince Constantine looked back and forth between his son and friend, "then all has been revealed?"

They both nodded.

"Forgive me my son," Constantine held Michael by his arms. "Please know that I only wished to protect you, and to let you live a life that was truly your own – even if for just a little while – before the weight of responsibility came upon you."

"I understand," Michael said quietly, "and there is nothing to be forgiven. I know that all you have ever done or said to me has been for love. And these last three years have been...amazing. I have lived already a lifetime worth of high adventures. I only wish I could tell you all the tales."

"Perhaps someday..." Constantine smiled. "Now though there is much to be done, and even greater adventures than these are on your horizon. You must not linger here, as much as we desperately wish that you could."

"You will allow me at least to feed him a proper meal before he sails," Maegan insisted.

"Of course," Constantine obliged, "and there is someone else you must see before you go."

Michael looked at his parents curiously.

"Your Grandmother Theodora is here," Constantine said with a touch of sorrow in his voice.

"She is?" Michael grinned. "That is wonderful! Where is she?"

Constantine put his arm around Michael's shoulders and led him across the clearing, while Maegan took General Strategopolous' sword and shield and welcomed him to relax in a nearby sitting area.

"Michael," his father began quietly, "you must understand that your grandmother is not well. Ever since Grandfather John died, much of her strength has faded. She returned here for good last year, having said her final farewells to our friends in England. The weather there no longer suited her health."

"I am sorry to hear that," Michael said.

"Seeing you shall certainly uplift her spirit though," Constantine patted his back. "I just wanted you to be prepared. She may not seem just as you remember her."

They walked a little further in silence until reaching the threshold of a tiny stone villa. Constantine knocked lightly on the wooden door.

"You may enter," a frail voice came from within.

Constantine opened the door and peered inside. "Mother, there is a visitor here that I think you shall be very glad to see."

"A visitor?" She stood slowly. "And who might be visiting our little island hideaway?"

"Hello grandmother," Michael entered the room.

"Ah, my dear, dear Michael," she brightened considerably.

Picking up her cane, she started across the room. Michael met her halfway and offered his hand to her. She took it up, kissed the backs of his fingers and then held his hand against her face for awhile.

"I shall see if your mother needs any help," Constantine said to Michael and bowed out of the room.

"Come...come..." Theodora motioned to a pair of soft chairs against the wall sitting on either side of a small round table. She lowered herself carefully into one, and he joined her at the table.

For quite some time, Theodora conducted an interview of her grandson. She asked him all manner of questions about his adventures at sea. She wanted to know about the friends he had made and the places he had seen. During each answer she watched him closely and listened carefully to his every word.

Then suddenly, the questions stopped.

“Oh, my dear Michael,” she said. Her eyes were wet and sparkling. “Such great wonders are the adventures of our youth. And you have only just begun yours...”

She closed her eyes and was quiet for some time. Michael was about to ask if she was alright when her eyes opened and she stared straight at him, a curious grin emerging in the wrinkled lines of her face.

“Michael, please be so good as to fetch from the top of my wardrobe, the long wooden box you see there,” she whispered.

Michael did as he was told, and set the box between them across the small round table.

“Open it,” she directed.

Again, he obliged. Inside was a long strip of purple cloth. She pulled it aside, and he nearly gasped at the sight of what lay underneath.

A sword of exquisite craftsmanship lay snugly in the cushioned interior of the box. The shiniest steel Michael had ever seen gleamed even in the shadowy room. The handle and hilt were encrusted with precious stones, and the blade was sharpened and polished to near perfection.

“You shall not mind if I stay sitting down for this?” Theodora winked.

“Grandmother,” Michael was overwhelmed, “what is happening?”

“The time has come for you to take up a new name.”

“I do not understand.”

“Please,” she motioned with her hand, “go to your knees.”

He obeyed.

“Michael you are, and Michael you shall remain,” she began, “for this is your name which was given in honor of your earthly father. That which comes from the earth shall return to the earth and there remain.”

She then seized the sword and with a supreme effort, her frail arms lifted it from the box.

“Yet that which is of the Spirit,” she continued, leaning the sword on her own shoulder, “shall be transformed and renewed, like the eagle. By love, with faith, and in hope you were adopted into a royal household – the House of the Angelus. Yet to truly live, the seed of hope that you brought into our lives must fall into the earth and die.

“The Byzantine House of the Angels is fallen, is fallen. Quietly we shall go into that night,” she had to look away from his face as she spoke, “but even as we sleep, the dawn of a new day is stirring in the east. You must go Michael. You must go and light the day once more.”

She continued speaking, but he could not understand the words. As she uttered them, she softly touched the blade of the sword to one of his shoulders and then the other.

“Please stand,” she instructed.

He returned to his feet.

With the sword now lying across the upward turned palms of her hands, Theodora Angeloi raised it toward Michael. She offered the weapon, and all of the authority bound into its history to her spiritual grandson with words that filled him all at once with exhilaration and terror.

“Go forth now and fulfill your destiny, Michael Paleologus.”

Verse Four – Shadow upon Sherwood

The first official act of Bishop Reynard, upon his appointment over the flock of Nottinghamshire, was to evict all children from the Nottingham orphanage and convert the building into his own private residence. In times past, the local nobility would have stood up against such outrageousness. However, Lord Roger of Locksley had died just a year earlier, and his son Randol had never returned from his adventures in the east.

Locksley was administered by the widow Lady Margaret and her sister-in-law Raven Allendale, who was recently widowed as well. Plagues and droughts during the last few years had sapped the wealth of the estate and left only a minimal staff in place. Many of the fields had gone fallow, and rogue bandits were becoming a more common sight in Sherwood Forest.

Bishop Reynard had plans to change all that. The orphanage was only the beginning. His eyes were fixed upon the lands of Locksley. He wished to add them to the already substantial holdings he controlled throughout England and France, and to exploit them to the fullest as he had previous widows' estates.

"And as for Sherwood Forest," the Bishop grinned at his henchmen, "we shall fell every last tree and make a tidy profit from the lumber. What better way to rid the local thieves and bandits of their sanctuary, while at the same time glorifying God with gifts to His Church?"

The henchmen grunted their agreement.

"The forest and her trees are the wondrous creations of the Lord," a voice called out behind them. "What glory shall come from the destruction of Our Father's handiwork?"

The Bishop and his men whirled around to see Friar Peter. Standing at his side, leaning upon his walking stick, was the aging Sheriff of Nottingham, known by his friends as James Little. The pair had been following and watching the Bishop as he toured the area on foot, making his sinister plans.

"Well, well," Reynard clucked his tongue a few times, "who should be joining us but little boy Peter? Still playing at Friar I see. A pity that Nottingham no longer requires your services, as one far greater than you is now here. Perhaps they could use an altar boy in Norwich. I can send an inquiry if you would like..."

"Young I may be," Peter nodded with a slight grin, "but I have lived here all my life. In fact – having grown up in the orphanage you now call home – the only times I have been away from Nottingham are the years when I traveled to York for study and consecration. May I ask, good bishop, how long you have known the people of this fair city? Has it been all of two months?"

"Impudent pup," the Bishop murmured as he turned beet red and strode over to stand face to face with the young friar. "Do you think your petty council of bards and druids in York means anything to me? I answer to Rome and the

Holy Father alone! And you shall therefore guard your tongue with a bit more caution unless you desire a reassignment to a parish far, far and away.”

“Now, now good bishop,” James the Sheriff’s voice rumbled out of his broad chest, “there is no need to let your heart be so troubled. I believe my young friend is simply suggesting that a churchman of your stature would surely have the wisdom to listen to his new flock and learn of their needs, their hopes and their dreams before making any hasty or...rash decisions under his new and fledgling administration.”

Reynard scowled at the Sheriff and sucked in air to make a stinging reply. Yet when the Bishop opened his mouth to speak, James cut him off and continued talking.

“For you shall find, good bishop,” James leaned forward on his staff, “that the people of Nottinghamshire are meek and humble, always ready to lend a hand to a neighbor in need, and more than willing to sacrifice for the good of others. Yet if pushed too far by injustice, they are quite capable of standing their ground – whatsoever the cost.”

“Are you threatening me?” Reynard whispered to the Sheriff.

“Certainly not,” James whispered back. “I merely am helping you understand the people of your flock.”

“Then let me help you understand your position as well,” the Bishop sneered. “Thieves and rogues lurking in the forest is an unacceptable abomination in the eyes of the Church. And since you, my dear old sheriff, seem incapable of handling the problem on your own, you leave me little choice but to take extreme measures. After all, Nottingham must be kept safe.”

“On that we surely agree,” James stared hard into the bishop’s eyes.

The Bishop glared back and forth between the Sheriff and the Friar. Finally, he let out an exasperated snort of disgust and marched away from them, rejoining his half-dozen surly henchmen and disappearing over the hill.

*

Kes Little bounded through the woods and up the hill toward Locksley on her dapple-grey horse. She had been visiting nearly every day since her grandmother Raven and Lady Margaret had taken in all twenty-one of the orphans displaced by Bishop Reynard.

True to her surname, Kes was small for a sixteen year old. Her enormous horse made her look even smaller as she entered the gates of the Keep. Yet her diminutive physical frame housed vast stores of energy and enthusiasm, making her of vital help to the aging stewardesses of Locksley Hall.

Her size, speed, and agility were all an inheritance from her mother. From her father’s side, she was gifted with great endurance as well as a mane of shiny golden hair. The musical talents that had skipped her parents’ generation were revitalized, and then some, in Kes.

Even her normal speaking voice had melodic qualities, making her a gripping storyteller. And merely in walking across a room one could see her innate rhythm and sense of timing. Music flowed in her veins like her blood.

“Look who is here!” Lady Margaret called out as Kes entered the main hall. The children had just finished their bread and soup, and twenty-one expectant smiles greeted her.

“Do we have time for a tale or two before these little ones are back to work?” Kes grinned at the Lady of the Hall.

The children spun around and waited for her reply.

“Perhaps one,” Lady Margaret assented, “but only after the table boards are spotless!”

A cheer went out, and the children flew about cleaning up from their midday meal. When they were finally settled before the hearth, Kes began telling them one of their favorites – the story of her grandmother Raven’s battle against the Egyptians alongside the Teutonic crusaders at Damietta.

Raven herself entered from the back of the Hall and listened as the tale approached its climax.

“...and the constant barrage of stones from the catapult made the Egyptian armies furious,” Kes talked as much with her hands and facial expressions as with words. “So they rode out against the Crusaders – thousand upon thousands of masked warriors riding atop loping, lurching, stinking giant camels. The other Crusaders wavered and broke ranks, but not the sturdy and true men of Nottingham!

“Wave after wave of the heathen desert marauders smashed themselves against the English shield wall! Only by sheer strength of numbers did the camel-riding aggressors finally swarm around the defenses and threaten the catapult. But then – then dear children – they found themselves to be in a place they had never been before; as a mark for English archers! The arrows flew and the riders fell from their foul beasts.

“Yet still the dark riders of doom pressed on, bolstered by the seething numbers of their endless ranks. Swinging their broad curved cleavers, the cowards singled out the one Crusader who had been separated from the others – my own dear grandmother Raven.”

The children gasped, though they had heard the story before.

“She was no older than I am this day, yet the smelly riders had no hesitation over pursuing a defenseless young maiden. They bore down upon her, hoping to trample her into the sand with the hooves of their unholy steeds. Twas then the spirit of my great-grandfather Robin – Hero of Sherwood – came over her. She ran and dove in desperation, at the last moment seizing a bow and half spent quiver of arrows.

“In a flash, she whirled around – hands and fingers blazing with quick and deadly accuracy. In every direction the arrows flew; each one true to the mark. Before the infidels even knew what she had done, they were toppled from

their camels. Now without riders, the dumb beasts panicked and ran haplessly into the sea or back against their own ranks.

“The Egyptians were thrown into confusion and began a hasty retreat to their city gates. The offensive had been broken, and the Crusader beachhead was safe once more. There on the bloody sands stood my grandmother Raven, her quiver of arrows nearly empty, but her heart full with the rousing cheers and hurrahs from the Christian armies up and down the beach. And great terror fell over all of Egypt as the word went forth – that from among the mighty people of Britannia; even a lone young lady was to be respected and feared.”

The children erupted with joyous cheering and applause. The young girls in the group particularly glowed.

“With each telling, I think a little more is added to the tale,” Lady Raven approached them from behind.

“Were you very afraid, mum?” one of the little girls asked.

“Do camels really smell just awful?” another chimed in.

“Yes and yes,” Raven sighed at the children. “Now you all have work that must be done before sundown. Boys, the log pile awaits – and do be careful. Ladies, you shall walk with Auntie Margaret to the edge of Sherwood. All the dry kindling you can find must be gathered in before the next rain. On with you then – get going now!” She shoed them out of the Great Hall to commence their afternoon activities.

Kes sat and stared at her grandmother in silence for a moment.

“What is it, child?” Raven came and sat next to her.

“I just wonder...” Kes hesitated. “Do you think I shall ever cross the sea and visit the far country like you and my mother?”

“Is that what your heart desires?” Raven asked softly.

“I have always thought...” Kes watched the stained glass window at the end of the Hall, sparkling from the bright sunshine outside, “well...tis really a bit silly and childish, I suppose.”

“Our hearts’ desires often are,” Raven winked.

Kes looked at her. “Well...I suppose I have always thought that should I travel to the far country, across the sea and to the east, then perhaps...”

“Go on,” Raven encouraged her.

“Perhaps then I would find a prince,” Kes blushed instantly, “and he would fall in love with me and take me to live in a palace, and all of those things that happen in the old stories, but it would be more than a story; it would be real, and we really would live happily forever, and now you are looking at me like I am mad, and I should probably just stop talking, because what are the chances that such silly dreams could ever...”

Raven finally pressed her finger against Kes’ lips, stopping the flow.

“First of all,” Raven began, “your dreams are never silly. They are part of who you are, and if God has built fairytale castles within the kingdom of your heart, then who are you to tear them down?”

Kes smiled.

"But be warned, my child," Raven's voice became ominous. "Just like in the fairytales, great darkness can be found in the lands across the sea. Camel riding warriors are only one of the dangers. Evil prowls the earth in many forms, and often we do not see it coming until too late."

Kes looked down and whispered, "I suppose it can come closer to home as well."

Raven watched her.

"I spoke with Friar Peter today," Kes finally let out the fear that had been gnawing at her soul. "He told me that turning out the orphans was only the beginning of the new Bishop's sordid intentions. Peter says that the Bishop will not stop spreading out his power and control over things. And he says that the Bishop will not rest until Sherwood Forest is a field of stumps and even Locksley itself is under his heel. Yet surely Peter is exaggerating, is he not? Surely a man of the Church – and a Bishop at that – would not do such things!"

Raven sighed, "You might be surprised, Kes. Power has a way of turning even good men over to darkness."

"What is to be done then?" Kes seemed close to tears.

"We trust in God," Raven answered.

Kes nodded.

"And we set our hearts upon the joys that God has given us," Raven added, "and in those joys – our families, our friends...our dreams – we shall find a path to take us onward, even if we cannot see it now."

Kes nodded again, still looking down.

"There is something I would like to give you," Raven stood and smiled. Without another word she left the Hall, leading her granddaughter by the hand.

*

"You are really giving this to me?" Kes gasped. "But...I cannot...why, what would Auntie Margaret say?"

"Actually," Raven laughed, "this was her idea."

"But Lord Roger's own fiddle," Kes shook her head. "Why should I deserve such a great honor?"

"My dear Kestrel," Raven cupped her face, "you are beyond a doubt the finest and most talented minstrel I have ever known."

Kes turned red again and with her eyes lowered whispered, "Truly?"

"The Song lives in you," Raven replied simply.

"What do you mean – *the* song?" Kes cradled the fiddle in her arms.

"Come this way," Raven beckoned her granddaughter out onto the balcony. In the distance, the tall green trees of Sherwood shimmered in the warm afternoon sun. "Now, close your eyes. Can you hear it?"

“I...” Kes was interrupted when a hawk circling high about the forest let out a piercing cry. She closed her mouth then and heard other sounds floating in on the breeze. The far off laughter of children, the braying of sheep in the meadows, and the clomping of her horse’s hooves down below in the courtyard were some of the first she noticed.

“That is good,” Raven whispered. “Yet there is more. Listen not only with your ears, but with your heart.”

Kes frowned. She had heard her grandmother talk like this before, and never quite knew what she meant – until it happened. First a steady rhythm, like the beating of a heart, but then a more complicated pattern arose; like the feet of many dancers.

Images began to flicker in Kes’ imagination, like memories, but she had never seen them before. People that seemed at once strange and yet strangely familiar too, came and went from the sight of her mind’s eye. Day and night, months, seasons, and years; she felt their rhythm and more than ever before sensed her smallness. A sudden understanding of the brevity of her life and her insignificance in history at first frightened her, but soon gave way to a profound sense of peace.

And then the music really began; horns, pipes and cymbals and strings causing each other to ring sympathetically in a crescendo of harmony and beauty and brilliance. The peace within was still there, but something else was building upon its foundation; something grand and new. To peace was added purpose, and new images filled her mind as sound quickened and became light.

She saw a vision. Before her was a table set for a feast, yet the delicacies laid upon it were not food for the body, but rather nourishment for the soul. They were gentleness and self-control, goodness and faithfulness, patience and kindness, joy and peace; and in the center of the table, resting as on a plate of translucent gold, was love.

She opened her eyes, and suddenly the breeze and her own breathing were the only sounds once again.

“I understand,” Kes said breathlessly, “I mean...I do not understand, but I do...”

“So you did hear it,” Raven smiled.

“Can you explain to me what just happened?” A tear rolled down one of Kes’ cheeks.

“The Song of Sherwood,” Raven explained, “is old and strong. The trees know it, but tis older than they. We can hear it, but tis stronger than us. Since long before our fathers and grandfathers, the Song has been here. Long after our children and grandchildren are gone, the Song shall remain. The music is strong in our family, but we are not the only ones, and anyone can learn.”

“Is it love?” Kes was overwhelmed and trying to understand her experience. “Is that what you mean? Is the Song simply...love?”

“Oh, my Kestrel,” Raven laughed, “you are so young. Do you suppose that love is ever simple?”

Kes looked down at the fiddle in her hands. “No, I suppose not.”

“Yes,” Raven grew serious again, “love is part of the Song, perhaps the most important part, but tis not all. There is truth and power and might in the Song – not ours, mind you – but the Lord’s. The Song begins with Him and returns to Him, and along the way if we are blessed, we shall hear it and resonate with it and sing.”

Kes was silent. She watched the forest in the distance and did not know what to say next.

“Of course, there are those who work against the Song,” Raven put her hand on Kes’ shoulder. “Those who seek their own truth and power and might, rather than God’s; they cannot bear to hear it. They try to suppress the Song, however they might. That may mean driving away good people. That may mean chopping down good trees. But I will tell you a secret they do not wish for you to know.”

Kes raised her eyebrows.

“No matter what they do – the Song *never* dies,” Raven whispered.

*

With her new fiddle safely wrapped up and strapped to her back, Kes rode away from Locksley Hall exhilarated by the rite of passage she had experienced with her grandmother. She rode briskly over the hills to the old Allendale Estate, now the home of her parents, Jonas and Angela Little.

Her father was, as usual, in his woodshop working on a new creation. Her older brother Jared had taken up the role of carpenter’s apprentice a few years earlier and was with him helping.

Jared took the work seriously and wanted to do well, in large part because he was planning to ask for the hand of a local girl, and he needed to be able to demonstrate to her father that he could provide for her. Molly was the only daughter of Nottingham’s finest baker, and Jared had been courting her for many years.

Kes’ younger brother, Simon, was in the kitchen helping their mother prepare a roast. Simon had little interest in his father’s carpentry trade. He was much more like his big sister with a passion for music and a head full of dreams. Most folk around Nottingham assumed he would eventually drift into a position in ministry.

Kes went to the kitchen first and told her mother and Simon about the gift she had received at Locksley. She took out the fiddle and began to play a joyous melody that quickly drew Jared and her father from the woodshop. When she concluded with a flourish of the bow across the strings, her entire family

cheered and they celebrated the deep honor that was bestowed upon Kes with hugs and tears.

They all dispersed soon to finish up their chores before sundown. Darkness had fallen completely by the time they sat down together and enjoyed the delicious roast. Afterward, Kes entertained her family with a few more songs by flickering candlelight, but as the day had been a long one, soon everyone went to their beds.

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At dawn, Kes arose and went to collect eggs from the family chicken coop. She only found three, but this was sufficient as her father and Jared had left before the sunrise on a ride to Coventry in search of several new tools.

The morning was warm, so Simon prepared a small fire in the outdoor pit. Kes scrambled some bits of leftover roast and bread into the egg mixture, and it was enough food for the two youngsters and their mother to start the day.

“How did you master it so quickly?” Simon asked his sister.

“Cooking eggs...?” Kes looked puzzled.

“Not the eggs, you ninny,” Simon flicked an acorn toward her.

“They are quite good,” Angela winked at her daughter.

“Thank you,” Kes smiled at her mother, picked up the acorn and tossed it back at Simon.

“I say,” Simon rubbed his head where the nut had struck him. “I am talking about the fiddle. You play it just as naturally as the lute, but without the years of practice.”

Kes and her mother stared at him.

“Did you just compliment me?” Kes narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

“What?” Simon turned red. “I am just telling the truth is all.”

“You want the lute,” Kes smirked.

“Must I have a hidden motive?” Simon acted outraged. “And beside, you know that drums are the instrument of my heart. That is just sad, Kes. Tis truly sad you cannot accept kind words from your brother without looking for some hidden motive.”

Kes just stared at him.

Angela bit her tongue and began scraping the skillet.

“What?” Simon fidgeted.

Kes kept staring.

“Look,” Simon folded his arms, “how much shall you even be playing the lute now anyway?”

“Ha!” Kes clapped her hands. “I knew it!”

Simon frowned, stood, and began gathering the dirty cookware to take down to the stream. “Simply impossible...” he muttered under his breath as he walked away.

Kes watched him, shaking her head.

"Are you visiting Locksley again today?" her mother asked.

"I truly feel I should," Kes answered. "Grandma and Auntie Margaret are having quite a time with all the little ones."

Angela nodded. "You can take Simon if you wish."

"You do not need him?" Kes looked at her mother.

"My greatest plans for today are the washing and tidying the shop for your father," Angela explained, and with a whisper added, "both of which your brother would only make more difficult."

"Very well," Kes sighed.

"You could even let him bring the lute," Angela patted Kes on her leg.

They both laughed.

"Perhaps I shall," Kes smiled. "And perhaps we should call upon Grandfather James. We have not seen him since last week."

"I know he would like that very much," Angela agreed.

*

When Kes and Simon finally reached Locksley, their Grandfather James was already there. He was meeting with Lady Margaret in a small side-chamber off the Great Hall. They were speaking in hushed voices, but the young Littles could not help overhearing bits of the conversation.

"...no doubt that someone powerful is behind it..."

"...surely that would never happen..."

"...I am afraid that without a male heir..."

"...the poor children...all over again...how could they..."

"...tis possible Rome has no idea..."

"...a letter must be sent...perhaps a direct appeal..."

"...cannot be too cautious...prowler was no accident..."

Kes motioned for Simon to follow her as she crept toward the staircase, hoping to get away without being detected.

"Ah, tis only you two," Grandfather James boomed from behind them, suddenly standing in the doorway.

"Oh...hello Grandfather," they said in unison.

"Did you just arrive?" he asked.

They looked at each other.

"Why, yes," Kes stammered.

"Good, good," he may have been grinning slightly, "your grandmother Raven could likely do with some relief. They are all out back."

"Grandfather...?" Kes began.

"Yes, my dear," James looked at her.

"Is everything...quite alright?" she asked in a lowered voice.

He sighed. "Come and find me after you have had some time with the little ones; both of you."

They nodded and ran out the back door.

*

When Simon and Kes returned, their father and older brother were in the Great Hall speaking with Grandfather James.

"Papa...Jared..." Kes was surprised to see them, "I thought you were riding to Coventry!"

"We were..." Jared seemed mildly annoyed.

"We had a slight change of plans," Jonas said quietly.

"Will someone please explain what is going on?" Simon demanded, as he perceived the tension in the room.

"Let us sit down," Jonas led his three children into the side chamber.

Inside, Lady Margaret was still seated at the table. As they entered, she set down her writing quill, looked at the parchment scroll she had been preparing, and waved her hands over it to help the ink dry.

Grandfather James looked around the Great Hall before joining them inside the chamber and pulling the doors shut behind him. Before coming to the table, he picked up a sturdy wooden board and barred the door.

"We rode out this morning before dawn, as planned," Jonas began to explain, "but decided to stop by Locksley and check on the Ladies before departing for Coventry."

"Tis indeed fortunate that we did," Jared added, "for a prowler stalked the grounds. We approached so quickly and quietly that we managed to catch him quite unaware."

"In fact," Jonas continued, "he made no attempt whatsoever to escape."

"Who was he?" Kes wondered.

"A very odd fellow," Jared shook his head. "Both his appearance and his tongue were strange to us, though he seemed to understand all that we said. Perhaps he shall be more forthcoming after spending a few days locked up in a cell in Nottingham."

"Why was he here?" Simon asked.

"We are not precisely sure," his father answered. "Perhaps he was merely a wandering bandit. However, our fear is that he was actually a hired scalawag working for Bishop Reynard."

A momentary silence dominated the room.

"To what end?" Kes asked when she could stand the silence no more.

"If the rightful proprietors of the Locksley estate were...no longer in the way," Grandfather James said gruffly, "the Bishop could much more easily advance the claims of the Church to its wealth."

Silence returned.

"Which is why," Lady Margaret said at last, "we must deliver this letter which I have written."

"What does it say, Auntie?" Kes asked.

"Tis a pleading to authority above the Bishop;" she responded, "an appeal to Rome."

Everyone looked around at each other.

"Kes, Simon," Jonas began, "do you remember the stories of the great adventure your mother and I undertook in our youth?"

"Of course," Simon answered, "the Quest for Prester John."

"We had grand dreams," Jonas remembered. "Set out to save the world, we did. We sought to shake the foundations of Rome itself by establishing contact with another great Christian realm. Yet in the end, all we found in the east were barbarians and sorrows.

"Today our Quest is far less grandiose. We do not seek to humble Rome, but rather to appeal to whatever goodness still dwells within her. We shall call directly upon the Holy Father. If we can reach him and deliver the message, then there is at least a chance for right to prevail. And if all goes as it should, he will send messengers and this rogue Bishop that troubles our town shall be removed, or in the very least, disciplined."

"And what if all does not go as it should?" Kes uttered what they all were thinking. "What if the Pontiff ignores our plea? What if the Bishop is not a rogue and is acting out the will of the Church?"

"Then at least we shall have done all we could," Grandfather James answered. "We will have pursued the law to its highest authority on earth, in the hopes of seeing right upheld."

"Still one question remains," Lady Margaret said quietly. "Who shall deliver the message?"

*

The consensus came quickly that distant traveling was the dominion of youth, and that Kes and Simon were the most qualified in this regard. Their mother was very distressed about the entire idea, but she had only very shaky footing for argument given her own personal history.

However, she was surprisingly understanding about Jared's decision not to accompany his two younger siblings. She knew how vital his help was to Jonas and their woodworking business. She also realized, especially given Jared's age and how long he had been courting his love; that wild horses likely would not succeed in dragging him away from Nottingham and fair Molly.

A third consideration also came into play, though no one spoke it aloud and it only crept along the outermost edges of Angela's thoughts. Namely, if the trouble with Bishop Reynard was to escalate prior to the hoped for success of

Kes and Simon's mission, Jared would be a much needed source of strength in confronting any overt threats to the Locksley or Allendale estates.

The plan was fairly simple. Jared and his father would accompany Simon and Kes on horseback as far as London. There the two youngest Littles would find passage on a ship to France and spend a month or so walking south toward Rome.

In order to avoid confrontations or excessive questioning, they would dress and behave like a pair of monks on pilgrimage from Britain to pay homage to the Holy Father. Hooded robes would be employed, particularly to conceal Kes' femininity.

Their supplies would be minimal, although their parents planned to provide them with bags of provisions, walking sticks, small daggers and a number of gold coins. Of course their most important item was the scroll which they would make every effort to bring to the Pope's attention.

Preparations were begun quickly and quietly so as not to arouse any suspicion from the Bishop or those who might be reporting to him.

*

Two mornings after these decisions had been made; Simon and Kes accompanied their father into Nottingham to visit their Grandfather James in his Sheriff's office. James had accumulated a number of maps over the years, some of which included parts of France and the Papal States.

Kes was fascinated by maps and poured over them with her father and grandfather. She asked a seemingly endless series of questions about terrain, place names, local customs, languages and politics. Jonas and James answered her curiosity as best they could, but each answer only led to three more questions.

Eventually Simon could take no more and drifted out of the room. He circled around the back of the building and to satisfy his own curiosity, peeked in through a tiny barred window that was the only external access to the Nottingham prison.

The prowler that his father and brother had captured was sitting alone inside the prison cell. He looked to be about Simon's age and height, though he was quite thin. His hair was a wavy mop of black curls, and his skin was darker than even well-tanned English hides.

Suddenly the prisoner looked up, feeling Simon's gaze. Simon's pale blue eyes met the dark and frightened eyes of the captive, and a strange moment of understanding passed between them.

"Do you have a name?" Simon whispered.

No response came immediately, so he asked again using universal Latin.

The prisoner nodded.

The awkward conversation continued, slowly at first, but with rapidly increasing levels of understanding. They might have continued all afternoon, but the map readers inside realized Simon was missing and went out looking for him.

"I say," Grandfather James barked in his best Sheriff's voice, "what do you think you are doing? Step away from that window at once!"

"Grandfather..." Simon turned around, looking pale.

"Oh...Simon," James softened his tone, "'tis only you. Why on earth were you conversing with the prisoner?"

"Grandfather," Simon was clearly agitated, "a terrible mistake has been made! The man you are holding has done nothing wrong!"

James shook his head and almost smiled. "Oh lad, you are too young and trusting. Believe me, when you have been a Sheriff for as many years as I have, you discover that all prisoners declare they have been taken by mistake and that they always claim to have done nothing wrong."

Jonas and Kes had come around the side of the building and were watching Grandfather James reprimand Simon's folly.

"I understand, Grandfather, but you must listen to me," Simon was nearly shaking. "The man inside may be a foreigner and strange, but he is not a troublemaker and he has not come here by chance!"

James folded his arms and raised his eyebrows at Simon.

"He is a refugee from a mighty war that rages in distant lands to the east," Simon explained what he knew. "He is named Kiran and he is the last of his people. Before coming to England, he traveled for many days in the company of the one who sent him here with a message to deliver - your old friend and fellow minstrel, Michael Tuck!"

Kes gasped with her hands over her mouth, and Jonas stepped forward to steady his father when it looked like the old Sheriff might fall over.

"Did he say these things on his own, without prompting from you?" Jonas questioned his son.

"Yes," Simon nodded, "and there is more..."

Verse Five – The Lost Boys

The news that the long lost Randol of Locksley and the twin brothers Edric and Alfred Allendale were alive swept across Nottingham like a blast of cool and refreshing autumn wind. After sailing away to Outremer twenty years earlier aboard a Templar ship, they had not been heard from since.

“Our God is a God of life, renewal and second-chances,” Friar Peter shouted joyfully, “Let us praise Him and celebrate His Holy Name!”

The crowd gathered in Locksley Hall erupted with cheers, music and dancing. Simon unleashed a driving rhythm on his tambour, and Kes matched the pace with fingers flying across the strings of her new fiddle.

The Ladies Raven and Margaret sat in large stuffed chairs off to one side, book-ended by James the Sheriff and Friar Peter, when he had finished stirring the assembled guests.

“I must confess,” Margaret leaned over and whispered to James, “that I still harbor doubts. So many years have passed...tis hard for me to believe...”

“I understand,” James nodded, “but Kiran knew too many details and intimate secrets of Michael’s life and heart; things no stranger could ever know unless Michael had shared them personally. And we know that Michael would never lie to us, even through another, about the boys being alive.”

“But why then have they not come home to us?” Lady Margaret still struggled with her feelings.

“The lands of the Mohammedans often prove far easier to enter than to leave,” Lady Raven advised. “And knowing the boys, the calling to action and adventure may be nearly as strong to them as that of home.”

“And do not forget the rest of the story that our mysterious messenger delivered,” Friar Peter reminded them. “Your sons may have begun their years in Egypt languishing in dungeons and slaving in stone quarries. Yet by God’s grace and direction, by the time Brother Michael crossed their paths, they had risen through the ranks and become captains in Egypt’s army at the highest echelons. Who knows but that they have come to royal position for such a time as this?”

“Surely there must be a way we could help them!” Lady Margaret thought out loud. “Could we not send a ransom to the king of Egypt and purchase their freedom?”

“That is a possibility,” James rubbed his grey beard thoughtfully. “However, reaching Egypt is an altogether more difficult and dangerous proposition than reaching Rome. And bargaining with the Sultan would be far more complicated and costly than making an appeal to the Pope. Although, if Simon and Kes are already going as far as Rome...”

“James,” Lady Raven gasped. “I desire my sons back as desperately as I desire to draw my next breath, but are you actually suggesting that we send our grandchildren into the lion’s den of Cairo? After all, if Randol and my sons have not been able to escape from the Leviathan of the South for twenty years...”

“Though as you said yourself, my Good Lady,” Friar Peter was rare in the boldness with which he would speak to his elders, “the long duration of their stay in Egypt has been perhaps, at least in part, a matter of their own choosing. While I was but a small boy when I knew the three; their reputation for adventure-seeking already preceded them. Yet, I have no doubt that once they were to hear of the dire straits in which Nottingham and Locksley have been placed by Bishop Reynard; they would exercise any means of returning to England with the utmost haste.”

“And if the rightful heir of the Locksley estate were to return...” James uttered thoughtfully and slowly.

“The scheming bishop could make no claim to the land,” Lady Margaret finished his thought. “And my Randol would set everything at right; of that I am most certain.”

*

Kiran sat quietly at the table board, while the entire family of Littles stared at him with curiosity and countless questions still burning in their hearts. He looked around, growing increasingly nervous under the expectant gazes of his fair-haired hosts.

“You do not believe there is any chance that Michael Tuck survived the destruction of Baghdad?” Angela asked sorrowfully, breaking the silence at last.

Kiran shook his head. “Not a single soul survived. That is the way of the Mongol Horde.”

“Yet perhaps he escaped through a secret passage at the very last moment,” Kes tried, “as you said he did with you at Alamut.”

“I am afraid that was not his intention,” Kiran explained. “He was ready to meet God.”

“Then we should not sorrow for him overly,” Jonas said after a long pause. “He is now in heaven; piping and singing and dancing with Uncle John, and Lord Roger, and your father.” He looked at Angela, who nodded.

“You have great faith,” Kiran said to Jonas.

“Michael knew the Lord,” Jonas answered. “In his life he may have wandered down different paths, but he was always a man after God’s own heart.”

Kiran nodded.

“Tell us again, if you will,” Jared began, a hint of suspicion still lingering in his voice, “how Brother Michael came to cross paths with Lord Locksley and my twin uncles.”

Angela leaned over and topped up Kiran’s goblet of water.

“Thank you,” Kiran said after taking a sip. “After leaving this island under clouds of pain and misery, he wandered for many years. Eventually, he fell into company with a band of South Sea pirates. They benefited from his

experience and knowledge as they plied the waters beyond Arabia and the Indias and even far off Cathay.

“Of course, Michael had been to many of these places before. His insights and information allowed the pirates to gain wealth much more quickly than otherwise would have been possible. In time, he came to be a captain of his own vessel in the pirate fleet – even visiting the legendary islands beyond the place of the rising sun.

“Although he often carried great wealth – the rarest spices and silks and gems – aboard his ship, he never had to worry about confrontations with other pirates, or even hostile armadas. For you see, he had built into the structure of his ship new kinds of weapons, like none that have been seen before. I did not fully understand when he described them to me.

“They used a mysterious black powder found only in Cathay. Fire unleashes the demon spirits bound up in this powder. Then by channeling their flames through hollow logs of steel, they can throw fire and stones across great distances and to devastating effect.”

Jonas and Angela looked at each other.

“In Cathay, the black powder was used mostly for making displays of smoke and fire for enjoyment at festivals,” Kiran went on, “although they also used it in greater amounts to open up tunnels in the mountains, for easier mining of gold and silver and precious stones.

“One day, Michael sailed his ship into the Red Sea. The entire vessel was laden with barrels of the black powder. He was seeking a buyer, and the only interested party with enough wealth to bargain for the load was the elite army of the Egyptian Sultan – the infamous Mamelukes.

“Three representatives of the Mamelukes came to the Red Sea coast to bargain with the pirate Michael. And they were...”

“Yes, yes, you already told this part,” Simon fidgeted. “But why then did they simply not sail away from their captivity aboard his ship?”

“That is a good question,” Kiran acknowledged, “though one that only your three lost kinsmen could answer for certain.”

Jonas was rubbing his temples.

“We have to find them and pay their ransom to the Mamelukes,” Kes declared abruptly.

“What about your mission to Rome?” Angela asked.

“Rome is on the way to Egypt!” Kes was forming her plan. “We shall deliver the Papal appeal, and then continue on to Outremer. Surely the Egyptians have border outposts at the edge of their territory. We shall find one, ask to speak with an emissary, and then strike an appropriate bargain.”

“Sounds simple enough...” Simon shrugged.

“Yet if...even if...we were to allow such a dangerous addition to your quest,” Angela looked back and forth at her two youngest, “you two do not know the languages of Outremer, the lay of the land, or the complexities of the

cultures. You would be much safer, and much more likely to succeed, in the company of a knowledgeable and skilled guide.”

Everyone turned and stared at Kiran again.

“As I have no home,” he understood their thoughts. “I have no where else to go.”

“You will come with us then?” Kes asked Kiran.

“If you will have me,” he lowered his head.

“We shall be stronger for it,” Simon smiled at him.

“A braid of three cords...” Jared mused.

Jonas stood suddenly and walked out into the cool evening. Angela looked around at the others with a worried expression on her face. She said nothing to the children, however, and followed her husband outside.

She approached him from behind. “Are you angry, my love?”

He turned around slowly, and the look of utter agony on his face frightened her.

“Jonas?” She held his hands. “What is it?”

“The pain...my head...” He winced. “This has not happened in such a long time...”

“Have you had a vision?” she whispered.

He nodded.

“Can you tell me?” She was even quieter.

“Kes...” he was shivering slightly. “I saw Kes...”

“Was she alright?” Angela grew pale. “Do you think she will come to harm if we allow her to go?”

“She was fine,” Jonas shook his head slowly, “in fact, I have never seen her so happy...almost glowing...”

“Then...” Angela took a deep breath. “I do not understand...if she was alright, then why are you...”

“Twas the valley behind her...” Jonas wavered. “There were bodies beyond number...both men and beasts...and blood...blood flowed as high as the bridles of the horses. Clouds of black smoke hung low in the air, and above them...circling...the carrion birds prepared to feast...”

*

After riding through Nottingham, Jared tied up his horse behind the jailhouse and met his grandfather inside.

“Grandfather, you should come quickly!” Jared panted.

“What’s all this then?” James sputtered, still coming out of a nap.

“The Bishop – he is in the town center,” Jared described what he had seen. “A crowd is gathering and, from the bits I heard, he appears to be back at his fear mongering.”

James let out a long sigh before saying, "Very well. Let us go and at least have a listen."

They walked briskly back into town, and along the way were joined by more residents going to hear the Bishop speak. By the time they reached the town center, a shoulder-to-shoulder crowd had pressed into the main square.

"...and respectable wives must go out of doors only when driven by true necessity," Bishop Reynard droned onward in his prolonged rant, "for these weaker vessels are far more easily corrupted by the creeping sin that has infected this land. Likewise, good men of Nottingham; keep your children quiet and out of sight, for the Devil shall steal them away if they are allowed to draw too much attention to themselves.

"Rogues and highwaymen lurk in the countryside and behind every tree in Sherwood Forest. Without a second thought, they will take your life for a single piece of silver. Guard your treasures well, I say! For in these dark times, none shall be spared from the scourge of greed and villainy without the firm hand of God's protection upon their households and very souls!

"Listen well, my children! Think these things not strange. For in the lands across the sea, in the Frankish kingdoms and the Teutonic principalities, affairs are far worse. Plagues infest the cities. Treachery rules the roadways. The farms are circled day and night by hungry wild animals. Wolves and mad dogs prowl in the shrubberies, waiting for that one moment when the shepherd's guard is down. And then another little lamb is torn apart..."

Some of those in the crowd let out startled gasps. Jared looked at his grandfather who was taking it all in without expression.

"And worse dangers than these very soon shall befall Nottingham," Reynard warned, "if the Godless and unholy ways of you people continue! Repent therefore, and place your trust in the only hope you have for a future, both now and in the life hereafter. Dedicate your lives to Mother Church, and show this dedication with your tithes and offerings. Only in this way will you have any hope of avoiding destruction and entering in to heaven, where your burdens and sorrows shall be washed away, and you shall know blissful comfort forever and ever and ever."

Some of Reynard's henchmen were already moving through the crowd with offering plates. The ringing of metal on metal reverberated throughout the square as the frightened townsfolk eagerly dropped coins of various values into the Bishop's collection.

"Tis odd," a voice emerged from behind Jared and the Sheriff, "but I never once heard Our Lord Jesus Christ mentioned during that impromptu sermon...if one could call it such."

"Hello, Brother Peter," Jared smiled as he turned and saw their friend. "Now that you mention it...that is quite odd."

"Our Lord heals people and sets them free," James said quietly. "Reynard appears bent on doing the opposite."

“Are Simon and Kes making their move soon?” Peter whispered to them.

“They shall ride out early in the morning with our father and the messenger Kiran,” Jared answered.

“I have many rounds to make,” Peter concluded, “but I should very much like to give them a proper blessing before they go. Shall I come to your house around sundown?”

“I know that would mean a great deal to them,” Jared nodded, “and to our parents as well.”

“Until sundown then...” Friar Peter winked and disappeared into the dispersing crowd.

*

Under cover of darkness, the Littles and Kiran departed from Nottinghamshire riding four swift steeds. A fifth smaller horse carried bundles of food and bags full of gold coins to pay the Mamelukes.

Assembling the ransom nearly emptied the reserves of Locksley Hall, as well as the Little households and a number of other individuals who made token contributions. Naturally these had been collected in secret, as Bishop Reynard would have become furious at the diversion of funds from the church plates.

The expeditionary party enjoyed a break in the late spring rains and reached London in only three days. Jonas sold the fifth horse to buy passage for the others aboard an English vessel heading for France. Access to the ship’s food and water stores for the threesome was negotiated into the price.

Kes, Simon and Kiran presented themselves to the captain and crew as traveling monks embarking upon a pilgrimage to Rome. Due to Kes’ appearance and Kiran’s accent, Simon took the lead role and did all of the talking. He was thrilled. As the youngest of three, he often had been overshadowed by his older brother and sister.

Simon explained that his two companions had taken vows of silence and that they spent most of their waking moments in prayer and meditation. The sailors and other passengers were completely uninterested and paid them no further attention.

The ship left London on a warm sunny day and quickly crossed the channel. Then, rather than sailing around France, they sailed right into it. With the help of some long ropes and sturdy shore men, they headed right up the Seine River toward Paris.

When they finally reached that great city, the ship docked there for two nights. The three masquerading monks stayed on board and kept quiet, while the sailors took turns cavorting with the locals. After delighting to great excess in the abundance of available wines, the progress of the sailors was much slower for a few days following the stop.

Coming to a shallow stretch of river, the crew paused again to unload at a strategically located trading post. From there the ship would head back downstream; so Simon, Kes and Kiran parted company with the sailors and continued south on foot.

To avoid the interest of rogues and thieves, they carried the ransom gold in a wooden box they had purchased at the trading post. The box was ornamented with carved representations of a cross and four angels, so it fit well with their cover story that it held religious relics of little monetary value.

They took turns carrying the heavy box and rested frequently, making their progress fairly slow. Fortunately as their food supplies dwindled, kind locals consistently stepped forward with modest contributions of bread and cheese to help sustain the quiet monks.

"I cannot help feeling a bit guilty," Kes confessed as they moved back onto the open road after leaving another town.

"What on earth about?" Simon wondered as he popped the last bit of hard cheese rind into his mouth and began to chew.

"People are giving us food only because they believe us to be men of God," she explained. "Yet none of us are truly monks, and I am not even a man!"

"I knew something was bothering me about you," Simon snickered.

Kes whacked her brother and turned to Kiran, who was taking his turn lugging the treasure box. "What do you think? Are we wrong to eat food that has come to us through falsehood?"

"Things often are not what they seem in this world," Kiran answered, "but our need for food is very far from a falsehood."

They walked in silence for a moment while Kes pondered his response.

Suddenly, Kiran looked straight up into the midday sun and turned off the road. By this time, Simon and Kes had come to expect the regular intervals of their companion's prayers and they welcomed the breaks from walking.

They sat quietly and watched as Kiran prostrated himself toward the direction of the rising sun. He uttered words that they could not understand, but they had no doubt of his sincerity from the way he said them.

Soon they were back on their way, and Kes took a turn hauling the gold.

"Kiran?" she began, after balancing the box on top of her hooded head for easier carrying.

"Yes?"

"May I ask you something?" she sounded hesitant.

"You have already," he grinned, "but you may continue asking."

"Very well," she did not understand his humor. "May I ask the name of the god to whom you make your prayers?"

"Of course you may," Kiran responded, "and I shall tell you. I pray to the Great God Allah."

"I wonder," Kes hesitated again, "do you suppose that your...Allah...is very different from our God."

“Do not wonder,” Kiran answered. “Can more than one being exist as the Most High? No. Only one can be the Most High. And if the Most High is the one to whom you pray, then you are praying to Allah, even if you cry out in a different way than I.”

“What about God’s son?” Simon jumped in.

Kiran looked at him, but said nothing.

“Do you believe in the Christ, the son of God named Jesus?” Kes tried to clarify. “Did Michael Tuck tell you about him during your time together?”

“We spoke of many things, but not this,” Kiran said. “Yet I know of the one named Jesus. He was a great and mighty prophet of God. He spoke powerful words of truth and stood bravely against the corrupt powers of his day. This makes him a great man and worthy of respect, but Allah can have no equal. A son is heir and therefore equal to his father. How then could a man be the son of God - who can have no equal? Forgive me, but this makes no sense.”

“Perhaps you have only heard a part of the story,” Simon said after reflecting on Kiran’s words for a substantial stretch of road. “You have said well that Our Lord Jesus spoke mighty words of truth and came to stand for that which is right, but truly none of these were His greatest deed.”

Kiran looked expectantly at Simon.

“He performed many miracles,” Simon continued. “He healed the sick and lame, fed thousands with mere handfuls of food, walked across the surface of raging waters, and cast foul spirits out of many women and men.”

“Those truly are great deeds,” Kiran nodded, “and many prophets have been known to perform miracles – when they are the will of Allah.”

“Yet there was a mighty miracle greater still than all of these that Christ performed in his time on earth,” Simon smiled.

Kiran arched his eyebrow, indicating his skeptical curiosity.

“He was rejected by his own people and crucified unto death,” Simon explained. “Yet he had done nothing wrong! In fact, he was completely without sin, having come from heaven, being born of a virgin woman, and living a blameless life. Though his people could not see it, he was their rightful king – and more than that – as was foretold in their ancient prophecies, he was the anointed one of God who would take away the sin of the world.

“As he died on the cross, all the evil and sin of the world was heaped upon him and he bore that pain and horror – to the point that even God the Father in heaven turned His face away from the shame of it all. Then Jesus died, but that is not where the story ends. God would not forsake his Son and just leave him in the grave. He raised him from the dead and restored him to glory, and by that mighty act the power of sin and death was broken.

“After showing himself to his followers for many days to prove that he was alive again, he ascended to heaven where he prepares an eternal home for all those that believe in him – in his words of truth and his defeat of death.”

Simon paused and took a deep breath. They walked down the road for awhile without any further words. At the crest of a hill Kiran stopped. Simon and Kes walked a few more paces before they realized he was not moving. They turned to look at him, and he was staring at Simon.

“This is the whole story of the one called Christ, who you have named yourselves after, and who you believe to be God’s son?” Kiran asked slowly.

“There are more details to the story,” Simon answered, “but that is the heart of the matter.”

Kiran stood still and silent for so long that Kes finally set down the treasure box to give her head, neck and shoulders a much needed rest.

“I have heard many new things today,” Kiran spoke at last. “Perhaps we shall discuss these things again, after I have taken more time to consider all that you have said.”

“Fair enough,” Simon nodded.

“And perhaps,” Kiran looked back and forth at both of them, “you shall be willing to hear more about what I believe.”

“That only seems fair as well,” Kes smiled, and turning to Simon added, “and tis your turn to carry the gold.”

*

Two days later, they came upon the construction site of an enormous cathedral. A small temporary town ringed the site, housing the various groups of masons and artisans. They had been working for three years, with an estimated six or seven years left to go.

The masons were quite hospitable, sharing the most substantial meal that the threesome had enjoyed since leaving England. As usual Simon did the talking, and the Master Mason explained to him that the entire project was being overseen by a Cardinal of Rome. Kes and Kiran kept their hoods pulled over their faces and ate quietly.

After their meal, the Master went to fetch the Cardinal so that he could bless them before they continued their pilgrimage to Rome. Yet when the Master Mason returned with the red-robed Cardinal, the three monks had vanished.

*

Rome did not match their expectations.

“I thought this was supposed to be the Eternal City,” Simon complained. “These buildings look ready to fall apart!”

“Perhaps this area is just a bit...neglected,” Kes offered.

They continued on, occasionally peeking out from beneath their hoods to observe the citizenry who looked, for the most part, even more dilapidated than the buildings. The notable exceptions were anyone wearing a robe, cape or cowl

that set him apart as a church official. These individuals looked well-fed, clean and almost carefree in comparison to the average man.

Then they reached a bridge. After crossing the river, everything changed. The buildings were clean and many of them were actually white. The few people they saw, whether in a church uniform or not, appeared to be of the privileged class. They had reached the realm of the Papal Palace.

No sooner did the three travelers realize they had arrived at their first objective, than they were halted by a group of stout, olive-skinned, halberd-wielding guards.

“What business do you have?” one of the guards shouted, waving his weapon menacingly.

“We come in peace,” Simon held out his hands and used his best Latin. “We bring an urgent message that must be delivered to the Holy Father.”

“Who sent you?” the guard barked.

“Uh...” Simon thought quickly, “Bishop Reynard of the English county of Nottinghamshire.”

“Where is your letter?” the guard pressed.

“A letter...” Simon shook his head.

“None shall be considered for an audience with the Father without proper documents,” the guard smirked.

“Bishop Reynard did not feel we would need one,” Simon kept at it. “The Bishop felt confident that his name alone...”

“A Bishop would know better,” the guard was becoming angry. “Now, the three of you get out of my sight or we shall...”

The guard’s threat was interrupted by a trumpet blast. Looking past the guards, they noticed a large crowd gathering in the square underneath a far-off balcony. For a few moments the guards watched the gathering and engaged in a brief argument with one another. When they turned back around to settle business with Simon and company, the three monks had once again disappeared.

*

“I cannot bear another moment of this,” Kes said to her brother as they sat underneath a fig tree waiting for Kiran to return.

“He will join us soon enough,” Simon tried to calm her, even though he was beginning to get nervous as well.

“What were we thinking?” Kes shook her head. “We sent our poor unbelieving friend all alone into the very heart of the Church to deliver our message. If he is caught...”

“He won’t be,” Simon reassured his sister and his self. “After all, he is an Assassin of the farther east! They have never seen someone like him. And more importantly, he is not constrained by the loyalties and legalisms that bind a believer like you or me. He can move unfettered – like a shadow...”

“Look!” Kes exclaimed.

They saw a robed and hooded figure moving quickly toward them across the field. Soon Kiran was back with them and they both hugged him out of joy and relief.

“Are you all right?” Kes asked.

Kiran nodded, breathing heavily.

“Did you deliver the scroll?” Simon was still holding onto him.

Kiran nodded again, a grin appearing on his face.

“Did you really see the Pontiff himself?” Kes was excited.

He nodded again, and then they allowed Kiran a sip of water and a few more moments to breathe before pressing for further answers.

“Are you sure it was him?” Simon motioned for them all to sit down.

“He was the one everyone was bowing to...” Kiran frowned. “Could this have been someone else?”

“No,” Simon shook his head, “not likely.”

“What happened?” Kes was nearly shaking.

“When everyone finally finished kissing his hand,” Kiran explained, “he retired alone to his private quarters. Only, he was not alone. I was there too. He seemed surprised to see me, but not afraid at all.”

“Did he say anything?” Simon was wide-eyed.

“He asked me my name,” Kiran answered, “and I told him. Then I handed him the scroll and explained that I had traveled a great distance to bring it to him. I told him the scroll was very important and required his attention.”

“Then what happened?” Kes looked as astonished as her brother.

“The door to the chamber began to open,” Kiran recalled. “He turned to see who was coming, and I took that moment to leave back through the window I had entered. I did not stop running until I saw you two.”

“Well done, my good man!” Simon began laughing out loud.

“Yes,” Kes agreed, “and thank God you are safe! But...how do we know if he will read the scroll, and understand it, and believe it, and take action?”

“That was always beyond our control,” Kiran shook his head.

“He is right,” Simon put his hand on his sister’s shoulder, “but fear not. The message was written and the message was presented. We have done what we could, and the rest is in God’s hands.”

Verse Six – Mamelukes

Egypt sweltered under the scorching summer sun. Even in the extreme heat though, the Mamelukes were hard at work.

Weapons needed sharpening. Shields were to be polished. The camel herds were inspected and any with visible weaknesses or flaws were removed. Arrows were manufactured by the hundreds of thousands. Maps and wise men were consulted, and fervent prayer was all around.

Randol of Locksley and the Allendale twins were on a special mission. They were on their way to a hidden storehouse near Giza where materials for a new kind of secret weapon were being kept. They had stopped to rest high on a ridge above the Mameluke camp.

“Many times in our years here,” Alfred watched the swarming activity from their hilltop perch, “we have ridden to war.”

“Then why does it feel so different this time?” Edric finished his twin brother’s thought.

“On every other occasion,” Randol said what they all knew in their hearts, “we rode out to bring overwhelming force upon a lesser foe. The Berbers, the Bedouins, the Arabs...the Ethiopians – none of these have threatened Egypt’s existence. This time, we are on the defensive. We are fighting to survive.”

“I had thought the Khwarizm would at least have slowed the Mongols down a bit,” Alfred lamented.

“Bloody Turks,” Edric shook his head. “As usual, they simply turned tail and ran at the first sign of an honest fight.”

Randol was silent. He stood, walked over to the edge of the palm tree shade, and looked down over the Mameluke barracks, workshops and muster fields. Far across the sands, the Great Pyramids shimmered in the rising heat.

The twins looked at each other but matched his silence.

“Do you know what the men are saying?” Randol asked at last.

“Do they not believe we can win?” Edric wondered.

“No,” Randol answered, “they do not.” He turned to face his two friends. “In fact, I believe they are counting on it.”

“Come again?” Alfred expressed his confusion.

“Remember where these lads came from,” Randol reminded them.

“They were taken from the Kievan Rus,” Edric remembered, “out of the Black Sea ports aboard the slave ships.”

“Yes, yes,” Randol came back over and sat down again, “but remember that they are of the same stock as our dear old Jonas Little, at least on his mother’s side. That is why he was mistaken for a boy of the Rus, and the slave traders tried to take him away.”

The twins looked at him, still uncertain what he was getting at.

“Do you not see?” Randol threw up his hands. “These boys that have grown into our brave Mamelukes – they are simply Norsemen, a generation or two removed from their original homelands in Skandia.”

“I had never thought of it that way,” Alfred confessed, “though that would explain their fairness...”

“And their eagerness for battle...” Edric added.

“And their eagerness for the end...” Randol said ominously. “Growing up in Norse homes – even transplanted ones – they would have been raised hearing the old myths.”

“What old myths?” Alfred wondered.

“You know,” Randol stood again and began pacing, “the ancient stories... the gods and heroes that the Norsemen dream of because they do not know the Lord. The great serpent... the sea of worms... the pack of the wild hunt... Valhalla and the Valkyrie... and then of course, Ragnarok...”

“That all sounds vaguely familiar,” Edric acknowledged, “but I do not know what those last words mean; Valhalla, Valkyrie...and Ragnarok.”

Alfred mirrored his brother’s curiosity by arching his eyebrow.

“Valhalla,” Randol began, “is the great hall in heaven where, according to the legends of the Norsemen, heroes slain in battle shall be welcomed and given an everlasting place among the gods.

“Valkyrie then are the handmaidens of the Norse god, Odin, who hover above battlefields and come down to choose from among the slain those that are worthy of a place in Valhalla.”

“Extraordinary...” Alfred commented.

“Quite,” Randol agreed. “In fact, not only are the Valkyrie said to decide which of those among the fallen they shall take up, but they can even influence the outcome of battles by granting their favor to individual warriors on one side or the other, while they are still alive and fighting.”

“A few Valkyrie on our side would be a help then,” Edric mused.

“I should say so...” Randol paused, losing his train of thought.

“And what say you of Ragnarok?” Alfred reminded him.

“Ah, yes, Ragnarok,” Randol resumed. “That is merely the inevitable and tragic end of all things when darkness and evil shall come crashing down in a final resounding victory over all that is good and even the gods themselves.”

“That is awful!” Edric exclaimed.

“It does rather dampen ones outlook on the future,” Randol concurred, “unless of course one feels that he is very likely to earn a place in Valhalla.”

“We must redouble our efforts to tell the soldiers about Christ,” Alfred asserted, “so they may hold to a hope that is assured.”

“You are right, of course,” Randol nodded. “Although we must be careful...this is not England, you know.”

“I should say a fair number are believers already,” Edric suggested, “though they must keep up a false front just as we have.”

They sat in silence for a moment.

“And for those who cling to the old ways,” Alfred wondered, “I suppose they look forward to Ragnarok as a chance to prove their bravery and worthiness, so they will be chosen from among the fallen as the world comes to an end...”

“The Mongol Horde may well provide that opportunity, as they are said to be invincible,” Randol sighed. “Yet I should like to deprive our Norse friends of their place in Valhalla – at least for a bit longer.”

“What are you saying?” Edric frowned.

“I am saying,” Randol looked back out over the valley of the Mameluke camp, “that I am not quite ready for Ragnarok. When we meet the Mongols on the battlefield, I do not plan to go down in a blaze of glory – I plan to win!”

“I like that plan,” Alfred grinned.

“Come then,” Randol motioned for the twins to follow him. “We have rested here long enough.”

*

“Ready your weapon!” Edric screamed at the top of his lungs.

The one thousand trainees under his command obeyed.

“Find your mark!” he bellowed.

The men pointed the open ends of their shiny metal tubes at the hundreds of wooden and straw dummies propped up on the nearby ridge line as targets.

“VOLLEY!” he roared.

The explosive thunder that followed in the next moment shook the ground, and flocks of birds many miles away took to the air in utter terror. Arcs of white fire erupted from the ends of the weapons, followed by the blackest smoke. The smoke from each individual weapon combined in the air above the soldiers’ heads, forming a dark billowing cloud that hovered low. The men trembled under its shadow. The air turned foul.

The dummies on the ridge line were gone. Swirling dust and sand were the only evidence that they had ever been.

“Impressive,” Alfred remarked from the back of his camel.

“I agree,” Randol nodded as they rode along. “I only wish we could allow the men more practice shots, but we must save as much of the black powder as we can for the actual battle.”

“Just how many of our soldiers do you plan to equip with this fearsome new wizardry?” Alfred asked.

“One thousand created a nice shock and a leveling blast,” Randol mulled the matter. “I should say ten thousand ought to do the trick.”

“Ten thousand...?” Alfred gasped. “We do not have near that many of the metal firing tubes.”

“That is why I have instructed the foundries to work day and night,” Randol grinned at his friend. “We shall have enough by the time we ride out.”

They pulled their camels to a stop as they finally reached Edric's position on the field.

"What say you?" Edric was smiling.

"Well done," Randol laughed. "Let us hope they are as effective against the Mongols as they are against men of straw!"

"If they are," Alfred considered, "then I fear the age of the archer may be coming to a close."

"Fear not, my bow-wielding friend," Randol patted him on the shoulder. "A need shall always remain for range weapons that do not draw so much attention to their users."

"I suppose," Alfred nodded.

"So," Edric continued, "are we ready to show Baybars then?"

"We are ready," Randol answered.

*

"Well done, my faithful servants," Sultan Baybars beamed at his trio of top generals. "And this black powder is just one of the many surprises we shall have in store for Hulegu and his Mongol Horde!"

The three men bowed to their leader.

"Now," Baybars clapped his hands, "give me the rest of your reports – Zaid, what of the mercenary levees?"

Edric stepped forward. "Ten thousand more spears have arrived from the Maghreb, your eminence, and five thousand swords from Karbala that escaped ahead of the Mongols. Thirty war elephants from Aswan are on their way, and a naphtha maker has been found in Sinai who will be in Cairo by tomorrow."

"Good, good," Baybars stroked his beard, "do not cease in your efforts." He paused before adding, "But we shall leave the elephants behind as a rear guard – they eat too much!"

Edric nodded and backed away as his brother stepped forward.

"Weapon and armor production is ahead of schedule, master," Alfred bowed low. "The camel herds have been culled of all weakness, and the desert sheiks have delivered on their promise of seven-thousand swift young stallions. Our cavalry lines shall be full and fresh."

"And provisions?" Baybars folded his arms.

"The grain wagons shall burst with any more reserves, my lord" Alfred grinned. "If the battle shall last three weeks, our men will not go hungry."

"What about water?" the Sultan frowned.

"That is another matter indeed, your excellence," Alfred nodded. "Our own reserves will only last three days of heated engagement. We will have to rely upon local rivers, streams or wells."

Baybars nodded and began pacing around the room. "Yes," he whispered, "the location of the battlefield shall be the key." He muttered

incomprehensibly to himself for a few moments more before waving Alfred away with, “good, good...well done Rashid.”

Alfred stepped back and Randol took his place, but waited for Baybars to look at him.

“My lord,” Randol began, “your spies have reported. The Horde has completed their Anatolian campaign and has begun moving south into the Syrian sands. They retain their superior strength with two hundred-thousand heavy riders and at least as many auxiliaries. The main Armenian force is with them, numbering over twenty-thousand. Bohemond of Antioch has joined the enemy as well. His troop numbers are not worthy of your concern, although there may be Templars in his company.”

Baybars looked slightly paler than a moment before.

“For his part,” Randol pressed on, “Hulegu sits in his tent. He has not emerged in weeks, leading some to speculate that he may be ill.”

“Who leads the army then?” the color quickly returned to the Sultan’s face, and he even had a twinkle in his eye.

“A Mongol general named Kitboga is directing them,” Randol explained. “He is said to be an unparalleled expert attacker; a stranger to defeat and merciless in victory.”

“What else do we know of him?” Baybars frowned.

“He is young – fewer than thirty summers,” Randol answered. “Also, he is a Christian of the eastern Nestorian tradition, as are his several wives.”

Baybars raised his eyebrows, “That is interesting...and worrisome.”

The Sultan paced around a bit more, and Randol finally stepped back in line with the twins.

“If the southern Crusader Kingdoms throw in their lot with the Mongols like Bohemond and the Armenians,” Baybars finally spoke his thoughts aloud, “they could prove most troublesome to our supply lines and rear guard.”

“What is to be done, my lord?” Randol responded to the Sultan’s troubled expression.

“The three of you shall ride out at morning’s first light,” Baybars declared. “You shall travel north, not to battle – at least not yet. No, you shall be playing the part of emissaries, for you understand the ways of the West.

“Rashid, I send you to the Templar stronghold at Ascalon. Seek out their Grandmaster, or if he is absent, whoever rules the castle at that time.

“Zaid, you shall travel to Acre. Count Julian of the Franj is the warden of that port city. Find him and secure an audience.

“Isam, you shall have the farthest to go. And you must move with all haste to reach the Hospitaller Knights and seek the ear of their Grandmaster at his hilltop citadel – the Krak des Chevalier!

“Each of you must gauge the intentions of these Christian rulers. Remind them that while we have always been merciful in victory, they may expect no such magnanimity from the Mongol Horde. At best you may win them

over to our side in this war. If not, then urge them to stay neutral – for their own safety and survival. Do you understand my instructions?”

“Absolutely, your highness,” Randol said as the threesome bowed.

“Good, then go,” Baybars motioned to the doorway. “You have not a moment to lose.”

*

“Look!” Alfred was the first to see the city on the horizon.

“Jerusalem!” Edric marveled.

“She truly is beautiful,” Randol declared.

The dozen Mameluke soldiers accompanying them reserved comment.

“If only we had time to ascend to the Holy City...” Alfred sighed.

“Perhaps another day,” Randol aimed his camel toward the north. “But now we must ride with all haste, my friends. The Mongols are coming and will not wait for us to complete our quest for allies!”

With no further words, the three acting emissaries split up and rode in three different directions – all moving away from Jerusalem. Four Mamelukes followed each of them, both as a bodyguard and to guarantee their prompt return.

By this time, however, escaping from Egypt was no longer on any of the Englishmen’s minds. Their hearts were entirely fixed upon the imminent battle, likely to be the greatest the world had ever seen.

*

“So you are not the Grandmaster of the Templar Knights?” Alfred sought to clarify.

“No, I am not,” Sir Thomas Berard answered, “but in his absence, all the Knights here at Ascalon are under my direct command. And you, I dare say, are not an Egyptian – and yet you speak for the Sultan?”

“Tis a long story,” Alfred winked, “though I am afraid there is no time for histories and recollections. The Mongol Horde is heading this way. At best, a few weeks remain for preparation. If you and your knights side with Egypt, you will have the Sultan’s protection guaranteed for ten years and as much gold as your men can carry.”

Berard grinned. “You make an interesting offer...what did you say your name was?”

“General Rashid,” Alfred answered.

“Yes...Rashid...” Berard looked at him skeptically. “Yet I am sorry to say I must refuse. This has not been a good year...”

“Then perhaps I could offer...” Alfred tried.

“I am sorry,” Berard cut him off. “The Templars of Ascalon shall not ride to war at this time. I will say no more.”

“Very well,” Alfred bowed. “Know this, however. Should Egypt fail to stop the Mongol advance on a day very soon to come, they will not rest at the River Nile. They will sweep across the Maghreb in under a month. The Mongol Empire will surround Christendom in a great arc from the snowy northern Rus to sunny Moorish Spain. And then who shall stand in their way? You may hold Ascalon – for a time – but Rome, Vienna and Paris will all burn. And the light of Christendom could well be snuffed out.”

“You seem awfully concerned about the fate of Christian lands...for an Egyptian general,” Berard was studying Alfred’s face. “Are you sure we have not met before?”

“Perhaps...” Alfred said quietly. “I traveled quite extensively in my younger days.”

An awkward silence passed as Berard continued to stare at the unlikely Egyptian warrior.

“In any case, I am grateful for your hospitality toward me and my men,” Alfred bowed and turned to leave.

“You can tell the Sultan,” Berard called out as Alfred neared the door, “that although we shall not ride to the battlefield, neither shall we take advantage of the situation from behind your lines. And within our power, we shall guarantee the safety of your supply caravans.”

Alfred grinned. Before disappearing through the doorway, he bowed one last time to the Templar leader and said, “Thank you...brother Berard.”

*

Upon his arrival at Acre, General Zaid was promptly arrested and thrown into prison. The next morning, however, guards came and rushed him straight to the palace.

“A terrible misunderstanding,” the rat-faced Count Julian over dramatized as he pranced across his royal court toward Edric. “And I most humbly beg of you your forgiveness. We would never, ever wish to offend a representative of his wondrous Excellency, the most powerful Sultan of Egypt!”

“No offense has been taken, good Count,” Edric assured him, “though I fear for the time that has been lost. The Mongol Horde this way comes!”

“Ah, armies of one sort or another have always gone up and down throughout the Holy Land since time immemorial,” the Count did not appear concerned in the least. “Come; let me offer you some refreshment as a small token of my sincere apologies for the most unfortunate...”

“Thank you, but no,” Edric demurred. “You must understand; this Horde is not like any other army that has come before. They move more swiftly than a sandstorm, and their arrival is preceded by a deadly rain of arrows. Defenders often do not even see the bringer of their destruction.”

“Oh my good general,” Julian poured himself a glass of wine, “how many thousands of arrows have shattered harmlessly against the great walls of Acre? And with a constant stream of Genoese supply ships coming and going from our port, we would need only wait until these...Mongols as you say, grow weary of besieging us and leave back to wherever they came from.”

“Have you not heard of the Mongol destruction of Baghdad or Alamut?” Edric was growing impatient. “Were their walls not also thick?”

“One hears many rumors and tales...” Julian sniffed.

“These are not rumors,” Edric said between clenched teeth. “Hundreds of thousands have died before the Mongol advance. *Real* men, women and children have been slaughtered. And garrisons much larger than yours have been swept away in a single hour like mere chaff.”

“What is it you want from me?” Count Julian was visibly uncomfortable.

“Rally your men,” Edric explained. “Take to the field alongside Egypt and help stop this invading force that threatens all of civilization!”

“Fight alongside Egypt?” Julian snorted. “I think not! Over the years we have suffered far more greatly at the hand of the Sultan than from any wandering barbarian tribe.”

“I understand,” Edric nodded, “yet you must at least acknowledge that the Sultan will respond to reason. He will honor his treaties. He will show mercy to women and children. And he will *pay* for the supplies that he needs!”

The last point seemed to give Julian pause.

“The Mongols on the other hand,” Edric sought to drive the point home, “will take whatever they want. They do not carry gold or silver, for the sword is the only currency they require.”

Julian began pacing.

Edric remained silent for a moment to let his words of warning take hold.

“Very well,” Julian made his decision at last. “While my men shall not become entangled in this war, we shall not interfere with your efforts. Moreover, we will keep your army supplied with all of the provisions, water and other materials you may need to whatever extent our stores can manage...all at a very reasonable price...naturally.”

“Naturally,” Edric grinned. “Your support shall not be forgotten, my good Count.” He turned to leave the palace and rejoin with his bodyguard.

Edric paused on the way out to comment, “And you have by far the finest prisons in all of Outremer!”

*

Randol and his men could see the Krak des Chevalier far off in the distance on its mountaintop perch. The fortress looked completely impenetrable.

Even more magnificent of a sight, however, to the thirsty and weary riders, was an unguarded grove of orange trees in full summertime ripeness.

They dismounted and enjoyed the shade from the leafy trees while tasting of their delicious and thirst-quenching fruit.

Suddenly, the quiet rustling of leaves was overwhelmed by a growing rumble. Soon a single heavily armored – but unarmed – knight came into view. He was heading on a course to go right past the orange grove. Four other riders, each brandishing long spears, were bearing down upon him.

“Bandits?” one of the Mamelukes asked Randol.

“Possibly,” he nodded. “In any event; this is not a fair fight. Let us lend a hand!”

Randol and his men remounted as the hunters and their prey thundered past. The Mamelukes fell in with the chase and Randol shouted for them to put arrows to their bowstrings.

“Loose!” Randol cried.

Two of the spearmen fell from their horses. The other two broke off their pursuit and turned around to charge at the Mamelukes. Another quick volley of arrows put an end to the fight.

The fleeing knight looked back, and perceiving his sudden change of fortune, retraced his steps toward Randol and his men.

“To whom do I owe thanks for saving my life?” the knight queried from behind his face guard.

“I am General Isam of the Egyptian Mamelukes,” Randol answered.

“Egypt, eh?” the knight removed his helmet, revealing an amused expression highlighted by his sparkling sky-blue eyes and a scar on his cheek that accentuated his grin. “Well, an unexpected friend is still a friend...”

“And you are?” Randol wondered.

“I am Sir Guy de Chatillon of the Knights of the Order of the Hospital of Saint John of Jerusalem, and I do thank you for your help in my time of need. I will remember this day and gladly repay you in any way I am able.”

“You are a Hospitaller?” Randol’s asked.

“Yes,” Sir Guy nodded. “I was returning from an errand to the castle you see behind me, when I was ambushed by these Turkish rogues.”

“What providence!” Randol smiled. “We are heading to that very same castle on an urgent diplomatic mission.”

“Then ride with me,” Sir Guy turned his horse around. “I will help you gain speedy entrance and find those with whom you need to speak.”

Randol signaled for the Mamelukes to follow and they rode off toward the Krak des Chevaliers.

“I must say... General Isam,” Sir Guy was smirking slightly, “that though profoundly grateful, I am more than a little amazed you should choose the defense of a Christian knight at the expense of four fellow Mohammedans.”

“Things are not always as they seem,” Randol winked. “In any case, four against one did not seem fair. By the way, Sir Guy, do you always ride out from the Krak des Chevalier without your sword?”

“I had a sword when I left,” Sir Guy laughed. “You see, there were six Turkish bandits at the beginning of the ambush. One of them is still...um... holding on to my sword for me.”

*

Randol returned to Cairo a long five days after the twins.

“Thank the Lord,” Edric exclaimed. “We were beginning to worry you had taken on the Mongols alone.”

“You know I would not keep all the action for myself,” Randol smiled broadly.

The threesome rode to their quarters and refreshed themselves, while Edric and Alfred recounted their limited successes in securing help from the southern Crusader city-states.

“Those that are not against us are for us,” Randol concluded after listening to their stories.

“What about your mission?” Alfred inquired. “What word from the Knights Hospitaller?”

“The end result was a similar gambit,” Randol explained. “They refused to become involved, and yet they will not hinder us.”

Edric and Alfred nodded in unison.

“Although I did make a new friend...” Randol grinned.

Before either twin could ask what he meant, the Sultan’s messenger Hakim Masood came on the run. As soon as he was able to catch his breath, he informed the three generals that their presence in Baybars’ court had been urgently demanded.

“What is going on, Masood?” Edric asked him as they donned their cloaks and left the building.

“An emissary has arrived,” Masood panted, “from the Mongol Horde.”

*

Randol, Edric and Alfred entered the Sultan’s court and bowed to Baybars just moments before the Mongol emissary was ushered in. In his entourage were two translators, a scribe and six guards.

All ten Mongols strode boldly toward Baybars’ throne. They skipped the standard signs of respect; neither bowing, nor offering diplomatic greetings. Instead, the emissary – through his translators – began detailing the extensive and varied forms of tribute payments that the Mongol Khan expected immediately in order for Egypt to avoid annihilation.

Baybars simply sat and listened, displaying no reaction at all. When the emissary had finished his outrageous list of demands, the Sultan continued to

stare coolly at the visitors. Eventually, the emissary grew impatient and insisted on a reply.

The reply came in the form of a slight nod from Sultan Baybars. At that signal, one hundred Mamelukes emerged from behind the many pillars and curtains in the hall. They charged at the Mongols from every direction, quickly disarmed the six guards, and after a brief scuffle had all ten of the visitors on their knees in front of Baybars' throne.

"So," Baybars roared, "I see the Mongols are capable of showing respect after all!"

The emissary shouted a series of words that sounded threatening, but the translators chose to remain silent.

Baybars gave a new signal, and a group of Nubian axe-men stepped into place behind the prisoners. They performed their task well, and all ten of the Mongols' heads fell away from their bodies. As blood pooled before his throne, Baybars shouted his command for the heads to be mounted on pikes above the city gates.

"I suppose in the grand scheme of things," Alfred said quietly, "that our diplomatic missions all went extraordinarily well."

"I should say so," Edric concurred.

The twins looked over at Randol, knowing he was always good for a humorous quip in the midst of extremely tense situations.

He looked back and forth at them, and much to their disappointment only offered the words, "It begins."

Verse Seven – Three Kings

Kes, Simon and Kiran hurried down the coast to Naples. They were ready to begin the second and more difficult portion of their quest – reaching Egypt, finding the long-lost Randol of Locksley and the Allendale brothers, and negotiating for their release.

Preserving their pretense of monasticism, they simply changed their cover story to explain themselves as pilgrims to Jerusalem and secured passage on a ship to Outremer. The ship they boarded was a Genoese vessel on a trading mission to the Crusader kingdoms of the Levantine coast.

“From there,” the ship’s captain explained to them, “you will be just a few weeks from the borderlands of Egypt traveling on foot. If you can afford horses or camels, you will only need a few days.”

*

Midsummer had arrived by the time the Genoese ship carrying Kes, Simon and Kiran passed north of Cyprus, and the sun blazed angrily over the shimmering waters of the Eastern Mediterranean. The Genoese, along with their Venetian rivals, clearly dominated the high seas; and Saracen pirates kept a respectful distance.

The captain had become fond of his three unusual passengers and called them to the bow of the ship at the first sighting of land since Cyprus.

“See there!” he shouted. “Behold Outremer – the land across the sea! Before the sun sets, we shall make port in the Crusader Kingdom of Antioch. But be ye warned, my friends. You must guard yourselves well, and trust no one. All manner of intrigue stirs within this great city, and every citizen is a scoundrel. Not a single honorable soul dwells within the towering walls you see rising toward heaven.”

Having finished his warning, the captain returned to the helm.

“Not a single honorable soul...” Simon remarked. “This sounds like quite a place.”

“That is not the truth,” Kiran whispered. “There is one.”

Simon and Kes watched him, but he said no more.

*

They disembarked on the very same dock from which Kiran had left Antioch nearly a year earlier. For two days they had eaten only stale bread, and so a decent meal became their first order of business.

In a small seaside tavern they purchased some flatbread with a salty paste for spreading, a roasted quail to share, and an orange for each of them. They ate with their hoods up and the box of ransom money underneath the table.

“That was wonderful,” Kiran commented as he finished cleaning one of the last quail bones.

“Wonderful would be having it all again twice over,” Simon peered out from under his hood, hoping the others would agree.

“We must be cautious with our spending,” Kes warned. “Remember the Captain’s advice. We should not draw undue attention.”

The boys nodded. Simon retrieved the ransom box, and with one last sorrowful glance at the picked-over quail, turned to follow Kiran and his sister out of the tavern.

Trouble was brewing in the street. A dozen Frankish crusaders had started a scuffle with a comparably sized group of Teutonic knights. Threats and shouted insults quickly gave way to full-blown shoving and fisticuffs.

Kes took the lead in trying to navigate through the chaos, with Simon clutching the ransom box to his chest and Kiran bringing up the rear. They ducked and weaved across the street, making for the relative calm and safety of a nearby alleyway.

They had almost arrived when the largest of the Teutonic knights picked up one of the smaller Franks and hurled him into the air. The flying Frank broadsided Simon, slamming him hard onto the cobblestones and sending the treasure box tumbling.

Time seemed to freeze for a moment as everyone involved in the melee turned to watch the sparkling shower of gold coins clinking and twirling all over the street. Kes and Kiran dove into the thick of the spill, desperately scooping up as many coins as they could grab. Simon simply tried to recover his breath.

Forgetting about each other, the Franks and Teutons piled onto Kiran and Kes. Each man began stuffing coins into his tunic. All was a mad frenzy of arms, legs and gold; and the poor English youths would surely have been torn limb from limb by the greedy crusaders and knights.

Fortunately, some of the nearby business proprietors had called out the town militia. Thirty armored pike-men came clanking down the cobblestone street, led by a pair of royal guards on horseback. The two factions of fighters that had started the brawl panicked and fled with whatever pieces of gold they had gathered.

Desiring to make a show of effort to the shop-owners, the militia arrested the only three combatants who had not escaped the scene. Then after seizing the small amount of gold that remained as payment for their trouble, the militia-men bound Kes, Simon and Kiran’s hands behind their backs and led them away to Antioch’s dungeons.

*

“I cannot believe it is gone,” Simon lamented. “All the gold of Locksley and our family...”

“This is not your fault,” Kiran assured him for the sixth or seventh time. “I saw the man hit you. There is nothing you could have done to prevent this.”

“What are we going to do?” Simon was still inconsolable. “Our entire journey has been for naught. Even if we somehow manage to escape this dungeon, what help can we be to our uncles and Lord Randol with no ransom?”

“The important thing is that we are still together,” Kes tried to comfort him. “We have come this far. Perhaps there is a greater plan working out in all of this than we can even know. We must trust in God not to forsake us!”

Kiran nodded, but Simon only looked down in despair.

*

That night, Simon fell asleep early. Kes and Kiran were both restless, however, and stayed up talking long into the night.

“Another wonder of Islam,” Kiran continued his explanation, “is that every man can take his prayers directly to Allah. There is no need to go through a priest or a bishop or a pope to reach out to the Most High.”

“Friar Peter...well, you met him,” Kes remembered. “He says that Christianity was once practiced in very much the same way; every man – and every woman – in direct communion with the Lord. Only more recently has the Church built up a fortress around the faith, controlling who comes in and who goes out.”

“Why do you think this has happened?” Kiran was curious.

“Friar Peter says that the hearts of men are easily corrupted and bent toward power. Therefore, even the pure and true Gospel of Our Lord can become something that is hoarded and traded and used for one’s own gain.”

“Do you believe he is right?” Kiran asked.

“From all I have seen in recent times,” Kes looked down, “yes – I am afraid that he is right.”

“That is unfortunate,” Kiran shook his head, “and could never happen with Islam.”

“Why do you say that?” Kes wondered.

Kiran explained, “Islam is simply submitting oneself to the will of Allah. So you see; all power is left where it belongs – with the Most High – and there is none left to hold over the heads of other men.”

“Friar Peter speaks of a day when we shall once again worship as in the early Church times. He says in that day the Word of God shall be the first, last and only measure by which men are judged. In that day we shall all be brothers and sisters as God intended – we shall be equal and free – and no man shall claim to hold the soul of another in his hands,” Kes was growing excited.

Kiran motioned with his hands for her to quiet her voice, so as not to attract the attention of the guards.

“Sorry,” she whispered. “He also says that there are many others who feel the same way – I know that my family and the Locksleys are among them – but that we must be cautious, for we are far from strong enough to stand up and speak freely.”

“I will pray to Allah for you and your family to find this strength,” Kiran said earnestly.

“Thank you,” she replied, “although right now I would only ask that you pray for us to somehow escape this dungeon.”

“In my heart, I have been praying for that all night,” he smiled.

*

After three days of hunger and darkness, their prayers were answered. Voices floated down to them along the narrow corridors of the dungeon, punctuated by the metallic ringing of cell doors opening and shutting.

Suddenly, a guard appeared.

“Can you monks do anything useful?” the guard asked in Latin.

“I beg your pardon?” Simon looked up.

“King Bohemond is going to war!” the guard seemed impatient. “Can you fight? Can you sharpen spears? Can you cook?”

“We can cook!” Simon looked hopefully at Kes.

She grinned slightly.

“Yes,” Simon nodded. “We are excellent cooks – all three of us – especially for large crowds!”

The guard unlocked their cell door and motioned for them to come out.

“Oh, you shall not regret this!” Simon was ecstatic. “Your army shall enjoy the finest...”

“Shut up!” the guard barked, handing Simon a small tin coin. “Go down the hall that way to the stairs. Take them up, and give this token to the sergeant at the outer gate. He will tell you what to do.”

Simon, followed closely by Kes and Kiran, bolted away toward the surface and relative freedom.

“Thank you!” Simon shouted back toward the guard as they rounded the first corner.

“Thank God!” Kes added quietly.

Kiran smiled.

*

Freedom came with a few restrictions. Most notably, an iron shackle was placed on each of their left ankles, linked together by a heavy chain.

“At least we can be fairly sure we shall stay together,” Kes concluded.

“We cannot have the help running off on us,” the surly blacksmith chuckled as he inspected his handiwork. “Now back to the sergeant with you!”

They walked with great difficulty at first, but soon settled into a rhythm. Following the sergeant’s instructions, they moved briskly to the gathering field with the other slaves, servants and auxiliary workers.

There they were loaded into a wagon along with a few other trios and pairs in shackles. All of the passengers made themselves as comfortable as they could among the many boxes, canisters and sacks; and the wagon soon began rolling along.

“I say,” Simon turned to another young western-looking man in chains nearby, “any idea where we are going?”

“This is the road to Damascus,” he answered in Greek. “They say we will not even have to fight. The city has surrendered, now that the Three Kings are coming.”

“What three kings?” Kes asked.

“King Bohemond has made an alliance,” the young man told what he had heard. “He has joined with Hethoum of Armenia and Kitboga of the Steppe Mongols. All three are Christian kings. Word is they shall take us all the way to Jerusalem; perhaps even into Egypt!”

“Is that so?” Simon muttered.

“Well,” Kes nudged him, “at least we are traveling in the proper direction again.”

*

After darkness had fallen, the wagon finally came to a stop. By the time Kes, Simon and Kiran worked their way out of the wagon, much of the camp had already been assembled. Tents surrounded them for as far as they could see.

“Don’t just stand there!” a new sergeant hollered. “The men are hungry! Get to work – all of you!”

While other slaves built up the fire, unloaded supplies and brought water; Kes – flanked by her two shackle-mates – took over the preparation of soup. Down on his end of the chain, Simon began the process by picking vegetables out of the sack that had been set next to him. He picked off any inedible portions and tossed them into the fire.

He handed the desirable parts to Kes who, lacking a knife, did the best she could to snap or tear the food into properly sized pieces. When they were as broken down as she could manage, she deposited them into the gigantic steaming cauldron in front of them.

Kiran continually swirled the concoction with the only tool they had been given – an enormous iron ladle. Soon a line of soldiers had formed, and Kiran did his best to quickly fill their cups, bowls, or in a few cases, helmets with steaming hot soup.

On that crisp and breezy desert night, they were grateful for a place next to the fire. They were much more grateful for the bits of vegetables that they were able to occasionally pop into their mouths when no one was watching.

"They seem to be enjoying the soup," Simon observed several nearby soldiers licking their bowls.

"I only wonder at what I could have done with a knife...and some sea salt...and perhaps a little marjoram..." Kes sighed.

"Next time perhaps," Simon patted her shoulder.

Suddenly a spirited melody swept across the camp, and cheers went up from an area just out of their sight.

"That sounds like someone playing flute!" Kes was curious.

"We must be near one of the leader's tents," Simon reasoned.

"Everyone seems to have been fed," Kiran looked around. "Perhaps we could venture a quick look."

The three monk-cooks shuffled off between the rows of tents, led on by the enchanting, almost haunting, music. They discovered its source near the entrance to a tent much larger than any of the others.

Dozens of drunken officers were carousing in the area in front of the tent. Two large plush chairs were situated underneath a canopy, holding what appeared to be the king and his queen. Next to them, sitting on a simple wooden stool, was a young lady with dark hair and eyes. The flute at her lips was the source of the sound they had been trying to find.

"Tis beautiful," Kes marveled.

"Yes," Simon sounded far away, "she is."

Kes looked over at him and prepared to chide him for misunderstanding her words. When she saw the look in his eyes, however, she left him alone.

She turned to Kiran to ask what he thought of the music, but the look on his face was so dramatic she almost gasped.

"Kiran," she touched his arm, "are you quite alright? I might think you had seen a phantom."

"Not a phantom..." he slowly shook his head, finally looking back at Kes and smiling slightly, "but a friend."

Kes opened her mouth to ask what he meant, but was interrupted by a loud voice behind them.

"What are you doing there?" the camp sergeant had found them. "You've a mess to clean up – get back to work!"

The trio trudged off to their soup cauldron.

Ovsanna paused from her flute playing and looked over at where they had been standing, but saw only an empty space.

*

Before dawn, the camp sergeant awoke Kiran – as the one lying nearest the back of the wagon – with a series of punches to his back. The punching only ceased when Kiran finally sat up.

“These men are going to be hungry when they wake up!” the sergeant bullied. “Get some porridge on!”

Kiran woke up his chain-mates far more gently, and they struggled with tired and aching limbs to start the day. The endless round of preparing food, serving food, cleaning up, and starting over again was so constant that they never had a chance to discuss their musical encounter of the night before.

Several days passed in the same way, and they began to despair that their situation was never going to improve. Then one evening, news of the Three Kings swept across the camp.

“Bohemon and his allies have entered Damascus!” a herald shouted as soldiers and servants gathered around. “The people of the city greeted them as liberators and the celebrations have begun! Damascus is a Christian city once again! Praise God, for not since the full glory of the Roman Empire has the light of true civilization penetrated so far into heathen territory!”

A series of cheers rose up from the crowd.

“We had better get back to work,” Simon sighed. “All this celebrating will surely make the soldiers hungry.”

He was right. They worked far longer into the night than usual, and the moon was high in the heavens when they finally dragged themselves into the back of their wagon with throbbing hands and sore backs.

They were aching close to sleep when they heard voices right outside the wagon canopy.

“If we have any, tis in this cart here,” the camp sergeant growled. “Wake the servants and tell them to find some.”

Moments later the canopy was pulled aside. A slender figure stood silhouetted in the moonlight. She raised a small oil lamp before her face, and the flickering light danced in her dark eyes.

“You...” Simon was even more awestruck by seeing the beauty of the flute player up close and he could produce no other words.

Kes sat up then and smiled at the unexpected visitor. Kiran appeared next and his eyes grew wide.

Ovsanna stared at him for a moment before taking a step back, gasping, and nearly losing hold of her lamp.

“Are you alright?” the sergeant grumbled from across the clearing. “Are they giving you trouble?”

“No,” Ovsanna turned and curtsied to the sergeant, “no trouble at all. They have just what I was looking for...”

The sergeant shrugged and disappeared into his tent.

She turned back toward the wagon and whispered, “Kiran! What are you doing here?”

“Greetings, Ovsanna. The story is a long one,” he winked. “But in short, I fulfilled my oath and delivered Michael Tuck’s message to his friends. As a result, a quest began to find some of their missing family, and I came along to help. Clearly, we have become somewhat waylaid...”

Ovsanna shook her head in amazement and started looking back and forth at the other two captives alongside her friend.

“Please allow me to introduce the Britons Simon and Kestrel Little of Nottinghamshire,” Kiran waved his hand toward them. “We were traveling to Egypt in the hopes of ransoming their uncles from captivity, when we became captives ourselves in Antioch. We chose enslavement in the army over rotting in the dungeon, and that is why we are here before you this night.”

Ovsanna bowed to them.

“The pleasure is ours,” Simon stuttered.

“Please, call me Kes,” her smile broadened. “And may I say you play music like an angel.”

Even in the flickering lantern light, the reddening of Ovsanna’s cheeks was easily visible.

“I must confess,” Ovsanna looked down, “I never would have chosen to play in front of so many people...by my Queen wished it.”

“She is a Queen now?” Kiran smirked.

“Yes,” Ovsanna looked up, “they were wed only last month.”

“Ovsanna is the handmaiden of Princess...now Queen Sybilla, the wife of King Bohemond,” Kiran explained to Simon and Kes.

“That is wonderful!” Kes exclaimed.

Ovsanna looked down again. “I suppose so,” she said. Just then Ovsanna noticed the chain that bound the three together. She did not know what to say.

“You were looking for something,” Kiran reminder her. “Can we help you find it?”

“Wine...” Ovsanna shook her head, suddenly remembering her original mission. “The Queen desires wine and our supply is exhausted. So she sent me to find some among the galley wagons.”

“We do have some,” Kes nodded, “but tis mere cooking wine, and not fit for a queen.”

“Trust me,” Ovsanna sighed, “at this point she will not notice.”

Kes, by necessity taking Simon and Kiran with her, shuffled to the front of the wagon and procured a full wineskin for Ovsanna.

“Thank you so much,” the handmaiden bowed to them. “I wish I could stay. And I wish there was some way I could help you...but if my Queen does not have her wine...”

“We understand,” Kes reached out and touched her arm, cheered and comforted by the presence – however brief – of another young lady.

Ovsanna hesitated. "I do dread returning, for after some more wine she will call for me to play. I never thought I could dread my flute, but it seems to be the only thing...beside her wine...that brings her any peace; and her need for that is nearly insatiable."

"For my part," Kiran's eyes sparkled, "I find the ways of music an utter mystery. But my companions here are quite accomplished minstrels."

"Is this so?" Ovsanna smiled slightly.

"I am a drummer by nature," Simon explained, "at least when I have one. But my sister," he looked at Kes, "well...if something is at all capable of making a sound, she can bend it toward beauty."

Kes took a turn at blushing.

"Just hold on," Ovsanna was nearly breathless. "I must go now, but I shall return very soon. Perhaps we may be able to help each other."

*

Ovsanna's influence with Queen Sybilla was not enough to entirely free her friends from cooking duty. Yet she was able to have their chains removed, and they were allowed to leave the side of the cauldron after dinner was served. Instead of clean-up duty, they went each night to the Queen's tent and participated in her entertainment.

A small selection of musical instruments was available in the treasure chest that accompanied King Bohemond's tent. Simon chose a small drum made of deerskin stretched over a hollow barrel of walnut wood. The drum had quite a tonal range depending on where and how he thumped upon it.

Kes picked two instruments; a flute that was smaller, though otherwise quite similar to Ovsanna's, and a shofar made from the hollowed out horn of an apparently very large ram. In contrast to the high-pitched, bright and happy sound of the flute, the shofar was loud, low and bleating. Kes did not use it for entertainment, but found it interesting and kept it with her – which no one seemed to mind.

For her part, the Queen took a liking to Kes and so accepted her explanation that Kiran was an expert in caring for musical instruments and therefore had to be kept with them. The camp sergeant was furious about the entire turn of events, but not enough to pursue Ovsanna's recommendation that he take up his grievances with the Queen.

This new arrangement not only brought a measure of relief to the overworked cooks' bodies and souls, but also gave them an opportunity each night to converse with Ovsanna once the Queen had fallen asleep. At first, they spoke almost entirely of the past; explaining to each other more details in the events that had brought them to their current situation.

Soon however, as Ovsanna began to know and trust Simon and Kes more, she revealed to them what Kiran had already perceived during their

original encounter – explaining that she too felt like a prisoner, swept along against her will by circumstances and fate.

After a week had passed, their nighttime conversations were reduced to a single topic – escape.

“What about your mother?” Kiran asked Ovsanna one night. “When we first met, you told me that your role as Sybilla’s handmaiden secured her support from King Hethoum. Will she be punished if you were to disappear?”

Ovsanna looked down and was silent behind a face that wordlessly spoke her misery. Only after Kes moved over and put her arm around the handmaiden, was she able to speak once again.

“For years my mother would not answer any of my letters, and I did not know why. I thought I had displeased her somehow,” Ovsanna said quietly.

“When Hethoum and his army rode down past Antioch; I snuck into their camp late one night in hopes of finding someone who remembered me. One of the men on watch duty had lived in my village when I was little. He still knew me and he told me...”

She broke down in quiet sobs. Simon left and brought back a cup of cold water for her. After drinking the entire cup, she took a deep breath.

“Can you tell us what he told you?” Kes asked gently.

Ovsanna nodded. In a whisper that sounded devoid of all emotion she said, “He told me that my mother had taken ill and died soon after I left. All the years that I have served Sybilla have been for nothing.” She looked around at each of them. “And there is nothing left for me here.”

All three moved closer and surrounded her as, for the first time in years; she spoke about her feelings to people who cared. Her composure quickly dissolved again and she simply cried for some time.

Finally, Kes helped her to her bed and bid her good night.

On the way back to their camp, Simon declared, “That settles it. We are making our move soon – and we are taking her with us!”

“I agree,” Kes nodded.

“Well then,” Kiran was grinning, “the only question that remains is when shall we make our move?”

As they came upon their covered wagon, they heard voices on the other side and paused to listen.

“You shall be moving out first thing in the morning,” a strange and unfamiliar voice was explaining.

“Ah good,” the gruff camp sergeant responded, “then Bohemond is ready to ride into Jerusalem!”

The stranger laughed, “I think not. This is Kitboga’s war now.”

“Kitboga?” the sergeant barked. “Does not Hulegu rule the Horde?”

“He does,” the stranger seemed perturbed at having to explain, “but he is returning to the steppe. Apparently a cousin of Hulegu’s – one known as Kublai

– is challenging his authority. In any case, Hulegu has taken more than half of the Mongol force and is moving quickly to the north and east.”

“And Kitboga is still planning to attack Egypt?” the sergeant frowned.

“Even now he commands over one hundred-thousand horsemen,” the stranger chuckled, “with almost that many over again on foot.”

“He will need Bohemond’s help now more than ever – and your men too!” the sergeant was adamant.

“My men have other plans!” the stranger hissed. “As for you, Kitboga is sending Bohemond to the west. You and your king shall provide a rear guard at the crossings of the River Litani. Kitboga wants Egypt to himself – and he wants no Turkish interference!”

“What about the Armenians?” the sergeant asked indignantly.

“Hethoum?” the stranger snorted. “Dear old King Hethoum and his mountain rats are going nowhere. They will hold Damascus, again, to insure there is no trouble at his back from the meddling Turks.”

“And your knights?” the sergeant wondered. “Where are you going?”

“That is for none to know but the holy father in Rome!” the stranger snapped before bidding the sergeant good fortune and stomping away.

Simon looked back and forth at Kes and Kiran and whispered, “I believe the time to make our move has come.”

*

As soon as the sergeant had vanished into his tent, they slipped out of the wagon and made their way back toward the Queen’s tent and Ovsanna. The night was cloudy, providing a blanket of darkness to aid in their escape.

Simon carried two cloth sacks. One held his deerskin drum, of which he had grown quite fond. The other held all the stolen vegetables he felt he could reasonably carry.

Kes had brought a smaller sack full of grain. In her other hand she carried the shofar horn, and her small flute was tucked into the rope belt of her monk’s robe.

Kiran cradled a full water skin under one arm, and in the opposite hand held the iron ladle with which he had doled out countless bowls of soup, stew and porridge to hungry soldiers.

“Why on earth are you bringing that?” Simon wondered.

“This is a heavy ladle – believe me,” Kiran answered, “and could make a formidable weapon if need be.”

Simon looked at him skeptically.

“Beside that,” Kiran frowned at his friend. “Since I do not possess the magic of music like you two, I may still require on this journey some way of making myself useful.”

When they reached the Queen's tent, Kes snuck underneath the fabric and brought Ovsanna out by the same way. The bleary-eyed maiden fled with nothing in her hands, and only a simple hooded cloak to cover her tunic.

They progressed slowly through the army camp, cautious to avoid the gaze of night watchmen as well as wandering patrols. Throughout that long dark night, no matter how far they walked, ran and crawled – they never could seem to reach the edge of the camp. They were near panic as the night faded and a faint pink glow began to emerge upon the eastern horizon.

When the sun finally peeked above the eastern hills, they realized in the daylight that they had in fact escaped from the camp of Antioch's army – only to wander in the darkness into the very heart of the unfathomably larger camp of the great Mongol Horde.

Struggling to remain calm, they kept walking; trying desperately to appear as if they were not trying desperately to get away. They passed several Mongol warriors who glanced at them and then looked away uninterested. Emboldened, Simon commented that they just might make it out alive.

No sooner had he uttered the words than an enormous spear-wielding Mongol emerged in their path, shouting unintelligible instructions.

Thinking only of defending his friends, Kiran defiantly held up his iron soup ladle. The Mongol roared and began shoving all four of them back the way they had come.

They marched along for some time and were eventually handed over to a different Mongol who marched them in a new direction still further. Soon after, they found themselves, once again, at the back of a wagon. Obeying the Mongol's hand motions, they climbed into the back just as the wagon began rolling off toward the south.

"I have a very bad feeling about this," Kes remarked.

"On the bright side," Kiran grinned, "we have most certainly parted company with Bohemond and the army of Antioch."

Ovsanna smiled at him.

"And," Simon nudged his sister, "we are most certainly still moving toward Egypt."

Verse Eight – Ayn Jalut

“How many would you say?” Michael Paleologus gazed across the dusty valley from their position high upon the rocky cliffs.

“Eight-hundred,” General Strategopolous said confidently, and then revised to, “certainly no more than one thousand...”

They watched the rising cloud of dust in the distance as the Turkish marauders advanced toward them. Michael removed his helmet for a moment of relief from the simmering heat. The general did the same.

“And what word from beyond our borders?” Michael asked before taking a sip from his water skin.

“As we feared,” Strategopolous began, “a sizable Teutonic force is coming south. They have a few knights, though mostly their ranks are filled with mercenary rabble. Ten thousand in all, our scouts estimate.”

Michael said nothing, but kept watching the valley.

“The Romans know you are here,” the General surmised, “but you should take it as an encouragement that they have resorted to hiring Teutonic scum for extra protection. Their fear of you shall prove their undoing.”

Michael could not help grinning at his ever optimistic second in command. “And in the east?” he raised his eyebrows.

“Ah, excellent news from the east, my lord,” Strategopolous smiled. “The Mongol Horde has turned to the south. Apparently they have decided to engage the Sultan after all. Bohemond and Hethoum have both left their castles and are following behind the Horde, no doubt hoping to gain territory in the aftermath of Egypt’s ruin.”

“You do not believe there is any hope for Egypt?” Michael watched the General’s eyes.

“No,” Strategopolous shook his head. “If the stories of the Mongol’s power are even half true, the best we can hope for is that the Sultan will slow them down – buy us more time.”

“Time for what exactly?” Michael frowned.

“Time for you to seize the throne in Constantinople, of course,” the General answered. “If we can succeed in that – anything is possible!”

Michael looked back out over the valley. The Turks were much closer.

“We should get in position.”

They rode down the hill to the front of the Kataphraktoi lines. Then with over one-hundred twenty heavily armored elite warriors behind them, they began circling the hill.

“This has been a long summer,” Michael commented before donning his helmet once again.

“The Turks are usually not quite so persistent this late into the season,” the General nodded. “At least this year they have been fairly scattered and disorganized, for which I suppose we can thank the Mongols.”

Strategopolous raised his arm as they entered a steep ravine, signaling readiness to the six-hundred archers they had hidden in the thick woods on the nearby hilltop. Moments later, the Turkish marauders came into view at the far end of the ravine.

Both mounted lines pulled to a stop.

“Flimsy spears...small shields...no armor to speak of...” Michael analyzed the enemy with his eagle-like vision.

“And their horses look hungry and tired,” Strategopolous rubbed his chin. “This hardly seems fair.”

“There are at least seven times as many of them,” Michael laughed.

Suddenly, the Turks let out a piercing howl of rage and charged their horses forward into the ravine.

Michael watched them briefly before bringing his own horse up to speed. The Kataphraktoi followed close behind him, keeping their formation tight. The distance separating them from the Turks was quickly melting away.

Strategopolous shouted a word in Greek and the sky over the ravine darkened with swift arrows. They rained down into the Turkish lines, and dozens of the unarmored horses fell – causing still more to crash and tumble.

The marauders were in a complete state of confusion and panic when the Kataphraktoi reached them, thundering through the ravine at an amazing speed. The Byzantine cavalymen worked their lances and swords with eerie calm, delivering measured blows as they crushed through the Turkish ranks.

The Kataphraktoi did not stop, or even slow down, until they had stormed their way along the entire length of the ravine. This left the surviving Turks with no choice but to flee in the same direction they had originally been attacking. The Byzantine archers on the hill poured arrows down upon the fleeing marauders.

Of the hundreds of Turks that had entered the ravine, mere dozens passed through to the other side. They circled wide away from the archers’ hill and fled to the north.

“Death awaits your return!” Strategopolous screamed after them the only phrase in the Turkish tongue he had made the effort to memorize.

As if in response, the first carrion bird appeared in the sky and shrieked with hunger.

“Come,” Michael urged his men, “let us return home.” He looked up and saw more birds arriving. “Our work here is done.”

*

Randol watched the desert jackal pause and glance back at him again.

“You had better find a place to hide,” he called to the animal.

Seeming to heed his advice, the jackal bolted down the hill and disappeared into a shallow gully.

“Who were you talking to?” Edric asked as he and Alfred returned from their scouting foray.

“No one,” Randol stared at the horizon.

“You had better come back,” Alfred advised. “The Mongol Horde draws near. The time is surely at hand.”

“See that stream down there?” Randol pointed, ignoring the urgency in Alfred’s voice. “The locals call it *Ayn Jalut*. It means the Fountain of Goliath. One has to wonder...will God favor us like he did young David...shall we triumph over a larger and more powerful foe...”

The twins looked at each other but said nothing.

The three quickly rode back and reported to Sultan Baybars along with the other generals, officers and scouts. Baybars took in all the information and sat quietly atop his camel.

“Recommendations!” the Sultan shouted at last.

“They must pass through the valley of Ayn Jalut,” Randol began. “This is their only way through the hill country of Ephraim without going around for many miles. Their cavalry archers will be in front with their heavier lancing cavalry in the rear. We should wait until they are bunched together inside the valley and then strike fast and head on with our heaviest armor. Their greater numbers will provide no advantage, and in such close proximity, the strength of our camels will be more important than the swiftness of their horses.”

“That is good, Isam,” Baybars nodded slowly. “That is very good. But what happens next?”

Randol looked puzzled.

“The Mongols are accustomed to fighting terrified enemies,” Baybars explained. “A hard frontal attack will surprise them, and I applaud your bravery. But when the shock wears off, how long will our one hundred-thousand heavy riders stand against their three hundred-thousand?”

Randol nodded and looked down.

Baybars just stared at him, knowing the plan would come.

Suddenly Randol looked up, and the twinkle in his eye showed that indeed it had.

“I do not like that look,” Alfred whispered to his brother.

“Always spells trouble,” Edric whispered back.

“We hit them fast and hard,” Randol said at last, “but *before* they even reach the valley.”

“Yes?” Baybars was grinning. “Go on.”

“Not our main force,” Randol explained, “but a smaller detachment – about ten-thousand. We attack, draw blood, and then quickly retreat; letting them think we have been routed. Our main force meanwhile will be split between there,” he pointed toward a thick cedar forest to the southwest, “and there, in the valley beyond that hill. The trees will hide us from the Mongol’s view, as will Mount Gilboa.

“We let them chase us, stretching and overextending their lines. When they are spread thin across the entire valley, we attack from both sides and they will be utterly defenseless. If we can quickly get enough spears in place at the entrance to the valley; we will be able to hold off their reinforcements long enough to wipe out their best troops. Then we shall turn and face them head on as originally planned, but with the odds a bit more evened.”

Baybars was grinning from ear to ear.

“As for their vanguard, we shall have an additional surprise waiting when they crest the far hill,” Edric winked.

“My archers shall take that ridge,” Alfred pointed to the far edge of the cedar forest, “and make sure the spearmen have plenty of support. They will surely need it.”

“Most excellent,” Baybars looked excited. “The only question then is who shall lead the ten-thousand cavalry that will be the bait for our trap?”

Randol swallowed hard, and said, “I will.”

*

Working as slave-cooks for the Mongols was much like it had been for the army of Antioch. The main difference was that whereas the soup broth for Bohemond’s men was based on water and vegetables, the Mongol soup had a base of mare’s milk.

The union of horse and man in the nomadic culture of the Mongol Horde was so complete that horses provided, through their milk, a large portion of the Mongol diet, in addition to their use for transport and battle.

Simon and Kiran made continual trips back and forth to the mare fields carrying buckets of milk. To their supreme relief, they were not allowed to actually touch the horses themselves. Kiran was able to understand enough of the Mongol speech to comply with any other random duties they were given.

Ovsanna was similarly savvy with languages in general and familiar enough with some Asiatic speech patterns to at least keep them out of trouble. She and Kes attended to the gigantic, smelly cauldron of mare’s milk that boiled and bubbled throughout the day.

They took turns using Kiran’s ladle to stir the mixture, occasionally replenishing its contents with milk brought back by the boys and adding other ingredients as they were provided. The ladies’ main tasks were to keep the milk from burning or curdling in the heat of the cauldron, and then to dish the soup out to hungry Mongols upon demand.

All four prisoners carried out their duties for several long days as the Mongol Horde churned slowly southward through the Galilean hills. The hard work helped them to sleep at night, despite the miserable conditions. They were not even allowed to sleep in wagons as they had been with Bohemond, left instead to slumber on the cold and rocky earth.

Then one night, Kes awoke in the darkest hour. The Mongol camp around them was nearly silent. Even the late summer buzzing of insects seemed extraordinarily hushed by the presence of the barbarian horde.

The moon and stars were obscured by clouds, and the campfires were at most red glowing embers. Still a light was shining brightly somewhere nearby. Overcome by curiosity, Kes arose to seek out its source.

Behind one of the supply wagons, she found a man wearing a white robe. He was leaning against the back of the wagon and looking down at his bare feet. The man seemed to be glowing softly, as if with an inner light.

“Who are you looking for?” the man asked quietly.

“I...” Kes was still stunned by the unusual sight. “I was just looking for...” she wavered.

“For the light?” the man smiled.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“I have a message for you,” the man straightened himself and took a step forward so he was right in front of her.

She said nothing, staring transfixed into his eyes.

“My Master bids me tell you not to be frightened; for these things must happen first, but the end will not come right away. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom – but not a hair of your head will perish.

“On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

Kes shook her head, “I believe your words, but I do not understand...”

“Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”

“Please...” Kes tried, “I do not...”

“Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen...”

After these last words, the man in white began to glow even more brightly. Kes closed her eyes and took a step back, but she lost her footing and tumbled to the ground.

She opened her eyes to see what was happening. The mysterious messenger was gone, but a bright light was still blazing in front of her. The sun had risen.

*

As the sun came up over the eastern hills, most of the Mamelukes were already hidden and waiting. Only Randol and his strike force were assembled out in the open. All ten-thousand riders had volunteered. In fact, Randol had to

turn many away. The brave Mamelukes had pleaded to be among the first to confront the invincible Mongols.

For this mission they had mounted swift Arabian-bred horses, rather than their usual desert camels. While the camels were stronger and could endure much greater treks without food or water, these horses were among the fastest in the world.

The men wore helmets and shields, but left behind all other armor to lighten their horses' burdens. For weapons they brought only spears and bows, not planning to even engage – at least not yet – in the kind of close combat where swords are most useful.

After briefly watering both horses and men from the Fountain of Goliath, they remounted and began a slow march across the valley. As they crested the far hill, they could see them – the front lines of the Mongol Horde. The Horde had begun moving south again and the vanguard was nearing the valley.

“Move into loose formation!” Randol cried out, and the section leaders echoed his command. The extra space between horses would prevent unnecessary casualties during the inevitable rain of Mongol arrows.

They moved along at a casual trot, closing distance but saving as much strength and energy as possible for when it would be needed most. As they came down onto the plain level with the Horde, Randol could see the Mongol frontlines swarming into attack formation.

“Increase speed!” Randol called, and his men were soon up to a gallop, but still holding back from a full charge.

The first volley of Mongol arrows took to the air from an amazing distance away. The northern sky turned black with them.

“CHARGE!” Randol bellowed, and his ten-thousand men shot forward, finally revealing their true speed. As a result, the first Mongol volley completely overshot them.

The second volley came, and now the Mongol cavalry archers were themselves charging forward as they fired. The Mamelukes held their shields up high, trying to protect their horses as well as themselves. Still, many of them went down into the dust.

Randol called for his men to return fire. Slinging their shields over their backs, the Mamelukes drew back their bows and sent a volley against the enemy as the gap between them shrunk. A few Mongols disappeared from the frontline, but were instantly replaced by other riders in their deep formation.

The collision of the two lines was just moments away when Randol called out an all-stop. The Mamelukes unleashed a devastating barrage, hurling their spears in unison. Then as planned, they turned their horses around and fled at full speed back toward the valley of Ayn Jalut.

The shields on the Mamelukes' backs served them well as the furious Mongols gave chase and continued to fire arrows. The wily Egyptian soldier-

slaves answered by turning their torsos around and counterattacking with arrow fire, even as they fled with all haste.

The chase moved into the valley, and hundreds of thousands of eyes watched from various hiding places. Among them, high on the ridge amidst the cedar trees was Alfred. His fingers were itching to send down arrows in defense of his friends, but he knew he must wait for the right time or the entire gambit would be ruined.

Mamelukes were falling by the hundreds to Mongol arrows all across Ayn Jalut, but to the delight of Baybars and the hidden troops, the Mongols were indeed overextending themselves. Their lead riders had nearly reached the ridge on the south side of the valley and more Mongol cavalry archers were still pouring in at the north end.

Randol's ten-thousand were now about seven-thousand, but they had fulfilled their mission and reached the south ridge. After cresting the hill they made a sharp turn to the left and poured down into a nearby gulley. Close on their tails rode the Mongol vanguard.

The Mongols advanced over the top of the ridge still at full charge. The invincible steppe-riders had only a moment to try making sense of a sight like none they had ever seen before. A very short distance away, five-thousand men were kneeling in the dust. Behind them, another five-thousand stood. All ten-thousand soldiers were holding shiny metal tubes that were aimed straight at the charging horses.

"Find your mark!" Edric screamed.

The Mongols were racing forward, just moments from overrunning the lines of footmen with their shiny tubes.

"Hold your ground!" Edric could tell his men were wavering at the sight of the onrushing fury.

"VOLLEY!" he roared at last, and the earth shook.

Fire flashed and thick black smoke billowed up over the ridge line. The air tore with a rending sound like a hell-born thunderclap, as ten-thousand iron missiles blasted into the Mongol lines and ripped them to utter shreds. Thousands of Mongol riders fell dead, and so the age of the supremacy of the mounted warrior began its last days. But it was not over yet.

The main body of the Mameluke army revealed itself from the forests and valleys surrounding Ayn Jalut and descended upon the Mongols, who were now thrown into confusion by the terror of gunpowder. Fear had always preceded the Mongol advance as one of their most powerful weapons. Now, for the first time ever, fear came home to them.

Nearly one-hundred thousand screaming yellow-haired warriors careened into the valley from every direction riding atop enormous lurching camels that bellowed out the collective rage and power of Egypt herself. Baybars had ordered no mercy, and as always, the Mamelukes obeyed. The slaughter in the valley of Ayn Jalut was swift, furious and total.

The morning sun was still riding low over the eastern hills, and forty-thousand Mongol warriors lay dead or dying. So much blood of both man and horse was spilled that the Fountain of Goliath flowed red.

Meanwhile, at the north end of the valley, Baybars himself was rushing thirty-thousand spearmen into place to hold the gap while the Mamelukes finished their gruesome work in the valley behind them. They quickly formed a wall of men and metal, anticipating a swift and brutal response from Hulegu Khan and the main Mongol army.

*

The Mongol camp was in complete chaos. Soldiers and slaves ran in every direction as the entire Horde mobilized for battle.

"I am telling you," Kes was nearly crying, "we have to escape now, or we never will!"

"And you dreamed this?" Simon was unsure what to believe.

"There may never be a better time," Kiran advised as he observed the pandemonium all around.

"I agree," Ovsanna said nervously, "for anywhere would be better than here right now."

The four itinerant cooks – armed with only musical instruments and a soup ladle, and armored with only hooded robes – fled their area of the camp with no clear idea where they were going. Fortunately, the Mongols seemed entirely focused on battle preparations.

They ascended a small knoll and caught a glimpse of the initial Mameluke attack.

"The army appears to be riding out," Simon watched in awe.

"Which way should we go next?" Ovsanna was much more concerned about their fate than the army's.

"This way," Kiran gestured and started moving, but stopped when the others did not follow.

"What are you looking at?" Simon asked his sister.

"Does anything about that fig tree look odd to any of you?" Kes replied.

"Look, Kes," Simon was agitated, "I am hungry too, but right now we really should be thinking of..."

"It is just sprouting leaves," Ovsanna saw what she meant. "Summer is well spent, and yet it is just beginning to put forth leaves..."

Simon and Kiran looked at each other in confusion.

"Do you not see?" Kes was actually grinning. "This is a sign! Come on, follow me!" She ran toward the fig tree, and the others had no choice but to go after her.

They reached the tree and paused.

"All right," Simon sounded angry, "what now?"

Kes looked around, unsure of what to do next.

“There!” Kiran pointed.

They all turned and saw a most unexpected sight. Very nearby were precisely four enormous horses that looked to be among the finest results of Mongolian husbandry. And they were completely unattended.

“That is it!” Kes cried. “That is our way of escape!”

“They will kill us if they catch us stealing their horses,” Simon warned.

“Yet catching us would be a challenge indeed if we rode upon those,”

Kiran shared Kes’ excitement.

“And the army does seem a bit occupied,” Kes added. “We do this now, or we will have to find some other way. What say you?”

Without a word, Ovsanna began running toward the horses. Kes and Kiran followed on her heels, and with a frustrated sigh Simon gave in and joined them. Moments later, they were mounted upon the mighty steeds and looking around for the direction of their next move.

The decision was made for them as the horses’ rightful proprietors returned and bellowed in rage at the slave-cooks who were stealing their precious war horses. The nearest Mongol soldier lunged at Kiran, who instinctively grabbed his iron soup ladle and swung the serving implement as hard as he could.

The ladle smashed into the bridge of the Mongol’s nose and he tumbled backward, spraying blood far and wide.

“I thought that might prove useful,” Kiran muttered as he dropped the ladle and sped off after the others who were already crashing through the Mongol camp at a full gallop.

“We shall never avoid them all,” Simon yelled as he watched the endless ranks of mounted Mongol warriors gathering in their path. “There are too many of them – we are doomed!”

“Make all the noise you can!” Kes shouted.

“What’s that?” Simon glanced over at her as they rode.

“Use your instruments!” she hollered back. “The time for hiding is over! If they think we are important they will let us pass! Just trust me!”

Feeling he had nothing to lose at this point, Simon guided his horse onward with his left hand and used his right to begin pounding on the small drum that was strapped to his hip.

Ovsanna followed Kes’ instructions as well and, putting her flute to her lips, blew a sustained loud and high-pitched note that sliced through the swirling din of the gathering army.

Kes briefly considered the small flute tucked into her rope-belt before choosing instead the shofar horn that was strapped to her opposite hip. She pulled it free, raised the horn to her mouth, and for the first time ever, blew into it with all the strength she had.

The crisp beating of the drum, the piercing whistle of the flute, and the vibrant low bellowing of the shofar combined into a sonic tremor that shook the

air around the fleeing riders and radiated outward from them in a warbling and frightening cacophony.

If getting attention was their goal, it certainly worked. Hundreds, even thousands of the assembling warriors turned to see the cause of this new commotion. Much to the horror of Kes and the others, however, they did not appear to be moving out of the way.

Kiran, alone lacking an instrument, began shouting at the top of his lungs, intoxicated by the danger and insanity of their escape attempt. He bellowed and whooped unintelligible phrases as he and his companions drove their horses forward toward the rear lines of the Mongol cavalry formations at full speed.

Then, at the last moment, a miracle occurred. The ranks of soldiers parted, apparently believing that only horsemen with a legitimate and extremely important mission would call such great attention to themselves while riding into the midst of an overwhelmingly more powerful force.

And so, armed with only the sound of music and that special kind of courage born of desperation, the four riders flew unharmed and unhindered through the ranks of the most powerful army in the world.

*

Randol and his swift riders had circled back around to the frontline held by the thirty-thousand spearmen. Other Mamelukes were coming up from the valley as they completed their route of the Mongol vanguard, and rallying around Randol and his horsemen.

From their high perches atop horses and camels, the Mamelukes looked out over the heads of the crouching spearmen. Down on the plains below, the main body of the Mongol army was continuing to rumble forward. Clearly, the battle had only just begun.

Randol looked to the cedar trees high up on the ridge. He could not see the archers, but he knew that Alfred and his men were there, ready and waiting.

He looked back across the valley of Ayn Jalut. The utter carnage was beyond belief. Countless Mamelukes on camel-back rode to and fro, spearing any Mongol that moved.

Far across the valley, the rising sun gleamed upon the ten thousand barrels of Edric's black thunder brigades, as they marched slowly down into the valley toward a forward position.

Randol looked back out at the advancing Mongols and took a deep breath, consciously enjoying the brief moment of reprieve before the long and horrible day of killing resumed. His respite was broken, however, as a strange and terrible noise began emanating from the plains below.

Along with thousands of Mameluke soldiers, Randol watched in awe as the lines of advancing Mongol cavalry parted, and from their midst rode out four

horsemen. The four riders moved with uncanny swiftness and they appeared to be the source of the strange thumping and blaring sounds that resonated across the dusty fields.

The four riders were hooded, adding to their mystique and wonder. Then suddenly, the hood of the lead rider fell away, and the bright mid-morning sunshine revealed a mane of long and golden hair. As the riders neared the Mameluke position, their leader's other feminine traits also became apparent.

The Mamelukes, remembering the stories and legends of their youth as Norse lads, grew pale with fear.

"This is the end!" one man shouted.

"The Valkyrie ride forth!" wailed another. "Make way for the choosers of the slain!"

"Prepare for the ending of the world!" a third cried. "Prepare your souls for Ragnarok!"

Verse Nine – Ragnarok

“We should let them in,” Randol advised as he rode up alongside Baybars. “Something is different about these four riders – I do not sense they are a threat.”

Baybars studied Randol’s face for a moment before nodding and shouting orders to the nearby captains. The thick rows of spearmen filling the northern gap slowly shuffled toward the cliffs on either side, thereby forming a narrow pathway through their center.

“Do you see that?” Simon pointed as they slowed down, realizing they were heading straight toward the opposing army.

“Are they letting us in?” Kes was amazed.

“Perhaps they think we are emissaries,” Ovsanna offered.

“Whatever waits for us through that gap,” Kiran turned and looked back at the steadily increasing speed of the massive Mongol front, “it is still better than the alternative.”

The four riders sped onward until they disappeared into a forest of long iron-tipped spears. The ranks closed around them as they passed, seeming to swallow them up inside the grand army of Egypt.

They passed through the gap and gasped in horror as they looked out over the valley of Ayn Jalut. Shattered bodies of men and horses were strewn as far as they could see. Swarming over them and gathering toward the north were tens of thousands of armored riders atop monstrous dromedaries.

The foursome was promptly seized by several nearby Mamelukes, pulled down from their horses, and taken immediately to the Sultan. They were bombarded with a series of questions that only Kiran could understand.

“What do they want?” Simon asked Kiran in English.

“What are they going to do with us?” Kes wondered aloud.

One of the Egyptian generals was staring at them with a very strange look on his face. Still astride his horse, he moved closer so he was staring down at the prisoners.

“Where exactly do you come from?” he asked them in perfect, though accented English.

Simon and Kes looked at each other.

“Various places, my lord,” Simon answered, “but for my part, and my sister here, we hail from Nottinghamshire on the far off island of Britain.”

Randol’s pale blue eyes suddenly grew wide with a mixture of joy, wonder and disbelief.

“What are the names of your father and mother?” the General asked.

Simon wondered why he could possibly want to chat as the Mongol Horde bore down upon them, but nonetheless answered, “Little, my lord. Our parents are Jonas and Angela Little.”

Randol descended from his horse. He moved forward to embrace the youngsters, unable to find any words to say.

Sultan Baybars stopped him, "General Isam, do you know these strange young riders?"

"Yes, excellence," Randol had tears in his eyes, "yes, I do..."

Simon and Kes looked at each other again with puzzled expressions.

Randol turned to them, "You must move to safety. Follow the valley until you reach the soldiers with shiny metal poles. Tell your names to their commander, and you will be kept safe. Move quickly now! The great Hulegu Kahn is coming with his five-hundred thousand!"

"Forgive me, my lord," Kes stood her ground as Randol tried to push them on their way. "Hulegu Kahn is gone."

"What did you say?" Randol was distracted as a defiant roar went up from the spearmen. The Mongol front line was nearly upon them.

"We overheard their commanders speaking," Kes struggled to explain it all quickly. "Hulegu Khan returned to the steppe with over half the Mongol army. One named Kitboga leads them now, with no more than two hundred-thousand all told..." Kes looked out across Ayn Jalut, "...and I should say fewer than that now!"

"Are you sure?" Randol grabbed her by the shoulders. "Are you absolutely sure?"

"Yes," she answered, and looked over at Simon for help.

"She speaks the truth," Simon offered. "We all heard it, and they did not know we were listening."

Randol ran over to Baybars and rapidly explained what he had learned from their unexpected guests. Moments later the Sultan began shouting new orders. The camel-riding Mamelukes quickly coalesced into ranks by the tens of thousands, lining up behind the front of spearmen.

The Sultan turned and waved a signal toward the cedar forest high on the northwest ridge.

Randol ran back over to his visitors. "Go now!" he shouted at them, motioning to the Mameluke guard to give them back their horses.

They rode off along the edge of the valley making for the column of gunners that was now quickstepping across the morning's battlefield.

*

High above among the cedars, Alfred had been watching the strange events with curiosity. But upon seeing the Sultan's signal, he roared his command that echoed throughout the forest reaching all ten-thousand archers hidden among the trees.

The mighty cedars shuddered from the wind of ten-thousand arrows blasting out from amidst their branches and hurtling down into the front lines of the approaching Horde.

“Volley at will!” Alfred chanted, and his sub-commanders passed the message down through the ranks.

The storm of arrows became constant, and the Mongol cavalry charge was devastated, piling up in a gory, blood-slicked mess just a few paces ahead of the waiting hedge of Egyptian spears.

Before long Alfred had exhausted his own quiver of arrows, but he would have stopped anyway when he saw what was being done behind the lines of Mongol cavalry. Far in the distance, the Mongols were rapidly assembling enormous catapults.

One heave from those siege engines would wipe away our spears, Alfred thought. They could even send boulders into the valley and no one would know they were coming until it was too late.

He ran back through the woods to where the horses were waiting. Along the way he called for any archers who had spent all of their arrows to join him. More than one hundred men heard and followed.

After loading their saddlebags from the nearby barrels of supplies, they mounted and rode off through the woods to the north and west.

*

Randol, having traded his horse for a heavy armored camel, rode up and down along the ranks of assembled Mamelukes. The men had enjoyed their morning taste of blood and were ready to resume battle. Seeking to rally them further, Randol shouted with all his strength as he sped along the endless rows of steaming, snorting camels.

“Remember who you are!” he wailed. “Remember where you came from! The Mongols and their minions tore you from your homes! They killed your families and your people, and sold you for slaves!

“But you grew strong! And the boys they thought were lost are returning now as men! But more than men – you are Mamelukes!”

A roar went up from the ranks.

“The spoils of past Mongol victories come back to haunt them now as their destroyers! You are judgment! You are justice! You are revenge!”

Another wave of shouting passed through the Mamelukes as Randol neared their front lines once again.

“Yes! Ragnarok is upon us – but not for you! Today is the end of the Mongol Scourge! Today is the ascension of the Mamelukes! We will break them! We will crush them! We will grind them to dust! And we will be the greatest army in the entire world!”

The rallying cries of the men made the earth beneath the hooves of their camels shake and tremble.

“This is Ragnarok!” Randol bellowed.

“RAGNAROK!” the Mamelukes shouted in reply.

“Ragnarok!” he repeated with fury.

“RAGNAROK!” the Mamelukes raged.

“RIDE FORTH MAMELUKES!” Randol cried, and now from the very front of their lines, led their charge into the northern gap.

The remaining spearmen, gladly obeying the command they received to retreat, melted away with all haste back into the valley of Ayn Jalut.

A great victory shout rose up from the Mongol Horde as they believed they had finally broken the Egyptian lines. The barrage of arrows from the high cedar ridge was slowing as the archers ran short on ammunition. And the heavy Mongol cavalry quickly regrouped to charge in through the northern gap and ride down the fleeing Egyptians.

The Mongols raced forward into the gap, but at the same time, the Mamelukes rode up from the south – their heavy camels already loping along at full speed. Like two tidal waves smashing together over a rocky outcropping, the opposing cavalry lines surged into each other.

From both sides, all eyes watched as the two great and terrible forces met with all speed and fury and power. Even the bravest and most battle-hardened warriors could not help but flinch as the awful wet crunching sound of splintering bones and tearing flesh echoed among the rocky walls of the gap.

The charge from each side carried so much momentum that at first, neither would give way. The crushed bodies piled deeper and deeper as more soldiers rumbled forth over their fallen comrades.

Finally the frontline shuddered and broke, and the Mamelukes prevailed. The strength of the heavy bellowing camels won out and for the very first time in all their history, the Mongol Horde found itself in retreat. But they were not finished yet...

*

Far away across the fields, the Mongol siege engines had been assembled, aimed and loaded. The siege commanders raised their flags to give the launch signal. Boulders the size of war horses would soon be hurtling through the air and right into the gap through which the screaming Mamelukes now poured.

Just before they could give the signal, a rustling in the nearby woods quickly grew to a thundering din as one-hundred horsemen burst out into the open, riding into the siege camp from behind. The few spear wielding guards that tried to block their approach were easily cut down by the swords of the charging cavalry.

The riders quickly gathered into small groups. In each group, six or seven horsemen surrounded one in the center who held up a glowing red ember. The others held up small jars of clay, and touched the thin rope tail coming out of each to the source of fire.

The ends of the thin ropes began to hiss and the riders charged forward, releasing the small jars in the direction of the catapults and stone-throwers. Upon impact the jars exploded, and flames instantly engulfed the siege weapons.

As quickly as they had come, the riders disappeared into the forest. Alfred paused at the edge of the trees and looked back to watch as the great siege engines began to collapse. He grinned and followed his men back up toward the high ridge.

*

Edric's ten-thousand gunners marched into the northern gap as the rear lines of the Mamelukes poured out onto the plains to run down the fleeing Mongol cavalry. Edric, however, had temporarily passed command over to one of his lieutenants as he was overcome with emotion.

"You look just like your dear mother," he hugged Kes again, making sure that she was real. "Well, except for your hair, of course...and your eyes perhaps. I suppose there is a glimmer of my dear old Jonas in them."

Kes was smiling, but still unable to speak through her tears. The complete surrealism of having a reunion with long-lost family amidst endless thousands of badly mutilated corpses was wrecking her nerves.

"We have heard so many stories about you, Uncle Edric," Simon was better at blocking out his surroundings. "I confess that I did not always believe them, but seeing you here in this place, I have to believe that perhaps they all are indeed true."

Edric laughed. "And I eagerly await the chance to hear some of your stories as well, young master Simon. But this battle is still far from over. And since your mother would never forgive me if I did not do all in my power to keep you safe..."

He motioned to a nearby group of two dozen former gunners who were now unarmed because their weapons were faulty and had either exploded or melted. He ordered them to take up spears and protect his niece, nephew and friends with their lives.

"I must go now," Edric hugged them one more time, "but I shall return soon! Until then keep safe...and pray for us!"

*

Not knowing how much of it was his, Randol wiped the blood out of his eyes and watched as the retreating Mongol cavalry parted and swarmed around a

large formation of spearmen further down on the dusty plain. He instantly understood what was happening and ordered the nearest standard bearer to signal an all-stop.

“Why are we stopping?” the Mamelukes around him cried. “They are broken – let us finish them!”

“These are Mongols!” Randol shouted back. “They will not be broken until every last one of them is trampled into the cold earth!”

“Then what are we waiting for?” the soldiers were agonized by their inaction, as the fever of the chase remained upon them.

“The Mongols learn quickly!” Randol exclaimed. “They would use our own tactics against us!”

“General Isam is right!” one of the Mamelukes called out. “It’s a trap!”

From the safety of their own hedge of spears, the Mongols launched a swarm of arrows. Their cavalry archers had been wiped out, but they still harbored twenty-thousand foot archers that had not even begun to exhaust their supply of arrows.

“Fall back!” Randol called out.

But even as they turned and began to ride away, the arrows were landing around them. Randol watched helplessly as everywhere his men fell dead. Then suddenly, an arrow hit his camel in the neck. The beast shuddered and threw Randol off before collapsing.

Breathless and aching, Randol reached for a fallen comrade’s shield and pulled it over himself just as several more arrows thudded down upon him that would surely have spelled his end. Still holding the arrow-riddled shield over his head and shoulders, he struggled to his feet and began running up the slope as fast as he could.

The sun had risen to its highpoint in the sky, and the day was becoming hot and hazy in the swirling dust stirred by the battle. Through the haze and his own sweat and blood, Randol saw something glimmering in the bright sunshine.

Edric and the black thunder brigades had arrived. Though on foot, they were coming quickly down the slope, holding high their shiny metal tubes – the ends now blackened from use. A line of shield bearers ran in front of them, doing their best to protect the gunners from the Mongol archers.

Just then, Randol noticed a pair of horses charging toward him. One was unburdened – the other carried Alfred.

“You look like a man who could use a fresh horse,” Alfred grinned.

“Thank you,” Randol panted, still short on breath.

Alfred helped pull him up into the saddle, and they rode back to relative safety behind the frontlines.

“We need to reorganize the Mamelukes,” Alfred shouted. “As soon as my brother blasts a hole in the Mongol spear-lines, we can ride down their archers and bring an end to this!”

They set about their task, as the gunners drew ever closer to the front lines. Soon they were in position and Edric gave the order to fire – but only to the front rows. He commanded the back rows to hold steady.

The Mongol spearmen had heard the thunder of the guns from afar when they had been used that morning. But hearing – and feeling – their effects up close was too much for the poorly trained second-class soldiers.

Since in the past the mounted Mongols had always swept to quick victory, their foot auxiliaries were never needed. As a result, the backfield troops of the Mongol Horde simply had no battle experience, and they broke and ran.

Yet, in the interim, the Mongol heavy cavalry had reorganized and made a charge at the line of gunners. Edric grinned inwardly at having anticipated their move. He called for the gunmen to hold their ground, and take their time aiming as they had done so successfully that morning against the Mongol vanguard of cavalry archers.

“VOLLEY!” Edric roared, for the last time that day.

Had the leaders of the surviving Mongol cavalry known that the Egyptian supply of gunpowder was now completely exhausted; they might have pressed forward and at least taken their vengeance on the wielders of these new weapons. But fearing another volley, the cavalry followed the lead of their fleeing archers and spearmen, and turned away in a final retreat.

The Mongols moved away down the slope and toward the east, perhaps hoping to escape across the Jordan River. The Mamelukes caught up with them there on the west bank of the Jordan, and the slaughter lasted all afternoon.

Several smaller Mongol contingents launched desperate and damaging counterattacks, but none of them was strategically significant. The sun was hanging low above the western hills as the Mamelukes finally surrounded General Kitboga and his elite guard.

With their backs to the river and no escape possible, Kitboga had his men throw down their arms and plead for mercy. Kitboga was brought before Sultan Baybars and ordered to kneel. In a last maniacal burst of defiance, Kitboga spat into Baybar’s face in full view of his troops.

After calmly cleaning himself, Baybars borrowed a short sword from one of his men. He stood in front of the Mongol General for a moment, letting him sweat before plunging the sword into his abdomen. Baybars reached into the General’s bleeding gut, pulled out a handful of his entrails, and proceeded to force them down his throat even after he was clearly dead.

The members of Kitboga’s elite guard were set loose after being blinded, so that the gruesome death of their leader would be the last sight they ever saw.

Satisfied, Baybars mounted his camel and began the journey back to the Egyptian camp. Some of the Mamelukes took it upon themselves to decapitate Kitboga’s corpse, place his head on the end of a spear, and bring it back to the camp as a centerpiece of that night’s grand celebration.

*

The entire next day was spent building bonfires and feeding their flames with the remains of the dead. As able-bodied young men, Simon and Kiran were recruited to help with this grim duty.

“As unpleasant as this is,” Simon commented at one point, “I still prefer it over the smell of that horrid Mongol soup! Honestly, I may never be able to drink a cup of milk again.”

Kiran laughed, “If not for your uncles and the brave Mamelukes of Egypt, the entire world may well have become slaves of the Mongols.”

“You do not suppose they could still return?” Simon grew serious. “What if they come back for revenge against Egypt with their full army?”

The thought gave Kiran pause, but he eventually answered, “Let them come. They may indeed still be a threat, but never in the same way. Not only did they lose nearly half of their army; they lost something even more powerful. They have lost their dominion of fear. They are no longer invincible, and everyone will know that as the story of what happened here spreads.”

“Does it bring you any peace,” Simon watched his friend, “knowing those that destroyed your people have themselves been dealt a mighty blow.”

“Peace?” Kiran sighed. “Perhaps it brings some satisfaction...but peace? I am not sure if I truly even know what that means...but I know that if I ever do find peace, it shall be something dwelling within, and not something that depends upon the outcome of events – good or bad.”

Simon nodded and considered Kiran’s response, as they continued throwing bodies and body parts into the fire.

*

Kes and Ovsanna spent that day helping attend the wounded, which were legion. Very few healing supplies were available, but they did the best they could with what they had. In several cases, they could offer nothing more than a soft and slender hand for a man to hold as he passed from this world’s realm.

The archers, gunners and other back-fielders actually had fared quite well, with very few casualties. The spearmen who had held the northern gap for those critical moments of the battle had taken much more punishment. Yet by far, the most damage had been done to the Mamelukes. Little more than half of their original one hundred-thousand would return to Egypt. Hundreds of them would never fight again, having lost eyes or limbs.

Even at her tender age, Ovsanna had seen several wars and their results. Kes though had been a stranger to the blood-soaked way of life in the so-called Holy Land, and the sights and experiences of that terrible day affected her greatly. Witnessing the battle from afar was nothing compared to seeing, touching and weeping over the broken and maimed bodies left in its wake.

Near the end of the day, the two ladies discovered Randol working alongside other soldiers disposing of bodies. A brief examination led them to the conclusion that he had been working all day with a broken left arm, in addition to the multitude of cuts all over his body that had been untended.

They forced him to return to his tent, where he summarily collapsed. Fortunately, the twins returned soon thereafter, and all together they were able to swiftly clean and bandage Randol, and set his arm into a sturdy splint. A few cups of wine helped him sleep through the night, and after a hearty breakfast the next morning, he regained a good portion of his normal complexion and humor.

Occasionally letting the twins add comments and clarifications, Randol spent much of the morning on that second day regaling the youngsters with the story of how, those many years ago, he and the Allendale brothers had become imprisoned and enslaved, only to ultimately rise through the ranks of the Mameluke army and become its leading generals.

Eventually though, they began asking about those loved ones in England that they had left behind for all the years of their grand adventure.

Simon gladly surrendered the role of lead speaker back to Kes as she delicately explained to the three men the overwhelming news that their fathers had died, and that their aging mothers were struggling against a greedy church bishop who was seeking to prey upon the Locksley estate.

After a long and fairly agonizing silence, Randol finally said simply, "The time has come for us to return home."

Edric and Alfred nodded.

*

Later, after another meal, the conversations resumed.

"We are certainly glad to see how well our sweet little sister and her dear Jonas have done for themselves," Alfred winked at Simon and Kes.

"Yes, we always knew they would end up together," Edric added. "They must be quite proud of you two."

"Actually," Kes smiled, "we have an older brother as well. His name is Jared. He stayed at home partly because father's carpentry work depends upon his help, but also because..."

"Because of Molly," Simon interrupted.

"Molly?" the three men asked in unison.

"She is quite lovely," Kes acknowledged. "By the time we return, there is a very good chance they shall be wed."

"I doubt Jared can wait much longer..." Simon commented and they all enjoyed a hearty laugh.

"And what news can you tell of my sister, Maegan?" Randol inquired, a bit nervously. "What became of her love with the dashing Prince Constantine?"

Simon and Kes looked at each other.

“To the best we know, they are alive and well and together and happy,” Kes answered, “though we have not seen them in some time.”

“Something happened...” Randol perceived their discomfort.

“There was a tragedy...” Simon whispered.

“Their first child was stillborn,” Kes explained. “We were told that good Lady Maegan was very fortunate to survive, and they were never able to have children afterward.”

Randol looked down.

“And yet they are not childless!” Kes added.

Randol looked back up, confused.

Kes looked at Simon for help.

“Along with their tragedy was another,” Simon thought back on what their parents had told them. “The old friend of our grandparents – Michael Tuck – had returned from his own years of adventure in the far country. He wedded the love of his youth, an Arabian lady named Shahar. She bore him a child and delivered him alive, but in doing so gave up her own life.”

“Good Lady Maegan took the child to wet nurse,” Kes concluded the tale, “and the bond between them never died, as ever since she and Prince Constantine have raised him as their own.”

“And what is the boy’s name?” Randol was amazed by all he had missed.

“Michael,” Kes answered, “in honor of his birth father.”

“You said you have not seen them in some time,” Alfred raised an eyebrow. “Did they leave England?”

“Several years ago,” Simon nodded. “They felt the Mediterranean islands would better suit Lady Maegan’s health, which even for all the love she gave to her adopted son had never been quite the same after losing her baby.”

“But you at least knew the younger Michael as children?” Edric asked.

“Honestly,” Simon said, “I can barely remember him. I was quite young when they left.”

“I remember him...” Kes blushed suddenly. “I remember playing together...and laughing. But twas so long ago, it seems almost like a dream...”

“Forgive me,” Randol interrupted wearing a look of concentration, “but I knew Michael Tuck. Why, we even saw him not so long ago! He is the reason we were able to obtain the black thunder powder that helped us win the war. But...why was he living the life of an old pirate? If he had a son, surely he would have wanted to be a part of the boy’s life...”

Simon and Kes sighed in unison.

Kes went on to explain the final piece in the tragic story – how poor Michael Tuck had fled England forever, believing that not only his wife, but his son had died as well.

“So you never knew him?” Randol asked sadly.

Kes shook her head.

“I did...” Kiran interjected.

The three men looked at him in amazement.

"I was at Alamut," Kiran responded to their curious gazes. "Surely the Mongols would have killed me like all the others, but Michael Tuck rescued me. We escaped together and he told me his many tales, both tragic and triumphant. Because of him, I sought out the people of Locksley and Sherwood Forest, to tell them what only he knew – that you lived!"

"What on earth was Michael Tuck doing at Alamut?" Alfred wondered.

"He was tracking the Mongol Horde," Kiran answered, "searching for a way to stop their relentless advance. He spoke often of desiring to atone for sins in his past..."

The three men looked at each other.

"And where is he now?" Edric frowned.

"I am sorry..." Kiran did not know what to say next.

"When the Mongols destroyed Baghdad," Ovsanna entered the conversation to help Kiran, "he stayed behind to aid in the defense of the city."

"I pleaded with him to leave..." Kiran fought back tears. "He would have been very proud to see this day..."

A moment of silent remembrance passed over them.

"Surely God was at work through dear old Michael Tuck in bringing us all together," Randol finally broke the silence. "Though there is still one thing I do not understand. Ovsanna, I am more grateful than you can know that you are here as well, for you are more skilled in the healing arts than all of the physicians in Egypt. But how is it that you became a part of this adventure?"

Ovsanna blushed terribly, "I..." was all she could manage.

"I barely escaped from Baghdad myself," Kiran tried to help, "and by the time I reached Antioch, I was not far from death's door. Ovsanna blessed me with her healing and care, and even helped me find passage to England."

"Then when our journey went awry and we were enslaved by Bohemond's army," Kes added, "she saved us all by having our shackles removed. Without Ovsanna, we would never have escaped."

"Without all of you," Ovsanna was still blushing, "I would still be a slave, too."

*

The following day, Sultan Baybars was ready to take his army home. Randol, Edric and Alfred went to him along with their four young companions, bowed down, and asked for their freedom.

Baybars did not look happy.

He stared at them until they began to sweat. At last he stepped forward, stood in front of Kes, and motioned for her to rise. With a command of English that surprised even his three best generals, Baybars asked her many questions

about the purpose of her journey and the extraordinary manner in which she and her friends had arrived.

She kept her answers honest and direct, and remained humble in her countenance. As briefly as she could, she explained the crisis in Nottingham, their loss of the ransom money, and their escape from the camps of both Antioch and the Mongols.

“Ah, but what delight that the fate of so many should turn upon the deeds of one so fair?” Baybars’ eyes seemed to mist over as he spoke to Kes. “In my heart of hearts, I had hoped at the very best to fight Hulegu Khan to a stalemate at Ayn Jalut. And then from the very midst of the enemy’s camp, who should ride forth? You brought us something that gold cannot buy and the sword cannot claim – you brought us hope!

“Hulegu has gone, you said!” Baybars chuckled. “And so rather than a force more than twice our size, we faced one that was maybe the same...maybe a little smaller than us, eh? Never again would we have had such a chance – to catch the Mongols in their arrogance and impetuosity. And we made them pay, did we not? My mighty Mamelukes...”

Baybars paced back and forth for a few moments. No one said a word.

“General Isam! General Rashid! General Zaid!” the Sultan shouted suddenly. “Stand at attention!”

The three popped up.

“You have served me well for many years, and you have helped to save Egypt from the greatest threat she has ever known.” Baybars sighed. “But now you are needed elsewhere, eh? You have earned your freedom. I release you. Go in the peace of Allah.”

With that Sultan Baybars spun around, leapt atop his camel, and began shouting orders for his army to move out.

Still in a mild state of shock, the three generals and their four unlikely rescuers began walking back to the tent to gather up their personal items. Upon their arrival, they found seven fine Arabian horses waiting for them as a gift from Baybars. The saddlebags held enough food and water to last several days.

They also held a number of gold coins that, when counted later, proved to be more than twice as many as the ransom that had been lost.

Verse Ten – The Catalan Company

The seven riders raced into the west, turning north after Megiddo, and continuing on to the port city of Tyre. Having so much gold at their disposal, they decided to buy passage both for themselves and their prize horses.

The ship they boarded was sailing for Spain. Journeying over calm waters under the late summer sun, they soon arrived at the first trading stop on the island of Cyprus.

“This is where our adventure began, all those years ago,” Randol remarked as they drew near the verdant island.

“What happened here?” Simon wondered.

“Very little,” Edric recalled.

“We spent the winter in the company of a Templar regiment,” Alfred explained, “before advancing into Outremer and eventual capture.”

“Just over that hill, in fact...” Randol grinned and pointed.

“One has to wonder if the Templars still keep a garrison there,” Edric muttered nostalgically.

“You know, we have a few days while the ship’s crew carries out its trading...” Alfred suggested.

“Take us there!” Kes was excited. “We would love to meet the Knights of the Temple and see where your great adventure began. The horses shall be happy to run a bit more, before we continue across the sea.”

*

Kes’ enthusiasm settled the matter, and by dusk the seven travelers entered the monastery gates that Randol, Edric and Alfred had last departed in their youth. There was no sign, however, of the Templars.

Instead, a lone monk in a brown woolen robe shuffled into the courtyard to greet them in thickly accented Greek. Randol succeeded in encouraging the holy man to use Latin, and after exchanging proper introductions, the monk welcomed them to lodge there.

“Long ago, we sojourned here among Templar Knights. Do they no longer base here?” Randol inquired as the group left their horses at the water trough in the courtyard and walked into a nearby stone building.

“The Knights of Solomon’s Temple?” the monk paused and chewed nervously upon his lip. “From time to time some will pass through and spend a few nights with us. From what I hear, most of them are now resting behind the walls of mighty Ascalon – or sitting behind tables in one of their countless banking centers.”

“You sound cynical,” Alfred noted.

“Ah, perhaps,” the monk shook his head. “What is to be expected from the crusading Servants of the Temple when the great crusades themselves have all but vanished?”

“What do you mean?” Edric pressed him.

“These days,” the monk lamented, “you are more likely to see merchants sailing into Acre and Ascalon than soldiers and knights. No one cares for Jerusalem anymore. Too many defeats...too much blood... Twas all a fool’s dream, I suppose...”

The monk led them through a series of corridors until they finally arrived at a small dining room. An eight-top table board suited the seven visitors and their host perfectly. Rudimentary but sturdy wooden benches provided seating.

Soon a young robed acolyte materialized from a doorway in the back of the room, bearing a wine pitcher in each hand. In silence, he poured drinks for all before disappearing back through the doorway.

When the acolyte returned, he had a large round pan of freshly baked millet bread balanced on one hand and a bowl full of ripe grapes and figs teetering precariously on the other. Kes reached out and helped the bowl down to its place on the table board, earning a smile and nod of gratitude from the young man.

He scurried into the back one last time, returning with the much more manageable burden of a small wooden cutting board holding a variety of cheeses. After setting the cheese board near the monk, the acolyte stood by his master’s side waiting patiently.

The monk said a blessing over the food and then, noticing his servant still standing at his side, muttered, “Good, good...thank you Davyd. You may return to your studies now.”

Davyd vanished from the room, and the diners began passing around the bread and fruit.

“Pray tell, good friar,” Kes was overwhelmed with curiosity concerning the monastic lifestyle, “has your assistant undertaken a vow of silence?”

The monk began to chuckle.

Kes looked around at her companions, wondering if she had said something wrong.

“No, no dear girl,” the monk answered at last, “young Davyd was born dumb. That is why his parents abandoned him to the Church.”

“I see...” Kes said, though she could not understand such a thing.

The monk munched loudly on an enormous fig, and when he had finished licking his fingers clean asked, “Now, are you traveling to the east or to the west? For nearly all that stay here are on their way toward one or the other.”

“We are traveling west,” Randol said after swallowing his wine, “to our homes in England.”

“Ah,” the Monk smiled knowingly, “finished with your time on crusade are you? Having served in Outremer, you are ready to return home and see to the affairs of kith and kin?”

“We are more than ready to see our homes and loved ones,” Alfred agreed with part of the monk’s assertion, “but we have not precisely been on crusade for all the years of our absence.”

“Yet you left here with the Templars...” the monk was confused.

“We began our journey from England those many years ago,” Edric tried to help explain, “not as crusaders, but rather upon a quest to find and secure an alliance with a great Christian monarch dwelling in the unknown lands of the farther east. We had heard legends that told of both his piety and his power, and we hoped that he would launch a second front in the seemingly endless war against the Mohammedans, thereby bringing about a decisive conclusion.”

“Extraordinary...” the monk was amazed.

“We stumbled upon this king as he advanced over the wide steppe of the Kievan Rus with a grand army,” Randol elaborated. “However, while the greatness of his power was indisputable, any piety he may have possessed was completely overshadowed by his lust for blood and conquest. Nearly two decades have passed since his vast hordes of horsemen completely crushed the eastern realms of Christendom. These dark riders have gone by many names. Some called them the Golden Horde; others simply know them as the Mongols.”

“Yes...yes...” the monk nodded slowly. “I have heard tales like this one that you tell. Honestly, I did not know if I should believe them, so filled they are with fantastic claims.”

“Believe it,” Alfred said abruptly. “For only by the intervention of God’s own Swift Sure Hand did the leader of the Mongols perish. This led to a long period of internal strife within the Golden Horde. And only recently did the Mongols reemerge to threaten the West once again.”

“Fortunately,” Edric continued, “their new ruler had his heart set upon plundering the riches of Egypt before returning to the conquest of Christendom. By God’s grace, we have just come through the most epic battle of our age. In the Galilean Hills – at the Valley of Ayn Jalut – we fought alongside the Sultan of Egypt, and for the first time in their history, the Mongols suffered a crushing and total defeat.”

“You fought...on the side of the Egyptians?” the monk shuddered as if the words were unspeakable.

“The enemy of an enemy is a friend indeed,” Randol proclaimed. “And perhaps the time has come for the end of the crusading age. As you said yourself, good friar, merchants and traders now frequent the Levantine coast more than knights and soldiers. Should this be a distressing turn of fortune?

“To be sure, we have differences with the Mohammedans. Do we not have differences within Christendom as well? Yet, perhaps those interests which

we have in common with Egypt – peace and prosperity and a hope for the future – perhaps these interests could outweigh the differences.”

“Perhaps...” the monk looked skeptical, and even a bit frightened.

Kiran looked around at his friends and they all smiled at him.

Silence held sway in the dining room as the monk scratched his head for a moment, opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, and eventually took a knife to the pile of cheeses on the cutting board in front of him.

“You bring interesting ideas to our quiet monastery,” the monk said at last, passing the cheese board to Randol. “I may have been hasty in my lament for the days gone by of warring crusaders. Peace, as you rightly point out, has many benefits for all – prosperity not the least among them. Perhaps this was the consideration that changed the plans of the Catalan Company.”

“What, may I ask,” Kes wondered, “is the Catalan Company?”

The monk rubbed his chin remembering, “Twas but a fortnight ago they arrived on the island. Two-hundred knights, I would say. They sailed in from Aragon aboard a Genoese ship. I believe their original intent was to join up with the garrison at Ascalon and eventually make for Jerusalem – though whether as pilgrims or besiegers I was never quite sure.

“The knights arrived at our gates and requested pasturing for their horses. I was more than pleased to oblige them, as their two-hundred mounts gave our ragged fields a sorely needed trimming. In any case, their plans completely changed during their stay. They departed last week on the Lord’s Day, and even as we speak they are likely sailing away to the north with a view to reaching their new destination of Nicaea.”

“What changed their plans,” Randol asked, “and why to Nicaea?”

“The day after the Catalan Company arrived,” the monk thought back, “another visitor came. He claimed to represent the free peoples of Byzantium, and though he was quite dark of hair and eyes, I must say there was something decidedly...less than Greek about his appearance. He proceeded to recruit the two-hundred knights for a war that evidently is brewing over the fate of Constantinople herself.”

Edric and Alfred, whose attention had been entirely focused on the tray of cheese, paused and looked at each other.

“If you ask me,” the monk went on, “they have embarked upon a fool’s quest. The Great City has been under the heel of the Roman Pontiff and his Venetian mercenaries for generations. Unless the Nicean Greeks have many tens of thousands at their command, two-hundred Aragonese knights will make little difference when they run up against Constantinople’s impossibly thick walls.”

“My good friar,” Randol seemed suddenly excited, “this man from Nicaea – did he give his name?”

The monk let out a sigh, as if frustrated by having to delve so deeply into his recent memory.

Kes leaned over to Randol and whispered, “Do you think...”

Before she could finish her question, the monk blurted out, “Paleologus! Yes, that was the man – Michael Paleologus he called himself. Though, I must say, this is not a name with which I am familiar.”

Randol looked over at Kes.

“Never mind...” she sounded disappointed.

“His offer to the Catalan Company was interesting,” the monk rattled on, oblivious to the fact that others had been speaking. “As I understand from the account provided by one of the knights’ leaders, they were tempted to alter their course not only with the promise of immediate payment in gold, but also long-term financial benefits as well.

“You see,” the monk was heartily enjoying having an audience, “so long as the Romans control Constantinople, the Venetians receive special rights and trading privileges to all of the substantial commerce that passes through the Great City by both land and sea. This naturally restricts the commercial access of their rivals, the Genoese. And since Aragon is one of Genoa’s staunchest allies and trading partners...”

“If the Catalan Company can help win Constantinople back for the Greeks,” Randol understood, “they shall also win favored trade status for both their own king and their seafaring allies as well!”

“Precisely, my good man,” the monk beamed. “But as I say, their chances for success are slim at best. *Although...*”

“What is it?” Kes wondered as the monk simply trailed off in thought.

“Well,” the monk shook his head, “the knight I spoke with was not entirely clear on how this Paleologus lad fit into the scheme, but he did make mention of a new hope that has arisen in Nicaea. Apparently some are saying that a long lost heir has emerged with an authentic claim to the Byzantine throne. If it is true, then this could at least be an interesting war. You see, they are saying that a descendant has been found from the royal house of the Angelos!”

*

The seven riders bade farewell to the informative monk and also parted ways with the ship bound for Spain. They rode swiftly to the north of the island, hoping to reach the Catalan Company before they sailed.

Randol was more than a little intrigued with the idea that his nephew – or perhaps even their old friend Constantine himself – could be in the area and planning a major coup. The others shared his curiosity, and did not mind the slight change of course as they were still heading in the direction of England.

In the early afternoon they stopped to rest the horses and water them at a small stream. A quick survey of the area revealed a major hedge of gooseberries not far from the water. Kes and Simon volunteered to forage in order to add fresh berries to their dry food supply.

"We found these at just the right time," Simon popped another berry into his mouth. "They are perfectly ripe...though a bit tart."

Kes smiled at her brother and continued staring at him.

"What?" he became a bit unnerved when he noticed.

"Nothing," she grinned.

"What?" he frowned, "Why are you looking at me like that then?"

"Well," Kes giggled, "I just noticed that you have been spending quite a bit of time with Ovsanna these last days."

"So?" Simon dropped a handful of berries into the sack. "She said she wants to better her English, and she is actually quite good at chatting."

"I am glad, that is all," Kes shook the bag to settle the berries, "for both of you..."

"Hold on there," Simon put his hands on his hips. "Just what are you getting at? And anyway, does she not have eyes for Kiran?"

"Oh, no," Kes shook her head. "No, no. They are just good friends. Trust me. I asked her about that."

"What did she say?" Simon could not resist wondering.

"She mostly asked about you," Kes nudged her brother and pointed to a nearby cluster of gooseberries.

"Is that so?" Simon tried to sound cavalier.

"She wanted to know if you were very popular with the ladies back in Nottinghamshire," Kes explained, "but I assured her that this was not the case."

"Kestrel!" Simon was exasperated.

"I just mean that I assured her you are...well, you know..." Kes paused as she reached for a far off berry.

"That I am...?" he folded his arms.

"That you are...unfettered," Kes answered as she decided to eat the berry rather than add it to the bag.

"Well..." Simon scratched his head. "I suppose I am..."

"Yes, you are," Kes whispered, "and so is she. Rather wonderful if you think about it."

She departed then, heading back toward the others with a full sack of gooseberries, and leaving her brother standing among the bushes, scratching his head and blushing terribly.

*

Following the advice of some local farmers who had seen the knights pass by, they rode into the port town of Poli early the next day. The last ship carrying members of the Catalan Company was undergoing final preparations to set sail.

"You four should stay here with the horses," Randol advised the youngsters. "Large groups of knights can be somewhat unpredictable in their

behavior, especially toward young ladies – and especially when they have been at sea for quite some time.”

Kes was not pleased, but accepted the situation as Randol and her twin uncles headed down to the docks on foot to seek information from the knights regarding the mystery of the Byzantine heir. The four youngsters took care of stabling the horses and then entered a tavern to attend their own needs.

“This is beyond a doubt the finest honey mead ever brewed this side of London,” Simon declared with a quiet burp after draining his third mug.

“I think you have had quite enough,” Kes scowled at him.

“You know,” Simon looked thoughtful, “I believe you are right. So if you will pardon me, I must answer the call of nature.”

“Will you please go with him?” Kes looked hopefully at Kiran. “I would hate for him to fall into a ditch and not be able to crawl back out.”

Kiran laughed. “I will watch out for him.”

The two lads departed the tavern.

Kes looked at Ovsanna and muttered apologetically, “He never drinks like this. I do not know what has come over him.”

“I can tell he does not drink often,” Ovsanna said and they both laughed. “But I am accustomed to much worse, if you will remember my Queen Sybilla.”

“I suppose...” Kes sighed.

Just then they heard footsteps coming down the creaking staircase from the inn above the tavern. The tavern keeper had disappeared into a backroom right around the time Simon and Kiran had gone outdoors, so when the man in black entered the dining area, Ovsanna and Kes were the only others present.

The man looked around the room, finally settling his dark brown eyes upon the two ladies. He was young with thick black hair pulled back into a ponytail, fully revealing his handsome and cleanly-shaven face. He was dressed in a black tunic and pants, with black leather boots and gloves and a black woolen cape hooked at one shoulder with a bronze clasp. Against his hip rested a sword, whose jewel encrusted handle hinted at its owner’s nobility.

He bowed slightly and greeted the ladies in Greek. Kes and Ovsanna looked at each other. They nodded respectfully to the stranger but did not speak.

“Are you ladies well?” the man in black switched to Latin, rightly perceiving Kes’ western qualities. “Are you properly attended?”

“Our escort shall return momentarily,” Kes answered the stranger. “Thank you for your concern.”

“Are you by any chance British?” the man asked in English as his piercing perception correctly interpreted Kes’ accent.

Upon hearing him speak in her native tongue, she suddenly saw the man in a different light. Kes stood as the man took a few steps toward them, his eyes fixed upon hers.

“Yes,” she answered. “I am...but how...”

"You look remarkably familiar to me," the slightest grin had formed on the man's lips. "May I be so bold as to inquire your name?"

"Michael?" she answered with his name instead of her own.

"Kes?" he responded in kind.

They stepped around the table and embraced, letting go of their tense apprehension in a wave of laughter. Kes took a step back and introduced Ovsanna, who had stood as well.

"But you..." Kes stuttered in amazement. "You are a man!"

Michael threw his head back and laughed.

"And you," he refocused his gaze upon her, "are most certainly no longer the little girl I remember chasing among the trees of Sherwood Forest!"

Michael and Kes stood facing each other as endless questions whirled through each of their minds, temporarily rendering them both speechless. Kes broke the impasse by stepping forward into her childhood friend's embrace once again, if only to assure her self that he was real.

Suddenly, the tavern door flew open.

"Ho there!" Simon shouted, still strongly under the influence of the honey mead. "Take your hands off the lady, you scoundrel!" He charged forward to defend his sister's honor.

"Simon, stop!" Kes shouted. "You do not understand!"

Her warning came too late. Simon reached Michael and took a clumsy swing at him. With very little effort, Michael side-stepped; allowing Simon to tumble head first into the side of the bar.

Ovsanna rushed over and helped him sit up.

"Simon, are you alright," she asked with great concern.

He responded with a low moan.

"What is happening here?" the tavern keeper shouted, coming on the run from the back room.

"Everything is fine," Michael reassured him. "No harm done...I hope." He bent down to examine Simon. "However, you may be wearing a nasty goose egg in the morning...Simon Little."

Upon hearing the stranger speak his name, Simon opened his eyes and looked up at the grinning man in black. Before either could speak, the tavern door flew open again.

"I say...back away from them!" Randol shouted, seeing only that a stranger in black was hovering above Simon and Ovsanna, both of whom looked quite distressed.

Michael complied, backing away and holding his hands up in a stance of surrender as Randol, Edric and Alfred had all drawn their swords.

"Good Lord," Kes sighed, "not again..."

The tavern keeper was slowly backing away and trembling.

Kes moved herself in between Michael and her well-meaning protectors and shouted for all parties to remain calm. She explained the true identity of the man in black and the men's swords were promptly returned to their sheaths.

"Can it truly be my dear nephew?" Randol started forward with tears forming in his eyes. He swept up Michael in a bear hug, and they were soon joined by the twins.

"These are very strange people indeed," the tavern keeper muttered under his breath.

Simon was soon on his feet again, though he wisely refrained from the round of drinks that Randol ordered to celebrate the moment of reunion.

*

"So the rumors we have heard are true," Edric said to Michael after tipping back the rest of his mead. "The heir of the royal house of the Angelos has come to challenge the Roman rulers of Constantinople."

"I know your father has long desired to see the day when his namesake city shall be redeemed," Alfred added. "And whatever the result of your quest, he must be very proud to see the man you have become."

Michael nodded appreciatively and acknowledged, "The challenges ahead shall be formidable indeed, but by God's grace we shall be victorious."

"Spoken like a true leader!" Randol put his arm around his nephew's shoulders and signaled for the tavern keeper to top up their mugs.

"I must say," Michael looked around at the entire group, "I am quite distressed to hear about the troubles in Nottingham that prompted your journey. And I know you must desire to return home with all haste in order to help set matters right. However..." He trailed off, staring silently down into the froth of his mead.

"What is it?" Edric was grinning slightly.

"Say what is on your heart, young prince," Alfred was too.

"Surely you must know," Michael began, "that my love and loyalty to the House of Locksley is rivaled only by my duty to Byzantium and her future. Many are the fond memories of my childhood days in England," he looked over at Kes, "and my mother versed me well in the great stories that we all share.

"Yet I cannot in good conscience suppose that Our Lord brought us together like this, only to pass by each other like ships in the night. Could there not be a greater purpose in our meeting here at this time and in this place? Might not the winds of destiny be calling us to stand together at this moment – if only for the sake of our common heritage?

"And there is another consideration. Autumn is well underway. Winter will have come before you can possibly reach England, and this could mean great peril for your journey whether by land or sea. Yet if you all were to come with me to Nicaea, you could wait out the worst of the coming cold and stormy season

and perhaps even play a part in the unfolding of these days of destiny that are upon us. What say you?"

Before anyone could respond, the door to the tavern flew open yet again.

The tavern keeper involuntarily flinched, but it was only a pair of Aragonese knights from the Catalan Company. Their ship was ready to sail, and they had come looking for their new leader.

"Forgive us, my lord," one of the knights said to Michael, "but the ship's captain does not like the look of the western sky. He says we must sail at once or we may miss this opportunity."

"I know I ask a great deal," Michael looked around at them all, "and I shall understand completely if you choose to make for England straightaway. But as you have heard, there is little time to decide. What say you?"

"He makes a valid point about the danger of traveling north as winter sets in," Alfred suggested to the group.

"And we *have* been several weeks now without facing a good battle," Edric smirked and nudged his brother.

"The prospect of accompanying you to Nicaea and taking part in your quest is most intriguing," Kes stepped forward and said to Michael, and then turning to Randol added, "but as the rightful heir and protector of Locksley, the final decision should rest with you."

"I agree," Simon piped in. "We fulfilled our mission by finding you and now we will follow where you lead."

Randol was frowning. He looked at the Aragonese knights waiting nervously in the doorway. He looked at Michael, who was wearing no discernable expression. He looked at the twins, his companions in countless adventures, and read the grins of encouragement on their faces.

Finally, he looked back and forth at Simon and Kes, the youngsters who had placed this burden upon him.

"Let us go to Nicaea," Randol said at last, "and let the Roman usurpers tremble at our approach!"

Everyone in the room, even the tavern keeper, let out a cheer.

"Mind you," Randol added after the enthusiasm had settled. "We shall stay no later than the very first sign of spring."

Michael bowed respectfully, and with no further ado, they paid the tavern keeper and headed for the ship.

*

Room was made below deck to secure the seven Arabian horses for transport along with the steeds of the Catalan Company. After reassuring their horses, the seven new passengers began climbing the rope ladder to reach the upper deck. The anxious ship captain was already letting out the sails to catch the wind.

“I still have one question,” Randol grunted as he pulled himself over the ship’s railing.

“Yes?” Michael raised an eyebrow.

“The Cypriot monk whose advice led us to you,” Randol thought back, “he mentioned another Michael. He said that in addition to the return of the rightful heir of the Angelos, there was one Michael Paleologus – a recruiter for the Byzantines who had secured the assistance of the Aragonese. Has this man traveled on ahead of us?”

Michael laughed. “He stands before you now – for we are in fact one and the same!”

Randol stared at him in confusion as the twins helped each other up onto the deck.

They gathered around as Michael explained, “When I accepted the call of destiny to reclaim Byzantium and the Great City for my father’s house, I was granted a new name. If we should succeed, the Empire will experience a new beginning – and as a part of that new beginning, a new dynastic line shall be created. The royal line of the Angelos will always remain a sacred part of Byzantine history, but the new imperial line shall be known as the *keepers of the ancient words* – the Paleologus.”

“If you plan to establish a new royal house when you become emperor,” Randol grinned at his nephew, “you shall need a wife to be empress, you know.”

Michael blushed as he leaned over the ship’s rail and extended his hand to help Kes reach the deck.

“That will certainly require some attention,” Edric chuckled.

“Unless of course you already have one...” Alfred supposed.

“I am afraid not...” Michael said as he stepped back to make room.

Kes finally overcame the ship’s rail but slipped as her feet met with some water on the deck. Michael caught her in his arms as she fell forward.

With their eyes just a hand-width apart he whispered, “Not yet.”

Verse Eleven – Paleologus

Nicaea Castle came into view as the riders crested a rocky ridge. They had ridden without stopping since landing near Smyrna, and the prospect of food and rest added to their excitement over finally reaching Michael's headquarters.

Once the gatekeepers recognized their leader, they sounded their trumpets. The drawbridge descended and the iron portcullis was raised, making a clear path for the weary riders.

Stewards waiting in the courtyard directed the Aragonese knights toward the stables where their horses were given nourishment and care. The men were shown to barracks where they were able to safely stow their weapons and wash themselves in running water.

Ladies of the court were assigned to oversee the comfort of Ovsanna and Kes, while Kiran and the Englishmen were given access to Michael's own quarters for resting and refreshing themselves. The men took turns in the royal waterworks, while the others munched upon grapes and juicy pears.

Randol, Edric and Alfred even took the dramatic step of shaving off their massive Egyptian-style beards. The boys found the results somewhat comical as the lower half of the men's faces were suddenly a milky-white shade in contrast to the sun scorched upper halves.

Night had fallen by the time everyone was clean and sated, so the guests were taken to spare rooms where they each enjoyed a pleasant night of sleep.

*

A light breakfast was provided at dawn, during which Michael introduced his guests to his second in command.

"I am truly honored and delighted to meet each one of you," General Strategopolous declared after he had made his way around the room shaking the hands of the men and lightly brushing the backs of the ladies' hands with his lips.

"We have heard many impressive stories of your skill and bravery during these last few days," Kes replied.

"I seek only to serve," Strategopolous bowed.

"We would appreciate an opportunity to review your plans for the recapture of Constantinople," Randol suggested as the twins nodded, "and perhaps to offer a few insights based upon our own experiences."

"I shall be both most grateful for any wisdom and counsel you wish to provide us," the General bowed once again. "Would you care to view my scale model of the city?"

The former captains of Egypt answered with their feet, and the entire group moved into a nearby chamber where a miniature version of the Great City lay across an entire table in dazzling detail. The shape of the peninsula upon

which the city rested was strikingly reminiscent of a horse head. Strategopolous stood near the snout and from his cloak produced a pointing stick.

“As you can see,” the General began, pointing to what would be the horse’s mane, “a direct frontal assault upon the outer frontier would be most ineffective. The Theodosian Walls are supremely fortified – a minimum of twenty feet thick in any location. A number of safeguards are in place to discourage the use of ladders or siege towers. These include crenulated parapets, boiling oil spouts, and an ever present garrison of expert archers.

“Even if the walls were somehow breached, an invader could only proceed a dozen city blocks before coming upon the thousand year-old Walls of Constantine.” Strategopolous pointed his stick at the approximate location of the horse’s bridle. “Less thick than the outer walls, these are still formidable and also heavily garrisoned. And even so the invader is no closer to reaching the prize of the Imperial Palace.

“Endless narrow streets must be navigated, with every angle exposed to the archers and ballistae stationed in countless watch towers throughout the city. Armor, by the way, is of little help. The tower garrisons can simply rain Greek fire upon the invaders. Even if the armor survives, the man inside shall cook. And the journey to the heart of the city is still not complete.

“The Walls of Septimus Severus remain to be breached,” the General directed their attention to the imaginary horse’s mouth bit. “Towering nearly thirty feet into the sky, these granite walls are reinforced with an interior framework of heavy iron. Not even earthquakes can damage them, and the elite palace militia controls their few gates. All in all, at least ten-thousand men are bearing arms in defense of the city at any moment.”

The guests remained mostly silent as they began to understand the enormity of the task facing Michael and his General.

Edric and Alfred were pointing to various spots on the model of the city and whispering ideas to each other, but they did not share these with the group.

Finally Randol acknowledged the obvious suggesting, “An overland attack may not be our best option. What about by sea?”

“Sea walls,” Strategopolous began tracing the outer perimeter of the peninsula, “that exceed the thickness even of those on land, root down into the bedrock beneath the waves. No ship borne ram or catapult that I have ever seen would have the power to breach these defenses. There are gaps in the wall – here, at the Theodosian Harbor – here, at the Julian Harbor – and all along here, among the Bosphorus trading ports at Keras.”

“Somehow, I doubt those are our best options either,” Randol had folded his arms and set his face in a frown.

“You are right,” the General nodded. “Eighty Venetian war galleys have established a permanent blockade of these access points. No ships go in or out of the ports without their approval – and taxation I might add.”

“If not by land or by sea,” Kes asked aloud what they were all thinking, “what other options exist?”

“Could you tunnel underneath the walls?” Simon asked.

“Well proposed, my lad! You are thinking beyond the map,”

Strategopolous grinned. “However, such a route might take months, if not years, to establish. And the moment the city defenders discovered the tunnels, the lives of any inside them could very easily be snuffed out.”

Simon nodded.

“If a very small force entered the city through stealth,” Kiran offered, “they could prepare the way for a larger force to follow.”

“You are quite wise for one so young,” the General’s smile broadened. “I share your line of thought, but many questions remain. How does this small force gain entry? What do they do once inside? And how do they communicate their intentions to the larger force in waiting?”

“What about the people?” Ovsanna asked quietly.

“Explain your thoughts, dear maiden,” Strategopolous was curious.

“Is this not a Greek city? Yet it is ruled by Romans,” Ovsanna looked around as she spoke. “Perhaps the people of the city would rise up against their oppressors, if they believed they might succeed?”

“Yes,” Strategopolous nodded, with a twinkle in his eye as he watched the Armenian girl, “another valid consideration indeed! Remember though that these poor Greek citizens have lived under the heel of tyranny for generations. Unless they see an undeniable sign of their oppressor’s demise, fear will surely win the day.”

The General looked around the room. His gaze settled on the twins. They were both grinning.

“I am curious what the two of you have to say,” Michael wondered as he came over and stood next to the General.

“Misdirection,” Edric answered.

“Diversion,” Alfred added.

“What do you mean?” Strategopolous furrowed his brow.

“Make the enemies believe they are under attack in one location,” Edric began to explain.

“And then attack them in quite another,” Alfred finished.

“Or,” Edric went on, “retreat from a battle, not necessarily because you are losing...”

“But rather,” Alfred concluded, “to draw the enemies to a location where you would prefer them to be.”

“I like all that I have been hearing,” Michael began pacing around. “And only with clever ideas like each of these shall we succeed. Brute force must always remain our last resort, for remember – we are trying to reclaim this city, not destroy it.”

“Your intention of sparing the innocent, and the city herself, from unnecessary destruction is noble indeed, young prince,” Randol nodded, “yet no matter how clever we are, and no matter what form our final plan takes; the fact remains that we are still likely to need more forces, more allies, and before this is all over, at least a few ships.”

“I agree,” Michael smiled as he put his hand on his uncle’s shoulder. “We still have much work to do. That is why I ask...no...I *command* all of you to come to my great hall this evening at sundown. No winning war strategy has ever been devised on empty stomachs. The time has come for a feast!”

*

“This I could grow quite accustomed to,” Kes sighed as she slid further down into the hot soapy bath water.

After scrubbing and fussing over the two young ladies, the attendants had departed the waterworks and left them to soak.

“Being the receiver of such care is wonderful, especially after always being the provider,” Ovsanna agreed from the other end of the enormous tub.

“I do not believe I have felt this clean and relaxed since leaving England – if ever!” Kes continued.

“Well,” Ovsanna grinned slyly, “you must be prepared to look your best for your prince.”

“*My* prince...” Kes blushed instantly. “Why on earth would you say such a thing?”

“Did you not see him in the war-planning chamber?” Ovsanna slid through the water to sit closer by her friend. “While all the others were studying the city and considering their battle plans, he scarcely took his eyes from you!”

“Truly...?” Kes had thought as much, but had been unwillingly to admit this to herself.

“One might almost think that you were the citadel whose walls he wished to breach,” Ovsanna giggled.

Overwhelmed, Kes shook her head and declared, “No! No, you are making too much of this. He is merely fascinated because we knew each other as children, and he has not seen me in such a long time and...”

“And now you are a woman,” Ovsanna stated the obvious, “and a very beautiful woman you are indeed, my friend.”

Kes struggled to think of how to respond.

So Ovsanna continued, “And it is right and fitting that he should have eyes for you. Do you not have eyes for him?”

Ovsanna played with some soap bubbles and waited while Kes considered the matter.

"I..." Kes stuttered. "Well...without a doubt he is handsome and dashing and brave and strong and a bit mysterious...and yet I *know* him too. I know his heart, and that he is a good and upright soul."

"That is a 'yes' then?" Ovsanna laughed.

"No!" Kes panicked. "I mean...yes. Well, I do not know. Yes, of course he is desirable, but..."

"What else matters?" Ovsanna wondered.

"Well..." Kes was becoming agitated, "I might be a distraction! He has an empire to reclaim, and I must not jeopardize that!"

"I think that our Michael Paleologus is very much a wise leader," Ovsanna reasoned, "especially for a man no older than you or I. He is likely thinking beyond the battle – and even the war – to the peace that shall come afterward. What value is winning the war after all, if the peace that follows is not won as well? Any strongman can conquer a city, but to rule and reign and build a lasting legacy, an emperor needs an empress."

Kes laughed out loud. "Can you hear yourself, Ovsanna? You speak of such things as if we are living in a fairytale. Not just anyone can become an empress, you know. Really...such a thing is beyond imagining – Kes Little, daughter of Jonas Little, the carpenter of Nottingham – Empress of Byzantium?"

Ovsanna did not laugh, but in all seriousness replied, "I think that title would suit you quite well."

Kes opened her mouth to continue arguing, but the ladies-in-waiting returned, pulled them both from the water, and moved them on to the next stage in their preparation for the feast. During the rest of that afternoon spent on clothing, hair, and other feminine details, there was no doubt that both ladies were treated like royalty.

*

While the others were washing and dressing, Kiran took a stroll in the extensive palace gardens. He was looking for a peaceful place to make his afternoon prayers and he found it in a shady grove near a small trickling fountain.

He unrolled his mat, knelt upon it facing the east, and began fervent prayers of thankfulness. He praised God for his life and the many wonders of the earth. He gave thanks for his friends and for the covering of protection that had brought them all this far through so many dangers.

He asked for continued safety and that God's will be accomplished in the battle for Constantinople that would surely come soon. He concluded, as he always did, by asking for God's peace to rest upon his heart.

When he was done, Kiran opened his eyes and squinted in the bright afternoon sunshine. Suddenly, he realized that someone was watching him. Across the clearing, standing underneath a date tree, was a young boy who stared at Kiran with a curious expression.

“Greetings,” Kiran said, staying on his knees so he remained slightly shorter than the boy.

“Are you here to kill me?” the boy sounded serious.

“Why should I wish to do such a thing?” Kiran played along.

“Are you not the Arabian Assassin who travels with the English newcomers?” the boy sought to clarify.

“I do come from the east, but I am not Arabian,” Kiran replied, “though you are right on the other counts.”

“What are you then?” the boy frowned.

“I am a young man,” Kiran smiled, “just like you. My friends call me by my name.”

“What is it?” the boy asked.

“Kiran,” he answered. “And yours?”

“You do not know?”

Kiran shook his head.

“John,” the boy replied. “John Laskaris.”

“Ah, yes,” Kiran stood and took up his mat. “Of you I have heard.”

“You really did not know who I was?” John was surprised.

“I did not, but now I most certainly do. You are the steward of Nicaea,” Kiran bowed.

“And you are not here to remove me?” he was still a bit nervous.

“Once again,” Kiran asked, “why would I wish to?”

“So that I cannot usurp the Paleologus,” John answered matter-of-factly.

“I see,” Kiran nodded, restraining from a smile. “And do you wish to take the throne in Constantinople for yourself?”

“No.”

“Then I should say you have little to worry about,” Kiran tucked his rolled up mat under his arm and motioned for John to follow him as he started back toward the castle.

The boy hesitated, but finally fell in step with Kiran. They walked slowly through the garden.

“They say though,” John resumed his worrying, “that the Paleologus is a hard and shrewd man who leaves little to chance.”

“That may be true,” Kiran shrugged, “but only partially so. He is also very kind and understanding. Have you not spoken with him?”

John shook his head and answered, “I have only heard him speak in the royal court and watched him from afar.”

“If I could arrange for you to speak with him, your fears might be allayed,” Kiran suggested. “Would you like me to try?”

“I suppose,” John sighed. He stopped then, put his hands on his hips and looked up at Kiran. “Just who are you after then anyway, if not me?”

“After?” Kiran was confused.

“You are an Assassin,” John insisted. “You have already admitted to it. So you must have been sent to deal with someone here.”

“Deal with...?” Kiran grinned.

“You know...” John drew his finger across his throat dramatically.

Kiran threw his head back and laughed.

“What is so funny about that?” John was frowning.

“I suppose you could say I am...retired as an Assassin,” Kiran patted the boy on his shoulder. “I am only here to help my friends.”

“And why are the English here?” John wondered.

“To help the Paleologus,” Kiran answered.

“Oh,” John said. “I wish I could help too, that is, if the Paleologus is truly kind and good as you say.”

Kiran paused again and looked down at his new friend. “How many summers have you seen, John Laskaris?”

“Nine,” the boy replied, “Though I shall turn ten this winter.”

“You look very strong and seem very wise for your age,” Kiran offered. “The Paleologus will need good young men to help him rule after he comes to power. There may yet be a place for you in the destiny of the Empire.”

They walked along in silence for a few paces as John considered this idea. Suddenly the boy remarked, “I like you, Kiran. I am glad you are not here to kill me.”

“As am I,” Kiran smiled.

*

The feast began humbly enough. Guests reclined against pillows with their legs tucked underneath low wooden tables. Bowls of whole fruit were spaced at regular intervals, and the diners refreshed themselves choosing from among pomegranates, peaches, plums and pears.

Conversation swelled to a dull roar, echoing against the high ceiling of the great hall. Michael watched with satisfaction from the high table as his guests settled in and relaxed. He was flanked on one side by Simon, Kes, Ovsanna and Kiran; and on the other by Randol, the twins and Strategopolous.

When everyone appeared to have satisfied their interest in the fruit; servants passed by each table carrying large bowls full of steaming hot towels. The guests used these to clean the sticky juices from their faces and hands. As soon as they were done distributing, the servants retraced their paths collecting the soiled towels and taking them away.

Next, a variety of salty spreads were brought forth. Guests sampled the nutty flavor of ground almond paste, the earthiness of roasted sesame spread, and the acrid bite of minced garlic drowning in shallow pools of olive oil and vinegar. Crisp triangles of unleavened bread were used for dipping into the different bowls.

The servants left these out for later nibbling as they placed before each individual guest a small bowl of hot lentil soup. The normally bland flavor of the lentils had been enhanced with trace amounts of crushed black pepper and finely chopped chives. Conversation continued to bubble throughout the hall as the diners sipped cautiously from their steaming bowls.

The fourth and fifth courses arrived together in the form of two salads. One was composed of shredded leaf lettuce, sliced radishes and diced cucumber – all lightly dressed in oil, vinegar and salt. The other was based upon soft white kidney beans. The beans had been long marinated in lemon juice and vinegar, and were further adorned with finely chopped onion and parsley, and seasoned with salt and pepper.

General Strategopolous watched the twins pack food away like desert camels storing water. “Have you ever been to a Byzantine feast?” he raised an eyebrow at the brothers.

They both looked over at him and, while still chewing, slowly shook their heads.

The General chuckled, “You must be careful to pace yourselves. We are only now nearing the halfway point.”

Eventually, after swallowing his mouthful of kidney beans, Alfred replied, “You must understand, we have not enjoyed a truly proper meal in nearly twenty years.”

Edric swallowed hard and added, “Tis true. While Egyptian culture has achieved many magnificent wonders, the culinary arts are not among them.”

Strategopolous laughed, “In that case, let me help stimulate your appetites!” He continued grinning as he reached for a nearby wine decanter and topped up their goblets.

“Much appreciated,” the twins said in unison, awed by the thoughtfulness of the General.

At the other end of the table, Simon was receiving similar warnings from his sister concerning the danger of his rapid food intake.

“Honestly, Kes,” Simon said through a mouthful of salad, “you are getting to be more and more like mother every single...” He stopped short as a bit of radish went down the wrong way. Despite his best effort at dealing with it subtly, he eventually had no choice but to cough it out with a fairly noticeable sound resulting.

“Are you quite alright, Simon?” Michael leaned over and rubbed the lad’s back.

Simon nodded, covering his mouth with his fist. His eyes had turned red around the rims. “Fine,” he whispered with all the voice he could muster. “I’m fine, thank you.”

Kes simply shook her head and turned to speak with Ovsanna, who had been watching Simon with some concern.

Everyone's attention was soon refocused, however, as the servants reemerged to launch the second half of the feast. In a sense, the festivities began all over again with trays of finger foods set about for nibbling amidst the steady flow of conversation.

The guests, quite a bit less hungry than before, picked lazily from the bite-sized selections of vegetables, cheeses and shellfish that were arranged in such ornate patterns; they were nearly as interesting to stare at and discuss as they were to taste.

Like the savory spreads from earlier in the evening, these morsels remained accessible even while a new course was brought forth.

"Oh, good Lord," Edric dropped the shrimp he had been holding.

"What could this be?" Alfred reclined and watched in wonder.

The servants were coming toward the high table pushing a sturdy wooden cart. On the top tier of the cart a small fire burned inside a shallow iron vessel. Propped just over the flames was another, smaller iron container that bore a remarkable resemblance to a frying skillet.

As the cart neared, they could see bowls of myriad ingredients on the shelf underneath. The largest was full of a thick yellow liquid.

"My friends," Randol leaned toward the twins, "I believe we are about to receive the desire of our hearts."

"Omelets," the twins looked at each other and said in unison, with almost religious reverence.

The castle's head chef soon arrived. A man whose shape revealed his deep delight for his work, the chef was slow in crossing the room. Once stationed in front of the mobile omelet grill, however, his hands flew to the task with seemingly effortless speed and grace. With uncanny precision, he produced individualized omelets to the exact specifications of every guest at the head table.

Each turned out as a work of art, with fluffy layers of egg lovingly embracing colorful peppers, onions, olives and pimentos. The only exceptions were the omelets that went to the twins. As they had requested every available ingredient, theirs appeared more like casseroles whose multitudinous elements were only loosely held together by a thin coating of egg.

The chef lingered in front of Ovsanna and Kes, particularly curious to see the reaction of the two lovely young ladies toward his work.

Both ladies had been full ever since the kidney bean salad, but still they forged onward. Taking dainty bites, they lauded the chef with praise until he became satisfied and left the hall. The servants continued around the room, bringing the blessings of the omelet cart to other tables.

Even after all of this, three more courses remained to be confronted. First among these were trays of seasoned and baked poultry – mostly chicken, with some quail. Next arrived platters piled with miniature juicy sausages, interspersed with thin strips of salted pork roast.

Only then, at the point where no one really needed or wanted more food, did the chef send forth the flagship of his culinary fleet. Carried on a giant wooden spit between two servants, was an entire succulent, sizzling, slow-roasted lamb.

The servants paraded it around the room as if it were the spoils from a long-running war. Eventually, they came to a stop in front of the head table. The portly chef, in an encore performance, skillfully sliced strips of the juicy meat and heaped them before the honored guests.

No one was quite sure what to do. They all were growing sleepy and lethargic from the evening's adventures in eating. Even the twins simply stared at the choice meat with glassy eyes.

"You win," Alfred muttered to the chef. "I surrender. You are the master of both my heart and my stomach!"

The chef, completely lost to the meaning of any of these English words, just smiled and motioned for them to eat.

"Please tell him," Edric leaned over to Strategopolous, after forcing down a bite, "that if I was still able to be aware of the taste of anything, I am certain this would be the finest meat I have ever had."

The General passed along a more straightforward compliment to assuage the chef, and then turning back to the twins chuckled, "I warned you about pacing yourselves!"

*

Everyone slept extremely well that night and was fairly late in rising. Kes found her uncles wandering in the gardens at mid-morning.

"Care to join me in the hall for a late breaking of the fast?" she queried, half in jest.

They shot her wary glances and just kept walking, holding their sides and moaning slightly.

By early afternoon, everyone was feeling a bit spryer. Michael called his guests back to the war room, where they had a light snack of fruit and water. Afterward, they returned to the serious business of planning the assault against the Roman overlords of Constantinople.

"Our plans may need to be accelerated," Strategopolous warned. "The vanguard of the Teutonic mercenary army has already reached the outskirts of the city, and once the main body of their force arrives, the Romans will not wish to pay them simply to sit and wait any longer than necessary."

"What about the Venetians?" Michael asked.

"Both the number of their vessels and the amount of their activity has increased dramatically, just in these last few days," the General advised. "They could be making preparations to begin ferrying the Teutons across the Bosphorus."

The Romans may well be planning to bring the battle to us before we can bring it to them.”

“Very well,” Michael sighed. “Let us begin the mobilization. Call in the Kataphraktoi from their border patrols so they may have at least a brief period of rest before riding out. Muster the provincial militias. Grant our blacksmiths any resources they may need – even the power to conscript workers if they ask for it. I want every blade sharpened and every quiver full.”

“If I may, my lord,” Randol interjected.

“Please,” Michael nodded.

“Our numbers are still...” Randol hesitated. “Are there no more allies you can call upon? What of Trebizond or the Armenians?”

“Trebizond is weak,” Michael replied immediately, his disgust evident, “they can scarcely defend themselves, much less offer aid. And Hethoum...” Michael trailed off.

“Hethoum is most likely quaking in his boots,” Randol grinned, “wondering why he ever backed the Mongols and when Baybars is going to come for revenge. He will be looking around anxiously for anyone to call a friend, even if he has to earn that friendship with assistance.”

Michael paced back and forth before stating, “Very well, we shall send a mission to Hethoum at once. Are there volunteers?”

Everyone looked at Ovsanna.

“I can go,” she said quietly, “if it shall be of some help.”

“Then I shall go as well,” Simon declared. “And I will protect you with my life.” He caught Kes’ eye and she winked at him.

“Let us accompany you,” Alfred stepped forward and Edric joined him.

“If you run across any Turks,” Edric frowned, “you may need all the help you can get.”

“Then count me in, too,” Kiran offered.

“Is there anyone else?” Michael looked around.

“With your leave,” Randol bowed to him, “I will stay and work with the General on the troop mobilization.”

Strategopolous nodded slightly and it was agreed.

“What about you?” Kes asked, turning to Michael.

“I will ride for the port at Smyrna,” he answered, “and attempt to contact some old friends whose help we will surely need.”

“And what shall I do then?” Kes wondered.

Michael grinned and his eyes sparkled as he took a step closer to her and answered, “Come with me.”

Verse Twelve – Gathering the Storm

“I say,” Simon confronted his sister as they walked in the gardens after dinner that night, “do you really think this is wise?”

“What?” she looked over his shoulder at the sun setting behind the western hills.

“Riding off all alone...” he scowled.

“I shall not be alone,” she dismissed. “I shall be with Michael.”

“That is what I am saying,” Simon worried. “You have only known him – at least – as the person he is now, for a matter of days.”

“Is he so different from when we were young?” she argued.

“How should I know?” he answered. “I cannot recall those days. I may as well have met him for the first time in that tavern on Cyprus.”

“And such a first impression you made...” Kes teased him.

“Yes, quite,” Simon coughed. “Look – all that aside – well, what would mother say?”

“She would probably say, ‘Oh, you shall be traveling with a dear old friend of the family? Alright, very well then – run along now and do remember to dress warmly.’” Kes smirked.

“I am being serious,” Simon stopped walking and folded his arms.

“Simon,” she put her hands on his shoulders, “I will be fine. We are merely riding to the coast, and we shall return directly after he has delivered his message. And beside that, no fewer than six of his royal guardsmen are coming along as an escort.”

“Oh,” Simon sighed. “You forgot to tell me that part.”

“Feel better?” she smiled.

“I suppose,” he frowned.

They continued walking, and a cool breeze lamented the final departure of the sun beneath the far horizon.

“Honestly,” Kes said quietly, “I am much more worried for the rest of you. The Armenian Kingdom is so very far from here, and in between could be bandits, Turks, or who knows what?”

“Our uncles will keep us safe,” Simon replied. “Of that I have no doubt.”

“I know,” she nodded. “Just promise me you will be careful.”

“I promise,” he smiled. “You be careful, too.”

*

Early the next morning, Michael and Kes rode to the edge of the castle grounds with the five emissaries and prayed with them before their long journey east began. Soon Simon, Kiran, Ovsanna and the twin brothers of Allendale had disappeared from view, consumed in the blazing light of the rising sun.

The five riders were heavily laden with food and water, and armed with swords and bows. A sixth horse carried a pair of tents, bedrolls and cookware.

Due to the hilly and rocky terrain of Asia Minor, their ride east lasted nearly two weeks. Rain storms in the far off mountains came down to soak them a few times, but the occasional wetness was a small price in exchange for fresh cold water flowing in the rivers and streams. A few autumn forage fruits were still available, and roaming woodland fauna kept meat in their diet.

The five riders encountered no bandits, and the handful of farming communities they passed through were home to peaceful and friendly tenants of Greek descent. Moving further east into the shadow of the Pontic Mountains, they spotted occasional bands of Turkish marauders coursing through far away dales and valleys. However, these were generally easy enough to avoid.

“That was quite a large one,” Edric whispered to his brother as they lay on their bellies watching another mounted band of Turks disappear into a distant fog bank.

“They certainly wasted no time moving back into the area,” Alfred shook his head.

“Without the threat of the Mongol Horde,” Edric surmised, “who is there to stop them?”

They stood, brushed off their cloaks, and walked back up the hill to the juniper thicket where the others had hidden with the horses. No one was there.

“Not good,” Alfred whispered as they both drew swords and stood back to back.

The twins refrained from calling out. Instead, they moved slowly and cautiously around the area, searching for any sign of what might have happened.

“Hoof prints,” Edric pointed, “there and there...”

No sooner had he said the words than dozens of heavily armed and armored riders burst out of hiding from all directions. The twins were instantly surrounded with a number of iron-tipped spears pointed right at their heads.

“Not good at all...” Alfred muttered quietly.

*

Michael and Kes enjoyed a delightful ride from Nicaea Castle to the port at Smyrna under sunny skies. Their party included six mounted guards, four supply porters, and a young handmaiden to wait upon Kes.

They rented the entire upper floor at an inn near the seaside and tarried for several days, waiting for a ship whose arrival Michael was anticipating. With the company of guards never far away, Kes was treated to a grand tour of the shops, markets and better eating establishments of Smyrna.

Initially, Kes restrained herself from enjoying the wining, dining and gift-giving that the young prince showered upon her. However, Michael was so

relentless in treating her like a princess; after a few days her resolve began to soften and she eventually gave up her striving for humble austerity.

She did insist though, on Sunday morning, that they attend church services together. Michael obliged and took her to the nearest of the city's three Orthodox chapels.

They sang the liturgies, participated in the sung call and response with the priest, and listened to his rather lengthy homily. Finally, after confessing their sins and being absolved, they partook of the Lord's Supper. Then after one last hymn, they were free to go.

While they had been inside the chapel, the long awaited Genoese ship had arrived at the port. Michael immediately boarded the ship, where he attempted to converse with the sailors who were shouting, celebrating, and competing with one another to hug him.

Standing on the dock among the royal guardsmen, Kes watched the scene with wonder, but did not try to insert herself into the chaos. Once the sailors had calmed down, Michael spoke quietly with their captain and leading officers for some time.

At one point Michael produced a small parchment scroll from inside his cloak and presented it to the ship's captain, who nodded vigorously and quickly hid the scroll away. Soon after, they concluded their conversation. The Genoese sailors began unloading their trade cargo, and Michael began climbing back down onto the dock.

Kes turned for a moment and looked around the harbor area. Not far away, standing by a stack of water barrels, a short dark-haired man in a black robe was staring at her. His look unsettled her and she turned back toward Michael who was drawing close. When he reached her, he was grinning from ear to ear.

"Your sailor friends seem to have missed you," she smiled.

"They are good men – every one," Michael replied, "and we would not be able to accomplish the task ahead of us without the help they will provide."

"Good friends are a wonderful blessing," she nodded as he took her by the arm and they began strolling back to their inn.

As they departed the dock area, Kes looked over her shoulder toward the stack of water barrels, but the man in black had disappeared.

*

"Please accept my most sincere apologies for your fright," the Armenian general said with genuine humility. "You must understand, we live under constant threat from the Turk, and we could take no risk until we were certain of your peaceful intentions."

"Think nothing of it," Edric spoke through Ovsanna's translation.

“We surely would have done the same had the situation been reversed,” she added on Alfred’s behalf.

“You are too kind,” the general bowed briefly. “Now, how can we be of help to you?”

“Our mission to your king is of the utmost urgency,” Edric asserted.

“Many lives depend upon our speed and our success,” Alfred added.

“Then I shall provide you with an escort of my own troops!” the general declared. “Take heart, for you are not far from the conclusion of your quest. King Hethoum is only one day’s swift ride to the east, in his capital city of Sis!”

Before dawn the next day, they departed on the road to Sis under the guard of twenty heavily armed Armenian cavalymen.

“Does it seem strange,” Simon called to Ovsanna as they galloped along under low-hanging grey clouds, “returning to your homeland after all this time?”

She refrained from replying for so long that Simon was thinking of withdrawing the question.

Suddenly she answered, “This does not feel like home to me. And I do not think it ever will again.”

“Are you sad?” he wondered.

“No.”

“Are you afraid?” he pressed.

She gave him a strange look, and again Simon wondered if he had crossed a line.

At last though, with the slightest smirk forming upon her lips she replied, “Not as long as we are together.”

*

The evening had grown quite crisp by the time Michael and Kes turned the corner onto the street where their inn was located. He held her more closely, and she was grateful both for the warmth and for the additional sign of the growing affection between them.

Her golden hair fell in front of her face as she laughed at another one of his wry remarks. She reached up her hand and tucked the hair behind her ear. As she did, she caught a glimpse of the short man in black again. He was quickly crossing the street several blocks away, but she was certain it was the same man who had been staring at her by the docks earlier.

She was wondering whether she should say anything to Michael about it when her handmaiden came running out of the inn’s front door. The girl was pouring tears, and babbling incoherently as she ran toward Kes.

“I am sorry...” the girl wailed. “I did not mean to...please, oh please forgive me...”

Michael motioned to a pair of his guards who immediately raced inside to see what was amiss. Kes was still trying to calm the girl when the guards returned and explained that there had been a small fire.

The handmaiden had gone to the room she was staying in with Kes to prepare it for the evening. She had left a candle on a small table while she went to retrieve more supplies.

By the time she returned, the candle had somehow fallen and started a blaze. The royal porters rushed in and used blankets to suppress the flames, but the walls and furniture were all blackened from smoke.

Content that the danger had passed, however, they all moved back into the building to discuss sleeping arrangements.

"I am afraid the room will not be fit for sleeping in this night," the innkeeper mourned, causing fresh tears to come forth from the handmaiden.

"You poor dear," Kes soothed the girl, cradling her head and gently stroking her hair. "You must have been completely terrified. But you must not blame yourself. Accidents happen to all of us. All that matters is that no one was hurt."

"I could not agree more," Michael shook the innkeeper's hand as he spoke, "and with a bit of work, the room should soon be as fit as on its first day."

When Michael let go, the innkeeper looked down into his hand to discover he was holding a trio of glistening gold coins.

"Quite so, my lord!" the innkeeper seemed to bounce slightly. "And if there is anything you need, my lord, why anything at all..."

"Thank you," Michael winked at him, "we have been most comfortable here, and you have been most hospitable. Unfortunately, we shall be riding out at first light. Perhaps a round of omelets in the morning to strengthen us before we depart...?"

"Oh yes, my lord," the innkeeper bounced again. "You shall find we make the finest eggs in all of Smyrna!" He bounced once last time and scurried out of the room, presumably to begin planning the omelets.

"Michael," Kes left the handmaiden to settle her nerves with a cup of diluted wine and stepped over to him, "where then shall I sleep tonight?"

"In my bed," he purposefully teased her, delighting in the sight of her cheeks turning bright red.

Her eyes fluttered and her lips attempted to produce a response, but nothing came out.

"You shall find it quite large, with plenty of room for two," he pushed his jesting still further before finally adding, "So it shall suit you and your attendant perfectly."

Kes took a deep breath. "Yes," she exhaled, "yes, of course. Yet, where shall you then find rest?"

“Oh, do not worry,” he smiled at her, “there are a few extra bunks in the guards’ quarters. Believe me; I was accustomed to much less during my years at sea with the Genoese.”

“Are you certain?” she was still flustered.

“It is decided,” he bowed to her, took up her hand, and lightly kissed the backs of her fingers. “Until the morning then, I bid you good night.”

He turned and headed for the staircase.

“Michael,” she called, causing him to pause and turn back around with a curious look. “I...I have had a wonderful time these last few days here...with you...together...”

He came back to stand right in front of her again and whispered, “I am glad you came along...with me...together...”

They stood there, staring into each other’s eyes, and neither knew how they were going to move on. Neither particularly cared.

Fortunately for all involved, the innkeeper soon came bouncing back into the room boasting about his plans for breakfast, and the tension was diffused long enough for everyone to make it to their beds.

Even so, the hour was quite late before either Kes or Michael actually fell asleep.

*

King Hethoum was not the ogre that Ovsanna had imagined. She had never actually met him face to face before, and this had allowed her imagination to run wild; fueled by the pain and anger over her mother’s death.

He was a small man, sitting upon an enormous throne. His white hair and beard, and his wrinkled face gave him a grandfatherly appearance. He smiled at Ovsanna with a disarming twinkle in his eye, at least, until he began to understand the message she was translating.

Hethoum’s expression darkened as Edric and Alfred’s warnings of doom and destruction came forth. The king stood and paced about his throne dais. The archbishop sitting beside the throne looked gravely concerned as well.

“The Great Sultan Baybars will show no mercy,” Ovsanna concluded. “The soldiers of his Mameluke armies are trained from childhood to fight and to kill. They will die before retreating. Walls do not stop them. Trenches do not slow them.

“The Horde of the Steppe Mongols, with the largest army ever assembled since ancient times, rode against Baybars and his Mamelukes. The Horde was crushed completely and ground to powder in the dusty hills of Galilee. Baybars’ eye is now fixed upon those complicit with the invasion. Antioch will fall. He will then turn north, and nothing shall stand between the Mamelukes and Sis.”

King Hethoum stopped pacing. He could not have been frowning any more deeply.

Ovsanna had broken a sweat, barely able to believe that she was speaking such threatening words to the king of her people.

“Since you come from Byzantium with your dark tidings,” Hethoum spoke quietly, “does the Emperor offer his aid?”

Ovsanna conferred with the twins and replied, “A change of power in the great city of Constantinople is imminent. A long lost descendant of the Angelos has emerged and shall found a new imperial line. The dawn of the Royal House of the Paleologus is at hand!

“Those who demonstrate support during this period of imperial transition shall be rewarded many times over in the future. Michael Paleologus requests from you a cavalry contingent of five-thousand heavy knights to support his bid for the throne. Your aid will be remembered, and the new Emperor shall bring all of his power, both diplomatic and military, to the task of protecting you from Egypt’s vengeance.

“Moreover,” Ovsanna continued after Alfred whispered in her ear, “unlike the Roman-Venetian alliance which for so long has usurped rightful power in the Great City, the Paleologus shall grant you permanent free and favored trading status. The Bosphorus straights will once again be open to your ships, and the merchant marines of the Mediterranean world shall once again enrich your coffers. Lastly, but most importantly of all, your excommunication from the Mother Church shall be overruled, and you shall be welcomed back into the Holy Orthodox Communion with open arms.”

At this, the archbishop stood and took several steps toward Ovsanna. He began to speak with her directly. She responded without consulting her companions and was growing visibly upset.

“What is he saying?” Simon whispered frantically to Edric. “We cannot let this go on!”

Edric ignored his plea, but continued watching the exchange.

Simon looked over at Kiran whose face mirrored his own anxiety. Although they could not understand the churchman’s words, his tone was unmistakably accusatory.

Soon enough though, the archbishop relented and returned to his seat.

Ovsanna cast a quick glance back toward Simon. When their eyes met, she looked down and her face, already much redder than usual, blushed terribly.

King Hethoum, who had been standing still and looking deep in thought, returned to the front of his dais and addressed the Byzantine delegation.

“He is going to help,” Ovsanna translated with a deep sigh of relief. “The full five-thousand cavalry requested by the Paleologus is more than he can manage. He says that his duty to protect his people from Turkish raids must come first, but that he shall send all the men and horses he can spare!”

“That is all we can ask, I suppose,” Alfred replied and urged her to determine how soon the help could be expected.

“Since he was not anticipating this request,” Ovsanna explained after conferring with the king, “some arrangements will have to be made. His troops will ride out, however, no later than two days hence.”

They thanked the king profusely and accepted his offer of accommodations for that night and the next, as they planned to travel along with the Armenian troops and lead them back to Nicaea.

“Hopefully, Randol and Strategopolous can keep matters well in hand until we return,” Edric muttered to the others as they departed Hethoum’s hall.

“Neither their preparations nor ours shall be of much consequence;” Alfred answered ominously, “that is unless young Michael succeeds in securing the aid of his Genoese friends. All the cavalry and soldiers in the world shall not breach the walls of Constantinople, if they do not first find a way across the Bosphorus Straights.”

“He will succeed;” Kiran sounded free from all doubt, “for God is surely with him.”

*

The diluted wine had a greater effect on the handmaiden than intended, and she was soon fast asleep in the large bed. Kes sat in a chair near the window, staring up at the stars shining in a clear autumn sky.

“My Lord,” she whispered, “where dost thou dwell? Are you there beyond the bright stars, watching me even now? Can it be true that you who created all things would take an interest in the vain struggles of our brief and insignificant lives on this green earth? Does any of this matter to you – whether a city should stand or fall, or who shall be called its king for a season?

“And what of this adventure, Lord? What does all of it mean to you? What should it mean to me? Could it be that all of this – finding my uncles, escaping death at the Fountain of Goliath, meeting Michael again...”

She clasped her hands together and closed her eyes. Words had left her. She simply sat for awhile, rocking gently and listening to the night. When she finally opened her eyes again, she realized that a good deal of time must have passed because her candle was much lower than before she had begun to pray.

She looked back toward the sky, and even the stars seemed to have shifted slightly.

Lord, she spoke silently inside her mind; I know that we are supposed to seek your will and not our own. But you also said in your word that we should ask you for our hearts’ desire, and that you will hear us. And I know that you are good and that you do care, so I ask you my Lord, if it be not against thy will that whatever may come of the city and this empire, and even our journey home and all of our other hopes and dreams...please Lord, let this one thing be.

Let this not be a mere dream, Michael and me. Let it come true...not so I may become a princess or a queen or whatsoever part I may play. Let it be,

Lord, for love's sake. Tis true...I do love him. And if he loves me too, Lord, please let this be...amen.

Feeling her exhaustion, Kes stood, stretched, blew out the stub of a candle, and by starlight crawled into bed alongside her handmaiden. The girl was lightly snoring, and the sound helped Kes quickly drift into slumber.

She was on the edge of a dream, when a soft creaking sound stirred her to semi-consciousness. Even so, she would likely have stayed asleep, but for a draft of cool air that blew across her face.

Kes opened her eyes. Clouds had settled above the city, and the absence of starlight left the room in nearly total blackness. Still she could perceive the silhouette of a man standing at the end of the bed.

She had no doubt in her heart, from the way he stood and the shortness of his stature, that it was the same man who had been watching her at the docks and as they walked back to the inn that evening. With all of her willpower, she refrained from screaming; not wanting to give away that she was awake.

Suddenly the handmaiden shifted in the bed, whimpering slightly as if having a nightmare.

The dark man continued to stand frozen for several more tense moments until the handmaiden had clearly settled. Then he reached into his cloak, and Kes heard the terrifying sound of a metal blade being drawn.

A shaft of starlight from a small break in the clouds made the blade shimmer momentarily in the dark room. Kes could see that it was long enough to pass completely through her body.

To her horror, the man began moving slowly around the bed on her side. As he approached, he raised the blade high up over his head.

In a flash, Kes threw aside her blanket and planted a solid kick into the attacker's gut. He stumbled backward, thudding hard into a chest of drawers. Several trinkets from the top of the dresser clattered across the wood floor. And if that noise had not been enough to raise an alarm, the handmaiden sat bolt upright and began screaming upon hearing the man grunting, cursing and thrashing around.

Her eyes finally having adjusted to the darkness, Kes leapt from the bed and reached for a tall candlestick. She stood between the man and her handmaiden, hoping desperately that help was on the way.

The intruder quickly recovered his breath and began moving back toward Kes, brandishing his dagger angrily. He swung the blade at her throat, but she blocked it with the candlestick. She took a step back to put more space between herself and the rogue; not quickly enough though to avoid a blow from his fist.

Kes fell back, hitting the floor hard and losing control of her weapon. From the strange feeling of warmth on her chin and the sickeningly salty taste in her mouth, she knew that she was bleeding. Even so she tried to reach for the fallen candlestick, but was only able to brush it with her fingertips.

The man stepped forward and kicked her in the ribs with his hard leather boot. Kes moaned silently as her breath was gone, and she felt sure she was going to vomit. The man was laughing quietly, but it sounded distant as her ears were still ringing from the punch to her nose. The handmaiden screamed again as she saw the attacker raising his blade once more above Kes.

Then the blessed sound arrived of the door being smashed open, and the room filled with the brilliant but dizzying light of a swinging lantern. The sounds of shouting men and quick footsteps added to the overall swarm of confusion. Kes made a valiant attempt to rise before collapsing from her lack of air and the pain pounding in her head and ribs.

When she next opened her eyes, she was nearly blinded by the brightness all around. Several lanterns had been lit, and the room was full of people. Her head was cradled in the handmaiden's lap. Michael was on his knees to her right side and one of the royal guards crouched at her left. They all wore grave expressions on their ashen faces.

"Speak to me, Kes," Michael begged, his voice cracking in his dry throat. "Say something... please."

"Is everyone else alright?" she muttered faintly, causing Michael to visibly shiver with relief.

"Everyone except for the intruder," the royal guard answered. "Our lord ran him through – fixed him for good, he did!"

"You saved me?" Kes turned toward Michael and attempted to smile, but even the slightest wrinkling of her nose brought agony.

"Please forgive me for not reaching you more quickly," Michael sighed, "for I do not know if I shall ever forgive myself."

"Is it that bad?" Kes wondered.

"Well, your nose is a bit swollen," he described her state while gently stroking her hair, "but thank God the bleeding has stopped."

"My side hurts..." she said after taking a deep breath.

"Just lay still and try to rest," Michael advised, "we have already sent for the physician."

After a brief examination, the physician declared that her ribs were only bruised and not broken. Everyone was relieved, though from the way she felt, Kes was skeptical.

The body of the attacker was also closely examined for clues as to his identity and purpose. Several gold coins were discovered in the lining of his cloak. Their imprint and superscription revealed them to be of Venetian origin.

*

A pair of elderly Armenian household stewards showed the travelers to their rooms for the night. They came first to dormitory-style quarters with bunk beds lining each long wall.

The men entered and began choosing their beds, expecting the stewards to take Ovsanna to a private room across the hall. The stewards paused, however, and motioned for Simon to follow as well.

“What do they want?” Simon wondered.

“Um,” Ovsanna hesitated, “they merely want someone to look over the room with me...to make certain it is fit and safe.”

“Why would it not be?” he was confused.

“Can you not just take a look with me?” Ovsanna seemed suddenly impatient and she quickly exited the dormitory.

Simon looked around at the others. His uncles were both grinning slightly, and Kiran was staring at him with a raised eyebrow.

“You heard the lady,” Edric’s lips were quivering as he applied a monumental amount of self-control in an effort not to laugh.

“Her room must be secured,” Alfred said with a completely straight face, causing his brother to whimper slightly.

Simon frowned and crossed the hall into Ovsanna’s quarters.

The household stewards seemed pleased and, after lighting an oil lamp, departed. They pulled the door shut behind them, leaving Simon and Ovsanna alone in the room.

“I say,” Simon sounded annoyed, “what is this all about then?”

Ovsanna sat on the end of the bed, buried her face in her hands and began to cry softly.

Simon hesitated for a moment, but soon went to her. He knelt at her side and asked, “Is something wrong? Are you quite alright?”

“I am sorry,” she shook her head. “I am so sorry. I have behaved very shamefully and foolishly.”

“What?” Simon was baffled. “You mean wanting your room looked at?”

She continued shaking her head and explained, “This all began in King Hethoum’s court. The archbishop was questioning me, asking why a nice young Armenian girl was keeping company with English mercenaries and a Persian spy. He was questioning my virtue and my purity and he would not stop... so I... I panicked and I told him that...”

Simon watched her, wondering what could be so awful to have upset her this much. “You can tell me,” he whispered.

“I told him that I was married...” she turned cherry red, “...to you...”

“Oh,” Simon rocked slightly. “I see...”

“I am so sorry,” she started crying again. “I just wanted him to leave me alone, and I did not know what else to do...”

“Look,” Simon sat next to her and held her hand, “there is no harm done. I shall just sneak back over to the bunk beds to spend the night, and we will keep up the pretense until we leave Sis.”

“Then, you are not angry with me?” she wiped her eyes.

"Of course not," he squeezed her hand again. "You were put in a difficult spot you know, having to lead tense negotiations with the very king who had sold you for a servant. Who could imagine such a thing? And you did brilliantly by the way."

"Really?" she watched him.

"I should say so," he smiled at her. "We have achieved what we came here for after all, have we not?"

"I suppose we have," she nodded.

"And beside all that," Simon grinned, "think how impressed my friends back in Nottingham will be when they find out that for one wonderful night, I was actually married to a beautiful and exotic Armenian girl."

He succeeded in making her laugh.

"Thank you for understanding," she whispered, "and for being so kind to me about this."

"Of course," he nudged her, "that is what friends do."

She stared into his eyes, and opened her mouth to say something. The words never came though, and she just continued to stare.

"I..." Simon realized how long he had been staring back. "I suppose I had better get across the hall and...you know...get some rest."

"Yes, of course," she looked down.

She walked him to the door where they paused.

"Well," he smiled awkwardly, "um...until the morning then?"

"Sleep well, Simon," she leaned against him and he returned her hug.

"Goodnight," he whispered.

"Goodnight," she let him go and watched him disappear through the door of the dormitory.

Ovsanna snuffed out the flame of her oil lamp, walked back to her bed and fell across it. Gripping a pillow to her chest she whispered, "...a beautiful and exotic Armenian girl..."

She soon fell asleep, a smile still on her lips.

*

Michael delayed their return to Nicaea Castle for two days in order for Kes to rest before taking to the saddle again. Naturally she was under constant guard, and Michael himself was never far from her.

She was healing quickly, but they still rode more slowly than normal to avoid overly jarring her ribs. Fortunately her nose had not been broken either, and only a slight dark area under each of her eyes indicated that anything had been wrong.

"I never should have let you take my room," even as they left Smyrna far behind, Michael was still tormenting himself over what had happened. "I should have known better."

“And you would have,” Kes reassured him, “if I had thought to mention my suspicions about the man in black. If anyone is to blame, I am.”

“Do not even say such a thing,” Michael scolded. “You handled the entire crisis with amazing strength and calm. I am truly impressed. As for blame, that belongs solely on the heads of the Venetians.”

“But if they have been watching us,” Kes worried, “then they must know now that you are in league with the Genoese. They will be expecting an attack by sea.”

“They will not expect what we have in store for them,” Michael said ominously, “and even if they do, they will not be able to prevent it.”

*

Simon, Ovsanna, Kiran and the Allendales rode out from Sis at the head of over two-thousand Armenian cavalrymen.

“Not quite as many as we had hoped,” Edric lamented.

“Even so,” his brother argued, “they shall be a far greater help than none at all.”

“That is true,” Edric accepted his brother’s pragmatism.

They flew over the rolling foothills of the Pontic Mountains, striving for speed but also staying alert for the presence of Turkish patrols.

Knowing they had a long road to travel before even reaching the field of battle, no one desired to engage against the Turks unless absolutely necessary.

Verse Thirteen – The Bosphorus Straights

“Bad news, my lord,” Strategopolous explained as he and Randol rode swiftly to the north with Michael. “The first Teutons landed three days ago. We attacked them immediately, but they kept coming in waves. The Venetian transports were beyond counting. They have established a firm beachhead, and more of their mercenaries arrive by the hour.”

“So the battle comes to us,” Michael said between clenched teeth. “What are their numbers?”

“The mounted Teutons approach five-hundred in strength,” Randol reported. “We skirmished with them, and they are tough characters. These are no boy crusaders, but seasoned professional knights. The footmen, however, are another story. They appear to be conscripted farm hands; some are actually armed with pitchforks and shovels. Most carry flimsy hunting spears and they have no real armor.”

“Then why are we worried?” Michael was confused.

“The problem is not with their quality,” Strategopolous advised, “but rather how their ranks have grown. At last count, nearly eight thousand swarmed the beaches and dunes. And with every Venetian transport that lands, another hundred join them.”

“That is bad news,” Michael nodded. “And there is no word yet from our Armenian delegation?”

“Nothing,” Randol said a bit nervously, though soon adding, “But I know they will come.”

Michael nodded and then asked, “And what about the usurper Baldwin? Has he come across the Bosphorus with his mercenaries?”

“We do not believe so,” Strategopolous answered. “Our sources indicate the palace is completely locked down, with Baldwin likely huddling inside behind his legions of guards.”

They continued riding along as Michael took a moment to consider the overall situation.

“Can we do it?” he asked finally. “Can we beat them in the open field?”

Randol and Strategopolous looked at each other.

“With the added strength of the Catalan Company,” Strategopolous began, “our Kataphraktoi can keep their knights busy, though I would strongly advise against an all out cavalry charge. Rather, if we can lure them away from their main spear ranks – and into the midst of ours – we may be able to inflict heavy enough losses against their riders that they panic and retreat. Then we would be poised to send a devastating charge or two against their foot soldiers.”

“The sand dunes to the south of their beachhead would be an ideal place to set the trap,” Randol commented, “as the deep soft sand might slow their steeds and take away some of the shock from their charge.”

“What if they do not take the bait?” Michael wondered.

“We can use our archers to buy more time by discouraging the advance of their footmen,” Strategopolous reasoned. “Of course, we shall need a large mass of brave and surefooted men to protect the archers against a cavalry charge. Fortunately, we have well over five-hundred battle hardened fighters who shall be up to the task. In any case though, our time will be limited. Once their main ranks catch up with their cavalry, we will likely have no choice but to fall back. No matter how superior our troops, we cannot risk being swarmed and surrounded by such overwhelming numbers.”

“So I ask you again,” Michael sounded tired, “can we do this? Can we achieve out and out victory?”

“If everything goes perfectly according to our plans, if the Teutons take the bait and fall into our trap, and if their men are cowardly and flee at the first sight of blood,” Randol analyzed the situation, “then even so, our best hope is for a stalemate – to fight them to a draw, so they return to the beach to await reinforcements. Then we shall be back at it again the following day.”

Michael frowned and asked, “What do you suggest then?”

Randol fell silent.

“We have been discussing this while you were away,” Strategopolous said nervously. “The safest route would be to fall back, bring all of our troops inside the castle, and force the Teutons to lay siege. Winter shall come soon enough. Hopefully as their supplies and tempers run short, their longing for home will overcome their longing for Venetian gold and they will depart from our shores.”

“What do you think of this plan?” Michael turned his piercing eyes upon the Lord of Locksley.

“While much time might be lost,” Randol responded, “so also many lives might be saved. I must remind you though, that I and the others returning to England would likely not be a part of a springtime campaign – for with the departure of winter; so shall we depart for home. I feel in my heart that we must delay no longer than we already have.”

“Your support means a great deal to me,” Michael said to Randol, “and there are other considerations as well. The Genoese fleet will soon arrive to provide our means across the Bosphorus. Their help is not given lightly, and such an opportunity may not come again. No, I am afraid we cannot settle in for a siege. The time for action is now.”

“How then will you have us proceed?” the General asked.

“Even if we cannot defeat the Teutons on the field of battle – we may still be able to win the war,” Michael explained his plan, even as it came together in his mind. “If we can merely keep them occupied and inflict heavy enough losses, then all the more loudly they will call for support from Baldwin. This shall in turn keep the Venetian fleet occupied, ferrying men and supplies across the straights.”

"I see," Strategopolous nodded. "Meanwhile the Genoese will take you over the water, and once inside the city you may cut the head from the beast – so to speak."

"And once their Roman and Venetian sponsors have been dealt with," Randol concluded with a grin, "the enthusiasm of the Teutons for this fight should rapidly diminish."

"Let it be as you say," Strategopolous bowed to his lord, "but the cost in lives may be great and terrible."

"I understand," Michael nodded. "And I am afraid I have some more bad news for you..."

The General looked wearily at his lord.

"Those five-hundred battle hardened men – the ones you planned to have protecting your archers," Michael explained. "They are going to be with me. They shall be my invasion force when we storm the city."

"I do not suppose any one has any good news," Strategopolous said with a cynical grin.

Their momentary silence was broken by a piercing shriek. The three commanders turned their faces skyward and saw a white gyrfalcon soaring high above, heading swiftly to the north and east.

"What is it?" Michael wondered at the huge smile that had spread across Randol's face.

"With any luck," Randol looked back up as the bird disappeared behind a cloud, "it is good news!"

*

"How are you feeling?" Michael had gone to check on Kes immediately upon returning to the castle. She had been resting under the constant watch of attendants in the castle infirmary according to his strict orders.

"I am fine," she answered. She had stood when he entered, but he quickly guided her back onto one of the padded sofas. "Honestly, your worry over me has simply gone too far."

"Nonsense," he replied as he looked her up and down with the solemnity of a physician.

"Are the war preparations in order?" she quickly changed the subject away from herself.

"Yes," he took a deep breath, "and it may begin at any moment now. That is part of why I came to see you. My Genoese friends will arrive soon, and my men and I will take their ships across the water. I do not know precisely what awaits us or what will happen on the other side. However, should the worst come to pass..."

"Do not even say such a thing," she said as she reached for his hands. He sighed and looked into her eyes as their fingers interlaced.

"Everything is going to work out for the best," she whispered. "I know it in my soul."

"I believe you," he smiled. "Still, before I go, there is something that I very much wish to say."

"Say it then," she smiled back.

He looked down at her slender fingers and pulled his away, only so he could more firmly grip her hands completely inside his own.

"These past few weeks," he began, "have been...wonderfully amazing. In some ways tis as if we had not even been apart for all those years, for I feel that I have known you all along without a day lost. But then at the same time I feel as if I have just met you, because you are so different. I knew who you were, but this beautiful, intelligent, strong and caring woman I see before me is so completely new."

She simply stared into his eyes, as transfixed by his gaze as by his melodious words.

"Then when I saw you bruised and bloodied on the floor of that room at the inn," he swallowed hard, "a part of me died. The thought that I might have lost you..." his voice temporarily gave out and he just shook his head slowly.

"But you did not," she whispered.

"And for that I shall thank Our Lord every day for the rest of our lives," he said, his voice still shaky. "And I realized then, though in truth I had known it long before, that...I love you."

"I thought you might," she whispered as he enfolded her in his arms and leaned in for a kiss. She just managed to add, "I love you, too," right before their lips came passionately together.

The kiss was magnificent, for a few moments, until Kes gasped in pain.

"My nose," she explained as he looked at her with a panicked expression.

"Forgive me," he lightly touched her cheek.

"You are forgiven," she said, their faces still extremely close. "I just have a tender spot right here," she pointed at the bridge of her nose.

"Perhaps if we are careful..." he turned his head a bit more to the side and leaned forward again.

"Yes, please be..." was all she got out before their lips reconnected for a much longer and much less painful kiss.

This one too was cut short though, when a winded messenger arrived at the infirmary door. The unfortunate boy began sputtering when he realized what he had interrupted.

Michael stood and ordered the lad to take a deep breath.

"My lord," the boy finally managed, "a large company of horsemen approaches from the north. Your generals urgently request your presence at the main gates!"

“Are you ready to ride out?” Michael called as he approached Randol and Strategopolous at the gatehouse.

“We are not riding out,” Randol answered.

“What do you mean?” Michael was panting from his run.

“The horsemen that approach – they are not Teutonic Knights,” Strategopolous replied.

“Who are they?” Michael stepped passed them and moved outside the gates, looking to the northern horizon. He could already see the dust cloud from their swift approach.

“We are not certain,” Strategopolous explained, “but our scouts report that they carry before them our own imperial banner!”

After a remarkably short wait, the three men saw the mounted company come into view. Nearly three-hundred rough riders stormed into the fields just outside the castle gates. They were large men on even larger horses. Most of the men and beasts were clad in studded leather armor, though some wore chain mail and a few of the horses were even barded with plate metal.

One of the lead riders broke away from the main group and approached the gates. Still twenty paces from the entrance, he dismounted, took a few more steps, and stood surveying the three men.

“We are seeking Michael the Paleologus,” the man grunted with a thick and strange accent.

“I am he,” Michael stepped forward.

The man instantly fell to his knees and prostrated himself in the dust.

“Rise, friend,” Michael tried to keep his bewilderment out of his voice.

“My lord,” the man spoke, “allow me to introduce myself. My name is Janus Benedek and before you is the last contingent of the Pronoiai Allagion.”

“Extraordinary...” Michael whispered.

“I thought all of the Allagion companies had disbanded,” Strategopolous said warily, “after the Mongol scourge swept though the Hungarian Kingdom two decades ago.”

“You are right,” Benedek grinned, “our order had ceased to exist, but we were reborn! For this, my lord, we have your father to thank. Several years ago, the great Constantine of the Angelos organized the company you see before you. He upheld us with funding and direction. At his orders we have long patrolled the wild lands across the Black Sea, guarding the northern marches against the Bulgars, Turks and Tartars. He desired to keep barbarian attacks from interfering with your rise to power.”

“Extraordinary...” Michael repeated.

“Recently,” Benedek concluded, “we received one last command from your father, and it was this: ride with all haste to Nicaea Castle and pledge your loyalty to my son. Serve him well and you will be rewarded.”

“And so you shall be,” Michael put his hand on Benedek’s shoulder. “But first, your men and your horses must be weary indeed. Let us offer what refreshment and comfort we can provide.”

A team of stable hands soon arrived and led the horses around the back of the castle to a large fenced area where they could efficiently receive food, water and care. The riders of the Allagion were led into the great hall of the castle for similar treatment.

Once the excitement over the new arrivals settled, Randol and Strategopolous went straight to work retooling their field strategy based upon their new level of cavalry strength. Michael left them to their planning and went to look for Kes.

He discovered that she had dismissed herself from the infirmary and returned to her own private quarters. He went there and knocked lightly on the door. When no response came, he grew concerned and peeked inside to make certain all was well.

She was asleep in bed and looked so peaceful that he had not the heart to disturb her. He simply stood watching her for a few moments before accepting that he was exhausted as well.

After verifying with the head steward that the Pronoiai Allagion were all well accommodated, Michael made his way to his own quarters and was asleep the instant his head touched the pillow.

*

That calm and peaceful night brought much needed rest to all who dwelt within the walls of Nicaea Castle. Just before dawn, however, their slumber was shattered by the blaring of trumpets.

From the towers and parapets, the heralds cried forth the message delivered by the tired night patrols.

“The Teutons are on the move!”

“Prepare for battle!”

Michael was already in full battle dress and heading for the gate when Kes found him.

She threw her arms around him, pleading, “Let me come with you!”

He shook his head, “You know I cannot.”

“You said a part of you died when you thought I was lost,” she cried. “What do you think shall become of me should anything happen to you? I could not bear it...I could not go on...”

“All the more reason you must stay here and stay safe,” he carefully brushed her hair back with the fingers of his leather gauntlet. “If you were with me I would not be able to keep the mission in my mind, for my only thought would be of protecting you.”

She knew he was right, though still argued, "But I could help...what if you need my help?"

"You can help," he looked deeply into her eyes. "Go to your chamber, close the door, and pray. And do not stop until you see me again."

She nodded.

He pulled away and continued out the gate to the muster field where his forces were gathering.

Wiping away her tears she turned back toward the keep, intent on obeying his last command. On the way she saw General Strategopolous speeding past. Dogging his steps, the young John Laskaris was making a frantic appeal.

"Please, sir," he waved a very short sword, "let me fight for Nicaea and for the Paleologus! I am a good rider and I know how to defend myself."

Clearly having reached the end of his patience, Strategopolous stopped and made ready to threaten the boy into leaving him alone. Something however in the hopeful and brave expression on the lad's face seemed to soften the General's heart.

He knelt down, put his hand on the boy's shoulder and said, "You are very brave, but many who ride out today will not return. As a rightful steward of Nicaea, your services may soon be needed in ways you have not yet imagined. Stay in the castle therefore, and keep it secure so there shall be a safe bastion to which we may return. Will you do this for me? Will you hold the rear flank?"

Placing his short sword across his chest, John pledged, "I will do my very best, sir."

"That is as much as any of us can offer," the General replied as he stood and, with a last nod to the boy, turned and ran for the gate.

Kes approached little John, who looked unsure what to do next.

"I too have been charged with looking after the home defenses," Kes said softly. "Perhaps we could work together?"

"Thank you, milady; I would like that," John bowed. When he straightened, he wore a curious expression and asked, "Milady, where have your other friends gone?"

"They rode east to seek help from another kingdom," Kes answered, her tone steadily growing more nervous, "but they should have returned by now..."

"Would you like to look for them?" John inquired.

"What do you mean?"

"There is a wooded ridge not far away," little John explained. "I ride out there sometimes to pray or just think. The ridge overlooks the valleys to the east. If your friends are near, we might be able to see them coming."

"But how would we get there? Have not all the horses been taken to battle?" Kes wondered.

"Not all of them," little John was grinning.

*

Randol and Strategopolous rode at the head of the Kataphraktoi companies. The Pronoiai Allagion rode on their right flank, and the Catalan Company of Aragon held their left. Behind the three mounted columns marched over seven-hundred archers followed by three-thousand armored spearmen.

Cresting a ridge, they looked out across the northern flatlands. The Teutonic Knights had already reached the hard-packed soil of the inland marches.

“So much for trapping them in the sand dunes,” Randol sighed.

“Remember,” Strategopolous reminded him, “our objective is not necessarily to defeat them outright, but rather to keep them occupied for as much time as Michael needs to capture the city.”

“Let us hope he moves quickly,” Randol pointed to the far away dunes, where more than ten-thousand foot soldiers marched in columns behind the mounted Teutons.

“Let us hope,” Strategopolous agreed.

*

Michael marched along on foot, leading his five-hundred raiders to the rocky sea shore south and west of Nicaea Castle. Only a single narrow strip of sand offered a safe loading area. Michael doubled his men’s pace as he saw the lead Genoese galleys racing toward them along the coast. He lined the men up on shore in battalions of twenty-five, as each of the fully manned galleys could accommodate little more.

Once the men were organized, Michael stood at the water’s edge and called out his last commands to them before setting sail, “Brave men of Nicaea – as we cross the sea into unknown danger, know that your first duty in the battle ahead is to survive! Your own safety and the safety of the man at your side must remain at the forefront of your thoughts.

“Remember that we do not enter the city to destroy! You must not burn or rape or pillage or desecrate. And you must only use deadly force when your life or the life of the man at your side is at stake. The more damage and fear we bring, the more we shall have to overcome after victory’s dawn.

“Our mission is simple, though not easy. We land inside the city walls. We make our way to the imperial palace. And we confront the usurper government. If they bend the knee to us and agree to serve me – the rightful ruler of the empire – then we will show them mercy. If not, they may choose between banishment and death.

“The same choice belongs to the city defenders. If the men-at-arms will join with us, let us welcome them to our cause as brothers. If they throw down their weapons and refuse to fight, let us show them mercy. And should they choose to fight against us, let their deaths be swift and honorable.

“By this time tomorrow I shall be emperor, or I shall be a memory. Either way, may God bless each of your souls and cover you with His Swift Sure Hand of protection.” Michael looked up and down the ranks of his brave warriors and shouted his final exhortation, just as the first Genoese ship touched the sandy beach, “Let us sail forth now and fight the good fight! For God and for Glory! And let this be the dawning of a new day for the Byzantine Empire!”

The men cheered long and loudly.

The rest of the morning was spent getting the men on board the ships. As the first grouping of troop transports pulled away from the beach, forty more Genoese war galleys out in the deeper waters cruised along in battle formation, heading due north.

“You have brought even more help than I expected,” Michael commented happily to his ship’s captain.

“No one wanted to miss this chance to teach the Venetians a lesson,” the captain grinned.

With several troop battalions still waiting to board their transports, Michael’s ship caught the wind and followed the main fleet north across the Sea of Marmara toward the Bosphorus Straights.

*

Kes and little John entered one of the smaller stables behind the castle. John led her to the back where two ponies looked curiously at them from within their stall.

“They are not very big,” Kes commented.

“Neither are you or I,” John replied.

Kes shrugged and helped him saddle the ponies. Soon they were on their way to the forest on the eastern ridge. In addition to his short sword, John had brought a hunting bow and quiver of arrows in order to, in his words, protect the future empress.

They dismounted and walked the ponies after the woods became too thick for riding. Soon they reached a rocky outcropping, and sure enough, far in the distance was an enormous horde of rapidly approaching cavalry.

“Are those your friends?” John asked excitedly.

“No,” Kes shook her head, a shadow seeming to fall over her face. “I am afraid not. See the way they lurch and lope, John? No, I would recognize those beasts from miles away – those are camels!”

*

The battle was going quite well. Randol had succeeded in luring the Teutonic Knights away from their main army by taking command of the speedy lighter cavalry of the Catalan Company. The Teutons could not resist the

prospect of dealing first with this smaller contingent before taking on the heavy Kataphraktoi, and Randol led them on a long chase across the northern plateau.

Meanwhile Strategopolous and Janus Benedek led the Kataphraktoi and the Pronoiai Allagion, respectively, in a pincer movement against the leading ranks of Teutonic footmen. While the Kataphraktoi skimmed along the outer edge of the lead column, causing more fear than damage, the brazen Allagion stormed straight into the thick of the poorly armored enemy.

As was their particular talent, the Allagion released a swarm of projectiles just before head-on impact. In this instance, a devastating barrage of javelins tore apart the Teutonic front lines opening a path of destruction for the thundering horsemen.

With swords swinging, axes hacking, and spears thrusting, the Allagion ripped a bloody arc through the lines of foot soldiers, slowly turning to cut their way back out into open field. Having successfully terrified the forward companies of the main Teutonic force, they joined the Kataphraktoi in a temporary retreat up the grassy slope.

Seeing their footmen being slaughtered, the Teutonic Knights had finally broken off pursuit of Randol and the Catalan Company, but by the time they returned to the main battlefield – there was no one there to fight.

Randol, Strategopolous and Benedek met on the south ridge to survey the results of the morning's work and confer on their next moves. They congratulated each other on their relatively low number of casualties and the ease with which they had disrupted the Teutonic advance.

"We must not grow over confident though," Randol warned. "If there is one thing I have learned about Teutons..."

He trailed off and never finished his thought, for away to the south and east he saw a most welcome sight – the return of some long awaited friends.

*

Just as Kes and little John were turning their ponies around to exit the woods, an arrow thudded into a tree trunk right in front of their faces.

"Get down!" Kes shouted and pulled John to the ground with her. "Quick," she commanded him, "give me your bow and arrows. Stay low and get the ponies to the edge of the woods. I will meet you there!"

Too afraid to argue, John obeyed and darted through the woods as fast as he could with the ponies in tow.

Kes hid behind a thick cypress tree. Staring out from its clusters of green needles, she saw a pair of archers lurking just a stone's throw away. One was clearly dressed in Turkish garb. The other had a remarkably western appearance.

They were both looking around, unsure where Kes had gone. So she took her time aiming and sunk an arrow deep into the westerner's heart. The Turk panicked and fled away through the woods.

Before rejoining with little John, Kes ran over to inspect the body of her attacker. To her sorrow she noted his facial features which, though she was sure were Teutonic, could easily have been English as well. She sighed and shook her head in further exasperation when she noticed the emblem of a black cross sewn into the fabric of his tunic.

She tore it free to keep as evidence and said a quick prayer over the corpse, for his forgiveness as well as her own.

Looking back at the man before leaving the scene behind for good, she shook her head once more and muttered, "We really should have been fighting on the same side..."

*

Kes and little John raced overland on their ponies, frantic to reach the frontlines and deliver their warning that the Teutons were in league with the Turks – and that a sneak attack from behind was imminent.

As they neared the northern flatlands, the frightening sounds of war drifted toward them with ever increasing volume. Thundering hooves, men screaming in agony, leaders shouting commands in many different languages; all of these sounds and more chilled Kes to the core and made her spine tingle with fear and dread.

The closer they came to the battlefield, the more she simply wished to flee back to the castle, hide in her chamber and fulfill Michael's instructions to pray without ceasing. Yet she knew they had to at least try to deliver their warning – before it was too late.

As they crested the ridge, to the sounds of battle were added the sights. Even after all she had witnessed at the Fountain of Goliath, Kes was no less shocked by the bloody violence taking place on the plains below. She was so awed and overwhelmed by the action in the field, she was completely surprised when little John asked, "Milady, are those not your friends?"

Just paces away sat Simon, Ovsanna, and Kiran atop their horses.

She shouted for joy and rode toward them. They embraced and touched hands from the backs of their mounts, but the celebration of reunion was short-lived as Strategopolous arrived and immediately began to scold both little John and Kes.

"I thought my orders to you were clear, John Laskaris!" Strategopolous looked especially intimidating with Teutonic blood dripping from his armor. "And damn it, Kes! You know Michael would have my head if he knew you were out here!"

"We are not here on a whim!" Kes shouted, holding up the Teutonic emblem she had torn from her attacker. "The Teutons have made an unholy pact with the Turks! More than one thousand camel-riding marauders approach from the south to attack you from behind!"

“Kes,” Simon repeated several times before she would acknowledge him. “Kes, we know. We have been tracking the Turks for three days, and you needn’t worry! We brought help from Armenia – over two-thousand horsemen.”

“They are more than eager to handle the Turks for us,” Kiran added, and turning to Strategopolous assured him, “and when they have finished dealing with that threat, they have pledged to join us here and submit to your command.”

“Excellent,” Strategopolous grinned. “Now, since that is all settled – get back to the castle at once – the lot of you!”

“General?” Kes stopped him as he was turning his horse around. “Where are my uncles?”

“Need you ask?” Strategopolous smiled again. “They were nearly frantic, thinking they had missed some of the battle. They are already down on the field. Now, with your leave milady, I shall join them!”

*

“Your timing was perfect as always, dear brother,” Kes complimented Simon as they rode slowly toward the castle.

“Very little of what happened was up to me,” Simon demurred, “though it was quite an interesting adventure to the east – full of surprises.” He winked at Ovsanna who smiled at him.

“And were you and Michael successful in securing the aid of the Genoese navy?” Kiran asked.

“We were,” Kes nodded. “In fact, he just left not long ago with his men to board the ships...”

“Kes,” Simon interrupted, “do you have a black eye?”

“Tis a long story,” she said dismissively, her mind already turning upon a new line of thought.

“I wish we had returned a bit earlier,” Kiran said to Kes, as he seemed to understand what was stirring inside of her. “I had hoped to accompany Michael across the Bosphorus Straights. Some of the...talents from my former life might have been helpful to him.”

“I can show you where they were meeting the ships,” Kes answered Kiran with a growing excitement in her voice. “Michael pointed it out to me as we were riding back from Smyrna. Perhaps not all of the ships have left yet.”

“Kes,” Simon interrupted again, “you had better not be planning what I think you are...”

“Shut up, Simon,” she snapped at him, “please, will you just hold your peace for a moment?”

“Will you show me the way?” Kiran was grinning at Kes.

“Look, Simon,” Kes turned to her brother, “I am sorry for shouting at you, but I need your understanding right now, alright? Will you and Ovsanna please just take John back to the castle and stay there?”

Simon stared at her.

"Please," Kes said softly, "I need you to trust me on this."

"Fine," Simon fumed.

Without another word, he turned and rode off toward Nicaea Castle. Ovsanna, after exchanging subtle grins with Kes, followed him. Before riding after them, little John pulled his pony alongside Kes' and handed her his bow and quiver of arrows.

"Are you sure?" Kes smiled at him.

"You are better with them than I am, milady," John sighed, "and beside, you may need them."

"Thank you, Lord Laskaris," she leaned over and kissed his forehead.

"Please look after my brother, will you?"

"Oh yes, milady!" John said excitedly and turned to chase after Simon and Ovsanna. As he rode away, he called back, "Do not worry about your pony! He knows his way back!"

*

The last Genoese ship was pushing off from the beach as Kes and Kiran approached the water. Leaving their horses, they dove in and began swimming after it. Seeing the two flailing in the waves, the sailors threw ropes overboard and pulled them up onto the deck.

Kes and Kiran stood there dripping and laughing, when suddenly they heard a very familiar voice ask, "What are you two doing here?"

They turned and were shocked to see Lord Randol emerging from the crowd of sailors that had gathered around. They looked at each other, but were at a loss for words.

"Couldn't resist, could you?" Randol folded his arms. "Had to be in the center of the action, didn't you?"

"Please do not be angry, Lord Randol," Kes pleaded. "Please do not make us go back!"

"Go back?" he seemed confused.

"You are going to make us go back to the castle now, aren't you?" Kes was confused as well.

Randol finally cracked a smile and even began to laugh.

Kes and Kiran looked at each other again, somewhat frightened.

"Am I right in guessing that our young Prince Michael forbade you from coming along?" Randol grinned, putting his hand on Kes' shoulder.

Kes nodded.

"When I left England all those years ago, your mother defied her parents and all the rest of us by accompanying our quest," Randol reminisced. "Have you heard this story?"

"Parts of it, perhaps," Kes answered quietly.

“Even I did not want her to come along,” Randol smiled, “for she was quite young, and quite lovely, and quite likely to be a distraction or even a danger to the mission.”

Kes looked sadly down at her feet.

“But had she listened to advice and kept in her place,” Randol lifted her chin, “I for one might well have been long in the cold grave. And you might not even have been born!”

“You are going to let us go on with you then?” she smiled cautiously.

“I insist upon it,” Randol looked back and forth at the two beaming youths, “and I am glad you are with me.”

Kes and Kiran each took a deep breath.

“In fact,” Lord Randol winked, “I may just need your help with a small but vital mission; one which could make all the difference in the hours ahead.”

Verse Fourteen – Castle Walls

“Fall back!” Strategopolous roared as the Teutons swarmed forward by the thousands.

Edric and Alfred rode off in opposite directions, carrying the General’s command to the left and right wings of the weary and battered Nicean army. All battle groups pulled away, moving as quickly as they could toward the safety of the castle.

The sun was setting, and Strategopolous prayed that the Teutons were as exhausted as his own troops. However, the seemingly tireless Teutonic Knights continued giving chase.

Their supply of arrows spent, the Nicean archers could do nothing to discourage the continued cavalry charges. And nearly half of the Nicean provincial militiamen were carrying broken spears.

Knowing the losses would be terrible; Strategopolous rallied his core battalions of utterly exhausted Kataphraktoi for a direct charge at the Teutonic frontline. He hoped at best only to gain time for the foot soldiers and archers to reach safety.

Finally though, the Armenian cavalry arrived. They had spent much of the afternoon chasing the Turks around the eastern valleys, before cornering and routing them in a pitched battle. Like their allies, the Armenians were tired and fatigued. Fortunately, the Teutons did not know this and called for a full retreat, believing that Nicaea had received fresh reinforcements.

And so, after a long and bloody first day, both sides withdrew to their starting positions. The task of feeding the returning soldiers and tending to the many wounded was enormous.

Simon, Ovsanna and young John Laskaris would not sleep at all during that long and terrible night of blood and tears. They, along with the other women, youths and aged citizens of Nicaea, had far too much work to do.

*

Meanwhile out in the cold dark waters of the Sea of Marmara, the Genoese ships slid silently northward. All flames had been extinguished, and the stars were veiled by thick clouds. All was blackness, save for a few twinkling lights on the distant shore.

“We are within range of their outer patrol ships,” the sea captain whispered nervously.

“Wait,” Michael replied. “Keep sailing.”

Time passed, and the sea captain was visibly shaking.

“My lord, we are drawing much too...” he began.

“Captain Franco,” Michael interrupted, “have I ever told you the story of the time I sank two Saracen baggalas from aboard my own tiny sloop, with only a short length of rope and three men at my side?”

“Uh, no, my lord...” the captain sputtered.

“Remind me, when this is all over, to tell you the story,” Michael teased the anxious seaman.

“Of course...” the captain held his breath.

“Now, however, I believe we have closed enough of the distance,” Michael nodded. “You may fire when ready.”

“Thank you,” the captain exhaled with a long sigh of relief.

Soon a single light appeared, seeming to float above the dark water. Then another, and then another, until dozens of torches burned brightly, causing the waves around the Genoese ships to shimmer against the night.

Suddenly, the sky filled with brilliant light. Hundreds of flaming arrows and ballistae arced overhead, soaring toward the unsuspecting Venetian galleys. Within moments six of the Venetian ships were ablaze, their masts cracking and toppling into the sea.

The handful of ships that had been spared the initial barrage immediately raced away down the shore, some to the east and others to the west. Wasting no time, the Genoese pushed past the damaged enemy vessels. The glow of their destruction provided guiding light as the Genoese made for the calm waters of the Julian Harbor.

Still in the lead, Michael’s ship slowed as it approached the nearest dock. At least one-hundred armed men had gathered on the pier, their sword blades and spear tips reflecting the light from their torches.

“Stand down!” Michael shouted to them in Latin. “Baldwin and the usurpers are finished. Join with us!”

The harbor guards did not move.

“Very well,” Michael muttered to himself, and then turning to his soldiers called out, “Seize the port, men! Let none stand in our way!”

With that, Michael lofted his spear and jumped overboard. Swinging his spear and whooping wildly, he caused the guards to falter and step back a few paces. As his men streamed over the side of the ship and landed next to him on the pier, they continued to push back the defenders.

Immediately, the lead Genoese ship moved away from the dock to make room for another. More Nicean troops raced to join Michael and his vanguard. Several other ships quickly unloaded, and the harbor guards soon found themselves outnumbered.

After about ten of their men had fallen, the guards wavered and then broke. They fled the area, and Michael’s troops seized control of the docks, the watch tower, and all of the access points to the port from land.

Hunkering down in anticipation of a major counterattack, they watched and waited while more and more of the Genoese ships pulled alongside the pier

to deliver the remaining soldiers. No counterattack came, however, and in an amazingly short period of time, all five-hundred Nicean invaders had disembarked. The Genoese ships, meanwhile, stayed either in or just outside the Julian Harbor, ready to defend against a Venetian naval assault.

*

“Follow me,” Randol whispered to Kiran and Kes.

The three gave Michael and his bodyguards a wide berth and stayed in the shadows as they snuck out of the port area. Quickstepping due north, they found the streets of Constantinople largely deserted.

Randol kept his sword hidden under his cloak, and Kes did the same with her small bow and quiver of arrows. Kiran had only a pair of small daggers; one inside his tunic and the other tied to his ankle. Since they appeared unarmed and traveled in such a small group, the handful of citizens they encountered paid them no attention.

After turning onto a larger flagstone avenue, however, they were accosted by a contingent of twenty city guards.

“Who are you?” the lead guard shouted. “Where are you going?”

“We are frightened!” Randol thought quickly. “Trouble has broken out at the Theodosian Harbor. There are dozens of rioters! You must do something!”

The lead guard nodded and motioned for his men to follow. They soon disappeared around a corner.

“That was brilliant!” Kes exclaimed. “But did we not come to shore at the Julian Harbor?”

“Precisely,” Randol grinned. “Let’s move!”

The skies had cleared somewhat, revealing the moon to have climbed high in the heavens by the time they reached the north shore of the peninsula and the destination they sought.

“What precisely are we looking for, anyway?” Kiran wondered as they lurked in the shadows, not far from where the mighty walls of Septimus Severus sank down into the water at the east end of the northern ports.

“See all those ships out there?” Randol pointed at the scores of transports and war galleys just off shore.

Kiran and Kes nodded.

“That is the bulk of the Venetian fleet,” Randol explained. “Clearly they have not yet received word of our attack, or they would already be on their way around the peninsula to deal with our Genoese friends. As long as they can be kept here though, they can do very little to obstruct our mission.”

Kiran and Kes nodded again.

“Now, that guard tower there – at the edge of the sea wall,” Randol pointed. “If I properly understood the directions from our ship’s captain...that is where we should find it.”

“Find what?” Kes was confused.

“The control levers,” Randol smiled, “to the sea chain!”

*

Michael left no one behind with a view to holding onto the Julian Port. Instead he moved forward into the city with his entire force, knowing that their only true option was to press on and seize the imperial palace. Anything less than total victory, and none of them were likely to leave the city alive.

They moved swiftly toward the walls of Septimus Severus, looking for the southern gatehouse. Along the way, they encountered several small contingents of city guards. When approaching each group, Michael shouted his same offer of mercy to any who would join his cause. Unfortunately none of the men-at-arms accepted, and so they were cut down by the rapidly advancing Nicean troops.

Periodic watch towers caused some difficulty. The tower guards sent arrows flying into the Nicean mob. Most of the arrows clanked harmlessly against the stone streets or the sides of buildings, but several of the Nicean men were wounded. A few of these wounds soon proved fatal due to lost blood, and with great sadness Michael ordered their bodies to be left where they had fallen.

Before long they arrived at the Septimus Severus walls – and the southern gatehouse. Yet, their swords and spears were useless against the thick iron portcullis that blocked the way into the heart of the city and their ultimate goal of the imperial palace.

To make matters worse, in addition to sending arrows against them, the tower guards had begun directing the men-at-arms on the street level. As a result, the Nicean force was fast becoming surrounded. Unable to advance through the gate and unable to retreat back the way they had come, they took refuge inside a nearby market forum.

“At least we are trapped inside a building with food,” Michael commented to one of his group leaders before taking a bite from a crunchy apple.

The group leader nodded and kept his head down as he worked feverishly to peel the skin away from an orange. Arrows thudded and clattered around them, but the city guards did not attempt to storm the building.

“What is to be done?” the group leader asked as he wiped orange juice from his lips. “Shall we fight our way out?”

“And go where?” Michael frowned. “No, we first need to find a way to open that gate. For the moment, however, we are relatively safe in here and quite well fed. We still have a long while until the rising sun further exposes our position. If in that time the gate cannot be overcome, we will have to find some other way through, under, over or around that wall!”

*

Randol and Kes remained in the shadows, anxiously watching the door to the tower and the two city guards sitting on a bench off to the side.

“Where is he?” Randol was growing impatient.

“Tis alright,” Kes sought to calm him. “This is what he does. Apparently, sneaking about can take quite a bit of time.”

“Bah,” Randol whispered. “I could have simply walked up and knocked both of their heads together by now.”

“And risked raising an alarm,” Kes reminded him.

“What if Kiran has been captured?” Randol continued worrying.

“Not likely,” Kes shook her head. “He is very good at this. He reached the heart of the Vatican, you know, to deliver our message.”

“Yes,” Randol nodded. “You told me of that adventure.” He sighed and added, “I truly hope that a proper response was issued by the Church authorities, so that our return to Nottingham shall take place in peace and joy, rather than in conflict and strife.”

“I hope so, too,” Kes looked down.

Randol watched her for a few moments before asking, “You are not coming back with us, are you?”

“What?” she pretended to be completely surprised by the idea.

“Has Michael asked you to stay yet?” Randol wondered.

Kes looked down again and answered, “Well, not as such. He has had quite a bit on his mind. But he did say...”

“What did he say?” Randol nudged her.

“He told me that he loves me,” she looked up and smiled.

“Well that should be obvious enough,” Randol shrugged. “He has hardly removed his gaze from you since we first encountered him on Cyprus. And did you tell him that you love him, too?”

“Are my feelings so obvious as well?” she asked.

Before he could respond, they heard two muffled thuds. Quickly refocusing their attention on the door to the tower, they saw Kiran waving for them to join him. They raced along the wall, crouching low to avoid drawing attention from any roving patrols.

“The door is locked!” Kiran whispered as they approached. “I checked, and neither of the guards had any keys.”

“What about that window?” Randol pointed to a tiny opening nearly twelve feet above.

“That arrow slit – I doubt we can fit through,” Kiran shook his head.

“You could,” Randol turned and said to Kes.

“Perhaps,” she said dubiously. “I just worry what I might find on the other side!”

“Take a look then,” Randol winked and made a cup with his hands.

She stepped into it with one foot, and Kiran took the other. The two men lifted her high above their heads until she was able to grip the ledge.

"There are two more guards," she whispered down to them, "but I think they are asleep. And I believe I can see the control for the sea chain. It looks like the wheel that steers a ship, but even larger!"

"If you can just get inside and open the door," Randol whispered back, "we can come in and help – both with the guards and the wheel."

"Very well," Kes sighed and, after handing down her bow and arrows to Kiran, began pulling herself through the narrow opening.

She slid silently to the floor and stalked past the snoring guards toward the door. Kes tried the handle, but to no avail. She nervously padded over to where the guards were leaning back in their chairs.

Noticing a key ring on one of the guard's belts, she gingerly attempted to slide it free. Feeling the tug upon his belt, the guard awoke and exchanged a fearful glance with Kes. Panicking, she reached for a nearby ceramic pitcher and smashed it down upon his head.

The guard tumbled out of his chair and lay still on the floor. The noise of the shattering pitcher woke the other guard however, who reached for his short sword. Kes whirled upon him and, lacking any other hard objects within her reach, planted a firm kick to his chest.

The guard flew backward, and she winced at the sound his head made against the stone floor. He too lay still, and Kes spent a few moments simply breathing and trembling before she remembered her original goal and finished removing the key ring from the first guard's belt.

Finding which key unlocked the tower door took a long time. Finally the bolt turned, and Kes drew open the heavy door.

"Are you alright?" Randol was nearly frantic.

"What happened in there?" Kiran wondered.

She did not answer either of them. Instead, she stared into the distance at the company of two dozen heavily armored guards marching up the steps toward them from the street level.

"Problem..." was the only word she managed to utter.

After looking to see what she meant, Randol shoved Kiran inside the tower with Kes and began barking orders.

"Lock the door. Raise the chain. Make your escape!" he commanded.

"But..." Kes began.

"Do not argue!" Randol hissed. "I can hold them!" he said as he pulled the door shut, turned, and drew his sword.

The armored men slowed as they drew close to the tower, eventually coming to a full stop several paces away from Randol. They seemed to be sizing up the Lord of Locksley before moving in for the kill. Randol boldly held his ground, determined to give Kes and Kiran as much time as possible to fulfill their mission and trap the Venetian fleet.

After a few more tense moments of silent stand-off, the leader of the armored men took another step forward. His features, like those of all the other metallic men, were obscured underneath a steely helmet and face mask.

Randol brandished his sword defiantly and muttered, "Who among you would like to be the first to meet his Maker?"

The leader removed his helmet, revealing an amused expression highlighted by his sparkling sky-blue eyes and a scar on his cheek that accentuated his grin. His strangely familiar voice asked, "General Isam?"

"Sir Guy?" Randol replied in complete astonishment.

"I scarcely recognized you without your beard?" Sir Guy laughed. "What are you doing here, so far from Egypt?"

"I am on my way home – to my true home in England," Randol quickly explained. "I am only here in Constantinople...to help a friend. And what may I ask are you doing here, so far from the Krak des Chevaliers?"

"My men and I are frequently reassigned to new and far away posts according to the whim of the Pope," Sir Guy answered, sounding less than pleased with the arrangement. "Most recently, we were summoned here to help protect Emperor Baldwin from a long awaited attack by Nicaea – an attack that seems to have already begun. This would not have anything to do with the...friend you are here to help, would it...uh, *General Isam*?" Sir Guy grinned.

"As I am no longer in the service of Egypt, you may call me by my true name – Lord Randol of Locksley. Now, if I were to tell you that in fact I *was* here to aid Nicaea," Randol cautiously proposed, "then I suppose you would have no choice but to arrest me, yes?"

"Not necessarily," Sir Guy said quietly. "You did save my life from the Turkish raiders that day in Outremer, and this debt I have yet to repay. Baldwin, on the other hand, has done little to deserve our allegiance. He has chosen to treat us no differently than the mercenary scum he has hired from Germania – yet without the pay. He seems unaware of our true quality, or the fact that only our respect for the Holy Father in Rome has prevented us from departing this city long ago."

"This Baldwin is a shameful character indeed," Randol sympathized with the Hospitallers. "However, such disrespect you shall not have to endure for much longer. Soon Michael Paleologus will reclaim his rightful place upon the throne of the empire. He is a good man and a just ruler. And those who aid him in this time of struggle shall be rewarded many times over."

Sir Guy looked around at the other knights. They exchanged words in a Frankish dialect that Randol could not quite understand.

When their consultations were complete, Sir Guy turned back to Randol and declared, "We shall not take sides in this conflict..."

Randol frowned.

"However," Sir Guy added, "I recently seem to have misplaced my extra copy of a master key which opens nearly every gate in Constantinople."

Sir Guy stepped forward and gave Randol a hearty handshake. When it was over, Randol looked down into the palm of his hand and discovered a large bronze key. He was speechless.

“In any case,” Sir Guy cleared his throat, “my men and I will go now to the Basilica to oversee the safety of that holy place. We shall remain there until this conflict is resolved. I certainly hope that none of the coming violence takes place anywhere close to the Basilica.” He gave Randol a knowing glance and then turned and walked away with the other Hospitallers.

Randol stood motionless for a moment, stunned by what had just happened. He turned around and slid his bronze key into the lock. It turned easily, and he stepped inside the tower.

“Kes?” he called out in the darkness. “Kiran – are you there? All is well. Where are you?”

As his eyes adjusted, Randol saw the two guards lying unconscious on the floor. Their hands had been bound. He looked at the wheel that controlled the sea chain. Not only had it been turned all the way to the fully raised position, but a piece of wood appeared to have been inserted – and then broken off – inside its gear mechanism.

Kes and Kiran were not in the room. After looking around for a few moments, Randol discovered a small trapdoor set into the floor. He opened it and called out their names into the darkness below, but there was no reply.

Letting the trap door fall shut, Randol exited the tower and locked the door behind him. He ran down the steps to street level and raced as fast as he could toward the south.

*

“They are closing in!” one of the forward watchmen shouted over his shoulder to Michael.

“Perfect,” Michael nodded, crouching low in a circle with his battle group leaders. “Now, here is the plan. We charge out with most of our force and fight our way down the narrow street to our left. We will be protected from the towers and will only have to fight along a single front.

“Instruct your men that once we leave the building, they should make as much noise as they possibly can. Scream. Shout. Bang your swords against the walls. We want the enemy to know which way we are heading and concentrate their forces there in the hopes of keeping us trapped.

“Meanwhile, during the distraction, our grappling teams will sneak out the back. We will have to fight long enough for them to scale the walls, take control of the gatehouse, and open the gates to let us through. When enough time has passed therefore, we should begin fighting our way back toward the walls.”

“How will we know when the time is right?” one of the group leaders asked nervously.

“We will have to feel it,” Michael said with confidence. The group leaders all looked around at each other, but none of them argued.

“Very well then,” Michael called out. “Take up your positions. Be ready to move on my mark. Prepare yourselves! Get set!”

“Hold!” a voice called out from the rear of the market forum.

Michael spun around, “Lord Randol! Where on God’s green earth have you been?”

“Busy,” Randol answered as he darted across the room to Michael’s side. “But my efforts have not been in vain. I have found a way for us to pass through the gate with much less risk to life and limb, and much greater chances for success in the end.”

Michael raised his eyebrows, waiting for an explanation.

Randol responded by holding up the bronze key.

“Well done, my friend,” Michael smiled, “and you are certain it works?”

“Tis the reason I am here,” Randol winked.

Michael called back his group leaders and quickly issued a new plan. Essentially, they reversed the gambit. Making sure to draw as much attention as possible, a large and noisy group smashed their way down a back alley carrying a ladder and wildly swinging grappling hooks. In response, the city defenders hurried to protect the high parapets and sent numerous men-at-arms in pursuit toward the back alley.

Moments later, the vast majority of Michael’s troops poured out of the front of the market and bolted for the portcullis of the south gate. Thrusting their spears through the iron grating, they drove back the handful of guards. Randol inserted his key, turned the bolt, and the Nicean soldiers easily lifted the gate.

After wedging a pair of spears into the guide tracks to keep the gate open, the men swarmed into the heart of inner Constantinople. Following Michael’s command, they gave the Basilica a wide berth and stormed around the southern end of the enormous Hippodrome stadium. As they did, the imperial palace came into view.

Between the Hippodrome and the palace lay a wide open stone plaza. Multiple watch towers on the plaza outskirts were within arrow range of the Nicean attack route, and projectiles were already whizzing overhead.

“Charge the palace!” Michael roared, knowing their situation was not going to get better if they held their ground. The hundreds of men-at-arms who had pinned them down in the market forum were already streaming through the southern gate in hot pursuit.

The men of Nicaea, though already exhausted from the long night of running battles, raced with all their strength to cross the plaza. Many fell to the arrows raining down from above.

“Spread out!” Randol cried, hoping that more of the arrows would find empty space rather than men, but by sheer numbers the arrow storm continued to produce deadly results.

By the time they reached the palace, a large mass of spearmen had formed to repel their charge at the main door. In addition, archers on the roof of the palace had joined with those in the towers to scourge the invading troops from above.

Hoping to cut off the angle of attack from the towers, and also pull the spearmen out of their tight formation, Michael called out a change of course. His men followed him around the side of the palace and down a narrow street.

The archers on the palace roof continued to track them, and one of their arrows found its mark in Randol's shoulder. He fell hard against the stone street, and the Nicean soldiers thundered past him in their effort to flee the continued barrage of projectiles. Michael happened to look back though, before turning the corner into the rear palace courtyard, and saw his friend fall.

Shoving his own soldiers out of the way, Michael struggled back through the sea of men to reach Randol's location. However, when he arrived, Randol had disappeared.

Optimistically assuming that Randol had risen and pressed on amidst the other soldiers, Michael turned and resumed his course around the building. He was thrilled to see what he had hoped for – a lightly guarded back door.

Unfortunately, as they drew closer, he realized that the small quantity of the defenders was more than compensated for by their size and ferocity. They were Varangian guards – giant axe-wielding Norse warriors, the likes of whom had served Byzantine ruling houses for many generations. They were most noted for the *beserker* gang frenzy that carried them to victory even against overwhelming odds.

Michael was beginning to wish he had taken his chances with the phalanx of spearmen in the front of the building. By now though simply as a matter of habit, he made an appeal to the Varangian giants to join his cause against the Roman usurpers. To his utter amazement, they lowered their axes.

“Are you the Paleologus?” one of the Norsemen growled, “he who was reborn from the House of the Angelos?”

“So I am,” Michael nodded.

“Our fathers' fathers served the Angelos,” the giant announced proudly. “But for many years, this city has been ruled without honor. Our services have been...misused.”

“I shall restore honor to this city,” Michael promised. “And your service with honor may begin this very moment. Can you open that door for me?”

The Norsemen looked at each other, grinned, and then turned their axes upon the thick wooden door behind them. In a few moments, nothing was left but a pile of splinters and debris.

Thanking the Varangians, Michael ran inside with his men right behind. Only a few of them had passed through the doorway, however, when the mob of spearmen from the front of the building entered the courtyard. At the same moment, a group of the men-at-arms that had given chase since the outer wall

arrived from the other side. The main force of Nicean soldiers, along with their new Norse friends, was instantly entangled in close-quarters combat with the two groups of city defenders.

The noise from the battle below led Michael to believe falsely that his men were pounding up the stairs right behind him. This mistake resulted in Michael entering the throne room of the Byzantine Empire with only a handful of men at his side to challenge the usurper Baldwin.

The swordplay that ensued did not last long. The brave Nicean soldiers were quickly brought down by the superior numbers of palace guards. Michael suddenly found himself to be completely alone and surrounded by dozens of armored spearmen.

One of the guards behind him swung his spear shaft into the backs of Michael's knees and he fell to all fours, dropping his sword. Another guard kicked the sword away, and Michael was left unarmed.

"Well, well," a voice boomed from across the throne room.

The crowd of guards parted, and an older man wearing a flowing purple robe with gold trim strutted forward. He was Baldwin, the Roman appointed emperor of Byzantium.

"This must be the great and mighty Michael Paleologus whose coming led us to such fear and trembling," Baldwin mocked. "Have your troops abandoned you, when you are so very close to the throne you sought? What a pity. I had hoped you would have at least put up a little more of a fight. But it seems our trap worked a bit too well."

Michael glared at the pompous ruler.

"Oh yes," Baldwin smirked, "why you didn't really think you were catching us by surprise did you? Ah, the impetuosity of youth! We have watched your every move for months, you see. All of your pathetic plans and preparations provided us with many hours of entertainment.

"Yes, soon the sun will come up, and our Teutonic friends will finish off your puny little band of horsemen across the water in Nicaea. And I must imagine that by now the overwhelming strength of our Venetian allies has sent most of the flimsy galleys of Genoa to the bottom of the sea to rest in the mud and muck where they belong."

Baldwin continued strutting back and forth, ignoring Michael's icy stare. Pausing at a window that overlooked the rear courtyard, Baldwin leaned his head out and watched for a few moments.

"Your men fight valiantly...for Greeks," he snorted. "What a shame that you led them on such a fool's quest! Did you really believe that a mere handful of swordsmen could conquer the most heavily fortified city in the world?"

Finally, Baldwin made his way over to where Michael still rested upon his knees.

"If all is as you say," Michael asked loudly so the entire court could hear, "and my cause is utterly lost; then why do you even now tremble with fear?"

Baldwin's eyes grew wide, and his face turned red. He backhanded Michael across his cheek. A trickle of blood issued from the corner of his mouth, but he made no sound and showed no expression.

"Once I dispatch with you," Baldwin hissed as he drew a dagger and placed it at Michael's throat, "I shall look forward to bringing your little principality under my authority, now that its strength has been utterly spent upon your vainglorious escapade! And I shall take great pleasure in assuming control over your lands, your livestock, and of course...your women!"

"Not bloody likely," a soft voice rang out from the shadows on the mezzanine level.

Baldwin opened his mouth to bark orders at his guards. No sound came out though, save for a belch of blood that spewed all over his regal finery. He looked down at his chest and was awed to see a feathered arrow shaft protruding from between his ribs. Baldwin teetered and then collapsed.

More arrows soon followed, each of them targeting the guards nearest to Michael. Chaos overtook the royal court.

Even as Michael was lifting himself to his feet, one of the guards charged him from behind with a spear. A moment before the spear would have run through his back, something whizzed past and the guard fell over dead.

Michael turned and saw his would be attacker lying in a pool of blood with a small dagger stuck into his neck. He spun around toward the direction from which the dagger had flown and saw Kiran emerge out of the shadows.

After nodding to the much-appreciated Assassin, Michael retrieved his fallen sword and began taking control of the court personally. Most of the remaining guards were already attempting to flee when the first Nicean troops began arriving from below.

"Forgive our lateness," one of the group leaders called as he ran across the court toward Michael.

"Although it would appear you have matters well in hand," another remarked as more and more of their men poured into the room.

Several of the Varangians soon entered as well. A few of them carried under their arms writhing guards that had been caught fleeing the court.

"Shall we take these outside," the Norsemen asked, their chests still heaving with battle lust, "or would you like us to behead them in here?"

"Give them a third option!" Michael ordered. "Let their lives be spared if they swear allegiance to me here and now!"

The terrified guards were more than happy to comply.

As his soldiers fanned out through the palace, securing the many rooms and stamping out any remnants of resistance, Michael looked up into the shadowy mezzanine. There stood Kes, holding a small bow and an empty quiver.

He was so stunned by her beauty, for a moment he was lost for words.

"Are you angry with me?" she called down to Michael.

As the sweet and unexpected sound of a woman's voice echoed around the hall, the dull roar from all the men's activity lessened quite a bit. Hundreds of heads turned to see how Michael would respond.

"That is not the emotion that comes to mind," he said quietly.

She smiled, and they stared at each other in silence for a few moments.

"You have won," she said at last, wanting to say something and not knowing what else to say. "The empire is yours."

"No," he shook his head and took a step forward. "I have won nothing. Nothing is mine, and I am no one. That is unless..."

He took another step forward and then fell once again upon his knees, though this time by his own free will. He laid down his sword at his side.

A quiet clacking sound echoed as the bow and empty quiver fell from her hands, and she gripped the railing in front of her.

"Kes," he spoke quietly with his right hand over his heart and his left reaching toward her with the palm turned upward. "You are the most beautiful, warm and wonderful woman I could ever imagine in my most blessed of dreams. You believe with all of your heart in that which is right and honorable and good. And today, you saved my life. But I must ask something even greater of you; that you will also save my life tomorrow and every day hereafter for the rest of our lives. For only with you at my side can I imagine a life worth living, and a world worth waking to. My dear Kestrel, daughter of Jonas the carpenter, will you honor me more greatly than you can know? Will you be my wife?"

In one-thousand years of Byzantine history the court of the imperial palace had never been gripped by a moment of such complete and utter quiet. Not a soul dared breathe as hundreds of eyes and ears watched and waited for a word to come forth from the lady on the balcony.

Finally, there came three.

"Yes," she said as tears rolled out of her smiling eyes, "of course."

Verse Fifteen – Return of the Emperor

The sun peeked above the eastern hills to find General Strategopolous riding north toward the Teutonic beachhead. He was flanked on either side by the twin brothers of Allendale. All three of their tired faces had gone rigid with grim determination.

Behind them the companies of Kataphraktoi, Pronoiar Allagion, Aragonese knights and Armenian horsemen had unified into a single enormous cavalry force. They planned to risk everything on one last defiant charge. The Nicean archers and spearmen stayed back behind the ridge to help cover the riders' retreat if the charge did not succeed in routing the Teutons.

When Strategopolous finally crested the ridge, he signaled an all-stop. Looking out over the northern flatlands and past them to the sand dunes and beaches, he was shocked by what he saw.

"What is happening?" Edric wondered.

"What on earth are they doing?" Alfred shook his head bewildered.

"They are leaving," Strategopolous grinned. "And thank the Lord!"

Far below on the northern beaches the Teutonic mercenaries were lined up in neat rows, patiently waiting for a place on one of the Venetian transports that lined the shore. The thousands of tents that had dotted the inland grasses only the day before were gone, and the mounted Teutonic Knights appeared to have already departed.

"Shall we ride down and teach them a lesson so they will never come back?" Alfred suggested.

"No," Strategopolous shook his head. "They are leaving. That is all that matters. More importantly, this means that Michael has won the day! We must return the horses to the castle and prepare to cross over the sea!"

The General turned and announced the good news to the mounted men. Rousing cheers rose up in several languages, and they all rode swiftly back toward Nicaea Castle, spreading the word of victory as they went.

Before riding after the others, Edric gave his brother a sympathetic look. "I know," he sighed. "That was just beginning to get interesting."

*

Randol awoke and looked up into a pair of perfect green eyes. Just down from them, a pair of equally perfect reddish lips began to move. Words came forth, carried upon a soft and soothing voice.

"I removed the arrow and stopped the bleeding. All in all you were very fortunate. Can you move your arm?"

"Then..." Randol's voice sounded strange to his ears. "I am not dead?"

"No," she said, her forehead wrinkling slightly in mild confusion.

Randol moved his eyes around to take in more of her. The woman's face was framed by long silken waves of shiny black hair. Her cream colored skin looked smooth, with a mild rosy quality as if she had just exerted herself.

"I thought that you were..." Randol felt himself blushing.

"That I was...?" she stared at him.

"Never mind," he smiled. "Who are you? And where am I?"

"My name is Ilyssa Botaneiates," she answered. "I saw you fall during the fighting last night. You would surely have been trampled, so I dragged you inside my home and did my best to heal your wound."

"Thank you," Randol was amazed. He tried moving his arm, but gave up as blinding pain coursed through his shoulder.

"You should eat something," she urged. "Can you sit up?"

He nodded and did.

She walked across the room to retrieve a plate of food. He watched her move and was awed once again by the beauty of her form. While she helped him eat and drink, he explained his identity and the basic details of his life in Egypt, his friendship with Michael Paleologus, and his desire to return to England.

During the conversation he discovered that she, though little more than half his age, had already experienced a brief marriage.

"We lived for three years near Trebizond," she concluded her sorrowful tale, "but he was killed in a raid by Turkish marauders. I recently returned to Constantinople to inherit his family home – this home..." she looked around at the expensively decorated room, "but ever since I have been very..."

"Lonely?" he whispered.

She nodded.

He was about to say something else when she stood abruptly, set aside the empty plate and said, "If you feel fit to walk, we should bring you to the palace now. Your friends will surely be relieved to see you."

"Of course," he replied as he slowly stood. Then taking up her hand with his good arm, he kissed the backs of her fingers and added, "thank you again, Ilyssa, for everything. I owe you my life and I will never...ever forget what you have done for me."

*

After the imperial court had been physically cleansed of blood, bodies and debris; Michael brought in Orthodox priests to consecrate the entire building to God. When the Greek Archbishop arrived the next day, he crowned Michael provisional Emperor of Byzantium. A formal coronation was scheduled to take place on the eve of Yuletide, the following year. This would give Michael time to consolidate his victory, as well as allow guests of honor from throughout Christendom to attend.

On the third day following the coup, Michael gathered all those who had played a part in his triumph in order to honor them and distribute gifts.

He stood by himself in front of the imperial throne, watching the guests and dignitaries file into the court. All of the leading nobles, merchants, artisans, priests and captains of Constantinople were in attendance. They had heard of Michael's prowess in battle and were more than a little curious to see how he would behave now that he had seized power.

Michael wore his usual black attire, but added to this was a long red cape buckled at the shoulder with a silver clasp. His sword rested against his thigh, and his dark wavy hair dangled loosely over his shoulders. A benevolent confidence seemed to flow forth from him, filling the chamber with a calm assurance of good things to come.

The Archbishop sat near the back of the court, lending added credence to the new ruler by his presence. Kes stood near the back as well, but further off to the side. She looked dazzling in a simple blue gown with gold adornments. Her uncles stood just behind her as bodyguards.

When the court had absorbed all the people it could reasonably hold, and a few more, Michael stepped forward to the edge of the throne dais. He raised his hands and welcomed the assemblage; thanking them for joining him at the dawn of a new era.

"Let justice and mercy uphold our empire," he continued. "Let peace and prosperity rest upon each of us. And let the greatness of Byzantium endure for another thousand years!"

The crowd cheered.

"Surely God has chosen this day as a new beginning for all of us that have gathered together here," Michael proclaimed. "Let us take a moment and bow our heads in honor and remembrance of those who gave their lives to bring us to this moment of hope and renewal – first among them, Our Lord Christ."

All heads bowed for a brief silence.

"Let us pledge in our hearts that these sacrifices shall not be in vain," Michael's voice echoed clearly in the chamber. "Rather let us always remember those who have gone before and run their races, and honor them in the days to come with our gentleness and self-control, goodness and faithfulness, patience and kindness, joy and peace; and most of all, with our love for one another.

"Moreover," Michael raised a finger, "this victory we celebrate belongs to many others who are here with us today. Let us now honor these heroes as well; those brave and noble souls who turned not from the call of destiny. To begin, I call forth the leaders of the Catalan Company of Aragon!"

Three of the knights strode forward and bowed respectfully. Michael praised their courage and skill in battle. He bestowed upon them a substantial sum in gold and written documents to deliver to their king, guaranteeing both their new privileged trading status and a formalized standing alliance.

“Of course you are welcome to stay and enjoy the city as long as you wish,” Michael smiled at them, “but when you are ready to return to your homes and families, two of our imperial galleys shall be at your disposal.”

The knights bowed and thanked Michael before backing away.

Next, Michael called for Janus Benedek of the Pronoiai Allagion. The burly man lumbered forward and bowed to his emperor.

“My father’s confidence in you and your men was well founded indeed,” Michael nodded. “And so I have for you a new mission. Many of the lands to the west of this city, though fertile and productive, have fallen fallow from years of mismanagement by my predecessors. To you and your men I grant these lands - permanently. You may build and develop them as you see fit. You shall be lords of your own manors, with titles of nobility to match. Bring the same strength to ruling and protecting your lands that you have shown on the battlefield, and we will all surely prosper together.”

Benedek was speechless, but tears of joy had formed in his eyes. He nodded his thanks to Michael, and the captains of the Armenian cavalry were summoned to the dais. Much like the Aragonese, they received scrolls documenting their trading privileges with the Byzantine Empire as well as diplomatic assurances.

“You may inform King Hethoum,” Michael explained, “that letters have already been sent to the Sultan of Egypt. We share mutual friends,” he winked at Randol, “and we will make every effort to stay his hand of vengeance. Further, we shall stand alongside the Armenian Kingdom in the ongoing fight against the Turk or any other enemies who seek to disrupt the peace of our lands.”

At that moment, Michael turned to the Archbishop and offered him the opportunity to address the Armenian delegation. His voice cracking with emotion, the Archbishop extended his welcome of the Armenian Church back into the Orthodox Communion. He then produced a written epistle to that effect for delivery to his Armenian counterpart. The soldiers bowed humbly as Michael officially released them from their commitment of service, and bid them Godspeed as they returned to their kingdom.

His own voice then breaking with feeling, Michael called upon the captains of the Genoese fleet. Twenty of them surrounded the dais and fell to their knees before Michael.

“Stand, my friends,” Michael said quietly.

They stood.

“Gold I give you, and our most highly favored trading privileges,” Michael said almost disdainfully, as if these were insignificant tokens, “but nothing I can offer shall compare with all you have given me. Your courage and loyalty these past few days have surely been notable. Yet some of the best years of my life were spent with you and your worthy sailors. I shall never forget those years of action and high adventure, or those alongside whom I served. Let us

continue to prosper together in the years ahead, but more importantly, let us always remain friends.”

Defying the protocol of court, the Genoese captains surrounded Michael with a flurry of hugs and kisses before they melted away into the crowd.

Michael’s smile quickly melted away too, as he steeled himself for the next order of business.

“I understand,” Michael said slowly, “that a representative of the Venetian fleet has arrived.”

An ominous murmur passed through the assembly as a tiny lone man came forward and knelt before the dais.

“What is your name?” Michael asked curtly.

“Niccolo Polo, your highness,” the man answered without looking up.

“Rise, Niccolo Polo,” Michael commanded.

He obeyed, while continuing to stare at his feet.

“I offer you and your fleet something even greater than money or status,” the new emperor announced to the audible surprise of the court. “I offer you forgiveness and a new beginning. Do you accept?”

“Yes, your highness...” the Venetian captain replied in awe; daring his first glance at this new ruler who was defying all of his expectations.

“Privileges and honor must be earned, and I leave open this possibility for the future of your fleet,” Michael declared, “but for today, I deem your ships free to sail Byzantine waters and free to trade at our docks – provided of course that you refrain from all violence against any other vessels, Genoese or otherwise, and that you pledge to aid any ship in distress, again without regard to its flag, so long as it sails within the Byzantine realm. Are these terms acceptable to you?”

“Most, your highness,” Niccolo bowed. “Your benevolence shall not be forgotten, nor ever become to you a cause of regret.” The young captain continued to flourish and bow as he backed away and disappeared from view.

Michael looked around the chamber, and easily spotted his next audience. He called forward the mighty men of the Varangian Guard. As they made their way through the crowd, Michael provided a brief history of the Varangians to those in the assembly who might not have known.

“Therefore on this day,” Michael concluded, “let the noble Varangians be restored to their place of honor as palace guards. Let their might be a symbol and an assurance of the peace that shall rest upon this palace from henceforth.”

Stepping down so that he was very close to the giant Norsemen, Michael whispered, “Your first task,” he said with a wink, “shall be to replace that back door.” The Varangians howled laughter at his jest, before taking up their new positions at the entrances to the court.

Michael walked slowly back up the steps and then turned to summon the next honorees.

“I call forward the guardians of Nicaea – General Alexios Strategopolous and the captains of the mounted Kataphraktoi!”

A spontaneous round of applause and cheering erupted in the chamber.

Strategopolous and the seven leaders of the Kataphraktoi companies arrived at the dais and bowed. Michael came close and put his hand on the General’s shoulder.

“Well, my friend,” Michael grinned. “Twas a long road, but now I am very glad I did not reject the calling to destiny that you delivered.”

“I never said the path would be easy,” the General laughed.

“No,” Michael agreed, “but it *was* worthwhile.”

He publicly praised the courage and skill of his field commanders at length, making particular note of Strategopolous’ genius. To each of the men Michael then presented military medals of the highest order in the Empire, and enough gold that they had no financial reason to ever fight again.

After dismissing his top soldiers, Michael paused. He took a deep breath as if nervous about his next encounter. Then he addressed the crowd in a quiet voice, so they had to still themselves and listen intently.

“Throughout the ages of our empire,” he began, “a bond has existed between the rulers of Byzantium and the nobility of the distant island realm of Britain. Was Helen, the mother of our founder Constantine the Great, not a British Queen?

“How right and fitting then, that in Byzantium’s hour of need a small band of Britons should once again join their destinies with ours, and through their faithfulness, friendship, wise counsel, and unspeakable courage; make all the difference for me and for the future of our realm. Will you please help invite them to join with me here by the throne?”

Michael had by this time certainly captured the hearts of the Byzantine assembly, and they responded to his request with another energetic round of applause and cheering. Randol, Edric, Alfred and Kes emerged from the back of the chamber and moved toward the front of the dais.

Simon started forward from where he had been standing off to the side. When he noticed that Ovsanna was not following him, he took her by the hand and practically dragged her for a few steps until she decided to go willingly with him to the front of the crowd. Michael noticed and smiled at them.

“Alfred Allendale and Edric Allendale,” Michael began when they had all arrived. “Your strength, daring, and unbridled enthusiasm have been of great service to the empire. Will you kindly kneel?”

The twins complied.

Drawing out his sword, Michael proceeded to knight them both right then and there to the thundering approval of the assembled court.

“Rise Sir Edric and Sir Alfred,” Michael ordered when the deed was finished. “I still have one more gift to offer you.”

Right on cue, a pair of young pages emerged from behind the throne. Each carried a long thin wooden box. They came to a stop on either side of Michael, who in turn opened the boxes and presented each of the twins with an exquisitely gleaming sword of the finest craftsmanship.

"The metal is pure Damascus steel," Michael whispered to the nearly delirious twins, who both bowed humbly and stepped back to allow the others a chance to receive their honors.

"Alas Lord Randol of Locksley," Michael stood before him, "I have not the power to elevate your station any higher than that which you already possess. I can, however, promise you this. On the first day of spring, or on whatsoever day you choose to depart for home, the fastest galleon in the Byzantine Empire shall be yours to command – and yours to keep. And may it carry you and any others from England who may ever wish to visit us, swiftly and safely."

Randol bowed and went to stand with the twins.

"Simon Little!" Michael came to him next. "Quite a young man you have become. You have served both me and your sister well during these trying times, yet I still have more to ask of you."

"Anything, my lord," Simon bowed.

Michael whispered in his ear, "As your sister's eldest male relative...at least within a three-month's journey...I need your permission before I can announce the engagement. What say you?"

"You want my permission to take Kes off our hands?" Simon whispered back. "You have it! Our parents will be thrilled, by the way."

"Good man," Michael hugged him and patted his back. "So, when are you going to ask Ovsanna?" he whispered while they were still embracing.

Simon was too flustered to answer.

"Do not wait too long," Michael advised. "Ladies like her do not come along every day."

He released Simon and moved over to Ovsanna herself. After lightly kissing the back of her hand, Michael thanked her for her vital help in securing King Hethoum's aid. He then said a quick blessing over her for a bright and happy future.

Simon and Ovsanna stepped back to join the others.

"Where is Kiran?" Ovsanna whispered to Simon as they came to a stop.

"That is a good question?" Simon nodded and began looking around.

Michael then held out his hand toward Kes. As she stepped up on the dais to take it, the entire court shivered with murmuring, whispers and a collective sigh. After hundreds had witnessed Michael's proposal, word had spread throughout the city about the fair-haired beauty who would be empress. But most of the assembled guests were just now getting their first good look at her, and they liked what they saw.

"I am going to announce...about us," Michael whispered to her.

"Am I ready for this?" Kes mumbled more to herself than to him.

"I know I am," he smiled, "and I want the entire world to know, too."

"Very well," she smiled and took a deep breath.

The crowd was quite possibly more excited about their new empress than they were about their new emperor. When Michael announced their wedding, to be held in one month on the coming Yuletide eve, the roar of approval was almost deafening.

When the noise and twittering had subsided, all eyes returned to Michael. Holding onto Kes with one hand, he raised his other until quiet finally descended once again.

"Stay here with me," he whispered to Kes. "I still have two more announcements to make."

"Alright, but I am going to be difficult to top," she winked.

"I think you are going to be just fine in this empress role," Michael grinned at her.

"You are not doing so badly yourself, emperor," she whispered as she squeezed his hand.

After reminding the assembled guests that they were all more than welcome at next month's combined wedding and Yuletide celebrations, Michael asked for their patience to hear his two remaining bits of news.

"First, before you return to your homes and your duties," Michael addressed the assembly, "there is someone I would like you to meet."

Kiran emerged then from behind the throne, but at first even his friends did not recognize him. He was dressed all in black, and his hair was neatly combed into a tight ponytail. He walked forward quickly and confidently, coming to a stop on the dais steps just below Michael.

"Allow me to introduce to you my trusted friend; Captain Kiran," Michael announced. "He shall serve from henceforth as chief of the palace guard. With regard to matters underneath this roof, his word shall carry the same weight as my own."

The assembly applauded politely, not overly concerned with the internal security arrangements of the Paleologus court.

Finally, Michael summoned young John Laskaris to the front. The boy did an excellent job of suppressing his nerves and stood confidently before his new emperor. He relaxed further when Kiran gave him a wink and a nod.

"Your family served the free people of Byzantium well during our time of exile," Michael spoke loudly, even though his voice was becoming worn out. He knew there were many in the court with loyalties to the Laskaris family and understood that their support would be vital in the days and months ahead.

"Your father was a good man," Michael continued, "and his stewardship brought strength to Nicaea without which none of us might be here this day. I see that same strength in you, young John. And now that the empire has been restored, and I must rule from Constantinople; I need a strong young man to take hold of the court in Nicaea Castle.

“Therefore, if you accept, I shall appoint you as the King of Nicaea. You will rule where your father ruled, and you shall have complete autonomy to do so – provided you remain loyal first to God, and then to me. What say you, lad?”

“I accept,” little John said quietly.

The crowd enjoyed another round of celebration.

“Let it be known then,” Michael shouted, “that young John Laskaris is Prince Regent of Nicaea until he shall reach the age of sixteen and may assume the throne under his own authority. To help guide Nicaea until that day, I shall appoint a guardian to oversee the young prince. For this task I choose a man who I know will treat young John like a son.”

Michael called General Strategopolous back to the front, and the crowd clearly approved of the choice. The General came forward and stood alongside little John with his hand on the boy’s shoulder. John looked up at his new protector and smiled.

Michael then proceeded with his closing remarks and dismissed court.

Assured that their new emperor was a good and just man, as well as a strong and caring ruler; the assembly offered a final round of cheering and applause before beginning to file out. And as all of the leading nobles, merchants, artisans, priests and captains of Constantinople returned to their own spheres of influence; they spread the good tidings that a new age of peace and prosperity had indeed dawned for the Empire – the age of the Paleologus.

*

A month later, Michael and Kes were wed. Michael looked handsome and stately, but no one seemed to notice. The attention of the entire court orbited around Kes as if a new star had appeared in the center of the sky. Her beauty, wrapped in flowing white, left the guests and onlookers breathless.

Her smile warmed and brightened the souls of all who stood and stared, entranced by the sight. Every movement she made, every word she spoke, and every glance she bestowed seemed inevitable, as if time itself had been patiently waiting out the ages for this day to come.

The Archbishop performed the ceremony and, to the delight of the crowd, held the homilies to a reasonable length. As provisional emperor, Michael certainly had the authority to proclaim his own vows, and to afford Kes the same right. However, in the end they decided simply to use the Archbishop’s standard formula, both feeling that speaking at all would be challenging enough given their emotional states at the time.

Ovsanna stood behind Kes as her attendant for the day, and Michael gave the part to Simon. The two attendants exercised all their restraint to keep from looking at each other during the pivotal moments of the ceremony, but always seemed to do so anyway.

When the vows and rings and kisses had all been properly exchanged, the Archbishop presented Michael and Kes to the people, and the celebrations began. A city-wide feast of unprecedented size and splendor was held straight through until Epiphany.

As they had only just arrived in Constantinople, the newlyweds decided against leaving the city for their honeymoon. After Yuletide, however, Kiran cleared the palace of all friends, staff and well-wishers; and with Varangians strategically posted to prevent any disturbances, the happy couple enjoyed many wonderful hours all to themselves.

*

The winter was mild with warm winds blowing in from the Aegean Sea. As the days passed, Randol became increasingly eager to return home in order to secure his estate.

He spent much of his time though during those weeks of short days and long nights calling upon Ilyssa Botaneiates. Always arriving with a gift of some sort, he tirelessly wooed the woman who had stolen his heart from the moment he opened his eyes to see hers.

They took frequent walks together in the promenades around the palace. They spoke of their pasts and their dreams for the future, though just as often the subjects of their conversations were of little consequence.

Ilyssa mastered the King's English with uncanny speed under the tutelage of the Lord of Locksley. She also carefully monitored Randol's shoulder and arm as he gradually returned to full strength.

*

Naturally, Sir Edric and Sir Alfred watched the blossoming romance with increasing curiosity, if not outright concern. After twenty years of high adventures alongside their friend, they could practically read his thoughts.

And so they knew he was up to something big as he prepared to leave one evening to call upon Ilyssa once again.

They confronted him at the door.

"You are going to do it, aren't you?" Alfred folded his arms.

"Do what?" Randol seemed distracted.

"You are going to ask her," Edric blocked his friend's escape.

"How do you two know what I may...or may not be planning?" Randol wondered as a trickle of sweat rolled down his cheek, despite the coolness of the winter evening.

"Look at you!" Alfred laughed.

"Even at the Fountain of Goliath you were not half this nervous," Edric rightly observed.

“Oh God,” Randol was almost trembling. “I think I am going to be ill.”

“You’ll be brilliant,” Alfred hugged him.

“Now get moving,” Edric did the same. “The longer you delay, the worse you shall suffer.”

“Very well,” Randol took a deep breath, “I can do this.” He walked off down the avenue toward Ilyssa’s home.

The twins watched him until he disappeared around the corner.

“Do you think he will be alright?” Edric wondered.

“Oh, better than that most likely,” Alfred sighed.

Edric sighed, too.

“Care for a drink?” Alfred nudged his brother.

“A toast to Lord Randol...?” Edric asked.

“Why not,” Alfred shut the door.

*

Simon was inspired by the Lord of Locksley, and when he heard that the ship to England would be leaving soon, he knew the time had come to act. He went searching for Ovsanna in the guests’ wing of the palace, but did not immediately find her.

“Looking for someone?” Kes found him first.

“Um...yes...as a matter of fact,” Simon looked around nervously. “I do not suppose...well, would you happen to have seen...”

“She is downstairs,” Kes smiled, “in the library.”

“Oh...right...very good then...” he turned to go.

“Simon,” she called after him.

He paused in the doorway and looked nervously at his sister.

“Relax, will you?” Kes walked over and gave him a hug. “She has been in love with you for a long time. You have nothing to fear.”

Simon breathed deeply. “Thank you, sis,” he finally smiled back.

When he found Ovsanna in the palace library, she was leaning over an open scroll on which was drawn a detailed map of the British Isles.

He came over and stood next to her.

“Is this your home?” she pointed to the center of England.

“Yes,” he answered. He placed his hand around hers and moved her finger slightly to the north. “Right about there, I believe.”

“I have wondered sometimes...” she hesitated, “what your home is like.”

“Tis not so different from any other place, I suppose,” he shrugged.

“Though there is quite a bit more rain than here.”

Suddenly, they each began to speak the other’s name at precisely the same moment.

“I am sorry,” he whispered, “you go ahead.”

“No...please,” she replied, “you go...”

“Very well,” he swallowed. “Ovsanna, there is something I need to say to you.”

Her dark eyes grew wide and remained fixed upon his.

“Do you recall that night in Armenia,” he continued, “when you told the bishop that you and I were...well...married?”

Her face reddened and she looked down, nodding silently.

“I shall never forget it,” he went on, “because after you said those words, I laid awake in bed the rest of that night, the entire time imagining what it might mean if those words were true...”

She looked back up, and the expression of anxious hopefulness in her eyes sent Simon down to his knees.

“Ovsanna,” he whispered, “I have been desperately in love with you since the very moment I saw you. Will you let the words be true? Will you marry me?”

Even during the brief moment of silence that followed, he knew her answer by the feel of the joyful tears that fell from her face and landed upon his.

Still, he was more than a little relieved when down into his waiting ears finally floated the sweet and softly spoken ‘yes’.

*

Simon was charged with the task of delivering gifts to his parents, grandparents, and brother on behalf of Michael. To this end, several satchels stuffed with gold, silver, gems, and pearls were stowed on board the galleon bound for England.

“And please beg their forgiveness of me, for my impatience in marrying Kes,” Michael asked. Finally, he and Kes gave their best wishes for Simon’s future with Ovsanna, and encouraged them to keep a substantial portion of the treasure for starting their own family.

Though excited to begin a new life with Randol at Locksley Hall, Ilyssa was concerned about abandoning her home in Constantinople. The house and its furnishings were the only link to her past. Michael solved this dilemma by purchasing the home and promising to maintain it without changes.

“After all,” Michael explained to Randol and Ilyssa, “you and your family might desire accommodations away from the busyness of the palace when you come on visits.”

As a result of Michael’s continued largess, Ilyssa left the city with a pile of gold that exceeded even the size of Randol’s share from Baybar’s gift. And of course, the galleon was fully stocked with food, wine and water.

Just before they departed, Michael pulled Randol aside one last time.

“Are you certain you do not wish for me to send along a small contingent of troops?” Michael whispered. “This business with the rogue bishop in Nottingham sounds as if it could lead to trouble.”

“I am certain,” Randol smiled, “and you needn’t worry – after all, I have those two.” He motioned toward Edric and Alfred who were already on board the ship debating whether or not they should wait until setting sail to tap into one of the wine barrels.

After the final farewells were made, Michael and Kes stood on the docks in the Julian Harbor, waving until the ship disappeared over the horizon. Naturally, everyone had been invited to attend the coronation at the end of the year, but with the understanding that circumstances might dictate otherwise.

Ilyssa and Ovsanna stood together at the ship’s rail watching Constantinople fade in the distance.

“Are we simply mad,” Ilyssa grinned, “sailing away to an unknown fate with these strange Englishmen?”

They turned and watched as the twins argued over the proper way to dispense wine from a barrel and Randol grew increasingly agitated by Simon who would not stop talking about how he thought that at some point, they should all go for a nice swim.

“We probably are,” Ovsanna sighed and nodded. “Though they do occasionally have their moments...”

Verse Sixteen – Return to Sherwood

With plenty of supplies and excellent winds, they only docked the galleon twice to let the horses run – once in southern Spain and once in western France – before sailing right up the Thames River into London.

Randol leased space at a pier for the ship, and they unloaded their horses and treasure. The skies grew dark and gloomy, the closer they came to Nottingham. In the same way, the mood of the people they encountered along the way seemed sullen and downcast.

At last they realized the reason. They had returned to England the week before Easter. People were meditating on the suffering and death of Christ.

“What a wonderful blessing,” Ilyssa pointed out as they rode past Northampton, “that you will be home for Easter Sunday!”

Randol nodded, but added, “*We* will be home.”

Then on the afternoon of Maundy Thursday – the night Christ had been betrayed – Locksley Hall finally came within sight. All six of the weary travelers looked on in horror after cresting the last hill.

Surrounding Locksley Keep on all sides were hundreds of heavily armed men. They did not appear to be doing much. Most of them were sitting in circles around campfires or standing near their tents.

Randol was silent, but shaking with rage.

“What does this mean?” Ovsanna asked.

“Locksley is under siege,” Simon answered in a way that sounded more like a question.

“Not for long,” Randol drew out his sword.

In an unusual reversal of roles, the twins sought to restrain him and encouraged calm consideration of the situation. Once the initial shock subsided, they convinced him to ride around unseen in an attempt to determine the wider state of affairs before proceeding.

Skirting the edge of the Locksley lands, the group soon came to the Little cottage by the stream at the base of the hill. Edric and Alfred were awed to see the place where they had grown up after such a long time away.

“I cannot wait for you to meet my parents,” Simon whispered to Ovsanna as they neared the house. “They are going to love you! And they will know the cause of this outrage taking place at Locksley...”

The twins dismounted and ran ahead of the others to surprise whoever was inside the house. No noise or shouts of joy were heard though, and a few moments later they reemerged wearing worried looks.

“There is no one there,” Alfred’s voice sounded hollow.

“The place is deserted,” Edric shook his head.

And so they rode on toward Nottingham.

Observing the east end of town from behind a grassy knoll, they watched as groups of soldiers – similar in dress and equipment to those outside Locksley –

patrolled the streets. They spotted very few townsfolk, and those that were out and about scurried quickly and nervously past the guards with heads and eyes lowered submissively.

“What has happened here?” Randol whispered to himself.

Shadows were growing long as the sun fell behind the tops of the trees.

“Is there nowhere we can safely go?” Ilyssa wondered.

“There is one place we have yet to try,” Edric said quietly.

“The last refuge of heroes and fools...” Alfred grinned.

“Very well,” Randol nodded. “We ride on to Sherwood!”

*

Darkness had arrived as the six entered the deep part of the forest, and they dismounted to lead the horses by hand. The increasingly thick brambles, branches and briars slowed their progress still further. Randol and the twins led the way with Simon and the ladies behind them.

“What are we looking for in here?” Ovsanna asked Simon after a strange sounding bird call frightened her.

“I do not know exactly...” he admitted. “Perhaps some kind of hope...”

He was interrupted by a loud rustling in the bushes. Shadowy figures came forth from every direction.

“Who dares disturb the forest?” a man wearing a hooded robe spoke in an ominous voice, just paces ahead of Randol.

“The rightful keeper of these lands,” Randol declared in a loud voice.

“Times are upon us when that which is wrong is often called right, and that which is right is often called wrong,” the robed and hooded speaker replied. “Whom do you serve?”

“I have served both emperors and kings,” Randol answered, “yet my heart belongs to the Lord of Lords and to Him alone.”

“If that be true,” the hooded man’s tone softened slightly, “then you shall find friends here.”

A slightly larger man holding a spear emerged then from the shadows and stood alongside the robed figure.

Randol could hear the robed man whisper, “Do you know him?” and the larger man quietly answer, “I have never seen him before...”

Suddenly, an even larger man approached from the other side with an even larger spear. He said nothing, but was clearly examining Randol. The largest of the three forest men took a step forward just as a moonbeam peeked from behind the clouds and reached through the trees, illuminating the scene.

“Randol?” the enormous man marveled. “Is that you?”

“Jonas?” Randol replied breathlessly.

“Father...!” Simon called out from behind.

After that, everything became joyful chaos for quite a while.

Simon celebrated the reunion with his father and the slightly smaller large man, his brother Jared. He introduced Ovsanna to them, and even in the darkness they perceived and commented upon her beauty. Simon also offered his assurance that Kes was fine, explaining as briefly as he could why she was not with them.

Randol proudly presented Ilyssa to the forest dwellers, and the identity of the hooded man was revealed to the newcomers as Friar Peter.

"But what word of Molly?" Simon wondered about Jared's long-time love. "Did you marry her? Is she well?"

"And where is our sister?" the twins questioned Jonas in unison on the whereabouts of his wife, Angela.

"They are both safe – for the moment at least – inside Locksley Keep," Jonas explained. "Ladies Raven and Margaret are with them, as is my father."

"Is he still Sheriff?" Randol asked.

"In title perhaps," Jonas shook his head sorrowfully.

"All of Nottinghamshire and Locksley have been turned upside down," Friar Peter explained, "by the evil machinations of Bishop Reynard."

"We reached Rome and delivered Lady Margaret's appeal to the Pope," Simon said hopefully. "Has there been no action from Mother Church?"

"Your appeal was indeed successful," Friar Peter answered. "A Cardinal was sent to look into the matter. He arrived late last autumn, but by then Reynard's strangle-hold on the city was already firmly established. You see, with all the wealth he squeezed out of the people during the past year, he was able to hire the mercenary soldiers you must have seen on your way here. With the coming of spring, the bishop revealed the true extent of his madness as he ordered them to lay siege to Locksley."

"Where are the mercenaries from?" Alfred was curious.

"Many places," Friar Peter guessed. "Some speak in a Frankish tongue, while others sound more Teutonic."

"Imagine that," Edric nudged his brother.

"What about the Cardinal?" Simon was quite upset. "Did he not care?"

"Much on the contrary," Friar Peter said sadly. "He publicly rebuked Reynard's actions and ambitions."

"What happened?" Simon held his breath.

"Ever since Yuletide," Friar Peter shook his head, "Cardinal Silviano has wallowed in the Nottingham prison – a captive of Bishop Reynard!"

"But if the Bishop has stepped outside of rightful Church authority," Randol reasoned, "he is a heretic, and we can appeal to the king!"

"We tried," Friar Peter mourned. "During the depths of winter, we sent three young men to London. Bishop Reynard, however, had anticipated our move. His agents reached the king first, and through their lies and deception somehow turned the tables. We received word just a few weeks ago that our

three young messengers were arrested on false charges and locked away in the Tower of London.

“Soon after, Bishop Reynard received word of our attempt to undermine his grasp on Nottingham, and his hunt began. All of us here,” Friar Peter motioned to the scores of men that had gathered around them in the dark forest, “are fugitives from Reynard’s vengeance.”

“If the authority of the Church has been ignored,” Randol thought aloud, “and the aid of the king has been turned away through deception...then we are on our own. If Locksley is to be rescued and Nottingham freed, there is no one else to make it so beyond those of us gathered here in this wood.”

“Then let us thank God,” Friar Peter urged, grinning at Randol, “for in our darkest hour, sending home to us the rightful Lord of Locksley! And may God’s will be carried out in the days to come with mercy to whom mercy is due, and justice for the rest!”

*

Before sunrise the next morning, Randol rode into Nottingham. On his right rode Edric and Alfred, their bows drawn and ready. On his left rode his old friend Jonas, with Jared his son; their polished spearheads gleaming even in the shadowy pre-dawn light.

As they galloped down the main road through the city, sleepy mercenaries arose from their resting places to see what all the noise was about.

Randol raised his sword up high and shouted as they rode, “Death! Death! Death to all usurpers of rightful authority! Death to those who would prey upon the estates of widows! Death to those who would forsake the fatherless and the poor! Death, I say!”

They rode up and down various streets with Randol bellowing similar declarations, until they had gathered a substantial following of angry mercenaries. Realizing that the slow-moving foot soldiers had no real hope of catching them on their fine Arabian horses, Randol and his companions slowed to a trot and settled in for a long morning of taunting and heckling the troops chasing them around Nottingham.

All of this was of course merely a distraction to allow Simon and about twenty of the forest fugitives to free the Cardinal from prison. The rest of the freemen, including Friar Peter, had stayed hidden in Sherwood and were charged with guarding Ovsanna and Ilyssa, as well as the other treasures brought back from the east.

Randol had decided that liberating the Cardinal would be a sensible first step in establishing the right order of things, and also a chance for him to size-up the quality of Reynard’s mercenaries. He was not very impressed, as the few close skirmishes that morning ended with quick and easy victories for the mounted men.

When Simon reached the prison with his team, he peered through the small barred window. The thought occurred to him that the last time he had peered through this window, he had seen Kiran for the first time. This day, however, he saw instead a small and very depressed looking olive-skinned man in a red robe.

“Cardinal Silviano?” Simon whispered.

The man looked up, but said nothing.

“We are here to set you free!” Simon whispered in his best attempt at High Church Latin, which was really not that good. Even so, the Cardinal nodded his understanding and gave hand signals indicating that four guards were perched right outside the door to his prison cell.

Simon nodded and quickly explained his plan to the men.

A few moments later, the four guards came to the front door of the prison to see who was disturbing their rest. Simon was stumbling and staggering around by himself on the far side of the street, singing and pretending to be drunk.

The guards came out to seize him with the intent of throwing him into the cell with the Cardinal. Simon flailed, writhed and produced a series of bizarre unintelligible sounds, causing the guards to devote all of their attention to the task of subduing him.

Meanwhile, Simon’s men flooded into the prison through the open door. They hid as best they could behind furniture and waited.

Eventually, when a few kicks to his ribs had convinced Simon to give up; the guards dragged him back into the building, laughing as they came.

Their laughter suddenly evaporated as twenty men surrounded them and pummeled them into submission. The guards were promptly bound and gagged. Once the proper key was identified, the Cardinal was set free and the four guards took his place in the cell. Simon held on to the key with the intent of returning it to his grandfather.

The Cardinal was safely delivered into the depths of Sherwood Forest long before Randol and his riders grew weary of sporting with the mercenaries. By afternoon, the five horsemen had joined back up with the others and begun plotting the liberation of Locksley.

*

Robbed of control over Cardinal Silviano, Bishop Reynard became enraged and accelerated his plans, issuing new orders to his soldiers surrounding Locksley. By the next morning, the mercenaries had felled a three-hundred year old oak tree from the edge of the Locksley estate, stripped its branches and sawed off a section to use as a battering ram.

Forty men hoisted the giant trunk and carried it to the main door of the Keep. Other mercenaries held up large wooden shields to deflect the smattering

of arrows that Old James the Sheriff, his daughter-in-law Angela Little, and a much-too-old-to-be-fighting Lady Raven Allendale sent against the attack.

Randol and his army of hoe and pitchfork wielding townsmen heard the thundering of the ram before they could even see what was happening. Between them and the ramming crew were over two-hundred men armed with swords, clubs and spears.

“We could sure use Strategopolous and some Kataphraktoi companies right now,” Edric lamented.

“A few thousand Mamelukes might do the trick,” Alfred countered.

“That door cannot take much more,” Randol ignored them. “We have to ride out!”

“You mean all six of us?” Edric looked around at their dramatically under-sized cavalry contingent. Simon had mounted a horse as well, increasing their ranks from the previous day’s strength of five. In addition to a long spear, he carried the shofar horn from the Fountain of Goliath. His sister had given it to him, assuming she would have little use for it in her new role as empress.

“I thought you liked difficult odds?” Randol grinned maniacally, the battle lust already falling over him.

“What about our footmen?” Alfred asked.

“Make for the nearest mercenary tent,” Randol instructed the crowd behind them. “Enter it, take any weapons you find, and then fight your way to the next one. If you get into trouble – run for Sherwood as fast as you can.”

Without another word, Randol and his five cohorts surged forward on their horses, heading straight for the gates of Locksley Keep.

“You heard him!” Friar Peter raised his wooden staff and shouted from the front of the group of villagers. “Forward!”

*

From the high parapets, James, Angela and Lady Raven watched a tiny band of mysterious horsemen charge straight into the crowd of mercenaries. They marveled as at the same time, a horde of about fifty villagers armed with but a few shovels, rakes, and axes raced up the hill and begin ransacking one mercenary tent after another.

“Oh, dear God,” Angela gasped in horror as she recognized her husband, “Jonas is one of those riders!”

James was grinning slightly.

Lady Raven wore an indiscernible expression as she stared intently at two of the riders who were sending arrows into the crowd of mercenaries with almost unnatural speed and accuracy.

“Oh no,” Angela went on, “Jared is with them too and...” She nearly swooned when she recognized her youngest son Simon as a third rider.

“My dear,” Lady Raven asked her daughter “is that...?”

Angela nodded silently as all color left her face.

"But if Simon has returned," Lady Raven's blue eyes sparkled in a way they hadn't in years, "then the other three must be..."

Before she could complete her sentence, the air all around was rent by a deep blaring sound. Simon was blowing the shofar incorrectly, and the resulting oddly off-pitch noise made the earth and all creatures within earshot tremble with its awful warbling tone.

James felt the moment, leaned over the wall, and in his best and loudest sheriff's voice boomed, "ALL HAIL! THE LORD OF LOCKSLEY HAS RETURNED! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES, BRIGAND SWINE!"

Just then, the riders reached the front door and attacked the men wielding the battering ram. Randol swung his sword rhythmically back and forth with an almost eerie calmness, cutting down mercenaries by the dozen. His companions followed his lead, and the ramming crew quickly gave up trying to hold on to their tree trunk. It fell to earth with a resounding thud. The doors to the Keep were badly cracked, but they had not broken.

Meanwhile, Angela and Lady Raven exhausted the rest of their arrow supply, picking off unshielded men on the fringes of the mercenary crowd.

Hearing the combined thunder of Simon's shofar and the Sheriff's threats, feeling the sting of arrows and the crazed horsemen's blades, and seeing their ram lying in the dust, their tents plundered, and a horde of fifty angry townsmen charging toward them; the mercenaries could stand no more. They broke ranks and raced down the hill, running off in the direction of Nottingham.

Randol, Edric and Alfred chased after them, running down several more of the terrified soldiers before finally realizing that they had won. The siege had been lifted. Locksley was saved.

*

The Little men rode back to Sherwood to retrieve Ovsanna, Ilyssa and Cardinal Silviano from the hidden camp, while Randol, Edric and Alfred enjoyed long overdue reunions with their families. Friar Peter led the mob of townsfolk in gathering up the rest of the mercenaries' abandoned weapons and supplies.

Edric and Alfred alternated back and forth between hugging their sister Angela and their mother Raven. Simon went to his grandfather James and leaned against the sheriff's broad chest. He had to explain all over again about Kes and Michael, and while he was doing so, Randol began looking around for his mother, Lady Margaret.

He walked across the great hall, reeling in the familiar sights and sensations from his childhood years so long ago. Then suddenly, he found himself face to face with nearly two-dozen small children.

"Hello," one of them said. "Who are you?"

“I am looking for my mother,” he tried to get past them. “Lady Margaret – do you know where she is?”

“You’re Lord Randol?” another one of the children asked in awe.

“Yes,” he nodded, still trying to wade through them.

“Where have you been?” the first child asked. “She has been waiting a long time for you.”

“I know...tis a long tale...” Randol was becoming frustrated. “Look, are you going to tell me where my mother is?”

“Upstairs, in her chamber,” another, more informative child said.

“Thank you!” Randol headed up the steps.

“My lord,” still another child called after him, sounding distressed.

He turned and stared at the crowd of little faces, not sure which one had called for him.

“She is not well, my lord,” the little girl spoke again. “We are supposed to be gentle with her and not too loud...”

“Thank you,” Randol said and nodded slowly to the child, his heart sinking, “I shall be careful.”

He continued climbing the stairs and went to his mother’s room. The door was slightly ajar. He peeked inside and could see his mother lying in bed. She looked to be asleep. A young woman was sitting at her side, with her back to the door.

Randol entered and quietly cleared his throat.

The young woman turned around with a fearful look on her face.

“Are you here to take control of the Keep?” she asked.

“Yes...” he started, but stopped when the woman began to weep.

“No...” he tried instead, still keeping his voice soft. “This is not what you think. The battle is over. The evil men are gone. Lord Randol has returned.”

“Lord Randol?” the woman looked up and her face brightened considerably. “Where is he?”

“He is the one speaking with you now,” Randol replied.

“My son?” a weak voice came from the bed.

Randol stepped closer and looked into his mother’s eyes.

Words escaped them for some time, and they simply wept. He hugged her and kissed her forehead. Soon enough, however, the words began to flow. He told her much in a short time of his adventures, but mostly he kept repeating how sorry he was; sorry to have been away so long, sorry that his father had died, sorry for not being a better son, sorry for everything.

“Stop it, Randol,” his mother finally snapped.

He closed his mouth.

“Your father and I did not raise you to wallow in a sea of regret and remorsefulness. Have you had many great adventures in many wonderful lands?”

“I have, mum.”

“Have you helped people, and showed them the Lord’s love?”

"I have tried to."

"Have you stood by your friends, and stood up for what is right?"

"Yes, mum. I have."

"Then no regrets, my son," she coughed lightly.

Randol looked down, nodded, and took a deep breath. He looked back up and the young woman was staring at him.

"I am sorry," he said to her. "I do not even know your name."

"Molly," she smiled.

"You are young Jared's wife," he made the connection.

She nodded.

"What a fortunate lad," Randol smiled at her, and his eyes went briefly to her enormous abdomen. "You are with child?"

"Yes," she beamed.

"What a fortunate lad indeed..." he said and then looked back at his mother. Her eyes were half shut.

"She needs to rest," Molly stood slowly. "The siege has been an awful burden to her, but now that you are home..."

"And I am home to stay," Randol kissed his mother's hand and she gave him a tiny smile.

Molly walked Randol to the door and said, "She will want to see you again after a bit of rest."

Randol nodded.

"What was all that terrible banging anyway?" Molly wondered.

"Nothing that cannot be repaired," Randol sighed. "I am very glad to have met you, Molly Little." Randol bowed and took his leave.

Just as he returned to the great hall, he heard a commotion right outside the battered front doors. Sensing something was terribly wrong, he sprinted across the hall. Simon entered on the run, and met him halfway.

"My lord," Simon was shaking and looked pale. "They found them. The bishop's men – they found the secret place in the forest and they murdered the watchmen! Ovsanna escaped with the Cardinal. We have them, and they are safe. But my lord..."

For a moment, Simon looked ready to collapse from distress. Randol put his hands on Simon's shoulders and calmly whispered, "Where is Ilyssa?"

"The Bishop..." Simon quaked, "he has captured her!"

*

Randol was on his horse in a flash, with Edric and Alfred right behind. James the Sheriff, his son Jonas, and Cardinal Silviano followed on the other three horses, while Jared and Simon stayed with their wives.

As they approached Nottingham, they saw Friar Peter and the fifty villagers – now armed with the mercenaries’ abandoned swords and spears – quickstepping toward the city.

Randol and the twins flew past them. As the other three riders caught up with the townsmen, James called out, “Seems we have some unfinished business in Nottingham, eh Friar?”

“We heard that Lord Locksley’s love is in distress,” the Friar answered without breaking stride, “and we go to lend a hand!”

“Then we will see you there!” James called over his shoulder as he sped after Jonas and the Cardinal.

Randol reached the city center, well ahead of even the twins. All of the mercenaries had gathered there, and for the first time Randol came face to face with Bishop Reynard. The people of Nottingham had fled the area, though many still watched the scene from windows, doorways and rooftops.

“This must be the great Lord Randol,” Reynard sneered, “back from his long adventures in the far country. And such adventures he has had – with so much treasure to show for it! How noble of him to have donated all of it to me...that is...to the church.”

Randol said nothing, but continued to stare at the madman.

“Now all that he has left to do is to hand over the lands of Locksley – lands that he long ago abandoned in his heart!” the Bishop grinned.

“You know nothing of my heart,” Randol said quietly.

“Oh,” the Bishop cocked his head, “don’t I?”

At Reynard’s cue, a pair of mercenaries emerged from the crowd holding Ilyssa between them by her arms.

“If even a hair upon her head is harmed,” Randol roared at the crowd, “every one of you dies!”

“Such a bold statement,” Reynard laughed unnaturally, “to be made by just one man!”

No sooner had he said the words than Edric and Alfred rode into the town center, coming to a stop alongside Randol.

The Bishop shrugged.

“Release her now,” Randol said to the mercenaries, ignoring the Bishop, “and your lives will be spared.”

“Do not play the fool, Lord Randol!” Reynard hissed. “Simply renounce your claim to the land, and she will be returned to you. Or do you care more for your miserable fields and fens than for your...supposed true love?”

Before more could be said, James, Jonas and Cardinal Silviano thundered down the street on their horses and came alongside Randol and the twins.

“Let her go, Reynard,” James advised, “before any more lives are lost.”

“Enough of this!” the Bishop spat, “Seize these traitors!”

Dozens of the mercenaries started forward, brandishing their weapons.

“Halt!” Cardinal Silviano cried. “I have sent word of these outrages to Rome. Any who takes action against me or against the rightful lord of Locksley, shall be excommunicated!”

The mercenaries wavered.

“He lies!” Reynard shrieked. “He is an imposter. You will be excommunicated if you do *not* seize them!”

The mercenaries started forward again, though hesitantly.

Suddenly a new voice rang out.

Friar Peter had arrived with the townsmen, but their ranks had grown. Word had spread like wildfire that the Lord of Locksley had returned to set things right, and the people were rallying to the cause.

The Friar chanted words from a Psalm as they marched forward:

*Blessed is the man
Who does not walk in the counsel
Of the wicked
Or stand in the way of sinners
Or sit in the seat of mockers.
But his delight is in the law
Of the Lord
And on his law he meditates
Day and night
He is like a tree planted by
Streams of water
Which yields fruit in its season
And whose leaf does not wither.
Whatever he does prospers.*

*Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff
That the wind blows away
Therefore the wicked will not stand
In the judgment
Nor sinners in the assembly
Of the righteous*

*For the Lord watches over the way
Of the righteous
But the way of the wicked
Will perish*

On the last word the Friar came to a stop, just behind Randol and the other riders. Hundreds of villagers had filled the town center, and many of them were armed. They far outnumbered the mercenaries.

Bishop Reynard, knowing he was near the end, panicked and grabbed Ilyssa away from the guards. He pulled a small dagger from his cloak and, standing behind her, placed it against her throat.

“Fight them!” he roared at the mercenaries. “Kill them!”

The mercenaries did not move. Many began laying down their weapons.

“Fools!” the Bishop was trembling. “All of you are fools!”

“Let her go,” Cardinal Silviano said gently. “As long as she is unharmed, there can still be forgiveness.”

“No,” the Bishop’s eyes were darting around. “You will kill me if I let her go!”

“Can you take him?” Edric whispered to his brother.

“Of course,” Alfred said quietly, “but I will not risk Ilyssa.”

Randol had heard them and cried out, “Remember how I was when you found me, my love!”

Ilyssa instantly understood. She reached up and pushed the bishop’s knife hand away before diving flat onto the ground.

Reynard lurched forward and lifted up his dagger so he could plunge it into Ilyssa’s back. Then suddenly, his dagger fell down onto the cobblestones next to his feet. Confused, Reynard looked at his empty hand and discovered one of Alfred’s arrows sticking right through the middle of his wrist.

The Bishop began to scream in agony and rage.

Randol flew from his horse and went to Ilyssa.

“Are you well, my love?” he helped her stand. “Are you hurt?”

“I am well,” she threw her arms around him. “And I know that I always will be, as long as we are together.”

Edric and Alfred passed by just then, carrying away the writhing bishop between them.

“Do not worry,” Alfred said reassuringly.

“We shall give him the best of care,” Edric winked.

*

The next morning was Easter Sunday.

All of Nottingham gathered in the town center once again, only this time there were no weapons and no conflict; only peace.

Cardinal Silviano came and began the morning with a formal blessing in High Church Latin, but soon handed the event over to Friar Peter. The young friar looked around at the crowd and was momentarily speechless at the love and joy and hope he saw everywhere on the faces of friends.

Finally throwing his hands in the air, Peter cried, “He is risen!”

“He is risen indeed!” the crowd roared.
With that the Lenten season was over, and the feasting began.

*

Cardinal Silviano left for Rome the following day. He hired a dozen of the former mercenaries, deputizing them as his own private guard. These men, with no love lost for their former employer, helped to transport the disgraced Bishop Reynard.

“What are you going to do with him?” Friar Peter asked the Cardinal as he walked with him to the edge of Nottingham.

Silviano shrugged, “Personally, nothing. I will leave his disciplining and punishment in the capable hands of the Holy Inquisition.”

*

The remaining mercenaries were offered a choice by Lord Randol. They could take a token amount of silver – enough to return to their homes – and leave Nottingham forever; or they could stay, and he would hire and train them to be productive workers on his lands.

Only a handful of the men chose to stay, but Randol was glad to have the extra manpower as he set about the task of restoring the fruitfulness of his estate after many years of gradual decline. The men were provided with room and board, and enough pay to enjoy their new lives.

*

Jared and Molly moved into his parents home – the old millhouse by the stream – and became settled just in time for the arrival of their first child, a girl. Jared took over the main operations of the carpentry shop, and Molly was glad to have him working on the premises.

Excited to enter a phase of semi-retirement, Jonas and Angela swapped homes with their eldest son, retreating to the house up the hill in the woods that they had originally built when starting their family all those years ago.

Jonas still advised Jared on his carpentry work, and helped with the larger or more complicated projects. Mostly, however, he enjoyed fishing in the stream, occasionally hunting deer with Lord Randol, and spending quiet and restful time with Angela.

For her part, Angela took up a renewed interest in gardening. Also, her expertise in dealing with rambunctious children became increasingly valued in the years to come, as she and Jonas became grandparents many times over.

*

Simon's attempt to return the key to the Nottingham prison to his grandfather was refused.

"If I learned anything from all the excitement these last few weeks," James explained to his grandson, "'tis that I am getting too old to keep up with all the duties of Sheriff of Nottingham. You keep it, Simon."

"But," Simon shook his head, "I am no sheriff."

"Would you like to be?"

Simon was stunned. "You can do that?"

"No," James laughed, "not on my own. But with my recommendation to Lord Randol, and his recommendation to the king..."

"Well," Simon took a deep breath, "I will need a job before Ovsanna and I can properly plan our wedding."

"Tis settled then," James beamed.

"But grandfather," Simon whispered, "I do not know the first thing about being a sheriff."

"Not to worry, lad," James reassured him. "I will advise you in the early days. Trust me, you will be brilliant."

In addition to giving him his job, Grandfather James gave Simon and Ovsanna his house after they were married. The newlyweds were extremely grateful, both for the steady income and the adequate housing, as they soon discovered that Ovsanna was expecting.

Nottingham quickly grew fond of its new sheriff, just as it had long been fond of his grandfather. Simon adopted James' easygoing style of law enforcement, with an emphasis on preventing conflicts rather than merely resolving them.

The neighbors on the edge of Nottingham were quite enamored of Ovsanna, whose kindness to all was itself a beacon of peace and light. Good sized gatherings often formed in the common grounds around the Little home on warm nights, when she would sit outside and play glad melodies on her flute.

Finally, after many years of music providing her only source of happiness, it became instead a reflection of the joy that reigned throughout her entire life.

*

The wedding of Randol and Ilyssa was seen as a symbol of renewed hope for all of Nottinghamshire, and was held as soon as the damage from the siege was repaired. Many hundreds of guests, from all stations of life, attended the ceremony and the feasting that followed.

Randol's mother, Lady Margaret, continued to live in the Keep and her health gradually improved with her burden of despair lifted. Likewise, Lady

Raven remained an honored member of the Locksley household; her wisdom and counsel always highly valued, and often sought.

Her sons, Edric and Alfred were given rooms in the Keep and proved instrumental in the restoration of Locksley's prosperity, just as they had served faithfully alongside Randol during the many years of their great adventures in distant lands.

*

The Nottingham orphanage was restored and cleansed from all traces of the foul Bishop. The children enjoyed a large addition built by Jared Little with his father's help. The new rooms included an indoor play area for Nottingham's many rainy days, a bathing chamber, and an enlarged dining hall with room for the children to gather around the fire after dinner and hear stories.

Grandfather James, retired as sheriff, became a mainstay of these story-times and had many a tale to tell – some of them true. He took up permanent residence in an apartment above the new addition, and his thundering footsteps became a wordless signal to the children that their bedtime was overdue.

Friar Peter also returned to reside in the orphanage where he had grown up, now as its overseer. Although with his many ministering duties, he was often out and about around Nottingham. Ovsanna and Ilyssa helped fill the gap, gladly offering their time while their husbands were off working at other tasks, to teach and nurture the orphans.

*

Ilyssa began to show by midsummer. She and Randol discussed names for the anticipated child well into many of those summer nights. They could never settle on a name for a girl. However, they agreed early on that if they were given a boy, he would be named Samuel.

This had been the name of Ilyssa's father. Randol was pleased by this and that Samuel was reminiscent of the name Isam; and would therefore also honor the memory of the many years he had spent in Egypt.

More than anything, Randol was overjoyed to have found love with a beautiful woman and that with her at his side he was able to restore peace and hope to his lands and people. As it happened, Randol and Ilyssa's impasse over names for girls did not matter in the end.

And so like all the people of Nottinghamshire, and especially his family and household, Randol was relieved and comforted to know that the name and noble line of Locksley would live on.

In the years to come, Samuel would grow strong in faithfulness, chivalry, and a passionate desire to help the less fortunate; and also like his forefathers, his cunning, bravery and skill in battle would become legend.

Postlude

Constantinople, 1261

As summer faded, the time had come for those from England who were planning to attend the coronation of Michael Paleologus to head for London and begin their voyage on the waiting Byzantine galleon. With their new wives and growing families; Randol, Jared and Simon all chose to stay behind, pledging to visit Kes and Michael on a later voyage.

The elderly matriarchs, ladies Raven and Margaret, like Grandfather James, also chose not to make the difficult journey, instead sending gifts and letters of blessing to show their love.

Jonas and Angela were giddy, not only about seeing their daughter, but also to be setting sail for a faraway adventure after so many years focused on child-rearing and other domestic concerns.

Edric and Alfred accompanied the parents of the empress. They made a convincing case that they would be needed as bodyguards, given the potentially dangerous nature of journeys to the east. Everyone knew though that after more than half a year back in Nottingham, they were simply itching to sail away once again to far away lands offering a more extensive variety of opportunities for action and adventure.

The group arrived two weeks before the ceremony and enjoyed a tearful reunion with the parents of the emperor, Maegan and Constantine of the Angelos. And so for the first time in two decades, with the exception of Randol, all members of the original Quest for Prester John were together again. And in a sense, they finally found what they had set out in search of all those years ago.

For no one could better fit the description of a powerful Christian monarch in the east, an ally against Islamic expansion and a bulwark against the hegemony of Rome, than Michael Paleologus.

*

They learned from Constantine the sad news that his mother, the incomparable Theodora Angeloi, had departed the year before to join the heavenly host.

“As it turns out,” Constantine explained with a sparkle in his eye and a curious grin, “the day she left us was the very same day that the imperial palace was cleansed and re-consecrated by Michael. Having faithfully completed her work in this world’s realm, I suppose she was ready to join the Lord in His preparations for the new heaven and new earth to come.”

The others nodded in agreement.

“Even so,” Constantine added quietly, “I miss her.”

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Jonas and Angela had to be careful hugging their daughter, as Kes' belly was swollen to an alarming size. She was not planning to attend her husband's coronation as emperor, as her anticipated due date was the same day and she had been restricted to bed rest by the palace physicians. Naturally, the coronation date could not be changed as invitations had been sent nearly a year earlier.

"You are absolutely glowing!" Angela said from the bedside while beaming at her only daughter. "You are going to be the most wonderful mother in the entire world."

"I will do my best," Kes smiled with misty eyes, "though I believe you long ago secured that distinction."

"Tis a family tradition," Jonas said as he gave Angela his right hand and Kes his left.

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Kes went into labor the morning of the coronation.

Constantine and Maegan went to take their seats of honor in the palace. Angela stayed at Kes' side. Jonas, unsure what to do, paced nervously until Constantine came back and rescued him by offering him a seat at the ceremony next to himself and Maegan.

The coronation was magnificent. The ringing of silver trumpets called the assemblage to attention. Kings and queens from as far away as Norway and Aragon were present, along with captains of fleets, generals of armies, bishops, archbishops, master masons, Templars, guild leaders, minstrels and troubadours.

Ambassadors bearing gifts arrived from Armenia, Novgorod, Hungary, Vienna, and the Holy Roman Empire. Sultan Baybars sent an emissary with his best wishes for peace between their peoples. And even the Pope delivered words of reconciliation and congratulations to his new rival.

At the conclusion of the proceedings, the bright red cape that Michael had worn for the past year was taken away and replaced with a new robe of imperial purple. He received his crown and scepter, and the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church proclaimed him emperor.

The herald cried out that the new imperial line, the Royal House of the Paleologus, was founded. The Patriarch prayed aloud, asking God to bless this new beginning – this new order of the ages – and that by His Grace, Byzantium endure another thousand years.

A moment of silence descended after the echoes of the prayer faded, but was shattered by the piercing cry of a newborn baby. While Kes slept, safe and sound in her chamber, her mother entered the court holding the emperor's beautiful son.

Then and there the child was christened, and Michael announced his name as he had already agreed upon with Kes.

“The royal line is secure!” the herald cried. “Behold the future emperor – Andronicus Paleologus.”

Jonas raised an eyebrow at Angela.

“Kes is calling him Andrew,” she explained.

“Ah,” Jonas nodded, “very nice.”

*

Later at the feast, Constantine encountered Kiran, the captain of the palace guard.

“Congratulations on the birth of your grandson, my lord,” Kiran bowed.

“Thank you,” Constantine nodded and took a sip from his goblet. “A compelling irony – do you not find – that you now serve a man whose true father once rescued you from death?”

“Michael Tuck was a great man and a noble soul,” Kiran replied with a look of mild confusion, “but you are my master’s true father; for at your side and with your provision and guidance he grew to be a man.”

“Thank you for that as well,” Constantine smiled. “You are an interesting fellow, Kiran...”

“That is my only name,” Kiran answered Constantine’s implied question.

“Is it true, if I may ask,” Constantine continued, “that you are the last of the fabled Order of the Assassins of Alamut?”

“This is true,” Kiran nodded. “Are you uncomfortable with your son’s life being guarded by a follower of Islam?”

Constantine thought for a moment before answering, “I am comfortable with any result of his judgment, for he is now my emperor as well as yours.”

Kiran bowed respectfully.

“Although, I must warn you,” Constantine grinned. “If I know my son, he shall attempt to convert you to the Way of Christ.”

“He does every day,” Kiran smiled. “I find his words and insights fascinating, and I look forward to our discussions – provided they do not interfere with my duty to protect him, and his wife, and now of course, his son.”

“Since you love God above all else,” Constantine said thoughtfully, “and since second only to that devotion is your love for those God has entrusted to your care, perhaps there is indeed more common ground between us than one might have thought.”

They both turned at the sound of the baby’s cry and saw Michael approaching, his newborn son cradled in his arms.

“We certainly share great reasons for hope,” Kiran said quietly, “and every reason to embrace peace.”

About the Author

Edward Philip White resides in the suburbs of Saint Louis, Missouri with his wife and children. In 1998 Edward completed a degree in history at Washington University in Saint Louis. Since 1999 his writing talents have played a significant part in fundraising for a private independent school.

The Song of Sherwood Trilogy, begun in 2005 and completed in 2008, is Edward's first major work of fiction, though surely not the last.

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