

# PART I

*November 10, 1901: Paphos, Cyprus*

The summons came while I was sitting at my desk. The afternoon post had just been delivered - the office boy placing the tidy bundle into my tray - so I thought nothing of it as I slid the paper knife along the pasted seam. It was only upon shaking out the small cream-coloured card that my full attention was engaged. I flipped the card over on the blotter. The single word, *'Tonight'* written in a fine script, brought me upright in my chair.

I felt my stomach tighten as an uncontrollable thrill tingled through me. This was followed by an exasperated sigh as I slumped back in my chair, the card thrust at arm's length as if to hold off the inevitable demand of that single, portentous word.

Truth to tell, a fair length of time had passed since the last meeting of the Inner Circle, and I suppose a sort of complacency had set in which

familial household was to be appropriated for a meeting of certain august members of the Ladies' Literacy Institute and Temperance Union, a gaggle of well-meaning old dears whose overabundant maternal energies have been directed to the improvement of society through reading and abstinence from strong drink - except sherry. Worthy goals, to be sure, but unspeakably dull. Instantly, my resentful resignation turned to unbounded elation; I was delighted to have a genuine excuse to forego the dull agonies of an evening which, if past experience was any indicator, could only be described as boredom raised to the level of high art.

Having shed this onerous domestic chore, new vistas of possibility opened before me. I considered dining at the club, but decided on taking an early supper so as to leave plenty of time for the cab journey to the chapel where the members of our clandestine group met on these rare occasions. With a contrite heart made buoyant by a childlike excitement, I contemplated the range of alternatives before me. There were several new restaurants in Hanover Street that I had been meaning to try, with a public house nearby recommended by a junior colleague in the firm; off the leash for the night, I determined my course.

When work finished for the day, I lingered for a time in my office, attending to a few small tasks until I was certain the office boys and junior staff had gone, and I would not be followed, however accidentally. I feel it does no harm to take special precautions on these infrequent occasions; no doubt it is more for my own amusement than anything else, but it makes me feel better all the same. I should not like even the slightest carelessness on my part to compromise the Inner Circle.

After a pint of porter at the Wallace Arms, I proceeded around the corner to Alexander's Chop House, where I dined on a passable roast rabbit in

passing on the street. For them it is a discipline which, faithfully applied, may lead to greater advancement in time; for the Inner Circle, it is an unquarable necessity - now more than ever, if such a thing can be possible.

Admittedly, these arcane concerns seem very far away from the honest simplicity of life on the Greek island where I now find myself. Here in the sun-soaked hills above Paphos, it is easy to forget the storm clouds gathering in the West. But the writing is on the wall for anyone with eyes to see. Even I, the newest recruit to our hallowed and holy order, recognize dangers which did not exist a year or two ago; and in these last days such dangers will only increase. If ever I doubted the importance of the Brotherhood, I doubt it no longer.

Our meeting that night was solemn and sobering. We met in the Star Chamber, hidden beneath the chancel, as it affords a more comfortable setting for discussion. I took my seat at the round table and, after the commencement ritual and prayer, Genotti asked to begin the proceedings with a report on the Brotherhood's interests in South America and the need for urgent intervention in the worsening political climate. 'While the peace treaty concluded in the first months of last year between Chile and Brazil remains in force,' he said, 'efforts to undermine the treaty continue. It has come to my attention that agents in the employ of Caldero, a dangerous anarchistic political faction, are planning an attack on the palace of the Chilean president. This attack will be blamed on Brazil in an effort to draw the two governments back into open conflict.'

Evans, our Number Two, expressed the concern of the group and asked Genotti's recommendation. 'It is my belief that the presidential staff must be warned, of course, so that protective measures may be taken. I also advocate, with the Brotherhood's approval, monies to be advanced to fund

overall aims of the Inner Circle - not least because such meddling in the power structures of sovereign nations possesses a vast and unperceived potential to seduce us away from our prime objectives.'

Tall and gaunt in his red robe with the golden cross over the heart, Pemberton looked around the table to ensure that each of us understood him precisely. 'Furthermore, gentlemen, it is increasingly evident that the world has embarked on a new and frightening course. And we cannot hope to remain uncorrupted by the increasingly corrosive powers beginning to assert their influence on the individual populations of this planet. South America is in ferment, Eastern Europe is rapidly sliding towards political anarchy and chaos, the clouds of war are darkening the skies in a dozen places.'

Citing example after undeniable example, our wise leader revealed to us not only the shape and form, but the vast extent of the wickedness about to fall upon an unsuspecting world. 'New threats call for new strategies. In short, gentlemen, we must adapt our methods if we are to survive. We must prepare for a new crusade.'

He went on to lay out for us the battle plan which would shape our future from that night. When he finished, one by one, we of the Sanctus Clarus, Guardians of the True Path, stood to renew our sacred vows, and pledge ourselves to this new crusade.

Our ancient enemy arms itself and its countless minions with new and ever more powerful weapons of mass destruction, so that night we soldiers of the Holy Light likewise armed ourselves for the coming conflict. In the undying spirit of the Cele De, we summoned the age-old courage of those dauntless Celtic crusaders who have gone before us and, shoulder-to-shoulder, took our places beside them on the battle line.



## *The Feast of St. George Anno Domini, 1132*

My Dearest Cairiona,

The worst has happened. As old Pedar would say, 'I am sore becalmed.'

My glorious dream is ashes and dust. It died in the killing heat of a nameless Syrian desert - along with eight thousand good men whose only crime was that of fealty to a stubborn, arrogant boy. I could weep for them, but for the fact that I, no less headstrong and haughty than that misguided boy, will shortly follow them to the grave.

The Saracens insist that I am the esteemed guest of the Caliph of Cairo. In truth, this is nothing more than a polite way of saying I am a captive in his house. They treat me well; indeed, since coming to the Holy Land, I have not known such courtesy, nor such elegance. Nevertheless, I cannot leave the palace until the caliph has seen me. It is for him to decide my fate. I know too well what the outcome will be.

Be that as it may, the great caliph is pursuing enemies in the south and is not expected to return to the city for a goodly while. Thus, I have time enough, and liberty, to set down what can be told about our great and noble purpose so you will know why your father risked all he loved best in

cut stone for the arches and thresholds, and were preparing the site for the arrival of the shipment which was due at any time. Your grandfather and Abbot Emlyn were standing at the table in the yard, studying the drawings which Brother Paulus had made for the building, when one of the monks came running from the fields to say that a boat was putting into the bay.

We quickly assembled a welcome party and went down to meet it. The ship was small - an island runner only - but it was not from Orkneyjar. Nor was it one of King Sigurd's fishing boats as some had assumed. The sailors had rowed the vessel into shallow water and were lifting down a bundle by the time we reached the cove. There were four boatmen in the water and three on deck, and they had a board between them which they were straining to lower. Obviously heavy, they were at pains to keep from dropping their cargo into the cove.

'They are traders from Eire,' suggested one of the women. 'I wonder what they have brought?'

'It looks like a heap of old rags,' said another.

The sailors muscled their burden over the rail, and waded ashore. As they drew nearer, I saw that the board was really a litter with a body strapped to it. They placed this bundle of cloth and bone before us on the strand, and stepped away - as if mightily glad to have done with an onerous task. I thought it must be the body of some poor seaman, one of their own perhaps, who had died at sea.

No sooner had they put it down, however, than this corpse began to shout and thrash about. 'Unbind me!' it cried, throwing its thin limbs around. 'Let me up!'

Those on the strand gave a start and jumped back. Murdo, however,

he and the next eldest, Skuli, had joined with Baldwin of Bouillon. In return for their loyal service they were given lands at Edessa where they had remained ever since.

When asked what happened to his brothers, Murdo would always say that they had died chasing their fortunes in the Holy Land. In all the years of my life till then, I had never known it to be otherwise. How not? There never came any word from them - never a letter, or even a greeting sent by way of a returning pilgrim - though opportunities must have been plentiful enough through the years. That is why Murdo said he had come back from the dead. In a way, he had; for no one had ever expected to see Torf-Einar again - either in this world *or* the next.

But now, here he was: to my eyes, little more than gristle and foul temper, but alive still. Of his great fortune, however, there was not so much as the pale glimmer of a silver spoon. The man I saw upon that crude litter had more in common with the sore-ridden beggars that huddle in the shelter of the monastery walls at Kirkjuvagr than a lord of Outremer. Even the lowest swineherd of such a lord would have presented a more impressive spectacle, I swear.

We untied him and thereby learned the reason he had been carried to shore on a plank: his legs were a mass of weeping sores. He could not walk. Indeed, he could barely sit upright. Still, he objected to being bound to his bed and did not cease his thrashing until the cords were loosed and taken away.

'After all these years, why return now?' asked Murdo, sitting back on his heels.

'I have come home to die,' replied Torf-Einar. 'Think you I could abide a

heaven have it. Two-faced demon spawn each and every one! A plague on the swarthy races, I say, and devil take them all.'

He became so agitated that he started thrashing around again. Murdo quickly said, 'Rest easy now, Torf. You are among kinfolk. Nothing will harm you here.'

We carried him to the dun, and tried our best to make the old man comfortable. I call him 'old man' for that was how he appeared to me. In truth, he was only a few years older than my father. The ravages of a life of constant warring and, I think, whoring, had carved the very flesh from him. His skin, blasted dark by the unrelenting Saracen sun, was as cracked and seamed as weathered leather; his faded hair was little more than a handful of grizzled wisps, his eyes were held in a permanent squint and his limbs were so scarred from wounds that they seemed like gnarled stumps. In all, the once-handsome lord looked like a shank bone that had been gnawed close and tossed onto the dungheap.

We brought him into the fortress and laid him in the hall. Murdo arranged for a pallet to be made up and placed in a corner near the hearth; a screen was erected around the pallet to give Torf a little peace from the comings and goings in the hall, but also to shield others from the ragged sight of him, to be sure.

The women scurried around and found food and drink for him, and better clothes - although the latter was not difficult, for the meanest dog mat would have been better than his own foul feathers. My lady mother would have preferred he had a bath before being allowed beneath her roof, but he would have none of it.

When the serving-maid came near with hot water and a little Scottish soap, he cursed her so cruelly she ran away in tears. He called upon

prepared for him, and heard what I took to be an animal whimpering. Creeping close, I looked on him to see that he had fallen asleep and one of the hounds was licking the lesions on his exposed leg. The pain made poor Torf moan in his sleep.

Jesu forgive me, I did not have it in me to stay by. I turned away and left him to his wretched dreams.

Over the next few days, I learned much of life in the East. Sick as he was, he did not mind talking to anyone who would listen to his fevered ramblings. Out of pity, I undertook to bring him his evening meal, to give my mother a respite from the tedium of the chore, and sat with him while he ate. Thus, I heard more than most about his life in the County of Edessa. In this way, I also discovered what had befallen poor Skuli.

True to his word, Lord Baldwin had given Torf and Skuli land in return for service. Nor was he ungenerous in his giving. The two brothers had taken adjoining lands so as to form one realm which they then shared between them. 'Our fortress at Khemil was crowned with a palace that had fifty rooms,' he boasted one night as I fed him his pork broth and black bread. His teeth were rotten and pained him, so I had to break the bread into the broth to soften it, and then feed it to him in gobbets he could gum awhile and swallow. 'Fifty rooms, you hear?'

'That is a great many rooms,' I allowed. He was obviously ill and somewhat addled in his thoughts.

'We had sixty-eight menservants and forty serving-maids. Our treasure house had a door as thick as a man's trunk and bound in iron - it took two men just to pull it open. The room itself was big as a granary and hollowed out of solid stone.' He mumbled in his bread for a moment, and then

grandfather Murdo's hall, and filled with such plunder of silver and gold that the devil himself must squirm with envy at such an overabundance of wealth.

That night, however, I believed not a word of his bragging. I fed him his bread, and made small comments when they were required. Mostly, I just sat by his side and listened, trying to keep my eyes from his ravaged and wasted body.

'There was an orchard on our lands - pear trees by the hundreds -and three great olive groves, and one of figs. Aside from the principal fortress at Khemil, we owned the right to rule the two small villages and market within the borders of our realm. Also, since the road from Edessa to Aleppo ran through the southern portion of our lands, we were granted rights to collect the toll. In all, it was a fine place.

'We ruled as kings that first year. Jerusalem had fallen and we shared in the plunder. At Edessa, Count Baldwin was amassing great power, and even more wealth. He made us vassal lords - Skuli and I were Lords of Edessa under Baldwin - along with a score or more just like us. All that first year, we never lifted a blade, nor saddled a horse save to ride to the hunt. We ate the best food, and drank the best wine, and contented ourselves with the improving of our realm.

'Then Skuli died. Fever took him. Mark me, the deserts of the East are breeding grounds for disease and pestilence of all kinds. He lingered six days and gave out on the seventh. The day I buried Skuli - that same day, mind - word came to Edessa that Godfrey was dead. The fever had claimed him, too. Or maybe it was poison ...'

He fell silent, wandering in his thoughts. To lead him gently back, I asked,

the Crusade. Abbot Elnyth, however, talked about it all the time. I remember sitting at his feet while he told of their adventures in the Holy Land. That good monk could tell a tale, as you well know, and I never tired of listening to anything he would say. Thus, I knew a great deal about Lord Godfrey, Defender of the Holy Sepulchre, and his immeasurable folly.

That night, however, I was more interested in what Torf might know, and did not care to reveal my own thoughts, so I said, 'Godfrey was Baldwin's brother, then.'

'He was, and a more courageous man I never met. A very lion on the battlefield; no one could stand against him. Yet, when he was not slaying the infidel, he was on his knees in prayer. For all he was a holy man.' Torf paused, as if remembering the greatness of the man. Then he added, 'Godfrey was an ass.'

After what he'd said, this assessment surprised me. 'Why?' I asked.

Torf gummed some more bread, and then motioned for the bowl; he drained the bowl noisily, put it aside, and lay back. 'Why?' He fixed me with his mocking gaze. 'I suppose you are one of those who think Godfrey a saint now.'

'I think nothing of the kind,' I assured him.

'He was a good enough man, maybe, but he was no saint,' Torf-Einar declared sourly. 'The devil take me, I never saw a man make so many bone-headed mistakes. One after another, and just that quick - as if he feared he could not make them fast enough. Godfrey might have been a sturdy soldier, but he had no brain for kingcraft. He proved that with the Iron Lance.'

'No,' I answered, 'my father never told me that.'

'He did! By Christ, I swear he did,' Torf chortled malevolently. 'Only Godfrey could have thrown away something so priceless. The stupid fool. It was his first act as ruler of Jerusalem, too. He got nothing in return for it either, I can tell you.'

Torf then proceeded to tell me how, moments after accepting the throne of Jerusalem, Godfrey had been deceived by the imperial envoy into agreeing to give up the Holy Lance, which the crusaders had discovered in Antioch, and with which the crusaders had conquered the odious Muhammedans. In order to escape the ignominy of surrendering Christendom's most valued possession, Jerusalem's new lord had hit upon the plan to send the sacred relic to Pope Urban for safekeeping.

'It was either that or fight the emperor,' allowed Torf grudgingly, 'and we were no match for the imperial troops. We would have been cut down to a man. It would have been a slaughter. No one crosses blades with the Immortals and lives to tell the tale.'

It seemed to me that Godfrey had been placed in an extremely tight predicament by the Western Lords, and I said so. 'Pah!' spat Torf. 'The Greeks are cunning fiends, and deception is mother's milk to them. Godfrey should have known that he could never outwit a wily Greek with trickery.'

'His plan seemed simple enough to me,' I told him. 'There was little enough trickery in it that I can see. Where did he go wrong?'

'He sent it to Jaffa with only a handful of knights as escort, and the Seljuqs ambushed them. If he'd waited a few days, he could have sent the relic with a proper army - most of the troops were leaving the Holy Land soon -

Torf called me boy, even though I had a wife and child of my own. I suppose I seemed very young to him; or, perhaps, very far beneath his regard. I told him I'd try to keep quiet so he could get on with his tale.

'It would be a mercy,' he grumbled testily. 'I said the Seljuqs took the Holy Lance, and if it was up to them, they'd have it to this day.'

But Bohemond suspected Godfrey would try some idiot trick, and secretly arranged to follow the relic. When Godfrey's knights left Jerusalem, the Count of Antioch got word of it and gave chase.'

Prince Bohemond of Taranto knew about the lance, too, of course. It was Bohemond who had taken King Magnus into his service to provide warriors for the prince's depleted army. Owing to this friendship, King Magnus had prospered greatly. It was from Magnus that we had our lands in Caithness.

Torf was not unaware of this. He said, 'Godfrey and Baldwin had no love for Bohemond, nor for his vassal Magnus. Still,' he looked around at the well-ordered, expansive hall, 'I can see the king has been good to you. A man must make what friends he can, hey?'

'I suppose.'

'You *suppose*? He laughed at me. 'I speak the truth, and you know it. In this world, a man must get whatever he can from the chances he's given. You make your bargains and hope for the best. If I had been in Murdo's place, I might have done the same. I bear your father no ill in the matter.'

'I am certain he will leap with joy to hear it,' I muttered.

That was the wrong thing to say, for he swore an oath and told me he was sick of looking at me. I left him in a foul temper, and went to bed that



Torf-Einar had indeed come home to die. It soon became apparent that whatever health was left to him, he had spent it on the journey. Despite our care of him, he did not improve. Each day saw a diminution of his swiftly eroding strength.

I fed him the next night in silence. Owing to my discourtesy of the previous evening, he refused to speak to me and I feared he would die before I found out any more about what he knew of the Iron Lance. I spoke to my father about this, but Murdo remained uninterested. He advised me to leave it be. 'It is just stories,' he remarked sourly. 'No doubt he knows a great many such traveller's tales.'

When I insisted that there must be more to it than that, he grew angry and snapped, 'It is all lies and dangerous nonsense, Duncan, God knows. Leave well enough alone.'

Well, how could I? The next evening I found Torf in a better humour, so I said, 'You said Godfrey was a fool for losing the Holy Lance. If he was ambushed by the Turks, I cannot see what he could have done about it.'

'And I suppose you know all about such things now,' he sneered. 'Were you there?' He puffed out his cheeks in derision. 'Had it not been for Bohemond, the thieving Turks would have made off with the prize forever.'

Torf frowned at me, and I thought he would not answer. After a moment, he said, 'At least he got himself something for his trouble. In return for the lance, he obtained the support of the emperor - and that was worth the cost of the relic many times over, I can tell you.'

This seemed odd to me. I could not understand why he should hold Godfrey to blame, yet absolve Bohemond whose actions appeared in every way just as suspect, if not more so. Realizing that I would only make him angry again, I refrained from asking any further questions. Still, I turned the matter over in my mind that night, and determined to ask Abbot Emlyn about it the next day.

I found the good abbot at the new church the following morning, and succeeded in arousing his interest with a few well-judged questions. Glancing up from the drawings before him, he said, 'Who have you been talking to, my friend?'

'I am giving Torf-Einar his meals in the evening,' I began.

'And he has told you these tales?'

'Aye, some of them.'

The priest wrinkled his brow and pursed his lips. 'Well, perhaps he knows a little about it.'

Something in Emlyn's tone gave the lie to his words. 'But you do not believe him,' I observed.

'It is not for me to say,' the abbot answered evasively. Now, I had never known the good priest to give me, or anyone else, cause to doubt him, but his answer seemed strange, and I suspected he knew much more than he was telling.

determined, for I could plainly see that there was more to the tale than they were telling. I got no more out of Abbot Emlyn that day, however.

Indeed, I might never have got to the heart of the mystery if Torf had died before speaking of the Black Rood.

That very night, his strength failed him. He grew fevered and fell into the sleep of death. Murdo summoned some of the monks from Saint Andrew's Abbey to come and do what they could for the old man, and Emlyn came, too, along with a monk named Padraig.

As it happens, Padraig is Emlyn's nephew - the son of his only sister - a thoughtful, well-meaning monk, despite the fact that he grew up in Eire. Our good abb has children of his own, of course: two daughters - one of whom lives with her husband's kinfolk south of Caithness, near Inbhir Ness. The other, Niniane, is a priest herself, as gentle and wise as her father, and who, through no fault of her own, has the very great misfortune to be married to my brother, Eirik.

Now then, it is well known that the Cele De are wonderfully wise in all things touching the healing arts. They are adept at preparing medicines of surpassing potency and virtue. Brother Padraig set to work at the hearth and in a short while had brewed an elixir which he spooned into the dying man's mouth. This he repeated at intervals through the night, and by morning - wonder of wonders - Torf-Einar was awake once more.

He was still very weak, and it was clear he would not recover. But he was resting much easier now, and the fire had left his eyes. He seemed |more at peace as I greeted him. I asked him if there was anything he would like that I could get for him.

'Nay,' he said, his voice hollow and rough, 'unless you can get me a piece

Never heard of the True Cross.' He regarded me lazily.

'Of course I have heard of *that*,' I told him. 'Everyone has heard of that.'

'One and the same, boy, one and the same. The Black Rood is just another name for the True Cross.'

This made no sense to me. 'If that is so, why is it called black?' I asked, suspicious of his explanation. 'And why is it in so many pieces?'

Torf merely smiled, and wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. 'If I am to tell you that,' he replied, 'I must have a drop to wet my throat.'

Turning to Brother Pdraig, who had just entered the hall and was approaching the sick man's pallet, I said, 'He is asking for ale. May I give him some?'

'A little ale might do him some good,' replied the monk. 'At least,' he shrugged, 'it will do him no harm.'

While the cleric set about making up some more of his elixir, I went to the kitchen to fetch the ale, returning with a stoup and bowl. Placing the stoup on the floor, I dipped out a bowlful, and gave it to Torf, who guzzled it down greedily. He drank another before he was ready to commence his explanation.

'So,' he said, sinking back onto his pallet, 'why is the rood called black, you ask? And I say because it *is* black - old and black, it is.'

'And why is it in so many pieces?'

'Because Baldwin had it divided up,' replied Torf with a dry chuckle.

I was about to ask him why this Baldwin should have done such a thing, but Abbot Emlyn entered the hall just then to see how the sick man had

pleased, and I am ready to pay the ferryman what is owed. Get you gone, priest, I won't be shriven.'

'As you say,' allowed Emlyn, 'but know that I will remain near and I will do whatever may be done to ease your passing.'

Torf frowned, and I thought he might send Emlyn away with a curse, so I spoke up quickly, saying, 'My uncle was just about to tell me how the True Cross was cut into pieces.'

'Is this so?' wondered Emlyn.

'Indeed so,' answered Torf.

'Then what I have heard is true;' said the abbot, 'the Holy Cross of Christ has been found.'

'Aye, they found it,' answered Torf, 'and I was there.' I noticed the light come up in his eyes and he seemed to rise to his tale.

'Extraordinary!' murmured Emlyn softly.

'Godfrey it was who found the cross - in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre,' Torf told us. 'He had gone with his chaplain and some priests to pray. It was after the western lords had begun returning home, leaving only Godfrey, Baldwin, and Bohemond in the Holy Land to defend Jerusalem. Well, Bohemond had sailed for Constantinople with the emperor's envoy, bearing the Holy Lance into Greek captivity. Baldwin was preparing to return to Edessa, and we were all eager to go with him, for he had said he would begin apportioning the land he had promised his noblemen.'

'Some of this I know,' mused Emlyn, nodding to himself.

had a vision. I cannot say how it happened, but the way I heard it was that a man in white appeared to him and showed him a curtain. This White Priest told the monk to pull aside the curtain and take up what he found there. When the priest awoke, however, the curtain was gone and he was staring at a white-washed wall only.

'No doubt it would have ended there, except Godfrey came to hear of it, and said, "A wall is sometimes called a curtain." So, he orders the wall to be taken down, and behold! There is the True Cross.'

'God be praised,' gasped Emlyn, clasping his hands reverently.

'It seems,' continued Torf, ignoring the abbot's outburst, 'that when the Saracens first captured the city, those churches they did not destroy, they turned into mosqs. In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, they found the True Cross hanging above the altar, but even those heathen devils did not dare lay a hand on it, so they walled it up. They mixed a thick mortar and covered over the sacred relic, hiding it from view. Godfrey orders the mortar to be pulled down, and there it is: the True Cross is found. The king declares it to be a sign of God's good pleasure, and orders everyone to kneel before the holy relic and pray for victory in the coming battle.

'This is difficult to do for the church is very small, and there are so many soldiers. So, he orders the cross to be brought out to us, and we all kneel down before it. Skuli and I find ourselves near the front ranks and we see the cross as the priests walk by; two priests, led by Godfrey's chaplain, hold it between them, and two more walk behind carrying censers of burning incense.

'I look up as it passes by, and I see what looks to be a long piece of rough timber, slightly bowed along its length. It is perhaps half a rod long, and

'good pleasure in the restoring of his Holy City. As we have kept faith with God, so God has kept faith with us. The enemies of Christ are even now marching against us,' cries Godfrey, his voice shaking with righteous rage. 'I say this cross - this Black Rood - shall go before us into battle. From this day forth, it shall be the emblem of Jerusalem's defenders, so that those who raise sword against us shall know that Christ himself leads his holy army to victory against the enemies of our faith.'

'The monks begin chanting: "Rejoice, O nations, with God's people! For He will avenge the blood of his servants; He will take vengeance on his enemies, and make atonement for his land." And that is how it began ...' So saying, Torf slumped back, exhausted by the effort.

I stared at him in amazement that he should recall so much of what happened that day long ago. Brother Padraig, who had crept near to hear the tale, motioned to me to fill the bowl again. I poured the ale, and held the bowl to the sick man's lips. Torf drank and revived somewhat.

'Rest now,' suggested Emlyn. 'We will talk again when you are feeling better.'

A bitter smile twisted Torf-Einar's lips. 'I will never feel better than I do now,' he whispered. 'Anyway, there is little more to say. We rode out from Jerusalem the next day, and met the Arabs on the road from Ascalon two days later. They were not expecting us to attack, and had not yet formed a proper invasion force. Two knights carried the cross between them, and Godfrey led the charge. We fell upon al-Afdal's confused army and scattered them to the winds. We routed the infidel, and sent them flying back to their ships.'

Torf drank some more, and pushed the bowl away. 'That was the first time the Black Rood went before us into battle, but it was not the last.' He

Torf gave the ghost of a nod. 'What else could he do? I swear that man never looked further ahead than the length of his own two feet. With everyone clamouring for a piece of the relic, Godfrey commanded that it should be cut in half.'

'The priests let him do this?' wondered Emlyn in dismay.

'Aye, the priests helped him do it,' said Torf, his voice growing thin and watery. 'The Patriarch of Jerusalem objected, but Godfrey convinced him in the end.'

'You said they cut it into *four* parts,' I pointed out, remembering what he had told me before.

This brought a flicker of irritation from Torf, who opened an eye and said, 'They sent one half to the church at Antioch to replace the Iron Lance which had been taken by the emperor. This was to be used by the armies in the north. The second half was kept in Jerusalem to be used in southern battles.'

'Over the years those two pieces became four,' surmised the abbot. 'It is not difficult to see how this could happen.'

'You said that only two remain,' I pointed out. 'What happened to the others?'

Torf sighed heavily. The long talk was taxing his failing strength. 'One piece was given to the emperor, and the other two have fallen into the hands of the heathen infidel.' He sighed again, his voice growing softer. 'I cannot say more.'

After awhile he drifted away. I thought he had died, but Brother Padraig

TORI'S arrival also awakened questions in my mind. Why did my father regard his brother's appearance with such cool dispassion? I had never known Murdo to be a callous, unfeeling man. Yet, he showed his dying brother scant consideration, or compassion - and not so much as a crumb of curiosity about his life in the East. What had passed between the two of them all those years ago?

Was it fear I heard in his voice when I asked about the Iron Lance? Or, was it something else?

After a brief word with Padraig, Abbot Emlyn rose to leave the hall, and I followed him out into the yard, determined to get some answers to my questions.

'I think your uncle will soon be standing before the Throne of Heaven,' Emlyn said when I caught up with him in the yard. 'I do not expect him to last the night. I should tell your father. He will want to know.'

'It seems to me,' I ventured, 'that my father knows all he wants to of Torf-Einar.'

The little round abbot regarded me with his quick eyes. 'You think he does not care for his brother,' he replied. 'But you are wrong in that, young Duncan. Murdo cares very much.'

'He hides it well, then,' I concluded sourly.

Emlyn stopped in his tracks and faced me. 'There is more to this than you know. Murdo has his reasons for feeling and behaving the way he does. Nor will I tell him how he should feel, or how he should act in this matter.'

The force with which this was said surprised me; it took Emlyn aback, too, I think, for he quickly added in a softer tone: 'The wounds were deep at the time. I think Torf's return has reopened them, and they are painful indeed.'

Accepting his appraisal, I suggested, 'Then maybe it is time those old wounds were healed once and for all. Maybe that is why Torf has come home.'

and see if Rhona was busy, thinking maybe she would like to ride with me down to the sandy cove below the cliffs south of the bay. Rhona and I had been married for seven years, and in that time had produced three children — two boys, and a girl.

Sadly, both boys died in the summer of their first year. Only you, Gait, the smallest and scrawniest infant I ever saw, survived to see your second year. It seems so long ago now, but that day the sun was high and the weather dry, and I still had it in mind to have a son one day. It seemed to me a splendid time to make a bairn, or at least to try.

I found Rhona sitting on a stool outside the storehouse, peeling the outer skins from a bunch of onions. 'To make the dye for Cairtriona's new gown,' she announced. Then, seeing my expression, Rhona laughed, and said, 'Did you think I would make you eat them for your supper?'

'If you cooked them, I would eat them,' I replied.

'Oh, you would ...' she began. Taking the bowl from her lap, I raised her to her feet. 'And what is this you're about?'

'It is a fine day, my love. Come out with me.'

'I thought you had work to do at the church.'

'The stone has not arrived yet, and father can look after the builders. I thought we might ride down to the cove.'

She stepped closer, holding her head to one side. 'And you think I have nothing better to do than go flitting off with you all day?' I saw the hidden smile playing at her lips. 'It is well other people have plenty to do since the young lord of this manor is an idle scapegrace.'

'Well,' I sniffed, 'if you do not wish to go, I suppose I could ask one of the

hands on my chest and pushing me gently away.

'Then come away with me.' I slipped my hands around her slim waist and untied the apron covering her pale green gown. 'The day is beautiful, and so are you. Let us take our pleasure while we may.'

'Someone has been listening to the Maysingers,' she said, drawing the apron over her head. 'Very well, I will go with you, Duncan Murdosson.' She bent and picked up the bowl of onion husks. 'But I must put these away first.'

'I will saddle the horses and meet you at the gate,' I said, stealing another kiss and hurrying away.

The horses were quickly readied and we were soon racing over the gorse- and bracken-covered hills to the south of the estate. The lands of my father's realm are great in extent, but the soil is thin and rocky in most places; also, our vassals are not so numerous as other estates, which means that we must all work the harder to survive. That said, there are good fields and grazing land to the west, and fine fishing in the wide bay between the high, sheltering headlands.

Banvard has prospered us well enough, and while we may not have possessed the ready wealth of more favoured realms, we nevertheless raised enough in grain and cattle to feed ourselves and our vassals, with plenty left over for gainful trade. From what my mother had told me about her youth in Orkneyjar, it seemed to me that growing up in Caithness was much the same. And, like my father, life in the wild, empty hills suited me.

Not that we had forsaken Orkney forever. Heaven forbid it! We regularly traded at Kirkjuvagr, and Murdo often took part in the councils there.

flower-sweet scent of green growing things, and the blood ran strong in me.

We reached the cove, and I tethered the horses at the clifftop where they could get a little grass. Rhona and I climbed down onto the sandy beach where we settled in a sun-warmed hollow in the long sea grass. Rhona untied the bundle she had brought with her and produced a loaf of bread, a lump of cheese, and an apple - all of which I cut up with my knife and shared out between us. After our little meal, we lay back in the hollow and enjoyed the warmth of the sand and sun, and the sound of the lazy waves on the shore. Rhona came readily into my embrace and we abandoned ourselves to our loving, and afterward dozed in one another's arms.

I awoke with my head upon my wife's breast, and the sun lowering in the west. The tide was lapping around the base of the dune; the shadow of the cliffs had reached our once-sunny hollow, and the air was growing cool. I lifted my head and kissed my lady, and she awoke with a shiver. 'We should be getting back,' I suggested, 'before they send the hounds to find us.'

'One more kiss, my love,' said Rhona, pulling me close again.

We dressed quickly, returned to the horses, and rode slowly back to the dun, enjoying the fiery extravagance of a setting sun which set the heavens ablaze with scarlet, purple, and gold.

Even before reaching the road leading up to the fortress, I knew something was amiss.

Lashing our mounts to speed, we hastened up the road, through the open gates and into the empty yard. I dismounted and helped Rhona from her saddle; letting the reins dangle, we started for the hall, and were met by

from his sleep. I thought to rouse him at sunset to give him a drink of the potion, but his spirit had flown.'

We went in to find a veritable crowd around the dead man's bed - serving-men and maids mostly, a few vassals, and half a dozen monks in attendance with Emlyn. They were standing with their heads bowed, hands folded, as the good abbot softly intoned the prayers for the soul of the newly departed. Rhona and I came to stand behind the monks, and listened until Emlyn concluded his prayer, whereupon the brothers arranged themselves in order around the dead man's bed, raised it, and began carrying it from the hall.

Moving to my father's side, I said, 'I am sorry he's gone. I cannot help feeling we should have done more for him.'

Murdo shook his head. 'He wanted nothing from us in his life, but to be allowed to die in peace. As he asked, so he was given.' He appeared about to say more, but turned away abruptly, following the monks out into the yard.

My mother laid her hand on my sleeve as she passed by. 'There is an end to all things,' she whispered, giving my arm a comforting squeeze. 'Let this also end.'

I wondered at her words, and would have asked her what she meant, but she moved on quickly, and Rhona came up beside me. 'It is sad,' she sighed.

'Only a few days ago, no one cared whether he was alive or dead,' I reminded her. 'Nothing much has changed.'

Rhona looked sideways at me. 'But *everything* has changed,' she said.

The Cele De, however, see in death a friend whom the All Wise has entrusted with delivering his children from the pain and travail of mortal existence into the eternal paradise of his gracious kingdom. When bodies and hearts become too sick or broken to go on, Brother Death comes to lead the suffering spirit away to its rightful home. Accordingly, this journey is accompanied with laments and dirges for those left behind, but with songs of praise and happiness also for the one who has gone ahead.

While the body was being prepared for burial, Murdo determined that a grave should be dug in the corner of the churchyard. Although, as he said, Torf-Einar had not been one of the Lord's better sheep, he was still a member of the flock. I offered to help with this chore, but my father would not have it any other way but that he should dig the grave himself.

At dusk, the corpse was brought out and borne to the gravesite in the churchyard where most of the settlement's inhabitants had gathered. The sun had set with a fine and radiant brilliance, touching the clouds with fire, and setting the sky alight. In the golden twilight, the linen grave clothes gleamed like rarest samite, and the faces of both monks and mourners glowed. We sang a lament for a departed warrior, and then Abbot Emlyn led us in a Psalm; he said a prayer, following which he invited those closest to the deceased to toss a handful of earth into the grave. Murdo stepped forwards, picked up a fistful of dirt, and let it fall; and I followed his example. I suppose, despite our brief acquaintance, I felt some innate kinship with Torf-Einar. For all his profligate ways, he was still part of the clan, and we did for him what we would do for any family member.

We sang a Psalm while the monks undertook to shovel the dirt into the grave. The deep hole filled up quickly, and a single flat stone with his

love and admiration for his first-born son. I could not help noticing, however, that he breathed not a word of their sojourn in the Holy Land. By that I knew the old wound had been reopened in my father's heart.

That night, Rhona and I clung to one another in our bed, exulting in our loving, and celebrating the life running strong in us.

Next day, the mundane chores of the settlement resumed. The awaited ship arrived with its cargo of cut stone, and we began the sweaty task of unloading the ship and dragging the heavy blocks up to the site of the new church. Murdo put as many men to the chore as could be spared from other duties, but it was hard labour still. By day's end we were well exhausted each and every one, and Torf's death and funeral were of no more account than the ripple of a pebble tossed into the sea.

As the weeks passed, however, I found myself thinking about some small thing or other Torf had told me about the Holy Land. Once, I asked Murdo for further explanation, but he just told me that whatever Torf had said was best forgotten. 'The ramblings of a sick man,' he declared flatly. 'He is dead and that is that. I will not speak of it again.'

Of course, this only served to increase my appetite the more. All through the rest of the summer and the harvest season, I fairly itched for some word of the Great Pilgrimage and its many battles, but little enough came my way. No one on the estate or any of the other settlements had taken the cross, or made the journey - save Abbot Emlyn and Murdo. When I asked the good abbot what happened in the Holy Land to make my father so close-mouthed on the subject, he replied, 'One day, perhaps, he will feel like talking about it. No doubt it is for the best.'

Towards the end of harvest that year, Rhona told me that our child-making

large and heavy - a sure sign that a man-child would be born in the spring. At winter's end, we awaited the appointed time eagerly. One morning, we awakened to the sound of the snow melting from the roof into puddles below the deep, overhanging eaves. I felt Rhona stir beside me and turned to find her watching me. 'Did you sleep well, my heart?' I asked.

'How am I to sleep?' she replied. 'This son of yours gives me no rest at all. He kicks and squirms the whole night through.'

Placing a hand to the bulging dome of her round stomach, I said, 'It is only because he is eager to come out and meet his family.'

'It is because he is his stubborn father's son,' she replied sweetly, stroking my hair with her fingertips.

Little Cait awakened and scampered into bed with us. She snuggled down between us and proceeded to wave her feet in the air while singing a song about a fish. It was a fine and happy moment with my best beloved and I revelled in it. Looking back now, I cherish it all the more - knowing the dark, unendurable days which lay ahead.

The birth pangs came on her early the next morning, but Rhona continued with her ordinary chores until midday when the pains grew severe. I ran to alert my lady mother, who came with one of the older women of the settlement who often served as midwife, and one of her serving-maids to help. They took matters in hand, and Ragna sent me off to the church to help Murdo with the building, promising to fetch me as soon as the birth drew near.

I was still there when Ingrid, the serving-maid, came running a short while later. 'Lord Duncan, you must hurry.'

'What,' I said, climbing down from the scaffolding, 'is my son born already?'

'My lady said you were to come as fast as you can,' she replied, wringing her hands in her apron.

I took her by the shoulders to steady her. 'Tell me what has happened.'

'It is your lady wife,' she said. 'Oh, please, come now. Hurry.'

My father heard the commotion below and called down to know what was happening. I explained quickly, and he sent me off, saying he would find Abbot Emlyn and follow as soon as he could.

'B-But -,' I stammered. 'But she will be well. And the child - we were going to -'

'There will be time to speak later,' she said, leading me towards the bed. 'Pluck up your courage, my son, and go to your wife.'

I stepped to the side of the bed and Rhona, her face grey-white with the pallor of death, opened her eyes and smiled weakly. I stared in disbelief. Only a short while ago that same lovely face had been glowing with love and life. How was it possible that such a change could occur so swiftly?

She lifted a finger and motioned me closer. I bent to place my ear near her lips. 'So sorry . . . my soul,' she said, her voice the merest breath of a whisper. 'I tried to get a son for you ...'

'Shh,' I whispered, trying to soothe. 'Rest now. We will talk about it later.'

'I love you,' she said, her lips barely moving. 'Kiss me.'

I pressed my lips to hers - they were dry as husks, and cold.

'Farewell, my heart...,' she sighed.

A tremor passed through her body. I took her hand and clasped it tight. Her breath went out in a long, slow exhalation, and she lay still.

'Farewell,' I said, my throat closing on the word as the tears came. I raised her hand to my lips and held it there. Then I took her in my arms for the last time. I bent my head and put my face next to hers, and held her close - until I felt my mother's hands on my shoulders, drawing me gently away. I allowed myself to be gathered into my mother's embrace, and we stood for a time, motionless, while she spoke words of comfort and courage to me.

Abbot Emlyn and my father arrived then. The abbot stepped into the room,

hands over the stiff-warm body, he began chanting - not in Latin, or Greek, but in the ancient and honorable tongue of the Celts - asking the Swift Sure Hand to enfold the soul of my best beloved, and guide her swiftly to her eternal home. Then he folded Rhona's hands over her breast, straightened her limbs, and told the serving-women to find Rhona's finest clothes.

To me, he said, 'God has called his faithful daughter to join him in paradise. Tonight we will sing a lament for the empty place she leaves behind. Tomorrow we will celebrate her life and rejoice in her receiving her justly-earned reward. Look your last upon her, dear friend, and I will return in a little while to take the body away and prepare it for burial.'

I looked at him in dismay. So soon? I thought. Why does it have to be so soon? But I said nothing, merely nodding my assent instead.

Emlyn left, and I turned once more to the bed. Already she seemed more at ease; the pinched tightness of her features had relaxed, and she appeared to be sleeping peacefully. For a fleeting instant my heart leapt up with joy. I felt like shouting, 'See! It has all been a dreadful mistake! She lives! Rhona is with us still.'

But no. Released from the pains of death, her body was taking on something of its natural calm. Stooping over her, I brushed the damp strands of hair from her face and kissed her forehead. 'Go with God, my soul,' I said, straightening. It was then that I saw the small still form beside her; wrapped in swaddling clothes, looking like little more than a lump in the bed, was the tiny body of my son. Dark-haired, his small face clenched like a fist against a world he would never know, he lay beside his mother.

I beheld the body, and felt my own dear mother beside me. 'The little one did not draw breath,' she told me. 'There was nothing to be done.'

No, I replied harshly. Go back and tell them to eat without me.

'Master Duncan,' he said gently, so mild and compassionate in his reproof I had not the heart to refuse him again, and so allowed myself to be led back to the hall. Upon entering, I glanced around quickly and Niniane was the first person I happened to see. She stepped swiftly towards me and folded me into her arms. 'Dear, dear, Duncan,' she sighed. 'I am so sorry ... so very sorry.'

I allowed myself to be consoled for a moment, and then asked, 'How is it you are here?'

'I was on my way to the abbey. I arrived in time to help prepare the - her body.'

Lost in my grief, I had not been aware of the comings or goings around me. 'Is Eirik with you?'

She shook her head. 'There was some trouble in Inbhir Ness. The son of a visiting nobleman accidentally killed a local chieftain's son. The clan has sworn a blood oath and the unlucky boy has taken sanctuary at the monastery. Eirik thought it best to stay on until matters were resolved.'

Niniane regarded me sadly. 'Rhona was a good friend to me, and I will try to be as good a friend to you. I will help in any way I can.'

I thanked her kindly, and escorted her to the table where the food was being served. They had saved a place for me at the board beside my mother, who was holding little Gait in her lap. You, dear heart, unaware of the sombre proceedings, held out your hands to me, and wanted me to play with you. But I could not. I merely sat and gazed glumly at your happy little face, deaf to your childish pleadings.

A more wretched man there never was than myself, that night.

When at last everyone departed for their beds, I left the hall, too; I thrashed around in my empty bed for a time, and at last, unable to rest, I rose and walked the clifftops above the dark, restless sea until morning.

Following the death service in the old wooden church, we buried Rhona in the new churchyard. She would have approved of her final resting place, I think, as there was a plum thicket growing nearby, and she was always fond of plums. I was the last to leave the yard. I knelt a long time by that mound of stones gathered from the beach, wondering how I could go on living when my light, my life, lay under that heap of earth and rock.

The next days brought no solace. I went about my various chores with dull efficiency, a man bereft of all hope and life, seeing no good thing, hearing no kindly word, taking joy in nothing around me. At night, I roamed the clifftops.

My wretched condition persisted until I could bear it no more. One night, with the moon shining full in the yard, I rose and went out. My feet found the familiar path leading down to the shore. Heartsick, weary with grief, I walked down onto the beach, and out into the sea.

God help me, I could endure the gnawing ache no longer. I felt the cold water surge around my knees, but I kept walking. If I had any thought at all it was that the pain would soon be over and I would be with my beloved forever.

I felt the water rising around me - to my thighs, and then my waist - yet still I walked on, and would have gone on walking. But, as the black water swirled around my chest, I heard a voice call out to me from the shore:

swell of the waves tagged at me, raising me on my feet. He shouted after me again, and then I heard another voice – a child's voice, frightened, crying. Casting a backward glance over my shoulder, I saw him striding after me, holding Caitriona in his arms. So unexpected was the sight of her, I stopped and turned around.

'What do you mean by this?' I shouted. 'Get her away from here.'

He waded nearer and, dearest Gait, your tiny face was twisted in fear and your hands were reaching out to me to help you, to save you - from the water, and the night, and the strangeness of what was happening.

'Come now,' Padraig called. 'Would you leave without saying farewell to your daughter? Better still, why not take her with you?' Stretching his arms, he held the child out to me.

'Take her back to shore, you fool!' I shouted angrily.

He merely shook his head.

I glared at him. 'Have you gone mad?'

'Here,' he said, holding her out to me again. Gait began to shriek as the cold water splashed around her legs. 'Take her now and make an end of it. It will be a kindness.'

'You *are* mad,' I growled.

'Perhaps,' he allowed. 'Still, it would be better, I think, to have died in the arms of your loving father than to lose both parents before you are old enough to remember either of them. As you mean to end your life, so be it. You might as well end her life, too.'

Enraged, I strode forwards and snatched the dear babe from his arms. 'Stupid priest! You know nothing about children.'

women from the settlement coming to bring me and little Caitriona some food. They gave me the baskets and departed, saying how they would be glad to help look after the bairn whenever I needed them.

The women went their way then, but all day long I kept thinking someone would mention the previous night's incident. No one did.

After vespers that evening, I saw Pdraig leaving the chapel and went to thank him for not breathing a word to anyone about my shameful behaviour of the night before. He looked at me curiously. 'Behaviour? What shameful behaviour could that be?' he said.

'You know,' I muttered, irritated that he would make me speak it out so bluntly. 'I went walking down by the sea.'

'How very strange,' he said mildly, his face betraying no hint of guile. 'I too went walking in my sleep last night. Now, try as I might, I can remember very little about it.' Leaning close, he said, 'Between ourselves, I would consider it a kindness if you would not tell the abbot. We are not supposed to leave the monastery after prayers.'

'Well,' I told him, 'you can trust me to keep your secret. Only see that it does not happen again.'

'Oh, I have repented of it a hundred times already.' He gave me a look of shrewd appraisal. 'I do not think I will have occasion to sleepwalk again.'

That concluded the matter and nothing else was ever said, either by Pdraig or anyone else. Let me tell you, I, also, have repented of that night a hundred times since then. Nevertheless, God is good; out of that disgraceful incident he brought a friendship which is beyond all price. For, from that night Pdraig became my dearest companion and spiritual

graceful, happy child that is my daughter, and for having been allowed to dare and do much for the advancement of my saviour's Invisible Kingdom.

Ah, well, make of it what you will. Whatever the workings of the mysterious inner heart, I began to contemplate some mighty work of atonement that I might do. As I pondered on what form this great deed might take, I found release from the shock and sorrow of my Rhona's sad death. My zeal and appetite for life returned and, along with it, a fresh desire for the things of the spirit.

Padraig noticed my newfound devotion. One night after vespers while we talked together over a bowl of ale, he said, 'Beware, Duncan, you will be wanting to become a priest next.'

'What would be wrong with that?' I replied, defiance hardening my voice. 'Do you think it above me? My brother is a priest, remember. I know well enough what would be required. I could -'

'I surrender!' He held up his hands. 'I spoke in jest. You would make a fine priest, of that I have no doubt.'

Despite his words, I heard the reservation in his tone. 'And yet?'

He put out his lip, and regarded me thoughtfully, but made no reply.

'Come now, what is in your mind?'

'Far be it from me to discourage anyone from seeking the priesthood ...'

'And yet you would discourage me - hey? Well, that is a fine thing.'

'You misunderstand,' he said quickly. 'There are many priests among the Cele De, but few noblemen. Our Lord has blessed you richly, Duncan. If you would do something to honour him, let it be in the manner whereby he

and soon I could think of nothing else. Could it be, I wondered, that I, too, was being called to join the pilgrim way?

Some few nights later, I happened to mention my musings to my father. We were at table for our evening meal; as always in Murdo's hall, there were a number of vassals and friends gathered around the board. Some of the stonemasons working on the new church had been invited to sup with us that night, so the ale and conversation flowed liberally.

Talk turned to Torf-Einar's return, and how he had fared in the Holy Land. Someone said he had heard that Torf left an enormous fortune in the East, and others began speculating on how much this unknown wealth could be, and whether it was in gold or silver. Their ignorance and frivolity vexed me, and I said, 'Perhaps I will go to the Holy Land myself and claim this fortune and become King of Edessa.'

My mother, directing the serving-boys, and listening to the table talk with but half an ear, turned to me as if I had said I meant to burn down the hall with everyone in it. The smile on my father's face vanished in an instant; his head turned slowly towards me. If I had uttered the most obscene blasphemy imaginable, I do not think his expression could have been more aghast. He swallowed the bit of bread he was chewing, forcing down his growing anger. 'That was ill-spoken,' he said, his voice strained and low. 'Idle fancies are the work of the devil.'

I started to object that it was no idle fancy, that I had been considering just such an undertaking, but I glimpsed Lady Ragna desperately trying to warn me off. Their reaction rankled me, truly. Yet, the swiftness and force with which my innocent comment roused my lord's wrath took me aback. I mumbled a vague apology, and begged his pardon.

and his eyes swung back to me. 'If you tell me she has

rightly divined the heart of the thing, and promise me you will never speak of such things again, I will forgive you fully and freely, and say no more about it.'

'Forgive!' I said, my voice harsh with outrage. 'Is it a sin now to speak of the Holy Land? As surely as I am your son, my lord, I will think and speak as I please.'

He glared at me. 'Only a fool jests about things he does not understand. I never knew you for a fool, boy.'

Lest I say something I would later regret, I turned and started away. 'There is another possibility,' I said, looking back over my shoulder.

'And what is that?' he growled after me.

'It was no jest!'

His unreasoning obstinance hardened my determination, I confess. I found myself dwelling on the things Torf-Einar had told me regarding the Holy Land, and imagining what it would be like to go there.

I did not work at the building that day; instead, I spent the day out in a boat beyond the headlands with three of the vassals, catching mackerel for the smokehouse. As the fishing was good, we did not return until it was almost dark, and then spent half the night gutting the fish so they would be ready for the drying racks in the morning. Indeed, I was busy tying the flayed and split mackerel to the birch poles when Abbot Emlyn approached me.

'So, my father has sent you to chastise me,' I said mockingly. 'No doubt he has grown tired of shouldering the burden all by himself.'

into step beside him. We walked across the yard and out from the caer; our footsteps found the track down to the sea, and so we followed it, passing the field where some of the vassals were chopping thistles. The breeze was out of the north, and I could smell the clean, wind-washed air faintly tinged with salt - a sign of cool, bright weather to come.

We came onto the pebbled shingle and walked for a time, the sound of our feet crunching in the stones made a hollow sound. Tiny white crabs swarmed the rotting seaweed at the high tide mark, darting out of sight as we passed. At last, the abbot drew a long breath, and said, 'I am disturbed, Duncan.'

I thought I knew what he would say next. I waited for the rebuke and prepared to defend myself against his unjustified disapproval.

'Murdo is not himself.'

This so surprised me, I stopped walking and turned to him. 'What?'

'Your father and I have been friends for many years, but I have never known him to be this contrary and short-tempered.'

'Nor I.'

'For the life of me, I cannot think what has happened to make him so disagreeable.'

'And changeable.'

'Yes,' the abbot agreed. 'Lord Murdo is the steadiest and most resolute of men. It hurts me to see him more miserable by the day.' He looked at me, distress furrowing his forehead. 'What can he be afraid of, do you think?'

'Why afraid?' I said, dismissing the question. 'I have never known my

even considered them. Even so, I knew them to be true the moment I heard them.

Emlyn did not disagree. 'Why should he be afraid of that, do you think?'

'Because,' I began slowly, 'he thinks I will become like Torf-Einar and forsake my family and my birthright.'

'Perhaps it is something like that,' the cleric replied. We resumed walking. The breeze ruffled the waves as they lapped at the stones, making a sound like chuckling.

'Your father never speaks of the Great Pilgrimage,' Emlyn continued after a moment.

'No, he does not.'

'For your father, the Great Pilgrimage brought nothing but hardship and grief. Like many others, Murdo lost nearly everything he cherished in life. Ever since he returned he has worked at replacing all that he lost, and he has succeeded admirably well.'

Torf-Einar's return reminded him of this,' I mused.

'More than that,' the abbot assured me. 'If Torf had not returned the past would have remained only a memory - painful though it may be.'

I began to see what he was telling me. 'Murdo is afraid I will go to the Holy Land, and he will lose me, too.'

'All things considered, it is not an unreasonable fear.' He looked at me, but I kept my eyes straight ahead so I would not have to meet his gaze.

'I see. So you are united with him in this.'

'Where?' I quickly scanned the horizon.

'There,' he said, pointing to a patch of bright water out beyond the headland. 'Who could it be, I wonder?'

We watched as the tiny speck grew slowly larger. It was a sizeable ship with red sails, speeding swiftly towards us on the landward breeze. All at once the answer came to me. 'Eirik!'

A moment later we were both hurrying back along the path towards the dun to alert the others that my brother had finally returned.

That night we welcomed Eirik home with a modest feast, and sat him in the place of honour at table. He was happy to be back in God's country, he said, and far away from the southern Scots and their interminable squabbles.

'You would think common dignity the rarest, most valuable substance in all the world, the way they ward and worry over it,' he said. 'And if any of them ever get any of the stuff, why he is the most miserable man you ever saw, for he must be on constant guard lest anyone besmirch it with a careless word.'

'Too true,' concurred Emlyn ruefully. 'I once heard of a man from Dunedin who killed a beggar for stepping on his shadow.'

'Are they all so contentious in the south?' said Ragna. 'If that is so, I never want to go there.'

'What say you, Murdo?' asked one of the masons. 'You and Abbot Emlyn have been further south than anyone hereabouts. Are the fellows so bloodthirsty as that?'

Murdo glared at the man for raising the question. 'Worse,' he muttered ominously; and, though the men asked for a story, he bluntly refused to say more.

He is well enough, I allowed. A ghost has returned to haunt him.

Eirik raised his eyebrows at this, and begged me to say more. I told him about Torf-Einar's untimely return and his lingering death. 'I begin to see now,' replied Eirik. 'The old wounds are reopened.'

'That is exactly what Emlyn says,' I replied. 'Myself, I think the two of them have a secret.'

This intrigued Eirik, and it flattered me to have my elder brother hanging on my every word, so I continued recklessly. 'Indeed,' I said, 'I think something happened while they were on the Great Pilgrimage together - something they have forbidden one another ever to mention aloud.'

Although I was speaking out of utter ignorance, I had struck closer to the truth than anyone could have known.

'Emlyn keep a secret?' wondered Eirik. 'It must be something terrible indeed.'

'Oh, aye,' I said carelessly. 'Whatever dark deed it conceals has reared its head once more, and it has made our father's life a misery ever since.'

'And it was something to do with Torf, you say?' asked Eirik.

'Perhaps,' I replied, 'but that is not what I said. Rather, it was something Torf said.'

'What did he say?'

'Why, he spoke of many things. Mostly, it was to do with his life in the Holy Land - his battles, and treasures, and the like. Father would not listen to him. He called it traveller's tales and dangerous nonsense.'

'Did he, now!'

'The Holy Lance, and the Black Rood. It was when I asked our lord about those two relics that he grew angry. He would never listen to anything Torf had to say about them; he said it was all lies, and he refused to hear a word of it. When I asked Emlyn about it, he declined to tell me anything. He told me it was not for him to say.'

'A very mystery,' said Eirik. Already, I could see the plot forming in his mind.

'And likely to remain a mystery. There is no power on earth to make Lord Murdo change his mind.'

'True,' allowed Eirik, pursing his lips and nodding. 'We shall see. We shall see.'

My elder brother is tireless when it comes to achieving the unobtainable. Tell him a thing is impossible, or impractical - better still, impossible *and* impractical - and that is the thing he wants. Nothing else will do. His ceaseless energy knows no impediment, no restraint, no limit. As a boy growing up, I watched him lavish the utmost of his strength and effort on all manner of hopeless enterprises.

Do not think I judge him over-harshly, Cait; he would be the first to admit it. You only have to ask him, and he will tell you. He glories in it! All the more so because every now and then he succeeds -as much to his own amazement as anyone's. One of his impossible achievements was gaining a bishopric at an age when most priests are only beginning to entertain the possibility of becoming an abbot. Another was Niniane. If you want to hear the tale of *that* courtship, Cait, ask your gracious aunt. It is a tale well worth hearing.

Over the next few days, Eirik went to work on the problem. I could see

realm. He took four brothers with him, loaded a few supplies and trade goods on a horse, and set off. He was gone but three days, when he returned abruptly saying he had had a vision. Everyone gathered around to hear what had taken place.

'We were camped beside a stream,' he told us, 'and I was tending the fire while the brothers prepared our porridge. I was bending to the flames when I heard someone calling to us from the nearby wood. I looked around and asked the brothers who it could be, for all we were far from any settlement. But they heard nothing.

'I waited a little, and the voice called out again, and yet once more. Did these good brothers hear a sound? No, they never did. Here,' the bishop said, 'ask them - they'll tell you.'

'What did you hear?' demanded one of the vassals.

'We did not hear anything at all,' replied the monks.

'And while I was considering what this might mean, a man came out of the wood. He was dressed all in white, and he called me by name. When I hailed our visitor, and pointed him out to the brothers here, they could not see him.'

'We never did see him,' confessed the clerics. 'We neither saw nor heard anything at all.'

The vassals, agog at this wonder, turned in wide-eyed amazement to one another, and I began to smell a rat.

Strange to say, however, I noticed that Murdo had grown very quiet, and now wore a most thoughtful expression on his face.

before. This brings a smile to my strange visitor's lips. Brother Eirik, he says to me, for he knows my name, as I say. "Come, I must be about my business."

'He turned and walked a little away from the camp, and bade me to follow. I did, and he said, "The day is coming when the church your father builds will be my home. Tell Murdo to look for me."

'I agree to deliver the message, and ask, "What name shall I give him?" And this is the strangest part of all, for the stranger merely raised his hand in farewell, and replied, "Tell him the Lord of the Promise is well pleased with his servant."

'And then,' Eirik concluded, 'he disappeared into the wood the way he had come.'

The vassals gabbled in astonishment and, when it was certain the bishop had no more to tell them, they went away shaking their heads in awe of this miraculous occurrence.

'I have delivered the message, father,' Eirik said. 'What does it mean?'

'It was your vision,' Murdo replied sharply. 'You tell me.' With that, he turned on his heel and walked quickly away.

The bishop sent his monks along to the abbey, and I walked with Eirik to the hall. 'That was well done,' I told him when we were alone. 'How did you find out about the White Priest?'

He stopped in midstep and turned to me. 'How did you know he was a priest?' he demanded.

'You must have said it just now.'

Eirik regarded me with a look of exasperated pity. 'Duncan, Duncan, what are you saying? Do you think I made up a tale? Is that what you think?'

'Of course you did,' I told him. 'It is nothing to me one way or the other, but -' He rolled his eyes and shook his head. 'What? Are you telling me now it was true?'

'In the name of all that is holy, it is the very truth,' he declared. 'It happened just as I told it. Why would I concoct such a tale?'

'To discover the secret -'

The light of understanding broke over my brother just then. 'Murdo and Emlyn's secret - is that what you mean? You believe I made up a story to try to draw them into confession?'

'Yes,' I admitted. 'That is what I thought. And I hope it works, too.'

'Brother,' replied Eirik with a smile, 'you are far more devious than I imagined. I do believe you have the guile of the young Lord Murdo himself about you, and no mistake. But surely as God is my witness,' he vowed earnestly, 'it happened just as I said.'

'Very well,' I allowed, accepting him at his word. 'But will it work, do you think?'

'It might,' replied Eirik, thoughtfully tapping his lower lip with a fingertip. 'We will have to be shrewd about it. Say nothing to either of them. Leave it with me. I think I know a way.'

We parted company then, and he hurried off to the abbey.

'When?' I called after him.

'Soon,' he answered. 'Leave it with me.'

Eirik raised his eyes slowly, as if contemplating at the cause of all human misery. 'Take no thought for me, father,' he intoned solemnly. 'The weight I bear is mine alone.'

'Is there nothing we can do for you, my son?' asked Lady Ragna.

'I fear not,' he said with a heavy sigh. 'The vision was given to me, and it sickens inside me ere I discern its meaning. This I will do, though I fear the effort will drive me to madness.'

He rose from the bench and made to depart. 'I am sorry. I should not have come to table tonight. I have spoiled a good meal, and beg your forgiveness, my lord.' He made a bow towards mother. 'My lady. I wish you a good night.'

A glance passed between the lady and lord. Ragna urged her husband with her eyes. 'Wait,' said Murdo, calling Eirik back. 'There may be a remedy for your ills. Come back and sit down. Eat something. I will summon the abbot and we will talk when you are feeling better.'

'My lord,' said Eirik resuming his place once more, 'dare I hope that you know something to help put my mind at rest?'

'Perhaps,' allowed Murdo. 'Perhaps. But this is not the place to discuss it. Eat something, son, recover your appetite if you can, and the abbot will be here shortly.'

Murdo dispatched one of the serving-boys to fetch the abbot, and the meal continued in a more convivial spirit than before. Eirik, I noticed, recovered his appetite wonderfully well. By the time Abbot Emlyn arrived, my brother was well into his third barley loaf and second bowl of stew.

Eirik explained briefly, whereupon Emlyn turned to Murdo. 'If this is not a sign from our Lord and Saviour, I do not know what it can be.'

'It was my thought, too,' replied Murdo. He stood and called to the serving-boy. 'Bring a jar of ale to my treasure room.' Turning to his other guests, 'I beg you forgive our absence, friends. This matter is best discussed in private. Please, linger as long as you like. My lady wife will see the jars remain filled.'

With that the three of them rose from the board and started from the hall. Those left at table were suddenly stricken with the knowledge that they were to be left out of the discussion and never discover the mystery's resolution. I include myself in that number, for I was not invited to share their private deliberations. I watched them walk away, and felt a mighty disappointment pinch me hard.

The meal ended and the guests drifted away. I sat for a time with my mother, glumly watching the fire on the hearth, and feeling as forlorn as a hound banished from my master's side. Haldi, the serving-boy, appeared after awhile with the jars of ale. Ragna called to him as he moved towards the door at the far end of the hall.

'Bring the tray to me, Haldi,' she said. He came and lay the tray on the table. She dismissed him, saying, 'They will be some time at their talk, I think. Help cook in the kitchen and then you can go to bed. I will see to the lord's ale.'

Haldi thanked her and ran off, glad at the prospect of finishing his chores early. Rising then, my mother, yawned and said, 'I have grown tired myself, and believe I will go to bed. Perhaps you would not mind undertaking this duty, Duncan.'



The treasure room is a small chamber in the centre of the house, with no windows and but a single low door. Its walls are good solid stone and very thick. It was, I believe, the first part of the house to be constructed, and all the rest - the sleeping rooms, stores, workrooms, kitchen and hall - was built around it. Many an Eastern potentate has such a room, I have learned, but few noblemen in the north. The reason is that such wealth as men possess in the wild northlands resides in the land itself - the fields, cattle, grazing land, and the like.

Murdo owns wealth like this in abundance, to be sure. But he also possesses a treasure that would make many a king grow heartsick with envy if the full extent of it were ever known. Murdo has ever been circumspect about his treasure; he never speaks of it, and seldom even visits the room wherein it is housed. Once, as a boy of six or seven summers, I sneaked the great iron key from its hiding place and waited until everyone was about some other chore, and then let myself in to see what I might find.

The room itself was, even to my childish eye, small and low. There was a table in the centre of the room with one chair, and a candletree with half-burnt candles. There were four large oaken chests - one on each wall - and each chest was bound in broad iron bands which were likewise locked. I had no keys for any of the locks, but the discovery of those chests proved

my presence began filling the bowls - as if this were my usual chore. I filled Emlyn's first, then moved on to Eirik's and lastly to Murdo's cup. He thanked me, and then recollected himself and asked what had become of Haldi?

I replied that the lady had sent him to help the cook, and asked me to serve in his stead. 'Since you are here,' Eirik said, 'you might as well stay and hear this.'

The suggestion sat ill with my lord, I could tell. He was on the point of refusing when Abbot Emlyn spoke up. 'Yes, let Duncan stay.'

'Do you think it wise?' asked Murdo doubtfully.

'He must know the truth,' the abbot declared, 'if he is to serve it. Yes, let him stay.'

His words sent a thrill of excitement through me. Was there more to this than I guessed?

Murdo held his frown for a moment longer, and we all waited for him to make up his mind. 'Very well,' he relented at last. 'So be it.' He directed me to close the door and sit down.

I did as he asked and settled atop the great oak chest I had tried to peek into years before. 'We have been speaking of your brother's vision,' my father told me. 'What I am about to say is known only to three other people in all the world. Emlyn, my old friend, is one of them. Your mother is the other.'

He paused then, as if uncertain how to continue. 'Speak it out,' Emlyn exhorted gently. 'It is for the best, I do believe.'

has found favour with your efforts, my lord.'

Murdo nodded thoughtfully. 'Many things happened in the Holy Land, and most of them are best forgotten. Though I have remained true to the vow I made, I had lately begun to think I would not live to see it fulfilled. Indeed, I had not thought to hear from him again.'

'Until today,' said Eirik.

'Until today,' confirmed Murdo.

'Forgive me, lord,' I said. 'But who is this White Priest? Is he a phantom?'

'Perhaps,' replied my father. 'He might be an angel. I cannot say. He told me his name was Andrew, and he appeared in the form of a monk - at least, he looked like one to me.' He paused, remembering, then added, 'Indeed, although I did not know it, I believe he guided me through all that followed - every step of the way from that day to this.'

Murdo went on to explain how he had been deep in the catacombs of the monastery of the Church of Saint Mary outside the walls of Jerusalem when he had his second encounter with the White Priest. 'I was alone for just a moment, waiting for the others to return, and he appeared to me,' Murdo explained, his voice taking on a softer edge as his mind took him back through the years to that portentous meeting.

'We talked, and he asked me to serve him. I asked what he wanted me to do, and he said he wanted me to build him a kingdom where his sheep could safely graze. He said: "Make it far, far away from the ambitions of small-souled men and their ceaseless striving. Make it a kingdom where the True Path can be followed in peace and the Holy Light can shine as a beacon flame in the night." You see,' said Murdo with a slightly

How so?' asked Emlyn. 'The Celts do have always been the Guardians of the True Path and Keepers of the Holy Light.'

'And so I truly believe,' replied my brother adamantly. 'But today a man appeared to me in a vision, and told me that he was coming here to live. Why does everyone seem to know about the White Priest but me?'

'I have never spoken of it before now,' said Murdo. 'Nor has Emlyn. Who else could possibly know?'

Eirik put out his hand towards me. 'Duncan knows,' he said, and told them about our conversation earlier that day.

'Is this true, Duncan?' Murdo asked, and I confessed that it was. 'How did you come by this knowledge?'

Torf-Einar told me before he died,' I answered, and related what he had said about the sacred relics and their mysterious guardian. Torf said the White Priest appeared to the pilgrims in Antioch and told them to dig in the church to find the lance of the crucifixion.' Spreading my hands in a profession of innocence, I added, 'I had no way of knowing it was part of any secret.'

Abbot Emlyn had grown very quiet and thoughtful. He regarded Murdo with a look of kindly reproach. My father, becoming increasingly agitated, finally burst out, 'Very well!' Thrusting a hand at the abbot, he said, 'If it will put an end to your pestering, I will tell them everything.'

So saying, he moved to one of the chests, and I thought he meant to unlock it. Instead, he slid one of the iron bands to one side, and withdrew a long rod, with a flattened hook at one end. My curiosity increased as he walked to the centre of the chamber and selected a flagstone on the floor. Slipping the hooked end of the rod into the crack between the stones, he

way both Murdo and Emlyn revered the object, I could see that it was a very valuable - nay, sacred - thing; but for the life of me I could not imagine what made it so. I beheld the slender rod and my heart sank. This? This is the great secret they had protected these many years?

Eirik, on the other hand, appeared dumbstruck. He gave out a gasp and went down on his knees, raising his hands and closing his eyes. He then lowered his face to the floor and lay there in an attitude of prayer. For his part, Murdo merely gazed on the object in silent wonder.

'What is it?' I asked at last.

My father glanced at Emlyn. The abbot stretched out his hand and held it flat above the thing, and said, 'Behold! The Iron Lance.'

I looked at it again. Less than a span in length, and bowed in the middle, it had an ugly stub of a blade at one end and a small hole at the other. Could this bit of scrap which I had taken for a fragment of broken hearthware - a piece of a spit for roasting meat, say - could it be the selfsame spear which had pierced the Blessed Saviour's side?

'If that is so,' I replied, 'I wonder that the emperor himself is not camped outside our walls at this very moment. Or, that the pope in Rome has not made pilgrimage to pay homage.'

'Watch your tongue, boy,' warned Murdo. 'You stand very close to blasphemy, and I will not hear it.'

Emlyn put out a conciliatory hand, and said, 'You promised to tell them everything.' Turning to me, he said, 'A simple explanation will soon set your mind at ease, Duncan. The reason we are left in peace with this inestimable treasure is that neither the pope nor the emperor - nor anyone else in Christendom - knows we possess the Holy Lance. For all the world

what they *think* they see,' he said and, taking up the jar, he poured out some ale then emptied the bowl. He then explained how this had come to be. That night he revealed his long-kept secret to us - as he will tell you, little Cait, when you are older.

'Why have you never spoken of this till now?' I asked when he finished.

'If you had seen half of what I saw in Jerusalem,' Murdo replied, 'you would not ask.'

'Terrible it was!' cried Abbot Emlyn. 'Like wolves loosed among lambs, they gorged themselves on the blood of the helpless. Their greed knew no restraint - and what they could not carry off, they destroyed.' The good abbot, almost shaking with disgust, bent his head and concluded sorrowfully, 'They broke their vows and disgraced themselves before God and man. They had the chance to show the world the benevolence of true Christians. Instead of presenting themselves the best of men, they behaved as the very worst.'

After a moment, he said, 'This makes the task of the Cele De all the more precious and important.'

'Perhaps,' suggested Eirik, 'that is why the White Priest is coming to make this his home.'

'No doubt,' reflected Murdo. 'No doubt *you* are right about that.'

He placed his hand reverently on the Holy Lance, then picked it up and handed it to me. My fingers closed on the length of old iron; it was cold to the touch, as you might expect, and slightly heavier than it appeared. Beyond that, there was nothing at all remarkable about it. I passed the ancient weapon to Eirik, who bowed his head as he received it, and said a

their care.

Then, as restless night gave way to placid dawn, I conceived the plan which, for better or worse, has led me to my fate.

I told no one of my plan. I wanted to live with the decision for a time to let it grow, and ripen if it would. On the whole, it is best not to rush headlong into schemes hatched in the dead of night. Daylight so often reveals the cracks that charmed night conceals, and I had no wish to be foolhardy.

Thus, I went about my work in the usual way, and no one was the wiser. Eirik resumed his circuit; Niniane joined the retinue this time, and Abbot Emlyn undertook a journey to Orkneyjar. Murdo threw himself into the building work, making himself and everyone around him busy dawn to dusk. We went about our chores amiably, but never speaking of the things he had revealed that night, or the marvellous treasure hidden in the centre of the house.

The days began to dull, and the nights to lengthen. Work on the new church slowed as, more often than not, the labourers had to finish the day's work by torchlight. Some of the masons would stay on with us through the winter to keep the worst ravages of gale and ice from undoing their efforts; others, however, were growing anxious to return to their homes in the south. They watched the skies and when Orkney's geese started flying, they flew, too.

Murdo had agreed to transport any who wished to leave to Inbhir Ness where they could get ships to take them home to Eoforwik. I went along,

I found no one who had any word of the Holy Land, but the harbour master said we might pay a call at one of the drinking halls fronting the quayside. This we did, but with no better result. No one knew anything. After our second hall and third bowl of ale, Sarn asked, 'Why do you want to know about the Holy Land?'

'Have you never been curious, Sarn?'

'I was once,' he replied thoughtfully. 'I wanted to know where the badger cub went.' He held out his hand and I saw that his middle finger was shorter than the others. 'I found out, and I was never curious after that.' He was quiet for a moment, then added, 'That is why the sea is better: no badgers.'

We finished our bowls, and walked around the town to clear our heads. I saw an old woman who was making shoes from lambskin and leather; she had a small pair made for a child and adorned with little birds of red and blue thread cleverly sewn. These I bought for my daughter. They kept you warm all winter, Gait, and I think you would be wearing them now if your feet had not grown too big.

There was a baker in the town also, who made little hollow loaves of bread filled with spiced meat and turnips; I bought two of these, and some black bread and sausage, for our supper. We fetched a jar of ale from the hall at the quay before retiring to the boat for the night.

Sarn and I ate our meal and listened to the talk of the sailors around us. Some of them got drunk and started to sing. After awhile, they left off singing and started fighting instead, and three of them ended up in the water. They were fished out by their shipmates and wandered off to find more to drink. Things grew more quiet after that, so Sarn and I rolled ourselves in our cloaks and went to sleep.

miserable holding grudges for imagined slights.

One night I dreamed of Rhona, and the dream reawakened the grief I imagined was finished. I began feeling her absence more acutely than ever. I spent whole days staring at the fire while the wind whined in the eaves. Other times I walked out along the shore in the snow and sleet until my feet froze and my face turned blue. I would start in my sleep, and awake with the feeling that I was being strangled. The queerness of it frightened me so that I refused to close my eyes when I lay down.

It was then I realized the source of my distress: my plan had come to maturity, but I was unwilling to face it. Having occupied myself with it from the Feast of Saint Brigid to Saint Thomas' Mass, it was time to begin doing something about it. Fearing the opposition my decision was certain to ignite, I hesitated, and this was the source of my misery.

My father would not welcome my decision, this I knew. Nevertheless, I resolved to announce my plan at the Yuletide festivities - imagining that any objection to my scheme would be muted by the general celebration. Having resolved myself, the clouds of gloom lifted for me and I undertook to help with the feast-day preparations, which pleased and gratified my mother greatly.

Yuletide found me in good spirits; some of the vassals remarked that I had finally ceased pining for the loss of my dear wife. Accordingly, I received the kindly attentions of certain daughters whose parents, no doubt, hoped for a noble match. While I enjoyed their blandishments, I did my best not to encourage their hopes. My mind and heart were set on other things, and I would not be dissuaded from my purpose. Still, I did not lack for female companionship, and passed a most pleasant Yule.

Other dishes were brought and placed before us in their turn: sausages cooked with ale and apples, fish with fennel, and smoked ox-tongue roasted with sour cabbage. On each table were small mountains of special round loaves - the Twelfth Night bread baked specially for the feast. We ate and drank our fill of these delights, and when the first pangs of hunger had receded, Abbot Emlyn rose from his place and called the hall to silence.

'My friends!' said the cleric, lifting his voice above the cheerful rumble. 'On such glad occasions it is good to pause and give thanks to the true Lord of the Feast who has so bounteously provided for his people.' With that, he clasped his hands and bowed his head. His prayer of thanks was simple and sincere, and short - a quality which greatly endeared the abbot to his flock. For when Emlyn prayed, one never got the feeling he was trying to chastise or rebuke his congregation by another means. Nor did he use the opportunity to display his erudition to impress or humble those beneath him - a temptation far too many clerics do not resist. When Emlyn prayed, he merely spoke his mind to his Creator, the Gifting Giver, he so evidently loved.

When he finished, my Lord Murdo rose next. He instructed everyone to fill their cups and bowls, and said, 'We drink to the year now begun! May the God of Goodness and Light bless us richly, and may our realm prosper in every good and worthy thing.' We drank to that, and he said, 'If it shall please our Great Redeemer, this time next year we will gather to consecrate the new church.'

'Amen!' cried Abbot Emlyn. 'So be it.'

We raised our cups again, and then I was on my feet. Every face turned

He gathered me in a strong embrace, saying, 'God bless you, my son! It is the Saviour King himself who has put this into your heart.'

I thanked him, and was suddenly swarmed by others who thronged me to wish me well, and to add their pledges of support to my own. Several of the younger men offered to accompany me, and others to send gifts of provisions or gold to aid the journey. Everyone, it seemed, was delighted with the purpose of my pilgrimage.

Everyone, that is, except the one whose approval I valued the most: Murdo. My lord stood looking at me as if he had taken an arrow through the heart. Then, very slowly, he walked to where I stood. The hard expression on his face soured the mirth and all laughter ceased as an uneasy silence descended over the hall. I could hear the fire crackling in the hearth as he stepped before me, his eyes burning with rage.

'That was ill spoken,' he breathed, his voice soft - as if he struggled mightily to restrain it. My mother, distraught, joined him.

'My lord,' I said, 'it has long been in my mind to do this thing. I believe God has called me to his service.'

'We will speak of this later,' Murdo said stiffly.

'Let us speak now,' I countered recklessly.

'Later,' Murdo insisted. 'This is not the time to pursue a family dispute.'

I made to reply that this was as good a time as any, when I felt my mother's hand on my arm, trying to restrain me. She implored me with a silent shake of her head.

'As you will, lord,' I replied, yielding to Ragna's gentle entreaty. 'We will

praises?

No. What had happened was what I feared would happen, nothing more. The trouble was my own making. If there was any consolation, it was this: at least, I had announced my intention; come what may, my plan was no longer a secret.

All the next day I waited to be summoned to my lord's chamber to receive the reprimand I knew was coming. But it did not come. The day passed and nothing was said; we bade farewell to our guests, and saw them away. Out of consideration for me, no mention was made of my announcement of the previous night. The day turned foul so I stayed in with little Cait, and took supper with my mother in the evening.

'He is that angry with you, Duncan,' she said, pursing her lips in her vexation. 'He has snapped and snarled like a wolf with a toothache all day, and refuses to come to the table.' She stopped ladling the soup into the bowl, and looked at me. 'You must go to him and tell him it was a mistake.'

'How so?' I asked. 'He may not like it, but it was no mistake. I mean to go to Jerusalem just as I said. True, I would go with a better heart if I had his blessing, but with his approval or without it, I *will* go.'

She frowned. 'Duncan, please, you do not know what you are saying.'

'Do I not, my lady?' I said. 'Have I lived so long in this house that I know nothing of such things?'

'That is not what I meant,' she replied, placing the bowl before me. She sat down and, folding her hands, leaned towards me across the board. 'When he returned from the pilgrimage,' she said, 'your father vowed that neither he nor any of his family would ever again journey to the Holy Land. You

again and reached out to squeeze my hand. 'Believe me, Maras could not stand the torment of your leaving.'

'The torment would be mine,' I said sharply, 'not his.'

Lady Ragna shook her head gently. 'No,' she said, 'because he knows - even if you do not - what lies before you. He has been there, Duncan, and he knows the dangers you will face. He could not live with the hardship and suffering that would befall you.'

'If God has put it in my heart to go, and I do *not* go,' I replied, 'what am I to do then? How am *I* to live with that?'

I left Banvard without speaking to my father again, and the regret of that bitter leaving pains me still. Believe me, Cait, I would give the world and all its treasures to have departed with a blessing from the one person in the world whose approval alone would have sustained me through the trials I have faced. But Murdo was implacable in his opposition. He refused to speak to me until I repented of my plan. This I could not do.

I have since had many occasions to wonder what he would have said if he had known the *true* purpose of my pilgrimage? Would it have made a difference?

Who can say?

Know this, my soul, and remember it always: I have no fear of death. For me to leave this life is to enter the next in triumph. But the thought that I will die in this foreign land without ever seeing the faces of those I have loved best in life fills me with grief so strong it does take my breath away.

Even so, I bear my lot patiently for your sake, and pray the caliph tarries yet awhile so that I may finish what I have begun.

It is a most curious captivity, I declare. I am given the best of food and drink; my modest needs are met without the humiliation that so often accompanies captivity. I even have a servant to attend me and, in many

On the morning I took the boat, I asked Sarn to accompany me. I did not tell him where I was going. I had made my farewells the night before - not that anyone knew it - and rose at dawn and went down to the bay to rouse Sarn out of his nest of oars and sailcloth. In warm weather he always slept in the hut beneath the cliff on the strand.

I let him think we were going fishing, until we had made the headland, and then I told him to sail for Inbhir Ness. It was then he looked at the pack I had brought aboard. 'Where are you going, lord?' he asked.

'I am going away for a while,' I told him.

'It is the pilgrimage, so?' A sly expression passed over his open, honest features, giving him a look of mild imbecility.

Of course, everyone in the realm knew about my desire to undertake the pilgrimage - *and* my father's unyielding opposition to it. The entire settlement had discussed it at length, and most had taken sides.

'Have you made a wager on me?'

He smiled readily. 'Yes, lord,' he admitted without guile. 'You are your father's son. Some of the others said you would stay, but I knew you would go.'

'Once you have seen me to Inbhir Ness, you can go back and collect your winnings,' I told him.

'The wind is good. We will be there before dusk,' he announced, looking at the sky. Indicating my small bundle of belongings, he said, 'Are you certain you have enough food to see you to Jerusalem? The abbot says it is very far away.'

before I found a ship to take me on. Certainly, when I bade farewell to Sarn and sent him home, I did not think to see him again.

But, two days later, I was still waiting at the quayside when he returned. I saw the ship as it came into the harbour and recognized it; my heart sank. I imagined my lord had come to take me back. But it was not Murdo he had brought with him, it was Padraig.

'If you have come to talk me out of leaving, you can turn around and go home,' I told him bluntly. 'My mind is made up. I am on pilgrimage.'

The tall, soft-eyed monk regarded me mildly. 'Then I am a pilgrim, too,' he replied.

'What do you mean?' I asked suspiciously. 'Did my father send you to bring me home, or not?'

'Lord Murdo says that if you leave now, you leave forever. You must never think to see your home again, for the dead do not return.'

'He considers me a dead man, is that it?'

'That is what he told me to say.'

'Well, you have said it. You can go back and tell him that I must do what God has given me to do.'

'My uncle said that is what you would say,' Padraig observed placidly. 'Abbot Emlyn said that if you were determined to carry out your plan, then I was to accompany you.'

'Accompany me? All the way to Jerusalem?'

'Yes, lord,' affirmed the monk. 'I am to be your servant and guide.'

go to Jerusalem with me, I said. 'You have no provisions, no cloak, no water skin.' Pointing to his bare feet, I added, 'You do not even have shoes.'

Padraig smiled. 'My cloak and staff are in the boat. If I have need of anything else, God will supply it out of his matchless bounty.'

Sarn, who had been listening to this exchange from his place at the bow rope, spoke up. 'That is the same thing *you* told *me*, lord,' he chuckled.

'You stay out of this,' I snapped. I glared at them both. Daylight was quickly fading and twilight gathering; if I sent them back now it would be dark before they reached the estuary. 'Very well,' I relented, 'you can stay here with me tonight, but you must leave in the morning.'

Padraig said nothing, but set about making a fire. Sarn tied the boat to a post driven into the earthen bank that served as part of the harbour wall. That finished, he brought out a bundle and began unwrapping it - loaves of bread, dried fish and pork, and other things to make a meal. 'There is ale in the stoup,' he said. 'Lady Ragna thought you might like a last good drink before going to the Holy Land.'

Stepping over the bow and into the ship, I found the jar.

'How did you know I would still be here?'

The seaman shrugged. 'There were no trading ships when I left you. If any came they would not have departed so soon.'

'So now it is Sarn the Shrewd, I suppose?'

He smiled. 'We would have drunk the ale whether you were here or not.'

'See you do not drink too much,' I warned lightly. 'You are leaving in the

are raising men for the Holy Land.'

'Rouen,' repeated Padraig. 'That is where Lord Ranulf and the northern noblemen joined the crusade.'

'It is,' I confirmed.

Then maybe we should go there,' suggested the monk.

'Is that not the very thing I plan to do,' I retorted, my irritation growing, 'as soon as I can get a ship?'

'You already have a ship,' Padraig pointed out. 'Sarn could take us.'

I might have resented the idea if it had not struck me as faintly ridiculous. 'He might,' I agreed haughtily, 'if he had a chart and provisions enough for such a trip.'

Sarn brightened, his smile wide in the dark. 'I have these things.'

I stared at him. Had the two of them conspired in this? 'The boat is too small,' I complained. Truly, I had imagined sailing into Jerusalem aboard a Norse longship like the one my father had journeyed in.

'Small, yes,' Sarn conceded amiably, 'but the boat is sound and the weather good. It could easily be done.'

'Where did you get a chart?' I asked.

'The monastery provided the chart,' Padraig replied, and explained how Abbot Emlyn had personally supervised the copying and preparation.

'And you have provisions?'

These we have also,' confirmed Sarn. 'Enough for three men for several weeks of days - although the abbot does not think it will take so long.'

It is a long way to Frankland, Padraig mused. Perhaps it would be best to wait until we see what we find when we get there.'

So, we sailed for Rouen, leaving the next morning as soon as it was light enough to navigate the river estuary. The winds were steady, and the weather stayed fair; we made good speed the first five or six days, keeping the coast in sight by day and night. Sometimes we made camp on land; most often we slept in the boat. We lost sight of land only once when fog stole the coast for a night and part of the next day.

It was only upon crossing the narrows and coming in sight of the prankish coast that the weather soured, and we were lashed by the tail of a thunderous storm. The wind shrieked and hurled stinging waves over the rails time and again. Padraig clung to the mast and prayed; Sarn and I bailed with cup and water stoup. We stood off the coast until the storm had passed; then, almost shaking with relief and singing psalms of thanksgiving, proceeded south to the sea mouth of the river the Franks call Seine.

The city of Rouen lies a fair way up river, and as there was considerable movement to and fro on along the coast we had no difficulty finding the right channel to take us inland. Indeed, we followed a large Flemish trading vessel and arrived two days later. While Sarn tended the boat, Padraig and I talked to the masters and pilots of other vessels to learn who might be heading south. Padraig's Latin was good, and I was pleased to find that mine sharpened quickly as I regained the rhythms of the speech I'd been taught since boyhood.

It seemed that I had arrived at the right place, for the wharf was very busy. As it happened, I was offered passage on no fewer than three ships in exchange for work. After discussing the matter with Padraig, I decided to

cloth sewn upon his chest.

A group of sailors sitting on the wharf stood abruptly. I heard one of them murmur a name. I turned to the man, and asked what he had said. He pointed to the red cross on the man's tunic, and said, 'Templars.'

Turning to Padraig, I repeated the word, and added, 'Have you ever heard the name?' He confessed his ignorance, and suggested we join the crowd which was quickly gathering around the two men and see what they had to say.

'Friends!' shouted the man in the white tunic. 'Come closer!' He motioned the people nearer, and when the throng had formed around him, he proclaimed, 'In the name of our Blessed Saviour, I greet you and beg your kind indulgence. My name is Renaud de Bracineaux, and you can see by the cross on my surcoat that I am a knight of the Order of the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon.'

A flutter of excitement coursed through the crowd. Whatever this Order of Poor Fellow-Soldiers might be, it aroused great interest and enthusiasm among the people, more of whom were running to join the throng.

'I will not detain you from your errands,' the knight continued. 'I merely wish it to be known that our illustrious Grand Master Hugh de Payens has lately arrived from Jerusalem for the purpose of inducing men of noble lineage to join our order, which is dedicated to the aid of Christian pilgrims in the Holy Land and the protection of the True Cross.'

These last words caused my ears to burn. I determined to speak to this knight in private, and was even then calculating how this might be accomplished, when he said, 'I thank you for your courtesy. My sergeant and I will remain in Rouen until dawn tomorrow, if anyone should wish to

John Gisbert and myself in our midday repast.

Of course, we all agreed right readily, whereupon the Templar called to the keeper of the inn to supply us liberally with an assortment of his wares. The merchant and his wife busied themselves at once, producing bowls of frothy brown ale, baskets of bread, and platters of roast fowl. Pdraig and I found places on one of the benches. The young men talked excitedly and asked many questions, which the knight answered patiently, explaining what would be required to enter their order - as well as the rich rewards awaiting all who donned the white surcoat.

We drank and ate our fill, and listened carefully to all that was said. I quickly discovered that this Order of the Knights of the Temple was in fact a monastic order made up of noblemen sworn to Christ's service for an agreed period during which they were required to forsake family and possessions, and swear a vow of poverty, chastity, and unswerving loyalty to their brother knights.

In exchange for their vow, the newly-accepted brothers would receive a horse, a fine hauberk of ringed mail, a sword, shield, battle helm, and a fine white surcoat with the distinctive red cross.

'Hear, Pdraig?' I whispered. 'They are monks - monks with swords. This is wonderful.'

He nodded, gazing on the knights in amazement. Indeed, who had ever heard of such a thing?

When the young men departed, pledging themselves to return later with the permission of their families to undertake initiation into the order, the Templar turned to me. 'What say you, my friend?' he asked amiably. 'Is there any way I can be of service to you?'

I granted that, attractive as the opportunity to join the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ undoubtedly was, I had undertaken a separate vow which I could not lightly put off.

'I understand,' Renaud replied sympathetically. 'Still, I would be remiss in my sworn duty if I did not point out that a rare opportunity exists which may be of value to you.'

'What is that?'

'Our illustrious Grand Master has sought and received the commendation of Pope Honorius II to grant full ordination of limited duration to any brother who wishes it.'

'How long would be required?' I asked, intrigued by the notion.

'Whatever God in his wisdom has laid on your heart, my friend,' answered Renaud. 'Speaking strictly for myself, I would think two years to be a sufficient duration to aid the Brotherhood - although, I have known many men to pledge five years, or seven. A few have promised service for only a year, as the spirit leads.'

'I see.'

'I mention this, because,' he said, smiling, his teeth a white flash of lightning against the dark cloud of his beard, 'you seem a most thoughtful and capable man, and one who takes his vows in solemn earnest. Also, since you travel in the company of a monk, I am persuaded that you understand the sanctity of our duty better than most. Tell me, have I misjudged you?'

'In no way, my lord,' I replied.

'Then permit me to suggest that you need not put off your vow at all,

Oranto, where we will join Bonclmond and travel to the Holy Land.

While he was speaking, a quarrel flared up between the owner of the stall and the Templar sergeant. As my attention was given wholly to Renaud, I did not hear how the altercation began. But suddenly, the owner of the stall was shouting, 'But this is not enough! Sir, you asked for the best and I gave you the best!'

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the innkeeper holding out his hands in dismay at the few small coins he had been given. 'It is more than enough,' Gislebert told him flatly. 'Be quiet, it is all you get.'

He made to turn away, but the innkeeper put out a hand to stop him. The Templar reacted as if he had been struck a blow from a sword. He spun around, hand upraised, ready to strike. 'Be quiet, you!' he hissed. 'Do you want the whole city to know you are a thief?'

'Is there some trouble, sergeant?' called Renaud, taking an interest at last.

'I asked for ten deniers,' cried the aggrieved merchant. 'It is a fair sum - ask anyone, it is an honest sum.' He thrust out his hand to show the small coins. 'He gives me but seven! Seven only! That is not fair.'

The Templar raised his hand to silence the man. 'Give him what he asks, Gislebert,' he said, adding, 'Let us be more careful where we trade next time.'

'It is a fair price,' the proprietor insisted, accepting the additional coins from the grudging sergeant's hand. 'Ask anyone in the city, they will tell you.'

He appealed to no one; the Templar had already turned back to me and was saying, 'We must be on our way, my friend. But remember, if you

truly thinking of joining them?

'It is tempting,' I confessed. 'But no, my thoughts are otherwise.'

'Then what are you thinking, my lord?'

'I am thinking,' I replied, 'that if a pilgrim were bound for the Holy Land, he could not do better than to travel in the company of God's own knights.'

We spent the rest of the day, and most of the next, trying to discover more about this Marseilles. For although Padraig professed to know of the place, he had no idea how far it might be, nor by which route it could be found. We showed Sarn's map to the pilots of no fewer than six of the larger ships and asked them if they could show us where it might be. Two of them had never heard of the place; one knew the name and told us it was on the south coast, but had never been there; and three pilots tried to buy Sarn's chart for themselves.

Then, as the sun was going down, a slender young man approached the place where our boat was tied. Sarn and I were sitting on the wharf discussing the problem, and Padraig was stirring among the supplies in preparation of our evening meal. The stranger came to where we stood and bowed low before us. 'Pax vobiscum,' he said, 'I would be most grateful if you could tell me if I am speaking to the men who have been inquiring about Marseilles.'

His speech, although flawless, lacked warmth - as if he were uttering words he was being forced against his will to speak. I regarded him closely. His eyes were large and dark against his sallow skin; his hair was black and thick, and cut close so that the curls were tight to his scalp like a knitted cap. His limbs were thin; the clothing that hung on his bony frame, however, was of the finest cut and cloth, and well made. On his thumb

'And you are its master, yes?' he asked, almost quivering with excitement.

'The boat belongs to my father,' I told him. 'But I have the use of it.'

'Splendid!' he cried, and I thought he would swoon. When he had calmed himself, he said, 'Please, do not think me brazen, but I would like to hire your boat.'

'I admire your boldness,' I told him, 'but I must disappoint you. My boat is not for hire. You see, we -'

'I have money,' he said quickly. 'I will pay whatever you ask. It is very important that I return to my home in Anazarbus as soon as possible.'

'Again, I fear I must disappoint you,' I replied, and explained that so far as we could understand, it was a very long voyage to our destination, and that we possessed, as anyone could see, only a small vessel. With four passengers it would not only be uncomfortable, but dangerous as well. 'I am very sorry,' I told him. 'Still, this is a busy port. No doubt you will soon find someone else who can take you.'

He frowned as sorrow overtook him, and I thought he would cry. His head dropped forwards and he looked at his feet. Then he drew a deep, steadying breath, and said, 'I have no wish to appear impertinent, but the extremity of my plight makes me persist where others would graciously relent. If I offend you, I beg your forgiveness. It seems to me, however, that you contemplate sailing to Marseilles by sea.'

Sarn smiled. His Latin was good enough to understand most of what the young man was saying. 'Sailing is best done at sea,' he replied dryly.

'Of course,' allowed the stranger, 'a man of your obvious skill would find it

friend! I will most happily be your guide.

Now it was Sarn's turn to frown. He leaned near, putting his head close to mine. 'I do not like this fellow,' he said. 'How can we be certain he knows what he is talking about?'

'We will find out more,' I told him. To the thin young man, I said, 'What you say intrigues me, I do confess. Perhaps you would care to have supper with us, and we will sit together and discuss the matter.'

Glancing at Pdraig, who was beginning to assemble the various items for our meal, the young man said, 'You are most gracious, lord. I will sup with you, but I must beg you to allow me to contribute something to the meal.'

Despite my assurances that this was not in any way necessary, he hastened away - only to reappear a short while later accompanied by a man carrying a large bundle in one hand, and two good-sized jars in the other. At the young man's direction, the man placed the jars and bundle on the ground and, with a low nod of his head, hurried away.

'Please,' said the young stranger, indicating that we should open the bundle. Sarn obliged, pulling the knot in the cloth, which opened to reveal a veritable feast. There were spit-roasted fowl and fish of several kinds; fresh-baked bread, dried fruit, and sweetmeats; there was a stew of beans and pork in a sauce of savoury herbs; and little cakes made with honey and almonds, and covered in tiny white seeds. There was enough for all of us, and more besides.

Pointing to the two jars, he said, 'I did not know if you preferred ale, or wine - so I brought both.'

Sarn was delighted with the banquet, and grinned happily. 'Perhaps we might listen to what he has to say,' he whispered, and began laying out the

began to eat. The food was excellent, and we were soon licking our fingers and smacking our lips. Our young friend, however, picked at his food as if he found it distasteful or unpalatable. He smiled wanly from time to time as Sarn, unable to help himself, exclaimed over the various dishes.

'Your generosity has won the favour of our pilot, it would seem,' I observed, pouring wine into the young lord's cup. 'But I cannot help noticing that you do not share his enthusiasm for our meal.'

'Alas, it is so,' he sighed. 'Exquisite as it surely is, I cannot eat this fare.'

Sarn heard this, and asked, 'Is it because you are a Jew?'

Roupen smiled sadly. 'I am neither a Jew, nor a Muhammedan - despite what many believe. The Princes of Armenia have been Christians for a thousand years.' He glanced with pensive sadness at the food. 'Alas, my lack of appetite is due to a unknown malady with which I have been afflicted since coming to this country.'

'I am sorry to hear it.'

'You are most kind. Still, I have been far more fortunate than my bodyguard and advisor - they took ill and died of it.' He went on to tell how he had come to Paris as part of a royal delegation hoping to establish formal relations with the Prankish king. There were fifteen men and women altogether, and all had succumbed to the mysterious illness, dying within a few days of one another. 'I, too, was taken seriously ill, and was many weeks under the shadow of death. By God's decree, I alone have survived.'

'That is unfortunate,' I replied, pouring wine into his cup. 'I can well understand your desire to return home as swiftly as possible.' I handed him

'Do you doubt me, sir?' replied the young man, suddenly irate. 'The route I propose was the same as that by which my companions and myself arrived in Frankland. By all means assure your expert pilot that, aside from a short distance which must be covered by wagon, it is possible to do what I suggest. Otherwise, I would not have mentioned it.'

'Do not misunderstand,' I replied. 'It is not your honesty that concerns him. It is your memory.' I explained quickly about Sarn's map, which the pilot hoped to enlarge by adding the details of our journey.

The young lord smiled thinly. 'Again, I must ask your forgiveness. My many travails in this land have made me unduly suspicious and quick to judge. I beg your indulgence. It will not happen again.'

We drank some more, and he seemed to relax a little. I had already decided that his knowledge of the river route would be invaluable to us, but I did not wish to tell him so without the ready consent of my fellow passengers. So, after the meal, I asked him to allow us a moment to discuss the matter. We spoke our northern tongue so that he would not overhear what we said.

'I think we would be well advised to take this fellow on,' I began. 'A journey by river has much to recommend it over a voyage by sea. I say we take him at his word and let him guide us to our destination.'

Padraig added his approval. 'He is a fellow Christian, and comes seeking our aid. He is obviously unwell. To turn him away would be an offence against Heaven, and one we might regret.'

'It is true our craft is small,' Sarn said. 'But if he helps me with the map, I will be happy to share deck space with him.' He nodded, considering his

But he would not hear of it. 'The service you do me is invaluable. I will pay for my passage, and gladly. Nor will my father be slow in rewarding you richly for your inestimable assistance.'

Taking the pouch from his belt, he untied it and began shaking gold coins onto his palm. He counted out twenty golden bezants, sorted them into two equal stacks, and passed one of them to me.

'This for my passage to Marseilles,' he said, tipping the gold into my hand. 'And you will receive as much again when we arrive safely.' Raising the second stack, he held it before me. 'This is for the necessary provisions for the journey. I am the son of a prince and accustomed to the best of food and drink wherever I go. Therefore, I expect the boat to be supplied accordingly.'

I accepted the gold gladly and without disagreement - which I could see surprised Padraig somewhat. Truly, it was not a matter of courtesy or generosity. I had come away from Banvard without so much as the price of a small fish in my purse. I had professed my faith in God to provide for us, and the appearance of young Lord Roupen seemed to be the Gifting Giver's way of answering our need. I was in no wise minded to shun the open hand of the Almighty.

Upon agreeing to the bargain, I said, 'We will depart tomorrow as soon as we have gathered supplies for the journey. Come to us as soon as you are ready. We will await you here.'

He smiled with slight embarrassment. 'If it would not trouble you too much,' he said, 'I would find it agreeable to spend the night aboard the boat. Then you will have no need to wait for me.'

Seeing that I meant it, the pilot approached the young man and, in halting Latin, established the fact that we were Christian pilgrims and not vicious thieves bent on slitting his belly and dumping his corpse in the river at first opportunity. What Roupen made of this assurance, I cannot say. But Sarn certainly seemed pleased to have sworn the innocence of his intentions.

We gave our noble passenger the bottom of the boat for his bed; Sarn slept on the tiller bench, and Pdraig and I slept on the wharf. As soon as the port began to stir the next morning, we bought the few things we needed and, with a prayer to speed us on our way, set off up river.

Sailing on a river is more tedious than navigation by sea. It is not without certain benefits, however. If the wind fails, you can always get out and walk along the bank and, if necessary - when confronted by strong currents, or a contrary wind - you can tow the boat. Also, since a river runs only where it will, there is less chance of losing your way. The Franks called the river Seine, and it was to be our constant companion for a good many days.

Roupen said that the next town we should come to would be Paris, which we would reach in five days. In fact, we reached it in four days. We paused only long enough to gather a few more provisions, and then set off again straightaway, for the merchants of Paris were a haughty, imperious tribe, and over-envious of the gold in our purses.

As we began to adjust to this new way of voyaging, I found the days most pleasant. Sometimes we walked, and sometimes we sailed; occasionally, we towed the boat with ropes tied to the bow. Even going with the current, it was hard work, but there were three of us to spell one another, so no one had to bear the brunt of the labour too long. Still, at the end of a day's towing, we were heartily glad we had only a fishing boat and not a fully laden longship.

The weather remained warm, for the most part, and exceedingly dry, as we

than the rest of us, but undertook such chores as he was able with never a breath of complaint.

As Roupen's stomach could not take heavier meat, we fed him with fish from the river. Sarn grew very adept at catching fine brown trout which we enjoyed almost as much as the mackerel we got at home. Roupen appeared fascinated by Sarn's ability to tease the fish out of the dark water. He watched with such fierce concentration whenever Sarn threw out the line, that the seaman undertook to teach him. By way of exchange, the young man offered to help Sarn with his Latin.

The two of them became good friends. Sarn is of a cautious disposition; he gives away little of himself unless he is satisfied his gift will not be squandered, or belittled. He saw in Roupen someone who would honour his friendship; and the young lord found a steadfast companion who did not demand anything of him save simple kindness.

Consequently, under Sarn's affable instruction, Roupen began to lose some of the stiff wariness in his demeanour. One day, he startled us all by laughing out loud at something Sarn was attempting to say. He threw back his head, clutched his sides, and shook with mirth, while we looked on in amazement as the veil of melancholy with which he habitually cloaked himself was suddenly ripped away, revealing a young man who, I suspect, had not known a moment's solitary delight in years.

His outburst intrigued me, but I did not like to embarrass him, so I waited until the next day to ask him about it. Sarn and Padraig were towing the boat, I was minding the tiller, and Roupen was braiding a bit of rope Sarn had given him for practice.

'What is it like for you at home?'

When I asked how his people had managed to make so many enemies, he explained that it was ever thus. 'The Latin church does not recognize our faith,' he said mournfully. 'They think us worse than infidels, and Byzantium will not rest until they have brought us under the rule of the emperor. Also, since we are first and foremost Christians, the Muhammedans harass and abuse us at every turn.'

'It was for that reason my father sent the delegation to the king of the Franks. It was our hope that we might form an alliance with one or more rulers in the West who could use their authority to prevent the crusaders from attacking us. In return, we would offer to help them maintain the pilgrim roads and keep their pilgrims safe from thieves and Turks.'

'Did the king listen?'

Roupen shook his head sadly. 'The chance never came. We made proper representations to his advisors and courtiers, who accepted our gifts and promised to bring our concerns before the king, but the day of audience was always delayed for one reason or another. When the king finally deigned to see us, the sickness had done its work and there was no one left - except me, and I was too ill to keep my head upright, let alone hold lengthy converse with the king.' He sighed, and his shoulders slumped. 'By the time I was well enough to speak to him, the king had long since gone away with his courtiers to his hunting estates in the north.'

'At least you are alive to try again,' I pointed out. 'No doubt that is why God has spared you - so you can help your people.'

'Perhaps,' he conceded reluctantly. 'Although, I have never understood why God does anything. If the Lord of Hosts wanted me to help, my people, he might simply have allowed me to speak with the king as we had

myself dreaming about what might be happening at home in Scotland.

I thought about you, dearest Gait, and wondered what you were doing at that very moment. I imagined you picking berries with Ragna, or chasing the geese with a willow switch. I thought about Abbot Emlyn, and it gave me some comfort to know that whatever befell us on this journey, he would be praying for us. This put me in mind of the true purpose of my pilgrimage - a thing which I had not shared with a single living soul, not even Padraig. I knew I would have to tell him one day soon, but thought it would not hurt to wait a little longer.

As it happened, that day was a Sabbath, so when we camped for the night, Padraig performed a worship service for us. I sat on the riverbank, listening to his clear, strong voice singing the ancient words in Gaelic while one-by-one the timid stars kindled and took light; I sat there thinking I had never heard anything so beautiful, and wished Rhona was with me to share it.

Although the days seemed to pass in lazy, almost effortless succession, we were all the time growing closer to the most difficult portion of our journey: the portage over the hills leading to the Saone valley.

Upon our arrival at the settlement which marked the end of the navigable stream, we found men who earned their living by hauling boats and passengers and goods from one valley to the other. For a fee, they were prepared to guarantee safe passage overland to the next river. As Roupen had dealt with these men before, he undertook to make the arrangements. Sarn was not content to entrust his boat to rough-handed strangers, so he accompanied the young lord to help him choose an acceptable carrier for our vessel.

They returned a short while later well satisfied with the arrangements they

at your service.'

'We were told you would come this morning,' I snapped. 'We have been standing here all day.'

Dodu apologized and explained that on setting out that morning, he noticed one of the axles on his wagon had split and the repair had taken longer than he hoped. He would have sent his boy along to tell us, he said, but the child had injured his foot and stayed at home.

The haulier spoke plainly, his Latin the uncomplicated speech of a child. He smiled and spread his hands. 'Starting off with a broken axle would never do,' he said. 'Such things only get worse, never better.' I agreed with him, and he set about his work, humming cheerfully to himself and calling endearments to his docile pair of brown-and-white spotted oxen.

The wagon was little more than two sets of wheels on heavy axles joined by a strong iron chain which could be adjusted according to the size of the boat to be carried. Once he had pulled the boat from the water, we raised the bow of the craft by way of long poles, and attached the front wheels with ropes. The oxen, straining at their wooden yokes, pulled the craft higher up the bank, and we levered up the stern and attached the rear wheels. We then replaced all the goods and rigging back in the boat, and lashed the mast to the bow and stern. By the time we finished, the sun was well down and we were growing hungry. Nevertheless, I was anxious to get at least a little further along the trail before stopping for the night. So, we made a start.

As it had been dry for many days, the road the boatmen used was high and well-kept. We moved out from the trees which grew along the river, and started up a long, rising slope towards the crest of the first hill. The heat of

valley the way we had come.

The river was hidden by the trees which formed a dark, ruffled line stretching away into the gathering twilight. The soft night air smelled of dry grass and sage; the scent of wood smoke drifted up from the valley. A stone wall separated the road from a small field. Twilight was deepening around us, so we decided to halt there for the night. Sarn made a fire, and Padraig busied himself cooking a porridge of dried peas and barley, which we ate with hard black bread.

After the meal, Padraig sang a song, and Dodu told us a story about a man from his village who found an image of the Holy Virgin in the moss on the side of his cattle byre. Everyone came to see this wonder, including the lord and the local priest, who declared it a miracle, and commanded that the image be accorded all respect.

The man's wife had gone blind the previous winter, he explained, and when the woman was brought before the cow byre, her eyes began to sting. 'Tears fell in a very flood,' the haulier told us. 'She cried out and wiped her eyes with the hem of her mantle, and when she raised her head, her eyesight was restored.'

Roupen listened, idly stirring the fire with a stick. 'Was anyone else healed by this miraculous image?' he asked, his face illumined by the glowing embers.

'Alas, no,' replied Dodu. 'Word spread far and wide, of course, and the sick and lame began to come in their numbers.'

'What happened?' wondered Sarn.

'It rained, and the image washed away. From that day to this,' he

woman's sight restored, why did he not simply heal her? Better still, why - if he wanted to help the poor woman - did he allow her to go blind in the first place?'

'Who are you,' demanded Dodu angrily, 'that you know the ways of the Lord God Almighty?'

'I am no one,' replied Roupen, his voice sinking in dejection. 'Please, do not upset yourself over anything I have said. It is merely the buzzing of a gnat in your ear, nothing more.'

With that, he snapped the stick in half and tossed it into the fire. He drew up his knees to his chin, and sat staring into the fire, but said nothing more the rest of the night. Talk dwindled after that, and we fell asleep where we lay - waking at dawn to continue on. We made slow but steady progress throughout the next day, and had the road to ourselves, passing no one in either direction. We camped for the night beside the road as before, only to be awakened just before dawn by the sound of horses coming up the hill.

I heard the faint cllop of the hooves and awoke at once. Pdraig rose and stood beside me. 'How many?' he asked, peering into the darkness. 'Can you see them?'

'No,' I told him. 'Two or three at least, maybe more.'

The moon had set, and although I could hear the riders coming nearer with every step, I could not see them. 'Wake the others,' I told him. 'There may be trouble.'

The monk had just turned to his task when a voice called out. 'Ho! What have we here?'

'Since you are in a hurry, I replied, 'please do not allow us to delay you. There is the road, and you are welcome to it.'

Still smiling, he looked across to the boat, and the oxen which were tethered nearby. 'That is a heavy chore,' he observed, 'hauling boats over hills. Perhaps we can do you a service.'

'We have no money,' I told him bluntly. 'We could not pay you.'

'Did I say anything about payment?' the man asked, as if aggrieved by my suggestion. 'I am certain we can come to an agreeable arrangement.' He made a motion with his hands, and his comrades came forwards. I heard the cold ring of steel as swords were drawn from hangers, and three more riders appeared, short swords in their fists.

Padraig, having roused the others, came to stand beside me. 'In the name of Christ,' he said softly, 'leave us in peace.'

The foremost rider's smile turned nasty as he drew his sword from beneath his cloak. 'We mean to lighten your load, friends, nothing more. Give us no trouble, and you'll get none. Get up, all of you! Stand over there.' He directed us a few paces away.

Padraig and I obeyed at once. The haulier, groggy with sleep and rubbing his eyes, stumbled forwards complaining. Sarn, glowering and muttering in Norse, came next. Roupen, wary but silent, followed; as he stepped from the road to take his place beside me, I saw his hand twitch at his stomach, and his belt slid free. He dropped it to the ground behind him.

While the leader of the thieves kept watch over us, his men began tossing everything out of the boat. They worked with such deftness and quick purpose, I could see they were well accustomed to their labour.

moaned and fell sprawling in the dust. Padraig started to his aid.

Swinging around to face us once more, the thief said, 'You there! Stand still, or you'll get the same.'

I pulled Padraig back. 'Just get on with it,' I growled. 'Take it and leave.'

Having secured the oxen, one of the thieves began leading them away. The others returned to their horses and climbed into their saddles. 'You see? We are happy to oblige.' Pointing with the tip of his sword, he indicated Roupen's purse on the ground. 'Now then, if you will kindly hand me that belt and purse, we will be on our way.'

Roupen made no move, but glared stubbornly ahead, his mouth clamped shut in defiance. So, the bandit chief called to one of his men who retrieved the belt, and then searched the young lord roughly from head to foot. Finding nothing else, he passed the belt and purse to his master, who snatched it up. The rogue wheeled his mount and started away. 'Kill them,' he called over his shoulder.

The thug swung towards us, brandishing his sword. I could see him trying to work out which of us to murder first. As Roupen was the nearest, and the weakest, he decided to begin the slaughter with him. I waited until he turned towards the young man, and then simply stretched out my foot and tripped him as he passed. The brute sprawled forwards on his hands and knees, but failed to release his grip on the sword. The blade struck the dirt, and bent near the hilt. Stepping quickly forwards, I stomped down hard on his forearm just above the wrist and heard a crisp snap. The brigand yelped in surprise and pain, as I bent down and snatched the weapon from his unresisting fingers.

'Get up,' I told him. He sat up slowly, scowling at me and rubbing his

secure for the next magistrate we meet.'

With Padraig on one side and myself on the other, we gently raised the inert bulk of the unlucky haulier into a sitting position. We were just steadying him when I heard Sarn shout. I looked up to see him rolling on his backside, his legs kicking in the air as the thug made for his horse. With three great bounds he gained the saddle, lashed his mount to speed, and raced after his now-distant comrades, leaving us to ourselves once more.

There was nothing to be done in the dark, so, as Padraig tended the goose-egg on Dodu's head, I built up the fire again and then we all settled down to wait for the dawn. Daylight confirmed that Sarn was right: the bandits had indeed robbed us of everything - except the boat, and that could not be moved without a team of oxen.

'How far is the next settlement?' I asked the haulier.

'Far enough,' he replied sorrowfully. 'Those oxen are my living. Without them I am destitute. Ruined!' He grabbed his head and moaned. 'I am ruined.'

'How far?' I asked again. 'Tell me, Dodu.'

He thought for a moment. 'If this is the first hill... ,' he began.

'It is,' I confirmed. 'We passed no others. This was the first.'

'Then there are three more hills before the next settlement - a half day's walk,' he sighed, closing his eyes.

'Half a day ahead, and two behind,' I said. 'I guess we go on.'

'But we will get no help there. It is two farms and a pigsty only. They have

it rocked forwards slightly.

'What are you thinking?' asked Padraig. 'We cannot pull the boat all the way to the river.'

'We cannot leave it here,' objected Sarn quickly. 'If you do, you leave me behind as well. I will not abandon my boat.'

'Peace!' I told him. 'I am not for abandoning the boat. If we can haul it to the next settlement, you and Roupén can stay there and guard it while we walk to the mill.'

Padraig gazed down the slope before us, and up the long rising incline to the next crest in the distance. 'It grows no shorter for staring at it,' I told him.

'Then we had best get started.'

Using the ropes with which we had towed the boat on the river, I attached them to the stern. 'Two men on each rope,' I said, handing one of the ends to Padraig. 'We will lower the boat down the hill a step at a time.'

'And the fifth man?' wondered Sarn.

'He will stand ready to place a beam under the wheels to stop the wagon if it begins to roll too fast.'

'Where will we get this beam?' asked Dodu.

I looked at the mast, but it was too long and unwieldy for one person alone. Also, I did not wish to risk damaging it beneath the wheels of the wagon. 'We will use stones until we can find a tree branch large enough.'

Thus, with Padraig and Sarn on one rope, Dodu and me on the other, and Roupen carrying two large stones borrowed from the wall beside the road, we began. At first it appeared we would have an easy time of it. Once we got the wagon onto the road, the slope fell away so gradually that we had only to keep the rope taut to prevent the boat from rolling too fast. Halfway down the hill, the haulier said, 'This is not so bad. Now I know how my team feels in yoke.'

'Wait until we start up the other side before you decide whether you wish to change places with your oxen,' Padraig remarked.

backward after each hard pull of the rope had gained us a few precious paces.

By dint of hard work we reached the top of the hill by midday, and stopped for another rest. We looked both ways along the road, but saw no other travellers, nor any signs of habitation anywhere nearby. Pdraig found a small spring in a rocky cleft low down at the side of the hill. We all went down to drink our fill, and then climbed the hill once more to sit in the shade of the boat.

We dozed through the heat of the day, and then rose once more to our work, taking up the ropes with stiff hands. Again, the downward slope was gentle, and we made short work of it, reaching the bottom of the hill in less than half the time the ascent required.

The next hill appeared but little steeper than the one we had passed that morning, so I was confident we could reach the top by nightfall. 'We will camp for the night up there,' I said, exhorting my exhausted little band. 'There are some trees for shelter. I think we best move along if we are to finish before dark.'

This brought groans of displeasure as we resumed our places once more. We were well tired now; the day's labour had worn away our strength. Each step was a struggle for but small advance. In the end, my hope of reaching the hilltop by nightfall proved wildly optimistic. The moon rose while we were yet but halfway to the top, and the stars were alight in the clear blue heavens long before we put the stones behind the wheels for the last time and fell sprawling into the long grass beneath the trees. Too tired to talk, we slept where we dropped.

The next day was much like the one before - save that we were stiff and

were forced to push. The day passed in a haze of sweat and blistering sunlight. The muscles in my shoulders, back, and legs knotted; my throat grew dry and my tongue seemed to swell in my mouth. My feet tangled time and again, so that I had to struggle to stay upright. Each slow, agonizing step became a battle of will and determination as we fought our way to the top where we collapsed in the middle of the road to lay gasping and staring up at the sky, the sweat running from our bodies in rivulets. After a time, I sat up and looked down into the valley. As Dodu had said, the settlement was little more than two clusters of buildings huddled together beside the road with fields on either side; there was a small stone enclosure for pigs, a few hayracks, a raised storehouse, and a stand of trees beyond the fields. It may not have been much, but, God be praised, it was not far, and the slope was not steep.

The end is in sight, I told them; the hard work is over. We have but to ease the wagon down the hill and rest is ours - food and drink as well. 'We will eat and drink tonight,' I said, 'and sleep on straw. Come! Our supper awaits.'

'I wonder if they have any beer?' said Sarn.

'I will gladly settle for bread and water,' remarked Padraig.

'Listen to you now,' said the haulier, still puffing as he climbed laboriously to his feet. 'Down there lives the woman who makes the best ale from the Seine to the Saone - and smoked pork chops, too. I always buy a few whenever I pass.'

'Why have you kept this from us till now?' demanded Sarn. 'You should be telling us this from the first.'

'I did not want to cause you an injury,' replied Dodu. 'Thinking about such

Before I knew it, Padraig and I were plummeting down the hill, trying desperately to slow the free-wheeling wagon. Roupen dashed to our aid. He ran up and shoved the tree branch in front of the wheels, but the wagon was already moving too fast. The wheels bumped over the branch and kept on rolling.

There was nothing for it, but to throw off the ropes and save ourselves. Padraig stumbled, still clinging to the rope, and was dragged through the dust. 'Let go, Padraig!' I shouted, releasing my grip.

The boat sped down the slope, rattling and creaking as it bumped over the close-rutted road. Faster and faster it fell, slewing this way and that, gathering pace with astonishing swiftness as it careened down the hill.

Padraig climbed to his feet and brushed himself off. 'Pray God it does not hit the house,' he said.

Even as he spoke, one of the wagon wheels struck the side of the rut. The front wheels bounced and turned, sending the wagon onto a new course - straight for the nearest dwelling. Padraig raced past me, shouting with all his might. 'Danger!' he cried. 'Danger! Get out of the way!'

What anyone might have made of this warning, I cannot say. But suddenly we were all flying down the hill after the runaway boat. Despite our fatigue and aching muscles, we ran like madmen for the settlement, shouting for all we were worth. 'Danger! Get away!'

The on-rushing wagon struck a bump in the road and veered into the long grass growing beside the road; the grass brushed against the hull of the boat and slowed the plummeting wagon somewhat.

A stone wall forming part of the pig enclosure stood beside the house. The

Sarn, two steps behind me, came running up. 'Is the boat damaged?' He climbed up onto the hull and looked inside.

Roupen, his thin limbs trembling with excitement, came to stand beside me. 'Never in my life have I seen such a thing,' he said, his voice quavering as he gulped down air. 'It was ...' he paused to find the word he wanted, '... magnificent!'

'The hull is unharmed!' announced Sarn, much relieved.

'I wonder where everyone has gone?' said Padraig, moving around the corner of the house to search the yard on the other side.

'Is no one here?' asked Roupen. He put his head in through the collapsed wall, looked quickly, and then said, 'That is a mercy. Someone might have been killed.'

Sarn climbed out of the boat and began examining the place where the hull had scraped against the wall. Padraig reappeared to tell us that there were no animals in the pens, or in the barn, and no one in the fields behind the houses. Then he disappeared again, to search the buildings across the road.

'Is there any ale?' asked Dodu strolling up at last. Red-faced and puffing from the unaccustomed exertion, he sat down on the rim of a wagon wheel and drew his sleeve across his sweating face. 'I am dying.'

'There is no one here,' I informed him.

'Impossible,' replied the haulier. 'In all the years I have been coming this way, there is always someone here.'

'Look for yourself,' I said. 'The house is empty, and so are the fields.'

Padraig returned just then with a wooden bucket in his hands. 'I found the

'Perhaps,' he said unhappily. 'We will have to see.' He walked away shaking his head.

'What should we do now?' asked Roupen.

'Padraig has found meal and water,' I replied. 'Let us see if we can find anything else to eat.'

While Dodu and Roupen searched the farm houses, Padraig and I set about making a fire in the yard. I took wood from the pile beside the door, and a flint and iron from inside the now-ruined house. While I struggled with lighting the fire, Padraig found a cooking pot and filled it with water from the well. He took a quantity of ground meal from a bag in the storehouse, and added it to the water. He then brought the pot to me and, when the fire was going sufficiently, he placed it on the flames, and sat down to keep watch over it.

Dodu and Roupen emerged from the neighbouring house, the young lord with a small bag in one hand and a bowl in the other. Dodu carried a crock and a wooden cup. 'I knew there would be ale,' he said, placing the crock carefully at his feet. He sat down and began to pour out the sweet brown liquid.

'I found salt,' said Roupen, offering me the bag. From the bowl, he produced two large eggs, and a wedge of hard, milky-white cheese. He handed the eggs to Padraig, saying, 'Maybe we could boil them.'

'I have a better idea,' replied the monk. Taking the bowl from Roupen's hand, he cracked the two eggs against the side and emptied them into the bowl. Then, taking the cheese, he broke off a portion and proceeded to crumble it into the bowl, whereupon he reached in and stirred the eggs and

We passed the ale cup around the circle to occupy ourselves while we waited for the pot to boil. Sarn, having decided that his mast might wait until he had a bite to eat, joined us and demanded his share of the ale, which Dodu reluctantly supplied. After a time, the pot began to boil, and Padraig stirred it with his stick. Sarn went into the house to see if Dodu had overlooked any jars of ale. I lay back and closed my eyes, and listened to the pot burbling away. The smell of the porridge brought the water to my mouth, and my stomach growled. I was just remembering the last meal I had eaten before leaving home, when I felt a touch on my arm.

I opened my eyes, and saw Roupen kneeling over me; his eyes were on the yard behind us. I rolled over and looked where he was staring and saw only the trees of the wood behind the field. 'What do you see?' I asked.

'Someone is there,' he whispered.

Padraig stopped stirring; he placed the stick across the top of the pot, and gazed into the deep-shadowed wood.

'Are you certain?' I asked. The young man nodded. I stood and motioned Padraig to my side. 'We will go have a look. You stay here and guard that pot,' I told Roupen.

Padraig and I walked to the end of the yard, and started across the field, watching the trees for any sign of movement, but could see nothing in the shade. We halted at the edge of the field, and I called into the wood. 'Come out! We have seen you. There is nothing to fear. We need your help. Come out so we can talk to you.'

We waited. No sound or movement came from the wood. I started to shout again, but Padraig said, 'Let me try.' He advanced a few more paces alone, and raised his hands in priestly blessing. 'Pax vobiscum! In the name of

more. Perhaps Roupen was mistaken, I thought; no doubt, hunger had him seeing things. Before I could suggest this to Padraig, however, I heard a rustle in the leaves and out from the forest stepped a wizened old man with a small knife in one hand, and a broken tree branch in the other. His wrinkled face was set in a glare of defiance as he challenged us to do our worst.

'Peace, father,' Padraig said. 'We are pilgrims, and mean no harm.'

The old man came on a pace or two further and then halted. He raised the broken branch in his hand and pointed it at Padraig. 'Are you a priest, truly?' he asked in crude Latin.

'I am,' replied Padraig, still holding out his hands. 'Come, let us break bread together, and you can tell us what happened here.'

The man threw down his rude weapon and gave a nod of approval to the two old women cowering behind him. 'All is well,' he called. 'That one is a priest.'

At this the women ran forwards and fell upon Padraig; they seized his hands and began kissing them, and crying aloud praises to God. The monk allowed himself to be handled for a moment, and then turned and herded his new flock towards the house.

Upon reaching the yard, they went at once to where Roupén was waiting beside the pot of porridge, and stood looking longingly at the steaming, bubbling food. Sarn and Dodu appeared just then, having searched the second house to no avail.

The old people recognized the haulier and ran to him. 'Dodu! Dodu!' they cried and began gabbling at him in a strange language. He patted them on

been hiding.'

The old women nodded vigorously and pointed to the woods behind them. It seems they had seen us coming down the hill and, fearing another attack, had run into the woods. That had probably saved them from injury when the boat came crashing through their house. I pointed this out, and then led them to the side of the house and showed them the wreckage. They clucked their tongues and muttered to one another, but all-in-all appeared far more interested in the porridge than the ruin of their poor dwelling.

One of the old wives crawled into the house through the hole in the wall, and began rummaging around in the debris. She brought out some wooden bowls, and passed them to her friend. From another corner, she produced a bag and passed that to me. When I opened it, I found hard bread in small loaves. Next she found a wooden ladle, which she carried to the boiling pot and, with a flick of her hand, dismissed Roupon from his post.

Settling herself beside the pot, she dipped in the ladle, blew on the food to cool it, and then tasted. She puckered her lips, and then called a command to the old man, who hurried away at a trot. He went to the storehouse and disappeared inside — emerging a few moments later carrying a brown bundle the size of a baby, which he brought to his wife.

She lay the bundle in her lap, and unwrapped the cloth to reveal a fine side of smoke-cured bacon. Taking a small knife from her sleeve, she began cutting off strips of meat and dropping them into the porridge. Next, the old man produced two onions which she also cut up and stirred into the pot with the ladle.

In a little while, the aroma wafting up from the pot had improved

That night the old women made flat bread on the hearthstones, and stewed bacon in ale; they then wrapped the strips of meat in the bread and gave them to us to eat like that. It was simple fare, but good and filling, and we slept that night without the gnawing ache in our stomachs - except for Roupen, whose unsteady stomach could not abide such rough food. He ate with us, but paid the price with pains and bloaty farting which kept him wakeful and miserable all night. Early the next morning, while the others slept, Padraig and I set off for the mill on the Sa6ne.

I had decided that our best hope lay in getting to the river head as soon as possible. If we were lucky, we might persuade one of the hauliers to leave the river and return with us to retrieve our boat. How to pay for this service was a vexing problem, but inasmuch as we had, according to Dodu, at least a three-day walk ahead of us, I was confident we would think of something along the way.

In any event, it was abundantly clear there was no help for us at the settlement. They were poor farmers, made all the poorer by the cruel robbery of their livestock and few pitiful belongings; even to stay with them put that much more strain on their already fragile resources. Indeed, it would be enough of a hardship feeding those who remained behind: Sarn and Dodu, to guard the boat, and Roupen to rest and strengthen himself.

At least Sarn and Dodu would work for their food, for I had promised the farmer while we were away the two men would repair the damage done to their little house. Roupen, however, I advised to take his ease. On the evidence of his indigestion the previous night, it was clear that he was far from fully recovered from the illness that had taken the lives of his friends. What little strength he had gained while on the river had been spent in

needing my help.' I thanked him for the thought, and said, 'As it is, Padraig and I are perfectly capable of dealing with the hauliers. You may as well rest and take your ease for the journey to come.'

'No doubt your powers of persuasion rival those of Great Moses himself,' replied the young lord. 'But unless the hauliers of the Saone are very different from those we have seen so far,' he replied, 'I think it unlikely you will convince them to work for you without pay.'

I allowed that this was true, and pointed out that he had lost his purse to the bandits as well. 'Since you have no money, I cannot see how you mean to help in the matter.'

The thin young man smiled at this, and raised his fist in the air. He came forwards until his hand was before my eyes; then he opened his fingers to reveal the large gold ring he had been wearing on his thumb the night we were robbed.

'I thought they took everything from you,' I said. 'I saw them search you.'

'I hid it in my mouth the moment Padraig wakened me.' He smiled suddenly, and I saw a boldness in him I had not seen before. 'And if they had searched me better, I would have swallowed it.'

It came into my mind that here was a young man who, perhaps for the first time in his life, was truly enjoying himself. Content no longer to be left behind, he had followed us half the day just to take part in whatever would happen next. Sending him back would be a rejection not easily forgiven. Since it obviously meant so much to him, I relented.

'Come along, then,' I said, passing him my waterskin and a piece of bread. 'We will be glad of the company.'

mill, so we passed by quickly and on towards the settlement. As we hurried past, Roupen halted in the road and turned around.

Padraig and I walked on a few paces before realizing he was no longer with us. I cast a glance over my shoulder and saw him standing stock still, and staring into the field beside the mill where the miller kept his oxen and cattle. The field was small, and surrounded by a low stone wall; two cows and a pair of oxen stood at the end nearest the mill. I called to Roupen, and when he made no answer, Padraig said, 'He has seen something.'

Still anxious to hasten on and speak to the hauliers, I resented having to stop with our destination so near. 'What is it?' I demanded irritably.

Without taking his eyes from the field, he raised a hand and pointed to the cattle. 'Those are Dodu's oxen,' the young lord said.

I looked across at the two big animals standing in the field, and said, 'Let us not judge hastily. After all, one ox looks very much like another.'

'They are,' Roupen insisted. 'I walked behind them long enough to know.' Pointing to the two milk cows, he added, 'And I suspect those cows belong to the farmer.'

I glanced at Padraig, who shrugged unhelpfully, and said, 'Even if what you say is true, I cannot see what we can do about it. We have other —'

Before I could finish, there came a prodigious squealing from somewhere behind the mill. Roupen started towards the sound. 'Someone is being killed,' he said.

'Aye,' agreed Padraig mildly, 'a pig.'

The squeal came again, more frenzied, more terrible. The unfortunate

That stone paving, however, was the solitary gesture towards order or cleanliness. As we drew closer the stink of the place hit us full in the face: dung and rancid straw stood in mucky heaps either side of the low barn adjoining the house, filling the air with a sour stench to make the eyes water and the gorge rise. Mounds of human excrement were piled on the ground beneath the upper windows of the millhouse, and dog dirt was scattered over the yard - along with horse manure left where the dray animals had dropped it.

'Our miller is a very earthy fellow,' observed Pdraig.

The house itself was in need of repair; the roof had once been handsome red tiles, but many of these were missing - and indeed quite a few lay smashed in the yard - though some had been replaced with ill-fitting chunks of flat stone. The mill wheel was green with moss, which clung in dripping slimy beards from the spokes and paddles.

The door of the barn had fallen off, and was leaning against one wall; and the wall of the ox pen was collapsed, the gap repaired not with the stone, which still lay on the ground, but with tree branches and bits of rope. A pair of bony, thin-shanked brown oxen stood with their heads down, lacking, I expect, the strength to move. Sharing the too-small pen were five fat pigs laying in the dung, their feet bound.

At the far end of the yard lay an enormous round grinding stone which was turned by means of a pole attached to a centre post. If not for the four men standing nearby, I would have thought the mill derelict and abandoned. But I saw the old grindstone and realized that this was what Dodu had been talking about when he said the miller kept oxen: when dry summer turned the stream to a bare trickle no longer capable of turning the

concerning his efforts, the boy was enthusiastically torturing the animal. He had already put out both eyes, and carved a long, bloody slice of hide from the back. Now, he had the spear thrust up the wretched creature's backside, and was jerking the shaft back and forth while the bawling pig, its feet tied so it could not escape, spewed blood from its mouth as it shrieked.

The expression of demented glee on the boy's face filled me with cold rage. That this should be allowed was abhorrent; that it should be encouraged was monstrous. I started forwards, and felt Padraig's hand on my arm, pulling me back. 'Be careful,' he warned. 'There is great evil in this place.'

Shaking off his hand, I said, 'They should be punished for what they are doing.'

'They will be punished, never doubt it,' he assured me. 'But you may not be the instrument of that punishment. God, I think, has other plans for you.'

'Then what would you have me do?' I demanded.

'It may be our presence will suffice to shame them,' he said.

'And if not?'

'It is in God's hands, Duncan.' He stared at me. 'Truly.'

'Oh, very well,' I relented. I took a deep breath, and put aside my anger; when I had calmed myself once more, I proceeded towards the men, calling out to let them know we were there. At my greeting, one of the men turned slowly and regarded us with dull malevolence.

'What do you want?' he said, his deep voice sharp with irritation at having been interrupted in his pleasure.

The big man spun around angrily. 'And are you deaf as well as stupid?' he growled, spittle flying from his fleshy lips.

At his shout, two of the men with him turned. One of them bent down and picked up a chunk of wood which was lying beside the grindstone, hefting it like a club.

'I would not ask,' I told the man, 'if need were not great. A few days, no more - and the beasts would be well treated.' I said this last to embarrass him, but he took no notice.

'This is a mill, not a stable!' he roared. 'Get you gone before I set the dogs on you!' He kicked at a lump of dog dirt and sent it flying at me.

The man with the chunk of wood raised it in the air and made as if he would attack. Since there was nothing to be gained by provoking them further, I quickly retreated. I had taken but a step or two when I felt a sharp thump on my back as the wood chunk struck me between the shoulder blades. I did not look back, but straightened and continued on to the sound of the miller and his friends laughing at me.

'Well?' demanded the young lord as I rejoined them. 'Was he the man who robbed us?'

'No,' I told him, 'this man is older and heavier. Even so, the resemblance is too strong to be happenstance.'

Padraig nodded in agreement. 'Brothers then?'

'That is my guess,' I said.

'Be they brothers, sisters, or husband and wife,' snarled Roupen with unusual fury, 'I say those pie-bald oxen belong to Dodu, and the pigs were

Roupen frowned with dissatisfaction. 'Cowards,' he muttered.

Padraig stepped close. 'He means,' explained the monk, resting his hand on the young man's shoulder, 'that having been as meek as doves, now we will become as shrewd as serpents to bring a measure of justice to bear on the crimes of these wicked men.'

'We gave the brute a chance to treat us courteously and fairly,' I said, 'now we will do business in a way he understands.'

'What are you going to do?' asked Roupen.

'Wait and see,' I told him, striding on.

We laid up in a neighbouring field under a rack of drying hay, dozing on and off through the long afternoon. The rest through the heat of the day was welcome, and it was not until the sun began to set that we stirred. I had taken the measure of the millhouse and yard, and knew how I wished to proceed.

My only worry was the dogs the miller had mentioned. Although I had not seen the beasts, I had seen ample sign of them in the lumps of dung scattered across the filth-covered yard. I did not know how many there might be, nor whether they were large and fierce, or small and noisy.

'The oxen will trouble us not at all,' I told my fellow-thieves. 'It is the pigs that will prove difficult. Even if we can avoid rousing the dogs, the pigs will squeal as soon as we go among them.'

We talked about this for a time, and then Padraig said, 'Leave the pigs to me. I will take care of them.' With that he rose and walked out into the field where he lay down on his stomach and stretched out his arms on either side.

'What is he doing?' wondered Roupen.

'Praying,' I said.

'For pigs?'

should anyone come along, Pdraig and I hurried to the field where Douu's oxen were being held. It was as I expected: the wall was ill-made and half-falling down, and the animals had not been stabled for the night, nor cared for in any way, but merely left out in the field to browse as they would. We quickly found a weak place in the wall, leaned hard against it, and pushed it down.

We then began shifting the fallen stones to clear a path through the breach. Thus, we had only to remove enough stones to lead the oxen out, and our aim was swiftly accomplished. Hurrying into the field, I loosed the patient beasts' hobbles and led them out while Pdraig followed with the milk cows.

Rejoining Roupén on the road, I said, 'We have what we came for, we can leave now and all will be well. If we proceed any further, we may lose everything.' I looked at my fellow-conspirators. 'What is it to be?'

'If you do not free those pigs, I will,' declared Roupén firmly. 'It is not right those rogues should prosper so.'

'The pigs are nothing to us,' Pdraig pointed out. 'But they are life or death for the farmer and his wife and sister. I think we should try.'

'Very well,' I said, 'we are agreed. Whatever happens, there will be no looking back in regret.' Turning to the young lord, I said, 'Lead the cattle away. We will join you on the road.'

'I am going with you,' he replied.

'Oxen are slow and easily overtaken,' I told him patiently. 'If we are followed, it would be well if you were out of sight.'

'I am going with you,' Roupén repeated, crossing his arms over his chest.

I do not see any dogs, I whispered. They must be inside.

'Or sleeping,' suggested Roupen.

'Either way, we must go quietly so we do not wake them.'

We moved with all stealth across the yard. The stink of the place struck me like a slap in the face. A pile of entrails and offal marked the place where the pig had been killed, and these added their sick-sweet pungence to the heady reek. We made short work of dismantling the decrepit enclosure - indeed, we had to be careful the wall did not collapse of its own and the resulting crash wake the miller and his dogs.

When we had opened a sizeable breach, I turned to Pdraig. 'If you know any runes for silencing pigs,' I whispered, 'say them now.'

To my surprise, he said, 'I have already done so.' He then instructed Roupen and me to move well away and remain still.

Then, stepping to the breached wall, the canny monk paused, pressed his hands together and bowed his head. After a moment, he crossed himself and entered the pen. He proceeded to go among the pigs, stooping over them to unbind their feet and moving on, speaking softly to them all the while. He soon had them on their feet, and then, with a gentle urging, led them out into the yard. They followed at his heels like faithful dogs.

He did not stop as he passed us, but walked briskly from the yard and out onto the road - and even then he did not stop, but continued walking back the way we had come. Casting a last glance at the millhouse to see if we had been discovered, I said to Roupen, 'We had best hurry and fetch the cattle, or Pdraig and his pigs will leave us behind.'

The moon had risen higher and the road stretched out before us as a softly

act, regularly astonished the settlement. It was as if a spring from which one drew water every day continually revealed hidden depths. They were Celts, of course, and this accounted for part of it. The abbey and its teaching was also partly responsible -how much, I had no way of knowing. But, Gait, I was very soon to discover that the Abbey of Saint Andrew was responsible for a great deal more than the peculiarities of a few of its clerics.

Once over the first hill and out of sight of the mill, Padraig stopped and allowed us to catch him. He stood in the road, surrounded by his herd as if by an adoring congregation. 'I would have waited for you,' he said, 'but I did not know how long the rune would hold. I thought it best to keep moving until we were well away from that vile house.'

'How did you do it?' wondered Roupen. 'If they had been mice, they could not have been more quiet.'

'I told them I was taking them home,' the monk explained. 'I asked them to be quiet so that the evil men who lived in the house would not come and stop us.'

'You did well,' I told him. 'No one awoke, and not so much as a snort from a sleeping dog.'

'And yet,' said Padraig looking down the road behind us, 'you were followed.'

I turned around, expecting the worst, and saw instead the two forlorn-looking oxen ambling along behind us. I suppose they had wandered through the hole in the pen and, seeing the other cattle, had simply followed the herd. 'What should we do?' asked Roupen.

While I did not relish the possibility of being caught with them -the others

overtake us.

At the bottom of one of the next hills, I found what I was looking for: a clump of trees no great distance from the road, yet tucked around the shoulder of the hillside mostly out of sight. So, while Padraig and Roupen led the animals into the wood, I pulled off a few branches from a broom-like bush and, walking back the top of the hill, began sweeping away the animal tracks in the dust.

The sun was rising when I finished and, taking a last look behind me, I ran for the shelter of the grove. It was made up of beech trees mostly, and although the nuts were not yet ripe, we pulled down a few branches for the pigs to chew on, before settling back to rest and wait. 'We will continue on at dusk,' I said, passing the water skin to Roupen. 'We will have to take it in turns to watch the animals so they do not wander away.'

Padraig took the first watch and Roupen the second; I went to sleep and woke around midday to the sound of tapping. After a quick look around, I found Roupen sitting on a rock with a stick in his hand; he was flicking the stick against the side of the rock as he watched the swine rooting for their food. 'Where is Padraig?' I asked.

'He said he heard something, and went to look at the road,' the young lord replied with a yawn. Raising the stick, he pointed out the way.

I ran back through the wood and joined Padraig as he was leaning against a tree. 'See anything?' I asked.

'Two men on horseback passed a little while ago,' he said. I asked if it was anyone we knew. 'It is difficult to say, but I think one of them we have seen before.'

In the end, the riders lifted the reins and moved on; we watched until they were out of sight, but remained alert after that. Aside from a shepherd leading a flock of sheep and goats, we saw no one else on the road the rest of the day, and at dusk we gathered our herd and took to the road once more. We walked through the night without encountering anything more troublesome than a foul-tempered badger who thought himself lord of the high way.

Dodu was overjoyed to have his oxen back, and the farmers were astonished to see the pigs and cattle returned. Like most peasants, they were intimately acquainted with hardship, but strangers to good fortune. Consequently, they did not know what to make of the sudden increase in their meagre wealth. They blinked their eyes and shook their heads as they patted the animals with their hands, all the while remarking how they had never witnessed such a miracle. I decided that they should have the extra pair of oxen; once the animals were fattened and their strength restored, they would be useful for pulling and ploughing.

When I told him this, tears came to the old farmer's eyes. Unable to speak, he seized my hand and began kissing it over and over. To Dodu, I said, 'Please tell him the oxen are not a gift. I merely repay the generosity of his hearth, and a modicum of compensation for nearly destroying his house.'

Dodu repeated my words, at which the farmer, embarrassed by my simple praise, bowed his head and shuffled away to look after his new animals. Afterward, Dodu came and told me that the farmers had been using the milk cows to prepare their fields for planting. 'And,' he said, 'when the animals tired, they pulled the plough themselves. Last year they were not able to plant both fields.' He smiled, and added, 'I think you have saved

Next morning we took our leave of the farmer; the women sent us off with little loaves of bread and a fair-sized piece of bacon. This they put in a bag which they pressed into Dodu's hands before scuttling off without a word. They watched us from the doorway of their newly-repaired house.

Three days later we descended the hill overlooking the settlement on the Saone. I considered trying to go around the mill and come to the river by some other way, but there were no other trails. So, we strode out boldly and moved as quickly as possible to the hauliers' landing.

On passing the mill, I allowed myself a sideways glance to see if we were discovered, but the house and yard were quiet; there was no one about. The landing was empty, too, so we wasted not a moment getting the boat back into the water. While Dodu and his oxen practised their trade, Roupén walked into the town to barter with the merchants for needed supplies.

A short while later, the boat was ready and I was anxious to be away lest the miller, or his thieving brother, become aware of our presence in the settlement. But the young lord had still not returned. 'What can be keeping him?' I muttered and, commanding Sarn and Padraig to remain in the boat and be ready to push off as soon as we returned, I went off in search of him.

I had no difficulty finding him. For, as I made my way along the narrow track between the houses of the town, I heard a commotion of angry voices as I entered the bare earth expanse which served as the market square for the settlement. A well stood in the centre of the square, and around it the stalls and wagons of the area's merchants and farmers.

Hurrying into the square, I saw a number of people gathered beside the

'You,' the ruffian said, recognizing me at once. Though it had been dark on the road that night, I knew him, too. The thief, so cheerful before, was angry now, and all the more dangerous for it. 'Step closer,' he said, 'and I will give you some of what your Jew is having. And then we will discuss the cattle I am missing.'

I made no move. 'Let him go,' I said. 'You can have no quarrel with him. He has done nothing to you.'

Someone from the crowd hollered, 'He's a stinking Jew! He stole a gold ring and tried to sell it.'

'He is not a Jew,' I told the crowd. 'He is a Christian. What is more, he is the son of Leo, Prince of Armenia, whose ring he wears - the very man this town must answer to if you harm his son and heir.' I paused to allow them to consider this, then added, 'Prince Leo commands ten thousand soldiers, while you have none ... unless you count this brute I see before me.'

A murmur of uncertainty rippled through the crowd - no longer so enthusiastic in their support of the beating as they were only moments before. One or two of the more timid among them crept away quietly.

'And who are you,' demanded the thief, 'to concern yourself with him?'

'I am his protector,' I replied. Ignoring the thug, I moved to Roupen's side and bent over him. 'Can you stand, my lord?' Still cowering, he nodded. 'Very well, let us be about our business.'

The rogue attacked in the same instant. I expected he would strike me then, and I was ready. He charged from the blind side, arms outstretched to seize me in a crushing embrace; I remained crouching and let him come

own stew, and you cry mercy for him. Would that you had done so for the innocent stranger among you.'

The ruffian ceased struggling beneath me; his eyelids fluttered and his eyes rolled up into his skull and his limbs went slack. Only then did I release my hold on him. I stood slowly. 'Murder!' someone gasped. 'He killed Garbus!'

'This ugly fellow is not dead,' I told them. 'He is merely asleep - although, perhaps it would be better for this town if it were otherwise.'

I stooped down and, tucking my fingers under the brute's belt, lifted upward sharply. This action produced two striking effects: the thief suddenly moaned as the air rushed back into his lungs, and the gold ring slipped from its hiding place beneath the belt and fell out upon the ground - to the astonishment of the townspeople looking on.

I picked up the ring, and handed it to Roupen. 'Come, my lord, the boat is waiting. We will shake the dust of this place from our feet.'

I put my arm around his shoulder and drew him away. 'What about the supplies?' Roupen asked as we walked from the square.

'There will be another settlement down river,' I told him. 'We will buy what we need there. I want nothing more to do with this place.'

Upon returning to the boat, I bade Dodu the haulier farewell. He was sorry to see us go, and said that if he did not have a wife and son waiting for him at home, he would count it a blessing to go on pilgrimage with us to the Holy Land. I told him we would ask for him on our way home. 'After all, I still owe you for hauling the boat.'

'No, no!' he cried. 'You saved my good oxen. I should pay you.'

The people gaped at me, aghast at this startling pronouncement. The current carried the boat away, and we left them standing on the landing, looking after us in wonder. Roupen, too, was more than a little awe-struck. Once we were safely down stream, he pulled the ring from his finger and offered it to me, saying, 'You saved my life at risk of your own. My father will reward you greatly. Consider this token but a small foretaste of the treasure to come.'

I thanked him for his thoughtfulness, but declined, saying, 'If I take your ring, you will have nothing with which to buy supplies in the next settlement. That is the agreement we made.'

'True,' he agreed, reluctantly slipping on the ring once more. 'Even so, I will remain in your debt until the honour of our family is discharged.'

The next settlement was two days down river. We were hungry again by then, but God is good: we arrived at midday on market day, and the market was lively and well-supplied, the merchants eager for trade. In exchange for Roupen's ring, we got two bags of ground meal, a haunch of salt pork, five loaves of bread, half a wheel of hard cheese, a few strips of dried beef, and various other provisions such as eggs, nuts, dried peas, and salt fish. We also bought a cask of cider, which the hardy folk of the region drink almost to the exclusion of all else.

We might have got more for the gold somewhere else - for all it was a very fine ring - but we were already feeling the pinch, and did not know how far the next market might be; also, with space already cramped it would not have helped us to capsize our craft. We bargained hard and were able to come away with our provisions, but nothing left over. While Sarn and Pdraig stowed everything aboard the boat, Roupen and I went to inquire of the way ahead. Although the young lord had come up the river, and knew the general route, he could not remember how many days the journey required.

'It is perhaps nine days,' said the merchant I asked. 'This time of year, of course,' he tapped his front teeth with a dirty fingernail, 'when the water is low, I suppose it might take longer.'

'Oh, aye. If I were you I would forget all about Marseilles and go to Lyon instead. It is better in every way. I always enjoy very good trade in Lyon; the people there are very wealthy. Not like here, mind. Still, I make no complaint. The people here are hard-working, and know the value of their goods.'

Again, we thanked him for providing such excellent advice, and made to leave, whereupon he said, 'After Lyon, you are only seven days - or perhaps eight, as I say - from Avignon, and from there it is but a short distance to Marseilles by sea. You should stay a few days if you can. The cathedral is splendid - or will be when it is finished. They have only begun, mind, but already it is a sight worth seeing. Even Paris has not such a grand cathedral.'

Padraig and I walked back to the boat. 'Our young lord Roupen might have warned us it was so far. He doesn't seem to remember anything about the journey at all.'

'Do you regret taking him with us?' asked the priest.

I thought about it for a moment. 'No - at least, not yet,' I replied. 'But we are still a long way from Marseilles.'

It was as the merchant said - we reached Lyon without trouble four days later, and six days after that Avignon - which, I was disappointed to learn, was nowhere near the sea. Our destination was still many days off.

Feeling that time was pressing, we journeyed on without even so much as a glance at the city or its splendid cathedral. It was late in the day when we reached the first shoal south of the city, and decided to camp for the night and begin our exertions afresh in the morning. We stopped at a place

We then lay down to sleep, though the air was quite warm, and the sky was still light. All night long I lay with my face covered, scarcely able to breathe, the perpetual buzzing in my ears. We all woke early, ill-rested and itching from a thousand tiny sores which the midges had inflicted. Not wishing to linger even a moment, we did not pause to break fast, but straightaway seized the ropes and began pulling the boat over the gravel shoal, eager to get as far away from that place as quickly as possible.

It was hot work. And stinking, too - owing to the numerous pools of stagnant water lying in the hollows of the sandbars. The ever-present reek of the warm, slime-green water filled our nostrils, driving all thoughts of food from our heads. So, aside from pausing now and then to swallow a few mouthfuls of water, we took no meals. There was little left of our provisions, and the smell and flies took away any desire to eat, so we pushed on and ever on, shouldering the ropes and towing the boat through the heat of the day.

Unfortunately, when the sun began to descend in the west and loosen its grip on the land, then the midges came seeking our blood once more. We spent another endless, insufferable night wrapped in our cloaks. Anyone stumbling upon our camp in the night would have imagined we had all been slain and prepared for burial in our shrouds.

After three days of fighting a losing battle against the vicious midges, we at last entered a deeper channel and, though there was only the slightest, most hesitant breath of a breeze, Sarn raised the sail so that we might leave the plague of pests far behind as swiftly as possible.

Downstream, we stopped long enough to prepare one final, meagre supper with the last of our provisions - a gruel of flaked dried meat and meal

Padraig, however, had other ideas. 'It may be the Templars will aid us,' he allowed indifferently when I suggested it, 'although I do not see why they should.'

'If you have something better to offer, I am waiting to hear it.' I cupped a hand to my ear and leaned towards him. 'Well, I am still waiting.'

'If you would cease your yammering, you might hear something worthwhile,' he replied testily. 'As it happens, your father stopped here on his way to the Holy Land - or have you forgotten?'

I had forgotten. Then again, owing to Murdo's reluctance to speak of his part in the Great Pilgrimage, I knew little about the place to begin with. Most of what I had heard about Aries I owed to Emlyn, who had also told Padraig - apparently far more than he had told me.

'They wintered here,' I said, remembering. 'There is a monastery. We could ask them for food - is that what you are thinking?'

'Come, I will show you what I am thinking.' He started off along the quay and I hurried after, leaving Roupén and Sarn to refresh the water casks and make the boat fast.

Padraig found his way to a market square near the harbour. As in most settlements of any size, there are always a fair number of elder citizens gathered around talking and taking their ease. Padraig greeted them respectfully and, seeing we were strangers, they wanted to know where we were coming from, and where we were going. He told them a little about our pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and they all nodded earnestly. They had heard of the Great Pilgrimage, of course, and several of them said they knew men who had participated, and had stories to tell. We listened and

Our informants grew very excited. Not only was the fellow still there, they said, he was still doing a brisk business in weapons of all kinds, and only for the noblemen of the region. 'The Templars have been here to see him,' one toothless fellow proclaimed proudly. 'They are fighting priests, you know. Only the best will do for them.'

Upon learning that we were on our way to Marseilles to join the Templar fleet, we were enthusiastically informed that one of the Templar ships had come into the harbour to receive the weapons which had been purchased the previous year. 'They were returning to Marseilles and were to set sail for the Holy Land in three days' time.'

'How many days ago was this?' I asked.

'Four,' replied the old man. 'They will have sailed by now. If it is the Templars you were hoping to find, I fear you have missed them, my friend.'

One of the other men spoke up. 'What are you thinking of, Arnal? It was only two days ago the Templars were here.'

'It was four days,' maintained the one called Arnal. 'I suppose you think I no longer know one day from another, eh?'

'When did you ever know one day from another?' said his friend. 'It was two days ago the Templars were here, I tell you. Charles remembers as well as I.' Turning to a third old fellow, he asked how many days since the Templar ship had sailed. The man leaned forwards on his stick, thought for a moment, opened his mouth, then closed it, thought some more, and then said, 'Three days.'

'There! You see?' cried Arnal triumphantly. 'I told you, it was never two

'They said Bezu's forge was once a gatehouse used by the legion,' mused Padraig. Pointing to a high stone wall rising broad and tall above the low rooftops of the houses clustered tight beneath it, he said, 'There it is - and there is the smithy.'

It was a solid stone edifice built into the wall. We could see the place where the old doorway had been closed up with rubble stone. Black smoke issued from a squat chimney, and the clang of hammer on anvil rang out from within. The low, wide door was open, so the canny monk walked directly into the smithy and called to the proprietor, telling him he had visitors who wished to make his acquaintance.

I stepped through the door to see a broad-shouldered man with a thick beard, his face red from the glowing iron in his hand. His shirt was a filthy rag full of tiny burned holes from the sparks and bits of molten metal that flew from his hammer. He regarded us without interest, and went back to his pounding.

I felt a pang of disappointment. 'Are you Bezu?' I asked; but he made no reply.

Instead, my question was answered by a man who suddenly stepped from the darkness of the room behind the forge. This fellow was short, white-haired, plump, and smiling. Clean-shaven, his round face glowing with the heat from the forge fire, he was dressed in a long mantle of fine cloth, with a wide leather belt to which a fine, slender sword was attached. He regarded us with a kindly expression, and said, 'I am Balthazar of Aries, at your service, my friends.'

I begged his pardon, and told him we were looking for the armourer named Bezu.

'Ah, yes, I expect that will be the likeliest explanation.' Bezu laughed, and said, 'You were looking for me? Well, here I am. How can I help you.'

'I have come to meet you, and to thank you,' I replied.

'Have you indeed?' he wondered. 'I am happy to make your acquaintance, sir. But how is it that you should be thanking me?'

'Once, many years ago,' I explained, 'you gave winter refuge to a young man. Like myself, he was from the northern isles and on pilgrimage. His name was Murdo.'

The old armourer's faded eyes grew hazy as his mind raced back over the years. 'You know,' he said, his expression growing thoughtful, 'I believe I did have a young helper by that name. I have not thought about this for many years, but now that you say it, I remember this fellow. Why, he was but a boy.' Bezu regarded me closely, as if trying to decide if he might know me. 'Even so, why should this concern you, my friend?'

I smiled and said, 'That young man you befriended is my father.'

Bezu's eyes grew round; he stared at me and shook his head in amazement. 'Your father, you say!'

'None other.'

I quickly explained that Pdraig was the nephew of one of the monks who had been travelling with my father, and that, as we happened to be passing through the city, we could not ignore the chance to thank the armourer for his kindness all those years ago.

'But it was nothing!' Bezu protested. 'He was cold and hungry. I gave him a little food and a place to sleep. He worked. Indeed, I would he had stayed on. He was a good worker, that one, and in those days -when the

I quickly explained how we were even now hastening away to Marseilles to meet the Templar fleet.

'The Templars,' said Bezu. 'But some of them were here, you know. What have you to do with the Soldiers of Christ?'

Not wishing to prolong the tale, I told him we were simply hoping to receive passage to the Holy Land aboard one of their ships. 'They are sailing from Marseilles in the next day or so. We must hurry if we are to join them before they leave.'

The old armourer nodded thoughtfully, then rubbed his hands and declared, 'But this is most fortuitous ... most fortuitous, indeed. You can help me with a problem which has vexed me greatly.'

'We would be only too glad to aid you in any way we can -' I replied, adding, 'provided, of course, we can still make it to Marseilles before the fleet sails.'

'But that is the very thing,' Bezu told me. 'You see, the Templars were here, as I said, only a day or two ago. They came to collect the weapons bespoken the previous year. I have two other smithies now - did you know? We are kept busy morning to night all the year round. The anvil is never silent.'

'Well,' he said, laying his hard hand on my arm confidentially, 'they asked me to make some daggers for them - special knives, these are, for the commanders. Come, I will show you.'

He turned and led us into to a tiny room carved out of the stone of the old Roman wall. Pointing to a bright red rug which concealed an object in the middle of the floor, he directed Padraig to throw aside the covering. The monk bent down and drew off the rug to reveal a small wooden casket

a craftsman without equal - a goldsmith; he does the gold and silver, and also engraving. He, like myself, is run off his feet by the demand for his services. He has not been well this year and the knives were not ready when the Templars came.' He smiled quickly. 'I told them I would bring them if they arrived before the fleet sailed. But you are going to Marseilles. If you would consent to deliver the knives for me, it would save me a great deal of trouble. What do you say?'

Padraig glanced at me and nodded, urging me to accept the commission. 'Very well,' I replied, 'we would be honoured to serve you in this way. Leave it to us, and worry no more about it.'

'Ah,' sighed the armourer contentedly, 'I feel better already. I thank you. Now!' he declared, rubbing his hands together. 'To supper! Come with me, and do not worry about your friends. I will send one of my boys to the harbour to fetch them along so they can join us.'

Needless to say, we accepted his invitation with unseemly eagerness, and we all enjoyed a sumptuous meal at Bezu's grand house on the hill overlooking the town and harbour beyond. Night was far gone when we finally pushed away from the table, made our farewells, and returned to the boat; we were therefore late rising the next morning. While we were getting ready to cast off, who should appear but our generous host himself, carrying a large cloth bag.

'Ah! I hoped I would find you here. There was so much left over from last night's feast, I thought you might like to have some of it on your journey,' he said, passing the sack to Sarn, who promptly stowed it in the boat. 'I also brought you this.' He pulled a small purse from beneath his belt and tossed it to me. 'For delivering the knives. I would have had to hire someone anyway, so you might as well have it.'

hoped we were not already too late.

Caitriona, dearest heart of my heart, we must take courage. The day of dread is near. The caliph has returned.

I have been told that he will soon summon me. Wazim Kadi, my amiable Saracen jailer, informs me that I am to prepare myself. Tomorrow, or the day after, I will be called before Caliph al-Hafiz to answer for my crimes.

As I have said before, and say again, the outcome is certain. Death, however, holds no fear for me. My only regret is that I will not see you again, my soul. I had hoped to have time enough to finish this, my final testament; yet it seems that, in his wisdom, our Merciful Redeemer has ordained otherwise.

I search through the pages I have written, and my spirit grieves. There is so much more that I wanted to say to you. I despair to think what you will make of this fragmentary and insubstantial tale. Time was against me from the beginning, I fear, so perhaps I was fortunate to have written even the little you hold in your hands.

Well, no doubt, all is as it was meant to be.

I can but give you what I have left, and that is my everlasting love, and this crude, unfinished document which, if nothing else, will at least bear witness that in my last hours upon this earth, I was thinking of you, my

So, here, I must leave it. A tale unfinished, but for time. I have prepared a second letter for my father and mother. If, by chance, it fails to arrive with this one, please tell your grandfather Murdo that he was right about everything: the Holy Land is a realm of demons, and only madmen think to conquer it.

Still, I had to try.

Farewell, my love, my light. I pray our Gracious King to send bright angels to surround you all the days of your life. Farewell ...

*November 11, 1901: Papkos, Cyprus*

In the days and weeks following that fateful meeting of the Inner Circle, I determined to educate myself in the crucial events taking place in the world around me. Inspired, not to say alarmed, by the vital importance of the work now before us, I endeavoured to emulate the example of the others by learning all I could of the current social and political climate of Europe and the West, thinking a firm grasp on contemporary affairs would aid me in the coming battle. The Seven had other plans for me, however, as I was to discover one rainy afternoon in early spring.

A wintry gale was blowing cold off the North Sea, lashing the windows and making the lights flutter above my desk. It was nearing closing time, and I was not looking forward to braving the elements on my way home for the evening. I heard footsteps outside my office, shortly accompanied by a rapid knock. 'Enter,' I called, glancing up as the door opened.

To my surprise, it was Pemberton, and with him, Zaccaria. I jumped to my feet at once, for never had a single member of the Brotherhood darkened my door - and now there were two. 'Gentlemen, welcome. Come in,' I said, rushing forth to relieve them of their dripping coats and hats. 'It is beastly out there. Come in, both of you, and sit by the fire. We'll have you dried out in no time.'

'Thank you, Gordon,' said Pemberton genially. 'I hope you will forgive this intrusion.'

'Intrusion? Not at all,' I replied, pushing chairs towards the fireplace where

I stepped to the tray of decanters on the sideboard and poured three small snifters of the firm's tolerable brandy, and passed them to my visitors. 'Slainte!' Pemberton said, raising his glass. We sipped our drinks then, and I took my seat and waited for them to reveal the reason for their visit.

'No doubt you will recall that last time we met mention was made of, shall we say, the *imperatives* before us,' Pemberton said, settling his lean form back in his chair. He cradled the bulbous glass in his long ringers as he swirled the aromatic amber liquid.

'Indeed, yes,' I replied. The dire warnings voiced in that meeting had scarcely been absent from my thoughts.

'You were a classicist at university, I believe?' said Zaccaria suddenly. A small, energetic man of swarthy complexion and sturdy build, he burns with a lively, barely contained intensity many people mistake for giddiness.

'Why, yes,' I allowed, somewhat cautiously, uncertain of the pertinence of this fact, 'now that you mention it, I was. It's been so long since anyone accused me of that, I had all but forgotten.'

'History, too, isn't that correct?'

'I hope you haven't spent too much effort rooting around in the hall of records. I'm afraid my academic career does not make scintillating reading.'

Zaccaria smiled, but did not disagree. 'At least, you showed a distinct affinity for the ancients rarely seen these days. For that, I commend you.'

'You will have studied Latin,' Pemberton said. 'Did you enjoy it?'

managed though to scrape by, but only just.

'I suspected as much,' mused Zaccaria; he made it sound as if he had long harboured grave misgivings about my natural parentage and patriotism.

'Then that is where we will begin,' said Pemberton. He tossed down the rest of his drink and set the glass aside. 'We have been thinking it was time you were better acquainted with your heritage, so to speak.'

'My *Greek* heritage?' I said. 'I wasn't aware I had any.'

'Oh, you'd be surprised,' replied Pemberton with a smile. 'Shake a family closet, and you never know what might tumble out.'

'I think it more precise to say your *Greek-speaking* heritage,' Zaccaria said.

'I am intrigued,' I said. 'Please, continue.'

'The Greek islands are pure enchantment. Have you ever been?'

'Only by way of Homer.'

'An excellent introduction to be sure, but not a patch on the real thing, I must say.'

Pemberton leaned forwards earnestly. 'We have a challenge to set before you, Gordon. Would you like to hear it?'

'By all means.' I put aside my glass and gave him my full attention. I imagined this unprecedented visit owed much to the new order anticipated by the Inner Circle and, aware of the seriousness of our endeavour, composed myself with all gravity for what was shortly to be asked of me.

'We want you to learn Greek.'

'Greek!' The suggestion made me laugh out loud. Given the climate of

I looked from one to the other of them. They were quite serious. In fact, Pemberton regarded me with such intensity, I began to suspect there was more to this proposal than I had been told so far. The only way to find out more, I understood, was to accept what had been put before me. Nor was I inclined to turn down my first genuine assignment as a member of the Inner Circle. In any case, I would have agreed just to see what came next.

'Well, why not?' I said at last. 'Yes, of course. I'll do it. With any luck, I'll be speaking like a native in no time at all.'

'That,' said Pemberton dryly, 'is about how long you have to master it.'

'Sony?'

'You have from now to the end of September,' he said.

'Good heavens!' I counted quickly on my fingertips. 'It's less than six months.'

'If it were up to me, I would give you as much time as you liked. Unfortunately, we no longer have that luxury.'

'I see now why you called it a challenge.'

I had, I suppose, imagined great deeds of high daring to answer the clarion call I had heard so clearly at the last meeting of the Seven. I had allowed myself to believe that when my turn came to serve, it would involve something far more grand and exciting than stuffing my head full of ancient Greek syntax. To tell the truth, I was slightly deflated.

Pemberton astutely read the disappointment in my mood. 'It is important, Gordon,' he said softly, 'vitaly so, or I would not have asked you. What is more, you will learn much to your advantage. That I promise.'

hounding Odysseus through the Scylla and Charybdis of aspirated vowels and masculine verb forms. If anyone can get you ready in time, he can.' He reached out and tapped the card in my hand. 'I dare say he'll even get your Latin back in fighting trim.'

'Then I will certainly pay him a visit first chance I get. I'll send him my card and arrange a meeting next week.'

'He is expecting you tomorrow,' Zaccaria informed me. 'Stroke of six. Don't be late. The good professor expects punctuality in his students.'

As if in anticipation of this meeting, the clock in the hallway beyond chimed the hour, and my two guests rose to leave. 'You will want to be getting home, I expect,' said Pemberton. 'Give your lovely Caitlin my best regards, and tell her it might be a good idea to keep the autumn clear in the social diary.' He smiled, enjoying his little mystery. 'I have a feeling you two will be spending some time in sunnier climes.'

I have seen the caliph. All praise to our Great Redeemer, I still live -under sentence of imminent death, it is true - nevertheless, it appears I am to be allowed to draw breath in this world another day. For, after the briefest of audiences, I was returned to my rooms to pray for the salvation of my soul.

Since I have every confidence in my redemption, I will use this time to set down a little more of my tale so that you, dear Gait, will have the benefit. That said, I looked over what I wrote yesterday, and would not change a word.

It was as I said it would be: a little after midday, Wazim came to my room. 'Da'ouunk,' he said, bowing low, 'the *hour* has come. His Majesty the Khalifa Muhammad Ibn al-Hafiz, Protector of the Faithful and Glorious Potentate of Cairo, has commanded you to be brought before him to answer for your crimes.'

This is how they talk.

'Da'ouunk' is the closest semblance to my name my little jailer's Saracen tongue could produce. And this word 'hour' is much liked by the Arab tribes, especially Egyptians; it is less easy to designate, but if you quarter the day from sunrise to sunset, and then divide each quarter into three, you will have cut the daylight into twelve equal parts. Each one of these twelve

imaginable. They carried the distinctive curved sword of the Saracen in the winding cloth that serves the Arab for a belt. They also wielded long, broad-bladed pikes, and curved knives in jewelled sheaths which were fastened to thick gold chains around their necks.

Wazim bowed low as I rose and stepped forwards. I had long ago decided not to argue with my captors, or try to defend my actions in any way, but to accept my portion with good cheer whatever befell me. Since I remained calm and self-possessed, the guards did not lay hand to me, and I was permitted to walk upright and of my own volition into the caliph's presence.

I was taken to a region of the palace I had never visited before. The corridors are wider, the rooms more lavish than any I had seen heretofore, with gold in endless supply gleaming in the furnishings and ornaments, and even the cloth which covered the walls and floors. The rooftrees are polished cedar; the enormous doors are a dark hard wood called ebony, black and shiny as polished jet.

The throne room itself is larger than any banqueting hall known in the West. Wazim told me that once, in observance of the previous caliph's day of birth, fifty men on horseback performed mock battle for the entertainment of scores of spectators. I believe him, for it is an exceedingly spacious hall. And sitting in the centre of it, beneath a live palm tree under which a tent-like canopy had been erected, is the solid gold Throne of Cairo. And on that throne, watching me with eyes as hard as chips of flint, was Hafiz the Resplendent himself.

Surrounded by ranks of servants, aides, scribes, and court officials of various kinds — most of them sitting on the polished marble floor on

linely made, but of numble, hard-wearing cloth.

He sat on a broad cushion upon his throne with his legs crossed beneath him, as if he were in a tent in a wilderness camp. He frowned when he saw me, and I knew my sentence was sealed.

Still, I bowed low as Wazim presented me and, by way of greeting, I spoke the few words of Arabic which he had taught me. 'Most Excellent and Exalted Khalifa,' I said, 'may the One God who created all men preserve you forever. I am deeply honoured to meet my lord and master, whose kindness and generosity have so long sustained me.'

Although the words were Wazim's, I meant what I said; I was grateful for my benign captivity under his roof. I knew how easily it could have been otherwise.

The great man's frown deepened further, but with consternation. He made no reply, but sat pulling on his long, grey moustache and watching me narrowly.

'As you are an educated man,' he replied in good Latin, 'let us speak directly.'

I was much heartened by this, to be sure; any time an Arab -be he Saracen, Seljuq, Danishman, or Egyptian - deigns to speak to you in your own tongue, number yourself among the few and fortunate. Still, I did not allow my elation to show in my manner or my speech, which would have been disrespectful. 'As you will, lord,' I replied evenly.

He regarded me for a time, and then said, 'You have been sent to me by the Khalifa of Baghdad.'

'That is true, my lord. No doubt he imagined I would be a useful addition

As the guards stepped forwards and grasped me by the arms, al-Hafiz demanded, 'Have you nothing to say?'

Placing myself firmly in the palm of the Swift Sure Hand, I replied, 'No, my lord. All is as the Great King decrees.'

The guards seized me, turned me around, and led me from the hall. Wazim, padding along behind, distraught, muttered platitudes of comfort under his breath. I paid him no heed, for I was gathering my courage to face the headsman's axe.

We reached the great ebony doors and halted while they were opened by two blue-robed porters. From the throne behind us the caliph called, 'Infidel, who did you mean?'

The guards halted, and I was hauled around to face the caliph. 'My lord?'

Lifting his hand from his lap, he motioned the guards to bring me before him once more. 'You spoke of the great king just now. Who did you mean?'

'I meant the Lord God, Ruler of Heaven and Earth, Shaper of Destiny, Architect of the Ages, and Champion of the Faithful.' These last were titles the Muhammedans used for the Almighty, and which any Christian could also espouse in all good faith.

The caliph's dark eyes grew narrow - whether with anger or distrust, I could not tell. 'There is but *one* God,' he declared, thrusting a long finger into the air above his head. 'Allah is One.'

'That is so, my lord,' I said, bowing my head in reverence. 'There is no god but God Alone.'

Neither pope nor emperor hold authority over me.'

This surprised him. And, strangely, his surprise gratified him. It was as if he had suspected something curious about me, and now his suspicion was rewarded. The frown vanished instantly, and he regarded me with an expression of wary interest. 'So! You, too, are an Armenian. We know of these Christians.'

'I beg your pardon, Most Excellent Khalifa,' I replied, 'but neither am I an Armenian.'

'Not an Armenian?' he said. 'What are you then, Christian? Tell me quickly.'

'My lord Khalifa, I am of the Cele De,' I replied. 'We are an obscure sect - once plentiful, but now vastly diminished in numbers. Where once we ruled the whole of Britain, we are now confined to a small realm in the far north.'

For some reason, this appeared to please him immensely. 'I have heard of this *Pritania*,' he replied. 'It is very far away from Rome and Byzantium, you say?'

'Yes, my lord. As far as east from west with three seas between.'

The caliph squirmed on his cushion impatiently. 'Since you are a Christian of particular devotion,' he said, 'I will grant you a day to make peace with your God before I send you to meet him in judgement.'

'I thank you, my lord,' I replied, bowing in acknowledgement of his generosity.

He gestured to the guards once more, and I was taken from the hall and

from the crack of dawn to after sunset. Half the town and countryside is kept busy serving the shipbuilders, and the other half earns its crust supplying the wharf and harbour with goods and commodities of one kind or another. The harbour is well-protected, wide, and deep; and there we found the last of the Templar ships making ready to set sail.

The larger part of the fleet had already departed - there were forty-two ships in all - but eighteen remained in port, taking on supplies which had not been ready in time. I instructed Sarn to put in close to the Templar ships, and then Padraig and I hurried to find the soldier we had spoken to in Rouen.

'Pax vobiscum,' I said, approaching the first warrior monk we saw. 'God be good to you, my friend. We are looking for one of your brothers.' I explained that we had been instructed to meet a member of his order in this very place. He asked who we were looking for, and I told him.

'It was de Bracineaux?' the man asked, looking us up and down. 'Renaud de Bracineaux, are you certain? If it was Renaud, then you are fortunate indeed. He was to have departed with the first ships, but has been detained. He is still here.'

He told us that Renaud was a commander of the order, and that all the commanders were holding council with the Grand Master over concerns which had arisen while sojourning in the country. 'His return is expected as soon as the council is finished - tomorrow perhaps, or the next day. And then we will sail for Outremer.'

I thanked the brother for his help, and we made our way back to the boat to wait. Roupen had determined to see if he could beg passage from any ship sailing east. Now that he was destitute, he could not afford to pay his way as he had originally planned, and the thought of humbling himself

The solution to this quandary remained beyond our grasp the rest of the day - although not for lack of discussion. Sarn could not understand why, having come this far, he should not be permitted to continue the rest of the way. 'You will need strong servants in the Holy Land,' he kept saying.

To which I would reply, 'My father needs strong servants back in Scotland. What is more, he needs his boat.'

'You would send me back alone?' he countered with sullen reproach.

'Believe me, I wish I had a better choice, but it cannot be helped. You must go home as we agreed.'

Next morning, a young Templar came to our mooring and informed us that Renaud de Bracineaux had been apprised of our request and was waiting to see us. Taking up the box containing Bezu's knives, Padraig and I followed the youth to the long double rank of Templar vessels, where we were conducted up the boarding plank and onto the deck of the largest ship I had ever set foot upon in all my life. Renaud was standing by the mast, directing the loading of supplies which were heaped in a small mountain upon the thick deck of the sturdy vessel.

He turned as the young man came before him announcing our presence, and said, 'Here, now! You have found me at last. It is good to see you, my friends.' He put his hands on our shoulders, and said, 'Are you ready to swear the oath and join our order?'

'Nothing would please me more,' I told him. 'As I have said, however, I am foresworn, and cannot undertake another oath.'

He accepted this with good grace. 'I am sorry to hear it. Yet, even knowing this, you have come. Why?'

Disheartened, I stood for a moment thinking what to do. Padraig held out the box to me. 'You have been most kind,' I told the Templar commander. 'We will not detain you any longer - only, I am reminded that we have something which belongs to you.'

'That, I heartily doubt,' he replied, already moving away.

'Balthazar of Aries sent it,' I said, raising my voice slightly.

He turned and looked back at me. 'The armourer?' He considered for a moment.

'The same,' I continued. 'You should remember him - you purchased a cargo of weapons from him.'

'We did,' he allowed warily, 'but I cannot see how this could possibly concern you.'

I explained quickly how upon completion of our visit with the armourer, he had given us a box containing six gold-handled daggers. I opened the box to display the knives. 'They were not ready when you came to collect your purchase, and he asked us to deliver them to you.' I passed the box to him. 'We have done what we agreed to do, and now we will leave you in peace.'

The frown reappeared on the Templar's face. Turning, he called to one of his brother knights across the ship; the man joined him and the two held close conversation for a moment, then de Bracineaux said, 'It is true that the knives were missing from the cargo. I owe you my thanks for delivering them, and will pay you for your trouble -for I, also, am an honest man.'

'Bezu has already done that,' I told him. 'You owe us nothing.'

At the name, his interest reawakened with wonderful swiftness. 'I know only one noble family in Armenia,' he said, 'that of Prince Leo. Could it be the same family?'

'One and the same,' I replied. 'I have undertaken to aid his return to the Holy Land.'

'By all means you must come with us,' de Bracineaux said, making up his mind at once. 'We have room aboard this ship for such as yourselves, and you will be made welcome and enjoy every comfort we can provide. Make whatever preparations you require, we sail tomorrow at dawn.'

I thanked the Templar, whereupon Padraig and I hurried back along the quay to where Sarn and Roupen were waiting. As we walked along, I caught Padraig watching me with a sour expression on his face - as if he had swallowed a bolt of vinegar.

'What?' I demanded, stopping in my tracks. 'Whatever in the world is wrong now?'

'You told the Templar you were foresworn,' he said, 'and could not undertake the Templar vow.'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'So?'

'I know of no such vow.'

'You think I lied to him, is that it?'

'Did you?'

'No. The vow was my own.'

He folded his long arms across his chest and regarded me suspiciously. 'As

We quickly rejoined Sarn and Roupen, who were waiting to hear how we had fared with the Templars. Roupen was less than overjoyed; he grumbled his thanks and went off to see if he could discover any word of his home from the sailors and merchantmen on the wharf. Sarn, too, grew petulant and quiet. He stared at me balefully, but said nothing; meanwhile, Padraig and I busied ourselves searching for suitable companions to accompany Sarn back to Britain.

Our search was concluded when Padraig discovered a fellow pilgrim named Robert Tookes who, having been sorely wounded in the Holy Land by a Seljuq bandit's arrow, was returning home to Britain with his aged father. The two of them had arrived in Marseilles three days earlier with a Venetian merchant ship from Jaffa, and were now seeking passage to England.

Padraig found them at the small chapel which served the wharf and harbour. He had stopped by to pray at midday, and had passed them as he was leaving. He heard them speaking to one another and, recognizing their speech, had paused to inquire where they were bound. Upon learning their destination, he brought them to the boat.

Although Sarn did his best to discourage them by glaring and frowning as if he were being asked to sail off the edge of the world with the Devil and his brother for passengers, the men were courteous and well-disposed, and we quickly struck a bargain: they would pay for all necessary supplies, and Sarn would take them to Inbhir Ness, where they would easily find a boat going south.

Upon concluding this arrangement, Robert Tookes seized me by the hand in friendship. 'We are both very grateful to you, my father and I,' he told me. 'Have no worry for your man, or your boat; as God is my witness, we



Roupen returned a little after sunset, and we ate our evening meal. 'No one in this fly-blown swamp has even *heard* of Anazarbus,' he complained, disappointed at not discovering any news of his home. Sitting beside the doleful Sarn, the two of them presented a uniformly dismal appearance which Padraig and I did our best to ignore. We talked idly of this and that as night slowly deepened around us. The harbour grew quiet, and we watched the swallows skim the water as the new moon rose in the eastern sky.

I was lying back, and thinking what a fine night it was for star-gazing, when Padraig turned to me, and said, 'I think a prayer before we sleep would see us in good stead for the journey tomorrow.' He stood. 'Come, the chapel is not far.'

'We can say our prayers here just as well,' I pointed out, reluctant to leave the peaceful harbour.

'The chapel would be better,' replied the stubborn monk, climbing quickly from the boat. 'You come, too, Roupen.'

I rose slowly and followed. Roupen declined, saying he would stay with Sarn and help watch the boat. I caught up with the long-legged priest as he started across the all-but-deserted square which fronted the wharf. 'You will like the chapel, Duncan,' he said as I fell into step beside him. 'It has a

mother with an infant child cradled in her arms. A halo of gold surrounded the heads of both mother and the holy child whose figures had been carved from a large piece of very dark wood. Aside from that, it was something one might have seen in any Latin church.

'What do you notice?' asked Padraig.

'The wood carver employed some considerable skill. Beyond that, I find nothing unusual about it.'

'They are black,' said Padraig.

'Well, the wood is black,' I allowed.

'No,' he said. 'Look more closely.'

I did as he directed and put my face near the carving. As I had said, the figures were finely rendered. The child was reaching a tiny hand up towards the mother's solemn face as she gazed with maternal gravity upon the world that would one day revile and crucify her son. Aside from the sombre, almost doleful, expression on the mother's face, I saw nothing at all to remark upon. 'Is there some mystery here that I am supposed to see?' I asked.

'They are black,' Padraig repeated.

'Yes, we have established that. They are black -'

'Not because the wood is black; it is not. They were *painted* black.'

I looked again, more closely, and realized he was right. There were places near the base where scratches in the paint work revealed the lighter colour of the wood beneath. 'How strange,' I remarked, touching the coloured wood lightly with my finger. 'Why would anyone want to paint them

Christ? It makes no sense.

'Indeed.' The monk smiled shrewdly. 'Unless, it is *not* the infant Christ she is holding.'

I waited for one of them to tell me who the infant figure represented. 'Well, am I the only one in all of Frankland who does not know who the infant is supposed to represent?'

'It is Jesu's son,' said Roupen.

His answer so amazed me that it took me a moment to work out all the implications of this extraordinary revelation. 'Christ's son!' I exclaimed aloud, staring at the tiny carved figure. 'But that is horrendous!'

Placing a finger to his lips to quiet me, Padraig merely nodded. 'There are those who believe that Jesu and Mary were husband and wife. After all, the scripture speaks often of the disciple Jesu loved. Most scholars assume the appellation betokens John the apostle, but there is no reason why it might not designate another.'

'Besides,' added Roupen, 'it is well known that many women followed Jesu and supported his earthly ministry in various ways - this, too, is well attested in holy scripture.'

'But see here now,' I protested. 'Christ's *son* - think what you are saying.'

'As to that,' the monk replied in the same calm, equivocal tone, 'it was commonplace for a Jewish rabbi to be married. In fact, it would have been remarkable, if not improbable, if it had been otherwise. If, as the church that bears his name believes, Our Lord and Redeemer was subject to the same humanity we all possess, then why should marriage remain beyond Christ's experience? The union of husband and wife is an essential part of

popo to recognize the rank and position of a powerful and influential woman.' Lifting a hand to the carving, he said, 'However it was, those who hold to this cult believe the union of Jesu and Mary produced a child. After Christ was crucified, and the persecution of the new faith began in Jerusalem, the holy family fled - first to Damascus, and then to Rome. Eventually, however, they settled here.'

'In Marseilles?' I wondered. 'This grows more fantastic with every word.'

'Indeed,' agreed Roupen. 'I have never heard that part of the tale.'

'It was called Marsalla then,' Pdraig explained, 'a well-known Roman port. Grain and cattle were shipped from here to the East, and the trade in those days was very good. It was a fine and prosperous city - and far away from the religious intrigues and oppressions of the East. The holy family and their train of followers brought the new faith with them, and they have been revered in this region ever since - as you can see.'

He answered with such assurance, I could not help asking, 'How can you possibly know all this?'

Pdraig smiled. 'The cult of the Black Madonna is well known to the Cele De. It is heresy, of course, although mild compared to most. Still, it is heresy nonetheless. We came to know of it when it was once laid on the head of Beloved Pelagius, our great teacher and advocate. He defended himself mightily against the charge, answering his accusers in a bold treatise which is preserved and studied by the keepers of the Holy Light.'

Pdraig led us briefly in our prayers, and we finished a short while later. Roupen went on ahead, leaving Pdraig and me to our talk. 'You knew the Black Madonna was there,' I said. 'Was that why you brought me?'

He shook his head. 'I had no idea it was there until I saw it today when I

I brought you here so that you could tell me the true purpose of your pilgrimage.'

I should not have been surprised, but - as I have said, and will say again - the priests of the Cele De are ever full of surprises. I suppose he had worked it out following our brief exchange earlier in the day. Although I would have preferred telling him when we were somewhat closer to our destination, I knew there would be no putting him off now, so I said, 'Very well. It seems this is the night for sharing hidden purposes.'

Padraig smiled knowingly. 'It is that.'

'It is easily told,' I began as we left the chapel, 'and not half so mysterious as the Black Madonna. First, I must ask you whether you have ever heard of the Iron Lance?'

'Of course.' He did not laugh outright, but my question amused him. 'It is the spear of Christ's crucifixion.'

'It is that,' I affirmed. 'And since it seems the priests of the Cele De know *everything*, you probably also know that the sacred object resides in my father's treasure room.'

'Now that you bring it up, I seem to recall hearing about that, yes.'

'Have you always known?' I asked, feeling like a fool for ever thinking I might hide anything from him. I stopped walking to look at his reaction.

'No,' he replied. 'Indeed, I learned of it only a day or so before we left.'

'Abbot Emlyn told you, I suppose.'

'He did,' confirmed Padraig. 'But my uncle asked me never to speak of it to anyone - unless, like now, someone else should speak of it first.'

"Torf-Einar told me all about the shameful desecration of that holy treasure before he died,' I said. 'You were there, you heard how they cut the cross of our redemption into pieces - with as little thought as I might chop a kindling stick.'

'I was there, yes. I heard.' He took a slow, deliberate step away, and then turned to face me. 'And this is why you could not swear the oath of the Templars?'

'I did not think it would be right, since I cannot say where or how I shall obtain the pieces of the holy relic. I must remain unencumbered in my search.'

'I can see that.'

'And you approve?'

He did not answer; instead, he asked, 'What will you do with the cross - if by some miracle you should obtain it?'

'I will bring it back to Caithness and place it in my father's treasure room alongside the Sacred Lance.'

'I see.'

He was quiet for a time, gazing up into the night-dark sky- as if in search of an answer written in the stars.

'Your plan,' he said at last, 'lacks nothing in audacity. And what it wants in feasibility, it more than makes up in ambition.'

'But do you approve?'

'In truth, I do not,' he declared firmly. 'If this is why you have undertaken

'Is this your way of saying you think it is a good idea anyway?'

'No, it is a terrible idea,' Padraig assured me. 'Even so, it may also be inspired.'

'Please, your assurance is breathtaking,' I replied.

'Have you not heard?' wondered Padraig. 'The Good Lord often uses foolishness to humble the wise. If this idea of yours is of God, then the combined might of all the nations on earth cannot stand against it.'

I accepted his judgement, and we walked silently along the darkened street for a time. As we came onto the quayside, I asked, 'You did not tell me, Padraig, why is the Magdalene painted black?'

'That I cannot say. It has been suggested that it was the colour of her cloak when she came to these shores, and that is how she was known to the people: the Black Mary. Others say it is to distinguish her from the mother of Jesu, since they are so often confused one for the other.' He paused thoughtfully, then said, 'Wise Pelagius said that it was to hide a secret which those who revere the Black Mary hold sacred and guard to the death.'

'What is this secret?' I wondered aloud.

'No one outside the cult knows,' said the monk. 'And those inside will never tell.'

The Templars were ready to sail by the time Padraig, Roupen, and I joined the ship the next morning. I wanted to see Sarn safely away before leaving, and although his passengers, the Tookes, were ready, we had to wait for the provisions to be delivered. The merchants appeared just after daybreak, and we quickly loaded the boat, and bade the three returning travellers farewell.

'Take care, Sarn,' I called, pushing the boat from the wharf. 'Give all at home a full and fair account. Ask them to pray for our safe return.' We watched until they were under sail, and then the three of us hurried to board the Templar ship. We were greeted courteously on our arrival, and shortly after climbing onto the deck the order was given to cast off.

We stood at the rail and watched the city of Marseilles pass slowly from view as the ship moved out into the bay. Once in deeper water, the helmsman turned the ship and headed south-west along the coast, and we settled ourselves aboard our new vessel.

I will now describe a Templar ship, for they are very unlike the sort of craft seen in northern waters. Broad of beam and high-sided, they possess several decks, one above another, and a single mast of gigantic proportions. These vessels ride tall in the water and tend to bob awkwardly in the least swell; they are unsteady and woefully difficult to

as captain.

We were introduced to him shortly after Marseilles disappeared from view. He invited us to break bread with him in his apartment.

You see, Gait, how very large these ships can be; there are rooms beneath the uppermost deck, some of them large as chambers in a lordly hall. And this is what the captain had - a chamber with a box bed and a long table with room enough for six men on benches either side.

Thus, Renaud, Padraig and I, and Roupen, as well as other high-ranking Templars were invited to dine with the captain that first night. Roupen excused himself, saying his stomach was unsettled; for all I know, that may have been the truth, and not an excuse to avoid joining the rest of us. However, I think it more likely that he had no stomach for the Templars, never mind the food. Padraig and I eagerly accepted the invitation, and if that meal was in any way typical, I quickly discovered how our captain maintained his rotund form despite his long sea journeys. Of meat and sweet breads, and other fancies, there was no stint: roast fowl and smoked pork, beef, and fish of several kinds, and flat bread made with the oil of olives - which Sicilians especially esteem - and small barley loaves made with honey. Wine was drunk throughout the meal - for the noblemen of Taranto dearly love their wine, and think nothing of serving it *and* drinking it by the tun.

Hoping to keep our wits about us, Padraig and I attempted to dine with some circumspection, as did Commander Renaud. Everyone else, however, behaved as if our supper was a festal meal following a long privation. I was appalled at the amount of food and drink which my fellow diners consumed, shoving bread and meat down their gullets in uncouth

even Constantinople, they eagerly took it upon themselves to educate us in the manner of life we should encounter - not that they were in any way agreed upon the particulars.

Still, I learned that the weather was hot and dry, and that the land was infested with all manner of biting flies and stinging plants which made life a constant misery. Rivers mostly dried up during the summer, and no rain fell from spring until winter, when the fierce wind came to scour the land from top to bottom, and fill every dwelling place with gritty dust.

The people, they said, were poor for the most part, barely scratching a living out of the rocky, unproductive soil - except in the rare river valleys where the streams were sustained by springs hi the mountains; *then* the resulting cultivation was a very paradise, bringing forth fruits and vegetables of every kind in almost unimaginable bounty.

For the most part, however, the language was incomprehensible, the food unpalatable, and the water undrinkable. A more barren land there never was, to be sure. If not for the fact that the Lord High God himself had chosen the place for his own peculiar reasons, surely no one would give it so much as a moment's heed.

As for the people, the women were dried up hags and crones, whose unlovely hides were wrinkled as grapes left too long in the sun. The men were sulky, sly and vengeful, skilled in imagining slights and capable of maintaining heated feuds into the sixth generation. What is more, young or old, they were cunning in all the ways of malice, iniquity, and greed.

'The Arabs are very devils, sir,' one man declared. 'Lies and blasphemies are all they know. Beware.'

'They are born thieves,' agreed another. 'They will steal anything that is

I considered such unbecoming reproach, and made no reply. But my fellow trenchermen followed one vulgarity with another, until I felt justified in remarking on their lack of common decency. 'Life in the Holy Land must be greatly altered indeed,' I observed, 'if such low profanity is cause for mirth rather than shame.'

I fully expected to be reviled for my words. I braced myself as blackbeard's lips drew back in an ugly sneer. But even as he drew breath to decry me, Renaud glanced up sharply. 'Our friends are right to remind us of our manners, brothers,' he said, glaring down along the board as if defying anyone to disagree with him. 'We will each ask forgiveness in our prayers tonight, and examine our hearts in all penitence.'

This quieted the raucous table, and the meal ended in a much more subdued, if not respectful, manner. Afterward, Renaud sought me out on deck where Padraig and I were taking the soft evening air. The commander presented himself with a respectful bow and said, 'Allow me to offer you both apologies for my brother monks' impious behaviour.'

'We are not the ones to receive your apologies,' I replied. 'It was not our table. You owe us nothing.'

'Nevertheless,' the Templar said, 'you were the ones who called us back to our better selves - and were right to do so. My men have been absent from the stringency of the monastery too long and have allowed themselves to grow irreverent.'

'I know what fighting men are like,' I told him. 'Do not think you must explain anything to me.'

He smiled stiffly. 'Even so, please accept my sincere apology for our regrettable lapse. God willing, it will not happen again.'

'Do you know anything of his family?'

'I know his father is a prince in his own country, but nothing more than that,' I answered. Something in the Templar's tone made me wish to defend the young man. 'Whether his people were nobles of the highest rank, or the lowliest of slaves, made not the slightest difference to me. Roupen needed passage home, and we needed someone to guide us to Marseilles. We struck a bargain which was beneficial to both our interests, and he has proven himself a faithful friend.'

Renaud raised his eyebrows at this. 'Are you always so trusting?'

'Until a man shows me otherwise,' I said, bristling slightly at the implication of his question, 'I give him my best regard. It is never a mistake to treat someone as you would wish to be treated if you were in his boots.'

'No,' he allowed quickly, 'of course not. Again, forgive me; I meant no offence. I merely wished to determine what you knew of the circumstances surrounding your young friend's family.'

'As I have said, I know very little of Roupen's family or their circumstances. Is there something I *should* know?'

The Templar pursed his lips thoughtfully. 'Only this,' he said at last. 'Your friend's father, Prince Leo, is an unhappy man in a dangerous position. I fear he is not to be trusted.'

'I am sorry to hear it,' I replied, uncertainly. I could not discern what he intended by telling me this.

As if in reply to my hesitance, Renaud continued, 'Believe me, it gives me

'Truly?' replied the Templar commander, his curiosity instantly piqued.

'Oh, yes,' I assured him, 'and the prince returned the favour. If not for Bohemond's help, my father might never have returned home.'

'Many did not,' agreed the Templar commander. His interest visibly quickened, there was sharp appraisal in his glance as he said, 'But you misunderstand me: I was speaking of young Bohemond, the son of the illustrious prince. Not that it matters overmuch, for the son is that much like his father. Unfortunately, he shares his father's insatiable appetites as well.'

He went on to explain that Bohemond II, son of Prince Bohemond of Taranto, had at last come of age and returned to the Holy Land to claim his inheritance. Not content to receive the County of Antioch in its present condition, he had determined to restore its boundaries to their furthest extent.

'Since coming to the Holy Land four years ago,' Renaud said, 'the young count has waged several successful campaigns and recovered a goodly portion of the land lost since his father had ruled there. He is a restless youth, and a formidable fighter.' De Bracineaux regarded me meaningfully. 'He will not rest until he has won back everything.'

'And this is where the trouble arises,' I surmised.

'Precisely,' the Templar agreed. 'The northern part of the county now belongs to the Armenian principality. At the time young Bohemond's father took it, there was no one to oppose him. The land had been under Seljuq domination for many years, and the Armenian princes had their hands full defending the little that remained to them.'

prince was forced to relinquish the disputed lands which were ceded to the Armenian rulers. Thus, with the emperor's help the Armenian princes had managed to claw back their traditional territory.

'But the peace of these last years will not continue,' Renaud announced bleakly. 'Young Bohemond II is as wilful and stubborn as his father. I fear there will be bloodshed between these two houses very soon.'

He seemed to expect some answer, but I could not imagine why he should be confiding in me, and knew not what to tell him. 'Your candour is both welcome and refreshing,' I said, 'but I would be leading you astray if I permitted you to think I possessed any power in these matters.'

'Of course,' the knight allowed, 'I understand. I merely thought you might derive some benefit from this information - in light of your friendship with Lord Roupen, that is. Naturally, if you were to find yourself in a position to influence the young lord's opinion, you would remember your duty as a Christian.'

This confused me somewhat. I knew full well the Templar was asking me to intervene for him in some way, but I could not understand what he expected me to do. 'Please,' I told him, 'speak plainly. I am unused to the plots and intrigues of the East. If you have a concern, tell me outright. I assure you, I will give it my fullest consideration.'

Renaud nodded, and folded his hands behind his back. 'As Commander of the Antioch Order of the Knights Templar, I am charged by His Holiness Pope Honorius with keeping the peace — not only in the city, but throughout the countryside as well. In addition, I am pledged to support the ruler of the county by whose sufferance we are granted our charter.' He looked at me meaningfully. 'I can put it no more plainly than that.'

Renaud's smile turned bitter. 'You are right, of course. I will not trouble you further.' He made to walk away.

I caught him by the arm, and held him. 'Speak what is on your mind, man. Where is the harm?'

Glancing at Pdraig his mouth drew tight. 'I have said all I care to say.'

'Then go your way,' I replied, releasing him. 'For if you hold the honour and counsel of a priest of the Cele De in such low esteem, you deserve all the anguish your silence brings.' Indicating Pdraig, I said, 'This man is my friend and advisor, my *anam cara*, the true friend of my soul; he shares my innermost thoughts and is my life's companion and guide. Speak to me, or hold your tongue. That is your choice. But know that any remedy you seek through me will be discussed with my wise counsellor.'

Renaud nodded curtly. He was not used to being addressed in this way, and did not like it, but was man enough to see the sense. He did not dismiss me, or turn me aside harshly, but swallowed his pride once more. 'Forgive me, priest,' he said, bending in a small, but genuine bow of humility. 'I meant no disrespect.'

Pdraig inclined his head in acceptance and pardon. 'I forgive you freely. If it would help you to unburden your soul, I will walk a little apart so that the two of you may speak more easily together.'

'No,' said the Templar, making up his mind, 'that is not necessary. I have come this far; let us see the thing to its conclusion.'

He turned and began walking once more, his hands clasped firmly behind him, his eyes downcast. As it was growing dark now, one of the sailors came forwards to light the torches in the iron sconces at the prow and at the base of the mast. We strolled the deck in silence until we were alone

I could not think this information treasonous, and told the worried knight as much.

'No,' he replied, 'that much could easily be discerned by one and all. What cannot be perceived is that the bold prince plans a surprise attack on Anazarbus before the summer's end.' He stopped and turned to me. 'There,' he said grimly, 'now you have it. I have entrusted you with knowledge which could defeat my lord on the battlefield, and bring about the ruin of Antioch. Such is the power I bestow. Use it wisely.'

I could feel my very soul shrinking from the terrible responsibility his words had placed upon my unsuspecting shoulders.

The Templar gazed at me, his eyes watchful in the soft glow of the torches. 'You spoke of plots and intrigues just now. Let me give you a word of advice: sooner trust an enemy than a friend.'

'Strange advice.'

'Yes,' the Templar allowed, 'and the difficulty, you will find, is learning to tell the difference between them.'

Thus, from the very first day aboard ship I was plunged into the labyrinthine schemes of the intrigue-breeding East - and I had not yet set foot in the Holy Land. Over the next many days, I stewed and fretted over every word spoken to me that night. The knowledge festered in me, poisoning my days and nights with dread and the dull apprehension that whatever I did would damn me. For, to save one realm would be to ruin another.

Why had the Templar confided in me? Was it to claim me as an ally, and thus remove me from the young lord's side? Or, did he wish to use my friendship with Roupen in some way? He had hinted as much, but I was at a loss to know what I might do. Try as I might, I could think of no way in which I might serve the common good.

What purpose would it achieve anyway? There was nothing the young lord could do about the planned attack just now, and the knowledge would only bring him misery and pain. Moreover, he might consider himself to be among enemies, and do something precipitous. By holding my tongue, I spared him that at least - although it was at considerable cost to myself.

It was not until we reached Cyprus that I had the opportunity to speak in complete freedom with Padraig about the delicate information the Templar commander had confided. 'What are we to do, Padraig?' I demanded, all

Padraig held up his hands. 'Peace, brother! Leave off your pissing and moaning a moment, and let me speak.'

'Speak then!'

'As it happens,' he began, 'you are not the only one to have struggled with this problem. I also have bethought myself what can be done.'

'Yes, yes, get on with it, man!'

'Very well. It comes to this: we must seek out Prince Bohemond at first opportunity and demand that he repent of his decision to attack the Armenians.'

I stared at the priest with envy at his sublime innocence. 'You are a wonder,' I told him. 'Even knowing what you know of princes and their insatiable appetites for wealth and power, you still suggest this? Tell me, what do you think will happen?'

'I expect God will move in Bohemond's heart and the young prince will recognize his error and turn aside before it is too late.'

'Your faith is remarkable, priest,' I told him, 'if you believe the prince will even listen to a single word you say, let alone heed your counsel.'

'That will be his decision,' Padraig replied. 'Our way remains clear: we must do what God would have us do.'

I glared at the monk and knew he meant just what he said; we would have to go before this Prince Bohemond and deliver the judgement: turn aside from your wicked ways, O Mighty Ruler! Repent and seek forgiveness, or suffer divine retribution for your sins.

Yes, and I could just about imagine the reception our call to repentance would receive.

I stared at him. 'And how did you come to that?'

'By reason of the fact that once we have declared our concerns before the prince, his actions will be open for all men to judge. He will repent, or he will not. If Bohemond proceeds with his nefarious plan, he does so in spite of our call to honour God's peace. Thus, there will no longer remain any obstacle to a full and forthright profession of the prince's intentions to any and all concerned.'

I turned this over in my mind for a time. It did seem the only way out of the dilemma Renaud had forced upon us. 'Then it is agreed,' I decided, 'we will make entreaty to the prince the moment we enter the city. But allow *me* to put the case to Bohemond. I will appeal to his honour, not his sin. If de Bracineaux is of the same mind in this matter — and I believe he is, for all his reasons may be his own - then he will support us in our attempt. If the three of us speak with one voice, we may have some chance of escaping the full force of the prince's displeasure.'

'Well said,' concluded Padraig. 'However it falls out with the prince, we must observe the utmost caution. For if Bohemond was to learn the son of his enemy was within his grasp, he would seize the boy and hold him to ransom, or worse. Roupen will have to be told what we intend. His life will be at risk the moment we set foot in Antioch. We cannot keep him in ignorance any longer.'

The next day, when the ships departed on the last leg of the journey to Outremer, we summoned the young lord onto the top deck where we strolled along the rail and watched the rugged brown hills of Cyprus dwindle into the wide, blue distance. When I was certain we would not be overheard by others going about their chores on deck, I informed Roupen

'Your determination is understandable,' I suggested, 'but there is another way. Come with us to Antioch.'

'Antioch!' he gasped. 'Go among my enemies? I never will.'

'Calm yourself, and listen to me. Padraig and I plan to confront Bohemond and demand that he turn away from his foolish -' I caught Padraig's glance, 'foolish and sinful plan to attack your people. I have every confidence that Commander de Bracineaux will support us in this.'

'Now then, if Bohemond listens to reason, you will have no need to fear him, and you can carry a good report home to your people.'

'And if he does not?' grumbled Roupen dubiously.

'Then you will hasten home with a warning, and we will help you. I cannot speak for the Templars, but I believe we can count on their aid as well.'

'Can we trust them?' he wondered.

'We can,' I told him. 'Renaud knows who you are, and has known since you first came on board this ship. If he had intended ill for you, we would certainly have seen evidence of it by now. He is constrained by his priestly vows, yet I believe he is trying to help you in the only way he can.'

'So we proceed to Antioch - and hide beneath Prince Bohemond's very nose,' Roupen said, little warming to the notion. 'What then?'

'Once we have spoken to Bohemond, we will know how things stand,' Padraig said. 'But understand, whatever comes of this, we will see you safely home.'

Needless to say, our entrance into Antioch a few days later was fraught and uncomfortable with the dread of discovery hanging over us as we

embroiders ablaze on white surcoats, spears and helmets gleaming - we descended the low hills and crossed the Orontes valley to join the road leading to the city. We passed over the bridge and in through the central gate, entering the long wide, tree-lined road which formed the city's main thoroughfare. Great houses of wealthy families lined the street, along with ancient basilicas, markets, and churches large and small.

I knew the Iron Lance had been discovered in one of these selfsame churches, and as we rode slowly along I kept turning my head this way and that in the forlorn hope that I might somehow see and recognize the place. If I found it, however, I never learned. For, although I saw several churches, none of them seemed in any way remarkable, and I felt slightly disappointed.

Nor did I have a chance to ask anyone about it, for no sooner had we arrived at the garrison in the lower city, but Prince Bohemond demanded audience of Commander Renaud. The higher-ranking Templars had been given quarters in the citadel itself, and Renaud, having arrived in the city, was evidently expected to go at once to join the prince.

I had confided to the commander my decision to bring a petition before the young prince at the soonest opportunity, and he assented - although he stopped short of assuring me of his complete agreement to the plan. When the Templar commander turned from the prince's messenger, he said, 'You are in luck, my friend. Bohemond deigns to receive me. I will take you and the priest along and we will have this out at once.'

'Now?' I said. 'And with the dust of the road clinging to us?' To avoid the sticky, all-embracing heat of the day we had risen just after midnight and crossed the rough hills before sunrise. The dry days of summer had come, when the sun's rays strike the earth like the blast of an oven, and the

The sergeant led us through a low door and out into a small courtyard surrounded by long ranks of old Roman-style barracks which were the Templars' quarters. The yard was filled with soldiers welcoming their comrades and seeing them settled in their new surroundings. Gislebert brought us to a fresh-running fountain in the centre of the yard. Roupen, grim and uneasy, stood stiff-legged, glumly watching Padraig and me as we splashed water on our faces from the stone basin.

'I will go with you,' he said.

'No,' I said, 'that would not be prudent.'

'I cannot wait here alone. What if someone tells Bohemond I am here?'

'Commander Renaud has given his word,' I replied patiently. 'You are safe in Antioch so long as you remain in the garrison. But you dare not show your face in the palace.'

'I am not afraid,' he announced carelessly. 'I will go and speak to Bohemond myself.'

'You may have opportunity to speak to the prince,' I told him. 'But before we abandon our plan, let us at least determine what manner of man this Prince Bohemond might be.'

'What am I to do while you are away?' he said unhappily, kicking at the base of the fountain.

'Wait patiently,' Padraig said, 'and pray our appeal meets with sincere contrition and repentance.'

'And if it does not?' he snapped angrily. He could not help himself, nor could I blame him. Had I been in his place, I would have behaved in much

shoulder. 'God willing, we shall bring you a good report.'

With that, we were led from the courtyard and, following Gislebert, conducted along a dizzying array of narrow streets and stairways up into the heart of the old city to the high citadel and the palace where the Count of Antioch held court.

Bohemond's palace put me in mind of a noble lady fallen into beggary. Undoubtedly, the royal residence had once been a very treasure, but years of indifference and neglect had marred its best features. Costly wooden panels were gouged and scratched; expensive silk rugs were worn threadbare, their fine colours faded and dulled by dirt and indifferent use; once-dazzling painted walls were dingy with the grime of smoke and oily food; polished floors were rutted and dull from too many rough feet, and too few washings. Several of the outer corridors contained filth from discarded slops and excrement which raised a nasty stink in the nose.

In all, the place breathed an atmosphere of forlorn decline and dilapidation. It made me sorry to see it sliding into decay, and I felt myself resenting the thoughtless lord who could allow this to happen. There are far worse things in this world, as well I know, but I glimpsed in the shabby surroundings a malignant disregard which I could not abide. How much of this rot should be laid at the feet of the current inhabitant, I could not tell. But that the prince inhabited these once-splendid halls and did nothing to relieve the distress so evident around him told me something of the man.

His appearance, however, all but dispelled the regrettable impression created by his surroundings. For Prince Bohemond II was a full-blooded, handsome man: broad-shouldered, long-limbed and tall, with a firm jaw and open, pleasant features. His hair was long and fair, and his beard

Gracing up as the door opened to admit us, he exclaimed, 'De Bracineaux! You *are* here! God be praised, man, it is good to see you. They told me you had arrived, and I could not believe my good fortune. I did not expect you for another week.'

Forgetting his rank and place, he leapt forwards to meet us, stepping around the table in quick bounds. He seized the Templar by the arms, and embraced him like a brother. Then, seeing two strangers idling in Renaud's wake, he cried, 'And who is this with you? Come in, sirs! I give you good greeting. Join me, all of you. Food has been prepared, and I was just about to eat.'

'We would be delighted,' replied the Templar. Turning to us, he said, 'May I present: Lord Duncan of Caithness, and Padraig, his chaplain.'

'I am pleased to meet you, gentlemen,' said the prince, inclining his head nicely. He smiled, and despite myself I felt compelled to like him. 'You cannot have been in the city long.'

'We have only just arrived,' I answered.

'Good voyage?'

'Very good indeed, my lord,' I said. 'The Mediterranean is smooth as a highway compared to the rough northern seas around Scotland.'

'I have heard of this Scotland, you know,' Prince Bohemond said. He turned away, indicating that we should follow him to the table. 'They say the men and women there are painted blue.' Smiling, he glanced at Padraig and then at me. 'But you are not painted blue, are you?'

'No, lord, although the Picti are known to daub themselves with woad when they do battle. It is an old custom, but still occasionally to be seen.'

green immaturity. He was little more than a child playing at a game for men, and I felt strangely sorry for him.

As our hosts talked, I considered how best to broach the subject of the prince's plan to attack the Armenians. It would, I considered, be best for all of us if Bohemond would raise the issue himself, giving me a natural opportunity to speak. But he seemed more than content to talk idly of travel and the weather, and it occurred to me that perhaps the prince did not wish to say anything about his plans in front of Padraig and me. So, it was left to us, and if no one else touched on the matter soon, I decided I would raise the issue myself.

I was steeling myself to do just that, when young Bohemond, unable to restrain himself any longer, tapped the table with the hilt of his knife. 'Here now, de Bracineaux, we have beaten the bushes long enough. I want to talk about the campaign. How many men can I count on from you?'

The Templar commander lay aside his cup, and composed himself to answer. 'I have considered your request very carefully,' he answered. 'To put the matter squarely, I must tell you it places me in a very awkward position.'

'Indeed?' wondered Bohemond innocently. 'I am distressed to hear it.' He did not appear dismayed in the least.

'You see, waging open warfare is outside the authority of the Templar Rule. We are pledged to guard the roads and those who travel on them - anything beyond that is a breach of our Rules of Order. In short, my lord, attacking the forces of our Christian allies would be reprehensible and unlawful.'

Bohemond's face tightened with vexation, but he maintained his cheerful

aggressors.'

'Do you deny that the protection of the borders of my realm is of utmost importance to the safety of pilgrims and citizens within this realm?'

'On the contrary,' replied Renaud, glad to find some area of agreement, 'if the borders of this county should ever fall under enemy threat, you will find the Templars foremost in the fight.'

'I am glad to hear it,' answered Bohemond quickly. 'For a moment I had begun to doubt the wisdom of allowing the Poor Soldiers of Christ to occupy such a large and, I might add, *costly* presence in this city. After all, a lord who cannot trust the courage of his warriors is already captive to his enemies.'

'Never doubt the courage of the Templars,' Renaud said, his voice tightening with suppressed anger. 'Our lives are forsworn before Almighty God, and we will fight to the death rather than dishonour the vow we have taken.'

'Then why this unseemly hesitance?' demanded Bohemond. 'I tell you that so long as the borders of this county are held by Armenians my people are not safe.'

The air fairly bristled between them. Seeing that he had pressed the matter to an impasse with the Templar commander, Bohemond turned his attention to Pdraig and me. 'You must excuse us,' he said testily, 'it seems the good commander and myself have opened a subject of disagreement.'

This was my chance to intervene, and I took it. 'Forgive me, lord. I am a stranger to this place, and have no right to speak. But if you would hear me out, I would be much obliged.'

Great Pilgrimage and died in Jerusalem. Moreover, my father once held council with your father - it was in Jaffa, if I remember aright, and my father was about the same age as you are now, my lord. He came away from that meeting with a memory which my family has treasured ever since.'

Padraig frowned and gave me a warning look as if to tell me I was treading too close to our secret for his comfort.

My story pleased young Bohemond immensely and, I thought, favourably disposed him to what I was about to say. 'Indeed, sir!' he cried. 'You see, Renaud! Not everyone in this godforsaken place is as ignorant of their Christian duty as you are. Please, continue.'

'Therefore,' I said, feeling my stomach knot into a hard ball, 'I pray you will not think me reaching too far above my place when I suggest to you that Commander Renaud is right in refusing to support an attack on the Armenians.'

Alas, my words did not strike the young prince as I had hoped. His face clenched and grew dark with anger. 'How dare you!' he muttered. He whirled on the Templar, giving vent to the full force of his anger. 'You worm! You put him up to this! You sneaking coward. Get out of my sight! Everyone get out!'

'Calm yourself, my lord,' I said, attempting to pacify him. 'Renaud is not to blame. My views are my own, and had I never set eyes on the good commander, I would still say the same: it is wrong to attack the Armenians. They are baptized Christians, fellow allies of the Holy Roman Empire, and hold to the same faith as you, my lord.'

'They are filth!' roared Bohemond, his face contorted in hatred. 'What is

picked up his knife from the table and flung it at the priest's head, shouting, 'How dare you! Get out!'

Padraig barely dodged the blade, which struck the wall and fell to the floor. Bohemond jumped up and shoved the table, spilling cups and sending food rolling from the platters. 'All of you, get out! Leave me!' he screamed, his pale face growing scarlet with rage.

As the furious prince reached for another knife, Commander Renaud, already on his feet, moved towards me. 'Go!' he urged. 'Get back to the garrison and wait for me there.'

'We will stay and see it through.'

'Leave us. I will calm him, and follow as soon as I can. Go.' Turning quickly to the prince, he said, 'This is beneath you, sir. Put down that knife, and let us discuss this matter like reasonable men.'

The prince, still shouting and waving the knife, was done with listening. While he raged at the commander, Padraig and I made our way swiftly from the chamber and hurried back through the long, low rooms of the palace, descending by a number of dark and narrow stairways to the former stables below. We passed quickly among the Templars going about their chores, and made for the first door and hurried out into the bright, sunlit street once more.

We hesitated only long enough to locate the street by which we had come up to the citadel, then hastened away again, walking quickly, but not running - nothing rouses citizens of a city as swiftly as the sight of a stranger in full flight. Every now and then I paused to look back and listen, but neither saw nor heard anything to indicate pursuit of any kind.

'We failed,' I told him bluntly. 'Bohemond would not listen to reason. Renaud stayed with the prince to try to calm him, but I do not hold out any hope that he will change his mind.'

The young lord nodded grimly. 'Thank you for trying,' he said softly. I could see he was frightened and had allowed himself to place too much hope in our efforts.

'We are not finished yet,' I told him, trying to offer some small comfort. 'When the commander returns we will sit down together and decide what to do.'

Alas, if only it had been that simple.

We waited uneasily for Commander de Bracineaux to appear. Padraig and I found an opportunity to nap through the heat of the day, taking it in turns to sit with Roupen while the other slept, lest he become fretful and overanxious. The garrison, now full of new arrivals, remained busy with much coming and going - yet peaceful for all that; the warrior monks maintained a cloistered calm amidst the general commotion of military life.

Indeed, the old Roman garrison bore more than a passing resemblance to the monastery: the quiet inner court with a chapel at one end, the long ranks of barracks, which might have been cells; the kitchens, always clattering with activity; the refectory with its long banks of tables and benches, and the Templars themselves — hurrying to and fro on their errands, dressed in the white surcoat of the order - if not for their swords, which they rarely removed, might easily have passed for their peaceable counterpart. A religious order they were, true enough; but these were brothers in arms - a fighting brotherhood first, and a religious fraternity after.

They left us to ourselves for the most part, pressed as they were with accommodating the sudden swelling of their ranks. Now and then we heard one or another of the Templars exclaim as he discovered a countryman among the newly arrived recruits, but otherwise the peace of

'I can only think that Renaud has suffered some misfortune,' I concluded, after explaining the circumstances of our meeting with the prince. 'Otherwise, he should have returned long since.'

'I am certain it is nothing,' he replied stiffly, dismissing my concern as if it were the trifling qualm of a spoiled and fussy child. 'The business of the garrison sometimes requires more particular attention than one, unused to such matters, may credit.'

I suppose he meant to put me in my place with that. He turned back to his inspection, running his hand down along the foreleg of the horse before him, a fine roan stallion. I decided there was little to be gained by quarrelling with him, and turned to go. 'If he said . for you to wait for him, I expect he meant just that,' Gislebert added over his shoulder. As he turned away, I heard him mutter under his breath, 'Only a fool would doubt him.'

I stopped in mid-step and turned around. 'I am no fool, Sergeant Gislebert,' I said sharply, 'contrary to what you seem to think. And I have every confidence in Commander Renaud. Yes, he told us to wait for him here, and all day we have done just that. He also told us that he would soon follow. Clearly, that did not happen. Therefore, in light of the prince's foul mood, I do not think it foolish to inquire after the commander's welfare.'

He straightened slowly, regarding me with rank distaste. 'I leave it with you, Gislebert. It would be the work of a moment to prove me wrong.'

After a moment, he said, 'What would you have me do, my lord?' The words were worms in his mouth.

'Perhaps it would not be too much of an inconvenience to send a message

bright stars shone overhead, and the moon was already showing above the rooftops. Beyond the garrison walls, I could see smoke drifting up from the houses round about.

I fell to thinking about what you, Gait, might be doing at Banvard at that moment. I could see you playing on the shore, gathering the glistening shells and holding them out for your grandmother Ragna's inspection. I was immersed in this daydream when I heard someone enter the yard. I looked up to see Gislebert striding quickly towards me.

'It is as you feared,' he said bluntly. Visibly agitated, he grimaced as, forced to his admission, he delivered the bad news. 'Prince Bohemond has confined the commander to the palace.'

'So it is as I thought.'

The sergeant squirmed with embarrassment. 'I was able to inquire after him through the monks in the palace. He is safe and well. He sent a message: you are to leave the city at once. The commander tried to make him see reason, but to no avail. Bohemond has commenced a search. Once they reach the lower city, the garrison will no longer be safe. The commander says you and the young lord must not wait any longer. You must flee.'

'Did he say where we were to go?'

'No, my lord,' answered the sergeant. 'Although, the commander imagines the young lord is anxious to return home as swiftly as possible.'

'He is extremely anxious,' I replied. 'But speak plainly, Gislebert. What does Renaud intend us to do?'

The sturdy soldier regarded me with dull implacability. 'That is all I know,

'Yes.'

'Then I expect you will be wanting to leave. The city gates are soon closed, and it would not be wise to wait until morning.'

'If there is nothing else ...' I paused to allow him to say more if he would, 'then we will be on our way, sergeant.'

Padraig and Roupen listened gravely as I told them what the sergeant had discovered. 'Unless we care to risk discovery in the city overnight, we must go before they close the gates.'

I did not like begging provisions from the Templar quarter master, but had no choice. The markets, if any could be found, would be deserted, and we had a long walk ahead of us. Padraig undertook to procure the bare necessities: a few loaves of bread, a little dried meat, and three skins of water - enough to see us to Saint Symeon where we hoped to get a boat. Gislebert might have helped us on our way, but he disappeared and was not seen again until, as we made our way out of the garrison and onto the street, the sergeant caught up with us to add one further complication to what had become a most mysterious flight. 'The commander said that if he was ever forced to flee the city, he would go to Famagusta,' Gislebert said meaningfully.

I had no idea where this might be, nor did Padraig or Roupen.

'It is a port on the island of Cyprus,' the sergeant informed us, 'and home to a man named Yordanus Hippolytus.'

I repeated the name. 'Would it be worthwhile trying to find this fellow, do you think?'

through their portals with deepest distrust, never more so than when preparing to bar the doors for the night. They halted us and questioned us closely and inspected us with scowls of disapproval. If not for Padraig, who offered priestly reassurances on our behalf, I do not think they would have let us go.

In the end, we were allowed to pass through the small doors - the larger gates were already shut - and out onto the road by which we had come to Antioch that very morning. The rest we had enjoyed during the latter part of the day stood us in good stead; however, Roupen, worried as he was, had not availed himself of the opportunity provided, and so we were forced to go at a much slower pace and stop more frequently to rest than I would have preferred; but there was nothing to be done about it. The young lord was still not capable of much vigour, and it would not help matters at all to exhaust him, and bring on his illness again.

We allowed ourselves a drink at daybreak and again at midday when we stopped for a meal and a longer rest during the hottest part of the day. As a precaution, we removed ourselves a fair distance from the road and took shelter from the sun beneath some low, blighted olive trees. We ate our food, quickly finishing the last of our scant provisions. I kept watch on the road lest Bohemond's pursuit catch us napping. Even so, I saw no sign of frenzied chase; we had the road and sky and empty hills to ourselves.

A short distance from this scrag of a grove stood a squalid little farm, the crabbed fields of which yielded more stones than corn. A few parched stalks drooped in the oven-hot air, their withered leaves crackling on each fitful breath of wind. That hard labour should be lavished on such hopeless soil would have been pitiable if it were not everywhere the same in that broken desert land.

assured us. 'The wilderness is very rough and barren; there are few roads, and those that exist are not good at all. We will certainly need help to get there, and good horses.'

I asked which direction Armenia lay, and how best to get there. Roupen explained that it was in the low Taurus mountains to the north, and that there were several routes. 'The best way, however, is through Mamistra,' he said. 'We can get there by boat from Famagusta.'

'Mamistra is a sea port?' asked Padraig.

'No, it is inland - on a river. But the water is deep enough for boats and small ships. It serves as the nearest sea port to Anazarbus.'

When the strength of the sun began to wane somewhat, we pushed on again, walking until dusk deepened around us. I remained wary of any pursuit, but saw no one until coming upon a group of Venetian merchants camped beside the road for the night. The merchants, seven in all, had been exploring trading opportunities in Antioch, and were on their way to Ascalon in the south. They greeted us pleasantly and invited us to share their evening meal, and asked how we found life in the Holy Land. Padraig would have talked to them all day long, but I thought it best not to encourage their interest too far, so after wishing them well, I begged to be excused, explaining that we had walked all day and were very tired.

I scraped out a place among the rocks and thorns, lay down, and dozed contentedly until Padraig nudged me awake at daybreak. 'Someone is coming,' he whispered. 'I was just praying and heard horses on the road.'

'Bohemond's men?'

'Maybe. They are still too far away to tell.'

The traders did not linger, but rode on quickly - no doubt in the hope of catching us a little further up the road. After they were gone, we waited in the ravine until the merchants departed as well, and then continued on, keeping a sharp watch on the road ahead for the returning soldiers.

We walked until midday, and then stopped for another rest, thinking to move on at dusk and walk through the night so that we could reach the harbour with a good chance of getting a ship before any sailed the next day.

This we did, spending a quiet night out on the road beneath the stars, so that we arrived at the little port town of Saint Symeon just after sunrise. We saw no sign of the soldiers, but two of the roundships were still in the bay, dwarfing the smaller fishing vessels riding peacefully at anchor off shore. We hurried down through the single narrow street to the harbour, where Roupen made a good account of himself by undertaking negotiations with a local fisherman for the hire of his boat to take us across to Famagusta. The sailor knew the place well, and was pleased to have ready payment in silver for his services. He called his son and one of his idle friends to help with the boat and, after providing ourselves with a few loaves of bread, a little wine, and some boiled eggs and hard lumps of goat cheese, we cast off.

As the boat slid out into the bay, I scanned the road and hills for the last time for any sign of our pursuers. There was nothing. I decided that Bohemond had made but a half-hearted attempt at apprehending us; if he had been in deadly earnest, his men would have caught us long since. Thus, I concluded that he had directed his main efforts elsewhere, and relaxed my vigilance. The race, I decided, would not be to outrun pursuers, but to reach Anazarbus first. Towards this end, I dedicated

been more simple and straightforward. But, as I was learning, nothing was ever simple and straightforward in Outremer. Our search quickly ran aground on the fact that, as night closed in, no one would speak to strangers in the street. In the end, we were forced to take a room from a local wool merchant who put out part of his large house to visitors for a small fee, for which he also provided an excellent meal. We ate heartily, and slept well in soft beds piled deep with fleeces, and rose early next morning to renew our search for Yordanus - with an ever-increasing sense of urgency. For, every day we spent dallying along the trail, Bohemond was that much closer to launching his attack on Anazarbus.

Before leaving the wool merchant's house, we asked if he knew where we might find this Yordanus Hippolytus. Our good-natured host had heard of the fellow. 'Oh, yes,' he assured us. 'He lives in the upper town - the old town. He is a goldsmith - fine man, a very saint, and given to many good works - if he is the man I am thinking of.'

'The man you are thinking of,' said the wool merchant's wife, 'does not live in the old town. He lives in the big house at the end of the road behind the hill.'

The sunny merchant's face clouded. 'How do you know who I am thinking of?' he demanded. 'Be quiet, woman, you will confuse these good men.'

'No more than you have confused them already,' she replied tartly. 'Take my advice and ask someone to show you the way to the house behind the hill.'

'The old town,' the wool man assured us. 'Pay no attention to my wife. She is obviously thinking of someone else.'

Armed with this conflicting information, we began our search in the old

'I thank you,' said Padraig, 'but we were given to understand that he was a goldsmith who owned a house in the old town.'

Seeing that strangers had come into the market, several of the more idle traders gathered around to see if we might require anything they could supply.

'Oh, no,' said the man, 'I fear you were told a lie. He owns no house, but sleeps aboard his ship. Look for the biggest ship in the harbour. That is Yordanus' ship.'

'What are you telling these men, Adonis? The man you are talking about died last winter.'

'Impossible!' cried the brass merchant. 'I saw him only two days ago down at the harbour.'

'You saw a ghost perhaps,' said a second man, a potter with large, bare hairy arms covered in dried clay. 'The ships are for sale. Do you wish to buy a ship?' he asked hopefully.

'Not just now,' Padraig said. 'Later, perhaps.'

'Yordanus Hippolytus did you say?' inquired another man, pushing in. His hands were red from the dye he used to stain the leather from which he made sandals and belts. 'I know this man. But he was never a ship owner. He came from Damascus where he grew figs.'

'A fig grower from Damascus?' said the first man. 'There is no such person in all of Famagusta!'

'There is,' replied the sandal maker with admirable confidence. 'He has a daughter who buys in the market. I sold her a pair of sandals once and she said they were the best she had ever seen -better even than Damascus.'

The market traders fell to arguing with one another over the particularities of the man's identity. Turning to us, Pdraig said, 'I am thinking the wool merchant's wife was right. Perhaps we should try to find the house behind the hill.'

Again, what should have been a simple task took on unimagined difficulties. No one we asked could tell us where this house might be. As one of our cheerful guides told us, 'The problem is not so much the house, as the hill. There are a great many hills in Cyprus, and most have houses.'

Roupen lost heart and was for returning to the harbour, hiring a boat, and leaving Famagusta behind forever. But, having come this far, and with the day already speeding from us, I was growing more determined than ever to find this Yordanus Hippolytus. Pdraig agreed with me. 'If we do not find him today,' I promised Roupen, 'we will be on our way again tomorrow.' So, we tramped around the hills above the port, trying first one house and then another, and came at last to a fine old Roman villa surrounded by a crumbling wall.

In the road ahead I saw a woman carrying a jar in her arms. She turned aside and entered through a low door in the wall. It was hot and we were tired. Thinking merely to ask her for a drink - or at least for directions to a nearby well, I quickened my step and followed her through the doorway and immediately found myself standing in the shaded courtyard of a once-handsome villa. There were large, leafy plants in great earthenware pots around the perimeter of the yard, and a small, finely-formed fig tree growing in the centre beside a rock-rimmed pool. Instantly, the blazing heat of the day vanished, and I felt as if I had entered a haven of peace and calm.

repiece, stepping boldly into the courtyard. Tall and willowy, with long dark hair, her simple blue mantle hung in fresh folds, except where she cradled the jar against the fullness of her breasts and the long curve of her hip. 'What do you want here?' she demanded. She spoke Latin, not Greek, but curiously accented, each word taking on a flattened quality.

'Please, we do not mean to intrude -'

'And yet you do intrude.' Her gaze was direct and unsettling.

'Again, I beg your pardon,' I replied, somewhat abashed. I had hardly spoken a dozen words and already I had apologized twice. I returned her gaze, almost daring her to interrupt again before I finished. 'We are looking for the house of a man called Yordanus.'

'Why?'

'We have business with him.'

'Liar!' she said. 'He does not know you.'

'My lady?'

'Be gone with you at once - before I call the servants to send you away.'

Remembering what the sandal maker had said about Yordanus having a daughter, I glanced at her feet and saw sandals the same shade of red as that which stained the merchant's hands. 'Then this *is* his house,' I concluded.

'Yes. But do not think you will see him. He sees no one.'

'We have come a very great distance,' I told her. 'All the way from Antioch. Commander Renaud de Bracineaux sent us.'

A cloud of suspicion passed over her face. She stared at me for a moment.

'You go, Duncan,' Padraig said. As he and Roupen sat down in the shade, the woman led me across the yard and around the pool to a wide stone-paved walk leading to the entrance to the great house. She did not pause but pushed open the large wooden door, and stepped quickly in, motioning for me to follow.

We entered the cool darkness of a vestibule dressed in marble and tiles. The only light came from a small round window high above the door; it cast a circle of illumination on the blue-tinted tile of the far wall, against which stood a row of statues - some entire human forms, others head-and-shoulders only, and all of them carved in the most wonderful pale, milk-white stone. Although I know nothing of such things, they did appear to me to be very lifelike, which I took to indicate a distinct skill on the part of their maker. That a house should own one such carving was to me a sign of taste and refinement; that this house should boast statues by the rank meant its owner possessed the wealth of a kingdom.

'Wait in there,' instructed Yordanus' daughter, pointing to the chamber beyond, 'and I will see if my father is well enough to receive guests.'

She hurried away and I wandered into the next room - a vast chamber easily more than three times larger than Murdo's great hall back home, and crammed with an assortment of tables, chairs, rugs, cushions, and other costly chattel; ornate jars, ewers, bowls, and platters were stacked carelessly on the tables and floor, and numerous ceremonial spears and halberds with braided tassels and silk bindings stood against the walls.

What I had first taken for tiles on the floor, on closer inspection turned out to be squares of fine polished wood cunningly arranged to form intricate patterns of alternating colours. The two walls at either end of the hall were painted with figures on horseback riding to the hunt of two tusked beasts,

enough to seat twenty guests with comfort, and a dozen or more smaller boards; some of these were of gilded wood, and carved with precision. There were chairs, too, some as big as thrones; I saw one or two which the Jarl of Orkneyjar would have boasted to own.

So enthralled was I with the inspection of my surroundings, I failed to discern that I was being watched.

'Take anything,' said a dry, husky voice in formal, precise Latin. 'Take as much as you can carry, just leave us in peace.'

I turned on my heel to see a gaunt, bald-headed man standing in the doorway behind me. He was tall and slope-shouldered; limp hands hung loosely at his sides. Sharp-featured, with a large, beak-like nose and narrow chin, he put me in mind of a fish-eagle. His dark, sad eyes, and the severe downward bend of his damp mouth, however, gave him the unfortunate appearance of an extremely aggrieved fish-eagle.

At first I imagined his doleful aspect resulted from the misapprehension that he had entered his home to confront a thief in the act of robbery - an error I hastened to correct. 'Pax vobiscum,' I told him. 'Pray have no fear, I am not a thief. Your daughter was good enough to admit me, and I merely await her return.'

He sniffed loudly - as if this explanation, so obviously untrue, was far beneath his lofty regard - and continued to watch me with his sad eyes. He was a taller man than he appeared; he carried himself low and hunched over as if bent inward by weight on his neck.

'In truth,' I said, trying to make him understand, 'I have been instructed to wait here.' He made no reply, but continued staring at me. 'You are Yordanus?' I ventured.

whatever you want and go. Leave me in peace.

He shuffled slowly away, leaving me to gape after him.

Dearest Caitriona, something has happened which has me shuddering with a ferment of excitement I have not felt in a very long time. An event of uncertain significance, I realize, yet I cannot bring myself to see it as anything other than a sign of great importance. It would not be the first time a lonely prisoner saw in some minute and arbitrary alteration of his bleak life the false gleam of expectation, I know. Still, my mind races and my hands sweat with anticipation.

Early this morning - the sun had not risen, and the palace was dark - the guards came for me. I was roughly roused from sleep so I had no time to prepare my departure; they would not even allow me to seal my missive to you, dear heart. Fortunately, Wazim, wakened by the noise, came padding down the corridor, and I was able to tell him what to do. Thus, I went to face my fate secure in the knowledge that whatever befell me, my labour of love would find its way to you one day.

Accordingly, I was hauled before Caliph al-Hafiz to receive my judgement. All was exactly as before. Indeed, if I had not been aware of the passage of the last few days, I might have imagined that I had left the room, turned around in the corridor and returned to find everything as I had seen it only moments before. The caliph, splendid in his snow-white turban with the peacock feathers, still sat on his golden throne beneath his palm tree, squinting with undisguised animosity as I was brought in.

'What is it that you write?'

'I am making an account of my -'

'Captivity,' he said, supplying the word himself.

'Travels, my lord,' I corrected. 'I am making an account of my travels in Outremer.'

He grunted, and pulled on his moustache as he considered this reply. I realized then that the man before me was discontented and oppressed by worry. The eyes that gazed at me were fatigued, and the day was new. 'Who will read this account of your travels?'

'I am making it for my daughter. Although she is still very young, I hope that one day she will want to know what became of her father and she will read it for herself.'

'Tcha!' he cried, as if he had caught me in a lie. 'How do you imagine she will receive this book of yours? Who will take it to her?'

'I cannot say how it will reach her,' I replied readily. 'That is for his Honourable Potentate the Khalifa to decide.'

The answer caught him off guard. 'For *me* to decide?'

'Even so, my lord. It was promised in your name that my last request would be granted. My last request is to have my writings reach my daughter.'

The caliph turned his head and demanded of one of his many advisors, 'Is this so?'

The man, a dark-bearded fellow with a basket of rolled-up parchments beside him, consulted the document before him and nodded. 'It is so,

an measure.  
'A parent should love his children,' al-Hafiz declared, as if instructing a stubborn pupil. 'So it is written in the Holy Qur'an.'

'And in the Bible,' I pointed out.

'You are not afraid to die,' he observed.

'No, my lord.'

'Are you so pure of heart and soul that you do not tremble to stand before the Throne of Divine Judgement?'

'How should I tremble, my lord, when even now my righteous advocate intercedes before the throne on my behalf?'

This appeared to interest the caliph. 'This advocate - who is he?'

'He is Jesu, called the Messiah.'

'I know of this Messiah,' said al-Hafiz, with an impatient twitch of dismissal. 'Among the faithful, he is considered a very great prophet.' He frowned, as if daring me to answer, and asked, 'Why should this prophet intercede for you?'

'He intercedes for anyone who trusts in him,' I answered.

Caliph al-Hafiz raised his chin, indicating he was finished with me. 'Then we will see if this advocate has the ear of Allah,' he said. 'At the sixth hour your head will fall to the axe and you will stand before the Throne of Judgement. May your advocate's eloquence open the gates of paradise for you.'

Even though I knew it was coming, hearing the words made me weak in the knees. Somehow, I summoned the strength to bow in humble

I already know what I would say: 'With all respect, my lord, my hope is in Almighty God, the Merciful Redeemer, who alone holds the power of life and death - in this world *and* the next.'

He stared at me, and I thought I saw doubt creeping into the deeply-creased lines of his face. Suddenly - as if the thought had just occurred to him - he said, 'What do you know of affairs in Cairo?'

The question so surprised me, I could not think how to answer. 'Why, I know nothing of affairs in Cairo,' I replied, when he had repeated it once more. 'I have been a prisoner of the palace since coming here. I see no one, and no one sees me.'

'Just so!' he declared triumphantly, and I understood the question had been a test, but what it was meant to reveal, I could not grasp. Gesturing to the guards, he ordered them to take me back to my cell.

I was swept from his presence and returned to my cell where I spent my last moments praying and preparing myself for the grim ordeal ahead. I do not know how much time passed - it seemed I spent an eternity on my knees - and I heard footsteps outside my door once more. I heard the key in the lock and rose to meet the guards who would conduct me to the place of execution.

It was Wazim who entered, however; and he was alone.

'Da'ouk,' he said, his face beaming like a swarthy sun, 'good tidings! The execution is delayed.'

'Delayed?' Relief flooded through me. 'Why?'

'I was not told the reason,' he answered. 'But I know there is some trouble in the city and the khalifa has sent all the guards to deal with it. He has

you can, please.'

'With pleasure, Da'ouk.'

Grinning, Wazim left my cell; I heard him scurrying away, and, after a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving for my stay of execution, I returned to my table.

After a long time pondering the implications of the unforeseen development in my situation, I picked up my quill once more, and returned to the work at hand.

Leaving the house of Yordanus Hippolytus, I rejoined Roupen and Padraig in the yard. They were sitting beside the little pool, talking quietly. Taking one look at the expression on my face, Padraig said, 'He refused to see you.'

'No, I saw him. He refused to help us.' I quickly explained that I had told him of Commander Renaud's recommendation. 'He said he did not care about our troubles.'

'Then I say we shake the dust off our feet,' Roupen said. 'We have wasted enough time with this already.' He rose abruptly. 'We never should have come here in the first place. We would be half-way to Anazarbus by now if we had not listened to that Templar.'

I was forced to agree with him, and we decided our best course was to return to the harbour and see if we could find a boat to hire; although, considering the little we had left from Bezu's largesse, I reckoned our chances very slender. Nevertheless, we started from the yard and, as I passed through the low gateway, I heard someone calling me and looked back to see Yordanus' daughter hurrying towards us.

thanked her for her help, and took my leave. 'You will excuse me, my friends are waiting.'

'Don't go.'

The desperation in her voice brought me up short. 'My lady?'

'Please, dine with us tonight. I will speak to my father. He will receive you in a far better mood, I promise you.'

Now it was my turn to frown. 'We have spent all day trying to find this place, only to be told to go away - first by you, and then by your father. Now that we are about to do just that, you say you want us to stay.'

She smiled suddenly - a delicious, winsome flash of fine white teeth against the tawny hue of her skin. For the first time I realized she was of an Eastern race, for her colouring was dark - her hair and eyes were black, and radiantly so, and her flesh glowed with a lustrous sheen the colour of honey mingled with cream.

'Our business is urgent,' I told her. 'We dare not waste time indulging the whims of an old man.'

'Please,' she said, laying a hand on my arm. 'You need to eat somewhere, and it is a long time since we have welcomed guests beneath our roof. Dine with us tonight and let us see what comes of it.'

She was right, the day was rapidly dwindling away, and we would have to find somewhere to stay for the night. We had come this far, I thought, we might as well see it through to the end. 'Very well,' I said. 'I will speak to my friends.'

'Good,' she said, brightening instantly. 'Fetch them back, and I will show you where you can rest and refresh yourselves.'

of two simple triangles, one inverted and imposed upon the other to form the Star of David, a symbol much employed by the Jews.

'I will not put my feet beneath the same board as a Jew,' Roupen growled angrily. 'Do what you like, I will not break bread with them. I would rather starve first.'

'Then you may do so,' I told him bluntly, aghast at his crude incivility. I had never seen him so irritated and angry.

'They are *Jews*,' he protested unashamedly. 'They cannot be trusted. We do not need them anyway. I am leaving.' With that, he spun on his heel and hastened off down the road. Padraig flew after him, attempting to calm him and bring him back to beg forgiveness.

Mortified by the young lord's discourtesy, I quickly turned to apologize. 'I am sorry, my lady. He is distraught and upset by the urgency of our predicament, but that is no excuse for his uncouth behaviour.'

'And what about you?' she asked sharply. 'Do you also hold Jews in such low regard?'

'I confess I have never known any Jews,' I answered; desperate to make amends, I added: 'Still, if they are even half so kind and generous as you have been, then they are indeed a noble race - and I will fight anyone who says otherwise.'

She gave the remark a dismissive huff and stared at me, her dark eyes searching mine as she pursed her lips in thought. After a moment, she said, 'Do you still wish to eat with us?'

'I would consider it an honour, my lady.'

'Then you may return this evening.'



We spent what little remained of the day in the market square of the upper town. Under Padraig's ministrations, and mollified by the fact that our host was not a Jew after all, the haughty young lord allowed himself to be persuaded to partake of a meal without further insult.

As a pale yellow moon rose above the surrounding hills, we found ourselves once more standing before the low door in the high wall at the end of the long uphill climb. There was an iron ring hanging from a chain beside the door. Padraig gave the ring a strong pull, and a bell chimed distantly from somewhere inside. We waited for a time, and nothing happened, so he pulled it again, and then once more for good measure. The monk was about to pull the bell yet again when the door flew open and a small brown man poked out his head. He spat a stream of invective which none of us could understand, and then slammed the door again.

'There! You see?' grumbled Roupen, only too ready to abandon what appeared to be an increasingly hopeless enterprise.

'Pull the bell chain,' I directed, refusing to give in.

Again the door flew open, and again the man glared and jabbered fiercely at us. This time, however, I reached in, took hold of his tunic and yanked him out into the street. He sputtered and cursed, and began kicking at us with his bony bare feet.

Yordanus is pleased to receive us for dinner this evening.

'So you say,' replied the man, wholly unmoved by my declaration. Reaching out, he tapped the squirming, spitting man squarely on top of the head. Instantly, he stopped righting; I released him and he scurried away.

'Have you something for me?' asked the fat man when the little porter had gone.

Uncertain how to reply, I glanced at Pdraig, who merely shrugged unhelpfully. 'No,' I answered at last. 'Should I have something for you?'

'That is for you to say.'

'I was given nothing for you,' I told him.

'Pity,' he replied. He rolled his eyes lazily from one to the other of us, then sighed and fell silent.

'Is Yordanus at home?' I wondered after an awkward moment.

The fat man yawned, then turned and beckoned us to follow. The three of us stepped through the doorway and crossed the deep-shadowed courtyard. We were led to the door of the villa. 'Wait here,' the man instructed; he pushed open the door and vanished into the darkness within.

In a little while, the small wiry fellow returned. He saw us waiting before the door and instantly flew at us, shouting and waving his hands. He seemed determined to drive us from the house, and might have succeeded, save for the abrupt appearance of Yordanus' daughter. She wore a long white robe and carried a lash of braided leather with which she proceeded to whip the little man.

'Go to, Omer!' she cried, swinging the lash. 'Go to!'

fluttering on the large candlesticks around the room. There were no chairs, but after the fashion of the East, we reclined on large cushions either side of the low table which had been spread with fine, ornately-woven Damascus cloth.

While in the marketplace, Padraig and I had taken the opportunity to have our clothes brushed so as to present a slightly less disagreeable presence at the board. Upon entering the dining chamber, the lady offered a wash basin filled with scented water. Roupén, however, did himself a great dishonour by not only refusing the wash basin, but scowling at everyone and everything as if enduring humiliations to his dignity so intense as to be physically painful.

The lady departed, leaving us to our ablutions. We were alone only a moment when she reappeared. If not for the fact that I had just seen her, I would not have known her as the same person. Having removed the white robe, she now wore a gown of the lightest, most delicate fabric I have ever seen. What is more, the thin stuff shimmered in the candlelight, glistening with a lustre like that of moonbeams on water. It was blue as the midnight sky, and cut low over her bosom, to reveal the graceful swell of her breasts. A wide cloth belt of gold gathered the gown at her slender waist, emphasizing the curve of her hips. Her dark hair hung in loose curls over her bare shoulders.

Unexpectedly, the sight of her slender, shapely arms sent a pang of longing through me of an intensity I had not experienced since my own dear Rhona held me to her heart. It was all I could do not to stare openly at her as she invited us to sit and make ourselves comfortable, saying, 'My father has been informed of your arrival. He will join us when he is ready.'

'Your graciousness, my lady, is exceeded only by your loveliness,' I said,

Fordeanus entered the room.

Grim and tight-lipped, he acknowledged us with chilly, if not hostile, indifference and the meal commenced. Our unhappy host reclined at the head of the table with the peevish and sour disposition of a man being bent into an unbecoming shape. Full of sighs and prickly noises, he fumed and fretted, giving every sign that he wished to be anywhere else in all the world but where he found himself just now. Shameful behaviour in a host, to be sure, and it might have spoiled the evening save for the fact that I only had eyes for Sydoni, and she ignored her father's unpleasantness to the point of invisibility. Clearly, the evening was hers, and she was not about to allow anyone to ruin it.

Once we were all seated, Sydoni presented us with small bowls of peeled pears cooked in a sweet sauce, cooled, and seasoned with a spice I had never tasted before. Tangy, pungent, it gave a warm tingle to the mouth and tongue; when I asked what it was, Sydoni smiled and said, 'It is called cinnamon.'

Roupen grunted at this, as if to say it was a commonplace too drearily familiar to mention. I thought it wonderful, however, and praised it loudly. I praised the next dish also: fish roe and curds of soft new cheese with cream and flavoured with garlic and lemon, all mixed together to form a thick paste into which we dipped strips of flat bread. There was sweet wine, too, and several kinds of bread, and grapes.

When we had eaten our fill of these things, Sydoni brought out the next dish: roast quail stuffed with bread crumbs, pine nuts, and herbs. Glazed with honey, the succulent birds were done to such perfection, even Roupen begrudgingly commended the art of the cook. Before I knew it, I had eaten two of them and was reaching for a third when I saw Sydoni

jar and poured the good red wine. Yordanus then raised his cup high and said, 'I drink to friendship, health, and peace - God's blessing on all his children.' We acclaimed this sentiment with cheers, whereupon our host said, 'May the Lord of the Feast eternally bless us with good food, good wine, and dear friends around the board -for ever and always! Amen!'

Roupen affirmed the benediction, but could not let the comment pass. 'Lord of the Feast?' he said when everyone had drunk. 'That is a title which belongs to Christ, I should have thought.'

Yordanus turned his head and regarded the young man quizzically. 'Yes?'

'Strange words from the mouth of a Copt,' Roupen observed with wine-induced carelessness.

The old man stiffened; the smile hardened on his face and his eyes narrowed.

Roupen, seeing he had offended his host, looked to me for help. But I remained silent and left him to face the consequence of his intolerance. 'I meant nothing more than that,' he offered weakly. 'Why does everyone look at me so?'

'You think Copts unworthy of salvation?' asked Yordanus, quietly bristling.

Roupen red-faced now, raised a hand in defence of his blunder. 'I meant no disresp -'

'You think because I am a Copt, I am less a Christian than you?' Yordanus challenged, growing rigid with indignation.

I made to intercede for the young man, but Padraig prevented me. 'Let him squirm,' the priest whispered. 'It will teach him a lesson.'

Roupen, stricken and guilty, stammered, 'Please, sir, I am the one who should leave. And I will do so.' He jumped up from his place. 'Before I go, I will beg your pardon and ask your forgiveness for the offence I have caused. Please accept my deepest apologies.'

He spoke with such contrition that Yordanus, urged by the silent entreaty of his daughter, grudgingly relented. 'Oh, very well,' the old man said. 'Sit down, young man. Sit down. There is no harm done.' He sighed, and forced a sad smile. Flapping a hand at the young lord, he said, 'Come, sit down. We will put this unfortunate misunderstanding behind us.'

Reluctantly, Roupen lowered himself to his place once more. Yordanus gazed at him for a moment. 'For more than thirty generations,' the old man said, thrusting his finger skyward, 'the House of Hippolytus has been a Christian house - before Byzantium, before Rome, before the Gospel of Christ was proclaimed in the streets of Athens, *we* were Christians.'

'An ancestry to glory in,' Pdraig remarked. 'If every family could claim such long obedience, this world would not labour under so great a weight of faithlessness and falsehood.'

'Indeed, sir,' said Yordanus proudly. 'When the followers of The Way were thrown out of the High Temple at Jerusalem where they were meeting in those days, my ancestors were there. On the day that the Blessed Stephen was put to death, my ancestors carried his poor, battered corpse to the tomb. When the persecution began, the infant church scattered - north, south, east, west - wherever they hoped to escape the terrible oppression of the mob, and the tyranny of the temple leaders.'

Yordanus raised his cup, and Sydoni emptied the last of the jar into it. He drained the cup and said, 'But all that was a very long time ago. No one

south. Since the time of the great patriarch, Abraham, whenever trouble threatened in Palestine, the Jews took refuge in Egypt. This my people did, and in Egypt they stayed. In time, we became Egyptians, and those of us who remained staunch in the faith became known as Copts. My ancestors prospered greatly; they became traders - some with fleets, and some with camels, some with important stalls in the principle markets of the great cities.

'This is the life that was handed down to me. I became a trader, after my own fashion, and my son likewise.' At these words, a shadow passed over the old man's face; his voice faltered. 'My son ...' he paused, cleared his throat, and finished, saying, 'Once the extent of my interests stretched from the banks of the Nile to the tops of the Tarsus mountains. Now all that is gone ... gone and finished and dead - like my son. The last hope of my illustrious line.'

Yordanus raised his eyes and smiled sadly. 'I am sorry,' he said, sinking once more into himself, 'my grief is a burden I did not intend forcing upon you. Forgive an old man.'

He paused, during which time the fat man who had met us at the door appeared. 'Gregior,' Yordanus ordered, 'bring us more wine.' The sullen servant turned without a word and lumbered off. 'And try not to drink it all before it reaches the table,' his master called after him.

'I do not believe in keeping slaves,' explained Yordanus. 'But I make an exception for Gregior and Omer. They are hopeless, you must agree. If I turned them out they would soon starve, and I cannot, in good Christian conscience, allow that to happen. So, I keep them for their own good, as no one else would have them.' He smiled weakly and spread his hands. 'I apologize for your sorry reception. Mind you, it would have been no

which Yordanus offered to us once more, saying, 'I drink to my friends, old and new! May the High Holy One keep you all in the hollow of his hand. Amen!'

We drank and our host, placing his cup firmly on the table, said, 'Now then, to business. Tell me, why did our Templar friend de Bracineaux send you to old Yordanus?'

Yordanus listened with half-closed eyes while I made a brief account of the events which had led us to his door. He nodded and glanced at Padraig as I described how the priest and I had come to be on pilgrimage, and how we had met the Templars and young Lord Roupen in Rouen, and all that had flowed from that meeting - all, that is, save for Bohemond's plan to reclaim the Armenian stronghold at Anazarbus. I thought it best to keep that to myself.

When I finished at last, Yordanus frowned mildly and said, 'A fascinating tale, to be sure. Yet, you have omitted one or two significant details, I think. No doubt you have your reasons, but if I am to help you ...' He turned his palm up as if offering me a choice.

I hesitated, trying to decide whether to risk telling him more. He saw my reluctance and pressed me further. 'For example,' he continued, 'you have not said why you were forced to flee from Antioch so quickly.' Lifting a hand to Roupen, he added, 'Would I be wrong in thinking your troubles, whatever they may be, began and ended with your young friend here?'

'Not far wrong,' I replied cautiously. Roupen lowered his eyes, but said nothing.

'Come now, my friends, if I am to help you I must know everything about this affair. What have you done? Impugned the prince's virtue? Sullied the

'We went to him to ask him to repent of his plan,' I concluded. 'Unfortunately, things got out of hand and de Bracineaux was taken prisoner in the citadel. Padraig, Roupen, and I were forced to flee before Bohemond could capture us as well. The good commander suggested we come to you.'

Yordanus plucked a red plum from a basket and bit off the end. He sucked the juice for a moment, and then observed, 'It seems to me that your path has been prepared from the beginning.'

'Indeed?' I wondered. Padraig nodded, smiling as he regarded the old man with, as I thought, renewed respect and appreciation.

Pushing himself back from the table, the old man beamed expansively. 'Rejoice, my friends!' he declared. 'Yordanus Hippolytus is the one man in the whole world with both power and inclination to speed you to your purpose.' Glancing at the young lord who had yet to exchange his wary, haunted expression for a more mirthful countenance, the ageing trader leaned over and gave him a fatherly pat on the arm. 'Be of good cheer! Your adversaries, though they be legion, have now to deal with me, eh?'

'I did not know we had so many enemies,' Roupen replied, struggling to rise to the occasion.

'For a fact, you do,' Yordanus told him. 'There are many in this part of the world who would love nothing more than to see the Armenian House obliterated by the swiftest means possible. Unsavoury, perhaps, but it is the truth.'

Turning to Padraig and me, he asked, 'Now then, who else knows about your errand?'

up. 'We must work quickly. The necessary arrangements must be made. We begin tonight.'

It was late and I was exhausted; traipsing through the hills all day had taken their toll. 'Tonight?'

'Forgive me. You are tired from your travails. Leave everything to me. Take your rest, and in the morning, God willing, we will be ready to depart.'

He rang the bell and summoned Gregior to lead us to the guest rooms. We bade good-night to our hosts and went to bed in far better spirits than we had enjoyed for many days. Padraig stayed up a little longer saying his prayers, but I lay down and slipped at once into a deep and dreamless sleep - only to be roused some time later by the whispered hush of urgent voices in the courtyard. I listened for a while, but was too sleepy to make anything of it, and soon drifted off again.

The next thing I knew, someone's hands were on me, shaking me awake. I sat up with a start.

'Peace,' said Sydoni, crouching beside me. 'All is well, but it is time to leave.' She rose. 'Gregior has brought you a basin of water. I will leave you to wash and dress. Join us in the great hall as soon as you are ready.'

She left and, as I scraped my scattered thoughts together, I heard her in the next room, waking the young lord with an explanation of our purpose. I stumbled to the steaming basin and washed, praising the Gifting Giver for the luxury of soap. I then dried myself quickly on the linen cloth provided, dressed, and lumbered out the door and down the long, cloistered corridor of the villa to the great hall. The sky was dark, and daybreak still

jagged sawtooth mountains, '— Anazarbus there.'

Frowning, Roupen bent down and examined the crude representation of his home.

'See here,' Yordanus continued, tracing the route to Antioch with his finger. 'Bohemond must go overland because he has no ships to carry so many men and horses and supplies.'

'Two roundships were still in the harbour at Saint Symeon when we left,' Padraig pointed out.

'It makes no difference,' asserted Yordanus with conviction. He had assumed the aspect of a man very much younger than he had shown himself to be. He became decisive and earnest, and I realized I was seeing a glimpse of the man he had once been. 'Two, you say? Two ships would not even carry enough fodder for the horses. He would need twenty, at least.

'So,' he continued, resuming his reckoning, 'Bohemond's army must go on foot. But it is far faster by way of Marionis on the coast, here.' He placed a long finger on a small spot on the coast north of Antioch. 'From there, Mamistra is easily reached on the river. See it there?' He indicated another black wavy line which was the river to another brown smudge north and a little west of the port. 'From Mamistra, it is horseback the rest of the way. With good luck and God's speed, Anazarbus is but ten days' ride from the river. Even if Prince Bohemond marshalled his troops and marched the same day you fled Antioch, you will reach the city at least four or five days ahead of the prince and his army.'

He glanced up to make certain that we all understood. 'You are frowning again, my friends. Now what is the matter?'

behought himself and took three more. Here, he said, thrusting three of the bags at me, 'a man on a journey can never have enough money.'

Thanking my host for his thoughtfulness and generosity, I tied one of the purses to my belt, and gave the other two to Pdraig to carry in his monk's satchel. 'With your help, we shall travel like kings,' I told him.

'Ragged kings, at best,' Yordanus said, indicating our clothes. 'Fortunately, I have something for you.' He crossed to a large chest and threw open the lid. Delving into the chest, he began tossing lengths of cloth and various garments onto the floor around him. 'Ah, here! Here!' he said at last, and brought out a long flowing garment like an overlong tunic.

Made of fine, light-weight cloth, it was the colour of the northern sea as night sweeps in from the east. There were trousers of the same cloth and colour, and new boots of soft leather, the sides of which were stitched with coloured thread in a plumed emblem. The tunic's sleeves were long and wide, but close around the wrists. The trousers were secured around the waist with a long cloth belt of woven purple strips to which hundreds of tiny bronze discs had been attached.

In all, it was the raiment of an eastern prince, and although I was impressed, I could not imagine myself wearing such a garment. 'People will think I am pretending to be an Arab,' I said. 'I will feel foolish. It would be better to stay as I am.'

'Nonsense,' said Yordanus, ignoring my objections, 'your clothes are unsuitable for the rigours of the journey ahead. Not only that, they mark you out as a stranger and an outsider. If you wish to travel swiftly without arousing unwanted interest in your affairs, you must not fly the banner of the ignorant foreigner.'

Gregor unlocked the door, then slipped out onto the deserted road. We hurried down the hill through the new town, and continued on to old Famagusta and the quiet harbour as crimson sunrise broke in the east.

'I will speak to the harbour master directly,' Yordanus told us as we came onto the quay. 'He will know which sailors are available for hire and, of those, who can be trusted.'

'As it happens,' volunteered Padraig, 'we know our way around a ship. Count us among the sailors.'

'Splendid,' said the trader. 'The fewer who know our business, the better.'

Among the vessels riding peacefully at anchor on the tranquil crescent of blue water, there were the usual fishing boats plus a few more substantial craft used by the island traders. There were also four large ships, which I took to be of Venetian or Genoan origin. I was wrong.

Upon arriving at the wharf, Yordanus pointed to the four large ships and said, 'My beauties. Which one do you like the best?'

'The smallest,' I replied, thinking how much work it would be raising sail.

'The fastest,' suggested Padraig. The canny priest was, as usual, closer to the mark.

'That would be *Persephone*? the old man said, indicating the long, low vessel at the end of the line. Although painted in the Greek style - with a green hull, a slender red mast, and a rail and keel of bright yellow - the ship owed more to the ancient Roman design which had held sway in that part of the world for a thousand years or more. 'Not the smallest, but she fairly flies before the lightest breeze. With God's help and a good wind, we will be in Anazarbus before Bohemond makes the Syrian Gates.'

Cait, you will not believe what has taken place. I can scarce believe it myself, and hardly know where to begin to explain. Nor can I say with any certainty whether it is good news for me, or bad. Good, I think. For, if nothing else, it has delayed my execution for another day at least, maybe more. Lord of Hosts in heaven, let it be more!

After dismissing Wazim to learn what he could of matters in the city, I returned to my writing and thought no more about what the caliph had said about the affairs of Cairo. You have been reading the result of my diligence.

This account grows more ungainly by the day, I confess, and my poor hand cramps and burns, and the effort tires me - Cait, sometimes I feel as if I have been wrestling giants from dawn to dusk, though I have not stirred from the chair! Nevertheless I worked through the day and into the night - a common enough practice for me, to be sure; the only difference was that this time no meals were brought to me. I assumed this was because I was soon to die, and the grim assumption spurred me on. Tired as I was, I worked all the more diligently for the knowledge that each page before me might be my last.

It was very late when I again heard rapid footsteps in the corridor. I lay aside my pen, and turned as Wazim burst into the room, excitement

thus leaving the ordinary charge of temporal matters to the vizier.

As it happens, the Caliph of Cairo, however fortunate in other respects, is cursed with a wayward and unruly son, Hasan. The caliph, upon taking the throne, had struck upon the idea of at once making peace with the stormy youth and bringing him under his control by raising the young man to the rank of vizier. Wazim tells me that, while many counselled against this, the plan nevertheless worked very well at first.

After a time, however, Hasan began to find his office too constricting. He drifted back into his former bad habits. Soon he was once more the bane of his father's life, only this time he was placed where he could work great harm to any and all who opposed him. Although none of this reached my ears, it was well known all along the Nile from Alexandria to Luxor, for the wicked young man ran from one tantrum to the next, plunging the government of Cairo into scandals and skirmishes of every kind.

Matters grew so precarious and unpleasant, and the outcry of aggrieved citizens so loud, that the caliph had lately begun to entertain the suggestions of his advisors who insisted that Vizier Hasan must be deposed. This, I suspect, had been behind al-Hafiz's inquiry into what I knew about affairs in Cairo - but more of that later.

So, there it is. All that remains is for me to say that on the day my execution was to have been effected, Vizier Hasan, on an insane whim, summoned no fewer than forty amirs and atabegs from the city and surrounding region to meet with him that he might receive their heartfelt homage. Once they were assembled, he charged them with plotting against him. Thinking it a crude jest, the noblemen made light of it. Enraged that they should laugh at him, he had them thrown into a *hafir* - a grain house -

Forty aims - an dead, he said, shaking his head at the grotesque audacity of it. 'Everyone is most upset.'

'I can see how that would be,' I allowed. 'What has become of the vizier?'

'The khalifa, as you know, was forced to send out the guards. They surrounded the vizier's palace and demanded Hasan to give himself up to them. He refused and there was a small battle.' Wazim paused to gulp down some air, and then hurried on. 'When the vizier's bodyguard saw it was futile to fight against the khalifa's soldiers, they surrendered and delivered Hasan to his father's troops. It is said they have taken the vizier out of the city to a secret fortress where he is to be held until Khalifa al-Hafiz can decide what shall be done with him.'

Now, Gait, that is how the matter sits at the moment. As Padraig so often reminds me: All things work together for the good of him who loves the Lord. Great of Heaven, this is my prayer even now.

Sydoni would not be left behind. While her father discussed suitable crew members with a sleepy harbour master, Sydoni offered to show us around the ship. Taking one of the small boats, Padraig and Roupen rowed us to where the trim *Persephone* was anchored, and we climbed up onto the deck. Once aboard, it quickly became clear that she had no intention of being put off.

When the last of the provisions had been brought aboard and stowed below deck, Yordanus turned to bid farewell to his daughter. 'Save your breath, father,' she said, kissing him lightly on the cheek, 'I am going with you.'

He was against it. There was a brief discussion and, of course, she had her way. The more I saw of Sydoni, the more convinced I became that if she

The first day at sea was a joy. The wind stayed light out of the west, but the ship surged along pleasantly. It felt good to be moving forwards with such efficiency and speed, and with such righteousness of purpose. Very soon our hearts were soaring and our worries seemed to recede like the island behind us. Quietly exhilarated by the inevitable success of our mission, I allowed myself to accept Yordanus' assurances that Bohemond could not possibly outrace us, and that we would reach Anazarbus to deliver our warning long before the greedy prince and his army. Thus, the pressing urgency of our flight began to recede.

Towards evening, dolphins gathered to sport before the prow. Sydoni liked watching them and, drawn by her exuberance, I joined her at the rail to see them leap and dive.

'They say that dolphins are naughty children who taunted Neptune from the safety of the shore,' Sydoni told me. 'In his anger, the god sent a great sea wave to sweep the children off their rock and drown them, but Old Nereus did not have the heart to see them killed, and so gathered them up and changed them into fish, instead.'

'I have never heard that story,' I said. 'But seeing how they play in the waves, I can well believe it.'

We watched the sleek dark shapes dart and glide, splashing in and out of the waves, slicing the wake with their agile fins and weaving trails of bubbles as they rolled and spun in the fire-rimmed water. On the deck behind us, the sailors had lit a small brazier, and the aroma of spit-roasted fish began to steal into the air.

'I love the sea,' Sydoni said lazily, resting her chin on her palm as she leaned on the rail. 'I have spent half my life on ships.'

Even as she said it, I knew she had been about to say something else, to confide more personally, but had pulled back at the last instant. Silence fell between us, and I thought she would not say more.

With a last flash of pale underbelly, the dolphins dove down into the darkening water, disappearing in a trail of bubbles, but Sydoni did not seem to notice. She went on staring down at the waves, a pensive look on her face. 'I want to thank you for saving my father.'

I opened my mouth to dispute her claim, but saw that she was in earnest. 'Did he need saving?'

She turned her face towards the far horizon. 'He was dying in that house.' The way she spoke made it sound like a prison. 'He had lost interest in his food, his affairs, life itself - you saw how he was.'

'I see he has changed,' I agreed. 'He has become a very lion on our behalf.'

'Yes, and that is because of you. I am grateful.'

'My lady, I have done nothing. Your father has taken an interest in our troubles for reasons of his own, and has decided to help us. Believe me, I am the one who should be grateful - and I am.'

'I do not expect you to understand,' she said stiffly, and moved away along the rail.

That night we sat on the broad, uncluttered deck and ate flat bread and roast fish basted in olive oil and sprinkled with dried herbs and salt. The moon rose slowly in a clear sky and made the sea bright. Sydoni went below deck as soon as she finished eating, taking a little food for her father. Pdraig, Roupon, and I sat and talked to the sailors, all three of

apologetic, she stepped nearer. I am finished. A little night, she observed, tilting her face towards the heavens.

'I can never sleep when the moon is so bright and the air is so warm. I often sit out alone all night watching the moon and stars.' 'I have been known to do the same at home.' Still gazing skyward, she asked, 'Is it nice where you live?' 'It is very different from here,' I told her, 'and very different, I would think, from your home in Egypt.'

She smiled, her teeth a glint of whiteness in the dark. 'Not all Copts are born within sight of the Nile. *I* have never lived in Egypt - nor has my father.'

'But I thought -'

'I grew up in Damascus,' she explained. 'No doubt I would have lived there all my life. It is a glorious city - or used to be. I was very happy there.'

'Why did you leave?'

'We were forced to flee,' she replied, her voice darkening slightly, 'and we were not alone. Three thousand Christians were driven from their homes that day. We were far more fortunate than most. Many lost everything, including their lives. They took most of the ready gold and silver, but we were allowed to bring anything else we could carry.'

'Was it because of the crusade?' I asked.

Sydoni gave a slight shake of her head. 'No, it was the *Fida'in*.'

She wondered at the word. 'What is a Fedayeen?'

'*The* Fida'in,' she corrected. 'Have you never heard of them?'

'No,' I told her, 'but I have not been long in the Holy Land.'

said the night before, and asked if he had ever heard of the Fida'in. He, like myself, professed ignorance, so we asked Roupen.

'Where did you hear about them?' He looked around the bare deck as if he thought they might be hiding behind the mast, ready to leap out on us.

'Sydoni told me,' I replied. 'She said they were the reason she and her father were forced to leave Damascus. She said three thousand Christians fled on the same day.'

The young lord shrugged. 'I am not surprised. Such things happen - especially when the Fida'in are involved.'

'But who are they?' asked Padraig.

'Fida'in means those whose lives are ...' he searched for the right word, 'forfeit - like a sacrifice.'

'Sydoni said they held to a hidden faith,' I put in.

Roupen nodded. 'That is why nobody knows much about them. They are very secretive. In fact, I have heard it said they will kill themselves rather than be taken by an enemy. If they die fighting for God, they go instantly to paradise. At least,' he shrugged again, 'that is what they believe.'

Just then, one of the sailors called out that land had been sighted. Yordanus emerged a short while later, and the old trader lurched across the deck to stand squinting in the sunlight and gripping the rail with both hands.

The three of us joined him, and I told Yordanus it was good to see him above deck. 'The air will do you good,' Padraig added.

The old trader gazed across the wide stretch of water at the hazy wrinkle



We reached the mainland after dark and stood off shore during the night, continuing up along the coast the next morning. The sun had but quartered the pale, cloudless sky when the pilot sighted the river mouth and, as the ship made the short run in, Padraig and I quickly became very busy with ropes and sails and suchlike. When I finally had a chance to look up, I saw a wide, shallow-channelled estuary opening out into the sea between two steep banks.

Above the river on the high right bank stood the village of Marionis, its tight clusters of tiny blue-domed houses dazzling white in the bright sun. Seeing that the ship meant to stop, a number of villagers leapt into small boats and rowed out to meet us; the first of these enterprising souls now clamoured for our attention. Yordanus hired two sturdy craft to ferry us to shore, and we soon found ourselves standing in the tiny market square, haggling over the price of mutton.

The old trader rose magnificently to the challenge of bartering for supplies. Truly, he relished the cut and thrust of the exchange with a zeal I had rarely seen in anyone half his age. He conducted the bargaining in Greek and I soon noticed that, although he put on a formidable countenance, he always settled on a price higher than he might have got if he had pressed a little harder.

filled with salted olives, a haunch of fresh mutton, slabs of dried meat and fish, four live chickens bound in pairs by the feet, two bags of flour and jars of oil, round pots of soft goat cheese, and garlanded strands of onions, and bunches of fresh root vegetables of a kind I had never seen before. Also, there was wine - no fewer than five large jars bound in baskets woven of dried river reeds.

At Yordanus' direction, the boys of the village took up the bags and jars and chickens and bread and all the rest and started down to the river. Padraig and I stood atop the bank and watched as the long line of bearers snaked its way from the village square and down the muddy earth track to the water's edge where the various items were loaded into the two boats Yordanus had hired.

Their work completed, the old trader gave each boy a piece of silver, and they raced back to their homes shouting ecstatically. We joined Roupén and Yordanus by the boats. 'Mamistra is two days by river,' Yordanus was saying as we came up, 'maybe three this time of year. It has been a long time since I was there. A man I know trades horses and pack animals, and we will get a good deal - if he is still there.'

'Anazarbus lies ten days beyond that,' Roupén reckoned. 'We will never make it in time.' Since leaving Cyprus, he had grown increasingly anxious. His normally pale aspect was, if possible, even more pallid and strained. I knew he was worried about reaching home to warn his people of Bohemond's attack, and although we had lived with that threat for many days the distress was finally beginning to tell on him.

Yordanus looked up into the bare brown hills beyond the town and tapped his lower lip with a long forefinger. He thought for a moment, and said,

once more into the square. She was nowhere to be seen, but three of the boys who had helped carry supplies pointed to a house, and I saw two old women and three or four young girls standing before the house looking in through the open door.

I walked over to the house and looked in, too, and saw a bare room with a freshly-swept floor of beaten-earth and a single table against one wall. Sydoni stood in the centre of the room holding a length of cloth to her body as another woman tucked it up here and there around her. Meanwhile, a third woman, perhaps the mother of the first, sat at a loom in the corner directing this activity; and all three were chattering away at the same time in Greek, oblivious to all else.

Moving into the doorway, I rapped on the doorpost with my knuckles, and Sydoni looked up, saw me, and smiled. It was a smile of recognition and welcome, but also of supreme and unassailable confidence - a woman secure in her domain, completely at ease allowing me a glimpse of it.

'The provisions are loaded, and we are ready to leave,' I told her.

'In a moment,' she said, and resumed her appraisal of the cloth, ignoring me until she had concluded her business. She passed the cloth back to the woman, who folded it carefully, tied it with a length of rag, and placed it on a bare shelf high up on the wall, then handed Sydoni what appeared to be a length of carved willow wrapped in coarse white cloth.

Sydoni then took her leave. The two women followed her out of the house and bade her farewell, each kissing her on both cheeks. We started off across the square, and the elder woman called to one of the young girls outside the house who fell in behind us. 'We are to have an escort,' I said. When Sydoni did not answer, I pointed to the cloth-wrapped stick. 'What have you there?'

The sound was magic - a warmly female sound, full of expression and gaiety, gently superior, but lacking any hint of scorn or ridicule. 'Have you never seen a sunshade?' she laughed.

'A sunshade,' I repeated, happy to be the fool if it provoked such a delightful sound. 'Is that what it is?'

Still laughing, she asked, 'What do the women of your land use when they travel about?'

'Nothing,' I replied.

'Then how,' Sydoni demanded in disbelief, 'do they keep the hot sun from wrinkling their skin and making them old before their time?'

'So rarely does the sun shine,' I replied, 'people welcome it rather than hide from it.'

'Are you saying the sun never shines?' She looked at me askance. 'I do not believe you.'

'Truly,' I insisted. 'When the men and women of Scotland see the sun it is a cause for celebration. No one would think of shielding themselves from its warmth and light.'

'Then I hope I never go there,' she replied emphatically. 'It sounds a dark and dismal place.'

Inexplicably, her words were like a stab in the heart; I felt a sharp pang of regret for having spoken of my homeland in such a way as to invite her disdain. 'How is this sun device employed?' I asked.

'Like this,' she said, raising the slender rod and resting it lightly on her shoulder. Her face, neck, and shoulders were now cast into the shadow of

Sydoni, who walked merrily beside me, spinning the circle of cloth and humming lightly. For the second time in as many days, I luxuriated in the unexpected intimacy of her cheerful companionship.

Upon arriving at the boat, Sydoni informed her father that she had purchased a mantle to be made by one of the women in the village and instructed him to pay the girl, who would take the money back to her mother. Yordanus counted a few silver coins into the girl's hand. 'And for the sunshade, too,' she said, and he tossed in a few more.

Then, under the watchful eyes of the people of Marionis, we climbed into the boats and began the slow, easy voyage up river to Mamistra. Pdraig and I shared the rowing chores with the two men from the village, relieving them when they began to tire. In this way, we worked our way along the winding river course. We spent the first night on a gravel shingle in the middle of the river with nothing overhead but the star-laden sky.

The second night we camped in a grove of fig trees planted beside the river and, as the sun went down on the third day we arrived at Mamistra. Leaving Pdraig and Roupen to help the boatmen unload the boats, Yordanus and I went into the town early the next morning to search out his horse-trading acquaintance.

Along the way, we stopped a farmer with a piglet under his arm and asked him if he knew of anyone thereabouts who raised or traded in horses. The farmer squinted his eyes, scratched a bristly jaw, shifted the piglet from one arm to the other, and at last said he might have heard of such a man. When Yordanus presented him with a silver denarius for his trouble, the farmer broke into a wide toothless grin and said, that, yes, he remembered now, the man he was thinking of was called Nurmäl.

'There is a mill over there -' the farmer pointed beyond the town to a knoll surmounted by a windmill. 'He buys grain and fodder there on market days.' Hefting his pig, he said, 'Today is the market.'

We thanked the toothless fellow and sent him on his way rejoicing in his unexpected wealth. The mill was further than it first appeared, and it took us some time to walk up the long, rocky slope. Only when we got to the top did we see that there was a road leading up from the other side. Nevertheless, we found a goat track and followed it, arriving at the mill from behind. The miller was a gruff man of few words, but more of Yordanus' silver loosened his tongue and we learned that Nural had not been there yet, but was expected some time during the day.

'I will wait here for Nural,' Yordanus suggested. 'You go back and tell the others we have found our man. Nural and I will join you at the river.'

I did not like leaving him, but as I was walking from the yard, the miller's wife brought him out a bowl of milk to drink. I left him sitting in the shade of the house, sipping cool milk and looking like a man for whom the world held no worries.

Padraig and the boatmen had unloaded the provisions under a tree; the boats were gone now, however, and Padraig was preparing food on a small fire at the river's edge. Sydoni was asleep in the shade of the tree, and Roupen sat on a rock nearby, knees drawn up under his chin, and gazing forlornly into the swirling brown water.

'All is well,' I said, settling on the rock beside him. 'We are making fair speed. We *will* reach Anazarbus before Bohemond and his army, you shall see.'

'It makes no difference,' he muttered without looking up. 'There are not

dusty, sage-covered hills beyond Mamistra.

Padraig and I were just discussing whether we should go back to the mill and look for Yordanus when we heard a horse whinny and there, coming down along the track leading into the town, was the old trader himself on a milk white stallion, riding beside another man on a black. Behind them rode two more men leading two horses each.

They reined up at the water's edge and while the two men watered the horses, Yordanus presented Nural, a smiling, graceful white-haired elder with a skin so brown it looked like polished leather. He wore the silken robes of an Arab potentate, and when he spoke, his long white moustache quivered with excitement.

'What do you think of my horses?' asked Nural when everyone had been properly introduced.

'They are wonderful,' I remarked. 'In Scotland, not even kings own such fine horses.'

'I am not surprised. Although they are perhaps more plentiful here,' allowed Nural modestly. 'The Arabs place a high value on their animals, and breed the best in the world. Yordanus and I have concluded our bargain. AD that remains is for you to choose.' He gestured towards the horses, inviting our inspection.

'I will be more than happy with any of them, I am sure,' I replied casually.

'You are too easily pleased,' he said. 'But that will not do. Any man who must trust life and limb to his mount would be well advised to take a moment's sober reflection over the choice.'

So, I stepped closer and subjected the animals to a more thorough

The others chose their mounts whereupon Nural announced, 'Now then, my friends, we are to ride to my home where you will stay tonight. You will dine with me and tomorrow we will set off for Anazarbus.'

'You mean to go with us?' asked Roupen. I could tell he thought ill of the idea.

'Indeed, yes, my lord. You need a guide and I must look after my horses, no?' Nural's smile was broad and handsome.

'Trust this man as you would trust me,' Yordanus said. 'I have already told him of your need for haste and secrecy.'

'That is why it is best for you to stay with me tonight rather than in the town,' Nural explained.

Roupen frowned, unconvinced.

'At least it hurries us on our way,' I told him, 'and in a better fashion than we have enjoyed so far.'

Whatever misgivings he might have had about the arrangements were soon swept aside in the exuberance of mounting such excellent horses: spirited, intelligent, compliant without being dull, they were indeed a joy to ride. It had been a fair while since I had been on the back of a horse, but I know I had never sat astride one half so responsive and well-mannered.

We struck off along an old road leading up behind the town and into the quiet hills. The dusky air was cool and heavy with the scent of broom and sage. The sky grew slowly dark, and the moon rose. We rode along, content to remain silent as we passed through the night-dark land, climbing higher into the rough, empty hills until we came to a large walled

journey ahead. As we went to our beds, Paulraig concluded, 'If hospitality was the saving of men, then I have no doubt that when the angels called us to the heavenly banqueting table, we would find Nural of Mamistra sitting at God's right hand.'

'Amen,' I replied happily. 'With Nural beside him, God could not ask for a more amiable dinner companion.'

It was still dark when we left that homely house. We stopped at sunrise to take the first drink of a long and thirsty day. The night sky grew milky grey, then yellow, and finally blue. Even as we watched the pale fingers of sunlight stretch along the valleys and separate the dark mass of rough hills one from another, we could feel the heat of the day spreading in waves over the land. We mounted up again at once and pushed on so as to get as far as possible along our journey before we were forced to stop and wait for the sun to set.

As I rode along, I thought of all those I had left behind in Scotland - of my mother and father, Abbot Emlyn, and the others - and you, dearest Gait, were foremost among them. I knew Murdo and Ragna were watching over you as well, nay better, than I would if I had been there. Still, I felt a pang of guilt for leaving you, and wished that I might have been a gull or an eagle that I could swoop down and see you and know, if only for an instant, what you were doing at that moment. I held you in my mind, and tried to imagine how you might have grown since I had last seen you. And then, my heart, I held you before the Throne of Grace and asked the High King of Heaven to send three angels to surround you and watch over you day and night until I could return.

Yes, on that rough road into those ragged, dusty, sage-covered hills, my thoughts turned towards going home. And I felt the gnawing agony of

I had not spoken to Yordanus privately for several days, and I had questions on my mind. So, I joined him as he reclined beneath his tree. He welcomed the company and we began to talk. 'There is something I have been wanting to ask you since leaving Famagusta,' I told him.

'An unanswered question is like a toothache that only heals with asking,' he said, turning his face towards me. 'What is vexing you, my friend?'

'Why are you doing this?' At his puzzled glance, I added, 'Ships, supplies, now horses - all this. Why are you helping us?'

'Ah, well,' he replied. 'Cannot a man help a friend in need?'

'Forgive me, Yordanus, but there must be more to it than that.' It came to me then that perhaps *I* was not the friend he meant. 'It is de Bracineaux,' I suggested. 'He sent us to you knowing you would do this. But why? What is between the two of you that you should take such personal interest in this affair?'

He sat with his back to the gnarled little bole, resting his head against the crinkled black bark and staring out across the narrow brown valley shimmering dully in the heat haze. The buzzing of the flies grew loud in the silence. I did not press him, but let him come to it in his own time.

At last he drew a long, low breath and said, in a voice full of mourning and melancholy, 'I am doing it for my son.'

'You mentioned him before,' I said, trying to make it easier for the old man to speak. 'I can see you loved him very much.'

'Julian was his name,' said Nurmal. Having overheard the beginning of our conversation, he had come to join us, bringing a water skin and a wooden

headlong into unimaginable turmoil. Out of the chaos new, and often dangerous, alliances emerged. Everywhere the rulers and potentates of the old order made the best bargains they could with anyone who offered the barest hope of protection from the burgeoning multitude of dangers, perils, and threats arising almost daily.

'It was no different in Damascus,' Yordanus told me. 'Atabeg Tughtigin held out as long as he could. In his prime he had been an able and fair-minded ruler, but in the end his age and health began to tell against him. He made alliance with the Fida'in.'

The word pricked my attention, and I recalled what Sydoni and Roupen had told me about this shadowy sect.

Yordanus saw that I recognized the name and said, 'You have heard of them, I see.'

'Sydoni mentioned them; she called them murderers and said they held a hidden faith, but she did not say what that faith might be.'

'They are Muslims,' Yordanus explained, 'but of a very strict and overzealous stripe. It is their all-consuming desire to unite the Muhammedans in a single observance of the Muslim faith. To do this they are willing to dare all things - even martyrdom.'

'Dangerous men,' I observed.

'Murderous,' Nurmal corrected. 'All the more because of the *hashish*.'

'The hashish?' I had never heard the word before, and asked what it might be.

'Oh, it is a very potent herb that can be used in various ways. The Fida'in eat it, or smoke the dried leaves in pipes. It is a powerful essence, and it

and hear every deed and every word; and, like God, they hold all men to judgement.'

'And their judgement is always the same,' added Nural. 'Guilty.'

'Sadly, it is so,' agreed Yordanus, nodding sagely.

'You said they came to Damascus,' I suggested, gently prodding the tale back to its beginning.

'Yes, and it was the worst evil ever to befall that admirable city. They were granted refuge in Damascus in return for helping in its defence. Why old Tughtigin ever agreed to this bargain, I will never understand. No doubt he thought it best to have them inside the tent pissing out rather than the other way. I cannot say.

'But as anyone might easily have predicted, the decision was disastrous. Once settled inside the walls, the Fida'in began to worm their way into every corner of the government. Within a few months they had taken control of the wazir's office and were exerting heavy influence over all state affairs. Tughtigin became a ghost in his own palace; unseen, unheard, he roamed the corridors moaning and fretting with remorse over his foolishness. But the damage was done. The Fida'in would not be moved.

'The people endured as best they could. Trade was difficult and unimaginably complicated. For example, if the Fida'in did not like the colour of the cloth you were selling, they declared it unclean, confiscated it, and imposed a heavy fine on you for selling it. If a man stopped in the street to speak to a woman, they fined him. If a woman ventured outside with her head uncovered, she was fined. If they found your turban too tall, or your beard too short, they fined you. If you could not pay these fines, they threw you in prison.

same internal impartiality. Each year it became worse - for the merchants and moneylenders no less than everyone else. Good trade depends not only on a reliable, healthy ebb and flow of goods and services, but a fair expectation of progress and a modest hope for the future. Let these springs dry up, however, and like a river in the desert, all trade swiftly disappears.'

Nurmal poured water into the cup and passed it to Yordanus. 'We endured as best we could for as long as we could,' he said, draining the cup and passing it back. 'In the end it became intolerable.'

'Is that when you decided to leave?' I asked.

'If only it were so,' Yordanus murmured, 'Julian would still be alive.' His mouth twitched in a smile of such sorrowful regret that I could not bear to see it and looked away quickly. 'All is vanity,' he said softly, 'and nothing more so than the heart of man.'

Seeing his friend in such distress, Nurmal quietly moved the conversation onto a less painful subject, and I was left with more questions than when we first began. As soon as the heat of the day began to fade in the desolate hills, we moved on. I thought about what Yordanus had told me, turning the pieces of his tale over in my mind. It seemed to me that Julian and his sorry fate lay at the heart of the mystery and, thinking I would get no more from the father, I decided to ask the sister. But I did not have a chance to speak to her alone that night, nor all the next day. Indeed, it was not until well after dark when we had stopped for the night and everyone else was going to sleep that I was able to get her alone.

'Sydoni,' I said, moving close to where she sat by the dying campfire, 'I would speak to you.'

She looked up at me, the glow of the embers bathing her face like the rosy

demeanor in her glance, and more appraisal.

'He told me a little,' I replied. 'He told me about Julian.'

'Then he told you much,' she corrected, turning back to her contemplation of the embers.

'I asked him why he is helping us, and he said he is doing it for his son - for Julian.'

She seemed to consider this, and then rejected it. 'No,' she said thoughtfully, 'whatever the reason it is not Julian.'

'Vanity, then?' I asked. It was the last thing her father had said, and I hoped she might know what he meant.

'Perhaps,' she allowed. 'You see, my father would have been the Governor of Damascus.' She glanced sideways at me. 'I see he did not mention that.'

I shook my head. 'No.'

'It is true. Julian did not approve. He urged father on numerous occasions to leave the city, but Yordanus refused to go because he coveted the exalted position.'

'He blamed the Fida'in,' I pointed out.

'Of course,' she replied as if this was manifestly self-evident. 'None of this would have happened if not for them. *Theywete* the ones who wanted him to be Governor.'

This made no sense. 'But I thought the Fida'in were Muhammedans,' I pointed out. 'Yordanus said they were ruling the city.'

'Shh,' she hushed, 'keep your voice down, or you'll wake everybody. Be quiet and I will tell you how it was.' Drawing up her long legs, she

Buri had vowed to rid the city of the hated Fida'in. And that,' Sydoni declared emphatically, 'is when our troubles really began.'

She spoke with quiet candour and I found listening to her a pleasure - and one I had not experienced in a woman's company for a very long time.

'The Fida'in considered themselves the only true Muslims,' she said, 'and in their eyes Buri and the amirs were faithless and unbelieving. As Tughtigin grew weaker, his son took over more and more of his father's power, and began taking steps to eradicate the hated cult. This alarmed the Fida'in, who had imagined they might control the new atabeg as they had controlled his father.

'The more Buri exerted his growing authority, the more the Fida'in feared losing the only place they had ever been welcomed. They soon discovered themselves hunted and harassed at every turn, and in desperation went looking for a protector who could ensure their survival. In secret - the Fida'in are masters of secrecy - they sent an envoy to Edessa -'

At her mention of my uncle Torf's former home in Outremer, Sydoni's recitation suddenly ceased to resemble a tale of long ago, and became immediate and real. 'Baldwin,' I murmured.

'Baldwin the second,' she amended. 'The Fida'in offered to hand over the city to the count, if he would let them have the city of Tyre to rule in return. What prince could resist such a gift? But Baldwin was wary. He sent word back that if the Christians of the city wished his intervention, then they must unite behind a leader who could organize the new regime.

'One night they came to our house.' Sydoni shivered at the memory. 'Six men dressed in black and wearing the curved swords and crossed daggers - they came asking for Yordanus Hippolytus, saying they had an offer for

think it over, and said they would come back for his answer.

'Well, Julian was against it. He did not want to have anything to do with the Batini, but many of my father's friends urged him to accept the offer. They saw it as a chance for the Christians to gain back the power they had lost under the Muslims. Still, my father hesitated.'

'For Julian' sake?'

'He did not like going against Julian, true enough. But he did not think he could trust the Fida'in to keep their part of the bargain. He did not see how he could govern a city where the Muslims far outnumbered the Christians.'

'What changed his mind?' I asked.

'Baldwin sent word that the Templars were ready to back him. The count promised that he would give Damascus a garrison of its own. De Bracineaux was at Edessa then, and he was to have been the Grand Master of the new garrison; he came one night and spoke to my father, and pledged his support. With the Templars at his command, the governorship would be secure. So, my father agreed.'

'What happened?'

'We waited all through the summer, but Baldwin never came,' she replied. 'I do not know why he abandoned us. I heard it said that he marched out with his army and was only waiting for support from the Count of Antioch; by the time he realized Bohemond would not come to his aid, the autumn rains had begun. Baldwin did not care to wage a campaign in the mud and cold, so he marched back to Edessa.'

When it became clear that Baldwin would not attack, she told me, Buri, the new atabeg, decided the time was right to make his move. He gathered

found in the city after dark would be killed.

They worked like slaves, and Yordanus hired many of his Jewish and Muslim friends as well. He organized an entire caravan and they loaded whole chests of treasure onto donkeys and horses. By sundown they had nearly finished, and Yordanus commanded Julian to begin leading the baggage train out of the city so that it would not be caught when the gates closed.

The danger was real, she said, and I believe her. All of Damascus was in an uproar as never before. They started out, but Julian was fearful of leaving Sydoni and Yordanus behind. So, once he got to the gates, he left the caravan in charge of the hired men and ran back to the house to bring the rest of the family and servants to safety.

Sydoni licked her lips, bracing herself for what came next. 'Once Julian had departed, father changed his mind and abandoned the rest of the packing - what was the use? Instead, we hurried after Julian, but the streets were crowded and it was difficult to get through. We reached the gates only to find the caravan stopped, the hired men scattered, and Julian nowhere to be seen. We searched quickly, asking everyone, but no one would tell us anything.

'At last, we found one of the workmen who said that when Julian could not get through he came back, and the soldiers at the gate challenged him and demanded a second bribe. When Julian refused, the soldiers seized him and dragged him away, threatening the rest of the hired men with violence if they told anyone. The man showed us where the soldiers had taken Julian, and we found his battered body lying in his own blood. The soldiers had beat him and left him to bleed to death behind a dung heap.'

It took us nine days to reach Tyre on the coast,' she said, her voice cracking slightly. 'With every step of the way, my father's heart hardened against Baldwin and the other leaders of the Christian principalities that much more. De Bracineaux helped us to reach Cyprus - he even sent soldiers to Sidon and Tripoli to get father's ships back. The merchants there had heard that the Christians had been exiled from Damascus, and they assumed Yordanus had been killed. But it was Julian.'

She turned to me in the soft ember glow, unshed tears gleaming her eyes. 'Now you know,' she said.

I regretted my curiosity; had I known it would cause her such pain, I never would have asked. 'I am sorry, Sydoni,' I murmured, feeling her sorrow as a leaden lump in my heart, and wishing I might have spared her the anguish of those awful days and their retelling. I wanted to put my arm around her shoulders and hold her close, but I did not know whether she would welcome such a gesture of comfort from me.

'That was two years ago and I have not spoken of this to anyone since the day we left Damascus,' she said, pushing the tears away with the heel of her hand. 'I will not speak of it again.'

Nor did I blame her.

Eight days we were on the road, and in that time met only a handful of fellow travellers - a few farmers and shepherds going to or returning from distant markets, four Greek priests, and a company of merchants on their way to seek their fortunes among the Armenians. These last fell in with us and hoped to keep our company until reaching Anazarbus. Otherwise, the journey was forgettable in every way. One rock-strewn hillside is much the same as the next, after all.

We slept and ate and rode on, growing more fretful and peevish, and less companionable, as the days wore away. Yordanus, who had begun with such zeal, began to fade; he was an old man and his strength was not equal to his enthusiasm. Sydoni seemed to retreat into herself, becoming ever more pensive and melancholy. I would see her riding with her sun shade spread above her, and try to engage her in conversation, but the sombre preoccupations of her mind were too potent to quell for very long; she soon slipped back into her distracted reflection. Roupén, anxious and tetchy since leaving Antioch, grew ever more so as his apprehensions mounted. No one could say two words to him without either starting an argument or casting him into a desperate frenzy of morbid self-pity.

Only Padraig and Nurmal remained unaffected by the oppressive sameness - Nurmal, because he loved his horses and found happiness in all circumstances so long as he was sitting in the saddle; and Padraig, because

kept me from my quest. More and more, I grew anxious to be about my own business, and longed for the day when there would be no one to defend, pamper, or appease, save myself alone.

I was heartily glad when, on the eighth day, we crested a hill and saw the walls of Anazarbus glistening in the heat-sheen. Because of the hills, we had come close upon the city before seeing it, and now there it was, nestled like a clutch of dull ruddy eggs in the protective bends of the curved city walls. Away to the south and east slanted a rough, broken plain through which a river had dug a deep ravine; to the north and west ranged the tumbling, craggy foothills of the high Taurus mountains rising elegantly, if forbiddingly, in the hazy distance.

Once in sight of the city, Roupen, morose and unresponsive at best, now became almost drunk with exuberance. He lifted his head and gave out a shriek which must have been heard in the streets of the city itself. He slapped the reins and urged his good horse to speed. The animal, glad for an excuse to run after so many days of dull plodding, put back its ears, reared, and leapt to a gallop, pulling along the poor pack horse tethered behind.

Following his lead, Nural and I gave our horses their heads and let them run, leaving our band of merchants behind. It was as if my heart took wings. Suddenly, the grinding monotony of the road fell away as we thundered down towards the city. Roupen was first to reach the gates, and had already dismounted by the time we arrived. We joined him as he remonstrated with the guards at the gate to let us in.

'Do you not know who it is that demands entrance?' he said, his voice tight with anger, his joy quickly quenched by the obstinate refusal of the

If they will agree to take a message to your father.

Roupen was ill-disposed to take my advice, but saw the sense of it nonetheless. Turning to the porter, he snapped, 'Take a message to your master. Tell him that Lord Roupen waits outside the city walls and begs to be reunited with his family.'

This caused the guards some consternation. The chief among them put out a hand towards the one next to him. 'You heard,' he said, pushing the man away. 'Run!'

The soldier scurried off, disappearing into the gatehouse behind him. 'I beg your pardon, my lord,' the porter muttered. 'We did not know it was you.'

Roupen seemed inclined to take issue with the unhelpful fellow, but Nural intervened. 'Save your breath, my friend. The error is soon put right.'

The walls of Anazarbus were curved, as I say, and protected with squat towers along their length, and over the central gate. What is more, despite the peace and calm of the day, soldiers manned the towers and moved along the walls. Upon pointing this out to Nural, he replied, 'It was the first thing I noticed. I think they must be expecting someone - but not us.'

Roupen did not hear this, as he was pacing back and forth between us and the guards, growing more and more peevish over the lack of respect shown him. I decided it was best to ignore his ill humour, and sat down on a rock beside the road to wait for the others to join us. Nural took up a waterskin, drank, and passed the skin to me. 'It is warm, I fear, but until we get something better ...'

I drank, and then stood, took the skin and poured some into my hand and

At the sight of the young man they both shouted a greeting and Roupen ran to meet them. The soldiers, slightly embarrassed that the strict observance of their duty should have inconvenienced the royal household, shrank back, looking both repentant and stubborn as the glad reunion commenced in spite of their earlier efforts to prevent it.

The two men caught the younger and lifted him off his feet in fierce hugs, and pounded him on the back until he winced, all the while speaking in a tongue as rapid as it was unintelligible. They knocked the youth this way and that with the easy abuse of true brothers, and it put me in mind of how Eirik and I had behaved towards one another when we were younger.

Nurmal and I approached and waited to have our presence recognized. Presently, Roupen turned and grinning, said, 'My friends, I give you my brothers!' Indicating the elder of the two, he said, 'This is Thoros.' The man inclined his head politely. Pointing to the second one, he said, 'And this is Constantine.' The man bowed respectfully.

Roupen then introduced me, and explained quickly that if not for me, he would not be standing there now. 'Duncan saved my life,' he said, proudly, 'not once, but twice. He is a true friend.'

The elder brother, Thoros, stepped before me then and seized my hand in both of his. 'We are much indebted to you, sir. Tonight, in your honour, we will hold a feast to celebrate our brother's return.' I accepted his announcement with a modest bow, whereupon he turned at once to Nurmal.

'Here you are! Nurmal, my good friend. I should have known you would have something to do with this.'

'Not at all, my lord,' replied the horse-trader humbly. 'They would have

not dressed in heavy black robes, and refused to believe he was a priest. Yordanus and Sydoni also received especial regard, and I noticed that Thoros lingered over Sydoni's hand as he welcomed her and her father. Then, with good grace and simple sincerity, Thoros thanked everyone for taking care of his brother and helping return him to his home.

'God will honour your charity with the praises of angels,' he said, 'but the Noble House of Anazarbus will fill your pockets with gold!' So saying, he gathered everyone with a great swoop of his arms as if we were children. 'Come now, friends! Let us go in! The prince will want to know his lost son has returned at last.'

Once inside the thick city walls, we were conducted directly to the palace which stood a short distance across a small square directly inside the gates. The palace itself was built in the manner of a church and was flanked by two domed towers, each surmounted with golden crosses.

As we walked across the square, I observed that there were few people about. Nor did there seem to be much activity in the surrounding streets - a few children playing, an old woman carrying a basket of greens, and one or two men pushing carts, but not at all what I might have expected from a city the size of Anazarbus. I was not the only one to notice the absence of the local population. Nural, walking easily beside Thoros, said, 'Is everyone in hiding? Where have the people gone?'

'As it happens,' replied Thoros, 'we are under alert. Seljuq raiding parties have been seen in the hills, and it is feared that an attack is imminent.' The big man cast a hasty glance at me behind him. 'Do you mean to say you have seen no sign of them?'

'No, lord. Not so much as a single turban between here and Mamistra.'

Constantine and Roupen were saying behind me: 'What is the matter with him?' Roupen asked; although he spoke softly, I caught the concern in his tone.

'He is not well,' his brother replied. 'The physicians have done what they can, but no one knows what ails him.'

'How long?'

'Four months,' answered Constantine. 'Maybe a little longer. There is not much hope any more - still, he lingers. The old warrior fights on.' The young man paused, then added, 'He will be glad to know that you are home at last. What happened to everyone else?'

'We were stricken with ague the moment we set foot in Frankland. I escaped, but fever took all the rest.'

'It bodes fair to take the prince as well,' observed Constantine gloomily.

Thus, I pieced together what had caused the closure of the royal city: Prince Leo was gravely ill, and the tribute paid to the Muhammedans had been allowed to lapse. Consequently, their Seljuq overlords were angry; those who should have been their allies and protectors were massing in the hills, gathering the necessary strength to attack. And the Armenians, soon to be forcibly reminded why they paid the tribute in the first place, were about to receive the unhappy news that Bohemond II's army was on its way.

Although not as large or as opulent as the citadel at Antioch, the palace of the Armenian princes was grand without being extravagant. While they obviously shared the same lofty ambitions of all noble families, they at least showed some restraint in the furnishing of the royal residence. Or perhaps their means were not as extensive as some. Then again, they may

But that was yet to come. For, no sooner were we conducted to our room, than the prince's chamberlain appeared to inform us that Lord Thoros was awaiting us in his receiving chamber. We splashed water on our faces and brushed the dust of the road from our hair and clothes, and then followed the servant. 'You must tell him about Bohemond's attack as soon as possible,' Padraig reminded me. 'They will need time to prepare.'

'Of course,' I agreed.

'At once,' the monk insisted.

'I will, I will.'

We were led through the inner corridors of the palace to a cozy reception chamber somewhere behind the main hall. Thoros was there alone, standing at a table mixing wine with water.

'Come in! Come in!' cried Thoros, pouring the wine into two large gold-rimmed silver bowls. 'I thought a drink might ease the fatigue of the journey,' he said, raising a bowl in each of his hands and extending them to Padraig and myself. After observing the proper greeting and welcome rituals - which he conducted in the Armenian tongue - he invited us to sit with him.

'With pleasure, my lord,' I replied. 'I wanted a word with you before the feast.'

As we stepped into the room, Nurmäl appeared behind us. 'Sit with us, my friend! We were just about to share the welcome cup.'

'Nothing would delight me more, my friend,' replied Nurmäl, his white moustache bristling with delight. 'It has been far too long since we sat together.'

from under his heavy brows. 'You see? I told you nothing happened east of the Taurus he does not know.'

'I did not come here to embarrass you into paying me,' Nural told him. 'Yet, if it would ease your conscience to lighten the load, I would of course accept any amount you would care to bestow in recognition of our long-forgotten bargain.'

'Ha!' cried Thoros, slapping the table with his hand. 'You are a fine fellow, Nural. So I have always said. Never fear, you will not leave Anzarbus empty-handed.'

Lord Thoros, I decided, was like a great shaggy bear, at once fierce and childlike. There was nothing of subtlety or guile in his open features or wide dark eyes. His loyalties could be easily discerned by the expression on his face.

'Yordanus Hippolytus appeared at my door in the company of these good men,' Nural volunteered. 'He said he had urgent business in Anzarbus and required horses for himself and his friends. Once I discovered why he needed my horses, what else could I do but see them safely to their destination?'

'Protecting your investment,' said Thoros, wagging his finger knowingly. 'I know you.'

'I will not deny it,' said Nural. 'But there is more.' Setting aside his bowl, he looked to me. 'Tell him, Duncan,' he said, his voice taking on a solemn tone.

Thoros sipped his wine and regarded Padraig and me benignly. 'Yes, whatever you have to say, tell it to Thoros. I am in a mood to hear the news of the world.'

smiled as if to dismiss the report as an ill-founded and fairly disreputable rumour.

'It is a fact,' Padraig said, speaking up. 'Lord Duncan and I heard it from the lips of Bohemond himself. We called upon him to repent of his plan before God.'

The priest's assertion seemed to impress Thoros, who inquired how this had come to be, so I explained about meeting the Templar Renaud, and how he had given Roupen, Padraig, and myself passage aboard his ship. 'Commander Renaud told me about the prince's plan - although it was by no means a secret. Bohemond had been raising troops for this purpose all summer.'

'But he would not listen to you,' Thoros suggested with a sympathetic shake of the head. 'They rarely do, these Franks.' If these tidings, for which we had endured considerable hardship, caused him the least concern, he hid his distress admirably well.

'We failed to persuade him and had to flee Antioch,' I told him. 'We came here as quickly as we could to warn you. I expect Bohemond wasted no time in gathering his troops. It is entirely possible that he is only a few days' march from here even now.'

Nurmal nodded gravely. Padraig frowned, gazing at the serenely untroubled nobleman as if at a riddle that might be solved by staring long and hard. 'Lord Roupen will no doubt confirm all we have told,' the monk said, watching our host for any sign of dismay or alarm.

Thoros nodded sympathetically. 'You have risked your lives to help my brother and bring this warning to us. For this you shall be rewarded. What is more, I shall order prayers to be sung in your honour tonight.'

farewell, and strolled from the room.

'You should feel proud,' said Nurmal. 'You have done well. The Armenians are a generous people, and will certainly reward you handsomely.'

'We have done only what anyone might do,' I replied, still struggling to shake the feeling that, for all his thanks and praise, Thoros cared more about his wine than the calamity looming over his city. The fate of his people swung in the balance, and his concern was arranging feasts. Moments ago, my chief desire was to see Bohemond and the rulers of Armenia reconciled, and for peace to reign between the two houses. Now, I could think only of leaving the doomed city of Anazarbus before the upstart Bohemond arrived and reduced it to smouldering bricks and ash.

Padraig and I returned to our room. I was tired, and wanted to rest before the festivities began. I lay down and slept soundly until I was roused by a servant sent by Roupen with fresh clothes for us to wear for the evening's celebration. The young fellow did not speak Latin, but indicated that we were to take the clothes and give him our old ones to be, I thought, cleaned and mended.

By the time we had worked this out and washed and dressed, Roupen was waiting to escort us to the banqueting hall. 'I suppose you will be leaving soon,' he said as we walked across the inner courtyard.

Owing to the nearness of the mountains - whose sun-flamed peaks could be seen rising above the palace roof- the evening air was cool; the play of light and air put me in mind of a summer night at home in Caithness. Before the memory could result in melancholy, I pushed it firmly from me and reminded myself of my vow — now long deferred. 'As soon as may be,' I replied. I no longer cared about anything but returning to the pilgrim trail, and resuming my abandoned quest. 'Tomorrow.'

'You must allow my family to honour you sufficiently,' chided Roupen. 'After all, you two saved the prodigal son and have proven yourselves allies of the Armenian kingdom. It would be ungracious to refuse the homage of my people.' '

talked only for a moment, my mother says he looked in better health than she has seen him for many weeks. The royal physicians are hopeful that he is showing signs of recovery.'

'Good. I am happy to hear it.'

'God willing, my father will be able to thank you himself before you both rush away.'

'We told Thoros about Bohemond's plan to attack Anazarbus,' I said. 'He appeared to take the prospect with astonishing tranquillity. I do not think I could be so placid in the face of the impending destruction of my home and people.'

'That is his way,' Roupen replied. 'Thoros rarely reveals his true disposition to anyone. No one ever knows what he is thinking.'

We reached the entrance to the feast hall then; the doors were flung wide and we were met by the royal steward who bowed low and, in a loud voice, announced to the assembled guests and family members that Lord Roupen and his friends had arrived. We paused to receive the adulation of the gathering, and were then led through the noisy throng, our ears ringing with enthusiastic shouts. Many of the courtiers reached out to clap us on the back; my arms and shoulders were joyfully slapped and pummelled until the flesh stung and I feared my bones would crack.

Padraig and I were brought to the high banquet table where a combed, shaved, and freshly arrayed Yordanus was talking to an ill-at-ease Constantine; Sydoni, immaculate in a thin summer gown of shimmering green silk, was listening to a grey-haired woman with sad dark eyes. At our approach, the older woman held out her arms to Roupen, who kissed and embraced her, and then declared, 'Lord Duncan, Brother Padraig, I

and bade me to open it. Inside was a brooch and pin of gold, the brooch was made of a single large blood-red ruby surrounded by a ring of tiny blue sapphires which glittered with frozen starlight. The ruby was carved with a curious symbol - what appeared to be an orb borne between the wings of an eagle; the orb was surmounted by the Greek letter *chi*, forming a cross in the shape of an X.

Padraig had received a band of gold, the ends of which were shaped like two bird's heads - storks, or swans, I think - and between their beaks they clutched a glowing emerald. For size and lustre, the gems were the largest and most brilliant I had ever seen.

'My mother gave these to me, and I wore them on my wedding day. I do not know if priests in your homeland are allowed to marry - I am told that some do not. But I hope you will keep these gifts for the woman who bears you a son as kind and loving as my Roupén.'

'Nothing would give me greater pleasure, my lady,' Padraig said, and thanked her with a blessing in Gaelic.

'And you, Lord Duncan,' she said, tapping the box in my hand with her finger. 'Do you have a wife?'

'Alas, no Lady Elena,' I answered simply. I did not care to disturb the memory of your blessed mother, Gait. 'One day, perhaps, God willing.'

Sydoni, standing behind Princess Elena, caught my glance as I said this; her look of frank appraisal was disconcerting in its intensity.

'Then I will pray the woman you choose will wear it always in love and happiness,' Elena said. Pointing to the symbol carved on the ruby, she said, 'It is the seal of the Royal House of Armenia, our emblem for a thousand years.'

with burning cheeks, accepted my gift as graciously as I could. To my relief, a serving-boy arrived bearing a silver tray with wine in small glass beakers. Constantine took the tray and distributed the cups to our little gathering. Taking up one himself, he said, 'Let us drink to safe journeys and glad homecomings.'

We raised our cups and drank. The wine was sweet and good, and as we drank and talked, I felt myself begin to grow more easy in my manner. Every now and then, one of the other guests would come to the high table to be introduced to Padraig and me and make our acquaintance. Most often, Roupen did the honours; when a name or face failed him, Constantine or Lady Elena obliged. At first, I tried to remember all the names and faces, but there were too many, and not only did they all look alike to me, they seemed to be related to one another in extremely complicated ways so that after awhile it was impossible to tell one from the other.

More people were coming into the hall, and the sound of the crowd soon made speech all but impossible. So, I stood uneasily beside Roupen and his mother, holding my cup and gazing out upon the milling throng. Just when I thought the hall could hold no more, the doors were closed - which made the sound inside even more deafening.

There was a movement in the crowd, and Thoros suddenly appeared, pushing his way through; Nurmal followed in his wake. They proceeded directly to the high table, and greeted the Princess and other members of the royal party waiting there. As they moved from person to person, I noticed that both men were already well into the celebratory spirit. They laughed loudly, kissing everyone and clapping them on the back, their gestures grandiose and exaggerated. In short, they looked for all the world

returned to his room, and Thoros had quit the hall before us. Certainly, the two might have met again and resumed their drinking, but I doubted this. The dull sense of dread spreading through me - like dark wine tinting clear water - told me the explanation was never so benign.

Thoros took his seat at the high table, indicating that I should sit at his right hand, and Padraig at his left. Nurmäl sat beside me, and the other members of the royal party assumed their places around the board and, the instant they were seated, the entire hall convulsed in a tumultuous commotion as the guests scrambled for places at the other tables. There were far more people than places, and many were forced to stand around the perimeter of the great room looking on, and awaiting their chance to claim a place when someone else finished.

As soon as the hall quieted, an old man dressed in long black robes advanced slowly to the high table and, in a loud voice, called the gathering to prayer. Clapping his hands, he raised them before his face and, in ornately antique Greek, proceeded to entreat the Almighty to bless the realm and the faithful of his flock. My Greek is not so good as my Latin, as I say, but I caught most of it. He prayed for the souls of all gathered within the hall, and prayed for the continuance of divine guidance and protection. He prayed long, often wandering from Greek into the obscure Armenian tongue. When he finished, the doors of the hall were once again thrown open and serving-men appeared bearing platters of food.

The first platters were placed on the high table - huge joints of roast oxen and boar - and instantly the aroma brought the water to my mouth and made me realize how hungry I was. Thoros, acting as Lord of the Feast, thrust his hand into the mounded victuals before him and wrested a goblet from the mass. 'Eat!' he called expansively. 'Eat, everyone, eat. Enjoy!'

with every word.

I watched as all signs of mirth slowly drained from Lord Thoros' face to be replaced by an expression so wretched and doleful as to stop the laughter in the mouths of all who beheld him. One by one, those at the high table also became aware of the swift alteration in Thoros' jovial mood, and the table fell silent.

'Whatever is the matter with you?' asked Constantine, his voice loud in the sudden hush.

Thoros looked at his brother, and then swung his eyes to his mother, seated beside him. He placed his hands flat on the table and pushed himself upright with, it seemed to me, an enormous effort. He stood there, towering over the feast and, in a deep, hollow voice announced, 'Patriarch Baramistos has just informed me that my father, Prince Leo, is dead.'

Prince Leo's death immediately plunged all the members of the royal family into a multitude of tedious and time-consuming rituals and formalities. The foreign visitors were quickly forgotten; Padraig and I gladly fended for ourselves lest we become a burden to our hosts in their time of distress. Anxious as I was to depart, I would gladly have left the city right then and there, but, in deference to Roupen's feelings, could not bring myself to just sneak away like a thief in the night. Thus, as we had nothing else to do, we took the opportunity to wander around the streets of Anazarbus and see for ourselves how the passing of the noble ruler was marked by the populace.

What I saw was a city sunk in grief over the loss of their much-loved prince. Apparently, Leo had governed his people wisely and well for many years, and the Armenians were genuinely sorry he was gone. Everywhere men and women went about their chores with the mournful countenances of the truly sorrowful, speaking in pensive tones. Scores of small shrines sprang up in the streets - here a painting of the prince, there a carving, or perhaps simply a coin on which Leo's image had been stamped - and each adorned with a palm frond or bit of green foliage, and a candle or lamp. Whenever anyone passed one of these makeshift shrines, he made the sign of the cross on his forehead.

Many of the older men and women wore ashes in their hair, and on their

All morning long, Padraig and I strolled about the city, marvelling at the long lines of mourners snaking across the square and into the surrounding streets as the people streamed in and out of the church where Leo's body lay. Every now and then, one of the grieving throng would suddenly throw his hands towards heaven, and let out a heartfelt, wailing cry. Otherwise, the crowds were quiet and respectful.

The monk was keenly fascinated to see how the Armenians conducted their religious services, and was enthralled by the endless ritual. For myself, however, the sorrowing crowds and religious feeling seemed wrong, or at least inappropriate for a city and nation teetering on the precipice of war.

Immersed in mourning, Thoros appeared to have given no further thought to either the Seljuqs lurking in the hills, nor the looming danger of attack by Bohemond and his knights. The beloved Prince Leo's death swept all else aside. Certainly, beyond the posting of a few more soldiers on the walls, there was no other preparation that I could see.

This amazed and troubled me greatly. Why had we risked life and limb to bring a warning that was to remain unheeded? If the rulers of Armenia did not care about their city and the lives of their people, why should we?

Disturbed and distraught, I turned from the gate and started back to the palace, resolved to wait no longer: we would leave at once. I reached the palace forecourt just in time to witness the arrival of a sizeable contingent of Seljuqs. I watched from the inner palace yard as the Turks were conducted with great ceremony into the hall, which had been hastily prepared to receive mourners. Prince Leo's funeral was to begin at dusk and the various services, rituals, and observances would continue through the night, culminating with the burial which would take place at dawn the

incredible - that they should wish to honour the prince in this way, or that an avowed enemy should be allowed inside the walls to pay their respects to the mourning family.'

Nurmal chuckled. 'I do not know what it is like in your country, my friend, but here our hostilities are not carved in stone. Our enmities are more fluid - like streams in the desert, continually shifting and changing. The enemy you meet today might be the friend you call upon tomorrow. You must remember that.'

He was speaking a simple truth of the East, and one I had not yet fully grasped. Even so, I heard in the words a foreboding that chilled me to the marrow. I thought: *if enmities are so loosely held, then loyalties are likewise inconstant.*

'Only yesterday, the city was in a state of alarm lest the dreaded Seljuq attack at any moment,' I pointed out.

'True,' Nurmal agreed cheerfully. 'But that was then. Things have changed. What hope would there be for anyone if nothing ever changed?'

With Nurmal's words rolling around in my head, I hurried off to find Yordanus and Sydoni, neither one of whom had I seen since the banquet the night before. I went to the small dining chamber where Thoros had served us wine before the banquet and there found Roupen with his brother Constantine.

They were speaking so earnestly to one another that I thought it best not to intrude. Nevertheless, I could not help overhearing. '-a very dangerous business,' Constantine was saying. 'Even Thoros must see that. If he does not, he is not fit to rule in father's place. I swear to you -'

I came into Roupen's view just then and they ceased their conversation at

'Come to the hall at midday,' Roupen suggested with a tight smile, 'and you will be included in the royal party. I will look for you then.'

I thanked them and moved off, aware of Constantine's pent-up fury. Although it was none of my affair, I could not help wondering what lay behind his agitation. Putting it out of my mind, I found my way to the wing of the palace where Yordanus and Sydoni had been given rooms. The old trader was sitting in a chair, gazing out the open window over the rooftops of the low buildings surrounding the palace.

I greeted him and, not wishing to waste time, explained my deep misgivings over the utter lack of preparation to meet Bohemond's army. I told him that Padraig and I were leaving Anazarbus and, in light of the fact that the city was largely undefended against the imminent attack, suggested that he and his daughter should seriously consider doing the same. 'Of course,' I said, 'we will be happy to escort you and Sydoni to Mamistra.'

He nodded gravely. 'When?'

'As soon as I can arrange horses and provisions - no later than midday.'

'Go then. I will tell Sydoni.'

'Come to the stables as soon as you are ready.'

Next, I hastened to speak to the hostlers about making ready five of Nurmal's horses. I had it in mind that, if Nurmal was agreeable, we might return the horses to Mamistra for him. If need be, I would buy them; the brooch Princess Elena had given me would no doubt purchase a half dozen of his best.

On the way, I found Padraig and told him to hurry and secure enough

blessing. But,' he added, 'if you do not mind my asking, why are you in such a hurry? Half the day is almost gone, and you cannot get far before nightfall. Why not wait until tomorrow? Better still, stay a few more days and we will all return together.'

'There is a battle coming, whether anyone in Anazarbus believes it or cares.' I told him I wanted no part of it, that greedy Prince Bohemond's boundary squabble was none of my affair. So far as I was concerned, I had done my duty by Roupen and his people; now it was for them to do what they would. As for myself and Padraig, we would wait no longer; we were leaving the city at once.

Nurmal regarded me with an amused expression. 'There is no hurry, my friend,' he said. 'We can leave whenever we wish.'

'Bohemond and his army could be here at any moment,' I snapped, unable to keep the growing frustration out of my voice. 'He is coming with hundreds of mounted knights and a few thousand footmen. I have no wish to be trapped in a city under siege, much less help defend one.'

'Calm yourself,' Nurmal said. 'Bohemond will never even see the city walls.'

The way he said it - with such careless confidence - sent a warning tingle through me. I stared at him. 'Why? What do you know of this?'

'Amir Ghazi will deal with them,' he said, pushing himself up on an elbow, 'and he has many thousand warriors - all of them mounted, all of them eager to die for the glory of Islam and a martyr's paradise.'

I stared at him, trying to make sense of what he was saying. 'The Seljuqs? Why would they intervene?'

The calmly horse-trader shook his head. 'No, it is simple expedience, my friend.'

'If I had imagined such deceit, I would never have left Antioch,' I declared, shaking with fury. 'This is intolerable! Unthinkable! It must be stopped.'

Nurmal frowned with benign pity. 'Peace, Duncan. You will do yourself an injury.' He rose from the bed, and put his hands on my shoulders in a gesture of fatherly advice. 'While I admire your sense of honour, I do not understand your scruples. Why did you come here?'

I did not understand what he was asking. 'You know as well as anyone why we came here.'

'You came to warn the Armenians of Bohemond's attack,' Nurmal said. 'Is this not so?'

'Yes, but -'

'What did you think would happen?'

'I did not think...' I began, and faltered, realizing how I had been used. 'My warning has been turned to treachery. I have been made a traitor!'

'Why speak of treachery?' Nurmal demanded, beginning to lose patience with me. 'Where is the betrayal? Where is the treason? Listen to me, my friend. There is no betrayal; there is only fate, and the capricious accidents of war. You learned of the coming attack and flew to prevent a slaughter -'

'Yes! For the love of God, I only thought to prevent it.'

'Well, you have succeeded. It is prevented. Amir Ghazi will see to that, never fear.'

'The slaughter is not prevented;' I growled, my spirit writhing with guilt, 'it

Antioch in good time, and the brooch was very valuable. So, I took it from its box, and pinned it to the inside of my mantle next to my skin where it would be safe.

Padraig was waiting with Roupen in the stables. The young lord was unhappy to see us leaving with such unseemly haste. 'I wish it could be otherwise,' I told him. He asked me to reconsider, but I declined. Seeing there was no changing my mind, he gave in with good grace and told me how much he valued our friendship, and that he would pray we concluded our pilgrimage safely.

Yordanus and Sydoni appeared in the doorway then, and Roupen went to bid them farewell and to thank them for their inestimable help in getting him home in time to see his father before he died. While they talked, Padraig and I examined the horses and the packs of provisions; satisfied that all was in order, we led the beasts out into the yard, and bade Roupen a last farewell.

We rode through the gates and out onto the road by which we had come, leaving Anazarbus behind. The sun was high onto midday; the weather was fine and bright, and hot, and we made fair speed with Nural's splendid horses. I had chosen the same mounts we had ridden before so they would know us: the speckled grey for me, the roan for Padraig, and the two chestnut mares for Sydoni and Yordanus.

When the city was no longer in sight, we paused briefly for water, and then rode on, at a slightly less frantic pace. Once in the saddle again, I felt slightly less apprehensive. Whatever happened, I thought, it was no longer any of my concern. I had done what I could, and my help had been twisted and perverted in its use. I desired no part of anything so nefarious, and was heartily glad not to have to stay another night in that haven of treachery.

prevent that arrogant young prince reaping the harvest of his insatiable ambition?

And why, oh why, did I even try?

The answer, I think, is that I could not in good conscience abide the thought of Christians making war on their Christian brothers, of believers pursuing the hateful waste of God's precious gift of life for the most frivolous and imbecilic of reasons. Blind and arbitrary fortune had placed me in a position to know certain things - the movements of armies, the intentions of rulers - and I had somehow concocted the belief that this knowledge brought with it an obligation to use it wisely and for good.

This is emotion, as I say, not reason. If I had stopped, even for a moment, and reflected on the matter, I would have seen grim futility looming starkly before me. If only I had asked myself one simple question: what did I want?

Now, after endless months of sober reflection, I have come to the conclusion that what I wanted was simply for everyone to sit down across the table and work out their differences in a sane and sensible manner. I believed that fellow Christians, Frank and Armenian, could be united against the common Seljuq enemy. In short, I wanted peace to prevail, and saw no just reason why it should not. I believed that one man of good will could make a difference and that God would honour those who strove to honour him.

In the madness that passes for sanity in the East, this belief was pure delusion. An infinitely sadder and wiser man understands that now.

On that fateful day, however, I raced from the city, eager to distance myself from the insidious deceit of the place and for Padraig and me to

road passed through the centre of the plain, I saw the sprawling mass of what remained of proud Bohemond's army.

'Christ have mercy,' Sydoni gasped. Padraig began praying aloud in Gaelic, and Yordanus croaked an incoherent oath.

Across the valley far below, a small brave knot of crusaders were yet fighting for their lives. All but lost amidst the swirling, howling Seljuqs, the Christian commanders were desperately trying to form the battle line. The few mounted knights had grouped themselves into a wedge-shaped complement in the vain hope of blunting the attack - a hopeless attempt, like trying to divide a sea wave with the edge of an oar.

Every time the crusaders made to engage the enemy, the swift Seljuqs melted away, only to assail the exposed flanks. When the crusaders turned to protect the flanks, the Arabs drove in upon them from the front. Indeed, the ceaseless swirling and diving looked like restless waves, and the clash of battle sounded like a distant storm far out on the ocean.

The flat floor of the valley formed a narrow plain between the deeply-eroded ravine of a dry riverbed to the west, and ragged, barren hills to the east. Along this plain, the rest of Bohemond's army lay scattered, fallen, still. From the long, spreading swathe of corpses, I could tell that they had marched up through the valley and into the ambush Ghazi had prepared for them. Pinched between the ravine on one side, and the hills on the other, the hapless crusaders had been cut down as they tried to flee back

Once, as a boy, I stood on a rock above one of my father's barley fields and watched the low black clouds of a sudden summer storm sweep across the land. The wind struck first, flattening the tall grain with breathtaking violence. And then, before the golden stalks could rise from beneath the initial onslaught, fierce, wind-driven rain and ripping hail drove the overpowered grain into the ground and battered it to shreds.

What I had witnessed as a boy, I saw again now, and a more terrible harvest could not be imagined. Even from the safe distance of the hilltop, I could see the fearsome gleam of the awful Arab swords as they slashed and slashed and slashed again, like fearful hail falling from on high to pound Bohemond's army into the ground, never to rise again.

Remorse, futility, and anger struggled within me; I did not want to see the final slaughter. 'Come,' I said, wheeling my horse and moving back up the slope.

As I turned from the sight, I caught the glint of gold on the edge of my vision, looked, and saw Bohemond's golden banner gleaming in the hard midday light. And then it was gone. It simply vanished -a fragile light swallowed by the dark-turbaned sea raging all around it. There was but a momentary ripple in the tide, the treacherous flood eddied and swirled, overcame, and then flowed swiftly on.

But wait, suddenly the banner appeared again, streaking across the plain - in the hands of a Seljuq warrior, this time. The enemy rider sped away with the prize, waving it on high, and screaming like the very devil. We could hear him from the hilltop; and long after, his shouts still echoed in my ears.

As we left the killing ground behind us, I raised my eyes towards heaven and prayed for the souls of those poor ignorant soldiers led blindly to the

'There are goat tracks all through these hills,' Yordanus said. 'If we keep the river between us and the valley, we will soon be well away from the fighting.'

Accordingly, I chose a goat track that ran along the back side of the hill, out of sight of the conflict, and led the way; Sydoni came next, then Yordanus, and Padraig last, leading the pack horse. We followed the path a goodly way; when it branched off, I took the new one, always keeping the line of shielding hills to my right.

At one point, the track descended towards the dry riverbed, turning in its descent and passing between two broad outcroppings of broken stone. Much rock had fallen onto the narrow trail from the steep banks on either side, thus making the pass very difficult. It took us some time to pick our way through the jagged stones, and when at last we emerged out onto the dry bed of the river, we paused for a short rest and a drink.

We dismounted in the shade of the overhanging rocks, and Padraig fetched a waterskin from the pack horse, and we passed it among us, each taking a mouthful or two. It was cooler in the shade, and it was a shame to move on, but we had a long way to go to rejoin the road, and wanted to be well away from the battlefield by nightfall.

So, we climbed into our saddles and moved on. The dry stream bed was flat and wide, and sufficiently low to allow us to ride without being seen from the hills where the battle was taking place. I pointed this out to Yordanus, who also thought this would be an easier way to go - at least for a short distance - for, although rocky along the slopes leading to the banks rising steep on either side, at its narrowest the bed was fine sand and still wide enough for two to ride abreast. Sydoni came up beside me as we rode

BC that as it may, I was paying more attention to her than to the track ahead. 'Peacocks are my favourite,' she was saying, 'especially when they fly. Their tails are so long and graceful. People eat them in Damascus, but I think they are too beautiful. It would be like eating a sunset.'

'What do they taste like?' I asked, glancing at her face. She hesitated, and I saw her eyes go wide. The words died on her tongue.

I looked where she was gazing and saw a party of Seljuq warriors appear around a bend a few hundred paces ahead. They saw us at the same moment.

There were six of them, each in a blood-red turban, black shirts and trousers, and short black cloaks. They were mounted on identical black Arabian steeds, and each carried a small round shield covered in white horse-hide and bearing a sharpened spike in the centre boss. The leader of the group had a single white plume atop his turban; he regarded us with bold severity for a moment, and I held my breath.

*Merciful God, cover us with your mighty hand,* I prayed.

Then turning to the two warriors on his left, he spoke a rapid command, extending his hand towards us as he did so, and my heart lurched in my breast.

'Fly!' I cried, jerking hard on the reins. The grey responded without so much as a quiver of hesitation, and we were away. The horses leapt into full, racing stride effortlessly and with such swiftness I muttered a heartfelt prayer of thanks to God that Nural traded in only the finest animals.

Padraig released the pack horse and led the way with Yordanus right behind; Sydoni and I were last, but only by the length of a tail. I slapped

So, with a prayer on my lips, my heart thudding in my chest, I slowed the pace of the grey enough to allow Sydoni to go ahead. Pdraig had already reached the cutting and disappeared up the path; Yordanus followed, holding to the saddle like a child as the horse leapt onto the trail. Sydoni's mount shied. 'Hi!' she shouted, and gave the reluctant animal a sharp kick in the flanks with her heels. The horse darted into the gap after the others.

Then it was my turn. The Seljuqs were almost on me. I slapped the reins hard and urged the animal forwards. The magnificent grey responded without a quiver of complaint, surging up through the cutting and onto the rock-strewn path. I saw Sydoni gain the track on the other side; she paused and looked back. 'Go! Go!' I shouted. 'I'm right behind you!'

She disappeared in a clatter of hooves and I saw clear light through the gap, and an empty trail ahead.

That was the last thing I saw. For the next thing I knew, earth and sky had changed places and the ground was rising up before my face. I was thrown clear of the horse and landed hard against the side of the bank, loose rock pelting down on me.

Dust filled my lungs and eyes; I could not breathe or see. My head felt as if it had been driven down between my shoulder blades. Every bone and joint in my body ached, and my right arm tingled strangely. My hands were scraped raw, and my clothes were torn, the flesh peeled away from my right hip in a wide and nasty gash.

I could not think what had happened. All I knew was that one moment I had been making good my escape, and the next there was a Seljuq standing over me with a sword-point at my throat. I made to rise, but the fellow put his foot on my chest and shoved me firmly back down. I lay

He regarded me with neither rancour nor curiosity, his shrewd dark eyes taking the measure of his prisoner. He must not have been impressed with what he saw before him, for after the briefest scrutiny, he said something to his companion and turned away. He moved towards his horse, and prepared to remount.

The Seljuq warrior beside me tightened his grip, and his comrade with the sword stepped aside - so as to get a better stroke, I thought, bracing myself for the killing blow.

But the man moved away, and I looked to see my own mount thrashing on the ground, trying to rise. Even in my dazed state I could see the poor beast's back was broken, and probably his right foreleg as well. In its eagerness to catch the others, the spirited grey had taken the path too quickly and had stumbled on the loose rock.

The commander spoke another quick burst to the soldier with the sword who bent to examine the injury to the animal. His brief scrutiny completed, he stood; the slow shake of his head confirmed what everyone already knew: there was no hope for the beast.

The commander raised his chin sharply, and the warrior bowed. Two men joined the first; one took the reins, and the other brought out a short throwing spear from its holder beneath his saddle. They made the horse lie on its side, and while one held the reins tightly, the other held the animal's head down, stroking the long jaw and whispering into its ear. The third warrior approached from behind with the spear.

A quick thrust up under the creature's skull, and it was over. The poor beast gave a shuddery kick, wheezed, and lay still. Satisfied that the horse had not suffered, the commander then turned and started back the way

over the rocks and sand splattered red with their blood. The Seljuq raiding party had been searching for any who might have escaped along the river when we ran into them.

After a quick search of the dead for valuables, they were stripped of weapons and armour, and the Seljuq commander led his men up the low bank and out onto the plain once more, leading me, and three riderless horses behind them.

Most of the dead were amassed in the centre of the plain near the road they had been travelling on when Ghazi sprang his trap. As we approached the road, where the fighting had been fiercest, I began to see corpses heaped one upon another - most of them without armour, and a few even without weapons. I wondered at this and decided that the ambush must have caught them so suddenly that the knights did not have time to arm themselves before the enemy was upon them; they were cut down as they struggled into their helmets and hauberks.

The blood of the slain had turned the dust-dry road into a sodden mess, churned to vile mud by the feet of soldiers and Seljuq horses. Already the air was thick with the stink of curdling blood as the white hot sun beat down on the carnage. The sick-sweet stench filled my nostrils bringing the gorge to my mouth; I gasped and gagged as I was pulled along, desperate to keep my feet lest I be dragged through the gore-slick muck.

I tried not to look at the dead, and averted my eyes whenever I could - their slack mouths and lolling tongues, their astonished empty stares, their raw and gaping wounds - lest they be disgraced in my sight. Their piteous plight filled me with an immense and oppressive remorse. I stumbled across the battle-plain staggering over the corpses, bitterness welling anew with every step. An entire army had been cruelly cut down for the

and gold, or other valuable objects. Bohemond had pressed hard in his effort to reach the Armenian stronghold as quickly as possible, so the crusaders had not pillaged many towns along the way and consequently had little plunder with them.

While I watched this dismal display, a great cry went up from a host of Seljuq warriors massed a short distance away where they were occupied with some great amusement. They waved their curved swords in the air, shouting loudly and enthusiastically. I could not make out what demanded such zealous attention, but more and more warriors were being drawn to the display.

I was still trying to determine what was happening when Amir Ghazi arrived. Surrounded by a bodyguard of fifty warriors on horseback - most of them on milk-white stallions like his own, and all dressed alike in cloaks of deepest blue with crimson turbans - he sat comfortably upon a raised, cushioned saddle of fine polished leather edged in silver. A small, smooth-faced man, he was swathed in shimmering blue samite, and wore a huge red turban surmounted by a peacock plume held in place with a great glittering emerald the size of a duck egg. In his cloak of white samite, he fairly gleamed like a star in the harsh sunlight as he sat in his high saddle and gazed at the still-growing mounds of treasure and weapons with the calm, beatific smile of a cheerful god.

He advanced and reined up before the atabeg and his men. The two addressed one another amiably and fell to discussing, as I imagined, the battle and its aftermath. At one point, the amir turned his attention to me; my captor simply shrugged, as if my presence was of little consequence, and they went back to their conversation.

Not all of the crusaders had been slaughtered in the valley; two hundred or so remained alive and had surrendered themselves. These men had been herded together onto the plain, and were now undergoing summary execution by the victors.

This was bad enough; what made it infinitely worse was the way in which the executions were being carried out. Even as I watched, one poor wretch of a foot soldier was pulled screaming from among his companions and hauled to the centre of the plain where he was released. The instant he was freed, two Seljuq riders sped out from the near end of the field - one with a spear and the other brandishing a sword. The two closed rapidly on the fleeing crusader.

Leaning from the saddle, the foremost Arab waved his sword high. There was a glinting flash of steel in the air, and the victim's head flew from his shoulders, spinning bright ribbons of blood into the air. The decapitated corpse stumbled on a step or two and collapsed, jerking and quivering until it lay still. The disembodied head struck the barren ground to roll like a lumpy ball in the dust.

The whole hideous spectacle was greatly and warmly cheered by the ecstatic onlookers, many of whom had struck wagers on the rider's ability. That they should do this appalled me, and rage bubbled up like molten rock inside me. Instantly, I was overcome by a towering fury; my vision darkened and my blood flared like liquid fire in my veins.

Burning with impotent rage, I raised my fist to Heaven and called down fiery judgement to consume the heartless infidel. But the sky remained clear and no flaming thunderbolts descended to scorch the brutal victors' heads. When God withdraws his protective hand, the powers of hell are



Cait, my light, I cannot contain myself. For the first time in my captivity, a great fear and uncertainty has descended upon me and I do not know what to do. I pace and pray the night away besieged by a hopeless dread the like of which I have never known.

This very night, two members of the caliph's bodyguard burst into my cell. Although it was late and all the palace was silent, I was hastened directly to the throne room where the exalted caliph had previously received me, as you will remember. The great room was in darkness, save for two torches burning in sconces either side of a door at the far end of the room.

I was led across the empty expanse of floor to that door. It was opened, and one of the soldiers indicated that I was to enter. I did so, the door closed behind me, and I found myself in a small chamber, alone. In the light of a single candletree, I saw a small three-legged stool with a leather seat and a large blue satin cushion of the kind favoured by the caliph. There was a table with a bowl of dates and figs, and a brass bell.

As I stood looking at these things and wondering why I had been brought here in the dead of night, I heard a curious grinding sound - very like that of a mill wheel when it turns; it seemed to come from across the room and, even as I looked, a small seam opened in the corner of the wall. This seam became a low door, which swung outward. A belch of cool air washed

He started when the door closed behind him and looked around at me. His eyes were baleful, dark, and staring. The grimace with which he beheld me did not bode well, I thought, for the outcome of our meeting.

Nevertheless, I bowed respectfully, and waited for him to begin. He placed the torch in a sconce beside the door and pointed to the stool, indicating that I was to sit. I did so, and he sat, too, cross-legged on the blue cushion facing me. A strange meeting this, I thought -no advisors, counsellors, servants or minions; no impressive array of guards to lend him stature; no lavish and costly appointments of gold and silk and sandalwood - just the two of us, man to man.

He looked at me hard, and I returned his gaze. I saw that he trembled slightly, as old men do when palsy claims them - a quiver of the head, a minute shaking of the hands. Then he began nodding, and intoning a chant in Arabic. After a moment he sighed and then leapt up again, and began striding around the room.

I watched him, mystified by his behaviour, yet moved to pity by the severity of the agitation which gripped him so tightly.

'So!' he cried at last. Then, as if frightened by the violence of his outburst, he repeated it again, but more softly. 'So! It comes to this.'

'My lord,' I replied.

'I am khalifa! Ruler and Protector of Egypt. Armies march at my command! I say what will be and it is. I am the law and the hope of my people, and I answer to Allah alone.' He stared at me as if daring me to defy him.

'Indeed, my lord,' I said.

This seemed to calm him somewhat. He sat down again.

'You are a father,' he said, almost accusingly so it seemed.

'That I am, my lord.'

'You know the love of a father for his children,' he declared, speaking as if it were a celebrated and widely proclaimed fact of my existence.

'I do, yes. God knows.'

He nodded. 'Then you know also the anguish of a father who must chastise his rebellious child.'

'It is a torment that tears at the very soul,' I sympathized.

'Ya'allah! It is true!' he cried. Closing his eyes, he began slowly rocking back and forth, his wrinkled face an image of the pain that was torturing him.

He sat that way for a long time, and I did not intrude on his misery. After awhile, he drew a long breath, and opened his eyes. 'I am the law and the protection of my people,' he said, his voice calm and steady. 'Justice is my decree. It is written: a man who knows the will of Allah and fails to do it shall not escape the everlasting flames of damnation. And again: A believer who departs from the path of righteousness is no better than an infidel; he shall find his reward among the damned.' He regarded me sharply, defiant once more. 'Is this not so?'

'It is so, my lord,' I agreed.

'Yes,' he sighed, his voice soft, almost broken. 'It comes to this: my son is rebellious and unbelieving. He has done great wickedness and the blood of the murdered demands justice. You are a father. You love your child. You know what I am saying.'

must be. He looked at me meaningfully, wishing me to understand.

The hair on the back of my neck prickled as his purpose broke upon me: I was to be that instrument of justice. That was why he had summoned me.

'You are a nobleman and a father,' he said again. 'You understand these things.'

'I understand your predicament, my lord,' I admitted woodenly, wishing with all my heart that I did not.

'I am khalifa!' he snapped suddenly. 'Do not presume!'

'Forgive me, Most Excellent Khalifa. I am unworthy of your regard.'

He stood again quickly. He shouted for the guards, and the door opened at once. Pointing to me, he spoke a rapid command in Arabic, whereupon, they seized me and pulled me away. As I was dragged from the room, al-Hafiz shouted, 'Pray to your God, Christian! Pray as a father that you might live to see your beloved child once more!'

Thus, I was returned to my cell and left to think about what had taken place. The more I pondered the implications of the strange audience, the more extraordinary it became. In his great despair, the Caliph of Egypt had turned to me; he had sought my aid with his wretched son. In some way I had become confessor to the caliph.

*Why?* I asked myself. Why had he chosen me?

He commanded armies, as he had needlessly reminded me. *The word of the caliph is law... justice is my decree...* Why confide these things to me, a mere prisoner in his keep?

The old man's reasons remained as dark and inscrutable as the beclouded night itself.

faces ashen with fatigue, their hearts numb with terror.

Those with presence of mind enough to know their peril were praying fervently; their voices formed a continual low gabble over which the moans and cries of the wounded among them drifted like a mournful dirge.

My Turkish captors untied me and pushed me down with the others. The man next to me raised his head as I settled in beside him. He regarded me dully, his battered face rapidly blackening beneath livid bruises to his cheek, and jaw, and neck; his chin was split to the bone and oozing big drops of blood. 'Are you a priest?' he asked in a ragged voice.

'No,' I replied. He made no reply, but his head sank lower. And then it came to me what he was asking. No man, feeling the cold hand of death on his shoulder, wishes to die unshriven. 'But I will pray with you, if you like,' I offered.

He nodded and, clasping his hands beneath his chin, struggled to his knees before me and began to pray. It was a simple prayer, yet well composed, and at the end of it, he begged the Heavenly Father's forgiveness for his many sins, and asked the Good Lord to remember his mother and his wife, and not to let them sink into beggary now that he was gone.

When he finished, I prayed that Christ the Blessed Redeemer of Men would carry the prayer before the Heavenly Throne, and -'What is your name?' The man opened his eyes and glanced at me. 'Your name, friend, what is it?'

'Girardus.'

'- carry the prayer before the High Throne of Heaven and that Girardus'

called a command to his men, who were at that moment dragging another screaming wretch out from among the beaten crusaders.

Then, one of the newcomers - a small, dark-skinned Turk with a bristly white beard and a face as flat and scuffed as the bottom of a boot - shouted something, turned his mount and rode out to where we were awaiting execution. This Arab carried no weapons, save a curved gold-handled knife, the pommel of which protruded from his dirty cloth belt. He glared at all around him with a dark and angry countenance, as if furious that we should be reclining while he laboured long in the saddle.

The glittering amir advanced and, smiling pleasantly, addressed the angry Arab in, as I thought, placating tones. The two began to converse, and I supposed the agitated newcomer was being informed of the disposition of the captives.

'He is furious as a tarred ferret,' observed Girardus.

'The amir does not appear overly concerned,' I pointed out.

'He is not the amir,' Girardus informed me. Indicating the small dark angry man, he said, '*That* is Amir Ghazi.'

I looked again at the man I had taken for a lowly scout. Unlike the other Arab chieftains I had seen, the amir was arrayed no better than the lowest soldier in his war host. Instead of flaunting his superiority, he wore the simple black dress of tunic and trousers of a Seljuq warrior, with black boots of soft leather; the only difference that I could see was that where their turbans were black or brown, his was sand-coloured. If Girardus had told me he was a trinket pedlar, I would have believed him. Certainly, the man I saw glaring down at us from the saddle appeared more disposed to selling brass baubles in the street than commanding the combined armies

I looked at Girardus in amazement. 'How do you know this?'

'I speak Arabic a little,' he said. I professed this to be a very wonder. 'No.' He shook his head. 'It is six years in Antioch.'

'If that is Ghazi,' I said, 'who is the other one?'

'That is Kaisin Tanzuk, Sultan of Jezirah,' my informer replied. 'They say he is wealthier than the Caliph of Baghdad.'

'What is he say -'

'Shh!' Girardus cut me off as he tried to follow the exchange. After a moment, the crusader turned to me, his bruised features forming an expression of pathetic relief. 'The killing is stopped. We are to be taken to Damascus.'

Satisfied that his command was understood, Amir Ghazi returned to his chieftains and began ordering the withdrawal of the army. While I was mightily grateful to be spared a messy and inglorious death, my relief was tempered somewhat by the realization that my rescue would now take longer. I had allowed myself to hope that once Padraig and the others discovered what had happened to me, they would ride to Anazarbus, alert Roupen, and the Armenians would instantly ride to my aid.

In a little while, a number of Turks approached with coils of rope, and began tying the captives together. *It is only for a short while*, I told myself as the Seljuq warrior passed the loop of tough leather rope around my neck. *They will come for me. When they realize what has happened, they will come for me.*

The rope was pulled tight around my throat, looped back to my hands, and



So began the most wretched portion of my life. I will spare you the most painful incidents, dearest Caitriona. I could not bear the thought that my distress should cause you grief. Even through my sorest trial, my chief consolation was that you would not know how your father suffered. Thus, you would remain forever blissful in your memories of me - if indeed you should remember me at all. You were so young when I left you, heart of my heart; and for that I am sorry. Believe me, I have repented ten thousand times since then.

Ah, but dull ignorant man that I am, I did not perceive the Swift Sure Hand of God moving mightily in the chaos of those calamitous days. No doubt Padraig would have had the wit to perceive the subtle textures of our Lord's grand design in the intricate warp and weft of time and the myriad actions of men.

'Look here, Duncan,' the good priest might have said, 'see how the cloak is made of many threads - some light, some dark. The pattern is in the interplay of both, and who but the weaver can foresee the design?'

I miss Padraig greatly and pray for him constantly, as I do for you, my soul. Yes, and every day I curse my ignorance and folly. How arrogant I was, imagining I could bring some small order into the chaos of the seething, benighted East. I rue the day I allowed myself to become so

the slightest tincture of good in that arduous and harrowing journey to Damascus. If there was a design in that, I confess I never saw it. Perhaps I may be forgiven my dullness of sight, however; most days, I was busy fighting for my life.

Amir Ghazi commanded the massed armies to move south at once. As I think on it now, he must have recognized the priceless opportunity he had won. Having vanquished Antioch's protecting forces, he moved to press his advantage as far as it would go.

So, without a pause to draw breath, much less celebrate their victory, the amir's army was on the move once more. In preparation for this, Seljuq warriors searched through the ranks of crusader captives with swords; anyone with a disabling wound was instantly put to death. Those with lesser injuries were spared, and allowed to continue so long as they could walk. Still, as the days passed, there were times when I reckoned a quick chop in the neck might have been the greatest kindness.

We marched from the plain of battle and into the low hills to the north and east. It was long past dark when we stopped. I spent a cold night on the ground in the company of eight other prisoners. We were tied together in groups to keep us from escaping, and each group separated from the others so that we could not raise rebellion.

Too disheartened to speak, we lay there on the stony ground and slept the sleep of the dead. Indeed, a good few did not rise in the morning; and a fair few more who *did* begin the day's march did not finish.

That day cast the pattern for all the days to follow: our captors roused us at first light, prodding us awake with the butts of their spears. We were bound together two-by-two, each man to another with short cords around the ankles, and a slightly longer one around the neck; our hands were tied

Our Arab masters were deaf to the cries of the suffering and dying. They pushed mercilessly, pausing only to give us enough water to keep us alive and moving - never enough to satisfy our parched and burning throats.

Hungry, thirsty, aching from our various wounds and injuries, we shuffled over the barren hills, our heads down, our hearts cold hard stone in our chests. Day after infernal day. We did not talk; there was nothing to say.

The sun blazed down on our naked heads with the heat-blast of a forge fire. Sweat streamed from us, stinging our eyes and dissipating our rapidly dwindling strength to the arid desert air. In this way, the decimated Christian army dragged itself across the scorching wastes staggering under the burden of its wounded. Muted curses and muttered Psalms ascended heavenward in equal measure, as the slow torture of heat and thirst began to exact a cruel tariff.

When men fell, the nearest Seljuq guard would ride to see whether any purpose might be served in getting the man back on his feet. If the crusader had life enough in him, those nearby were ordered to carry him. If not, he was simply left where he lay, and the death march moved on. Often those left behind cried out for the knife to end their misery, but these, like all other pleas, went unheeded.

The fourth day was the worst I have ever endured. Around midday, a badly wounded soldier collapsed directly in front of Girardus and myself, pulling down the man bound to him. The Seljuq guard rode up and, without bothering to dismount, commanded the three of us to get the unconscious man on his feet once more.

For this, we required the use of our hands, and so our bonds were loosed, which was a mercy in itself. The three of us were able to raise the wretch,

I set my jaw to the task, and trudged on and on through the interminable length of that endless day. After a time, the searing ache in my legs and arms eased as my limbs grew gradually numb. I could no longer feel the uneven ground beneath my feet, and this caused me to stumble over rocks. Each lurch and jostle brought a moan from our unconscious comrade, but his complaints grew gradually weaker and more infrequent.

The land was a barrens of broken rock and thorns; gnarled trees, white with dust and shrivelled by the merciless sun, twisted up from stony crevices. Everything in that godforsaken land was blasted, blighted and deformed. No less easy on the eye than underfoot, the harshness seared itself into the soul. Never did a scrap of green - or any other colour - relieve the limitless sameness.

Seeking refuge from the sun and blight, I turned in my mind to thoughts of Blessed Scotland, and the family waiting there; I brought the image of each face before my mind's eye, and prayed for the soul of every one I could recall. In this way, I withstood the rigours of that inhuman day.

When at last the sun began to fade behind the western hills, the Seljuqs stopped to make camp for the night. The three of us stiffly lowered our wounded comrade to the ground and collapsed beside him. We lay there panting like sun-scalded dogs, unmoving, sweat running in rivulets from our spent bodies to stain the dust beneath us.

The sun was almost down when one of the Seljuqs brought a waterskin and revived us with a few mouthfuls of water. After I drank, I drew myself up on my elbows to rouse our wounded comrade so he could get his share. It was then I discovered he was dead.

When he died, and how long we had carried his lifeless corpse, I cannot

and legs felt cast of lead, my head ached and my mouth was coated with scum. Those of us left alive were given a fair ration of water, which we gulped down quickly lest the guards change their minds. I thanked God for every mouthful. Many there were who could not face the day, and refused to get up. The Seljuqs killed two unfortunates where they lay, and the rest, faced with a spear in the gut and an agonizing, lingering death, found the strength to rise once more.

The land grew rough and craggy; the trail degenerated into rugged little goat tracks through dry streams and over shattered hills, making the march yet more strenuous and difficult. Time and again the cry went up for water, food, or rest. We were given none of these things.

I kept myself alive with Psalms and prayers, reciting 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want... the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want... he makes me to lie down in pastures green... beside the still waters he leads me... though I walk through the valley of the Shadow of Death ... Lord, I walk through the valley of the Shadow of Death, yet I no evil fear ... no evil fear ... no evil fear ...'

Over and over and over again, I spoke these words and the rhythm of their speaking became a litany of life to me. For, as long as I could say them, I knew I would live - at least to the end of the Psalm.

The searing, relentless heat and lack of water began to claw at our numbers. All around me men collapsed and fell, and as the eternal day wore on and on with no end in sight, I began to regard these as the lucky ones.

Mumbling my Psalm, I moved in and out of dreams. I saw Padraig walking before me, and tried to hail him, but my throat was so dry I could not make a sound. When I looked again, it was just another captive

The scents and sounds caused me to imagine the faces of those I loved, and I heard the babble of their voices filling my ears. I tried to make out what they said, but in their joy at having me among them once more they spoke over one another so that I could not understand them.

Holding up my hands, I made to speak and forced out a ragged croak, and this made them excited. They rushed to me and I was pulled this way and that, and I realized they were dragging me down to the sea. Stiff-legged, I tried to resist. My strength was gone and I was shoved down to the water.

I felt the blessed wetness lapping around my feet and legs; I heard others splashing in behind me, and turned to see the dusty faces of my fellow pilgrims floundering into the sea. How, I wondered, had they come to be in Scotland? Had they followed me there? Had we walked all the way?

And then people began throwing water over me. The cold shock restored me to my mind. Water! I sank down to my knees and began scooping it up in my hands, throwing it into my mouth and gulping it down, choking on it, and gulping down more.

The water revived me. I raised my eyes and looked around. Gone the cold ocean bay, and gone the prosperous holding snug amongst the dazzling green hills. Before me was a sun-baked settlement shaded by a few scruffy trees and forlorn palms on the bare earth banks of a muddy, but very real lake. The people there were not my beloved friends and family, but Muhammedan shepherds. My heart writhed within me as the dull realization seeped into my sun-dazed awareness: I was alive still, and far, far from home.

We stayed there that night. Revived by the water, and blessed with a moment's respite from the day's heat as evening drew near, the captives began to appraise their chances of survival. And they began to talk.

next to him. If the Templars had been there they would have been killed along with all the rest.'

'Yes,' agreed another, 'it is for the best. At least this way we have a hope of rescue.'

'What makes you think anyone will rescue us? No one cares,' concluded another gloomily. His head sank onto his chest. 'God has given us over to destruction. His hand is against us. We are dead men - each and every one of us. There is no hope.'

'Has the turd turned philosopher now?' scoffed the soldier called Thomas. 'When the garrison learns that Bohemond's army has been captured, they will ride at once to the rescue.'

'And who is going to tell them, eh?' demanded another soldier, struggling to rise. He had been slashed on the arm, and the wound showing through the blood-crusting rag of his sleeve was grey and watery with pus. 'Idiot! Who is going to ride to Antioch to tell them? Eh?' He glared furiously around the ring of grim faces. 'Gaston is right, we are all dead men.'

'What!' demanded the one called Thomas. 'When they learn the rood has been captured, they will come, by God.'

'Do not speak to me of God, or the rood,' muttered Gaston. 'If the rood goes before us, we cannot lose - so they said. It is God's good pleasure to lead us to victory, they said. Where is the victory now?' He glared around daring anyone to challenge him. 'Damn them! Damn their lies!'

'Forgive me, brother,' I said, breaking into their conversation, 'is it the Holy Cross you mean?'

'Aye,' he agreed dubiously, 'is there any other?'

'Where is it?' I asked, interrupting their argument.

'The rood? Why, the Turks have taken it,' answered Matthias. 'They will have it with the rest of the plunder. Christ alone knows what they will do with it, the heathens.'

'They'll burn it,' suggested Girardus dolefully. 'By God they will, for they are godless devil worshippers every hell-cursed one.'

The discussion moved on to speculation about what would happen to us when we reached Damascus, but as no one had any notion, I turned instead to pondering what I had learned: the Holy Rood was here ... somewhere.

I determined then and there that if the High King of Heaven allowed me to remain alive, I would resume my quest: somehow I would find the Holy Rood, and I would save it. This I vowed to do.

We stayed four days at Kadiriq, a baked-mud settlement on the banks of the stagnant lake, regaining our strength for the days ahead. I suspect the march from Anazarbus had been made as tortuous as possible to kill off the weak and wounded. The Seljuqs wanted slaves to sell and only those strong enough to survive the ordeal would bring a price worth the trouble of keeping them alive.

I slept nearly all of the first day, and the second I spent lying in the shade of a gnarled little tree beside the lake - I could not bear to be out of sight of the water, and several times went in swimming to cool off. The sight of this white-skinned foreigner thrashing around in the shallows produced great amusement for the children of Kadiriq, who had come out to examine the conquered captives.

That night we were given food for the first time since the battle: flat bread - thin and dry, and tough as parchment - and lentils cooked in beef broth. The second night we were given bread and beans again, and some leathery scraps of goat meat.

On the third day, Amir Ghazi arrived. He travelled in *caravan* -that is to say, with his entire retinue of advisors, liegemen, and a bodyguard of three hundred or more warriors - all mounted, and leading a long train of pack animals, mostly horses. However, moving with a strange, swaying gait, I

have the honour of hosting the amir, and that night there was a feast in his name. A dozen cows were slaughtered for the spit, and a score of sheep and goats. The festive mood overflowed the town and even spilled out into the captives' camp, to the extent that we were given a humble share of the feast. That night, along with our bread - a soft, thick flat bread flavoured with *anise* - we were also given lamb stewed with figs. It was very good, and there was not a man among us who did not lick the wooden bowl clean. We were also given a drink of fermented goat's milk - slightly salty, with a rancid sour taste which failed to seduce many to its charms.

The next morning, rested, fed, and as hale as I could hope to be in the uncertain days ahead, I determined to try my luck with Amir Ghazi.

The sun was high and the wind hot out of the south. I was bathing in the lake when two of the amir's bodyguard appeared. They spoke to the Seljuq keeping watch on the bank, and I decided the time had come. Hauling myself from the water, I motioned for Girardus to accompany me, and came to stand before them on the bank.

'What are you doing?' he whispered desperately.

'Tell them I demand to see the amir.'

He gaped at me in disbelief, and started to object.

'Tell them.'

The guards glanced at us with haughty contempt, but otherwise ignored us.

'I do not think they speak Arabic,' Girardus concluded quickly. 'Let us go before they make trouble for us.'

'Tell them. Make them understand.'

demand to see Amir Ghazi at once.'

To his credit, Girardus swallowed his fear and spoke up once more. In a halting and trembling voice, he told the guards what I had said. The Seljuq guard started towards us, waving his spear and shouting. But one of the amir's men took him by the arm and pulled him back. He motioned me to him.

Without hesitation, I stepped up. He gazed at me, his dark eyes searching mine. The second guard said something, and flapped a hand at me, but the first guard took me by the arm and turned me around, indicating that I was to walk before them.

'God go with you,' called Girardus.

They marched me around the lake to where the amir had established his camp. Upon arrival, I was brought to stand outside the amir's tent, which was pale blue instead of the deep black-brown of all the others. I was given to understand that I was to remain there

- a few score paces before the tent - and my two keepers spoke to a man who appeared briefly at the tent entrance, before retreating to the shade of a small date palm beside the tent where they could watch me. Thus, I stood, waiting for my audience and observing the commerce of the camp.

Amir Ghazi was a very busy man, judging by the comings and goings of the amir's many advisors, and subject lords. Few of the people who entered the tent stayed very long. I expect they were merely paying homage to the amir, or discharging some perfunctory duty. Indeed, the entire Arab race from the highest caliph to the lowest goatherd is hedged about with a veritable wall of duties and obligations, not one brick or block of which can be removed or altered.

with a kiss. Most often, however, it was one of the amir's servants who, bowing low, directed the guest into the great man's presence.

Not all of the amir's visitors were men. Many of the nobles brought women with them, and these, from what I could see of them, were even more magnificently arrayed than the men - although they hid their splendour under long hooded outer cloaks or gowns which covered them head to toe, and they wore veils across the lower parts of their faces so that between hood and veil, only their eyes were visible. But such eyes! Almond shaped and black as sloe, with long lashes and brows thin and dark and delicately curved.

It put me in mind of Sydoni and I spent a long time happily thinking about her - until I remembered my grave predicament. If I had not been such an impetuous fool I would no doubt be with her now. My thoughts grew so forlorn and pitiable, that I was forced to put them off at last. It does no good to wallow in regret. What might have been is as impossible as what can never be.

After awhile one of my guards fell asleep. As I had been standing in the sun for a goodly while, I sat down. The other guard did not like this; he hissed at me and gestured for me to stand up again, and I obliged. Soon, however, he was fast asleep, too, and so I sat down again and pulled my siarc over my head to keep the sun off me while I waited.

The sun passed midday and began its long slow descent into the west. Still, I sat in my place, dozing now and again, and waiting for the amir, and still people came and went on errands of fealty and homage. As the sun began to stretch my shadow towards the entrance to the tent, I heard horses approaching.

A party of Arab chieftains was riding into camp. I climbed to my feet and,

He barked a single sharp word of command and the men ceased their attack. I looked up to see the Atabeg of Albistan, the same who had captured me days before. He recognized me, too, and bade me rise; he pointed towards the tent and I saw the amir himself standing at the entrance surrounded by advisors and liegemen. He was frowning mightily, none too pleased at the interruption of his affairs.

Rising slowly, I dusted myself off, and prepared for whatever would happen next.

The unhappy amir beckoned his attendant nobleman to him. The atabeg put his hand on my arm and pulled me away from the guards, and I was brought before the amir where I was made to kneel at his feet. This was to humble me, but I did not greatly mind. It is no shame to acknowledge one who is above you, and inasmuch as I was a lowly hostage in his camp, Amir Ghazi was certainly superior in every way.

The black amir scowled down at me. I cannot say what passed in his mind, but I bowed as I had seen the other noblemen do, touching my forehead to the ground, and then, employing my best Greek, said, 'My name is Duncan of Caithness, and I am a friend of Prince Thoros of Armenia.'

He glared, and spoke a word of command and one of his advisors approached on the run. This fellow - an Armenian, I believe, for in manner, dress, and appearance he was very like those I had met at the banquet in Anazarbus - was an ungainly, sallow skinned man, with a large eagle-beaked nose and smooth, hairless jowls like the wattles of a pig, he cast a dour, pitiless black eye over me. 'Who are you?' he asked in Greek, suspicion thickening his reedy voice.

I repeated what I had said before, and added, 'I am a pilgrim from a

'Tell me your name,' I commanded.

The Armenian stiffened slightly at my audacity. But he was well accustomed to taking orders, and replied, 'I am Katib Sahak of Tarawn, advisor to Amir Ghazi.'

I thanked him, and said, 'I ask you now, Katib -'

'Just Sahak only,' he said. '*Katib* is an Arab word. It means scribe.'

'I ask you, Sahak, do the Franks speak Greek?'

At this, the Armenian turned and held close conversation with the amir, whose interest pricked slightly when he heard what Sahak had to say about me. Breathing a fervent prayer, I said, 'I had no part in Bohemond's army, and took no part in the battle. I was a guest of Prince Thoros and was captured by mistake. I was with three others when this man captured me.' Pointing to the atabeg, I said, 'Ask him if this is not so. The others were able to escape. I alone was captured.'

Sahak discussed my story with the atabeg, who nodded, which I took as confirmation that I was telling the truth. 'The Atabeg of Albistan agrees that it happened the way you say,' the scribe confirmed. Ghazi spoke up then, and Sahak added, 'The amir demands proof.'

Looking directly at the amir, I answered, 'Tell him I can prove I have come from the prince's household.' When my words were interpreted for the amir, I said, 'This was given to me by Princess Elena for aiding the return of her son, Roupen.'

So saying, I pulled the neck of my siarc down and twisted it inside out to reveal the brooch I had pinned there the day I left Anazarbus. Sahak's eyes went wide with amazement. 'If you will look closely,' I said, directing their

Tapping the brooch with my finger, I repeated the word. 'Namus'lu keza,' I said, and prayed they understood what I was trying to tell them.

The amir made up his mind. Speaking gruffly, he held out his hand to me.

'Amir Ghazi says you are to give him the jewel.'

I hesitated.

'You have no choice,' Sahak informed me. 'You are to give it to him now. It will be sent to Anazarbus to inform them of your capture.'

With great reluctance, I obeyed, unfastening the brooch and placing it in the amir's palm with a last appeal. 'Namus'lu keza.'

The amir closed his hand over the brooch, turned on his heel and walked away, pausing to toss a word of command to the guards as he retreated to his tent. They took hold of me and I was taken back around the lake to resume my place with the captives.

Girardus was glad at my return to the fold, so to speak. 'I never thought to see you again,' he confided. 'They are saying the amir is holding court, and judgements are being given.'

'It is true,' I told him. Other captives gathered closer to hear. 'The amir is indeed holding court, and he seems to be renewing the loyalties of his vassal lords.' I went on to describe what I had seen of the comings and goings of all the noblemen and women and gifts they brought.

When I finished, Girardus, who had assumed they had taken me away to be tortured or beaten, asked, 'What did they do to you?'

'They kept me waiting all day in the sun,' I answered, 'and then they brought me back here.'

an event of far greater significance for the Seljuqs than I knew.

Ignorant of the forces and powers that held sway in the Holy Land, I could nevertheless imagine that a single great victory could produce a result with far-reaching implications for the man who accomplished it. Certainly, it would not be the first time a shrewd leader, having delivered a decisive conquest, had used it to concentrate his power.

Further, I could well imagine that the hole left in the defences of Antioch had created an opportunity which such a leader might wish to exploit. What the astute amir had in mind, I could not guess, but the activity in the camp gave every indication that he was marshalling his support for an important undertaking.

These thoughts occupied me until a little past midday, when the Atabeg of Albistan, whom I took to be one of the amir's chief advisors, emerged from the tent. He came to stand over me, and I rose quickly to my feet. After a cursory scrutiny, he signalled the guarding warriors, and I was escorted into the amir's tent.

An Arab tent is a wondrous thing. With very little effort the desert folk make them as spacious and comfortable as palaces. The interior is often divided up into smaller rooms for meeting, dining, sleeping, and so forth. Accordingly, Ghazi's tent featured a large outer room where he received his guests before bringing them into his inner chambers, so to speak. This is where I was brought; here also were the gifts which had been heaped upon the amir by those who came to do him honour.

There were many jewelled swords and knives, and ornamental weapons of various sorts - spears, shields, helmets, bows and arrows - and other items of which the Arab artisans excel in making: chalices, bowls, platters, and

and knew that it must be true. Hidden somewhere amongst all the gifts and plunder lay the greatest prize in Christendom.

After a moment the Armenian scribe, who had served as my interpreter the day before, appeared. 'Do you know why you have been brought here?' Katib Sahak asked; his voice was cold and unforgiving.

'I am hoping the amir has accepted my ransom payment and will now allow me to depart in peace.'

'That is for the amir to decide.' In bearing and tone, Sahak gave every indication of despising me. 'He wishes to ask you some questions. I urge you to tell the truth at all times. Your life depends on it.'

'Be assured I will tell the truth.'

He made a sound in his nose as if he thought such an endeavour unlikely. 'Follow me.'

Stepping to the inner partition, he pulled back a fold of the cloth, indicating that I should enter. The room was simple and spare; there was no furniture of any kind, save cushions; fine silken rugs had been spread thick on the ground to make a soft floor beneath the feet. The mountain of gifts which filled the outer room encroached upon this room as well, but here the heap was smaller, and the objects more costly.

The amir sat in the centre of the room, surrounded by four Seljuqs who, by dress and bearing, I took to be noblemen and advisors -the Atabeg of Albistan among them. Amir Ghazi's expression was stern and challenging. His white beard bristled like hog hair on his flat, wrinkled face; he had put off his buff-coloured turban, and his long grey hair was knotted into a hank, which rested on his shoulder. 'God is great!' he said in Arabic.

Excellent Amir's sage opinion - are these: either you have made enemies among the royal family, or you have committed some crime in the royal household. Perhaps the theft of the brooch with which you have attempted to purchase your freedom, yes?'

'Tell my lord the amir that I am not a thief,' I said, trying to remain calm and unruffled. 'I have stolen nothing. Neither have I made enemies among the royal family.'

I might have insisted on recognition of my noble rank, but it serves no purpose to allow one's self-importance to erect obstacles at times like this. As Abbot Emlyn says, martyrs are often burned, not for their beliefs, but for their toplofty pride alone.

Sahak repeated my assertion, and then gave me the amir's terse reply. 'It makes no difference,' he said. 'Amir Ghazi says that you are to remain a captive. You have said your friends escaped. If this is so, those who were with you will send ransom, and then you will be freed. By this he will know the truth, and the matter will be concluded.'

'If no one comes for me?' I hated asking the question, but I had to know.

'You will be sold in the slave market in Damascus with the rest of the captives who have no hope of ransom.'

The amir watched me to see how I would take this news. When I made no outcry or protest, Sahak said, 'Do you understand what I have told you?'

'Completely,' I answered. 'I am more than grateful for the amir's wide forbearance.'

The rancorous scribe's eyes narrowed as he tried to determine whether I was mocking him. Satisfied with my sincerity, he relayed my words to

'Therefore,' Sahak continued, 'by the immense mercy and generosity of Lord Ghazi you will be accorded the honour and rank of a nobleman in captivity.'

The pronouncement dismayed me, I will not say otherwise, yet I shouldered the burden of disappointment as manfully as I could. I held my head erect and kept my mouth shut. I tried to preserve my dignity in the circumstance by reminding myself that, at least, by remaining in Ghazi's camp a little while longer, I would be near the Black Rood.

'All noblemen are to be ransomed in Damascus,' Sahak told me with spiteful glee, 'and, should anyone wish to claim you, the amir has decreed a price of ten thousand *dinars* for your release.'

'Please, tell the Excellent and Admirable Amir Ghazi that I am truly overwhelmed by the prodigious magnitude of his mercy and generosity.'

Sahak grimaced. 'Tomorrow we will continue our journey to Damascus. You will travel in the amir's baggage train with the other noble captives. So that you will not offend the Illustrious Atabeg Buri, by arriving empty-handed, the Wise and Benevolent Ghazi will provide you with a gift befitting your rank.'

When the translator was finished, the amir clapped his hands, and a guard entered from the outer room. Ghazi beckoned him near and put his mouth to his servant's ear. The man rose quickly and left. The amir enjoyed a shrewd smile at my expense and I felt a dread apprehension creep over me as the guard returned bearing a large wooden box, which he placed on the floor between myself and the amir.

The box itself was one of the ornately carved variety I had noticed in the



Impetuous no more, Prince Bohemond appeared serene and tranquil, his fine features becalmed, if not beatific - a testimony to the embalmer's art, for even in my fleeting encounter with the hasty Count of Antioch, I could tell that serenity was never part of his nature. Certainly, I had never seen him looking more contented - as if in death, his war with the world now over, he had entered a splendour of peace that had eluded him in life.

The flesh had a waxy texture and a slightly glistening tawny sheen, due to the pitch resin used to preserve the head. Yet, it was lifelike in every other way so that poor Bohemond seemed merely to slumber in the serene tranquility of a golden sunset. Alas, it was a sleep from which there would be no waking, and I might have mourned the life of a brother Christian so brutally cut off - if not for the fact that he had brought this ghastly extremity upon himself.

He had sown destruction, and reaped a bounteous harvest. Those who deserved my grief were the men who had no choice but to follow their vainglorious prince into death's cold and darksome halls.

My Seljuq masters wanted me to feast my gaze upon the grisly prize that I might know the fate awaiting noble traitors. Oh, they took great pleasure in their victory, of which the prince's head was the emblem. Given a choice, I believe Amir Ghazi would rather have had the ransom money -

every trudging step of the way.

Provided with a length of folded cloth to serve as a strap, I hoisted the bejewelled box onto my back and followed the other servants when, upon striking camp, they set off. The box was heavy, and in a discouragingly short time my shoulders and arms were throbbing with a fiery ache. I eventually worked out that by knotting the ends of the strap and raising the knot to my forehead, the pressure on my shoulders was relieved by taking some of the weight on my hands. It was awkward, and bent me like an old man, but at least I was able to walk like this for long stretches at a time without exhausting myself.

On that first day, I wondered why it was that the amir's caravan made no attempt to keep pace with the troops. After a time, it became apparent that we were travelling by another route. This caused me some concern, and I hoped we would eventually rejoin the rest of the Seljuq army, as I did not like being separated from the other Christian prisoners.

Then, as the day dwindled away towards evening and we stopped to make camp, I was joined by three other captive noblemen bound for ransom in Damascus; all were Franks. One of them had been wounded in the battle, and still suffered from his wounds; the other two were nobles of a more rustic stripe who knew little Latin, and no Greek, which made it difficult to speak with them. Also, because of my dress and speech, they thought me an Armenian and worthy only of contempt; say what I might, I could not disabuse them of this notion. Consequently, they would have nothing to do with me, and I was left to myself for the most part.

In many ways, those servants employed in the keeping of the amir's camp had the best of the travelling. Since much of the treasure and tribute was loaded onto horses, requiring the servants to walk along beside, they

lit, and meals prepared.

Each evening, as the flame-tinted sky flared with the day's last brilliance, the amir and his retinue would arrive and the camp would be ready. The amir ate a simple meal, usually alone, and then received members of his following - sometimes singly, more often in groups of two or three.

Left to myself for the most part, I would find a hollow place among the stones to sleep, and lay on the ground listening to the sound of the Seljuqs' voices, loud in the quiet of the camp. They talked long into the night, their intense discussions frequently interrupted by bursts of rowdy laughter which would cease as abruptly as they began. Then, in the morning, the amir would emerge from his tent, give orders to the chief steward, mount his horse and ride away, leaving us to strike camp and move on to the next stopping place.

After we had been several days on the trail, my presence ceased to be of interest to my erstwhile guards. I was treated no more or less well than a dog or mule belonging to the camp; if no one took any interest in my welfare, neither did they show me cruelty or inflict needless torment. They were not warriors, after all, but servants: inexperienced in keeping prisoners and largely unaware of any pressing need to keep me bound or tethered in any way. Perhaps they reckoned escape unlikely as, with nothing but empty desert wilderness stretching away in every direction, there was no place for me to flee.

This was the unvarying pattern of the next eight or ten days - each day so like the last that I lost count, and simply drifted along until we came in sight of Damascus. I heard one of the Arabs shout, and the others began to chatter excitedly all at once. I raised my head and saw the shimmering

burden and sat on the mud brick rim of the well to watch while the servants scurried to make ready to receive their lord. I noticed that some greater care attended this evening's chores, and it occurred to me that perhaps the amir was preparing to receive dignitaries from the city.

For, once the amir's tent had been erected beneath the tall date palms, the treasure - which ordinarily remained packed and secured with the animals — was unloaded and brought to the amir's tent. This task finished, the servants hastened to prepare the evening meal, and I took the opportunity to doze awhile in the dying rays of the sun.

The chief steward must have caught sight of me sleeping, and saw the carved box between my feet, for I was roused with a sharp kick in my ribs and I woke to find him standing over me, railing in Arabic. Before he could kick me again, I jumped to my feet, whereupon he snatched up the box and thrust it into my arms. Still shouting, he gestured towards the amir's tent and at last I understood that I was to take the box and put it with the rest of the treasure.

I obeyed. As there was no one to take the box from me - everyone was busy with other chores — and as the entrance flap was open, I entered the tent myself. The treasure had been dumped in a careless, cascading heap. I checked my first impulse to simply pitch the box onto the pile and walk away, but fearing the square casket might come open and spill its grotesque contents, I decided to take a moment and make a secure place for the box to rest.

I carefully pulled a few items from the haphazard hoarding and set them to one side - a golden bowl, a ceremonial quiver containing four gilded arrows, an alabaster chalice rimmed and footed with silver, a pair of beaded silk shoes, and so on. This created a goodly space, but as I bent to

dense and heavy still, and hard as iron.

A strange feeling crept over me as I stood holding that short length of age-darkened timber and realized I had found the holiest treasure this side of heaven. I had found the Black Rood. My heart began to beat more quickly, and I was overcome by a powerful urge to kneel down and cradle the strange object to my breast.

Fearful of being discovered, I quickly turned and made my way to the tent opening to see all the servants working away busily. The camp steward was overseeing the preparation of the cooking fires, and there was no one near the tent that I could see. Retreating into the tent once more, I knelt down and picked up the relic and held it for a moment as one might hold an infant child.

Like my father before me, I had discovered the treasure of a lifetime carelessly stowed in an Arab tent. A prize of battle, nothing more, with no more meaning to those who captured it than the price of the gold and gems adorning its surface.

These thoughts were the realization of an instant, and fleeting at that. I knelt and embraced the holy object, and revered it with eyes closed and a prayer of thanksgiving in my mouth. Strange to feel such an upwelling of emotion at the ordinary sight of this bulky chunk of old, old wood. Truly, there was no mystery or enchantment in its appearance. Yet, there *was* mystery.

For as I knelt in the fading light of the open entrance, I felt a quickening presence in the tent. The still air suddenly seemed to seethe with an almost oppressive power. My lungs laboured as if trying to breathe water. My hands began to shake uncontrollably; lest I drop the holy object, I placed it

disregard. My God and Saviour, let me redeem it from the hands of the unworthy who in their hateful pride and folly have disgraced, defiled, and demeaned your matchless gift.'

The thought that the unclean hands of unbelievers should touch this sacred relic filled me with a great disgust. I took up one of the many rugs which served as a floor for the tent and, reverently and prayerfully, wrapped the holy object in the rug and tied it with a braided cord I pulled from around a large jar containing pungent frankincense.

Then, in all reverence, I carefully replaced the Holy Rood in amongst the other items of plunder, rose, and crept from the tent. Having found the object of my quest, I did not want to allow my Seljuq captors any reason for suspicion. So, I left the tent before I was discovered, and returned to my place beside the well.

That night I lay awake gazing at the stars wheeling slowly overhead, and thinking about the Black Rood. I prayed over and over again that I might be accounted worthy to be the one to rescue it. As I held this prayer in my mind, I sensed the same quickening presence I felt in Ghazi's tent - a curious sensation. I once felt something like it in the woods when I suddenly became aware of someone, or something watching me as I knelt beside a stream for a drink of water. I slowly turned to see a large tufted wildcat crouched in a patch of sunlight a few dozen paces behind me.

Sleek, wild and powerful, muscles twitching, the magnificent creature stood with lowered head, its golden eyes aflame with a fierce intensity as it observed this odd new kind of prey. I had the same feeling now - as if I were being stalked by something of immense power, grace and subtlety; it had drawn near and fixed me in its burning gaze.

I looked across the silent camp to the amir's tent, dark and shadowy

brought about immediate execution. On the contrary, I was bailed in a serenity of calm which gave me a feeling of fearless exultation as I set about gently shifting the various items of plunder in the amir's treasure trove in order to uncover the Black Rod. I moved one object and then another, and a few more, and then ... the priceless relic lay before me.

'Great High King, reveal your glory through your servant,' I whispered. I said the first thing that came to mind only, but as soon as the words touched my lips, wonder of wonders, the tent began to fade around me - as if the fabric walls had become a thin, gauzy stuff allowing me to see, as through a veil, all the camp around me. Yet, it was not the camp I saw, but a busy road leading to the walls of a great city.

As I tried to make sense in what I was seeing, there arose a shout from the direction of the city. I looked towards the towering walls and saw a crowd of people emerging from the wide open gates.

With a cry like that of hounds scenting blood, this dark raging flood poured out from the city almost as swiftly as the dark storm clouds gathering in the dull yellow sky overhead. The blue-black bulging heads and shoulders of mighty clouds boiled in the stifling desert air, and away in the distance I could hear the low grumble of thunder.

There were others nearby, standing beside the road, waiting for the crowd to pass. I quickly joined them to see what was happening. The crowd came closer and soon reached the place where I was standing, and I saw that they were driving some poor wretch before them - prodding and shoving him along. As they drew near, I saw that his arms were tied to a rough-hewn wooden beam, and when he stumbled, they hauled him up by yanking on the ends of the beam and, once on his feet, they drove him on.

The crowd soon reached the place where I stood, but were so intent in the

Merciful God, great tattered shreds of flesh hung from his shoulders, ripped from his broad sturdy back by the wicked, iron-tipped Roman lash. Blood coursed freely down his sides, staining his torn robe and spattering the dusty road with each jolting step.

He took but one more step and fell again. They were on him in an instant, kicking at him and shouting for him to get up. Two soldiers shoved into the throng and while one began pushing people away, the other seized the end of the beam and untied the ropes binding the man's arms.

The crowd howled with rage and three more legionaries appeared and waded in, forcing the rabble back with the shafts of their short spears. One of the soldiers turned and seized a man - a huge black Ethiope on his way to the city, and who, like myself, was merely standing alongside the road watching the fearful procession. Too frightened to resist, the poor fellow was yanked into the wild maelstrom, and pressed into service.

Freed from the crushing burden of the beam, the wounded prisoner made to rise; he lifted his head and looked up, his eyes met my gaze, and my heart caught in my throat, for I knew I looked into the battered face of God's own dear son.

That once-noble visage was bruised and bleeding, the high, handsome brow shattered and the straight, fine nose broken. A circlet cap had been woven of desert briar and the thorns jammed into his scalp. Blood trickled from the wounds, mixing with the dust of the road to form muddy rivulets down his face. His eyes as they beheld mine, although filled with anguish, were yet keen with intelligence and a burning volition.

That was all I had - a single, fleeting look - but I swear all the grief and care of creation was in that pain-riven glance. The crowd, baying like crazed hounds, urged him on. The soldiers grabbed his arms and hauled him upright. He was shoved on his way with the Ethiope following behind, dragging the heavy crossbeam. And the ghastly retinue lurched along once more.

I stood for a moment, too astonished and terrified to move; and then, before I knew it, I was following the crowd, surrounded by a large number of loudly wailing women, and giddy, excited children. We continued down the road towards a curious, hump-shaped hill no great distance from the city walls.

The hill was topped by a rocky outcrop against which a large timberwork frame had been erected. A small contingent of bored-looking legionaries sat waiting on the hillside near the road. By the time I pushed my way to

labourer's apron, rose and stepped quickly to the prisoner. Shiftless, his big arms glistening, he gave a nod of command and the prisoner's right arm was stretched out and held down on the timber. Then, kneeling on the condemned man's arm so as to hold it still, he ground a splayed thumb into the hollow of the man's forearm just above the wrist and held it there for a moment.

With his other hand he reached into a pocket of his leather apron and drew out a thick iron spike which he placed where his thumb had been. Then, with quick, practised efficiency he reached behind him and took up a short, heavy blacksmith's hammer. The movement was so swift I did not see what was happening at first.

I saw the soldier's great arm rise with dread purpose and fall with a solid resonating crack. In the same instant the Lord Jesu's head jerked up, eyes bulging, mouth snatched open in a soundless scream of agony as the hard metal smashed through the flesh and tendons and veins of his wrist.

My heart trembled within me, and I wanted to look away - but I could not. I watched, clasping my hands together and murmuring helpless, hopeless prayers.

Bright blood welled up in a sudden crimson gush, and the crowd roared its approval as two more mighty blows drove the cruel spike deep into the stout timber beam - whereupon the soldier rose, stepped over his victim and repeated the procedure on the left arm. Three quick, decisive blows rang like anvil peals, driving the spike between the twin bones of the man's forearm and into the heavy wood.

No sooner had the last blow rung out than the soldiers passed ropes under the timber beam and secured the condemned man's arms at the elbows. They then turned and began hauling the beam up the hill, three soldiers at

until the crosspiece met the upper beam of the framework where it jarred to a stop, leaving him suspended high above the crowd, his arms pinioned to the heavy timber beam. There the Blessed Christ swung, writhing with the violence of his crude ascent.

The crosspiece was quickly lashed to the upper beam of the framework, and there - his gentle, healing hands twisted and deformed into the shape of claws - he hung; high above the ground, he hung, blood coursing in rivulets down his arms and sides, mingling with the muddy sweat of his torment. Stretched between earth and sky, the Holy One of God hung, the weight of his broken body dangling from his strong arms.

Meanwhile, two other unfortunates - thieves caught in the act -were likewise crucified and strung up either side of him. As soon as the two wretches were secured, the soldiers produced a long beam, part of the trunk of a tree, and lashed it tight to the uprights just below the knees of the hanging men. The big Roman then proceeded to drive spikes through the victims' anklebones, fixing them to the lower beam. The two thieves screamed and thrashed in their agony while the mob jeered and applauded.

Unable to bear the torment any longer, Jesu opened his mouth and screamed, 'Elo-i!' The cords stood out on his neck with the force of his shout. 'Elo-i!'

The mob fell back at the fearful power of the cry. They looked at one another and murmured. 'He is calling on Elijah,' someone said. 'No, wait!' said another. 'He is calling on God to save him!'

'He saved others,' scoffed one big brute merrily. 'Now let him save himself!'

'Quiet! He is speaking!' shouted a man near the front. 'I cannot hear what

mob and stood, like monuments of self-righteous reprisal, glaring up at the dying man. The Romans, having completed their duties, now turned to other amusements. They had some bread and wine with them and sat down a little apart to eat and drink, while they waited for the execution to reach its fatal and inevitable conclusion.

The crowd continued their crude harangue of the dying men, mocking them, laughing at their misery as they tried to keep the weight of their bodies off their pinioned ankles while, at the same time, relieve the searing torment of their arms. Some of the older youths thought it good sport to pelt the condemned with rocks -which they did with increasing impunity. Indeed, one young thug made a lucky throw, striking one of the thieves full in the face, smashing his cheekbone and knocking out the man's eye; the poor wretch moaned and tossed his head back and forth, the mangled eye dangling and bouncing on his crushed cheek, much to the delight of the jeering throng.

This emboldened the rest, who redoubled their efforts, and I believe the condemned might have been stoned to death on the crosstrees if not for a careless throw which struck the beam and careened into the party of Roman soldiers who, having finished their meal, were now playing at dice for the prisoners' clothes and sandals. The stone struck one of the legionaries on the leg, and up he came; he charged into the boys with drawn sword, walloping one or two of the pluckier ruffians with the flat of his blade. They howled like scalded pups and the whole pack fled.

A strange calm descended on the hump-backed hill then, as the crowd settled down to wait. The sky grew darker, the dreadful yellow turning green-grey like a diseased wound, and the air, already still, became stifling. The only sound to be heard was the desperate wheezing and

I could not make out what was said, for I was on the inside and the centurion remained on the road. But two of the legionaries jumped to their feet and hastened off to where some of their tools and gear were lying on the ground. One of the soldiers reached for the ladder, and the other a hammer and flat piece of wood which were lying there. Resting the top of the ladder against the upper crossbeam, the first soldier climbed up, while the other, standing below, handed up the hammer and wood. The first soldier then proceeded to nail the wooden placard to the upper beam next to Jesu's head.

There was, so far as I could see, nothing written on the placard, but this oversight was soon corrected, for the commander spoke again, and the legionary on the ground bent down and picked up a stick, broke off one end, and passed it to his friend on the ladder. The soldier took the stick and, holding it to the body of the hanging man, dabbed the broken end in his freely trickling blood. He then proceeded to write in ragged red letters these words: Iesu Nazarethaei Rex Iudae.

Seeing this, the crowd instantly sent up an appalling shriek. The priests and elders standing proudly at the forefront of the crowd flew into a foul rage, wailing and tearing at their clothes and beards. Two of the Jewish leaders hastened down to where the centurion sat on his horse, watching the commotion with a bemused expression.

'Please, hear us, sir,' the senior of the two cried. 'That man is *not* the King of the Jews!'

'We have no king but Caesar!' added the other. Some of those on the hillside took up the reply as a chant. 'We have no king but Caesar!' they shouted half-heartedly.

A white-haired man in priest's robes joined the two. 'The sign is an offence

reasonable tone, then perhaps it could be made to read: 'This Nazarene claimed to be King of the Jews.'

At that moment, one of the ruffians in the crowd darted out from among the throng. Before anyone could stop him, he ran to the ladder and climbed up, almost knocking the legionary from his perch as he tried to grab hold of the sign and tear it down.

The centurion lashed his mount forwards up the hill to the ladder and, reaching out, seized the rascal by the leg and pulled him from the ladder. The man rolled on the ground, yelling and fuming, and the priests and elders quickly gathered around pleading with the soldiers to take down the sign and restore the peace. But the Roman commander, growing tired of their sanctimonious bleating, refused to be drawn into the affray. He ordered soldiers to remove the man who had tried to tear down the sign and, as they dragged him aside, the sky gave forth a low, worrisome growl.

A sharp gust of wind sent the dust swirling around the hilltop. The commander raised his eyes skyward, and then, as the first fat drops of rain spattered into the dust, he decided that it was time to disperse the crowds before the situation deteriorated further. Turning to his cohort, he gave the final command: 'Finish it.'

Taking up his hammer once more, the big Roman stepped to the nearest of the victims and with a mighty swing, hurled the flat of the hammer into the man's leg halfway between knee and ankle. The shinbone cracked with a dull sickening crunch - a sound so appalling it even made the blood-lusting crowd wince. The suffering wretch screamed in agony and passed out. The legionary applied the hammer to the other leg, and the unconscious man slumped down hard, the weight of his body tearing his

torture as the ragged ends of his shattered bones gnashed and splintered like broken teeth.

Turning his attention to the last victim, the big Roman swung his hammer wide, but withheld the blow at the last instant. Looking up into the face of the hanging man, he said, 'This one is dead.'

The watching elders heard this and raised an outcry at once. 'How can it be?' they demanded. 'It is not yet evening!'

'He is not dead!' someone shouted. 'He has only swooned.'

One of the elders, dressed in red robes and wearing a heavy chain of gold around his neck, stepped forwards. 'See here, centurion,' he said in educated Latin, 'the people are right. He has only swooned — revive him, and you will see.'

The executioner heard this and grew angry. 'Do you call me liar?' he snarled.

'By no means!' said the elder, raising his hands as if to fend off a blow. 'But this Jesu was known to be a sorcerer and a magician. He may be using his powers to feign death. Do not be deceived. Rather, do your duty.'

'I know my duty,' growled the big Roman, moving nearer, 'just as I know a dead man when I see one.' Hefting the hammer in his hand, he said, 'Maybe you would like to join him in Hades - or wherever it is you people go.'

The wealthy elder gave a yelp and backed away. The executioner made as if to pursue him into the crowd, but the centurion called him back. 'Longinus! Enough! We will prove it to them,' he said, casting an eye to the gathering storm. 'Then maybe we can get back to the city before we're

himself, whimpering like an animal in pain, and kicking up prodigious clouds of dust and dirt. Seeing that the condemned men were dead, the crowd retreated, streaming back to the city, throwing their cloaks over their heads as they ran. The Romans quickly gathered up their weapons and followed the throng back to the city, leaving two of their number behind to keep watch.

The rain came hard and fast, pelting down in stinging sheets. I looked around, expecting to find myself alone on the hillside, but was surprised to discover a small, miserable knot of people - women, mostly - standing a little apart. They were weeping and clinging to one another, oblivious to the storm crashing around them.

The wind howled like a wounded animal. Lightning flashed and rolling blasts of thunder shook the ground as if to crack the very walls of Jerusalem. The rain pitched down in great lashing waves -as if the bruised sky had ruptured, spilling out its waters all at once. The dry hillside slowly dissolved into a sticky quagmire.

Despite the savage blast, I waited to see what would happen, and in a little while the storm which had blown up so quickly, passed the same way. The thunder stopped, and the wind calmed. The air, refreshed from the cooling rain, smelled wonderfully of spices and rare desert flowers. The dead men, their corpses washed, hung dripping from their crosspieces, clean now, and ready for burial.

Above the sound of the wailing women, I heard someone calling from the road below; I turned to see a young dark-bearded man in a fine yellow cloak hastening towards the hill and hailing the little knot of mourners as he came. Some distance behind him came a man leading a donkey and cart. I do not know if either of them had been present at the execution, but

The young soldier howled. 'We were told nothing about this. You must get permission from the governor.'

'Please,' the young man said, 'there is no time.' Indicating the bundle under his arm, he said, 'I have brought the shroud, and I will happily take full responsibility for the burial.'

Reaching into his belt he brought out several pieces of silver which he passed to the soldier. 'This is for your trouble. I will need your help to get him down.'

The second soldier looked at the money, and nudged his more reluctant comrade. 'Very well,' the legionary agreed at last. 'You can have all three of them for all I care.'

The young man called to the waiting mourners, still clustered together, sobbing quietly, and two men came out from among them to help. The Romans put up the ladder and one of them ascended with drawn sword, preparing to hack off the hands of the dead man.

'No! Please, no!' cried the young man. 'You must not mutilate the body.'

The legionary grimaced. 'I thought you were in a hurry, friend.' Hefting the broad blade. 'A clean chop - it is the best way.'

'He won't feel a thing,' added the other soldier helpfully. 'He's dead as dung.' /

Pointing to the group of women now standing below the body, the young man said, 'Please, for his mother's sake, let us preserve what little dignity remains.'

The soldier shrugged and proceeded to hack at the rope binding the crosspiece to the upper framework. One side gave way and the body

Next, the legionary went to work on the spikes holding the dead man's arms to the crossbeam. Using the huge tongs, he gnawed and worried the beaten heads from the iron nails, and all the while the young man pressed him to hurry as it was growing late. The soldier grew angry. 'Do you want it fast, or do you want it clean?' he demanded. 'Which is it?'

'Joseph,' said one of the women gently. She was younger than the others; long dark hair spilled out from beneath the hood of her cloak. 'Do not anger the man. He is only trying to help.' Her voice was a warm balm of comfort poured out to soothe the cold, cruel hurt of the day.

'Miriam, we must -' He started to object, but she silenced him with a smile of such sweet sadness, it cleft my heart to see it. 'Please, Joseph. It will be all right. There is no hurry anymore.'

'Very well,' the wealthy young man relented. To the legionary, he said, 'Take your time, my friend.'

The soldier, glancing at the woman with something more than benign interest, resumed his work, eventually freeing the right wrist and then the left. The women carefully spread the woven linen shroud on the ground and the body of Heaven's Fairest Son was laid upon it. The men watched while the women carefully arranged the torn limbs and smoothed back the tangled hair, murmuring a low litany of Psalms the while. Then they folded the shroud over the body and secured it with broad bands around the neck, and chest, and feet. Thanking the Roman soldiers, the men took up the body and carried it down the hillside to the cart which was now waiting on the road. They placed the body of the Saviour in the cart and then began the long, slow journey back to the city.

The soldiers divided the money between them and, with a last glance at

unforgiving weight hard beneath my palm. I heard voices behind me and, thinking the legionaries had returned, I glanced quickly over my shoulder and saw myself asleep on the ground beside a well.

Instantly, I was back in Amir Ghazi's camp.

The moon was down and the stars were fading with the first pale hint of dawn showing in the east, and I was in my place beside the well once more.

I rose. The camp was quiet; nothing had changed. Had I crept into the amir's tent? Or, had I fallen asleep and dreamed it? It did not matter. I knew beyond all uncertainty that I had received a vision of rare and special power. My hands and face tingled, and the ground felt thin as water beneath my feet.

My body began to tremble - not with fear or foreboding, but with a ferocious ecstasy. I felt like running and leaping and crying to the star-dusted heavens in praise and thanksgiving to my Generous Creator for the wonderful vision I had been granted.

It was all I could do to keep from laughing out loud and waking all the camp. So, I lay beside the well, exhilarated, shaking with jubilation, joy coursing like liquid fire through my veins, pure elation bubbling up like a wellspring filled not with water, but with sweet, heady wine.

As dawn broke full and glorious in the east, I got up and knelt, raising my face to the sun, and stretching my arms wide, I pledged a solemn vow within my heart that whatever should befall me in the days to come, I would strive above all things to acquit myself with the same humility, strength, and courage I had witnessed in Jesu's death so that I might be worthy of my Redeemer's sacrifice.

*November 17, 1901: Pa-phos, Cyprus*

Professor Manos Rossides lived in the bottom floor of a tiny townhouse. A violin teacher had the upper floors, and there was a violin and cello duet wafting down the stairwell as I stood before the sombre brown door in the semi-darkness waiting for my expectant host to answer the bell.

I yanked the bell-pull again, waited some more, and was just about to give up and go home when I heard a shuffling sound on the other side. Presently a key clicked in the lock and the door opened onto a small dark man with a heavy beetling brow, hooded eyes, and an unruly mass of thick, wavy, dark hair which stood out from his head in all directions; it put me in mind of a storm at sea, and it was all I could do to tear my eyes from the startling sight and say, 'Professor Rossides? I am Gordon Murray. I was given to understand you would be expecting me.'

At the sound of my name the man's sleepy countenance sparked to life. 'Quite right, sir! Right on time!' He smiled and his dark eyes became keen, and his features boyish and winsome. 'Do come in, Mr Murray.' He took my coat and waved me to a chair at a spindle-legged table piled dangerously high with books and papers. A brass lamp with a green glass shade hung over the table, illuminating the stacks of printed matter like upland plateaux in the glare of the summer sun.

I will be content with the merely passable,' I told him.

He laughed, shaking his head. 'Dear me, no. We'll have none of that. You are too able and too clever to settle for second best. No, my friend, when we are finished you will be able to sit in Aphrodite's Taverna on the waterfront in Rhodes and talk politics with the fishermen.'

'Oh?' I said, rising to retrieve my coat. 'Is that all? I rather thought I might indulge in a bit of lecturing on Plato's *Symposium*.'

'Tut, sir,' the professor chided, his eyes wrinkling with mirth. 'I said we should achieve the impossible - not perform miracles!'

Thus began my short, but intensive apprenticeship in conversational Greek. My tutor sent me home with two books that night - one Greek, the other Latin - both of which I was to have read by my next visit the following week. I do not know how he crammed so much expert instruction into our all-too-short sessions. But as the weeks went by, I found my mastery growing by leaps and bounds; naggng little foibles and difficulties that had plagued me since college evaporated in the blistering heat of the professor's searing, searching intellect.

Summer came and went, and as autumn rolled on apace, I began to think ahead to what might await me at the end of September. The answer to this came on my last visit to Professor Rossides' study. Actually, I did not know it was my final visit until my assiduous mentor reached over to the text I was reading, and closed the book. 'Perfect,' he declared. 'Our work together is completed.'

'How can it be finished? I feel as if I have only begun.'

'Oh, indeed. And I congratulate you on a most auspicious beginning. But, my assignment was to enable you to speak and write well enough to make

'It was a most gratifying experience, I must say. I enjoyed it very much.'

'Be that as it may,' said Pemberton, withdrawing a long white envelope from the inner pocket of his coat. 'I think you will enjoy employing your new skills even more.'

He passed the envelope to me and indicated that I was to open it. I lifted the flap, reached in, and pulled out two steamer tickets -one for my wife, and one for myself- with the destination listed as Paphos, Cyprus. 'As you see, the ship sails two weeks from today,' he said. 'That should give you time enough to arrange your affairs, I should think.'

'Six weeks in Cyprus,' I mused, reading the return portion of the ticket. 'Yes, I think Caitlin and I could do very well with that, thank you very much.'

'I do not anticipate any problems arising from your legal work.' The way he said it, I could not tell if it was a question, or an observation of fact. In any case, I suspected any genuine obstacles would have been foreseen and removed.

'None at all,' I replied. 'As it happens, this time of year is normally very quiet. I can have one of my juniors keep an eye on things while I am gone.'

'Splendid.'

Thus, the arrangements were firmly in place. All I had to do was pack and get myself and the good wife to the steamer on time - a task which somehow expanded to fill every available moment, even as Caitlin filled every available case and trunk. It was not until the ship loosed its moorings and steamed for Cyprus that I realized not a single word had

'It is non-stop adventure start to finish,' I said.

Our greeter introduced himself and I understood at once why I had sweated and strained through the summer to learn the language: Mr Melos spoke no English. Nevertheless, I was quickly to learn that he was the most expert and knowledgeable guide imaginable. He was an archaeologist who had spent his entire career digging on the island; there was nothing about Cyprus or its history he did not know. He also ran a small, private museum, with a guest house next door, both of which he had filled with mementos from his various digs. 'The more valuable specimens go off to museums around the world,' he said, when he showed us through his rooms one day. 'But the smaller pieces, the duplicates, I keep.'

We spent the first few days in Mr Melos' able care, the sole tenants in his guest house. Caitlin fell instantly in love with the place, and proclaimed that it was high time I had brought her someplace nice, and furthermore, she was never leaving.

That first day we ate a light meal and waited for our luggage to arrive, which it did by donkey cart towards evening. By then, we were already feeling ourselves slipping into what Caitlin called 'Cyprus time' - the pace at which things happened, or didn't, according to the whims and preoccupations of the locals.

The reason for my adventure remained obscure, and I had begun to wonder whether I ought to say something about it, when Mr Melos appeared as we were having breakfast one morning. He presented me with a letter which had arrived some little while previously, I suspect. It was from Zaccaria, and it contained the purpose of my visit. As soon as we were rested from our journey, we were to make our way to a certain monastery in the hills. 'I will take you,' said Melos when I asked him

We spent a wonderful first night in our little cottage, dining by candlelight with the windows open onto the courtyard where late roses were still in bloom. The next morning, our inestimable host collected us and took us to the monastery.

'Ayios Moni is a very ancient place,' he said. 'The monks there maintain a library of many priceless manuscripts.'

It was, of course, these manuscripts that I had come to see -rather, it was one manuscript in particular.

Upon our arrival, we were introduced to the bishop, who conducted us on a tour of the small, but tidy monastery, which was now home to fewer than thirty monks. At the end of the tour, he said, 'I suppose you will be wanting to get started.'

'To tell you the truth,' I replied, silently thanking Rossides for my new-found fluency, 'I would like nothing better. Unfortunately, I do not know precisely why I have come.'

Bald Bishop Naxos laughed, and said, 'You have come to view the Caithness Manuscript.'

'Caithness,' said Caitlin, when I had told her what the bishop had said. 'You mean the Caithness in Scotland?'

'Haven't the foggiest.'

He led us to the library where a few monks were working away, hunched silently over old vellums and parchments. He spoke a few words to the brother in charge of the collection, and the black-robed monk disappeared into the stacks, returning a few moments later with a weighty bundle

He passed his hand lovingly over the bundle of parchment, and fingered the silk cord which bound the bundle together. 'This will be the last time the manuscript is seen in the place where it was created. I think it highly appropriate that you should be the reader.'

He regarded me meaningfully, but the reference was lost on me. 'I do not understand,' I said.

'Next month it is going into a vault at the Ministry of Antiquities in Athens,' he explained, but before I could tell him that this was not what I meant, he added: 'It is felt by my superiors at Khyrsorroyiatissa that our order can no longer protect it adequately.'

'Nonsense!' grumbled Melos sourly.

'We have it for a little while yet.' He smiled sadly, and pulled a chair from the table. 'Please, sit. We would be honoured for you to be our guest for as long as you like.'

Again, I understood that he was according me a special favour, but his meaning remained beyond my comprehension.

I told Caitlin what he had said, and asked if she minded very much amusing herself for awhile. 'Go on with you,' she said, 'and don't be silly. Of course I don't mind. I can well look after myself for a few days.'

So, with the blessing of both bishop and wife, I settled myself into the chair I was to occupy for a good many days. When the others had gone, I loosened the silken cord and turned back the battered old covering.

The script that met my eye was strong and fair. The rich black tone had faded to a pale reddish sepia, but remained clearly legible. I read the first words, and knew why I had been summoned to this task. My heart began



Amir Ghazi's arrival in Damascus was hailed as the triumphal entry of a conquering hero. He massed his army on the wide plain outside the city walls and then proceeded to lead his victorious troops and their wretched captives into the city. The wily amir spared no pomp in making his entrance as impressive as possible. Drummers went before the amir and his bodyguard, pounding out dull thunder; children ran beside the amir's horse, scattering flower petals; trumpeters blew shrill blasts to part the crowds who stood and gaped at the passing spectacle.

We marched through the streets to the citadel where Atabeg Buri and all the officials and dignitaries met the grand cavalcade in the courtyard of the Rose Pavillion. Proud Ghazi made a great show of displaying his prize captives; the prisoners were paraded before a double rank of noble Arabs, some on small cushioned stools and some on thrones, and made to bow before them in a show of subservient humiliation. I, who had carried Bohemond's head on my back, was forced to display the ghastly prize to the Arabs.

Summoned from the fore-ranks of the captives, I was marched before the Seljuqs and Saracens as they sat in festal splendour, enjoying the subjugation of their hated foe. Two guards led me to the foot of the low rise of steps leading up to the perfumed pavilion and, at Ghazi's direction, I was commanded to open the box. The Arab noblemen laughed to see the

them. The amir advanced and was presented to the stranger in the blue turban, whereupon he immediately fell to his knees and pressed the nobleman's hand to his forehead. The Arab potentate endured the fawning servility of the amir with cool aplomb and, to my great chagrin, raised his hand and pointed directly at me.

Ghazi jumped up and, with an ostentatious flourish of his arm, waved me forwards. Accompanied by the guards, I was led to the pavilion steps and there made to kneel, holding the box while the strutting amir presented the resplendent onlooker with the gift of Bohemond's head.

Why he should want the grotesque thing, I could not say. But the bestowing of it filled old flat-faced Ghazi with a rare elation. His rough and weathered visage cracked wide in a grin of exaltation and, in a fit of largesse, he lavished the whole of his trove upon his obviously superior overlord: the objects of gold and silver, the saddles, weapons, and armour, the horses, and all the rest he had accumulated - including the prisoners. Yes, and myself as well.

Although I guessed what was happening at the time, I did not learn until much later that day the identity of the glittering luminary who was to be my new master. It was Sahak, the Armenian scribe and advisor, who told me, and took great delight in the telling. 'You belong to the Caliph of Baghdad now,' he said, unable to suppress a wicked smile at what he imagined would be distressing news to me.

'But that is impossible!' I cried. My reaction gave him great satisfaction, and his hairless jowls jiggled with mirth.

In truth, I was not dismayed in the least. As I say, I had already worked out what had happened, and concluded that it did not greatly matter who held the end of my chain, so to speak, just so long as I remained close to

harder, 'they will ransom me.'

'So you say.' He shook my hand from his arm. 'But they have not come for you, have they? If I were you, I would forget about being ransomed. Your friends have forgotten you.'

'They would never do that!' I shouted, my agitation increasing his merriment.

'They have given you up,' he maintained, 'or else they would have come for you. If they wanted to ransom you, they would have done so long since.'

'They will come,' I insisted. 'The Caliph of Baghdad, you say? I cannot go with him. You must speak to Amir Ghazi. You must beg him to let me stay in Damascus where my friends can find me. You must tell him, Sahak, you are my only hope.'

'Oh, rest assured, I will do what I can,' he told me, the keen light of treason in his eyes.

'Thank you, Sahak. Thank you,' I said, knowing full well that now I would remain with the caliph and within reach of the Black Rood.

The deceitful katib scuttled away, and I watched him go - a thoroughly detestable fellow, to be sure, but he had his uses. I returned to the corner of my cell and reflected on how even the wicked were not beyond the reach of the Swift Sure Hand, who employed all things as he would to bring about his purposes.

For, following the triumphal entry and Amir Ghazi's rash fit of generosity, my fellow captives and I were taken to the stinking, vermin infested prison of Amir Buri, Damascus' preening potentate, to await the pleasure of our



















































































bone glowed red for a moment, and then that, too, disappeared in the darkness.

Wazim called me again. I made no reply.

There was nothing to say. The soldiers would be on us at any moment, and that would be the end of it.

I heard Wazim moving in the darkness, and felt a touch on my arm. I thought he meant to move me along. 'I am sorry, Wazim,' I said. 'It was all for nothing.'

Out in the main gallery, the last remnant of the door gave way and, with shouts of triumph, the Templars stormed into the treasure house.



















I looked where he was pointing and saw sunlight on a pale grey wall of stone a few hundred paces further ahead; a short time later we rounded a bend in the canal and reached our destination.

A massive iron portcullis covered the canal entrance, but this was so old and rusted there were gaps showing in the ironwork and it was but the chore of a moment to force a hole wide enough to squeeze through. A few more steps, following the stream around the base of a massive shoulder of fallen rock loosed from the overhanging cliffs above, and we were standing in the reed-fringed shallows, peering with dazzled eyes at a golden sunrise shimmering on the Nile.

Our underground journey had taken us to a place on the river below the city walls which rose sheer from the pale ochre cliffs above us. The sun was just rising in a glare of golden fire, and the air was already warm and heavy. The tall reeds and river grass bent in a light breeze, and I could hear the buzzing thrum of flies overhead as we stood in a sandy shoal, feeling the life-giving sunlight play over our faces.

Across the river, the low mud-brick huts of craftsmen and farmers glistened like pale gold in the early-morning light. A man and a boy led an ox along the bank, scaring two snow-white egrets into flight. Out on the water, a graceful low-hulled Egyptian ship was raising sail to begin the voyage north. All was so peaceful, bright, and calm, our tribulations of the previous night seemed small and insignificant, and very far away.

I looked up and down the riverbank, green-fringed with the stately plumes of river grass as far as the eye could see. While I was standing there, I felt something bump against my leg. I looked down to see a piece of wood from the wrecked boat floating out from the canal and, tangled by its broken strap, my bundle of parchments.

'Good news, my friend,' crowed Wazim cheerily. 'God has returned your writings to you!'

'I wish he had taken better care of them,' I replied, lifting the soggy bundle

My wet clothes began to dry in the sun and, although I was exhausted, I found my spirits soaring. Every step brought me closer to a glad reunion with Padraig, Sydoni, and Yordanus, and that much closer to home. The Holy Rood was heavy on my shoulder, but I did not mind the weight. Considering what the Saviour King had endured on my behalf, I would have carried it from one end of the world to the other and back.

After a while, we came to a cluster of huts fronting small green fields of beans, melons, onions, and garlic. Smoke from the morning cook fires drifted across the trail, and I could smell bread and meat cooking. The scent made my stomach rumble, reminding me that I had not eaten in some time. I stopped and looked around. Wazim asked why we were stopping. 'Do you think we might beg something to eat?' I wondered.

'Yes,' he said, glancing around, 'but not here.' He started away again.

'Why?' I wondered. 'Is it because they are Muhammedans?'

'Worse,' said Wazim, lowering his voice. 'They are pagans. Idol worshippers. Very bad people.'

'How can you tell?' It seemed like an ordinary holding to me. There were thousands along the wide, winding river.

He would say no more, so we moved on, passing through one small settlement after another, until coming upon yet another where Wazim stopped. 'There are Copts here,' he declared.

'How can you tell?'

'A true Copt never dwells beyond sight of a church.' Extending his hand, he said, 'See?'

I looked where he was pointing and saw a small white building with a

Wazim did likewise, and the two of them held a brief, but intense discussion filled with much gesturing and pointing. The old priest raised his head, brayed, and spat, and then, grasping me by the arm, he led us along the cramped beaten earth street to a tiny hovel of a house where he pounded on the door with the flat of his hand. A woman pulled back the door and peered out, just her nose and one eye showing. The priest spoke a few words to her, and she closed the door; it opened again a moment later, and a hand appeared holding two eggs.

The old Copt took the eggs, blessed the woman, and we continued on. This ritual was repeated at the next house, where we were given three round, floppy pieces of flat bread and two green onions. After three more houses we had amassed another egg and some salt, four dried figs, a slice of fresh melon, and a handful of honeyed dates -whereupon I called a halt to the foraging and told Wazim to thank the priest for helping us.

After exchanging a few words, Wazim reported, 'He will accept no thanks for allowing his people the blessing of giving succour to strangers in need. Today they have earned a great reward in Heaven.'

'Then offer them a blessing,' I replied. 'Tell him, gold and silver have I none, but what I possess I share freely: the blessing of the Three to be aiding you, abiding with you, and showering peace and plenty on you, and on your people, each day, all day, and forever.'

The old priest liked this blessing, and made Wazim repeat it twice so he would remember it. We took our leave and found a place on the high bank overlooking the river to eat our meal. I flattened some of the tall grass and made a place for the rood so that it would not rest on bare ground. Then I sat down beside it, tired to the bone, and began to eat.

rood, and declared that if we were to reach the ship by midday, we would have to hurry.

We walked on a short distance and crested the bluff, coming in sight of the city walls once more; and just beyond the great sweeping bend in the river, I could see the wharf and the wide avenue leading to the city gates. Somewhere down there, amidst the dark clusters of ships and boats lining the busy quayside, Yordanus' ship *Persephone* was waiting to carry me out of Egypt.

Beyond the walls, smoke rose in twin columns from the centre of the city. 'That one,' Wazim told me, 'is the covered market.'

'And the other?' It seemed to arise from the base of a high stony bank which dominated the northern quarter.

'Ah, that is from the citadel.'

It could easily have been the palace that was set on fire instead. I realized the risk Wazim had taken in coming back for me. 'Thank you, Wazim Kadi,' I told him. 'It was a brave thing you did last night. I am forever in your debt.'

He made a little bow, saying, 'I did only what one Christian would do for another.'

'No,' I corrected, thinking of all the betrayal, deceit and disloyalty I had seen, 'you did far more than that, believe me. You risked your life for me, and I am grateful. I will not forget it.'

The cattle trails and pathways ran continuously along the Nile's lofty banks, linking one small riverside settlement to the next north and south, on both sides of the river, as far as the eye could see. We passed through

we came onto the quay, I caught sight of the familiar red mast rising amidst the untidy forest of rigging at the far end of the wharf. My steps quickened as I pushed through the crush of people thronging the docks, dragging Wazim in my wake. I was almost running by the time I saw the bright green hull and yellow keel of the *Persephone*.

Panting and sweating, I paused to catch my breath before hailing those on board. 'Go on, Da'ouk,' urged Wazim excitedly, 'they are waiting for you.'

'It is a long time since I ran like this,' I said, lowering the rood gently to the wharf. 'Let me wipe the sweat from my brow at least.'

As I did so, I heard a familiar voice call out: 'Duncan!'

Glancing up, I saw Padraig standing at the rail. He waved to me, and then called to someone on the deck of the ship before starting over the rail. My heart leapt, and I started forwards to meet him on the wharf. And then another face appeared above the rail, and the sight halted me in midstep: Gislebert, the Templar sergeant.

At the same moment, I saw two more Templars standing on the wharf below the prow. Turning to Wazim, I said, 'Quick, Wazim, do exactly as I say. Take the rood. Stay here and guard it with your life. I will explain later. Whatever happens, do not give it to anyone, understand?'

'Perfectly, my friend.' Taking the rough length of timber from me, he planted himself on the wharf.

I turned, took a half-dozen steps and was caught up in Padraig's strong embrace. 'Hallelujah!' he cried, fastening his arms around me and lifting me off my feet. 'You are alive and well, Duncan. All praise to the Swift

between his fierce hugs and bone-rattling slaps on the back. 'I never doubted.'

'Oh, Duncan, Duncan,' he said, grabbing my face in both his hands, 'look at you now. Earth and sky bear witness, it seems as if you had just walked down to the end of the quay and here you are back again, hale and hearty as ever. Are you well, brother?'

Before I could answer, he said, 'There is so much to tell you. How I have prayed to see this day!' he laughed aloud, shaking his head in happy disbelief. 'Praise the Saving God of Grace! Praise him all you heavenly hosts! The son who was lost is found! Praise him you burning-eyed angels, you saints give voice and sing -'

'Listen, Padraig,' I said breaking in, hating to stifle his happiness. 'It is good to see you, too, but there is something I must tell you before we board the ship.'

He looked at me, blinking in merriment. 'Speak, brother. I will listen all day to hear the sound of your voice.'

'I am in earnest, Padraig. Hear me.'

The priest became serious. 'Go on then. I am listening.'

We were nearly at the ship. 'There is no time to explain. We must leave Cairo as soon as possible. We must get rid of Gislebert and the Templars - send him on an errand and cast off at once.'

'That soon?'

'Even sooner would be better.'

The priest accepted this without question. 'So be it.'

the shoulder and arms, as if to reassure himself that I was, indeed, returned in the flesh.

'Welcome, Duncan,' said Sydoni, her voice soft and low. She smiled and demurely offered her cheek. 'It is good to see you safe.' Compared to her father's effusive welcome, hers not only lacked warmth, but was ambivalent as well - though not from any timidity, I thought, for the glance of her dark eye was as proud as ever.

Braving her coolness, I gave her a kiss on the cheek and pressed her hand in mine. 'It is good to see you, Sydoni.'

Gislebert, who had been standing a little apart, watching, now stepped before me. Extending his hand, he said, 'Praise God, my friend. We have been working for your release these many days.' I took his hand and thanked him. 'We are only glad you are free.'

'Indeed, yes,' said Yordanus, breaking in. 'You were never forgotten for a moment, I can assure you. Welcome, Duncan,' he said, seizing my hand. The old trader beamed with good pleasure and danced from one foot to the other, unable to contain himself. 'Welcome, my boy. Praise Christ, our mighty redeemer.'

'Is this all you have with you?' asked Gislebert, indicating my crude bundle of soggy parchments.

'Yes,' I told him. 'I kept a record of my imprisonment, and I hoped to bring it out with me. Alas, they are ruined.'

'Allow me to have a look,' said Padraig, lifting the sodden sling from me.

'And who was that with you on the wharf?' Gislebert said, looking back towards the crowded quayside. For someone who was only glad for my

breast, she lifted an eyebrow - a sceptical judge inviting me to make my best explanation.

'How else would we come for him?' Yordanus chided; stepping forwards quickly, he embraced me again. 'Come, let us celebrate the return of our friend! Pdraig, let us fill the cups and drink to his safe return.'

'Forgive me,' Gislebert said haughtily. 'I merely wished to know if you had seen Commander de Bracineaux?'

'How should I have seen him?' I asked, smiling. 'Was he looking for me?'

'When the riots began, he went to the palace to see if he might rescue you,' the sergeant answered. 'I imagined that was how you were freed.'

'I pray something has not gone wrong,' suggested Pdraig quickly. The canny priest had seen his chance and taken it. 'Perhaps you should see what has happened to him.'

Gislebert frowned with indecision. He disliked the turn things had taken, but was not quick enough to see how to forestall the thing. 'I think the priest is right,' added Yordanus innocently. 'Yes, go at once, Gislebert. He may need you.'

'My orders were to wait here with you,' the sergeant replied dully.

'And you have done that,' said Sydoni suddenly; she stepped forwards, took his arm and turned him towards the rail. 'All is well, thanks to you and the good commander's vigilance. We can fend for ourselves here - at least long enough for you to see if your help is required elsewhere.'

Sergeant Gislebert's frown deepened. At Sydoni's gentle leading, he found himself at the rail. Unable to disagree, he said, 'Very well, if you think-'

watched until they were out of sight.

'Yordanus,' I said, 'how soon can the ship be made ready to sail?'

Taken aback by the question, he hesitated. 'You want to leave? But the commander will be exp -'

'How soon?' I insisted.

'Well, as soon as we can lay in some provisions,' he replied thoughtfully. 'I know you must be anxious to -'

'We can get provisions along the way,' said Sydoni. To me she said, 'We can cast off at once, if that is what you wish.'

'We cannot leave Commander de Bracineaux here without at least -' began Yordanus.

'Father, I think Duncan is attempting to avoid the Templars,' Sydoni said, looking to me for confirmation.

'It is true,' I confessed. 'I know you have laboured mightily on my behalf, but I fear I must ask you to aid me a little longer. There is some deceit at work here, and I fear de Bracineaux is not to be trusted. We must leave at once.'

'The pilot is sleeping below,' Sydoni said. 'I will wake him. You and Padraig make ready to cast off.'

I was puzzled by the sudden change in her disposition, but there was no time to wonder about it just then. 'I will fetch Wazim,' I told Padraig, already sliding over the rail. 'Begin casting off.'

I hastened back to where I had left Wazim, and found him sitting cross-legged on the dock, his eyes closed, the sacred relic nowhere to be seen.

last night, said Forquanus.

Leaving Wazim to explain, I went to secure the rood below deck. Curious, Padraig started to follow, but I asked him to stay behind and keep anyone from intruding on me. 'I will tell you everything,' I promised, 'just as soon as we have put this city behind us.'

I descended the short wooden steps, aware that Sydoni was watching me all the while. I hid the rood among the baskets of stores and supplies in the hold of the ship, and then rejoined the others on deck. I stood at the rail and nervously watched the quay for any sign of the Templars. But de Bracineaux did not appear. A few moments later, *Persephone* pushed away from the dock, and we left Cairo behind for good and forever.

The green-bordered Nile spread its slow, gentle curves before us, bearing swift *Persephone* north to Alexandria and the sea. I stood at the bow as the tiny riverbank settlements receded, and watched the twin columns of smoke rising in the distance - all that could be seen of Cairo now, and soon that was gone, too, blended and vanished in the heavy blue summer haze.

Leaving the rail, I descended to the hold, retrieved the prize and rejoined the others gathered around the mast where Wazim Kadi had been telling them about our escape from the palace. Yordanus and Sydoni were seated on cushions, and Padraig reclined on his elbow on a rug, listening to the little jailer as he spun the dull dross of our ordinary trials into the gleaming gold of great adventure.

'And this!' Wazim said proudly, waving his hand with a grand flourish as I lay the bundle on the rug before the seated listeners. '*This* is the Holy Rood of Christ, rescued from the treasure house of Khalifa al-Hafiz.'

Padraig rolled up onto his knees, and Yordanus and Sydoni leaned forwards eagerly as I slowly unwrapped the sacred relic. I pulled away the cloth to reveal the dark, deeply grooved length of ancient timber. Padraig gasped, and reached out a hand, hesitated, and stopped short.

'Go on,' I said. The priest lowered his hand and with trembling fingers,

Pressing his finger to the hole in the wood, the weeping priest said, 'Here the cruel spike was driven which split the vein, divided bone and sinew, and slew the Blessed Jesu. But the wisdom of the All Wise Father encompasses things undreamed in human hearts. In Him, all divisions are united, all torn and broken lives made whole.'

'Through the nail-riven body, the rent between time and eternity is joined. In the dying of the Only Begotten, life everlasting is born. For the Swift Sure Hand did not leave him in the grave, but raised him up. And all who cling to this black and Holy Rood shall likewise be raised up on the final day.'

We were silent then for a time, gazing on the holy object, filling our eyes with the homely crudeness of the relic, even as we filled our hearts with the certain knowledge of God's power to bend all things to his redeeming purpose.

'We heard in Antioch that the rood was lost,' Yordanus said, after a long silence. 'I never expected to see it with my own eyes.' He, too, lowered his hand and reverently stroked the rood - much, I expect, as people have done since that morning when the women ran from the empty tomb to tell the twelve that the Master's corpse was missing. For the faithful, it is a natural response, like that of lovers linking hands, to reverence the beloved with a touch.

'Thank you, Duncan,' he said, his eyes growing misty. 'I know I shall not abide this world much longer.'

'Papa, no,' chided Sydoni gently.

'Look at me,' he said. 'It is the simple truth; I am an old man. But I will go to my reward with a better courage now, thanks to Duncan.'

feared they would take it from you?'

'If they knew I had it, nothing would stop them trying to get it back.'

'But it rightly belongs to them,' Yordanus pointed out. 'At least, it belongs in Antioch.'

I heartily disagreed, but did not have it in me to dispute Yordanus. So, instead, I said, 'Tell me how you knew to look for me in Cairo.'

'Ah, now that is a tale in itself,' said Padraig, making himself comfortable.

'But if we are going to tell it,' Sydoni said, 'then I will fetch the cups.' Wazim liked the sound of that and scurried off to help her, returning a few moments later with his arms full of round, wheel-like loaves and two jugs of wine. Sydoni followed with a wooden tray on which were stacked a number of bowls. One of them was filled with olive oil and crushed garlic, and another had salt mixed with black pepper. She set the tray on the deck and handed around the cups.

'At first we did not know you had been taken,' Yordanus confessed, pouring wine into his bowl; he passed the jar to me. I poured and handed it to Padraig. 'We thought you were right behind as we raced to escape the Seljuqs, and it was not until Padraig looked back that we discovered you were no longer with us.'

'Would that I had looked back sooner,' said Padraig, passing the jar to Wazim.

Sydoni, meanwhile, had begun breaking bread into another of the bowls, which she then ranged before us. 'By the time we rode back to find you,' she said, 'the Seljuqs had taken you.'

the royal family and nobles were attending to Prince Leo's funeral, it was a simple matter to bar the church doors and take over the garrison.'

'Those who resisted were killed,' Sydoni added sadly.

Yordanus took a piece of bread and dipped it in the olive oil and then the salt, chewed thoughtfully, and said, 'Although there was very little resistance.'

'What about Roupen and his family?' I asked, a weight of sorrow beginning to descend upon me.

'A great many people fled the city,' Padraig said. 'We met them on the road and they told us the royal family had been killed at their prayers - although this was far from certain.'

'No one knew anything for certain, save that the Seljuqs were in command.' Sydoni offered me the bowl of bread. 'They had closed the gates and no one was allowed in or out of the city.'

'We had no choice but to turn around and ride for Mamistra,' said Padraig. 'It is an eight-day journey, as you know - well, we made it in six, and regretted every day that it kept us from finding you. I wish there had been another way, but what else could we do? Our best hope lay in getting to Antioch as swiftly as possible. As soon as we reached Mamistra, we sailed for Saint Symeon, and then hastened to Antioch to alert the garrison there what had happened.'

'Bohemond's defeat left Antioch's defences decimated,' Yordanus observed. 'The idiot prince had taken his entire force, leaving only the Templars behind. It was a foolish, foolish thing. Mark my words, he will answer for it before the Judgement Throne on the last day.'

had but two days to prepare, and then the Seljuqs appeared and promptly mounted a siege. At first it was not so bad, but as the siege wore on, a plague of dysentery broke out and good water became difficult to find.'

'If relief had not come from Jerusalem,' added Sydoni, pouring more wine for me, 'I do not know what we would have done.'

We ate our bread and sipped our wine, and though it felt strange to me after spending so much time imprisoned on my own, I found myself gradually adjusting to the pleasures of human companionship once more. Peculiar too, I thought, to hear someone speak of events that intimately concerned me, but which I knew only in part.

I looked at those gathered around me, glancing from one face to the next, silently thanking them for their fealty and perseverance on my behalf. Yordanus, keen as a youth, slender still, wearing his age but lightly ... and beside him, Sydoni, she of the dark hair and soulful eyes, distant, watchful, a secret waiting to be known ... Wazim, smiling, his brown head bobbing, traversing an uncertain world with quiet courage and bountiful good will ... and Padraig, true friend of my soul, wise guide and boon companion for a pilgrimage or a lifetime ... I was blessed beyond measure and, as the sun warmed my back, and the wine warmed my stomach, I knew myself to be held in the strong arms of a love greater than any I could have thought or imagined.

'What happened?' I asked, suddenly wishing the day would never end, that I could sit with these friends forever, just like this, and time would cease.

'After the Templars left Jerusalem,' Yordanus replied, 'King Baldwin sent to Jaffa and Acre for troops to help protect the Holy City in their absence. They were a long time coming, because soldiers are needed everywhere these days and few can be spared.' He shook his head ruefully.

'God knows it is true,' agreed Yordanus. 'No one was happier than we were to see Baldwin riding through the gates of the city leading the crusaders in triumph - all the more since he brought word that a few of Bohemond's knights had survived the massacre, and these were taken to Damascus to be ransomed. The Seljuqs set a high price on the survivors - ten thousand dinars.'

'I still have many old friends in Damascus, and we made arrangements to go there at once - which we did. Unfortunately, things did not go well for us in Damascus. We encountered great difficulty in getting reliable information from the atabeg's courtiers. They told us you were there and they would release you if I paid the ransom. But when I brought the money, they could not find you.' He paused, shaking his head. 'We feared you had been executed.'

'Prisoners without ransom are often killed for the pleasure of their captors,' offered Wazim.

'But then Renaud arrived,' said Padraig.

'He came to Damascus?' I could not keep the suspicion out of my voice. Sydoni marked my distrust with a knowing expression, although no one else seemed to notice. 'Why?'

'Also to ransom prisoners,' Yordanus replied. 'It was fortunate for us that he came when he did, because he was able to discover what had happened to you.'

Yes, I thought - no doubt the Fida'in told him. To Yordanus I said, 'You learned I had been taken to Cairo.'

'And so we came on as soon as we could.'

speaking ill of him before Yordanus, who was his friend.

'You look troubled,' said Padraig. 'Is something wrong?'

'I am tired,' I said. 'I have not talked so much in a long time. I had forgotten how taxing it can be.'

'You should rest now,' suggested Sydoni. 'There are quarters below deck where you will not be disturbed.' She rose. 'Come with me, I will show you.'

'Yes, go with her. We can talk again this evening,' the old man said. 'Sydoni, make him comfortable.'

I rose to my knees and, taking up the Black Rood, placed it in Padraig's hands - along with the responsibility of looking after it. 'Do you think you might find a safe place for this?'

'Gladly and with honour,' he said, accepting the precious relic with a bow of respect.

I retrieved my mantle and followed Sydoni forwards to a hatch in the deck with wooden steps leading down to a small, bare room set apart from the larger holding area below deck where cargo and stocks of provisions were kept. Quiet and dark - the only light came from a small grated opening in the deck above - it was the room she and her father shared, and it contained two low straw pallets set in boxes between the great curving ribs of the ship's hull. The pallets were spread with linen cloths and cushions to make a soft, inviting bed.

I thanked her and sat down on the edge of the box to remove my boots. She watched me for a moment, making no move to leave. 'I owe you a very great debt of gratitude, you and your father,' I told her. 'I intend to

wants to see.  
'And you, Sydoni? What do you see?'

'I see a man who winces every time the Templar's name is breathed aloud.'

'I do not wince.'

'Like an old woman with a toothache.'

'An old woman ...' I did not care for her choice of comparison.

She laughed and the sound charmed even as it humbled. 'It is something to do with the Holy Rood.'

'Yes,' I admitted. 'I know that much is obvious.'

She nodded, waiting for me to say more. When I did not, she sniffed, 'Well, you do not have to say anything if it taxes you overmuch.'

'I want to tell you. It is just that it is not so easily told.'

'People only say that,' she observed tartly, 'when they cannot decide how much to leave out.'

I had forgotten how very changeable she could be; like intemperate weather, Sydoni could be mild and calm one moment, and hurling thunderbolts the next.

'If I thought to leave anything out,' I replied, quickly losing my patience, 'it was only to spare your feelings.'

'My feelings?' She held her head to one side and regarded me as if I were mad. 'I have no feelings for Commander de Bracineaux.'

'Your father's feelings then. I know they are friends.'

intensity - took me aback.

'He told us he was doing all he could to secure your release,' she said, the words tumbling out in a rush. 'When father grew impatient, he told us to wait and pray, and leave everything to him, that negotiations had reached a precarious stage - the least word or action out of place, and we would risk losing everything, he said. Lies - it was all lies.'

'And that was when Yordanus approached the Copts,' I surmised.

'Indeed, it was his first thought,' Sydoni replied. 'He wanted to make contact with them the day we arrived, but had promised de Bracineaux he would let the Templars try first. After waiting three days, he and Padraig decided that it would harm nothing to have our friends look into matters. The Copts of Cairo,' she added proudly, 'have been living with the Saracens a very long time; they have many influential contacts throughout the city.'

'If not for your friends,' I declared, 'I have no doubt I would still be a prisoner in the caliph's palace. De Bracineaux did not care about me - at least, I was far from foremost in his thoughts.'

'He wanted the Holy Rood,' Sydoni said. 'You were just an excuse to help him get it. He used you, just as he used my father.' She regarded me wonderingly. 'But how did you discover he was with the Fida'in?'

'I saw them together.' I yawned, exhaustion overcoming me. 'They were trying to break into the treasure house.'

To recover the rood.'

'Yes - that is, I believe that is what they were after.'

head in the place where Sydoni lay her head; and I fell asleep to the slow and gentle rocking of the ship beneath me, and the scent of sandalwood drifting through my dreams.

I awoke to a cool touch on my forehead and a warm breath in my ear. I had slept long and deep, and roused myself with difficulty. When I finally opened my eyes, Sydoni was gone and I wondered if I had dreamed her. I pulled on my boots and climbed back to the upper deck, emerging into a sky of radiant, deep-flamed red and gold, with darker shades of sapphire in the east where the first stars were already shining. Low green Egyptian hills were gliding slowly past, and goat bells across the water tinkled as the shepherd led his flock to the fold for the night.

Sydoni was kneeling before a low charcoal brazier cooking red fish on latticework spits. She ladled olive oil over the meat, which made the glowing coals sizzle and flare, and threw a delicious silvery cloud of smoke into the air; when the flames died down, she squeezed half the juice of a yellow lemon over the fish, glancing up at me as she did so. Her smile was ready and welcoming. 'Good evening,' she said.

'It smells wonderful,' I told her.

She held out a bowl of large flat yellow seeds. 'Try these.'

I tipped a few into my mouth and munched them. They had a salty flavour. 'Nice.'

'Parched squash seeds. The farmers make them. They also make this,' she

'Padraig insists the Celts were first to make it - but he says that about everything.' I sipped the bittersweet brew with satisfaction, and breathed the soft fragrant air deep into my lungs. 'Where is Padraig?'

'He went below to say his prayers.' She turned the fish on the charcoal and squeezed more of the lemon over it. 'Vespers before the Holy Rood, he said.'

'The dreamer awakes!' called Yordanus. I turned as he came up from the stern where he had been talking to his pilot. Padraig and Wazim were not about.

'I feel as if I could take on an army,' I said.

'I hope you can eat like one,' said Sydoni. 'My father has decreed a celebration to honour your rescue. We stopped a little while ago at a market and bought everything in the settlement.'

'We want to honour your return as the occasion merits,' he said. 'God bless you, Duncan, but it is good to see you. I am sorry if I cannot refrain from saying it. I do not mean to embarrass you, but it is good to see you again.'

'And you, Yordanus,' I replied. 'Please, it does not embarrass me in the least. Indeed, there were times I thought I would not be seeing you, or anyone else, ever again.'

We talked of my captivity in the caliph's palace. Already, time was at work, blunting the sharp edges of that existence and bathing it in softer hues.

'Is that why you wrote it down?' asked Sydoni. I noticed how naturally she slipped in beside me, and remembered how much I missed her simple womanly graces.

'The monks of Ayios Moni excel in such work. They are always copying old scrolls and parchments. We can take your book to them,' Yordanus suggested eagerly.

'Papa,' said Sydoni, 'you presume too much. Perhaps Duncan does not wish to return with us to Cyprus.'

'No?' The old man's face fell, but he recovered himself quickly. 'Of course, I was forgetting myself. My friends, you have only to say where you wish to go, and this ship will take you there.' He looked from me to Padraig expectantly. 'Well?'

'I think,' said Sydoni, touching my arm lightly with her fingertips, 'it would be best to tell father what you told me.'

I nodded and drew a reluctant breath. 'I think none of us should return to Cyprus just yet,' I began. 'I have reason to believe that de Bracineaux and his men are in league with the Fida'in.'

'Impossible!' scoffed Yordanus. 'You are surely mistaken. Commander de Bracineaux would never contemplate such a thing.'

'If there is another explanation, I will gladly hear it and repent if I am wrong. But I know what I saw.'

This news proved so distressing to Yordanus that Sydoni suggested we all sit down and discuss it together over our cups. 'The meal will be a little time yet. Let us get this unpleasantness behind us before we eat.'

Wazim roused himself from his nap as we filled our cups, but declined to join us as we sat down on the rugs beside the mast; Sydoni put him to work helping prepare the meal instead. I related what Sydoni had told me

It is possible, I answered. I leaned across to Wazim, and asked him if he had any doubt about who we had seen breaking into the treasure house.

'No, my lord,' he replied. 'They were the Hashishin.'

'But you did not see them, Wazim, did you?' asked Yordanus. 'You did not see them with your own eyes.'

'I did not need to see them,' he said, 'I could smell them. They smelled of the hashish smoke.'

'Much of the city was in flames last night,' the old man pointed out shrewdly, 'how could you be certain it was the hashish?'

He had sown the seed of doubt, but I remained convinced. I asked Wazim if anyone had come to the caliph's court to arrange ransom for me. 'No, my lord,' he replied again. 'No one ever came.'

'Might someone have come without your knowing?' wondered Yordanus. Although his manner was tactful and kindly, I could see what he was doing, and it made me uncomfortable. Had I been too hasty in my judgement of the Templars? Perhaps imprisonment had soured my good opinion of Renaud.

'I am a good jailer,' the little man answered. 'I make it my business to know such things. If anyone came seeking ransom for one of my prisoners, I would know of it. But no one ever came to the palace to offer ransom.'

'Who approached you on my behalf, Wazim?' I asked.

'Father Shenoute sent word and summoned me.'

'That is the Holy Patriarch of the Cairo church,' explained Padraig. 'When Renaud seemed to have trouble arranging the audience with the caliph,

I conceded the point. 'It may be as you say,' I granted, 'but one thing bothers me still. If they only wished to help gain my freedom, why did they go to the treasure house first? When given the chance, why did they not seek my release?'

'I suppose they hoped to secure the Holy Rood,' said Yordanus.

'That very thing above all else,' I said, trying to keep an even temper.

'Can you blame them?' said Yordanus. 'It belongs to the church at Antioch. Blundering Bohemond lost it and they have a sacred duty to get it back.'

'They chose the relic above my life,' I said. 'Yet they told you nothing about that part of their enterprise. Why would they hide it from you?'

Yordanus spread his hands. 'That is something we must ask Commander de Bracineaux when next we see him.'

'What do you propose?' Padraig asked. I could tell from his tone and glance that he, like myself, was uneasy with the prospect of allowing the Templars to get their hands on the holy relic again.

'My friends, I believe this has been an unfortunate misunderstanding. I propose we sail home to Cyprus and, with your kind indulgence, I will send word to Renaud to come and meet us in Famagusta to discuss these matters. After all,' he said, 'the good Commander Renaud helped us immeasurably in Damascus. Before condemning him, we owe him a hearing, I think.'

Sydoni came and called us to our dinner then, and no more was said about the matter that night. It did not sit well with me, but I tried not to let it spoil the festive mood which Yordanus and Sydoni strove to instil in the evening's celebration. After a few more bowls of ale and Sydoni's

We sat on the deck and talked and ate as night deepened around us. The flickering fires of passing houses and settlements spangled the river banks even as the stars dusted the sky above with glowing shards of light. The moon rose late and spilled its light onto the water to turn the lazily swirling liquid into molten silver. After a time, Yordanus bade us good night and went to his bed, then Padraig and Wazim likewise, leaving me alone with Sydoni.

We talked long into the night, enjoying the balmy air and the gentle music of the water rippling along the keel and steering paddle. The pilot kept the ship in the deep mid-river channel; from time to time, one of the crewmen would come to relieve him, and he would lie down on his mat in the stern for a time, only to awaken a little later to take the tiller once more. It was a fine night for sailing, and I was glad to be out on the water. Looking up into the great bowl of the heavens and the star-flecked sky, with no bound or hindrance in any direction as far as the eye could see, I began at last to understand that I was truly free.

Some time later, Sydoni bade me good night and went to her bed, but I remained on deck gazing up at the stars and listening to the sound of the dark river as the ship slid along the slowly winding waterway towards the sea. I slept a little towards dawn, but woke again at sunrise and went at once to the stern. The sky was bright pink in the east with grey shading to blue above, and not a cloud to be seen. The river had broadened considerably during the night, and the nearest bank was now a fair distance away.

There were no ships behind us, but two smaller boats kept pace one behind the other just ahead. I asked the pilot how long they had been there, and he said they had joined us at sunrise. 'They are fishing boats,' he told me in

inghts, we reached Cyprus in only three days. While the island was yet but a blue-brown hump looming in the sea haze, I prevailed upon Yordanus not to put in at Famagusta, but to use another port instead.

'But why?' he asked, genuinely mystified by my distrust and uneasiness.

Although I could think of several extremely compelling reasons to avoid Cyprus altogether, I merely replied, 'I would feel safer if our return was not widely known just yet.'

"But where is the danger?" the old trader countered innocently. 'I am certain the caliph has more important matters on his mind than the escape of a solitary prisoner. Still, if it would ease your mind, I will have a word with the magistrate and he will put the garrison on watch for a few days.'

'Father,' Sydoni scolded, 'we both know the magistrate is an officious gossip and meddler. The garrison is only a dozen old war dogs who bark far worse than they ever bite.' To me she said, 'We have a small house in Paphos on the other side of the island. We can stay there for as long as you like.'

Yordanus rolled his eyes and sighed heavily, but yielded to his daughter without further comment. I spoke to the pilot, who arranged it so that we did not make landfall until just after sunset; I wanted our arrival to arouse as little interest as possible. Accordingly, once ashore, we moved quickly through the lower, busy sea town and up the hill into a quieter quarter, known as Nea Paphos, where, scattered in amongst the large new estates of wealthy planters and merchants, the ruins of ancient fortresses and the crumbling palaces of long-dead kings could still be seen among the gnarled olive trees and thorn thickets on the hillside.

The house Yordanus kept here was less than a fourth the size of his great

finished, asked if I was satisfied.

'It is stout enough,' I replied, rattling the iron bar in its holder. 'It will serve.'

'Good. Let us join the others and drink to a fortuitous return.'

As the main room of the house also served as kitchen, Anna would not allow us anywhere near the table until the food was ready; she chased us all back out into the courtyard where Pdraig found a low bench and a number of stools, which he quickly arranged in a loose circle. Sydoni appeared with a jug of wine and an assortment of carved olivewood cups. She poured the wine and we all drank one another's health and prosperity, and long, happy, eventful lives.

'What will you do now, master?' Wazim asked me. I marked his use of that word - it was the second time he had called me that; the first time was in the tunnel.

'We will rest for a day or two,' I answered carelessly, 'and then Pdraig and I will set about finding passage back to Caithness in Scotland.' I looked at the little Copt who had been my solitary friend in the caliph's palace. 'What about you, Wazim - what will you do?'

He thought for a moment. 'If Yordanus has no further need of me,' he said at last, his voice heavy with resignation, 'I will return to Alexandria.'

'Not Cairo?' I said lightly.

'Oh, I can never go back to Cairo, Da'ouk,' he replied. 'Truly, the khalifa would have me flayed alive and spit-roasted over hot coals.'

The little jailer had risked his life and given up his livelihood for me, and I

Da'ouk. God himself has prepared my reward.'

'I have no doubt of it, Wazim, my friend. Still, it may be some time before you collect that reward; it would please me to see you well settled and comfortable while you wait.'

I glanced over to where Pdraig was sitting, and saw that he was following our conversation. My faithful *anam cara*, he gave me a nod of approval to let me know that yet another skirmish with the slippery adversary pride had been contested successfully.

Anna called us in to our supper then, and we went in to a meal of eggs and peppers with dried fish, wine, and olives. After the meal, we remained at the table long into the night, talking to Yordanus and Sydoni about how best to go about finding a ship to help us on our homeward journey. As we talked, it soon became apparent that Yordanus was less than enthusiastic about our leaving. He was intent on seeing de Bracineaux and myself reconciled, our differences mended and the Holy Rood returned to its rightful place.

I was against this, I confess, but felt deeply in Yordanus' debt, and was heartily reluctant to grieve him over this difference of opinion. We went to our beds that night with the matter unresolved, but I promised to give it my thoughtful consideration over the next few days. This pleased him, and he said no more about it, leaving me to my meditations.

Next morning, Pdraig and I, with Sydoni's assistance, wrapped the Holy Rood in red silk and secured it in a stout wooden casket which Anna used to store her good shoes and feast-day clothes. We hid the sacred relic in the bottom of the box and replaced the clothes, adding a few shawls, a tablecloth, and such like. The box did not lock, but Sydoni said it was just

it.

My sudden and unexplained appearance on the quay at Cairo had confounded Sergeant Gislebert, and I knew hi my bones that de Bracineaux would quickly narrow his search to me - if only to satisfy himself that I did not have the relic in my possession. Thus, Yordanus' suggestion of sending word to him to meet us and discuss the matter had something to recommend it by way of surprise, but beyond that, try as I might, I could not think of a single good reason to meet with the Templars. I did not say as much to Yordanus, however, but merely begged more time to think the matter through.

'Take all the time you need,' the old man replied obligingly. 'While you are thinking, why not go up to the monastery and speak with the monks about restoring your damaged papyri? It is not far - you would only be gone a few days, and you could see something of Cyprus along the way.'

Padraig agreed that it was a good idea, so that is what we did.



Yordanus had warned us, they were mean places - tumbledown, soot-covered hovels with miserable dogs and dirty children standing in bare dirt yards looking silently and hungrily at us as we passed. At one such dwelling, Padraig was so moved by the want of a naked boy and his young sister that he gave them half our bread, some dried meat, and all the cheese we had brought with us.

Later, as the sun began to sink into the green valley to the west, we sought and found a clearing in the forest a short distance from the road where we made camp for the night. We made a fire of fragrant pine branches and cooked a simple meal of pease porridge, and slept on beds of pine needles with the stars shining down through the gaps in the lightly sighing trees.

We rose at daybreak and continued on, arriving at our destination just as the monastery bell tolled vespers. The gates were still open, so we went in and presented ourselves to the porter. They were Greeks for the most part, but we had no difficulty making ourselves understood. Padraig told the porter that he was also a priest, and that we were on pilgrimage, returning from the Holy Land - whereupon the simple monk became excited and ran off to find the abbot.

Abbot Demitrianos was a kindly and gentle man, humble in manner and appearance, with a head of wavy dark hair and a beard with two grey streaks either side of his mouth. Like the brothers under his care he dressed in a simple black robe that covered him from just below the chin to the tips of his toes; and like all the others, he wore a black, brimless peaked cap sewn with a tiny white cross on the front over his brow. Around his neck he wore a wooden cross on a braided leather loop, and he carried a short wooden staff in his hand.

It makes no matter,' the abbot replied. 'Many of us have never travelled so far as Lefkosia or Salamis, and some have never been beyond the next valley. I am certain that anything you can tell us of the wider world will be respectfully and gratefully received.'

The little monastery of Ayios Moni, the good abbot told us, was very old, the first monks having come from Byzantium over seven hundred years ago. 'Before that,' he said, 'there was a temple to the goddess Hera; our chapel is built on the old temple's foundations. It is an ancient and holy place.'

When Pdraig expressed an interest in hearing more about the monastery, the abbot became our guide and led us to each of the buildings in turn and showed us the treasures of their brotherhood, including the small, much faded and, it must be said, extremely crude icon of the Virgin Mary, which was believed to have been painted by none other than Saint Luke the Evangelist. Upon viewing this marvel, I did feel as if I had beheld a thing of immense age and undeniable consequence.

Although I lack a proper appreciation of such things, I do freely confess, what impressed me most was not the plaintive image of the young woman with large dark, melancholy eyes, but rather the worshipful reverence with which the monks handled their priceless relic. Their loving veneration was heartfelt and deep, and it shamed the arrogant crusaders with their careless desecration of the True Cross. The manifold profanations heaped upon that holy object by those who should have been its protectors amounted to a gross and terrible sacrilege. The humble adoration of the monks renewed my resolve to keep the Black Rood as far from the Templars' grasping hands as I possibly could.

The monks of Ayios Moni lived a simple life of prayer and toil, growing

Padraig and me describe our sojourn in the Holy Land. In truth, Padraig did all the talking, as his Greek was far more eloquent than my own rough expression and he knew precisely what his fellow monks wanted to hear. Thus, I sat with the abbot at the high table, drinking my wine and eating a delicious stew of lamb and barley, while Padraig stood at the pulpit normally occupied by the brother reading the evening's lesson. He spoke well, adorning his talk with finely-observed word portraits of the people and places we had seen. He told them about my captivity among the Seljuqs and Saracens, and my escape - making it sound much more courageous than it felt at the time - drawing many appreciative murmurs from his listeners. When he finished, the entire community - thirty-five or forty monks in all, I think - stood in his honour while the abbot thanked him with a special blessing.

Following the meal, we were invited to Abbot Demitrianos' lodge for a special drink before night prayers. We walked across the quiet monastery yard in the balmy twilight, and I felt the deep peace of the place enfold me in its soft, inescapable embrace. The abbot's house was little more than a bare cell, but it had a hearth and a fleecy-lined bed, several chairs and a table, on which stood simple olivewood cups and an earthenware jar. The abbot invited us to sit and poured a pale, slightly cloudy white liquid into the cups, which he passed to Padraig and me. He placed the palm of his hand over his cup and blessed the drink, whereupon we imbibed the sweet fire of the Ayios Moni monks: a delectable honeyed nectar that soothed even as it warmed, beguiling the unwary with a delightful smoky taste before stinging the senses into a lucid and delectable dizziness.

After only a few sips, I felt large and expansive, friend and brother to all mankind. It was with great reluctance that I set aside my cup, but when

where Duncan was a prisoner for many months.'

'Yes,' nodded the abbot with benign admiration, 'you showed great fortitude and forbearance in your captivity,' he told me. 'Our Lord was surely with you.'

'While he was a guest of the caliph,' Padraig continued, 'he wrote of his experiences -'

'I thought I would not live to see my young daughter,' I explained, 'and wanted her to know what had happened to her father.'

'A thoughtful and commendable bequest,' mused the abbot loftily. 'A very labour of love, to be sure.'

'Unfortunately,' I continued, 'all my work was ruined.' I went on to tell him what had taken place in the escape from the caliph's palace, leaving out any mention of the raid on the treasure house and the rescue of the Holy Rood.

Abbot Demitrianos frowned and clucked his tongue. 'Regrettable, to be sure.' He reached for the jar and offered to refresh our cups. 'More *alashi*?' I declined, but Padraig succumbed. 'Still,' the abbot continued, tipping the jar into his own cup, 'your life has been redeemed, all praise to Our Great Heavenly Father, and that is of inestimable value to your dear little daughter.' He raised his cup and imbibed deeply of the potent drink.

'As it happens,' said Padraig, 'this work was written on good papyrus, which the Egyptians use instead of parchment.'

'We know of it, to be sure,' replied the abbot contentedly. 'We call it *papuros*. Fine stuff, but very brittle, and lacking the durability of good parchment. I suppose, however, if you cannot obtain the sheep ...' he

Again, I declined politely, and was surprised when Padraig helped himself, emptying the jar into his cup. 'I have no doubt that what you say is true,' the thirsty priest replied. 'Yet, it seems to me that the work might be copied.'

The bell for night prayers began tolling just then. Padraig stood. 'Ah, night prayers. I am keenly interested in attending the service tonight. Perhaps, with your kind permission, we might continue this discussion tomorrow. I think if you were to have a look at the papyri, you will see what I mean.' Turning to me, he said, 'Come, Duncan, we must hurry to the chapel. I thank you for your kindness, and bid you God's rest tonight, abbot.'

The abbot blessed us with a benediction and sent us off to prayers. We left him to his rest and, as I closed the door behind us, I noticed Padraig still clutched his drink in his hand. 'A lesser man would have surrendered long ago,' I told him.

'A lesser man *did*,' he replied, tipping the nearly full cup onto the ground. He lay the empty vessel beside the door, and we hurried to the chapel, taking our places at the rear of the small assembly of monks. There were two short benches either side of the door, and upon one an elderly brother sat with his hands folded in his lap, snoring softly; all the rest stood with their hands raised, palms upwards at shoulder height, intoning the prayer in a humming drone.

Padraig joined right in, but I did not know the prayer and found it difficult to follow the recitation. From time to time, one of the monks would raise his voice and call out a phrase and, just as I was beginning to grasp the prayer, suddenly the chant would change, and off they would go in a new direction. After a while, I gave up and sat down on the bench beside the sleeping brother until the service was over. He woke as I sat down, looked

the old Roman empire. It is true.'

'Verily,' added another, 'you can still see where Paul was chained to the pillar and scourged for impugning the supremacy of the emperor.'

Padraig and I soon exhausted our small store of memories of Antioch. I wished I had more to tell them; I had spent but a single day there, and had seen almost nothing of the city. At least I was able to describe the Orontes valley and the famed white walls of Antioch rising up sheer from the river bank, and something of the wide main street leading to the citadel, as well as the citadel and palace.

Abbot Demitrianos entered while we were eating and joined us at table, helping himself to bread and cheese and joining in with the brothers. I liked him for his easy, unassuming ways, and his disregard for rank and ceremony. In this he reminded me of Emlyn, and I found myself wishing I was long since on my way home.

After the meal, the abbot took us to the scriptorium and introduced us to two of the senior monks who had the charge of the work of the monastery.

'I present to you, Brother Ambrosius,' the abbot said, indicating a small, round-shouldered monk with sparse white hair - the monk with whom I had shared a bench during prayers the night before. '... and Brother Tomas, our two most skilled and experienced scribes. If anything can be done for you, they will know.' The two bowed in humble deference to one another, and invited us inside. The room was small, but airy and light; a number of wide windows along the south wall allowed the sunlight to illumine the high work tables of the monks. Most of them were still at their morning meal, so we had the scriptorium to ourselves for the moment.

'My brothers,' said Padraig, 'we come to you with a problem, begging your

examination of the documents in question,' added Brother Tomas.

'By all means,' said Padraig. I brought out the bundle, laid it on the nearest table, and began to unwrap the still-damp sheepskin.

Brother Ambrosius stopped me at once. 'Allow me,' he said, stepping in and staying my hand. 'Let us see what we have here.' He bent to his work, holding his head low over the skin as he carefully unpeeled the wet leather. Brother Tomas joined him on the opposite side of the table, and in a moment the two of them had exposed the tight roll of papyrus scrolls.

They gazed upon the soggy mass of slowly rotting matter as if at the corpse of a much-loved dog, and clucked their tongues sadly. There was a green tinge along the edges of the rolls, and the papyrus stank with a rancid odour. The two monks raised their eyes, looked at one another, and shook their heads. 'I fear it is as the abbot has said,' Ambrosius told me sadly. 'There is nothing to be done. The papuri can never be restored. I am sorry.'

Even though I was already resolved to this prospect, I still felt a twinge of disappointment.

'I am certain you are right,' replied Padraig quickly, 'and we anticipated as much. But perhaps you could tell me if I am right in thinking that these pages could be copied?'

This request occasioned a second, closer inspection, and a lengthy discussion between the two master scribes. They carefully pulled apart one section and carried it to the nearest window where they held it up to their faces and scrutinized it carefully. 'It could be done,' Tomas allowed cautiously. 'Each leaf of the papuros must be dried very slowly and flattened to prevent it from cracking to pieces.'

not be able to contemplate any new endeavours, however worthy, for a very long time.'

'I am prepared to pay you,' I offered. 'Such a service requires great skill and effort, I know. I would be more than happy to pay whatever you deem appropriate.'

'Please,' said Demitrianos, raising his hands in protest, 'you misunderstand me. I was not fishing for payment. It is not your silver I am after; I am telling you the truth, my friend. As much as I would like to help you,' he spread his hands, 'but -'

'Forgive me, abbot,' said Ambrosius, speaking up. 'Something has just occurred to me. A word?'

He led the abbot a little apart and the two of them spoke to one another quietly for a moment. I heard the abbot say, 'Very well.' And then he turned and smiled, and said, 'Our brother has just brought a matter to my attention which I have overlooked. He insists there may be a way we can help you - provided you are agreeable.'

'I assure you I am most agreeable to anything - within reason,' I allowed, 'and the limits of my purse.'

'The work we do here is not only for ourselves, but also for the wider world - for edification and learning, for posterity, for succeeding generations. This is why we take such great care - so that those who come after us will enjoy the benefit.' He made a gesture towards the elderly monk, who stood looking on hopefully. 'Brother Ambrosius reminds me that what you have written of your sojourn in the Holy Land might well prove a unique, and therefore valuable, reflection of our perishable age. He suggests that we should honour your request.'

what had happened to me. While there was nothing in the papyri of which I was ashamed, I was not sure I wanted anyone else to read my mind and heart.

Before I could decide, however, Padraig nodded enthusiastically and said, 'An excellent solution. Of course! Nothing would please us more than to know that Lord Duncan's work might continue to serve in this way.'

'There is one other thing,' suggested the abbot, in a slightly embarrassed tone. 'I am reminded that the scriptorium is in need of a new roof. Needless to say, it would greatly contribute to our work if we did not have such a burden hanging over our heads as it were.'

'I understand completely,' I replied. 'I would be happy to stand the cost of a new roof for the scriptorium.'

Brothers Ambrosius and Tomas both clasped their hands in delight and praised the Great Creator for his bounteous provision. We thanked the brothers for the consideration, and arranged for a time to return and collect the finished copy; then, before the sun had quartered the sky, Padraig and I were on our way back to Paphos.

We arrived the evening of the next day to learn that Yordanus was gone.

'He went where?' I said, disbelief making my voice harsh. Anger blazed up bright and hot as the sun beating down on my head, though I tried my best to quench it.

Sydoni bit her lip. She knew I was displeased, and was loath to withhold the truth from me - though it meant betraying her father's purpose. 'He went to Famagusta,' she said timidly. 'He took Wazim with him. I know you said —'

'When?' I demanded. 'How long has he been gone?'

'He departed the same day you left for the monastery. I suppose you are right to be angry. But he is only trying to help.'

'It will be no help to any of us if the Templars find us here.'

'He promised not to do anything without your consent,' she said half-heartedly.

'Then he should not have gone at all!' I snapped.

'He only went to see to his affairs - nothing more.' She was growing defensive. 'Never fear, my father will not betray your precious secret.'

'It was a foolish thing to do!'

'Peace!' said Padraig, entering the courtyard just then. 'The entire island

of the island.

Little more than an overgrown mound now, with wild olive trees and bramble thickets, there were still a few sun-bleached sections of toppled columns to be seen, an arch and part of a wall - rising from the surrounding wrack like the enormous bones of a monstrous creature. My anger finally subdued, I sat down on the carved capital of a ruined column in the shade of a half-dead palm tree to rest and collect myself. I could see the bay from where I sat, and watched a few boats returning from the day's fishing, but there was no sign of the ship.

Padraig and I had arrived back in Paphos at midday and, upon coming in view of the shallow bay, I had suddenly become agitated. By the time we descended the hill overlooking the harbour, I knew what it was that disturbed me: *Persephone* was missing; the ship was not in the harbour, and nowhere to be seen.

We had hurried on to the house to be met by Sydoni, who took one look at my distraught expression and guessed what had caused my distress. She explained that she had told him not to go, but her father insisted he knew what he was doing, and anyway, he would be back before we returned.

In fact, he did not return until two days later.

I spent the intervening time stalking the hills and muttering about the ruins, waiting for Yordanus to return. I was sitting in my accustomed place in the shade when I saw a ship round the far headland and enter the bay just before sunset. I watched with growing expectation until I was certain it was the *Persephone*, and then I hurried back to the house to alert Sydoni and the others that Yordanus had returned.

While Sydoni and Anna fluttered around preparing food and drink for her

touch of self-righteous vindication, 'I needed to replenish my purse. Silver does not multiply of its own accord, you know, and travel is a costly business.'

There was no point in berating the man. 'Well, it is over and done now,' I said as graciously as possible. 'We will speak no more about it.'

'Very wise,' agreed Yordanus. Just then Anna came into the courtyard carrying a tray laden with bowls of food and baskets of bread; Sydoni emerged behind her with a tray of cups and a jug of wine. They placed the trays on one of the benches beneath the fig tree, and the four of us sat down to eat.

'I am anxious to learn about your trip to the monastery,' Yordanus said. 'Were the monks able to help you?'

'They were indeed,' replied Padraig. He told about the monastery and the agreement we had made to allow the papyri to be copied. 'They were only too happy to do it once they learned they could make a copy for themselves.'

'*And* a new roof for the scriptorium besides,' I said. The words came out sounding far more caustic than I intended. Both Padraig and Yordanus looked at me curiously.

'You seemed to find the agreement satisfactory at the time, brother.' Padraig scowls only rarely; thus, it speaks all the more eloquently of his displeasure. 'You have made a fine deception of hiding your disapproval until now.'

'I beg your pardon,' I muttered. 'I have misspoken. Forget I said anything.'  
Sydoni joined us after awhile, and she and Padraig began discussing the

'As always everyone else has a better claim on the treasure than those who discovered it.' Once again, my tone belied my true intent. The others regarded me with rank displeasure. 'What? Am I not allowed an opinion?'

After one or two more abortive attempts at joining in the conversation, I finally gave up, lapsing into a disgruntled and fidgety silence. As the evening dragged on, I found it increasingly difficult to sit still and listen to the idle prattling of the others. I sipped my wine and munched salty olives, all the while sinking deeper and deeper into a peculiarly fretful melancholy. When at last I could no longer endure the prattling, I stood so quickly I spilled my cup. I grumbled an apology and excused myself, saying my head hurt from too much sun and I was going to bed.

And that is where Pdraig found me some while later; he had sat up talking with Sydoni and Yordanus and came in to find me still thrashing around, unable to sleep. He stood over me for a moment, and even though I could not see his expression in the darkness I could tell by his prickly manner that he was disgusted with me. I did my best to ignore him.

'I know you are not asleep,' he said at last, his voice sharp with disapproval.

'Is it any wonder? If you mean to stand over me all night neither one of us shall get any rest.'

'It is not myself keeping you awake. For a certainty, it is your own guilty conscience.'

His unjust accusation brought me upright. 'Guilty! What have I to feel guilty about?'

'You know what you did,' he said. 'Your own heart condemns you.'

not forgive him? why are you throwing this back in my face?

'Listen to you now ... *disobeyed my orders* - who are you to issue commands to everyone else? Duncan the High and Mighty lifts his leg to fart and the whole world must dance to the tune - is that it?'

'You twist my words, disagreeable priest!' I growled angrily.

'Do I?' he sneered. 'Do I, indeed?'

'You do.'

'Perhaps they were twisted to begin with.'

'And what do you mean by that?'

'Think about it. Look you long and hard into your soul and repent of your vile and sinful conceit. It does you no credit, my lord.'

He turned away, leaving me to stew in my own bitter bile. His rebuke stung - all the more because I knew he was right. Though I was loath to admit it, the shrewd priest had read my soul aright. Proud as I was, I begrudged Yordanus his efforts on my behalf- not the least because I feared his meddling would result in my having to surrender the Black Rood to the Templars. Nor was that all. I resented having to depend on anyone - especially one I deemed less reliable than myself. In truth, in my long captivity I had grown used to trusting no one and relying only on myself to the extent that I now resented the intrusions of others into my affairs however well-intentioned, and viewed their small failings as wilful defiance of my authority.

These unhappy reflections kept me from my rest. I lay awake long into the night, staring into the darkness, restless and rankled, unable to sleep. Dawn was but a whisper away when I finally abandoned the effort. I rose

The sound put me in mind of a rat scurrying back to its nest, but if so, it was a rat the size of a donkey. I stood motionless, listening, and when I heard the slow scrape of iron against wood, I moved slowly to the corner of the house and looked towards the gate.

A figure dressed all in black - little more than a shadow in the deeper shadow of the wall - stood at the gate, lifting the iron bar away. I started for the gate, moving as swiftly and silently as I could, and wishing I had some of Murdo's legendary stealth. I crossed to the fig tree, and as I stooped to crouch beneath it, I caught the faint whiff of the scent I had last smelled in the tunnels beneath the hareem in Cairo: the unmistakable tang of hashish.

My mind froze.

Fida'in!

There was no mistake. Pungent and sweet, with a musty, metallic odour, once smelled, the scent is not forgotten. I picked up one of the benches from beneath the tree and darted forwards.

The intruder heard me as I closed on him. He stepped back from the gate, swinging the iron bar as he turned.

I threw the bench before me, catching the iron bar as it came around, and forcing it back against his chest. I drove in behind the blow, slamming the bench hard against his chin. The Fida'i's jaw closed with a teeth-shattering clack as his head snapped back against the timber door just as his comrade on the other side started to push through. The door banged shut and the Arab intruder tried to squirm away. I heaved the bench into his chest, driving the air from his lungs; he slumped to the ground, his back to the door.

The howling Fida'i pulled his broken arm out of the way and I pressed the door closed with all my might. I shouted for Padraig again. At the same instant, there came a tremendous thump on the door as someone on the other side drove into it, trying to force it open once more.

There came a rush behind me. I spun around and caught the dull glint of metal streaking towards my neck. I threw my hands before my face and dodged away. The blow was ill-judged and hurried, catching me on the meaty part of the shoulder as I turned. The blade went in — it felt as if a red hot poker had been applied to my flesh.

Flailing with my fists, I stumbled backwards, falling over the body of the unconscious intruder on the ground beside the gate, and pulling the weapon from the grasp of my attacker as I went down. He leapt on me, straining to retrieve the blade still buried in my flesh. As he bent forwards, I kicked up hard into his groin - once, and again. He gave out a groan, staggered unsteadily, and collapsed onto his knees, holding himself.

Swift footsteps sounded on the earth beside me. My hand closed on the handle of the knife. I yanked it from my shoulder and made a wide, awkward swipe to keep my new assailant off balance. The man cried out, 'Duncan! It is me!'

The next thing I knew Padraig's hands were on me, pulling me to my feet. The Fida'i I had kicked was struggling to rise. Gasping, puffing, his eyes streaming with tears, he raised himself up on wobbly legs.

'May God forgive me,' Padraig said, and aimed a solid kick into the softness of the half-paralysed attacker's private parts. The man shrieked and pitched forwards, rolling in agony. He gagged and then vomited over himself, subsiding with a whimpering groan.



I flew to the house with Pdraig two steps ahead of me. He darted through the door and across the darkened room towards the sound of Sydoni's muffled screams. I started after him and collided with a black robed figure bent over something on the floor. The invader went sprawling and my feet slid out from under me. I fell, landing on my wounded shoulder in a glutinous pool.

Pain seared through me; my arm throbbed with a burning ache. I rolled onto my back and found myself lying next to Yordanus on a floor slick with his blood.

The Fida'in attacker lurched towards me. I saw his hands, pale in the darkness, fumbling frantically over the old man's unresisting body, and realized he was searching for his knife, which was hilt deep in Yordanus' neck. We both saw the weapon at the same time and grabbed for it. I was the quicker. My fingers closed on the hilt and I jerked the blade free.

The black-robed Arab lunged again, diving across Yordanus. I tried to roll away, but his hands found my throat and squeezed hard. I swung the knife backhanded with all my strength against the side of his head. The blade entered his temple with but little resistance. His limbs stiffened and his spine arched rigidly. He gave out a startled cry and began convulsing, his teeth chattering and gnashing as he writhed beside his victim on the floor.

the door open. In the light of a single candle, I saw Sydoni on the far side of the room, bending low over Anna's slumped body. Padraig was standing over her, his arms outstretched in an attitude of protection.

The Fida'i was standing with his back to the door. He glanced over his shoulder as the door opened, saw me, and said something in Arabic. Then he saw the knife in my hand and turned to confront me.

I saw the curved blade glint in the candlelight as he swung towards me and did not wait for him to see that I was wounded.

'Now, Padraig!' I shouted, charging headlong into the Arab intruder. He threw his arms wide to free his blade, and I pulled up at the last instant as Padraig, stepping in swiftly behind, seized the intruder's knife hand in both of his. The attacker swung on Padraig and I dived in, sliding the blade up under his ribs. Blood and hot damp air spewed from the wound.

The Fida'i struck me with his elbow, catching me on the jaw and knocking me off balance. I staggered back. Breaking free of Padraig's grasp, he leapt on me, knocking me to the floor, his knife blade slicing across the side of my face as I fell.

The curved blade rose in my assailant's hand and, helpless to prevent its descent, I shoved my knife up into his throat. The blade entered under the point of his chin, passing up into his mouth. He gave a strangled cry and tried to stab down at me, but Padraig now held his arm.

Gagging on the blade, he tried to pull it free, but I held tight to the hilt. Blood cascaded over his teeth, spilling down his chin and over my hands. The wretch toppled backward, choking on his tongue. His fingers raked at my hands, but I held firm.

I have seen five of them. I said as Padraig raised me to my feet. 'We must search the house. There may be more.' I looked at the crumpled body of the old woman; I did not have to ask whether she still lived. I would mourn the dead later, right now it was the living who needed my attention.

'Where is Wazim?'

Neither Sydoni or Padraig had seen him. 'Stay here and keep the door barred,' I instructed Sydoni. She glanced down at the dead Arab and shook her head. There was no time to argue with her, so I said, 'Come along then. But keep well back.'

We proceeded through the house, but did not find any more Fida'in. Upon reaching the kitchen, Sydoni saw her father lying on the floor. With a shriek of anguish, she rushed to gather his lifeless body into her arms. Although I wanted nothing more than to comfort her at that moment, I had to make certain there were no more Fida'in about. Padraig and I continued out into the courtyard and there found Wazim standing with a spear pointed at the Arab I had kicked and left unconscious. No longer inert, he was slumped against the outer gate, glaring at the little Egyptian and fending off the jabbing thrusts of Wazim's spear.

'Well done, Wazim,' I called, hurrying to join him.

At our appearance, the Arab straightened. Wazim, glad to be relieved of this dangerous duty glanced around at us, taking his eyes from his captive. The spearhead wavered and dipped as he turned. It was a fatal mistake. The Fida'i darted forwards and, before I could call a warning, reached behind his back and whipped out a slender dagger. Wazim, sensing the attack, raised the spear, catching the Arab in the pit of the stomach.

I watched in horror as the Fida'i grasped the spear and held it, then, with a

*'The sleep of seven joys be thine, dear friend.  
With waking to the peace of paradise,  
With glad waking to eternal peace in paradise.'*

We hurried on with our search, scouring every last corner of the house, yard, and outbuildings until we were satisfied that there were no more intruders to be found. Padraig put his hand on my shoulder. 'It is over.'

'No,' I told him. 'There is one more.'

Taking up Wazim's spear which Padraig had removed from the dead Arab, I crossed the courtyard and opened the gate to find the last of the Fida'in crouching beside the wall. He was rocking slowly back and forth, cradling his crushed arm across his body. He turned his head and looked at us as we stepped out onto the road. His eyes were half-lidded and his movements sluggish as he made to stand.

Padraig, holding out his empty hands, slowly advanced towards the injured Fida'i. 'Peace,' he said. 'Salaam.'

The Arab fumbled at his belt with his good hand and brought out a knife. Holding it at arm's length, he uttered a low growl of warning, his speech slurred and muttering.

'It must be the hashish,' I told Padraig, stepping quickly beside him.

'The killing will stop,' said Padraig, extending his hand once more. 'Give me your weapon.'

At that moment, a cock crowed in the yard of a house down the road. Away in the east, night was beginning to fade. The Arab made a clumsy swing with the knife to keep us back and then leaned against the wall, his face to the rising sun.

'Amen.'

'How did they know where to find us?'

'Do you wonder?' I asked. I saw it so clearly in hindsight I could only marvel at my blindness to now. 'They must have been watching Yordanus' house in Famagusta. When he returned to Paphos, they followed him here.'

'But who could have sent them to Fam -' the priest began, and then halted. '... de Bracineaux.' Padraig turned to me, his face illumined by day's first light. 'You knew this would happen.'

'No,' I replied, shaking my head sadly. 'I feared it only.'

'Now that they know where to find us,' Padraig surmised, 'there is nothing to stop them sending more Fida'in. The Templars will not rest until they have achieved their aims.'

'We cannot stay here,' I said. Suddenly exhausted, I passed a hand over my face. My arm was throbbing, and I could feel the beat of pain in my head and all down my side.

The cock crowed again, and then everything grew strangely quiet. I swayed on my feet and my vision blurred. I looked at Padraig and I saw his mouth move but could no longer hear him speaking to me.

I remember very little after that. Only darkness, and a sense of tranquil motion ... and then, nothing.

Dearest Caitriona, my life, my light, my hope. If not for the poisoned blades of the wicked Hashishin, I should have been home long since.

As it is, I have been forced to endure another captivity - this time in a bare little cell within the walls of Ayios Moni. Abbot Demitrianos will forgive me for saying that while my clean, bare cell may be poorer by far than the sumptuous chamber I had within the caliph's palace, this new confinement is eminently superior in every way. I have had nothing but the best of care since my arrival these many months ago. Indeed, I do not hesitate to say it: if not for the healing skills of the monks here, I heartily doubt whether I would be drawing breath, much less lifting pen to write to you now, my soul.

Although I chafe at captivity once more, I endure with a high and hopeful heart, and thus resume the work which has occupied me during my long sojourn hi Outremer. Kindly Brother Tomas visits me daily, bringing the list of difficulties his diligent scribes have encountered in their patient work of copying my poor scraps of ruined papyri onto fine, clean parchments. Sometimes it is a word they cannot read owing to the deterioration of the brittle and delicate papyrus; just as often, it is likely to be my ham-fisted script that has brought them to distraction.

Thus we sit together, the gentle brother and I; he asks me to supply the

good brothers diligent hands.

Abbot Demitrianos comes to see me every day also. He tells me that for the first few weeks I was, as he puts it, not of this world. Nor was I of the next world, either, I confess, for I remember nothing save recurrent periods of light and dark - days, perhaps, except they spun like the alternating spokes of a fast turning wheel - and this along with the soft and distant murmur of comforting voices, often with the scent of fragrant smoke. They say I hovered between life and death, and the times I smelled the smoke was when I drifted close to the heavenly altar and partook of the incense of paradise.

As to that, I cannot say I am the wiser for it. Any glories that might have been glimpsed through the veil were certainly lost on me; the all-obscuring shroud remained in place, secure from my prying eyes. Thus, the secrets of the Hereafter are safe for another season.

Later, when I awoke from my long sleep, the first thing I saw -once the daylight had ceased causing my eyes to water - was Sydoni's lovely face as she bathed my brow with a cooling cloth. For she, too, has been a constant visitor, rarely absent from my side for more than a few brief moments when she takes her own much-needed rest.

The Greek monks do not usually allow women to remain behind their protecting walls beyond sunset, but the wise abbot offered a special dispensation for Sydoni. In view of the circumstances, however, it was as much a necessity as a blessing - although, I imagine they would have had a fight on their hands had they tried to send her away. She has been a perpetual source of strength and comfort to me, and I have needed both - especially in those first days after waking when, too weak to lift my head from my pallet, she fed me and nursed me. I do believe Sydoni pulled me

decide. He summoned Sydoni who confirmed that the Pida in most often poison the blades of their knives so that should they fail to strike a killing blow, even the smallest cut will eventually prove fatal. He wasted not an instant, but bundled me in a robe and put me - along with the box containing the Holy Rood - in a borrowed wagon and carried me with all speed to Ayios Moni. If it was the monks who healed me with their shrewd knowledge, it was Padraig who gave them the chance.

Poor Sydoni faced the cruel dilemma of accompanying me to the monastery, or staying behind and seeing to her father's burial. Not that she had time to linger over the choice; Padraig needed help to get me to the monastery, and could not allow her to remain in any event. He foresaw the likelihood that another attack would be forthcoming as soon as those who instigated the first began to suspect it had failed.

Nor did his watchcare end there. Far from it. No sooner had he delivered me into the capable hands of the Greek brothers, than he hastened back to Paphos to move the ship. He sailed to Famagusta and, with the ship's pilot and crew, and Gregior and Omer's help, loaded the *Persephone* with as much of Yordanus' treasure as he could without raising local suspicion. He then hid the ship in a tiny cove on the north-western side of the island - a little fishing village called Latchi near the ancient Roman city of Polis - thus safeguarding our surest and best chance of making good our escape when the time comes to do so.

Having seen to these arrangements, he returned to the monastery to help relieve Sydoni in her long and selfless vigil at my bedside. They took it in turn to pray over me, and anoint my insensate body with holy oil and medicinal balms, which they rubbed into my half-dead flesh. Along with the Greek brothers, they worked the slow miracle of my recovery.

about her. I loved her for the kindness in her face, and the joyful tears in her eyes.

And then I slept again.

This time it was a genuine sleep, deep and restful. When I opened my eyes on the next morning, Sydoni was there beside me, praying for my healing. The moment I beheld her graceful head bent over her folded hands, her arms resting on the edge of my bed, I knew I would live and not die. Each day thereafter, I enjoyed some small improvement - drinking my broth unaided, eating my first solid food, sitting upright, and the like. Although it would be a long time yet before I could walk unaided under my own strength, that day was the beginning of my recovery.

Though Sydoni and Padraig spent the greater portion of every day with me, I nevertheless had a great deal of time to think. As I grew stronger and could sustain the effort, I considered what had happened. At first my memories were vague, shadowy and unreal -through a glass darkly, as Padraig would say. But as I put my mind to it, more came clear, and still more, until I could at last recall the events of that terrible night.

Alas, it would have been better to allow the memory to sleep undisturbed. The horror of that painful night will haunt me for a long time, I fear. I lost good friends, and cannot help feeling that my own stubborn will is to blame. Padraig tells me this is foolishness, that I was not the one who sent the Fida'in to kill and recover the relic. That was Commander de Bracineaux's decision alone, and I believe in my bones that he is right.

Yet, as I have passed the days in contemplation, I cannot swear before the Judgement Throne that this is so. As much as I believe the Templar commander bears the responsibility, I have no real proof of his guilt - only

their own accord, hoping to recover the holy relic and thereby win favour with the Templars for obscure reasons of their own. Maybe that is the way of it. Again, I cannot say. And I think no one will ever know.

Thus, although I do believe Renaud de Bracineaux was the author and agent of the bloody butchery of that awful night, the fact remains that I can offer no decisive proof one way or the other. I do know, however, that I am fully to blame for my part in it. If I had walked empty-handed from the caliph's palace Yordanus, Wazim, and Anna would still be alive today. I grieve for them, and I lament their cruel deaths. Before I leave this island, I will stand beside their graves and beg their forgiveness, as I have done a thousand times already in my heart.

Padraig says that each of life's experiences has great volumes to teach any ardent enough to seek the learning. So, I ask myself: what I will take from this strange pilgrimage of mine? Try as I might to reclaim something golden from the dross of this misbegotten enterprise, I cannot help hearing Nurmäl of Mamistra's voice saying, *The enemy you meet today might be the friend you call upon tomorrow.*

I think of this, and I remember Emlyn telling me how the crusaders of the Great Pilgrimage, inflamed by blood lust and ignorant greed, slaughtered Greek and Jew, Armenian, Copt and Arab alike, recognizing no distinctions, lest any foe escape. On my pilgrimage, however, it has been the enemies of those first crusaders who have befriended me, while the friends I thought to trust were worse to me than enemies foresworn.

This has been a bitter lesson. I know now how my father feels, and why. I know why he set his face so adamantly against crusading, and against my going. I pray I may yet receive his forgiveness for my wilful disobedience.

Padraig, wise priest that he is, tells me I have no need to ask that which

assured, there is a good fast ship awaiting us, and once we loose the moorings there will be no more stopping, no more adventures, until we reach the Caithness coast.

In my heart, I am already on that homebound ship. Indeed, I can almost feel the fresh northern wind on my face and hear the ropes sing as fair *Persephone* bounds over the waves, carrying us around the broad headland and into the bay below Banvard.

What will I bring with me?

Many extraordinary memories, a few scars, a little wisdom. I will bring the parchments the good brothers have so faithfully and carefully prepared. I will bring the Black Rood, of course, and that would be prize enough. Even so, I will bring with me another treasure: Sydoni herself, to be your mother, and my wife.

Dearest Cait, I know you will love her as much as I do. I pray the Swift Sure Hand smooths the way before us, for I cannot wait to see the two of you together under the same roof. When I have my family around me once more, I promise never again to let the wild, red-heathered hills of Scotland out of my sight. That is a vow I shall gladly keep.

*November 30, 1901: Paphos, Cyprus*

Paphos glistens in the warm autumn light. The white-washed houses of the fishermen shimmer as I gaze out upon a bay of hammered silver. The late afternoon air is soft and scented with lemon blossom, and I have been drowsing over my work far longer than I intended.

Here in this ancient fishing village, bathed by the sun and soft Mediterranean air, everyday life in rain-lashed Scotland seems very far away indeed. As Caitlin and I amble along the winding streets of this charming, quiet town it is difficult to imagine the bone-chilling North Sea gales roaring through Edinburgh as winter prepares to wring the final ounce of forbearance from the tough Scottish soul before grudgingly relinquishing its allotted span to a grim and dismal spring.

I exaggerate neither whit nor whisker when I say I have spent the most thoroughly luxurious and enjoyable holiday of my entire life. Although we have been here but a few weeks, I feel as if I know the timeless rhythms of village life like a native. In short, I am enamoured of this little island and its old-fashioned, homely charms. It may be dotty romanticism - the affliction of the Scotsman abroad - but I believe the local people have taken us to heart. At least, we have been here long enough for the Cypriots to begin to accept us as something more than the novelty we obviously

So enchanted with Cyprus are we, that I find myself hankering after a little cottage in Kato Paphos where Gait and I can potter around when my days of legal beavering are over. In the scant few weeks since our arrival, I feel myself positively reborn. I suppose the years of dull lawyering have taken their toll. Without my noticing, I had gradually sunk into the deadening routines of the dutiful drudge, going about my mundane affairs. Life had dwindled down to a comfortable, not to say monotonous, sameness that is as deadly to the soul as any sin.

I know now why I was sent to this haven - and why it was necessary for Caitlin to accompany me. Over the past few weeks I have been on a quest - a pilgrimage, if you like - which has transformed me utterly. I now know who I am and, more importantly, my ancestry and pedigree. I now know that my election to the Seven was no accident of chance. I belong to an ancient and noble lineage.

In these last blessed days of light and warmth before the darkness and cold of battle descends, I have been given an inestimable gift to carry me through the bitter times ahead.

In these last days, I have recaptured something of the intoxicating recklessness and abandon that I experienced when I last put pen to paper in that white-hot blaze of incendiary vision. At the time, I truly felt that I was losing my mind; that if I left off writing, even for a moment, the tenuous thread of sanity would slip from my sweaty grasp, and I would plunge headlong into the bottomless pit of dementia, there to live out my days perpetually seeking the thing I had lost, but never remembering what it was, or why it should matter so.

Such was the fever that drove me.

I have, of course, read that much-blotted missive - not once only, but

end, I cannot say, but I know I am in good company. Like Duncan, I am learning that, however dark and uncertain the path, we never travel alone: there are angels along the way waiting to help and befriend us.

Brave, stalwart Duncan seems to me, in many ways, closer than a brother. Almost an entire millennium stands between his day and mine, and yet I can hear his voice speaking to me across the years as if he were hovering at my shoulder. However mistaken I may be, I feel as if I know him as I have known few others. Moreover, I am reconfirmed in the realization that not only are the past and present woven of the same thread, the past is neither dead nor distant; it continues to exert a genuine and potent force on both present and future, on all that is and is to come.

In these last days I have come to believe that we are none of us so estranged from our ancestral heritage that we no longer feel its age-old rhythm in the pulse and flow of the blood through our veins. The lives of previous generations can be traced in the lines of our hands and the meditations of our hearts. For we are not ourselves alone; we are all that has gone before.