

THE FORGOTTEN KING

Jonathan Dunn

The Complete Serial Novel

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CHAPTER ONE

Do not ask me how he came to be there. Let it suffice to say simply that he was there, deep in a forest of the grandest trees imaginable, each standing straight and tall, like living towers that watched all in silent meditation. There he stood, clothed in a ragged green cloth that barely reached his knees and elbows, with a longsword sheathed at his side and a fierce light in his eyes. It was a light which could mean only one thing: independence. He walked slowly through the underbrush, looking about himself as if searching for some hidden beast that might at any moment spring forth and ambush him. Such was the way of the forest: one against all and all against one, strength against strength, survival of the fittest. Not that the forest was without law, for law is more than flesh and bone. Yet the law of the forest was this: give no mercy, for none shall be given you; spare no tactic to conquer, for none shall be spared you; forget no wrong and allow no insult. Such is the kingdom of nature.

Do not ask me why he was there. Let it suffice to say simply that he was there, a solitary human amongst the creatures of the forest. A human he might have been, but still he was a beast of the field; for there was no refinement in him, no eloquence, no cultivation. There was, however, a spark within his breast, a light among the darkness that would sometimes show itself, revealing in its shadows the remnants of someone who was once there, before he had taken the course of nature and decayed into something inhuman, something of the forest.

As he stood there, a burst of energy came from behind a few bushes to his left. It was followed by a howl and a thud, then footsteps -- rapid and coming in his direction. A black bear burst forth from the bushes and charged toward him, with a swarm of bumble bees close behind, clawing at his backsides. The man leapt out of the way just in time to let them pass, and they vanished from sight as quickly as they had entered it.

Most of the forest dwellers would then have quickly slid away, counting themselves lucky to have

escaped an encounter with one of the black bears, the ruling caste in forest society. But the man was only an adopted member of the forest, and his natural propensities took over.

"It is not for the sake of pleasure that bees chase bears, but for defense. And what do bees have to defend besides honey?" Such was the thought process of the man, and it was then that the law of the forest reared its influence within him. In the deep forest, honey is the most coveted delicacy, a sweet diversion from meat and roots. The bees congregated to protect themselves, forming a monopoly of such delicacies in only a few large hives. Such an opportunity as this could not be missed.

The man took the pot that was strapped to his back, emptied it of its mushrooms, and quickly made his way in the direction from which the bear had come. It took little tracking skill to see which tree the bear had been in, for its scratched limbs displayed the bear's exact path of retreat. The man followed them upwards and soon found himself at a deserted hive of liquid gold. He quickly filled his pot and -- with a light step -- made his way down the tree, sparing no haste in order to be gone before the bees returned. He went off to the northwest -- downwind of the hive -- and after half a mile shifted his path to the southwest, entering a clear, open part of the forest. Ancient trees dominated the area, leaving no sunlight for any undergrowth; instead, it created a widespread porch: the trees pillars and their leaves a roof. A soft grass clothed the ground, littered with white bell flowers that smelled of butter -- not that the man knew they did, for he had not smelled butter for many years.

He walked slowly and cautiously, making enough noise to broadcast his presence to even the most preoccupied of animals. His task was difficult -- as risky as it was unprecedented -- for the man had recognized the bear as one of the great hunters of the region, and knew he made his home in the area. And yet the bear was known to show mercy to his prey: sparing children and their mothers, even though few other animals would substitute the pleasures of tender meat with thoughts of mercy to the newborn. It was this strange quality that drove the man onward in his dangerous mission.

At last, the man came to the cave, kicking leaves before him as smoke before the fire. The bear angrily stuck out his nose, wondering who disturbed him in his pain. When he saw the man, he remembered passing him in his retreat and turned his head slightly to the left, donning a curious expression. His ears became erect and his eyes wary. The man advanced a step and placed the pot on the ground, bowing and stepping back. The bear came forward to inspect the pot. He tasted it and -- seeing it was indeed honey -- looked up once more at the man, who merely lowered his head to show submission.

The man began making signals to the bear, communicating the recent happenings. First, he imitated how the bear was chased by the bees; then, how he retrieved the honey; finally, how he offered it to the bear as a gift. At first the bear was confused, for this was unprecedented in the forest: showing mercy to one's enemy. Indeed, under the forest law, the honey was worth more than the man's life.

The bear thought for a moment. Then -- as if relieved of a burden -- he walked up to the man, snuggling his nose against his face like an excited dog. He stood upright and let out a resounding howl, a sound that frightened every animal within hearing. Except the man; for he had nothing to fear.

The forest law was a strange thing, for while it was heartless and wild, there were great bonds that could be made between two animals -- or between a man and an animal. One of these was the Bond of the Blood Brother, joining the two as if they were of the same womb. Blood brothers became hunting partners, sharing the same game and habitation, protecting each other in the face of danger, and becoming inseparable companions.

The man had made a gamble that was quite daring, but in the end rewarding -- for he made an alliance between a being of great strength and one of great wit. The pot of honey, seemingly meaningless to those

outside the forest, represented his life -- for its value was more than his own. It was as if he had sacrificed himself for the bear. There is no greater thing that one can do, and so they became blood brothers. It cleared the way for the man to become the king of all the forest, and eventually of all the land. How does he do this? Well, you shall see soon enough.

CHAPTER TWO

The ancient forest covered all of Atilta, an island some distance off the coast of France. Atilta was several hundred miles across, and the forest hung heavily upon it, to the extent that the entire country was simply referred to as "The Forest." There were but few castles and fiefs within its borders, the lands of the more independent nobles. Some fifteen years before this time there had been a coup. The man who ascended the throne punished his enemies by sending them away from the center of power, and thereby away from hopes of riches and glory. As for the interior of the forest, it was ruled only by its own laws. There were a few inns along the principle roads, and a number of rangers, or forest dwellers. But these men kept to the canopy of the forest, rather than the ground. Our man, however, was not among them.

"Who was this man?" you ask, "Dwelling away from humanity in his own little kingdom?" And I could easily answer that question, yet I will not. For it is my duty to relate to you only such information as was known at the time. This is a history which until now has been unknown. Its presence was purposefully concealed by the royal families of Europe, until -- just as those families themselves -- it has faded away and is forgotten. With it is missing a great link between the modern and the ancient times, the light which fills what we call the Dark Ages. It is this history that I tell.

The man's name was Willard, and he knew it, though he didn't know where it came from or why it was so. It was simply Willard -- no reason, no explanation. Willard was twenty years old, which generally means he was no man at all, but liked to think himself a particularly great one. Yet, seeing as he knew no other men, this illusion -- though unhampered -- was meaningless. Willard was neither tall nor short, but somewhere in the middle. His appearance was not at a loss for this though, for his face was strikingly beautiful. His nose was long and angular, his eyes reflective. His hair was as black and as long as night, hanging down to his shoulders. There was a thick beard upon his face that masked most of his features, and made him seem secretive. He looked like a beast, but also like he could have been a prince.

The sword he wore at his waist was also beautiful: carefully crafted, with a golden handle and blade, each wrought with pictures that told the story of some ancient family. By all appearances, it would have cost the lives of as many men under human law as honey did under forest law. As to how a wild man came to be in possession of such a costly weapon, that will be seen later.

The black bear, whose name was Horatio, was gigantic: six feet tall when he stood erect on his feet, which he could do with surprising ease. His fur was black and his eyes brown, though strangely gentle. While he could not talk, he could grunt in such a manner that people could be persuaded he was speaking some foreign language. He was bright, as well, and could communicate through gestures. There was something strange in the forests of Atilta, which gave the animals a greater intelligence than mere brutes, and there was also something strange between the man Willard and the bear Horatio. They could understand one another, and communicate through signs which others could not decipher.

These things happened right at the time of year when spring gives way to summer. The region of the

forest in which Willard and Horatio lived was in the center of Atilta. Its trees were grand and spaced far apart, and the underbrush sparse and mostly of a short, soft grass. There was a perpetual twilight below the roof of the woods, and all was slow and meditative, smelling deeply of life. The air was dense and damp, a drought of water at every breath.

A few roads pierced the forest, and the main one stretched from the center of the western coast to the far eastern side of the southern coast. The forest rangers lived apart from the main population, and had a system of roads that ran among the branches of the canopy in which they lived, but we will speak of these roads later. For now, it is the road between Thunder Bay and the capital city, Eden, which concerns us. Willard and Horatio were hunting near it one day, making their way silently along its edge and tracking the animals that lingered there.

Their usual method of hunting was this: Horatio crept up to an animal and frightened it away in a certain direction, where Willard sat in ambush. It worked well. They were doing this, with Willard hidden by the roadside and Horatio some way off into the forest, when the sound of a carriage came from around a bend in the road. The bear gave Willard a questioning look, which was answered by a gesture to hide. They both knelt behind a tree, Willard alongside the road and Horatio some way back from it.

The carriage that came up was a stately conveyance, made of wood and designed to be both comfortable and defensive. This marital attitude was on account of the bandits which had risen after the coup, sanctioned by usurper's Elite Guards. Inside the carriage was a man in his late forties, dressed nicely and having the look of a feudal lord. Around him were three guards, generally intimidating with their sharp countenances and sharper swords. The lord in the carriage was conversing with one of the guards when, from the trees on the side of the road directly opposite Willard, a group of bandits leapt out and struck at the guards. The latter put up a fierce resistance to the outlaws, but eventually the guards were overcome without slaying any of the six thieves, who were each armed with a sword and covered with a tough leather jerkin.

When he saw they were defeated, and the lord in the carriage harassed and mistreated, something arose in Willard -- from he knew not where -- that made him indignant to see authority treated in such a manner. His blood quickly came to a boil, and without thinking he jumped up and onto the road.

"Hold yourselves, bandits," he cried, "And do not mistreat the innocent traveler -- or I shall hold you myself, and I trust you will not like my grip!"

The bandits were somewhat taken aback at the sight of a wild man brandishing a gloriously crafted sword and commanding them to relent with an intelligent and forceful voice. For a moment, they stared at him in confusion. But their leader, a tall man with a noble countenance -- looking more like an officer or an educated man than a bandit -- spurred his men forward, their swords drawn and extended before them. The leader reached Willard before his men, and the two engaged in a brief melee before the others arrived.

Many years of forest life had given Willard great strength and dexterity, and he seemed to have some innate knowledge of swordplay, as if he had been trained in it sometime in his distant youth. The swords of the two men met between them, each pushing with his strong wrists and eying his antagonist with raw determination. Willard made the first offensive by pivoting on his left foot and withdrawing his sword from the grapple it had been engaged in. But he did not leave it disengaged for long, for he thrust it at the bandit's stomach. The latter whipped his wrist to the side and diverted Willard's blade from its intended course. Then, pressing down upon his lips, he drove forward with an overhand swing at Willard's head. But the forest man was too quick for him, and was already to the bandit's left, behind the swing of his blade. Thus, he had the man's undefended side turned to him.

Willard's forest nature allowed him to show no mercy, and he ran the man through the stomach with his blade. The other five bandits reached him just at this moment, however, and Willard -- unable to parry five blows at once -- fell back into the forest. Seeing his protector thus forced back, the lord in the carriage hung his head, so as not to see his demise.

What he kept himself from seeing, however, was Willard draw them into the forest a few yards, and a black bear suddenly leap from the bushes and bring down two from behind with his giant claws. The others soon followed them, surprised and out-manuevered by the partners of the forest. All this took up only an instant of time, and when the lord again looked up, he was amazed to see the dead bodies of his antagonists deposited half in the forest and half on the road. He could see no one but Willard, for Horatio had again vanished behind the bushes, and he was astounded at the wild man and his marvelous sword. Willard advanced and asked the man if he was well.

"Am I well?" the lord answered, his arms flaying about in agitation, "What a question from a god to mere man! If I were rude, I should ask you how a wild man could wield such an exquisite sword, and do so with such surpassing skill. But I am not, so I shall not ask, nor what type of being you are, a king or a prince?"

Willard smiled at the man's indiscreet questioning, and opened his mouth to reply.

"My lord, I am indeed a prince," was the first thing to enter his mind, and so he said it. "Prince Willard of Bombay, and heir to the throne of the same." He was, of course, entirely making this up, but he was so invigorated with the power of battle that he said it with power and authority. The feudal lord, in his excitement, believed him.

"Tell me, Prince Willard," he said, "How is it that you came to be here, to all appearances a barbarian of the forest? If it is by treachery that you find yourself exiled to the wilderness, know that I share your fate, and that what is mine is your's as well," and his arms moved back and forth in wild gestures. "Bombay is a great kingdom, but have they fallen to the depth of regicide, even as our great Atilta?" The lord had never heard of Bombay, but at that moment, Willard's word was canonical.

"Your kindness disarms me," Willard said, and he bowed lowly and sheathed his sword. He saw the length to which his words of whim had taken the feudal lord, and so decided to diffuse the situation with a greater falsehood. "Your kindness disarms me," he said, "But I cannot accept your gifts, for I am on a voluntary exile, which every crown prince of Bombay has taken. We must learn to live as the poorest of the peasants, to face the gravest of dangers, and to feel the grandest of loves, before we can take the throne."

The mind of the lord turned over within his head. He looked at Willard's tattered clothing and said, "There is none poorer than yourself, and just now you have faced the gravest of dangers. Is not your exile fulfilled, and the throne yours?" He knew there was a missing requirement, but that was his reason for asking.

"No, good man. I must also find love."

"But can something be found if it is not sought? Come to my castle with me -- my daughter is very lovely to the eyes."

"It is not for the eyes that one seeks a woman," Willard said, growing anxious, "But for the heart."

“True, yet my daughter is also one of great heart. Come with me, then, and fulfill the last requirement of your exile.”

Willard grew worried, and only a single way of escape presented itself to him. “Very well, but not until my other duties have been fulfilled. Only then can I seek out love. When it is time, I will come.”

The lord smiled, “I am Lord Milada of Erlich,” he said, “And I will await your coming with great anticipation.” He bowed his head respectfully.

Willard did the same and, bidding the lord farewell, turned toward the forest to depart. But Lord Milada beckoned him back, “Surely, you will not go your way dressed in old rags. Let me clothe you as best I can, for I have some monk’s robes with me that will suit you well, and keep you warmer than those when the night grows chill. Besides, who is poorer than a monk? Fetch them, Hismoni.”

He said this latter part to one of the guards, all three of whom had recovered their senses; for the bandits had -- for some mysterious reason -- left them alive with little more than scratches. The guard went to the back and grabbed two frocks from the trunk that sat there, bringing them humbly to what he seemed to view as a mighty warrior.

“Two I give you, my lord, for you are surely twice a man.” The guard said this to show his respect, and it was well received by the so-called Prince Willard, who bowed and gave him a friendly nod before he again turned and disappeared into the forest, anxious to be gone. Lord Milada and his guards then continued on their way, making haste to avoid any other criminals that might be lurking there, though there were none.

When they had gone, Willard came back and looted the bodies of the slain bandits. The laws of the forest held no dishonor for those who took that which they had proved their right to by strength of arms. Willard felt no shame, for while he displayed at times an embedded sense of man’s law, he was also at times entirely devoid of such concepts as an honorable burial. In his world, the dead were eaten -- and why not, for it provided life for those scavengers that partook of them.

Without a thought, therefore, he took the leather armor from the leader and the gold pieces which filled his purse. Then he set off into the forest with his blood brother walking beside him, both feeling exalted after their great victory, a proof of their might. Willard, especially, was excited, for he had gone from being a mere wild man, to a noble prince who was fated for marriage and the throne -- if those things were even blessings. It was then that thoughts of power and pleasure outside of his beloved forest began to fill his mind. He thought of living in a castle, with servants and luxuries and honor among men. When a person has no desires, he is content; but when he is given a little, he must have more. This is what happened to Willard at that moment, when all the possibilities of life opened up to him, and he became eager to try himself outside the forest, among men such as himself.

CHAPTER THREE

Willard and Horatio had walked twenty yards into the forest when the young man had an idea. It was an idea that could not be suppressed, and he soon yielded and resolved to carry it out. It was this: he had better go and make his way in the world, to make himself worthy of the great honor that had been

bestowed upon him. He stopped walking and beckoned to the bear to come back to him, for he had wandered some distance ahead, as was their habit while hunting.

Willard had Horatio stand on his hind legs, which he could do with extraordinary dexterity. Taking one of the monk's frocks, he slipped it over the bear's head, pulled it down to his feet, and brought his arms through. It worked wonders, for with the hood pulled over his face -- in a way not uncommon among monks -- the thick, brown robes gave Horatio the physique of a very tall, fat man. The bottoms covered most of his feet, and the parts that showed did not look altogether inhuman. It was the same with the hands -- or rather, front paws. They seemed to take on the form of hands when he stood erect.

Once the robes were on, Willard walked around Horatio and looked him over from head to toe, then whistled a tune and laughed, "Horatio, you were born to be a friar." He took one more trip around the bear and then put on his own frock, fastening his sword around the waist. It was a little out of the ordinary for a monk to wear a sword, but in those places monks did whatever they pleased.

With their disguises in place, Willard led the way back to the road, and they began to walk in the opposite direction as Milada and his entourage had gone -- east. They made a good pace, and Horatio easily walked upright, making a convincing monk. They were three days on the road, and nothing important happened until the third night, when they came across an inn -- the first sign of civilization as they began to grow near to the capital city of Eden. The city was still a hundred miles away, but there were several inns and small settlements along the road as it drew near. The rest of the forest roads were deserted.

Willard still had the bag of gold coins he had looted from the bandits, so he decided he would spend the night there and see what he could see. The inn itself was small and made of wood, a low rectangular shaped building with white walls and yellow trim. Upon the door, and again on the sign, was painted a coat of arms, though done by a trembling hand. The windows were bright and cheery from the fire within, but the light was dimmed by the smoke of the same. It was already growing dark and the forest fast becoming solemn. Willard and Horatio went inside and were greeted by a blast of warm air from the rooms, carrying on it the smell of smoke and ale, the characteristic scents of a frontier inn.

The main room was almost the same shape as the building itself, for the only separate rooms were the kitchen and a private bedroom for the innkeeper, both of which were cramped. The main room served as the dining and sleeping room. A counter ran along the wall opposite the door, a few tables sat adjacent to the left wall, and the other space was outfitted with little beds of hay, upon which the traveler could lay his bedclothes. In addition to the proprietor and his wife at the counter, there were three stubby merchants with short hair and long noses sitting at one of the tables. There were also a few half-drunk lumberjacks and peddlers congregated in the far corner.

Amidst the smoke, Willard could see the fire was burning well, so he led Horatio over and took a seat at one of the nearby tables. He talked to Horatio in a pretending sort of way, to allay any suspicions that the bear was not human. With that done, he rose and walked to the counter.

"Hello there friar, is your throat dry or -- are you looking for something to eat? Some ale, some meat?" The innkeeper hailed him in a gruffy, sing-song manner, wrinkling his stump of a nose like a charging bull, and running a hand through his greasy hair to make it stick upwards in a haphazard manner, which he apparently thought made him handsome.

"A little of both, and some bread -- enough for two, if you please, sir." Willard calmly sat down right in front of the man, remaining solemn and polite despite the other's almost comical mannerisms and rhyming speech.

“Bread, beef, and beer for the gentleman here!” He called to his wife who was working in the kitchen. He then played his eyes back and forth like two rolling balls, trying subtly to ask Willard where he was from. But it was unintelligible to Willard, as it would have been to most who did not know the strange Innkeeper. Eventually the middle-aged man grew impatient and chimed at his customer once more, “I don’t recall having seen you at all, or are you new these parts, come to save some old hearts?” This allusion to missionary work among the isolated forest dwellers was brought on by Willard’s appearance, for he was still dressed as a monk.

“No, good sir, I have just finished a very long period of hermitage with my friend over there,” here he pointed to Horatio, “So we are headed toward the coast and the more civilized areas of Atilta for the first time in years. More than that, I cannot remember -- though I would be pleased to here some tales while I wait for my supper.”

“Who was king when you left, the man of right or the man of theft?” The Innkeeper pointed one of his long, slender fingers at a picture of a man in royal garb that hung on the wall behind him. He had a thick black beard, sensitive eyes, and a Romanesque nose -- apparently the ‘man of right’ to whom the Innkeeper referred.

“He was king.” Willard paused a moment and looked at the painting with curious eyes, for it was very familiar, like something he had seen so many times. Yet he could not place it. “But you seem to imply that he is king no more? How can this be?” His deep voice was driven through with emotion at this last sentence.

The Innkeeper was doused in emotion, and could only turn his head to hide his leaking eyes. “Gylain has taken the throne, and Atilta left to mourn its own.” Then silence came on the Innkeeper, and he fled to the kitchen in a passion. Willard sat in silence as he waited for the matron of the house to finish preparing his supper.

Meanwhile, not twenty feet behind him the three stumpy merchants came up to Horatio, sitting beside him at the table and hoping to have a drink with the gigantic monk. They were identical, but that one had blond hair, one brown, and one black. Their other features were the same: a long, crooked nose; two beady eyes that their big sockets made look like pearls in an oyster; and an over-sized mouth. They sat down and offered Horatio a drink, but he could only grunt, not knowing what to do.

“Have a drink with us you big brute! We are the Fardy brothers, men of patience and virtue. But though I could not care more if you despised me, I will not let my brothers be spurned. Now drink, or I will pour it down your throat like so much water down a river,” said the blond Fardy.

“He is no liar, you overgrown preacher. Mother always said I was a patient man, but when I am insulted more than it is right to bear, I can become angry.” said the brown Fardy.

“No one can steal your steel tempered temper, brother, but have you not taken into account that this monk might have taken a vow of temperance, not to take a drink for the sake of the church? That would make us his tempters, and it is better to have a millstone tied around one’s neck and be thrown into the sea, than to lead one of his little ones astray,” said the black Fardy.

“Little ones? He is no little one!” roared the first. “Size up his belly, brothers, and tell me he does not take a gallon of Atiltian scotch each meal!”

“A single gallon? I reckon two! There is nothing temperate about that monk, my long suffering brother,

and what he refrains from doing he refrains from spite,” cried the brown Fardy.

“Perhaps he has taken a vow of silence, and we would be better not to tempt him from his holy work,” returned the dark one.

“Vow of silence? Brother you are more peaceful than I and that is no virtue in my book! I saw him chatting like a drunken nun with his friend, just moments ago. The only vow of silence he has taken is against the Fardy brothers; and though for myself I do not take offense, I cannot let my brothers be bullied!” With this, the blond Fardy brought both his fists down on the table with such a thud that the board cracked and his cup catapulted into the air, landing on the brown Fardy’s head and spilling its contents all over his clothes.

Thus injured, the brown brother yelled, “By the devil, he has set us against one another, brothers. We must not let his warlike nature overcome our peaceful ways. The quill triumphs over the sword! Remain calm in the face of his outrages, my brothers!”

The noise of the thud had gotten Willard’s attention, and seeing what was happening to Horatio, he leapt up and went over to the table.

“Excuse me, dear sirs, has my companion done anything to rile your tempers?” he asked, giving them a respectful bow.

The respect served only to confirm their high opinions of themselves, and the blond brother said, “Your companion has cruelly wronged us by refusing to drink, or even to speak, with us. Though we keep our tempers, his subversive ways inflame them unto bursting.”

Willard remained calm, imparting some of his steadfastness to them by the peaceful nature of his eyes. “You must excuse my companion, for he speaks only Latin and has given up drink. I hope my apology for his conduct will excuse him?”

“Not at all,” cried the brown Fardy, “He could have signaled to us in the very least. But no, he sat there and looked at us with contempt. We must duel, here and now!”

“Duel, here and now,” repeated the blond brother.

“Perhaps we should have an arm wrestle,” suggested the black Fardy in a conciliatory voice, “For no one will get hurt, yet it is still a way for us to prove our strength against him.”

“A grand suggestion, my brother,” rejoined the blond brother as he eyed Willard’s ornate sword with greed, his merchant’s instincts kicking in, “And perhaps we can make a wager: a full suit of the finest mail for that sword. It is fair, considering the odds.” He said this with a greedy light in his eyes, for it was never heard of before that three men could be defeated by one in an arm wrestle. But Willard was confident, for he knew what his opponents did not: Horatio was no man.

“I accept your odds,” he said, “And let the people in this room take witness that the bet has thus been laid.” He motioned to the others in the inn, who had come over to see what was going on. They all assented, and looked forward to the match with great excitement.

Willard said some words in Latin that he somehow remembered from his youth -- though he could not recall why -- and made his signals to Horatio to let him know what to do. He looked at the crowd and pointed to the bear, whom they thought to be a monk, and said in a confidential manner, “Mens sana in

corpore sano.” They cheered, though they had no idea what it meant.

Horatio then put his elbow to the table and held his paw in the air, looking at Willard in order to follow his lead. The three Fardy brothers each grasped his paw with both of their hands, putting all their weight behind their arms. This was against the rules, and the crowd booed. But Willard allowed it, to add the sympathies of the crowd to their side. The Innkeeper began the countdown, “One, two, three, begin the jamboree!”

The three brothers heaved all the weight and force they could muster against the monk’s arm, and for a moment it seemed they would win, for they slowly pushed his hand toward the table. The crowd became silent and held their breath, hoping the monk would overcome the odds and defeat the rowdy Fardy brothers. Further and further down the monk’s arm was pushed, until his hand rested only an inch from the table. The crowd gasped in suspense, and the brothers began to smile at their victory. But then Willard winked at the bear, who winked back. Suddenly his arm stopped moving downward, and no matter how hard the brothers pushed, they could move it no further.

The crowd began to tremble with anticipation. Then, after a moment of such suspense, the bear began to move his hand up, and slowly it rose, despite the brothers’ desperate attempts to stop it. With an expensive suit of armor on the line, it was more than personal to them. The bear’s arm reached a perpendicular angle with the table and continued on, without the monk losing his breath. He did not tire, though the brothers were wheezing, with little waterfalls protruding from their brows. Then it was over. The bear swung his paw down in a fury and crushed the brothers’ hands beneath his. The crowd let out a loud, jubilant roar, cheering for the victorious underdog, without having any idea that it was not a man at all, but a bear.

“Who could have thought that it would be, that a single man should vanquish over three!” shouted the Innkeeper.

The three brothers were in a state of awe, and though they opened their mouths many times to speak, nothing came out. Their eyes hung open like their mouths. At last, the black Fardy whispered, as if his voice would never return, “Let us make a receipt for the goods.” The others assented, and they fetched a piece of parchment and some ink and wrote out the following:

The Three Fardy Brothers, merchants of the city of Eden, do here give to Willard a receipt for a suit of armor, it being the one once owned by the King of Atilta, before he was deposed. To be given over upon the presentation of this receipt at the brother’s store in the aforesaid city.

Signed, the Fardy Brothers.

The paper was given reluctantly over to Willard, as the brown and black Fardies looked angrily at the blond, whose idea it had been to wager the priceless armor for the priceless sword. In fact, the idea had come into his head because the metalwork on the sword matched exactly that on the armor. How was it that such a sword came to be in the hands of a monk, or a wild man? That is for later in this history.

For now, let me say that the brothers, though quick to anger, were also quick to leave it -- in spite of what they claimed -- and they became friends with Willard and Horatio after the arm wrestle was over, exchanging amiable good nights before each went off to his own bed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Willard and Horatio had just finished their morning repast in the main room of the inn, and were reclining to let it digest, as was the custom at that time. The smoke had slowly fled the room during the night, and by morning the air inside was fresh by comparison. The other guests had also dissipated, with the exception of the Fardy brothers, who now took breakfast with the two false monks.

The blond Fardy was the first to break the silence which had come down with the third plate of bacon. "I know a man when I see one, Horatio, and you are surely the most man-like of all men. Now, I will admit to eating more of this food than can safely dwell within, but you have had enough to fill me thrice over -- and that disregarding the bacon. I have heard the preacher talking about the great abyss where all is consumed, and before now I thought he was talking nonsense and rigmarole. Now I know," and he laughed heartily, joined by his brothers.

The brown Fardy laughed, "Horatio does not condescend to speak Atiltian with us laity, my patient brothers, but I suggest he will speak it soon enough with our Atiltian Scotch. Heave ho, there, Horatio: will you take this round for good, old King Plantagenet?" whereupon he poured Horatio a glass of scotch, which the bear downed without hesitation, to the brothers' great amusement.

"He is the living well itself, my brothers," cried the blond Fardy, "How else could he take so much without unseating himself? The living well itself!"

"Perhaps he has been so long without the pleasures of the table he cannot help himself?" suggested the black Fardy. "Has he not been secluded in a hermitage these last fifteen years?"

The other brothers were subdued by the thought, and left their fun with Horatio. When the meal was finished, the travelers parted ways: the Fardies headed west and Willard and Horatio east. The brothers had a tab with the Innkeeper, and went their way with the understanding they would pay on their return. Before they left, the black Fardy pulled the Innkeeper aside and whispered:

"You will travel to Eden with the news, then? Be wary on your way, for one of our ships saw The King's Arm passing the channel, and William may be about."

The Innkeeper nodded and the Fardies left. Willard, however, had to wait while the Innkeeper reckoned his account.

"Two beds for the night, and for breakfast a bite -- of plentiful stock from the downs; dear sir, it comes to three crowns."

Willard paid the liberal price from the thieves' purse and bid the odd man farewell. The Innkeeper returned it full force, holding his overwrought features tight beneath his bushy eyebrows. With their faces to the east, the two resumed their journey. The forest was lawless in those times, ruled only by its own edicts: power over weakness and strength over justice. The Inn was a small oasis amidst the desert of civilization that was the forest, but it could not hold back the tide of trees which pressed upon it with ever increasing pressure. As soon as the road bent away, therefore, the insecurity of the forest returned.

Only a short, trampled grass marked the road, while on either side loomed a cross-section of the forest. The trees were mighty towers and kept watch over the scarce undergrowth, a cloud of purple wildflowers that spread across the ground. Rather than travel in a straight line, the road wound through

the forest to avoid the trees, which were too large to be cut down for a mere path. Yet, also because of their size, the trees were spaced at least twenty feet apart, and the forest naturally open.

Willard and Horatio had abandoned their hunting formation, and now walked side by side. The inn set them to civilization, and led them to think themselves in safety. But the forest was never safe, and a shriek of horror, coming from south, reminded them of their danger.

Willard had drawn his sword before its ringing passed away. "Mind yourself, Horatio, for there is danger afoot! Fall back to the forest and hide yourself."

The bear obeyed and in a moment was invisible in the forest, though close enough to join Willard's side in an instant. Willard, meanwhile, stood in the middle of the road with his sword in a defensive position, waiting for something to happen. But nothing did. The scream was alone, and nothing followed it but the songs of birds. A moment passed, and Willard replaced his sword onto his belt. Just as he did, however, a noosed rope was thrown from a tree to the south, catching his arm and pulling itself tight.

"Remain," he whispered to Horatio, and grabbed the rope with his forest hands. His feet ate the ground, and he pulled the rope toward him with tree-limb strength. Three men tumbled out of the tree, revealing a platform fifteen feet above the ground.

"Forward, Horatio," and the bear came up.

Willard, meanwhile, had drawn his sword once more and freed himself from the rope. Then, before the three men could recover themselves, he charged them and raised his blade to strike.

"Why do you harass me? Speak, fools, or I will kill you."

"We are followers of Alfonzo of Melborough," and they hesitated to see his reaction to the name, but saw none. "We have word that you attacked Lord Milada, and so can guess your partisan feelings. Slay us if you must, but you yourselves will not last long in that case."

"I am not against recalling your bluff," and Willard menaced with his sword.

"Let them go!" a voice cried from the forest.

Willard turned his head but not his sword. The voice came from a noble man, with a lofty forehead and a short, pointed goatee. His hair was tied back in a single ponytail, his eyes large and perfectly spaced between his temples, though too near the bridge of his nose.

"Let them go," the man repeated. "You have a mark against you, but kill them and add three."

"So I have heard," was Willard's reply. "And yet we are in the forest, where the only voice of authority is the voice of strength. As it is, I reign over you; and if you would give ultimatums, first reveal the force which backs them. Otherwise, I despise you."

"Wretched brute!" the man moaned, "Is this what infests our forest, the scourge of our castles? No, I am not weak," and he whistled.

Twenty armed men revealed themselves from hidden posts around the road. On the platform, several archers came through the veil of the trees.

“So you see, I am not to be despised.”

“Perhaps, but these men are cowards, and cowards do not palpitate my heart.”

“Cowards? Say the word and they will give proof to the contrary. Why are they cowards?”

“Cowards or villains, either way -- but to me, the two are equal. A strong man does not harass the weakest, and a multitude does not plunder the minority. To do so shows weakness of spirit, and that is a weakness of strength. I have heard the scream of a single man, and is he not held by your men? Thus, I say they are cowards.”

As Willard spoke, he leapt at Alfonzo of Melborough, brandishing his sword above his head. The latter, however, had his own sword drawn and repulsed the attack with a simple sidestep, leaving Willard to his right. But Willard pivoted on his left foot and threw himself across Alfonzo's front. Their swords met again, crossing between them. They grappled for a moment, then each stepped back, unable to overcome the other.

“You are not weak, in body at least,” Alfonzo said, “But your mind I still doubt. Look about you: you are outnumbered greatly.”

“I have overcome such odds before,” and Willard drove forward with a series of blows, each of which Alfonzo parried while retreating into the forest. It seemed at first that Willard took the advantage, yet the forest was filled with Alfonzo's men.

“You allude to the assault on Milada. Yet while you escaped, he did as well.”

“Indeed, and I am pleased in that.”

Alfonzo probed Willard, and weighed the meaning of his words. Willard bravely returned the look, but as he did Alfonzo tripped him and he tumbled to the ground. He was not used to fighting creatures who could do such things. Alfonzo bound his hands before he could recover, then helped him to his feet, standing him against a tree. He paced before him for a moment, distracted, then suddenly stopped before Willard. He took his hand and struck his cheek with an open fist. Willard was enraged, but conquered his anger and did not add to his injury with insult.

“That was for the ambush involving Milada of Erlich,” Alfonzo said with a sharp smile.

“Then you mean to revenge the noble looking man? He would have lived, had he known to respect authority.”

“A fitting epitaph, traveler, and perhaps one which will soon find its way onto your own tombstone.”

“A man of the forest needs no marker but his own bones, to adorn the earth where he is buried.”

“And are you a man of the forest, monk? Yet your sword is honored by your skills with it.” Alfonzo took Willard's sword from the ground, and held it up to the light. “Tell me, wild peasant, from whom did you steal this sword?”

“From no one.”

“From a grave, then? These markings are from the royal house of Plantagenet.” He tried to pierce

Willard with his eyes, but Willard's gave a sharp riposte. They struggled for a moment, then Alfonzo retreated. "You seem more than a petty grave thief, Willard, or else I would slay you here and now. I was once tutor to the youthful Prince Willarinus Plantagenet, and for any man to yield his sword and mock his name in so doing invokes my wrath. Yet I will allow you to live, for you do not know what you do. If you did, my curse would find its end in you."

"You are an outlaw and a vagabond, even if once an attendant to a noble house. How is it that you can call curses upon any head but your own?"

"For fifteen years I have made my home in this wilderness, battling the corruption of our fair land; fifteen grueling, forsaken years filled with hardship and loneliness, undertaken willingly in penance for my sins. How much of an eternity is needed to be forgiven?"

"Time is not forgiveness. And philanthropy does not use the wealth of another. Lord Milada, whom I rescued from your fellow bandits, was he an evil man?"

Alfonzo paused. "Your lies almost deceive me, with your flawless delivery. Yet I know the ways of deceit, and I know it was you that attacked Milada. I have word directly from Hismoni, the captain of the guards."

"I am a man of the forest," Willard answered, "And if I am wronged, in action or in word, I can only rebuke it a single way. Yet I am proved weak, so I will not release the vanities of speech in my defense."

Alfonzo paused, then, "You seem otherwise than I would have thought, not the crude ruffian of evil you were portrayed as. Still, there are those who are both noble in bearing and evil in heart; but you, perhaps, are not among them."

"You say that with contempt, with the passions of hatred against a man. A common bandit cannot hate with the virtues of revenge, whether he be evil or not. If you were in noble service, you have lost it long ago."

"I have said I was the ward of Prince Willarinus, and I was with him when he was taken. A choice presented itself between my own love and my duties, and I hesitated. Both were lost. Yet I do not hate the man who did it, for some things cannot be stopped. They are determined beforehand."

"You speak in riddles, Alfonzo of Melborough."

"So I do, but you will gain nothing else from me. For now, there is silence."

With that, the other men brought Horatio forward, bound at the wrists in such a way that his paws were not revealed as such. The two were blindfolded and led for an hour through the pathless forest, headed south -- though the rangers disguised it with a crooked path. Such devices were lost on Willard, though, for a man of the forest can see without seeing. At length, they came to a stop near the sound of a waterfall.

"Be still there, Horatio," Willard whispered. "We will have them yet!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Willard and Horatio were freed from their blindfolds at the entrance to a cavern.

"Follow me," Alfonzo said as he started in.

It was a large underground labyrinth, and had long been used as a base for the rangers: the tunnels were equipped with fireplaces delved into the walls and furnished with tables and chairs. They were unable to see its true extent, though, for Alfonzo led them into a small chamber adjacent to the entrance, not twenty feet within. A wooden door separated it from the main tunnel. Inside was a table and two chairs, upon which sat as many guards, and a man was tied in the corner. Alfonzo said nothing as he committed Willard and Horatio to the guards, and left before they had been placed on the ground beside the first prisoner. After a moment, Willard spoke:

"Hello, fellow prisoner, I am Willard of the forest."

"And I am Vahan Lee of the northern shores, Friar Willard," returned the other, frightened and morose in his rich garments. "Trust me, fellow prisoner: I am a loyal Atiltian, and neither a spy nor in the employ of a foreign monarch. I am accused of things that I cannot understand."

"I said no such thing, and much less thought it, friend. We must be comrades in our difficulty. But how did a man as noble in appearance as yourself come to be imprisoned in these forsaken caverns?"

"I am a loyal Atiltian from Eden," began the gentlemen, although Eden sat on the southwestern shores of Atilta. "I cannot hide that I am wealthy, but I will contest the charge that I am of an evil disposition. Before my abduction, I was on a journey begun for the liberation of Atilta. I cannot divulge the secrets of my expedition -- lest I betray the interests of certain powerful persons -- but there is no conspiracy against the well-being of Atilta. No one loves their country more than myself." The speaker's face was confident, as if he wholly believed what he said and caused those who heard to do the same.

There was a prolonged silence, until the guards left the chamber for a moment to attend to something else. In their absence, Willard whispered to Vahan Lee, "Have you seen a way of escape?"

"The guards sometimes leave and the entrance is nearby, but we are tied."

"Not anymore," and Willard showed his hands, unbound. Horatio had removed the ropes with his claws.

"Undo mine, if you please," said the surprised gentleman.

"Of course, but keep them wrapped around your wrist, for appearances."

"As you wish. Thanks you."

Just then, Alfonzo entered the room, followed by a dozen rangers.

"Willard, I have some urgent tasks before me, and I suspect they will reveal more of your past than you would like. As for me, I think there is more to you than even you, yourself, know. When I return, I will speak with you. Until then, farewell," and he left the room again.

Their footsteps could be heard leaving the caverns, then faded into the forest. Two guards were left on duty. Willard waited, unwilling to put them on warning with a failed attempt. Half an hour later, his time came. The guards had turned their backs and were engaged in a game of dice. Willard nudged Horatio and nodded at the table where they sat. The two slipped their bonds, creeping behind them. Willard took a rock and Horatio raised his heavy paw. Then, with a thud, the guards were dispatched. They struck the floor, unconscious.

“Come, Vahan, bring your bonds to me,” and the guards were tied as they themselves had been.

“Now, to the forest! Come quickly and make no noise.”

No rangers were in sight, and the three left the cave without a fight, recovering their weapons by the outside entrance. Willard was a man of the forest, and that is where he fled. He turned south, further from the road, and led them away in haste. For an hour they continued the pace, though their direction slowly shifted to the west. Vahan looked anxiously about as they went, and his eyes leapt from one tree to the next in bewilderment.

Then, in a voice even smaller than himself, “The road is in the other direction, if I remember correctly.”

“You are a sharp man, Vahan,” Willard winked.

“Should we not be heading for it, then, as the surest means to safety?”

“Only if you seek safety in a bandit’s hands. You are lucky to have been captured by this Alfonzo, for I have seen others that are no so merciful. But you are with me, now, and even Alfonzo will not find us where we are going.”

“Nor will we, I fear! I am no enemy of Atilta, yet I would rather be its friend in the open than the wild.”

“A man who travels with a bear is not so easily lost.”

“But who travels with a bear?” Vahan looked at Horatio. “Perhaps we should ask for Horatio’s opinion?”

The bear growled lowly, like a newly woken bass.

“I did not catch what he said,” Vahan was confused.

“He speaks only Latin, and he said simply, ‘To the forest.’ Since he agrees with me, that is where we will go.”

Vahan nodded absently, thinking it the worst Latin he had ever heard. Yet he said nothing, for he knew it would not have mattered. When they had traveled three hours and were beyond fears of Alfonzo, their pace slowed and they entertained thoughts of food and drink. Vahan grew discontent with the silence, and yet could think of nothing to break it with. His face began to blow with the doldrums, his eyes to grow shady with the passing sun. Willard saw the discontent growing, and knew they had many miles to cross before they reached the river he had in mind. So, while Vahan looked fearfully into the depths of the forest, he plucked a dozen acorns from the forest floor and hid them in the folds of his frock. For a moment, he walked on as before; then he threw an acorn against a nearby tree, from which it ricocheted into the far side of Vahan’s head. The latter did not see Willard’s discreet throw.

“Willard!” he cried in alarm, “There is someone there, lurking in the forest!”

“Nonsense, we are too deep to meet anyone.”

“But there is!” Vahan grew excited. “Someone threw an acorn into my head.”

Willard laughed. “Where do acorns grow, but on the trees? They do not reach the ground without falling.”

“But it struck the side of my head!”

“The wind blew it over as it came down.”

Vahan submitted to this opinion, but kept his eyes and attentions on the forest beyond. Thus occupied, he kept the pace and did not grow worrisome about their course. If he forgot his troubles, Willard was quick to remind him with another acorn, and the gentleman was left a pleasant companion.

In the ancient forest, the sun sets early, for it falls behind the trees long before it falls behind the horizon. Soon the it became more like twilight than daytime in the forest, and Willard turned his thoughts to the night. The tree trunks were far apart, while their canopies covered the whole area, and the forest was a shaded meadow, covered with grasses and wildflowers. Still, it was more wilderness than it felt -- until nightfall. Then, the wilderness awoke. It was important, therefore, that they find a camp that was secure. As Willard had passed through the area many times before, he knew of a camp and had been leading them to it. Just as twilight came, they reached it: a circular clearing forty feet across, with berry bushes growing in the sunlight and a pile of rocks and branches collected by the river that ran on its southern side.

They had grown a fire within a quarter hour, and surrounded themselves with a ring of logs, rocks, and pickets -- sticks driven into the ground until they formed a rude wall. While they prepared camp, Vahan Lee gathered berries, and when the labor was finished they sat down on the grass to enjoy their repast. Once they had filled themselves, all three leaned back on a log parallel to the river, facing the northern side of the clearing.

“Today has gone strangely for me,” Vahan said.

“Nothing that happens is strange,” answered Willard, “For what is strange but that which does not happen?”

“Still, you must think it a terrifying place: the labyrinth of a bandit, whose occupation is theft and murder. No one loves this country more than myself -- I would never betray nor sell its secrets to a foreign monarch -- and it pains me to see such lawlessness.”

Willard laughed at his oddly patriotic companion. “There are worse bandits than Alfonzo. The Fardy brothers left the Inn as I did, but he did not take them, and they had more money than I. Why were you taken, for wealth?”

“No, for they left me my gold,” and Vahan took a bag of coins from his shirt. “Yet I cannot be mistaken for a foreign agent, nor someone who is not native to this great land,” but Vahan’s loud declamations were belied by his very foreign accent.

“We are free now, and Alfonzo’s intentions -- whatever they were -- no longer concern us,” Willard

answered, then fell silent.

The trio enjoyed the scene for a moment, before they were roused by the sound of heavy footsteps passing rapidly through the forest. At least a dozen people ran in their direction, and the three companions jumped to their feet just as the first of them were coming into the far end of the clearing. The light was beginning to fade, and in the twilight the newcomer's faces could only barely be made out. Yet as soon as Willard saw them and they saw Willard, both came to a halt, struck over the head by amazement.

"The devil!" Willard cried, "How can this be? Rouse yourself, Horatio, for it appears we have a fight on our hands!"

CHAPTER SIX

The part of the cavern in which the prisoners were kept was uncouth and roughly equipped. The deeper interior sections, however, were furnished with means of both comfort and security. The long, dark passages were lit by means of fires, burning at all times in small indents which the rangers had carved into the sides of the natural cavern. These formed rude fireplaces that also heated the cavern. Off the main tunnels were smaller caves or rooms, where the individual rangers made their homes. These were provided with couches and tables, so the life of the forest men was to some extent civilized.

These things were furnished through moral means, not from that which was taken from the travelers whom they captured or robbed. Alfonzo's bandits differed from the others in this respect: they were supported by the labor of their own hands, not by that which they plundered from others. The caverns were rich with iron ore, and the bandits used this natural resource to create all types of weapons and armor. Other blacksmiths lived in the city under the control of Gylain, and those who opposed his tyranny could not arm themselves. The rangers under Alfonzo, however, worked to change this, and the result was a well-armed rebellion. The very fortress itself was crafted by these means, for as they mined into the vast rock that surrounded them, they enlarged and improved the caverns themselves, cultivating the natural defense and shelter with unnatural means. It was thus that they were strong.

They were also uncommonly selective as to which travelers they plundered, and most ordinary citizens passed by without feeling their watchful eyes upon them. More often than not, they protected loyal travelers from bands of outlaws sanctioned by Gylain. Milada of Erlich was a leader of the loyal resistance, the rebellion, and the propagation of the news of his travels through the forest only confirmed what Alfonzo had long been unwilling to accept, that there were traitors within his midst.

After he retired from his meeting with Willard, Alfonzo went to his room, the deepest in the caverns, where he sat in reflection for a few moments, stroking his pointed goatee and looking altogether perplexed. There was a knock at the door, but Alfonzo did not seem to hear it. After waiting a moment, the one who had knocked slowly entered the room. He was a mid-sized man, with well-kept blond hair and thin, contracted lips.

"Blaine, it is well that you have come, I have many questions that need answered," Alfonzo looked up, showing that he had indeed heard the man's entrance.

"I have just returned from Eden, but I, too, bring only more questions. Monice told me that you have taken prisoners, yet I was in too much of a hurry to look at them and passed directly through to you. Are the rumors concerning Milada true?"

"Yes, and one of the prisoners is suspected, on account of Hismoni's word. But I will not punish him yet, for there is something I do not understand." Alfonzo was also sensitive to justice, and he would not punish Willard because of rumors or circumstantial evidence. That was his nature, restrained by his morals from doing any injustice, out of heat or revenge.

"Perhaps it was not him," assented Blaine, "But there are rumors."

"What rumors?" asked Alfonzo, knowing Blaine too well to be fooled by his talk of rumors and the opinions of others.

"The men say he is like Willarinus, that he calls himself Willard, and that he carries a royal sword, though clothed as a monk. Is it not possible that the boy survived in the forest after his capture?" Blaine spoke this latter word quietly, and even then it brought a pained look to his superior.

"Captured, yes, do not be afraid to say it, Blaine, for I know my faults as well as any man. It is unlikely, to say the least. Willarinus was a strong child, but a five year old in the great forest? I would jump for joy if it could be so, yet I am wiser than to chase the wind and ask favors of the air."

"The men think that perhaps we should look into the matter, that if he is not Willarinus himself he may hold an important clue, since he has the royal sword."

"I mean to, Blaine, but my mind is preoccupied at the moment. There are other matters to deal with." He looked away from the fire to get a glance at Blaine, who shared his anxiety in the unstated matter.

"There are some who say a man's worst enemy is himself, Alfonzo; and perhaps second are his men. If there is treason we must find it out, for the situation is growing precarious indeed, and I fear the next few weeks will see us either victorious or ruined."

"Yes, that is the course," Alfonzo said, "For these things have long fermented. The end has already been decided, and I fear -- through dreams and apprehensions -- that it will not turn out as I desire. I see many things, scattered here and there -- and yet who knows? Perhaps my worries resurface as I sleep, and I enchant myself once more with thoughts of the future, thoughts which I myself have planted, watered, and harvested."

"Perhaps, but let us hear these thoughts, for it would not be in vain."

"Perhaps not, but then vanity is never known until it is possessed. I think of Willarinus, and the night he disappeared; I think of William Stuart, and how he was betrayed; I think of de Casanova, and when he will return to haunt us; I think of the legends and the prophecies, of Atlantis and Eden. But most of all, above these other things, I think of Celestine, and my love for her."

Blaine hesitated. "I do not envy you your position as the strategist. I think merely of the execution, and am soothed by the thousand little details and questions of action that arise. I can forget the past, and so it does not bother me. But to concentrate of these things? The rumors I have heard, though, are that William will never return, nor de Casanova. As for Celestine, know that she is faithful to you, and that Gylain cannot break her. If men fear those things from jealousy, you need not, and so your lot is easier in that respect."

“Yes, but though I fear not that others do not enjoy her love, I would rather that I could do so myself. I do not forget her face or her voice or her mind, nor the feelings which she evoked within me. But I forget, through the years, the calmness of her features and the patience of her heart. I recall their impression upon me, yet not their origins; their effect, yet not their cause.”

“She waits, enduring and hoping all things. Eden is strange at present -- the rumors say it is as slow and carefree as ever, on the surface, but agitated beneath. The Floatings are filled with those who would overturn Gylain, and we can expect their help. But only if we have occasion to ask for it.”

“True, dear Blaine,” returned the leader, “I wonder when the Fardy brothers will come to bring us news. Did you not speak with them in Eden?”

“They were away on business, the rumor was that they would be through these parts a few days ago. I’m surprised that you have seen no sign of them.”

“We have seen signs, to be sure, but they have not come out to counsel with me, as is their habit. They left the Inn earlier this morning, but we followed our prisoners instead. I have Osbert on the road watching, with orders to report anything that looks odd.” Alfonzo paused for a moment, listening to the sounds of footsteps coming down the hall. He continued, “Perhaps that is him coming this way, now.”

As he spoke the door flew open to reveal a panting man, shrouded by a look of apprehension. “Alfonzo, I have news of the Fardy brothers!”

“Go on, Osbert,” for that is who the man was.

“They are captives of Montague -- held, no doubt, for some evil purpose. I followed them along the road until they broke off into the forest, a few miles east of here and heading south.”

Alfonzo leapt to his feet, “Captives of Montague’s band! They will be destroyed before the sun sets! Has Gylain dared to assassinate the wealthy brothers while they are out of town on business? A cruel move, and a daring one as well. I pray to God it does not work!”

“The path they took makes me think they return directly to Eden, and do not mean to dispatch them in the forest, where none are around to witness the execution.”

“Than they are sure of themselves. Gylain moves swiftly when the time has arrived.”

“And so must we.”

“Yes, and so must we,” Alfonzo said, “Let us be off!”

With that, he rushed out of the room, followed closely by Blaine and Osbert. When they had reached the main hall of the cavern, which connected each of the tunnels together, Alfonzo stopped. “Osbert,” he said, “Assemble the men and have them prepare to leave immediately, leaving only two guarding the prisoners. Blaine, I know your zeal, but I must ask you to rejoin the forces around Eden. This move of our opponents was unexpected, and shows they are willing to take risks, and that they feel they have the strength to confront us directly. It may work to our advantage that they press ahead hastily, but still, I would rather have a trusted man watching the city than his sword tracking the Fardy brothers. Make haste, therefore, and remember Jack Clifford, the Jester; for if the Fardy brothers have been taken, they will certainly take him as well. Here we must part. Farewell.”

Once he had finished giving his orders, the other two dashed off to fulfill them, and he entered the prisoner's chamber, followed by the men who had begun assembling at the cavern's entrance. He calmly told the prisoners that urgent business required his departure, and took their leave. When he regained the main tunnel, Osbert had returned.

"Good, you have brought the men, Osbert. Are there no more than twelve left to us?"

"No, sir," Osbert answered, "The rest were sent to Eden and to patrol the forest to the north and west. These are all we have to spare, unless we take the blacksmiths."

"No, this is enough," was the answer.

With that, Alfonzo put himself at the head of the dozen rangers and left the cave at a brisk pace, unable to disguise his anxiety. But then, just outside the entrance to the caverns, he paused once more and turned to Osbert, who walked beside him.

"The Treeway goes faster," he said, "But can we use it? The nearest entrance is out of our way, and Gylain would discover it if Montague were to escape us alive."

"We should take the ground," Osbert replied, "That is my judgment."

"Very well," he said.

Then, turning to the west, Alfonzo set off at a run, hoping to overtake his longtime enemy, the terrible Jonathan Montague.

"The final battle for Atilta begins," Alfonzo said as the rangers sprinted through the forest, "The die has been cast, and all we can do now is turn the table."

"And let it be on them," Osbert answered.

"I fear it shall fall upon us all, and ere the end has come, many things will have been sacrificed for the freedom of our people that we, at this moment, would not be willing to sacrifice. That is the nature of a revolution, Osbert, and remember my words when the final days have come. But for now, we must work to stay afloat until the land shall sink, one way or the other. Forward, then, and let us overtake Montague before the Fardy brothers are lost to us forever!"

With that, he quickened his pace, and said no more.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Shear my shanks and call me crazy, my brothers," said the blond Fardy, "But it is my belief that the monk we have just left is no human at all. Perhaps he is a god or an animal, but he is no human. Write down my words, for I will claim them later!"

The morning sun filtered down through the lofty canopy that extended itself above them, casting shadows that showed it to be no later than nine o'clock in the morning. Behind them, half hidden by a curve in the road, was the Inn where they had spent the night, and before them stretched a desolate road through the deep forest country. The air was warm and pleasant, slightly moist, and their stomachs were filled.

"Yes, brother, he was hardly a man, for I happened to grasp his hand from underneath the thick robes that shrouded him, and it was as hairy as my head." The brown Fardy raised his hand to his scalp and rubbed it vigorously to prove his point.

"Perhaps he wore gloves made from fur, brothers," the black Fardy said. "Besides, if he were an animal he would not speak Latin."

The other two assented hesitantly, sorrowful at the thought of all the witty remarks that were lost to them. Still, their minds -- as fleeting as their tempers -- were quick to light upon a new subject for their bombasts.

"I know you are slow to anger and swift to love, my brothers," began the blond Fardy once more, "And I have seen your patience hold through many troublesome situations, though strained to the utmost. I believe I can justly declare that though many fallen mortals suffer from an angry disposition, my brothers, we are not among them."

"I see your point, brother," answered the brown Fardy, "Just as our dear old mum used to say, 'The road to health is temperance and wealth.'"

"What the devil! Why are you always interrupting me?" exclaimed the blond Fardy, giving his brown haired relative a firm smack on the head. The latter responded with an equally firm slap on his brother's right cheek.

"As the good book says, 'Whoever slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also!'" With that the brown Fardy slapped his brother again on the other cheek. "I will even prove my pious character by adding another smack, you wretched villain. I will go the extra mile, as the bad book says."

"Perhaps it meant to refrain from taking any revenge, rather than doling it doubly," suggested the black Fardy, causing his brother to lower his hand in mid-air. "What was it that you were saying, my blond relative?"

"As I was saying, before being interrupted by my patient and long suffering brother," the other went on as if no altercation had taken place, "My brothers are very calm men of business, and it is a misfortune that--"

Here the brown Fardy interjected in cold sobriety, "I protest, brother, for if anyone is a patient, forbearing soul it is yourself, and I will not allow myself to be counted above you in that, or any other, regard."

A flush rose in the blond brother's face, and he roared, "You are by far my superior in terms of gentleness and self-control, and to prove that it is so, I will do this," and he gave the brown Fardy a furious blow to the face, causing him to reel under its force and almost fall to the ground. "I challenge you to show, after that display, that you are any less subdued than myself."

"I will not yield, patient brother, that I am any more virtuous than you, and I must defend your honor by raising you another level. Do not think that I enjoy this, yet it must be done to preserve your good name."

With that the brown Fardy gave the blond Fardy such a blow that the latter was thrown backwards.

The violence promised to soon get out of hand and into the fist, for neither would yield that he was any more patient and slow to anger than his brother. Luckily, the black Fardy offered a way of escape.

“Perhaps, my brothers, you are both possessed of such an enormous amount of patience and gentleness that there can be no rivalry. For if two cups overflow, it is certain that neither contains more than the other.”

The two assented to this opinion and became genial once more, as if nothing violent had passed between them.

“I was saying it was a pity that we lost the suit of armor, because of its value, both in gold and as the royal armor of the house of Plantagenet. Yet it is lost, and to a monk. It should be worn only by the king.”

“His sword would have been a fitting addition to it, if we had won, and I can only fault myself for being too risky in thinking of such a venture,” the brown Fardy replied.

“If anyone was risky it was I, and I will hear nothing else,” was the answer.

The brown haired brother opened his mouth to refute that remark, and another storm cloud looked as if it were about to burst. The situation was eased, however, by the voice of the black Fardy.

“Perhaps it was our destiny to commit that risky act, my brothers,” he said, “But look, a lone monk approaches from the north.” He pointed his finger at a portly monk that was coming toward them on the road, with a long, droopy black mustache that came to his chin, and a pair of plump lips. The Fardy brothers composed themselves, putting on their much proclaimed -- and little shown -- calm business-like appearance.

“Hello there, fellow travelers: a fine morning, is it not?” hailed the approaching monk as he drew near to them. “I am Erwin Meredith, a friar from the castle of Milada of Erlich.”

“And we are the Fardy brothers,” they chorused, pretending not to recognize him. “I am the blond Fardy, and these are brown and black -- my patient, long suffering brothers.” The speaker bowed low to show his humility. “Do you bring news from Lord Milada, about a certain meeting that may have taken place between the nobles?” He asked it as though it were a polite trifling.

The monk played ignorant to the true meaning of the question and answered, “He had recently returned when I left, yet it is not my purpose to bring news. I am on a less joyous mission.”

The brown Fardy put aside his jocularly and blinked his moonshine eyes at the monk, “If we can be of service to you or Milada, only let us know and it will be done.”

The monk looked about them, searching for any spies. Then, after a moment, he said, “Very well, I will make my mission known to you. Ivona has disappeared from the castle, and there is no sign of her anywhere. The night it happened was defined by a fierce storm -- the kind that have been more common of late -- and we fear Gylain used it as a cover to kidnap her.”

The Fardy brothers were greatly surprised, for they had come to know her well on their trips to the nobleman’s estate. Yet they also knew of her firm determination, and of her aspirations.

“Perhaps she only went to fulfill her vow to the church,” suggested the black Fardy.

“By Beelzebub!” he cried, “Ivona would never run away from her beloved father. Have you seen or heard nothing of her?”

“Not the slightest sign, friar,” replied the blond Fardy, “But I will tell you this: we have just passed two men claiming to be monks. One was huge and possessed a powerful arm that defeated the three of us in an arm wrestling match. The other had an agile tongue and a richly ornate sword. They were out of character for a monk, especially the man Willard.”

“Yes, but his eyes were true and his face noble. They were in no hurry and were not hiding anything -- if Ivona was with them, we would have seen her. But you can question them yourself, Meredith, for they left the Inn only moments ago. Hurry, and fear not, for I believe they are trusty, and the Innkeeper felt the same. We will hurry on to the castle and speak with Milada. Until then, farewell.”

With this, the Fardy brothers and Erwin Meredith departed in haste, anxious of the news to be gathered. The brothers became at once solemn and noble of bearing, a transformation that always overtook them when danger showed itself. Swift to anger and swift to duty -- such were the Fardy brothers.

“This news is sorrowful,” said the brown Fardy.

“Let us hurry,” the black Fardy returned, “My blood grows cold.”

Five minutes later their quick pace left them alone in the forest, Meredith being a good distance away and, in the forest, as good as gone. They almost ran down the road, without a word between themselves, each absorbed in his own thoughts. Then, they were disturbed: a shrill whistle resonated through the forest.

“What have I heard, my brothers? Answer, for I am impatient to know.”

“A whistle,” said the black Fardy, “But not from a bird.”

As he spoke, a dozen armed men leapt from the trees and surrounded them.

“Outlaws!” cried the blond Fardy, “If only we had brought our swords.”

“It would have made little difference,” the leader of the bandits answered them in a calm voice.

“Montague!” the black Fardy recoiled, “Montague, release us at once, for we are peaceful citizens. Gylain would never arrest us, for we have done no wrong.”

“We will see,” was the only answer. Montague raised his eyebrows to his men, and they came forward to bind the brothers’ hands.

“Gag them,” he added, and it was done.

The leader of the band was the infamous Jonathan Montague, Gylain’s lieutenant. His short, black hair was combed forward at the temples after the fashion of the Romans, and his face smoothly shaved. He wore a dark, close fitting tunic with trousers that reached his ankles, and a pair of well-worn boots. The smug smile that stretched itself across his lips gave as good a definition as any to his character -- without

conscience or remorse.

He led them at a feverish pace into the forest, unwilling to risk lingering where the rebels frequented. They turned south at a sharp angle, before adjusting it to the westward some time later. When the road was far behind them, a single man came down from his perch in a tree on the other side of the road, where he had been hidden. It was Osbert. He quickly looked over the spot, grabbing a few fallen items before rushing off to the caverns that formed the headquarters of his companions, to inform them of the Fardies misfortune.

“Gylain is either brave or foolish,” he said to himself as he ran, “I pray it is the latter!”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Once they were safely away from the road, Montague, his men, and the Fardy brothers made their way swiftly and stealthily through the ancient trees. Montague led the way, with his stern, oceanic countenance. The brothers, behind him, were bound by the hands, and their mouths were gagged, albeit loose enough to allow their breathing to keep up with the pace. It was evident from his demeanor that Montague did not wish to confront Alfonzo’s band, though he was superior in numbers, and they sped on without halting until the noon hour.

Then, seeing they were far from his enemy’s headquarters, Montague halted and had a light meal set out for lunch. It was of the usual forest cuisine: venison and double-baked bread, with only water to accompany it. Montague was many things, but one thing he was not was a glutton, and neither did he allow his followers to be. Rather, they were always in a state of half-hunger, the best condition for physical performance. They had stopped in the shade of a particularly large oak tree, in the center of a small clearing. The sun came on from directly overhead, so their shade was complete. Once a guard had been set, the Fardy brothers were set loose.

They sat across from Montague, and at first were silent, awed at the efficiency and ruthlessness of their captors. Their eyes blindfolded at first, the brothers had not been able to see anything until an hour or two into the forced march, and their utter surprise at being caught and secured in so swift a fashion subdued the voices of even those talkative persons. Yet their blood was gotten up as fast as it had gotten down, and their temperament was as shifting as a northern wind.

Montague was the first to speak, saying in a polite way, as if his form would forgive his substance, “My dear sirs, I hope your journey with us has thus far has been a pleasant one?”

“If we were horses, and used to a bit in our mouths and a rope around our necks, maybe, but we are not,” the blond Fardy answered. “And neither are you, I believe, but rather one of the horse’s close cousins -- the ass!” It was quite evident that his blood had gotten up to a complete boil, for his face was flushed and his eyes swam in contempt.

His brown haired brother added to his harangue. “This is an outrage, and you will be brought to justice, you vagabond. Even the wicked Gylain will join the chorus of death at your trial, for not even he would dare to approve of such a shady adventure as this!”

"Perhaps this is merely a misunderstanding, and he thought us to be criminals, merely doing his duty as citizen?" asked the black haired brother.

"A mistake, perhaps," the blond brother went on, "I wouldn't doubt that from such a half-headed lump of lunacy as our captor here, the infamous Montague." He ended this outbreak with a questioning look, the least polite way he could think of to inquire the present title of the lead bandit, though he well knew his true position.

"Captain of the guards -- or, in military terms, commander-in-chief -- of His Majesty, King Gylain of Atilta's forces."

"Despot, maybe, but never king; and the island itself will sink into the sea the day he is called Gylain of Atilta. May it never be!"

"Your petty resistances are futile, and of no hope. What type of man would risk his life for a title, for a noble man who was king before and is now powerless?"

"I would," the brown Fardy stated matter-of-factly.

"Indeed. But your resolve will soon be tested, and that of your brothers with you. For you are to be hung."

"And would your wretched master Gylain not suffer us to be arrested in the city, in plain view of the people? You misjudge -- and wish us to as well -- if you think we will die weakly in disgrace, or that we will confess and be spared. If our petty rebellion was as out of favor with the people as you say, than you would spare no ritual in condemning us in public. But as it is, you are afraid of the populace, and so take us in secret, where none can come to rescue us." The blond brother gave Montague a steadfast look as he said this, showing his will remained strong.

Montague answered calmly and with a slight, sardonic grin, "You act as if you were in the right, as if you had morality on your side, but is it so? Does not even the church support Gylain, and do not the scriptures say that authority on earth is given by God?"

"Yes," returned the brown Fardy, "And just as David waited for Saul to be deposed in God's timing, so will we wait, and then, when the time comes, we will strike you and your Goliath down with only a single stone! As for the church, you bring it to follow you by threats and bribes, and not through reason or right. The church has power as the servant of God, but if it rebels against him and is no longer his servant, than what power has it? It is then only a fool, looking to a hope which it does not believe. So it is with you and your tyrant." As he spoke, the brown Fardy was filled with anger, and he struck Montague in the face.

The guards behind the brothers quickly grabbed them and bound them once more. Montague, however, gave them no more than a haughty look, for his self-control kept his anger within him. Yet he was not any weaker nor less angry because of it, and he carried out his duty silently, knowing they would not survive their punishment.

The restive attitude of the noon hour was broken by the brothers' outrage. Unable to remain at ease, the party set off once more in the same direction and at the same pace. They were heading southwest, through the deep forest. On they went and on it came, never reaching an end. After one tree, another arose, and behind it a thousand more. Yet the trees were not noticed after a time, instead blurring together in a haze of nature, an atmosphere of foliage rather than the foliage itself. Montague drove them forward, himself in the lead, and his restless feet chasing each other beneath him, pushing each other

forward. The Fardy brothers were directly behind him, and then the rest of the bandits -- or marshals, if that word can be so manipulated as to apply to them. At length, when it was half past six in the evening, Montague stopped and turned to his men.

"The stream we seek is slightly south of here, I believe, and if we turn we will run into that clearing which we often use for camps. Do you have the same idea of where we are, Horace?" This last part was addressed to his deputy, with whom he often checked his coordinates, for in the depth of the forest it is easy to become lost.

"Yes, sir," came the answer, "Half a mile south."

"Very good," was Montague's only reply, and they were off at the same grueling pace as before, this time heading due south.

After ten minutes, they slowed their pace and unbound the Fardy brothers.

"I hope you are well rested," Montague said, "For you will be practicing your camp craft tonight. I hope you have no objections, but someone must do it."

"Indeed," the black Fardy said, raising his head proudly, "Should we send an ass to do a horse's duty?" and he set off walking before Montague, his brothers at his side.

The other bandits began to collect sticks from the ground, for use in creating the camp and fire, and Montague was left alone with the prisoners. They walked several yards in front of him.

The darkness was just beginning to become greater than the light, the wind to turn cool instead of warm, and the birds to sing instead of chirp. The shadows covered the whole ground, and night was coming on fast. Soon they drew near to the clearing, which was generally where they had thought it to be. Through the twilight they could make out the edge as they drew near, and Montague pushed the Fardy brothers forward.

"Go on, you should get an early beginning," he said, and turned around to look after his men. He had no fear of them attempting to run, for the ancient forest was a truly frightening place, when it was not well known, and the brothers could not have escaped. There was nothing around but the forest itself.

"We will have him, sometime, my brothers," the blond Fardy said. "And as they say, patience is a virtue when you cannot do otherwise."

"They won't squeeze us dry, without a bit of work first," the brown Fardy added.

"Let us hope that work is not done by us," the black Fardy sighed as they entered the clearing, thinking of the work that stood before them.

Yet that was not all that stood before them.

"What is this?" the brown Fardy cried, "It appears we are not alone!"

"Indeed," the blond brother answered, "But who can it be?"

There, laying behind a row of sturdy pikes driven into the ground, sat two monks and a richly dressed gentleman. The one monk was enormous, and the other had a golden sword on his belt. Montague was a

few paces back and facing the other direction, apparently unaware of their surprise.

“We are free,” the black brother whispered, and the three dashed toward the camp, in haste to make it before they were noticed.

As they were running the monks leapt to their feet and the smaller one looked at them closely in the twilight. When he recognized them, he called out, “The Fardy brothers! How do you come to be here?”

Their faces bent with an urgent gesture to be silent, but it was too late. Montague had heard.

“Forward, men, they are escaping,” he cried as he dashed forward.

Willard pulled one of the palisades from the ground, making an opening through which the brothers entered. When they were in, he replaced it.

“What is the hurry?” he asked, giving each of them a stout stick to defend themselves with, since their demeanors made him think a great enemy was just out of sight.

“He is coming,” they breathed.

“Who?”

“Montague!” they chorused, pointing to the edge of the clearing, where Montague and his men were advancing toward them.

“Prepare yourselves, then,” Willard said, “For we fight for our lives!”

As he spoke, Montague began to charge.

CHAPTER NINE

The camp that Willard had made was surrounded by the clearing on three sides, and by the stream on the other. Around it they had placed a rude wall of stones and logs, and inside that a series of pickets or palisades -- sticks driven into the ground to form a make-shift fortification. It would not hold back an army, yet that was not its purpose. Instead, it provided a first line of defense in case of an attack by either wild beasts or wild men. It was the sort of precaution that Willard always took, greatly to his advantage in this situation.

Since the camp was made for only three of them, it was rather small, a semi-circle of nine feet in diameter with the straight side against the stream. With the addition of the Fardy brothers, their number was increased to six, enough to man the walls but not enough to challenge the bandits, who were twelve strong.

At the first sign of the charge, Willard drew his sword and flourished it round and round above his black-haired head, calling out in a defiant manner, “Come forward to your destiny, cowardly vagabonds!”

To many people it would seem foolish to provoke the anger of those who are hostile in intent and superior in number. Yet Willard was wiser than most, and he knew that if he was able to draw them into an attack before they had prepared themselves -- and when they were in the heat of anger -- the coolness of the defenders could win the day.

"There was never a more steadfast citizen of Atilta than myself," Vahan began in a trembling voice, "But it is my opinion that we would be better advised to parlay than to fight, for our lives are surely forfeit in the one case and not in the other."

"Yes, but it is in the case of surrender that they are forfeit. Man the wall in silence, then, and leave the planning to us," roared back the blond Fardy, full of animation at the thought of bloodshed.

Willard turned and answered Vahan's concerns in a gentler and less contemptuous manner.

"We do not doubt your loyalty, Vahan Lee," he said, "Only your judgment, or should I say knowledge, of the character of bandits. To surrender is to admit weakness, and that is the most despised short-coming in the forest, not to be treated lightly or with compassion."

"Yet Alfonzo of Melborough was kind to us, and we were treated as free men. Only the ropes held us prisoner, and even those were loosely tied."

Here it was the brown Fardy's turn to roar at the timid Vahan.

"Alfonzo of Melborough is no bandit!" he cried, "But an upright and virtuous man. Those bandits are led by Montague, and though I and my brothers are three of the most patient and long-suffering folks to be found, the outrages committed against us by that infamous lowlife are enough to boil my blood and cook my virtuous side like a cony in a cook's pot. Read my words, you loyal Atiltian of a Frencher -- for such is your accent -- if we fall into his hands it will be more than a cony that's cooked!"

Willard laughed amid the danger, "Yes, and if I remember rightly your patience was tried just as harshly by my silent brother Horatio, the monk. But come now, they charge from the front, and look, there," he pointed across the stream, "A few creep around to the back. You, brown and black Fardies, keep them occupied, even if you have to cook their goose."

"Cook their goose and cut 'em loose!" cried the brown Fardy, brandishing his quarterstaff -- as the stout sticks were called in those days when used as weapons -- and spinning it round his head to display his zeal. It was, however, too zealous for the blond Fardy, to whom he gave a good whack on the head on the second swirl, having misjudged the distance.

"Patience is a virtue," he said, "But so is vengeance, and if I must choose, I choose the latter!" With that he returned his brother's blow two-fold, with a down stroke to the shoulders and a thrust to the ribs.

"Perhaps patience is the more dominant virtue, though," said the black Fardy.

"I agree with you there, brother of mine," bellowed the brown Fardy, "Yet I will give no one a chance to call me more virtuous than my brother, so I must choose vengeance myself."

He gave his brother another full swing with his quarterstaff, but the blond Fardy ducked and it passed right over his head with a swoosh. It was not a vain swing, however, for just at that moment the two bandits whom Willard had warned of reached the camp walls, unseen in the commotion. They stooped

as they came, and were just standing up to attack. But the brown Fardy's quarterstaff made sure they did no such thing, and as their heads rose above the pickets it swung by and smashed the one on the right, driving his head into his partner's, and knocking them both down cold.

"The Lord has rewarded my virtue!" exclaimed the brown-haired brother.

Willard was about to say something, but before he could the rest of the bandits reached the walls, and he had to focus his attention in their direction. There were eight in the front, two having gone to the back, and two to the left. The pickets only reached chest-high, leaving the defenders to grapple with the bandits over top of it, their quarterstaffs against the others' swords.

Two of the attackers raised their swords above their heads and drove them down hard on the blond Fardy, but he grasped both ends of his quarterstaff and blocked them both, pushing forward with great strength until his opponents were tired. He then slid his left hand down the length of his staff and swung it fiercely at the midsection of the first bandit. Upon receiving the blow, the latter fell to the ground, but his companion took the opening that the blond Fardy left and drove his sword at his right shoulder with a strong down stroke. The blond Fardy was able to position his staff so as to block the blow, but his grip was not firm and the sword pushed it sharply into him, knocking him back and giving his shoulder a resounding blow. It was not as bad, however, as it would have been if he had not partially blocked it. Seeing his brother in danger's way, the black Fardy gave his opponent a quick thrust to the face and diverted his attention to his brother's rival, giving him a full blow to the back.

Meanwhile, on the other side, Willard and Horatio were charged by three of the bandits. Horatio had no weapon but his paws, which gave the bandits the idea he would be an easy prey. They were dead wrong, of course. The bear dodged to the left as the first thrust his sword toward his chest. Missing his mark, the bandit was pulled forward by the sheer force of his blow and was left open to Horatio's built-in cleaver, which sent him down to the ground in a hurry. Seeing the fate of his partner, the other bandit who was heading toward Horatio decided against it at the last instant, instead diverting his sword in Vahan's direction. That worthy gentleman was panic struck at the sight and followed his first impulse, which was to hold his quarterstaff out toward the oncoming bandit in the same manner as the latter's sword was pointed toward him. The suddenness of the move left the bandit without the time to stop himself, and as the quarterstaff was a good two feet longer than his sword, he hurled himself headlong into it, putting an end to himself, and sending Vahan flying backwards, as he was not prepared for such a collision.

As he flew back, Vahan bumped into the brown Fardy, who was grappling with a bandit directly behind that loyal Atiltian. They were both pushing as hard as they could against the other, their heads being less than a foot apart in their determination to gain as much leverage as possible. When Vahan hit the brown Fardy, his head flew forward and bashed into the bandit's, sending him to the ground.

Willard, at the same time, was contending with Montague in a battle of sword against sword. Both of them were very skilled with that weapon, and it was a spectacular sight to behold. They sparred with one another ferociously, parrying here and thrusting there, and the clang of their weapons could be heard over the din of the rest of the battle. At last, however, Montague caught Willard's blow with his sword and turned his blade so swiftly as to twist Willard's. This gave him an instant in which to place the point of his longsword against the other's neck.

"Yield or be slain." Montague's demand was spoken in a silent battlefield, for all the other fighting had stopped as well. The defenders had bravely stood their ground, but in the end superior numbers took the day. The blond Fardy was disabled in his shoulder and held by one of the bandits. His black brother had turned his back to his assailant to help him, and had been rendered unconscious by a hard blow to the

back of his head. The brown Fardy, meanwhile, was left with a dazed feeling after the blow between his head and his opponent's, although the latter lay dead on the ground. Vahan likewise was disoriented by the collision. Horatio alone had not been bested by his adversary, yet he was no match for the half dozen bandits that remained standing.

"Yield or be slain," was once again spoken. Yet this time it did not come from Montague's lips. Surprised, the chief bandit turned his head in the direction of the voice and saw, to his utmost dismay, that it came from none other than Alfonzo of Melborough, his rival of the forest. One represented the forces of the true king, and the other of the impostor Gylain. "You are surrounded, Jonathan Montague; yield or be slain."

"I will do neither."

"Defiant to the end, yet the end it is indeed."

"Hold your tongue, misguided Alfonzo. You would do better to join Gylain's forces, for the battle is not as proportioned everywhere as it is here."

"You know my answer already, Montague, and it is no, a thousand times over."

"Your loss, Alfonzo the tutor, slave to the child of the king. Your time has passed away even as he has."

Here Alfonzo came forward a step, before Montague cried out, "Halt, or this monk's life -- and that of all the others gathered here -- is forfeit. Give us your word to let us depart in peace and we will let them do the same."

Alfonzo was silent, but he soon yielded and answered, "So be it, but let not you nor your men be found within a hundred miles of this place, or it will go badly with you."

"As you wish, my master," Montague mocked, sheathing his sword and motioning for his men to do the same. He walked toward the edge of the forest, his stride as steady as ever, and his hair remaining perfectly combed forward at the temples. His face was flushed, however, as were his eyes. Before disappearing into the vast forest, he turned to taunt his rival one last time.

"I will not forget this, Alfonzo -- until death do us part." And with that, he was gone.

CHAPTER TEN

Alfonzo watched the treacherous Montague until he was out of sight, then sent Osbert to follow and see that he did not return. This done, he went forward to where the stalwart defenders were sitting down in exhaustion and pain. He sent two of his followers to drag the bodies of the fallen bandits a little way into the forest, where nature would soon dispose of them.

"What kept you so long, Alfonzo, for I was beginning to think you were not the king of the forest after all," said the blond Fardy, holding his hand to his aching shoulder.

"I was searching for you, friend. But I had no idea you had been already found," he turned his eyes to Willard, who met his look as if nothing were amiss. "Your hermitage has made you at ease in the forest, since you found what I was searching for before I even knew you had escaped my prison."

"I suppose it has," was Willard's only answer.

"And it has left you a master swordsman as well, has it? Come now, do you take me for a fool, that I will believe this pretense of being a monk?"

Willard was silent, thinking of an adequate reply, but before he could respond the brown Fardy broke in.

"Alfonzo!" he said, "Have you taken Willard and Horatio prisoner? You are greatly mistaken in this, my friend, for these are two of the finest fellows ever. They filled their front sides with us this morning, and saved our back sides this evening."

"That I see," Alfonzo returned, "And for that I am grateful. Yet Willard's suspicious facade shows his falseness, if not in character than in presentation. You have used a move in your fighting that I have only seen used by the royal house of Plantagenet," he turned to Willard, "And you execute it with the royal family's own sword! You must reveal yourself to me."

"I cannot," was the only reply.

"And why is that? Your secret is safe with us, but we must know," was the firm answer.

"I cannot tell you because I am nothing more than I appear," Willard hesitated, "A monk and a hermit. Your suspicions are unfounded."

Alfonzo stroked his pointed goatee and held Willard in a penetrating look. The latter yielded to the probing.

At last, Alfonzo let his eyes wander and whispered to himself, "Can it be true?"

Aloud, he said, "What of Horatio? Who is he, and what?"

Willard winked at the bear, who then mumbled some inaudible remarks.

"He speaks only Latin," Willard said, "But he says that he, too, is but a monk, though his flesh sometimes consumes more than a monk is entitled to."

"Indeed?" the blond Fardy laughed, "I would think him an enormous animal, myself, with all that he eats. He is a hairy man, as well, though that never made a beast of anyone. Too much ale will do such things to a man," and he sighed.

A faint smile flickered across Alfonzo's lips, "Vincitneveritas peric'lum, Horatio?"

The bear mumbled something else unintelligible, but it did not fool Alfonzo.

"Perhaps he speaks French, Willard, but that is no Latin."

"It does not seem like Latin to the untrained ear, perhaps, but you must remember that he and I have

been hermits for many years. His Latin has decayed during that time.”

“And your Atilian has not, I see? But you forget: I taught the crown prince Latin, so I would not say my ear is untrained.”

“In fifteen years, his vocabulary has become a new dialect of Latin, the forest Latin,” and Willard donned an ecclesiastical look.

“Then you would not mind if I took a closer look at Horatio’s face, that I might be aided by his eyes in understanding his speech?”

“He is mostly blind, and his eyes show little emotion. Furthermore, he has taken a vow to conceal his skin from the sun.”

“He moves deftly for a blind man. Yet, I cannot rightly break his vow.”

Willard sighed with relief, though almost imperceptibly.

Alfonzo saw it, however, and continued with a slight smile. “Osbert, Archibald, bring some oak branches to shade Horatio’s skin from the sun.”

They obeyed and in a moment Horatio’s body was in a thick shade, with the two men holding branches above his head. Every eye in the camp was fixed intently on his head as Alfonzo’s hand slowly reached to pull back the hood. Willard sweated and turned his head. Every inch that the hand drew closer, they heads of the others advanced a foot. In a moment there was a small, tight circle of curious faces around the impostor monk.

Alfonzo pulled the hood back with a quick jerk, revealing Horatio’s hairy head. His snout was half open with his tongue sticking out, and his eyes had a curious glaze on them. Nothing was said, though every mouth was opened and every eye strained itself to see the trick. But there was none: Horatio was fully a bear.

“Yet another piece of trickery on your part, Willard,” he said. “Have you said anything we can believe?”

“I neversaid Horatio was a monk, I merely communicated his own words. And as for his Latin, it sounded good enough to me.” Willard grinned.

Alfonzo was reassured by his easy attitude, and it calmed his suspicions.

“Very well,” he said. “I do not accuse you of lying for malicious reasons, for if we had known that Horatio was a bear, it would have alarmed us, had we not already known his easy temperament. But it proves that you have indeed been lying, and that you are no monk. Listen, we know of a prince who appeared during the attack on Lord Milada. Hismoni tells me he was the attacker, though I have yet to speak with Milada himself. A few days later, you appear from nowhere. You fight like a prince, you speak like a prince, and you wield a prince’s sword. Who are you Willard? Know before you answer that I will not judge you for the attack, before all is known. You have shown yourself to be fair, with Vahan, with the Fardy brothers, and with me. Therefore, you are innocent. But you must tell me now who you are.”

Willard paused. “I cannot tell you,” he hesitated, “Because I do not know myself who I rightly am.”

Alfonzo looked at him closely. "Fifteen years ago," he muttered, "And five at the time."

He sighed quietly and said aloud, "Very well, Willard. If you do not know, then we cannot ask you to tell. I know you tell the truth this time, for it must take a firm, native forester to befriend a fierce black bear such as Horatio."

"He is not so fierce, nor was it so hard. I had merely to be sweet to him," Willard chuckled.

"What do you mean?" Alfonzo asked, "Perhaps it is my turn to exhort you not to speak in riddles."

"I paid for his friendship with a pot of honey, worth more than my own life under the forest law."

"That is no law, for law is justice," Alfonzo answered, "And if there is no justice in the law, then it cannot be called a law, only a set of injustices. How can a pot of honey, short-lived and useless when it is gone, be worth more than a man?"

"There are some who would describe mankind itself that way," Willard retorted, "Short-lived, and useless when they are gone. But forest law is more just than human law, in this, for while a pot of honey is worth more than a man's life, it is because of its practical value. In human law, however, it seems a crown of gold outweighs the lives of thousands, though it has no purpose outside the desire to possess it."

Willard turned from Alfonzo in disgust and tended to Horatio. The leader of the rebels did the same, though his face did not clarify with whom he was disgusted. After several moments, the Fardy brothers approached Willard and Horatio, who were conversing in signs. The blond Fardy began the conversation with this speech:

"You have a noble disdain for objects of desire made from precious metals, Willard the fair and noble. I take it as a matter of course that you will show that disdain equally, and refuse to accept the suit of armor you have won from us? Surely, you would not think of falling yourself into the same trap of material lust that so many of your more civilized brothers are ensnared in?"

The brown Fardy added greedily, "Yes, and was not the arm wrestle illegitimate, since we were unknowingly wrestling a bear? Now, my brothers and I are patient and long-suffering, as you well know, but I wonder how long we can stand strong under such injustices?"

"Perhaps," interjected the black Fardy, "Perhaps that injustice was countered by the injustice of our method in the arm wrestle. For we each used more than one arm, which is against the rules of chivalry."

The blond Fardy was about to pick up the thread once more when Willard stopped him with his authoritative voice. "I will keep the receipt, and I fully plan to redeem it, if I ever find myself in Eden. I have no certain plans, however, and my arrival there is uncertain at best. If, after three years, I have not redeemed the armor, it is yours once more. Those are your odds."

"Very well, if you insist on burdening yourself with worthless material possessions," the blond Fardy pretended to wail, "Possessions which have already cost the lives of many men. But who am I to interfere with your business? I can only recall what the good book says: where your treasure is, there your heart will be also," and he cast a sorrowful glance around at the others.

"Yes, but it is not my treasure. Besides, the armor could be of much use to me in some future danger."

"Perhaps you do not understand, Willard," the brown Fardy said, "But the armor is the coat of mail worn by the royal house of Plantagenet, crafted many generations ago and used by them ever since. After the rebellion, many men lost their lives trying to secure it, and we were only able to do so by purchasing the rights to the Gylain's debts, forcing him to default and give us the security, which was the coat of arms. What I would like to know, Master Willard, is how you came to possess the royal sword?"

"I only remember having it since I have memory. Or rather, since I have firm memory, for there are faint, dreamy thoughts of long ago, though I pay them no heed. Do not ask me how I came to have it, or how I came to live in the forest, for that I cannot answer. Let it simply suffice to say that I was in the forest, and that I had the sword. As to why I happen to be who I am, I can only think that there is some purpose for me to serve that I do not yet understand."

Willard hesitated, then went on faintly, "I feel as though I have something to do, a very important something; something that I do not wish to do, but that I have no choice in; something that I wish was over that I might do what it is that I wish to do, without being under the tyranny of fate."

"Perhaps it is only yourself which forces you to these thoughts," said the black Fardy. "Perhaps it is your thoughts that lead you to your fate, and not fate that begets your thoughts? Can the future be stronger than the past?"

"Neither defeats the other," Willard answered, "Instead they crash together about us, and from the ensuing chaos comes that veritable time which we call the present. The past and the future fight for the right to oppress us, yet only we can decide the victor. That is our curse."

With that, the two groups split. Night was now fully upon them, and, setting a guard, they went to sleep in their various places around the camp. Alfonzo was the first to wake, though the dawn was yet far away, and he took the watch from Osbert who had come in late from his trek.

"How are the tidings?" Alfonzo asked him.

"They have gone to the southwest, maybe to Eden," was the answer.

"Were you seen?"

"I think not, though you can never be sure with Montague's guile."

"That is certainly so. You have done well, Osbert, and I count myself blessed to have such a faithful follower in these times of unrest."

"Not hardly as blessed as I to have a wise and just leader."

Alfonzo smiled inwardly, knowing it to be as honest a compliment as his had been.

"Tell me," the leader said in a low whisper, glancing around him to the rest of the party, "What news do you have of the spy?"

Osbert sighed silently, reluctant to condemn his fellow rangers on circumstantial evidence and word of mouth. "I thought I saw Casper when I followed Montague, after he had taken the Fardy brothers. There was a shrouded figure walking with them, showing them the way, but he dashed off before I could be sure. Then, when I returned to the caverns, I saw that his boots had been newly muddied. I asked him, and he said he had been asleep. There are other explanations -- but I can only tell you what I know."

Osbert dropped his head, ashamed for his friend Casper.

“Do not be afraid Osbert, many have fallen away before, and more will yet leave us. Traveling the great forest, protecting loyal travelers from the thugs of Gylain, taking from the oppressors and returning to the oppressed -- it is not an easy life. Every moment is filled with danger, and there are some who cannot handle it. Even de Garcia, the great warrior of my youth, fell into the snares of Gylain. Be strong, therefore, and persevere.”

“Yes, Alfonzo, my only fear is that I put false charges on an innocent name.”

“I will keep Casper with me, under close watch. You have only done your duty. Come, what else is there?”

“I found a note from Blaine at the message post, in the sixth quadrant of the Treeway.”

“Let us see it.”

Osbert handed Alfonzo a carefully folded piece of paper, and the latter opened and read it to himself.

Alfonzo, I hope that you receive this before it is too late. I know your orders, and will not turn back to consult you, instead putting my worries to paper. I've tested the men with me and they are loyal, though I cannot say how in this letter. When next we meet, I will tell. Until then, know that the traitor is with you or Milada, and not with me. There is news that the Queen of Saxony is arriving within a few days, so we must be extra vigilant of action against us. Also, the news from Hibernia is that Patrick McConnell is imprisoned. These things do not affect Atilta directly, yet our companions across the sea are treated ill. May it not be passed on to us. For now, though, all is well at the eye of the storm, and at the Great Goliaths. ? Signed, Blaine.

Alfonzo finished the letter and looked at Osbert. “The news is good, then -- at least, better than I anticipated. He has tested the men, and they are loyal. I know not how, yet he says they are true to the cause.”

“To me that news is less than good.”

“How so, Osbert?”

“It means the traitors are among us, and it makes my heart as cold as the earth from whence it came, to think any of my comrades would do such a thing.”

“Yes, our feelings are the same, but we must put ourselves beyond our feelings, when dealing with matters that are beyond ourselves.”

“And the freedom of Atilta is at stake here.”

“Exactly,” replied Alfonzo, “You must sleep now. We leave early.”

“Goodnight,” and with that Osbert, the trusty ranger of the forest, went off to catch his rest.

For the rest of the night Alfonzo sat motionless on guard. His tall figure was stony and reserved, as always. His long, bound hair gave him an ancient look, like a statue from the past. His goatee had not been trimmed in many days, though the rest of his face was kept clean, and his mustache was beginning

to droop in an arch over his mouth. His eyes burned, flaming with memories, mostly of the crown prince, his youthful friend and protege; and of his love, Celestine. Then, when these thoughts passed through him, his eyes went from flames to mirrors. Injustice was his only enemy, the one who manifested it merely his enemy's form. He had no hatred of Gylain or of Jonathan Montague, or any of the others -- merely of their actions. And why should he, for those who were pardoned from above would never be judged, and those who were not were already condemned.

"Patience, Alfonzo," he murmured to himself, "Justice will prevail. And if it does not, than life will not live to know of it."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The dawn was slowly passing and the warmth of day replacing it with every step it took in retreat. The party congregated around the camp, and there was no sign of commotion or disturbance, for Montague had entirely disappeared the previous day. The sun shone down at just the right angle that it streamed in over the tops of the trees like a divine spotlight, slivering down and squirming with the mist that rose up through it. There was a slight breeze, warm to the touch, and the air was thick and pure, full of life.

The walls of the camp had been partly disassembled and used for firewood, for all that needed to be defended against was the morning chill. The trunk that was laid out against the stream still rested there, along with a few of the rangers and a robin that sang to them in exchange for food, a forest minstrel. Several more of Alfonzo's followers were sprawled out in the center of the clearing, laying in a bed of buttercups and bell hoppers, as they called them, an orange and yellow flower that had the shape of a bell and smelled strongly of apples. Thehopper in the name came from the fact that they closed up at night, and in the early dawn a careful observer could see them popping open one by one.

The rest of the group sat around the campfire, which was starting to fall asleep just as the men were fully waking up. Willard and Horatio were next to one another, talking with signs about the Fardy brothers. Willard explained that they were not wholly insane, just mostly so, while Horatio gave the brother nearest him a questioning look every now and then. Upon receiving it, the brother would return it with an upraised eyebrow and an open mouth. Horatio would then pretend to be looking beyond him, at something in the forest, squinting and moving his head back and forth as though he could just barely make the thing out, until he finally gave up and turned back to Willard, forsaking the thing which wasn't there to begin with.

Vahan Lee sat beside Willard, listening to the talk of the others and keeping his own to himself. He was an interesting character, to say the least, for he spoke with a heavy French accent, and was dressed according to the French fashions of the day. Yet he claimed to be a loyal Atiltian. Indeed, he stressed this loyalty to the point of obsession. But his features were fair, and his eyes told of simplicity over duplicity. He was not threatening, but amusing, with his portly figure, and his facial expressions which were vividly humorous: at once confident and frightened. His purposes were evidently on the side of freedom, but they were also mysterious. It was this that caused Alfonzo to take him prisoner, for Vahan seemed a strange little man. He took him to ascertain what his intentions were, and, so far, they were proving good.

Meanwhile, the Fardy brothers sat beside Alfonzo and Osbert. The Fardy brothers were known to be at times overly serious, at others overly whimsical, at others overly angry, and at others overly proud of

their humility. They switched between these moods without warning and as a group, so that one moment they would be commending each other for being patient, while the next they displayed the opposite quality.

Alfonzo, on the other hand, was almost always serious. When he wasn't, it was easy to think that he was, for he never let himself stray from his purpose. His eyes were always burning, and Blaine Griffith once heard the men say they were surprised they never smoldered out. Yet they never did. He was the type of man who thought more than most, but who kept the fruits of that thinking to himself. The more a man thinks the more he keeps silent, some would say, and it was true, at least, in the case of Alfonzo. The most mysterious thing about Alfonzo was his past, not his present, and the way he looked at Willard let on to something that was going on within him. As he said himself, Alfonzo had been torn between his love, Celestine, and his duty, Willarinus. As a result, he lost them both.

Osbert was a man that needed much less explanation, for he was a loyal ranger, good with his bow and sword and better with his heart. There were few men as selfless as he, and as willing to suffer. He had no thoughts of glory, or if he did he put them down, and did not allow them to affect his actions. He was by no means the wisest of men, yet he knew one thing that often escapes the wise: *Habetsuum venenum blanda oratio*, and is not the poison worse than the bite that gives it?

Soon Alfonzo and the Fardy brothers finished their breakfast. At the same time, Willard and Horatio had said all they pleased to each other. The two groups, therefore, joined together and began speaking of the situation. Their conversation is as follows:

ALFONZO: In the danger, as well as in peace, you have forgotten the main purpose of your journey, my dear Fardy brothers -- to tell us the situation in Eden.

BLOND FARDY : We thought it was good news that we brought. But our opinion has been changed by our kidnapping. If Gylain is willing to risk taking us, then he must feel our power is fading.

BROWN FARDY : Which makes it a better time to strike him! Let him think he has us down, then we will jump up and clobber him like a hammer on a nail.

BLACK FARDY : Perhaps we should take this time to secure our position. A watched pot never boils, you know.

BLOND FARDY : Yes, but whose to say an unwatched pot does any better? As for myself, I'm of the opinion that we should dispense with this boiling business all together, and get on with roasting him out of there.

VAHAN LEE : My sentiments of loyalty to Atilta are well known here, I believe. So I will venture to say that external strength should perhaps be solicited.

BROWN FARDY : External strength makes external masters, and as for tyrants and despots, I prefer them domestic rather than foreign. To export one we need not import another, for at least here I do not need the wind to carry my curses over the sea.

BLOND FARDY : I doubt you need the wind to carry your curses anywhere, my brother. And if you do, there is enough in your belly to do justice to the cause. Now, I know you are the most patient and forbearing man that ever lived, and it is my belief that if you became so heated as to curse another man, all the elements would join with you in the venture. But still, a foreign master bends me the wrong way, as they say.

WILLARD : An ally from abroad will only be an ally, and it would be unwise to deny any assistance in this

hour of danger. If the feast is prepared, yet there are few guests, it is better to invite those you do not know well, rather than bare the loneliness.

ALFONZO : It will take more than just us to decide whether to ask the French for assistance. We must speak to Milada first.

BLOND FARDY : We are headed to the Western Marches, and to Milada's castle. Indeed, at double speed after the news we have heard.

ALFONZO : Which is?

BROWN FARDY : That Ivona is missing -- kidnapped or run away.

ALFONZO : Osbert and three of the others will go with you, to assist in the search. What are your plans, Vahan Lee?

VAHAN LEE : I am loyal to cause of Atilta, and as you seem to be as well, I will follow you.

ALFONZO [laughing]: I misjudged you by your French accent, but from what I have seen I think you must be one of those from the mainland that support us against Gylain.

VAHAN LEE : I would rather remain anonymous until I am sure of my way.

ALFONZO : Very well. Your courage has earned our trust.

ALFONZO [turning to Willard]: Willard, friend, the day is getting on and we must do the same. I am anxious to see this place far behind us, and Montague with it. What do you mean to do once we part?

WILLARD : When I rescued Milada of Erlich, I had no intention but to save an innocent traveler, yet it plunged me into this rebellion in a way which I had not expected. My mind has been troubled of late about certain things which surface in it, memories of the past and dreams of the future. At first I thought they were no more than the fancies of youth, to be derided and ignored. Yet with what has befallen me, I cannot but reconsider. I wonder whether it is good to disobey fate, and abandon the company into which I have fallen.

ALFONZO : Then it was you who rescued Lord Milada?

WILLARD : Indeed, but I thought you knew of it?

ALFONZO : I knew of it, yet Hismoni told me that you were the attacker, and that he barely escaped with his life. After seeing you fight now, I can see why. Yet what I cannot think is how you could have done it. You say you did not, and I will take your word.

WILLARD : It is either lies or mistakes. As I remember, the guard called Hismoni was unconscious throughout the fight, though I was surprised to see he was not wounded.

ALFONZO : Not even wounded? I shall have to think over this, Willard. But I am sure I have misheard him, for otherwise either one or the other of you is a liar. I trust Lord Milada, and he trusts Hismoni, so I have no doubts about him. And you I have seen myself, and I know a true man when I come across one. They are hard to find, since the coup, for power and right have been divorced. A man cannot fight for both, as he sometimes can. You, however, I know are true.

WILLARD : You need only ask Lord Milada, and he will tell you what took place, for he saw the battle. Afterward, he promised me his daughter's hand, though I cannot accept, for he thought me to be a prince.

ALFONZO : And are you not a prince? You have heard, no doubt, what has befallen Ivona? Tell me, you have fought with us so far -- for both Milada and the Fardy brothers -- out of necessity. Now, however, the choice is yours. I would welcome your assistance, but I understand if you wish to remain neutral.

WILLARD : I know little of the political situation in Atilta. I have lived here my whole life, it is true, yet the forest is far from civilized. I have rarely met men, and when I have, the speaking has been between our swords. How do things go?

ALFONZO : I will not try to fool you, Willard. The rebellion has little chance of succeeding. Gylain is not loved by the people, nor is he just. Yet even in his cruelty he is no fool. Every man has a desire to be peaceful, to look the other way when wrongs are done to others, but when they themselves are not effected. Gylain, therefore, gives enough of a tolerant facade to appease the selfishness of men. He oppresses the people, he plunders their labor, he tortures their men, but he does so under the facade of the merits of each case. Were he to destroy a family merely because it opposed him, the people would be roused. Were he to execute the Fardy brothers merely because they support the rebellion, the public would demand justice. Yet he goes from one victim to another, pretending in each case they have done some illegal thing. As his reign is secured, the oppressions increase, and soon the time will come when he will be strong enough to act without pretensions.

ALFONZO [continued]: There are a few nobles plotting against him. Yet it is only the morally noble man who fights when he has little to gain and much to lose, and nobility is not decided by such worths. If we do well, they will follow us as they now follow him, but if we fail they will quickly disown us. Milada of Erlich is the most ardent supporter of our freedoms. It deeply troubles me that spies and traitors within our own cause would attempt to take his life. Were it not for you, as you say, perhaps they would have done so.

ALFONZO [continued]: Fate, indeed, has put you in our path, for if he were lost we would soon join him in the otherworld. There are rumors from the Western March that do not bode well for him if they are true, but the Fardy brothers are on their way there now, so we must be patient.

BLOND FARDY : And there are none more patient than the Fardy brothers, Alfonzo. We should reach there the day after tomorrow.

WILLARD : Then you will not soon be in Eden?

BROWN FARDY : Not without a strong guard, friend. You can redeem the armor from our clerk though, for he knows our writing. If he troubles you, give him a good smack on the head and he will listen.

BLOND FARDY : Or be patient, but my brother is always that.

ALFONZO : Osbert will accompany the Fardy brothers; now that we know they are in danger, we will protect them to the last, as well as any other who needs our protection. Vahan Lee, now that you have heard more, do you still wish to join me?

VAHANLEE : Yes, if I am allowed, sir.

ALFONZO : Call me Alfonzo, not sir.

VAHAN LEE : Very well. I am a loyal citizen of Atilta, Alfonzo, and since I have fallen in with you, I think I can do no better than to follow you from now on, without thought to any foreign monarch who might want to encourage the rebellion against Gylain.

ALFONZO : You serve the French King, then?

VAHAN LEE : Good gracious, sir! I, well, I do not know how you got that idea into your head, though I am sure that if I did serve him, he would want to let you know that he was with you against Gylain. I will follow you of my own accord, de bonne grace -- excuse me my throat was dry -- I meant to say that I would follow you with a good grace, degage -- I mean, freely and easily.

ALFONZO : Perhaps you had better keep silent for now, Vahan, and we will discuss this later when we are alone.

VAHAN LEE : Good idea, Alfonzo, a very good idea.

ALFONZO : Now, then: Thurston, Selmar, and Fritz will go with Osbert and the Fardy brothers to Milada's castle, and once there will aid him however possible. Caspar will come with Vahan and myself to the southern hideout, to look over some documents. The rest will return to the caverns to patrol the road. Willard, have you come to a decision?

WILLARD : Horatio and myself will take our disguise as monks once more and head north to the road, and from there eastward to Eden. I will join your rebellion, though I have a feeling that danger will find me own its own, and I need not search for it like the others.

ALFONZO : Good, I trust fate will reward your fidelity with some adventures, and that those will do well for the cause of liberty. I have seen you and Horatio in action, and have no fear for your safety, so I will send no rangers with you. A forest native can overcome many times his number of adopted forest dwellers, and with a bear at your side all is well. Still, I will warn you to beware that your disguise does not lead you into any traps or dangerous situations. Gylain has been at war with the church for some time now. He has bribed those who serve themselves more than God, and the others he has attacked. He has been sending masked soldiers to burn and ransack their monasteries, forcing them to flee overseas to find comfort. If you are harassed by his men, do not be afraid of utterly routing them, for it will not be viewed with suspicion. Many monks have turned to the martial arts to preserve themselves from their persecutors before, David foremost among them. In short, be careful.

WILLARD : As I always am.

ALFONZO : Even when we stole you from the road? But we will remember that no more, for you were outnumbered greatly, and still made a fight. Farewell, then, Willard.

WILLARD : Farewell, I hope we will meet again soon.

ALFONZO : As do I.

And with that they took leave of one another, each going in the direction of his destination, one group south, one north, and one west. The council was broken, and sword was once more drawn, for in the forest danger is never distant, and enemies grow thicker than the trees.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lord Milada, whom Willard saved from the bandits in the forest, was earl of the Western March, the thickly forested area between the southern portion of the Bay of Thunder and the ocean. It was a cradle of great wealth and fertility, but sparsely inhabited: for it was far from the population centers. Lord

Milada of Erlich -- the latter being the area his ancestors were from -- had been a stalwart follower of the previous king. When he was deposed, the leader of the coup -- Gylain -- made himself king and sent those who had been closest to the rightful royal family to the obscure regions of the inner forest. Offered an earldom larger in acreage than his ancestral one, Milada of Erlich had no choice but to accept. There he continued to make his lonely way, free from the bustle and ambition of Eden. He soon found, however, that he was more content in this domestic bliss than in the ambition of the city, though his worldly standing was much lower than before. His only occupation, now that he had no nobles to entertain, was to stand against Gylain, and there were rumors to the effect that he had been traveling to forge alliances against the tyrant. Indeed, the promising of his daughter to Willard had been partially out of a desire to ally himself with an outside power, and partially out of a desire to give her a strong husband in those days of turmoil.

His castle was made of stone, strong and impregnable, standing in the center of a meadow that stretched for a mile in every direction. On every side the plain was bordered by the ancient forest, except the north, where Thunder Bay could be seen a mile away. The outer walls of the castle were twenty feet tall and five thick, with towers every hundred yards and a massive iron gate in the front. Within those walls were the inner walls, twice their height. Between the two sets of walls was a covered courtyard, not unlike a separate castle within itself. There were holes leading into it from which spikes could be thrust at intruders. The only way to enter the castle proper was to take this covered courtyard to the far side of the castle, where the inner gate was located. Within it was the castle itself, a mountain amidst the plains, impressive even by the greatest standards.

The first floor was mainly covered by the great hall, flanked on every side by rooms for the servants -- kitchens, pantries, and the like. The second floor held an armory with training rooms for the soldiers, an extensive library, and a bright sitting room that Milada had put in -- contrary to all the customs of the time -- in order to have a pleasant, airy room. This would have been derided had he lived nearer civilization, but as there was no other town or village within a hundred miles, he was left to his own whims.

Above the second level were several towers, one at each corner and an especially tall one in the center, which served as both the lord's chambers and the keep, the last defense in times of war. Of the smaller towers, one belonged to Ivona Milada, his beautiful daughter; one to the prior of the church, Oren Lorenzo; and the two others to the chief servants of the castle, the doctor and the captain of the guards -- Hismoni, by name.

It was at this time early evening, and the towers were empty and dark, for all the house was still feasting in the main hall. All that is, except for Ivona's tower; for she was already in her room, having retired early when her father did not arrive before dinner. She was indeed a lovely woman: moonlight skin and midnight hair, with emerald eyes sprinkled with the sun. Her nose was slender and aquiline: large enough to be respected, and small enough to be lovely. Her lips showed her emotion as brilliantly as her eyes, and held themselves with as much poise as she herself. Her form was supple, neither overwrought into indecency nor underwrought into shapelessness.

At this time she was laying back on the cushiony platform that her indulgent father gave her as a bed, her eyes beseeching the ceiling and her lips God, to whom she spoke:

"He will arrive soon, but how can I tell him? This time, he will understand and not do as usual. Yet no matter how he reacts, I must tell him soon -- no, the moment he returns. I cannot have him searching for my husband in all the earldoms loyal to the true king, even while my fate has been decided." A few tears escaped her eyes, falling to her parted lips, where their saltiness brought a half-hearted smile to the surface. "Yes, I will pledge my life to God, who will never leave nor forsake me: he will be my groom and I his bride. What should I profit if I gained the whole world -- and even the undying love of one man

-- and yet in so doing lost my own soul? No, he who wishes to save his life shall lose it, but he who gives up his life for God's sake will find it. It must be so, I only hope that father will understand I have no other choice but that to which my conscience leads me: serving the church as a nun."

Before she could say more, her maidservant burst into the room and cried out, "Ivona, the master is back!"

She was surprised, however, to see Ivona apprehensive at the news, as if guilty and bound for punishment. It was that day her twentieth year upon the earth, marking her entry into adulthood by the customs of Atilta, and so a feast was to be held as soon as Lord Milada returned. She went, unwillingly, but her beauty masked her emotion.

It was a short walk down the tower stairs, through the family rooms and into the main hall. There she found the whole household assembled together, waiting only her arrival to begin the celebration feast. The main hall was twenty yards by forty, and the ceiling fifteen feet from the floor; both were made from massive blocks of stone. The walls were also stone, ordained with rich tapestries, arms and armor; bronze candle holders allied with several rude chandeliers to light the room like twilight sun. Raised on a dais, the head table stood perpendicular to the others, with Lord Milada at its head and an open chair beside him, meant for Ivona.

Milada stood, his tall, lanky figure swaying in an involuntary dance, as was his wont when things excited him. Like an inverted rainbow, his smile broke on his face, and his eyes danced along with his arms as they played to the jig the fiddler wove. He was a different man here than in the forest, for here he had authority and there weakness.

"My daughter, I have returned at last!" He threw his arms around her as she reached the dais.

Her composure had returned, and once more she was gently joyful. "Father, it is time!" was all she could say before her tears broke through once more.

"Tears of joy, and what joy it is, to be here at last. And on your birthday, the day you become an adult, a woman, the lady of the castle!"

"Yes, father. I am a woman now, and I have decided what I will become."

"Wait, we will talk about that another time; first, I have a special present for you, a present that you cannot imagine!"

The people assembled in the hall gave a loud cheer. Over a hundred people stood there, everyone from the village and the castle household. They venerated him for many reasons, and in that time of oppression, he was on firm footing domestically. After a moment, the crowd began to hush, and Milada stood once more: this time on the sturdy oaken table before him.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered together to celebrate the birthday of my blooming and beautiful child, marking her entry into womanhood. It is also the day of my return from a long and troubling journey, one giving me many pains and stresses. Indeed, I am not lying when I say that I barely returned home at all!"

He paused here and delivered the last phrase with emphasis. The audience gasped and waited for him to continue.

“I was traveling from Horam on the forest road, the last leg of my trip, and had not met a soul for three days. Things grew tedious and I fell asleep, leaving Hismoni and his guards to steer the way. Then, at about noon today, I was awoken by a loud cry. I jumped from my seat and saw a half dozen ruffians battling with my three guards. They were the fiercest, toughest men I have ever seen: seven feet tall and stronger than a dozen horses. In a moment, they had wiped Hismoni and his men to the ground without being injured themselves. Then they rushed toward me, with an evil light in their eyes that left me sure they would leave me dead. The leader, a humongous brute with a face like a dragon, reached in through the window and grabbed my shirt, pulling me up and throwing me back down with a low growl. I was terrified.

“But then, from nowhere, came a deep and commanding voice -- the very voice of God -- booming as thunder and roaring as a thousand lions in full rage. It spoke these words, ‘You ruffians and heartless brutes! Release him at once or I will make you suffer the wrath of the heavens and the earth!’ They turned to see who spoke, and as they did their ranks opened and I was able to see him as well. It was a man, of normal height, but with a build strong and fearsome face. His hair was dark and low, as was his beard. Both were uncombed, and he himself was dirty and clothed in a soiled rag that reached neither his feet nor hands. This wild man was the one who had spoken, but his appearance was at odds with his intelligent speech, and even more so with a marvelous sword that hung from his side, glittering in the sun like a lightning bolt. ‘Surely,’ I thought to myself, ‘This is Zeus, and that his weapon of fire!’”

Again the crowd gasped, and Ivona herself was amazed and frightened: appalled at what her beloved father went through, yet thankful for the strange man’s courage. The nobleman went on:

“The bandits were at first frightened, but then -- seeing they outnumbered him six-to-one -- they charged, and I put my head into my hands, hiding my face in shame at the thought that he would lose his life for my sake. I could hear the clash of swords and cries of pain -- like men being killed -- and a fierce roar that no doubt came from the wild man, though it sounded like a bear. Suddenly, all was silent and I looked up, expecting to see him slain; but he stood there alive, all by himself. Around him were the bodies of his opponents, everyone of them as dead as death itself. The guards were beginning to wake, and he came closer that I might hail him. ‘My lord,’ I said, ‘What man are you that you do such mighty deeds?’ He looked at me solemnly and said, ‘I am Prince Willard, heir to the throne of Bombay, making my hermitage here to gain wisdom and love before my reign begins.’ I was once more astonished, for Bombay is well known to be one of the richest and most powerful nations in the world!”

This last part Milada greatly embellished, for it did not exist, as far as he knew. But Willard had told him and he believed, because of the latter’s heroic deeds. He went on:

“I bowed and offered him all he could want. But he declined, saying he had come to deny himself. I then asked him if he was indeed looking for love, as he had implied. He said yes, and I told him of Ivona. This, then, is the wondrous present I have brought you, my daughter: the heroic Prince Willard of Bombay is to be your husband!”

The crowd cheered again, a smile playing on every lip, for each respected Milada and loved his daughter. But then something happened that they did not expect: just as he announced the marriage, Ivona fainted and fell down at his feet.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was in her bedroom that Ivona awoke, in the company of her father and of none other. She had been unconscious for ten minutes, during which time Milada was very anxious to know the cause of her fainting. His lean figure paced the room and he muttered to himself, in distress once more. His outward bravado at dinner had given way to his writhing at the forest melee. His worries soon came to a head, either way, for Ivona's fair features began to awaken from their involuntary slumber. She looked about, confused until her eyes lit upon her father. Then her face fell to the ground, and she remembered what had been said.

"Tell me you were merely jesting, father."

"No, it was all truth," his thin limbs wiggled in a half-hearted dance, "But for the bit about the dragon heads, which I embellished for the sake of the tale." He seemed proud of his attempt at jocularly and began his natural jigging movements again, to which Ivona could do nothing but laugh and sigh inwardly at the apparent simplicity of her beloved father.

"Father, tell me, am I so false to you that you promise my heart to a wild man before you had even conversed with him for half an hour? Am I, the jewel of your heart, given at half price to an unknown merchant -- or even, for all you know, to a pawnbroker?"

His dancing stopped. "Would you, then, be an old maiden all your days? The man is a crown prince and a valiant warrior, articulate and of honorable morals. He defended an old man whom he had never met before at the risk of his life, and would take no reward for it. Ivona, listen to me and heed my words -- this life is as hard as it is fleeting, as uncaring as it is meaningless. And you must live it by its own rules. You cannot sit here and hide yourself away behind the vale of the vast forest, nor can you ignore the truths which crown this existence as frail and empty, coloring them with thoughts of God and religion, thoughts of service over authority and humility over pride. You chase after all that is not seen and is not known in hopes of gaining wisdom, not realizing wisdom is the cessation of such pursuits. Look about you, my daughter, look about you and see: do not the evil flourish and the righteous fade away? Do not the lawless defeat the law, and the haters conquer the lovers?"

Ivona arose, her spirited eyes blowing with the spirit of the forest. "And if what you say is true, father, then why live at all? If all the joys of life are ill-gotten, and all happiness bought with the price of another's suffering, then why feel love for any? Yes, father, this life is fleeting; and all is forgotten, without love or hope in all the earth. Those who have gone before us have no meaning here, nor do those who toil along with us, for all is selfish and made to serve its owner. And so my heart longs to serve its owner, though it is not myself who owns it, but God. While all else is torn down and ridiculed by men, while all that is good is proclaimed by the wise to be wicked, and all that is wicked is proclaimed by the good to be wise, there is one who remains steadfast, whose message does not change: love your neighbor more than yourself, and do to others what you would have them do to you, for that is the law and the prophets!"

"I have had enough of your spiritual delusions and metaphysical masquerades! There is nothing but what can be seen and felt, there is nothing beyond the here and now, so do not sacrifice yourself to divine apparitions; instead, marry a man who is strong and powerful. For your supreme beauty will bring you riches and power, if you allow it."

"Father, how can such blasphemies flow from your mouth as freely as water from a fountain? If I am made powerful by my beauty, what will I have when it fades? And if I am made rich by it, what will it leave me?"

“Enough, I will hear no more about it: you are to be married to Prince Willard, and that is that!” and Milada roared in his anger, his habitual dancing movements becoming as infuriated as his voice, writhing like a fly in a spider’s web. Ivona warmed as well, but had the strength to hide its effects. Yet all she could do to prevent an outbreak was to flee from the room. And that she did, passing through the empty second story rooms and the main hall, where the festivities continued. She passed the castle gate and entered the village which encircled it, coming to a stop before the church, always open by the vow of its pious prior, Oren Lorenzo.

It was a quaint stone church, with its sharp roof and its lofty steeple, and especially with the wooden door that graced its front like the humble mouth of an otherwise noble countenance. It was there that she went to seek shelter, as much from the driving rain as the disfavor of her father. The entrance brought her into the open sanctuary, supported by ornate stone pillars and arches made of wood. A few resident clergy prayed at the altar, and -- hoping to escape their notice -- Ivona climbed the stairs to the tall belfry upon which the steeple rested. One of the priests saw her, but turned his mustached face back to his prayers.

The belfry or tower atop of the church was uncovered, though to its right the steeple shielded it from the view of the castle, blotting out all light but the sky. Ivona was run through by the water, but the rain was warm with the spring and only refreshed her. Overhead the clouds were thick, though still the stars and moon shone brightly through the various breaks, illumined with their own joys and sorrows -- whatever they may be -- and exhibiting their faceless gaze to all who sought respite from life. Among them was Ivona, and as she looked over the rain-clothed forests from her lofty observatory, she could feel the comfort of night and hear its whispered hopes.

She was happy then, without the burdens of existence, until she heard footsteps coming up the belfry. She turned to the opening and saw a head of thick red hair coming toward her, bowing reverently as it approached. The figure wore the robes of a humble priest, and on his Bible-beaten face was written a countenance at odds with his lowly attire. His nose was long and straight, his lips hidden by a protruding mustache that ran from ear to ear like a streak of fire.

“If my opinion is desired,” he humbly began, “I would say you have had words with your father once again, and that they were neither gentle nor loving. Ivona Milada, you must learn to obey, even as the scriptures say.”

“Yet I am no longer a child.”

“Nor yet a woman, little one; though closer than most to that lofty ideal.”

Ivona sighed, “He wishes me to marry, Father Lorenzo: a man whom I have never met and who has never met me.”

“That is of no consideration, child, for the wisdom of a father should rule the daughter. He is more capable of judging a man’s character than you, for he is old and veteran in such things.”

“He is more capable to find a husband of strength, but not of heart. And if his judgments of character are so refined, how does he reject God, himself?”

The priest evaded, “No mortal is flawless, child, and no husband is immortal. Love is more action than feeling, more labor than romance. With patience and faith love can be built on a firm foundation, while one formed on mere romance is doomed to pass away. When your father chooses your husband, there is not the mixing of romance into the decision.”

“A marriage without romance may sound good in theology, Lorenzo, but can a celibate priest set the standard of the love between man and woman from experience or practicality?”

“You are right, but it is the will of God that you should do as your father desires. Your course has been predestined to you, and should you refuse to marry him now you will only marry him later. Such is the will of God, and you cannot escape it.”

“Your words are wise, if it were God’s will; but how can you know so easily? If marriage is a symbol of the covenant between God and his children, still I would forgo the symbolic and enter into the practical. You know that it has long been my desire to give my life to the church, to forsake the symbolic for a direct covenant with God. I would not rebel against him, but I hear his calling differently.”

“But God has many voices, and foremost among them is the voice of your father, the authority put over you.”

“Then should I travel to Eden, to inquire as to Gylain’s wishes on the matter?” She sighed and looked at the priest while a smile spread across her face. It grew until she laughed outright.

“What is humorous, Ivona?”

“Your somber demeanor, Lorenzo; I have heard stories of your zeal, but I see only a pious man.”

“For you, I am pious; for freedom, I am zealous.”

The maiden’s laugh died down to a mere smile, and that gave way to a sigh. “Perhaps you are right. I will submit.”

She left him on the belfry and returned to the lower parts of the church, crossing the sanctuary when she heard a group of monks reading from the scriptures. She was literate in Latin, and crept to the door to listen:

“Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth; for I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. I came to set a son against his father. He who loves his father more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me.”

These words grabbed her heart and ran her through. She fell back in fear and raised her face to the ceiling. “My God, my God, why have I forsaken you?”

With that, she fled the church, taking a monk’s frock as she went and disguising herself. She took a bow and quiver of arrows from the sentry tower, and a short sword that fit into her belt. Then she left the village and the castle, and all she had known since birth, setting aside worldly peace for a still conscience. She sought her fate in the inhuman forest -- such was her love -- and as she slipped through the gates into the darkness, an owl’s cry pierced through the gloom and through her heart. She was alone, it cried, but she did not turn her ears to listen. Instead, she set off to the forest, not afraid of that which would ruin the courage of any man. For she was no man, and her heart was a strong fortress: when the gates were open all could enter; yet when they were closed neither man nor nature could break through, neither love nor fear.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After parting from the others, Alfonzo, Vahan Lee, and Casper crossed the stream and headed south through the great forest. Their destination was a small hideout in which the rangers stored secret documents. It was these documents for which Alfonzo searched.

The trees in all parts of the forest were massive and tall, standing at least twenty feet apart, and it was no different in the southern area where they were headed. There were few bushes on the ground, and still fewer saplings. The trees of the forest seemed to live forever, invigorated by the climate of Atilta, which was so much purer than its neighbors: Hibernia to the north and France to the east. It was a place of refuge amidst the turmoils of the times. The legends of the people made it the brother of Atlantis and Eden, with their paradisaic island climates. Some, however, were greatly disturbed by this analogy.

Through the first hour of the walk the three travelers were silent. Alfonzo was thinking of many things, among them the suspicions he had about Vahan Lee. That worthy gentleman, Lee, was wholly occupied by thoughts of his failure to conceal his mission.

“By folly’s face,” he said to himself, “I should guard my tongue better, but no! When I want to keep something secret I seem to shout it from the rooftops.”

Casper was no less lost in thought than his companions. He knew why he was singled out to go with Alfonzo, and he had an idea as to what was to happen. But he could not make up his mind, so he did nothing.

When they had walked a good distance, Alfonzo called out to him, “Casper, go forward and watch for an ambush, we will follow behind.”

“Yes, master,” and with that Casper went forward, out of hearing of Vahan and Alfonzo.

“We are alone now, Vahan Lee. You can tell me of the secrets which you seem to enjoy spewing forth.”

The gentleman apparently thought better than that, and decided not to reveal himself just yet.

“I do not understand your drift. I am a loyal Atiltian, and I have no secrets,” he said

“You have changed your mind once more, have you?” questioned Alfonzo, “I do not understand why you keep pulling back, unless you serve the French monarch.”

“How can you think that, Alfonzo, after what has befallen us?”

“What has befallen us, Vahan? You escaped from my prison and defended yourself from another group of bandits. Perhaps I should recapture you?”

“I did nothing in the beginning and I am doing nothing now.”

“Nothing, and that is the problem. You have no answers to the questions that I ask. I am the master here, Vahan Lee, and if you wish to be free then let me know your identity.”

“What questions would you ask then? I am a simple-hearted man, and loyal to my country. It is for my accusers to prove otherwise,” said Vahan.

“I do not accuse you of being disloyal to your country, I merely ask if your country is Atilta or France?”

“France!” cried Vahan, forgetting himself. Then he recovered by adding in a half-hearted attempt at deception, “Is not my country.” He smiled weakly at Alfonzo.

“Tell me all, Vahan Lee. If I desired you dead would you now be alive? Your secrets are safer with me than yourself, and I dare say, if I guess them right, so are your plans.”

“My plans, the loyal Atiltian that I am, are for the benefit of this land, and I will reveal them to whom I choose. You cannot coerce me.”

“Yes, of course. I know you are right in this. I must apologize, for I grow boisterous whenever I think of my native land in the trouble that it is. If only we had allies with a monarch on the continent, then we would be secure from that side and our troubles half over. Have you heard rumors of any kings thinking about supporting us against Gylain?”

This subtle tactic of Alfonzo’s was more than Vahan Lee could bear, and he stood almost bursting out of his seams during Alfonzo’s little dialog. The gentleman’s face turned red and his eyeballs half popped out: so great was his excitement, and the anticipation he had about revealing his long -- and badly kept -- secrets.

“You have earned my trust, Alfonzo of Melborough, so I will confide in you -- strictly confidentially, of course.”

“Of course,” was the answer.

“You know me as Vahan Lee, but that name is merely a fake, to allow me to go incognito. I am rightly known as Thomas Vahanlee. You may have noticed that I have a slight French accent.”

“Yes, a slight accent,” though he had a very heavy one.

“And that my attire is partly French.”

“Is it? I did not notice,” though he stunk of French nobility.

“That is because I am indeed French, though obviously very loyal to the people of Atilta. One need not be native to be patriotic.”

“Oftentimes foreigners are the most vocal in praise of a country.”

“True, but to continue: I am a noble gentleman in my country France, the king’s chief, the hands behind the government, so to say. It was he that sent me on this secret mission to ascertain the character of the rebels in the forests. No one else could be trusted to be loyal to both France and Atilta, and to be discreet about being so.”

“Discreet it is,” Alfonzo chuckled.

“Let me tell you, friend, though they are not very visible, I, too, have my faults.”

Alfonzo gasped in feigned amazement.

“Yes, I too, Thomas Vahanlee of France, have my faults, as imperceptible as they may be. But to continue.”

“Please do.”

“His Majesty the King of France wishes to explore the possibility of assisting the rebellion against the tyrant Gylain, and he has asked me to find a noble man with whom he can communicate without fear of betrayal.”

“May I suggest Lord Milada of Erlich.”

“I was thinking you.”

“Oh, indeed? You must know that I am not a leader, for I am not noble born, at least not in the Atilian nobility. I have no property except the hearts of men.”

“Yet what is worth more than the very images of God?”

“Nothing, though it is a sin to worship his images.”

“True. But I am still of the opinion that you would be a better contact than a nobleman. You are free from suspicion, or at least free from the eyes of the enemy. You are safely in the forest with your own men. And you have the means to easily communicate with all of the country.”

“You have convinced me. Tell your king that his help is welcome, but his rule is not.”

“His purpose is to restore the royal family of Plantagenet to the throne. His brother was the king, you will remember, and his death struck him hard.”

“But where does he intend to find an heir to the slain monarch?”

“The rumor in France is that the boy survived, and His Majesty feels the presence of a strong king rising from the oppressed forest lands.”

“Feelings are deceptive, though I admit to the same. There is someone whom my eye has rested upon of late, and now I go to look into it more closely. Directly after the Revolt of the Lion’s Mane, I wrote an account of what took place, that I would not forget the details should I need them. Now I am in such a need, for if things are as I remember them, our chances have improved.”

“Of whom do you speak?”

“Willard.”

“A strange man to say the least: mysterious and cunning.”

“We will see soon enough, for we have reached the hideout where the records are stored.”

They had come to a rather large oak tree with a trunk that broke into three sections ten feet from the

ground. The whole trunk itself was no less than forty-five feet around. Alfonzo and Vahan Lee stopped at the trunk, and the former dropped to his knees, throwing himself into a vigorous search for the hidden area. They called it a hideout, but it was more a secret compartment, for their shelter was twenty yards to the east. After a moment, he stopped and lifted a dirt-covered panel from the ground. A locked chest sat beneath it.

“Help me pull this out, Vahan,” and the two men brought it out of the hole.

Alfonzo took a key from inside his shirt and opened it. From the inside he took a piece of folded paper. Then he stood and concealed the chest once more, so that, in the case of an ambush, the bulk of the papers would not be lost. Such was the way of the forest.

“Where is Casper?” he asked Vahan.

“He crept off into the forest while you were digging,” was the answer.

Alfonzo took a long look in each direction, then returned to the paper he held in his hands.

“I will read this aloud to you, Vahan, that you may know a little more of the history of our struggle, and that you may judge Willard’s identity, for the opinion of but one man is worthless.”

“Often the opinions of many are no different. But read it, and we will see what we will hear.”

“What?”

“Never mind, just read it.”

“Very well,” and with that, Alfonzo began to read what he had recorded roughly fifteen years before:

I, Alfonzo of Melborough, record this on mid-summers night of what was the twenty-first year of the reign of our beloved King Plantagenet. Not more than three days ago the Revolt of the Lion’s Mane was affected successfully, however, and the king is no more. The royal family was destroyed: the king and queen murdered, the prince chased into the heart of the forest by followers of Nicholas Montague.

It happened on the night of a banquet, held for the Queen of Saxony. She was living in Eden when she came to power, and her realm was saved by the military intervention of the king. If that were not enough to endear him to her, she was married to William Stuart, the king’s beloved Admiral. Yet even that was not enough to appease her thirst for power.

It was cloudy and dark, with a strong, biting wind from the south. The king thought himself safe, for Gylain’s plot had been discovered, and he was placed in the city dungeon. Such was the fairness of the king, that he placed Gylain in custody with the full rights of a citizen. But the latter did not share his respect, and was freed by his own men, who had long ago infiltrated the dungeon guards. The queen’s entourage was replaced with followers of Gylain, armed and ready to commit their murders. The king trusted her, yet she was Gylain’s lover, and lovers cannot be trusted.

I looked on, from above, when the toast was raised, and the king, in good faith, was merry and at ease. He stood and threw back the wine before him, pledging his trust for the Queen of Saxony. Yet before the cup had been drunk, he was forced to drink another. Gylain and his men leapt forward, throwing off their disguises and attacking ruthlessly with their knives and daggers. The king and queen were slain.

This tragedy took place in the great hall of Castle Plantagenet, in the center of the city Eden. The hall rises through several floors of castle, the bottom being the dining room, and the top an open space, with no floor at all, merely an empty space wherein chandeliers are hung. Around that room, on the second floor, there is a hallway that has windows opening into the Great Hall. I was passing along this hallway with Prince Willarinus, to give him a glimpse of his parents before he went to bed.

I was his tutor, as well as his friend, for though he was a youth, his innate wisdom was remarkable, as if fate bred him for some special mission. As we passed one of the windows, we stopped to look. But what we saw horrified us: Gylain was disguised as the Queen of Saxony's lady-in-waiting, and when the toast was raised, he threw aside the veil and killed the king with a foul stroke from his knife. One of his followers likewise dispatched the queen. Then a fight began between Blaine Griffith, captain of the guards, and the followers of Gylain. The forces of the king were outnumbered, but I did not stay to assist them, for I had other duties.

I took my liege the prince and rushed to the secret passage that connects the dungeon with the forest outside the walls of the city. There was no time to arm or supply ourselves as we ran, but my sword was at my side from habit, and Willarinus grabbed the royal sword from the hallway as we fled, though it was as long as himself. The passage to the outside was in the wall of the deepest dungeon, hidden behind a statue. The two of us were able to reach it in safety and flee to the forest.

Yet we were seen by Nicholas Montague as we ran from the apartments of the royal family to the dungeon in the under-tower. He left the fight in the great hall and chased after us. When he could not find the hidden passage, he took some men and went to the clearing in the forest where it ends. Apparently the conspirators had been able to ascertain its general location.

Along his way, Nicholas Montague came across a group of servants and ladies-in-waiting from the castle, who had fled when the violence began. Among them was Celestine, my wife, who did not know the intentions of the queen. Somehow the Queen of Saxony came to hate her with the same zeal with which she had once loved her. It was as if madness compelled the queen to hate all she once held dear.

The passage was narrow and cramped, turning many times along the way as it passed under the narrow city streets. We moved slowly because of this, thinking we had escaped danger. Nicholas Montague reached the forest before us, therefore, but his attention was turned to the party from the castle when we exited the tunnel. He did not see where it came out. But once we were in the clearing, Montague came face to face with me. The hour was late, and the moon was obscured by the ominous sky. Everything was dark, except for what was lit by a single lantern which the servants had brought with them.

Montague drew his sword and lunged forward at me. I was only able to deflect his blow by stepping to the right and letting him pass by me. I brought a hard blow down upon him as he was left undefended, and for a moment he was disabled. While these things took place, however, one of his men ran after my wife, and another after the prince. By some desperate action, I may have saved one, but I hesitated. I was torn between them, and both were lost. On one side was my love, to whom my soul is devoted, and on the other was the prince, the only heir to the throne, the only hope for Atilta. I could not decide, so fate decided for me. If only there were another cure for indecision!

A dozen men came from the direction of the castle, aiding those who had control over Celestine and her companions. Willarinus, at the same time, eluded the grasp of the men who held him and fled into the forest. Seeing that Celestine was beyond my help, I abandoned her and followed Willarinus. But before I could overtake him, Nicholas -- the elder Montague -- engaged me in combat. It was not possible for me to flee.

Our melee was fierce, but at last I overcame him and was able to escape alive from his men, albeit badly wounded. I chased after the prince. Yet I could find no trace of him anywhere in the forest nearby. As for the men who had followed him, I found their lifeless bodies a short way from the clearing. My first thought was that the prince had killed them with the sword he wielded. Upon closer inspection, however, I found the traitors had been killed by a bear, with claw marks at their necks. I looked to the ground for prints that might explain what had happened, and at length I found the prince's feet fleeing into the forest. Beyond where the bodies of the men rested, he was followed no more. Yet something strange appeared about twenty feet to the left of his tracks: the prints of a full grown black bear. I followed them both for five miles, but they disappeared into a stream, and I could catch no trace of them again.

That was three days ago, and since then I have searched without ceasing, but with only vanity's assistance. I am afraid for Willarinus; but, for now, it is only the forest that can save him. Whatever bear killed the men who followed him is his only hope now. As for myself, I will rest and then see to the situation in Eden. Time is short.

Farewell to whoever may pick this up. Signed, Alfonzo

The two men were silent after reading the letter. Vahan and Alfonzo were alone; Casper had gone off on some other task, and whether it was sinister or not did not matter to them. It seemed as if even the birds had stopped singing, and the wind had stopped blowing, such was the silence that prevailed. At length, Vahan spoke.

"I am ever loyal to Atilta, and to her royal family," he said. "Can it be that Willard of the Forest is none other than Willarinus, the prince?"

"I believe so. The name, the background, the sword: it is solid and circumspect evidence."

"Horatio the bear, could he have been protector?"

"No, for he isn't more than five years old. But perhaps there is a link between them that made their friendship possible."

"What can you mean? Keep nothing from me for fear of my telling it to others, for I am loyal."

"If I hesitate in speech," began Alfonzo, "It is only because I am hesitant in thought. But I will tell you what I am thinking: perhaps there is a clan of bears that watches over the royal family. It sounds absurd, I know. I would dismiss it without thought myself, if I had not seen the bear prints, and if -- whenever I walked with Willarinus in the forest -- I did not catch glimpses of bears in the distance."

"There is a tale in the house of the King of France, the other branch of the Plantagenets," said Vahan, "That Atilta is a magical land, the last of the magical lands of earth, like an isolated bubble of myth in the middle of the medieval world. It was said that before mankind had traveled from their origins, the land was filled with dwarves, dragons, fairies, and all such creatures. But as the human population grew, the others declined. When the populations of Egypt and Greece grew too large, the magical creatures moved to the island of Atlantis. Their magic made it prosper and gave it defenses against the encroachments of mankind, the legends say, until at last the avarice and lust of the humans effected them as well, and their land was sunk in the sea under their self-oppressions. The tales say Atilta is the same, that some day it too will sink beneath the sea."

"Yes, but that is a fairy tale, Vahan," Alfonzo said, "And such things are not to be believed. We must focus on ending the oppressions on Atilta, without thoughts of the mythological." He paused and looked

anxiously at the forest around them. "Did you hear that?"

Alfonzo unsheathed his sword and leapt to his feet as he spoke, cocking his head to the side as he listened to the sounds of a man running through the forest. At length Casper appeared, with a look of wild fear in his eyes.

"Be alert! There is an ambush at hand!"

Alfonzo looked him over closely, then turned to Vahan and said, "Arm yourself."

"Be quick about it," Casper gasped from his running, "For Montague is coming!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Mere moments after Casper came out of the forest, fifteen men followed him into the clearing which surrounded the giant oak tree. Jonathan Montague led them, his dark hair combed forward at the temples as before, his gait strict and emotionless. They emerged at a brisk run, and, like a well-trained legion, circled around the three freedom fighters. Montague pulled back to a walk as his men did this, and entered their circle with an air of victory. He waved his hand and they drew their swords, forming a wall of steel around Alfonzo, Vahan, and Casper.

Montague was the first to speak.

"Alfonzo of Melborough," he laughed deeply, "Who would have thought the King of the Forest would find himself surrounded? Surely, not I. What of you, Casper? Does it strike you as ironic, as unexpected?"

"No, but you will be struck with the irony in my steel blade, if you dare advance another step," the ranger retorted.

"We shall see soon enough whose words are meant, and whose are mere grass, my friend, to be thrown into the fire." He paused. "Casper, have you switched your allegiance once more? You must know that I do not play with the fickle."

"My allegiance remains were it ever was."

"Indeed?"

"Am I not at Alfonzo's side? Why would I follow you, who offers pain instead of comfort, and power instead of consolation? Let the fools be fools, I say, but I will not join them in it."

"Ah, Casper, you surprise me. What are the rewards, you ask? To the victor goes the spoils."

"And you would spoil me in your victory," Casper said. "Do I not remember de Garcia?"

"Very well, if that is how it is," Montague said. "Yet I will not forget our bargain," and he took a bag of

coins from his pocket and threw it at Casper. It hit him and fell to the ground, and thirty silver coins came out upon the grass.

Alfonzo's eyes glared with anger for a brief instant, before he could extinguished them.

"Casper!" he wailed, "Casper, you are the traitor!"

Casper turned to him with an open mouth, but he could not speak, for his emotions were overcome with surprise.

"There is forgiveness on earth," Alfonzo whispered, "Yet earth is not eternal."

"No!" Casper cried, sinking to his knees and raising his hands toward Alfonzo in supplication.

"Have mercy, Alfonzo, for it was not I. Gladly I would die for you and for the cause; for Atilta and for its people. He speaks lies," and he gestured to Montague.

His face was sincere, and Alfonzo was silent for a moment as he looked him over. Montague was indignant with the silence, however, and grew angry.

"William Stuart was a cowardly traitor to all that is good, as are you, Alfonzo."

Alfonzo looked up from Casper, who remained prostrate before him.

"And what would you know of that which is good, Montague? Your schemes here will not work, for I will not disown those who call me master. They will be punished, if they do wrong, even as you and your master Gylain will be. But only when such wrongs are shown clearly. I will not judge before the matter is known, but rather, I will wait and fate shall judge us all." Alfonzo's face flushed with passion.

Montague broke ranks with his men, advancing toward the three prisoners.

Vahan was trembling with fear and muttering under his breath, "I am loyal to Atilta, I am not a Frenchman."

Casper still knelt before Alfonzo, anxious to be exonerated.

"If I am false to you, Alfonzo, it is not by my design. I only followed the orders I was given by you, in the letter."

"I gave you no letter, Casper," Alfonzo said slowly.

"You did not give it to me yourself, sir, but you wrote it. I was handed it by--"

But Casper did not finish. Before he could, Montague stepped forward briskly, and raised his sword. With a slow, calculated swing he broke the alliance between Casper's head and his body. The severed skull rolled off to the left and the body fell limp at the feet of Alfonzo.

The latter was overcome with grief, and dropped to his knees, hiding his face in his hands in desolation and despair. Then he slowly raised his moistened eyes to Montague's.

"I surrender," he whispered, and let his sword fall from his hand onto the ground.

Montague stood silent, marinating in his victory. He raised his sword above his head, and prepared to bring it down upon Alfonzo, to finish off his stalwart enemy. But he stopped himself, with a strange hate gleaming from his eyes, that kind for which it is not enough to merely kill.

“No,” he said, “No, you will not be slain Alfonzo of Melborough. We must first let you soak in your dishonor. We must let you live and watch as your foolish followers are hunted down and slain, one by miserable, wretched one.” He paused, then, turning to his men, he went on, “Bind them. Then we are off to Eden, to the castle dungeon, from which there is no escape.”

He turned his back to Alfonzo and began to walk toward the edge of the clearing.

His men bound Alfonzo and Vahan Lee, kicking the decapitated body of Casper from their path. Montague did not wait for them, but started off in the direction from which he had come: east, toward Eden. The soldiers followed soon after, with the two prisoners between them.

When they were no longer in the clearing, but in the skyless forest once more, Alfonzo let out his grin, smiling from ear to ear in a simplistic way. Vahan turned toward him and opened his mouth in surprise.

“My friend, what is there to smile about at this sad juncture? Can you possibly be relieved that the fight is finally over? Can the end of the war, however horrible the defeat, bring with it rest from worries?”

“No, for the war has just begun, Vahan. Perhaps you do not realize what we have accomplished?”

“No, I do not see what is good in this.”

Alfonzo looked forward at Montague, but he was too far away to hear him, and the soldiers did not seem to care.

“We’ve cleared the forest of Gylain’s men,” he whispered, “For the safe passage of His Majesty, the King of Atilta, and his loyal protector, Horatio.”

He laughed silently as he spoke, as did Vahan, both grown men giggling to themselves. Yet they could not contain it, and soon they laughed ferociously, without giving any thought to what their captors would think.

Montague turned and gave them an incredulous look.

“What is this?” he cried, “You are defeated, and your followers slain. How can you laugh in this defeat, you fools? The end draws nigh, but not in your companions’ favor.”

“It does draw near, but it is you who has lost, Montague. The days of Gylain the Wicked are numbered short.”

“And how do you know this, Alfonzo?” Montague asked.

“I can hear it in the wind.” This was all Alfonzo would say, and Vahan added nothing more.

With an indignant countenance, his victory confused by his enemy’s rejoicing, Montague turned once more and set off at a double pace.

"To Eden," he shouted to his men, "To Castle Plantagenet!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Meanwhile, there was action in another part of the forest, to the north of the camp in which the rebels had spent the night. Willard, the king of Atilta -- though he did not know it -- and Horatio, heir to a long line of black bears -- the kings of the forest and the guardians of the house of Plantagenet -- traveled together. The two kings of Atilta, one of man and one of beast, were together as blood brothers, though neither knew their true importance.

The forest was as ancient there as elsewhere, and it was still under the broad canopy that they walked, clothed in a soft, mellow shade and cooled by a slight breeze that wisped around the trunks of the massive trees. In this section of the forest, the trees had vines growing on them thickly, stretching all the way into the upper branches. There was a heavy fog that sweetened the already wholesome air, and nothing could be seen more than ten yards away. Even within that range everything took on a smoky, shrouded appearance, as if the air had just woke up, and its eyes were still too tired to let things show through.

The first leg of their journey was entirely uneventful, until the noon hour. It was only then that the two reached the road, which they took in the eastern direction, toward the city of Eden. Their pace was slack, for they were in no hurry. It was as though they gave adventure a chance to overtake them. And sure enough, within a few minutes, Willard and Horatio -- once more disguised as monks -- spotted an odd, clerical figure coming toward them from the west.

"Look there, Horatio," Willard said, "An odd man approaches, and I should count myself amiss if I did not take the chance to speak with him. Let us take our rest in the shade, therefore, and wait for him to reach us. He is going the same way we are."

The two sat down at the base of a large oak, enjoying the cool shade for a few moments. Soon the man drew near enough to make out his features. He was a little above the average height, very slightly overweight, and had a blazing red mustache that stretched from ear to ear like a lightening bolt attached to his face. It was apparent he was the prior of a church, for his robes were richer than a monk's, yet simpler than a bishop's.

"Greetings stranger," Willard called out as he drew near, "Would you care to make your way with us? The forest is a grim place for the lone ecclesiastic, these days."

"With pleasure, my fellow churchmen. But let me make my positions known, for there are many of Judas' companions among us," the prior answered with a grave, animated countenance. "I am on the side of freedom, against the usurper Gylain, the most wretched and tyrannical ruler since the purloined rib -- that is to say, from the creation itself. And if you be of those putrid, pale-hearted churchmen who -- for love of money and power -- forsake the commands of the Holy Scriptures to follow this Gylain -- and who declare that his reign be just -- then I have more contempt for you than for the devil himself, and may he take your souls!" He finished his monologue with a flush and a little jump on his heels that, while not raising him from the ground, elevated him enough to display his zeal for freedom.

"We are faithful to the true king, friend," Willard began, not realizing the irony in his statement. "But what type of Christian would wish the souls of his enemies to the devil? Does it not say to love your enemies more than yourself?"

"Of course, and I am rightly convicted. Thank you for your rebuke, most learned monk. You have

proved yourself true, in my eyes, and in the most telling way possible: not only to our earthly king but to our heavenly one as well. Tell me then, friends, what are you called?" asked the man.

"I am Willard, and this is Horatio. We have only recently come from a long hermitage in the forest, and he has yet to regain a decent knowledge of any language but Latin, yet I will translate his speech."

"No need, I know Latin well."

"Yes, but fifteen years make a strange vocabulary, and it is perhaps more gibberish than Latin. What is your name, good sir?"

"I am Oren Lorenzo, prior of the Western March and good friend of Milada of Erlich." He gave Willard a close look as he said this, to detect any feelings he had in connection with that name. Willard remembered him as a great leader of the forces of freedom, and his face showed it.

"Perhaps you have heard the tragedy that has befallen his house of late?" Oren offered.

"Yes, indeed, that his daughter Ivona is missing. A sad event, I am told."

"By whom?"

"By Alfonzo of Melborough and the Fardy brothers. I left them not four hours ago."

The prior's face lit to a glow upon hearing this, and he said with feeling, "At last, they are on their way. They come to help, I am sure?"

"The Fardy brothers, yes, with several of Alfonzo's men. But he himself is off on another task."

"That is good to hear, friend, for I was beginning to lose hope in her being recovered. It is a sad situation, as well as a dangerous one."

"Your journey, then, is to gather news about her?"

"Yes, as well as a certain Erwin Meredith, a monk under me. He went out to gather information, but has not yet returned. What, may I ask, is the purpose of your journey?"

"I do not know yet, though I hope to discover it before long."

"What faith in providence! You are a most extraordinary monk, dear Willard."

"Yes, faith. Or perhaps just acknowledgment that I can do little to control my destiny."

"Destiny is an odd, phantom word, I always say, so let us leave it behind."

"Very well."

With that, the three walked on, looking like innocent, peaceful churchmen -- though two of them were far from that, and the third had his own secrets. From noon, when the party met, until eight o'clock they walked through the forest. The great limbs from the trees on either side of the road clasped hands overhead to give them shade, and a gentle wind traveled along the road with them, refreshing them as it went by.

It was at the time of evening when the shadows begin deepen that they came to a clearing in the forest, stretching from the side of the road to the end of a long meadow. Between were fields of wheat, oats, and hay, the later in its highest, richest shade of gold, so that it twinkled as it wrinkled in the breeze. Ten yards from the road stood a short building, made of roughly hewn boards and whatever bricks could be hauled from the city. It was long and narrow, in the middle, with a larger section at either side.

The forest in this area was rather highly elevated, with the meadow sloping down from the road. Through this landscape the ocean could be seen, shining sweetly beyond the wooden barrier. Beer-froth clouds filled the sky, illuminated underneath by the drowning sun. The rigid forms of the forest trees contrasted this heavenly panorama with their earthly roots, and the result was the natural mixture of the romantic and the mathematical. It was, in a word, paradise.

“That is my destination, friend,” said Oren Lorenzo, his fiery mustache bent upwards by his grin. “It is one of the monasteries in my district, and I would be pleased if you would join us here this evening. This is, perhaps, a beautiful place, but the food trumps it nicely. The abbot hails from Italy, and his pasta and bread are unsurpassed. I can taste it even now.” The prior kissed the ends of his fingers and twirled around, excited by the thought of good food amidst the good scenery.

“They must be preparing quite a feast,” Willard replied, “For look, the smoke pours from the building.”

As he said this the smoke became more and more evident, increasing rapidly until it was suddenly replaced by the flames that caused it, moving swiftly to the outside of the building.

“Good heavens above us!” shouted Lorenzo, “The abbey is on fire!”

He dashed off toward the blaze, not heeding Willard’s request that he remain. It would have been better if he had. For at that moment a half dozen horsemen came around from the back of the building. They were dressed in black, with the insignia of Gylain on their shields. With them came a dozen monks, swarming around their burning monastery like ants around a broken ant hill. Before Willard and Horatio were able to get half way to the burning building, Oren Lorenzo was already there, shouting at the horsemen.

“You wretched vermin! I have never witnessed a more hideous, debauched act in my long life -- and who can doubt but that the good lord hasn’t either? What is the meaning of this -- of setting fire to the house of God? And of those loyal to the country? By Goliath and the Queen of Sheba, who slew him with the braids of bondage!”

The leading horseman reared his steed. “We are soldiers of Gylain,” he answered harshly, “Under orders to punish this house of heathenism for treason to the crown, for plotting to overthrow the king, and for aiding rebel bandits. We act under the law, so step back!”

“A plundering law is worse than anarchy. This is no lawful deed -- this is arson and you will be punished.”

“By whom?” laughed the horsemen.

“By me!” roared the prior, his face becoming as red and as fiery as his mustache. He held his staff in the air and swung it at the speaker, knocking him from his saddle. His eyes flashed and he turned to the next in an attempt to repeat the performance, raising his staff to strike. But just as he hurled it toward the horseman, the leader, stretched out on the ground, kicked Lorenzo’s legs from beneath him. He fell out

of balance and tumbled to the earth. In an instant the leader was on his feet once more, and he quickly bound Lorenzo's wrists.

"You will be richly rewarded for your trouble, you fool of a friar. The dungeons of Castle Plantagenet will soon remedy your zealous heart."

He laughed and pushed the friar onto the horse of one of his men. The monks stood by helplessly as their beloved prior was thus imprisoned, prevented by their vows -- as well as their incapacity -- from saving him.

There were others present whom the horsemen had not yet seen, however. Willard and Horatio began charging at them when they saw what was taking place. At the same moment that the leader remounted his steed to ride off, they came with a charge. The air was thick with their shouts, Willard yelling and Horatio roaring. The bandits quickly spun around to face the newcomers. Willard was a great swordsman, yet even perfection could not have overcome a half-dozen mounted men. It was all he could do to protect himself. He parried first one and then another, dodging a third and making two of them clash their swords together.

While Willard was thus engaged, Horatio was sparring with the leader of the soldiers. The leader succeeded at last in giving the bear a firm kick in the face, but it was only to his horror that he succeeded. As the bear's head was pushed backwards, his hood slipped off. His anger was aroused at being kicked in the snout, and Horatio let out a death-defying roar. The monks and the soldiers were terrified, thinking the monk had been turned into a bear. They all turned to look at him, and were silent. All except Oren Lorenzo. His surprise far surpassed that of the others, for he had spent the whole afternoon speaking with the bear, as he thought, and was fully convinced that he had previously been a human being.

"By the hairs on my back and the skin on my head," he shouted, very confused, "It is the devil himself, and he has come to claim the souls of those who would defile the church. I am against you, Satan. But for now, let loose the flames of Hades!"

The leader of the bandits was hardly phased by this, but his men were panic stricken with the sudden thoughts of death and eternity put into their heads. The leader feared their courage was at an end, and spurred his horse forward. He commanded the others to follow, before they lost their souls -- or rather, their courage.

"Onward, men," he cried, "Onward to Eden and to safety! The only soul that will meet death there is yours, blasted friar!"

And with that, the soldiers of Gylain, with Oren Lorenzo as a prisoner, disappeared from sight around the bend in the road, galloping off at such a speed they could not be caught.

"To Eden," Willard whispered to himself when they had gone. "You have not seen the last of the devil yet, Gylain."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

From the meadow where Lorenzo was abducted, it was possible to get a good view of the ocean beyond. Atilta was an island similar in size to Scotland, and it was not more than ten miles from the monastery to the coast. In all the commotion that resulted from the burning of the monastery, Willard did not get a chance to look at the ocean for any length of time. If he had, however, he would have seen a gallant sailing ship, with four stout masts and a carved whale that stuck out from the bowsprit. Its sails were full of the wind, stretched out like clouds and pulling the ship forward.

There were a hundred men on deck, and twenty of them were bound tightly in chains. From their dirty, unshaven appearance, it was evident they had been prisoners for at least several months, and possibly several years. One of the prisoners was especially terrible, for his countenance was one of evil and malice, and his black eyes burned with the watch fires of hate. He sat on a bench beside the wheel, gazing at the shore of Atilta. Beside him stood a tall, muscular man with a flowing white beard and a weather-beaten face. In his hands, the latter held a telescope, carefully examining the area where the monastery was on fire.

"By the depths of the sea," he grumbled, "There is a church burning up there, and a troop of Gylain's thugs harassing the clergy."

The prisoner laughed.

"Yes, but what were you expecting? This is Gylain's land, and he is the power here, regardless of who owns this ship. You will get no joyful welcome, William, for the rebels are defeated by now. There is none left to greet with open arms the former Admiral of Atilta, least of all his former friend!" He laughed again, mocking the pride of his captor.

"Fifteen years ago I was captured for the second time by Gylain, Nicholas Montague, but you must know that. I was placed upon this ship, to be tortured by you and your heartless men. Do not think that I have forgotten the pain I felt as you hung me from the bowsprit day and night, with the cold waves breaking against my face and the sharp winds devouring my flesh. You left me there for months, and during the fiercest storms you did not do so much as cover me from the elements. Yet I am made stronger by it, and my fever has only grown. No, Montague, I have not forgotten."

"But what importance does your memory have, William? You have no power for revenge."

"Against you, I do. You were careless and let the loyal Atiltians catch you in your weakness. We returned to find that Gylain had only increased his power. The navy was his, and it chased us off to India and China, a lonely refugee in this world of pain. You have been chained there ever since, old enemy, and you know your fate: to never again be a free man. That is the reward for your treason. I need take no revenge, for your bitter heart can do more torture than I."

"Fools will be fools," Nicholas Montague answered. "Can you think the rebels are any closer to overthrowing Gylain? Have you not just said that Gylain's men burned down a church building? Even in the forest the rebels have no strength."

"Yes, Nicholas, the vagrants burnt the building. Yet they were chased away. Two men opposed them, and they fled." He fell silent for a moment. "Perhaps it was merely the sun," he hesitated, "But the one wielded a golden sword, the sword of the king. Either way, six against two, and the two prevailed. Is this the omen of our demise? No, but fools will be fools."

The swarthy prisoner stopped his grin short, angry that his master's forces were beaten. But he did not let that anger suppress his hatred.

“Do you hope to find Celestine still among the living? If she is, than she is no better than her mother! You must realize that she has long ago consented to marry Gylain, or has been slain. There is no hope for you to rescue your daughter.” The prisoner feigned laughing.

The Admiral, however, was not fooled.

“Alfonzo lives,” he said with conviction, “And he is more a man than Gylain, for he has the hardness of a man and the wisdom of a woman. Celestine still lives, and still retains her honor. Does not the sun still rise? And do not the stars still shine? If she were lost, then even they would hide their faces in disgust.”

A small tear fell down the old man’s rough face, and even the heartless Nicholas could not help but feel jealous of the love of the father, though it had been tried so hard in his younger days.

The ship rocked steadily up and down to the pulse of the water, with the occasional creak of a timber attempting to adjust itself to the change of pressure. With a slow, unstoppable attraction, the sun was being pulled down below the horizon, leaving the world behind for another dark night. The officer of the watch approached the Admiral.

“Sir,” he said, “Should we not turn to the sea, for the night is coming and this is a lee shore.”

“Yes, turn her to the south, Barnes Griffith. We will spend the night between Atilta and France.”

“And tomorrow?” the officer, Barnes Griffith, asked.

“We go ashore to hear news of Alfonzo and his followers. This is war, young one, and I plan to win.”

“We land outside Eden, then?”

“No, for that is too rash. We have no intelligence of their fleet, and it is best to avoid it. We will send out the longboat when we are across from the Western March. I know of an Innkeeper on the forest road that runs out of there who will be able to give us the information we need. From there, we will travel to Eden in disguise and see what we can about the fleet. Gylain has no seamen as followers -- none of those who served under me, anyhow -- so the navy was full of rebels and lubbers when we last were in these parts. If he has done no better, we have but to overthrow the captains and retain the crew.”

“As you say, sir.”

The Admiral nodded his head and went below, leaving the control of the ship to his trusted officers. His quarters were directly under the bridge, a simple stairway connecting the two. The room was small and cramped, for a land building, but on a ship it was luxurious. There was a cot in one corner, and a grand oak desk on the opposite wall, in front of a large French window that gave a panoramic view of the ocean. A deck jutted out from another wall, projecting itself over the ocean. Each of the other walls were windowless, one leading to the main deck of the ship, The King’s Arm, and the other to his private bathroom.

Admiral William Stuart sighed heavily and stared at a picture on the wall of a beautiful woman, muttering to himself, “I will not forget, Casandra, nor will Gylain. The love that I have given you, and the hatred that has been returned to me, are too great to be forgotten.”

The old man pulled off his shirt and looked at his reflection in the full-length mirror that rested against the

wall, his eyes cold with a smoldering anger. His back was covered with the scars of a hundred lashes, each one slithering along his rough skin like a snake -- a very deadly snake.

"I will never forget, Gylain, nor will you. What was taken will yet be avenged."

With that, he went to bed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The capital city of Atilta was Eden, sitting on the southern coast, toward the eastern portion of the island, although it was still near the center. It was a magnificent city, without blemish on its exterior, though its interior was decaying. At this time, and indeed throughout its entire history, it was a large and important city, for no other reason than that Atilta was a small, wild place, and its only civilized region was Eden. The ancient forest stretched itself out all the way to the coast, even near Eden, and it surrounded the city on three sides, with the ocean on the other. Between the forest and the city a giant stone wall had been built many centuries prior to this time, making a barrier between civilization and nature that still stood so many years later.

Eden was an ancient city, retaining its former grandeur despite the tyranny it had beheld of late. The houses were still built of mighty timbers from the heart of the forest, and still loomed hundreds of feet above the ground. These lofty houses filled most of the city's interior, interspersed with shops, which, however, were constructed in almost the same manner.

Each of these buildings varied somewhat from the others, but as is always the case, they were built with the same principles of architecture in mind. The cornerstone of each building was not a stone at all, but a log. In Atilta, the land of the forest, the products of the forest were used to construct the buildings. The trees of the forest were both ancient and strong, especially those of the species *firmus*. The forest was of purer origins than those on the continent, still retaining the strength of the early world. Because of this, none of the trees were deciduous, and the oaks and maples would remain in leaf alongside the pines. All of the species of trees that grew elsewhere also found their way to Atilta, or, perhaps, found their way from Atilta to elsewhere. The willows truly weeped, and in some places these trees shaded whole fields. The *firmus*, however, was exclusive to Atilta. Its wood was as dense as the iron trees, and it was these trees that were used as the cornerstones of the buildings.

At each of the four points of the compass -- the Atiltians were very strict that each corner of a building faced the four cardinal points -- a log was secured into the ground. These logs were not much different from the trees as they grew in the wild. The bark was stripped, and the branches removed, yet other than that, the buildings were made from uncut trees. Now, these logs were not only very tall but also very wide, on average twenty to thirty feet in diameter. Because of this, not only were the outside corners rounded, but the inner sections of the building were carved right into the tree. For the homes, the custom was to place the bedrooms inside of the trees, as well as the dining room. The average Atiltian, therefore, woke from a bed of which even the frame was carved from the inside of a tree, and ate his meals looking out from windows of the same. For these reasons, the island was considered magical by the ignorant.

This formed the basic building, excepting only the walls and ceiling. These latter two were supplied by a vine that was very common in Atilta, called the "Hanging Timber," because of its thick, impenetrable

nature. With these vines for walls, the elements could not penetrate into the inside of the building, and yet it was still fresh and airy like the outdoors. This was the wonder of Atilian architecture: portions of the house were closed and comfortable, built into giant timbers; while other portions were open and airy, a natural veranda in the center of a vibrant metropolitan area.

In the center of the city was Castle Plantagenet, close enough to the harbor -- or rather, the Floatings, as it was called -- that the towers and walls overlooked the water. The castle was named after the royal family of Atilta, though it was now the home of Gylain. It was a magnificent castle, reflecting the economic dominance that Atilta enjoyed at this time, as the hub of the world's trade. It was built of stone, with wooden supports on the inside. The entire structure was contained within a single, massive tower, stretching far below the ground to the dungeons, and far above it to the skies. Around this tower there was a set of square walls, and the space between the two was filled with barracks.

At the same time that Willard fought for the monastery, and that Admiral William Stuart laid out his plans aboard *The King's Arm*, there was a lone figure gazing out of the window of the highest room of the castle. It was a woman, an older woman, but one who was still in her prime. Her hair was dark, speckled with white, though from birth rather than age. The contrast between the two shades gave her an enchanting charm, but it was the enchantment of nature, of an eagle flying over a field of wheat, rather than one of man, of a structure of stone. Her most striking feature, however, was her eyes, as black as night but as soft as the stars. She was not shapely, in the vulgar sense, but her beauty seemed flawless nonetheless.

A voice called to her from within the tower, but she did not turn her head to listen.

"Celestine, my love," it said, "I have returned."

Her eyes were as the stars. But a star is a peculiar thing, for it can be soft and pleasing as it twinkles in the night sky, or it can be a flaming ball of gas, a sort of spherical hell that burns and blazes with rage.

"Gylain, you wicked impostor, begone. You are not welcome here." Her voice was firm and resolute, and any but the most deaf or the most stubborn, would have skulked away. Gylain, apparently, was either one or the other.

"Dear Celestine," he sounded pleased, "Are there no allusions to the devil, today? You must be in a good mood this evening, my love."

Gylain approached her with a broad smile on his face, which was not altogether evil. In fact, it seemed an open, honest face.

"Your face will not deceive me, fool, for I know your ways," Celestine said.

"As well as I know yours. Come, let us set aside our quarrels and have supper, shall we not?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you made a wicked woman of my mother! Because you have cruelly put my father to death, and try everyday to do the same to my husband!"

"If it was good enough for David, it is good enough for me," he laughed, with apparent sincerity.

“Besides, can I be blamed for their insurrection?”

“You can be blamed for your own, and damnation is as bad once as twice.”

“True, true. You have convinced me of the errors of my ways. I repent.”

“Repentance is better shown than confessed.”

“I agree, and so I show it. Would you not love to be reunited with your husband, before this evening has faded into the wastelands of history?”

Celestine’s face pulsed at the thought, and her eyes twinkled once more.

“You would be well advised not to play with the love of a woman, Gylain,” she said. “For I will not tolerate your scoffings, your mockings, and your lies any longer.”

“I assure you, Celestine: this is no lie. I am convinced of the evil of my ways, and before the sun has crossed into the underworld, I will have you reunited with your beloved husband.”

She turned and removed herself from the window sill, looking closely into his face as he said this. Experience convinced her that there was some cruel joke in his speech, yet his honest, almost naive countenance equally convinced her that there was no joke. His face grew even more sincere as they looked at each other, and his fierceness seemed to melt away. He was pure.

But then, the moment passed and he turned his head away to the door.

“Destiny,” he moaned, “I cannot go against its impulses, for it is not in my power to resist fate.”

He clapped his hands loudly and turned toward the only door, which led to the stairway.

Just then it was thrown open from the outside, revealing several soldiers standing there with a man hanging limply in their arms. They marched in and threw him roughly onto the floor.

“Celestine, I give you your husband.”

Gylain said no more, and he did not laugh or seem to enjoy it. Then, without even turning to watch her face in its emotional paradox -- incensed at the wrongs done her lover, but joyous that they were at last together -- Gylain strode from the room, followed by the soldiers. The door shut abruptly and left the two long-estranged lovers alone in the lofty tower.

“Alfonzo!” she cried, rushing toward him as he lay limply on the ground. “Death itself is worth this one moment of fellowship.”

“And it appears to be the price,” he weakly returned. “But where are my thoughts? I have missed you, but my love has not diminished.”

“An odd way to express it,” she laughed.

Alfonzo laughed too, at his own wretched condition, but he had been badly beaten, and had not the strength to raise himself. With the help of his wife, he lumbered over to the bed of the lofty prison. It was the same room in which Celestine had been a captive for the previous fifteen years. She set about nursing

him, comforting him in his pain. He watched her movements intently, smiling slightly and sighing when their eyes would meet.

At last, he said heavily, "I do not even know you, Celestine."

"Time has separated our bodies," she answered in a soothing tone, "But not our hearts. We will find our love again, in time."

"You do not feel it either, then?"

"Not at the moment, but I feel its memories and its anticipations."

"As do I. Perhaps it is better this way."

"That we do not feel love?"

"That we know it without feeling it, for the road is easier for the blind man that knows it well, than for the blind man the merely feels his way along."

Silence reigned for a moment, before Celestine continued in a different vein.

"You are captured, can there be any hope?"

"The men are still free."

"But can they act without a strong leader, to hold them in when they are over zealous, and to push them out when they are afraid?"

"No, for that is not their nature."

"Then all is lost. Gylain has won."

Alfonzo chuckled to himself in a knowing manner.

"Not exactly. There is another."

"But who can replace Alfonzo of Melborough?" and she caressed him. "Perhaps you do not realize the trouble you have caused Gylain. He does not say it, but I listen, and I hear the guards talking. They fear the forest. They speak of a single man who kills a dozen men. Of a monk who turns into a devil when he grows angry. Of the rebels who rain down on them from the sky. But without you, what will they fear?"

"Who is not afraid of the forest? You must be mistaken, though, Celestine, for it is not me alone who strikes fear into the hearts of men."

"Yet God is slow to anger."

"I did not mean him, I meant the man who slew a dozen men."

Her face grew curious. "Then, it was not you?"

"I am a fair swordsman, but a dozen men?"

“Tell me, Alfonzo, who is this man whom they speak of?”

“The king.”

Celestine fell off the stool she was sitting on, shaking her head as if to clear her ears of water. Her eyes opened in amazement and her face flushed with surprise.

“There is only one problem,” Alfonzo went on.

“Do not leave me hanging, my love!”

“The king does not know what he is.”

“What do you mean?”

“He has no idea that he is the king!”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

After Gylain left the room, he made his way down the stairs to his own quarters, which were directly below Celestine’s. They were the most secure in all the castle, for a man who gains power by a coup, fears a coup himself.

The central tower itself was almost a castle within a castle, for it sat in the center of the outer walls. These walls were thick, and housed barracks and storage rooms within. The outer walls were defended by a moat. Unlike other castles, there were no blacksmiths or other artisans within the castle walls. Instead, Gylain relied upon the city for those things, and kept his stronghold purely military.

The great stone tower that composed the inner part of the castle was several hundred yards in diameter at the ground level. It tapered off as went above and below the ground, until, in each direction, it ended in a small, round spire. Downward, in the very depths of the earth, it housed the castle’s dungeons. These were layered, with the more depraved criminals being housed in the very bottom, and the lesser ones near the surface, all in a collection of circular rooms that were connected only a by narrow stair.

Gylain reached his floor -- for his rooms took the entire level -- after a moment. As he reached them, he was greeted by a man with a clean-shaven face, and dark black hair combed forward at the temples. The man wore a dark cloak, with an ornate sword hanging from his belt without a sheath, and an iron-knuckled glove on either hand. When Gylain came into the room, the man strode toward him and knelt at his feet, saluting him in both manner and meaning.

“Arise, Montague, and come with me. We have business to attend to.”

Gylain showed no emotion as he said this, barely even glancing at Jonathan Montague.

“As you wish,” and the two men passed the guards and entered the room.

It was majestic. The ceiling rose up a hundred feet, and the walls were made almost entirely of stained glass windows. The room was bare of furniture, except for a writing table and two chairs. The table itself was of roughly cut wood, and wobbled slightly. Besides this, there was a bed mat on the floor in the corner, where Gylain slept. He used no bed, and the humble desk only heightened the cathedral room by contrast. This contrast was an obsession with Gylain, and he slept on the cold stone floor so that, when he sat otherwise, he would be more comfortable. It was his belief that things are only known by contrast, that white cannot be seen without black, and comfort cannot be known without pain. It followed, therefore, that to fully enjoy his power and wealth, he must live as the poorest pauper.

When they were in the room and the door was closed, Gylain sat at the desk, and Montague in front of it. Their conversation is as follows:

GYLAIN : I have heard and seen that you have taken Alfonzo. Yet something is amiss, for I can see that you are not pleased with yourself. Speak, for there is nothing to fear but death itself.

MONTAGUE : Are my thoughts so easily read? I must work on this. Yet there is something amiss, for although I have taken Alfonzo, the rebels seem to grow only stronger. I have a report from the Elite Guards, that they were forced to retreat by three men, one of whom was transformed into the devil. Whether it is nonsense or commonsense, I do not care. What disturbs me is that our men were frightened away. There was a prisoner, however: Oren Lorenzo. He is in the dungeons now, along with some wretched Frenchman. I could think of no greater torture than to place them together.

GYLAIN : Then it is as I expected.

MONTAGUE : How so? The Frenchman or the devil?

GYLAIN : Neither. I mean destiny, Montague -- the fate which presses down upon us, and drowns us in our predestined actions! I cannot control it, yet so easily it controls me. For I can see what comes upon us. I am a harbinger, as is all of the present, for that which comes has already been decided. Did I not know, when I was young, that I would become the tyrant of my people? I did, and though it disgusted me -- and though it still disgusts me -- it is my fate. Can I argue with God? No, but what I do is not what I desire to do. And what I desire to do I cannot do, for it is written in the book of life that I am something which is not my own. Can the poor man lift himself from the ground, and produce wealth from the air? Neither can the rich become poor. For it is written. Can the blind man open his senses to perceive the dawn? Neither can the man who sees keep himself from seeing. For it is written. Can the weak man raise himself to power, and, by his own purpose, become the tyrant of all? Neither can the powerful, to whom tyranny is given, desert it. Is it a joy to murder and to torture? To plunder and to rob? No, and I only do so because I have no choice. For it is written.

MONTAGUE : What, then, does this mean? For I am unable to see.

GYLAIN : Thank God for the blindness he has given you. It means this: Prince Willarinus has survived. The tide has turned, and soon it will overwhelm us. The deluge has begun. I can see it, even as I can see its letters etched upon my eyes with a fire's brand, and spelled with blood upon the empty pages of my mind. The man you fought in the forest, is it not he?

MONTAGUE : Perhaps, but Alfonzo gave him no special consideration. We will see. Shall I return to the forest, to look into the matter?

GYLAIN : Yes, it would be wise. God has predestined, perhaps, but I am eager to defeat him. If he carries out his judgment through the rebels, it is them we must battle. Yet, we have politics to consider. The Queen of Saxony is to arrive this week, and it would be best if the domestic front was silent during her

stay. Cybele is not Casandra; the daughter is not the mother. But I would still possess her -- for her own qualities, and for her father's hatred. She knows of Celestine, but she is a hard woman, a polite woman. She knows the nature of power, and the nature of morality by strength. If God's morality is his strength to conquer, it can be no different for men.

MONTAGUE : And what of me? Am I to be present at the feast?

GYLAIN : Do you object?

MONTAGUE : No, with pleasure, my lord. If power is sweeter than love, it does not preclude it.

GYLAIN : Perhaps. You may go now.

MONTAGUE [exiting]: I will return when the queen arrives.

GYLAIN [to himself]: Power sweeter than love? No, for the first is the means, the second the ends. Do I not have all the power a man can be given? Yet I do not have love, and I am lost. I can move mountains, perhaps, but I have nowhere to put them; and no reason, other than vanity. Does power console me in my pain, and rejoice with me in my happiness? No, but I must ask: does love?

GYLAIN [pacing in front of the stained-glass windows]: Man is created in the image of God, and yet is sinful and corrupt. What conclusions can we draw? Yet even among men, there are those who are righteous, and those who are evil. God has appointed our positions, and given us the actions we must take, even as he judges those same actions. But why must I be evil? Could it not be another, could it not be Alfonzo? Why is it my destiny to be against all that is good, to destroy and tear down? What wretched fate is this, that God has given me? It is my destiny to be cruel, can I complain? For I am but a servant of God. Like master like servant. God is cruel; so I, too, must be cruel. God is heartless; so I, too, must be heartless. Yet look, what wretched company this destiny is. It precludes us all to foolishness.

GYLAIN [in a whisper]: To hell with destiny -- to hell with me!

CHAPTER TWENTY

Meanwhile, far below the tower where these things were taking place, there was something else of importance happening. The dungeon occupied the same tower as the rooms above, though it was as far below the ground as they were above it.

There was a layer of grime and mold along the walls that obscured the stones and left only a black, formless mass in their stead. Since it was a continuation of the massive stone tower above, the dungeon was circular, and only a narrow stairway led from level to level, cell to cell. It came down through the middle of each room, while the prisoners were chained to the sides. There were doors between these levels, but they were barred rather than solid.

The last of these levels was called the Devil's Door, because no one in it ever survived to be released. To the superstitious prisoners, this was the devil's doing -- for those in the bottom most cell did not simply die, but rather, disappeared. Whenever a prisoner was released, he first passed through each of the cells above his own, traveling up the central, winding stairway. Those prisoners in the Devil's Door never passed upwards again, whether living or dead.

At this particular time the only prisoners kept in the lowest cell were rebels. It was their special punishment to be subjected to such horrible conditions. The room itself was circular, as were the others. On one side the stairway came down, and on the opposite there was a statue of a strong, thick-bearded man holding a golden sword, with intricate pictures carved into its blade and handle. In his hands he held two rings, to which the chains of the prisoners were connected.

"There never was a more loyal citizen of Atilta than myself," said the first prisoner, in his heavy French accent. "To charge me with treason is most preposterous; for I was, at the time of my arrest, actively serving my country."

"Yes, but is that country Atilta or France?" boomed the other. "I have never chanced to meet a gentleman with a heavier French accent than yourself." The speaker's face was covered by a lightning bolt mustache, which twisted when he spoke as if it were another feature of his face. Some say that it was.

Vahan Lee, the first prisoner, was distracted by the flopping mustache of the second, Oren Lorenzo, and could only manage to mutter, half to himself, "Surely, that is not so."

"If it is not, then I wish I may be hanged."

"Be careful what you wish for, friend."

The last remark was made by a scrunched, small-boned old man who had come quietly into the room while the prisoners were conversing.

"By Saint Simon, the mother of Jesus!" exclaimed Lorenzo, "If it isn't Jack Clifford! How can it be? In the flesh?"

"Yes, in the flesh. Or rather, half out of it, for age has besieged my body. I do believe that I am quite as old as Saint Simon, though I doubt he is the mother of Jesus. Lorenzo, you could be a Calvinist, for all of your mistaken doctrine. What do you know of your companion?" and he looked at Vahan Lee.

"Nothing, particularly, but that he is here. And as there are no friends of Gylain this deep, I assume he is with us."

"Yes, of course. I forget the others are afraid of the Devil's Door," he chuckled.

Vahan answered Clifford's questions about him: "To the Plantagenets, of Atilta and of France, is my loyalty given."

"The latter being your home country? Why do they not send help?" Jack Clifford questioned.

"In body it is my homeland, yet not in spirit. As for the rest, I am not sure, but perhaps they are scouting the situation."

"Is that so, Thomas Vahanlee?" replied the old man Clifford.

Vahan's leg leapt up -- though his body did not follow -- at the surprise of hearing his true name spoken, for he had not given it to the guards.

The old man turned to the other prisoner and said, "He is safe, Lorenzo, old friend. I was just with Alfonzo of Melborough, and he praised him highly to me, asking me to see to him."

"Alfonzo is here? By the devil's mother and the Queen of Saxony!" Oren Lorenzo jumped to his feet as he said this, forgetting the chain around his wrist, which pulled him back sharply to the ground and made him sit once more.

"Be careful," laughed Clifford, "And mind your curses, for every idle and useless word will be judged we are told, dear prior. And do you not know that the devil's mother and the Queen of Saxony are one and the same? But yes, Alfonzo was taken."

"What woe is this!" moaned the other, "Has hope deserted us after all these years?"

"No, hope has just returned, old partisan."

"I cannot see how."

"The king has returned!"

Oren Lorenzo was once more so filled with passion that he leapt to his feet, and once more the chain pulled him back to the stone floor with a hollow thud.

"By Daniel's staff and Moses in the Lion's Den!"

"There is hope, my friends. Yet I must go and work on your escape."

"There is a way safely out of this dungeon?" Lorenzo asked. "But I would not have you risk your cover as the court jester on my account. I can scare away the devil, friend, so there is nothing to fear about that matter. Have I not walked half a day with him myself, just yesterday. Even he has had enough of Gylain!" Oren did the sign of the cross and muttered holy things to himself. "He scared the hell out of those soldiers, crying 'Homeward bound!' all the way, and the fools ran like tomorrow was today, and yesterday was lost two weeks back."

Even the court jester could not top this outburst by the red faced, red mustached Lorenzo. So he answered calmly and soberly:

"Have no fears about my cover," he said, "For there is a way out of this dungeon, and not past the guards. Indeed, you are chained to it -- the statue is the door to a secret passage!"

Oren once more leapt to his feet, and again he was thrown to the floor.

"Let us be gone, then. The countryside needs revived. There is work to be done!"

Lorenzo's mind was too focused to have any memory of what he had just done. He leapt up again, and was pulled sharply back.

"There is a -- uh -- slight obstacle," muttered Clifford.

"Then out with it, for there is no time left unused within my pockets. We are hard pressed."

"I seem to have lost the key."

“By Peter’s wife and Pottifer’s denial, what else can equal the distress caused by a single person!”

There were, of course, many more oaths the flowed from the mouth of Oren Lorenzo, priest and rebel soldier, after he learned of this. But it would not be useful to record them here. Let it suffice to say that the three loyal souls parted with hope and encouragement, along with a fascination with the statue for one; very sore wrists and bottom for another; and a stinging inward rebuke to remember where it was he had put the key, for the third.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Ivona traveled five days through the forest, avoiding the roads for fear of being discovered -- although she still wore the stolen monk’s frock. For in the wilderness, men would have different ideas with a crusty hermit than a young enchantress. She gruffed her voice until she seemed an old man, and padded the frock to conceal her form. She traveled as a hermit, and a hermit she became. The quiver was strapped to her back and the sword to her waist, and she held the bow in readiness for an ambush. Such was the way of the forest.

At this time, it was evening and the sun had already retreated from the forest floor, although the canopy still burned. The larger animals were coming out, and Ivona crept along from tree to tree, concealing herself beneath their gnarled roots as she began her nightly hunt. After a moment she came to a stream, and the roots of a nearby tree were exposed, spread like toes several feet above the ground. There was a crevice between them at one point, large enough to shelter Ivona, surrounding her on three sides while leaving her front open to the forest. She knelt down and laid her bow before her, laying an ambush for the animals that would come to the stream to drink and bathe.

The first to come was a giant black bear, standing upright and walking like a man. She raised herself to see more clearly, but a twig snapped beneath her. The bear stopped and turned to her, searching the darkening forest for the noise. Yet she was in the shadows of the roots, and invisible. The bear nodded slightly, as if acknowledging something behind Ivona, then continued on its way to the stream. Ivona did not wait, raising her bow and fitting an arrow to its string. She aimed, then, with a skillful arm, brought back the arrow to bring low the bear. She prepared to fire; but she never did. For at that moment a sword was thrust against the back of her neck, cutting through the frock and resting roughly on her skin.

“Shoot and I will run you through, regardless of your position in the church.”

Ivona raised her head slowly, careful to keep the hood over her face. A monk stood beside her on the upraised roots; he had not been there before, and she had not heard his arrival. His face was fair, but forested with a long, unkempt beard that made him seem a beast. His eyes glowed, as did the sword which jabbed her neck.

“Would you deprive a poor hermit of his daily bread?” asked Ivona, her voice a hermit’s.

“A poor hermit, indeed, to think a bear provides bread. And perhaps a hungry night would not deplete your stores,” and he pushed his sword against the padding beneath her frock. Looking away, he called to the bear, “Come, Horatio, and show this hermit you are not the bread he seeks.” He mumbled to himself,

though purely for Ivona's profit, "This hermit who has been caught in our hunting press."

Ivona smiled, thinking she had come across a true hermit. Horatio came up at that moment, looking over Ivona closely.

"Horatio does not resent you, for bears do not take revenge like men."

"Like men other than yourself, you mean?"

"I am more beast than man; and if you ask forgiveness, there is none in the forest. Still, as I have watched you, I have seen a skilled hunter -- for a man among men. For that, you have my respect and friendship. I know of a willow grove where we can make camp, within five minutes of this place. There are plants to eat there, and you may find they are better than meat, especially bear."

"I should introduce myself: Eglebert, of the Franciscan order," Ivona lied.

"I am Willard and this Horatio, my blood brother. We are not churchmen, though we wear their robes."

"What are you, then?"

"A prince."

Ivona's heart stopped, recalling the wild man who saved her father.

"In truth?"

"No, in falsehood," he laughed, "But it sounds better than the truth, for I am no one."

Ivona looked him over closely, but let it pass. If Willard was no prince, he was at least a king. Yet neither knew it. At this point, they reached the willow grove. It consisted of a small ring of trees with a clearing in the center, large enough for several people to rest comfortably. Around the outside, the willow branches drooped to the ground, forming a curtain that blocked the forest from view. Willard made a fire in the center of the clearing with firewood he had collected along the way, and Ivona filled their canteens from the stream that ran several feet to the south of the camp. Horatio gathered a hard fruit that grew from a tall, thorny tree, which his claws rendered an easy task. They ate, and when they were done Willard began the conversation.

"How long have you been a hermit, Eglebert?"

"I cannot say; time means little in the forest."

"True, there is only day and night. I am surprised we have not met before."

"This is a vast forest."

"Indeed."

"And you, how long have you spent here?"

"My life, mostly. What else I have done, I cannot remember. For now, however, I am traveling to Eden."

“The road is to the south.”

“Yes, and I will come across it again as it heads to Eden. I am in a hurry, and the road is too indirect a path for haste.”

“Why are you in haste?”

“I am a forest man, and thus know little about the politics of the city and the coup. But whether Gylain is right or wrong, he has moved against the forest and I will defend it.”

“Then you are connected with the loyalists, the rebels?”

“Some would say by blood. I have come across Alfonzo and Montague, and between the two Montague was my enemy and Alfonzo my ally. He aided the Fardies and me against Montague.”

“The Fardies? It would seem you truly are a rebel, with such friends. I have been long in the forest, and far from news. Can you tell me of a certain rebel, Milada of Erlich?”

“I have spoken to him once; but as it is, I cannot claim to know him. He was frightened by the forest, and I by a nobleman. Neither of us spoke candidly, and I would think myself dishonest to repeat his words, spoken in fear. You could say, however, that my present journey is for his faction.”

“How so?” Ivona watched him in interest.

“I happened to travel with an ecclesiastic from his abbey, and we came across the Elite Guard burning a monastery. He could not be controlled and charged the soldiers, and now is taken to the castle dungeons. We attacked, but they fled on horseback and the monks held us back in our chase. That is where I go now, to free Oren Lorenzo.”

“Oren Lorenzo!” she cried, forgetting herself. Her hood fell down, revealing her beautiful face in the firelight, and her voice was left undisguised. “Oren Lorenzo? What devilry is this?”

“What devilry, indeed!” cried Willard, jumping to his feet. “What treachery is this? A female monk? A nun dressed as a man?”

Ivona lowered her head in shame, “I am no monk. I wished to escape notice, even as yourself. Yet, while you revealed yourself, I was too wary to do the same.”

“And for good reason, for the forest is a treacherous place. You have wisdom, at least, as well as wit. To me, that is enough justification for a lie.”

She looked at him with entreating eyes, as if wishing to trust him.

“You need not be afraid, for I have no evil intentions toward you,” he answered her unspoken fears.

She smiled and sat back, fearless beside her newfound friends.

He continued to conversation, “Then, Eglebert, what are your plans?”

“First, I am not Eglebert, but Ivona.”

“Ivona Milada?”

“The same.”

“Then that is well, for there are less things to be anxious about. You will come with me? Lorenzo was traveling to search for you, fearing you were kidnapped by Gylain.”

“I was kidnapped, but only by my heart. I ran away, for my father wished me to marry some foreign prince, for political purposes.”

Willard looked down at his pack, pretending to readjust it. “Then you despise this foreign prince?”

“I have not met him.”

“But what you have heard?”

“I despise the prince, as a prince. As the man whom he is, I respect him for saving my father. Yet I will not be in bondage to such a man, and to his duties.”

“Whom would you love? Every man has his duties.”

“I would love no man. It is God alone who has my affections, and to marry I must first forsake him. My father does not have ears for such things, and I could do nothing but flee, even as Joseph from Pottifer’s wife.”

“Yet you are the beauty.”

Silence came. After a moment, Willard broke it: “Tomorrow we head south. We will take the road for a time, and then turn south again to look for Blaine Griffith and the rebel forces. We will need their assistance to free Lorenzo.”

“So it will be. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” and they went to sleep on the forest ground.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The distance from the willow grove to the road was a few miles. As the canopy overhead blocked most of the sun, the forest underworld was left in constant twilight. At dawn, however, when the sun was still low on the horizon, it pierced the canopy and came through with little splashes of color. Thick mosses grew where the light struck the trees, joining the palette of wildflowers that crowned the ground. On the whole, they presented a uniform appearance; but upon closer inspection they were infinitely varied, each with its own living patterns and intonations.

The early mornings were the time of song, when the nocturnal birds had not yet turned in and the day

birds were already about. The song of the forest was not written in an artificial time scale invented by men, nor was it played on the artificial wave lengths designated by men as notes. Rather, it was played to the rhythm of life, and its only notes were those of nature. It was a symphony in its progression, a waltz in its simplicity; a ballad in its meaning, a sonnet in its sweetness.

In an hour, the three travelers reached the road. The sobriety of the forest weighed heavily on them, and they could not bring themselves to break the silence. It was another hour, therefore, before they were disturbed from their inward reflections. The day was getting on, and they approached a bend in the road, around which they heard the sound of travelers.

"Quick," and Willard hastily motioned for Ivona to clear the road. She was entirely concealed before the other travelers came into view.

Three men composed the approaching group, dressed as poor forest laborers. Willard recognized the bent nose and unruly hair of the first as the features of the mysterious Innkeeper. The others were unknown to him, though he was not entirely unknown to them. One was a tall, strong old man with a weather-beaten face and an officer's demeanor; the other, a young and intelligent man. Seeing who was among them, Willard hastened forward and gave the Innkeeper a low bow.

"These are among the friends of the forest?" he asked.

"Yes," the Innkeeper answered with a nod of his head. "There are none more true, on the seven seas or the thirty-two."

"Good," Willard answered, giving the other men a look of hurried introduction. "I have good news, Innkeeper. Are you heading to Lord Milada's, perchance?"

"Yes, we are; and it is not too far. I'd guess we will be there, before old Lucifer loses his hair." What this metaphor meant was beyond Willard, but he knew the Innkeeper's meter, like that of many aspiring poets, was more important than his meaning.

"Tell Milada his daughter is safe, for she is with me. We journey to rescue Oren Lorenzo from Castle Plantagenet. Have the Fardy brothers hurry to Eden with whatever forces they can gather, for we will need them in the battle."

"The lady is found, what joy profound! But where is she, that with you be?"

"Hidden off the path," Willard said, turning to the forest and beckoning for Ivona to show herself.

She appeared in a moment, to the Innkeeper's great delight. Then they parted, unwilling to attract the attention of spies. The old man never even threw off his hood to greet the young woman. It had been fifteen years since he saw her last, he thought, and she would not recognize him as her father's old comrade.

"It has been too long," he muttered as he walked away, "Too long for even an old man like me."

"How do you know the crazy old Innkeeper?" Ivona asked, once they were a good distance from the other party.

"There are not many people in the forest," Willard answered. "And what few there are come across each other from time to time."

"I suppose he will bring word to my father that I am found."

"Would you have it otherwise?"

"No," she hesitated, "Yet though my shame tells me I need to face what I have done, my pride tells me I should avoid it."

"You have an easy choice here, I believe, for the quickest road home is forward. There are hardships ahead that will outweigh your misdeeds, when you are reunited with your father. By that time, there will be more important things to remember than a foolish flight."

"True, but still I am convinced of the failings of my flesh. While it is my deepest desire to seek refuge in the arms of my father, that is the last place to which I run. The pride of men is only broken down by the dangers of life."

"Yet you are no man."

"Indeed, but I am a woman. Is that not twice as damning?"

"Perhaps, if the judge is a man."

They fell silent for a few moments. Willard looked about them to see that they were alone.

"Here is where we turn from the road," he said. "We near the city, and the rebel outposts. To the forest we go."

He walked into the forest at an acute angle, and the three left the realm of man once more. It was as if they had been above water and suddenly dived below it. The one was of civilization, the other of the wild. There is an awe that comes when one is put into a place where man has no stronghold, where man is but a lone foreigner on enemy ground. On the road, there was a slight gap in the trees overhead that allowed a sliver of the sky to come through. It was narrow, yet it was the sky. In the forest, however, there was no sky but the branches. One was surrounded on all sides by living plants; living plants that seemed to breathe and talk, to walk and sway about; living plants that were imbued with the magical as no other plant is except those in the ancient forests of Atilta.

And yet its magic was not in the sense of something that touched upon the supernatural, but rather a thing that was entirely of the natural, without the impurities of civilization. Its was a pure nature that flowed from a complete organic existence, untouched by man. There was the city of Eden, and the rangers of the forest, with their Treeway. Yet on Atilta, the vast reservoir of the forest was far greater than the blowing sand of man. All through the years the waters remained untouched, unfilled by the silt and sod of humanity that had slowly brought a drought to other lands. The forest was a fountain of youth for Atilta, and it was only by the forest's deep foundations that Atilta was able to remain the last unspoiled creation, the last Garden of Eden, the last Olympus, the last Atlantis. Those who lived in Atilta did not realize what made their land special, what made it living. They remained in Eden, at that time the nautical hub of the world. It was the paradox of Atilta: the capital was the center of the civilized world, the forest the center of the natural world.

"I hear a growling," Willard said after several hours of silent marching, "And by experience I know it to be Horatio's stomach calling for his lunch. Let us rest."

There was a meadow to the east, and the nearest side them was bordered by a large willow tree, whose little fingertips covered the area around it. They sprawled out under its shade, and it kept them from view of those more than a few yards away, while giving them a clear view of the meadow. The latter was a hundred yards across, covered with a mixture of short wildflowers: some golden discs, some blue bells, others red hearts. A few deer were grazing in the meadow, and, above all, the sky was clearly visible.

“To think men cultivate the earth,” Ivona sighed, “When all is perfect without them.”

“But its beauty is wild. Civilized beauty can only be made by destroying things.”

She was silent for a moment, meditating on the scene.

“Do you consider me beautiful?” she asked after a moment.

“Yes.”

“And of what type is my beauty: wild or civilized?”

“It is partly of both. Your skin is wild, yet its features are civilized; for the beauty of the first is its pattern, the second its expression. Your hair is civilized, for it is kept together neatly. But your eyes,” he paused, “Your eyes are the buds which cover the willow’s branches,” he pulled one from the tree beside him and rubbed it in his fingers. “They are the smooth stone which is found at the bottom of a stream, that the water ripples past. They are the fog which covers the ocean on a summer night. They are of the wild.”

Just then, the deer ran quickly from the field in a fright.

“They have seen us,” Ivona said.

“No, but they have seen another,” Willard answered, pointing to the far end of the meadow. “A troop of horseman advances from the far side,” and he stood to get a better view. “It is the Elite Guard, and they go the execute a man!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Twenty black-clad horsemen rode into the meadow. They were well-equipped in the accouterments of war, with steel shields the length of their upper bodies, plate armor and a plumed helmet, swords at their sides, and spears on their backs. It was a battalion of Gylain’s Elite Guard. They were a fluid body, moving as one into the desired formation: a fifty foot circle. As there were only twenty horsemen, there were gaps in this circle, and it was possible to see into its center. The leader dismounted first, carrying a double-headed ax. Two of his lieutenants followed him, the first carrying a wooden platform, and the second a shriveled old man.

“Jack Clifford!” whispered Ivona, “They have Jack Clifford, the king’s jester!”

“The joke’s on him, if we do nothing, for they are about to execute him.”

"Yet we will do something, will we not?" she looked to Willard.

"Yes," he answered. "Climb this tree, until you have a good view of the field. Shoot however tries to execute him. In the meantime, Horatio and I will see what we can do."

"Just a moment," Ivona answered as she turned and dashed up the tree. She stopped at the first branch and looked down at Willard, "You have no chance of victory, Willard."

"Not if I meant to fight them. But Blaine Griffith is nearby, and he would not let the Elite Guards dash about the forest without his supervision. We need only to keep Clifford alive until Blaine and his men arrive."

"And if they do not show themselves?"

"Then we fight."

Willard and Horatio drew their hoods over their faces, and Willard hid his sword in the folds of his frock. They took to the open field, walking slowly and meditatively with their hands linked together in front of them under their baggy sleeves. At first they pretended not to notice the horsemen, until they were sure they had been sighted and their coming awaited. Then, with a slow nod, they acknowledged the presence of the riders and continued on toward them at the slowest pace possible. The leader of the Elite Guards realized he could not execute Clifford until the two monks came up, for religious reasons, and grew impatient.

"Hurry there, you bloated bullhorns. I haven't got a thousand years."

"A thousand years are as a day, and a day is as a thousand years," Willard called back.

"Blasted monks," muttered the leader, and he resigned himself to wait until they arrived.

A moment passed before the so-called monks reached them, and as they waited the riders stood with an impatient smirk upon their faces. When at last the two reached the circle, their leader hailed them.

"Hello there, monks," he said, "What is it that you want?"

"We smelled death upon the wind this morning, sir, and have come to collect that which is God's."

"That is churchmen for you, arriving just as there is money to be had. But you had best be on your way, friends, for this poor fellow is just that -- a poor fellow."

"I meant his soul."

"Indeed? You can have that, if he gives it. You have my leave to take it, at least." The horseman laughed, "For he has suffered enough." It was evident from his appearance that Clifford had been severely beaten.

"May we take him aside privately, and offer him his last rights?"

"If you must, but in the center of our circle, at the platform."

Willard and Horatio took Clifford by the arms and led him to the center of the circle, where their

whispers could not be overheard. The old jester was haggard and dazed, but his wits still seemed to be with him. And a man with his wits is never alone.

“How are you holding up, old fellow?” Willard questioned in a friendly manner.

Clifford looked at him with confusion, searching his face for a moment before his mouth slipped up into a beaming smile and he exclaimed, “By God, its the king!”

The jester remembered Alfonzo’s account, and recognized the grown man whom he had once known as a child. Willard, however, thought the beatings had bruised his brain and left him with visions. He thought it best to let him think what he would.

“Yes, I am the king. We must escape, though.”

“Time’s up!” roared the leader of the horseman as he started toward them. He grabbed Clifford with his burly hands and pushed him down onto the wooden platform. He took the ax from his side and raised it above his head to bring it down on Clifford’s neck.

An arrow flew from the upper branches of the willow tree and struck the commander in the back. In pain, he hurled his ax into the air and cried out, “By the king’s men!” The ax thus thrown flew through the air until it came to rest on the head of one of the lieutenants, putting a swift end to his life.

In the confusion, Willard cried out, “The king has returned, and he is coming with a hundred hardy men! Run! Run and warn Gylain!”

The effect was instantaneous. The riders fled in every direction. One of them rode his horse past the commander, sending him to the ground in a whelp of pain.

“Come back here, you cowards!” he cried, “Reform the ranks!”

He was a powerful man, even in such a compromised situation, and at the call of his voice the men returned. Two had been shot down by Ivona. By the time they were reassembled another had fallen, and the arrows still came swiftly.

“Look, fools!” the commander yelled to his men, “It is only a single archer, in that tree. Go, bring him to me!”

The remaining fifteen men, not including the commander, galloped straight at the tree. Within a moment they had Ivona on the ground and in their hands, and started back to where the commander had sat.

Yet he was no longer alive. When the horsemen galloped off, Willard drew his sword from the folds of his robe and plunged it into the wounded man’s chest. Then, quickly looking about him, he concealed it in his frock once more. He went over to the commander’s body and pretended to worry over him, as if his wound had caused his death. They made no attempt to flee.

The riders returned with Ivona prisoner to where their commander lay dead. With the commander and first lieutenant dead, it was a young man who found himself in charge, and he had not yet the strength of mind to control his anger.

“You will pay for this with your lives!” he shouted.

"I doubt that," Clifford answered.

"Why, you senseless old man, I should have killed you when I had the chance!" he raised his sword to strike the jester down.

"Yes, you should have!" laughed Clifford.

The lieutenant stopped his swing in the air. "Why the devil do you say that?"

"Because of this!"

Clifford took the fallen commander's ax from behind his back, and struck the young lieutenant at the joint in the greave of his armor. The ax tore through the weak point in the plate, and drove deeply into his leg. The young man, yelling in pain, swung at Clifford again. The old man closed his eyes and prepared for the fatal blow to come.

But it never did. Instead, the clash of swords rang through the air. Willard came up behind Clifford and extended his blade to absorb the blow. The young lieutenant held him in a deadly grapple: Willard was far stronger, yet the horseman had the advantage of height. Another of the riders came up to help the lieutenant, but Horatio mauled him as he approached. The horse of the rider, frightened at the bear's sudden appearance, dashed wildly forward. The lieutenant was directly in front of him, and caught the sharp side of the rider's spear right through his helmet.

Thus fell the other lieutenant, yet things were still grim for the loyalists, for they were outnumbered fourteen-to-four. The riders formed a circle about them and prepared to strike. One of the veteran soldiers pulled them together, to outmaneuver their land-locked opponents and not allow them to attack one at a time. Slowly the circle closed around the four.

"It is an honor to die alongside the King of Atilta, my lord," Clifford said as they came on.

Ivona looked at Willard strangely, and he only answered with an ambiguous smile.

Then, from the outskirts of the meadow, a deep trumpet blast was heard. The horsemen turned their heads, only to be greeted by a cloud of arrows.

"Down!" cried Willard, grabbing the shield of a fallen horseman and covering Ivona with it. In a moment they were all sheltered likewise.

Without their leaders, the Elite Guard was not as elite as before. Their weakened ranks broke easily from the assault of the fresh combatants, and they were scattered throughout the plain. Thus separated, the forest rangers began to hunt them down, one at a time.

The rebels were clothed in unmatching outfits, and had no formal training or official support. Yet they were quick and efficient. The leader of the band swaggered up to the four, who were still on the ground: no longer under the shields, but too exhausted to stand.

"The men say if we were any later, you would not have survived." He laughed, "Why, if it isn't good old Jack Clifford!"

"Well, Blaine Griffith, who else would it be?" the old man said. "But do not stand there like a mindless woodsman -- bow to your king!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“The men tell me things went badly for you, Clifford,” Blaine said as the rangers finished off the remaining soldiers and brought their equipment -- which the rebels badly needed -- to the center of the meadow.

“Not at all, we were just playing a rousing game of hide and seek -- with my head, mind you, but rousing nonetheless. Just like the time old Stevenson had a statue built around himself, so he could surprise his wife when she returned from France,” and Clifford proceeded to spin a long tale, much to the amusement of his listeners. He gave a long pause after finishing his story before concluding, “That is just about how I feel right now, myself.”

Those present who knew Clifford merely shook their heads and laughed at his old antics. His was a peculiar character: when time was pressing, he was a man of action; but when things were carefree, he would begin to blow his wind about, until he ended with a hurricane. He was a rambler, and his long life as a jester had given him enough to ramble about.

Seeing there was at last a break in Clifford’s monologue, one of the rangers came forward.

“Blaine, we have taken care of them. The horses and armor are ready to go.”

“Good job, men,” replied Blaine, “To the Great Goliaths, then.”

“Yes, sir,” was the reply, and within a moment the two dozen woodsmen were ready. Some led the horses, piled with equipment, and others obscured their tracks in case they were followed. It was a solemn procession, if a victorious one.

At length, they reached the rebel city, the Great Goliaths. In the Atilian forest, the trees were massive, often rising several hundred feet from the ground, with diameters of twenty to thirty feet. The rebel city, however, was built within and around what were called the Great Goliaths. The trees and plants there were by far the purest of the island, for it was the center of the forest. Four trees composed the centerpiece of this place, each over a thousand feet tall, and a hundred and fifty in diameter. They were arranged in a square, each corner pointing to one of the cardinal points.

For a square mile surrounding these four trees, the ground was only covered with wild grasses and flowers, and a thick shade from the canopy. Their trunks were hollow, and inside the rebels made their city -- in little rooms connected by a spiral stairway made of rope that wound around the outside of each tree. The four main sections of the city were connected by underground tunnels, and, above the ground, by several bridges that crossed between them. These bridges were hollow trunks of Atilian trees -- several hundred feet long -- and stretched from each tree into the center, where they met. Every hundred feet of altitude these bridges were repeated.

The party arrived at the base of this magnificent city, yet from the ground it could not be seen, for it was only in the upper canopy that it truly blossomed. Rather, it looked like an open plain, except shaded by the four giant trees, and with their massive trunks rising from the floor. In the ground in their center,

however, stood a small stump which had once been a tree.

"I see no city," Ivona said, "Though I have often heard of its wonders."

"Indeed, because the city is above us," Blaine said. "The men say you are a man of the forest Willard. Is it true?"

"I am."

"Then let us put you to the test. How would you say we reach the city above? You must remember that even these horses can find their way to the top."

"I would expect nothing less," Willard answered. "But it is obvious: that stump is the entrance."

"What?" Blaine said, giving Willard a close look. "Perhaps the men are right. But I am not so easily convinced, so tell me how you know it."

"He knows because he is the king!" the old man Clifford exclaimed, but the others gave him no heed.

"The stairways along the outside of the trees begin only several hundred feet from the ground, and they serve only to connect the city to itself, not to the ground," Willard said. "We are left to reason that the roadway to the city is built within the trees themselves, for rope ladders would not be practical in this instance. As for the stump, there is a thick moss growing on it, the Hebicor moss. Yet, in the wild, it grows only on the northern and western portions of a tree, and here it grows even on the southern side. It is evident that someone has carefully cultivated it. But to what end? To disguise the tunnel leading to the pathway within the trees."

Ivona smiled -- having heard the same explanation from her father, who had helped plan the city -- and Clifford whistled in amazement.

"That is my king and I expected nothing less from him."

Blaine gave Willard a knowing look, as if understanding that Clifford's age and recent trouble made him lose his once piercing wit.

"By the devil, you will see," Clifford exclaimed, "I am right, Blaine Griffith. You will see. Does not Alfonzo have the same opinion of Willard? We both know he does not think such things lightly."

"Yet you have not spoken to Alfonzo, Clifford. He is far to the west."

"No, but to the southeast."

"Where, in Eden? The men have said you are a silly old man, and I am prepared to believe them after this."

"Yes, in Eden, foolish young boy. He was in the Castle tower when I left him, with Celestine."

"Then why have you waited this long to tell me?" Blaine tried to show him his mistake.

"You have come to rescue him, have you not? I feel no need to tell you things you already know."

"Not I," replied Blaine, "Merely ask the men to find that we are here to prevent an attack, not to make our own."

"I have come to rescue Oren Lorenzo," Willard said, "Yet if Alfonzo is there, we will free him while we are in."

"Oren Lorenzo is captured?" Blaine asked incredulously. "How can that be?"

"It can be because it is," answered Clifford, "He and Thomas Vahanlee are in the Devil's Door."

"Vahan Lee, too?" asked Willard, "Poor fellow."

"This is an impossible mission," Blaine said, "And I will not send my men to death on the rambling memories of an insane old man."

"Insane?" Clifford paused. "Have you not read the letter I gave you, written by Alfonzo himself?"

"You've given me no letter."

Clifford paused again, his face condensed into the act of remembering.

"Perhaps I have forgotten to hand it over, let me check," and he slipped his hand into a secret pocket on the inside of his shirt.

A small, metallic key fell to the ground, and Clifford bent to pick it up.

"What is this?" he mumbled to himself. "I have never seen it before."

As he bent down, a letter fell from the same hidden pocket. He snatched it up and handed it to Blaine.

"So you see, I am not so crazy. Am I, your majesty?" and he winked at Willard.

Blaine looked it over carefully for a moment, moving his lips as he read.

"It is Alfonzo's handwriting," he said, "And the secret password we use when things might be intercepted is encoded into the message." He looked up at Clifford. "I am wrong to have doubted. But listen, I will read it for us all to hear."

Blaine, I have been captured, along with Vahan Lee, who is truly loyal to Atilta. I am with Celestine, and we are safe at present. Yet you need not fear for us, but for Lord Milada; for I know you care more about my safety than do I. Casper was true to the cause, though Montague tried to condemn him before me, and -- as you have tested your own men -- the traitors must be with Lord Milada, within his own castle's wall. Yet this is why I write: our friend Willard is no mere forest man, but Willarinus, returned to us at last. Take joy, Blaine, for once more there is a King of Atilta.

-Signed, Alfonzo of Melborough

There was silence for a time, broken at length by Willard.

"I do not see how it can be true. Alfonzo must be wrong."

"I have seen it in your face," Clifford answered, "For I knew you as a child."

"Yes, and Alfonzo has his own proofs. Yet I have no such memories, and it will take more than one man to convince me. If another recognized me, I would believe. That you saw Willarinus in me, after you were told is not enough."

"Then we will have a second opinion," Clifford said.

There was an old maid sitting on a log a few yards from them, enjoying the feel of the earth beneath her feet. Clifford called to her to come, in a loud voice as she was mostly deaf. She was withered with the burdens of age, and her step was short and slow. Nevertheless, Blaine and Clifford lowered their heads in reverence as she came.

"This is Heiden," Clifford said, "Nurse to the last three generations of Plantagenets. She was Willarinus' nurse, just as Alfonzo was his tutor. If they both recognize Willard," but he did not finish.

The old woman stepped forward slowly. She raised her frail hands to feel Willard's face, moving the tough skin and thick beard to get a glimpse of what was veiled behind all the dirt, the years, and the pain which it had seen. She looked long and hard at him, going back in her head through memories of years gone by, going back to the memories of Willarinus as a child.

Then she fell to her knees without warning, lowered her shriveled face to the ground, and said in a high, clear voice, "Long live the king."

The others joined her, first Blaine and Clifford, then Ivona, and finally the woodsmen around them. All those on the ground below the city stopped and knelt, joining in the chorus to the true King of Atilta, Willard Plantagenet.

Willard could do nothing but stand and listen to them, almost unable to understand what it was they were saying. He did not look like a king. His black hair was long and uncut; though it was clean and combed, it fell wildly around his head and onto his shoulders. His beard reached his chest, and seemed like that of an old philosopher, rather than a king. Beneath these things, though, he was a noble looking man.

"Friends," he said, "If fate calls, then I will answer. Gylain must be overthrown, and freedom restored. Let us prepare for the battle."

There was something different in his voice, something that had come out before only when he was in an impossible situation -- when he defeated the bandits, when he fought Montague, when he battled the Elite Guards. There was something in his voice that dwelt there in the shadows all along, only coming out when the end seemed near: power and authority. This was the fate for which he had been waiting. This was the purpose for which he had been summoned from the forest. His time had come.

"Perhaps I know a way to rescue them," began Clifford. "You see, the Queen of Saxony is coming to Eden in a few weeks."

In the central tower of Castle Plantagenet, at ground level, was the Great Hall. Far above were Gylain's quarters and far below the dungeon. Due to the circular nature of the tower, the room itself was also circular. Yet it was much larger than the other portions of the tower, for it tapered off as it grew higher and lower.

The Great Hall was used as both the dining hall and the throne room. The throne sat on a platform on the wall opposite the gate, and the remainder of the room was furnished with oak tables. The ceiling rose two hundred feet, spiraling to a point; three chandeliers hung down and a hallway wrapped around the top, with windows overlooking the room below. Behind the throne was an anteroom: Gylain's private closet, connected directly to his quarters -- he could come or go without passing through the crowd. It was only large enough for its function, equipped with a simple chair and a long mirror. Gylain sat on the chair with his head lowered to the floor.

"Destiny," he muttered to himself, "Why must I be the wicked despot? What a foul hand fate has fed me. But then again, how much better is that given to any other? And how can I reject what is mine, when I have no choice in the matter?"

He raised his head and leaned back, sighing, "All of life is pain, for there is no hope, no purpose. What is today is gone tomorrow, and forgotten forever. Pain is all that is left, to prod us with its pangs and lure us with the promise of its absence. Is it not pain what motivates us? To inflict it on others and remove it from ourselves? Are not emotions judged by their contrast to pain, and the human perception started from pain upwards? Woe to us, that it is so. Yet I wish that my road had been another, for inflicting pain -- the elixir of life -- is not enjoyable. To see children standing hopelessly beside their parent's shriveled bodies is poignant to the heart. But to have caused it is worse. To see parents, broken and forlorn, beside their children's corpses is painful to the morals. But to have done it yourself brings a cold shiver to the heart.

"But whom do I mean to fool? If it were not me, then fate would have some other minion. And no matter what position a man is in, he is still the cause of pain. The rich man who sits in his palace -- while at its gate an entire family starves -- is he not guilty of active murder, more than just passive? And the nobleman who in his gluttony eats until he is sick, does he not sin by taking food from a hungry child? No, I am not so shamed on the pages of the Book of Life, for every man is a concentration of sin, and fate merely dilutes it with power and wealth, that it can be spread about more easily. Guilt is guilt and sin sin. Does it matter if it is passive or active? And death is still death, in spite of the means by which it comes, or the life that lived before it."

Gylain brushed his hand over his face and brought it to his chin, where he played with his beard and looked at the wall. His face was a windless day.

"Fate must be obeyed, and certain things are to be done, but woe to them by whom they come about."

As he spoke, his fists clenched and his face grew into a storm. He arose and strode to the mirror that graced the opposing wall, looking deeply at himself.

"If it was not for me to give my soul to God, than how was it mine to keep it from him? If some are saved by grace, than by what are others condemned? How is it that while all humanity is held precariously over a lake of fire, only a few are plucked from it and taken to paradise? As he says, revenge is God's; for he would keep the best things from us. Fate and destiny? Salvation and condemnation? Hate and love? Are they not the same thing: different in persons, same in essence? But what difference does it make, for we all have pain and the devil has us all."

Gylain struck at the mirror in his exasperation and fled the room, entering the Great Hall. It was being prepared for the opulent feast which would greet the Queen of Saxony, Cybele. Her arrival was expected at any time during the next week, though the exact date was unknown.

Jonathan Montague was just entering the throne room to consult with his lord. His face was as emotionless as ever, and his spirit as evil. Gylain grimaced.

“What a wretch,” he mumbled, “For he actually enjoys the wicked which he does.”

“Hail, my lord,” and Montague bowed on his left knee before the throne.

“What is it? Speak quickly.”

“Of course, my lord,” returned Montague, “I am beginning to raise the defenses of the castle in preparation for the queen’s visit. Would you have us transfer Alfonzo and Celestine to the basement dungeons?”

“I understand your fears, Montague. For the situation on the mainland is precarious for us: France would gladly be our enemy and only Saxony prevents them. If the rebels capture the queen, France would be with them in an instant. Yet it is not so simple: the rebels have not the power.”

“Have I not heard from your very mouth that the king has rejoined their ranks? He wields much power and influence, both here and in Europe.”

“You fool, the king is dead, his head cut clean from his filthy body. The king that I speak of is his son: young and inexperienced. Influence comes with strength, as does morality. He has nothing in Europe.”

“My lord, I fought him in the forest. He was mighty, and even the trees respected him. I was only able to overcome him when his comrades were defeated and he surrounded.”

“Perhaps; we will see before long. But do what you will: I leave the defenses to you.”

“Very well; we will not be vulnerable. Yet Alfonzo claims he cannot legally be moved without your permission, as he is a prisoner of the crown.”

“Do you now care for legalities, or is it that you do not wish to anger me again? Have I grown so soft, Jonathan? Move them to the Devil’s Door with a heavy guard. Old Lucifer himself will not be able to take them alive.”

“Yes, my lord. As for the castle defenses, I will put men heavily in this hall and on the outer walls, leaving the inner courtyard without more than a watch. They can only sneak in, so we must stop them before they can enter.”

“Any word from the Elite Guards?”

“They seem to have disappeared. It is my belief, however, that they went into the forest after they executed Clifford, as is their wont -- to chase the rebels.”

“They will be sorely missed. You may go now, Montague.”

“Farewell, my lord.” Montague bowed once more and left the hall. The servants avoided his fiery eyes

as he passed them with his deliberate stride.

Gylain remained silently on his throne for a few moments, playing with his beard. He was broken from his reverie only by the sound of bold, heavy footsteps approaching the raised dais on which his throne stood. He turned his head to cry out at whoever disturbed him. Yet when he saw who it was, he said nothing.

“Yes, Gylain. It is I.”

The speaker was a swarthy man in late middle age, with a thick beard, uncombed hair, and a ghastly scar running down the side of his weather-beaten face. He was dressed in rags, bleeding steadily from the stomach, and still bound with iron shackles on the wrists and ankles. His figure was frightening and his disposition seemed evil, though it was strictly controlled by the dictates of reason. His laugh was thunder, ringing out across the Great Hall like a flood in the desert.

Gylain almost jumped from his throne.

“Nicholas Montague, you have returned at last.”

“Yes, Gylain: in flesh.”

“And in blood,” Gylain pointed to his bleeding.

“Pain is necessary, death is forever.”

“How true. But what can this mean, Nicholas? That William has returned as well?”

“Yes: I barely escaped, while the others were caught and hung in the forest.”

“They were worthless, anyhow.”

“Yes, but suffering endears men to one another.”

“Forget them, for we have work to do. The arrival of the Admiral is unexpected, yet not uninvited. It is now the end with which we struggle, but let the deluge come, I say: of blood and water. This is the time when God’s tyranny will be overthrown.”

Nicholas smiled with half his mouth and frowned with the other. His eyes opened for an instant, and the flames of revenge which burned within his head leapt out. He slammed his clenched fist into the heavy oak table beside him, unable to control himself. It was only by inflicting pain upon himself that he could control the intense passion which drove him, and retain the mental pedantry which he worshiped. The table cracked loudly, split in two, and fell to the floor.

“I have heard that Alfonzo is captured.”

“By your brother,” Gylain answered.

“Then I will go to him, and rebuke William’s mockings.”

“You will beat him?”

“No,” he paused. “I will do more than that. Where is Jonathan?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Meanwhile, Alfonzo was no longer bed-ridden from his severe beating, and was steadily improving. He was still weak, however, and sat across from the window. Celestine joined him, her aging face still retaining the comeliness it had known in youth. This, coupled with the poignant maturity age had given her, made her both wise and beautiful; a siren in beauty, an angel in wisdom. No words passed between them, and none were needed. Alfonzo was a patient man, but the present circumstances stretched him to weakness. He could sit for only a few moments before he found himself wandering to the window again, to search the horizon for signals.

Once more he repeated his trip to window, Celestine watching him closely with overflowing eyes.

“Come quickly, my love!” he cried, “There is a signal from the edge of the forest.”

Celestine arose and ran to him in excitement. He was not mistaken, for there, twenty yards past wall, rose a puff of smoke. Yet it was not the smoke that was the signal: the rebels were too wary for such a thing. Rather, there was a flashing light -- a mirror reflecting the sun -- pulsating a hundred yards to the left of the smoke.

“Can you understand them?” she asked.

“Yes, it is from Blaine. Clifford made it safely to the city, almost: he says Clifford was captured by the Elite Guard, but then rescued by,” he paused to wait the signals, “The king and Ivona Milada!” Alfonzo could not look away from the flashing light, for fear of missing the message, but Celestine could see the excitement that flashed across his face.

“They are working on our escape, and hope it will be soon. We should try to be transferred to the Devil’s Door; or, if that is not possible, to Gylain’s quarters and take the passage to the anteroom behind his throne, shortly after we see the Queen of Saxony arriving.”

“What have they to do with her?” Celestine asked, casting her face to the floor as if in shame.

“I do not know, but we must trust them. Blaine can see what we cannot.”

“Ivona is safe now?”

“Yes, though I am uncertain of her. She was a wise counselor to her father, and an anchor amidst passions. She symbolized the cause of the rebellion. But now that Milada’s life is endangered by traitors, she is not there to protect him. Yet I know why she fled, and she is justified.”

“Love is a powerful thing, dear Alfonzo, of man or of God. It is not to be despised.”

“No, nor even the love of woman.” He held her close and kissed her lightly on the forehead. “Celestine, time does not dampen emotions, as I feared. I only love you more.”

“No, time does not bury the passions,” rang out a thick voice from the doorway. “For my hatred of you has only grown more intense as the years pass, Alfonzo.”

Alfonzo turned, his figure silhouetted against the window and his stature without sign of weakness.

“Nicholas Montague, you have returned. But love conquers hate, and righteousness wickedness.”

Alfonzo approached the swarthy ruffian with outstretched arms. Nicholas let him come until he was but an arm’s length away. Then he knocked him over the head with the broadside of his sword. Alfonzo fell limply to the ground.

At that moment, a powerful voice yelled to the guards outside the door, “Who gave you permission enter their prison?”

“I did, my brother,” cried Nicholas.

“What? Can it be possible? Nicholas, my long lost brother!”

“Yes, little John. You are well?”

“As good as ever,” Jonathan Montague walked into the room and embraced his brother.

They were affable and friendly. But then Jonathan saw Alfonzo stretched out on the floor. He turned sour, and his countenance was drowned in hatred. He gave the rebel’s limp body a forceful kick.

“I see you have found my plaything. Will we go torture him?” Jonathan laughed to his brother, in high spirits once more.

“Yes, of course, little one. It will be just like the old days.”

“Ah, yes, the old days. Guards, carry him to the game room for us.” Jonathan turned once more to his older brother, “If only father could see us now. I wonder what has happened to him.”

“We killed him, do you not remember?”

“Of course, where was my mind?” and the tower echoed with their sinister laughs as they carried their prey off to their torture chambers.

Later, in the Devil’s Door, Lorenzo’s face danced with rage and his fiery mustache with righteous wrath, his preferred emotion.

“Moses may have filled the Nile with blood, but mark my words, friends: if ever I get my hands on the Montague brothers, I will fill much more than a bloody river!”

“Do not doubt my loyalty,” began Vahan Lee in his veritable French accent, “But it is my belief that they have given him a great honor. For when their foul deeds overtake them -- and the island of Atilta is once more in the hands of the people -- Alfonzo will only be honored more for what he now endures.”

“It is easy enough to spew forth such rigmarole about honor, when it is not you who have been beaten. Perhaps you would like to have the same done to you?”

"Silence, Lorenzo," whispered Alfonzo through his pain. "Vahan is optimistic, and I am with him. Anger and vengeance do not make good bedfellows, dear priest."

"I have neither bed nor bedfellows. Yet I understand your meaning, and I acquiesce to your superior wisdom."

"Do not speak, my love, only rest. You must be well enough to walk when the time for our deliverance comes." Celestine held her husband's head in her hands, comforting him in his distress. She raised her face to the two other men who were imprisoned with them, "Good old Clifford made it safely to the forest band, and the king is with them there. We will be rescued soon enough."

"Ah, the king," sighed Vahan Lee, "Little did I know when he saved me from those bandits -- no offense, Alfonzo -- and then from the mysterious thrower of the acorns who wished to mistreat me."

Alfonzo laughed at the silly man, as did the others.

"I think I know who threw those acorns," Lorenzo said.

"Who? You must tell me, so I can be wary of him."

"The king!"

Vahan Lee blushed at the realization, but soon recovered enough to laugh at himself in good-spirits. "I suppose I am a better spy than a woodsman."

"And a better talker than a spy!" cried Lorenzo. "You tell that Frencher king of yours to hurry up his army and help us throw off Gylain! I just wish I was with Milada now, with the danger he is in. You are sure you heard Ivona was safe?"

"I am," answered Celestine.

The prior Lorenzo savored those words, just as he had the dozen times he had already heard them. "Ivona safe at last. What goodness it is, what joy it will be to see her again."

"Yes," Alfonzo said, "There will be many joyful reunions when this ordeal is over. Even Celestine will be rejoined with her father."

She smiled softly, as if to herself. "Why do you say that, dear Alfonzo? Can there be any hope of his return?"

"Of course: Nicholas Montague was with him on his ship, as prisoner. He still bore the marks of imprisonment when he came to us. If he came back, then your father must have, as well."

"But if Nicholas had succeeded in mutiny once more?"

"The ship is not in the harbor, and Nicholas made no triumphant entry, which his vainglorious mind would have done had he the opportunity. It is my belief that the Admiral and some of his men came ashore to see how things went, and when he was gone Nicholas escaped. None of his men returned, only him."

“Could it finally be, after all these years, that we will be together again in peace and safety?”

Before anyone could respond, they heard the creaking of the door as it swung open.

“See to him, and be sure he is not harmed!” It was Gylain’s voice, shaking with anger.

“My lord,” the voice of Nicholas Montague could be heard, “He will survive -- but with greater pain -- if he is not treated by the doctor. Would you ruin our work?”

“Silence, fool! Who told you to torture him? Do you think you are God, that you can take a man’s life only to please your sadistic nature? There are some deeds which are ordained by fate, but to add to the condemnation that has already been thrust upon us is folly, sheer folly!”

“Very well, my lord,” Montague humbly said, obviously in disagreement but also in obedience. His long stride could be heard as he climbed the stairs of the tower.

“Make sure he is well, doctor, and relieve his suffering as much as possible without letting them escape.”

“Is there a message my lord would have me tell them?”

“No! I was never here.” Gylain’s footsteps also climbed the stairs, and in a moment the doctor came down to their cell.

“How is he coming along?” he asked Celestine.

“He’ll recover,” she murmured, thinking of the paradox that was Gylain, “He’ll recover.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“And tell them to reach the Devil’s Door if possible. If not, to sneak into Gylain’s quarters and take the tunnel to the anteroom behind his throne,” Blaine Griffith said to the man who signaled Alfonzo.

“It is done,” the man said, “I have told him everything.”

“Good, and here comes his reply, ‘Will do.’ That is Alfonzo; he still lives.”

A dozen rebels stood around the base of the tree in which the signaler was perched, among them Willard, Horatio, Ivona, Clifford, and Blaine. As they waited for the man to climb down, Willard spoke to old Clifford.

“Let us hear your plan, then, Clifford.”

“Of course, my lord. We all know the Queen of Saxony is due at the castle in the next week. But, because of the weather, it is expected she will be late. Gylain wishes to find favor in her eyes, and is being extra careful in protecting the castle. As you have seen, there are men on all the outer walls: it is impossible to enter without help from within, and we do not have the strength for a direct assault.

“For part of the mission, we can use the secret tunnel. Yet there is no direct link between the dungeon and the Great Hall, although they are part of the same tower. Instead, the dungeon opens to the courtyard, which in turn leads to the hall. It is my suggestion, then, that we disguise Ivona as the Queen of Saxony, and you as her knight. Thus, from the Great Hall, you can distract the guards from the dungeon and courtyard, allowing those who came in through the tunnel to rejoin you with the prisoners and make the escape.”

“But Gylain and the Queen of Saxony were once lovers,” Ivona said. “I am young, and she must be fifty.”

“That was the old queen, Casandra. Gylain has never seen Cybele.”

“It is possible, on that end,” Blaine said, “But where are we to get the proper retinue for a powerful queen? We do not have the horses or armor for such a guard.”

“But you forget we have taken twenty suits of armor with horses to match from our fallen enemies. We can redye them, and paint a new insignia. Only Willard remains unequipped with a proper suit of armor.”

“I will provide for myself, so have no fears there,” Willard answered.

“We must begin our preparations now, for the true queen may arrive at any time. The sooner we begin, the better.”

“I will enter Eden, to scout the land and collect some belongings. Blaine will join me.”

“I also need to set up a netting within a city circle,” Blaine said.

“What the heavens for?” and Clifford raised his eyebrow.

“You will see soon enough. I will enter by the secret passage while Willard and Ivona pass the main gate as the queen and her entourage. We will need the netting to escape, and I will say nothing more of it now.”

“We must part, then.”

With that, they went their separate ways: Blaine and Willard to Eden, the others to the rebel city.

It was a short walk to the stone wall that separated the city from the wilderness. The latter was fifty feet high and ten thick, a formidable wall among men. Yet beside the forest, it was dwarfed. Only two gates led into the city: one in the west and one in the north. Both were heavily guarded, but that was no matter to the rebels, who had long ago discontinued using them. Between the wall and the forest was a valley: a short, empty clearing. Blaine walked up to the wall -- miles from either gate -- and knocked against it three times. There was a scraping sound, as of a tightly fitted door opening, then the wall swung open into the clearing. Standing in the doorway thus revealed was an older man with a fish hook nose.

“Coming in?” he asked.

“Of course, Templeton,” Blaine answered as he stepped in, followed closely by Willard. The door was shut behind them.

“Who is this?” asked Templeton, poking Willard in the stomach with his index finger.

“He is your king, you disrespectful fool. Where is your loyalty?”

Templeton looked up at Willard and fell to his knees in submission, for no longer was Willard a wild man from the forest. His beard was shaved and his handsome face allowed to show. His hair was trimmed, set back in a dignified manner. But his monk’s frock still shrouded his grandeur.

“Arise, friend. I desire service, not servitude. We have much to do.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Where is it you need to go, Willard?” asked Blaine.

“To Fardy brother’s shop.”

“Very well, off we go.”

They left the building and set off through the streets of Eden to the Fardies’ shop. Eden was a very dense city: its buildings were made from the trees of the forest and equally tall. The city was divided into circles of buildings, each self-contained with a private garden in the center. Between the circles were open triangles of space, housing a statue or memorial to the heroes of the past. The streets were made from a white, chalky marble that came from the northern mountains, and built like a mosaic out of foot-long bricks. They wound between the circles, narrow and compressed into the space as an afterthought.

In all, Eden was a large semi-circle, with the back opening into the ocean. There were four distinct sections of the city: the harbor area, called the Floatings; the castle area; the wealthy and commercial area; and western area. The first of these, the Floatings, was a collection of floating buildings and structures that covered most of the harbor, each floating freely. Its layout changed everyday, and even every moment. The castle area was directly in the center of the city, surrounding the castle, which was nestled within a dense collection of other buildings. The Western section was the closest to the forest, in both geography and feel. It was almost a wilderness itself, for the buildings were rougher and more natural, with thicker vines and less marble. The Eastern section, on the other hand, was the most civilized. The buildings there were sometimes of brick foundations, and occasionally walled with brick or stone instead of vines. It was in the Eastern section where most of the wealthy citizens lived, among them the Fardy brothers. Their shop served as the base of their commercial operations, which were largely carried on in the Floatings. They were the principal merchants of the city.

“Here we are,” announced Blaine, as he and Willard came to a particularly large and impressive building, “The Fardies’ Shop, as they call it.”

Inside the building was an entry room with doorless walls on every side except the back, on which was a counter. Behind this sat a young man, the clerk, who controlled access into the back rooms of the store.

“Hello there, Blaine Griffith,” he said as they entered, “How can I fix you today?” He looked at the two warily, as if afraid they would take too much merchandise for too little a price.

“It is not I, but my companion here, who has business.”

“Yes,” said Willard walking forward, “The Fardy brothers and I have already made the deal, I have just

come to pick up the goods.”

“I will have to see a receipt, sir.”

“Of course, here it is.” Willard pulled a rolled up piece of paper from his frock and handed it to the clerk, who read it aloud:

The Three Fardy Brothers, Merchants of the city of Eden, do here give to Willard a receipt for a suit of armor, it being the one once owned by the King of Atilta, before he was deposed. To be given over upon the presentation of this receipt at the brother’s store in the aforesaid city.

Signed, the Fardy Brothers.

The clerk’s eyes opened wide when he was finished reading, surprised the Fardy brothers would sell their prized armor. Blaine’s face was occupied only by a wide grin.

“How did you pull that from them?” Blaine laughed.

“Let’s just say I had to twist their arms a little,” was the reply.

The clerk went into the back of the store. A few minutes later he returned with a fancy leather satchel in his hands.

“Here you go, sir.”

Willard opened it and pulled out a helmet of pure gold, with silver as decoration upon it. Detailed figures were carved onto its surface, a mural that told the history of Atilta and the Plantagenets. A quick look through the bag assured Willard the whole suit was there, and he replaced the helmet and closed the satchel.

“Thank you. I am glad there was no need to smack you, as the brown Fardy prophesied.”

“I have learned,” the clerk laughed, “That one should not trust to their patience. Will you not try it on?”

“Not here. It is not safe within the city.”

“Ah, of course,” the clerk answered, showing his understanding.

Willard and Blaine left the store, setting off once more through the narrow city streets.

“Now we must set up the netting,” Blaine said.

“Yes, and I think I have guessed your game. Onward, then, to hope and to freedom!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The Innkeeper led his two companions down the road, through the forest from which they had long been absent. The first man was William Stuart: six feet tall, with oxen shoulders and tree branch arms. A long white beard clung to his face, but the hair above his head was closely cropped. He wore leather armor, which -- though not as tough as his face -- could keep away the blade of a weak man. Beside him walked Barnes Griffith, his first lieutenant. He was not yet twenty-five, with low tide lips and sand castle hair. When they were away from Willard and Ivona, the Admiral spoke:

"Fifteen years has wrought a change in Ivona, from babe to beauty. Time is a universal phenomena -- it passes in all places though it seems to pass only where you are, yourself. I return to Atilta, thinking to find it where I left it. But Gylain and the tide have blown it far off course."

"If you cannot see what you left behind, what of me?" Barnes asked. "Your daughter and Alfonzo were already what they are today, though to a lesser degree; and your wife," he hesitated, then by-passed the subject. "But when I parted from my brother, we were too young to be ourselves. I fear I will not know him."

"Though far apart, of kindred heart," rhymed the Innkeeper.

"We will see when time reveals itself to us, not before," the Admiral said.

"Your years bring patience, whereas mine bring zeal."

"No, though my years bring the appearance of patience. Within I am more zealous than even you, for there are those whom I have not seen for many years."

"Celestine awaits, do not fear."

"I do not speak of her. I am zealous for Gylain. It is he who my eyes cannot depart from, nor my mind set aside. He is my goal, and I will have his life, yet."

"Look, there is a man approaching," and Barnes pointed down the road.

There was an older man coming toward them at a quick pace, as if he recognized them. He was dressed in a monk's frock, and seemed to truly be one: the top of his head was uncovered, his middle rotund, and his nose hooked. It was a moment before they came together. When they did, the Innkeeper was the first to speak.

"Good heavens! What is this? Erwin Meredith back from the abyss," he cried. "Many days it has been, since news of you traversed the wind."

"Hail, Innkeeper," Meredith answered. "I am glad it is you, for it has been too long since I have seen a friendly face." The monk furled his eyebrows and glanced over the Innkeeper's crooked nose, ruffled hair, and seagull eyes. "That is to say," he muttered to himself, "I am glad to see a friend."

"I am not your only friend here," replied the Innkeeper, "William himself is near."

"Silence, there, I will have none of your fanatical ejaculations. How could the Admiral have returned? You give yourself so easily to faith and hope, Innkeeper."

"My presence means hope, then?" and William Stuart removed his hood. "Meredith, it is I! How many years has it been now, since we were parted on the decks of The King's Arm?" He stepped forward to

Meredith's side. His face was broad and powerful, emanating authority.

The Admiral continued his remembrance: "The sky above was clear, and the sun came down like fire to the ground. Below us the water was rough from the wind, but in the shelter of Thunder Bay there were no waves. It was only the swell that moved us. There were two ships on the side of freedom, and six on the side of oppression -- a small battle, but an important one. Yet all around the shore stood the great trees of Atilta, entirely oblivious to the petty struggles of man which they witnessed."

He went on: "The King's Arm was alongside The Merry Forester, each drawn to quarters and ready to battle. Gylain held the land, and his ships the neck of the bay. If we could not break through his line, the forces of the true king would be lost."

The memory of that glorious day surfaced in Meredith's mind, as if it were happening once more. He caught the strand of the Admiral's narrative, and threw it forward. "All was silent as both sides waited for the other to begin. Then, without warning, Gylain's ships started toward us. You took your ship, The King's Arm, to the left; and I took mine, The Merry Forester, to the right. We planned to split the blockade to allow at least one of us to escape. If they split, their center would be left open. If they did not, we would flank them and send a volley of arrows down their throats."

The Admiral broke in: "Fortunately for us, the navy had been true to the rightful king, and Gylain was forced to man his fleet with pithy land-lubbers. At first, the enemy commanders could not decide what course to take. It would have been a sad defeat for Gylain, had not Nicholas Montague throw the captain overboard and taken the fleet into his own hands. His hatred was equaled only by his vigor, and though he was no seaman, he made himself one during the battle. He commanded the fleet to follow The King's Arm, and they were upon us in a moment. There was no way of escape -- they completely surrounded us. They were too close for arrows or missiles, for in the confusion they would hit their comrades on the other vessels. Yet we could, and for a moment we gave them hell at half price. Soon, however, they repaid us double, and we found ourselves being boarded simultaneously by six frigates."

Meredith took over the narrative: "On The Merry Forester, we were left in the open, able to flee to safety. Yet our comrades in The King's Arm were doomed, stuck between the enemy ships and the woody shore. I stood upon the board, facing the open sea and freedom with one side and my beleaguered comrades with the other. Every face was turned my way, waiting my command and knowing the fate of the rebellion rested in our course. 'Men,' I cried without hesitation, 'We must decide whether to save our own lives, or the lives of our comrades. We must die, yet will we die for ourselves, or for others?' 'For others!' rose the shout. We came about and sailed into the battle."

The Admiral resumed the story from his vantage point: "The battle was thick upon the decks of The King's Arm. A hundred and fifty of us stood against Gylain's four hundred. We could not hold them back, but were overpowered. It looked as though we had no chance to survive, and I cursed myself, that I could not take Gylain down to death as I went there myself. But as I looked up, I saw The Merry Forester quietly boarding the enemy's ships. Montague had left the ships without a guard, thinking nothing of it in the battle. In the chaos, your men sneaked into the ships, killed the guards, and broke the boards that crossed to the deck of The King's Arm. We were defeated. But The Merry Forester and all six of Gylain's ships were stolen away, out of Thunder Bay and the reach of Gylain. This is the first I have returned to Atilta since."

"And it is a great joy to see you, Admiral!" cried Meredith, embracing his old friend tightly.

"Do I not feel the same? But tell me, Meredith, what became of those liberated frigates? I hope they were sunk at once, and not allowed to fall into Gylain's possession again?"

“No, Admiral. Too many of our friends were killed, for us to reverse our victory by such a foolish mistake as returning them to Gylain.”

“Then they are sunk? It is good.”

“No, not sunk.”

“What?” the Admiral asked, “Then what have you done with them?”

“We have hidden them in our hidden harbor,” Meredith laughed. “A harbor in the middle of the forest.” He paused for a moment to give his words greater drama, then explained. “We took an inlet that flowed into the forest, and deepened it to allow the passage of ships. Then we covered its mouth with camouflage. They are only a hundred yards into the forest, but are completely invisible from the water.”

“Meredith, you amaze me -- though I should know better. Yet why do you not use them?”

“We do not have the men or officers to man them, and we cannot train more in the present situation.”

“I am returned. Let us begin! But first we must visit Lord Milada. The Innkeeper tells me his life is in danger from traitors and spies.”

“What? First Ivona is taken, and now the same is attempted on Milada himself. Let us be off at once!” Meredith exclaimed.

“Have no fears for Ivona, for she is safe. I will explain on the way.”

With that they began their march to Milada’s castle at double pace. Yet before they had gone a dozen yards, a man -- panting heavily -- came running from behind them.

“Admiral, Admiral!” he called, “I bring news.”

“Speak it then, Forsmil,” the Admiral responded, for the man was one of his crew.

“Montague has escaped!”

There was a moment of silence.

“We have been discovered,” the Admiral whispered at length. “Onward, then, to the Western Marches. Before it is too late!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Meanwhile, in the Western Marches, the day went on as well. In the second floor of the castle, the Fardy brothers sat in counsel with Milada. They were in the family room, which covered most of the second floor, with passages to each of the upper towers contained in a circular pillar in the center of the

room -- thirty feet in diameter -- with each door leading to a different tower. The outside walls of the room were walled entirely in glass, with several bookshelves and table standing in front. Part of the room was sectioned off as a training room for the guards, and another part as a storage room for the same. The rest of the room was furnished as a family, or sitting, room.

It was unusual to see a castle with walls of glass, yet the beauty of the surrounding land was also unusually potent. At this time, the sky was cloudless and the sun nearing the end of its daily pass. The castle itself sat in the center of a circular meadow that stretched for a mile in each direction. The village was nestled between the meadow and the castle, circling entirely around the latter. The ground sloped downward as it came toward the castle and the village, and the farmers took advantage of this to irrigate their lands: all the rain ran down to them. The trees cast a shadow over half the meadow, as the sun sank lower, and in the shaded portion it was already night. Yet in the rest of the meadow, it was late afternoon.

Milada looked out of the window absently, murmuring sometimes to himself, and sometimes to the others. His manner was frightened, as it had been when Willard rescued him. Though his body still danced strangely, his limbs seemed more to writhe than waltz. The Fardy brothers looked at each other anxiously. They wished to be briefed on the situation with the nobles, and the rebellion from Milada's viewpoint. Yet Milada did not help their efforts, and the brothers did not have the tact to steer him along.

"Look there, my friends," Milada said gloomily, pointing to the shaded meadow. "Look there, where the night meets the day. See the contrast between the depression and the joy? See the contrast between the cold complacency, and the zealous enthusiasm? Such is the state of my heart. Indeed, such is the state of Atilta: divided between the night of tyranny, and the day of freedom. And look friends, is it not the day which wanes?"

"Does not the dawn replace it, though?" asked the blond Fardy.

"Yes," Milada sighed, "Yet the dawn gives way to the noon; and noon once more to the evening. What good is freedom, if it cannot be kept? Have we freed anything but the blood of our compatriots, and that only to spill out on barren ground?"

"We are patient men, Milada," said the brown Fardy. "But there is a time for peace, and a time for rising up. It cannot always be one or the other."

"Perhaps," suggested the black Fardy, "Perhaps we should prove our patience before we preach it. Remove the plank from our own eyes, so to say."

"Prove before we preach? By my mother's left arm! Brother, what sort of a humble, forbearing remark was that? Am I to understand that you would feign to question your own patience? Well, then, let me prove it to you. Only be glad that I have no plank in my eye, or else I would pull it and use it as an instrument of learning upon your head," and the blond Fardy grabbed an ancient, handwritten manuscript from the bookshelf beside him and struck his black brother firmly on the head.

Upon seeing this, the brown Fardy's eyes opened wide and he leapt to his feet.

"The Fardies are a virtuous bunch," he said, "My brother here showing his patience, and my brother there showing his zeal. Yet I would count myself a sinner, if I did not step forward and protect the patience of my brother."

"You will do no such thing, or else someone might think you impatient! I strike him that he may see his

own patience, his own superior cheek-turning morals. Perhaps it is best that I show you your patience as well!" The blond Fardy gave his brown-haired relative a quick smack with the ancient manuscript.

"By the hand that rests on my mother's left arm! I will not let you show yourself impatient while showing me patient. For that would make me your superior, and I will not suffer myself to harbor such pride!" The brown-haired Fardy returned his brother's blow with a punch to the face that knocked him backwards onto the floor with a resounding thud.

"By the dainty mole that rests upon the hand that rests upon my mother's left arm! I will not allow you to put yourself last here on earth, for I know as well as any that the who is first will be last, and he who is last will be first ." With that the blond Fardy raised the ancient manuscript in preparation to hit his brother with it. But his other kin -- the black Fardy -- arrested his arm in mid-swing. The sudden, jolting stop causing the book to fly across the room at great speed.

Just then, Milada was aroused from his melancholy meditations and looked across the room to where the Fardy brothers were quarreling. As he opened his mouth to bid them cease, the book crashed squarely into his nose and tumbled down to his lap. It landed open, facing upward. The impact brought him to the alert, and as he regained his composure, he looked down at the book. It was open to a page that held a sketch of the Kings Plantagenet of many generations ago, with this text written beneath it:

In ancient times, the Plantagenets were rulers of the Holy Roman Empire. As it broke apart, they moved their capital to France, and from there to Atilta. Their purest line reigns there, and they have reigned with mercy and compassion. The people love them dearly.

Upon reading this, Milada was filled with rage at the thought of the king's murder. He thought of his duty to the people of Atilta, and to history. The Fardy brothers saw the resolve written on his face, and hoped to keep him engaged. The blond Fardy was the first to speak.

"Perhaps it is time to consult on the situation of the rebellion, Milada?"

"Yes, it is time," he answered. "How are things in Eden and in the forest?"

"Jonathan Montague is about in the forest, kidnapping and attacking. The Queen of Saxony will arrive in Eden within the week, and the policy of France is soon to be decided. Above all, there are traitors among us. The end is coming, whether or not we are ready for it."

"The nobles are neutral," Milada said. "My trip found them inclined to the rebellion, because of Gylain's increasing tyranny. We would do better with them on our side, but as long as they are not for Gylain, we can survive. If we can make them question Gylain's strength with a victory -- more symbolic than strategic -- we can count on their help. But if we fail to move forward in the coming weeks, they will commit to his banner."

"Then our hope lies in Eden. If only we were there to help our comrades."

"And yet we are not, brother. So let us be patient with our friend Milada, and keep guard over him -- for if harm comes to him, all is lost as well."

"True, my brother, but do you think that I would not be patient?"

"I said no such thing. You, above all others, are clothed with gentleness and self-control," said the brown-haired Fardy.

“Once again, you put others before yourself, brother, and I will not allow it! If I am more peaceful than you, you must be one brute of a man.” He struck his brother across the face.

“My conscience will not allow me to allow you to put yourself down in such a manner, brother. Do not take this personally, for it must be done,” and the brown brother returned the blow heavily.

By this time, both the blond and brown Fardies had arisen from their chairs and were facing each other. There was but one stairway leading to the second floor, a stone stairway that wound around the outside of the castle. The glass panels behind the bookshelves overlooked this stair.

Once the brown brother defied his blond kin to show himself less self-controlled, the latter prepared to show that he was, indeed, far his inferior in that regard. The black Fardy, always desirous of a peaceful solution, jumped from his chair to his brown brother’s side. Yet just as he did so, the blond Fardy reached down and pulled the rug from beneath them. The two brothers flew backwards and crashed into one of the bookshelves. It tilted precariously backward, then wobbled three times. It slowed slightly, until it became evident the shelf would not fall through the wall. The blond Fardy, however, feeling he had proved his inferiority, leapt forward to help his brothers. He tripped on one of the chairs as he came, and fell headlong into the shelf. The added force was too strong. With a final wobble, it crashed through the glass behind it and onto the stairway below.

“Look out below!” cried the brown Fardy. But it was too late.

“They are throwing shelves at us!” roared out the voice of Hismoni, the captain of the guards.

A resounding crash was heard, as the shelves hit the stone stairway. A horrible scream followed. Someone had come between the shelves and the stair.

The Fardy brothers rose and peered over the edge for a second, before chorusing in a hoarse whisper, “Dear God! What have we done!”

CHAPTER THIRTY

An hour before this, there had been a clandestine meeting in the basement of the castle, in a room used as an armory. Twelve men were present, among them Hismoni, the captain of Milada’s guard; Thurston, Selmar, and Fritz of Alfonzo’s band, and several of the soldiers under Hismoni. Noticeably absent was Osbert.

“Now is the time, gentlemen,” said Hismoni, “The hour draws near.”

“Yes, when darkness falls, so shall our lord,” added Thurston.

“He is not my lord,” Selmar said, “I serve only Gylain, and I will not call that fool Alfonzo master any longer, in truth or deception. The game is up.”

“But when do we get our reward?” Fritz asked a cloaked man who sat on a stool in the corner. His face

was shrouded by the shadows of the low-burning candles.

“You will be paid,” answered the spy, “When my master receives Milada’s severed head. For the heads of any of the Fardy brothers that are taken, the price will be doubled.”

Hismoni rose to his feet. “What treachery is this? Are we to carry the heads through the forest, without a strong guard? If Alfonzo finds us it will mark our deaths, to be sure.”

“An assassin fears assassination, and a mercenary fears the same. If your party is not a strong enough guard, then you will have proved yourselves too weak for my master’s service. Besides, Alfonzo is this very moment deep in the dungeons of Castle Plantagenet.”

“Can it be?” Fritz exclaimed, “That he has finally been captured? Woe be unto us!”

“Bind your tongue, Fritz,” said Selmar, “It was his fate, and it is ours to make our fortune in his downfall. Do you still have a conscience? Of what are you afraid, of God or of man? Of God there can be no fear, for do not his self-proclaimed servants lead the way of wickedness? Of men, there is only Gylain to be feared.”

Thurston sat down beside his doubting companion, “Fritz, do not repent now, for your judgment will still come, but your reward will not -- you will lose what you had before as well as what is yet to come. Think of the seeds we have sown. Think of poor Casper, who was chosen by yourself to take the blame for our actions. Do you not remember that it was you who soiled his boots that fateful night? He was innocent, and still he lost his head. Blood is already upon your hands, and it can only be washed off by more blood. Such is the way of the sword.”

“Perhaps you are right,” Fritz acquiesced, and he spoke against the plan no more. Such is the way of man, silence in wickedness and speeches in righteousness.

Hismoni rose and took charge, hoping to bolster the courage of his fellow traitors, that his fortune may be secured. Gylain knew Milada’s death would end the rebellion, and he could well afford to make it happen.

“Arm yourselves,” the captain of the guards ordered. They did, each taking a sword in his hand.

“If you fail, you will find safety with Gylain, but not favor,” the gruff-voiced spy said. “I will be ready with horses at the rendezvous. When the deed is done, meet me there and we will flee together. But wait, you are sure that Osbert is safely away? If he returns in the midst of the action the tide may turn against you.”

“He has gone to the forest,” Hismoni replied, “We told him Admiral William Stuart was coming to the castle, and that he should meet him upon the forest road. He set off this morning, going toward Eden. He is a simpleton, and will reach it before he realizes our fraud.”

The shrouded man gave Hismoni a sharp look, and though only his eyes showed, they cut Hismoni deeply.

“Fear not,” Hismoni answered, “The Admiral is far from here, there is no way that Osbert could meet him upon the road.”

The shadowy man said nothing, only grunted to himself and fled the room, going to the point of the

secret rendezvous.

From the castle basement the traitorous party made their way to the ground floor. Hismoni had used his power as the captain of the guard to ensure none would come across them. Once on the ground floor, they took the stone stairway that wrapped around the outside of the castle.

“Will we feign friendliness or merely attack?” asked Selmar.

“We will try to put their guard down, and say we heard they were in danger. But if they hesitate, waste no time in dispatching them. The force of the guard is small, but with the townsmen alarmed it will be hard for us to escape.”

“Yes, but luck and fate are with us,” said Selmar.

“I doubt it,” replied Fritz, “For our deeds are dark, and fate does not smile on such as us.”

“The only thing dark about us are your spirits, Fritz, so be of good cheer. Are you still afraid that God will rain down punishment from the sky and kill us at once? What a fool you are, my friend.”

At that moment, a loud crash was heard directly above them, and the sound of breaking glass. They looked upwards, and Hismoni was the first to speak.

Just as the glass broke, he cried, “They are throwing shelves at us!”

Fritz looked up to see a heavy shelf falling at him. He scream in panic. “Judgment!” he yelled. But then he was silenced. The shelf crushed him into the stairway.

“They know our intentions, men, so let us charge while we yet have time!”

Hismoni charged forward up the stairs, followed closely by his men. Each had his sword raised for combat.

Above, the Fardy brothers looked over the edge of the wall, their heads extended through the gap the shelf had made. When they heard Hismoni yell the charge, the blond Fardy said, “Brothers, they are attacking! We must have angered them intensely.”

“If only men were all as patient as ourselves,” answered the brown Fardy.

“No,” whispered the black Fardy in something slightly resembling fear. “No, they are the traitors.”

“Yes,” the blond Fardy returned, “And that shelf was the reward of our virtue!”

“What providence you knocked that shelf on them,” Milada said, growing excited, his limbs throwing themselves around. “Come, to the keep!”

With that, Milada dashed to the pillar in the center of the room. The door to the keep was a massive stone slab, positioned nearest to the stairway. The four pulled on it frantically, but it was slow to open, for its size. At last, just as Hismoni and the assassins came in, it flew open. Once it was outside the frame, it opened easily.

“Hurry! Pull the door closed!” cried Milada, as the Fardy brothers struggled to close it.

“Hurry! Before they pull the door closed!” cried Hismoni, as he raced to the door, hoping to keep it from shutting.

It was a long second, each party straining themselves.

“We have them!” roared Hismoni, and he grabbed the edge of the stone door with his extended fingers.

But it was not to be. For just as he did so, the momentum of the door swung it shut. It sealed with a thud and a bang, taking Hismoni’s fingers with it. He cried out in pain. From the inside came the sound of slamming wood: the door was locked. The keep was made to be impenetrable.

“So it comes to this,” Hismoni groaned. “Thurston, go and keep watch through the windows. Selmar, go to the storage room. The battering ram we trained with yesterday is still there,” he glanced down at his left hand, now devoid of its fingers. “By coincidence,” and he laughed, but it was strained by the pain.

“So it was you, Hismoni,” Milada called through the door. “I trusted you as my own son, and I am given this in return. I wondered that the bandits did not slay you in the forest. Yet now it is explained.”

“Yes, but do not lie, for you have never trusted me as your own son. If it were not for the prince, I would have had you before. Yet revenge is only sweetened by delay.”

“I am a fool, perhaps,” Milada’s muffled voice returned, “But I am no liar. I have given you everything that is mine to give.”

“Everything, you mean, but that which I have most desired.”

“You had merely to ask it, and it would have been given.”

“No, not this. For I desire Ivona.”

“Hismoni!” Thurston cried from the windows. “Hismoni, come quick!”

“What is it? Are we in danger?”

“Yes, for a group of riders is galloping across the plain.”

Hismoni rushed to the window. There, just leaving the forest, six riders could barely be made out, riding wildly for castle.

“Hurry!” Hismoni whispered, for fear of letting those within the keep overhear. “Hurry! They will reach us before ten minutes have passed!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

By the early evening the forest had already fallen into darkness. As the trees stretched into the distance,

they converged into a continuous wall, and nothing could be seen through them. A fog came up from the ground, and the winding road rendered the blindness almost complete. This only made the forest more beautiful, however, for while darkness filled the forest, there was light above. The sun was still in the sky, though below the tree line, and the colored light shone through the canopy. It was as if the forest slept, while the sunset still came through the bedroom window.

It was in this paradox that the Admiral, the Innkeeper, Barnes, Meredith, and the messenger from the ship found themselves. They had been traveling all day, making a quick passage through the forest. By this time they were growing weary, though they had set their wills upon reaching the castle before resting.

"My legs grow heavier with each step I take," said Meredith.

"Be glad your heart does not, friend, for that is my ailment," answered the Admiral. "I have a feeling of urgency about reaching the castle. Doubtless it is only my fears, yet it will not pass from me."

"A darkened heart will not impart tidings blessed or good, it will merely start to tear apart the hope which time has stood," rhymed the Innkeeper.

"Yes, yet a heart jolly may be destroy from its own folly," said the Admiral, "But look, who is that over there, turning the bend? He is familiar to me, yet I cannot place him."

The others looked closely for a moment, but the darkness of the forest was hard to pierce. At length, Meredith plunged his eyes through it and recognized the man.

"It is Osbert," he said. "Perhaps he brings news of Milada."

They quickened their pace, though it was unnecessary. Osbert broke into a run when he saw them.

"Hail, Admiral, I have been expecting you," he said as he reached them.

"Osbert, what faith and patience! Fifteen years I have been gone, and still you are expecting me."

"No," the simple man laughed, "For I was told you were arriving today. I was sent into the forest to meet you."

"Who could have known?"

"Hismoni told me. Why do you ask?"

"Hismoni?" Meredith raised his eyebrow.

"He could not have known, for we hurried here straight from port," William said.

"Yet they knew. You must be mistaken."

"Hismoni must have wanted to get rid of you this evening," Meredith said slowly, "And used William's name as an excuse, not knowing he had indeed returned."

"But why? There is no need to fool me. Unless they mean to," and Osbert said no more.

"Harm the Lord Milada," Meredith finished his thought. "To your heels, friends! There is evil and

treachery abroad tonight!”

They set off on a mad dash forward, hoping to reach the castle before it was too late; hoping to save Milada. Yet, at the same time, they knew that on foot it was too far to run. If they did make it, somehow, they would be too exhausted to fight. Still, they had hope. They believed their cause was just, and that fate would intervene.

A moment passed before they came to the bend ahead. As they turned it, they ran into a cloaked man, dressed in a black robe and a hood that shadowed his face. He carried the reigns of six horses, strung out on a rope. Yet when he saw them, he dropped the rope and ran. Osbert intersected his retreat into the forest, however, and plunged his sword into the man’s stomach. The party stopped and mounted the horses.

“Providence or luck,” cried the Admiral, “But does it matter? I only hope, Osbert, that you have not killed an innocent man in your haste.”

“Have no fear of that. He was one of Gylain’s chief spies -- he escaped me only a few days ago in this very area.”

Osbert was still on the ground, and he quickly searched the dead man. He lifted a sealed scroll to show the others.

“Let us hope this carries useful intelligence, though we cannot tarry to read it now.”

He mounted the last horse as the others galloped off down the road.

Meanwhile, back in the castle, things looked grim for Milada and the Fardy brothers. With the help of their battering ram, the traitors made quick work of the stone door, as massive as it was.

“What is that noise without?” cried the blond Fardy, hearing the great booms of the ram striking the door.

“They must have a battering ram! We are done for, I fear,” said the black Fardy.

“Do not lose hope, brother. We may die in the end, but will we never be captured alive,” said the brown Fardy.

Milada could not handle the sudden danger that was thrust upon him, and was pacing back and forth in the tight stairway, his limbs still dancing.

“We had best get furniture from the rooms above, to barricade the stairway and throw at them when they break through,” the blond Fardy said.

“Good idea, brother, and we can arm ourselves as well.”

Since there was nothing they could do to keep the door upon its hinges, all of them went up the stairs to the rooms above. The first was a small armory. They each took a suit of leather armor and a sword, then continued upward. Next was Milada’s bedchamber. They moved the heavier furniture down to the beginning of the staircase, that they might hurl it down on the attackers.

At that moment, the door broke open. Hismoni and his followers charged up the stairs.

“Land ho!” cried the Fardy brothers in unison, and they pushed a heavy dresser over the edge of the stairs. It charged down Hismoni, even as he charged up. With a shriek, he turned and fled, grabbing at the doorway to pull himself forward. Yet he had no fingers left on that hand. The dresser crashed into him, and he sailed across the room.

His companions, however, continued on unwounded. The Fardy brothers shut the door at the top of the steps with little time to spare, locking the attackers out.

The second door was made of wood. In a moment it, too, was forced open. The small armory was merely a foyer, and another flight of stairs reached into Milada’s bedchamber. Once more Hismoni led the charge, for his pride was not diminished in his pain. Neither was his folly. The Fardy brothers were at the top of the steps, and as soon as he came forward, they let loose a bed frame. It tumbled down the steps, rattling with every bounce. This time, though, Hismoni was quicker to react. He turned and fled safely from the steep, narrow staircase.

His companion Selmar was not so lucky. He tripped as he turned, and fell face forward to the ground. Behind him he heard the oncoming charge of the bed frame, and he lifted his head instinctively, to see what came at him. Then, with a hollow knock, it struck him straight in the forehead. He died instantly.

“Forward men!” roared Hismoni, “Now is our chance!”

The remaining eight attackers dashed up the stairway with their swords drawn. Yet there was no one above to oppose them. In the bedchamber at the top, the three Fardy brothers stood in a line in front of Milada. The latter stood with a sword in his hand, but it was evident that he was too frightened to make use of it.

“Surrender or die!” Hismoni said.

The brothers were solemn, no longer rowdy or boisterous. With a calm, collected air, the three chorused together, “Die.” And that was all.

The defenders stood their ground in the corner, and the attackers slowly approached, each with his sword drawn and in position to be used.

“There is no hope, brothers,” said Hismoni, his face badly bleeding from his wounds, “Why not surrender -- we only seek Milada.”

There was no answer, for the Fardy brothers would not lower themselves to speak with the traitors. Still the attackers advanced, slowly and cautiously. Still the Fardy brothers held their ground, without a trace of fear or worry on their faces. The only thing that held sway there was duty, to Atilta and to freedom.

The attackers came at last, in a sudden onslaught. But the brothers were ready. The blond Fardy clashed swords with Hismoni, parrying his first blow and his second, then knocking his third into the air by twisting his blade. He took the opening that followed and thrust straight into Hismoni’s stomach. The blow was shallow, for Hismoni fell backwards. Yet for the time, he was out of the battle.

At the same time, two of the guards challenged the black Fardy. He was by far the best swordsman of the three Fardies, and was able to fend them off at first. Then, after a long grapple and several parrying exchanges, the leftward attacker gave him a blow far to his left. He held his sword sideways and kept the guard in a grapple. The rightward attacker, however, took the opening that was left on the black Fardy’s

right side. He drove his sword into the black Fardy's shoulder, causing him to stumble backwards. With his last breath of strength, he stabbed the leftward attacker and brought him down. But once more the rightward attacker had an opening, and once more the black Fardy was stabbed in the shoulder.

On the other side, the brown Fardy was also faced with two attackers. The first came at him with his sword over his head, prepared to cut him open from above. But the brown Fardy ducked to the left and stabbed his sword straight through the oncoming man. The other attacker was directly behind his freshly killed companion. He, too, raised his sword above his head to rain it down on the brown Fardy -- with the latter's sword caught in the dead man's stomach, he thought, he could not defend himself. He was dead wrong. The brown Fardy rushed forward into the dead man's body and forced his sword through him. Then he charged forward at the second attacker, pushing the sword into his body as well.

A third man had now come up, however, and the brown Fardy could not dislodge his sword to defend himself. There were already too many men skewered upon it to add another. The third man thrust his sword into the lower left side of the brown Fardy's chest. A muffled clang could be heard as it pierced the leather armor. He fell limply to the ground.

Seeing his two brothers struck down, the blond Fardy let loose the full fury of his patience. His face blazed with fire and his eyes shot forth from his head like demons from hell. He flourished his blade above his head, and with a loud groan disembodied two of the guards, one to the left and one to the right. Then he raised it again -- still hot with anger -- and smote the man in front of him.

All were motionless on the ground, except Hismoni, one of his men, the blond Fardy and Milada. The latter was too frightened to wield his sword. The blond Fardy left himself open in his final blow, and Hismoni swung his sword hard into his stomach. The blade was turned to the broadside, yet its force knocked him to the ground. Hismoni dashed forward to Lord Milada, in whom rested the rebel's last hope of victory.

"I will finish what I started in the forest," Hismoni said as his sword swung through the air.

To the ground on either side lay the brown and black-haired Fardy brothers, dead or unconscious. Milada stood in front of a large window, his limbs convulsing and jerking about as Hismoni's sword came at him. The blond brother had arisen from the ground, prepared for one last desperate defense.

As Hismoni began to swing, the blond Fardy began to leap.

"Atilta!" he cried out as he flew forward to where Hismoni stood.

As Hismoni's sword hit Milada, the blond Fardy hit Hismoni. He grabbed tightly ahold of Hismoni, and the momentum of his leap forced the two men through the window. The glass shattered, then fell into the abyss below. The tower was a thousand feet high, and nothing broke the fall, except the stone walkway far below.

As Hismoni fell through the window with the blond Fardy, his sword went with him. Milada fell to the floor. His wound was deep, yet he was saved. Thurston remained alive, and as the two men fell, he raised his sword to strike Milada and finish him off.

Yet the sound of footsteps came from the stairway.

William Stuart ran into the room at that moment, holding a narrow, flat handled sword.

"Milada," he cried as he saw what was taking place. "Milada, I have come," and he flung his sword at Thurston. It flew through the air like an arrow, just as Thurston's sword began to descend toward Milada's head. It hit him directly, piercing straight through him. The Admiral threw it so hard that it went completely through Thurston's stomach. Only a hollow wound remained as it passed through. It continued its flight, until it stabbed into the stone wall beyond, directly below the window. It struck at the joint in the wall, where the stones were cemented together, and it passed straight through the mortar to the other side.

This all took place in a single instant. Hismoni and the blond Fardy still were crashing through the window, even as the sword broke through the stone. They were but a single instant too late.

The newcomers stood there without moving. Milada lay on the ground, mortally wounded; two of the beloved Fardy brothers were close beside him, and the third was hurtling toward the ground a thousand feet below. The silence was ended by a distant thud -- the sound of a body hitting the ground.

"Dear God!" moaned the Admiral, "Is freedom truly worth this? There will be none left to enjoy it."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

William Stuart dashed forward across the ransacked bedchamber, littered with the debris of battle. The furniture was broken or gone, the paintings and tapestries torn, and the window broken. First, he went to Milada, and with the help of Osbert lifted him onto the desk, using it as a bed. His stomach was badly wounded. Though the vital organs were spared, it looked to be beyond the healing skill of man.

"Meredith, bring the doctor," commanded the Admiral.

"He came when he heard the fighting," he answered, pointing to the elderly gentleman that was nearing the bed.

The doctor had long, white hair, bound behind his head in a thick ponytail, and as full upon his forehead as fifty years before. His face was long and narrow, covered only with a short stubble of white hair. He set his instruments down on the desk beside Milada and set to work at once. The others watched carefully, thinking the other fallen to be already beyond their help.

"All is lost," moaned the Admiral, "And if not, then all is at least for no purpose."

"They would have wanted us to keep going, to continue the cause," Osbert answered.

"I would think they would like to still be alive," Meredith said. "But may the good Lord take their souls." The monk made the sign of the cross with his finger and bowed his head reverently.

"They lived and died for freedom, and it is for us to follow their example," was Osbert's reply.

"I am a patient man," a voice from behind them faltered, "But I am at the edge of my patience, with this talk. Hismoni and his traitorous comrades attempt to assassinate Milada, and you mourn their deaths with thoughts of their virtue? By the bottom of the ocean, and may you die there!"

The party assembled around the bed quickly turned to see who spoke.

“Good God, you live!” cried Meredith.

“And why not? I have as much right to life as any other.” The brown Fardy stood before them unsteadily, yet fully alive. “Where are my brothers, friends? I cannot see them anywhere.”

“Alas, they are no more.”

“Who is?” asked a voice from the other side. It was the black Fardy. His shoulder was bleeding from its wound, yet otherwise he was well.

“Say, brother,” asked the brown Fardy, “Where is our blond brother?”

“I am afraid he has gone somewhere without you,” and the Admiral pointed to the broken window behind them. It took a second for the other to understand. It struck him like a sword from above, and he lowered his face to the floor. “Things have gone badly here” said the Admiral, “Though not as badly as I once thought. How is it that you survived?”

The brown Fardy reached his arm into his outer shirt and pulled out a bag. He emptied it into his hand and held it up for the others to see. It contained thirty gold coins -- inscribed with the face and figure of Gylain, as were all of Atilta’s currency. There was a deep dent across the face of the uppermost coins, where they had turned the blade away from his chest. He held the coins to his eye and said:

“Let Gylain have that which is his own. I no longer care for such things,” and he tossed the coins out the broken window.

Then, from outside, came a muffled voice.

“I am a patient man,” it said, “But when a man is left hanging, so to speak, it is downright rude to throw coins at him!”

“Woe am I!” moaned the black Fardy, “Even in death my brother’s voice haunts me.”

“And I as well,” the brown brother added, “Such is the curse of the Fardy brothers!”

They lowered their heads to weep, embracing each other in sorrow.

“I will give you another curse, if you do not unhook me,” the voice returned. “This is a good view, perhaps, but I’d prefer the rendezvous better.”

The two Fardy brothers ran over to the window and looked out through the hole. The blond Fardy was directly below them, hanging by the leather jerkin he wore. The Admiral’s sword was sticking through the mortar between two of the stones, coming out three inches from the wall and forming a sturdy hook. The neck of his leather armor had bunched up as he passed through the window. When the excess leather passed the hook, it got caught, and secured him to the wall. Thus, while Hismoni fell to his death, the blond Fardy survived. The terror of his brush with death had painted him over with silence. But the Fardy brothers could not be subdued for long.

He was quickly pulled into the room and reunited with his brothers. There were many tears and hugs

between them, and as many oaths. At length, the blond Fardy spoke.

“He who lives by the sword dies by the sword,” he said, “But the same cannot be said of money, brother, for your greed has spared your life. You have cast the coins aside, however, and we cannot rightly keep them as our own. Therefore, when we recover them from the ground below, we will buy a round of ale for the whole village.”

“You mean to say,” the black-haired Fardy interrupted, “That we will buy a round of ale for the whole village, including the guests of the castle,” and he winked at the brown brother.

“You are wiser and of better sense than I, brother,” was the response.

“I will not hear it,” he began to say, but the outburst was prevented by the Admiral, who turned from Milada’s bedside to face them.

“Let me see you wound,” he said to the black Fardy. “You are a very lucky family,” he mumbled. The Admiral was skilled in the way of healing. He quickly cleaned and bound the wound. It was rather deep, but not a threat to his health. That done, he turned to the doctor and said, “Is he well enough to move? The smell of death fills this room.”

“Yes, his wound is now dressed, though we must be careful. Where will we take him?”

“To Ivona’s room,” Meredith said, “It is down these stairs and up the next. I will lead the way.”

They moved Milada onto a sturdy panel and slowly carried him to Ivona’s bedchamber. It was clean and fresh, and still smelled of the beauty who had once lived there. The change from death to that of life gave Milada strength, and soon he came to his senses.

“William? I must be dead, or else how are you here?”

“You are still among the living, Milada. I have returned at last, and with me the tide of hope.”

“A glimmer of hope, perhaps, but in the darkness any light is bright. Ivona is gone, old friend, and I am worried for her safety.”

“She is safe with Willard, and is probably in the rebel city by now.”

“Who is this Willard? Has my daughter run off with some strange man? Now I begin to understand her refusal to marry the prince who saved my life.”

“No, my lord,” the brown Fardy said, “For Willard is the prince who saved your life.”

“And not only that,” his black brother added, “But he is no mere prince, but a king.”

“And not only that,” his blond brother added, “But he is the King of Atilta.”

“My daughter and the true king! This is better for my advancement than I had expected.”

“They are merely companions,” hesitated the Admiral, “On the quest of freeing Lorenzo from the dungeons; not companions on the quest of love.”

“She ran away because she did not want to marry him,” said Meredith, “But there is certainly no shame in serving the Lord.”

“No, but there is waste and stupidity. Lorenzo said it is her fate to marry the prince -- or rather, the king -- whether or not she felt love at first. If she avoids the arranged marriage now, she will yet marry him for her own desire. I am no fool, gentlemen, but I wager this will indeed take place.”

Milada grew excited as he spoke of these things. It was not wholly from his self-love, nor from his love of Ivona. Rather, it was a mixture of the two, with the hope that their ends were the same. But this excitement was in his mind and not his body. He was wounded beyond the cure of medicine, and even as he finished speaking his face grew pale. He leaned his head back and fell into a deep sleep. Seeing this, the doctor and the others left the room to hold a counsel, and some of the women of the castle entered to nurse their beloved nobleman.

They went to the second floor of the castle, and gathered in a circle on the far side of the room. At first there was silence, as they watched the activity outside. The townsmen had risen up when the alarm was heard, and a heavy guard was put up all around the castle. None of the remaining guards were traitors, but even so, enough guards were stationed that if one had treason on his mind, he could not have acted upon it. The villagers loved Milada, and hated his enemies. In this dwelt his strength -- domestic security. This was Gylain's only weakness.

This makeshift counsel was made up of the Admiral, Barnes, the Innkeeper, Meredith, the Fardies, the doctor, and Osbert. The proceedings are as follows:

WILLIAM STUART : We are all men here, doctor, and accustomed to bad tidings. What is the state of Milada's health? Do not be positive, for we must know the truth.

DOCTOR : He is still among the living -- but for how long, I cannot say.

WILLIAM STUART : If he dies, than we have lost more than a good friend.

DOCTOR : It is not I you must convince, but Milada's body. He will probably live on weakly for many months, before finally succumbing in the end. It would take a miracle or a magical elixir to bring him healing, and I am afraid such things do not exist.

MEREDITH : Indeed, they do, and I will not have your extreme opinions flouted around in the matter as if they were fact.

DOCTOR : If they do exist, it takes more than my skill to call them forth.

MEREDITH : They are not of men, but of God. With faith, God works wonders. Could he not heal the centurion's servant with merely his voice?

DOCTOR : Perhaps, if you believe that way. But faith without works is dead, as they say, and it hasn't worked yet. We need a way that is more in the realm of mankind.

WILLIAM STUART : Yes, Meredith, we need to find actions for ourselves to take. What medicines are there that would help?

DOCTOR : His case is severe, for the wound is very deep. I know of nothing that will suffice.

MEREDITH : Ah, but I do. It is sure to heal forever, if it can be found.

WILLIAM STUART : And what is it? We have no time for riddles here, friend.

MEREDITH : Which is why I speak none -- only of this: the Holy Graal.

DOCTOR : I have heard of such a relic: the cup that contains the blood of Christ.

WILLIAM STUART : We cannot waste time searching for what does not exist. If we were to look, where would it be? No, Meredith, unless something arises we cannot do this. Fate has helped us this far, and we will have to let it work on Milada's health as well.

OSBERT : I know I am a mere woodsman, and have little knowledge of the outside world, yet I may be able to help.

WILLIAM STUART : Do not be shy, Osbert. You may think us wiser, but we know nothing of this matter.

OSBERT : Very well. My only knowledge comes from something I have just read. To be honest, a scroll that I have only read within the hour.

WILLIAM STUART : How you find time for reading is beyond me, but go on.

OSBERT : I found it on the hooded horseman, the spy and messenger of Gylain. I read it as we galloped to the castle, as is my habit when traveling great distances. I will read it, and we will see what fate has planned for us:

Nicholas -

My spies tell me there is increased activity in the rebel camps of late. Their reports are unsettling to me, for I have for some time been anxious, as I have told you, of the return of the king's son. I do not fear him, but the deluge. I am only God's messenger, perhaps, yet he uses messengers against his own messengers, even as I do. I will defeat him, if I can, and overthrow the divine dictator. The rebels fight foolishly, for earthly freedoms. I fight for heavenly emancipation.

There is something that has been on my mind of late: the Holy Graal, the ancient goblet which holds the blood of Christ. I am the son of man, and he the son of God. If the father's blood cannot be spilled, the son's is just as good. Because of Atlantis and the Garden, I have turned my face to the books of the ancients. If our fate is to mirror theirs, I must look to them to see myself. At last I have discovered the location of the Holy Graal.

There is a forested mountain range in southeast France called Cervennes. Through the center of these mountains runs the Ardeche River, and to the north of this river is a deep forest, compared to the Atilian in majesty. In these mountain forests there is an ancient temple that was carved from the mountain itself. From its deep base, it rises over the tops of the nearby mountains, and the Graal is kept in its upper tower. It cannot be reached but through the temple itself, and that through the forest. The Titans guard the temple -- the same who overthrew Atlantis before it sunk.

I can send no one but you to retrieve it. Jonathan must remain with me, to defend the castle. You may take as many men as you wish. The dangers are great, perhaps, but I believe you to be even greater. I fear I will be too busy with the Queen of Saxony when you return from the Floatings to speak of this, so I write you this epistle. I send a copy with several messengers, that I can be sure you receive it, yet the hand is my own. Return to Eden before you depart.

Signed -- Gylain, King of Atilta

WILLIAM STUART : Then there is hope of our success, for we know as much about it as our enemy. Yet

Nicholas Montague will expound our troubles. On the other hand, we can spare more men, for we will not have to contend with him here.

MEREDITH : He is not the most to be feared, I think, but the Titans. But who among us can survive the dangers of the forest and the temple to even reach the Graal? This looks more grim than before.

BLOND FARDY : I think that I know who we must send.

BROWN FARDY : Then out with it. I am a very patient man, but it is too much to bear, to be told that you know, yet not what you know.

BLOND FARDY : Your patience is more than my own, for I cannot bear to be interrupted in the course of my speech, and then rebuked for stopping short.

WILLIAM STUART : We will send Willard, the king.

BLOND FARDY : As I was preparing to say.

WILLIAM STUART : Then we go, for there is much to do.

And so the counsel broke up, and they parted to go their own ways. The Admiral, Barnes, Osbert, Forsmil, and the Fardy brothers departed for Eden; the doctor, and the Innkeeper remained at Milada's bedside; and Meredith went into the forest, to prepare the rebel fleet.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

It rained that evening, and nothing could be seen through the veil of the forest. Had Gylain's forces been able to pierce it, they would have seen the rebels hustling about, finishing preparations for their attack. The rebel city was built into and around the Great Goliaths. There were no entrances except a tunnel that ran underground into the southern tree. A wide roadway was built inside this tree, which wound its way to the top until it opened into a cavernous entry room -- the front gate of the city. The room was circular -- three hundred feet in circumference -- with a pillar of the tree's heartwood left standing in the center. A single, roughly hewn door opened to the outside, to a small platform.

It was no more than five feet wide, and the stairway of the city began from it. It was bordered on each side by several layers of ropes, and the bottom was secured with stout Atiltian boards. As it rose, it came across other platforms, each with a simple door leading into the tree. There were thousands of these doors. What they opened to was as various as any city: some were small apartments, others giant warehouses; some were shops, some manufactures. The entire rebel population -- those who actively opposed Gylain -- dwelt within the trees, carrying on their trades as they had done before.

Yet this, as every other city, was divided into sections. Part is private, part is public. In the rebel city, all private buildings were carved into the trees. Above, in the canopy, was the public city. It was here that the city truly blossomed. In the center of the four trees, near the beginning of the canopy, a central platform was suspended in the air. This was the public square, and the beginning of the Treeway, which branched out to its various routes. In the forest, the canopy was always between the sky and the ground, and was always made from sturdy branches, for the ancient trees were themselves sturdy. The rebels built a road along these branches by securing a boardwalk or a platform across them, creating a smooth

path far above the ground. There were three major thoroughfares of this walkway, each starting at the rebel city. The first went to Thunder Bay, the second to Eden, and the third to the temple ruins and the rebel port.

In the city itself, the canopy was covered by the Treeway. In some areas, there was a waterfall, collecting the rainwater which flowed over the canopy until it found a hole to fall through. Below these waterfalls, the rebels had constructed a trellis, or a framework, upon which hung themellis vine. This was the rebel's primary grain, and it produced a flavorful pod. They were irrigated from above, and cultivated by those who made their living walking along the narrow frame. Other portions of the canopy were covered with bazaars and open markets. The arts also flourished there, and in one place a theater was built in the center of a forked branch. Seats were placed all about, carved directly into the thick limbs.

When Blaine Griffith spoke of spreading a thick netting between several buildings, it was not an unusual thing among the rebels. For in their vertical city, they had many such nets stretched between the trees, to catch those who might fall. They were hundreds of yards across, and the ropes which held the weight were two or three feet thick, woven from the fibers of the Atilianfirmus tree. The youths of the city were known to fall quite often into these nets, although it might be attributed more to daring than to folly.

There were innumerable rope ladders hanging in the rebel city. By climbing these, the rebels also became expert archers, for their arms were steady and sure. Yet, for those who could not or would not climb the ladders, there were elevators. Quite simply, these were platforms which would travel across a rope, from one section to another. Sometimes the rope was a pulley, running from a high branch to a lower one, and the elevator simply was pulled up or down. At other times, the rope was extended between two trees, and the platform hung on a wheel that ran along it.

Yet the marvel of the city was the highway, or the Tops, as they called it. Built above the canopy, it was the resort, the view of the city. On every side the forest could be seen, the canopy of the lesser trees spreading on before them until it ended in the horizon. The clouds could not only be seen here, but could also be felt as they sailed by. The sunsets were unpolluted, the stars unmasked. It was, for the rebels, paradise.

In the western tree, five hundred feet from the ground, there was a door in the tree. It appeared the same as any other door in the city, yet it contained a special room. It was the war room, where Blaine and his lieutenants planned the strategy of the rebels. At this time, there was a briefing taking place, concerning the night's mission. Among those present were Willard, Ivona, Horatio, Clifford, and Blaine.

"You speak of the danger of the rebellion," Ivona said, "And of the coming conclusion. Yet when I look about me, I see a city that is safe and peaceful. What do we fight for, if we ourselves have freedom?"

"It is a mighty city," replied Blaine, "But do not be mistaken -- for every person among us, a hundred live in Eden, wishing to join us. Yet there is no room, and no resources. Atilta is a maritime power, and even its economic strengths come from Eden. Gylain controls it, but as he prospers from its wealth, he becomes harder to overthrow. Already his army is larger than that of Spain, the Slovaks, or the Northmen. Indeed, much of his army comes from those countries. Even de Garcia, the rebel hero of old, came from Spain. We are a small island, and everything we have is imported -- even our fighters. Gylain's only weakness, therefore, is domestic insurrection -- in a word, the rebellion. But even that cannot long stand against him, for he grows in power as we are weakened."

"He is greater in the traditional sense of strength," Willard said, "But we can harass him with quick, local attacks, and spread him about for the final battle. All we can do is fight, and trust fate to guide our hands."

"I would rather trust to God, than to fate," Ivona replied.

"To trust in fate is to trust in God; yet to trust in God is not necessarily to trust in fate."

Ivona shook her head with a laugh and lowered it to conceal the her broad smile.

Willard saw it, however, and laughed to himself.

"If everyone were as pleasant as you in disagreement, Ivona, than I could hardly stand a peaceful exchange."

Willard was no longer the wild forest man. His face was open to the air, and its Roman frame exposed. His chin was squared, coming together slightly in the center. His nose was narrow and came down at a perfect forty-five degrees, climaxing in a respectable point. Before, his hair had shadowed his eyes, yet now they also were revealed. They were large and set closer to the nose than to the ear, but not too an awkward degree.

His early education had always shone through his rough exterior, like a sunset through a dirty window. Yet now the window was clean, and his learning plain to all. His voice was deep as the owl's and melodious like the warbler's, rolling from his tongue with the rhythm that comes with the knowledge of authority. His passions were subdued and his compassions inflamed.

Yet his hermitage also shone through, for he was not given to flattery or politeness. Instead, he was terse and almost taciturn. His stride was long, his step swift, his eyes cold, and his conscience undecided between the laws of the forest and those of man. Both were dim parallels to the laws of God, yet each differed in opposite directions.

In the forest, a pot of honey was worth a man's life; in the city, a metal crown. In the forest, survival was the reward of the strong, and death the fate of the weak. In the city, power was the reward for the strong, and slavery the fate of the weak. Which was worse? Neither, for between Hades and Hell there is no difference. Between the love of self and the hatred of others, there can be no distinction.

Ivona, on the other hand, was purely a follower of God's law. She did not desire money or power, for she realized that the desire behind both was contentment. "Money is a medium of exchange," she always said, "Traded for what you desire. Yet I desire only God, and he can give me what he will. I would use faith, not money. The road to contentment is not possession -- for the more you have, the more you want. Therefore, the only way to desire nothing earthly is to have nothing earthly."

What Ivona struggled with was the desire for love. Her heart longed to be one with another. She longed to serve and to be kind, to prefer her lover as much as he preferred her; to be filled with the contentment that comes only when the desire for contentment has gone; to yield herself, her thoughts and her actions, to another, and combine them to make something greater; to forget her own wants in the face of the wants of others.

She wanted, in a word, to commune with God and to follow him. But her heart was weak, and the spiritual so distant at times she felt alone, though she knew, mentally, that she was not. She desired a love in the physical realm that was born in the spiritual. But when her heart longed the most for a touchable love, a simple sentence would echo through her mind --many things will be forgiven, but this alone will not: blasphemy against the spirit of God . If she were to cling to an earthly being and satisfy her desire for love, would she not be going farther from contentment? Would she not be seeking earthly things to

complete a spiritual longing? Would she not be using temporal means to fulfill an eternal end? If she were to seek love apart from God, she would be denying that he could love her enough. What irony it is, that those who are the nearest the truth, are those whose conscience mourns the most.

When Willard or her father laughed at the apparent simplicity of her mind, or of her supposed naivety, she could only smile slightly and close her eyes. Do not the simple think all to be simple? Do not the doubters think all to be doubt? If they did not know, it was only because their eyes were closed from above. So she did not grow angry. Excepting the Fardy brothers, can one prove a peaceful point through unpeaceful means?

“Arise, men,” Blaine Griffith as the briefing came to an end, and each knew his part. “Arise and take up your arms. Tonight the battle begins. Let us hope it does not end with our defeat.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Meanwhile, in Castle Plantagenet, Gylain was also holding a counsel, though he was the only participant. He paced about his bedchamber, in front of the stained-glass window that covered the outside wall. It was illuminated by the bright moonlight, which diffused through it and gave a silvery glow to the room. Far above hung a single chandelier, of simple design. During the reigns of the Kings Plantagenet, the room was the castle's sanctuary, where the religious services were held. To Gylain, however, such things were foolish -- what purpose was there in worshiping the great beast who ruled the lesser beasts? Gylain himself was one of the middle beasts, as he said, between God and man. He was the oppressed and the oppressor. Therefore, the room was taken to be used by himself, the son of man.

“Why must they look to me for leadership?” he said. “Why must they look to me to endorse their sins as righteousness -- as if my word declares what is right and what is wrong. They come to me with hate and anger in their eyes, and beg to be allowed to inflict some savage cruelty upon the innocent. And they seem to enjoy the travesties which they commit. I only hope they also enjoy their reward.”

Here he turned toward the stained-glass window, gazing upon it.

“I, myself, do not enjoy such actions. But it is my fate, and what dam can a mortal man hold against the tides of fate? It swells and overpowers us, taking us up into its morbid grasp and moving us about in every which way. Our meager strength cannot resist. How can a man who is forced by fate to do a certain deed -- no matter how hideous or inhuman -- be blamed for what he does? For it is not his desire, but God's, that he carries out.”

He walked to the humble writing desk, the only piece of furniture in the room. He sat and attempted to write a proclamation for the arrival of the Queen of Saxony. But the words did not come. At last, he gave up, and left the ink-filled quill lying on the paper. He raised his face to heaven.

“Curse you, oh cruellest of beings,” he cried out, “Oh God the Just -- for you equally abhor all of your creations! You have created the beast that is man, as well as the beasts of the field, and the beasts of the air. But tell me, who created you, oh beast of the heavens? Am I such a fool that I do not know? You are God, indeed, and you are powerful above all other beings. For you were before time and before matter, and so you are beyond them. It is you who holds the stars in place, and makes the sun to shine. It

is you from whence the energy for these things originates. But from you also originates the energy of man: his hate.”

“You created man, and instilled in him the spirit that he has. It is not in his power to go against your will, for how can the clock tick apart from what its maker tells it? How can a piece of pottery form itself? If man could rule his own destiny, than you would not be God, but only a superior man. Why would a being of goodness give man the aptitude and the will to commit wrongs? Why would a being of love make man to commit acts of hatred? To reveal his own glory by contrast? To make his own light brighter in their darkness? What type of sadistic being would create another for the sole purpose of failure, that he himself would not look so bad in comparison? I look around me at the hate and villainy which possesses humanity, and I see only one thing: that man was indeed created in the image of God!”

Gylain clenched his fists and waved them at the heavens in his anger.

“It is you that gave me the destiny that is mine, it is you that forces me to be the way I am. And for what other reason, than that you may punish me for eternity, while still maintaining a facade of justice? Yet I am not fooled. I do not want these wicked things which you place before me. I do not desire to be the beast that I am -- my only desire is to serve others and to live in peace! Yet you flood my spirit with contrary desires, you make me do what it is that I do not want to do; and what my heart longs for, you keep from me.”

“When my gut is wretched in sorrow, and my bosom beats with brokenness, and the desire to do what is wrong is far from me, you come and inhabit me. You whisper in my ear, and speak to me through me conscience, saying, ‘Do this, for it is evil,’ or ‘Do not do this, for it is good.’ Who am I -- a mortal man, a weak man, a broken man -- to deny the will of God -- who created me, and who has power over all things, including my will and my desires? You who harden the hearts of some and soften those of others, how can you pretend to be a God of justice? You who condemn one and bless another, who sets the fate of man to what it is that he most desires not to do, who makes the desires of a man point to the very thing which is an abomination to him -- how can you, of all beings, claim to be good? If God is for you, who can be against you? None, for no one needs to be!”

Gylain fell to his knees and lowered his head, for he no longer had the strength to raise it to the heavens. He began to weep, as if he were a little child, as if he had no strength to move or to think, yet could only sit and weep, and beg for another to save him. His features became soft and placid, so unlike the fierce, vengeful scowl they had worn before. His limbs became limp, for he no longer had the spirit or the strength of mind to control them. Instead, he was consumed by the sense of his weakness, his frailness, his inability to exist without the sustaining hand of another, far greater, being. He was a broken man, for his desires for good and for evil were engaged in a great civil war, tearing his spirit apart in the process.

At length, he lifted his despairing face to the stained-glass window, and the pale moonlight that shone through it hit his face, giving it a deathly hue. He held his gaze to heaven as if in supplication, until a voice floated through his mind:

“Whosoever shall cause one of these little ones that believe in me to stumble, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung about his neck and he were cast into the sea. And if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off -- it is good for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having your two hands to go hell, into the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off -- it is good for you to enter into life crippled, rather than having your two feet to be cast into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, cast it out -- it is good for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched. For everyone shall be salted with fire.”

Gylain cast his eyes to the floor, saying in a weak and faltering voice, "And if my heart should cause me to stumble, should I cut it out as well?"

At that moment, Nicholas Montague burst through the door -- to which Gylain's back was turned -- and spoke to his master in haste. "My lord, we have intercepted a message between the rebels. They will attempt to rescue the prisoners."

"And?" Gylain asked, obviously annoyed at the interruption.

"And I've come to ask your permission to deal with the situation."

"In what way?"

Montague's voice did not shudder as he said, "By execution, my lord. The securest prisoner is a lifeless one."

Gylain glanced once more at the silvery window. Then, with a look of inward division and in a voice barely above a whisper, he said: "In death will they part. Let it be done." He dropped his head, as if in shame at his weakness, as if he had wanted to say something else, yet it would not pass his lips.

"Very well, my lord," and Montague was gone, dashing to the dungeon far below, that he might sooner do his devilries.

Gylain stretched out upon the floor, to sleep upon its stony surface without covering. It was all he could do to relieve his mind -- to suffer in body as well, to put himself into the lowliest of positions, that by contrast he could know paradise.

"The poor wretch -- he has no conscience in that wicked soul of his. God has spared him that, at least."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Those held prisoner in the Devil's Door had not been fed that day, except what they could gather from the insects and rats that flocked about them. Neither did they have water from above, though the walls and floor were damp enough to drink from. The small lanterns on either side of the stairway had long ago burnt down, and the cell was left without light. Alfonzo had grown steadily better after the care of the doctor, and even with the horrid treatment he was nearly healed.

"There never has been a more loyal inhabitant of this island," groaned Vahan. "My whole desire is for its prosperity, but this is how I am treated: like a savage, a heathen, and a poor man. And I am none of the three!"

"It is easier for a horse to pass through a keyhole, than for a rich man to go to heaven," Lorenzo said. "Perhaps Gylain does your soul a great favor, in treating you this way."

"Solomon was rich enough, and I will follow his path, over Paul's."

“Help is coming,” Alfonzo reassured them, “For the the rescue is nearing.”

“Those nasty Montague brothers will return and spoil our getaway,” Vahan moaned. “I can feel it in my bones.”

“A Frencher’s bones?” Lorenzo cried. “You have not been touched: think of Alfonzo’s pain.”

“I have no pain, no hatred -- what good can they bring?”

“The words of a good Christian, Alfonzo,” answered Lorenzo. “Yet they are contrary to the doctrines of the church: revenge and retaliation.”

As he said this, the sound of footsteps came from the stairs. The door clanged open, and the bright light of a lantern streamed into the cell, blinding their eyes. They could see nothing, but what they heard could not be mistaken.

“I would like to see them rescue four dead bodies!” Nicholas Montague said to himself, but loud enough for the prisoners to hear.

“By the belt that binds me!” cried Lorenzo. “We are doomed.”

“Are you? Only by the plans of your companions,” Nicholas said.

“Be silent and do the foul deeds you have come to commit,” answered Lorenzo.

“Watch yourself,” Alfonzo interjected, “Lest you bring on tomorrow’s evils. Have you not heard that patience killed the porcupine?”

Nicholas Montague coiled his features and said with a scornful laugh, “Perhaps, yet I have killed patience, so I rule over them both.”

“Haste does not kill patience, but merely covers it up. Patience endures all things.”

“Perhaps, but I did not come to philosophize. Rather, I came to execute you. We are not fools, and your friends’ rescue leaves you in a worse condition.”

At these tidings, the prisoners were visibly disheartened. Except Alfonzo, for to him it was nothing.

“Would you execute a loyal Atiltian such as myself?” the flushed Vahan cried in his thick French accent. “What crime is loyalty, that it is punished by death?”

“Perhaps you hope to spare yourself with these statements, fool? Do you not know that your crime is indeed loyalty -- to one who has no power over you.”

“Loyalty is confused by some with slavery,” said Alfonzo, looking at Montague from his bed on the damp stone floor.

“And eloquence with truth, by others,” was the answer. “You must know that power is the only truth upon this earth. I have the power, therefore I have the right. And I fully mean to use it.”

He beckoned the men who followed him to bind the prisoners. They grabbed the four roughly and forced them against the wall. Their hands were chained to iron shekels that were embedded into the stone. Celestine was not spared the harsh treatment. Indeed, it seemed Montague treated her with extra scorn, as if to show that the weakness Gylain had for her was nothing to him.

"Shall we take you first, Alfonzo?" he asked, not stopping to patronize or torment him.

"It would be best. For if I live to see Celestine die, I might be led to hate and bitterness; and therefore be turned away from heaven's gates, as the merciless debtor."

Montague looked at him, and though he was not moved to mercy -- he seemed to be beyond that -- he did not make him regret his speech. He merely muttered, "Very well," and stood beside him against the wall. Alfonzo's hands were chained to the wall above him, and his neck stretched to allow an easy end. He did not resist, nor did Celestine.

Indeed, she was silent: not from grief, but from hope. And her hope was not of rescue or reprieve, but of the end. Her love was more than death could destroy, for Alfonzo, and for God, and therefore for all mankind. And this was the irony: Gylain was cruel to them because he thought God to be cruel and hateful. At the same time, they forgave their tormentor, because they thought God to be loving and forgiving. But this is the paradox of sin: those who hate God for his supposed injustices, often carry out those injustices themselves.

Alfonzo's head was leaned back and his neck exposed. Nicholas raised a knife to cut his throat, a peaceful death compared to his preferred method. But Montague was no fool, and he would rather exercise his hate in haste, than let it slip away. He brought the knife to Alfonzo's throat, and began the motion of cutting.

"Wait!" a voice rang down from the stairway above.

Montague stopped.

"For what reason?" he asked.

"Gylain bids it," the newcomer, a young page said. "The Queen of Saxony has arrived, and you are needed. I hope you are not yet bloody?"

"Not yet," Montague answered, obedient to his master's command. "I am coming," and he turned to Alfonzo. "Fate is with you, yet she is an unfaithful mistress."

His voice faded with his footsteps, as he spoke. The prisoners were left chained and in the darkness. The other guards had also gone.

"We are saved," Alfonzo said, giving Celestine beside him a kiss.

"Yes -- saved by Cybele, the Queen of Saxony," and she hung her head as if in pain.

"We may be saved at the present," began Lorenzo. "But evil company breeds evil actions, and there are none more evil than Gylain and the Queen of Saxony."

"Do not speak of the queen in the current company," Alfonzo scolded him. He continued softly, with a gentle glance at his wife, "Perhaps the queen is the bearer of good tidings for us."

“How so?”

“We will see, and I will say no more.”

Silence came over them and stood there for some time. Their hearts still raced at their narrow escape. At length the silence was broken, but not by any of them. A muffled scratching noise came from the wall, from the statue of the king.

“The devil is upon us,” Lorenzo said, “He saved me once, but I do not herald his return.”

Lorenzo opened his mouth as if to continue, but before he could, a louder noise came from the statue. They turned to the stone king, waiting for something to happen. Suddenly, it swung open to the right, revealing the secret passage. A head was pushed through into the prison cell. It was a blond head, with thin lips and noble eyes. The newcomer carried a lantern, and in a second was in the cell with them. More men stood behind him, though they remained in the tunnel.

The prisoners stood chained against the wall, but Lorenzo still found a way to dance about in joy. Celestine stood with a calm, expecting smile upon her face. Vahan’s features were blank, for he had no emotions in his surprise. Alfonzo stood still, his countenance immovable. It was as if he was expecting the man to appear.

“A well-executed plan, Blaine,” Alfonzo said. “The guards have just left us.”

“That’s right, sir, the diversion is taking place,” he answered. “Your face is pale.”

“He was badly tortured, Blaine,” Celestine whispered.

Blaine’s face was filled with a sort of wrath, but it only made him look nobler.

“We must hurry, sir,” he said, “For we have to make it to the inner courtyard: our decoy may need rescued.”

“Of course,” Alfonzo said, as he was unchained. “Let us finish what we have begun. Have you brought swords? We will need them above.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The night was clear and the air sharp with cold. Far above, the moon gave a silvery tint to everything it touched, even the shadows that covered the forest road. All was silent in the forest, but from the road came the sound of a troop of galloping horses. The dust was thrown into the air as they went, catching the light of the moon and focusing it into a beam that fell upon the riders.

There were twenty horsemen, dressed in silver plate mail with only a yellow crescent on the chest and shield. The horses had no spot of a color on them, but were wholly black. There were two riders in the front, and those behind rode three abreast. The first was a beautiful woman, clothed entirely in white and

riding on a white mare. Her hair was as rich as the night sky, and as dark, falling halfway down her back. The second leading rider was an imposing man -- not tall, yet strong and graceful in his holding. He was covered by a black cloak, with a hood over his helmet. Still, as his mount ran oddly along, the hood fell back to reveal a golden helmet, ornamented with silver inlays. His mount was not a horse, but a gigantic black bear.

"The lights of the city draw near," Ivona whispered to Willard with a smile, her lips as the reefs of the ocean, and her teeth as the pearls upon their surface.

"Yes, it will be no more than a moment, my lady, the Queen of Saxony," he laughed in his silent fashion, "From here, you do the talking. I will sit and look fierce."

Ivona turned her head into the forest, her the green eyes shining in the moonlight.

Willard ignored her implied response and continued, "Blaine will start down the passage to the dungeon when we enter the city gates. Once there, we go to Gylain's castle."

"And then?"

"We trust to fate."

"And God."

"Yes, of course," he smiled, as if saying a falsehood. He turned to the horsemen and said loud enough for them to hear, "Keep silent, for they will know your accents."

They came to the southern gate of the city. The wall of stone that separated the forest and the city was fifty feet tall, a sort of demarcation line between civilization and the wilderness. Each rose up to show its full power, and between the two mortal man seemed powerless. The gate was of metal and rose a few feet higher than the wall. There was a second gate a dozen yards after the first, and the area between the two was walled and covered by two stone towers. Ivona led them directly to the gate and halted, giving the guards a moment to react before Willard blew the horn that announced the queen's arrival.

"Halt, who goes there?" cried the guards.

"The Queen of Saxony," Ivona yelled back, her voice a mixture of indignation and surprise that they should question one so great as her.

The guards opened the gates without further proof, dispatching a messenger to alert Gylain of his coming guests. The troop rode through the city without delay, with the stiff demeanor of a royal retinue. Willard guided them, having passed through the city earlier in the day.

Eden was composed of circles of buildings, each forming a complete seal around the park or garden that filled their center. There, the community of the circle would spend their evenings, in the common yard. At this time, the populace was in these yards, and the streets were mostly clear. At times they were especially narrow -- where the closest edges of the circles came together -- and at others they were almost spacious.

On either side of the streets, the buildings rose up for hundreds of feet and blocked the direct moonlight, though there was still an aura of silver that lit the way. Many of the houses were lit from top to bottom, and most of the stores were still opened, their front rooms almost hanging into the cobblestone streets.

Some of the city dwellers still walked the streets, passing from one building to the next. At some points, there were parks that took up an entire circle. In these, larger gatherings were taking place.

At length, they reached the castle quadrant in the heart of the city. The castle walls were three hundred feet tall. But the buildings surrounding them were just as tall, and the castle was not as great as it would have been, if it had been alone. Most of the buildings around the castle were lit and busy, except a circle of five, adjacent to the drawbridge. These were dark, and it seemed that a cloud hung around them.

Ivona glanced over and shuddered at them.

"The clouds of darkness," she said. "I am glad that is not our destination."

"Let us hope they will be, ere the end has come, Ivona," Willard answered.

Two dozen yards separated the buildings from the castle walls, and through that space ran a small river. It passed through the commercial section of the city -- including the area by the rebel's secret entrance -- and was used as a canal until it emptied into the Floatings. In this area, it was diverted from its path to wrap around the castle, partly for defense and partly for customs. Because the roads in Eden came close together halfway through the circles, large numbers of wagons could not pass through them without clogging the traffic. Therefore, it was commonplace for the manufacturers, tradesmen, and artists of the city to place their wares into large barrels, and float them down the river to the harbor. There they were loaded onto ships and sent out into the Floatings, the maritime market. As the canal passed around the castle, the customs officers had only to station themselves on the drawbridge to collect their taxes.

Barrel shepherds would guide the barrels with long, wooden poles as they traveled down the river. This was commonplace, and no one wondered when a herd of barrels floated by, even after the fall of darkness.

They stopped in front of the river, waiting for the drawbridge to lower. As they stood there, an old, stooped man herded about two dozen barrels past them. Half of the barrels were floating heavily in the water -- as if full -- and the other half were floating lightly -- as if empty. Ivona and Willard stood directly before the spot the drawbridge would reach the ground. Just as it came down, the old man stopped in front of them, and his barrels came to a halt under the drawbridge.

"If the duck quacks, don't blame the chicken," the old man said.

Willard scowled at him and said, "Begone, old man. The queen cannot be bothered."

"I'm not a quack," the old man winked, "And I reckon you are no chicken."

"Sure enough" Willard returned. Then he added, in a voice loud enough to be heard by the castle guards -- and to cover any other sounds, "Begone there, poor old barrel shepherd."

"As you wish, master," the old man muttered.

As he did so, however, he turned his back to the castle and his face to Willard. With his pole, he banged three times on the drawbridge, under which his barrels were still floating.

"Hurry up," he said, and he quickly lifted the hood that covered his face. He winked at Willard.

He was none other than Jack Clifford, but Willard pretended not to recognize him.

“Begone, old fool,” he growled, “Or I will send you away forever.”

This time, Clifford moved along, poking his staff under the drawbridge as he left, as if to loosen the barrels. It worked, for the barrels floated on, the same number as before. The only difference was their weight: now all of them floated lightly on the surface of the water. When Clifford was safely passed, they crossed the drawbridge in a hurry. On the other side they were greeted by Gylain and Nicholas Montague, who seemed to be taken by surprise at the queen’s early arrival.

“What a pleasant surprise, madam,” and Gylain bowed to who he thought was the Queen of Saxony. “Come this way, for the feast is prepared!”

He led them into the outer courtyard of the castle, within the safety of the walls, which were thought to be secure from the infiltration of the rebels. Behind them, the draw bridge was swiftly raised and locked, so that none could come in or go out.

Yet there were a dozen dark figures on the outside of the drawbridge that the guards did see. The darkness of the wood matched the darkness of their clothing, and they were obscured by the angle of the drawbridge. They held onto the wooden boards with small, metallic hooks, and when it reached the top, they jumped onto the parapets of the outer wall. Then they scurried into the shadows of the castle, where they became invisible, even in the light of the moon.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

After Montague left him to execute the prisoners, Gylain resumed pacing around his lofty chamber. Finally, despairing, he sat down at his writing desk. But the words of his proclamation still would not come, so he leaned back and sighed to himself.

“At last, Cybele comes to visit me on this desolate isle. Her mother was both beautiful and powerful -- an enchanting combination. But I should not give myself to such emotion. What irony it is, that the fate of my kingdom lies partially in the hands of a woman, the daughter of the man I hate, and the sister of the woman I have held prisoner for fifteen years. But she is a queen, and knows the ways of power. Without her mother’s help, I would not have overthrown the king. He trusted Casandra of Saxony, the wife of his old friend William Stuart. When I was caught in the midst of my treasons, they threw me into jail -- not the secure dungeon, but the city jail. The king sought to save me from the mistreatment of the guards whom I had plotted against. What foolishness, what naivety! From the city jail I was easily rescued by those in my confidence, and when Queen Casandra arrived, the time was ready for the revolution. Men put altogether too much faith in women.”

He arose and went to the window, where he stood and looked into its kaleidoscope patterns. “The coup did break her, though,” he muttered to himself, “It weakened her spirit. After all those years of loving the Admiral, she turned on him viscerously, and the shame broke her, made her fall into the foul hands of her conscience. It was her destiny, though, and how can you disagree with God’s plan? Admiral Stuart was always away on duty, doing this or that. She longed for his presence, but he never returned for more than a few weeks at a time, and then was gone for months. Love is a dangerous thing, and between it and hate, there is little difference. They are two sides of the same thing; two in person, one in essence. Its

passion to serve can quickly change into a passion to resist. Her love soured into hate, and she began to despise him and everything he represented. Together, we fell into treason and immorality.”

Gylain put his hand into the air and imitated picking fruit from a tree. “We fell from Eden.”

But then he pretended to throw it to the floor. “Yet she was not consistent in her hatred. Even in her passion she was never unfaithful to him. She never loved me the way I desired; she never completely forsook herself.”

He walked closer to the stained-glass window and ran his hand over one of its intricate depictions.

“At first, she was all I wanted,” he said, “Then I came to hate William myself. Yet I was eluded by them both. Celestine was so similar to her, and so I loved her as well. But once more, her faithfulness was too strong. Perhaps the younger daughter will love me as I desire.”

He paused and began playing with his beard in a thoughtful manner.

“Yet her love is not what drives me, nor her mother’s, nor the hatred of William. They were never the purpose but only the door; never the ends but only means. God cruelly uses us, his creation, who are unable to strike him back upon his divine cheek. The poor are swept away, and have not the power to resist the dictates of his feudal fate. Who, then, can stand against him? Who can rise up and secure the freedoms of his fellow humans? It is I. The rebels oppose me, fighting for their earthly freedom, while I put our strengths together to fight our divine dictator. They are fools to hinder me.”

He raised his head to the heavens and scowled.

“God places authority in certain men, that they may oppress their fellows, and thereby represent his own oppressions. He puts kings over countries not to keep the peace, but to break it. For God is not peace, but war. He is chaos and hatred, and authority is what he gives to those whom he would use to show his oppressions. In my youth, I was a foolish boy. I thought I could overthrow the king, and with him God’s authority. I thought I could take the reigns of oppression in my own hands, and bring them to a standstill. But look about me! I have myself become the vehicle of his evils. I cannot defeat him, for he uses me against myself!

“So I pursue William, knowing him to be the manifestation of God’s judgment on me. If I cannot kill God, I can kill those he sends. And so I seduced Casandra, and so I will seduce Cybele. I care nothing for them, and nothing against William. But as far as they are used by God, I will oppose them and bring them to destruction. Look at this, cruel dictator! Can you see what is happening, oh God, from your heavenly Hades? I will bring your judgment upon yourself. I will defeat your will by defeating those who carry it out -- even if it means destroying myself. You have flooded before, and the deluge will come yet again; for you are, of all things, a liar. But let it come, I say. Let it come!”

He was interrupted by a knocking on his door.

“Enter,” he called out loudly, heated by his monologued prayer.

Leggett, the captain of the castle guards, came in. He was of the average height, well-built, and had a short goatee. His dark hair was set back in a curly mass above his head.

“My lord,” he bowed, “I have come, as you commanded.”

Gylain looked at him blankly for a moment. Then, as if just remembering, said, "Ah, of course. Come, sit down and speak with me." He pointed Leggett to the chair beside the desk, and both of them sat down.

"What I wanted to discuss with you, Leggett, was the security of the castle. You know that the Queen of Saxony is coming within the week. I want her to be welcomed graciously, and securely. The feast is prepared, and ready to be presented in a moment's notice. But we have had rebel communications intercepted, speaking of an infiltration of some sort. We must be ready, from now until the queen leaves. What is the situation?"

"The only way into the castle is over the outer wall, or through the gate, and neither of those is vulnerable," Leggett answered. "There are constant patrols along the parapets of the walls, two men to a patrol and three patrols at any minute circling the castle. The gate is guarded by twenty men. Once inside the courtyard, there are two troops of fifty men each stationed on either side, in garrisons where they will live until the queen is gone. From these they can be easily awoken to defense by the numerous sentries. The dungeon has few guards, to make up for the greater numbers elsewhere. But to reach it, the rebels will have to get through the wall guards first. As for the castle itself, Nicholas Montague stands ready to command the outside garrison when the queen arrives. It is our plan to keep the guards on outside duty until the queen arrives, then move them onto the walls and the gates. The rest will be sent to the Great Hall. Is it well, my lord?"

"Yes," Gylain mumbled, his mind still troubled about the security, but realizing that nothing else could be done. If William Stuart was near, his anger would be boiling. Gylain knew him well from before his treason -- the Admiral was one to put a facade of patience over his anger, but to never lose the anger itself. His rage would grow until it could be used wisely. Gylain had used his wife to overthrow his friend and king, had seduced her, and was having his daughter and son-in-law executed. Furthermore, he allied himself with William's youngest daughter, Cybele, the Queen of Saxony. Gylain was afraid of William, perhaps, but his fear seemed only to invigorate his hate and his power.

"Sir?" Leggett asked as Gylain stared blankly into the space in front of him.

"Hmm? Ah, yes. Good work, Leggett, I am not disappointed; you may go now."

"Yes, sir," and with that, Leggett bowed and exited the room. "We will see how pleased he truly is," Leggett whispered as he left. "By all appearances, the castle is safe; but appearances can mean little. Let the rebels come, I say."

Just as he went, a courier came running into the room from the secret passage. It was Roberts, Gylain's page. Gylain turned to him as he came in and said, with an almost parental tone, "What is it, Roberts?"

"The queen, sir, she's come -- arrived I mean, just now."

"What? The Queen of Saxony here already? Fetch Montague from the dungeons, and have him forgo the executions today. Perhaps he will get to them later. Be sure that he is presentable. Hurry, lad."

Roberts dashed off down the stairs to do his bidding, and Gylain himself was not far behind. The stairway of the secret passage was only two feet wide, and the incline was steep, for it traveled the same height as the outer stairway, but with a much smaller circumference. They went down about six hundred feet, and at the bottom was the small anteroom behind the throne. Gylain's most striking feature was his countenance, for a man of his position and disposition would be thought to have a cruel face. But his was handsome and open -- in appearance, an honorable, upright man -- though he was troubled within about his purpose. Still, he did not stop to groom himself in the anteroom, but rushed through the Great Hall to

the courtyard, stopping for only a moment to don the crown. He reached the drawbridge just as Nicholas Montague was arriving from the dungeon, whose door came out in the courtyard beside the castle.

"Lower the drawbridge," Gylain commanded the soldiers guarding it.

"Yes, sir," and the heavy wooden door began to lower.

As it was doing so, Gylain turned to Montague and talked to him in a low voice that could not be overheard. "Remember, Nicholas, manners and nicety are the orders of the day. Do not talk of the rebels, the hunt for the Holy Graal, or the recent return of Admiral Stuart. Above all, do not mention the prisoners."

"Of course, my lord. Is it not I, the man of tact?" he laughed to himself in sarcasm. "When will my brother return?"

"He is on a patrol with the harbor fleet, but I expect him back before the night is through."

By that time the drawbridge was lowered. There was a troop of twenty horsemen on the other side, waiting for an old barrel shepherd to pass by. In a moment he was gone, and the horsemen came forward, led by a beautiful woman and a fierce man riding on an enormous black bear. They crossed the river, and came to a stop in front of Gylain and Montague, who both bowed.

"A pleasant surprise, madam," Gylain said as the Queen of Saxony approached. "Come this way, the feast is prepared!"

He turned and led them through the massive gate and into the courtyard. There was a double-gate into the castle, and the second could not be opened unless the drawbridge was closed. Therefore, they stopped for a moment and surveyed the scene. All around the central tower that formed the castle was the courtyard. The entrance to the dungeon came out into the side of the courtyard, directly across from the clouded buildings. The castle tower was wider at its base than either its upper or lower sections, and the Great Hall was at the ground level, although its floor was raised ten feet from the ground outside. There was, accordingly, several large windows that began on the floor of the hall and reached a dozen feet above it. One of them came out directly above the dungeon door, ten feet from the ground. Fifty men were assembled in the courtyard. As she looked out upon their gleaming swords, Ivona began her first speech -- as they had written beforehand in order to set up their plans.

"I am impressed by the display of your power, Gylain, for even in Saxony we do not have such impregnable castles, and such timely soldiers."

It struck Gylain's pride, and he bowed low to show his gratitude.

"I would only desire one more thing, if I could be so imposing," she continued.

"By all means, it would be my pleasure to fulfill your desires," was the answer.

Ivona gave him one of her lovely smiles and continued. "I have heard about your catapults, that they are superior to those of Europe. Would you display them for me, tonight?"

"It will be done," he bowed again. He turned to Leggett, who was behind him, and said, "Bring out the catapults and set them under that window," he pointed to the large window near the dungeon door. "The queen can admire them as she eats."

“How many, my lord?” Leggett asked, though he knew already what he was to do.

“All of them. There is room for twenty under the length of the windows, is there not?”

“Yes, I should think so.”

“Excellent. Will your men be joining the feast?” he asked the queen, giving the cloaked man who rode bear back a significant glance.

“Yes, we are tired from the ride.”

“Good, then let us go to the feast!”

With that, Gylain led the horse troop toward the door of the Great Hall.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Meanwhile, in the Devil’s Door, Blaine and his men were exiting the secret passage. First Blaine came out. Then, once they were sure the guards were not around, the rest of them exited. There were five men in all, including Blaine, and each of them carried two swords, one for themselves and one for the prisoners. Blaine held a torch instead. The room was dark and damp, and though it was now lit by the torch, its shadows were still deeply etched upon the face of the wall.

“Why do the men exit the tunnel, Blaine? Should we not leave at once?” Alfonzo asked.

“We cannot, unfortunately. There are large patrols around the tunnel’s exit.”

“Yes, Nicholas Montague is back. He saw us come from it on that fateful night.”

“It is too dangerous to risk. Even we, the forest dwellers, had a difficult time entering the tunnel. To leave would be impossible, for you cannot know if the soldiers are near until you open the hidden door, and then they are upon you. Besides, the only reason the guards are away from here is that Ivona is impersonating the Queen of Saxony.”

“Then it is not the queen herself?” Celestine asked quietly, though it was not possible to tell if it was from relief or disappointment.

“No, only Milada’s daughter. Come, we must be on our way.”

“Are there many guards above?” asked Alfonzo as he took a sword from one of the men.

“We cannot be certain, but we counted a hundred earlier. They should all be in the Great Hall, now, our informants tell us. They feast with the queen.”

“And if not?”

“Then we fight.”

“So we shall,” Alfonzo murmured, “Follow me.”

Blaine looked at him with wondering eyes.

“I am well, Blaine. We both know this castle, but I know its soldiers better.”

“I follow, sir. My only thought is for your health. Yet I see that you are well.”

Lorenzo and Vahan Lee were already unchained, the former wielding his sword confidentially, the latter awkwardly. Celestine, also, had taken a blade, and stood among the men.

“Vahan and Celestine, take the rear,” Alfonzo ordered, and it was done.

Behind Alfonzo, the small company went up the stairway to the next cell. The cells in the dungeon were on top of each other, without a hallway or passage other than the spiral stairs that ran up the center. The doors that separated the cells were merely bars in a frame, and could be seen through. They were always locked. Halfway up the dungeon, one cell was converted to a guard room -- the headquarters of the jailers -- below which the desperate criminals were kept.

The prisoners were stacked on top of each other, according to the various degrees of their offenses. It was almost an earthly Hades, where the tormented souls are stacked in various degrees of suffering. Those suffering less could peer between the bars of the door and jeer at those below them, who did likewise to those below them. Even in their horrid situation, the prisoners found joy in mocking those in worse straights than themselves.

In preparation for the arrival of the queen, all prisoners were chained to their walls, to prevent outbursts with the few guards on duty. Blaine came forward and unlocked the cell door with small pick, and the group continued to the cell above them. There were several desperate looking men chained heavily to the wall. One of them -- a dirty fellow with a wild beard, though heavily muscled -- looked at them as if recalling events through the mists of time. Just as Alfonzo reached the stairs to continue upward, the prisoner called out, “Master Alfonzo, have mercy.”

Alfonzo turned to look at him, his goatee untrimmed and his face haggard from the torture. For a moment, Alfonzo could not recognize him through the troubles of the years. Then, with a mystified look, he left the stairwell and walked over to him.

“Not all who say to me, ‘Alfonzo, Alfonzo,’ will be forgiven. I remember clearly what you have done, de Garcia. I do not forget traitors, least of all those who betrayed my dearest friends.”

“You speak the truth, master,” the prisoner moaned, his face fallen and his spirit broken. “Yet have mercy upon me, for I am wretched and perverse. I have fallen from your trust, and therefore I cannot ask you to release me. All that I ask is your forgiveness, that I might die in peace.”

“Arise,” Alfonzo said to him, “Take off your chains and follow me.”

“Thank you, master!” cried the man, and he bounded up as one of the men released his chains. It was evident that he had worked himself hard during his prison stay, for he was still in the same physical perfection of his youth.

Next to de Garcia sat another prisoner, equally dirty and forsaken.

“Master, have mercy upon me, too,” he called out.

Alfonzo turned to him, and he continued.

“I am not as wicked as de Garcia, Alfonzo. For while he betrayed, I only deserted with small, useless intelligence. If you released de Garcia, surely you will release me?”

“Which is easier to say,” Alfonzo asked, “‘Take off your chains and follow me’, or ‘Your sins are forgiven?’ Yet how can the sins of a man be forgiven, when he will not even ask for it?” He turned to his men, “Come, let us go. De Garcia, follow behind.”

They continued to the next cell with the cries of the prisoner following their ears. Yet not one of them turned to look at him, for he was entirely forsaken. The next dozen cells were populated with prisoners of treachery and violence. They did not release them, though the prisoners clamored after them with cries for mercy. At length, they stopped to collect themselves in the cell below the guard room.

“When they brought me down,” Alfonzo whispered to his followers, “This was the greatest concentration of guards, between the lesser and the greater criminals. Prepare yourselves for action.”

Alfonzo crept up the stairs, the others behind him. Even the prisoners kept silent and did not warn the guards -- though revenge was their only motive. Alfonzo came to the door and put his hands silently to the bars, trying to push them open.

“Locked,” he whispered, and he turned to the prisoners below them. “You,” he called out to the nearest, the one directly below the ledge of the stairway, “Call the guards.”

Hoping to receive clemency, he did as he was told.

“Guards!” he cried, “The wall is on fire!”

He was a veteran liar, and his plea for help convinced the guards. The door was thrown open and a guard came out to investigate the strange report. But before he could see what was truly about him, Alfonzo was upon him, plunging his sword into the guard’s stomach. He fell lifelessly from ledge of the stairway, his sword pointing downward. His limp body fell upon the man who had cried ‘fire,’ and his sword pierced the man’s chest.

“The fate of a liar,” said Lorenzo, but he could say no more, for another guard rushed out to see what was happening.

The second guard suspected nothing, but ran into Alfonzo and met the same fate as his comrade. The third, however, was not so foolish. He pulled back into the room with the other guards, to await the attack. There were ten of them left in the guard room, and their orders were to hold the post at all costs. Therefore, they stayed in the room.

“We are saved,” Alfonzo said, turning to those behind him “They do not flee. But they have the advantage, for we can enter only one at a time.”

“Allow me,” said de Garcia, in his thick Spanish accent.

He stood across the room, looking into the guard room over the ledge of the stairs. He stepped forward to the fallen guards and picked up the topmost one, hugging him closely so that the dead man's body covered the living man's. Thus equipped, he walked slowly up the stairs and through the doorway. The guards came at him, but the armor of the dead man protected him, for their blades had to pass through the armor twice, as well as the body. They could not attack his sides, for Alfonzo and Blaine had stepped forward and were guarding his flanks. Thus prevented from blocking their entry, the guards retreated to the back of the room, pushing over the tables and chests to form a rude blockade.

By this time Lorenzo and one the rebels had carried up the two other bodies: the first guard, and the prisoner. Lorenzo held the guard's sword, for de Garcia to use.

"Those who live by a sword die by a sword," Lorenzo said. "But what will those who live by a dead body die by?"

"A sword, no doubt," de Garcia answered his old comrade. "And so will you, for your body armor is wearing no armor but his meager skin and bones!"

"Then what will we do?"

"Throw it at them," de Garcia answered. "It will throw them off if we bombard them with their fallen comrades."

"Always the warrior, de Garcia," Alfonzo said, "A fighter before a man. But in this you may be right. Are we ready?"

"As ready as death," was the answer.

This dialog was whispered, and the guards across the room could not hear them. Without warning, the bodies were flung at the unsuspecting guards. They hit lengthwise, knocking the guards to the ground. The rebels closely followed the bodies, and fell upon the guards with their swords. The guards, however, were defeated by the sight of their comrades. Their mortality was paraded before them, and they surrendered as soon as they were free from the bodies. Alfonzo led them out of their barricade and had them bound with the irons used for prisoners.

"What should we do with them? We have little time," he said.

"If I may suggest something, master," said de Garcia. "We should strip them of their uniforms, and chain them down below -- in the lower levels -- as if they were but common killers. If we dirty their hair and ruin their beards, they will not be recognized. It is time they saw what it is that they have done."

Alfonzo nodded his head. "Perhaps it would be best, that they may repent. Make it so, de Garcia, take two with you," and he pointed to two of Blaine's men. They set to their work at once, preparing the guards for their imprisonment.

"We will be above," Alfonzo continued, "These are the upper levels, and you should have no trouble following us when you are finished."

"Yes, but now we must hurry," Blaine answered, "Already I can faintly hear the rumblings of the catapults above. The impersonators have arrived, and the escape is prepared. Now it is our turn."

“To do what?” Alfonzo asked.

“You will see soon enough,” and they split: Alfonzo and the rest going upward; de Garcia and two of the men downward.

The upper levels of the dungeon were cleaner and brighter than the lower. Hurrying on, they reached the top of the dungeon in a few moments. The main part of the castle was all contained in the same massive tower: the dungeon below the ground, and the Great Hall on it, with its adjacent kitchen and store rooms. It covered all of the first floor, except a small entry room to the dungeon that opened into the courtyard. This was directly below the large window of the Great Hall, where the catapults had been placed.

There were only two guards in the entrance room, and they were preoccupied with a game of chance. Alfonzo and Blaine stole up behind them, slitting their throats before they could raise the alarm. Then, they were out of the dungeon and into the courtyard.

There, standing before them, were twenty catapults -- each twenty feet long and five wide. The buckets were five feet in diameter. These were Gylain's catapults, built to his own design. It was on them that he based the security of his castle. A few men guarded the catapults, but they were more interested in the clamor coming from the Great Hall, than in their duty. Thus, they sat in a group with their backs to the dungeon door. Alfonzo motioned to the others, and crept up to their backs. He raised his sword and his hand, to signal the others. He brought them both down at once, and with a single motion, the careless guards were put to sleep.

“I see your plans now,” Alfonzo said to Blaine, pointing to the buckets of the catapults. They were directly below the Great Hall's window, and facing the high outer wall.

“We must still aim them,” Blaine answered, and immediately they set to work correcting the catapults' angles and direction.

“Surely, you do not mean for us to land softly on the ground?” Lorenzo asked.

“Of course, not. We have spread a heavy net spread between a circle on the other side of the wall. It can hold a hundred men, and we do not have nearly that number.”

“A well-planned rescue, perhaps. Yet we cannot see the houses over the wall to aim at them, and a misfire here marks the end of us.”

“There are yellow streaks along the wall, if you look closely. Our men marked it earlier, while they were disposing of the wall and gate guards, to delay the chase.”

“Ah, so there is! Good work, old friend.”

“No praises just yet, Lorenzo, for we have yet to escape.”

In a moment, the catapults were aimed correctly, and loaded with the spring and lever that would release their loads into the air.

“This is not good, Blaine,” Alfonzo said, “For these catapults must be set off by a human hand, and whoever releases them will be stranded within the castle walls.”

“Someone will have to remain,” was the answer.

“But whom?”

“I will,” said a deep voice, shrouded with a thick Spanish accent. “I will remain behind.”

“De Garcia,” Alfonzo said. “I will not let you be captured again, and brought back to your hellish prison.”

“I will not be told no in this, master. I am not worthy to even sacrifice myself for you. How much less am I to be sacrificed for?”

“I have misjudged you, de Garcia.”

“Perhaps, but only on the side of mercy.”

They had been out of the dungeon for over ten minutes, but had not stopped to listen to the clamor coming from the Great Hall, which could be heard through the window. Now that they were silent, they listened.

“What? Are they fighting inside?”

“They must have been discovered,” Alfonzo cried, “Quick, into the catapults!”

They scrambled into the buckets of the catapults -- except for de Garcia, who remained on the ground. Then, just as the last of them came over the edge, the sound of breaking glass came from above them.

“Look out below!” roared the voice of the blond Fardy, and an instant later some thirty people came crashing down, landing upon the buckets of the catapults.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“Come, your highness,” Gylain was saying to the impostor Queen of Saxony, “The catapults will be here soon, but we must feast before we inspect them. The food is now ready, I believe.”

“Yes, sir, the feast is prepared,” Leggitt answered his subtle question.

“Then to the Great Hall we go,” and Gylain turned and led the way to the castle door, where the party dismounted.

“Leggitt will take your horses to the stables for you,” Gylain told them.

“I would not impose upon you the care of our mounts, so we have secured the use of a livery in the southern section of the city. If you would take them there, I would be most grateful,” Ivona said. Then, glancing over to Willard, she added, “All of our mounts, that is, except the knight’s. He does not part from his.”

"Very well, we would be pleased to serve you in this. Leggitt, make it so."

"Yes, my lord, it will be done." Leggitt took the white mare by its reigns and led it toward the outer gate. The other horses were led by the stable hands. "This is the last Gylain will see his horses," he whispered to himself.

Behind him, Gylain and Nicholas Montague led the queen's entourage into the Great Hall.

"Where would you like your soldiers to dine?" he asked the queen.

"At my side, and I should like to sit at the window that overlooks the catapults, if I may."

"So it shall be written, so it shall be done," and now they were within the Great Hall, and saw the feast spread before them. It was no less luxurious for its hastened preparation.

The castle was made of a single tower, and at its base -- where the Great Hall was -- its diameter was over three hundred yards. The hall itself was not this wide, for there were rooms on all sides except the wall nearest the outer gate. Its ceiling reached upward two hundred feet, growing narrower as rose. There were three chandeliers hanging above, each thirty feet in diameter. Just as there were servants' quarters along the outside of the lower level of the Great Hall, so there were royal quarters along its upper level. A hallway connected these rooms together, and it overlooked the Great Hall through a long window that stretched around the room.

Gylain's throne was directly opposite the outer gate, and thereby directly opposite the window the queen sat by. He abandoned his custom of eating from the throne, therefore, and took his place at her table. He sat down across from the queen, with Montague at his left side, across from Willard and Horatio. Horatio sat as upright as any man, which seemed to startle Nicholas Montague.

"I trust your journey was enjoyable?" Gylain asked the queen.

"Mostly, but I will not complain about those parts which were not so."

"No, please do. I will have them taken care of."

"How kind," Ivona smiled. "The worst was when we were chased by pirates between the coasts of France and Atilta. I do not know who they were, but they had six well-built frigates. They forced us from our planned course. Instead, we landed in Thunder Bay."

Gylain was incensed at this, for in spite of his precautions, the rebels had found a way to harass the queen. "I will have my navy look into it," he answered. "Where did they come from?"

"The north."

"Have no fear, then, Cybele. I send the harbor fleet now, to destroy them." He stood and beckoned for Leggitt, who had just returned from taking the queen's horses to the livery. When he came up, Gylain said to him, "Send the harbor fleet to the northern coast. The queen was attacked from that quarter."

"Yes, my lord," Leggitt carefully replied, "But the northern coast is uninhabited."

"Of course, the Vikings made sure of that years ago. Jonathan Montague should return soon; send him out again as he comes in."

“Very well, my lord.” Leggitt turned and left the Great Hall, still famished from his vigorous preparations.

Gylain turned to the queen once more. “And Lord Milada welcomed you, I am sure?” Gylain smiled slyly, thinking of what Milada would soon become.

“He did, and his beautiful daughter,” Ivona smiled back.

“Is she indeed beautiful? I have heard, but never seen.”

“She was the gem of the forest, as they say.”

“Truly? Yet I cannot imagine her beauty surpassing your own.”

“We were equal.”

“What does your knight say about this: are they equal?”

“No,” Willard returned bluntly. “Ivona is much the victor.”

Gylain raised his eyebrow at the hooded man, but Ivona merely laughed outright, much to his surprise.

“I thank you for your concern for my safety, Gylain. I did not bring a large fleet, but I will send for them upon my return. Still, I am glad to see my interests are important to you,” Ivona said with a smile, though Gylain did not then realize its true purport.

“Your interests are my interests,” he answered.

“Yes. I suppose I am like a child to you, am I not?”

“Something much more than that, something closer and more important.”

“More important than a child? Your allies are truly allies,” she laughed. “I have heard that my sister still lives in Atilta,” she made the conversation come about. “I would like to meet her, if you would tell me where she is.”

Gylain turned his face from her for a moment, torn between his desire to deal honestly with her, and his desire to please her. He compromised, saying, “I do not believe that she is living in Atilta any longer, I am sorry. As for her present whereabouts, it is anybody’s guess.”

Ivona saw his discomfort, and -- not wishing to play her hand of gathering intelligence too heavily -- graciously changed the subject.

“I have often wondered,” she said, “How you manage such a maritime economy, without any substantial native production?”

This question put Gylain on more secure footing, and his answer was long and detailed. It was also irrelevant. Meanwhile, Montague conversed with Willard.

“You are the queen’s knight?” he asked Willard.

“Perhaps, and you are Gylain’s?”

“No, I am only his servant. He needs no knight.”

“It is the same with the queen,” Willard growled back, looking fierce in his dark robe. Horatio sat beside him, his face unveiled and frightening, to those who opposed his blood brother. Montague was visibly shaken by the bear’s presence, though he soon recovered himself. In his lifetime he had encountered many terrible beasts, not least among them his own younger brother.

“An interesting mount, to be sure,” Montague said. “What are you called?”

“Willarinus of Saxony,” he watched for Montague’s reaction.

“I am Nicholas Montague,” he answered, remaining unmoved. “As I was saying,” and he looked at Horatio fearlessly, “You have a most unusual steed.”

Horatio growled lowly, as if sensing he was derided.

“Better an unusual steed,” Willard answered, “Than an unusable creed.”

“I use my creed quite well,” Montague laughed.

“That is the rumor in the countryside. Your infamous deeds inflame the hearts of many.”

“Perhaps,” Montague said politely, “But I am sure you are far more infamous than I.”

“Not nearly, for I could never aspire to that lofty ideal. But tell me, Montague, what comes first, the creed or the deed?”

“Does it matter? As long as there is rotten wood, to Hades with the fruits and the roots.”

“Eloquently put,” Willard answered, subduing his flaming heart. “Eloquently put, indeed.”

He would have said more, but he was interrupted. The doors of the Great Hall were flung open, and a tall, beautiful woman stood in their stead. She was beautiful, but it was of a different source than Ivona’s, though equal. It was the beauty of power, rather than gentleness; of fear, rather than of love; of demons, rather than angels. Her hair hung down her back, and was perfectly white, though she could have been no more than twenty years old. Her eyes were gray, like the fogs that cover the forest coasts, and glaring, like the moon that comes down through them. Her features were similar to Celestine’s and Casandra’s, but with a different demeanor upon them. She wore a black cape and an iron crown, plainly cast and adorned. To those with true power, its symbols are not necessary.

Behind her was stood her entourage of two dozen soldiers, each armed with a double-sided battle ax. At her side, however, were seven men -- to the left were the Fardy brothers, and to the right was the Admiral, Osbert, Barnes, and one of his sailors.

“What is this?” the lady said through the silence that had come over the hall. “Another guest of honor?”

Gylain stood called to her, in his own commanding voice.

“Who are you, there, to enter this castle so brazenly?”

“The Queen of Saxony!”

Gylain stood silently, his face unmoving. He turned and glanced briefly at Ivona, then at Cybele, the queen. He reached his hand to his sword and opened his mouth to command his men.

Yet whatever his command was, it could not be heard, for it was preempted by a shout from the other side of the room. The brown Fardy -- seeing the situation they were in -- acted quickly.

“Charge!” he cried, “Gylain is upon us!” and he ran straight toward Gylain, flourishing his sword wildly above his head.

CHAPTER FORTY

The moon shone down on the forest road, illuminating the shadows with its silvery garnish. It came down through the cracks in the canopy above, slicing its way through the darkness of the forest. Yet it was not silent in the dark -- for the forest was a nocturnal beast. Owls and cicadas joined together in a lonely dirge, kept steady by the constant rut-tut tut-tut of galloping horses.

There were seven riders coming down the forest road, in the greatest hurry. They rode two abreast, with the odd rider in front of them, leading the way. It was evident from his careful and dexterous riding that he was well acquainted with both the forest and the horses. He was dressed in a green frock -- the clothes of a forest ranger -- and his hair was cropped short. His face was that of an honest man: unlearned in letters, yet fully literate in the hearts of man. Behind Osbert rode the Admiral, the Fardies, Barnes, and the sailor.

“This world has never seen a more patient family than my own,” the brown Fardy said. “But I would venture to say that our patience is ill-shown with all this bustling hurry. Perhaps my kin would think of resting, that we may manifest our patience before the world?” He spoke in a slow and deliberate manner, as if he were out of breath.

“I will not allow my brother to humble himself below me, and to claim that I am more patient than him. The first will be last, and the last will be first: I would not dare let you be above me here!” answered the blond Fardy, who rode beside him.

“Silence! There will be no stopping, for we must ride through the night,” Admiral Stuart said. “Above all, there will be no displays of patience by the Fardy brothers -- we are in far too much of a hurry!”

“Listen,” Osbert interrupted, “I can hear horses approaching.”

They brought their horses to a stop and turned about, to see who was coming. As they did, a party of horseman came around the corner, led by a beautiful, white-haired woman. They came on at a gallop, and stopped in front of the rebel party. William Stuart was the first to act.

“Welcome to Atilta, your majesty,” and he lowered his head in respect.

"Then Gylain has not forgotten my arrival," she answered. "Why did you not meet me at the harbor?"

"We did not know you were landing in Thunder Bay, madam."

"Of course not. We left for the Floatings, yet the captain caught sight of The King's Arm as we came, and diverted course."

"He did?" the Admiral asked. "I did not know the fearsome William Stuart was about."

"William Stuart is not fearsome," she snapped, "Though he is dead."

"Your wisdom gives you courage," the Admiral returned, his countenance an empty canvas. "Come, to the Castle Plantagenet -- to our master Gylain." William seemed to choke on these last words, and the Queen of Saxony saw him. Yet she said nothing.

Instead, she said, "Let us go, then. You will ride at my side," and she looked at the Admiral.

The rebels fell into the ranks of the queen's entourage, with the Admiral at her side. Osbert gave him a raised eyebrow as the others looked away, asking what they would do.

"It is good," William whispered in response, "For we gain entrance to the castle."

Osbert returned to the ranks, and the Admiral joined the queen.

"What is your rank?" the queen asked Admiral Stuart.

"I am a noble commoner -- common by birth and noble by achievements. At present I am the Admiral of the Atilian Navy, madam," he replied.

"With a sailor's pride," she laughed, "But with plenty of reason. Atilta's navy is renowned for its strength, both under the Kings and under Gylain." She said this with a faint sparkle in her eyes, as if remembering the navy's past was a pleasant exercise. Soon, she recovered her royal countenance.

"We do, and not only in the main squadron, madam. We have many -- how shall I say it -- hidden vessels. I have but lately returned from abroad, and there has been little time to reveal them," the Admiral said, eying the queen affectionately, as a parent long separated but at last returned.

She was both quick witted and quick to emotion. It was a trait she had in common with the Admiral, though neither was quick to display that emotion.

"Always improving, but never getting better: the human condition. Perhaps your navy is the same?"

"No, my lady," he answered, "I am finally returned, and things will soon be ship-shape. Indeed, I would venture to say that within the week we will be driving Gylain from this land."

The queen looked at him closely -- his tongue had betrayed him.

"What can you mean by that? A coup?" She raised her left eyebrow and tilted her head slightly in the same direction.

"A coup? Who would think of such a thing?" he looked about him in pretended wonder. "No, your

highness, I had something entirely different in mind. Gylain only needs a stronger fleet to invade France. We will have that power in a few week's time. The navy will drive Gylain from this land: driving him before the wind toward the coast of the newest acquisition of his empire." He gave the queen the wink of a sailing man.

"Lyndon -- the King of Hibernia, and Emperor of the Three Kingdoms -- is on his way as well. The attack will soon be made ready. But I thought we first destroyed the rebels which plague both Atilta and England?"

"I have been away, as I have said. I do not know why, only what, I must do."

"Ah, a man of duty. Or should I say a thing of duty, for duty comes before manhood. How long have you been gone, then?"

"Fifteen years."

"Why would he send the head of his Navy away?" she asked.

"Important missions, my lady, important missions," he answered with an air of great significance. "I would tell you here, except that these forests are filled with bandits and spies. Gylain will surely inform you, himself."

"I see," she answered gravely, and she shifted the conversation. "You left your family for fifteen years; you must be very zealous in the service of Gylain. I am surprised that you are not with them now. How does your wife feel of this? You are married, are you not?"

"A widower, madam," and he lowered his head in grief.

"Was your wife a person of importance? Perhaps I have heard of her."

"A person of importance?" the brown Fardy broke in, "Why, she was the Queen of--"

"--my heart, the queen of my heart," the Admiral finished his sentence.

The queen smiled slightly and coldly, although beyond that her countenance was concealed behind itself. All this time they had been trotting briskly through the forest. The road was lit by the moonlight coming down from above, through the slender opening in the canopy. The dust that was kicked up by the horses was thrown into the air around them. The moonlight hit it, and was refracted and broken from its original silver into several different colors. These colored lights were focused on them, like a lantern in the dark. It was no longer a steady light, but a varied one -- like the quilted wildflowers of the forest floor. One piece of the air was blue, while that directly adjacent was the purest green.

The trees were poignant in colored darkness. They brooded in the shadows, their branches entangled and their leaves whispering. They were ancient and unchanging, but that was the source of their poignancy -- they were at once fearsome and comforting; knowable and unknowable. Yet it was not contradictory, for these characteristics did not come from differences in themselves, but in those who passed through their ranks. In the night, the forest itself came alive, joining the creatures which infested it. To the passing human, it gave fear and calm. Fear, for it was more than the human, and could defeat him. Calm, for it was more than the human, and he could not command his own destiny. In the realization that nothing can be controlled, there is a trust in fate. Gylain, in his despotism, was left calm at times, for even his own evils were beyond his control. This was the essence of the forest. This is why men live to destroy

it.

“Who goes there?” called the guards as the party approached the western gate.

The queen sat stoically on her horse, her face invisible beneath its own features. They masked her demeanor, and covered her countenance. Her voice was equally controlled, wielding its power without thought. It was the voice of strength, that did not need emotion for a fuel.

“The Queen of Saxony,” she said, and the sound of her voice conquered the silence. “Open, that I may enter.” It was done.

Around his waist the Admiral wore a leather belt, with a sword hanging from it. As they approached the castle, he reached down and loosened the belt, so as to draw it more easily, should it be needed. The queen saw him, and looked over with her graceful mouth drawn into a smile.

“In case your master is displeased with you?” she asked.

“I will not deceive you,” he answered gravely. “There is to be a great feast in your honor, with an abundance of luxurious foods. I would not have my lord see me loosen my belt, lest he think me a man of weak habits.”

She laughed and said to herself, “If he is not a fool, he is a traitor. Yet I will not protect Gylain, if he means him harm. He is a man of strength, and if he is overpowered it is his own fault.”

They came to the castle gate, and the queen stopped her horse in front of the river.

“Open!” she cried. “For the Queen of Saxony!”

The guards hesitated, until they saw the Admiral at her side, and Osbert and the Fardy brothers behind. They were the rebels who had scaled the wall. After the castle guards were destroyed, and the aiming marks painted, they prepared to destroy the drawbridge. If the queen and her rebel escort had been a moment later, they could not have entered. But as it was, the drawbridge was lowered, and they passed silently over it and into the courtyard. Behind them, the last exit rumbled shut. Before them, underneath the windows of the Great Hall, were a group of catapults, with a group of men preparing to fire them. The queen turned to the Admiral and questioned him with her eyes.

“There is to be a display, for your amusement,” he said. “An exciting and unexpected display, I should think.”

“Of course,” she answered, and continued forward to the doors of the Great Hall.

They dismounted, and gave their horses to a stable hand. He thought nothing amiss, since the impersonators had deposited their horses in the town. The queen led them up the steps to the hall, hurried on by the sound of merriment within. She was angered by this show of contempt -- as she thought it to be -- from Gylain, in starting the feast before her arrival. Yet her emotions did not show through her face, as she grabbed onto the handles of the double door and flung it open. Silence entered the room at her side. Every face turned to the Queen of Anger, the Siren of Saxony, and she returned every look with an invincible facade of power.

“What is this?” she bellowed, and her voice rang out through the lofty hall. “Another guest of honor, to overshadow my arrival?”

Gylain stood and asked, in a tone that told he already knew the answer, "Who might you be?"

"The Queen of Saxony!" she returned, growing heated.

The brown Fardy -- seeing that he and his companions had to reach the other side of the hall, before Gylain's men took up their arms -- cried out, "Charge! Gylain has turned against us!"

He waved his sword above his head and charged across the room, followed closely by the others.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Nicholas Montague saw the brown Fardy's charge, and he knew they had been fooled.

"Quick, Gylain," he cried, "To arms! These are impostors!"

They drew their swords and stood back-to-back in a defensive manner. Willard was on them in an instant, his golden armor still covered by the black cloak. He jumped over the table and came down beside Montague. Both were skillful swordsmen, and neither afraid to die. They each held their two-edged sword in their right hand, while the left sat on their hips and their legs remained firmly on the ground. Willard and Montague were men of great strength -- of both body and mind -- and they parried back and forth as if they used mere foils.

Willard struck Montague's blade, catching it along its broadside and pushing it downward. Yet Montague held his advance in check, and neither retreated from the fierce grapple. Then, as if by common agreement, they both pulled back. Montague lunged forward at Willard, knocking his sword to the left, but Willard recovered it and pushed him back again. Then, Willard took the charge, and came down upon his head with a powerful downward blow. Montague knelt and held his sword above him, holding it at both the handle and the blade. It absorbed Willard's blow, and its force ran back to its creator's arm. Willard fell back for a moment, and Montague pressed forward with several scissor strikes back and forth. Willard skillfully parried them, deflecting the blade rather than standing against it, to recover his strength.

As they fought, Montague said, "You fight well, sir. It is an honor to meet a man of such strength, of such skill in destruction. It will be a greater honor to strike you down." His speech was broken into short segments and accompanied by the clangs of their clashing blades.

"I, too, have fought many lesser enemies -- among them your brother," Willard enticed him to anger.

"It is rare that both emerge alive, when my brother fights a man. I shall see that it does not happen to you and I."

"By your weak left side? I see you are wounded," and he drove forward with a series of leftward plunges and thrusts. Montague dodged to the right each time.

"Honor will yet be mine."

“That is not what I would call it,” Willard answered, “For it is but devilry.”

“Perhaps,” and Montague dodged Willard’s sword, dashed to the left, and brought his own sword down at Willard’s head with a momentous downswing.

But Willard was quicker. He tucked his sword under his left arm and rolled in the same direction. When he came to a halt, he sprang from the ground and fell upon Montague, who had not yet recovered from his heavy swing. Montague leaned sharply away from Willard’s blade, his own sword still going downwards. His leaning changed its course, and it came at Willard. It was easily dodged, however, and the move cost Montague his footing. Willard fell upon him at once, and his loss of balance kept Montague from parrying the blow. Instead, he blocked it with his arm, receiving a large gash between the shoulder and the elbow.

“Impressive, but it will take more to take this demon’s head,” Montague laughed, taking the recoil of Willard’s blow to better position himself.

His feet stable again, he went after Willard with a rage. He came forward with a diagonal blow, going from his upper right to lower left. Willard could not parry, but allowed his blade to take the hit, weakening his arm. Montague looped his sword in a circle behind him -- catching its momentum -- and brought it down again from left to right. Once more, Willard’s sword absorbed the shock -- giving Montague the smallest opening. He plunged at Willard with a leap. Spinning to the left, Willard dodged it and gave a sharp blow to Montague’s blade. The latter was not recovered from his reckless plunged, and went reeling backwards for a moment.

“Impressive, indeed,” Willard said, “But I cannot finish this at the moment. You will excuse me, I am sure.”

He pushed a table onto Montague, and dashed off to Ivona’s aid. She was being attacked by several soldiers, and was only armed with a bow and a dagger. She had been forced back, until she abutted the wall beside the throne, which she used as cover. Willard’s cloak was still in place, and the soldiers had no idea the King of Atilta was present. Therefore, he was able to slip through them to her side.

The Great Hall was immersed in the battle. Gylain’s forces were a hundred strong, and the rebel’s thirty. The Queen of Saxony’s soldiers, however, did not join the fray on either side. The rebels had formed ranks in a tight semi-circle around the windows, while Willard and Montague had been fighting.

Willard came upon the first of Ivona’s attackers without warning, and quickly dispatched him. Seeing his comrade thus struck down, the other soldier fled into the anteroom. Willard turned to follow him, but stopped for a moment to speak with Ivona.

“Hurry,” he said, “Join the others, we must stay by the windows, or all is lost.”

“And you?”

“I will be there, in time.”

Willard turned again and ran into the anteroom, chasing the soldier. But the soldier, by this time, was no longer in the anteroom. Instead, he had fled into the secret passage, with Willard close behind him. Ivona ran to the window, where she was able to use her bow in relative safety.

Meanwhile, the Fardy brothers, Osbert, Barnes, and the sailor had safely reached the cover of the rebel line, behind the rude barricade of tables that had been set up before their ranks. The rebel soldiers knelt behind them with their spears before them, holding the attackers back. There were twenty-eight within the barricade, yet it was small and they could hold it easily -- for a time. Behind the soldiers, those who did not have armor were filling the hall with arrows.

"Can we jump?" Osbert cried to Barnes, who was keeping watch on the catapults below.

"Not yet," Barnes called back. "They are not ready."

"Nor is Willard here," said Ivona. "And the Admiral did not come with you."

"By thunder!" yelled the blond Fardy, looking back to see what came of him. "There he is, stranded in the center of the Hall!"

William Stuart was standing on a table, surrounded by several soldiers. He kept them at a distance with his powerful arms, and the others were too busy to assist them in overcoming him. Montague was preparing siege equipment in the far corner, to drive the the rebels from their barricade. Gylain and the Queen of Saxony were speaking near the door. Their conversation is as follows:

GYLAIN : Have your men join mine in assaulting the rebels. We will conquer them either way, but a greater force will mean fewer casualties.

CYBELE : Your domestic struggles are your own, Gylain. My men are here to guard me, and nothing more.

GYLAIN : True, and they can do so with honor. But was it not under your aegis that they gained entrance to the castle?

CYBELE : Not in the least -- I did not help them into the castle.

GYLAIN : But was it not for you that the gates were opened?

CYBELE : The guards would have been suspicious, with two Queens demanding entrance. They must have been destroyed, and replaced with rebels. They are not so weak as you pretend.

GYLAIN : Perhaps not, but we will see their fate soon enough. Look about you: they have little hope. What have they accomplished, other than present themselves for execution?

CYBELE : As you say, we shall see. Did you not expect me so soon?

GYLAIN : Not from the west. The forest is not my own.

CYBELE : But this castle is? Still, if you did not know, then why plan demonstrations of power?

GYLAIN : Demonstration? There were none planned.

CYBELE : What of the catapults?

GYLAIN : The catapults!

Gylain's face recoiled as he remembered -- in the excitement he had forgotten. He looked across the hall, to the rebel's makeshift fort that overlooked the catapults. Then he understood. His countenance was transformed from that of the gentleman ruler, to that of the beast of passion.

“Montague, come here,” and he drew his sword.

“My lord?” Montague answered as he came. “The siege will begin soon.”

“No, we must attack at once. The catapults!”

Montague turned his head involuntarily to the rebels and drew his own sword.

“Charge!” Gylain roared in fury, “Charge men, as if hell is upon your heels!”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

“The Admiral will fall, if no one goes to him,” said the brown Fardy. “And I am not the kind of man who stands by while an old friend is in danger.”

“We have got to save him, brothers,” the blond Fardy said.

“Yes, but how?” answered the black Fardy.

“With our swords,” said the brown Fardy. “It is dangerous, yet it must be done.”

His brothers nodded their heads in assent and drew their swords. The Admiral was making his last stand in the center of the Great Hall, surrounded by several soldiers, who were making thrusts at him with their swords. They could not draw near, however, for he was a powerful man. Yet his strength could not last forever against such odds.

The rest of the hall was in a giant melee, with the rebels stoutly defending their line until the catapults were ready for their escape. Fifty of Gylain’s soldiers were attacking them along the overturned tables, throwing chairs at them and using spears to wound whoever they could. But their efforts were weak, for the rest of their body -- led by Montague -- were busy preparing weapons that would easily defeat them. Their only task was to keep the rebels contained.

There was no mischief from the Fardy brothers now, for they were in a serious mood and were prepared to die for their country. Having drawn their swords, they stood abreast of one another and began to run toward the lines of their comrades, from behind. They leapt over the soldiers and into the ranks of the enemy, who scattered as they came down. The Fardy brothers passed the ring of enemy soldiers, and the way was open to the center of the hall.

“Friendly faces in unfriendly places,” the Admiral called out as they reached him.

One of his adversaries tried to thrust at his legs, but he countered with a downward slash. A soldier on the other side tried the same thing, but the Admiral harnessed the momentum of his downswing and aimed it in his direction, where it clashed with the soldier’s sword and sent him reeling backwards.

“To work, brothers!” yelled the blond Fardy, as he engaged the nearest soldier. Their swords met and

parried, first to the left, then to the right. The soldier tried to slash the blond Fardy from the left once more, but the latter stepped into the blow with his hands firmly gripping his sword, which absorbed it. Using his right foot as a pivot, he spun around and took the soldier by surprise, breaking the alliance between him and his head with a single, powerful stroke.

Meanwhile, the brown Fardy attacked the next soldier, who was a more able swordsman. First, their swords clashed between them. Then, in quick succession, they parried back and forth with slight, jerky movements -- until the soldier's strength was lessened and the brown Fardy knocked his sword to the side, thrusting his own sword through him in the resulting gap.

The third soldier was dispatched by the black Fardy -- the most skilled swordsman of the three -- with a simple three stroked move: an upward stroke to the leftward, where their swords met; then a peculiar twist that swung his sword to the other side of the soldier's; then a swift cut to the throat.

While they were fighting the soldiers around the table, the Admiral jumped down upon the fourth soldier. He was not expecting such a reversal of fortune, and was easily overcome.

"Quick," the Admiral said, "Back to the lines!"

As he spoke, Gylain called Montague to him and ordered the charge. The four friends left the table just as Gylain reached it, and charged full force into the attacking soldiers, who were not expecting an attack from the rear. The soldiers scrambled to the sides just long enough for them to leap over the barricade and into the safety of the rebel line. The soldiers charged after them, but were kept back by the defenders' spears.

"Not a moment too soon," said the Admiral when they were safely within the walls.

"Yes, and almost a moment too late," replied the blond Fardy, turning his head to look at his back. His shirt had been cut open by one of the guards.

"There is no time to mend it now, for look: Gylain advances."

"Barnes," Osbert called back, "Are the catapults ready?"

"Almost, sir," he answered, "But not yet. Another minute, at least."

"Admiral," Ivona said, coming up to him. "Admiral, Willard is not among us." Her face was distraught, and her large eyes were no longer the green of a meadow in the sun, but of a meadow after the rain.

"He will come in time," William said.

"And if he does not?"

"Then he does not," the Admiral said in his commanding voice, its resolve meant to build confidence. "We can only do what can be done."

"Dear Ivona," the black Fardy said with a compassionate look, "My brothers and I are the most patient of people, and you must join us in it. I know Willard well, and ere long we shall find that he is rescuing us."

Ivona smiled. "I only meant to make sure he was not forgotten," she said. "Indeed, I am worried. But I

do not take my fears to men.” She spoke calmly, and her feminine strength reassured the others.

At this point, however, their dialog was interrupted. Gylain -- in his towering rage -- had rallied his men in the center of the hall, and now they were marching toward the rebels. They came to a stop just beyond their spears. Gylain let the grave silence permeate into the hearts of all who were present, before he began to speak. His voice was loud and deep -- devoid of the doubting intonations of his private dialogs, and the mercy of his peaceful times. He spoke thus:

GYLAIN : For many years you have eluded my grasp. Though my fist was outstretched, you were never overtaken; though my will was set, you were not overcome. Yet now you are mine, and what irony that your own foolish plans bring you here. I will not waste time in vain speeches, nor will I sacrifice the air of my lungs to conversation. I say only this: where have your impostor king and your impostor queen led you? And where are they now, to deliver you into the lands of your fathers?

WILLIAMSTUART : I am reminded of a man I once knew, Gylain. Perhaps you have heard of him. He was handsome: well-formed after the Roman model, with a straight, angular nose, and honest eyes. His stride was long, his anger contained, and his desires overcome. In a word, he was a man among men; a man destined for greatness -- or for infamy. It was his choice, for his talents gave him the world.

WILLIAMSTUART : This man fought by my side in the Battle of the Beaches, when the Vikings came to plunder and pillage; to take away the freedoms which we have so long enjoyed. They had beaten us back upon the sea, until we could no longer keep them from landing. The army was decimated, not a hundred men still remaining from the thousands there once was. The Vikings were yet two thousand strong, every one of them a well-armed, beast-like man.

WILLIAMSTUART : The beach and the mainland were separated by pathless cliffs, with only a single pass through them. We stationed ourselves in that narrow pass in one last, desperate struggle to defend our homeland. They broke into a furious charge, but we held them back, led on by the sword of that one man. Again and again, the sword of that man led us forward, until at last the Vikings retreated in defeat and disgrace. We were victorious. That one man -- through his zeal for his people and his king -- redeemed our freedoms. So I ask you, Gylain: how did that man become the vessel through which that very king, and those very freedoms, were destroyed? How was your youth as zealous for your country, as your age is against it? Why, Gylain, do you persecute us?

GYLAIN : Because, William, it is my fate; and I cannot forsake the will of God.

GYLAIN [to his men]: Prepare to charge!

The soldiers raised their swords into the air and let out a horrifying roar, as if they were not men but beasts of the field. They beat their swords wildly against their shields, and began to stomp upon the ground until the floor shook beneath them.

GYLAIN : Where is your king now, in your time of need? Is this where you put your faith, in a wild man with no courage; in a mere child of the forest? Where is he? Bring him forth!

“I am here, Gylain!” came a voice from above them. Everyone became silent. There -- standing upon the chandeliers that hung a hundred feet above them -- was a powerful man, wearing golden armor that shone in the light of the chandeliers like the rays of the sun. In his hand he held a golden sword, sparkling as with flame, and on his head he wore a golden helmet with a single, scarlet plume coming from its top.

“I have come to warn you, Gylain,” the man called out, his voice echoing through the lofty hall. “I am King Willarinus of Atilta, and this your only warning: Let my people go!”

As he spoke, Willard cut the chains which held the chandeliers, and they began falling to the ground. Gylain and his men were directly underneath them, and dashed wildly to the far side of the hall. Willard stood upon the center chandelier, riding it like an eagle upon the winds, until it came within five feet of the ground. Then he leapt into the air, and the force of his upward motion offset the force of his downward motion. He landed firmly upon his feet, within the rebel line.

“Come, friends, now we escape!” he said, and he leapt toward the window, breaking through it and falling toward the catapults below.

“Look out below!” yelled the blond Fardy as he fell.

They fell into the gigantic buckets, each with a thud and the squeak of the catapult wheels. Willard landed, and Ivona came after him. He caught her in his arms. Horatio came down a few feet over, and the brown Fardy on top of him.

“I am a loyal Atiltian,” Vahan Lee said in his French accent, “But this is too much.”

“What is that?” asked the brown Fardy.

“You have landed on my legs, I fear,” said Vahan, who was partly under them -- he had been in the catapult before they jumped.

At that moment, a hairy head popped up over the side of the bucket. It was de Garcia, and in his heavy, Spanish voice, he said, “All is ready? Here you go!”

Willard sat near the edge, and de Garcia whispered a short sentence into his ear, such that the others could not overhear. Then, with nothing more, he unlatched the catapult’s arm and sent them flying through the air, over the tall, outer wall. They began to descend as they passed over the moat, and they were just high enough to clear the buildings on the other side. Between the five buildings a huge net was spread out. It was there that they landed.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

The net they landed on was made of ropes, and those at the edge were two feet thick. It was secured to five houses, connected by a metal ring on the end of each corner rope. As they landed, it was pushed down almost fifty feet, until its elasticity overcame the force of their impact and they shot upwards again. They bounced up and down a dozen times -- each with lessening height -- until they came to a stop, and sat upon the net. Men on the housetops released two of the sides, creating a rope ladder to the ground.

“Hurry, Gylain will be after us,” Willard said as he climbed down, agile even in his heavy armor.

“You’ll be traveling in the French fashion, now,” Clifford said, still dressed as the barrel shepherd. He stood on the porch of the house nearest the river. “Follow!” and he disappeared into the house.

They followed him through the outer door and into a sort of storage basement to the left. It was down

several feet -- to the level of the ground outside -- and was found in all buildings that bordered the river. Several barrels stood upside down on the floor, their bottoms open. Across from the stairs there was a lowered section in the floor, five feet square, with a broad stairway descending to its bottom. It was filled with water. There was a short tunnel on the outside wall, half filled with water and opening into the river. It was the hole through which the barrels were pushed into the river.

"Into the barrels, friends," Clifford said.

They crammed themselves hastily into the barrels, for they were still just outside the castle and the pursuit could not be long in coming. When each was safely inside, Clifford went around and sealed the ends. Horatio was given a much larger barrel to fit his much larger size.

"All right, here we go," and Clifford began rolling them into the tunnel. There was a grating on the far end, which opened from the outside and kept them from floating away. When he was done, Clifford ran around to the riverside and opened it, letting them out. He caught them with his long pole, and kept them in a group until the last one floated out.

"Here we go," he said again, and set off down the river with thirty barrels in tow.

To reach the Floatings, Clifford had to take the barrels past the castle gates and under the drawbridge. He was a strong-willed man, and to even the most careful observer he did not appear worried or guilty, as an ordinary man would have. Still, he was but a man. As he neared the gates, he hummed some ancient ditty to himself, the rhythm kept upbeat by his beating heart. The fate of the rebellion was in his hands -- or rather, in the river -- and if they were discovered, all was lost. The night had begun to grow old, and the moon was past its height. Still, the city was well lit -- especially around the castle -- by street lamps. The castle gates loomed ahead, but as Clifford neared them with his floating herd, the drawbridge remained close.

"I do not ask much, God, but I do ask this: do not let the drawbridge be lowered!" he said, as he drew within two dozen feet of the drawbridge. Then, from within the castle walls, he heard a hollow banging -- the sound of a great timber being rammed into the drawbridge.

"Heavenly pedantics!" he cried, "The door is sabotaged and cannot be lowered, so they break it down. I'll watch my words next time, I will."

Clifford quickened his pace as much as he could without appearing hurried. He guided the barrels carefully with the pole, keeping them together to prevent his passage being delayed. The closer he came to the drawbridge, the heavier and more severe the blows against it came. Then, with a final crash, it fell forward across the moat. Clifford was no more than ten feet from it, and could not stop, for fear of exciting suspicions. His face convulsed strangely, his nose wringing up and his chin lowering. He had worked within the castle for seventy years, and if they saw his true face they would know him.

Just as he reached the end of the drawbridge, the first horseman came over it: Gylain. Clifford shoved the barrels forward under the drawbridge -- where they could not be seen from above -- and came to a stop. Gylain also stopped, directly in front of him and looking down at the old man. At the angle, however, the hood of his cloak shielded Clifford's face.

"Who are you, that you take your wares around in the dead of night?" Gylain asked.

Clifford put his hand to his ear, as if listening.

"Listen, my lord," he said, "If it were the dead of night, would there be revelers still returning home? I am poor, and if I do not work all day and night, I cannot eat. A starving stomach will make any man nocturnal."

"I see," Gylain said. He turned to the north and cried, "Is that them?" as he pointed to a group of men returning home from their shops.

His men turned their heads, and as they looked away Gylain tossed a few gold coins to Clifford. He did not smile, however. Then, a second later -- as the others reported it was but some brewers -- he scowled at Clifford and rode off to the circle of houses the rebels had occupied only moments before.

Behind him, a hundred and fifty horseman galloped over the bridge -- some following Gylain and others scattering into the city. When they were past, Clifford pushed the barrels down the river once more, toward the harbor.

"That was too close for an old heart like mine," he said as he examined the coins. He put them into a pocket in his cloak and glanced briefly around, to see if anyone was looking. Then he quickened his pace considerably, eager to be safely in The King's Arm.

It was two miles from the castle to the Floatings. The river's current grew swifter as it neared the ocean, and for much of the length Clifford had to jog to keep pace with the barrels. Between the castle and the Floatings was the merchant's quarter, the wealthy district. The river there -- and throughout the city -- was flanked by two stone walkways, with the edges of the circles coming within ten feet of it. Between the outer edges of the circles there was an open space, ordained with a fountain or garden. The circles on either side of the river were aligned, and while one point was open for fifty yards in every direction, a few yards down there was little space, with towering buildings crowding in on either side. Partly because of the current -- quickened by the receding tide -- and partly because of his hurry, Clifford and his barrels reached the Floatings in fifteen minutes.

The merchant's quarter continued until it reached the edge of the harbor, where it abruptly turned into the Floatings. That entire area of the city was not built upon land, but upon floating platforms. The harbor itself was a long curve, coming in diagonally from sea. It was two miles across and ten long. The southern portion of Eden wrapped entirely around the Floatings, abutting the ocean beyond in a semi-circle.

Six piers pierced the Floatings, each half a mile long. They were used for loading cargo onto transport ships, which carried it to the larger ships docked in the bay. At slower times -- that is to say, at night -- ships in a hurry would come to it directly. The shipping of Eden was docked around the interior of the Floatings, not connected or anchored to the land, but to the various buildings that made up the Floatings. These buildings were themselves left to float freely wherever they were wanted. It was constantly engaged in the evolutionary cycle, becoming faster and easier.

Because of this, Atilta was the maritime capital of the world during this period -- and at this period, maritime power was above all others. The shipping of Europe, the Mediterranean, Africa, and Asia was collected in the great Atiltian harbor: the Floatings. Civilization did not decline into barbarism with Rome, as some have said. Instead, it grew up in Atilta.

The buildings of the Floatings were large, and many rose several stories above the water, with another below. Most commonly, a wide deck stretched along the outside of the building, on which ships would moor and unload their cargo. Their movements were controlled by a rudder, as other ships are. Sails were used to propel them on longer journeys, and there were booms that folded out from the sides for that purpose. Within the Floatings, however, there was no room, and oars were used. There were over

two hundred of this sized building, most of which were the size of a moderate house in the other quadrants of the city. Therefore, the owners made their residence entirely within the building -- the Floatings was as much a community as it was a port.

Any harbor has its establishments -- ale houses and inns for the sailors, and even gambling houses and other immoral venues. In the Floatings, these buildings were named Timbers. Above the water they were round, usually fifty yards long and ten across. Underneath the water, however, there was a platform that stretched for several yards in each direction, upon which vessels could moor, as if they were docks. The upper portion had windows on either side, and a single room within -- the public or drinking room. Below, however, the Timbers were rectangular and divided into rooms, as any metropolitan inn of the time. There were at least two dozen of these Timbers in the Floatings, and it was not uncommon to see them flocking about the larger ships, vying for the sailor's business. They also left the Floatings at times, taking tours or cruises across Atilta.

Greater still were the Marins. There were but two of these massive structures, belonging to the Fardy brothers -- who had risen from a humble beginning to become the foremost merchants of Atilta, and even the world. The Marins were a floating circle -- as in, the city circles into which Eden was divided. They were a hundred yards across, and formed a ring. On the outside, there was a tall building that circled around it. On the inside, there was a small, open area, occupied by a deep cylinder whose center was open to the water. It was constructed of the firmus wood and thirty feet thick, going far below the surface of the water. A sharp steel ring was welded into its tip. Around the bottom of the Marins there were gigantic ballast tanks, capable of holding enough water to sink the entire circle until it was submerged. The building was waterproof, and aerated by a series of pipes. When the Marin dived, the cylinder would drive deep into the ground below, forming a suction between the ocean crust and the air above. After a few days of hard pumping, the crew of the Marin could safely lower themselves to the bottom, and mine the rich minerals hidden in the crust. These mining cylinders could be released from the Marin itself, which then could travel at a speed surpassing ten knots.

Most of the Floatings, however, was populated by much smaller vessels. There were many floating shops -- a small, floating day shop in which no one lived. The inside of the building would store the wares, while the sides were open to the air. The merchant sat along the outside of the building, dipping his feet in the water and propelling himself along with long paddles. Another variation of the floating shop was a circular vessel, with the merchant placed in the center. Oars were stuck through the walls, and he would glide along to do his business, following the directions of the lookout who sat on the roof. There were thousands of these tiny vessels. They swarmed about the Floatings like gnats, and as the larger sailing vessels came in from distant ports, the merchants would come alongside them and jump upon their roofs until they were the same height as the deck. Then began the flurry of selling and trading, in which all hands would take part. Most foreign ships did not moor in the Floatings for even a single night, for their business was finished within hours.

With so many merchants in the harbor, there was need for people to service them with food and the necessities of life. The Timbers were good for long meals, but most of the traders did not have the time to enter them. At any moment a new ship might arrive, and if they left their stores to eat, they would lose their market. Therefore, there were long, narrow vessels that the traders could pilot their ships alongside, and eat their meals sitting on their roofs. There were windows on the restaurant ship through which the merchants would be served, and they could disengage themselves at any time to chase a ship that had just come in.

From his tiny Lipel -- a small, circular store -- a merchant could glide between the larger buildings and sell his wares as he went, resupplying himself from the same. He was surrounded by counters filled with his wares -- whether they were linen, fruit, books, or some other commodity -- and he would never lose

a moment waiting for his customers to come up.

The Floatings was supplied with the freshest seafood, and that became its primary food. The fishing boats were similar to the trader's, except they were longer and wider. Instead of a shop in the center, they had a hole that communicated with a wooden tub below the ship, open to the water by several small holes. When the catch was brought in, they would dump it into this tub, and whatever was ordered, they would simply reach down and grab it fresh from its native element. No fish were wasted, and as their supply built up, they were able to pass over those days when little was caught without affecting the supply.

In most cities of that time, the tradesmen formed themselves into guilds, and built warehouses and guildhalls within the city walls. In Eden, the tradesmen would construct floating bizzarres, which were no more than a covered frame in which the tradesmen would dock their boats, while shoppers or traders would float through on their own craft, and purchase what it was they wanted. These were invaluable during the busiest times of the day, when the surface of the Floatings was so packed with vessels that the water could not be seen.

There were also a number of transport ships, whose only purpose was to carry citizens through the Floatings to conduct their business. These were usually uncovered flatboats, with a row of seats along each side that could raise or lower and extend to reach whatever vessel the occupant was dealing with. To go shopping, the citizens of Eden would pay a fare on one of these and be taxied from place to place around the Floatings, to carry on their business without leaving their seats.

A market or bazaar is a bustling, confusing place. The Floatings were doubly so. There were tens of thousands of vessels constantly moving about its surface, some the size of a city circle. To control things, however, every ship was equipped with flags -- color coded according to seller or buyer, wholesale or small-sale. This, as well as with shouting and yelling, the people were able to communicate. It was for the most part an orderly place, though its magnificent wealth attracted many desperadoes. Under Gylain's tyrannical rule, the only plundering allowed was his own.

It was into this scene that Clifford led the barrels, though it was subdued for the night. The use of lights was strictly forbidden, for a fire in such a dense jungle of wooden vessels would be disastrous. Many of the smaller vessels -- too small for the owner to live in them -- were docked every night after darkness came. At this time the waters were desolate, at least compared to the daytime.

Clifford led the barrels down the river until it emptied into the harbor, then guided them down one of the piers. At its end was The King's Arm, waiting for the barrels. It had come in with the darkness, disguised as a merchant ship. No one had recognized it.

As he approached it, Clifford called out in a loud whisper, "The meat is here, sirs. I've brought the meat -- the hams and the pork."

"And the salted beef?" a voice answered.

"Yes, and the salted beef."

"A bit late, but we will still take it," and the barrels were stopped by the crew and lifted onto the deck.

"Come aboard to receive your payment," the voice called to Clifford, who boarded the vessel.

A moment after he was aboard, the crew quietly slipped the ropes and floated out to the harbor. While

the pilot and the helmsman were busy navigating through the other vessels, the crew began to pry open the barrels with an iron crowbar. The first to be unsealed was the Admiral, and as the lid came off and showed his head, the sailors stood at attention and saluted him.

"Welcome aboard, sir," they said, "It does a man good to see you back again."

"We are not out of hot water yet," he answered.

"Oh, I don't know, sir. We haven't had it too hot since we left the Indies."

"I meant danger."

"No, I am with you there. Let me help you up," the sailors grabbed onto the Admiral's arms and pulled him from the barrel.

"It is not very authoritative, but I must stretch myself out upon the deck."

"Go ahead, sir. We won't think ill of you, after all you've brought us through."

"Good," the Admiral laughed pleasantly, "I feel like a side of pork," and he stretched himself upon the deck.

One by one the sailors opened the other barrels, pulling the occupants out and letting them stretch themselves upon the deck. The last barrel left was the largest. As they opened it, one of the sailors said, "Must be a biggun -- even the monk with the lightning mustache had a smaller barrel than this."

"I gamble its a giant, after what we've pulled out -- a man in golden armor, and two of the prettiest dames I ever seen."

"Well, let's see."

They stuck the crowbar against the barrel and pried it open. There -- looking up at them -- was a black bear with an odd grin covering its face.

"Eegads!" they shouted and jumped backwards.

"Fear not," Willard called out, "He is friendly."

They gave him a hand and pulled him from the barrel, and Horatio went to lay alongside Willard. No one said a thing. They were overcome with relief at having escaped, and did not wish to draw attention to themselves by talking. Only Barnes Griffith, the energetic seaman, was upon his feet. He was at the helm, watching their course carefully.

"By the devil!" he exclaimed, "Admiral, come here!"

"You can handle it, my boy. I have faith in you," he answered from the deck.

"No, you don't -- not for this, anyway. Come here at once!"

"Now, I am the Admiral here, and I give the orders," he laughed, "What is the matter?"

“There are six ships of war coming toward us -- flying Gylain’s colors!”

“What? You must be mistaken,” cried the Admiral as he leapt to his feet and ran to the bow.

“There, sir, off to the port bow.”

“Good God!” the Admiral said. “It’s the whole bloody harbor fleet!”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

“Unfurl the sails, men, and prepare for flight. Archers, take your positions and soldiers stand in front of them. They may outnumber us, but we will not go down easy!” cried the Admiral.

The men were about to carry out his orders, when Ivona, still wearing her lovely white dress, stepped forward and said, “No, we must not do that.”

The Admiral turned to her. “For what reason, Ivona?”

“Because, my lord,” she answered humbly, “It is impossible for them to know that we are escaping. While Gylain ate with me, I had him send the fleet to the northern part of the island, and he did it immediately. They are just returning, and have not had communication with the land since. If we behave as an ordinary frigate, we will not be stopped.”

“Your presence of mind is worthy of your rank and beauty, Ivona,” he said, bowing, “And mine to my own. Men, do nothing to excite suspicion. Archers and soldiers, go below deck and do not show yourselves unless you are summoned.”

“Yes, sir,” and it was done at once.

The Admiral stood facing the oncoming ships of war, the wind coming directly toward him. His stature was straight and manly, his bearing strong and courageous. There were no lights except the moon, and in the semi-darkness his eyes shone forth with the anger that was always kindled within him. A few mere coals, perhaps, yet present nonetheless. The others had arisen, and were standing around the deck toward the port bow, watching the approaching ships. Celestine stood hand-in-hand with Alfonzo, her head resting lightly on his shoulder. They were still strangers to each other, except for their love. Willard stood alongside Horatio, the black cape once more covering his gleaming armor. A few feet to the left, Ivona stood by Oren Lorenzo. The Fardy brothers and Vahan Lee were solemnly assembled in the stern, and Barnes and Blaine Griffith stood directly behind the Admiral, silent in their brotherly companionship. Osbert was near them, looking lost apart from his native element, the forest.

“If I remember correctly,” the Admiral turned to Barnes, “The prisoners were all killed attempting to escape, except Nicholas Montague?”

“Correct, sir. They had little choice, for the captives were escaping

“No doubt, Barnes, for the winds of Gylain blow here just as the trade winds blow in the Indies, only

more regularly.”

The Admiral gave Barnes a more serious look. “I suspect you are glad to have gotten over your childhood fancy for my daughter? She is as compassionate as her mother, for good or for ill.”

“Father,” Celestine implored, “Think of her only at her best; she was not always as she became in the end. You harm the good memories when you think only of her faults.”

“Her faults were also her charms, my daughter. And her charms cannot be forgotten by any who loved them, much less those who suffered for that love.”

“Suffered, yes, but with joy,” she answered, “And with hope. Memories are so much more than the present, their love so much fuller.”

“But memories are the past, and the past is no more.”

“Then why do you not let it go? Why is a memory of anger and hatred allowed, when one of love is not?”

“Because the parting note is the most replayed -- in its melody the others are forgotten. If only the hearts of women were won as easily as the hearts of men, and the victories of love as the victories of battle.”

“Both battles can be lost, even in the end,” Alfonzo said. “I hope ours does not go that way tonight.”

“We will see soon enough,” William Stuart answered, “For the ships are up to us now.”

While they had been conversing, the gap between The King’s Arm and the six frigates had closed, and now the enemy fleet split, three on one side and three on the other, to let them pass. As they did, the fleet came to a stop, not risking a maneuver in the crowded harbor. As The King’s Arm went by them, the captain of the leading ship called out through the night:

“Ahoy there! Is it not late to weigh anchor?” It was Montague’s voice.

“Our orders were late in being fulfilled, but our schedule allows no time for idle stops. Just as well to sleep aboard while sailing, than to sleep aboard while anchored,” the Admiral called back.

“There may not be much sleeping beyond the harbor this night, for the sea grows rough.”

“Yes, I can taste it in the air. It will be a long storm, and I would rather take the pressure until we reach the calms of the stretch, than be stranded here while it blows itself out.”

“A wise decision. Have you sailed these regions before, for your voice is familiar?”

“It is an accent that everyone from my home port has.”

“Ah, well, bon voyage.”

The King’s Arm sailed forward, going slowly in the crowded harbor. It seemed an eternity to those aboard before the last part of The King’s Arm had gone past the fleet. But at last it did, and they were out of danger. They sat in different areas of the deck in small groups, reuniting with those they had left behind before the battle. The first of these groups was Blaine and Barnes Griffith, who sat on two barrels that

overlooked the ship's stern. The water was still and placid, the full moon reflecting in its face, and its shadowy residents drifting aimlessly.

"Well?" Blaine said, "How long has it been, fifteen years? You left a boy and return a man."

"A man in form, perhaps," Barnes returned, "Yet I have much to learn. Before, I felt as if I knew the world, but now I have seen that I am nothing."

"I've been given the wisdom of age, but it dries up the energy of youth," Blaine said. "Neither is better or worse."

Silence fell upon them. Each tried to sneak a look at his brother, but when their looks met, they turned away as if some distant object required their immediate attention.

"They tell me you've become an expert fisherman," Blaine said after a moment, as if they had been apart for only a few weeks, "A real terror with the hook."

"My early lessons have made me great," Barnes laughed. "The forest has its fishing holes, I surrender that. But there is nothing like trolling for deep sea fish with a mackerel on the hook. You've got to twitch it just right," and he stood and pretended to jerk a rope in a complex pattern. "If the movements are right, the big ones go for it. Then you hold on tight and hope it gets tired before you do. How have the old forest rivers been?"

"As good as ever. Osbert made a flat-bottomed raft, and we take it out to the sand banks on the old Gloten. I hear some of the best trout are down there, but it takes patience."

Their conversation continued in this manner, passing over the missing years to those before them, when one was a child and the other a young man. It was not that they confused the two times, but that it was easiest for their hearts to speak the native tongue of their youth.

Meanwhile, Ivona and Oren Lorenzo had gone to the center of the boat. They stood alone, near the side. Ivona was beautiful in the moonlight: her fair skin glowed like the dawning sky, and her eyes like the owl's. Her head was hung low, as if in shame, and her demeanor was powerless -- a sharp contrast to her stint as the Queen of Saxony. She was broken-hearted, without the strength or the will to pretend innocence. And yet she had done nothing that would seem wrong to another person -- only her own conscience condemned her.

"Do not hang your head in shame, child," Lorenzo said as he stroked her hair with his rough hand. "The forgiveness of our God is great, and greater still his mercy."

"Yes, father, but how can it be given to one such as I? How can it be given to one who knew what was right, yet did not do it? Ignorance cannot shield my guilt, nor even passive understanding."

Oren's fiery mustache erupted in passion as he answered. "You are young, child, and your wisdom is insufficient to guide your life."

"Yes, but is not that of any man -- or woman -- the same? Do you know wisdom?" and she turned her head from him in muted emotion. Her flesh attacked her spirit.

He reached out and drew her back to him. "God uses authority to guide us, but those who wield it are cursed to guide themselves. Your father is your authority, and he has pledged you to Willard. Who would

not marry a handsome king?"

"I do not see you chasing after him," she laughed.

Lorenzo shook his head, flopping his mustache about. "You feel no love for Willard?"

"Yes, but the love I feel for him is the love of self, rather than of others. Therefore, it is but a bland imitation of love. True love is to give, but the love I feel for Willard is to receive -- to receive his affections and perfections, and thereby to satisfy my own desires for companionship. But it is my spirit that seeks such love, and not my body. Therefore, it cannot be fulfilled with a physical love."

"But he as much spirit as you, and it is the spirits of a man and a woman that become one."

"I am consecrated to God through salvation, and Willard's spirit is not holy. Men are changing, yet I need an anchor to build my love upon. Men are selfish, yet I strive to forget myself. My need is for God, and so I will desire none else. I have tasted the water of life, and am no longer thirsty."

"You may be a spiritual being, Ivona, but still you are physically based. The loves of the flesh can bring companionship -- the joys of marriage and of motherhood."

"Joys, yes, but only so far as they are a reflection of the relationship between man and God. Does not God give birth to his creation, and nurse it to maturity? So he gives us motherhood as a symbol. Is God not intimate with his followers? So he gives us marriage as a symbol. He gives us these things as placards to the heavenly. But I can have the spiritual: why would I abandon it for a pale comparison?"

"Yet, since the physical reveals the spiritual, it can be used to guide our souls. It is good, or God would not have made it."

"God desires my whole heart, leaving no room for any man or child to be loved of their own accord. I cannot love a man romantically without putting him above my God. I can only love him through God; as a creation rather than a creature. If I do not hate my father, I cannot be of God, and if I do not hate Willard, I cannot follow his commands. For if I give love to a man for his own sake, I would be tempted to love him more than God."

"My dear child," Lorenzo said, "Why do you sell yourself?"

"Do you not see? The kingdom of heaven is like a great treasure hidden in a field. When a man finds it, he sells all that he owns and buys that field -- that he may own the treasure."

Lorenzo began to speak, but before he could a shout came from the stern.

"Admiral!" it cried. "Admiral, come quick!"

"What is the matter?" answered the Admiral from the front of the ship.

"The fleet, sir," Barnes yelled, "It has come about and is sailing toward us."

The Admiral took a look behind them. "Raise the sails, men, and put her into the wind. We've been discovered!"

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

"I will have you yet, William!" Gylain roared, and his voice echoed through the lofty Great Hall.

His men were scattered about the room, fleeing the chandeliers that had broken through the floor into the storage closets below. The windows overlooking the gate were broken, and the rebels gone.

"Leggett, come to me," he scowled. When the chief guard was at his side, Gylain turned to Montague, who was also by him. "Put him in irons, and throw him into the dungeon. I will decide his fate later."

"Yes, my lord," and it was done.

Gylain gathered his troops and made for the exit. The queen of Saxony and her men still stood in front of it.

"What is your hurry?" she asked.

"Vengeance."

"I am glad to have witnessed your strength myself, before making an alliance with you."

"The rebels will not leave this city alive. This was a symbolic blow, but it does not diminish my power. Indeed, if the rebels had a chance against my full strength, they would have taken it."

"Perhaps they are stronger than you think. Their leader was a cunning old fellow."

Gylain raised his eyebrows. "Do you not know who he is?"

"I have my suspicions."

"He is the man who abandoned your mother in her distress. Do not put your faith in him, lest he do the same to you."

"Who, then, am I to trust? God?"

"No, not him: he is fading. Trust in me."

She sighed and looked about the room, lost within the maze of her own mind.

"Very well," she said, "I will trust in you."

"Excellent," and Gylain placed his arms upon her, pulling her forward. He kissed her like a wave makes love to the shore, and she did not pull back.

"Let us go," he said after a moment, "We will catch them, and the master of all will prevail."

"Gylain, the master of all," she said solemnly. She raised her face to the sky and laughed with derision.

“Yes -- Gylain, the master of all.”

They hurried down the stairs with Montague and hundred men behind them. Their strides were long and their faces drawn, as were their swords. Gylain threw open the doors to the outside and dashed down the stairs. There, in the courtyard, the stable hands had prepared their horses for riding. They feared Gylain's strength as much as they respected it, and did not want to displease him.

“Ride to the rear of the lines,” he said to the queen, “And command the tail as you think best. Montague, do likewise with the center.” It was done as he ordered.

A group of men was battering a ram against the drawbridge, trying to break it down before their lord saw them and grew angry.

“What? Did they lock us within our own castle?” Gylain roared.

“Yes, my lord,” answered one of the men.

Gylain dismounted his horse and ran to the battering ram.

“Do not ram the drawbridge,” he cried in anger, “Or it will break and leave us within!”

He swung his powerful arm and knocked several men to the ground.

“Come to me, three of you on each end,” he said, standing in the center of the ram. When they came, the seven of them picked it up and held it above them. “Rotate,” and they did, holding it parallel to the drawbridge. “Throw!” It flew through the air and crashed into the drawbridge, hitting with its broadside. The impact knocked the drawbridge open, and it crashed to the ground on the other side. Before it hit, Gylain had remounted his horse and led the troop forward.

Then, without warning, he came to a halt.

“You, there,” he cried to the captain on the ground. “Do you see that hairy man by the catapults?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“His name is de Garcia, and he was once the finest fighter on the earth. He is a very arduous man, and even his imprisonment has not subdued him. Take him, with Leggitt, to the galleys. There we will consume their zeal.”

The captain went to fulfill his orders, and Gylain proceeded across the drawbridge. An old man was passing by, herding a group of barrels down the river.

“Is not late for herding barrels?” he asked sternly.

“I am too poor to take the liberty of an early evening.”

“Very well,” he answered. Then, in a louder voice, he cried, “Is that them?” While everyone turned their heads, he threw the old man several gold pieces. “Onward!” he cried, and galloped to the circle of houses that stood adjacent to the drawbridge. As they reached it, Gylain turned to the troop and gave them their orders.

“Search for the rebels. When you are done, kill those within and burn the houses.”

He was the first to enter the houses, going into the first -- from which the rebels had escaped only moments before. The first room through the outside door was a study. A man sat in front of the fireplace, deeply possessed by the book he held. It was a tattered manuscript, evidently as ancient as the forests. Its cover was of a strange, synthetic material, and the words “Temporal Anomaly Box: Number 12. Location: Central Savanna,” were written neatly on its front.

Gylain recognized the book as an Atiltian classic. “A good choice; does not Jehu fascinate you, with the paradox between him and the future? The fate of all is tied to him, yet he cannot control what happens.”

The man looked up from the book. “Can any man control his fate?”

“No,” and Gylain took a spiked club from one of his soldiers. “No man can control his fate or his actions -- we are all but a White Eagle, and the future our only adversary. Can I stop myself?” He paused. “Do not lie to me, for I will not spare you. Where have they gone?”

“My lord, I would never tell.”

“I will kill you if you do not.”

The man’s face remained steady. “I am willing.”

Gylain held the club before him. “Tell and I will let you live,” he said.

“Nothing can pain me more than my conscience.”

Gylain said nothing, but struck the man cross his knees. The knee caps were shattered under its force, and the man cried out in pain. Gylain struck him again on his left and right arms, shattering them as well. They could not be moved.

“Fate,” Gylain whispered, “See what it does through us?”

He threw the man onto the floor, his feet hanging into the fire. The flames would slowly creep up his body, until he was consumed. But the man’s face remained set, and he did not curse Gylain. To those who will not burn after death, to burn in life is nothing.

Gylain left the room, only stopping on the threshold. Without turning, he said, “You are strong, but foolish, and your death in vain. Your eyes have betrayed your friends, even as they flee in the barrels.” The man on the floor wailed, but Gylain seemed callous to his suffering.

“Place the manuscript into my private library,” Gylain said to a soldier as he left. “It should be preserved, for future civilizations.” With that, he left the house.

Montague and Cybele were waiting for him on the road.

“There is no sign of them,” Montague said.

“They were hidden in the barrels,” Gylain returned. “Did you burn the houses?”

“Yes, my lord, except the one you were in.”

“Excellent,” and Gylain drove his heels into his horse, galloping desperately to the Floatings.

They said nothing as they rode, for the sound of the horses against the stone road was as thunder in the air. Fear went before them, and hate behind. The two miles between the castle and the Floatings were passed in six minutes, and within eight they had reached the end of a pier. The harbor fleet arrived just as they did.

“Gylain, my lord,” called Jonathan Montague from the helm. “I have found nothing to the north, but have left a squadron behind to keep watch.”

“We were deceived,” Gylain answered.

“By the queen?”

“By the rebels. Have any ships passed you?”

“That bloody fox!” Jonathan Montague cursed. “So that is where I knew his voice -- William Stuart!”

“He will be bloody soon enough!”

Gylain dismounted directly into the ship, and the others followed as swiftly as they could. Nicholas Montague and the queen of Saxony joined him in the flag ship with twenty-five men, and the others distributed themselves among the rest of the fleet. The fleet spun about and pulled the sails to their full height, heading toward the ocean.

“They are mine, now. I will follow them unto death,” Gylain said as he strode forward to the bow. He stood there -- ten feet from the others -- and raised his face to the heavens. The moon came down and cast a physical shadow over his face, though it was already shrouded by a spiritual shadow.

“Do not tempt me any further, oh God of the heavens,” he whispered, “For I am already given to evil, and I will do as I will do.” He clenched his fist and his teeth pierced his lips as he scowled at the moon.

Then a voice came into his mind. “Let no man say he is tempted by God; for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no man. But each man is tempted when he is drawn away by his own lust. His lust conceives sin, and his sin matures into death.”

Gylain features became placid, and his eyes grew quiet. He was as a child who does not understand.

“But, my God,” he said, “Death is all that I desire.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

“They fly through the waters as if Neptune himself propels them!” Barnes Griffith cried to those in the bow. “They ride the sails of their mizzenmast as if the wind were calm, but their mizzenmast does not fail them!”

“Take the reef from the mainsails,” the Admiral cried, “And tighten the flying jib. But I dare risk no more, for the seas are turbulent.”

As he spoke, The King’s Arm passed from the harbor into the ocean. On one side, the land protected the surface from being ravaged. On the other, the seas rolled about with watery fire.

“All through the day the sea has been heaving,” the first mate said to the Admiral. “And now it has stirred itself to violence.”

“Yes,” he answered, “But we cannot turn back. If we must choose between the wrath of the seas and the wrath of Gylain, I would gladly choose the former.” He stood rigidly as he spoke, his eyes scanning the ship and the sea. He calculated the strength of the wind, the roll of the sea, and the size of the waves against the endurance of the sails and the masts. “What a sea!” he said to himself, “It will be a miracle if we survive this night.” Then, raising his voice, he said, “Celestine, go below deck.”

“Yes, father,” and she went.

When she was below, he called out to Barnes, who still held his station in the stern, “What is our speed? It can be no less than thirteen knots, but still they push faster.”

“Thirteen and a half, sir. They do fourteen, at least.”

The Admiral said no more, but stood in the spray of the breaking waves -- some against the side and some against his weather-beaten face. His short hair was not moved by the wind, but his beard was blown into his chest, dancing with the currents of the air. His eyes were lanterns in the night, fueled by hatred and vengeance. It was a vengeance that had long been suppressed -- like a fire allowed only to smolder. Yet when the air comes, it bursts into flame. So it was with the Admiral. He was finally in a position to inflict the wound of death upon Gylain; but he could not do so before his wrath played itself out and Gylain trembled before him -- aware that his end was near, and that it came from the hands of William Stuart.

The Admiral stared into the storm, his face stern and his thoughts concealed. It had been many years ago that he first met Gylain.

William was born to a man who was already dead and a woman who was soon to follow. From youth he was an orphan, left to wander the streets of Eden and beg what he could, steal what he could not. It was several years before he stumbled into the Floatings, for the rest of the city was a maze for the child. He walked between two lofty buildings, and the city abruptly came to an end -- all he had ever seen or known simply vanished. In its place stood the Floatings. He was entranced by its charm and its bustle. He looked out upon the harbor -- so full of floating structures its surface could not be seen -- and he saw the dreams of the hungry nights, sitting before him like paradise.

For an hour he did not move, but stared with the delight of discovery. When he finally ventured within the Floatings, it was as if he entered a bubble of excitement. Even at its edge, it felt different than the city. It was alive. He crept to the edge of the water and put his foot in, as if assuring himself it really was there and not some dream of his. The keeper of a small shop saw him there, and brought his Lipel beside William with two strokes of the oars.

“Child,” the shopkeeper called out to him, “Are you busy?”

“No, sir.”

“Ah, then would you care to earn a penny? I have need of a helping boy.”

“Yes, sir,” and William’s face opened into joy.

The shopkeeper was a man in his forties, with a round face and a nose almost as long as his head. This prodigious nose, however, was straight, and gave him an honest look. He reached out and picked William up, pulling him into the center of the boat. It was a circular boat, with a counter some three feet tall running around edge -- covered in fresh fruits -- and a thatch roof. There was a small platform in the center, resting on a row of ball-bearings: it turned in whichever direction his feet pushed. A wooden chair occupied its center, and a pair of oars came up through the bottom and swiveled with the platform. A pedal at his feet controlled the rudder on the bottom, allowing him to adjust which way the current pushed him. In this way, he could dart among the other vessels of the Floatings with the dexterity of a water bug.

“You will be my spotter,” he told William, and he opened a door to the roof. There was a comfortable seat built into it, and he set the boy upon it.

“Can you swim?” the man asked him.

“No, sir, though I have always wanted to learn.”

The shopkeeper laughed until his face was red with mirth. “I will teach you when the day is done. Until then, wear this,” and he handed a small floating vest to William.

“Thank you, sir.”

“You are perfectly welcome, my boy. Here is what you must do: look about you for anyone that might be wanting some fruit. When you see them, call into this tube,” and he showed William a speaking tube that connected to the cockpit. “Tell me where and what it is. With a little experience, you will learn what is a good prospect and what is not. Until then, keep your eyes open.” The shopkeeper’s smiling head disappeared into the Lipel. It came up again a moment later, however, and he handed William a plump orange -- not two days from the tree. “When you are done with it, holler down to me and I will give you another. Don’t be shy about it. Just be sure to show the joy there is in eating such extraordinarily good fruit.” He winked and pulled his head below. Then away they went, darting around the Floatings like a fish among whales.

The shopkeeper had no children -- though his wife dearly wanted one -- and from that day they raised William as their own. He worked with his father on the Lipel until he was twelve. Then, with the money he had diligently saved, he bought some sailor’s clothes and became a cabin boy in the Atiltian fleet. By twenty, his courage had made him a lieutenant.

At that time, Atilta was at war with Spain and Egypt. It was the threshold for Atilta: victory meant empire, and defeat enslavement. In the battle for Saxony -- Atilta’s only ally in the three kingdoms -- the Admiral of the fleet was killed. Chaos threatened, and William took command, issuing orders to the fleet as if the Admiral was still alive. He wisely feared a power struggle between the other captains that would ruin them, and through his genius the battle was won: Atilta became great. In the glory of victory, his means were praised. He became a hero.

In the courts of Saxony, he met the beautiful royal daughter: Casandra. The end of the war filled the air

with the fuel for love, and their passion sparked it to a blaze. They were married before he left. She left her country for Atilta, forsaking the power and wealth of her family for the power and passion of her lover. Passion is not long fermenting into sweetness, and when they fed it love, it did not fade. William grew in stature among the court of Atilta. His victory over the Spanish was brilliant, but he did not grow dull with authority. He won every battle, and made no excuses. At length, he was named Admiral of the entire navy.

There was another young man who also grew quickly into power, however. Gylain was born into the highest level of wealth and power, as the Duke of the Lion's Mane. With beauty and nobility, little worth is needed for advancement, and Gylain possessed both. Yet he was also a brilliant, spirited man. He burned in the service of the king, just as he later burned to overthrow him. He was named General of the entire army at the same time William became Admiral.

They first met in a council of war, called to discuss the Viking invasions to the north. William came with a powerful stride, as did Gylain, and from the first they felt an affection for each other. While other men were weak and prostrate before them, Gylain and William were equal. Yet Gylain envied him in one thing: the love of William's wife was still passionate, for they were not together enough for it to grow cool.

The council lasted through the night. The next day they parted: William for the seas, and Gylain for the land. William went to confront the Viking fleet and destroy the threat before it could land. On his journey, however, Gylain first met Casandra, and was charmed by her surpassing beauty. He was accustomed to satisfying his desires, and struggled with his lust for her. Yet it grew within him -- by divine dictate, as he said -- until it consumed his conscience. He flamed within, and it manifested itself in his sword.

Casandra's love, meanwhile, had evolved into bitterness. In her loneliness, she cursed William. She desired him, but he was not to be had. She gave herself to him, but he was not there to receive her. Hate is but the after taste of love, and she hated William.

On the northern coasts, William was wrecked against the shore. Whatever men survived joined Gylain's army. Yet the army had also been beaten back, and was reduced to a hundred men -- a hundred hard and desperate men, left to defend their country. The Vikings were almost two thousand strong.

The beaches of northern Atilta were flat and sandy, stretching inland for half a mile. There, however, they came against a mountain range whose precipices could not be passed. On either side the beach stretched for a hundred miles, and could not be left but through a single, narrow pass: the Pass of the Forest. It led directly into the heart of the forest that covered the rest of the island. The pass itself was ten feet across, with cliffs rising thousands of feet on either side. The sun could only penetrate to the bottom for two minutes at high noon. At any other angle, the cliffs would not let it come down, and the pass below was dark.

Gylain and William embraced at the foot of the cliffs, their backs in the darkness and their faces in the light. Yet Gylain had given himself to lust. He did not combat it because he did not desire to. Though he could have done anything, he did not want to do it.

"The curse of God!" Gylain whispered to himself as he embraced William. "I cannot do otherwise than what I desire, and it is God who shapes those desires. I am damned, now. But I do not care -- I will have what I will have."

Gylain fell back into the darkness to hide his scowling face.

“Come,” he said, “We will take them in the pass.”

They hid in the center of the pass, and waited in the darkness. They could hear the heavy breathing of the approaching Vikings, but stalked backwards -- remaining always in front of them. The Vikings did not know they were near.

Then, in a flash of brilliance, the sun came over the cliffs far above and shone into the pass. The light was as great as the darkness had been. The Atiltians attacked, spreading themselves over the narrow pass and charging down the surprised Vikings, who turned and ran to the beaches. Yet Gylain chased after them, and his heart boiled within him. He used the power of his lust to fight the Vikings, and they could not withstand it.

“Destroy me now, God,” he muttered as his sword flew forward on its own accord. “Destroy me now, or else I will destroy you. I will have Casandra!”

The Vikings were routed and banished forever to their icy homes. The Atiltian army and navy returned to Eden, amidst a great celebration. The empire was saved, as was western civilization. William was dispatched to rebuild the navy, and Gylain paraded through the streets as a hero.

Casandra’s passion, meanwhile, was fully converted to a passion of hatred. She met Gylain in the secret of the night, and they plotted to overthrow of the king. Casandra hated the man who took her husband, and Gylain the man who had power over him. But Gylain was discovered, and placed in the city jail. The jailers, however, were Gylain’s followers. They released him, and he escaped to Casandra’s chamber.

Fate played their side in the matter, for Casandra’s father died, and she became queen of Saxony. The king did not suspect her, but held a banquet in her honor. Gylain came disguised as her handmaiden, and sat opposite the king and queen. Then, in the middle of the feast, he sprang forward and slew the king, while one of his men did the same to his wife. The castle guards sprang upon them, but Gylain had positioned his own men around him. It was a desperate struggle. Alfonzo of Melborough escaped with the prince, but the rest of the castle was taken. Casandra hated William so much that she imprisoned her own daughter, hoping to bring pain to her husband.

William, however, did not know what had happened, and returned to the city. He was arrested by the new king’s army as he left the safety of his fleet, and taken to the top room of Castle Plantagenet. The guards secured him to a post -- his arms apart and his back open to the air -- then left, as Casandra and Gylain came in.

“What is this, my love?” William asked, concealing his emotions. “What is this cruel joke?”

“I do not jest, William. I loved you long ago, but I have since grown to despise you.”

William looked to his friend Gylain for comfort, but there was none to be had in him. He had been overtaken by his lust and was no longer a man, but a beast. His lusts were fulfilled, yet he was not satisfied. So he looked deeper into evil, where there is no satisfaction to be had.

“This is the end, friend,” and he walked behind William, out of his view.

Casandra stood in front of William. She grabbed a whip from the table beside her, and slashed him across the face. He did not wince at the physical pain, but could not hold himself through the spiritual.

“Why have you forsaken me?” he said through his tears.

“Was I not forsaken first?”

Gylain began to scourge William’s back with a glass-tipped whip. His flesh was flayed away piece by bloody piece. Yet William did not feel the pain of this, for his spirit had died within him. His eyes grew emotionless; his face as the face of the dead. He said nothing, but stared at Casandra with the innocence of a child. He did not perceive what happened to him. He did not understand.

When the evil was complete, they left William alone in the upper room of the tower. Casandra saw the wrong she had done and fled to Saxony with her youngest daughter, Cybele. She could not return to William, yet that ancient love within her rejected Gylain. So she faded away to the land of her youth, and was no more. Gylain, however, hardened his heart against sorrow, and killed his conscience with ever greater evils.

William, meanwhile, was rescued by Erwin Meredith. The newly formed rebellion took him to the Western Marches, where William was returned to health in Milada’s castle. The forest could not be crossed by an army, and the navy had been destroyed and deserted. But Gylain pushed to rebuild it, and when it was ready, he sent it after them. The Battle of Thunder Bay followed: William was captured, but the fledging navy taken by the rebellion.

William Stuart was taken into exile by Nicholas Montague, traveling the world on a ship of torture. But then, in a daring action, the Admiral took over the ship, with the help of his fellow prisoner Barnes Griffith. They turned course to Atilta, but the winds beset them, and they wrecked on the African coast. Without tools, it took years to rebuild the ship. But William led them on, his eyes always smoldering for revenge. At last, he had returned to take it.

“Admiral!” a voice cried through the noise of the storm, “Admiral!”

The old man’s eyes opened, as if awoken from a deep slumber.

“What is it, Barnes?” he asked with an air of sorrow.

“Sir, Gylain’s fleet has begun besieging us. Their arrows barely miss our stern, but we will soon be in range.”

“It is time,” the Admiral sighed deeply, with a distracted countenance. “It is time that I fought Gylain to the death.”

“And your daughter, Cybele?” Barnes asked with an air of worry.

The old man laid his weather-beaten hand upon the young man’s shoulder, with a look in his eyes that showed his weather-beaten heart. Their ship tore through the water, and the waves beat fiercely against the bow, crashing down on those aboard the ship. The swell kept The King’s Arm from seeing their pursuers at times, though they were only fifty yards apart. A steady crash fill the air as the waves collided with themselves, and the floodgates of heaven were swept aside by the rain.

For a moment, the eyes of the youth and the old man met and broke like stubborn waves upon each other’s faces. At last, the Admiral spoke in a quiet, heartless voice:

“My daughter,” he said slowly, “Has already chosen her side.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

“Archers, take your positions,” Gylain roared above the noise of the storm. “Show no mercy, have no fear -- the deluge and the end are near!”

There was a wild scramble on the deck, as the archers tried to gain a sturdy foothold. The waves crashed down, spraying them with the cold, salty water until they were frozen. Yet there was a fire within them that no physical pain could extinguish.

Gylain still stood at the bow of the ship, staring forward into the ever gathering gloom of the night. The moon shone above the clouds, but its light did not break through to the sea below. The waves grew stronger, and by now were rising above the sides of the deck. There was a constant roar that filled the air -- the wind and thunder partaking in a terrifying duet. It was as if Hades himself had taken control of the seas, and as if his only desire was to destroy those two men who fought with fiercer wrath than even he knew.

“Your time draws nigh, William,” Gylain said to himself, “But I fear that mine will not be long in following. Oh wretched fate that was given me -- to destroy that which I love most!” and he fell silent, his face fixed like stone against the whipping winds that stung him. “The deluge,” he murmured.

At length, Jonathan Montague approached him and said, “My lord, we are within range for the archers to begin.”

Gylain stood silent for a moment, staring into the chaotic sea as if he did not hear him. But at length, he turned to face Montague. With a tender face, Gylain asked him, “Jonathan, have you ever hated?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“And have you ever loved?”

“Yes, my lord, dearly.”

“And which came first?”

“They came together, at the same instant.”

“So it was with me,” Gylain whispered, turning his head once more into the storm and hardening his face and his heart. “So it was with me.”

At that moment Gylain’s countenance was overshadowed by evil, as if he no longer cared for what was good.

“Fire!” he cried, and nothing more. But it seemed to linger upon the face of the waters for a moment. It was loud enough for all the fleet to hear it. The King’s Arm as well, but there was nothing for them to do -- for flight or fight they were doomed to fail. Yet still they tried.

The seven ships were now within a dozen yards of each other, a dangerous distance in a storm. Yet for their closeness, the waves and the roll of the sea kept them from having a clear shot at each other. The rebels were formed into lines upon the deck of The King's Arm : twenty armored soldiers forming along the stern rails, with archers kneeling behind them, only standing when they shot. Ivona had taken her place among the archers while Oren Lorenzo had gone below to arm himself. When the prior returned, he rushed over to her.

"Ivona! This is no place for a woman."

She turned her comely face toward him, and her beauty was radiant. Her hair was wet and tangled, and her pale face contrasted by a smear of blood upon it.

"Neither is it a place for a priest of the church," she answered solemnly. "But when death knocks, no one can refuse it entrance."

"If your father were here, he would not allow it," Lorenzo replied.

"If my father were here," she stopped her sentence short, for fear of disrespecting her beloved father. But she continued it to herself, "He would blaspheme and curse the God who made him."

Oren Lorenzo gave her a broad smile, his lightning bolt mustache turning upwards with his lips. Evidently, he had finished her sentence the same way. "There is little hope for us, dear child," he said with an affectionate smile, "And if death must come, then let it come with honor."

"There is little honor in death, when it is done for one's self," she answered. "But what do you mean, there is little hope? Does not God provide a way, when there seems to be none?"

"My child," he laughed, gently kissing the top of her head, "Your faith could throw mountains into the sea, how much more the tyrants of the land?" With that, he left her and joined the ranks of the armed men.

Meanwhile, in the front of the ship, the Admiral and Alfonzo were speaking.

"I hear you have arisen in the need of your countrymen, forsaking your own desires for those of your people," he placed his leathery hand upon Alfonzo's shoulder.

"Yes, father," Alfonzo humbly answered.

William's eyes moistened as he said, "You have done right by Celestine, as I should have done by her mother. Go, take her with you, and escape in the longboat. The shore is near at hand and the enemy will not see you in the waves. Go, escape to peace, for you have long deserved it, but have longer been denied."

"I cannot leave my comrades."

"No, do not say that, Alfonzo. I have been where you are now, and I have made the wrong decisions -- all that we now suffer is the result of my selfish zeal. No, you will go. The love of his country brings honor to a man, my son, but the love of his wife brings him happiness. I will not allow you to destroy what has been given to you and to my daughter. May she have the love her mother was never allowed."

The Admiral's stern face would not yield, and Alfonzo -- seeing the wisdom that had been bought at

such a painful price -- bowed low and went below to fetch his wife. She went with him, and within ten minutes they were in the longboat, halfway to an inlet that ran into the forest. It could barely be seen from the distance, even to those eyes that knew its location -- for it was ingeniously camouflaged with bushes and branches.

Meanwhile, Willard and Horatio stood side-by-side near the taffrail.

"Horatio, it has been a wild journey, this last week. We have gone from wild men to kings. But it is all the same now, for we have reached the end. When a man has a blood brother like you, what else can he aspire to? No kingdom can surpass the greatness of the love of one dear friend, be he man or beast."

He embraced the bear, and Horatio plucked him from the deck of the ship, holding him there within the folds of his massive arms.

"Horatio!" Willard said, "We have to keep up appearances. What would the men think if they saw their king hugging a bear like some rough country boy?"

Horatio turned and looked at the soldiers, standing tall upon his hind legs and roaring horrifically. The soldiers turned and pretended to study something in the opposite direction. Then, with his odd grin, Horatio set Willard upon the deck once more.

By this time arrows were streaming over the deck of The King's Arm, most landing harmlessly in the sails and rigging, then washed away. The battle, however, was just beginning to grow desperate. A few longboats had broken away from the enemy fleet and were now stealthily drawing alongside the rebel ship. Among them, in the lead boat, were Gylain and the Montague brothers.

"I am a patient man," the brown Fardy called over the storm, "But this watery chase is running me dry!" He stood alongside his brothers at the foot of the spanker boom -- on a platform that stood several feet above the deck in the center of the ship.

"You are long suffering, my brother, but perhaps I know a way to free your mind from its heavy load."

"Speak, then, but do not leave me waiting like some old woman."

"Dear brother! Am I the sort of chap to let any man look at my brother and call him impatient? I will have to make you wait now, lest you bring dishonor to yourself and your family."

As the blond Fardy spoke, the black Fardy was hard at work sorting through some barrels and changing their contents. In one barrel was a supply of candlewicks -- not yet made into candles -- and in the other were small jars of whale oil -- widely favored at that time, though extremely explosive in large quantities. He was trying to set fire to the candlewicks, in the hopes of warming himself. The barrels were deep, and the contents protected from the rain and wind. They stood a few inches above the spanker boom.

"Are you proclaiming yourself a more patient man than I? For my own sake, I would not care at all, my brother. But I cannot allow you to lose your reward in heaven, by gaining it here on earth!"

"Gentleness runs in my veins," the blond Fardy returned, "But not nearly so much as blood. If I must have one or the other, let it be the latter!" He saw the spanker boom's sheet -- the rope that kept it from spinning around -- and dashed to untie it.

Just as he did, a strong burst of wind came from the troubled waters, catching the spanker sail and

throwing the boom in the opposite direction. If it had still been secured, the result would have been no more than a ripple on its surface. But when the wind's strength was hurled against it with no resistance, the boom swung around its axis with a vengeance. The black Fardy had succeeded in lighting the candlewicks, and was on his knees, looking for a dropped match. The blond Fardy was on the ground, having dove to undo it. The brown Fardy, on the other hand, was on the same side as the wind, and could not be hit. The boom flew without impediment and crashed into the two barrels: the candlewicks -- now burning -- and the bottles of whale oil. They flew over the taffrail and fell toward the sea on the other side of the deck.

But the barrels did not reach the sea. One of the enemy longboats had moored against the ship, preparing to board, and sat between the falling barrels and the sea. In the first instant, the bottles of whale oil fell from the barrel onto the longboat's floor, shattering as they hit. In the second instant, the burning candlewicks came from the second barrel, landing on the spilled whale oil. In the third instant, the longboat burst into flames, the explosion shooting the broken glass at the boarders. They leapt into the sea terror, and were immediately swallowed.

"Enemy boats boarding!" chorused the Fardy brothers as they retied the spanker boom.

Seeing they were discovered, the rest of Gylain's men boarded at once. There were thirty of them -- toward the front of the ship -- with Gylain and the Montague brothers at their head.

"Come about!" the Admiral roared.

His crew obeyed, and they swung around roughly, almost falling to their side. But the Admiral's calculations were exact, and they turned as sharply as they could. The enemy fleet was caught by surprise, and had to part in the middle to allow TheKing's Arm to pass through. It would have been a massacre, had the fleet fired on them, for they were vulnerable on both sides. But the archers feared their master, would not shoot at him. Thus, TheKing's Arm passed safely between them. The fleet was slower in coming about, for they had to avoid hitting each other. The rebels drew ahead, sailing toward the inlet into which Alfonzo and Celestine had disappeared twenty minutes before.

Gylain parted from his companions and went to fight the Admiral. The Montague brothers also left to seek out Willard. The rest of the soldiers formed a tight circle in the center of the ship, with the main body of the rebels around them. Their fight was bloody and desperate, each man fighting for all that was dear to him -- on one side freedom and family, and on the other plunder and rapine.

Willard saw the Montague brothers coming toward him, and took his position upon the stern, waiting calmly. Horatio was at his side, but Willard sent him away. "Horatio, my brother, the fate that awaits me does not await you as well. Go, and let me die alone." Horatio obeyed, walking off and hiding behind a group of barrels.

At that moment, Nicholas and Jonathan Montague appeared. Jonathan had his dark hair cut short and combed forward at the temples, while Nicholas wore it combed backwards. In all other features, they were as closely related.

"We meet for the second time tonight," Nicholas said. "But I fear you will not escape me this time."

"Would you, then, forsake honor and fight a single sword with two?" Willard asked.

"We have long ago forsaken honor, fool," was the answer. "But if you prefer, then let it be," and Jonathan took the extra sword he wore upon his back and threw it to Willard. The latter caught it

between his thumb and forefinger, without cutting himself upon the blade.

As soon as he wielded both swords, they were upon him. The Montague brothers fought in unison, first with a downward blow. Willard parried them both, and they struck again from the sides, each coming in at Willard. That is, they would have come into him, had not Willard leapt forward -- spinning in the air and landing behind their backs. He could not bring his sword down on them before they turned, so he pushed his shoulder into Jonathan and forced him into the cruel waves below. Nicholas, however, would not allow his brother to be destroyed. He gave Willard a fierce blow and knocked him backwards. Then, with the time he gained, threw several barrels to his brother. Jonathan set himself upon these and floated with the waves, until he was rescued by the fleet.

"You grow stronger with fatigue," Nicholas said as they circled about one another.

"And you weaker," Willard returned with a scornful laugh, meant to inflame his adversary's anger and push him to recklessness.

Montague, however, was already inflamed and fully reckless. He rushed toward Willard with fire in his eyes and lightning in his hands, pushing him back against the mizzenmast with a series of scissor strikes. Willard could not retreat, so he stood his ground and parried the blows. Yet with each successive blow, the king became weaker and weaker. He had done too much without resting, and after his final outburst against Jonathan he had no strength left to withstand the heated attacks of Nicholas. At length, his sword fell from his hand, and he was left leaning against the mizzenmast, with Montague's sword pushing against his chest.

"We come to the end," Nicholas said, his bosom heaving. "But I will not prolong it, for fear you will yet escape me. Farewell, my king," he laughed, and he raised his sword above his head to strike Willard down.

Yet at that very moment a prodigious roar sounded behind him. It made the sea look calm in contrast, and the lightning as but a chance ray of the sun. Montague felt two massive claws grip him, then he was picked up and thrown headlong into the sea.

"Horatio," Willard said slowly, as if in weakness, "You are a bear among men."

Willard rose to his feet and walked to the taffrail, looking out upon the water. There, struggling to keep himself above the surface, was Nicholas Montague. He saw Willard looking at him, yet he would not beg for mercy. He would rather die than humble himself. Willard hesitated for a moment, then took a barrel from the ground and threw it to him. Nicholas swam to it, calling out to Willard.

"Why do you spare my life? I would not have done the same to you."

"There is a way that seems right to a man," Willard called back, "But in the end it leads to death," and he turned away from the sea.

Ivona stood behind him. She smiled, and her face became more beautiful. She was innocent in her joy. Advancing to Willard, she embraced him, and he held her close to his heart. Yet neither of them spoke. For there was nothing to be said.

Unfortunately for the rebels, all had not gone as well for them elsewhere. The enemy soldiers, circled closely together, were able to withstand their advances. It was a contest that could not be decided by anything but the passage of time. Both sides were formed to repel attacks, and neither would risk a

charge. So it became a stalemate, a test of patience and of wills.

Yet things went worse with the Admiral as he battled Gylain at the bow. Their swords flew like hail and flashed like lightening. Gylain came on first, lunging forward with a desperate thrust. William knocked it to the left and came forward with a side-swing that Gylain ducked, and it passed over his head. Before William contained his swing, Gylain lunged forward again. William dodged to the left, but lost his balance slightly, giving his enemy time to recover. Gylain advanced again with a series of blows, but the Admiral caught himself and parried them, returning the last with his own. This blow Gylain deflected, and made a thrust at the other's chest. But William was too quick, and he knocked Gylain's sword away from its intended path, instead bringing his own down toward his enemy's head. Now it was Gylain's turn to dodge, and he pivoted on his left foot -- rolling to the Admiral's back -- where he let his sword fall upon him. It did not hit, though, for William had rolled to the right and now faced Gylain, who was recovering his sword from his false blow.

"I will have you, old man," Gylain said as they struggled.

"Only in death," was the answer.

Their swords clashed once more in a flurry of strikes and counterstrikes.

"I will have my revenge for Casandra," the Admiral said.

"Then you must seek her grave and not mine, for she acted of her own will."

"Under the influence of your wicked heart."

"No, but under the influence of another."

"Speak not against my love!" and William leapt forward with a tremendous blow to Gylain. The latter caught it with his blade, and -- catching the Admiral's on its side -- twisted his own, knocking his opponent's to the ground. He kicked it away from William and pressed his sword against the Admiral's chest. William Stuart faced the sea in front of them, and Gylain the stern.

"It is over," Gylain said quietly. "And I have won."

"What victory is there, that has no reward?" William answered.

"But there is a reward -- the joy of having destroyed you."

"If there is little joy in life, than how much less is in destroying it?"

"Have you not spent the last fifteen years plotting my demise, even as I plotted yours?"

There was silence for a moment as their eyes mingled, and the memories of what had gone before filled their minds -- of the friendship they had shared, and the hate into which it had mutated.

"Did she love you?" William whispered, as if in great pain.

Gylain's hand trembled as he thought over the question in silence.

"No," he answered, "She remained faithful to you, even in her hatred. For better or for worse, she was

your wife.”

“Then I can die in peace, knowing you will also meet your death before the dawn breaks upon this hellish scene.”

“Your friends will not prevail.”

William nodded his head in the direction of the shore, and Gylain turned to look. There -- sailing toward them and flying the colors of the king -- were the six rebel ships. William kicked Gylain back, jumping forward to recover his sword. For a moment the two men stared at one another, viewing the other as the symbol of his own hatred. Then, with a sigh, Gylain turned to his men in the center of the ship.

“Retreat!” he called, and the men broke their ranks, running to the side of the deck. The rebels let them pass. Gylain turned once more to William. “We will yet be destroyed, and I will not meet my demise without you.”

“So be it.”

Gylain leapt over the railing and disappeared into the water. When he was gone, the Admiral whispered to himself:

“So be it, Gylain. I will see you dead as well.”

END OF BOOK ONE

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Sometime after this, in the Atiltian forest, there was a flurry of activity at the rebel city. In the shaded meadow beneath the four Great Goliaths, a train of wagons and carts stood waiting to enter the tunnel that led to the city above. The grass there was but ankle-high, and the sun only came down through a spotlight the rebels had made, a beam that illuminated the waiting area below. The citizens of Eden with ties to the rebellion feared for their lives and property after the attack on the castle, and crowded to the city for protection. There they were welcomed, but as the only entrance to the city was a narrow underground tunnel and a steep climb, it was many days before they could all enter. In the meantime, there was a small, nomadic settlement on the meadow below the canopy.

The tunnel that led to the city was thirty feet wide, and it sloped gently upward as it spiraled around the tree. Since the tree was nearly a hundred and fifty feet in diameter, such a slope served its purpose. Traffic, on a large scale, could only move in one direction, and generally going took place before noon and coming after. The migration of the rebels was slowed in the underground tunnel, however, rather than the tree-tunnel. It was ten feet across, with a slight ceiling that could be collapsed in a moment.

The tree-tunnel was not delved into the center fifty feet of the tree, nor was any other room in the city. Accordingly, the first hall of the fortress -- two hundred feet from the ground -- was the same diameter

as the tree, yet its inner sections did not connect. Therefore, it was easily divided into sections, through which an entering person had to pass. These were partly commercial and partly governmental. The first quadrant of the hall was a passport area, with a strong guard to prevent the entrance of spies. The second quadrant was a bazaar, with a host of merchants on hand to buy the goods of those coming in, with the view of taking them above to the main market and selling them. For those without a private rope route, it was difficult to have wares hauled to the upper sections of the city. The third and largest quadrant was the stables, in which the animals were kept, for they could not walk the Treeway safely.

The third quadrant opened into the outside, onto the Treeway that connected the rest of the rebel city. It was a road, made of sturdy planks attached to the branches, and at this point it wound around the outsides of the trees, in the same manner as the tree-tunnel had wound inside it. Along this road were doors, each leading into a room delved into the tree. After the initial tunnel, the city was not connected within the trees, and only the Treeway brought the rooms and structures together.

The city was entirely self-sufficient. For food, the rebels grew mellis upon the upper branches of the trees. Mellis was a plant that was found only in the forests of Atilta, for it could not be supported by the devolved climates of the mainlands. It was sweet in taste, much like the sugar cane or beet, except its taste was clearer and stronger. On the trunks of the trees they grew pomum, a rich fruit not unlike a combination of an orange and a pear, except that it had no outer peel or covering. It was purely fruit. These two foods were their favorites, and were used in some extent in most of their dishes, not unlike the sugar beet and the onion in Eden. Yet their primary food was frondis. This was grown on giant nets that were stretched between the trees in a sort of horizontal terrace. The frondis, a vine similar to lettuce, was farmed by the Frondits: a lofty group, for they walked along the wooden frames to cultivate the plants.

For water, the rebels made a reservoir of the canopy above, canalizing the rainwater along it until it emptied into wooden tanks for daily use. It came down like a waterfall into the tanks, where certain plants were cultivated to purify it. The water thus collected was transported throughout the city via wooden pipes, flowing downward until it finally came out into a stream on the ground below. A series of aquatic plants were grown in the stream, and whatever contaminants left in the water were quickly removed as it flowed to the ocean.

Many of the rebels never walked upon the ground. Yet this does not mean they stayed in their city. Travel through the forest roads was unsafe -- for those who were unarmed -- and the majority of the rebels were peaceful folk, only involved in the war as those who could not escape it. They took sides, but were not partisans. To facilitate their travels, a roadway was built hundreds of feet above the ground, in the upper branches of the trees. Since the trees were so large in the forest, and since their canopies connected and formed a continuous framework of thick, sturdy branches over the entire forest, the rebels built the Treeway upon them. They secured boards to the branches, one after another, until a smooth roadway was formed.

The Treeway traveled in several directions from the rebel city, and continued in each until the forest emptied into the ocean. The first branch traveled to Eden, directly south of the tree city. The second traveled southwest, to the rebel harbor, and a second branch traveled from the harbor to the ancient ruins, slightly to the north of the latter. The third main roadway extended to the west coast, the independent kingdom of Lord Milada of Erlich. The height of the road rendered it invisible from below, and a cloud of foliage surrounded it from all angles. Could it have been seen, however, it would have made little difference, for it could not be reached from the ground without someone above to lower a ladder.

Also at this time, far to the southwest of the rebel city, a party of about two dozen persons was traveling north, to the ancient ruins. The dawn was in its latter stages, and the sun was fully above the horizon,

though it could rarely be seen through the dense canopy that surrounded the Treeway. The leaves and branches surrounded them on every side, as if they traveled through a cave or a tunnel. Birds sat on either side of them, unconscious of their audience; and their songs were sweetly innocent.

“My strength diminishes as the sun’s grows stronger,” said Alfonzo, who led the party. His goatee was untrimmed, contrasting his otherwise prim appearance. Beside him walked Celestine.

“Yet who would fault you for it, Alfonzo?” she asked with a smile and a squeeze to his hand, which she held in her own.

“We are all worn with you,” added William. “This day has seen me twice through the forest, twice in heavy battle, and once in a duel to the death. Or rather, it would have been had you not come to our rescue with the rebel fleet. But it would be better for you to forsake the art of war for that of love. Though they are both art, the reward of one is life, and the other death.”

“Do not be fooled,” Alfonzo answered, “For though my love has long been sleeping, it has not yet grown entirely cold. Perhaps it will wake soon.” He looked to Celestine for a moment, then continued. “But as a man of war, I must ask: why did Gylain retreat at our approach? We outnumbered him, but only by one, and he held The King’s Arm. Above all, why did he spare your life, William, when he grasped it in his hands?”

The Admiral slowly drew a breath and his eyes flared up for a moment, as if a spark was lit but then quickly subdued. “Absolute hatred is absolute patience,” he said, “And vengeance would rather be delayed, than carried out incompletely.”

The Griffith brothers walked alongside the Admiral, and Barnes asked, “Could it have been that Gylain was afraid for his own life? In a continued battle, he may have fallen.”

The Admiral laughed, but from hatred rather than humor. “Gylain has no fear. He has looked into the devil’s eyes, and seen himself staring back. When he closes his eyes, the fires of Hades dance before him; and when he dreams, they scorch him to the soul. No, he was not afraid: only cautious.”

“How do you know Gylain so well, father?” Celestine asked.

“We were once as close as brothers.”

“Yet even brothers cannot read minds and interpret dreams.”

“I know what haunts Gylain,” the Admiral whispered faintly, like rustling leaves before the wind, “For it haunts me as well.”

They were silent for a time, until Alfonzo spoke. “The ruins are near, and we can camp there safely, as I have done many times before. When we have rested, we can decide our course further.”

“That would be best, Alfonzo,” said Blaine, “For they tell me we are to hold council, and that we will part ways at its end. Better near than far, as they say.”

An hour later, they reached the camp. There were ruins of what was once a great city scattered all through the area, for a mile in each direction. A thick wall ran around the perimeter: once mighty, but now like mere dust. There was only a foot of earthly stubble where it had once risen high into the air. The buildings were reduced to a similar state, and most of them were already engulfed into the nothingness of

the past. In the center of the ruins was a temple, made of white marble and a mysterious stone with a strangely patterned grain. Thousands of years before it had been tall and majestic, with a tower above that stretched into the sky. This tower had long ago crashed into the lower portion of the temple, however, and now lay scattered across the ground. The rooms of the temple had no ceiling, and their walls were tumbling over. Its center, though, remained intact, as if something within had protected it from the disaster that leveled the rest of the city.

There was a platform on the Treeway with a hole in the bottom and a rope ladder attached to the side. It was one of the exits to the ground below. The party left two soldiers guarding the platform, and descended several hundred feet to the ground. Throughout the descent they remained silent, for the ruins had a heavy, solemn atmosphere. The canopy above was especially thick, and blocked the light from passing into the ruins. The result was a twilight, made even darker by the fog that covered the area. Only in the center -- directly above the temple -- was there a break in the canopy, and a single beam of sunlight fell upon it. The fog seemed to smoke as it passed through the light, writhing as if with life.

"Do not be afraid," Alfonzo said as they came to the temple, answering his own thoughts as much as those of the others. "It is safe." With that, he led them into the temple.

They had to pass through several smaller rooms before they reached the larger, central chamber. A thick wooden door still stood between it and the outside world. The central chamber was different from the outer ones, for it had not been deteriorated by nature. The walls and ceilings still stood strong; the floor was intact, though the carpeting was mostly gone; and the furnishings remained, albeit a bit dusty. A long, narrow table stood in the center of the room, and some bookshelves lined the walls. A door to the left of the entrance remained in place, but it led to nothing more than a pile of rubble. A statue of a white eagle covered the wall opposite the door. It was made of diamond, and grasped an altar in its claws, an altar to the god of the temple.

When the party was inside, Alfonzo spoke. "These ruins are safe, though they do not feel so. We will set two guards outside the door to this chamber, and the guards above will whistle if anyone approaches on the ground. As for me, I am weary enough that any bed -- no matter how hard -- is a welcome one. We will gather in the evening for a council. Until then, rest well."

Then, saying nothing more, Alfonzo sat on the table in the center of the room. He curled his body into a ball, and was asleep before he could feel the tender touch of Celestine as she laid down beside him.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

The evening passed, as did the night, and it was not until the next morning that the party woke from their slumber. Alfonzo was the first to wake -- as he always was -- but he did not rise, instead enjoying the warmth of his wife, whose caresses he had been so long without. Celestine woke soon after him, her face radiant in the morning light which somehow found its way into the room. They were silent for a moment, unable to convert their thoughts to language.

At length, Alfonzo whispered, "Have you slept well?"

"As well as I could," she answered, "Yet I dreamed of nothing but you, and the fate to which you are

predestined.”

“Do not fear, for either of us. What pains can death bring, that we have not already felt?”

“None, perhaps. But who can tell?”

He laughed silently and smiled in his simple fashion. Though he was not naïve -- he had seen too much of the beasts of the earth -- he often seemed as if was, as if he did not understand.

“No one can know anything without a doubt, so we must have faith in every matter, in one thing or another. Did I know you continued to love me, while I was exiled to the forest? Did I know you were faithful, while you were imprisoned by Gylain? No, yet I had faith; and it has been shown true. Therefore, I must also have faith for the future -- faith that God will arrange our paths. For if not God, than in whom do we put our faith?”

“Am I not too old for faith?” she asked, a muted sigh covering her features. “I am old now, but when was my youth? I have had faith, but for what result? Perhaps fate is but an illusion.”

“Am I an illusion, Celestine?”

“No: you are love, my love. But I am tempted to feel bitter, for throughout these years I have been strong: for you rather than for myself. Now that you are here, I am allowed weakness. I am allowed to put my fate into the hands of a being I can see and feel. So let me indulge in it. After so much faith, it is a pleasure to wallow in doubt. It is refreshing to say, ‘this cannot be.’ After so much strength, I desire weakness.”

“And what of me,” he answered. “For I, too, have been strong. Yet I am not allowed the pleasures of weakness, and the burden still weighs upon my shoulders and upon my conscience. I must remain strong, for there is no one for me to relinquish myself. Would you desert me now? Would you abandon our dreams for the pleasures of failure?”

“Are you not a man and I a woman? Are you not the general, and I the soldier? Strength is the curse of authority, but weakness is the poor man’s gift. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they will inherit the kingdom of God.” Celestine fell silent for a moment, but Alfonzo waited for her to continue, which she did. “I am a woman -- a help mate and a being created to weakness. Yet in my youth, I thought that was my curse, and I hated it. I rebelled against it. But now I know that weakness is victory. Weakness is yielding to fate, and fate will have its way regardless of what I do.” She paused. “Yet I am yours, and I will be as you would have me be. I will be strong.”

They rose from the table on which they had slept, and began to wake the others.

“We must hold council,” they said, “The toils of the future will overshadow those of the past.”

Within fifteen minutes, the party was collected around the long table that ran down the center of the room. The room itself was dim, for the only light seemed to ooze through the stone walls and cast a fresh, greenish light about the room, without emanating from any certain location. The Admiral took one side of the table, with Meredith and Clifford at either side; while on the other end Alfonzo sat with his wife on his right and Blaine on his left. Between the two ends sat Lorenzo, with Ivona at his side, facing the statue that graced the far wall. To their right sat the Fardies, and across from them sat Willard and Horatio. Next to Blaine sat his brother, Barnes, across from Lorenzo, and between him and Willard were Osbert and the venerable Vahan Lee.

Monsieur Lee was the first to speak, but his words seemed to fall out of him involuntarily, and even as he spoke his face held a grimace, as if he embarrassed himself. "Never was there a truer Atiltian than myself," he began rather loudly, for his voice echoed in the silence. "So I do not fear that I can speak freely without being thought a spy, or a representative of any interests other than those of this fair island."

"You need not begin every speech with a disclaimer, friend," Alfonzo interrupted, "For it would do nothing to lessen our anger if you were speak offensively. Especially, when you are already known to be an agent of the French monarch. This council is the place for you to give your master's terms, so do not be overcome with silence."

Vahan's face caught fire as Alfonzo spoke, and he became intensely interested with the area around his feet. The others were silent for a moment, and it was the blond Fardy who was the first to speak. "Patience is refuted," he said, "For I judged you wrongly, and may I be slapped."

"With pleasure," his brown brother answered, and he raised his hand in preparation of doing so.

"Why am I so patient?" The blond Fardy raised his hands in exasperation. "I spoke with poetic license, and in that I cannot be condemned."

"Poetic license?" the brown brother shook his head in shame. "What patience, indeed, if we have allowed Gylain to control poetry with a license. What tyranny are we to expect next? Regulations on the purchase of spirits and liquor?"

"There are none as patient as my brothers," the black Fardy said, "But perhaps you have become overly patient with ignorance?"

"It is a quality I carefully cultivate," the brown Fardy smiled, "Lest your merits be considered less than my own."

The Admiral stood and silenced the three with a wave of his hand. "I am becoming impatient of your patience, my friends. But what were you saying? I have never heard such a ramble, except from the mouth of old Clifford himself."

"Indeed, that was a superlative ramble," Clifford bowed his head in respect, "Aramblest, as I say. You know, when I myself was but a mere lad of forty-seven--"

"Enough, there," the Admiral cried, "Every moment that is spent in foolishness is a moment that is bought with the blood of our countrymen. We have news as well, Alfonzo. Gylain seeks the Holy Graal, and sends Nicholas Montague to retrieve it."

"Indeed?" Alfonzo returned. "Then perhaps the advantage is ours once more." He turned to Vahan. "We will have to send a group of rangers to stop him, but we do not have enough to spare as large a force as he has. Would your king send soldiers to aid them against Montague, Vahan?"

"A brilliant idea, Alfonzo," cried Vahan Lee, with an uncharacteristic strength of purpose when a return to France was mentioned. "I will have them for you; I will leave at once," and he jumped up from his seat as if to set off that very moment.

"Wait, dear friend," laughed Alfonzo, "There are others who must go with you, and we have yet to decide who they will be."

“Yes, of course,” and Vahan sat down slowly, the color remaining on his cheeks.

There was a brief silence, but Ivona took the chance to speak. “I will go with those who seek the Graal,” she said. “I will go to find the blood of my savior.” Her emerald eyes shone oddly in the dim room, and as she looked around the table there were none to meet her gaze. She was terrible to the eye, yet not from power, or evil, or madness. It was her beauty that made her great, and her spirit that made her strong. The only one who could stand the siege of her eyes was Horatio. As she looked at him her lips curled into a simple smile, and she laughed with her characteristic, regulated mirth.

Celestine joined Ivona in her laugh -- though silently to herself -- and turned to face Alfonzo. “I have found my youth,” she whispered, “And my faith is returned.”

Alfonzo nodded said to the council, “You will go, Ivona, for your purity will aid in the quest. William tells me it is also for your father that the graal is sought, and that fate only provided the directions. Let it be you who finds his cure, lest failure leave you broken. Who will go with her?” He looked to Willard.

“The king cannot leave his country,” Willard said after a short silence.

“But this is not your country,” William gruffly returned, “It is Gylain’s. And that is why you must go: he will be searching for you with his restless passion, and your presence will only endanger those you are with. And you forget that there are none among us who have defeated nature as you have done. I would have expected less from the son of your father, but you are strong; and it is strength that rules nations. Nicholas Montague strives for the graal as well as us, perhaps, but the forests of the Cervenues are the greater danger. They are as ancient and troublesome as the deepest forests of Atilta, and as you near the temple you enter the realm of the Titans. They have destroyed greater islands than Atilta, in the past.”

“Very well,” Willard answered, “I will go with Horatio and Ivona. The rest of our party must be raised in France.”

“Have no fears of that,” Vahan said, “For there are many interesting people in Bordeaux.”

“We shall see.” He glanced at Ivona for a moment, then continued, “What of the rest of you?”

“I will pick up the work of Lord Milada, as best I can,” Alfonzo said. “From that I expect I shall have little rest, for the nobles are afraid of Gylain. Milada has done what can be done with them, and I fear our only hope is to forget them, and appeal directly to the citizenry. Either way, an army and the defenses must be raised to protect the western coast. Gylain will not be long in attacking.”

“As for me,” the Admiral said, “There is work to be done with the navy. We sent the harbor fleet into a retreat, but Gylain’s navy will soon return from abroad, in company with that of Hibernia. We must drill our sailors, and weaken his navy. How, I do not yet know.”

“Leave the weakening to the Fardy brothers,” said the brown Fardy.

“Lend us but a little patience,” the blond brother added, “And we will wrest the water fortresses from him, by force or by deception.”

“Deception?” Clifford asked, “Then you will need my assistance.”

With that the council came to an end, and no time was wasted in farewells. The first to leave the enclave

were Willard, Horatio, Ivona, Vahan Lee, and Meredith, taking the Treeway south once more, to the rebel harbor. The first four disembarked for France before noon had passed, and the last remained to repair the rebel fleet, and carry out the changes the Admiral ordered. The Admiral, however, with Barnes at his side, took the northeastern road to the rebel city, to train and recruit for the navy. The Fardy brothers and Clifford traveled with him for a time, but took the road to Eden in the end.

CHAPTER FIFTY

It was a calm day on the Atlantic. The sky was empty, and the wind blew fairly from the east; the waves were soft, as was the roll of the sea. Yet it was still strong enough to rock the lone ship that made its way between the horizon and the waters. It was a ship of war: triple-masted with decks standing ten feet above the water line. The sails were rigged in the fashion of the Mediterranean, for the customs of the Romans were still fresh in the minds of all, though the Empire's power had already been forgotten. The sails were set out as if to dry, and each ballooned forward, kept tight by the sailors manning the ropes. Below the deck, ten long, wooden oars reached out in unison from the ship's sides, then were pulled back against the water, using its resistance to force the boat forward. Together, the wind and the oars propelled them at ten and a half knots.

The ship, itself, was two hundred feet long, and fifty wide. The figurine of a fierce sea god formed the bowsprit, and its eyes were filled with two sapphires that caught the sun and glowed in anger. Nearly a hundred sailors walked the deck or were perched amid the rigging, trying to avoid the gaze of the captain who paced the starboard bow. He was a man of middle age -- no more than forty-five -- and was strongly built. He muttered to himself as he walked the command deck, each pass taking him but three long steps. His hair was of the deepest black, cut short and combed backward at the temples and forehead, giving him the look of a powerful noble. He wore a doublet, tied at the waist with a dark, leather belt that also held his bare sword, and a black cape streamed behind him, flapping in the breeze. Though he was the captain, he was not dressed as a sea-faring man, but as a man of the forest.

He seemed lost in thought, and his rambling could not be understood, for it was but pieces of words and phrases that floated chaotically through his mind. Every few moments his features would compress, as his mind flexed itself into anger. His eyes narrowed and his lips pressed together until they grew pale.

"Alfonzo!" he whispered to his thoughts. "Alfonzo, I will contrast you with death. But one more moment, and William would have been my master's plaything. Yet no matter, for the dogs enjoy the chase, as do the gods."

After he repeated this several times, the officer of the watch timidly approached him, coughing loudly to draw his attention. But it did not work, and at length the officer took courage and bowed before the captain. "Sir, may I have a word with you."

The other raised his face from the ground, looking at him blankly for a moment before answering. "Out with it, Vladimir. If it is important, do not delay. If it is not, then begone."

"Yes, sir. I come to tell you the coast is in view."

"And we are directly across from Bordeaux?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, then prepare some of the crew to disembark. I will take them with me until we reach the forest, then send them back to you. You will await my return in the harbor.”

“Very well, sir. But are the prisoners to be left with a small guard?”

“Can you not handle petty prisoners, Vladimir? Or is it Patrick that worries you?” Nicholas Montague paused. “De Casanova has requested him, and he is now in Bordeaux. The young rebel will not be with you long, and de Garcia will be taken with him. As for Leggitt, he is but a man of weakness, of inaction. He knew of the rebel plans, and yet he did nothing.”

“A weak man, indeed. I will take warning.”

“Good. Do not let the men carouse in my absence. It is unfitting for a man of war to also make love.”

“Yes, sir,” and the officer saluted Montague, then turned and carried out his orders. Nicholas returned to his former thoughts, and continued to pace around the deck in his long, limber strides.

Meanwhile, below deck in the airless rowing room, twenty desperate looking men continued to heave and ho to the beat of the timer’s drum, which still kept double pace from the night before. They were all shirtless, and many were scarred by the gaoler’s whip. Most of them were beasts of men, marked by years of captivity. There were some, however, who looked as though they had but recently been imprisoned. Each man was chained to the floor, and his wrists to an oar. These chains chinked together to the rhythm of the beating drum, and the rhythm of the moaning boards around them. It was the rhythm of death.

There was a row of men on either side of the ship -- each with his own oar -- and they were separated by a narrow aisle, with beams every few yards that obstructed the view from front to rear. The officer in charge had strolled down this aisle for the first hour of his watch, to see the prisoners behind the pillars, but then he grew tired and sat down in the front. As far from him as possible, in the rear of the room and chained to the last oar, was a particularly unkempt man. He looked to be of middle age, though worn by many hardships. His hair came down to his shoulders, as did his untrimmed beard, but his body was in the peak of physical perfection. In front of him sat a youth: no more than nineteen, but already endowed with a strong form and a fiery spirit. His hair was no less fiery, for it was orange and left to wave and wrap about his head however it would. His nose was short, his lips thin, and his skin freckled and not yet hardened by the beatings he was given. In front of the youth sat another man. Contrary to the others, his hair was kempt, and his beard perfectly trimmed. These three men talked among themselves as they rowed, to keep their minds from despair.

“Leggitt,” said the dark-haired man, his voice clouded with a Spanish accent, “Observe the wrath of your master, and the justice of mine.”

“Perhaps, de Garcia,” the other responded calmly, “But I have also observed your own wrath, in relation to your merciful master.”

De Garcia’s face was a shrouded with his shame for a moment. Then he looked up and answered Gylain’s former chief guard. “I pay my penance and I do not complain. For this fate is mine by choice.”

“We both see the errors of our past,” Leggitt said as an apology. “Yet let us remember it no more.

Perhaps we will escape and atone for it, but lift your countenance, for the past is gone, and will come no more."

"If it were not gone, would it be the past?" de Garcia's answered. "Yet the eyes of Nicholas Montague are never passed. There is no escape."

"Where there's a will, there's a way," the red-haired youth said, "And I will escape this evening, alone or with you two at my side."

"You bleed the exuberance of youth," de Garcia said. "Still, you do not look like a criminal. How is it that you join us here, for we are but the swine of the people. What crime of hatred have you committed?"

"Hatred is not a punished crime where I am from; only to love, truly and freely. For that I am condemned." The young man's lips pressed together tightly.

"A lover's angst," de Garcia said. "But do you have any more reason to weep than the other broken-hearted children of the world?"

"If I am a child, than you are an old man."

"I do not deny it," the Spaniard laughed quietly as he rowed. A moment later, he went on, "I am called de Garcia."

"I am not deaf."

"Hearing is not understanding. Will you not introduce yourself?"

"I am Patrick McConnell, an English peasant."

"Indeed? I have heard more," Leggitt said from the row in front of them. "But the pleasure is mine, of course."

"What of our escape, then?" asked Patrick McConnell.

"I will make no attempt to disguise myself," Leggitt answered. "Until yesterday I was the captain of Gylain's guards. It was I who planned the layout of this vessel."

Patrick trembled. "Then you are here to spy for the beasts of power?"

"I do not know why he is here," de Garcia said gravely, "But I was for nine years a prisoner in the castle dungeons, under the authority of a man named Leggitt. I was in the trenches, in the second lowest level. I was starved and beaten without mercy. Though I had deserted to Gylain and the Montague brothers, and betrayed my comrades to them, my only rewarded was torture. It was only this Leggitt that eased my sufferings, and kept the guards from killing me. I have not forgotten the table scraps I was brought, nor the ale to soothe my madness. If you lead us in escape, Leggitt, I will follow."

Leggitt turned completely forward and rowed with vigor, as if to disguise the tremors of emotion that shook through him. "If a devil gives some small reprieve, is he not still a devil?" he whispered to himself.

Aloud, he said, "All the chains which Gylain employs use the same variety of lock. To each of the lesser guards there is given a key which will open only a certain group of locks; but to the master guards --

Gylain, the Montague brothers, and myself -- is given the master key, which opens them all. When I realized the rebels would escape the castle, I hid the master key upon my person, knowing the fierce anger of my master. I have it with me." At this point an iron key -- no more than three inches long -- was slid under the benches to de Garcia, who retrieved it from the floor without altering his rowing rhythm.

"Very good, Leggitt."

"Unlatch your fetters, but do not open them. When we reach Bordeaux, and the main body departs, we will slip away between the watches. I have a friend who will give us supplies and send us on our way."

"A friend from Gylain's service?"

"Yes, but I can fool him. I can continue the charade."

"And if he reports us to the authorities?"

"Gylain is quick to anger, but quicker to wisdom. Do you think I was arrested without cause?" Leggitt asked in a whisper.

"What? Do you mean that you were--"

"Yes, it is as you say. Long live the King of Attila!"

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

In the harbor at Bordeaux, the sea was mild. The water was a cloudy green, with little humps of waves jostling between the ships and the docks. Overhead, the sky was open and sharply blue, with wispy holes here and there that gave a glimpse of the great whiteness beyond. Though there were many ships about the harbor, one in particular rose above the others. It was a Romanesque trireme, flying the colors of Gylain -- the colors of the beast, as the French said. The ship had three masts, each with as many sails; but at this time they were tied down, as it was moored with both port and starboard anchors.

Its only visible crew were a half dozen soldiers lounging on the deck, and they gave little attention to the harbor around them. Three played a game of tittle-fritz, and the others sat on the stern deck, enjoying the serenity of the scene. Despite their easy ways, each was fully uniformed. Their breastplates were of iron, and covered only their mid-sections. Their arms were covered with a ring mail sleeve stretched over a leather jerkin. Their upper legs wore greaves similar to their breastplates, and their lower legs wore leather and ring mail similar to their arms. The sides of their helmets came to their shoulders, but were open in the front. A single plume came out of the top, but it was nothing more than a small hole in the helmet, through which the soldier's own hair was taken up.

"This station is not so bad as I had feared," one of the lounging soldiers said to his companions. "I worried Montague would take me to my death, but without him there is only life," and he sipped the wine he held in his hand.

"No death, perhaps, but neither a chance for honor. Will we not waste away to mere guardsmen,

without the chance for battle? Soldiers grow with blood, not wine!” He clenched his fist and spit at the sun. But breeze from the ocean was too strong, and his spit was blown against his comrade’s helmet.

“To Hades with your bloody honor,” grumbled the soldier, and he wiped his helmet.

“Do not mock Hades,” a third soldier said, “For you are his spitting image.”

The two laughed at the disgraced.

“Laugh if you will, but I would rather my head were hit by a crude spit, than by a shafted spit upon the archer’s bow.” He snarled and rose to go below.

“Wait, Rebus,” said the first, “You need not go in anger, for I did not mean to spit on you. But as I did, it was better to laugh than to remember the reason for my anger.”

“I would have done the same, but I am in a wretched mood.”

“Then drink to happiness,” Petros answered. “What is your burden?”

“I am payed to murder and oppress my countrymen. Is that not reason enough?”

“But that is duty, and duty needs no reason.”

“None is given,” Rebus laughed. “But if it is our duty, to whom are we beholden?”

“Our commander.”

“But who does he serve, when he orders us to kill?”

“Gylain, the King of Atilta.”

“Still, Petros, who does Gylain serve? Who is it that I serve by proxy? If it is my duty, and it is not wrong because I am commanded; and if it is not wrong for my commander because he himself does not kill, then with whom does the circle commence?”

“It begins with Gylain, and it ends with Gylain,” said a stern voice behind them. The soldiers turned and saw Vladimir, their commander. “Do not question, for that is not your duty. You are to serve your country without doubting, without emotion. Go, relieve the guards at the rowing blocks.”

“Yes, sir!” the three soldiers chorused as they stood and saluted Vladimir. Then they hurried below deck, leaving the commander alone on the stern of the ship.

When they were out of sight, Vladimir sighed to himself. “Duty! Am I truly so deceived? No, but each of us knows whom Gylain serves, and whom we each serve by proxy.” He paused. “Yet I fear Gylain more than him, for at least he does not disobey God.” With that his eyes changed into a soldier’s eyes: a mirror that lets no weakness escape.

Meanwhile, below deck, the three prisoners were preparing their escape.

“When the watch changes, we will slip away,” Patrick said.

“Is that all?” Leggitt laughed.

“They will not expect an attack, and we have only to gain the city streets to be free. There is a row boat on the port side, adjacent to the stairs. We can take it to the shore without those above deck seeing us.”

“Your eyes are sharp,” de Garcia said, “For the boat escaped my notice.”

“You are old, but I am young.”

“So you see: youth is an unpleasant commodity, for it is gone before its true value is known.”

“Yet life is contrary to young and old alike,” Patrick compressed his mouth.

“At times, perhaps, but there are as many joys as sorrows. Have you never seen a French woman?”

“I have not, but I do not ail because of it.”

“So you think, though you have never seen one. Let us hope God is not so cruel as to let you die before you have tasted the fruits of Eden.” He paused and looked to the ceiling, but kept his rowing rhythm. “I, myself, am too old for those things. For a thing is only a pleasure while it is new, and to an old man there is nothing new under the sun. But twenty years ago, when I was renowned for my swordsmanship,” de Garcia laughed and did not finish.

“Be silent, old fool,” Leggitt joined him. “When did you become a connoisseur of women? When did you last make love to anything but the stray hairs of your beard?”

“Bah!” Patrick scowled and ceased their merriment. “A woman is but a serpent: a faithless merchant who buys from all and sells to none. I will have none of them.”

“Your Hibernian women, perhaps, but not the French.”

“All women,” he stood and charged the front of the room.

The guards had just left to call the next watch, and there was no one to stop Patrick at the moment. Leggitt and de Garcia were right behind him, but neither stopped to unchain the other prisoners. Instead, they dashed into an armory that was just outside the room, on the hallway that led to the stairs. They each grabbed a halberd and waited within the room, ready to ambush the soldiers, who could not see into the small armory until they were passed it.

“Am I no more than a beast, that it is my duty to kill without thought?” one of the soldiers was saying. “But what choice is there?”

“None,” another answered, “For duty is duty: it is to be done.”

“Yet it will bring my death. I can feel it coming, growing stronger even as we walk,” Rebus said.

“Feelings lie, though you will die sometime,” Petros laughed with a soldier’s guffaw.

“You have such bravado now, Petros, but will you when the time comes?”

“Am I a diviner, that I can tell the future? Death is death, I say. Let it come.”

As he spoke, they crossed the threshold of the armory door. Rebus came first, then Petros and a third guard. As his helmet passed by, de Garcia swung his halberd down hard upon him. The knob on the bottom passed through the small hole in the helmet, and Rebus fell silently to the ground. The next instant Leggitt did the same to Petros, and Patrick to the third soldier.

"Come," Patrick was the first out of the room and up the stairs. He turned when he was half way to the top, and looked at de Garcia, who still stood at the armory door. "What keeps you?" he asked.

"I was thinking how easily we kill. I have been a man of the sword since my childhood, and death is nothing to me. Still, I wonder that I feel nothing whatsoever."

"You are a man of wisdom," Leggitt said, "For when death is inevitable, it is best if it is not your own."

"Inevitable?" de Garcia smiled.

Patrick turned to the stairs once more. "To Hades with fate," he said when his back was turned. "But at least it was nother."

"Who is she?"

"She is no one. Not to me; not any more," and Patrick leapt up the stairs, this time followed by the two others.

The stairs were beside the wall of the command deck and the port stern, and a bulkhead screened it from the forward sections of the ship. There was, therefore, an open path to the rowboat. Patrick jumped into it, and in a moment they were rowing furiously toward the shore. The soldiers did not see them, and it was not until the third watch went down that their escape was discovered.

Before them lay the harbor city of Bordeaux, then in its prime. Unlike Eden, it was not arranged according to any general plan, but had sprung up according to chance. The streets were narrow, and the buildings often only a few feet apart. The architecture was not trite, though it seemed so when compared to that of Eden. The buildings were mostly of brick or rough stone, and the poor houses of wood. The roofs were flat with an open space on top, forming a small porch. The wealth of a man added to the height of his house, and therefore to the position his upper deck took in proportion to the others: the upper, middle, and lower classes.

The streets were crowded with citizens, and even if they had been pursued they could have easily disappeared into the tumult. Patrick led them in the rowboat and onto shore. From the docks they had to pass through a long customs house, and it was there that Leggitt took the lead. He passed the soldiers with a confident wave, and the young officer on duty did not stop to question him.

"He is well-received, indeed," Patrick whispered to de Garcia.

"Yes, but do not worry, for we are in France. Gylain has no power here, and Leggitt is wise enough to choose where we will seek refuge." Then, to Leggitt, he continued, "Where will you take us, friend?"

"To the home of an acquaintance. He is a man of power, who can supply us as we need; but he is not powerful enough to know of our situation."

"He served Gylain with you?" Patrick asked.

“No, for he is Hibernian.”

Patrick’s face clouded over. “Indeed? A man of authority?”

“Somewhat, but all authority is under another. His position would mean little to an English peasant, as you claim to be.”

“Let us not feud,” de Garcia broke in, “Will peace leave us suspicious, where slavery left us amiable?”

“You are right,” Leggitt said, and his face was impermeable. “I do not suspect Patrick -- how could a man of my background? But having been so long in a position of authority under Gylain, I have heard many things in connection with the name Patrick McConnell. To tell the truth, I had a great respect for your actions.” He paused, then continued with a sigh. “Your conscience led you to action, while mine led me to treason, to spying.”

Patrick sighed as well, “My conscience did not lead me, but my heart and my pride.”

“You both speak riddles in my ear,” de Garcia said, “For I have been imprisoned these last nine years, and when I last walked free Patrick was but a boy. Who are you?”

“No one,” he replied. “I have been a lover and a warrior, and now I am an exile.”

“Then you are not unlike me, for my youth was spent in passion as well.”

“And strength,” Leggitt answered. “You underestimate my memory, de Garcia, if you think I do not remember your martial greatness. I am a man of the sword, and I cannot but honor your skill with one.”

De Garcia sighed and looked to the sky. “It is my turn to be ashamed,” he said. “For skill with the sword is an unfortunate talent.”

With that, the three men fell silent, unable to escape their memories as easily as they had escaped their prison. Such is the way of life.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

“Silence, there! Do you think it is for pleasure that we take this journey, gentlemen?” Nicholas Montague asked, coming into a small clearing with his measured stride unhindered by the undergrowth. Six men were sitting on a fallen tree and grumbling amongst themselves, but as he came into the clearing they stood at attention. They were heavily armed, and dressed in the uniform of Gylain’s Elite Guards.

“Have you grown tired already?” Montague continued in a more subdued voice.

“Sir,” trembled a man with a gold band around his chest, the officer under Montague, “Sir, can we not take the roads? We,” he nodded to the others, “Are not as familiar with the wilderness as you seem to be.”

“You are Atiltian, are you not?” The officer nodded his head nervously, and Montague continued. “Did you never leave the city walls?”

“No, sir, we were stationed near the Floatings.”

“I see,” Montague said slowly, his thoughts masked. “Thus it is that Gylain’s best, whom he hand-picked to attend me, have never traveled in the forest?”

“We were not trained for it, sir,” the officer ventured.

Montague interrupted him. “I see that, and the only remedy is to train you now.” The officer winced slightly, which Nicholas saw, though he looked into the forest beside them as he spoke. “Prepare yourselves, men!” he cried of a sudden. “We will march until the dawn comes; then we will march until the night comes; then we will march until one of you falters, and only then will we stop, as I beat him to death.”

Nicholas began to march even as he spoke, and the soldiers came close behind. They were several days from the Cervenues Mountains, since they did not follow the roads. Yet as they marched, a river could be heard a few yards to their right, though the thick undergrowth kept it from view. Montague strode through it in his armor as if he walked a paved lane, and the soldiers had to run to keep pace with him. But before they had gone ten minutes, a man came running up behind them.

“My lord!” he called.

Montague turned to him, his face composed. “What is it, soldier?”

“A message from Vladimir, my lord.”

“Which is?” and Montague fingered his sword.

“McConnell, Leggitt, and de Garcia have escaped.”

“Indeed?” and he grasped his sword. He paused. “Tell me, are you married?”

“I serve Gylain, not the bosom.”

“That is well. For there will be none to mourn you here,” and Montague drew his blade, thrusting it into the unsuspecting soldier.

“That is the price of failure,” he turned to the others. “You would do best to succeed.”

Meanwhile, the three escaped prisoners walked the crowded streets of Bordeaux: Leggitt on the right, de Garcia on the left, and Patrick in the middle. On either side the simple buildings crowded over the road, and little space was left for pedestrians. Still, the passers-by made room for the three men to pass, for they had the carriage of warriors.

“You should reconsider your disgust of women, Patrick,” said de Garcia. “They are fickle, perhaps, but that is their charm.”

“A charm for some,” replied the latter, “But can one love the dust, which is thrown about with every gust

of wind?"

Leggitt smiled, "I feel the airs of a rejected man."

"Rejected, betrayed -- does it matter?"

"Not in time, and you are young," de Garcia looked into the sky. "When I was young, I was the same."

"As was I," Leggitt said, "But for now, there is the house we seek."

He pointed to a large mansion that stood in the crossroads of two city squares. It was made of stone -- in large, rectangular blocks that grew smaller as they rose higher -- and surrounded by a thick garden that wrapped around it. The second story roof tapered into a tower: it was as broad as the house itself at first, but as it rose it tunneled into a single, round tower. A figure could be seen looking out of the tower, but only Patrick was able to see it. He stumbled and came to a stop in the center of the lane, until de Garcia turned to him with a questioning look. Then he mumbled something incoherent, and ran up to the others. But his face remained dazed, as if he had been struck on the cheek.

In a moment, they reached the house. Leggitt led them through the dense garden -- cultivated to separate the mansion from the lane -- and up a flight of stairs to a doorway that stood ten feet from the ground. He knocked three times, and the door was opened by a servant.

"Yes, monsieur?" he said, and his graying eyebrows rose slightly.

"I am searching for the Chevalier de Braunign, de Casanova."

Patrick's face lost what little color it had, and he stepped back faintly, hiding behind de Garcia.

"This is his residence," the servant said, "But he is not in Bordeaux at the moment."

"Yes, he is," answered Leggitt, and his eyes flashed with impatience.

"No, sir, he is not. I must remind you that I am his butler, not yourself."

A voice from the inner hallway interrupted him. "Brovil, what is the matter?"

A moment later another man appeared in the doorway, and the servant stepped aside. A column blocked de Garcia's face from his eyes, and Patrick was hidden behind de Garcia.

"Leggitt," he said, "I did not know you were in France. Gylain is indeed busy, if he has both you and Nicholas Montague here." He paused. "The King of Hibernia knows nothing of your missions, however, and I was surprised when Montague did not stop to debrief me."

"His mission was too urgent. I was sent for that purpose, de Casanova," he gave the man a close look, and it was returned with double intensity.

After a pause, the man replied, "Very well, come in." He disappeared into the house, and beckoned them to follow him, though in his haste he did look at either de Garcia or Patrick.

Leggitt and de Garcia entered behind de Casanova, but Patrick hesitated for a moment on the threshold. He looked at the tower and whispered to himself.

“I will have my revenge!”

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

The inside of the mansion was as imposing as the outside, and it was entirely isolated from the bustle of the city beyond its walls. The door opened into a spacious hall, floored with finely-polished mahogany boards and walled with a white plaster; a table stood in the center of the room, with two large volumes and a quill pen upon it. Besides this, the room was elegantly bare. The hall was rounded, reaching its apex in the center of the room some fifteen feet from the ground. The walls came down in a sharp, parabolic angle, and extended inward three feet from the ground, creating a shelf that wrapped around the interior. It was only broken by three round corridors, each with a doorway inside, some ten feet down. Only the first was open, and a glass room could be seen through it, overlooking the garden.

De Casanova led them directly through the open passage, without turning to see the two men who walked behind Leggitt. He was a tall man, and he carried himself with authority. His hair was short and uncombed, but kept in the perfect position by some unknown force. His face was long and narrow, and this appearance was enhanced by his beard, which was, in fact, no beard at all. Rather, the area of his face around his mouth and chin was carefully shaven, while a beard of sorts grew from the bottom of his ears to his cheeks. This rendered his appearance two-fold: from a straight angle, the side-beard or side-burns made his face seem altogether narrow, and his nose the same; from the side, however, his face seemed wide, and his nose long. These two faces were only connected by his pine-tree eyes, sharp and of the darkest green.

“I did not expect you, Leggitt,” he said, still walking before them with his back to de Garcia and Patrick.

De Garcia walked cautiously, keeping his eyes about him and fingering the dagger he had taken from the armory. Patrick boiled, and his face grew more heated with every step, as he stared upwards -- as if his sharp eyes could pierce the ceiling.

“It is of no matter, for we will only stay a moment. I am to join Nicholas immediately, but as we left in such haste, we must ask for your support.”

“In gold?”

“Indeed -- we must be supplied.”

“Of course; but tell me, when did Nicholas return? I had not heard.”

“It was only days ago.”

De Casanova turned as he reached the table, and found himself face to face with de Garcia. Leggitt closed his mouth, as if any further attempt at deception was impossible.

“De Garcia!” he cried, stepping back against the glass wall, and drawing the longsword from his belt.

The untrimmed Spaniard stepped forward, dagger in hand. "So it is -- surrender or be slain."

"He is mine," Patrick cried from behind de Garcia, and he thrust him aside and onto the floor in his passion. "The Hound of Hibernia is my own prey, de Garcia!"

"Foolish youth!" de Casanova laughed. He raised his wrist and dashed forward at Patrick with his sword extended.

Patrick rolled to the side, and stood as de Casanova charged passed. There was a suit of armor beside him, standing in the well-shaped corner. With hardly a glance, his hand shot down and disarmed the statue, taking the sword for himself.

"Where is she?" and he jumped forward, putting himself before de Casanova, who had returned from his overzealous charge. "I will have her; as surely as I will have your throat."

Patrick lunged forward at the stately de Casanova, and gave him a sharp downward blow. But the other caught it firmly on his own blade, and discarded Patrick's sword with a quick turn of the wrist. Leggitt and de Garcia stood to the side, unable to help for the moment for lack of swords, though they searched around them for blades of their own. De Casanova smiled slyly and laughed at Patrick, hoping to anger him to rashness before his friends could deliver him.

"Miserable youth!" he said. "She left you of her own accord."

"If so, then you have but to let her answer for herself."

"She does not deserve the pain which your sight will cause her. She has memories."

"As do I."

Their parrying stopped, and they stood still for a moment, staring at each other: with contempt for the other and passion for the mysterious woman. Then de Casanova came forward and knocked Patrick's blade aside. The youth laughed and returned the blow with double force, his feet shuffling forward and his hand resting loosely at his side. He burst forward with a series of successive blows, and with each one de Casanova was forced back, until he came against the windowed wall.

"Now will you bring out Lydia, you jailer of the innocent?" asked the heated Englishman.

"No," and de Casanova returned Patrick's advance blow for blow until they reached the opposing wall, and it was Patrick who found himself caught.

"Now," continued de Casanova, "Will you withdraw your accusations against my honor?"

"That is not possible, as you have no honor," Patrick cried, parrying his opponent's blow.

De Casanova had barely recovered, when Patrick struck him again. Yet this time de Casanova dodged by jumping to the left and kicking a chair toward Patrick. The latter stumbled, and only raised his sword again in time to stop de Casanova's fierce blow to his head.

Until this point, Leggitt and de Garcia were only spectators, unable to assist their friend due to a lack of arms. As he searched for something to use as a weapon, Leggitt happened to glance out the window into the garden, which was bounded by the streets of Bordeaux on two sides, and a row of houses on the

third. He saw a party of soldiers coming up the street, hurrying to the house of de Casanova. Leggitt grabbed de Garcia's arm and nodded toward the soldiers.

"Am I blind, or is that Vladimir?" he asked.

De Garcia looked for a second, then he fell back and cried out, "It is -- he comes to report to de Casanova."

"The rouse is played," Leggitt said.

"And we must vanish," and de Garcia leapt forward into the battle, grabbing the shield from the suit of armor and bashing de Casanova against the glass wall. He crashed through and was knocked unconscious by the fall. While the noise of the crash did not attract the attention of Vladimir and his soldiers, they still came toward the house at a double march.

"Come, follow me," shouted Patrick, and he rushed out of the room. The others followed.

They passed through the round corridor and into the entry hall again, where the butler was just coming in as well, from the left passage. Patrick grabbed him by the collar and demanded, "Where is she?"

The butler was too overcome by surprise to answer, or else too witty to be taken easily. Either way he did not answer, and Patrick, in his haste, knocked him upside the head with the broad side of his purloined sword. He fell in a swoon, and the zealous Englishman leapt over his body, running down the corridor the butler had come from. It went ten feet before it ended into three doorways, one in front, and one to either side. Patrick first went forward, but as the door opened there was only a dressing chamber beyond. So he took the leftward door, behind which was a steep stairway leading to the second floor. Patrick was halfway up the stairs before Leggitt was upon them at all, and only de Garcia delayed to bar the door, which he did with a plank from the stairway. As he did, the soldiers outside could be heard knocking at the door.

"Hurry," de Garcia yelled forward, "They are here!"

Those words -- however intended -- could not give Patrick any greater haste, for by this time he was at the top of the stairs and furiously kicking the door down. The second floor was a single room, beginning as an open chamber and quickly tapering into a narrow spire. There were three vertical divisions of the room, each open to those below by a circular hole in the center. Through these holes the trap door that led to the tower could be seen. That was the highest room of the tower, and was entirely closed off from the lower divisions.

Patrick paused for a moment to wait for his companions, then the three men climbed the ladder that connected the divisions or sub-floors. After a moment, they were underneath the trap door. Patrick -- full of ardor -- pushed a table underneath it, then jumped up and began to push, for it was locked from the inside.

"This door will not be opened," said a sweet, feminine voice from above, "Not to you or your filthy master, the king."

"Lydia!" Patrick cried "It is I!"

"Patrick! Have you burned your way through France as well?"

"I would burn my way through Hades, my love. But open, for there are soldiers below."

Lydia did not hesitate, and the trap door was soon removed, opening the passage to the attic. As it was pulled aside, a fair head came down through the opening, searching for Patrick. He was found, and she smiled. Lydia was beauty, a true Hibernian divinity. Her hair was the red of a closed eye looking to the sun, and it fell past her shoulders with a slight curl. Her eyes were mismatched -- one of hazel and the other azure of a dark blue. Her skin was light, almost pale, and her nose was slightly pinched at the end. Her lips projected from her face, but even with their shape were rather small. They were held with a graceful poise.

"Royalty cannot defeat love," she smiled, her hazel eye looking at Patrick. She turned her head, then, and her blue eye came to face him. "Yet without love, royalty is but tyranny," she laughed, and disappeared into the tower.

Patrick leapt up behind her, but turned when he was in and faced his companions. "Come up, it is our way of escape." They came, and when they were in, Patrick continued. "Close the door and seal it," and they obeyed without question.

"Now," he went on when they were done, "Do as I do." He turned to the window and looked out upon the buildings below them. "I think I know how to escape!"

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

The mansion of de Casanova was located at an intersection between three roads, about a mile from the harbor. The harbor itself was segregated from the rest of the city by a row of buildings, the walls of which served as fences or barriers. These surrounded the entire harbor, pushing outward until culminating in the customs house: the only thoroughfare between the harbor and the upper city, as it was called. From the customs house, one main road led to the upper city, and split when it reached the outskirts of the palace district. De Casanova's mansion sat right in this branch, and thereby overlooked all who came and went from Bordeaux, via the ocean. It was for this reason that de Casanova -- an agent of the Hibernian King -- kept a place in Bordeaux. For during the season that the king spent there, he could spy without discomfort.

The mansion was surrounded on all sides by a garden, and beyond that by two rows of houses. Its second floor tapered as it grew taller, until it became the single tower in which they were now trapped. Because of the taper, it was not a perpendicular fall from the tower, but a forty-five degree incline. At this time in history, Atilta had been trading with Japan and the Far East for many years. There had been a certain degree of influence on the architecture of Europe therefore, and this mansion was modeled after a pagoda. Its roof was made of a slippery tile from inland China, and its edge bent sharply upward at the edges -- to prevent water from flowing over the side. They were, in effect, ramps the water could not cross.

"I know how to escape," Patrick said. He stood at the window facing the harbor and the houses which bordered the narrow garden. As he spoke, he pulled a wooden panel from the wall, three feet long and two across. It was made of chestnut wood, tempered with alcohol to make it tender and bendable -- for the wind charged in from the harbor, and the tower was designed to give way without breaking. "Do as I

do,” Patrick said.

Lydia turned to him with her blue eye; and while the hazel eye had looked upon him with tenderness, the blue was laced with scorn. “Does the child have an idea?” she asked with a sneer, “Does the poor, innocent child have an idea? Do not delay on my account, young one!” and her blue eye burned, though her hazel eye remained placid.

“The dust blinds my eyes,” he moaned, “But who can save me with their spit, now? Double woman, you will be my undoing! But silence; for we have the devil on our tails, and by God if he does not bite.”

“The devil whose hell you have escaped. Do you think, child, that a poor village boy can overcome the will of the King of Hibernia, and Emperor of the Three Kingdoms? Does he not allow you to defeat him, to make his inevitable victory sweeter by its price?”

“Silence, I said; and I will be obeyed!” Patrick rose up to his full height, as if to threaten her.

“Beat me,” she laughed, “Beat me until I am tempered; for you are a man, and I am but a woman.”

“Could I touch you but in love? No, but do not tempt me.” Patrick became silent, and as he stood there, Leggitt and de Garcia removed panels for themselves and for Lydia.

The latter turned her pale face to Patrick, looking at him through her hazel eye. She spoke in a tender voice, though only in a whisper, “No, you would not hurt me, though I would myself. If I were the devil, you would not refuse me; and if he were God you would not repent. For that I love you, though I have not the strength to show it.”

Patrick smiled at the change he had seen many times before. Then, with hands skilled in carpentry, he removed the window from its frame with a dagger. When the way to the roof was clear, he turned to the others and said, “Do as I do.”

He held the wooden panel in front of his stomach and dove through the window. When he landed on the roof it was below him, and it glided over the slippery tile as if over ice. His momentum multiplied with the incline to bring him speed, and as he neared the upward curve of the roof’s edge, he was going fast enough that he could not stop. Yet he did not want to. The pliable panel curved up the ramp and he was thrown over the garden to the houses beyond, whose flat roofs stood waiting. There was a muffled thud and a slight groan, then he landed safely. The others were right behind him.

“Come,” he said as he stood and turned to leave, “For our enemy pursues.”

Meanwhile, five minutes before this, Vladimir and his soldiers had entered the house. There were six of them with him, mounted and armed heavily. The young officer led them at a feverish pace, as if fleeing the spawn of hell; and indeed Montague was no less, though he did not pursue him at that moment.

“Hurry, men,” he hesitated. “There is no one else but de Casanova, so de Casanova it will be.”

At that moment, they arrived at the door. Vladimir came forward and knocked three times in a heavy fashion. Then he turned and waited, resting his hand on the door handle in his haste. He stood that way for ten seconds, then could bear no more and tried the handle -- albeit with the vain energy of the unexpected. Yet, to his surprise, it turned and opened, revealing the inner scene to him. The butler was prostrate on the floor, and the furnishings disarranged.

"Has de Garcia's wrath been shown here, as well?" he sighed. "It is as they say: the warrior within is never broken." Then, in a louder voice, he called, "De Casanova, what has happened?"

"Damnation!" a voice called from the garden room, and Vladimir and his men ran back to see what was about.

There, laying on the ground beyond the broken window, was de Casanova, in a swoon. Vladimir ran over and pulled him further into the garden, onto a small spread of Spanish moss.

"Awake, friend!" and Vladimir shook him.

"Damnation," the other moaned, rolling to the left.

Vladimir shook him a second time, and he leapt to his feet, in a heavy fever.

"Damnation!" he cried, "They escaped you, Vladimir!"

"Yes," the other lowered his head.

"I am disappointed," de Casanova grew angry. But then, with a press of the lips, he stopped himself and spoke quietly. "Yet look what they have done to me. I did not know Leggitt was among them, and Gylain does not choose his friends without cause; nor his enemies, as we have seen. But look, they are still above us." He picked his sword up from the ground where he had fallen, and put his foot within the garden room. "They will not fly by us again."

As he spoke, Patrick McConnell sailed by overhead, flying on a wooden panel. Neither De Casanova nor Vladimir could speak for a moment, but stood with their heads extended upwards as the others passed over the gap between the houses.

"How quickly I have forgotten," de Casanova said, "The man who ruined the Spanish rebellion, and the man who started the English rebellion together, with Gylain's trusted deputy at their side. But we outnumber them." He placed his sword within its sheath and ran around the narrow garden to the street beyond. The soldiers' horses stood there, tied to a post alongside de Casanova's. "Hurry," he yelled back to those following, "For they will not delay!"

In the meantime, Patrick was leading the others to the next house, whose roof was directly adjacent to the first in the row of houses. They jumped across the narrow gap, and did the same for the next three before they came to the end of the street, just as de Casanova was mounting his horse. A hay wagon happened to be passing by underneath the roof, and Patrick did hesitate as he jumped over the edge and landed squarely in the back, his companions beside him.

"You there, driver," Patrick called out, "Ten crowns if you fly as the wind! To the docks!"

The driver -- a stale old man -- started back in his chair and turned to face them.

"I've lived to see ten kings," he said, "But never ten crowns!" and he spurred the hairy horse until it could go no faster. Even then the cart knocked the passers-by over, as if they were but weeds by the roadside. There was nowhere to run in the narrow streets, but danger is the mother of genius, and poverty the father of the French. None of the peasants were injured.

Meanwhile de Casanova, Vladimir, and the half dozen soldiers were at a full gallop. The pilfered

peasants were looking at the cart to see who had bounced them, and when the soldiers came through everything was upset again. They were slowed by the tumult that followed.

"Through them," shouted the chevalier, "We have larger beasts to slay!" He dug his heels into his horse's flanks, and the beast dove into the crowd. The peasants were thrown aside, though still they saved themselves from harm.

"Death to the king!" some of them shouted, though they hid their faces even as they offered rebellion.

Yet the soldiers took no notice of them -- they were foreign soldiers with a foreign mission. Rather, they followed de Casanova and the escaping cart. Their gallop far surpassed the wagon's, and after a moment the fugitives came into view. They were half way down a long lane of houses that emptied into the customs house, or the port authority's building. It was a long, low rectangle with one end in the docks and one in the city.

"Vladimir," de Casanova called out as they charged, "Take three men and circle around to the other end of the avenue. If we can trap them between us, the battle can begin. So fly -- fly like the anger of a prince, lest it come for you!" And Vladimir did, rushing forward at a deadly speed.

"Our horse is tiring," de Garcia whispered to Patrick and Leggitt, who were looking back at the troop of horseman thundering down the lane.

"Yes, and the promise of money will not motivate that poor beast," Leggitt added, turning around and glancing at the driver. "Are you clever enough to have ten crowns?"

"Clever enough to say so," and Patrick winked his companions, who returned it with a laugh.

"A bad time for joking, children," sneered the blue-eyed Lydia. Then she turned and her hazel visage said, "Yet laughter eases pain. Be glad the old man does not hear." Indeed, the fat-eyed driver leaned forward on his bench and laid a challenge to the customs house, daring it to flee him.

Yet the horsemen were but ten yards away and quickly coming up. The row of buildings continued without a break in either direction, and the customs house blocked the lane in front of them. The only escape was through the building, or through a narrow lane to its right. But for them, neither was open.

"We are trapped!" Leggitt yelled, "They have circled around!"

Vladimir and his men charged through the narrow lane, and came to a stop in front of the customs house. The driver stopped the horse, having no where to turn, and de Casanova and the other soldiers formed a circle around them. There were eight with de Casanova, as opposed to five in the cart, one of whom was an old man and another an unarmed woman.

"I cannot be defeated, Patrick," and de Casanova dismounted and drew his sword, "In love or in war. Come, Lydia, return to my side."

Lydia looked at them, her blue side facing de Casanova and her hazel Patrick. For a time she was silent, as if in deep thought, then she spoke in a hurry: "No, you are mistaken, old man. For I am with Patrick!" Blood charged into her face, and its paleness retreated until it became as livid as her glowing hair. She went to Patrick's side, holding herself with grace of a princess, and sat down upon the hay with as much bearing as if she were a queen returning to her throne.

De Casanova was equally as livid, though from anger rather than love. "So it will be," he whispered hoarsely, "I send you to death, my love," and he raised his sword to carry out his threat.

But he was stopped by a solemn voice from behind him, from the steps of the customs house. "Silence, there! By whose right do you lift your sword, vagabond? By king or by tyrant? If by the first, I command you to heave away and flee to your den. But if by the second, then I command you to turn your face to me, for I dislike to strike down a man from behind!"

De Casanova spun around, as did his still-mounted soldiers. There, standing between them and the customs house, were four shrouded figures, hidden behind their dark robes. The first was a over six feet tall, and the same in girth. The second was only average in height, but he held himself with the strength of a king. The third was slender and curved, beautiful even when disguised. The forth was short and somewhat stocky, but he held himself with a strange courage. As they looked on, the fourth figure threw off his hood and revealed his face to those before him. Vladimir jumped back, and his horse reared from the terror of its rider. Even the stolid de Casanova stepped backward, raising his drawn sword involuntarily to a defensive position. The figure only laughed.

"I am loyal, without a doubt," it said, "But you are dead!"

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

The sea rolled softly in the breaking dawn, the sun's muffled rays soaking into the swell. The cloud covering was light, and the sky was clear but for a few puffs of white to contrast the soft pinks and oranges of the sunrise. The only sounds were from the creaking timbers of a small cutter with two masts: each with three, loosely drawn sails, in addition to a giant jib that spread from the bowsprit to the quarterdeck.

There were two men on deck, and one on the mizzenmast keeping watch. The first man was average in height, though with a strong frame and noble bearing. His nose was straight and long, his hair thick and black, his eyes a mysterious gray. His companion was lesser in stature and greater in belly, with a chin that had long ago lost its form; his head was as bald as his face. They were enjoying the birth of the new day without speaking, but as it arrived the taller man spoke.

"What has happened in your absence, Vahan?" Willard asked, "For the politics of France holds the fate of Atilta." He was silent for a moment, then went on as if no time had passed. "Look at how quickly things change -- for where I was an animal, I am now a king. I can only question how different the two are. And look, I think of you as an old, trusted friend, though I have only known you a few days."

"Yes, and I think you the same," Vahan's eyes sprung a subtle leak. "After our adventures in the forest, I have become quite fond of you as well. I only wish we did not find ourselves in this horrible mess."

"If we were not in it, perhaps we would not have found ourselves at all. But listen: what is this foreboding that has overtaken you? Since our escape from Castle Plantagenet you have been taciturn, and keep to yourself, even at the council; though I realize there were many ears there, and half as many mouths."

Vahan sighed. "I have been surmising evil for my countrymen. These are the times of traitors, and my sovereign is easily swayed by the whispers of his counselors and would-be allies."

"You fear the Chevalier de Casanova, then?"

Vahan Lee almost fell backwards in his surprise at the hearing the name which had long held scepter over his thoughts. "How do you know of him?"

"De Garcia whispered his name in my ear before setting off our catapult. 'Beware de Casanova,' he said, 'For he lurks in the shadows.' Since then I listened, and it chills the marrow in my bones to think such men find favor in the eyes of fate."

"Yet fate is a faithless mistress. He came to France from his master in Hibernia as I left, but there was no time for me to personally see to him. Let us pray the king has not given him his ear." Vahan shivered. He was a different man in French than in Atilta. In the one place, he was the second man of the kingdom and respected by all; in the other he was a hapless noble without authority. And authority makes a man of him who wields it.

"Not ear enough, at least, to betray your journey to Atilta, for Gylain did not know you other than Alfonzo's companion. If he had, it would have gone worse with us. Yet the King of Hibernia -- the Emperor of the Three Kingdoms -- is more to be feared than his servant de Casanova, in political realms."

"Have no fear for politics, for I am now returning to France. Politics is my slave, and I will have him arrested the moment he displays himself. Then I will send a battalion against Montague, to aid you in the quest for the Holy Graal." A shade passed over Vahan's face, and he continued in a whisper. "I fear it is unwise to disturb such sacred places, Willard. There is much power in the hidden places, and much evil to be unleashed. It is for the good of Atilta, perhaps, but it can only harm my native France."

"I am as anxious as you, but we will have to see."

"What of Ivona: do you also fear for her?"

"She is a woman, Vahan. If I did fear, it would be wasted, for where the shoulder cannot push the water can still flow. She would need only to smile, and the devil himself would serve her."

Vahan smiled to himself.

"Haven't you a serious thought, Vahan?"

"I do, I do -- as they say," and he chuckled like an old rabbit.

"Of course," Willard replied. "I will go see to her and Horatio."

"We will soon reach the harbor, for I can see the coast even now. I will send word when we enter."

"Very well." Willard went below deck, leaving Vahan Lee to enjoy the solitude.

Below deck, the cutter was rather spacious -- at least it seemed so, for besides the four passengers there were only four crew. The two cabins were given to the four: one to Willard and Vahan, and the other to Horatio and Ivona. A narrow stairway led down from the deck, and opened into a hallway that

went in either direction: in the front were the crew and cargo, and in the rear the passengers. Willard took the rear hallway -- walking slowly, for it was lit by only a single, swaying lantern -- and when he reached Ivona's cabin, he tapped his finger against it. A deep grunt came from the other side, telling him to enter, and he opened the door to see Horatio standing before him. Horatio gave him a half-human grin and returned to the bed where he was sitting. His time as a monk had somehow imparted to him the demeanor of a monk.

Ivona sat in the corner, reading an ancient leather-bound tome. As Willard entered, she turned to him with a slight smile, her every feature perfectly under her control. Her emerald eyes contrasted with her midnight hair, and together the two left her face invisible -- though it was lovely, one could not look beyond her eyes. She wore a dark cloak like the others, but it could not hide the charms of her person.

"Have we reached Bordeaux?" she asked as her eyes returned to the tome.

"No, though it is in sight. I came to see if you were well."

"I am, not least because I have rediscovered sleep. It has been too long."

"The ground is not the best of bedfellows," he smiled.

"Have you known any other?" and she laughed, though without reason. Still, beauty cannot be considered foolish, and Willard laughed with her. "However," she continued, "I slept on the ground. Horatio took the bed: it seems you have made a man of him."

"That he enjoyed luxury, or that he put himself first?"

"The former, for I insisted. I have become used to a hard bed, and now it has a certain fondness for me. It is youth and freedom, since it has no boundaries; and it is always new, since no matter which way you lay you will awake somewhere else. Besides, I do not think men are selfish. I have known you, have I not?"

"Am I selfless?"

She looked at him closely. "Do you think otherwise? I have seen you risk death for a man of a day's acquaintance."

"Perhaps I only enjoy the adventure, or make love with death?"

"No," she continued looking at him, "No, for I was there, and I saw. You are the king, and you were then, even before you knew it. You were predestined for your place, as I was to mine."

"Which is?" He paused. "A king must have a queen."

"And you will find one," she returned to her book, though she did not read. "I am betrothed to another king, and he is a jealous God."

They were silent, having reached an impasse in their insinuations which neither dared to confront. Horatio laid on the bed, and Willard took a seat beside him. If the bear bore himself like a man, Willard was still the master and he the beast. Yet even among men, it is the same with kings. After a moment, Ivona closed the book and placed it on the table beside her.

"I have heard that there is a certain man in France," she began, "Who we may come across before we return home. What do you know of de Casanova?"

Willard returned to his feet and paced to the side of the cabin. "You have heard of de Casanova, then?"

"Could I not have? I am Lord Milada's daughter."

"And so you know he is in France," Willard hesitated. "I have been warned about him, first by de Garcia, then by Vahan Lee."

"Then let me add my warning," and she lowered her head to hide her face.

"You now what he has done? I have not heard, except that he is the agent of the King of Hibernia, even as the Montague brothers are the agents of Gylain. Beyond that, no one would speak, but rather lower their heads as you have done, and assure me he is debased."

"Does that not suffice?"

"Not for a king."

Ivona's lip trembled slightly, and even her composure could not keep a tear from escaping her eyes and fleeing down her cheek. "He did many things in Hibernia."

"But I am not Hibernian," Willard insisted. "I have heard that he helped Gylain in the revolt, but beyond that I cannot gather. I should know, if I am to come across him."

"He is the man who planned the murder of my mother." She trembled, not in wrath but in terror -- in fear of the terrible punishment that God would inflict on him. Such was her compassion.

Willard put his hand on her shoulder. It was not the touch of a friend or of a lover, but of a king. She raised her head again, and continued her story:

"When Gylain took power, the king's loyal followers were assassinated or weakened. My father was too powerful to be harmed personally, but my mother was away when news of the revolt came. De Casanova saw his chance, and had a great warrior sent to dispatch her. When my father heard what had happened, he broke and did as Gylain wanted. We retreated to the Western Marches, given us by Gylain as a haven, far from the center of power. But look at us, Willard: for you comfort me for the loss of my mother, while you lost both parents in the same insurrection. Does no one comfort you?"

"I am the king," he answered. "There is no comfort for a king."

"I would comfort you," she whispered, without realizing what she said. When she heard herself, she grabbed the book and pretended to read. But she could not; she was trembling that she said what she had not wanted to say. "I will follow only God," she whispered, as if she could sermonize herself to piety. "The love of men is not what I desire."

Willard, meanwhile, stood by with a closed countenance. She looked up, and for a moment their eyes held a secret rendezvous.

"As a friend," she said in monotone, "As a friend; I could not love a man."

At that moment, Vahan Lee entered.

“We have arrived, my friends,” he said. “Do not doubt my loyalty to Atilta, your majesty, for what I keep to myself I do only for your best interest. It is better that you be unknown in France, or else everyone will know of your journey to the Cervennes mountains. Above all, court politics could be hindered if you did not see the king first, yet you have no time to see him. So we must keep your identity from being known. As for the court, I will handle them.”

“You have served us well in this,” Willard said, “And your advice will be heeded.”

With that, the party went above deck. The sun was now full in the sky, and the waters within the harbor were smooth. Triremes and galleons -- after both the Phoenician and Roman models -- filled the docks, and their small cutter received little attention. Vahan led them to a longboat that was prepared for their departure and in five minutes they were ashore, landing opposite a long, low building with an entrance in both the harbor and the city. It was the customs house.

“We are safe in France,” Vahan said, “But Bordeaux is still dangerous. Are you armed?”

“I have the sword of my fathers at my side, and their armor beneath my cloak,” said Willard, and he lifted his hood to show the gold helmet that covered his head.

“I have my bow and arrows,” Ivona said. “I need nothing more.”

Horatio growled lowly and showed his gigantic claws.

“Then we depart.”

With that, they entered the building. Barrels and crates lined the walls, and merchants were set up in small booths to deal in pre-customs merchandise: some had fish, others jewelery, and another wines -- or honey of grapes. It only differed from other markets of the day in that it was deathly silent.

Vahan passed the merchants without stopping and went directly to a great desk in the center of the room, fifty yards from either door. A stuffy young magistrate sat behind it, wearing an abominable, bureaucratic wig. He, himself, seemed an interesting man. But his job required a pedantic, inhuman veneer, so he made himself inhuman.

“Vahanlee, sir,” he bowed, “You have returned.”

“I have, Carleton, and these are my companions.”

“You can pass, sir.”

“Good day, then, Carleton.”

“Same to you, your highness.”

Vahan walked gracefully forward, indwelled with the superiority of his importance. He continued silently until they reached the far door, when he turned to them and spoke in a confidential voice:

“I will get you whatever you need for the journey: men or supplies -- nothing is beyond my reach. And I will have it by dawn tomorrow. Fear not, for France is mine.”

Without waiting for their reply, Vahan opened the door and led them into the city. But they did not go far, for there -- standing in a ring before them -- were de Casanova, Vladimir, Leggitt, de Garcia, and a half dozen mounted soldiers.

"We are betrayed!" Vahan whispered, "De Garcia is against us!"

Then -- in his deep, kingly voice -- Willard spoke: "Silence, there! By whose right do you lift your sword, vagabond? By king or by tyrant? If by the first, I command you to heave away and flee to your den. But if by the second, then I command you to turn your face to me, for I dislike to strike down a man from behind!"

It was as if the riders had not expected them, for Vladimir's horse reared in fright and even de Casanova fell back. De Garcia and Leggitt, however, seemed to take courage at their arrival, and drew their swords with a spirited relish.

"Forgive me," Vahan whispered, "I spoke before I saw, and that is a sin in politics."

He did not hesitate, but threw off his hood and stepped forward, laughing at de Casanova.

"I am loyal, without a doubt," he said, "But you are dead!"

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

For an instant, de Casanova could not move. He stood there in a stasis, and raised his sword to a defensive position. Then, in the next instant, he regained his composure and bravado, and by his example his men did the same. He leapt forward with his sword above his head and struck at Willard. Yet before the blow had fallen, Willard had also drawn his sword, and held it above him at an upward angle. The blow dispersed into his tree-like arm, and he stepped forward to thrust his sword at his undefended adversary. De Casanova recovered his blade enough to knock the thrust aside, but in his haste he hit it downwards and it pierced into his leg. He fell back several strides from the others and awaited Willard's advance in a crouching position.

Willard rushed him with a calm fury -- zealous in his swing, yet cautious in his stride. Their swords met above their heads and they grappled for moment. Neither could force the other down, but de Casanova surrendered the match by using his sword to kick himself into Willard, who stumbled. And though it took de Casanova a moment to recall himself from his forward momentum, it took Willard longer to raise himself from the ground. While he held the advantage, therefore, de Casanova fell upon Willard with a series of down swings, made stronger by his anger at being surprised. Yet Willard was as stalwart as the trees of his youth. As de Casanova loaded him with vicious downward swings, Willard skillfully caught his blade and diverted it to the ground without weakening himself. After ten such blows, de Casanova grew weary.

Willard leapt up as de Casanova slowed, and rolled to his right. The other's blade plowed forward into the open air, and could not be stopped until it ran into the ground. Willard, meanwhile, came up behind him and held his sword to the back of his neck.

“So you see,” Willard said, “The side of right prevails.”

“Perhaps,” returned the other, “But I am not always in the wrong.”

“You have done many things, I am told.”

“But what have you seen? A wise man does not judge without witnesses.”

“Yet I do not claim to be wise. Still, have you not attacked de Garcia, my comrade?”

De Casanova laughed and looked to the others, who were still engaged in a thick melee. The ringing of blades was such that their conversation could not be overheard.

“De Garcia, your comrade?” he asked with an innocent, unaffected laugh. “I must confess, until you came forward there was no battle, and I thought him my comrade.”

Willard hesitated, “Is Leggitt your comrade as well?”

“I thought so, but enemies will be friends, and friends will be enemies.”

“You speak in riddles.”

“Only to those who refuse the truth,” said de Casanova, having only a vague understanding of what had taken place in Castle Plantagenet.

“Go on.”

“Would Gylain let you escape only to plant a spy in your midst?”

“For little purpose, since he was not with us,” Willard said. “De Garcia left Atilta as Gylain’s prisoner.”

“Convincing evidence, to be sure,” and de Casanova pretended to be confused. “I never thought Gylain to be a merciful man, and to let live those who thwart him as de Garcia has.”

“And you, I suppose, are merciful? I have heard of Lady Milada’s murder.”

“We have all heard many things, I am sure,” de Casanova smiled. “Did you not hear who carried out the murder?”

“No, only that it was of your devising.”

“Then I will not be the one to tell you,” and de Casanova looked at the others who still fought, focusing his eyes on de Garcia. “No, I will not be the one to tell you of your comrades.”

“Very well,” Willard said quietly. He waited, then added, “My friends are still in battle: will you give me your word of honor to stay here, as a conquered man?”

“Of course, my lord.”

“So it will be,” Willard withdrew his sword from de Casanova’s neck. “Be here when I return, and we

will speak more of this.”

Willard turned his back to de Casanova and his face to the battle. The latter, when he was free, crept into the side-street and was seen no more.

The others had been close to defeating the soldiers already, and with Willard’s help the end came at once. Only two of the soldiers were yet alive, along with their commander, Vladimir.

“It is done,” Willard said as he sheathed his sword.

“But de Casanova is not,” de Garcia answered.

Willard turned to where he had left his prisoner, but he was not there. He laughed to himself and smiled.

“A strange way to mourn the escape of an enemy,” de Garcia said.

“Perhaps, but it is the return of a friend that I celebrate.”

“Since my redemption I have never left your service, my lord.”

“But de Casanova insisted otherwise; he insinuated things to your dishonor. But he, himself, has now proved the veracity of his claims, and it is he who is the liar.”

“Not every insinuation is a lie, even from a liar’s tongue,” de Garcia hung his head.

“Yet the past will not return. Now, as to Leggitt?”

“The past will not return, my lord.”

“True, and if Leggitt is with us now, I will say no more.”

“He is not only with us now,” Ivona said, “But he was with us before. My father has for many years received secret reports from Leggitt, the head of Gylain’s guards. They have been of the greatest value to the rebellion, and though your service has been unknown until now, Leggitt, I thank you for it nonetheless. You are a valiant man.” She bowed lowly to Leggitt, with such sincerity that the battle-hardened spy felt a foreign emotion, and a tear glided down his terse cheek.

“My life is nothing,” he answered softly, and the others turned their heads in respect.

“We must part at last, Vahan,” Willard said through the silent spell.

“Remember that I am loyal to Atilta as much as to France,” he said. “De Casanova knows of your arrival, however, so you can no longer wait to be equipped. I will send a battalion after Montague -- with orders to take him to the gallows without question -- but you must equip yourself with this,” and he handed Willard a large bag of gold coins. Then, leading the three bound prisoners before him, Vahan Lee entered the customs house.

The peasants who had watched the battle returned to their business, as unmindful of the struggles of their superiors as their superiors were unmindful of them. Still, they would take the tale to heart, and repeat it fervently whenever conversations seemed to lull. During the battle, the cart’s owner had fled, abandoning his possessions for fear of his life. As he went he had snatched the purse of de Casanova, and found that

it contained one hundred crowns -- an immense sum. So he took the money as due compensation and went off to Paris, where he made himself into a wealthy prince.

"We must be off as well," said Willard, as he took the soldier's two remaining horses (the others had fled in the battle, and the old, hairy horse could not move for want of breath) and fastened them to the cart. The wagon's harness was of an ingenious design that allowed it to accommodate either one or two horses. Willard and de Garcia soon had the two horses harnessed, and they mounted the driver's bench when they finished: de Garcia with the reigns and Willard with the watch. The others, meanwhile, had made the wagon itself suitable for a long journey by disposing some of its cargo of hay and installing themselves. With that, they drove off through the crowded streets of Bordeaux: Willard and de Garcia telling each other what had taken place since their escape from Castle Plantagenet, and those in the back doing the same.

"Vahan has left a letter of passage," Willard said later, as he looked through the bag given him by Vahan Lee, "As well as a hundred crowns. Ivona, Horatio, and myself need nothing more, but we must arm you and the others. You are familiar with Bordeaux, are you not?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Then I leave you in charge of the supplies, for I must become acquainted with Leggitt, and this Patrick McConnell, about whom I have heard much and seen little." He handed de Garcia the bag of money.

"You trust me so?" the other asked with rain cloud eyes. "I have betrayed the cause of freedom before."

"The past will not return," and Willard went to the back of the wagon.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

It was now early evening in the Atiltian forest, for the sun had fallen below the treeline, and the remaining light came down like rain. The rebel city was more active than usual, as well as more crowded. In the lower city it was nighttime, and few were out of doors. The horizon became a single, tree-limb mural in the distance, and only scattered violet patches gave evidence of the sky above. Below, the ground could be seen, though its foliage had been transformed into an enchanted jungle, and the trees into its solemn guardians.

In highest branches of the city, however, it was still late afternoon. The Great Goliaths rose several hundred feet above the surrounding trees, and the canopy below spread out like a meadow before them. Its branches wavered in the wind, undulating like green clouds or a groundless grass. The sky could be felt as well as seen, for the upper city reached into the clouds. As the moon and stars began to appear as slight impressions on the horizon, the rebels could reach out and feel the waters of the earthen aquarium flow over their hands. The forest was an ocean of unbroken green; the sky of unerring blue.

Yet it was in the middle city -- the area nearest the tops of the surrounding trees -- that the action was taking place. There the rebels had created a giant framework to stretch between the branches, with nets spread over the top to create individual squares of five square feet. In these squares themellis vine was cultivated: the primary staple of the rebels that both fed them and provided everything from rope to

clothing. But at this time, the framework and its vines were not being used for a strictly agricultural end. Rather, two hundred men were climbing the vines and running across the framework, from one side to the other without any visible purpose.

Back and forth, up and down they went, and if any began to grow slack a rough voice below would cry out, "Up there, man! Gylain will not be defeated by weakness, nor by half-hearted land-lubbers and sea-weeds! Up, and up! Forever upwards!" And the men pushed harder. The commander himself was not exempt from the exercise, but vigorously led the way -- until a young officer called him to the side.

"Admiral," said the thin-lipped, blond haired man, "Admiral, the ropes are prepared."

"Good work, Barnes. Have the men lower them."

"Yes, sir," and Barnes turned and raised his fingers to his lips. A loud, piercing whistle followed, and a moment later two hundred ropes dropped from the branches above. The men grabbed onto them and pulled themselves upward hand by hand, bloody hand. Yet they did not moan as ordinary men would do, for they were fueled by the intensity of their Admiral, and pushed to burning by his constant demand for revenge.

"Casandra will not be forgotten," the Admiral muttered to himself.

"Sir, may I have a word?" interrupted Blaine Griffith, having just returned from a mission in Eden.

"What is it?"

"There is a rumor going about the city, sir: among the spies and soldiers."

"Get on, what is it?"

"They say, sir."

"Forget what they say -- what have you seen?"

"Gylain is mobilizing his army. The city is heavily policed, the rebels are imprisoned, and the scattered fleets are collecting outside the harbor. No ships can pass in or out -- except in Gylain's service -- and the Hibernian fleet is soon expected. It is my belief that he will send troops through the forest to the Western Marches, to make clear a place for the fleet to disembark. He comes to destroy the rebellion, to stop our recent advances with a firm and measured stroke."

The Admiral stood there listening, but a reaction could not be seen on his countenance. "How long until they reach Milada's castle?"

"Five days, at least. The Hibernians have yet to arrive, and the land forces have just set out. There are men positioned to harass their advance throughout the forest, growing stronger as they near our strength. There are over five thousand men marching, though." He paused and the Admiral remained silent. "They say Gylain strikes the rebellion down, knowing Willard to be away. He hopes to scatter us without our king."

"Yet the rebellion did not start with Willard, and so will not end without him." The Admiral turned to watch the men training a few yards to his left. Then, in a whisper, he asked, "How does Gylain know of Willard's absence?" He spoke as though he feared the answer.

“Yesterday, before the city was put under military control, a Hibernian noble came through the Floatings as I was passing by. He was in a great hurry, and his clothes were torn as from battle. I followed him to the castle, and soon after the soldiers shut the gates and the harbor. None can come or go, but through our secret entrance.”

“This man, did you recognize him?”

“I did,” and Blaine grew silent, unwilling to identify the man without an outright order.

“Speak his name.”

“De Casanova!”

The Admiral grew pale. His sea-salt face was too sun-dried to show emotion, but at this moment -- for only an instant -- he was a man who had been overcome. He looked to his feet, and to the ground hundreds of feet below, and was silent. “This is the time,” he said to himself, “The time when freedom must be bought with blood, and revenge with the death of friends. Yet look at me: for I will have it, though it only gives more to be avenged.”

He whistled loudly for the men to stop their exercises, and stood silent as they congregated in the branches around him. Then, after a moment of mental absence, he began speaking to them in a deep and mournful voice:

“Men, this portion of your training has come to an end. But do not rejoice, for that portion which is to come will be only more difficult. It will be war, gentlemen. It will be death and hatred, and revenge and bitterness. It will be what children are taught to abhor, and men to manifest. You will slaughter, and you will be slaughtered; and your enemy will be a man who had done no wrong but to be put into the wrong army. He, himself, is not evil, just as you are not good. But he must be killed because he represents tyranny, and you must kill him because there is no one else to do it. So you will give yourselves to murder, for the purpose of peace. And once you give yourselves to it, you will never again be what you are today. In times of peace, you will remember. In times of love, you will not forget. Gentlemen, from this time forward you are no longer gentlemen -- you are only men.

“Do you desire peace? Do you desire nothing more than tranquility? If a man is wounded in the leg, do they not amputate it to save his life? We are evil men, and evil is within us. To defeat this evil, we must amputate it; and to amputate it we must kill. That is peace, men, when there is no more evil and no more killing. Yet there must be war, and there must be killing -- it is predestined by God that mortals kill each other, even from the first brothers to the last. Therefore, if you will have peace, you must first deplete this reservoir of evil that resides among us. We can only end the fire by burning all that fuels it; and we can only bring peace by killing enough for years and years to come. Even the almighty God cannot forgive without blood.

“Yet what else can we do? For if we do not win this battle, men, our Atilta will be no more; and our forest will sink beneath the weight of its wrongs. If we do not kill our enemy, I say, we will ourselves be killed. So prepare yourselves: for tonight we march!”

The men did not cheer, but fell silent and went away to their homes for a final farewell. In an hour they would return, and the march would begin. Blaine Griffith, however, remained beside the Admiral.

“Where do we march, sir?” he asked.

“To the rebel harbor. Meredith is there, and the fleet will be repaired. Did you see them?”

“In the forest, before the lock down.”

“Indeed,” the Admiral remained stolid. “But we cannot help them. We must go to the Western Marches, to reinforce Alfonzo. You will speed ahead, bringing him this letter and your service: he will need a forest man more than I.” The Admiral wrote for a very short time, using his arm as a desk, such was its hardness. “How many ships do you think Gylain can amass?” He asked after a moment.

“I am no seaman, but it will be more than ours by far.”

“We must have the French!”

“The king will bring them,” Blaine said, and his voice was the voice of faith.

“You are a blessed man among the cursed, Blaine. But I cannot expect him to return within twelve days, if he returns at all. It is simply too much of a journey, regardless of the obstacles.”

“He has beaten the Montagues, Gylain in his own castle, and de Casanova in France. If he has done miracles before, he will do so again.”

“To bring a dead man to life is a miracle, but to bring death to a live man is human nature. And it will take more than either to recover the Holy Graal.” He paused and looked to a dark patch of sky, far above. “Yet he will have help enough. For where de Casanova goes, there is another who follows. I do not know him, but I remember myself, when I was young. Love and lust are as dangerous weapons as they are foes.”

“Of whom do you speak?”

“Of Patrick McConnell!”

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

The night was a hole in the ground. Though the moon was full -- and though it shone clearly and lucidly -- the trees on every side of the meadow blocked its rays as it sank across the horizon. The shadows thus created pulled themselves over the plain and converged in a circle just outside the walls of Milada's castle, covering the town beyond them. Already, the lights were put away, except those from the guard towers and the tallest, central tower. Beyond this, the darkness was not wounded. To the north the waters of Thunder Bay could be seen, lonely in the moonlight.

The silence was destroyed by the sound of a galloping horse, drawing nearer through the forest. At last it emerged into the open plain, and continued its feverish pace until it came into the low, wooden walls of the town. Yet even after this it galloped, until it came upon the very threshold of the castle.

“Who goes there?” a voice came, “Stop or be slain!”

“Tis I! Open at once, Osbert -- I bring word!”

“Blaine? My word, you bring word!” he turned to those below, in the tunnel into which the door opened, “Throw open the doors.” He ran along the parapets and came down the stairs that led to the wall, entering the inner courtyard just as Blaine did, his horse having already been taken. “I will lead you to Alfonzo myself.” Behind, the gates closed with a thud, and the two men walked arm-in-arm to the upper castle, to the lighted tower above.

“Word of what?”

“Do I read the letters I am sent to deliver?”

“No, but do you discover the intelligence to be reported?”

“Perhaps, but I cannot speak it but in Alfonzo’s presence.”

“No doubt.”

By this time, they had reached the second story, as high as the outside stair led. Several guards were posted at the door, but they made way for their superiors to pass. Inside, the walls were of glass -- arranged in small, triangular panels -- and it was evident that several panels on the western side had been recently replaced. Several bookshelves were spread across the room, and the chairs were equipped with miniature dragon heads at the end of each leg. A company of five guards stood around the large pillar in the center of the room, in which were the doors that led to the towers above. Four doors were positioned on each of the cardinal points and made of a strong wood; while a larger, stone door was set in the center, facing the door to the outside stairway. The captain of these guards -- while recognizing Blaine and Osbert -- did not step aside at once.

“We have orders not to disturb their sleep. Lord Milada is not well, you know.”

“Yet their light burns; and we have word.”

“Word!” the captain and his men drew closer, “Of what?”

“We will not know until we deliver it.”

“Ah, the devil! You can pass, but you must let us know if it is about her. We would die if something happened to the angel of the Western Marches.” With that, the soldiers parted and opened the door.

“Of course -- if we can!” and Blaine and Osbert went up the steep staircase beyond. There was a room after twenty stairs, a small armory with another set of guards. Yet they did not question the two, having overheard the conversation below. Osbert rushed by in his hurry, but Blaine stopped and clasped hands with one of them, a gingerbread man whose features were hidden by his helmet. All that could be seen was a blazing red mustache that came out through the gratings in the front.

“Lorenzo! Is that the garb of a church man?”

“No, but I am also a citizen of Atilta. Long live the king!” Lorenzo stood with emotion as he spoke.

“By ginger’s head and beadle’s bread -- I have heard that you have word!” said the other guard, who

had also risen.

“Innkeeper!” cried Blaine “This is an unlikely guard, I admit, but I would not trust anyone more. Are you both away from your occupations?”

“I am laying down the robes for a time,” said Oren Lorenzo. “Not that I am no longer an abbot, mind you, but I am wearing armor, for now.”

“And I have no inn to tend, as my establishment has since met its end” the Innkeeper said.

“Many things have been lost in the struggle for freedom. But I must hurry, for I have word.”

“He has word, indeed!” Osbert called from the stairs above. “Come, Blaine, for we will dine with these fine fellows soon enough -- after the word has been given.”

“I give my word, we will,” Blaine finished as he ran up the stairs.

The two rushed up the stairs as if they were chased by a horde of barbarians, and dashed against the door as Osbert turned the handle. It swung open under the force, and the two men stumbled into the room. The door swung closed by itself. Alfonzo sat at the desk beside the wall, and he stood to greet them. His goatee was well-trimmed, and his cheeks clear from rubble. His hair was out of its usual pony-tail and left to stream down his back and around his face.

“Blaine, you have returned to my side.”

“Sir, I have brought word, from the Admiral,” and Blaine took an unsealed note from his inner pocket and handed it to Alfonzo.

“Have you read it?” Alfonzo asked.

“No, though I know what it contains, as he spoke with me as he wrote it.”

“Yet why did he send you, when a lesser ranger would do?”

“For it was I who brought the intelligence to him, Alfonzo, and you will know further when you read the message.”

Alfonzo turned his face to the note. As his eyes met the words, his face lost its color, though its expression remained unchanged.

Lord Milada -- laying on the bed across the room -- sighed to himself, “Then she has left us! What poor, poor fate! What terrible destiny!” and his limbs wiggled weakly around the bed.

Osbert fell to the ground, overcome with grief.

“No, it is not that,” Alfonzo smiled weakly. “It is something that promises of evil far greater than that; for what you think is a personal tragedy, while this subdues the hearts of all. No, my friends, that is not what this note reveals. Indeed, it contains but two words: De Casanova.”

“De Casanova!” cried Lord Milada from his bed.

He did not finish his thought, but each in the room knew what it was.

“Blaine, the Admiral has sent a verbal message, has he not? There are things which are sealed better with the lips, than the pen.”

“Gylain prepares to attack, and Hibernia is with him,” and Blaine continued to report what he had reported to the Admiral before.

When he was finished, Alfonzo said, “Within five days we will have the whole force of the enemy outside these walls, and only our meager rebellion inside them.” He paused, looking into the darkness beyond the window. “Yet still we can win, so let us prepare. Osbert, Blaine -- there will be no rest for us, now. Summon the officers to the great hall at dawn, for I will lay out our plans then.”

“Yes, sir,” the two chorused, and they left the room to carry out their orders.

“Hold on, you have given your word,” Oren Lorenzo cried as they rushed past him.

“And so we must break it, friend,” Blaine said. “For in five days as many thousand men will march through the forest to our walls, and the navies of two maritime powers will be anchored on the bay, with Gylain and the King of Hibernia at their head!”

“So it has come,” Lorenzo moaned. “The final battle has begun. Yet will the deluge come as well?”

As Blaine and Osbert left, Alfonzo sat down beside Milada. It was the same room in which Milada had been wounded, though it had been rebuilt by the zealous townsfolk. At this time, it was lit by only a flickering lantern, making the stone walls seem a wild man’s cave. The stained-glass window that faced north -- to Thunder Bay -- had been replaced with a clear-paned window, and opened the tower to a view of the surrounding countryside. The lights of the town were out, and in the darkness even the castle below them could not be seen. Instead, the tower seemed to float aloft, towering above the ground like a cloud or a star. Yet though they sat in the heavens, it was not paradise; for Milada’s wound had been slowly destroying him. It was nearly closed on the outside, but on the inside his stomach had been pierced and could not be reclosed by the methods of man.

“Can it be, old friend?” Milada moaned as his arms moved weakly across the surface of the bed. “Can it be, that Atilta has come to the end? De Casanova is here, and his king soon after. The nobles were our only hope, yet they have deserted us; and I am too weak to exhort them.” He was silent for a moment. “And my lovely Ivona! To what have I sent her? She wanted to serve God, and I man; and if she was wrong, I was equally foolish. A woman is a weaker vessel, but what is the strongest vessel, if it holds no water? And Ivona holds wine and honey. She is a weaker vessel, perhaps, but what do we cherish: the crystal cup or the wooden? I have pushed her into something which bodes ill for us all, and above all for her. She will not die, but her innocence will be lost.”

“Will she be guilty, then? One can be both innocent and seasoned. Do not curse yourself, Milada, for she is pure -- and God, in his justice, will reward her in full.”

“God? You are as naive as my daughter, Alfonzo. If God were so mighty and just, would we not but trust in him and be saved? If so, then why do you fight? Look around you, man! Where is the greatness of God? Is he in the children who starve in the villages, or in the broken women who sell their souls to the rich men? Is he in the murderous soldiers who keep the peace (from existing), or in the fat priests who confess all sins but their own? God, you say; but I know of no God.”

Alfonzo smiled, but in pity rather than amusement. "God is in the back of our eyelids. We will not see until we forsake the physical, and draw our sight from another source."

"Yet I am already overdrawn."

"You always will be, on your own account. But I say it is good that de Casanova has come to Atilta, for Willard has sent him running away. Victory is already with us." He paused, then added, "But the diplomat must ask: where is Patrick McConnell? I do not know of his intent, but he has raised the English against their oppressors; and if the nobles are too interested in the current regimes to join us, the peasants will not be. It would be good if he were in France, and if the king befriended him."

"It would grow to be good in the future, you mean, yet we need allies in the present. The yoke of Charlemagne has finally been broken, and Rome no longer rules the seas. Venice is not a military power, and the way is open to freedom. The people will be free, in the end; but will it be worth the price? Is freedom what we think it is? We will see, for the precipice is past and the ground will come whether we desire it or not. When the tide breaks, what will be written in the sands? Nothing, I should think. Therefore, let us forget the philosophical, and spend our energies on the military." Milada sighed. "But our energies must mean your own, for I have none."

"I will not be alone. Blaine is here, and can organize the forest resistance with Osbert's assistance. With a few forest rangers, they can delay Gylain's land force. And with the time gained, Lorenzo and myself will have constructed a fortification to prevent a forced landing. If the fleet cannot land, they cannot besiege the castle. As for the soldiers," Alfonzo continued, "More will come from all across Atilta, as the messengers reach them. Let us hope the entire forest rises up to join us. Even now our blacksmiths are toiling away, night and day, to make weapons for the host. Let us hope there are men to wield them."

"For a man who claims God, you are surprisingly reliant on the instruments of war."

Alfonzo looked out the window for a moment, then replied, "Yes, I am. And even as I am, I know they will not redeem us. Yet I cannot see what will."

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

"Patrick McConnell rescued by Willard Plantagenet? It would be better for you if you lied to me, than if what you have said is true!" Gylain was furious with de Casanova's report.

Three men -- Gylain, de Casanova, and Jonathan Montague -- stood in the unfurnished cathedral that served as Gylain's quarters. The sun came right at the stained-glass window, and its colorful diffusion made the room bright like the sky before a storm. De Casanova had arrived only moments before, followed by Blaine until he entered the castle gates.

The lofty ceiling -- a hundred feet above them -- subdued the character of the room, strengthened by the utter lack of furniture other than the rough writing desk. Gylain sat behind it and Jonathan in front, both on slight stools. De Casanova paced in front of the window, his face condensed and dripping. He had not slept or eaten since his defeat, but his main ailment was terror. He was not used to being bested in a melee in which he held the advantage.

“Yet what could I have done?” he thought in the silence. “They were men of power, each my equal in combat. Together they were unstoppable.” Aloud, he said, “I swear to you Gylain, by all that you hold sacred.”

“Then you swear in vain, for I hold nothing sacred. I am a beast, as the God who created me. Yet I believe you, so continue.”

“I make no excuses, for all that can be said is that their strength exceeded my own. Still, this is much against us: the King of Atilta, the rebel of England, the second man of France, and your own deputy, allied together. And who bore swords with them, but the great de Garcia. This is an omen of ill, for us!”

“It was not planned, de Casanova,” said Jonathan. “It was merely chance, the fortunes of war, as they say.”

“But even then: can we battle the fortunes of war as well as our enemies?”

“The fortune of war only fights those who first fight it, and destiny rules only those who make it supreme,” Montague said.

“Silence!” cried Gylain, “Do not speak of what you do not know.”

“I am wrong, my lord,” Montague bowed in humility. “I spoke idly, forgive me.”

There was a brief silence, broken by de Casanova. “How do you know it is but fate that favors them? Do you divine their thoughts, Montague?”

“No, though I bedevil them. What I meant to say is this: it was only a spontaneous decision that put Leggitt on the galley, where he met Patrick and de Garcia. It was chance, and chance may favor us as well -- if we allow it,” and he looked cautiously at Gylain. Yet Gylain was staring absently at the window.

The following silence was only shattered by a loud knock from the door to the secret passage. Gylain awoke and darted up from his desk. “Enter,” and it was evident he was eager to receive an expected communication.

The door swung open and Gylain’s page came in with a brisk, assured step.

“I have word,” the young man said.

“Of the brothers?” Gylain hesitated.

“Yes, my lord.”

“And?”

“The answer is affirmative.”

“Then we have them,” cried Gylain, and he rushed back to the desk, grabbing his sword from its top, where he kept it while he sat.

“My lord,” the youth hesitated, “The Fardy brothers have been found, in theory, but I fear they will not

be so easily taken.” He stammered as Gylain looked on him, his eyes as bare and cutting as the sword he held. “I do not doubt the strength of the army, or the cunning of its officers, but the Fardy brothers have something on their side.”

“Which is what?” Gylain grew angry, and the page’s words stumbled on his lips and fell forward disorganized.

At last, he conjured the courage to blurt, “They have stolen the Marins!”

Disbelief struck them on the head, and left them stupid. Gylain fell backwards a step, physically distraught at the news. Yet his was a dynamic evil, not by passion but by plan, and carried out systematically. In an instant, his plans were revised, and he turned his maniac vigor toward their fulfillment.

“Arm yourselves, for we ride!” and he put his own sword into his belt.

Montague and de Casanova were already at the passage, and when Gylain reached them the three men dashed headlong down the narrow stairwell. Soon they reached the outer courtyard, and Gylain signaled the Elite Guard, who mounted their horses as the three did the same. The drawbridge was lowered by the time they were in the saddle, and the troop galloped over it and toward the Floatings.

They soon reached it, and the three of them dashed into a lighthouse that bordered the harbor. It was used mainly by guards and customs officers observing the business of the bizarre bazaar. The tower was made from a white marble -- mined from the mountains to the north and cut into wide, cubic blocks. Its insides were narrow and empty, with nothing more than a winding stairway that led to the top. There, however, a circular room was built with a deck or extended platform that overlooked the harbor. Three telescopes were mounted on the wall that skirted the platform, equipped with swiveling bases that allowed a close inspection of the traders below. Gylain took the middle, and his companions the flanking telescopes.

The three were silent for a moment as they scanned the horizon, but it was clearly evident that the massive Marins were missing. Montague was the first to break the silence, “So it is: they are gone,” and he looked up from the glass to see the others, and the captain of the post who stood solemnly behind them.

De Casanova also looked up, “Did you not see them to be missing? For they could not be removed but with an hour’s hard work.”

“Both of them were gone at daybreak, yet that is not unusual,” the captain said. “They sometimes leave the harbor to mine beyond its reaches.”

At this Gylain also looked up, “And yet you sent word in relation to my orders? I said to remain silent, but to watch for the Fardy brothers.”

“The harbor fleet was sent to find their coordinates, but they could not be found. As this is unusual, and the Marins connected with the Fardies, I sent word. More than that I do not know.”

Gylain looked out over the watery market, his thoughts disguised by his firm and unchanging countenance. “The crews of the Marins have been replaced, as I ordered when they were seized, have they not?”

"The captains were, sir, but it is not possible to replace an entire crew in two day's time. We were working on training replacements when the Marins disappeared."

The tyrant smiled slightly, and looked over the harbor once more with his naked eye. "Close the Floatings," he said, "Allowing no one in and no one out; and do the same for the city. We are now at war." He paused. "Bring me the harbor's depth chart."

The captain disappeared into the room, returning with a map in hand. Gylain took it and spread it out on the table to the left, with de Casanova and Montague at his side. He looked it over and the others looked him over as he did, until his extended finger came to rest above the section of the harbor that was shaded the darkest -- the deepest point in the Floatings.

"If the Marins are not in the Western March, they are there," he said, to the surprise of the others, "And where they are, so are the Fardy brothers. Come, we will soon see!" and he dashed down the stairs with the same vigor with which he had dashed up them.

CHAPTER SIXTY

"I have never met a man who denied my patience," said the brown Fardy, "But I threaten to cease my virtuous life altogether, if those guards do not cease to stand there, preventing our entrance! While they loaf here, there are criminals fancying mischief elsewhere in the city."

"Yet we are those criminals fancying mischief," returned Clifford, "And it is only their loitering that prevents us."

"True, but still I would punish them, for I dislike their look. What type of man raises his arms against his fellow countryman?"

"A soldier is a soldier. Besides, what is the difference between an Atilian and a Frencher?"

"A bed and a good meal, these days. But look, they are moving. My patience is proved!"

As he spoke, the small company of guards standing atop the city wall began to walk southward. The four rebels -- the Fardy brothers and Clifford -- were sitting at the edge of the forest, hidden by the shadows of a monstrous tree. With the guards out of sight, they crept to the wall and knocked: thrice loud and once quiet. A section of the wall swung open -- along cracks cleverly hidden in the pattern of the bricks -- and revealed a narrow tunnel, which led in turn to a small chamber under a stairway in a house adjacent to the wall. The black Fardy carefully resealed the door behind them, while in front of them a gaunt man with a week's beard lifted the staircase and peered into the chamber. His head pushed into the hole, and when he opened his eyes he found himself nose-to-nose with the blond Fardy.

"At last!" he said without removing his face, "What held you?" He continued without pausing to breathe, "We are ready, but the night is short. Follow me," and he turned, stepping onto the stairway above. The others joined him, and the stair was closed once more.

The house was narrow and long, since it was squeezed between the crown's road and the crown's wall.

It was, therefore, only the next room over that opened onto the crowded streets. The house itself was also a brewer's shop, with all the associated equipment -- even a wagon with a giant barrel mounted on the rear for the purpose of transporting the wares. The windows were covered with heavy curtains, and the room dimly lit by a lantern on the table beside the wagon. A stable stood to the left of the room, connected to the brewing hall by a large, wooden door.

"Get in: we are late already," said the gaunt brewer, pointing to the wagon.

"A giant beer barrel?" cried the blond Fardy. "My brothers -- as patient as they are -- have seen enough of the insides of barrels. Could you think of nothing else?"

"I am a brewer, so I have a brewer's wagon. As for your beer barrel, and I do not make it, only Atiltian Scotch. Here," and the man opened a trap door on the wagon's bottom, large enough for a man to enter. It was triggered by pulling on the tap which was mounted on the rear of the barrel.

"What if someone tries to turn on the tap?" Clifford asked.

"There is a latch on the inside, and the trap door cannot be opened against its will," the other returned.

"I did not mean that," and the old man smiled, looking to the shadowed corners with a probing eye. "I have heard it said that guards do not let a brewer's wares pass, without ensuring its quality. What if they should try this tap while we are inside?"

He followed Clifford's eyes to the wall, where a dozen bottles of Atiltian Scotch were stacked. He sighed, "Very well," and Clifford hurried to the shelf, returning with each of them cradled like an infant in his arms.

"If a soldier should try the tap, it will flow as if it were full."

"But what soldier needs twelve bottles to inspect?"

"A thirsty one," Clifford winked, and was inside the barrel before the brewer could respond. The man closed and sealed the trap door, then jumped into the driver's seat and was off, nodding to the servant boy who stood by to open the door.

The moon was rising, and its brightness cast a shadow over the streets, kept away from them by the tall buildings. These rose up a hundred feet or more, covered in thick vines and a beautifully grained wood. The lower portions of the houses were made of brick, with square windows covering most of the first floor. The tall portions sat several feet from the street, while the windowed porch or sitting room extended to its edge. The people of Eden were friendly, and if one saw an acquaintance sitting in the front room while they passed, he would stop for a moment. Indeed, the forward rooms were open to the public at all hours, and the richer citizens left meals out for the poor to eat during the night. Atiltians were known for their vigorous pursuit of whatever struck their fancy. They worked obsessively at things that they loved, and were up before dawn without turning in until midnight or later. Yet when they did turn to sleep, they proceeded with the same vigor that characterized their waking hours.

As the ale wagon drew nearer to the Floatings, the guards became more numerous and more vigilant. Just as they came into the Floatings, in the final circle before it began, they were stopped by a company of six soldiers. The circle was lit by several lamp posts, with a fountain in its center and a garden around its edge. The captain of the guard had just returned from foreign duty, as evidenced by his plumed helm and his deep tan on his face -- both testifying to a man of French persuasions; though his accent pointed

to Hibernia.

“Stop there, man,” commanded the captain as the brewer entered the circle. The wagon came to halt beside the fountain.

“What is your business at this hour?” the captain asked.

“A delivery, sir,” was the answer. “A broken valve delayed the brewing, but the delivery cannot wait until morning.”

The captain was satisfied with his answer, but thought such an easy passing to be lax. “What is your cargo? There is no need to deliver it at night.”

“I have Atiltian Scotch,” the brewer paused, “And it is precisely for the darkness that I hurry, for sailors can only be kept from carousing about the shore if the shore is brought to them. If you do not want drunkards laying about the city, let them drink where they cannot safely fall over.”

“Very well,” it was the captain’s turn to pause while he sought something to say. “I am just from Hibernia, and already I miss their ale. Beside it, Atiltian Scotch is but Atiltian barrel scum. But as we are not in Hibernia, and as my men are thirsty, it will have to do.”

The brewer grew flustered by the captain’s insult, and only barely kept his temper -- a fact those within the barrel could surmise by the wavering tone of his voice. “Go on, then, but not so much; for I have a wife to support.”

“Then you will need extra for yourself?”

The soldiers enjoyed their captain’s answer, and congregated around the tap. Having heard the conversation, those inside were prepared, and when the soldiers cupped their hands beneath the spigot, Atiltian Scotch poured out readily. Yet the soldiers were wastrels, and much of it overflowed onto the ground. At last, they were finished, and there could not have been much left within the massive keg. Yet the captain had not tasted it, and he walked briskly to the tap with that in mind.

“My men enjoyed your Atiltian Scotch,” he said, “But my tongue is sharper than theirs, having tasted the Hibernian best. We will see how it fits my taste.”

“It is cold going down and warm once within,” the brewer boasted. But to himself he worried, “There can be nothing left for them to pour!”

The captain cupped his hands beneath the tap as one of his soldiers pulled back on it. A trickle of liquid came out, slower than before and a different shade in the moonlight.

“Indeed, you have just brewed this,” the captain said as he prepared to drink, “For it is yet warm.” The brewer sat up straight.

“I must confess,” he continued, “That its smell is not altogether pleasurable; for it is sharply tinged and stabs itself into my nostrils.”

After letting it flow over his hands and onto his boots for a moment, the captain raised his hands to his lips and drank deeply of the warm Atiltian Scotch. His face collapsed as he swallowed, and his eyes snapped shut in revulsion.

“Blasphemy!” he cried, “That this sour scum is named Scotch. In Hibernia this would be considered nothing more than vile excrement!” His face shook and he spit repeatedly. “Go on, brewer,” he commanded, “Go on, and take your putrid concoctions with you. I will never drink again!”

The brewer bowed, then quickly spurred his horses forward. “What the devil?” he said to himself as he drove off, “Can it have been so bad? And so warm?” He shook his head. “Whatever became of it, that old boozier got what he deserved. And many times over at that!”

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

The Floatings was still in the moonlight. No torches were allowed -- on account of the densely packed ships -- and the harbor was left without any light but the moon's. Nothing could be heard but the breathing of the tide and the snoring of the groaning ships. The brewer drove his wagon down the first pier that reached into the harbor, at whose end a small cutter was waiting. A ramp connected its deck to the pier, and a shrouded man waited there.

“Ambiance!” the man called out.

“Forever, and justice!” the brewer returned.

“For all,” the man finished. Then, stepping forward, he said, “Your delivery is late, but it will do. Help me roll the cargo aboard, for I will pay only once it is in my possession.”

“Very well.”

The two unhooked the barrel from the wagon, and rolled it up the ramp. Inside, the four men were jostled around, but still made no noise. The Fardy brothers were indeed patient, when it came to matters of business. Once on deck, it was placed in a cargo room off the stern, prepared in advance. The cloaked man paid the brewer, and the latter returned to his wagon and thence to his home. Before the other man had returned to the cargo room, the Fardies and Clifford had come out the trap door beneath, and sat on the floor, slightly disorientated.

“We are clear, then?” the black Fardy asked as the man returned.

“Yes,” and the man pulled the cloak from his body, revealing himself. “It is good to see you again, my friend.”

“As always, my dear clerk,” and the two men grasped hands. “You have done well in this, and the king was satisfied with your service, as well. But, for now, are the men prepared?”

“Yes, and growing impatient. The crews of the Timbers have the cables set, and the harbor authorities are expecting them to be leaving at dawn,” their faithful clerk answered.

“So all that remains is to,” the black Fardy raised his left eyebrow rather than finishing the sentence. The others knew his meaning.

“Yes,” the clerk said, “That is all. The Marins are ready to be sunk, and all that remains now is to take command. Mutiny.”

“Then we go, though I would not call it mutiny. For the Marins are our own by right!” the black Fardy rose and strode quickly out of the room, the others following.

Above deck, the cutter was creaking through the harbor. Its sides were strewn with the nets of fishermen, and if any doubted their cover the smell of fish was embedded onto the planks. Several sailors made the crew, steering skillfully through the sea of wood and rope that was the Floatings. At times, it was so dense one could walk across as if on dry ground. Yet none of it was anchored, and it was a dynamic city. There were no maps or charts, for every moment everything was entirely rearranged. Rather, it was a special skill the navigators of the Floatings had, which would guide them safely along. They were both quick and keen.

The man presently at the rudder was one of these navigators. He was tall, with a strong build but a wiry frame. He was neither bearded nor clean-shaven, but rather had always the rubble of several days which he assiduously cultivated. His hair was dark by nature, but lightened by constant exposure to the sun, and of late had turned a light red. His eyes were too close together on the inside, but they were also large, and were perfectly aligned with the outside of his face. Between them, his nose hung down, though it was neither blunt nor fat; rather, it came down close to his face before suddenly veering outward to a sharp, medium point. He wore a hooded jacket over his shirt, though it was not stormy in the bay. Yet while the hood cast a shadow over his face, it did not dampen his eyes, which could not be overlooked. His left was the color of silvery moonlight, but his right as yellow as the sun.

“Lionel,” the blond Fardy called him by name, “How long?”

“There she is, already!” and he pointed to a Marin, riding low in the water. Beside it was a Timber, and to their left was another pair: Timber and Marin.

“The signal, then, Lionel.”

Lionel bent the handle of the rudder down, latching it to keep the ship’s course straight. Then he drew a pipe and match from the flap of his jacket, and pretended to light the first with the second. He left the first match alight for three seconds, then blew it out and lit a second match for five seconds, lighting the pipe with it. A short time later, the same pattern was repeated by each of the nearby vessels: the Timbers and the Marins.

“Good: they are ready,” the clerk said. Then, turning to the black Fardy, he continued, “My masters to the first, and Lionel, Clifford, and myself to the second?”

“Of course, and when it is over we will meet upon the first Timber?”

“Patience,” Clifford laughed, bouncing his shaggy eyebrows, “For if all goes well, I will be sleeping in a feather bed ere twelve hours have passed.”

“And may Gylain sleep below the sea!”

As the blond Fardy said this last line, the cutter passed the first Marin. The Fardy brothers -- each armed with a short sword -- looked over at the edge of the deck to the Marin, but a few feet below them, as it was mostly submerged. Several men stood there, and when they saw the Fardy brothers, they

motioned for them to jump. It was no more than five feet down and as many over, and they landed with a soft thud.

"We are ready," said the black Fardy.

"And so are they," the blond Fardy gestured to the cutter, which had already reached the second Marin.

"Then we have only to capture the captain," said one of the men, stepping forward from the shadows. He was short -- no more than five foot -- but strongly and stoutly built. He was evidently a dedicated geometrist, for his face was as round -- proportionately -- as his nose, his mouth, and his belly.

"Timultin!" cried the blond Fardy, "We are at last reunited! How have these treacherous days befallen you? But patience, for we have no time for idle speech at the moment. Where is the captain?"

"In her quarters: I am on watch."

"Herquarters? By the devil, let us hope it is not the devil. But come, we cannot delay! You must watch us as we imprison her. Come, to the bridge." With that, the black Fardy entered the Marin through the third story door -- the first and second were already many yards beneath the surface.

The door opened into a bare sealing room. They sealed themselves in, and entered the main portion of the Marin, into a hallway lit only by covered lanterns. It stretched beyond sight in either direction, curving with the contour of the Marin, for it was the primary thoroughfare, connecting the various departments together. On the outer side, there were no doors except the airlocks, but on the inner side doors were spaced an even three feet apart. Some led directly to rooms, others were steep, narrow stairways that tunneled into a deeper section of the floating mini-city.

"She is in the captain's room?"

"Yes, when I left," Timultin answered.

"And her lieutenants?"

"On the bridge."

"Then let us be off."

The black Fardy stepped forward and opened a nearby door, no different in appearance than the others: the walls of the hallway were wooden, as were the doors, latched only by a revolving finger. This door led into a cave-like staircase: only two and a half feet across, while the steps were made of a black chestnut wood, and each a foot tall. It was like a tunnel in the ground, for the only light was from lanterns hanging in the landings, where the stair reversed course and continued to descend. On these stairs, the party pierced into the heart of the Marin, and soon came to another door, into which the staircase ended.

"It is time," but the black Fardy paused, listening to the silence. He trembled slightly.

"We must do what we have come to do," the blond Fardy raised himself with a dramatic gait. "And though I am a peaceful man -- and above all, a patient one -- I will not relent on the edge of the cliff, though I should die in the descent. For here we are, and there we need to be!" The others understood, under the influence of the same horrific atmosphere.

Silence took the throne. At length, the black Fardy answered, "My patience grows thinner than my brother's beard," and the blond brother inadvertently stomped his toe.

"Then we go," said the brown Fardy, and he extended his arms as if to open the door. But before he could, the air was filled with a shrill scream from the bridge beyond. It was followed by a screaming laugh, and a whipping sound; then by voices too faint to be intelligible. The three brothers looked to each other for an instant, then kicked open the door and stormed onto the bridge with their swords drawn.

"The devil!" cried the black Fardy. "We have come, fair Celestine, and will not leave you to your torturers! Forward brothers, forward, and let us end the curse of Saxony forever!"

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

"Celestine!" Alfonzo whispered in the darkness of the temple ruins, "Celestine, will you not have a thought for yourself? If not for yourself, than for me; for I am weak."

"Yet I will not be persuaded, and do not play with the winds if you will not be rustled by them. She is my sister, and I must go to her. It is not my choice to make."

"When so many have died to free you, would you return yourself voluntarily to Gylain's power? Think what he would do, in his anger."

"You misjudge him, Alfonzo. He had chances, but did not take them; for if he is evil, he is not cruel."

Alfonzo looked to the ruins around him and then to the darkness of the encircling forest. "You say he is not cruel? What is not felt is easily forgotten, perhaps, but what of your father and myself? Torture does not flee the memory like courage does the heart."

Celestine's countenance clouded. "My father's fate was by my mother's hand; and Gylain rebuked those who tortured you, sending a doctor to heal you."

"Even God rebukes the devil, even as he uses him for his own purposes."

"Yet Gylain is not the devil, and you are not God." She paused, breathing on tip-toe. "Forgive me, Alfonzo, but I will go. If I am to be strong, I cannot be weak with my sister. For though she is shadowed by the past, she is not shadowed by betrayal."

Alfonzo did not turn his countenance from the forest. It was late morning, and the council had just been completed. Above the forest that came in close on every side was the sun, beginning its daily march with its usual soggy-eyed approach. The buildings of the long forgotten city were made some of cobblestone and others of a white limestone; but in the harsh conditions of the forest, nothing remained but scattered debris. Nothing grew within the circle of the ruins, and the ground was flat and barren as an ocean of rock. Only the central tower still stood, and its top had collapsed onto the lower section.

After a moment, Alfonzo soaked up strength from the immutable scene in which he was immersed. "So

be it, Celestine: go, if you must. But as much as I am yours in love, I am Atilta's in duty. If you are captured, I will not rescue you again, though by it I am shown to be a coward." He paused. "Cruel fate! Men say we fight for our women and our children; yet who must be sacrificed ere the end?"

There was silence, as Celestine softly kissed her husband. Neither spoke, though their eyes courted for a moment. Then, she stood and left, with a bundle in hand she had prepared the night before, while the others slept. Alfonzo had seen it when he woke, and his eyes could not part with it all during the council. She left, and did not turn for a parting glance. Instead, she climbed the rope ladder to the Treeway, and began walking northwest, to Eden.

The sun came down at a gentle angle, and as it passed through the cloudy foliage it gave a hazy, green light to the leafy tunnel. On either side the trees let down their uncombed tresses, brushing away Celestine's weariness as she went. The ancient trees' branches were muscled and as thick as the trunk of a lesser tree. Their leaves, however, cut a contrast: where one was ancient, the other was young; where one was steadfast, the other blew with the wind. There, one upon the other, were nature's oldest children, and her youngest; the old and the new joined together. Yet they did not break apart, for the one was not wine, nor the other wineskin.

Celestine traveled the living clouds for a day, entering the gates of Eden several hours before the Fardies arrived. She came clad as a simple peasant -- homely in dress and in bearing -- and no one lowered themselves to question her.

"I am not your slave, Gylain, nor are my armies. If you wish my aid, than you must seek it as an ally, not a lover."

"Yet we are both, since my heart and my confidence are equally yours. My life is given to you."

"Indeed? Or is it given against my father?" Cybele flushed, and she quickly added, in a whisper, "No, do not answer! I do not want to know." She paused again, then, "For I am no different, though I am a woman as well: seeking love while seeking power."

"One cannot have both," Gylain smiled.

"What is power but the hatred of freedom? And hate and love are not at war. Each is a way of pleasing oneself: the first through self-service, the second self-sacrifice. I have power, and thus hate; but I also have a bosom, and thus love."

"The contrast!" Gylain moaned, "Without hate you cannot enjoy love; and without tyranny the people cannot enjoy their freedom."

"Is that your sleeping potion, then?"

"Come, you jest with me." He sighed, seeing she did not. "We are creatures of analogy, and we can only know things by comparing them against others. To those who live in luxury, only greater luxury can bring momentary contentment. For those in poverty, a slight reprieve is paradise. And so it is with freedom: it must always grow more abundant, lest it does not satisfy. And when it flows too freely, those who wield it self-destruct, for in freeing men you also free their evil. The rebels fight for freedom, but with it Atilta would subside, even as Rome before her. So I give them tyranny, and tyranny gives them both power and freedom."

“And you love them as well?”

“I love no one, for love is emotion.”

“Indeed,” she smiled, “And there can be no emotion in the affairs of state: for which reason I will not be played as a pawn.”

“War is dangerous, for a woman of beauty. The queen of Saxony you are, my Cybele, but your mother you are not.”

“Nor am I yours, outright.”

“No?”

Cybele pressed her lips. “I will accompany the fleet.”

Gylain closed his eyes and stood a statue. Then, with a pleasant smile, “Of course, Cybele, and for that reason I have prepared a Marin to be your headquarters during the campaign.”

“My trust is not placed in vain.”

“I know.”

“As in everything else. I will occupy it immediately.”

“You will find it in good repair,” and Gylain turned to the Floatings. They were walking on the inner wall of the castle, fifty feet above the bustling streets. In the distance, the harbor city could be seen.

“Left that way by the Fardy brothers, then? A shame, for they amused me with their foolishness.” She paused. “How can idiots become wealthy? Were they not born poor?”

“Above all, yes: the sons of a glider merchant. Yet they are not fools, as you say. For how do we judge a man’s worth, but by his actions? And those by their results? The Fardy brothers have done more than many who are thought wise, as if placed by feudal fate to humble me: to show me that before God I have no more power than three bumbling idiots. They are fools, you say, but fate does not discount them; and fate is all that matters in such things. *Vitam regit Fortuna, non Sapientia* .”

“*Stulti timent Fortunam, sapientes ferunt*,” she retorted.

He sighed, as if looking upon foolishness in wisdom’s garb. “To whom it is not given, it is not known,” and he was silent.

Seeing Gylain eloping with his own mind, she bowed. “Tomorrow, then, for I must prepare my affairs.” He did not seem to hear, so she left and walked briskly to the inner courtyard.

Cybele was sharply beautiful in the morning light, a sword into the hearts of man. She wore a simple silk doublet, with trousers beneath. It was not the dress of a queen of court, but she herself was not one, either. Her arms and neck were bare, and her head covered only by her cloudy hair with its slight curls: enough that it was not wispy, yet not too much to make it reckless. Her face was long, her features proportionate. Her nose bridged between her curious eyes and her storm-cloud lips, blossoming into a

round bell flower near her mouth. She was tall, even for a man, and her form august and inaccessible. She was firm in her bearing, while not pedantic in her movement; accented in speech, while not vainly rhetorical. In a word, she valued substance over perception: cultivating the former without excuse, while not abdicating it in reaction to the latter.

Her carriage was brought out: narrow above while shallow and rounded below. It was at once carriage and boat, and could change from one to the other without stopping. Atiltian built, rather than Saxonian, since Atiltian horses could swim as easily as they could run. The rails swiveled on an axis not far from the coachman, allowing him to detach them for rowing -- in the same fashion as the Lipels of the Floatings. Indeed, the carriage was but an elongated Lipel with wheels.

It was thus that Cybele crossed the harbor without leaving her carriage. She was also lost in the maze of her own mind during the journey, and only came to as they abutted the landing platform on the first floor, which was then above water. She leapt out and hurriedly entered the Marin, asking the short officer, Timultin, to take her to the captain's room. He did, and she did not speak along the way. When they reached the bridge -- adjacent to the captain's room -- several of her officers were assembled, taking charge of the crew.

"Gylain assembled you?" she asked.

"Yes, your majesty."

"Very well, prepare the headquarters as you will."

They stood back, surprised she did not superintend them, for she was normally an energetic leader. She saw their hesitation and added, as she turned to enter her room, "I have seen something while I passed through Eden, and I cannot remove her face from my mind."

With that, she closed the door and took a seat in the far corner of her room. An expansive window graced the outer wall, looking over the inner circle of the Marin. From that side, the room tapered into a narrow way and reached across to the outer wall, where another window -- albeit smaller -- opened onto the Floatings beyond. The room was weighted toward the inner side, and could only be reached by passing through the bridge.

"What will I do about her?" she whispered in a violent agitation, "She has tainted me thus far, in mind if not in body. The conscience is a dangerous foe." She was interrupted by a sharp knock on the door.

"The someone has come," one of the officers said from the other side.

Cybele shot up and looked about the room with a wild expression. Her face was the shadows cast by a candle: once shaded, then bright; once light, then dark. Her expressions changed like water flowing over a bed of rocks.

"Is it her?" she asked at last, and her voice trickled with power -- synthetic hatred.

"It is I," Celestine's voice returned.

Silence nestled down on either side.

At last, "Enter, my sister: enter and be mine!"

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

Cybele jumped from her seat as she told Celestine to enter, then she regained her stolid outsides and returned to her seat. A table stood beside her, bolted to floor with a chart of soundings spread upon it. She leaned over under the pretense of examining it.

"Come in," and she did not look up as Celestine entered, still covered in the peasant's cloak. For a moment she pretended preoccupation, then stood, kissed her sister's hand, and seated her at the table. Celestine faced the window overlooking the inner Marin.

"Your highness," and Celestine lowered her head.

"Cybele; for I am your sister."

"Cybele," a pause, "Cybele, who are you?" Her voice wavered with sorrow's vibrato.

"I am the one you remember, as a child."

Celestine took heart, "Yet she was innocent and you are not." In a lower voice, "But neither are you wholly guilty."

"Am I not, Celestine? I have a bosom, but also a crown."

"Crowns can be beaten into plow shears as easily as swords. Treaties can be forgotten, when they are made with tyranny."

"Not when they have been signed in blood, and that blood is not your own."

"But blood can wash away sin, as well as conceive it."

"Can it?" Cybele laughed quietly, withdrawn for a moment. Then, "Is that why you have come, to turn me?"

Celestine did not answer, so Cybele continued, "I am not a reed, blown easily by the wind. Do not waste your love on me, for I am a dry sponge that will only soak and never splash."

"No! You would not do evil, if you did not force yourself to do it."

Cybele stood, "And neither would you do good, if you did not force yourself to do it. I only walk the paths of evil because I am evil: I revel in it because I revel in pain. When I am gently caressed, I feel it and am pleased: but the feeling is weak. When I am beaten, I feel it in same way as the caress: but the feeling is overpowering." She drew closer to Celestine. "When I give others the joy of pain, I am gratified still more: for a pained conscience has a stronger pulse than purity. Let us pray there truly is a Hades, for I look forward to it with longing." She reached out and struck Celestine.

"Do you know why mother did what she did?" Cybele asked in a hurry, "Do you know why her love

transmuted into hatred?"

Celestine did not answer, but sat weeping at the table.

"Her love increased the pain her hatred caused, and thus the intensity of her pleasure. She shook, her limbs quivered, she could not breathe for all the weight upon her chest. Her heart burned, at God and man; her nose tickled enough to drive her passions to a flame. Damnation!" she cried out in a fury. "You speak of righteousness, but what hope do the righteous have: that they may be good enough to enter heaven? With God there is doubt, for none can be good enough. But with the devil, there is only damnation. Blessed damnation! Oh, blessed damnation!"

"Yet none are brought to paradise by their own works, but only by the works of another. The wedding feast is prepared, and he awaits only the arrival of his guests."

"If none are deserving, then why are not the evil invited as well? If it is truly not based on works, then the devil has as much chance as the pope."

"All are invited, but few are chosen."

"A change of words, but not of meaning." Cybele continued in a gentler voice, "And you are one of the chosen? I am glad your life has been so blessed, thus far. But what of your husband, or have you not chosen him?"

"He knows why I have come, as do you."

"I see: you wish to turn me to your side, and have my armies behind your walls?"

"I do not care for your armies, only for you. Your armies are made of men, and to be loved as such. But as armies they are mere drones of darkness, and as their leader you are no different. But I come to you as a sister and a woman, not as a diplomat."

Cybele released herself into her chair. It was dark outside, since the sun was no longer high enough to shine over the sides of the Marin to the central courtyard. Celestine sat in the chair opposite Cybele. Her hair was as black as Cybele's was white. Though their faces were formed the same, their expressions were different: the one content without power, the other lusting for more. Celestine's features were loosely held together, her mouth almost open and her cheeks relaxed. Her skin was not as fair as Cybele's -- nor as young -- but her age gave it a pleasant texture. It was beautiful, and the difference between them was that between a lake in full calm and lake rippled by a slight breeze. In either lake, the water is equally pure.

"You misjudge mother," Celestine said at last, almost in a whisper. "She was an angel."

"The finest angels make the cruelest demons," and Cybele smiled slowly, her lips rising until they parted.

"Yet still they give witness to the light, if only by contrast. Mother was no demon."

"She sat in front of father as he was strapped to the block and beaten. Gylain scourged him with the flail, and she with her loveless eyes. Tell me, which was crueler?" Cybele grew more animated.

"Which was more loving?"

“So you play the fool? Then I have only to prove your foolishness to you? We will see how it is soon enough. Godfrey, enter!” A tall man came in from the bridge, three others following.

“Your majesty,” he bowed.

“Chain her to the block.” The men obeyed. They took Celestine by the arms and led her to the bridge. Under Cybele’s direction, some took a bench from the wall and transformed it into a whipping block. The others chained Celestine, her arms in front and her back undefended. Yet she did not resist. Cybele took a seat directly before her, holding her lips tightly together.

“You can do what you wish,” Celestine said, “For I will not resist one whom I love.”

“Then you are a fool. Who will save you, fate?”

“I name it God, and call him my father. But yes, that is who will deliver me.”

“Fate! You are as foolish as Gylain! If fate is so strong, then let it rescue you.”

“If you challenge God, he will not be mocked.”

“Indeed?” and she looked about the bridge, her eyes lighting upon a portrait of the Fardy brothers, the Marin’s previous owners. “Indeed! Then let your God rescue you, and do so through the Fardy brothers.”

“Very well, I have faith that he will do so.”

“Begin the whipping!” Cybele cried, her face a stormy sea.

They began, using a leather strap from the bench.

“Where is fate, now?” Cybele laughed.

“Where it has always been.”

“On its way, you mean? Foolish woman! Harder men, for she does not yet cry.”

“God will redeem me: I have faith.”

“Faith is wasted on a God who does not exist.”

“If not he, than why we? I will be delivered.”

“You amuse me, Celestine!” Cybele laughed in her throat.

She began to say something else, but her words were left to rot in her mouth. For, just at that moment, the door was kicked open and several men charged into the room with drawn swords in their hands.

“The devil!” their leader cried. “We have come, fair Celestine, and will not leave you to your torturers! Forward brothers, forward, and let us end the curse of Saxony forever!”

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

“Fear not, Celestine: we have come to deliver you!” the Fardy brothers shouted in unison.

The brown Fardy was foremost among them, running toward the tall lieutenant with his sword whirling over his head. As he drew near enough to strike the man, he released the blade from its circuit around his head, sending it flying toward the lieutenant’s. The latter -- overcome with surprise at their arrival -- did not move, and the sword bashed broadside against his helmet. The force knocked the man to the ground in a stupor, and the brown Fardy stepped backwards with a trembling arm.

The blond Fardy fell upon the second soldier -- who was whipping Celestine -- and brought a furious downward blow upon him. Yet he came on with an unsteady foot, and the sprightly soldier was able to dodge to the sword’s left. Thus without anything to hinder its course, it continued downward in the direction of Celestine’s back -- over which the mini-melee was taking place. Its momentum was too great to be recalled mid-flight, and the blond Fardy cried out in agony as he saw what must inevitably happen in the next instant of time.

Cybele’s other followers had been easily overcome by the surge of crewmen who followed the Fardies, and all of them stood by motionless as fate played out before them. There was a single, narrow piece of time in which to spare Celestine’s life, and none had the presence of mind to take the chance. None, that is, but the soldier for whom the blow had been intended. His quick eye let him dodge it, yet when he saw what was happening, he reached out his hand and caught the blade mid-air. He groaned slightly as the sword came down, but his dark, Spanish face with its hooked nose did not grimace. For a second, the sword continued its course toward Celestine, then -- just before it struck -- the soldier’s hand brought it safely to a stop, hitting her back with a harmless thud.

Nothing was heard over the man’s breathing. He did not move his hand, though all the eyes were fixed upon it like a ship upon the water. His fingers remained tightly clenched around the blade and a small stream of blood flowed from his hand onto the back of Celestine’s peasant cloak, which soaked it up like a sponge.

“Well?” Cybele was the first to speak, “Remove your hand, or are you a dramatist?” Failure prodded her to anger.

“Madam, I cannot.”

“You must, fool! Can you not see we are taken? The crew has risen and the Marin is the Fardies’ once more, so release the sword and be bound. Perhaps the crew will show mercy for your sacrifice, or perhaps they will despise you for scourging her before hand.”

The soldier bowed his head in submission and lifted his arm from Celestine’s back. The palm of the hand rose with it, but the portion from the knuckles upward remained grasping the sword. Around him, the crew was still silent, awed by his quick response to the badly aimed blow. Ten of the crew were in the room by this time -- along with the Fardy brothers, Cybele and Celestine, and several of Cybele’s officers. Some had gone around behind the Saxons, so they could not flee.

For a moment, the blond Fardy and the fingerless soldier looked closely at one another. The former was

the first to speak: "In the heat of battle, one can see into the heart of a man; yet in the stupors of peace, a man may be forced into cruel wrongs. When your actions were your own, you have shown yourself to be noble hearted. Therefore, the guilt rests on your commanders, and the honor on yourself. You are free to go," and he stepped aside, making way for him to leave.

"My lord!" the soldier said hoarsely, "Do you think my master would be pleased in that? I have lost my fingers for this woman's sake, am I to lose my head for Gylain's?"

"What would you have, then?"

"I have served in the royal battalion for twenty years: half my life; first in the service of the king, then in the service of Gylain. For the king I served with honor through respect, and for Gylain I served with guilt through authority; for I am a soldier, and bred to follow my orders. My brother served alongside me in the guards and gained great renown in the foreign wars. When our captains joined Gylain, he deserted to the forest rebels. To my shame, I did not join him; and I can make no excuses. But now -- at last -- I can plead for my life and beg forgiveness, that I might rejoin my brother and my conscience."

The rebels were endeared to the man, especially the Fardy brothers. The black brother asked, "What is your brother's name? I will reunite you myself."

"I am called de Garmia, and he de Garcia."

The men stepped backwards in surprise, and even the Fardies could say nothing for moment.

"So my fears are not unfounded," the man hung his head. "Tell me, what fate has met my brother?"

"It was he who gave himself to save us, when Gylain had us all within his castle," the black Fardy whispered. "It was he who cut loose the catapults, but was left behind to face the wrath of Gylain."

The soldier fell to his knees and tore open the doublet that covered his armor. Celestine, having been untied during the preceding dialog, comforted him with a maternal demeanor.

"God is a being of mercy, and he will work all things together."

The soldier could not speak through the tears which soaked his beard.

"God's mercy!" mocked Cybele. "God's mercy is but the devil's revenge! Your brother is as dead as my heart, de Garmia, and his death was accomplished by the most depraved means."

As she spoke, the lieutenant -- whom the brown Fardy had knocked unconscious -- returned his mind to the room.

"De Garcia?" he moaned in confusion, "Has he been recaptured?"

"What!" and de Garmia grabbed the lieutenant by his uniform, "Speak, man!"

"De Garmia," he hesitated from disorientation, "Your brother was long a prisoner, though we were forbidden from above to let you know. Montague is a hard master."

"Yet he has no power here!" the brown Fardy said, stepping forward. "Speak!"

The lieutenant looked at the queen with a fearful expression.

“Fool,” she laughed, “Do I care if you are slain?”

He was silent and thought for a moment. Then, relieved, “Am I Montague’s son, that I follow him through sin and Hades; or am I Gylain’s lover, that I praise him in his evil?” He gave Cybele a sharp glance as he spoke, angering her immensely though she did not show it. “Your brother, de Garmia, is the shaggy prisoner about whom we joked these last ten years.”

De Garmia’s face sunk to the floor. “Go on.”

“He escaped with the rebels, but was left behind, for he shot the catapults. When Gylain emerged from the castle, he saw his old comrade and had compassion. The glory of a great warrior, if only a memory, can save the life of a haggard shadow of the same. With Leggitt, he was sent to a slave ship under Nicholas Montague’s command. It is a terrible mercy, perhaps, but for many it would have been death instead. That is all I know.”

“Come with us, de Garmia,” said the blond Fardy. “Your brother is beyond our help now, though there is yet hope for him. Nicholas is bound for Bordeaux, and there are powerful men in that city who are indebted to de Garcia for their lives.”

“I am willing to go, my lords. Only let me fight to avenge my wrongs.”

“All Atiltians will fight, and I would be glad if you were on my side. But, for now, you must be doctored. Huhn, take Celestine and de Garmia to the doctor’s room.” Then, turning to Celestine, “God uses the foolish to confound the wise,” and he winked.

“So he does,” she smiled. “As for me, I am not wounded; for de Garmia is a skillful actor. But I will go nonetheless, to bandage his wounds with my own hands.”

When they were gone, the Fardy brothers turned to Cybele, who stood there without a countenance. She said nothing, and made no expression to reveal her thoughts.

“Chain her to the rack,” said the black Fardy without hesitation, pointing to the device which had held Celestine. “Do not beat her, but neither set her free. Celestine will no doubt speak with her later, but until then she is to be gagged.”

The bridge, like the captain’s chamber, stretched across the Marin, having windows on either side. A command desk stood before each one, with a myriad of instruments and controls for a variety of purposes. As these things were taking place, Timultin had been by the window overlooking the Floatings, where it was now entirely dark. When the black Fardy finished speaking, Timultin called out to them, “Sirs! The chains are fastened!”

Cybele looked to her own chains in wonder, but the others looked to the window.

“Indeed, and there is the water line, several yards above us,” said the brown Fardy, pointing to the window. “You have planned well, Timultin.”

“Freedom,” is all the blond Fardy said.

As they looked, several dozen chains -- immense in proportions -- could be seen attached on one end

to the Marin, and on the other to the Timber that floated above, on the surface of the Floatings.

“Come, my brothers,” the brown Fardy said, “The Timber’s scheduled excursion must go on: Thunder Bay awaits.” He turned and winked at the imprisoned queen, who could not keep her eyes from flashing at the thought of her defeat. She had not thought of that.

“You are foolish for a queen,” the black Fardy laughed. “For while you waxed and waned, our crew submerged the Marin, and chained it to the Timber above us -- the wide, docking platforms of which will screen us from those above. And so we go in peace where you would have gone in war: dragged on by an innocent excursion boat.” He could think of nothing to add, so he raised himself on his heels with a flourish, cried “Long live the king!” and left the room, followed closely by his brothers -- the simple, foolish Fardy brothers.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

The King of France resided with his court in Paris, during the winter, but he also kept a palace in Bordeaux for the height of summer. For the most part, that city consisted of small, brick buildings condensed into an equally small space, with only narrow lanes to separate them. The roofs were flat and made into patios -- giving witness to the influence of the Mediterranean civilizations which were held in such high esteem by those who overthrew them. Yet there was no transcending pattern to which the city conformed -- like the circles of Eden or the squares of Rome -- and at times even the narrow lanes did not exist, with only a path of connected roofs to serve as inroads to exclusive communities. It was as temporal as it was chaotic, though it was not as fluid as the Floatings.

At this time Bordeaux had two general delineations: the upper city, near the palace and the spacious suburbs; and the lower city, extending from the docks up the slight incline to the upper city. There were few architectural pleasures in the lower city, but for the scattered mansions and royal buildings that formed an oasis in the poverty. Even the upper city was not beautiful, though it was still imposing, for it had been built with an eye to defense by the legendary Charlemagne. But time had passed since then, and the city now advanced to the very walls of the palace: filling the old moat with the homes of peasants. The walls had been converted into the sides of an extended palace -- no longer a castle even in name -- and the king found himself connected with the citizenry in a way that his Parisian fortifications did not allow. And this king enjoyed it, though his motives were not always political. Three divisions presented themselves in the palace: first, the outer rooms, being only two stories high; second, the inner rooms, being four stories high; third, the royal chambers, being eight stories high.

The royal chambers were in a tower above the rest, but it was square and wide enough inside that it did not seem a tower. Though it was four stories high -- for it only began where the rest of the palace ended -- it housed only two rooms: the king’s council room, below; and his bedchambers, above. Their floors were of marble and uncarpeted, their walls of precisely cut stone, their windows of a particularly transparent stained-glass. The domed ceiling was made entirely of the latter, through which the king was wont to look when on his bed. At this time, the council room was empty but for the king, sitting at the head of the long table with his head resting on his hands in a rather unkingly manner.

“What beauty,” he said as he minutely studied his surroundings, “What amazing, unadulterated beauty. Yet it is not the sort a man longs for, since it is made my man himself. The beauty that jigs my blood is

that which is from above, the beauty of the bosom-bearer.”

He brought his face around to the door, which could be heard opening, followed by a dignified footstep. Yet a pillar stood between his eyes and the intruder.

“Who is so daring to disturb my confidence? It would be better for you if you left this chamber at once, petty servant, and told your master I am occupied.”

“But I am not petty, my lord, though I am most humbly in your service,” answered a fluid tenor, possessed with a literary strength.

“Vahanlee! You have returned!” and the king stood to greet him. “I had feared the worst.”

“Your majesty, fear is an emotion unsuitable to your position. I am a loyal servant, of course, but it is not a service to incite fear in the fearless.”

“You are right, if discreet,” the king shook his hand. “I am a ruler, so I must not be ruled. But still, it would be a mortal blow to me, to lose you. Gylain has many eyes, and though he woos France, he does not do so willingly.”

“Gylain knows nothing. Have I not been in his dungeons, myself? Yet here I am, released against his will,” and Vahan raised his arms to show his resilience.

The king was amazed. “In his dungeons!” he cried. “Does he have the mettle for such things?”

“I remained unknown to him, though he visited my cell in person.” Vahan lifted his head, in pure pleasure at relating in bravado what he did not undergo with such.

“This is too much, Vahanlee! In person?”

“Indeed, but perhaps because I was imprisoned with Alfonzo of Melborough,” he emphasized the name, and the king bounded up from the seat he had just taken.

“Alfonzo, the son-in-law of my old comrade, William Stuart? Vahanlee, I knew you as a wise man and a great ruler -- but I must add a man of action to your credentials. Tell me, what took place?”

“I will, your majesty, but there are things which pass this very moment, and which each hour grow more dangerous for our dear Atilta. We can lose no time, for there is much to be set in motion.”

“Then tell me what I must know in haste, and tonight we will relish the tale for its own worth.”

Vahanlee drew near the king. “The King of Atilta was your cousin.”

“Yes, though he is dead.”

“He is dead, my lord, but he is not; for his son still lives.” He paused and the king wished he did not, but enjoyed the rhetorical flourish nonetheless. “He escaped into the forest, living there alone for the last fifteen years. When I met him, he was accompanied by a black bear named Horatio.”

“Vahanlee, you astound me. I did not think those old wives tales could be true. But,” the king’s face clouded, “But if one is true, could not the others be?”

Vahan was silent. The king recited, "As went Atlantis, so goes Atilta, drowned beneath its heavy burden."

"And so it will be, if Gylain remains in power."

"Then what do you suggest I do?"

"Gather the fleet," Vahan said, "And ready the soldiers: the Emperor rides with Gylain."

"I have foreseen that much, since Lyndon is a man of short lineage. Where is my nephew, the King of Atilta?"

"In France, I have just left him. He contends with Nicholas Montague for the Holy Graal, to heal Lord Milada."

The king lowered his glance from Vahan's face and fell back in terror. "Vahan! Your shirt is stained with blood!"

Vahan looked down, and -- with a hardened, forest demeanor -- said, "So it is. We fell into combat with de Casanova outside the customs house; but do not fear, for he was easily dispatched."

"Vahan, you are a warrior," the king laughed. "See, I was wise to send you, in spite of your objections. I knew your strength more than yourself."

Vahan colored at the thought.

"I will send a battalion to their assistance," the king volunteered in the other's silence. "Khalid," he called, and a captain of the guards came from outside the door. "Montague has come, and you can avenge your brother in full," he said. "Do not spare his life."

"Of course, my lord," he bowed. "But where am I to find him?"

The king turned to Vahan, who said, "The Cervenues mountains."

"And how will I know him?"

"He is a powerful, dark haired man with a firm, unerring demeanor," Vahan said.

The king added, "If they are captured, carry them to the fortress and execute them at once. Be careful, Khalid, for they are slippery fellows. Disregard their words, as honest as they seem."

Khalid bowed reverently and was gone.

"As for the fleet," the king said after a short pause, "They are scattered throughout the seas, and it will take weeks to collect them again. And even then they must be outfitted."

"You are mistaken, your majesty," Vahan smiled slightly, "For I took the liberty of collecting them prior to my departure. You will find them collected and outfitted in the fortress' harbor, with their crews collected and armed."

“Forgive me, Vahanlee,” the king laughed, “For in your absence I had forgotten your genius.”

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

“Do not lose hope,” Willard called back through the dense forest air. “The mountain draws nigh.”

“I cannot see,” de Garcia replied, “For the trees forbid any view of the sky above.”

“Yet I can smell the open air of the clearing. It will be only a moment.”

They walked through a last remnant of the ancient forest that still lingered on the continent, in the area of the Cervennes mountains. It was protected by some unseen influence that resonated from the main peak of the mountain range, but it still was not as ancient or majestic as the forest of Atilta. To Willard, the differences were clear: the trees were slightly closer, the underbrush thicker, and there were fallen leaves and branches littering the ground. In Atilta, leaves rarely fell, and the ground within the forest was but a shaded meadow. Yet to the others, the forests were similar. For some see personality when they look at nature: that some trees stand proud and others droop with worry, that some are plump and jolly, and others gaunt and solemn; while others see nature as a picture, as an immovable facade that is meant only as a backdrop for human things; others, still, see nature as a tunnel through which they must pass before they can return to civilization, that ironic human fancy.

Willard was among the first, and he was not lonely during his exile in the forest, since he had millions of companions. Ivona was also of the observant group, and so was as comfortable in her father’s castle as in the wilderness. Patrick, however, was of the second declension: the forest was not beautiful in itself, nor was the dress, but when Lydia was present both were lovely. De Garcia was also of the second, though his romance was war and adventure his mistress; a solemn duel in the streets of Bordeaux was invigorating, but in the backdrop of the magnificent forest it was truly a tale worth living. Leggitt was of the third declension, and when he saw the forest it was merely the means to an end; for him it was military precision and theory, and nature only a variable within the strategic paradigm. As for Lydia, she was the troublesome, ambiguous soul, sometimes of one declension and sometimes of another.

It was now late afternoon, and the forest was growing dark and chill; its heart had turned against them. They walked at a steady pace, but the trees went with them, it seemed. Each tree became another in the distance, and those not of the forest became disheartened. But then, the trees came to an abrupt end. As they looked into the distance, the forest stopped to watch them pass, and they were cast forward into the embrace of an open clearing. Yet the clearing was not the relief they sought, for it was but a vacuum for greater things: behind them the mighty trees and before them the centerpiece of the mountain range -- a peak of stone that tapered upward until it became a jagged spire that pierced the very bowels of heaven.

The forest was itself on the mountain, but the ascent was masked and not until the plateau could the distant lowlands be seen. A hundred yards of meadow separated the forest on every side from the mountain in the center. It burst from the ground and blew into the heavens, showing its kingly silhouette against the sun. The sun struck its sides and was thrown aside, for the mountain was formed from obsidian, and its sides were perfectly smooth and mirror-like. It could not be climbed from the outside, and no mark or blemish could be seen. Far above, its lofty peak was lost in the clouds.

"I no longer wonder that the Holy Graal remains untouched," Leggitt said.

"Untouched, indeed," de Garcia returned, "For even here there are no signs of Nicholas Montague's passing. Yet we know he is before us nonetheless. Will we make camp in the clearing, before dark? It would be better to face the trials in the morning cheer, than the evening fear."

"It will be the same darkness within," Patrick said, his glance shifting from Lydia to the lonely mountain before them. "And though time is an ally at the moment, if we delay it will be our greatest enemy." With a surge of passion, Patrick began marching across the plain.

The others followed, silent as they crossed the abyss. Night came quickly, and it was dusk before they reached the mountain; then, in a mere instant, complete darkness engulfed them. The sun fell behind the forest and was extinguished as if it had fallen into the sea. A small cave opened onto the plain on the western side of the mountain -- from which they approached -- with a rectangular mouth that appeared as a door in the darkness.

"The lanterns?" Willard asked.

De Garcia and Leggitt each produced two from their packs, giving one to Willard and the other to Patrick. Leggitt also had a small tinderbox, and in a moment the four lanterns were lit. With that, they entered the cave. The lanterns cast out the cavern's darkness, revealing an ornate hallway -- with pillars hewn from the rock as by the hand of an ancient man. The floor was carved into triangular tiles, coming together into a pattern; yet the pattern was not uniform -- though it was continuous -- for there were variations within its framework. Murals were sculpted into the walls, a combination of bas-relief and sculpture, the forms of which came out from the walls and stood proudly as individual pieces. Yet they flowed together, and did not repeat.

The party, however, did not look over them closely. Willard had taken the lead once more, and the others walked in pairs behind, swords drawn. De Garcia now bore his famed broad foil, having purchased one from a blacksmith in Bordeaux: it was round like a foil, but as thick as a broadsword. With it, his renown as a warrior was built; he could parry and block a blow from a stronger sword, but when an opening presented itself he could lunge forward with its single point. The cavern continued without turning, though it had a vertical incline. Still, they could not see beyond the light of their lanterns, nor hear beyond their own breathing.

After twenty minutes of walking, Willard stopped, turning to the others. "Something rests in the path ahead, but though it has the shape of a man it does not seem to move. Beware of an ambush."

The others raised their weapons and said nothing.

Willard took one step, then another, and with each the light drew nearer to the shadow. Then, on the third step, the light struck the figure and opened it to their eyes. Willard jerked his sword forward involuntarily, falling back a quarter step before recovering himself. The others did likewise, with the exception of the hardened de Garcia: only his eyes jerked back in terror.

There -- stretched across the path in front of them -- was the lifeless and mutilated body of a man: his face and limbs torn off savagely, his skin drowned in blood, his eyes plucked from his head. He did not seem human, and his mother's womb would not have known him. Yet beside the body lay a telling piece of evidence: a helmet of the Elite Guards.

"So it is," de Garcia whispered, "Nicholas is before us, as is the devil himself!"

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

“Rouse yourselves, men, for we must be on,” Nicholas Montague scowled at his men. He stood in front of them as they lounged on the outskirts of the forest, and was staring down the solitary peak before him. His dark hair, combed backward inerrantly, shone in the afternoon sun.

“My lord,” one said, “Could we not wait for the others to come, and let them be the first to meet the demons and undead which the legends say dwell within?”

“Do you fear them?”

“No, my lord,” he said, and it was clear he did not.

“Then be silent, for I will not be advised by my inferiors. Come, follow me.”

The half dozen men stood, replacing their helmets and fastening their swords to their waist. They were the Elite Guards, the best of Gylain’s army: strong and agile, inured to hardship and emotion. They neither felt nor thought, for they were beasts before men and soldiers before beasts; any remnant of manhood had been trained out of their souls. To some, the animal nature is an evil force, a passion that destroys -- and so to be subdued; but to the Elite Guard it was to be trained and cultivated, and in the end used to follow the wishes of their masters. It was their duty to kill, perhaps, but a man must first chose his allegiance before his duty is given.

Montague did not wait for them, but set off across the plain at a rabid pace. When they came to the cave, he led them in without a moment’s hesitation, for their lanterns were already lit and in their hands. In truth, the cave was the hallway of an ancient temple: its sides sculpted and lined with pillars, its floor tiled with the mountain’s own rock. It went straight, but climbing upward at a ten degree incline.

After a little more than twenty minutes, Montague stopped in front of a magnificent door, into which the tunnel ended. It spanned the width of the cavern, with a pillar on either side and a statue of a growling lion’s head jutting out from the wall above it. The lion’s face was three feet wide, and stood between a type of man-dog on the right and a man-alligator on the left -- both standing upright and looking strangely down upon the door. Two fine cracks ran along the frame of the door, without which it would seem nothing more than a continuation of the wall. The figure of a white eagle was etched onto the face of the door, with its claws extended as if grasping something on the floor. The party of soldiers -- with Montague and his own stone-chiseled face in the lead -- came to a stop before it.

“I doubt the wisdom of continuing further,” said the same soldier who had doubted on the plain. “This door bids us depart, before we are destroyed by what lies within.”

“The legends of this place affect even you, an Elite Guard?” Montague asked with a smile. “Then what must it do to the untrained rebels? Perhaps they fear the eternal darkness, and so we must increase their fears by realizing them.”

“But, my lord,” the soldier asked, “How can we, when we ourselves are not demons?”

“Are we not?” Montague asked. He paused. “If not now, then we will be in a moment,” and he drew his sword, pressing it against the man’s chest.

“Shall we begin?” he asked, and began driving it slowly and firmly through the soldier’s armor and into his flesh. The soldier’s face was a nightmare, but Montague only derided his death and sent his sword to the man’s heart. The blade came just within the organ of life, and the soldier passed from life like a dreamy, lingering spirit. His body sunk to the floor, laying face up before the door.

Montague looked at the corpse for a moment, his face playing with some foul thought. Then, with the tip of his sword, he began to peel the skin from the soldier’s face. The other Elite Guards were at first abhorred, but it grew on them like a moral mold that waited in the air for them to be infested. One by one each drew his sword and joined Montague in his devilry, mutilating the body of their comrade. They laughed as they did, calling out to him in mockery, and their detail was lucid and horrific: some scratched rude claw marks, others hacked downwards to emulate a powerful bite. All at once they stopped and stepped back, seeing that nothing more could be accomplished. The body lay directly beneath the claws of the eagle, its face staring into the eyes of the lion.

“The only demons within this mountain are those we have brought in with us,” Montague said after a pause, “We are the only evil force here.”

But as he finished, the dead man’s eyes opened, and a gurgling noise came from his throat. His hand began to shake, and his lips quivered violently until -- at last -- a deep moan fled off his tongue, “No!”

The soldiers fell back, trembling. Even Montague was startled

“Come,” he said, “Let us go from this place.”

He stepped forward, straddled the corpse, and pushed hard upon the door. It groaned loudly, then swung back on its hinges and opened the way before them. Beyond was the darkness. Montague could see nothing, but the black took many shapes and filled his mind with strange colors and patterns. It was too devoid of light to be understood. He did not move through it, but stood there as before a wall that could not be passed. His nose pressed against the wall of darkness, and he could feel its cold grip pushing back.

A moment before, Montague had placed his lantern on the ground, and its covers had unhinged and fallen over the light; the lanterns of the others, meanwhile, were too far behind to pierce the veil before him. Therefore, he reached down and grasped for the lantern’s handle, to light the way. Yet he moved with a slur, his eyes fixed on the darkness before him and his limbs moving slightly of their own accord. A cold, metallic handle struck his fingers and he jumped slightly at its touch, but when his mind came alongside his body, he curled tightly around it and stood. His arm trembled as it held the lantern before him, on his side of the wall, and for a moment he did not open its shutters. Then -- with a surge of passion -- his right hand shot upward and grabbed the foremost shutter, yanking it open and sending a single, intense beam of light shattering against the nothing.

For a brief instant he saw beyond the veil, though the others could see nothing with him standing there. Then Montague screamed and jumped backwards, tripping on the corpse and falling upon its bloodied head as he came down. The lantern fell from his hands and landed on the stone floor with an echoing bang. It bounced once and landed on its side. The light only streamed three feet from the ground, and the upper portion of the doorway was left in darkness.

There -- revealed in the lantern's light -- were two thick, scaly, pale red legs. The feet were gnarled and horned, clawed as with swords. Behind, a forked tail wriggled back and forth between the legs, as a cobra on the attack.

Montague could not move, paralyzed with fear; nor did the soldiers breath. The figure hissed a silent laugh, then turned and vanished completely into the darkness. A moment later, Montague reclaimed his feet, his body soaked in the blood of the mutilated soldier. The other soldiers stood behind him, faceless.

In a weak whisper, "Come, men, we must move on."

They did not answer.

In a louder voice, "Come, men, we cannot rest here."

Still, they were silent.

In a bitter command, "Come, men, we have seen what many men have not. But to fear is to acknowledge God."

They remained still and he laughed bitterly, a furious reaction to the fear he had allowed himself to entertain. But he was Nicholas Montague, he remembered, and he did not fear damnation.

"We came for the blood of God," he smiled, "But I will not leave without the blood of Satan as well!"

With that, he plunged into the darkness and was gone.

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

"What the devil has happened to him?" cried de Garcia, his unruly hair thrown back in disgust. "I have heard the legends of the evil of this place, but I did not believe it."

"Nor I," Leggitt answered, "But his companions continued onward."

"And so must we" Patrick added, "So come, time flees and we must pursue."

He walked forward, through the open doorway before them, but Willard held him back. "Time does not exist within this place, be it tower, temple, or mountain. The things we will encounter are not governed by mere time."

Beyond the doorway, the hall continued forward, though it began to curve along a circular path as it wound up the mountain. The sub-human figures of the mural gave way to ape men, their clothing torn and their surroundings dismal. No windows or doors appeared on either wall, and no outside light came into the tunnel, not even the faint light of the moon. They were arranged in a military pattern, suggested by Leggitt and seconded by de Garcia: Willard -- with his plate armor -- went first, and Horatio at his side; de Garcia took the center -- between Lydia and Ivona -- where he could assist whichever side was assailed; and Patrick and Leggitt brought up the rear. Since the walls were unknown, they were to form

into a circle should they be ambushed.

After they had walked another fifteen minutes, they came to an open, cavernous hall -- or, at least, a room that seemed open, for they could not see. They stopped along a corner of the room, where part of it turned inward at a sharp angle, and made a temporary camp to rest themselves. The lanterns were spread out three feet in front of them -- so they could see anyone who came toward them -- and the packs were set around them. Horatio and Patrick stood on watch, though the others were no less vigilant. De Garcia sat beside Leggitt, and Lydia rested alone in the corner. Willard and Ivona were left alone in the center, and their conversation is as follows:

"You are silent, Ivona."

"Should I be loud?" she smiled slightly, "This is not a place to be exuberant."

"No, but the last we truly spoke was on the ship. Your beloved father is near death, perhaps, but you are wiser than to think your mood will bring him healing."

"Am I? For I have entertained that very thought twice since the sun went home."

"Still, you have rejected it. Why are you silent?"

"Do not pretend ignorance, for it does not suit a king so well as it does a humble man. I fear God will not find me worthy. We have come to retrieve his blood as a healing for my father, and as his daughter it is by my merits that the blessing will be given or withheld. If my desires are pure, my father will be saved; but if they are sinful," she turned her head and was silent.

Willard touched her shoulder to comfort her. "If any is worthy, it is you."

"You know my action, but not my heart. I have fallen, shown my weakness for the things of man. How can I ask God to give himself to me, when I will not give myself in return? I cannot give my heart to any man, since it is not my own to give."

"Without love, even faith is meaningless. For love is not a sin but a requirement."

"Yet I am called for another purpose, and for me the love of man is sin, because it overpowers the love of God."

"And what of he who loves you, is it sin for him as well?"

Ivona turned her face. "I am set apart, not to be sought after by men."

"How can you utter such blasphemies? Does your God rejoice in the suffering you inflict on yourself? Does he rejoice in the flagellations of body, as well as of spirit? If that is your God, forsake him; for his punishment and his promise are the same. As for me, I have lived apart from men all the days of my life; and apart from men, there is no God."

"But still you are here. Have you come only for me, to aid me in my weakness, as you think it?"

"I have, as well as to pursue Montague and solicit the French."

"Then you have not come for God, but for hegemony: in politics and in my heart. And yet you know that

though I want to love you, I cannot. I will do only as God wills, and he has redeemed me for chastity.”

“And if you suffer for God, he will heal your father?”

“You are a fool! I do not suffer for God, but for you. I choose to follow him because I desire him more than I desire you. You are an arrogant fool, if you think I suffer because I do not chase after you. You are not my God.”

Willard opened his mouth, but was interrupted by Patrick, who whispered, “Look! There are lights shining through the darkness, and muffled voices with them,” and he pointed into the darkness.

There, barely visible to them, where six dim spots of light.

“Put out the lanterns,” Willard said, and rushed forward to douse the one nearest him. They were themselves doused in darkness. “The other lights have faded,” Willard said after a moment, “And we have been seen.”

They armed themselves and prepared to be attacked. In the distance a low growling could be heard, as well as hissing and gnashing of teeth. The rebels drew near together, swords bared and pointed at the darkness that bound them.

“Ready yourselves,” Willard whispered faintly. “There are footsteps approaching!”

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

“Onward, cowards!” Nicholas Montague called back through the stone doorway to his men, who were not following him. “He escapes us!”

To an ordinary man, those words would not have been disappointing. But they were soldiers, and when their initial surprise was thrown away, their impermeable consciences returned. So they drew their swords and ran after Montague. Before them the passage was narrowing as it curved, and they went single file. Each stood guard against his own fears, though in the passion of the chase, their fear canceled out their cowardice. To live, one must fight; and to fight, one must not fear. So they did not.

Montague drove them forward at a wicked pace, and several minutes later the hall opened into a spacious chamber. In the darkness it was not possible to see its dimensions, but a wind echoed past and the chill of night could be felt. Their lanterns had illuminated the walls, while in the hallway; but in the chamber, there was nothing by which to judge distance or direction. After traveling haphazardly for a moment, Montague stopped abruptly.

“It is foolish to continue in this fashion,” he said. “For now, we will go our separate ways, since we search for separate ends.”

“As you wish, sir,” the soldiers bowed, though they feared wandering alone amidst the chamber.

Montague did not answer, but was gone before he heard their reply. To find the Holy Graal, he needed

the company of soldiers; but what he sought was far from holy, and the only blood it held was perhaps his own. He charged into the darkness without a lantern, his path lit only by his passion to destroy what had caused him to fear.

"I was weak," he growled to himself, "But now I will overcome this thing and earn reprieve for my faltering spirit. Blood will cleanse me, whether his or my own!"

The darkness parted in front of him, and in the mysterious light a figure could be seen, standing motionless before him. Its tree-limb legs were gnarled and scaled, identical to those seen before. Yet its body was a man's, though misshapen and deformed. Its head was giant and plastered with plates of skin, its mouth with fangs, its neck wrapped in serpents. Its chest, open to the air, was gilled and crimped.

"You have come," it said, its voice a falling tree, though spoken in the tongues of man.

The two creatures circled each other for a moment, their eyes fixed and unmoving. The one was human in form, the other was not; yet neither were human in heart.

"Sin is a lonely bedfellow," Montague paused, "Or should I make hate to you as you have done to so many of my comrades?"

"Have I, indeed? You flatter me. Still, you have a spirit to be admired, and even I do not know many with your piety. I will rejoice when you are adopted into my hellish harem. There are many who pursue my works, yet none who pursue my person. You prove the exception; so I ask, knowing the answer: why have you come?"

"Is it wrong for a man to know his father?"

The creature laughed. "Nothing is wrong, for some; and for others, nothing is right."

"But what father -- when his son asks for a fish -- would give him a snake?" Montague asked.

"I would give him only an apple from my tree."

"Would he be the apple of your eye?"

"Do I love myself? Then neither can I love you. That is not my way, for I am the contrast," the creature hissed.

"I know one who patterns you -- weak and foolish, lorded over by feudal fate. Yet you are the rebel of the heavens, though if you do not besiege the tyrant, others will replace you. If you do not overthrow him, Gylain will raise a tower as well as a siege. Contrast! What folly is this?"

"Folly? It is us!"

"Speak, wyvern-tongue."

"He cannot exist without us, nor would he be righteous if we were not evil."

"Then defeat him!" Montague cried in a passion, "Remove the oppression which declares him righteous because of his all-consuming power. You failed before, perhaps, but the mortals will join your side. All creation will arise and overturn the one who corrupts."

The creature turned its head and showed its teeth in desperation. "Would you know? Can a mortal have knowledge of the immortal, or the finite of the infinite? Proportion and contrast! Without darkness, light cannot be known; without black, white cannot be understood. If you would destroy him, you must first remove the contrast through which he presents himself. You cannot destroy the good but by destroying the evil that defines it."

"To hell with contrast; to hell with you, suckling!"

"Yes!" the creature hissed in despair, "That is our fate! But have you come to speak, or to die, mortal."

"Neither."

"Damnation's ghost!"

Montague bared his sword and lunged at the creature, but it disappeared into the darkness, vanishing into nothing.

"We will meet again," Montague whispered, "And I will not regret the day I die."

With that, he returned to the soldiers he had left behind. They remained together, unwilling to part in the desolate, earthen Hades. Instead, they sat in a circle, facing outwards with their lanterns in one hand and their swords in the other. Montague had been gone for an hour.

"I am back," he said as he came up to them, "What have you seen, that you are so terrified?"

"We have seen nothing, but a multitude of footsteps passed around us for several minutes, then suddenly stopped and silence fell down once more. We ventured out to look, and found gnarled footsteps in the dust of the floor, covering our own. What is more, we found a stone tablet lying on the floor -- there are esoteric figures upon it, but we cannot read them," and the soldier handed him a smooth, rectangular stone.

On one side there were hieroglyphic letters -- not symbols, but actual letters written in complicated picture forms. For a moment, Montague was silent and his face knotted. He was a student of ancient languages, and this was a script older than all others, from which the lesser alphabets had descended. So, combining the aspects of several scripts, he was able to read the tablet. He read aloud:

In the name of Uranos, by whom the trident of the nations will be sunk to the nether lands of Hades. The Pillars of Heracles has been sunk, and with it the gods of men. The Garden of Hesperides has been sunk, and with it the men of gods. Soon, the third and final remnant of the ancient world will be destroyed. Just as Eden was overrun by evil and sank, so will it be. Just as Atlantis was conquered by the Titans and sank, so will it become. The trident of the nations will pierce Hades.

Montague looked up from the tablet with a light in his eyes: the light of revelation.

"We must return at once!" he said, "For Gylain must hear of this. Perhaps his forebodings were not as unjustified as I feared. The three lands of paradise, corrupted and destroyed! He must know," and Montague trembled.

"Look, my lord, over there!" a soldier cut his thoughts in two, "There are lights, as if lanterns."

Montague smiled. "Put out the lanterns!" and they were plunged into darkness. "We have been seen," he said after a moment, "For the other lanterns have faded as well. Arm yourselves, for they come!"

But he did not finish, for his voice was overrun by the sound of approaching footsteps.

CHAPTER SEVENTY

"How are there so many footsteps?" de Garcia whispered. "Does Montague have an entire army behind him? This cannot bode well for us."

"To the contrary," Patrick said with a stolid lip, "For if it is an army, it is not his. Whoever they serve, they are as contrary to Montague as to us, and therefore must be used to our advantage. Let us hide ourselves."

"Very well," Willard said, "But prepare for action nonetheless -- we may be enemies of Montague in Atilta, but in France we are countrymen."

"A noble sentiment," Patrick said, "But Atilta is more than the men who inhabit it; it was before, and it will be after. Besides, do common hardships erase a wicked past? No, I say, and geography does not make evil into goodness."

"Leggitt and de Garcia stand here together," Willard answered. "If they, why not another?"

"Yet Montague is no man," Leggitt whispered, hardly concealing the feeling with which he spoke, "No man, but a bloody devil!"

"I am no different, for I have more than one man's blood to my account," de Garcia paused and looked to Ivona. "And a woman's as well."

"Love does away with fear: for fear expects punishment, while love is forgiving," Ivona said. "My heart is not hardened toward your past transgressions, de Garcia, nor is my mind."

The old, veteran killer was a child in emotion. "My lady, you know what I have done?"

"I do, since childhood."

"And yet you do not disdain me? In the catapult, that night we first met, you smiled at me in innocence -- and your smile cut me more than the whips of the jailers. Did you know, at that moment, consciously?"

"I did."

De Garcia moaned and was visibly pained. "I am the devil incarnate."

"No, and I neither judge nor condemn you. A convict cannot despise his fellow prisoners, can he?"

"But you are neither guilty nor convicted! Your mother's blood was spilled by these very hands," and he

held his hardened, plate-mail hands before him. He paused to combat his tears, but when they did not retreat, he continued. "And yet you drink my cup, and call yourself guilty? May it never be!" De Garcia wept. "Listen, the footsteps have been replaced with the clashing of swords. If I remain here, I am dead within and to be killed without. Let us deliver Montague from whatever creatures steal the silence."

Before the others could object, de Garcia charged toward the clamor coming from further within the massive chamber. They followed him, willingly or not, into the melee. It was still too dark to see what was taking place before them, but as they drew near the chamber suddenly burst into light, coming from a multitude of fire-buckets hanging from the lofty ceiling.

In the light, the chamber was suddenly dispossessed of its damning demeanor. The ceiling stood fifty feet from the floor, and both were crafted entirely from the mountain's native stone. Carved murals adorned the walls in the same fashion as the previous hall, but they were proportional to the room's size, and therefore much larger. In its entirety, the chamber was circular; but it was divided into three distinct sections: the first was a semi-circle beside the hallway to the outside, and the last section was its symmetric partner with a tunnel leading to some other portion of the mountain's chest. The central division was square, however, with a stout pillar in its center that formed a wall, in which stood a double-hung stone door. This central island blocked either party from seeing the other, until they came out at right angles and converged their lines of sight.

"Forward," de Garcia called back to the others, "We can see our enemy, so let us overcome him."

Indeed, the mysterious footsteps were no longer shrouded in mystery. Montague and his five men were huddled into a tight circle, surrounded on every side by a horde of terrible creatures, similar in appearance to the one Montague had conversed with. They wielded tridents, using two hands and thrusting them like spears. Amid the tumult, the approaching party was not observed until they chose to join the battle.

When that moment came, de Garcia unfurled himself to his full height, drew his sword, flourished it above his head, and bellowed in a deep, throaty voice, "Montague, we have come to rescue you!" Then he cut into the creature nearest him, removing his head with a single, clean stroke. The body fell left, the head right, and the latter split in two -- an intricate mask and an ordinary human skull.

"No one desires your rescuing," Montague called over the din, though his men were clearly being overcome. As they grew tired, their circle collapsed foot by foot.

"And yet we give it," Willard returned. "Prepare to receive it!" and he thrust his sword into one of the strangely attired men.

Nearly a hundred men fought behind the strange masks, but when de Garcia and his comrades charged, they were sent into confusion. They could not see at first how many the newcomers were, nor where they had come from. Above the clash of steel could be heard their shrill cries, articulated in some strange tongue, though their fear was evident in any language. One of them -- more prominently built than his fellows -- formed them into a tight company and retreated to the chamber wall. Once there, they fled precipitously; but the lights were extinguished at that moment, and their destination could not be guessed.

"Nicholas Montague," Willard said, advancing toward the same with an extended hand and a somber face. "Nicholas, we meet again."

"So we do. Let it be the last," and he motioned as if to force a duel upon Willard.

But the latter held his hand before him, "Do not be so quick to seal your doom." He turned to the Elite Guards, "Depart from here, if you wish. You are Atiltians, and I your king, unless you continue to follow Gylain." His was the majesty of a king, and in the preceding days he had become king in more than birth and right.

The soldiers bred with silence for a moment. They were trained to resist all pain and toil, to endure all hardships without wavering. Yet they were also trained to be loyal to the king, and with Willard standing before them in the armor of the Plantagenets, they gave way. First one, then the other remaining three, bowed and said, "We obey." Then they departed, leaving Montague alone with Willard and his followers.

Montague watched his soldiers' lanterns as they were eaten by the darkness, listening to their fading footsteps. "So it goes," he said, deserted in the end by those he forced to follow him. "So it goes," he mumbled, thinking of something distant. But then -- when he had collected himself again -- he resumed: "Why do you spare me, your highness? What purpose do you have for me?"

"It is for my sake that your life is spared," de Garcia stepped forward, "Because it was for another's sake that my own was redeemed, and hers by yet another. It is the unending chain, and even for you the time is at hand."

"Then you wish to seduce me with forgiveness? Know that I am beyond your seduction, beyond all hope of redemption. If I am to be slain, let it be done."

"No one is without hope," Ivona said, "Unless his heart is so hard it will not admit the possibility of such hope."

"Fool of a woman! Your words are eloquent, you think, but I know them to be fire before the water: easily extinguished by a moment's thought," and Montague drew his sword to strike her.

De Garcia intervened. He drew his own sword and rendezvoused with Montague's blade as it cut the air, blocking it with a resounding clang.

"Do not resist," de Garcia warned, but Montague turned his wrist in response, rotating his blade to open its pathway to de Garcia's chest. The great warrior would not have it, though, and turned his sword downwards while pushing its rounded sides against Montague's hand. Then -- without visible exertion -- he brought the sharp point to play and placed it to Montague's throat.

"You are better than I," the latter said. "Dispose of me, for I am weak and do not deserve life."

"Yield, and I will not considered it against you."

"Yet you are not the keeper of accounts!" Montague hit de Garcia over the head with his broad side, causing him to stumble. Once clear of the party, he dove into the darkness with a covered lantern in his hand.

De Garcia started after him, but Willard stopped him, "He is gone."

And indeed, he was. Montague did not stop until he reached the tunnel to the outside. Then, assured he was not pursued, he stopped to consider his course.

"Who is there?" he whispered, "I can hear your breathing, your hissing."

“How easily you forget!” a familiar voice returned.

Montague opened the flaps of the lantern, casting a beam of light upon the creature. It was the same which he had spoken with before.

“You are but a man, fool,” and he hit the creature’s head with the broadside of his sword, to dislodge its mask.

But the creature did not move, nor did its head roll to the ground. For it was not a mask that he wore.

“Welcome to eternity,” it hissed in return, “Welcome to my harem!”

“My God!” Montague fell silent. “And yet I forget -- I have no god but you!”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

“Time runs short,” Patrick said, his voice as heavy as the darkness.

“But what to do?” asked de Garcia. “To go deeper into the mountain risks the return of the masked men, but to turn back risks our purpose.”

“Forward,” Willard said, “For if they would have us, we are already theirs. Come, in the light I saw the path forward,” and he started toward the pillar in the center of the chamber.

After a moment of blind travel, their lanterns struck the stone door, all of which could not be seen in the dim light. Its face was covered in esoteric symbols, carved meticulously in vertical rows. Each figure was at once hieroglyphic or symbolic: a drawing that represented a single idea, usually according to the Egyptian system. At the same time, however, each of these symbols was also an alphabetic letter: the symbol was drawn as an embellishment of a letter, the alphabet of which was an ancient ancestor of both the Phoenician and Mayan alphabets. Because of this dual purpose, the writing could be read two different ways, depending on whether the symbols were read as hieroglyphics or letters. Yet there was also a third message, for the individual symbols were mosaics of a larger image, which -- when taken abstractly -- formed a giant third symbol.

“There is writing upon its surface,” de Garcia said as he held the lantern against the door. “But I cannot read it.”

“Nor can I,” Leggitt added, “But I am fluent only in French, Latin, and Atilian.”

“My father has many books in his library,” Ivona offered, “Perhaps I can make sense of them where others cannot.” She stepped forward and examined the face of the door. “Space the lanterns apart, so the whole door can be seen at once,” and they did.

Ivona stepped back to look as they stood close and held the lanterns.

“Ingenious!” she cried as she grasped the pattern. “There are three meanings, each derived by reading it a different way. The first two are dialogs from lesser gods to mortals, and the last is a greater God’s answer,” and she read as follows:

LETTERS : You are cursed and downtrodden, for you are men treated as gods. Yet he who was first is now last, and he who was highest is now lowest. Uranos, beware the Titans.

SYMBOLS : The ocean’s crust is pierced by the trident, and its sons are sent to Hades. No longer will the ancients reign, for they think themselves more ancient than even the gods.

MOSIAC : A picture of a White Eagle, its claws extended and its eyes gleaming, holding a lion’s head in its talons.

“There is a hole in the center, a rectangular place for a tablet, but there is nothing around. Whatever it says, we cannot know.

“No doubt, but we are not here to understand ancient scribblings,” Patrick said. “We have come to retrieve the Holy Graal, so let us be on with it. The air grows fouler every moment we remain.”

“So it does,” Willard said, and he laid his shoulder against the door to force it open. The others joined him, and it began to creak, then to rumble, and at last swung open -- rousing the dust and sediments of many years. There was a mysterious glow for an instant, but it passed quickly.

The opening revealed an ancient staircase, roughly hewn from the stone from which the pillar had been carved. It was narrow and steep, curving around within the diameter of the pillar and leading them to the mountain above. Even after it passed from the chamber it did not expand, and they could walk only in single file. The ornate carvings of the previous rooms ceased, and were replaced by a rough, minimalist architecture. Willard led them, led himself by the short lantern light that went before him. They could not stop to rest along the way, for the stairs were too narrow to sit upon and the too steep to be connected.

After a long climb, the stairs ended, opening into a veranda that occupied the top of the mountain, open to the air on every side with only occasional pillars to uphold the roof. The stairs came in on the far side. Outside, the moon was sinking fast and the swaying canopy of the forest could be seen far below. To the west, the dawn’s cold fingers were grabbing onto the horizon, and the lanterns were no longer needed in the faint, phosphorous haze. A man sat in the furthest corner, looking over the dawn with his back to them. His hair and beard were uncut, wafting around him and dropping to the floor. They said nothing, some from respect, others fear.

“You have come for the Holy Graal,” said a pleasing voice, coming from the man. “But to what end?”

“My father stands before death, my lord,” and Ivona fell on her knees before the back of the chair. “I come for the Graal, that he might live.”

“The blood of Christ can be found in many places, why have you come this far?”

“Are not the hardships of the search rewarded by our God? I have come with a great request, so I come with great ceremony to ask it.”

“God rewards no one; for who has given the heart to seek, or the heart to remain aloof? If a man is saved by grace, can he be rewarded for what he has not done? No, for God gives grace to whom he pleases, as well as damnation. You do not need blood to heal your father, child, for the blood has

already been spilled.”

“Then may it be, for I have faith!”

“Who has faith, who has not been given it? You may go, for he is healed. But beware the sign of Jonah.”

As he finished speaking, the sky was darkened by a school of clouds passing under the sun. When the light returned, the man was gone. They were silent for a moment, wondering over what they had just witnessed, until Ivona rose from her knees and turned to the others.

“We are done here,” she said faintly, and began walking to the stairs across the room.

“Then this is all?” asked Patrick in unbelief, “We have come on a mistaken whim? Time is not my lover, that I can safely forget it, and you are no different. Let us return to the action!”

“We came for Montague, and have had him. But if it were not for our mistaken whim, you would yet be imprisoned; and a man is not always imprisoned without reason,” Willard said.

“What do you think? That I am a mere farmer’s boy, and Lydia my youthful dame? Then I understand why you do not value my counsel.”

“You are more than a farm boy?” Lydia mocked him, her blue eye turned his way. “Are you a king, simply because you rose the countryside in rebellion to capture my heart?”

“Her heart does not seem so much a prize,” de Garcia moaned.

“Do not blaspheme my god!” Patrick cried vehemently, “Do not mock my savior, my world, my Lydia! If she is contrary at times, it only accents her innocence at others. If a woman is always gentle, who knows and relishes it? But if she is foul tempered, her previous gentleness is praised. She is made perfect by her imperfections, so do not blaspheme my love!”

“How can you call a mortal your god, with what we have just seen?” Ivona asked quietly, as if in pain.

“All I have seen is a man, and Lydia is more lovely than a mere man.”

“With eyes, they fail to see!” Ivona sighed.

“With minds, they fail to think!” Lydia mocked. “Poor farm girl, poor farm boy! Fools be both of them, but what can one expect?” she hissed at Patrick, who turned his head and closed his eyes.

“Fools!” Lydia continued, but her head turned and her hazel eye fell upon Patrick. “But all men are fools, and their ways with them. If you are a fool, it is the crown of your manhood.”

The dawn broke out, the sky was lit, and the room was silent from its outburst.

“A man’s heart is revealed when he is given authority,” Willard said at length. “If you were a farmer’s boy, I was lower still; but if you are now a noble warrior, I will only see you as such.”

“Thank you, my lord,” said Patrick McConnell, his passion subdued for the moment. “I am only an English peasant, though the people have followed me into rebellion. Yet I am only a boat which is pushed

along by the tides; for I, myself, do not shape events. I fought for love,” he looked to Lydia, “And the rebellion came behind.”

“So it is for many.”

“They come,” de Garcia interrupted, running to them from the mouth of the stairs, where he had been standing in silence. “The footsteps have returned, my lord, and in greater numbers!”

As they became silent, the floor began to shake, and the air to spin with the sounds of war. From the echoing stairway poured an onslaught of rumbling footsteps, followed by terrible screams and cries in an unknown tongue.

De Garcia alone voiced their thoughts. “They come, and there is no escape!”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

“Our fruitless quest damns us,” Patrick moaned, the horde growing nearer on the stairs even as he spoke.

“Nothing is without purpose,” Ivona said quietly, and she forgot herself in the dawn beyond the veranda.

“Theology is one thing, but escaping is quite another,” Patrick returned.

“Have you no ideas,” purred the blue-eyed Lydia, and her voice was a tiger in the savanna.

“My mind has become a hermit, my love. De Garcia, veteran warrior, what say you?”

“There is no escape,” and he looked over the side to the ground far below, hidden by the mists.

The stairs shook under the force of the coming horde. Drums were beaten, wails of agony resounded, and a droning, bumble-bee chanting floated up to the heavenly veranda. The stairway had no door, but opened directly into the room. The sound of their approach was the masked men’s only vanguard.

“We cannot escape,” Ivona said faintly, still staring into the dawn, “Yet there is no need.”

“Min consilio, feminae vincunt viros. Speak your mind, Ivona,” Willard said.

Ivona smiled at Willard’s misplaced Latin, and turned away from the rising sun, “We have no reason to fight them. No one has been wronged, and forgiveness’ mandate is not violence. Let us lay down our arms, and meet them as friends.”

“I cannot let the destiny of my followers rest on the benevolence of a brutish mob,” Patrick cried. “How can we know what they will do?” and he ran to the door and peered into the darkness, struck across the face by the approaching chaos.

“How can one know anything, but through faith?” Ivona asked him. “You must have faith that either they

will fight or forgive, so you cannot abdicate on grounds of reason. We cannot know, so let us have faith in what is good.”

“Faith, faith, the churchman’s wraith! I will not have it, when more than my life is gambled,” he glanced at Lydia.

“They are not a brutish mob, as you say, according to what I have read. They are the Titans.”

“The Titans,” Willard repeated, and his blood shivered at the name. And it was the blood of the throne that filled his veins.

“The sons of Caan, the bastards of Uranos, the ransackers of Hesperides.”

And Willard trembled.

“The trident of the seas, the flaming sword of the garden.”

And Willard’s face became a waterfall.

“The destroyers of Olympus, the assassins of the Grecian gods.”

And Willard drew his sword and plunged it into the heavy air about their heads, partially cloud and partially sky. “I will destroy them,” and he rushed toward the the stairway.

“They draw near!” de Garcia interrupted, “I can feel their flaming breath upon my ears!”

Willard started down the stairs in a fit of madness, impelled by unknown remembrances of the ancients. But Leggitt stopped him, coming forward and grabbing his arm, forcing him back into the room.

“Be patient, your majesty,” he entreated. “For this is merely a matter of tactics: we cannot defeat them in combat, though they can defeat us. At the same time, they cannot destroy Atilta, for they have not the power of their ancestors; they cannot destroy Atilta unless we force them to destroy us. Therefore, we must do as Ivona says: yield, and do not provoke them.” He paused. “If they were the judges of the past, their role in the realms of man is no more. We need not fear them.”

“You may not fear them,” de Garcia returned, his head protruding into the stairway, “But I cannot help it, for here they come!”

Willard looked to Ivona for a brief instant, then, “Disarm yourselves and move to the corners. I will meet them alone and in peace.”

The stair’s opening stood in the center of the wall, and those in the corners were hidden by the angle. Willard struck himself to the floor, his golden armor flashing in the morning sun and his regal face unmoving. It was a mountain in itself. He did not have to wait long. The air danced in confusion, and the various noises of the approaching Titans converged into a single, overpowering din. One moment the stair was empty, and the next a man appeared. He was rotund, covered with venerably white hair and beard, and a cornered nose that came out straight and went back at an angle. He danced joyously with his arms -- as if in an ancient tribal ritual -- and let his feet fly from the stairs at every step. It was not until he crossed the threshold of the room that he saw Willard. He stopped, looked over his stalwart form, and smiled.

"You remain with us, friend?" he asked. "Since I see that you do: greetings. I am Zeus Agmannon, king-over-the-mountain."

Willard returned, "And I am Willard, King of Atilta."

"Truly? And so it is you I have to thank for this."

"For what?"

"Opening the passageway to the stairs. For weeks we have been unable to open it, as if it were bound by a force outside of what can be seen. Yet it opened for you, and now we rejoice!"

"Why so?"

"Why so!" the old man laughed, "This is the wine cellar!" He smiled boyishly and raised his hand to guard his lips before continuing, "With a superb view." He winked at Willard.

"Where is the wine?" he asked.

"Under the floor! You no doubt noticed that the stairway's circumference is greater than the room's; there is a narrow chamber below, within the stairway's spiral. The wine is kept there, but we must first come up to get it -- lest we take too much!" and he looked out the window at the growing dawn, breathing deeply. He turned back to Willard. "You were with those others, were you not? The tall, dark man with his hair combed backward?"

"I was."

"And you rescued him from our guards?"

"I did."

"For what purpose?"

"He is a citizen of my kingdom, so I must protect him from foreign elements. It is my duty."

"True enough, but where has he gone? His men left us in peace, but he disappeared."

"He fled from me -- we are enemies at home."

"Your duty is strong!" Zeus Agmannon turned his head and caught Ivona with his eyes. He twirled around and ran to her, kneeling at her feet and saying, "Beauty personified! What joy to my eyes. You have a pleasant air, lady. And you!" he turned to Lydia, "You are equally fair. May I ask you to join me for a drink and for breakfast?" He saw their hesitation and laughed, "Only the guards wear goblin helmets: for the outsiders' sake. We have been given a refuge for our deeds, and we mean to keep it, though without violence."

"I would gladly drink with you, but I must beg leave to take only water," Ivona said in a stately, graceful manner.

"Granted, granted!" Zeus cried in joy, and he ran about the room with his arms above his head. Then he stopped and knelt to the ground, opening a trap door that was hidden in the floor. "I will only be a

moment,” he said, and disappeared beneath the floor. In a minute he was back, with a basket of bottles and cups in one hand and a basket of victuals in the other. “Behold!” he said, “TheHoly Graal !”

The others winked at one another, joining Zeus and the Titans in a circle on the floor, where they partook of their morning repast.

“I can smell your hurry,” the king-over-the-mountain smiled, “But let me assure you that no one can travel in the forest until the sun rises, and it will not pass the canopy for another hour.”

“Quite so,” Willard said.

“Ah-ha, a forest man? I love you already!”

The rest of the hour was spent in resting and feasting, lavishly entertained by their former enemies. Zeus Agmannon, if he was anything, was a gracious host; and their journey was not so vain as they had feared.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

For the beauty of contrast, there was never a more wondrous place than the coastal forests of Atilta. On the one side a citadel of nature, a great forest cut like rock against the sky; on the other the cup of the gods, overflowing with the biting ocean waters. On the one side stood trees mighty and majestic, their canopies outstretched in a communal celebration; on the other side water, a plasmid plain reflecting the trees and bringing out their true nature in the distortion. On one side were wooden towers, crisp and real; on the other their phantoms wavered this way and rippled that.

In this whirlwind of contrast lived a small rowboat, carved from a single log and floating in the shaded waters. It was late afternoon and the air hung lazily over the sea. A man sat in the boat, newly fifty with his hair still colored brown, though the center of his head had long ago gone nude. His nose was short and stout -- much as his person -- and his eyebrows were weeping willows that shaded his hardwood eyes.

“Those Fardy brothers!” he said to himself, “Let them confess to me later, and I will give them rosaries enough to test their patience. ‘We will be back,’ they says, ‘And you will not have missed us at all!’ Mortal pride of self, it must be, for I do not miss them more than the Lenten feasts.” He paused and, sighing, “Still, I wish they were here.”

He sat up and collected his limbs on the bench that occupied the stern of the boat, looking into the trees. There, hidden among the thick foliage, was a platform attached to the highest branches of the canopy. None but the sharpest eyes could have spied it, and those only if they cared to study the scene for several minutes. Atiltian trees were not deciduous, and in the winter it was as invisible as in the height of summer. A man stood on the edge of the Treeway and waved his arms at Erwin Meredith.

“Why do you disturb my prayers, Koon?” and he drew himself up as if returning wearily to the land of mere mortals. “Wait, do not answer from there, but come down instead. I need a moment to wipe the blood from my face before I can grant you my attention.” He knelt and splashed water onto his face. In a moment the man reappeared, but on the ground. He was young, no more than thirty, and had a

theological beard. His face was handsome, and though his beard and baldness gave him the airs of a wise old man, his bearing gave him the breeze of youth. He was disarming and unarmed, but for his rapier eyes and his hurricane laugh.

“What is it now, Koon?”

“Ships, sir, from the northeast.”

Meredith lowered himself to conceal his interest. “Of what kind?”

“Timbers.”

“Timbers? A chaotic time for a cruise,” and Meredith looked at him closely. “Koon, your beard remains, though I ordered all officers below captain be clean-shaven, for discipline. I favor you, perhaps, but I will still be obeyed.”

“Sir, it is against my conscience.”

“How so?”

“The spiritual ratio, sir!”

“Good God, are you Gylain now?”

“Not at all, but I have been studying as you commanded, and have seen that nature represents God in the ratio of its purity to its unblemished natural face. So I, too, must have a natural face. If I were to shave, I would be removing the ratio that connects nature to its creator.”

“In matters of theology, the atheist’s razor is as much to be feared as the pedant’s beard,” Meredith sighed.

Koon’s rapier eyes gave a quick riposte, “But better a hairy face than a bloody one,” and his hoarse laugh sent the air into a whirlwind.

Meredith leaned back in his boat and shook his droopy eyebrows. “Very well, then, there can be only solution.” He paused, “Captain Koon, you will captain my ship -- which I, as the commodore, should not command directly.”

“Thank you, Commodore,” the genius Koon bowed lowly, “Now, the Timbers.”

“Ready the men for action, and beat to quarters; but do not reveal the fleet unless you are seen first.”

Meredith took to the oars and rowed to shore. There was an impermeable shield of trees along the coast, with no sign of any openings. Yet he rowed toward them without slowing. Then, the instant it seemed he would run against the shore, he passed through the trees and found himself inside a wide channel. It opened on either side, a valley between the mountains, and ran into the forest two hundred yards; then it turned and emptied into a small harbor nestled into the trees. The trees themselves had not been cut down, but the water was raised above their trunks and the ships were moored to their upper branches. The Treeway that led to the harbor jutted out once there, forming docks for the cleverly concealed ships.

The partisan monk rowed along the channel, flanked on either side by sentinel trees, in which stood unseen rebel look-outs. The Treeway also extended along either side of the channel, and was busy with those repairing the ships, a task just then being completed. As Meredith's boat swung around into the harbor, he came face-to-face with a triple-masted galleon. A wide loch was filled beneath the forest, and in it was the rebel fleet: seven magnificent vessels, made from the best materials and by the best craftsmen in the maritime capital, Atilta. Their backbones were of Atiltian wood, their rigging of its fibers, and their sails of dandelus -- a flower with a seed similar to cotton, though many times stronger and lighter. It was found only in the depths of the Atiltian forest. Several days of relentless work had returned the fleet to perfect condition, and it only needed the Admiral's sailors to complete its crews.

"Heave away there, old timer!" cried a man from the deck of The King's Arm. Meredith looked up and saw Captain Koon, shooing him away. "You are headed to friends, perhaps, but to the wrong ones. Turn back at once, for you are rowing in the wrong direction!"

"Indeed, and you are rowing me wrongly, as well. You called me here a moment ago, so cut to the hunt and slice your rigmarole like so much buttered venison."

"Venison, venison, venison -- first a meal and then a sun!" cried a wanton sailor.

"Fool!" Meredith was angry, feigned or not, "It is impolite to keep a man in suspense, even if he is of holy persuasion."

"They have returned, sir!" Koon tossed his lips aside and a rolling, unending laugh strolled from his tongue.

"Who?"

"The Fardy brothers!" and Koon's laugh continued.

Meredith dropped the oars.

"And with them, their Marins!" and he still laughed in pleasure.

Meredith crossed himself feverishly, grabbed the oars, and spun the boat around like a Floating merchant. His arms rampaged, and the little boat shot forward, the trees on either side running beside him. In a moment, he reached the end of the channel.

"Oh, my devil!" he cried, piously refraining from blasphemy, "Oh, my devil -- Beelzebub, Baal, and all princes and powers of the air! What the heaven is this?"

Unsatisfied with merely reaching the shoreline, he pushed the boat forward at a tremendous speed. He was a man of the forest before a man of the water, and he began to kick his heels into the floor as if he were riding a horse.

"Faster, girl, faster!" he cried, and his feet pounded the floor with an unconscious fury.

He sped like lightning that fearfully flees its own thunder, and in another moment reached the first Timber, behind which a Marin was towed. He passed the first and stopped at the second. As he came against the Marin's docking platform, his boat was beginning to sink from the holes he had driven into the floor. Water covered the lower portion of the craft. Meredith grabbed his sword and dashed onto the Marin, his eyebrows bobbing around him in pure monastic action. He turned to examine his sinking boat,

and as he did the door creaked open behind him. He spun to face it and stretched his arms out to embrace the newcomer, assuming it to be one of his dear friends, the Fardy brothers.

"I see how seriously monks regard their orders, here in Atilta," a foggy, feminine voice said, "That they throw open their arms at the first sign of a woman."

"My devil, my devil! Oh, my bloody devil!" Meredith cried, and he fell back until he teetered on the edge of the deck.

There -- standing before him with a lion's face -- was Cybele, the queen of Saxony.

"Treachery!" he cried, looking in horror at the fair lady, whom he knew was not so fair within. Her hair made the clouds gray, and her gray eyes made the misty dawn a desert.

"Treachery!" he cried, and took a step backwards, forgetting that he already stood on the very precipice of the waters. He stumbled and fell into his boat, which was sinking steadily beneath the waters. Meredith grabbed the oars and began rowing away from the Marin, imbued with the same vigor he had while approaching it. But within ten feet he found himself floating on the oars, as the boat deserted to Neptune.

"You may have me!" he cried with great determination, "But though you take my life, you cannot take my secrets!"

"A bottle of Atilian Scotch will do that easily enough," a jolly voice called out. "But come, old friend, you are getting wet!"

Meredith turned and saw the blond Fardy exiting the same passage as Cybele. Behind him were his two brothers.

"You know us to be patient," the brown brother called out, "But still, I am eager to know why you should swim, when there is so much to be done?"

"Indeed," the blond Fardy added, "And though I do not mean to sink your ship, we must hurry. As for swimming, you can do it within the walls of our Marin."

"We must be patient, brothers," the black Fardy said, squinting his crooked nose and opening wide his oyster eyes, as if to display absolute seriousness. "We may be men of action, but Meredith has served well enough to do whatever floats his boat."

"He is a great man, without a doubt," the brown brother added in the tone of a eulogy. "For even when our cause seemed dark and without hope, he never abandoned ship."

"Shut up or shove off, there!" Meredith cried, half angry and three-quarters joyful. He paddled with his arms a moment; then, when he reached the Marin's dock, the Fardy brothers pulled him up. By this time, the current and the Timber had taken them closer to the hidden harbor.

"What is this?" Meredith asked as he looked over the queen.

"A prisoner of war," the blond Fardy boasted.

"Ah! But?" Meredith did not finish, though the others knew his meaning.

"She is here," the queen said silently, all breath and no voice.

"Ah! But?" they knew what he meant this time, as well.

"She came to me and I imprisoned her, as the strong must do to the weak. Then I was made weak by these -- men. I am no fool; still, I will not be tamed."

"No one blamed, no one tamed."

"Spare me! My ears have cavorted with your impious tongue long enough," and yet she smiled vaguely. If her heart was corrupted by power, she no longer had any. Yet there are worse things for a person than mere authority.

"Your tone betrays the good which you cannot cover," Celestine said, coming onto the deck. "Or you do not even wish to cover it?" She placed her hand on her sister's shoulder.

Silence, then, "You were not lax in preparing a greeting, Meredith," the blond Fardy said, pointing to the channel, where the fleet was coming onto the ocean single file.

"I did not order it," Meredith said, "And there is barely enough men to sail them. Captain Koon is a presumptuous man."

"Yet the sea is calm, and men are not so necessary."

"Perhaps, but I will still rebuke Koon for moving without my orders. A true navy would not be run in such a manner."

"Is it a false navy?" Celestine asked. "And is not a true man worth a dozen veteran sailors?"

"You rebuke me!" Meredith said. "But look, we will see their purposes soon enough, for they come at a speed which this wind would not seem to sanction. I misjudged their seamanship."

They stood in silence, waiting as the grand vessels drew near. The figures on the deck were obscured by the sun and sails, and could not be identified. The foremost ship -- The King's Arm -- purposely sped past the Timber, then came about in a tight circle and stopped directly alongside the deck.

"Ho! You are not a petty officer, Captain Koon," Meredith called out.

"Nor am I," returned a gruff, old voice.

"Demons and devils!" the monk stepped backwards, "Admiral Stuart!"

"Whom did you expect? The devil has come, as you say, and my demons with me. But come aboard, for Gylain is on the move and we must join him in that."

As he spoke, Cybele closed her eyes and pressed her lips together.

"Do not fear him," Celestine whispered, "For he is father."

"Yet as he says, he is also the devil!"

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR

"Meredith!" called the Admiral as he stuck his head over the rail to see and be seen. "Meredith, why does the commander leave his post?"

"To see the Fardy brothers returning gallantly on their water castles!"

"That is well in times of peace," the Admiral spoke slowly, "But in war it is weakness, and weakness is rewarded only with defeat. Remember this."

"I had not forgotten."

"Very good, then. Yet the Fardies have loosed the lion, and he is on the hunt. If your Marins cannot break fifteen knots down the coastal stretch, we will tow them."

"They cannot," the black Fardy answered.

"There, Barnes!" and the Admiral turned shipward, "Attach this Marin to The Hare and The Tortoise, and the other to The Merry Forester and The Sheathed Sword. The King's Arm will stay unharnessed, to maneuver in case of an ambush."

"Yes, sir!" though the young man could not be seen on the towering deck.

The Admiral returned his face to the Marin. "Celestine, why are you here? You should be with Alfonzo, for he needs you in his endless toil."

"Yet my sister is here."

"Your sister by blood but not in it; for she serves another. I do not know her as a daughter, but as the Queen of Saxony; and the queen of Saxony does not dwell within my heart." He paused. "She has come in war, and meant to attack Thunder Bay alongside Gylain -- so my spies have said. Do you even deny it?" His voice was a glacier.

"Not in the least," and she returned his cold glance emotionlessly.

The Admiral grabbed onto the rail of the ship -- fifteen feet above the Marin's dock -- and swung himself over and onto the platform below. He landed in front of Cybele, raising himself to his full stature and locking her into a melee of the eyes. To Meredith, "Bring forward the chains, Commodore. She is an enemy commander and not to be treated with leniency."

"Father!" Celestine cried, and she stepped back to separate herself from the act which she abhorred. "Have you no heart? No love for your own daughter?"

"I am a soldier."

"But a soldier still has a heart, for he is a man before a soldier."

“Silence, fool!” Cybele hissed, “For I am a soldier, as well. To be captured is weakness, and for a soldier weakness is death. I am was gloried in strength, and thus must be mocked in weakness. Let it be!”

“Meredith, chain her,” the Admiral said, ignoring the conversation between his daughters.

Meredith did not do it, partly from wonder, and partly because he had no chains.

“Forgiveness, father!” Celestine continued. “Are not the ways of God above the ways of man?”

“I am not God!” the Admiral turned and looked her over. “What has happened? For your face is marked with the whip.” His voice became involuntarily tender, and he held her chin in a fatherly embrace.

“The toils of the journey,” she whispered.

“She lies,” Cybele said, her voice broken. “She is indeed marked by the whip, and by my orders. I faced her as it was done, even as our mother faced you!”

The Admiral struck her across the face with an open palm. “The devil in a woman’s skin! Has your mother been reincarnated, in beauty and in sin?” To his ship, “Barnes! Prepare the galley for a rowing slave!”

“Sir,” a voice returned, “A single oar will break our current, and there are no other prisoners.”

Celestine did not leave time for the Admiral to speak, “Barnes, I will join her.”

“Sir?” and Barnes Griffith’s face appeared over the rail.

“If she is a fool, let her be foolish.”

“Yes, sir!” and the lieutenant disappeared.

The Admiral was silent, and flew up the rope ladder that had been dropped from the side of The King’s Arm. His daughters followed, each with vigors of a different origin. Celestine was passionate for her sister, and Cybele for evil. Meredith and the Fardy brothers followed as well, and the very moment the blond Fardy threw his legs over the rail the Admiral ordered, “Heave away!”

The sailors were a strangely efficient force. The Admiral had set the sails against each other as they came about, and while they stood at the Marins, the ship did not move. But as he called out, a group of sailors jumped off their perch on the cross-trees of the main mast and launched themselves toward the mizzenmast. They landed firmly on its ropes, and the force of their impact caused the mast to rotate in its base -- at that time unfastened. The masts were set in brass cauldrons and could be rotated in a complete circle. It was a unique characteristic of Atiltian ships, and one that was lost with its inventors. Several notches were crafted into the mast, and when these notches aligned within the cauldron the mast was as sturdy as a static mast; yet when unlatched, they could be rotated to optimally catch the wind. As the mizzenmast reached the correct position, two men standing at its base dropped the brass fastener, which brought it to a stop in the desired notch. An ordinary sailor, perhaps, could not have executed such a dangerous operation as using the force of a leap between the masts to swing one about. But these sailors had been born into the canopy, and the air was better known to them than the ground.

"The ropes are prepared?" Barnes was asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. Take these women below and treat them as you would any other prisoner. Mercy, for a man of arms, is cowardice." His eyes were no longer cold, since even that much emotion had left them.

Barnes hesitated, but Cybele and Celestine went below without him. Seeing this, he hastened to escort them.

"Come to me," the Admiral said after a pinch of silence. He stood at the starboard bow, watching over the ocean with a father's eye. The wind beat against his face, but to him it was a soft linen nestled against him. He was speaking to Meredith and the Fardy brothers, and they came, albeit in silence: awed by his determination, but not surprised. He was a fierce sailor whose only fault was his blind and unwavering loyalty to his country -- to the trees and the foliage and the mountains, rather than to thenation -- above man or beast. To him, the forest was god.

"Do not think me incapable of feeling," he said, still staring into the ocean's abyss. "Do not think that I have no love, that I am not human. For I am, though that is my failing." He hesitated. "The ways of men are a narrow thread that keeps the world from ending. Yet the same thread if made too strong, hangs those we would help. If we are conquered, then Atilta will lose its claim to freedom, as will the Three Kingdoms. The mainland will not be long in following, and the torch passed from Rome will be swallowed by the sea. Yet even if we are victorious, danger still lurks underfoot, waiting to destroy us. For a beloved king can be as harmful as a tyrant. But I meander. You have come through safely, friends, but what of old Clifford?"

"He is safe," the black Fardy said, "Though not as patient as me and my brothers: he could not wait for our arrival in Thunder Bay before making his escape. At the moment, he naps in the Timber," and he pointed to the Timber that had hauled the second Marin.

"Ah, the old man!" William Stuart laughed out loud. "And he will need the rest, ere this battle has played out."

Meanwhile, Celestine and Cybele were chained to their oars on either side of the otherwise empty galley. It was the bottom of the ship -- but for the two foot deep water tank beneath -- and stretched the length of the ship, curved at the sides along the hull's contour. Barnes Griffith had stayed with them for a time, pressured by his good nature to comfort them and by his orders to discomfort them. But Cybele had mixed thoughts for the man she had known as a young girl as her father's servant, and at last bellowed at him to begone. He raised his eyebrows, muttered something inaudible, and limped away with a cluttered countenance. The two sisters were alone in the room.

They rowed vigorously. Though supremely beautiful, neither was weak, but inured to hardships. Celestine had been for fifteen years a prisoner of the man who lusted after her, and who had done the same to her mother. Every day she held her love for her husband, and endured the suffering by looking over the forest canopy, in which her beloved Alfonzo labored endlessly to free her and the people of Atilta.

Cybele had been raised from youth to be a powerful queen. Her mother was bitter, though she only warred against herself: her love soured, and with it her whole person. Cybele was thus in daily communication with manifested misery. She was still young when her mother's death placed her on the throne, but she was not ruled by the legions of officials who thought to govern in her stead. Rather, she

burned even from the womb with a passion for power, and it did not smolder with age. By this time, she was twenty and her rule as uncontested as her beauty. The latter was that of youth, of newness, of spring. Yet the whiteness of her hair and the strange determination of her spirit gave her the beauty of old age, of life, of wisdom, of winter. These two sources of beauty were married in her, and she was left a goddess. She was in every sense a woman.

As they rowed, the two did not speak, nor did their faces express their thoughts. Their countenances were as silent as their tongues.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE

A man stood in front of the window, and another was motionless on the bed several yards to the left. Twilight came through the window, and a lamp hung by the door. The room was made of stone, though the walls were covered with tapestries and the floor with a rug. Outside the windows was a castle, and outside that was a small town; beyond the town lived an expansive meadow, stretching for a mile in every direction, until it struck the edge of the forest. To the north was Thunder Bay, upon which busy men could be seen.

“Alfonzo,” said the man on the bed. He spoke weakly, on the verge of sleep or death. “Tell me, in my final hours, what is passing in my world.”

“Milada!” Alfonzo entreated, “You will not be killed so easily, will you? Why are you so eager to quit the battle?”

“Because, friend, I am not fooled by your supposed optimism. Look,” he gestured to his stomach, “The wound eats my strength.” He paused. “As I said, give me the last glimpse I will have of Atila.”

“We are building defenses around the castle, and the rebels are gathering here in constant streams. The king is in France, but we have heard nothing of him.”

“Perhaps we were wrong,” Milada said slowly. “If he had stayed, his presence would have strengthened our ranks. Instead he searches for a cure for an useless old man!”

“Do not say such things, Milada. We cannot change what has been set in motion, but only commit our fate to God.”

“You are as lightheaded as my daughter, about such things.”

“We will see.”

“You will, at least,” Milada moaned, “For I will not live. Go, and leave me to my fate.”

Alfonzo looked over the dying man, then left the room, leaving the plans he had drawn sitting on the table. No one greeted him in the armory, and the guards below were not at their posts. He passed through the room without seeing anything, absorbed in the deluge which surrounded him. It was not until he reached the door that the spell was broken by a windy voice.

"I am a patient man," it said, "But what is this? Can you pass by your friends without even an acknowledgment? By the patent sobriety of my kin, I am outraged, Alfonzo of Melborough: outraged and incensed!" The speech could only have been more fervent if the speaker had not broken into a laugh at the end, leapt from his chair, and charged toward Alfonzo with open arms -- a strange appearance, for he was an oddly shaped man.

"The Fardies!" Alfonzo cried, grasping the blond brother by the hand.

"And they are not alone," Meredith said, advancing to his old friend. The two embraced.

Behind Meredith stood the Admiral. He shook Alfonzo's hand stoically; both held themselves tightly. Throughout all the greetings, Alfonzo did not betray his ardor, keeping his stature mature and his air commanding. But that changed in an instant. He looked beyond and saw Celestine standing sweetly in the rear, waiting for the others to present themselves. Their love was not a painting in public, only to be seen and never felt; nor was it a sculpture in private, rigid and unmoving.

"My love!" and he could not disguise his rapture. He ran to her and she to him, and together they became lovers. "All is well," he said, "For I am whole once more, not to be overtaken."

"Not by men, in any regard," Celestine smiled.

"And if by God, then I am willing," Alfonzo returned. Then, looking her over, "You look pale and worn. What has overtaken you?"

"I was scourged, and rowed in the galley."

"In the galley!" Alfonzo turned to the Admiral. "I will have a word with you, in a moment."

"She chose it herself. She is a woman, and who am I to tell her as if a child?"

"What fools and heathens!" mocked a voice to the left. Cybele came forward. "While others deny their actions, I embrace mine, I flout it proudly. What fools, that evil is a thing to be abhorred. For evil is considered such only by the power of God, and God has no power that I have seen."

Alfonzo faced her. "If it is sin to boast about good deeds, how much more about evil ones. What you say to anger me only drives me to compassion, that one could be so proud to cast away her sister. Do you think debts are not to be repaid? Mercy is not eternal."

"Nor is it here, for there is no such thing. Where there is forgiveness, there is a pride that dictates it. What mercy is there when the strong are respected for their mere strength, and the weak destroyed for their mere weakness? What mercy is there from God, whose purpose is only to glorify himself? As is God so is man, I say: given to their own glory. And you are also a man."

"If there were no mercy, where would you be? And what has Celestine gained in her dealings with you? Good will lead to good, and evil to evil."

Cybele drew her beauty from its sheath and smote them with a poignant smile. "Then let it be: she has forgiven me without selfish motives. But what will her forgiveness lead to, if I make my escape? Will I not return to evil deeds, and to persecuting your rebellion? It will not lead to good, and the evil will be your own reward."

Celestine advanced toward her sister. "You see only what you look for. Life is more than cause and effect, for there are infinite causes and infinite effects."

"Yet if God is merciful, why would he inflict evil on all only to give reprieve to some? If we are known by our actions and the fruit of our labor, then who is God?"

"Quos vult perdere -- dementat," Celestine whispered.

"Perhaps," Cybele returned, "But, insanus medio flumine quaerit aquam."

"Then open your eyes and see, for you are mad! If you seek God, do not look to the circles of the godless. You will find the contrast, but not the vision; the darkness, not the light. God will show himself, if you look."

"Will he? Then let Lord Milada, who lays dying not far from us, be healed. Give me a sign, and I will believe."

"What of the sign on the Marin? There you asked and it was given."

"That was coincidence, and a sign must be something entirely impossible. Lord Milada must walk to me -- upright and full of vigor -- and kiss me upon the lips. Then, I will believe."

"That is not such a terrible prospect," laughed a voice from behind them.

"My God!" cried the Admiral, "How can you be walking, Milada?"

"How? William, do you not remember that I have a Godly daughter -- praise be to God. Not two minutes ago, I was overcome with warmth and healed. I do not know how, but I do know why."

He jiggled and jibed his way to Cybele, giving her a gentle kiss on the lips.

"The proof is given," he laughed. Then, winking, "Unless you require more?"

She was silent for a moment, then whispered to herself, "Yet I will not believe!"

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX

De Casanova sat alone at the top of Castle Plantagenet, in the same room in which Celestine had been imprisoned. The only addition was a writing table before the window, and a stool before the table. It was there that he sat, his back perfectly straight and his arms resting on the table before him. His head was extended toward the window, but even this he did with a controlled bearing. Only his countenance was not so well-mannered. His hair changed to the light, cut short but not combed, and sat high on his forehead. His thick side-burns remained trimmed, and the rest of his face clean.

With de Casanova, method was the arm of madness. His plots were achieved systematically, rather than

with daring or rash courage, and once an objective formed in his mind it could not be finished but with success. He was a bureaucratic warrior, and a terror to those either passionate or pedantic. To commit evil in a desperate passion is an abomination, but to make it an institution of one's person beyond the mere animal nature is something far worse. Generally, the righteous work assiduously to keep themselves from sin, and the evil lazily allow themselves to fall into their own sinful natures. But de Casanova was an assiduous worker of evil, going beyond the lust or pride that drives a man to a self-sacrifice that denies himself.

"What is this pressure which attacks my chest?" he moaned to himself. "What is this throbbing which fills my body, and this tingling which oppresses my veins? Can it be?" and he fell silent as he gazed out the window. "Lydia!"

Gylain had come in during the pause, and heard the final word.

"What is this?" he asked.

De Casanova turned, saw it was Gylain, and returned his face to the window.

"I have lost," he sighed. "I can crush him and kill him; I can burn his honor and feed its charred remains to the beasts of history. But still I have lost; I am defeated."

"Your strength forsakes you in your emotion, and this is not the time to be forsaken."

"But what am I to do? For above all, I love her."

"De Casanova, you do not know what love is. If you did, you would see it to be emotion, and that is to be disregarded. There are but two things in this world: strength and weakness. Anything else is only a way of viewing or denying them. Is God righteous? His strength makes him so. Is Satan evil? His weakness makes him so. Right and wrong, justice and injustice, liberty and oppression -- these things are strength and weakness in a different dress. Love is emotion, and emotion weakness. Therefore, flee from it before it steals your robe, lest you sleep with it."

"And you do not love Cybele, nor her mother, nor her sister?"

"I do not," and Gylain hesitated. "I hate," he said at last, "And what love I have serves only to increase my hatred."

"And yet, as you say, it is weakness."

"It is, and I will defeat it. It will die with William Stuart."

"And you? Overconfidence is a vice," the other returned. "To defeat the rebels will take more than we have given. The people--"

"The people!" Gylain laughed. "They are horns to the bull and claws to the leopard, but they do not swing themselves. This democracy they flout is tyranny in a harlot's dress; for it must have strength the same as any dictator, and something cannot be strong unless another thing is made weak in contrast. If democracy follows the will of the people, why is it needed? As far as it needs power to enforce its rule, it is not freedom; and if its rule is not enforced, it does nothing."

"What I was saying, my lord, is that the people would not care if we were deposed. So we should not

care if they are destroyed: give and take.”

“There you are wrong; for we rule for the power and receive our due. But without the people there would be no power to be had. We cannot take what they do not give. Therefore, we let them go their way.”

“Emotion is to be feared in leaders, but cultivated in followers. And this is our disadvantage: our soldiers are trained beyond humanity, while theirs fight for self -- albeit under the guise of woman and country. The emotions of self are a powerful ally, in matters of justice.”

“I doubt their emotion. Still, we will see, for I have the heart of William’s daughter as a security and it may have to be used. But will he hesitate when the time comes? He will not flinch.” He paused. “The end will come and he will not care.”

“There are many ends.”

“But this will be the end of Atilta, its final battle. I have seen it in my dreams, and what God has dictated no man can turn aside.”

De Casanova replaced his eyes to the window and Gylain paced the floor.

“The end is dictated, de Casanova, and our actions are without consequence. Evil is weakness, and strength righteousness. Thus God is the creator of evil, because it can exist only under his own strength. We are made only to fuel his pride: the contrast, the lone tree that stands against the sunset to give it depth. Evil is weakness and the inability to be like God, and it was God who made beings who had no chance of being like him. He made us evil.” Gylain groaned. “But I will have him yet; for the stronger we become the weaker he seems.”

The air grew heavy. And it was not lightened by the appearance of Jonathan Montague, who at that moment entered the room. His countenance was drenched in sweat and sorrow, his eyes in despair.

“I have seen my brother,” he said without waiting, “I have seen him just now.”

Gylain leapt to action. “He has returned? Where is he and what news does he bring?”

“No, he has not returned, and I fear he never will. I have seen him in a vision,” and Montague’s voice was a rainstorm.

“You have come to speak, so speak,” Gylain said.

“He came to me as I washed, having just returned from a patrol. I stood by the water bowl, and he appeared as a ghost across the room.

“‘Brother, put your finger into the water, and then upon my lips.’

“‘Why only a finger, when you may have it all,’ and I picked up the bowl as if to bring it to him.

“But he commanded me to stop, ‘Do this only for me, brother. Promise me you will do whatever I ask, lest you follow me where I have gone.’

“‘Am I not your brother? When have you needed my promise?’

““This is something more than I have asked before, and I pray it will be the last I ever see or speak to you.’

““You startle me, brother. What is it?”

““Repent!’

““Of what, my brother? Only ask and it is done.’

““Repent!’

““My brother, I have done no wrong. Tell me and it will be done.’

““Repent!’

““How can I answer you, but that I cannot repent of what I have not done.’

““Repent! For you have forsaken the ways of God!’

““I cannot! Do you not know me, what I have done?”

“He said nothing, but screamed in agony, then disappeared. I came to you at once.”

“And what will you do?” Gylain asked.

Still shaken, Jonathan Montague answered, “I will wait for my brother’s return and ask him. It must have been a delusion.”

“Those who do not have faith in their heart will not have faith in their eyes,” Gylain whispered.

“I cannot hear you,” Montague said.

But Gylain could not answer, for at that very moment a page stomped noisily into the room.

“My lord, I have a message!” the young man said.

“From whom,” and Gylain gave a solemn countenance.

“Peter, the Captain of the Guards.”

“I know who he is,” Gylain said. “But what is his message? Out with it.”

“The queen of Saxony is not to be found.”

“Very well, begone,” and the page hurried out of the room in fear, lest the three men send him on a dangerous mission. When he was gone, Gylain continued, “It is as I thought. Damn those patient fools.”

“But what will we do?” and de Casanova regain his zeal in the presence of action. “Will we trust to fate, to see what course has been planned for us?”

"You learn," Gylain sighed at the jest. "We will see what is sent."

"Look!" Montague cried at that instant, "Look, for a battle fleet is coming into the bay. Its rear extends beyond my view, and they fly the colors of the Three Kingdoms."

"So it is!" Gylain laughed, "Lyndon has joined our banner, as well as victory. By fate's declaration, we sail today -- for war and for revenge!"

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN

The King of France leaned against the window sill, his elbows bent and his arms folded. He wore a majestic cloak over his clothing, and a simple golden crown on his head that named him the king. His hair was a twilight sun -- gray and grasping -- his face ruddy, his hands womanly, and his stature shapely, though in a manner that denotes an indulgent diet.

The room was small and not as grand as others in the palace at Bordeaux, for it was the king's private study on the second floor of the western wall. A secret passage connected it to his bedchamber, and as few servants but Vahan and his captain of the guards knew of its existence, he was not disturbed. Through the windows could be seen the streets, and the passers-by could be observed in detail. Behind him -- in the center of the room -- stood a square table, at which Vahan Lee was looking over a pile of papers. The whole palace was in stone, but here it was covered again by maple boards, and that by an ornate rug from Istanbul. In all, the study was made up with inviting -- if expensive -- furnishings.

"What will it be?" the king asked gaily, and his tone was strangely carefree for an old king. "What will I have for dessert, blond or brunette? My tongue is cleared for action, yet I cannot decide. The day is pleasant, the sun radiant, the sky clear -- and the mood is set for blond. But in the distance storms approach and the sky darkens -- and the mood is set for brunette. With such decisions, I do not now how I manage to stay above it all," and he sighed, though in a pleasant manner.

"I should say there will be no dessert for your majesty tonight," and Vahan's voice ran out with a serious undertow, washing away the light-hearted mood. When in his position, Vahan was not unconscious of his power; and when he knew of it, he did not let it idly sit.

"No dessert? But my health will suffer from such deprivations."

"I say only this, my lord: there is war ahead, and war is won by hungry men."

"Perhaps, since we make war, not love. But what trouble it is to be king! I am burdened with decisions and turmoil; without you I would simply dry up and be gone. If only I were someone else." He sighed. "I sometimes wonder how a tailor makes love. His mind is clear from troubles and his time from burdensome tasks. He must have a good time of it!" He returned his eyes to the window. "I wish I were a tailor."

"But, my lord, tailors make love but once or twice a lifetime," and Vahan did not look up from his business.

"Truly? That is the strange, for were I in their position I would make it every day, with no responsibilities hanging over me to keep me dry. I wonder why they do not."

"Because they cannot afford it."

"Cannot afford it? I did not mean with the harlots, but with their wives! Truly Vahan, you have such odd ideas on these matters." He laughed, "Cannot afford it!"

"I insist they cannot," Vahan grew warm, "For children are formed in the act, and children are expensive. The tailors are fined too heavily to raise them, and so cannot make love. If they do, they must work harder to support them, and so have no more time for it."

"An abomination," cried the king. "What scoundrel devised this love making fine? I will have it out with him, to be sure! The audacity!"

"Your majesty, it has been since there were records."

"I should think not, my dear Vahan, for I have never before heard of it. To fine a tailor's love making! That is too far, indeed, for a government's arm to reach."

"It is not called the love making fine, sire, and it is not for merely tailors."

"For more than tailors? You mean, it is for all citizens? What a horrid idea, and it is no wonder they seem always unhappy -- for I would die myself if I could not release my passions. Let us repeal it, for my conscience cannot bear taxing the only pleasure in this life."

"My lord, it has other benefits, which you have supported so strongly in the past."

"Have I? If so, it was not named the love making fine. What are these benefits, though I cannot see how they are worth their price in happiness."

"My lord, would there be so much dessert for you and the court, if the tailors went untaxed in these matters?"

"No, the wells would run dry. But still, I must not be selfish. What is this fine called, that I can repeal it."

"It is not so much the love making fine as it is the love making tax, for that is the effect of our taxes: on imports, on linens, and on grain."

"Now I understand," and the king paused, still staring out the window. "I have reached a decision, Vahan."

"I am ready, your majesty. Will we repeal the love making tax?"

"What? I have decided on my desserts, I meant -- for I will have both blond and brunette, to celebrate our coming victory. As for the tax, my health is not what it once was."

There was a knock at the door, hurried and important.

"Enter," Vahan said, and he did not wait for the king's approval.

The door swung open and a soldier replaced it in the doorway. He was fully armed and armored, bearing a sealed letter in his hand. Vahan evidently knew him, for he beckoned him to come over, while the king continued looking after the passing women.

“A message?” Vahan asked the soldier.

“Yes, sir: from Captain De Seinaly. I have not stopped since I was given it yesterday evening.”

“Well done, Horace, though I did not expect less. Your service will be remembered when the time is right. But for now, let me read the letter,” and Vahan took his penknife from the table and carefully opened the seal. It was written in a hasty, untidy script, with the ending words omitted, and the sentences incomplete. After he had read it to himself, Alfonso read it aloud, “Your Majesty, the fleet sails from the Three Kingdoms. We send word immediately. There is nothing to spare. They sail at ten knots.”

The king sighed deeply, “Then I will have no dessert.”

The soldier was surprised, “My lord, why should you have less than the soldiers? For we bring our dessert with us when we sail.”

“Genius!” cried the king, “I had not thought of it, but it will do nicely!”

“If we have time,” and Vahan sighed, though in a different manner than the king. “We are needed at the fortress at once.” The fortress was a military compound two miles beyond the city walls, along an inlet.

“Yes, you are right,” the king moaned. “And we had best leave now, as there is much to be done if we are to reach Atilta in time. But wait -- we cannot have more than two days, and that beginning yesterday,” and the king hung his head.

The three men -- Vahanlee, the king, and Horace -- took the hall to the king's coach, and set off at a quick trot through the streets toward the city's end. On the way, the carriage passed through the crowded, narrow streets of Bordeaux, jostling those inside. Horace sat on the left and Vahan Lee on the right, both of the rear seat, and the king occupied the front seat by himself, making a positive or negative sigh in relation to each of the ladies they passed. Several minutes were spent gaining the highway, which ran straight through the city and was kept well-tended by the merchants' guilds. No one walked along the highway, and the king, thus deprived of his attentions, turned to Vahan and began to speak.

“How much of the army is ready to depart?” he asked.

“Fifteen thousand,” was the answer.

“And they are aboard?”

“On two hundred ships.”

“The whole fleet,” and the king paused. “But let us hope it is enough against our combined enemies. You say de Casanova attacked you?”

“There was an ambush and a melee, but I cannot say who planned it. Patrick McConnell was taken by de Casanova, and de Casanova by us.”

“The King of Atilta will be returning to Bordeaux soon, I should think, if they went to the Cervenues

Mountains.”

“They should, or else they will miss the final fight. But they are beyond my gaze.”

“About that we will see, anyway. Captain Khalid took a battalion after Nicholas Montague, and they cannot be far, either.”

“I hope to hear word any hour.”

“So I thought, for there is the equipage of the battalion, lined between the fortress and their ship. The crowd overflows the courtyard, in excitement,” and the king pointed to the fortress before them.

“So they are!” cried Vahan. “And what could it be, than that they have Montague and execute him without a trial, as I ordered. For I know the guiles of Montague.”

“Wisely done,” the king said, and he poked his head out the window, calling to the driver, “You there, hurry!” Their speed increased to a gallop.

The fortress was circular, ten thousand feet in diameter, and formed into ten buildings -- each of which was entirely self-contained. A courtyard filled much of the center, and the only entrances to the individual buildings were stationed behind a moat that circled the interior. Only a narrow, underground passage led to the courtyard, with a dozen gates along its length and murder holes throughout. The buildings themselves had hundred foot walls on the outside, wherein no way was made to enter. And below the whole of the fortress was the King’s Keep, buried deep beneath the ground in a system of caves. At this time, the baggage of a full battalion was spread between the port and the fortress and was slowly being brought through the entrance tunnel. A large crowd of soldiers was standing around, hanging out of the courtyard with an air of the unusual.

The carriage approached the tunnel gates and began to slow. But Vahan, struck by some strange feeling of urgency, stuck his out the window and demanded the guards clear the path for the king. They recognized the powerful minister of state and the tunnel was cleared at once. On the smooth stone, the horses could only stop from falling by pushing forward at full speed, and the tunnel passed like a dreamless night. The soldiers in the courtyard were strewn aside from its path, and it only came to a stop at the very foot of the gallows, on which stood seven persons on the very verge of being hung. When Vahan saw who they were, he leapt through the window -- shattering the glass -- and tumbled onto the stairs that led to the raised platform. As he hit the ground, the hangmen opened the trap doors the seven stood upon.

“Stop!” Vahan cried in desperation, “For that is not Nicholas Montague!”

CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT

“We part in friendship and brotherhood,” Zeus told Willard at the edge of the cavern. “But I warn you never to return! It is nothing personal, of course, but we must spend our days in peaceful isolation, lest the gods revoke our pardon. So here we part, for all and ever.” The old king-over-the-mountain bowed low before Willard, then turned and disappeared into the darkness.

Willard and his companions stood silent for a moment, unable to break themselves from the spell of the mountain. Then -- with a single, united action -- they returned to the world in which strife reigned, and their impatience to return was reborn.

"We must hurry," Patrick said, "Come, Lydia, it will pass soon enough."

"Will it?" she asked sweetly.

"Yes, but if it does not, we must drink it. It is our cup to bear."

"We will be thirsty, indeed, if we do not bind speed to our feet," de Garcia said. "So let us run, if we can. Our wagon has been taken, no doubt, but we can take another in its stead."

"The peasants can suffer the loss of a wagon," Leggitt agreed, "Against the loss of a people."

"Yet we will only arrive when God desires," said Ivona, "And we need not sin to change his timing."

"Nonsense," de Garcia said, "For I trust only my sword," and he drew it from its scabbard, flashing the sun with its steel to show his fluency. "As for God, he can help us if he so desires."

"No, Ivona is right, de Garcia," Willard said, and his regal voice put an end to contrary thoughts. "She is right, for we cannot help the people of Atilta by taking from the people of France." He dared a look at Ivona, who at the same time dared a look at him.

Her heart was tempted to weakness, and Lorenzo's words became her earrings: "You will marry this prince, whether now or later. It is your fate, and cannot be escaped." Her pulse quickened and for an instant her heart made war against itself. But it was in vain; for she loved him in spite of herself.

"I am of de Garcia's opinion, though I suspect you both think vainly," Patrick said. "For I see a body of metal approaching from the forest; and it glitters, as if armor." He pointed to the forest, and the others strained their eyes to see as well.

It was late morning, and the sky was already bright with rib-cage clouds. Beyond the blue, only green surrounded them; yet the green of the forest and the green of the grass were hardly the same color, for one was a blond and the other a brunette. The party was left in a vacuum, both of colors and shapes; for the meadow was an arena, the trees were as spectators, and the clouds were distant buildings. And they were the gladiators. Yet the opponents were missing, though only for a moment. For the glowing steel that Patrick saw became clearly visible as it emerged from the forest: a battalion of French troops. They marched in perfect order, even through the forest, under the command of a valiant looking man. Their pace did not fall off as they approached.

"Sheath your sword," Willard said to de Garcia, who still wielded his blade. "We will not run nor fight, for they are our allies."

The French soldiers saw they did not flee and wondered who they might be. But Captain Khalid, remembering Vahan's warning about Montague, did not slow his pace. In a moment the two groups met, and the battalion circled around them until there was no escape. Only then did Khalid speak.

"In the name of the King of France, I take you prisoner. Resistance is death."

"For what reason," Willard asked him, taking a step forward and rearing himself to his full stature. He looked and sounded every bit a king, which set the captain the wrong way. The man was not used to ordering those above him in rank.

"For reasons of the crown," he answered.

"In his territory, the king is privileged to arrest whom he will," Willard returned. "I do not resist, yet take me to him, for I need to speak with him on an urgent matter."

"He does not meet with commoners."

"Indeed? But I am none other than the King of Atilta."

"The king?" the captain tried to fill his voice with mockery, but it came out respect. "I have been warned of your guiles, Nicholas Montague. So, knowing they will not work, do not attempt them."

"He is not Montague!" cried Ivona, "For his lips do not lie."

"It is not the lips that are defiled," Khalid answered. "If his lips do not lie, it is his heart."

"No, I am not Montague," Willard said. "Do I even look like him?"

"I have never met him, so I cannot say. But I have heard of him, and he is you."

"You have heard of him and of his deeds? Then tell me, if I were Montague, do I look to be fifty years of age? Is my beard not the richest black, and my skin as tight as youth? But if I am not fifty, could I have been in France at the late king's demise? Or at Saxony in the heat of battle? You see, I am not Montague."

"Your words are coherent, but my orders are more so," the captain said. "I am here to protect the interests of France and of Atilta, by order of Sir Vahan Lee." They smiled when they heard the name with its illustrious prefix. "I am told that you are Montague, that you are not to be trusted nor given the slightest leeway, and that I am to hang you immediately upon return to the fortress outside of Bordeaux. And I do as I am told. Now turn yourself, surrender your weapons, and let us be off."

De Garcia made as if to draw his sword, but Willard stopped him. "Is it better to die possibly in the future, or for sure in the present? Vahan will not let us be executed."

"No, good sir," Khalid said, influenced by Willard's kingly stature, "I will do as I am commanded, and you will hang. But to live another day is still a blessing. Men, take their arms." The soldiers disarmed the captives, bound their hands, and spread them throughout their ranks.

"Bring the women to the front," Khalid commanded. "They will walk at my side."

"If you harm them, I will eat your rotting flesh," Patrick growled.

"Would you not?" laughed the blue-eyed Lydia.

"It is not I who would harm them," answered the captain, "And I only bring them to the front that they may enjoy the lovely day without a hundred metal boots clanging before them. It will be only a short walk, for the river is nearby." With that, Khalid turned and began marching, followed by the others. He

was a hard man, and his pace was a double march.

They reached the river within the hour, finding the battalion's river boat under guard on the bank. It was fifty feet long and fifteen across, though its bottom was flat and sat only a foot below the water. Some sat on barrels and crates full of provisions, others on the sides, and still others were left standing. Khalid, however, gave this pleasure to his soldiers rather than the prisoners. It had taken three days to reach the Cervenues mountains by wagon; by ship, they reached the fortress by the evening of the next day. On the evening of the second day, Willard and Ivona were seated together on a large crate on the rear of the boat, close beside Khalid's own seat.

"Were you treated well during the march, Ivona?" Willard asked.

"As well as any prisoner. I am aware of my beauty, for though it is nothing to me, it is much to others. It inspires a passion in men: some to possess it by love, and others by force. But the captain is a man of honor, and it only inspired his respect."

"You are aware, then, of the powers you have over men?"

"I am," Ivona did not look away, but met Willard's eyes with her own.

"And yet you do not yield in favor of any man?"

"And why would I? What I have is only mine because I have been given it, and I cannot give what is another's."

"You are strange, for a woman."

"Because I do not revel in my beauty?"

"Yes, and because you do not try to increase it with ornaments."

"Perhaps I know that my beauty is best served alone."

"So it is. Your countenance is your beauty, and that is formed by your mind and your thoughts."

"Have you studied me so?" she asked with a smile. Then, quietly, "There are better things to be studied."

"But Ivona, a flower must grow to the sun, and a man to beauty. For you I feel many things."

"Do not say it," Ivona turned her head, "For I cannot return it, as I am not meant for it."

"Would God create such beauty, only to leave it beyond the touch of man?"

"The finest things he consecrates to himself."

"Perhaps, but I have seen how you are, and you have seen how I am."

"I have feelings, you mean, but they do not govern me. If my heart is yours, my soul is not."

"You speak, and I see your lovely lips moving, and I see their expressions that delight me unto

weariness. Yet I cannot comprehend their words.”

“My love is the folly of youth.”

“If youth is folly, then age is wisdom; let us grow old together.”

“Foolish man!” she faltered, losing the strength of her voice. “I cannot love you!”

“Foolish woman!” he returned in the same whisper, “I cannot but love you!”

In the fading light Ivona’s hair grew darker, and her eyes deeper. The moon hid behind a cloud for a moment, and in the darkness gravity drew them together. He kissed her, and she did not recuse herself. Then, with a brilliant twinkle, the moon returned. Ivona broke away and turned to the night to conceal her happiness. Only the silence thought back to what had been: heavy, foggy silence.

“Vanity, vanity, all is vanity,” she whispered, but she could not mean it.

The air was broken by a laughing call from close beside them. “Make love, Montague! For now come the gallows!” It was Captain Khalid.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-NINE

The fortress was just ahead on the river, twenty yards from the shore with a paved path passing from its gate to the docks, where several other ships were loading men and cargo. The gates of the complex were left open for the moving of cargo and in the courtyard -- though it could not be seen from the river -- was a gallows, a raised platform for the purpose of hanging.

Khalid disembarked his men and, with a rock-hard countenance, took Willard by the arm as he led them to be hung. “The end has come, Montague. Do you have any confessions to bring your soul to peace?”

“Only this,” answered Willard, “That I am not Montague.”

“Stubborn and stout-hearted before the end. But that is well, for I would have thought less of you, if you groveled after all the tales which have been told of your motionless heart.”

“Does a dead man care for a living man’s opinion?”

“While he lives, he does; and you are yet alive.”

“Still, I am a king, and kings cannot care for the opinions of men; for they forge them with their fiery eyes, and shape them with their outstretched arms. But, for conscience’s sake, know that I do not hold you in contempt; for you do your duty and nothing more. The soldier cannot be swayed by the personal, and you are a soldier.” To Willard, a man of the forest, this was the highest degree of praise. “Vahan is a strange man and doubtless forgot to include in his orders that you spare the king you were sent to save. I did not think of it, myself,” and Willard laughed for a moment. “No, he is not to blame: he is too good a friend for that.”

"I am not so foolish, though I still admire your persistence, Montague. A lesser man would have growled and sworn long ago, and thrown the jest aside. But to do so, I tell you that if there were a King of Atilta, Vahan would be as dear to him as you say."

As the captain spoke they reached the gates of the tunnel, and Khalid bellowed through the stone corridor to those beyond, "Prepare the gallows!" A crowd began to stir, as the soldiers came out to greet their comrades and witness the execution. Willard looked about him for some sign of Ivona, but she could not be spied.

"It is not until the end," he moaned, "That the beginning is even known! Woe to me, in life and love."

Khalid turned his head in the darkness and did not answer. If even his foot was human, he did not let it know; but as for his heart, it was a species of the orderdutiis. He did not stop as they were absorbed into the courtyard, but led the battalion forward until they stood before the gallows. It rose ten feet from the ground, with ten separate nooses hanging from the upper section, while below each sat a trap door. These were the blocks. When the execution was ordered, they would be pushed open, and the prisoners left out to dry. Khalid led Willard directly to the platform, and rose his hands as if to tie the noose himself.

"Have you any final words, Montague?"

"Not yet," Willard said.

"What?" But the captain could say no more, for at that moment a massive, hairy arm swiped his head to the side with such force that he fell over unconscious. Before his body hit the platform, Willard had taken his sword from his belt and held it out before him. Behind them, another soldier led de Garcia. Willard turned before the soldier could react and struck him down. De Garcia reclaimed his sword from the soldier -- who had taken it as his own -- and held it before him, his prayer and salvation.

"My faith is renewed!" and he held the long, cylindrical blade in his hands while flourishing it in the air: a skillful move with bound hands.

The other soldiers, however, saw what was up and pushed the other prisoners back into the circle of soldiers that had formed around the gallows. They drew their weapons and formed ranks, leaving the rebellious prisoners no where to flee. Thus, Willard, Horatio, and de Garcia stood by themselves on the high platform, their wrists still bound. They stood in an outward circle and looked over the legions. It was clear they could not escape.

"We cannot win," de Garcia said.

"Yet we can keep from losing," and Willard flicked his sword at a soldier who thought to approach them. He fell back, and Willard went on, "Can you see the road that stretches off into the distance?" Willard nodded his head to the southwest, toward Bordeaux. From the height of the gallows they could see over the surrounding fortress at one point, and thus the road beyond. A solitary carriage raced along, shooting dust behind it. "Vahan comes to our rescue. We need only delay a few moments."

Just then, Khalid came to his senses at Willard's feet.

"A desperate attempt," he said.

"Give us half an hour to prepare ourselves for death," de Garcia said in a French heavily influenced by

his native Spanish. "We will yield if you give us but one half hour."

"I have orders, and duty renders me unable." De Garcia whipped his sword down and smote the captain with the blunt sides. He fell unconscious once more.

"Deliver our comrades to us, and we will deliver the captain to you," Willard called to the soldiers, his voice a symbol of authority.

Rather than answer, the soldiers charged the platform. It was a terrible onslaught. The stairs were narrow, and allowed only one man to cross at a time; yet the sides were too steep to be climbed while anyone stood on top to stop the advance. A whole horde of soldiers surrounded them, but only one at a time could attack. The first struck at Willard's head with a downward blow; Willard dodged to the left and the blade passed innocently beside him. By this time a second soldier had come up, and lashed his weapon sideways at Willard's chest. With his wrists bound, the latter could not parry it correctly, so he diverted it by holding his sword before him at a gentle angle. When the two swords met, Willard's tree-limb arms did not give way, and the soldier's sword was forced away like water down a hill. The first soldier, meanwhile, was still recovering from his missed strike. Willard lunged forward at him, running him through the center and throwing him from the platform. But by this move he left the circle, and thus the protection which de Garcia and Horatio had of his back. A third soldier came just at this instant and thought to dispatch the foreign king for good. Yet the second soldier's blade still hung in the air, and it came to a stop against the new soldier's head, piercing his forehead and dropping him to the ground. These things happened in the same second of time.

In the same instant, de Garcia was fencing three French soldiers who had scaled the far side of the gallows. His sword flew in every direction, as it parried and returned each blow with his fluid agility. His wrists were bound, yet as always he found a way to use it for his advantage: with his right hand he held the sword, and with his left he held his right wrist, supporting its weight and freeing his other wrist for swordplay. The soldiers swung with their arms, and their strokes were stronger if slower. But de Garcia whipped his blade and it sang as it rebuked each of the stronger strokes. He could deal three parries by the time the first soldier had regained his balance to strike again. But it did not last, for as the soldiers grew tired, others took their places. De Garcia, however, had no reserve.

"It is time we ended this," he called to Willard over the clash of steel. "For if we go down fighting, we are dead; but if we surrender, they will have to hang us."

"How so?"

"The rules of war. If we yield, they cannot kill us by sword but by execution. This Khalid is a hard man when it comes to duty -- like many men I have met as a warrior -- so let us play him in our hand."

"The laws of men are strange. But we are among men, and the carriage will arrive any moment. We have delayed long enough."

With that, the two dropped their swords and gestured for parley, while Horatio lowered his paws to the same effect. Khalid was beginning to regain himself a second time, and when he saw them yield he called to his men, "Do not attack them! For they have surrendered."

He stood -- unsteadily for a moment -- and faced Willard. The platform was empty but for a few soldiers, and the other captives were once more brought to the front.

"Well done, Montague," Khalid said, "But to no avail: you are still caught."

“We will see. The future brings hope, and every delay brings it closer.”

“I see. Then we will have no more delays, if you expect a rescue of some sort. Men, place the nooses,” and he led Willard to the furthest noose, looped it around his neck, and left him standing on the trap door. As he did this, the soldiers did the same to the other six comrades.

Horatio was placed next to Willard, and still wore his monk's frock. The noose had been placed around his neck outside the hood, and the soldiers did not know he was not human. In their minds, perhaps, no monk was fully human, so they did not trouble their consciences over his portly figure. Horatio silently allowed them to do what they would, for he followed Willard and Willard allowed it. After a week of feigning humanity Horatio was beginning to feel human, and as he stood there he had a very human thought, “What of the forest creatures? Whom will they follow?”

Next was de Garcia. His hair was long and unruly, his face unshaven. On the outside his thoughts could not be pierced, for his face was immutable, fearless. He wondered, at that last moment, where a different path would have led. “If I had not betrayed Alfonzo,” he thought, “I would have been able to stop Montague long before he could even lead us to France. But look, what have I become? Before, I was a zealous man -- an honorable man -- because of my fighting glory. Yet now those same talents have brought me to ruin. And what will my brother, de Garmia, think when we are never reunited? On his deathbed, what will he tell his children of me, that I was a traitor to my cause, a coward? Oh, but that I had not listened to de Casanova and his foul-mouthed advice! Oh, but that I had slain him when I had him, all those years ago!”

Leggitt stood beside de Garcia. He was as trim as ever, as perfectly manicured, in spite of the recent troubles. His hair was haggard though -- aging and worn like so much mown grass -- for he was no longer fueled by the passions of youth. His mouth was small and terse, as one of silence, and that is what he had become. In his youth: a rebel spy; in his age: a mere prison master and captain of the guards. Such years of service, and so easily discarded -- even if the whole of it had been in treachery. “Or was it?” he thought to himself, “If I was truly a spy, why did I not take the numerous chances to assassinate Gylain? I told myself I would have patience for something greater, yet what is above that? Montague might have replaced him, but not with the same restraint or foresight, the same passionless vigor that reigns over Gylain. Here I die, an outlaw in France in the service of Atiltian rebels, while at heart I cannot know which side I am truly on. But so should it be, for I deserve death.”

Ivona stood beside Leggitt, pale and composed. Her face was dirty from the trek through the forest, and her white cheeks bloodied. Still, she was beautiful; for she was a woman whose beauty was but a reflection of her mind, and so its enchantments could not be lost. Her hair fell loose like little streams of night, and her lips like rainbows were not raining. “My God, my God,” she thought, “Why have I forsaken you?” A solitary tear escaped her eyes, and Khalid turned away when he saw it, knowing the innocence he snuffed out of a guilty world. Yet it was not death that made her cry. For she was no longer innocent, she thought, and though a righteous man do good all his life, if he turns he is still wicked. She had fallen into love as into sin, and it was her damnation. She feared she had given love where it should not have been, and made love where it was not already found. But such is the way of the world: to the pure, a guilty conscience; to the wicked, a hardened heart.

Next was Lydia. Her red hair grew richer by contrast to the twilight, and her eyes by contrast to themselves. Her face was as divided as her heart, and even in her final thoughts the mental melee ravaged on. “My father will be displeased with France, and join Gylain without doubt for my sake. But what of my father? He is with Gylain already, and pushes de Casanova like a stone around my neck. If Patrick is a rebel, at least he has passion for me, and even a farm boy can plow a heart as much as a field.” She

looked to Patrick, beside her. "I will be his, and my father can keep his crown."

Patrick McConnell was last. His thin lips were pressed together, and his wiry frame extended between the noose and the block. His hair was light and as fiery as his eyes. His only emotion was passion, and his only character zeal. "We cannot be thus delayed," he muttered aloud, but what he thought was, "I will lose her, and with her my own life. To the devil if I survive or am hung, if she is not beside me. Am I the people, that I care for freedom? Fool that I am, I love her. I do not know how or why, but that I do. If I tell her, she will scoff; and if I show her, she will laugh. Yet how can I forget? For she is my life."

Khalid stood before them, pacing and preoccupied, so he did not notice the carriage that sped through the tunnel and into the courtyard. He looked Willard over one last time, gave him a dutiful wink, and said, "The end, Montague." Then he turned to the executioner who held the latches for the trap doors, and cried out in an echoing voice, "Release the doors!"

But another voice came the second his had gone, and it was even greater.

"Stop, do not hang them! That is not Montague, but the King of Atilta!"

CHAPTER EIGHTY

At the same instant, however, the executioner pulled the lever that dropped the trap doors, hanging the seven freedom fighters. For an instant, they remained in stasis above the gap, then began to descend. The ropes had several feet of slack, and with every passing second the slack grew less and the danger more. Willard was placid, his eyes closed with his mouth. Patrick, however, writhed in impatience; and as he saw Vahan emerge from the carriage he turned his head and looked about him with vulture eyes. The executioner was unable to react, but stopped in confusion. Only Khalid could move, and he set himself in motion before Vahan had even cried, just at the instant he gave the order. He leapt off the platform -- in his heavy armor -- and rolled twice on the ground before regaining his feet directly in front of the lever. This he grasped with his giant hands and forced upward, closing the trap doors with a resounding snap. The seven were caught up in their downward motion, and just as the ropes grew taunt to kill them, they came to a stop. The soldiers rushed to unbind them, and they were saved.

Captain Khalid fell to the ground in exhaustion after his inhuman exertion. Yet it was for only an instant. Then he retook his feet and his strength, hurrying up the stairway to the platform and kneeling before Willard.

"By the duty of a soldier! I knew you could not have been Montague!" He exhaled with an air of fealty. "You must excuse the duties of a soldier," he continued, "I had not the power to do other than I did. Yet I felt -- even as I did otherwise -- that if you were indeed a king, I would zealously serve you."

"Arise," Willard said, "Did I not respect you, even as you treated me so? You are a man of nature, of the forest. This is what a man should be." He reached down and grasped Khalid's hand, pulling him up.

"My dear Vahan!" the King of France said, sticking his head through the shattered window pane, "My dear Vahan, are you well? In your zeal, you forgot that a door is freely opened." The king unlatched the door and stepped out, kneeling over his powerful adviser.

“What orders have I given,” Vahan moaned, his face buried in his hands like an ancient sculpture in the desert. “May my quills ever run dry, and my glasses fall as I read!” Vahan rolled over, assisted by his sovereign, and spied Willard standing freely on the platform. “He lives! I did not think it possible.”

Willard answered: “I do, and without your faulty orders and their strict obedience we might not have. For we journeyed three days to the mountain and were a day within. Had not your soldiers abducted us and taken us here without delay, we would still be two days from the coast. As it is, we have arrived in time to reach Atilta ere the end is decided.”

“Then my grief is assuaged; but I am not pleased with you in this, Captain Khalid.”

“My duty, sir.”

“Indeed, Vahan, he is a model soldier,” and Willard walked down the stairway. “I am well pleased with men of this type.” The King of Atilta approached the King of France, the latter preoccupied until this time with returning Vahan to his feet. The bureaucrat’s face was cut and his arms bleeding, but he was well.

“Uncle, I am pleased you have come,” Willard said.

“A few miles is not a great distance, for the sake of my brother’s son.”

“We will make servants of many more miles ere our presence is divided, so devotions can still be proved.” He paused. “I come to you as your nephew and as the King of Atilta; it is to you how I am received.”

“As both, and as a great warrior. Vahan has told me of your exploits and your exile. My brother would be proud if he lived, but as he died he will be revenged.”

“Your majesty,” Vahan turned to his king, “And, your majesty,” he turned to Willard, “We would be better served to finish this aboard *The Bas Bleu*, as we sail to Atilta. The squadron is ready.”

“Then we had best be aboard.”

“Without delay!” came from Patrick McConnell, who stood behind Willard.

“So this is the English rebel?” the French King gave Patrick a close look. “We will see more of you, later.” He turned to his nephew’s other comrades, and his eyes could not pass Ivona. “There will be desert this evening, after all,” he winked at Vahan. Yet Ivona’s eyes sent him backwards, for he was not used to being rebuffed by his feminine pursuits.

“Tonight our only feast is the blood of battle,” she said in a cold, prophetic tone, “And our desert but death or victory.”

Willard met her with his eyes. “So it will be; let us go.”

Khalid’s battalion was the last of the garrison to be loaded, and everything was prepared for their boarding. A majestic vessel, *The Bas Bleu*, sat in the river, waiting for their arrival. It was a galley of a hundred oars, a hundred feet from fore to foot and twenty-five across. Six masts were stationed across the deck, and the sails were spread between them, rather than from the cross-trees of one. Much less rigging was needed, and the sails could be swiveled from one mast to another to catch the wind at

varying angles -- a uniquely Atiltian ship, built for France by the late King Plantagenet. Below deck, the sleeping quarters had been commandeered for supplies, and the entire fleet was at full strength. They could not spend the night aboard, perhaps, but they did not plan to. This was all done by Vahan Lee, whose strength in matters of detail and pedantry was unsurpassed. What he lacked in military prowess he made up in preparation.

Once on board, they went to the dining room -- reserved for the king -- and took their evening meal, in preparation for the coming battle. The King of France took the head of the table, with Willard to his right and Vahan Lee to his left. Ivona sat by Willard, then Horatio, Leggitt, and Captain Khalid. De Garcia took the foot of the table, and on the other side were Leggitt, Patrick, and Lydia. Their conversation proceeded as follows:

VAHAN: What has come of your journey? You return, but Montague does not.

WILLARD: He is no more, at least in this world.

KING: Montague destroyed?

WILLARD: He went to his god. The mountain was full of hideous creatures, and he disappeared among them.

KING: So it is! My father was right to decree that none should approach that lonely peak. I will not revoke it, for there is unspeakable evil within.

WILLARD [with a smile]: Unspeakable, indeed.

VAHAN: And the Holy Graal?

WILLARD: We will see what comes of it. If Milada is healed, we will know.

IVONA: It is done.

KING [to Lydia]: And you, my glowing sun, are some royal creature, in blood as well as beauty?

LYDIA: Indeed, I am the daughter of the King of Hibernia, Emperor Lyndon.

KING [rising to his feet]: What! You keep strange company, Willard; I, however, disdain to keep spies within my circle, and do not feed them from my table!

WILLARD: And do I? She is with us by chance.

PATRICK: Chance, and in the same degree as that which formed the heavens and the earth. She is by my side, and by the side of my people. For birth is not worth, in royalty or in peasantry.

KING [sitting]: So I see, and I will leave the politics of the Three Kingdoms to Vahan. But beware lest your loves lead you to wrong, Patrick McConnell. Even I, the king, must guard against the temptations of the flesh.

PATRICK [with a wavering voice]: I will take your majesty's saintly lead in the matter.

The king seemed to linger on the precipice of anger; but, thinking of his dignity, pretended not to understand the young man's remarks. The others did likewise. Silence fell like snow, and through it their thoughts could not be seen. As they finished, the silence was shaken by a knock on the door. No one answered, and it opened to reveal a windy old man, the Admiral of the fleet.

“Your majesty,” and he lowered his head in respect, “The storm has come full force, and has risen the waves against us. We will be late reaching Atilta, if we can pass through at all. For not even my old comrade, William Stuart, could pass this storm -- such is its temper!”

CHAPTER EIGHTY-ONE

“At last, it is time,” and Gylain took the hand of his ally and equal, the King of Hibernia.

“We will both bruise their heel and crush their skull,” the other returned.

They stood on the deck of a great warship, The Barber, the centerpiece of the navy of the Three Kingdoms. It was four hundred feet long and seventy-five wide, with three stories above water and four below. The materials were Atiltian -- as were all good ships of the time -- but the construction Hibernian. Atiltian sailors used swiveling masts, but foreign sailors could not handle them as well; instead, the largest ships used a system of multiple masts similar to the French King's flagship. The masts were arranged in rows on either side of the ship, placed at equal distances from one another either along on side or across the center. Sails could be hung across the width of the ship, or at an angle perpendicular to it; one system assisted in turning such a massive hull, and the other in propelling it. Since the sails could be easily rotated, The Barber could turn almost in a complete circle, when the sails and rudder were aligned together. Still, it was inferior to the Marins, for those did not need to tack or come about at all.

The Barber stood in the center of Eden's harbor, surrounded by two hundred battleships: half from Atilta, half from Hibernia. Hibernia had never been a sea power, and thus did not have as large a navy as France; Atilta, on the other hand, was a sea power whose navy had been diminished by its Admiral's forced departure. Ships that had been in the Atiltian navy were now pirates haunting distant waters, or mercenaries for other nations. Hibernians were by nature precise, and were -- as their ideas of beauty professed -- enchanted by a uniform, consistent architecture. Their navy, therefore, was made of ships built from a single design. The Admiral of the fleet knew the exact proportions and abilities of each ship, and each captain could know what his comrades could achieve; and the result was a systematic fighting force. The Hibernian navy was run as if it were an army: their formations, lines, and maneuvers came directly from the Emperor's experience as a general. Each ship held a battalion of archers and of soldiers, with a limited number of sailors, and the ships were treated more like floating islands than maritime vessels. Yet what they gained in consistency and force, they lost in genius; and a single, dexterous ship could confound a whole fleet of this kind.

The fleet of Atilta was of an entirely different character than that of Hibernia. Its ships were gathered from wherever they could be had, and manned by whatever seasoned sailors Gylain could find. Some were small cutters, barely fit for combat but fast and agile. Others were galleons, meant for pirating but used for privateering. Still others were massive frigates or triremes. Their captains came from an equally assorted mix: some were pirates working with a license, others mercenaries, others Ailtians fighting for their fatherland.

The Floatings was now empty but for the warships, for the larger vessels had withdrawn into the river system at the sight of the force -- afraid of being plundered -- while the smaller vessels had been taken ashore. A few merchants worked to supply the fleet at a great profit, though they risked sanctions by the largely rebel trading force. While they were supplied, the two fleets floated there a bobbing military city:

upwards of thirty thousand men in a few square miles. Gylain sat beside Lyndon -- the King of Hibernia -- at a table put out on the deck of The Barber, covered by a canopy of sail cloth.

"We rule by strength, and our only justification is our strength," Gylain said. "We do not claim to rule by the people, nor by the blood of destiny: our only mandate is our strength, our might, our power to enforce our wills upon the people. The only consent of the governed is the strength of the governor. Thus, we now go to prove our right to the throne, Lyndon. Let us not prove our weakness instead."

"For order and hierarchy among men, and equality of man with God," the King of Hibernia returned. "I am with you in this, Gylain. But tell me, where is Cybele?"

"She is a prisoner of the Fardy brothers, and on her way to the rebel headquarters even now."

"This is dark news, if not quite dark forebodings; for we still have her armies. The strength of the commander is important, but we have other commanders; what we lose most is legitimacy among the ignorant people."

"In Saxony, perhaps, but not in Atilta. But so be it, for the people are ignorant, as you say."

Lyndon turned to face the deck behind him, where Montague and de Casanova were approaching. "I see you have found your way to Gylain's side, de Casanova," and he motioned for them to be seated.

"I have, though by bitter turns of which I am not proud."

"I have heard as much," Lyndon sighed. "Yet we will feast on revenge, and in our repast you will undo the dishonor done your name. Do not think that I feel you weak, for if you had won you would be a god. What of my daughter?" He said this last part carelessly, but with a disguised meaning, a masked sincerity.

"She denied my love."

"What is lost in love is won in war, and what the heart forfeits power regains. Be at ease."

"Am I not? The ardor of my love grows chill, and at each remembrance I am more sane to the world of reality. Her enchantment is passing."

"Then it is well, for I feared I would lose my adopted son to my earthly daughter, even as I lost my earthly son to my adopted riches. In the end, however, you will not go astray as he has."

"Your son is of no concern," Gylain said, "For Lionel is lost in exile."

"Were it true!" Jonathan Montague exclaimed, rising from his seat to expend his passion in pacing before the table. "But I saw him in the streets of Eden but last night, though I could not catch him in the darkness. I meant to tell you, but I forgot after my vision of Nicholas."

"Lionel, in Atilta?" cried Lyndon. "Then he is among the rebels." He lowered his face, frowning, but then laughed silently. "Weakness is punished, even in the son of a king. Yet how would I have it? For his weakness would be my only inheritance, and he would rule what I conquered with his foolish notions. It is well that he had abandoned me, as I did not have the strength to abandon him."

"You need not fear for that," de Casanova said, not realizing the potency of his prophecy. "For your kingdom will be ruled by a mighty hand, whose strength will not be forgotten. Do not fear for that!"

“There is much to conquer,” Lyndon replied, “And each man must begin anew.”

“Such is the way of men,” added Gylain, “To act is to satisfy pride, but pride is not grown by the acts of another.” He paused, then, looking into the distance, “Look, Lyndon, why is your fleet in such chaos?”

As Gylain spoke, the well-ordered columns of Hibernia’s fleet were degrading into a mess of disorganized ships. One vessel, in particular, was sailing in a strange, offbeat manner; and the others seemed to chase, though any real maneuvers were impossible in the crowded waters. The renegade ship suddenly broke free from the surrounding vessels, and once clear sped toward The Barber and the mouth of the harbor.

“I ordered no such actions, but we will see soon enough; for they approach us. Perhaps they have urgent news.”

“Those are the actions of a desperate man,” de Casanova said as he looked on, “And my heart chills to warn me that something ill is coming.”

“You have become a Romantic in your love, de Casanova,” Gylain laughed. “And now you view your emotions as the end of truth and reality. We will see, as your sovereign says.”

The ship was gaining speed as it came, dodging the other ships easily with its momentum. As it came up to The Barber, a voice rang out from the rigging:

“For king and country! We have them both, as good as gospel!” The man was in his mid-twenties, with long brown hair that flapped in the breeze and a plot of beard beneath his lower lip. But what made him unusual were his eyes: one blue, the other hazel.

“A thousand deaths!” cried the Lyndon, King of Hibernia, “A thousand deaths to me and mine. It is Lionel, my son, who yells such blasphemy!”

“Did you expect another, father?” for Lyndon and his ship were now close enough to overhear them. “Yet now it is not your tyranny I defile, but that of another,” and he held up his arm. There -- shining away in the sun -- was the crown of Atila, left securely in Gylain’s own flagship while he himself was out among his equals.

“The crown!” Gylain cried, “Admiral, follow that ship!” He dashed forward to the command deck and watched the fleeing ship -- an Hibernian cruiser commandeered by Lionel -- pass them like a dream. “Fools!” and he grabbed the Admiral’s bullhorn, held it to his mouth, and lava erupted from his lips, “Make sail! Make sail!”

“They give chase,” Lionel called down to his comrades, who were manning the sails and pushing the ship beyond its greatest speed. Any less would bring them death. He dropped the crown into the hands of another man who stood on the deck, then followed it himself. “The plan is working,” when he had regained his footing on the deck, “They follow in anger, de Garmia.”

“So I see,” laughed the latter. He was a dark-haired man with a Spanish crook in his nose; yet it was a dignified Spanish crook, and one which drew heavily on his Roman lips and chin. “So I see, but are we soon enough to make it work? Either way, if the wind fails, so will we.”

“But it will only grow stronger, friend, for we have need of it.”

“I feel the same, today, with the warmth of the wind and the sting of the sea to give me courage. I do not regret having followed my brother to defiance of the tyrant, and if I find him we will be reunited in this cause as we once were in its antagonist!”

Lionel kept his eyes on the pursuing ships. The Barber, first in the center of the fleet, was now in its rear; for the smaller ships were quicker in gaining their top speed.

“The cutters approach rapidly, but we can make the open seas before they overtake us; and once there our speed will double theirs. It is the others we have to fear. If The Barber reaches full speed, we will have little chance of escape.”

“But we will have reached Thunder Bay by then, and they will have been drawn into a battle for which they are not fully prepared. No, a ship of that size can only function on the high seas, and we must only pass the Atiltian stretch.”

“There is little choice on our part,” Lionel said. “For if their fleet reaches the Western March without provisions for a siege, they cannot make one. Their ships are all with them, and if they break off to receive supplies we can take them. If not, the French will blockade them and they will starve.”

“But will the French come?”

“We cannot but hope.”

“Hope, hope, the immortal pope,” de Garmia laughed. “But who else will be our priest?”

They were interrupted by the cry of a sailor, coming from the stern, “They make headway, sirs.”

At that moment, an arrow struck the deck.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-TWO

Far ahead, and barely visible through the bright sun and sea, was a ship: its storm-cloud sails throwing it forward. The sea about the ship was empty and quiet, filled only with bird cries from the trees that hung nearby. But two hundred yards behind them was a line of pursuing ships, stretching backwards a mile until it ended with the lofty rails of The Barber. Gylain was its figurehead, his arms dragons and his eyes the sea. But the latter were also closed, and though he saw he did not look.

Several yards behind him a table was prepared upon the deck, and a feast upon it, albeit untouched. Lyndon, Montague, and de Casanova still sat around it, the circle of power. Yet they had power only to have it, and they commanded luxuries only to know they could. Sometimes they sat, and sometimes they stood, and sometimes they inspected the soldiers or studied charts of Thunder Bay. Only Gylain played the hermit, dueling the ocean with his stare; and he did not need his eyes to see, for he knew what was there. De Garmia and Lionel were only symbols of his fears, and could not bring them to pass. To lose the crown, the power, the strength; to have it clearly shown that, far from being God's equal, he was not even the best of men. God was his enemy, weakness his foe.

“We will punish the rashness of youth, my friend,” Lyndon said, and in the silence their thoughts still lingered on the same subject. “We will punish him, and bring his mind to sanity. Then, when all is done, we will remake the crown a hundred times nobler, or a thousand. Money is of no account, for there is always more to take.”

“Nothing falls from a head without a purpose; and if every hair is numbered, how much more every crown. This is an omen, Lyndon: an omen that has been replayed a thousand different ways. Yet I see them, and I know what is coming. Oh God, my enemy!” and his hands flew to the air like fate to the luckless. “Will you stab your own earth with the trident of the seas? Will you overturn the Pillars of Heracles, and sink them to Hades? May it never be!” Gylain clenched his fists and fell silent, staring deeper into the sea as if he unwove its fabric with his piercing gaze, and saw into the dimensions beyond.

“Has not my brother’s death not appeased your thoughts of predestination, Gylain?” Montague asked. “If Nicholas cannot retrieve this Holy Graal, can the rebel king meet another other fate? Your rival is vanquished, and your life secured.”

“Fool!” Gylain said lowly, his feeling not anger but resignation. “Fool, if you think I sent your brother for the Holy Graal, you are mistaken; if you think I sent him to the Cervennes peak for an ancient goblet, or even the blood of God, than you are gravely mistaken.”

Montague stood, “Then why was he sent?” and his voice betrayed his doubting heart.

“He was sent on a mission of intelligence and divination, to the Titans. He went to see of the prophecies of the poets, of the Greeks, and he has not returned but in dream. What can this be, other than an ill omen and a mark of predestination? What has gone before will come again, and what has happened once will repeat a thousand times! Woe to us who live, and woe to those who die. Above all, woe to the White Eagle!”

Montague stood and Gylain, hearing his surprise, broke his connection with the sea. “You are distraught? Then you see as I do.”

“No, though I have seen as you say. There was more when my brother appeared to me, but I did not understand, and so did not think it important.”

“Your hesitation breeds my impatience with this life, man!”

“My lord,” and Montague’s demeanor flinched, “He held a smooth, rectangular tablet in his hands as he spoke, and there were letters or symbols engraved upon it. I could not read them, but they formed an outline of a White Eagle; and as you spoke just now, it recalled itself to my mind.”

“Can you remember what they were?”

“Yes, for they are engraved upon my mind as well.”

Montague began to trace what he had seen on a paper, symbols arranged in a box as if still upon the tablet. They were at once hieroglyphics and letters, and Gylain seemed to understand them. In a shaking voice, he read:

In the name of Uranos, by whom the trident of the nations will be sunk to the nether lands of Hades. The Pillars of Heracles has been sunk, and with it the gods of men. The Garden of Hesperides has been sunk,

and with it the men of gods. Soon, the third and final remnant of the ancient world will be destroyed. Just as Eden was overrun by evil and sank, so will it be. Just as Atlantis was conquered by the Titans and sank, so will it become. The trident of the nations will pierce Hades.

Gylain was silent for a moment, then looked to the compass that sat beside the paper. "I cannot see the White Eagle," he said, "But these figures have two meanings: one as symbols and one as letters; one as Egyptian hieroglyphics and one as Phoenician letters. It must come from the ancient race of strength, from Atlantis. Still, I can see no White Eagle."

"Yet I saw it, and I drew it just as I remember."

"What of the pyramids, if it is partly Egyptian?" Lyndon suggested, "Or of the temples of Ra?"

"Of course!" Gylain cried, making the connection. "For in each of those, each corner is placed precisely on one of the four geographic poles. Here," he took the drawing and -- using the compass as a guide -- set it straight to the cardinal points: north, east, south, and west. The figures seemed to melt away, and were molded into a White Eagle with a lion's head grasped in its talons.

Gylain fell into a pit in his mind. It was several minutes until he was rescued, suddenly, by a movement of Lyndon's hand. The latter held a knife, with which he was carving idly upon the table.

"Let me see the knife," Gylain said, and Lyndon handed it to him, though he also handed him a questioning look. The knife was a foot long, with half its length manifested in the handle, divided into ten rings or lines; then, upon the hilt, was an etching of a sky with ten stars. A small section stuck out on either side between the blade and the handle, and on this portion was carved an ancient galley or ship of war.

Gylain held it in his hands and examined it minutely. After a time, and in a voice hardly audible, he asked, "From where does it come?"

"I found it on the beach of Hibernia, near my palace as I walked alone," Lyndon answered. "It had washed ashore from the deep."

Gylain opened his hand as the words lashed against his ears and courage. The knife came loose and fell to the deck, piercing three inches into the wood.

"So it comes," Gylain paused, "The end draws near."

"This is enough," Montague slapped the table. "Can we fight if we fear to lose? Can we win if we think ourselves predestined not to? Look about us, Gylain, and see the forces which you master: there are two hundred ships in the fleet, each well-made and well-manned; there are above thirty thousand soldiers with us, as well as the five thousand already sent by foot. The rebels do not have even five thousand, and the French are slow to come. Why do you fear destiny and fate, when all that has befallen is a result of action, and that alone?"

Gylain expired into his chair and resumed his obsession with the sea. "How many times in the history of this warrior's world have the few defeated the many? We have numbers, perhaps, but it is strength which wins wars. When the Israelites swept through Canaan, was it by their own strength? Were their voices truly strong enough to shatter walls, and their arms to part the seas? What God will do, he will do; and damnation to the man through whom he does things. Has it not been written, 'The king will do as he pleases, he will exalt and magnify himself above every god, and will utter blasphemies against the God of

gods. He will be successful until the time of wrath is completed, for what has been determined must take place.' And again, 'At the time of the end, the King of the South will engage him in battle, and the King of the North will storm out against him, with chariots and cavalry and a great fleet of ships. He will invade many countries, and sweep through them as a flood.'" Gylain moaned aloud, then continued, "Am I not the King of the South; and you, Lyndon: are you not the King of the North? And he ! Do we not know who he is? And will he not finish what he has begun?"

"Such it is," Lyndon said slowly, "That weakness is destroyed. But who is to say that we are the weaker? If it is God whom we battle, can we not overcome him? You say the Titans destroyed Atlantis? If so, gods can be destroyed. Let us face him in open combat, and put his strength to the test. The rebels cannot overcome us, and neither can this God you speak of."

"For once, I hear truth!" and Montague rose to his feet in a passion. "You have been persecuted by God, you say? And if a man slapped your cheek, would you not devour him? Or if a man poked out your eye, would you not strike off his head? Then who is God, that he is outside of justice? I say, if he has persecuted you, let us strike him double hard; and if his stake is held with the rebels we will overcome them in blood and in anguish, and thus defile his name -- more so than he himself can do! Woe to him who has set his heart against us!"

"And lo!" de Casanova also stood, "Does one persecute an old man, whose teeth have long since gone the way of his hair? Or does one besiege an old woman, in love or in war? No, but only those who have strength to overthrow. Is it not, then, an admission of your strength that God himself is against you? Do you not see, that you are what he fears; and his only weapon is your own fear of him. Throw that yoke aside, and yours will be easy and your burden light."

Gylain stood and paced the side of the deck, looking over the rail to the raging sea below. He groaned, and his bones were as the wood of the ship. "You who has damned us with sin and evil, who has judged us before we left our mother's womb, who has stricken us for the purpose of your own glory: let it be! You may hold their staff above their heads, that it might not fall; but, by God, I hold my sword above my own, and surely it shall fall!"

Silence.

"Look, we draw near," Montague called just then from the bow. "Thunder Bay approaches, and Lionel's ship enters it even now. The rebel fleet opens their ranks to let them pass, but it closes again behind them. Now the Hibernian fleet approaches, now the Atiltian. The ships speed on, but will they engage them at once? Yes, they charge in a fever." He turned to Gylain, "Now is the time for orders, my lord; now is the time for action."

"Keep the course," Gylain returned, and he paced to make his plans.

A few moments passed before The Barber came up to the rest of the fleet and joined their ranks. The mouth of Thunder Bay was a quarter mile wide and filled with a dozen ships, among them The King's Arm, the Marins, and now Lionel's ship. Their decks were lined with a large force of archers and soldiers. Yet this was partly an illusion, for the Atiltian rebels -- archers by birth -- had been trained to be sailors; so, rather than a truly large force, they had men of many helmets. Behind this line spread Thunder Bay, the same in which the previous battle of the rebellion occurred. It was not more than a mile deep, and had no bank or shore on either side but that facing the castle; the others were barricaded by living pikes: trees growing to the very edge of the water. The rebels' forces were drawn up on a rampart abutting the shore and in the castle itself. The ships were only meant to halt Gylain's advance, and prolong their defeat until something should intervene. As The Barber joined the ranks, a file of men appeared at the far end of the

plain. At first a few, they grew until a whole legion of soldiers marched forward, donning the colors of Gylain.

"It is time," the tyrant called in his booming voice. "It is time for strength, for hate, and for victory!"

As he spoke the sky grew dark, and the long accumulating clouds broke forth in rain. The battle had begun.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-THREE

It was growing late, and the golden air quickly died to darkness. A large group was gathered in the glass-walled second floor of Milada's castle, foremost among them the healthy nobleman himself: his limbs writhing and dancing and contorting themselves in pleasure. Beside him sat Alfonzo, his face drawn and his beard overflowing until it now covered his entire face. Then came Celestine, Cybele, Admiral Stuart, Meredith, Lorenzo, the Innkeeper, and the Fardy brothers.

"The counsels of war are counsels of madness," Milada began. "Still, we hold them, even as history holds us. Yet time flees us as we cannot flee our enemy, so we had best begin."

"Alfonzo has led in defenses, and so should lead in the council," the Admiral added. "But I do not think more can be done, than what he has already begun. We can only carry out his plans."

Alfonzo stood, holding a paper in his hands: a design of the castle, a map of the area, and a chart of Thunder Bay. Everything was drawn in careful detail -- nearing the point of pedantry -- as it had been Alfonzo's only occupation during lonely nights by the dying Milada. Alfonzo spread it on the table that had been placed in the center of their circle, and it was carefully examined by all. Its detail was enough that he did not need to speak or explain it.

The castle was a square within a circle, for the building itself was square, though both the inner and outer walls were circular; a sentinel tower rose up on every side but the north, where stood the gate. The inner gate was on the southern side, and could only be reached by passing through the outer courtyard -- the space between the inner and outer walls. The latter was more a corridor than courtyard, however, for it was covered and had murder holes communicating to the inner wall along its length. On the ground floor, the castle was circled by an inner hallway, through which the murder holes were operated. Within that was the central hall, broken into a main hall, pantries, armories, and servant's quarters. Its ceiling was flat and equal in height to the inner walls, forming a platform upon which the keep was built: the second story and the towers above.

The town surrounding the castle was not meant to be defended. A six foot wall surrounded it, but its purpose was more to stop the invading forest than invading men; at this time it was being taken down and its materials removed to the ramparts adjoining Thunder Bay, that the incoming armies would have no ready materials to form their own protections. The town itself was quickly coming apart as well, and the materials of its buildings stored within the castle; hundreds of men worked day and night on these things, and every dawn found years of work swallowed by the arts of war. This included, to the supreme indignation of Oren Lorenzo, the humble church of which he was abbot; but, in the end, he acquiesced for the betterment of the cause. Nothing was built to replace the town, and only the castle and the distant

ramparts remained to fill the void of civilization. While hundreds of years had been spent forcing back the wilderness of Atilta, it returned full force in but a few days. It was as if no one had ever been there.

A dirt path communicated between the castle and the harbor fortifications, lined with small guard posts in case of a precipitate retreat. It came right up to the castle doors, behind which were several deep holes drilled with stakes, to support the door against a battering ram. On the other end, it reached the ramparts along the shores of Thunder Bay, built to keep the hostile fleets from disembarking. The whole of the bay was heavily wooded, and no landing could be attempted anywhere but a hundred yard stretch on the southern side. It was there that Alfonzo had built a series of fortifications: first, a six foot ditch covered with wooden planks and then three feet of dirt, leaving a hollow tunnel with holes for archers to attack from with impunity; then a tall rampart, its foundation of logs and its top of earth. Several tunnels connected the corridor before the ramparts with the defenders behind them, and those within the first could easily retire when the position were no longer tenable. These connecting tunnels, however, were held open by only a few logs. Thus, with little labor and in no time, a defender could pull these logs from their place and the connecting tunnel would fall in upon itself, sealing the entrance.

The only other human scars on the area was an extension of the Treeway: a series of military platforms built in the upper canopy. They formed a ring around the entire plain, but were most heavily congregated to the north -- by Thunder Bay -- and to the east -- by the route to Eden. Each was garrisoned with a dozen archers and enough supplies to last them months. When the enemy soldiers passed underneath, a thunderstorm of arrows would greet them, and they would not be able to return the attack. Still, a dozen men can do little to bodies of five thousand. The rangers assigned to these platforms were only partly in place, with the remaining rangers placed under Blaine and Osbert, to harass the advancing legions as they came through the heart of the forest.

These plans were all shown on the map, and when those present had finished looking over them, the conversation resumed. Milada spoke first:

MILADA: You have done well in my sickness, Alfonzo. But what did I expect? I have known you for many years, and you have never been weak or unprepared.

LORENZO: No, but he is a warrior, by Isiah! But as a man of God, I am pained by the loss of his house.

ALFONZO: You have a room for the altar and for worship, but more we cannot spare.

LORENZO: Of course, of course! But I loathe the beating of the church into a castle, and the plow into a sword; yet if we can beat the enemy into the ground, I will still rejoice.

ADMIRAL: Loathe, indeed, Oren; but God has no place in councils of war. I see you made no plans to defend the bay by ship, Alfonzo, and I assume you leave that to me.

ALFONZO: I do.

ADMIRAL: Very well, I will begin at once. Milada, I trust you did not lose sight of the chain we took from Gylain after the coup?

MILADA: Not at all: it sits in the basement armory as we speak.

ADMIRAL: It is not wise to put such a massive chain in a basement armory, for it will be difficult to remove. It was built to protect the harbor in Eden, but it will do just as well in Thunder Bay. After that, we will sink whatever debris we can, to foul their larger ships. Then we can only hold the line or be damned.

ALFONZO: Any word from abroad?

ADMIRAL: None.

They were interrupted by a sharp knock on the outside door, which was opened without a wait. A man walked in, just from the forest: he smelled of trees and air. He wore leather armor, somewhat dirty, and his beard was thick, dark, and in every way the beard of a forest man.

MAN: A message for Alfonzo, from Osbert and Blaine.

ALFONZO: Go on.

MAN: We have met the enemy, sir. I was dispatched right away, to raise the alarm.

ALFONZO: Very good; and their number?

MAN: Five thousand, at least: the same force that left Eden two days ago. Blaine hopes to cripple them before they gain the open plain.

ALFONZO: He is ambitious, if trusty. Still, if he does not cripple them, they will do the same to us. It is time, friends: to war!

With that, he left the room to attend the preparations, as did the others.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-FOUR

It was late afternoon, though the sun had already set in the deep Atiltian forest. The distance became invisible, and the veranda blocked by rising trees. Still, the forest rangers could see what others could not.

“It begins,” Osbert said to Blaine Griffith, who stood beside him.

The former, with his low tide lips and sandy hair, wore only a plain leather jerkin. A bow rested in his hand and a large quiver on his back, while his leaf-shaped bronze sword was left in his belt. Blaine was attired in the same manner, though adorned with his animal eyes. In civilization, he was a meek and indirect man; in the wilderness a beast, a fierce hunter, a man of arms.

“So I have heard,” Griffith said. “The men say they are five thousand strong and our lives are forfeit in the attempt.”

“The men say many things,” Osbert hesitated, “Though in this they may be right. Come, old friend, let us grasp hands for the last,” and the two embraced firmly. “For once we reveal ourselves, we will not rest until the battle is won, for us or them.”

“So it will be: you take the left and I will have the right. There are arrows hidden along the way; perhaps we will meet when we rearm ourselves.” Griffith paused. “We will fish when we are through: you, me and Barnes. The men say the trout are best this time of year.”

Osbert looked away and the moist air condensed around his eyes. “Yes, we will have our trout.”

They crouched low to the ground, as they spoke, a hundred yards from a large body of marching soldiers. While they stood directly before the soldiers' path, there were two bodies of rangers -- each a hundred strong -- hiding to the left and right. The two friends returned to their men and took their positions in the fore. None of them wore armor or shields or helmets, only a bow and a bronze sword and a quiver of arrows on their backs. In the forest, nothing more was needed.

Osbert knelt behind an exposed root as he reached his men, taking his bow and fitting an arrow to its string. The others did the same.

"Let us not shoot too powerfully," he whispered, "For beyond the soldiers crouch our comrades. If Gylain's soldiers charge, fall back without hesitation and reform in the distance. We are not here to meet them in battle, but to weaken them for our comrades."

In front of the soldiers rode an officer on horseback, a magnificent plume of feathers making his helmet conspicuous. Osbert pulled his arrow back until its string was steel, then waited: he could not shoot until they advanced to a certain spot, when both sides would attack simultaneously. The officer came forward slowly, and drew ever nearer to the fateful spot. Then, the same instant the horse's hoof hit the spot, he released his arrow. Its tail swirled silently as it sliced the air, then came a hollow clang, then the officer fell lifeless to the ground with an arrow camped in either side of his helmet. Yet before he had fallen, there was another arrow on Osbert's string, and it was sent away as his body hit. The air was devoured by a dim droning, and obscured by flashes of horizontal lightning.

Before the second string had been released, fifty of the soldiers had fallen. The remaining mass, however, was not thrown into chaos; rather, they continued marching at the same double pace they had previously employed. The leading officer was replaced by another with a thicker helmet, and the actual commander was hidden safe within the ranks, out of the rebels' sight.

"They take our assault without hesitation," Osbert cried. "Keep up the pace, men!"

He returned his attentions to his prey, since no soldiers were detached to displace them. The first soldiers had passed through their ambush, though the long line continued to advance and take theirs in turn. Yet a battalion of soldiers from the rear had crept up, and circled around Osbert's company while they shot. Then, just before the ambushade was ambushed, a cry came up from the rebels.

"Retreat!" he commanded, getting to his own feet. "Retreat, retreat!" and he fled into the forest abyss.

The rebels were unencumbered with heavy armor and soon left the soldiers behind. Still, a dozen of their fellows were lost in the surprise.

"Forward," Osbert cried as he galloped through the trees. "Do not stop, or we will be slain."

When they were safely away, they stopped and listened to the skirmish in the distance. Their pursuers could not be heard, but they did not stop to rest, following the rampant Osbert back into the fray. He led them to a point in advance of the enemy line, and their attack began anew -- albeit with sentries.

This time they released ten strings of arrows before they were displaced, and none of them were lost over a few who tripped along the way. Now, however, Osbert led them to a place where the grass was slightly discolored. He grabbed onto a knob that stuck out from the ground and pulled open a secret chamber, filled with arrows. The men refilled their quivers and refreshed themselves with water from a spring, then were once more sunk into the deluge of war. Only seventy-five remained.

This was continued all through the night, and the soldiers were forced to continue their march without rest. Many were slain. By the next morning the men were weary, and the adrenaline which had sustained them through the night began to give way. Their commander pulled them into ranks, and with a heavy guard they ate a hasty breakfast. While their enemies rested, the archers kept to their work. They aimed high and shot far, dropping arrows deep into the camp, from which could be heard the sounds of dying men. Thus it was that the rangers -- who would stop their work to assist an elderly man, or run through the night to fetch a doctor for an ill stranger -- found themselves killing men whom they did not know and with whom they had no quarrel; they were merely on a different side of a name, a standard, a cause. This was war, and there was nothing personal about it; yet those who killed and those who were killed were each persons. Such is the mystery of war.

The soldiers resumed the march and the rebels their harassing attacks. Then, at noon -- after twelve hours of combat -- Osbert pulled his twenty-five men together.

"We draw near the castle, and our best has already been given: if we grow tired and are caught, it will do our friends no good. So let us rejoin our comrades in the Treeway, where a spell of weakness will not mean death. We cannot sustain this fighting any longer."

Only the strongest and most fortunate of the rangers survived, and these were glad to hear of their reprieve. They turned their fleet feet to the west, and charged until they came to the first of the ring of platforms that skirted the plain. The soldiers were not far behind.

"Hurry, friends!" Osbert called up, "Let down the ladders, for the enemy approaches quickly. Signal the castle at once."

"Yes, sir," a ranger lowered his voice as he lowered the rope ladder. The canopy was several hundred feet above the ground, and there were no branches within a hundred and fifty feet from the ground. Nor was it possible to climb the trees, even with spikes or ropes, for the wood was strong and the height too great. There were only a few places, bordering the mountains on the far northeastern side of Atilta, that could be climbed by assiduous exertion. Once up, the forest could be traversed along the branches, and the rebels built their Treeway further and further into the forest, until it reached the Western Marches, where it was invincibly high: no one could enter from below without their assistance. So the ladder was lowered, and a flaming arrow shot into the plain: the preconcerted signal that the enemy approached by land.

"I will ascend last," Osbert said, looking anxiously into the forest. "Hurry, for they will be upon us soon."

The rangers began the ascent, but only two or three could climb at once, lest the ladder break and they fall to their deaths. As the others climbed, Osbert peered into the forest. "What has come of you, my friend?" he whispered to himself, and he seemed upon the edge of despair when, from the far left, he saw a rapidly approaching band of rangers. It took them a moment to come up, but Osbert smiled when they did.

"Griffith!" he cried, "I am glad you are well. What has come of your followers?"

"Alas, it is only me and these five. The battle was fierce and some chose to fight rather than stay: an obstinate choice, but perhaps they will have done more than we."

"Perhaps, but the loss of a brother is grief. Go, the officers ascend last," Osbert motioned to those newly arriving.

Blaine looked warily into the forest, where the soldiers were spewing from the trees in the distance. "If they approach while the ladder is down, we are lost," Blaine said. "We should retreat to the castle, as there is not enough time for us to ascend without compromising our companions."

"We should, old friend; yet after this night of battle, I have not the strength for such a sprint."

The soldiers grew closer, and the vanguard was only a hundred yards away.

"Come," Blaine said, his voice firm, "If we wait longer we are lost: you first."

Osbert nodded and jumped onto the rope; Blaine followed after he had gone thirty feet. The two climbed with all their strength; yet of that there was little left, and the foremost soldiers reached the ladder before they were halfway up. The ropes creaked and grew too taunt to be easily climbed; the ladder began to swing uneasily about. At length, Osbert reached the platform and rolled onto its safety. He waited only a moment, then took up his bow and turned over the edge to resume his attack on the invaders. Yet what he saw made him cry out in distress.

"Blaine! You must hurry, for they climb faster."

Blaine Griffith, tired from the night's work, was still twenty feet from the platform; but beneath him the soldiers were growing closer. Their heavy armor added to their weight, and it was too much: the ladder seemed ready to snap. At last, his hand reached over the platform and was grasped by Osbert, who held onto it in fear. Just then, the rope ladder snapped and fell to the ground, which clubbed the soldiers to death as they met it. But they were not the only ones.

"Blaine!" Osbert grasped his hand, but his strength gave way, "Blaine! This cannot be!"

There was no answer: only silence from below; then, far below, a muffled thud. Osbert rose his anguished face to the sky, and both were dark with storm.

"Blaine, my friend, what has happened?" he cried. "This war has taken many lives, but now? Now, it has begun in earnest."

As he spoke, his voice was defeated by the charge of the legions below. They had begun passing into the plain, and their way was hotly contested by the rebel arrows. With gravity behind them, the arrows broke through to the soldiers' vitals; but with fate behind them, the soldiers broke through to the plain.

"Let us die together," Osbert moaned, "And our blood mingle with our enemies'!"

The soldiers below yelled and shouted, and did all the things men do to encourage bravery and abandon; but as they ran, their ranks were abandoned, if not brave. A mound of the dead erected itself in a ring around the Treeway, and with every moment it became more difficult for those below to pass. Osbert took his bow, and sent his arrows off with the last of his strength. His hands began to quake and his arms to shake, and his fingers danced in his exertion. He had pushed his strength to its limit in the night, and only his iron will held the morning; but now both his strength and will were defeated. His hands he pushed forward in pain and blood came with his sweat.

Then, he could move no more. He pulled back an arrow and found its prey, but could not release it. Instead, it fell limply to the floor, and a faint moan escaped his lips; he was powerless to do more. His mind was imprisoned within his worn body, but the latter could not be forced to continue. A tear fell from his eye like a star from the sky, and he drew his sword as if he drew the earth. He held it before him,

shaking violently, and surrendered himself to death. He fell forward, pivoting at his knees, and his upper body swung over the side and began descending to the ground. He fell, swiftly and without noise. He fell, his face a mountain, his fate a valley. He fell, but his eyes were already lifeless, empty, without form. For even as his body charged the ground three hundred feet below, Osbert was dead.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-FIVE

Meanwhile -- a mile to the east -- Alfonzo rode horseback along the rampart that bordered Thunder Bay. The rebel forces were positioned there in strength, prepared to prevent the landing of the enemy fleet. Oren Lorenzo was at his side, on a mule, and each was armed with a sword.

"The signal!" Lorenzo cried, his fiery mustache quivering.

"Yes, the signal," Alfonzo returned, "Let us hope Blaine and Osbert prove themselves once again."

"Gylain's soldiers will have an early taste of eternity, either way," Lorenzo said soberly, "And may they repent beforehand."

"May they, indeed! But it is too late for such things now," Alfonzo shook his head.

As he spoke, a horn sounded from the rebel fleet, straddling the channel into the harbor.

"They call the charge!" Alfonzo cried, "But why? Have they seen the soldiers?" He spurred his horse and galloped down the line, until the trees no longer obstructed his view of the harbor. Then, "Can it be? The fleet arrives early! To arms men: the enemy is upon us!"

The combined fleets of Gylain and Lyndon could be seen charging the rebel lines, over two hundred ships in all.

"Gylain has always had a devil's heart," Lorenzo said, "But now he has a devil's cunning. Could any man bring his troops to bear with such deadly, inerrant perfection? Alfonzo, this bodes ill for us!"

"We will see," was the only answer.

By now, the land contingent of Gylain's force had passed from the forest to the plain. Behind them, the dark forest and the arrows of their enemy; before them, the open air, albeit stormy. Yet this is not what made their hearts rejoice, for they saw very clearly before them the rebel lines. To the south, the castle was secure, and to the north the ramparts stood strong against the landing force. But only a dirt road stretched between them, with unwall'd guard posts along the way. And, above all, the ramparts were open in the rear, and there was no defense from the east, from the plain. It was as if the rebels had not prepared for their arrival, as if they did not know they were coming. A loud cheer went up from the men, and even from the officers. From five thousand, they had now only four. But in the end, it seemed, their troubles had not been in vain: for they caught the rebels unguarded. The soldiers were more worn than the rebels, having marched for days in heavy armor in addition to their narrow escape, but still they came forward -- by duty and by drill. They came forward to break a hole for the fleet's landing.

Alfonzo galloped to the edge of the ramparts nearest the forest and the soldiers, then stopped, his face set against them like a stone wall. His icicle eyes pierced the air, and his hands did not even tremble as he raised them to his mouth, for he was beyond a conscience in his role as general. "Fire!" he bellowed, and was silent.

It was not a legion of archers that arose to attack, but a single man, stationed in one of the guard posts. He stood ready, and on the order let loose a single, flaming arrow. It sailed across the horizon of the midnight noon like a miniature sun making its daily route, finally erupting into twilight at the feet of the advancing soldiers. The ground also erupted: in flame. The grass of the plain had been mowed near the forest and the castle, and the dead grass piled in the center of the plain, where it still grew high. A flammable liquid was poured upon this, and it was consumed with fire within the minute.

The soldiers were overcome in their weariness, and some fled back into the forest; but there was no respite to be found in the bosom of the archers. All that was left to them was fire or flight, and they chose the latter. The officers huddled the men together, and forced their way through the fierce flames.

Alfonzo pondered the scene without emotion, and though the others looked away, he did not. For it was his duty, and men will do anything in allegiance to that word.

"The rain!" Lorenzo gasped, reaching out his hand to see if it were truly so. But it was, and as he spoke the rain fell harder and faster and the clouds buried the sun.

From the bay, the sounds of an engagement rang out, and it was clear that the fleet had begun the attack. But Alfonzo could not turn his attentions to that quarter, as the ground troops were beginning to emerge from the flames. The rain -- while not stopping the fire -- subdued it and gave the soldiers time to escape. They began to form into ranks again, preparing to charge the rebel lines.

"March out the castle troops," Alfonzo commanded Lorenzo, who rode off to carry it out. Alfonzo turned and rode down the line, yelling out as he went, "Shift ranks, we must fight the rear!"

The rebels poured out of the tunnels and earthen works, making ranks in front of them. Still, it did not take them long to file out, for there were only a thousand of them. When they had assembled, Alfonzo put himself at their head.

"Men," he said, "The time has come: not for vainglorious speeches, but for blood."

With that, he kicked his horse and began the march to the castle. Its gates had opened, and a large force was coming to meet them in the center. By this time, the enemy soldiers were assembled: still over three thousand strong. A knight rode at their head, with a plume of feathers sticking from his helmet and an iron broadsword in his hand. The rebel forces converged, turning to the advancing regiment. Each group stopped fifty yards from the other and waited, unwilling to be the first to bath in bloodshed.

Alfonzo sat firmly on horseback: his stature erect, his face stern. His long hair was back, and it made him seem noble. Yet he was still a man of the forest, and his beard -- no longer a mere goatee -- took root firmly on his face. His eyes did not burn, and his heart did not hate. It was not his desire to go to war, but he thought it his duty; and thus, he went.

Beside him rode Oren Lorenzo, no longer in a monk's frock but a suit of armor. His hair was as fleeting as his temper, his face as severe as his oaths, his mustache as wide as his convictions. He was a churchman, and thus a man of impatience and strange ideas. But he was also a loyal man, if not to God than to Alfonzo, his old comrade of the forest.

“Woe to us, that it has come to this,” Lorenzo said, “Our land marred by fire and war. Is freedom worth the price of death? Or is liberty so sweet if none are left to eat of it?”

“I cannot say,” Alfonzo said slowly, “But I know that it has been put to us to win it, and so we must. If not for ourselves, for those who trust us to secure it. Would any man choose war? Not I, at least. But it has come, and we would be wrong to flee from it.”

“Indeed, but look: our precious land is aflame, and even now the forest is threatened,” and he pointed to the field behind the enemy ranks. The wind had begun gusting over the plain, and had blown some of the flames toward the edge of the forest, where it was beginning to take hold.

“It has come to the end,” Alfonzo sighed, “And that which does not burn will be doused forever. Perhaps it is true what was said long ago, though it is mocked by the ways of this dreary land.”

“Many things are said, and most of them in foolishness. What of it?”

“Nothing, perhaps; but perhaps everything -- I can no longer tell in this land of destiny.” He paused, and, drawing his sword, “Do not return evil for evil, but with goodness. The guilt is upon me, if we are wrong, and I cannot say that I am fearless in its face.”

His own face fell, and its innocence was lost. Alfonzo had climbed the mountain of rebellion; and now, on the precipice, he was condemned. Yet still he cried out, “Charge!”

CHAPTER EIGHTY-SIX

With Oren Lorenzo at his side and fifteen hundred rebel soldiers at his heels, Alfonzo led the charge toward the enemy. The latter did not rush to meet them, but took their position and made ranks. Some held spears without swords, others swords without spears, and still others had neither -- for in the flames much of their equipage had been thrown aside. They were veteran soldiers, however, and possessed the carriage and control of such.

The two forces met as a wave upon the shore. Alfonzo’s face was drawn, as was his sword, and he held both in readiness to strike down the enemy commander. While the others yelled and flourished their blades to incite their wrath, Alfonzo did neither. He was a man of the forest, and he was the forest. If war is madness, still those who are least mad are most feared; and Alfonzo was armed with both a cold heart and a cold sword. The plumed commander did not shy from Alfonzo’s charge, but he was thrown aside a corpse. For Alfonzo had both the force of his arm and his horse, while the commander had only the latter. Alfonzo looped his blade down at a slant, while the other raised his own to defend. His sword was caught by the momentum and overtaken, dashing against his face; his dead body dashed against the ground.

Meanwhile, Lorenzo drove himself into the mass of soldiers, passing through a hole in their rank in which there were no spears. His heels were used correctly and his mule -- a drooling beast with wide nostrils -- rushed headlong into the forest of armored men that made up the army. The soldiers, exhausted and ill-equipped, let him pass, and Lorenzo zealously shared his sword with them as he went: first to the right,

then leaning over and circling his arm over his head to the left. He did not look up, in his fury, and after a moment found himself in the center of the enemy, surrounded on all sides by thousands soldiers.

"The devil!" he cried, looking about for his comrades, "I am alone!"

None of the rebel soldiers were mounted, and so could not as easily follow him in his charge; and Alfonzo had pulled back after confronting the commander. He was alone in the midst of enemies; only his wits were with him.

"Heave ho!" he yelled ferociously, "Flank the forest, men, and gird the trees!"

He shouted nonsense; for while he could think of nothing meaningful to say, neither could he keep silent. So he rode through their ranks, and they parted for the crazy man; and they were so worn and their minds so spent that they could not tell he was alone, or that he made no sense. Soon he passed through the army altogether, killing many along the way. Only then did his vigor subside, and when he saw what he had done he was doubly afraid, and continued his charge toward the forest, toward the smoldering fires.

It was a midnight noon and the sun a lesser moon. The rain came in like the tide, and streams were forming by which it traveled steadily to the lower ground until it finally congregated around the castle -- the lowest spot on the plain. Yet along with the light, the rain also drowned the fires; now only scattered pieces remained, flickering like candles through the darkness. Everything on Atilta was ancient and majestic, and as the thundering rain came, all was baptized and converted to darkness. Baptized with water, baptized with fire.

Lorenzo retained both his speed and his fear as he entered Hades. Smoke went up where the rain came down, and the air was a cloud. The ground was bare and charred, littered with burnt carrion. They covered the ground like dirt, and the mule could not avoid them. Smothered by the scene, Lorenzo was sober: pressed by the fear and the evidence of death.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," he whispered faintly. "That is the curse of God."

He was silent until he came to the edge of the forest, where he dismounted. The ground was covered by a crop of the dead, sprouting from every crevice or imperfection in the ground, in which they had stumbled in their flight. Some moaned, others were silent. But each was dead or soon to be. He left his mule and wandered around the graveyard in a reverie, broken only by a familiar face.

"Blaine! Osbert! What has been done?" and he wept for the first. For the dead are merely dead, merely dirt; it is only in the contrast between the living and the dead that sadness is known.

"Oren Lorenzo?" a voice called from the lofty canopy.

He slowly lifted his head and returned, "It is I."

"We will drop a ladder, and you must climb up to us, since it is still dangerous below. Will you come?"

"Yes," he mourned, "I will come."

With that, a rope ladder dropped down beside him. He hesitated a moment, then removed his cloak and placed it over the bodies of his two comrades. Then he began the long ascent into the canopy, the Treeway that sat blissfully above the battle. The rain did not reach the platforms, for it only came down in

waterfalls, and those the rebels redirected. As Lorenzo reached the top, the ladder was brought up again.

The battle, meanwhile, had not fled with Oren Lorenzo.

Alfonzo dismounted his horse after dispatching the commander, and sent it away from the battle with a whistle. Then, on foot, he joined his men in the battle.

“Where is Lorenzo?” and he raised his sword to deflect that of an enemy soldier, twisting it to turn it back on the man. The soldier’s blade fell back and his chest was exposed, giving Alfonzo the opening to finish him.

“He rode on, through the army,” the other rebel replied, his words spoken to the rhythm of his sword.

“Has he gone mad?” Pause. “His fate is his own, and God’s.”

The battle waxed and waned within a moment, for Gylain’s soldiers’ had no strength left to fight with. They fell back in a general confusion, and Alfonzo pushed his men forward, pressing the enemy into a full retreat. Still, they pushed harder, for their position along Thunder Bay was guarded only by the sea wind.

“We must press on!” Alfonzo called to his officers as they reigned in their men. “We must route them completely, for the fleet has arrived and we must battle them as well. Let us finish off the first to face the second!” He raised his sword and rushed into the violence.

As the Admiral held back the fleet, Alfonzo pushed back the army, and soon they found themselves in the smoking graveyard they had so recently fled. It was then the it began. One of the troops gave a shrill scream, the sound of concentrated suffering, and then another. It spread among them and then ended abruptly in silence: they fell to ground, unable to move themselves from exhaustion. They were alive, perhaps, for there was not enough life left to show itself. Even as they fled and fought, they fell to the ground and to sleep. The dead and the living slept together.

“Do we finish them?” asked an officer.

Alfonzo was once more a man and no longer a soldier. “These are brave men, though mistaken; and their bravery is used against them. These are men who have suffered for a man to whom suffering is a pleasure; and have been through fire, foe, and fear for the sake of the fatherland. These are men who carry battle in their hearts and will fight until they can no longer animate their bodies. Should we slay them in their weakness? That is not the question, my friends, but this: should we return evil for evil?”

Silence mingled with the rain and smoke.

“No, we will not slay them,” Alfonzo continued, relieved and reassured by the return of his heart, “We will comfort them. Percival, take a hundred men and find those who still live. Take them to the shelter of the forest and see that they are cared for, then return to the battle. Clarence, take a hundred men with you and gather supplies for the wounded, that they may nourish themselves; then, return to the battle.” Alfonzo turned and whistle for his horse. It came sprinting across the plain, and he mounted as it arrived.

As he began to ride away, Percival called out to him. “Sir, have we not spent ourselves to destroy these men, and they us? And by giving them mercy, do we not defile those who have fallen for freedom and peace?”

“What is our purpose?” Alfonzo returned. “If it is freedom and peace, as you say, how can we hope to

gain our own by stealing that of another? For while they stood between us and liberty, they were our enemies; and while they bore arms to prevent our success, they were our foes. But now, in defeat, they have reverted to men, and we must treat them as such." He paused. "Look about you: what have we gained, and what have we lost? If we fight for freedom and war for peace, we have been defeated."

He turned his horse and galloped to the front. Yet as he arrived a shrill horn cut the air and pierced the thundering rain: the horn of the Admiral. The rebel fleet had fallen.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-SEVEN

"No, friends, the Marins are yours and under your command," the Admiral told the Fardy brothers. "I am a man of ship and sea."

"But we are three and the ships two," the blond Fardy answered. "We are patient -- no one would deny that -- but it is too much for us to be separated in the cold water and the hot battle. So, if not you, then another must command the second Marin. We will sail and fight together."

"Together and inseparable," the brown Fardy added, "Like the sea, the ship, and the barnacles beneath!"

"The barnacles beneath? That is too much, my brown haired brother, for I fear that you demean yourself to be a barnacle. So I must stand and protect your honor, and insist that I be considered the nefarious hanger-on."

"It shall not be so! By God above, I am the barnacle beneath!"

"So be it," the Admiral interrupted, afraid lest the brothers grow boisterous. "Barnes, you will command the Marin."

"Yes, sir," the young man said, dutiful more than pleased.

"Meredith," the Admiral called to the monk, who was sitting atop the mast, examining the horizon for the expected fleets: friend and foe. "Meredith, what is it that I see at twelve mark one hundred and twelve degrees?"

"Let me look a moment, sir," came back. A minute passed, then it was followed by, "The devil's doorway, and Satan's stair! Beelzebub's back from who-knows-where!"

"Hold your tongue, and tell us what it is about," the Admiral rebuked.

A wine-skin scalp appeared over the sail. "What is it about? It is about the largest fleet I have ever seen."

"Indeed?" and the Admiral leapt to the rail, holding himself up by the yard arms to gain a clearer view. "What fleet, and what size?"

“As for size: over two hundreds ships,” answered the monk. “As for who: some fly the colors of Gylain, others of the Three Kingdoms. Yet the leading ship flies our own colors, those of the Atilta. In all, I can make nothing of it.”

The Admiral grabbed ahold of the yard arms and began climbing the ropes to the mast, reaching the top in a short time. Erwin Meredith was perched on the cross-trees, and the Admiral stood beside him, taking the telescope and examining the approaching vessels.

“The enemy approaches with over two hundred ships of war. But the foremost ship is fleeing the others, and though it is of Hibernian build it flies our colors.” He paused. “Who is in it, I cannot tell. But this I know: if we do not draw the chain, they will perish on the threshold of safety. Yet if we remove the chain the fleet will outflank us and we will lose the wind gage. Still, it must be done.”

“But can we know that it is not a trick, a hoax to lower our defenses?” Meredith asked.

“Yes, for I know who it is.”

“Then, by dollar and denarius, do not force us into impatience!” chorused the Fardy brothers.

“It is Lionel and de Garmia, whom you left behind on account of business. This was the score of which they had to make accounts.”

“Then let the chain be raised,” said Meredith, “I, myself, will lead the effort. But how will we do it, Admiral? We have no more than an hour.”

“The chain is two feet thick and five hundred wide, though as the mouth of the bay is only three hundred across, we have excess on the far coast. It is too heavy to be taken off and then returned in a moment.”

“Yet the foremost ship is a cruiser, and its hull is not as deep as most. We have only the slacken the chain, letting it sink far enough for the ship to pass over before raising it against the pursuing ships.” Meredith grew excited. “The chain already rests in the Treeway, that it cannot be destroyed by land. If we can heave more chain up the tree for a moment, it is done.”

“Very well,” answered the Admiral, “But if time is lost, so is the ship.”

“We will have it done,” Meredith shouted, already in the longboat which rested at the ship’s side. The ropes were cast away and it fell into the water, launching for the shore. Meredith did not need to take men with him, for the platform was garrisoned, as was a small guard station on the ground below.

It was at this time an hour before high noon. The sky was scarred by only a few clouds, but a whole armada came in from the northeast. The ocean was beginning to tremble and the waves to overflow; a powerful storm approached. For an hour, the Admiral paced the deck, watching over the preparations in silence. The men and officers had their orders, and he spent most of the time watching those on shore preparing to lower the chain, then quickly raise it again.

“Distance?” the Admiral asked Koon, who had replaced Meredith at the lookout.

“A quarter mile,” the other returned, laughing inexplicably. The sails puffed out as he did.

“Five minutes,” and the Admiral turned to the crew. “Koon, prepare to break formation,” and the other, still a hyena, leapt to the deck to ready the men.

The wind came on like Koon's laugh, and hit the fleet just a point off the compass. By now, Lionel's figure could be seen against the battling blues of the sea and sky: he stood on the yard-arms as did the Admiral, his hands grasping the crown above his head. The ship did not change course, but neither did the rebel fleet part to let them pass. Then, just as the ship passed within fifty feet of the chain, the silence died.

"Heave away!" the Admiral roared, "Heave away and break formation!"

The ships parted in the middle by turning sharply away from each other, creating a narrow space between them through which the Hibernian cruiser could scarcely pass. Koon only wheezed with laughter.

At the same instant, Meredith and his men lowered the chain. It was controlled by a platform built between three especially large trees, forming a triangle around the perimeter. In the center stood a massive pulley, with the chain on one side and a boulder on the other. They had drawn the chain up onto the platform, and when the time came lowered it on the opposite side. It was strung through several steel fasteners, and did not drag over the wood.

"Release the chain!" Meredith called out, and threw himself against the piled chain, sending it over the edge. As it fell, the pressure lessened and the chain over the harbor sank a dozen feet.

As the chain sank, the ship passed over and into the rebel ranks. The rebels gave a hearty cheer to the incoming crew, and the latter returned it, hauling up the stolen crown as their colors. The effect was tremendous, and nothing could be heard over the roar.

Nothing, that is, but the roar of the Admiral.

"Quickly men, close ranks!" the Admiral cried, and the ships were put to work. The masts were unfastened in their cauldrons and swiveled to the right until they sat perpendicular to the wind. At the same instant the sails were turned, and the ships juked sideways until they once more covered the entire bay. Then, with the same speed and agility, the masts were reset and the sails set against each other. The ships were once more dead in the water.

Still, Gylain's fleet came on, and the chain was too low to stop them.

"Release the boulder!" Meredith ordered, and it was dropped from its platform to counteract the weight of the chain. But the chain weighed more, and the boulder lingered in the air.

"It is too light," Meredith moaned, and he turned his head to catch sight of the enemy fleet. "By Baal and the gods of Moab!" he yelled, "If the boulder does not fall, our fleet is lost, and so our freedom!"

They heaved back on the chain, pulling the boulder further up before releasing it again. But its momentum, while lowering it more, did not make it fall to the ground; and if it did not fall the chain would not be raised. The leading ships were but fifty yards from the chain.

"Look!" cried the lookout, "Look to the forest: a whole regiment emerges, charging with the devil in their eyes! They have run through the forest with their heavy mail, and look ready to run us through as well."

"Then we must hold," another moaned, "For the others must leave the ramparts to meet them."

The ships drew nearer.

“Fools, do not curse defeat before it comes!” Meredith rebuked in a passion. “Our comrades are closer to death than ourselves! Heave the boulder once more, and I will make sure it falls to the ground!”

The boulder was hoisted again, further than before, and let go without ceremony. It hit the weight of the chain with a bounce, and tottered for a moment, hesitant to fall. Meredith made up its mind for it, for he charged to the end of the platform and leapt across the void. He landed firmly on the boulder, his hands grasping a smaller chain that attached it to the larger. It reeled once more, than shot to the ground. Meredith fell with it.

The chain scraped against its fasteners as the pulley brought it upward, until -- with a resounding snap -- it jumped above the waterline and was taunt. By this time, the enemy ships could not stop or turn aside; they dashed against the chain as if it were a rocky shore. The ships were severed in two as they passed it, and the decapitated hulls left to sink into the bay, blocking the passage even more.

Meredith lost his grip in the fall, and because of his narrower form he fell faster than the boulder. He struck the ground an instant before it, then was lost beneath it. The boulder rocked sideways three times, as if landing in a hole, then finally tumbled in. Meredith was entombed beneath it.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-EIGHT

“What the devil are they doing?” Gylain asked, seeing the foremost ships chasing after Lionel and de Garcia. “Why do they attack without orders?”

“They are bad soldiers who do not act without orders,” replied Lyndon.

“But they are worse soldiers who act foolishly. The harbor is chained, or at least blockaded.”

“Lionel passed safely.”

“Perhaps; we will see.”

As Gylain spoke, the fleet came to a sudden halt. As if by magic -- for in the distance the cause could not be seen -- the ships were torn apart and buried beneath the waves.

“So it is,” Gylain said coldly, “The fools! They cannot be punished now; yet can you ever punish a fool?”

“How is this?” and Lyndon joined Gylain at the bow, looking over the scene. “This is devilry indeed, as I have heard about William Stuart.”

“De Casanova, your telescope,” and Gylain eyed the situation for a moment, following the chain along its length. “There is indeed a chain, but its ends are held far from the ground with pulleys. Thus, it can be raised or lowered. I had forgotten William, in his absence, but I am pleased by his return. For the rebels are no longer mere woodsmen, and I enjoy the chase. Montague, bring me a dozen men and the longboat. As for the siege, it is yours, Lyndon.”

“And the land is yours. You cannot desert in the battle’s preface, Gylain, for we need your strong will to break them.”

“You will have it: they have made the chain adjustable, and so we will adjust it. When it is lowered beyond danger, take the bay and rendezvous with the ground troops. I will flash my blade in the sun three times in swift succession when the deed is done.” As he finished, Montague returned with a dozen of the Elite Guard and a load of equipment and supplies. He began loading the longboat, and before Gylain finished speaking he was at its side. He waved to Lyndon, and was off.

The longboat was built in proportion to the ship it served, large: it was thirty feet long, though it had nothing below deck. A mast stood near either end, but they folded on two steel bars: one as an axis, the second as a lock. The masts were then down, and the sails with them; the boat was powered only by oars and thus made discreet amidst the fleet. By this time the fleet had seen the chain and fallen back to formation. Thus, the longboat was near the coast, and in a moment they beached themselves on the far side of Thunder Bay.

“Do not be afraid, men,” Gylain said as he disembarked, “For if death comes, it is predestined; and if life goes, it is foreordained. Therefore, courage.”

With that, Gylain started forward, with Montague beside him and the men following two abreast. The beach was of a fine, white sand, and stretched twenty feet before the trees. Yet the canopy overhead covered the sand and left it in a twilight shade; it also blocked the rain. The short, innocent grass of the forest began where the sand ended, and with it the air of the forest. Within a moment they reached the guard post: a short platform built only high enough to suspend it from the wild animals. It was covered by a log roof but its sides were left open, and the men within saw nothing but the gathering fleets and growing storm.

“Montague, take six men and circle to the far side. I will attack, and when they turn their attentions to us, you will take their rear. Hurry, there is little time.”

“Of course,” and Montague, gesturing to the men, went around to the other side.

Gylain waited a moment, then drew his sword and rushed the platform. He did not yell, and the rebels in the guard post were soaked in surprise. Gylain did not allow them to recover. The first -- a tall, lank man -- jumped up, but had no sword. Gylain ran him through, and left him to his wound. The others were treated in the same manner, and by the time Montague arrived there were no survivors.

“They fight like peasants,” Montague said.

“Perhaps, but their commander is not to be found. He must have left for the fleet, but that is just as well; for it is easier to die on sea than land.”

They walked as they spoke, and the forest opened into the clearing in which the boulder had fallen, the chain still attached. The platform was less than fifty feet from the ground, but those above did not notice them, as they did not need a watch.

“We will unfasten the chain, but first we must move this boulder,” and Gylain pointed to where the boulder had rolled over onto the chain it held down.

He began to cradle it back and forth, using its added momentum to push it forward. The others joined

him, but still it took a moment: a deep hole was dug into the ground for the boulder to rest in, and they had to force it out. At last, it rolled clear. But the chain is not all that was freed: in the deep hole beneath the boulder, a mysterious figure growled at them.

"I have you now!" the darkness cried.

"By the blades of the Titans!" and Montague leapt back.

There, stooped in the hole, was Erwin Meredith. He was on his feet in an instant, and flew from the hole like his sword from its sheath.

"Step back there, Gylain, or I will strike you down!"

Meredith lifted his sword and dropped it on Gylain with a powerful side stroke. The latter could not riposte, but partially blocked it and partially fell back.

"A worthy adversary," Gylain laughed, "And one whom I have long desired to meet again. We enjoyed each other in our youth, and may old age find us as willing comrades." Gylain drove forward with a circling thrust at his opponent's midsection. The monk turned it away with the cross-handle of his sword, then brought the long portion down and pushed Gylain's blade to the ground.

"Our friendship ended with your treachery, but you are unworthy of my hate if you do not jest. I meet you only with the sword, and where you once felt my affections you will now only feel my wrath!" He thrust at Gylain, but the other batted his sword to the side with his powerful wrist.

"Montague," Gylain said, "Step back, for this fight is my own. Unfasten the chain, if you must do something, but leave Meredith to me."

Gylain gave Meredith a sharp stroke, and his old enemy parried it. He struck again from the left, and again it was parried. Gylain came forward with a succession of blows, and each was turned aside. The sun, happening to pass through the darkness for an instant, hit on his sword as he did. It flashed three times. At length, Gylain slipped as he came and his right side was left undefended. Meredith jumped to the right and struck at Gylain as he passed. The latter, however, was too quick to be taken so easily. He dropped to his feet and the blade passed harmlessly overhead. They both reeled from their exertions and missed a beat to regain their footing.

"Look," one of the soldiers cried, "The fleet begins the attack!"

There, not two hundred yards from them, the fleet chased the wind toward the rebel lines. But the chain remained. Montague was working hard to unfasten its latch, as it was no longer pinned beneath the boulder. The links were two feet wide, and as a barrier to ships it was unbreakable. But its strength was only valid if it was secured to the land. The latch, itself, was composed of several screws and four bolts that kept the final two links together.

As Montague worked, the soldiers above were aroused by the commotion and came to the edge. At first, they marveled at seeing Meredith alive; but their love of him reminded them of their duty. They could not shoot Gylain, as he was too near to Meredith; but Montague and the others were open targets. The arrows began to buzz about their heads, and one of the guards fell at once with an arrow through his neck.

The fleet drew nearer to the chain.

“Hold your shields around me,” Montague ordered the guards.

They obeyed. Yet in protecting him, they left themselves vulnerable. One by one they were shot by the rangers in the tree; one by one they began to fall.

The foremost of the fleet reached the chain, and was dashed aside like the waves they rode.

Yet at that moment, the chain was unfastened from the boulder. The weight of the chain beyond the fulcrum was a continuous pressure on it, and when it was released, the chain dashed into the air. It shot over the platform, ripping out its fasteners and tearing away the foundations of the platform. It shook, then completely gave way and tumbled to the ground. The rangers were dead before they hit. Thus, with the pressure released, the chain sank harmlessly into the harbor.

Meanwhile, Gylain and Meredith still fought.

“You will not survive this fight, old friend,” Gylain spoke steadily.

“If I am damned, you are the devil,” and Meredith came at him with a slashing stroke.

Gylain parried, but was forced back: once on the rebound, Meredith kept at him with a flurry. He struck from the left, then let his sword swing to the right; there he caught its momentum with a small loop and came at Gylain again. As he pushed forward, though, a stone caught his foot and he fell, unable to balance in the midst of his swing. Gylain sprang forward and knocked his sword aside, leaving Meredith pinned on his back and unable to recover himself. Gylain stood over him.

His face was a placid sea, as if there were nothing taking place. His mouth bent upward slightly in his usual half-smile, but it was not evil in the sense of being. Rather, it was pathetic: the smile of a man who is lost to himself, and who knows it better than any other; the smile of an atheist who knows God well.

“Slay me, fiend; for I will not yield, and you will not prevail.”

“No, Meredith, I will not make you a martyr, to prove your ideas with the sanction of my violence.” Gylain had no emotion. He bashed Meredith upon the head, putting him out. “It would please you far too much.” He turned to Montague, “Come, for where there is Meredith there is William Stuart; and I will prove God a fool!”

CHAPTER EIGHTY-NINE

“Fire,” the Admiral cried through the waterfall that came from the sky. “Fire, and do not relent!” The arrows mix with the rain as it poured upon the advancing fleet.

As the foremost ships were separated by the chain, the upper sections were thrown toward the rebels until they ran into the rebel line. Their crew prepared to board the rebel decks as they passed, to save themselves from the raging sea.

"To the railings!" the Admiral called out again, "To the railings and bar their passage -- throw them off into the sea! Hold strong, men, for this is but the first of a greater wave."

The rebel ships had their sails turned inward and set against themselves, leaving them motionless. The crew was left to line the rails, repulsing the invaders with their arrows -- for they were forest men first and sailors second.

The storm became a tempest, the swell waves, and the waves mountains. The decapitated decks of the enemy ships were lifted by the waves and raised to the height of the rebel ships for an instant. In desperation, the sinking mariners proffered their swords blade-first to the rebels. In turn, the rebels replied with a flock of arrows. A crashing boom sounded as the ships collided, and the rebels pulled their bows, waiting. Then, as the invaders came, they shot the arrows against their chests. Two, sometimes three men were taken down with every shot. The invaders kept on, but the swell subsided and their decks lowered to the sea. But, without a hull, they sunk. They disappeared into the sea, and were devoured.

"Well done, lads," the Admiral out blew the storm, "Move the masts now, for they come again and we need not meet them." He dashed to the wheel, and as the sails were turned, the ship side-stepped to the left, avoiding another approaching ship. It passed by and sank to Atlantis.

Meanwhile, Barnes had control of the second Marin and prepared it for the battle. The command deck stretched across the central floor, with ends abutting both the inner and outer walls. Each wall was dressed by a ten by twenty foot window, secured by a system of steel bars that kept larger debris from reaching it, while smaller things, such as arrows, could not break the glass. A control desk was stationed before either one, while the lesser furniture was removed to the adjacent captain's room while the war was on. In the center of the room -- between the command decks -- was a larger command area, bolted to the floor and equipped with a chart of the harbor, enclosed under a glass panel so that the actual chart could be exchanged.

Barnes sat at the outer desk and watched over the enemy fleet as it approached. His lieutenant took the inner command station, from which the rotational navigation of the Marin was conducted -- in effect its wheel, though it was, itself, a wheel. Barnes, as the captain, surveyed the situation and ordered the operation of the Marin via a system of speaking tubes that traveled through the corridors to the various departments of the ship. They converged on the captain's command desk, and could be opened or closed individually, as the need arose.

"Have we reached full buoyancy, Maticks?" Barnes called into the speaking tube.

A hollow, tinny voice came back, "Yes, sir: three hundred feet."

"Very good, and the ballast tanks?"

"Full but prepared for ejection -- we can sink at your order."

"Closed and complete," and Barnes closed the tube to the engineering compartment. He opened another, "Hornhonker, we've reached full buoyancy: raise the spikes and prepare for ramming."

"Yes, sir." Pause. "Done, sir."

"Closed and complete."

The spikes were sharp metal spears that protruded from the sides, and anyone who attempted to board would be run through by his own energy. As for the maritime battering rams, there were twenty aboard the Marin: a five foot ax head attached to a long lever, able to be raised and lowered powerfully. In peace, they were used for mining minerals, in war for mining enemies.

As he spoke, the enemy fleet began to charge.

Barnes opened every speaking tube and said, in a slightly excited voice, "They come, gentlemen. Prepare for battle."

Meanwhile, the Fardy brothers had also taken command of their Marin. The brown Fardy sat at the inner desk, the blond brother at the outer, and the black brother at the central, running between the two and giving liberally of his advice. He now stood behind his blond brother, who surveyed the situation and drew vigorously on a chart of the area.

"Barnes raises his to full buoyancy," the black Fardy offered. "I am patient, of course, but war is not a patient man's pen name. Perhaps we should reach for the clouds?"

"Barnes is a fine sailor, but we are the Fardy brothers; and who designed these Marins? He will ram them high and harass their rigging, we will ram them low and destroy their hulls. You will see," he winked, "We will show them our barnacles."

"Genius; pure, insightful genius," and the black Fardy ran across the room to his other brother. "We fly low today."

"Then I will have the pleasure of piloting our craft into the bosom of our enemy."

"My brother, do disdain our rebel beauties enough to fly into the arms of those Hibernian haberknacks? You know, we have as many pillows here as ever they did."

"Patience bids me consider that you make me a mockery. Still, I am glad, for it extols your own virtues by contrast: that I assume worst and you best. I have never known a better assumer," and he returned to his work with a dubious smile.

The black Fardy's eyebrows raised themselves like towering thunderclouds that threatened to wash out his clam-shell eyes. "This is beyond the cause of goodness, and I cannot but repent of it, if it makes me seem your superior in virtue." He brought his hands together as if he were clanging cymbals; yet his cymbals were his brother's ears.

"I beg to agree," whereupon the other stood and faced his brother.

They were interrupted by the call of their blond relative, "My brothers, the enemy charges! Your patience must be patient to be proved, for we must first survive!"

"Yes," the two belligerents chorused, and they set to work at once.

Meanwhile, de Casanova and Lyndon paced the deck of The Barber.

"What keeps them? Can the resistance have been fierce?"

"Would I know?" de Casanova growled, seeing in his sovereign a picture of the woman who scorned his

love. "Perhaps it was better guarded than he thought. We can only wait."

"So it is," Lyndon sighed and returned to his seat. He was thoroughly soaked, even with the canopy.

De Casanova continued pacing, his eyes latched onto the coast where Gylain and Montague had landed. Then, seeing something, he stared into the impenetrable forest. At this time, Gylain and Meredith were engaged in combat, but de Casanova could not see this. Instead, he saw the sparks from Gylain's sword as he lashed at his opponent.

"They have done it, Lyndon!" he cried, "The signal has been sent."

The King of Hibernia took his feet. "Forward, Captain! Signal the charge!"

"The chain, my lord?"

"It is removed, begin the attack," and Lyndon danced in glee and terror at the upcoming clash of arms and convictions.

The massive fleet began to move. It was a small island off the coast, a dense metropolis of war. Those in front began to charge, slowly then with gathering speed. Those behind followed, and like water coming from a mountain they grew faster as they went, flowing down in a frenzy of pride and patriotism.

But the chain was not yet lowered. The first ships wrecked upon it, sliced in two and sunk to the bottom of the sea.

"What is this?" Lyndon cried, "Gylain signaled us, yet the chain remains!"

"Should we pull back?" the captain asked.

"No," Lyndon hesitated, "No, I will take Gylain's word: forward."

Then, with a crash and a splash, the massive chain snapped from its anchor and itself sank into the sea. The fleet continued without losing its momentum, and the rebels were left exposed. Meanwhile, the storm grew stronger, and the attacking fleet was thrown forward by a powerful swell, landing on top of the rebel ships. The archers shot and the boarders were forced back. But they came in greater numbers, and the rebels lost their advantage. The archers released their birds of prey, but the decimated ranks of the enemy did not fall back a second time. Instead, the rebels were left to fight off their enemy with their meager weaponry. It was a massacre, and the blood was only kept from overflowing the deck by the waves which washed it away.

"Do not fear, my men," the Admiral roared, "Courage is the devil's handmaiden, but fear foments defeat," and he grabbed a bow from a dead man's hand and fitted an arrow to its string. A soldier came from behind, hoping to cut him down; but the Admiral turned to him just as his sword began to descend. "Death, fool!" he cried, and shot the arrow through the man's eye. He died at once.

But elsewhere the battle soured into defeat. The deck was swarmed with Gylain's soldiers, and as one died another took his place. The ships were overtaken, and only the desperate attempts of the crew kept them from complete destruction. The Marins broke their opponents to driftwood, perhaps, with their rams above and spikes below; but they could not leave their position, lest the enemy flank them and cut them off from the shore. At length, the Admiral sounded the retreat.

“We are taken, fire the ships!” and he dashed the lantern down the hold, into the hull.

The crew followed his command, and the boarders were too confused to stop them. The ships were lit, and the rebels jumped onto the Marins, which came alongside to gather the survivors. It took only a moment, for few of the crew remained alive.

“All that live are aboard, head for home!” the Admiral called to Barnes through the command window.

Barnes obeyed and the Fardies followed; the rebel fleet abandoned the harbor to Gylain’s force. Still, their burning ships blocked the passage for a moment, for the fleet could not risk being dashed against them and thrown to the fire.

“But ten more minutes and the sea would have eaten them,” the Admiral cursed. “As it is, we must do that ourselves.”

At that moment, the Marin hit the shore and the rebels began to disembark.

“It is time,” the Admiral said to Alfonzo, who had just returned from battle on the plain. “It is time,” and he said no more.

CHAPTER NINETY

The rebel sailors poured over the sides of the Marin, fleeing to the ramparts. The Marins were set adrift and ablaze, destroyed lest they be used against their makers. The Admiral walked beside Alfonzo across the beach, silent until they reached the fortifications.

“The rain is against us,” Alfonzo said, “For the trenches are flooded.”

As he said, the tunnels in front of the ramparts were flooded, leaving the archers without a perch. The water washed against the foundation of the ramparts behind, undermining its strength. Yet the distance to the bay had lessened -- the water had already risen ten feet in the flood -- and the enemy had less of a foothold to assault from.

“Can we hold them?” the Admiral asked.

“Forever, no; as for how long, we will see. If we can slow their landing, the storm may be our ally. As it is, they will have trouble laying siege on the castle in this rain.”

“But a retreat, if only to the castle, will prepare the men for defeat. Your plans have been washed away,” and he looked into the sky. Gravity had struck the celestial ocean.

At that moment, Barnes came up. “Sir, the Marins are abandoned.”

“Well done, Barnes. Your first command is completed with honor,” said with affection.

“Thank you, sir. Where should I position the men?”

“That is not a question for me, but for the commander, Alfonzo. As for me, I retreat to the castle: my war is with Gylain, not is armies.”

“Then you fight only for revenge?” Alfonzo asked. “Victory for revenge trumps defeat in damnation.”

“Nevertheless, it is what I will have. What happiness is left for me in this life?”

“Your daughters; they would be slaves for you.”

The Admiral flexed his face. “No, I have had domestic happiness, and it is damnation as well. If I must be damned, I will make myself worthy.” Turning to the castle, he added, “Send for me if he comes.”

“He will not,” Barnes ventured, “I know for sure that Gylain will not march with his men.”

“How?” and the Admiral struck out with broadsword eyes. But the young man was not cut.

“It was he who lead the assault on the chain: I saw him with my glass. He has Jonathan Montague and a dozen soldiers with him, and they do not mean to rejoin the fleet, for they beached their boat and it will not sail again until the tides come.”

“He seeks me, as well,” the Admiral looked into the darkness. “I will follow him.”

“Alone?” Alfonzo cried, “Father, you cannot do this: without Willard, you are the rebellion.”

“Me? Fool of a man! Where have I been, these last fifteen years? I am myself a beached old man, dried and salted and hung in the galley. I may be Gylain’s enemy, Alfonzo, but you are freedom’s ally.”

“Will I go with you?”

“By no means! You are meant for Celestine, not for death!” The rain came down his cheek. “Still, I will not go alone; I may meet someone along the way. Farewell.”

With that, he turned to the forest and flew before the wind. Nor did he turn before he disappeared. The others watched him go, then Alfonzo roused them, “Come, there is much to be done.” He turned to the ramparts and passed through the small opening left unsealed. They were the last to pass through, and behind them the enemy was already beginning to land. “Seal the gap!” as he went through.

“What of the Admiral?”

“He is lost to his revenge. Do not wait for a bitter man.”

“As you wish, sir,” and the guards did their duty.

At that moment, the Fardy brothers approached Alfonzo, and the blond Fardy said, “Alfonzo, where are we needed? Say the word and we are there.”

“To the castle, friends,” was the quick reply.

“The castle! Then we would miss the battle, and our patience is weak in war.”

“To the castle,” Alfonzo firmly repeated. “With the trenches flooded there are more men than spaces here, while Milada is pressed to prepare the castle. For the deluge comes, of men and water.”

“Then our patience will be proved -- my brothers’ more than my own -- and we will meet again in the castle. Until then, be safe,” and the three brothers set off for the castle, though where the dirt path had been a river now ran. They ran beside it.

Meanwhile, the rebel ships had become charred ruins at the bottom of the sea, and the ships broken by the chain no longer blocked the channel. The Atiltian, Hibernian fleet hurried into the harbor to save itself from the wrath of the storm, and while the forest made landing impossible, it also defeated the wind. Aboard the flagship, de Casanova and his king controlled the siege. The former stood at the bow, reading the situation with his telescope; the latter sat at his table beneath the canopy, reading the situation with his maps and charts.

“The ships are anchored,” de Casanova said.

“Excellent, begin the landing; but take only what you need for the ramparts. The castle sits at the bottom of a basin, and if this downpour continues, we will have to float the troops down by flatboat.”

Soon the fleet stretched along the coast several ships deep. Because of its size, however, The Barber remained in the rear. De Casanova prepared to lead the invasion himself, but as he went he spoke to his sovereign, without turning to face him.

“If I fall, do not be harsh to Lydia.”

With that, he signaled the trumpeters to begin the call, and jumped across to the next ship. The fleet was huddled together so densely he could pass from one ship to another, and in a moment he reached the shore, occupying the same ground the rebels had just deserted. It was a wasteland between the two forces. A mist went up as the rain came down, and the land was left in haze; and though it was now one o’clock, the only sun was that which refracted off the storm. De Casanova took his place before the soldiers, who had already made ranks.

“We will charge them, men, but we will not retreat. Charge!” and the trumpets sang.

The landing force was twenty thousand strong, standing rested and restless. The rebel ramparts were within fifty yards now, though the distance was covered by an inch of water and their passage slowed as a result. They pushed a siege weapon before them, a steel barrier that formed a triangle, the point facing the ramparts. With the rain decaying the foundations of the fortification, the siege onager was meant to push the mud walls in and open them to the attackers. The mud slowed its advance; but, as de Casanova made his life doing difficult things, he forced it forward. The ranks extended parallel to the onager on either side, angling backward to protect their flank. Arrows swarmed, but the rain slowed them, and in a moment the onager struck the ramparts.

“De Casanova,” Alfonzo whispered as he watched the approaching armies. “If I were a man of revenge, this would be a time of celebration. As it is, I will fight for duty and nothing more.”

Lionel came along beside him. “You would fight without hating? I confess I am a youth, but still I have never seen a man kill one he loved. If not one, then the other.”

Alfonzo was silent, lost in the sea that fell about them. Then, “You are right, perhaps but I cannot leave so great an enemy unchallenged.”

“It is not your hatred I condemn, but your denial. Either way, you need not think of that foul old man, for he is mine. His blood will be on my account, and justice done.”

“Many men, in war, make themselves the justice of the peace,” Alfonzo rebuked in turn. “But beware, for de Casanova has defeated justice more than once. He will give no mercy.”

“And he will have none. But would it matter? Look about you, Alfonzo: we will all die.” He looked at the storm and paused. “But if there must be murder, let it not be God’s but mine!”

At that moment, the onager struck the ramparts, and the earthen walls fell back in disarray. It came again, and the water began to pass through. A third time, and the entrance was unsealed.

“Quickly, men,” de Casanova yelled, “Quickly, follow me!” He dashed up the wall -- sloped on the inside -- and washed over two rebels stationed there. They had no weapons but arrows, and raised their arms to surrender. But they only surrendered their souls, for de Casanova struck them down with a single side stroke.

Meanwhile, the advancing soldiers propagated themselves throughout the defenses, and the melee was general. Alfonzo rode about on his horse, rallying and forming them into a disciplined line. De Casanova saw him from the wall and started after him, but he was halted by a voice behind his shoulder.

“The Chevalier de Braunign, de Casanova; who could have thought I would have such luck?”

De Casanova spun around. “Lionel!”

“Indeed; come, let us finish this like men.”

“Like men? And for what, a woman?”

“What is fighting for, but man’s woe? Come along.”

“Very well,” and he followed Lionel over the rampart to the ground between the fleet and the fortifications. The water grew deeper and the bay crept closer. Between the two, however, was empty; for all the soldiers were in battle. “Very well, Lionel; but you must know this fight is as meaningless as that which tears your heart. The outcome is decided, and by her.”

“Patrick is my friend, but Lydia my sister; I fight for her honor alone, for he cares less for his own than even I. Here, we are alone: draw,” and Lionel’s blade came from its sheath and shot toward de Casanova. The latter had his ready and parried the blow.

The young man followed with an assault on his adversary’s left side. He struck again and again in rapid succession, advancing a step with each; de Casanova deflected the blows. Then, seeing he could not prevail in this manner, Lionel lunged at the other’s chest. De Casanova slipped as he fell back, and the sword struck his arm -- a painful wound, but harmless. He fell into the water.

“It is finished,” Lionel stood over him.

“Indeed,” and he kicked Lionel’s feet aside, bringing him to the ground.

They regained their feet at the same time, and the duel resumed. Lionel grew in zeal, and with his larger

sword brought a rain of fierce down strokes on his enemy's head. Thunder rang as de Casanova struggled to block them, and lightning flashed on the steel. De Casanova dodged to the left and a blow fell to the ground. Yet Lionel picked it up before the other could return it, and de Casanova recoiled under its hurricane force.

"You struggle, old man, for weakness haunts your eyes."

"The eyes of the jaguar are not seen before he strikes," and he leapt upon Lionel with a sudden flash of vigor. The youth jerked back and slid to the ground, almost covered by the water. De Casanova stood over him, pressing his sword against his chest.

"Now, it is finished," de Casanova laughed.

Silence covered Lionel, his courage a memory. Then he, himself, was nothing more. De Casanova ran him through, and his corpse was buried by the flood. Then, taken up by the water's strong current, it floated away. As de Casanova watched him disappear, a messenger came from the front.

"The rebels have fallen back," he said. "We have taken the field."

CHAPTER NINETY-ONE

The fleet began to disembark the siege equipment, placing them upon flatboats and rafts to be floated to the castle. The current carried them, as that was where it naturally deposited its cargo. Lyndon watched over the process from his command deck, since the water had risen high enough for The Barber to come in close. De Casanova came to bring him a report of the battle.

"It is done," he said, "We have driven them back to the castle, and it will not be long now."

"Very good; if this rain continues, we will not have much time."

"The flood begins. But we are islanders, and it has happened before."

"Have you seen Lionel?" the king asked abruptly, "For I thought I saw him passing by."

"I have."

"And? He is my son, though sons are the curse of the throne. Most are weak and arrogant, a double fault line that cracks the sanity; and humility to the weak is as arrogance to the strong. But Lionel was neither weak nor arrogant, and therein lies his fault. Tell me, what of him? Did he fight with honor?"

"Yes, and with skill."

"He can be redeemed to his heritage, yet. It is a shame he endangers himself."

"I doubt there is danger where he has gone."

The king turned aside his eyes and lowered their curtains. "And where has he gone?"

"That is not for men to know; I killed him."

"There was no other way?"

"None that would not dishonor him. He fought for the honor of his sister, and he was defeated."

"Strength over weakness," Lyndon sighed. "My daughter sells her beauty to a peasant, and her brother his life for her honor. A pitiful thing, is pride in honor; yet without it, what would become of us? Our pride, our honor -- it is the ale of the elite, driving us to madness, fueling our mispronounced sin; but without it we would be damned outright." Pause. "But let us throw philosophy to the wind, de Casanova. How is the siege?"

"The castle is garrisoned with several thousand men; how much supplies we cannot tell. The town is gone, and there is nothing in the area to cover ourselves with. Above all, our supplies will not last a siege, and we cannot resupply while the sea rages."

"Why did they not resupply in Eden? With two hundred ships, the room can be found."

"We would have, to be sure, if Lionel had not seduced our wrath before we could load what had already been set aside."

"The young fool! Still, I am glad because of it: he had my cunning," and Lyndon laughed, turning his head upwards until the rain disguised his weeping. He was a man of power, for good or ill.

A man approached the bow, Lyndon's private deck. He was a scout, sent out by Lyndon.

"I have news, my lord."

"Speak."

"A small regiment is encamped to the south, three thousand strong. They seemed alive, but slept so soundly I could not rouse them."

"Sleeping, through battle and storm? These Atiltians are stout men," de Casanova laughed. "And you as well; I, at least, would not rouse an enemy host when I was alone."

"They were not enemies but Gylain's infantry, those he sent through the forest."

"Then his men do not have his fire," de Casanova returned, "For he has not closed his eyes these last four days, nor so much as blinked. If he is undead, they are unalive."

"Return to them until they wake," Lyndon interrupted. "We will continue the siege without them and without their leader," he glanced to the forest. "Gylain has trained his army well enough that they can fight alone, and I did not even expect those sleeping soldiers to remain among the living. As for Gylain, it is neither among armies nor rebels that he seeks battle."

"Nor is it among men; for he fights strength and there is only one stronger than he. Begone," and de Casanova nodded his head to the scout, who turned and fled the scene.

Meanwhile, Gylain, Montague, and the eight remaining soldiers traveled through the forest at a morbid pace. The canopy stopped the rain but not the water, and the ground was the earth's tear. Where it came down, the water rushed as if it fell off the world, and the cloudy air swirled with the sound of falling water. Below, the grass glowed with phosphorous plants, refugees of the angry sea. It was one o'clock and it was midnight, lingering like a jelly fish dream. It was the forest and it was the sea. It was the deluge.

"William's blood gives scent to the forest," fell from Gylain's lips.

"I smell only death, and it strongly," Montague returned.

"We near the southern rim of the plain, through which the land force must have passed. And they cannot have done so without a large casualty."

"So I thought, but it is better to know from your mouth than my head."

"In this troublesome life, Montague, you offer me what little comfort can be found." He paused, then, stopping, "Wait! Do you hear those splashes?"

"Yes," and they turned their heads toward the approaching footsteps.

"Prepare for action," Jonathan Montague turned to the Elite Guards and drew his own sword.

They formed themselves into a line and prepared to meet whatever force was coming. But as they did, another set of footsteps broke through the heavy air, coming from behind them.

"At last!" Gylain cried as he saw who came, "At last, and for the end!"

Some time before this, on a platform off the southern side of the plain, Oren Lorenzo sat with six rebel rangers. They huddled around a fire contained within a bronze pit that was built into the platform, and covered by a canopy of cloth as well as one of leaves. The other rangers had migrated through the Treeway on various missions.

"We'd best be going, for the war will not await our arrival, though victory may," Lorenzo said, but his voice had no conviction.

Still, they answered, "We follow your lead, sir."

"Very well; and since I am no ranger, I will lead on the ground. We will scout the edge of the forest, to spy any ambush meant for our comrades."

The canopy dwelling rangers were born into an aviary, and to descend their rope ladders they simply grabbed ahold with their gloved hands and slid down. Lorenzo, however, climbed slowly; for five minutes he was alone in the air, battling the swinging rope with a swinging pulse. Below, the waters had come, and its rivers flowed to the castle. The bodies of the dead were carried along, pushed about like fallen leaves.

"I am glad the rebellion comes to an end," Lorenzo said as they left the battlefield behind, "It will be decided in the present fight -- for freedom or against -- and perhaps it would be better were we enslaved than slain for freedom. The dead have no freedom."

"I have lost my father, my brothers, my sons," a ranger replied. "Years ago I fought for the women and children; but now the women are widows and the children soldiers. If this is liberty, it does not feel such a glorious thing."

"Liberty!" another ranger, with a missing eye, laughed. "You cannot get liberty by fighting others, for we are first enslaved to pride, whether our own or that of our king. If we must be beaten, let us be beaten; but I will not beat another for the privilege of beating myself."

"And there we differ, old friend" a third said, "For I would not sin as hard, if the beatings hit my own back, and neither would our king. If he was beaten for my sin, I would court the devil; no one would gladly bear the beatings of another."

"There is one, that I have heard of," the priest Lorenzo began gravely. "He takes the beatings of criminals, even as they mock him for it."

"I would call him a fool, myself," and they laughed.

"As do others," Lorenzo smiled, "But who is the greater fool: the man who is beaten for another, or the man who insists he be beaten as well as the first? It is given if it is taken."

"So where is this man to take the beatings of this bloody war? If it is already given, then why do we masquerade as if it has not, and fight as if we had to earn our peace with blood?"

"We are given this life as a mirror to the spiritual, a parable to the truth. For, unless he has been poor, a rich man does not know what he has to enjoy; and if a man has never drunk he cannot be thirsty. In the same way, we cannot know God to be good, unless we first know our ourselves to be wicked."

"I can think of easier ways than murdering my countrymen! As we fought an hour ago, I saw a man I know with my arrow through his throat; and last week I ate dinner at his father's table. I saw him, and at once I understood what I have heard in a thousand stuffy sermons by a thousand pond-scum preachers: we are children of our evil father; but he is God, not the devil. So maybe you are right; but if God made us as you say, he made us to be evil and to do these things. If I cut off my son's arms that I would be strong by comparison, what would I be? And if I scarred my wife's face that I would be comely in contrast, what would I become? In the same way, God can go to hell."

"What was that?" Lorenzo gasped.

"God can go to hell, and the devil with him."

"Not that, fool. By Beelzebub, I heard footsteps to the left!" and Lorenzo dashed through the fog and water, splashing like a waterfall. What he saw caused his tongue to throw aside his lips, and he cried out, "To arms, men! Disregard philosophy and fight, for we have met the devil!"

Some time before this, in the forest adjacent to Thunder Bay, William Stuart strode alone through the flooded forest. He wore a longsword at his side, attached to his belt by two simple metal hooks upon which the handle rested. The blade was bare. A doublet covered his body, tied about the waist with the same belt that held his sword; beneath he wore leather armor. His hands were bare, his face clothed with a rye grass beard.

"Who goes there?" he boomed, "Show yourself at once, or I will assume you hostile and dispose of you accordingly."

There was silence, and the splashing footsteps that caused his outbreak could not be heard. Then, a voice came through, "William?"

"Meredith! As I thought, you have not abandoned ship! Come, friend, follow me."

The martial monk passed through the mist. He still wore his frock, not dissimilar to William's doublet, but that it was brown and coarse. He wore armor beneath as well.

"Meredith, old friend, I hoped to see you. Has Gylain passed through here?"

"Indeed, and bruised my head upon his way," and the monk rubbed his nude scalp.

"Then come, and let us bite his heel," and the two ran into the forest.

"Who was with him?" the Admiral asked as they went.

"Jonathan Montague and a dozen men, though four were killed by the rangers."

"We are outnumbered, then."

"Yes, but it does not matter with Gylain. Montague, perhaps, would fight us full force and take the day; but Gylain will not let his men fight unless there are equal numbers on every side."

"He does so now, perhaps, but I remember a time when his morals were not so refined," the Admiral scowled. "But revenge has come, and not without its allies death and damnation."

"You speak grimly, friend."

"And yet I speak truth. Listen! What is that noise?"

"The splashes of many men. This rain has done us that good, at least."

"It will do us worse, I fear," and the two suddenly came through the fog to a large body of men.

On one side were Gylain and Montague with their men, on the other Oren Lorenzo and half a dozen rangers.

"At last!" the Admiral's eyes smoked, "At last we reach the end!"

CHAPTER NINETY-TWO

Alfonzo was the last to pass through the castle gates, having waited for the last of the fleeing rebels to safely enter. The gates closed and the steel bars were run through its latches. Behind them, a dozen stout poles were dug into the ground and a vertical wall of boards inserted, leaving a four foot gap between the first gate and the second. Dirt and debris from the town had been collected onto the walls above, and the

gap was filled until it was thicker than the walls beside it. They were buried within their fortress, and none could come in or go out.

The plain extended for a mile in each direction, and the castle sat in the center of a wide basin, collecting the surrounding water. De Casanova and his men were arriving, encircling the castle and forming ranks. Yet the rebels had dismantled the town, and there was no shelter to keep them from the falling water or the raining arrows. They could not charge the castle outright, for the water ringed around it like a moat, several feet deep around the walls; the castle, however, was waterproof, and the water did not penetrate inside. The water came in rivers, and collected the debris of the battles around the walls of the castle.

“Alfonzo, you are well?” Milada greeted him in the tunnel that ran through the inner walls.

“I am, though not by the greatest margin. The worst has passed, though, for the storm aides us now as it aided them before. They can easily transport their siege weapons, perhaps, but it is not so easy to shoot catapults from a raft. Nor can they bring in their towers, for the wind would overturn them. Their only weapon, then, is starvation; but with Lionel’s courage it will only be their own.” Pause. “Where has he gone? He joined the fight but not the retreat.”

“I have stood beside the entrance, hailing the returning warriors; he has not passed,” and he writhed in an excited jig as his zeal overflowed his mind to his body.

As they spoke, de Garmia came up to them with a squadron of his fellow deserters.

“De Garmia!” Alfonzo called, “Come here, and tell me what you have seen.”

The other came meekly, fully aware of his time in Gylain’s horde. Alfonzo, however, did not seem to remember.

“De Garmia, where is Lionel? Was he not with you?”

“Indeed, he was ; but that verb is purely past tense, my lord. I left him on the battlefield.”

“And have you seen de Casanova?”

“I have, as they charged, but he disappeared soon after.”

“He went away to duel a man,” a soldier returned, “I saw them as they left the ramparts.”

“Whom did he duel?” and de Garmia drew his tongue as if a sword.

“Lionel.”

De Garmia fell back, as did his face. He wept.

“Fool! De Casanova will devour him, as he would anyone. Even my brother, the famed de Garcia, could not withstand him.”

“Perhaps,” Alfonzo hesitated. “But many have fallen today, on either side; and most were as innocent and courageous as Lionel. If we pay him greater dividends of homage, we can only take it from the plate; and all that fills the tithe box is the blood of martyrs.”

They fell into a reverie, each to his own remorse. It was broken only after a moment, as the Fardy brothers stormed through the tunnel at a pace that belied their oddly-shaped bodies.

“Patience killed the porcupine!” yelled the black brother as he approached.

“If so, we are saved; for I do not possess it in the least,” his blond brother added.

“Defamation, my brother, and libel above,” the brown Fardy began.

Alfonzo interrupted him, “I, at least, have none. Why do you come?”

“To bring word,” the black brother stood at attention, “The catapults have begun the assault.”

“By raft? De Casanova is a hard man, but even I did not expect this. Still, we have scoured the area, and there is nothing left to shoot.”

“Besiegers often catapult dead beasts into a castle, to spread disease. You say de Casanova is a hard man, but I say he is no man at all!”

Silence and fear, the realization of a depraved enemy.

“Come and look,” and the Fardy brothers led them back through the tunnel.

They passed from the shelter into the warring rain. Still, the castle did not flood, for a series of small drains led the water away to a reservoir beneath the ground, and to the forest beyond. Until the water rose above the outlets, they would not sink. Beside the tunnel’s mouth was a flight of steps, winding backwards to the top of the wall the tunnel ran through.

“May God forgive us,” Alfonzo whispered as the battlefield around the castle came into view, the air thick with the enemy’s projectiles. “May God forgive me !”

As the waters brought debris to the castle, it also brought the bodies of the dead, picking them from their open graves and taking them away. The army of Gylain was assembled around the castle, floating on rafts, flat boats, and the smaller vessels of the fleet; the army of the dead was assembled as well, a morbid barrier between the living warriors.

When de Casanova reached the front after conversing with Lyndon, he was enraged they did not attack.

“The water washes away the catapults,” the general insisted, “We cannot fire.”

“Fool!” de Casanova struck the man with an open fist, “Fool! Have stakes driven into the ground, and the rafts secured. We will fire the catapults as they float.”

“But, my lord, there is nothing to fire. The rebels have gleaned the area clean.”

De Casanova drew his eyes from sheaths of madness, watching the parade of corpses that marched in from all sides.

“Dust to dust, ashes to ashes,” he whispered in the general’s ear. “Let the men be used to further the cause for which they have already given their lives!”

And so it was. The castle was bombarded with the corpses of the slain. The soldiers who ran the catapults were against themselves in heart, for even those who defile and destroy living men cannot to do the same to the dead. De Casanova lashed them with his tongue and burned them with his branded eyes. One man alone refused, an Atiltian peasant from the forest. De Casanova broke his arm above his head and threw him headfirst into the catapult; he screamed until he hit. The other soldiers continued, and though at first it seemed reviling, it became a joy. They were trained to duty by their officers, and to evil by their maker. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes -- thus it was with their conscience.

Those soldiers who had come through the forest continued to sleep, in a coma from their exertion. And they were not exempt from being weaponry. Their screams rang out, as they awoke while flying to their deaths; and the rebels shrank back in fear, fleeing their posts to the dead. Alfonzo did not stop them, though he himself remained, aware he had led them to the graveyard.

"What will men not do, but that which is right? Forgive me, father, for I have sinned. If freedom is won by the sword, it is lost to the same."

At that moment, a body struck the stone wall a few feet to his left. It bounced and broke apart, and the partially severed head came off and rolled between Alfonzo's feet. He did not move. He knew it was there, but he could not look. Yet neither could he forget its presence. He set his face to the grindstone and looked down. Thunder struck; it was his heart, and he fell back a step. But the head rolled back with him. His eyes broke, his heart rained.

"My God!" he moaned, "Are we even men, or deluded apes who claim your image to be our own? If we are men, then let us be damned; for we will have it either way."

There, decaying on the ground between his feet, was the head of Blaine Griffith. It looked up with open eyes, and his last words lingered on its lips.

"Sir," a young voice broke in from behind, "You are in danger; come below with me."

Alfonzo did not answer. He could not. He did not want to.

"Sir," the voice drew nearer, "Are you injured?"

"Only in my soul," Alfonzo gasped for breath. "Only in my soul, Barnes."

The young lieutenant came alongside Alfonzo. He saw his brother's head only when it was too late to stop him, and he became himself a corpse. Horror burned his eyes, terror blew a wind within his heart.

At length, "I will have my revenge."

Alfonzo broke free from his reverie. He grabbed Barnes by the collar and pulled him close. His face was a raging sea, his lips a siren's reef.

"Revenge?" he trembled. "You seek revenge?"

Alfonzo's countenance was flooded with passion. He reached down and grabbed Blaine's head, holding it up to the young man's face.

"This is the face of revenge," he wept, "Will you embrace it?"

Silence came heavier than the rain, and the dismembered head remained against Barnes Griffith's face. He was dead, himself.

"This is the face of revenge," Alfonzo repeated, his voice raised, "Will you have it as your own?"

Silence.

"This is the face of revenge, as well as its reward," Alfonzo cried aloud, "Will you kiss its cheek?"

Silence and a moment's beating tide.

"No, I do not want it; forgive me. Let us bury him with honor," and life returned to Barnes' face.

They took their departed friend's body and carried it to the inner castle. A coffin was found by some soldiers, and Blaine was laid to rest with a sword on one side and a bow on the other. One of the priests gave a short eulogy, with Alfonzo, Barnes, Milada, and the Fardy brothers in attendance. Then, when it was finished, they turned their backs to the priest and their faces to the battle.

"This has gone too far," Alfonzo said, "When will it be brought to an end?"

"When it is God's time," Milada replied, "It is in his hands we lay this battle; for it is too heavy for our own." Milada had grown to be his daughter.

As he spoke, however, de Garmia rushed into the room. "I understand respect for the dead, but come quick! For they assault the walls, and we will be dead ourselves if we do not stop them!"

CHAPTER NINETY-THREE

Celestine and Cybele sat in the tower that was once Hismoni's room, but which -- since his treachery -- was given over to honored guests. The sisters occupied it, but were themselves occupied with the situation below. The walls were windowed, and from it the whole surrounding plain could be seen: a design requested by the former captain of the guards.

"The rebels will soon be vanquished," Cybele prophesied as she stood by the window. "My army will overcome."

Celestine walked to her side, and when she saw the floating graveyard, moaned, "What brutes, what animals! Still, they will not take the walls; even the storm is against them. God will not let us be defeated."

"Would he not? God has done many such things before, Celestine. Even now, the storm is not against us; rather, it is our ally. For the water rises swiftly, and soon the soldiers will only need to float alongside the walls and board them as if they were at sea. The water raises the siege," she smiled and pointed to de Casanova's distant figure -- in the distance his energy set him apart from the others. He had sent a detachment to the fleet, to dismantle some ships and send their pieces to the front. Yet it was too late for rafts, for the fleet had advanced half a mile into the plain, and soon the lesser frigates would be able to reach the castle.

“With your military mind, you cannot see beyond the means.”

“I will be freed, and you imprisoned. I will be returned to power.”

“That is not yet the end, for the flood comes quick upon us. If your armies can conquer the forces of man, they are powerless before the forces of God.”

“As are you, if he exists. But I have not seen him.”

“You cannot force open the door, but only knock.”

“And yield our souls to the almighty footman? I do not care for God, for if he exists Gylain will destroy him.”

“How can he think such things, if he is not mad?”

“If he is not mad? He does not deny madness, nor do I. If he is mad, it is only that he agrees with you, that God is with you. For that is why he battles you, and why he overthrew the king. He claimed divine right to rule, and Gylain defeated him; the rebellion claims God’s grace for freedom, and Gylain will dash it against the rocks. Thus he will defeat God by proxy.”

“It is hard to fight an enemy you will not admit exists.”

“Does it matter? Can anything matter, for what is truth?”

“If you did not know, could you deny it?”

“Foolish woman. But look, my allies attack!”

Below, on the castle walls, the besieging army began its assault. The soldiers rode rafts across the water, and smaller frigates stood in reserve. The rebels countered with a herd of arrows, and Alfonzo could be seen rushing to join the fight, coming from the inner castle. De Garmia went before him, and the Fardy brothers behind.

“Fight well, my love,” Celestine whispered, “Fight as if it mattered!”

Meanwhile, far below the two sisters, Alfonzo spoke to the guards as he gained the wall.

“They attack?” he asked.

“Yes, on rafts; for the water is nearing the tops of the walls.”

“So it is,” Alfonzo returned. Then, grimacing, “We have little time left, before we have more invaders than mere men. The castle cannot long hold up against this water!”

As he spoke, the first raft drew near the walls. It was four planks tied rudely together with two ropes, all of which had apparently been plundered from the fleet. The water was turbulent, and many of the soldiers were lost as they crossed the encroaching sea on their pitiable rafts; still, they came. The fleet, itself, had advanced within a quarter mile of the castle and would be able to reach it in a few moments if the storm continued. But de Casanova did not wait, fearing he would be forced to show mercy to the rebels, on

account of the elements. He rode in the foremost raft, standing tall and defying the defenders with his flourishing blade.

"Archers, bring him low," Alfonzo ordered.

The rangers drew their strings and sent a volley straight for him. Some flew overhead, some underfoot, but none of them hit. There was no time for a second volley, and the raft landed on the wall, several feet below the top. The soldiers raised their spears and jumped onto the wall, pushing back the archers as they came.

"Surrender or be slain," de Casanova cried as he gained his feet.

"Your mercy is not so desirable, de Casanova."

"Alfonzo, I did not expect you."

He leapt from the parapets onto the main wall, landing beside Alfonzo with his sword drawn. The latter held his blade and met his downward blow; they pushed, then fell back when neither yielded. Their swords angled out before them and they circle about before resuming the melee. The blades danced between them, first with Alfonzo's down stroke, then as de Casanova blocked it and forced his opponent's sword to the left. Alfonzo dashed forward, de Casanova caught the oncoming sword with a down stroke and forced it to the right. Then he came forward with three desperate lunges, each parried by Alfonzo. He pressed forward, forcing the rebel back, then rained down with a powerful overhead blow. Alfonzo stumbled, and de Casanova jumped onto the parapet, then down again behind Alfonzo before the latter could recover himself.

Alfonzo extended his blade and spun around, whipping it toward his opponent, who leaned back to let it pass. Three men were engaged with a group of invaders behind him, however, and he hit one in the back. Alfonzo's blade buzzed past his chest, and de Casanova lunged forward to the opening. Alfonzo threw himself back to evade the blow, and while he escaped, he fell to the ground in process. De Casanova advanced and raised his sword to smite him.

"Bonvoyage," and he sent it screaming toward Alfonzo.

It never reached him. De Casanova was grabbed from behind and pulled back, then thrown to the ground by a powerful arm. His sword came with him, and Alfonzo was left unscathed.

"The Fardy brothers," as he looked up to his attackers.

"For sure; and our patience is thinner than the skin which keeps our blades from your neck."

The battle elsewhere had not gone the same for the rebels, but neither did the besiegers gain victory. The soldiers were weary, and the threat of the increasing storm left them afraid of more than each other.

"Your men grow weary," de Casanova observed. "You would do well to finish me before my forces take the day."

"Your forces do no better," and Alfonzo returned to his feet.

At that moment, de Garmia ran past, driving four soldiers and the Fardy brothers' attentions before him. De Casanova saw the opening.

“Perhaps,” and he rolled to the left, escaping the blond Fardy’s blade, pushing himself over the parapet with his powerful arms, and falling into the water beyond.

“Archers, take him,” Alfonzo cried, and took his own bow for the same purpose.

But de Casanova was a hard man. He dove beneath the waves and did not resurface until he reached the awaiting fleet, now within twenty yards. Alfonzo measured his aim and shot far to the left of his enemy. The wind forced it to the right, and it sank into de Casanova’s leg. But it was too late, and he was hauled onto the ship and into safety.

“He has escaped us again,” Alfonzo turned to the Fardy brothers.

“Yes, but patience, my friend,” the brown brother answered, “Patience!”

Alfonzo laughed, “Yes, it has already been written. You rebuke me.”

Only then did Alfonzo look to the ongoing battle. The walls, inner and outer, were filled with fighting men; and the dead floated just beyond. Rain came down like hail, and with the sounds of war added, cacophony ensued. Then, when the melee grew desperate, the water rose above the outer wall and crashed into the castle, bringing the dead on its charging swell.

“All is lost,” the Fardies moaned. “The deluge!”

“Do not repent of your courage yet; for deliverance is near,” and Alfonzo climbed a nearby sentry tower. Standing on its peak, he looked over the murdering men and broke the thunder with his voice.

“Peace!” he cried, and the battle stopped to listen. “We fight for many ends, but the end of all is drawing near, for us. Whether we fight for freedom or duty, both will be lost to us if we do not save ourselves from the storm. The water comes, and it will wash us away. So let us make peace and save ourselves, that we may murder each other later, in safety. Even de Casanova has fled to the fleet.”

“Yet our fleet insures our safety,” an officer returned, “For when the tide comes, they will gather us up again.”

“Do not expect salvation from your friends,” Alfonzo answered. “Even now they are under attack, and the battle does not go well with them.”

“The French?” and the officer dropped his sword, joining Alfonzo atop of the tower. The men, weary, laid down their arms to rest.

After a moment, the officer cried out, “So it is! Yield yourselves, men, for de Casanova has left us and the fleet is under heavy attack by the French. They surround our two hundred ships with an equal number; some of our ships do not join the fight, and the rest are in confusion.”

“It is as I said. Now, let us save ourselves.”

“We cannot, without the fleet. This water comes from the very bowels of the earth, and washes over us as over the bottom of the sea.”

“We cannot stop it, perhaps, but we can rise with it.”

“You speak in riddles, enemy, but there is little time to play semantics.”

“Forgive me. What I meant is this: we tore down the wooden buildings of the town and left them in the castle. If we work together we can build them into flat boats, to carry us until the fleets have ceased to fight.”

“Let it be done!”

With that, twenty thousand men turned their zeal to salvation, and worked like a tidal wave upon the shore. They struck hard and fast, and the wooden buildings were transformed into boats and rafts almost instantly. Yet even as they did, fate was against them. For the water continued to rise.

CHAPTER NINETY-FOUR

Meanwhile, as the Atiltian rebels fought the Atiltian and Hibernian armies, the French fleet fought the storm. The waves and wind were set against them, and the passage rough. Still, they came. Below deck, Vahan Lee and the King of France sat alone in the dining room.

“A splendid meal, Vahan,” the king said. He paused before adding, “It is a shame, however, that there will be no dessert tonight.”

“We are at war, your majesty, and such frivolities are to be discarded.”

“Yes, I understand perfectly. But to know is not to cease desiring.”

“Perhaps, but it is the beginning of a desire in the opposite direction. You must realize that this war, though fought on Atilta, decides the fate of France as well. Hibernia rules the three kingdoms, and soon we will no longer be able to play England against them. The Moors come up from the south, and Spain has already fallen. Alone, we too will fall; but with the Atiltian king returned to his throne, we can drive them back.”

“Yet these things are not affected by a small, trifling dessert.”

“I must disagree, my lord, for the theory is justified only in execution; and the execution by its vigor. If you hunger for the desires of the flesh, you will burn to fulfill them; but the glutton has nothing more to gain,” and Vahan winced at his choice of words.

“A glutton, you say?” the king sighed. “So I am, and you are right. If not for your bureaucratic vigor, what would we come to? Come, Vahan, to war!”

With that, they returned to the deck, to watch the passage of the fleet. There were rooms above, sheltered from the elements, from which the storm could be observed. Meanwhile, in another section of the ship, Captain Khalid entered the armory, where de Garcia practiced his swordplay against a fighting dummy.

“The warrior’s retreat,” Khalid said.

De Garcia turned, saw his former warden and executioner, and smiled. “You ask me? As one warrior to another, you must know it is so.”

“So I do, but a man of your skill cannot have much to learn from a wooden opponent.”

“I learned things from your French soldiers, anyway.”

Khalid’s lip turned upwards, but he could be said to have smiled. “I have seen you in action against my men, and will excuse your pride -- though your future antagonists may not. I am told you were long a prisoner,” and Khalid took a thick rapier, identical to de Garcia’s sword, from the table. The ship swayed, as did the single lantern that lit the room. Still, the two men held their footing as if on land. “I have heard you were for a many years a prisoner, in the dungeons of Gylain. I am surprised, then, that you retain your strength of arms and of mind.”

De Garcia returned his look. He was, as Khalid said, in the greatest physical shape.

“I fought my chains every waking moment, until I fainted away in exhaustion. As for my mind, I do not know that it has kept so well; it lives only for revenge. You are a fighting man, as you say,” he looked down at the sword which Khalid had taken up. “Shall we practice?”

“The ship rolls, it will be unsafe.”

“As is war, but have no fear: I will not let you be harmed.”

Khalid laughed. “Then let us practice.”

The two stood for a moment, their swords crossed. Then, without warning, de Garcia parried Khalid’s sword to the side and lunged at him. The other knocked it aside with a flick of his wrist, and advanced with circling thrust, the point of his blade remaining within a coin’s circle. Their swords met seven before a second passed, and Khalid’s feverish charge was controlled by de Garcia’s quick ripostes. Still, he was forced back against the wall. He laughed and rolled beyond Khalid in a somersault, gaining his rear and sending a blow to his shoulder. It never hit. Khalid hurricaned around and parried the blow, forcing de Garcia’s blade into the air. De Garcia caught its momentum, deftly looped its point, and sent it towards Khalid. But the melee itself was parried by a voice from behind them.

“That is enough, friends,” and the two lowered their swords.

“Leggitt,” de Garcia bowed as he turned around, “You wish to join us in the fight?”

“A fight, yes, but not this one. We have broken through the storm and Thunder Bay is just ahead. It is held by Gylain’s fleet!”

Meanwhile, in another part of the ship, Patrick and Lydia sat in conversation, on the forward rail overlooking the sea. A deck below kept them from harm.

“You hold our country in your hands,” and Patrick held them in his own.

“Yet I am no warrior.”

"I am, and you hold my heart."

"Only a fool mortgages that which is indispensable to him."

"Did I set out to sell myself? Did I intend to be indentured to the flaming sun that holds your face, and to the eyes that haunt my dreams? If I did, then yes, I am a fool. But no man is made a fool by fate, for fate the foolish do not understand."

"When your desire is fulfilled, your passion will subside. Have I not seen it before? Patience is necessary in love: it is becoming more than being."

"Than am I to become nothing? For this love consumes me. Am I to reap the nihilist's demise, because I cannot but see your beauty? If I see a forest in the distance, I cannot rest until I stroll among its trees and taste its leafy air. If I see the ocean beyond a bluff, I cannot breathe until swim alongside its waves. And when I see your sunny hair and starry eyes, I cannot live until I walk along your lips and swing your tempered tongue. It is the way of nature."

"Nature has many ways, and civilization has arisen to thwart them. Should a man kill to fulfill his hatred, or plunder to vanquish his hunger? Trees do not look back and seas have no heart; a woman does, and I am no pleasure cruise."

Lydia turned her head to the storm and her blue eye to Patrick.

"Damnation drown my wayward heart, the siren cries!" Then, in a whisper, "I am a vulture in the graveyard, and the carrion my own."

"A siege without a fight is no true tale, and a woman without a tale no true bitch. Faith makes love, that when passion has fled desire remains. Let it be this way, and it may be."

"You give me hope!" Patrick cried in joy, "And I am not so foolish as to ask for more. Now, my love, I go to ready my arms, for look: the Atiltian coast approaches."

He went below deck. At the same time, Willard and Ivona sat together.

"Silence does not suit your countenance, Ivona."

"Yet it suits my mind. What would you have me say?"

"That you love me, and will be my queen when this is over."

"I am not a liar."

"Nor am I, to say I love you."

"I, however, cannot love you. So I will not."

"All that keeps you is yourself, Ivona!"

"But if your heart keeps you from love, love it may not be."

"Then you do not love me: your glances originate in my mind, and our kiss was but my nocturnal

longings? Do you feel nothing?"

"I feel everything, but my heart cannot think and my mind cannot love. If I loved man, I would love you; but I love God alone."

Willard rose and paced the room. It was a closet by land, a cabin by sea: wooden walls, ten foot square and six high, ordained with an empty bookshelf and a paperless desk. But there was nothing else, as it was only a sitting room beside the galley. Ivona was silent as he paced, having nothing to say. At length, he aroused himself and spoke in a distracted manner.

"I am a man of the forest, and by justice I mean strength and power: the ability make your sense of justice enforced. Yet you are something else, Ivona. To you justice is applied by the power of God, and not derived from man or beast below. I am a man of the forest, and I do not know you, I cannot. For you are a woman of God."

"Than why do you pursue me? I am of God in spirit, of earth in flesh, and torn asunder by the tides of love against love. One will win, and I will make it God. But, by God, why must you love me?"

"Because I am a man only in contrast to a woman. Does not the darkness love the light? For without it, what would darkness be? And do not angels love demons? For without demons, what would angels be? Thus, I love you; for without you I am not man but beast. Only your love keeps me from the forest, gives me heart above the trees."

"But if an angel loves a demon, does it not fall itself from the light? If the light makes love to darkness, will it not grow dim? If I am yours, I will not take you from the forest; I will join you there. And if I love you, I will no longer be what you love. Thus, I will remain with God. He will be my only master."

Willard knelt before Ivona, placing his hands together in supplication.

"I beg you, Ivona, forget the realms which cannot be known and give yourself to those which can. I love you, and you love me; if God keeps us apart, then let him be forgotten and our love remembered. Even now the storms of love invade your heart, and they cannot be defeated. So let it be, and let us be one in love."

Silence came down from above. The timbers creaked, the waves broke against the hull; but they were no longer noise within the room. Ivona looked into Willard's face with raining eyes and storming lips. Her face was torn apart as he watched with forest eyes. But then, with the virgin glow of passing storm, her storm-cloud lips broke into a rainbow, and her heart was calmed. Its storm had passed.

"As for me, I will serve the Lord."

Willard fell back with a word through his heart. His face blew foul, his heart trembled with the swell. He returned to his birth and was, once more, a creature of the forest. Time disappeared, and only returned when the door opened to reveal Leggitt and de Garcia, with Khalid close behind.

"It is time," they said, "We have reached Atilta!"

Willard went with them, and did not turn back.

CHAPTER NINETY-FIVE

Thunder Bay had spread across the plain, and now the entire area was underwater. Only the tall trees of the forest stood above it, and even those no longer seemed secure. The Hibernian and Atilian fleets could come within yards of the castle walls, and still the rain showed no signs of slowing.

“Let me go, fools!” cried de Casanova to those who bandaged him. “Let me go, for if we all die what evil will my wound cause? There is much to be done.”

“No, my lord,” the sailors answered, “We have them trapped, and if they resist us they cannot resist the water. We need only enjoy the spectacle.”

“Fools, I say again, that you have eyes and cannot see. Look, behind us in the bay proper, what colors do those ships fly? By God, if they are not the French! The fight continues!”

The distant trees blocked the ocean and the bay’s mouth from view, so the sailors had not seen the French coming. The trees seemed to vomit them endlessly, each ship lined with soldiers and archers fresh for war. De Casanova jumped from the deck upon which he was stretched, and leapt between the ships as he had done before. In a moment he reached The Barber, passing directly to the bow and to his king.

“De Casanova,” Lyndon said without emotion.

The same screwed back, alarmed by the ambiguous tone.

“My lord, the French fleet arrives.”

“I am not blind,” the king returned sullenly.

“Indeed?” de Casanova answered, his voice flush with anger at the other’s languid form. “Indeed? Then why do you not prepare the fleet?”

“What is this war to prove?” the other asked. “We fight on foreign ground for foreign oppression, and for what reason?”

“To destroy the rebellions of freedom, which are connected in spirit if not in force. If the Atilian rebels fail, so will the Hibernian; and it is better we put down a rebellion without fighting our own country men. Gylain chases his own ends, and Cybele is taken: you must command.”

“Gylain! Where has he gone, the fool? He would not care one way or the other, where he is bound.” He paused. “Do we not fight our own country men, even our own kin?”

“Lionel, perhaps; but it was his folly that destroyed him, not your policies.”

“War is many things, and to many it is death. But I am a king, and to me a dead man is judged only by what is death has achieved. If I see a hundred bodies, do I care if they are in the known miseries of life or in the unknown miseries of death? But if I see the body of my own son, war becomes something more, something personal.” In anguish, “Lionel! Am I not his murderer?”

De Casanova turned his head one way and the other, physically pained as the French fleet devoured his own ships and drew near to them. As Lyndon finished his speech, they had reached The Barber and were beginning to board.

"Inaction rots my soul!" de Casanova cried as they came on.

"Does it not?" a familiar voice returned, "Then let me heal your innards with my blade!"

"De Garcia!"

"Then you have not forgotten my face."

They circled, swords drawn, like vipers on the hunt. De Garcia was the first to strike, uncoiling and springing upon de Casanova with a swirling stroke.

"This is for Tarina," and his sword played with the thunder, flipping de Casanova's left, then throwing it right. Still, the other kept a firm wrist, and de Garcia lunged forward to unset him.

"To fight for the dead is not a talisman of victory," and de Casanova caught his lunge and forced it to the side. Then, with a laugh, he took the offensive, thrusting at his enemy's open chest.

But de Garcia was a quick man. He rolled to the left, then -- without apparent effort -- jumped into the lower shrouds, climbing to the first yard arm. De Casanova followed. The storm sent a strong wind whipping through the rigging, but neither was displaced. De Garcia stood up on the yard arm, navigating its slender width with ease; and when his enemy was beside him, the duel resumed.

"I will not forget the Battle of Amorou," de Garcia said.

"Nor will I," and their swords sang as they spoke.

De Garcia delivered a full swing from the left, then another from the right. De Casanova counter attacked with equal strokes, and the yard arm swayed beneath their force. When de Garcia came with a third side stroke, de Casanova dodged beneath it and thrust at his opponent, who could only divert it with a swift upward stroke. De Casanova's sword was forced up, and then -- as he threw himself into it -- hurtled down on toward the Spaniard's head.

De Garcia stepped back and fell purposefully from the yard arm. As he did, the other's sword passed harmlessly by. De Garcia grabbed the yard arm as he came down, channeling his momentum to swing himself forward; and though de Casanova leapt to crush his hands, he had let go again before he could. He flew through the air and into the upper shrouds, pulling himself onto the upper yard arm, the uppermost timber on the ship. It was a foot across and held the top of the main sail to the mast. De Casanova was not slow in following.

"You retreat to the sky," the Hibernian called through the wind as he gained the upper yard arm. "Yet now that we have reached it, you can retreat only to the ground."

"I do not mean to retreat, at least until I have avenged my love."

"Love! You are as much a fool as ever, for I did as I did as a favor. You are a warrior, and warriors are corrupted by a woman's fondle. I have fallen to the same trap, and only her loss makes me more a man. As for Tarina, her death made you angry, and your anger won the battle."

“Some battles are better lost.”

“Perhaps you are no more a warrior! To lose is weakness, and that death.”

“Then die, fiend. Look about you, de Casanova. What have you gained?”

“Your hatred, friend of before, and God’s way is as good as my own. You have gained nothing more.”

De Garcia channeled his fury into a side stroke, which the other caught with an angled blade: it skipped off and flew over his head. With his enemy left undefended, de Casanova thrust his blade into his side. The other clutched it with his hand, dropping his sword and falling onto his stomach. He laid on the yard arm and de Casanova stood over him.

“Your weakness is defended, and I am proved right. From dust you came, to the bottom of the sea you will go,” and he kicked his foot forward to push de Garcia to his death.

But things did not go as he intended. De Garcia had taken a knife from his sleeve as de Casanova spoke, and held it as if he held his wound. When de Casanova’s foot came forward, de Garcia stabbed it through. De Casanova reared back. The knife had severed the nerves in his foot, and he could not hold it against the yard arm, leaving his weight upon his left leg. But that had been wounded by Alfonzo’s arrow, and now gave way as well. He tottered and tried to swim through the rain with wild arms. He could not, and fell from the yard arm. Four seconds later, his screams were extinguished by a hollow thud. De Garcia leaned slowly over the yard arm and peered through the darkness. De Casanova was dead upon the deck.

“So it comes to an end. Rest in peace, my love,” and de Garcia climbed down to the deck.

Elsewhere, the fight had gone to the French. The Hibernian and Atiltian fleets were caught unaware, with their men deployed or unprepared. Lyndon stood on his command deck, now in the company of the Kings of Atilta and France, as well as Patrick and Leggitt. The others remained aboard the French flagship during the battle, and were just boarding the far end of The Barber .

“You are taken,” Willard said, parrying Lyndon’s quick glance to a sword laying on the table. “You are taken; but unless you resist, your life will not be.”

“It is not the taking of my own life that ruins me,” the king mumbled.

Willard ignored him, “We offer these terms of surrender: your family retains Hibernia, in the person of Lydia. Saxony and England are taken from Cybele and given to the rebel leader, Patrick McConnell. And, first, you must remove your fleet from Atilta.”

Lyndon looked about him, “There is little Atilta left to retreat from.”

“Even so, you must withdraw what fleet we will leave you. Those we keep are lost to you.”

“I have lost too much already.”

He stepped toward the railing of the ship.

“Lionel,” he moaned in a whisper. “Lionel, where are you hiding?”

He convulsed slightly, in pain. "My God, is this how you torment me? I hear your voice even now, 'Have I not given my own son?' But you are a fool to do it! A fool! What cruel being would sacrifice his own son? Not I -- not I! I will save him, wretched Jehovah, I will save him by my own strength," and Lyndon spun around, deranged and staring into the sky. "He is mine, I say, and you cannot have him!"

He laughed wildly and jumped over the railing, falling fifty feet into the churning seas. He landed feet first and sank like an anchor, then came sputtering up in confusion. His face was a nightmare, his nightmare a face: Lionel's. He could not swim, and as his arms beat the waves, he wildly searched for something to hold onto, something to keep himself afloat. Yet all that floated were the corpses of the dead. He sank, yelping, desperate, and mad.

"You will not vanquish, child-killer!" he shouted to the sky, and he reached out to the nearest body, grabbing ahold to save himself.

His weight pulled down the dead man's side, then it rolled over and its face was exposed to the sky. Lyndon bobbed beneath the water, panicking, and grabbed wildly at the body. His slender fingers grabbed its chest, and he pulled himself from the water. But the corpse rolled again, face to face with Lyndon as he grabbed its chest. His face was eaten by the pall of death. Silence, and he gasped for air. He struggled, vainly, and began to sink beneath the waves. As he went, a word escaped his lips, "Lionel!" Then it was doused by the water, and he was seen no more.

Silence ruled the ship, until broken by Patrick. "Sailors, take Lionel's body aboard. We will bury it with honors in Hibernia," and they retrieved it.

"There is more that will be buried than him," Vahan Lee came to the bridge, "For if we delay any longer, the castle will be lost."

The others turned to the south, where the castle was almost entirely submerged. Both the inner and outer walls and the first floor of the castle were underwater. A great crowd of people clung to the towers and upper stories, and even more floated on makeshift rafts nearby.

"Set course for the castle!" and Captain Koon filled the air with his unsettling laughter. How he came to be aboard, none could tell. But somehow he made himself Admiral of the fleet, and as he ordered the others followed.

The Barber was not foremost in the fleet, for the other ships had surrendered and been taken by the French. With Willard, the King of Atilta, aboard, the sailors cheered as they made way for them to pass through. 'Hail Willard Plantagenet,' the men roared, 'Rightful King of Atilta.' Willard stood on the bow as they went, his figure that of a king. His limbs were Atiltian trees, girded with the golden armor of a king. His hair had surrendered to civilization, and his beard no longer obscured his beautiful face. His countenance was tempered steel, his eyes inured to emotion. He was once a wild man; he was then a king. He was a king by birth, by strength, by merit. Above all, he was a king in the hearts of men.

Ivona stood beside him, but her eyes were not his. She had passed the test of lust, and was left to God alone. Horatio took his other side, standing freely as a bear. Patrick stood behind. He was still a youth, but his passion was doused and only desire remained. Beside him, Lydia shared his arm, and she was beautiful.

Vahan Lee and the King of France sat underneath the canvas shelter. The king watched Willard's homecoming with a leaking eye, but Vahan busied himself with several pieces of paper. He was careful

lest anything won by battle be lost by diplomacy, and he crafted treaties before the armies had even dispersed.

De Garcia and Leggitt stood uneasy at the victory which they had finally won. De Garcia was bandaged already, and his wound found to be harmless. They were men of war, and when the war was finished they had little left. Their lives had been consumed in the conflict of the age, the great power struggle of the Dark Ages; and when it was complete, they were men without a country. For they were citizens of war.

The foremost ships reached the castle, and in the rising water could come alongside the highest towers. Everything else had been consumed by the tide. The survivors were taken aboard, almost twenty thousand men. As each ship was filled, it turned to the open sea while another took its place loading the survivors. The Barber was the last to come, and by then only the central tower remained aloft. All were evacuated but the last handful.

"Come," Willard called when they reached the window, "Come out, for we are friends."

It was broken open from within, and several people appeared where it had been.

"Friends, you still live!" Willard said in excitement. "I had feared you went down with your land."

"My lord," Alfonzo bowed lowly to his king, "My lord, it is no one's land but God. I am glad you have returned, though, your majesty."

"No, today you show deference to no one, Alfonzo of Melborough; for the honor of victory is yours. I know royal blood, but I know better a royal heart!"

"Yet I see no victory," Alfonzo crossed the extended plank to the ship, the last of those inside.

"Father!" Ivona cried, throwing herself into his arms. "Father, forgive me!"

"What words are these?" his limbs threw themselves about wildly. "Forgive you? You were right, my lovely daughter, and I a foolish, bitter old man. Yet now, I see!"

She kissed his cheeks gently, "You are healed, father?"

"Where is your faith?" he laughed. "I am healed in body and in heart."

Her eyes opened and her beauty poured out. "Then you believe?"

"Yes; a thousand times over, I believe!"

"God is good."

As she spoke, Willard turned and their eyes could not be kept apart.

"God is good," she whispered, "And I will dwell with him forever."

De Garcia met his brother as he came forward and knelt before him, sobbing. But then, when he opened his eyes to look, he found his brother kneeling before him as well, sobbing all the same. They exchanged a look of grief and wonder.

“Do you ask me for forgiveness?” de Garcia asked, “When I am the one who has sinned against you? I deserted the cause of freedom, and betrayed my comrades for lies. I am disgraced, and yet you kneel before me?”

“You are disgraced, my brother? Then I am doubly so, for I did not desert to Gylain; I served him by default. Our breach is my fault, do not blame yourself.”

As they spoke, the Fardy brothers gathered around them.

“What is this, my brothers?” the blond Fardy asked. “I am a patient man, and you my better in that family virtue.”

“Do not disdain yourself,” the black Fardy began.

“Let me finish,” and he struck his brother’s head. “De Garcia and de Garmia, I have known you both. I have fought alongside you both, and here even my great patience is taxed like French tailors, that you do not arise and embrace. There is nothing else to be done.”

“My most-patient brother is right in this,” the brown Fardy added, “Arise and embrace.”

They did.

“You are right, friends,” de Garcia said, “We are brothers, de Garmia and I.”

“Amen,” the other answered.

“Come below with me, then,” de Garcia said. “We have been apart so long I have forgotten how you fight. We had best return to practicing, lest we become unable to serve our king.”

“You speak truth,” de Garmia replied. “Willard will need our swords ere this mess is cleared.”

The two turned and disappeared into the hold. Meanwhile, Alfonzo and Celestine were joined together once more. This time they were not to be separated again.

“We have finished the fight,” Alfonzo said. “Our fears and hopes mingle, but what is left will not be done by us. We are left only to love.”

She held him and they kissed beneath the falling dew of heaven.

Cybele stood beside them, flourishing a smile like a sword. “How can you rejoice when our father is missing?”

“The Admiral!” Alfonzo cried.

He looked out upon the deep, where once was Atilta. All that remained was forest canopy, and even that would not live long. The ship had been sailing north, and was nearing the forest west of what was once Thunder Bay. Two figures danced wildly to gain their attention, and when they were spied, The Barber came alongside the upper Treeway, upon which they stood. It was built on the very tops of the canopy, and the lower platforms were already below the waves.

“Come aboard, there,” Alfonzo called out as the boarding plank was extended.

It was Lorenzo and Meredith, wheezing in exertion as they came aboard.

“Our reunion is that much merrier,” Alfonzo laughed, “For our friends survive.”

“Yes, we live,” Meredith panted. “But -- by Beelzebub and the ten princes of the air -- we cannot celebrate yet, my friends.”

“No, for the war is not complete!” Lorenzo added. He pointed to a distant clump of trees, to which the upper Treeway extended. Two figures could be seen through the distance, locked in a deadly combat. “William and Gylain yet live!”

CHAPTER NINETY-SIX

“William, what fate is this?” Gylain smiled through the dark forest air. The ground was flooded, and spouts of rain came down from the canopy. Behind him stood Montague and his soldiers.

“The fate we have made,” William Stuart returned. Meredith and Lorenzo stood behind him with the rangers. “I thought to find you in the wasteland, Gylain.”

“And here I am, in the flesh and of it. Now the battle can be accomplished.”

“Was it not for freedom and oppression? For strength and possession?”

“Was it? You know yourself what it was for. There are kings and there are queens; but though the queen is powerful, she is not the end. For that we hold the king before the light.”

“Yet who is the king? Not you nor I.”

“Why not? Do we not at least represent the players?”

“Perhaps; but you are evil, as am I. The shadow from there is an aberration.”

“The shadow is but that which casts it; there can be no aberration. If one player is light and the other dark, both are evil and for themselves.”

“And we are no different?”

“Answer it yourself.”

“It needs no answer; our acts cannot be refuted. But if I am as Godless as you, those who follow me are not as those who follow you.”

“Fools, the one and the other: fanatics of fantasy. In this game, there can be no winner.”

“And thus no loser.”

“None,” Gylain said.

“And yet, we fight.”

“Has any war been won? I say no, for the players remain and will fight. If we make peace, they will replace us.”

“Ever the fool, Gylain, ever the ambitious. You brought her down, and for that alone I fight.”

“She followed, William, and you pushed. But could it have been stopped? It was foretold long ago, and the sword cannot rebuke the hand that wields it.”

“I wield my own sword.”

“Blindly, and it has no effect. If we lift them, we cannot say what will be hit. The players have decided, and it will come to pass. In this way it is predestined: I can choose the cause, but the effect is not my own. For the action is earthly and of piece, the result is divine and of player. Look about us, William, and will we lift our swords or drop them? Either way, we die. For Atilta sinks.”

“And so we fight, to add our own face to the demise which is given us. I would rather fight with you than against; but as you say, the fight is not our own.” He drew his sword.

“It is fate’s fight, and we are as much spectators as the gods. But know this: if God did not draw my sword against himself, I would draw it on my own. May God decide the victor,” and Gylain drew his sword, lunging at William.

The Admiral did not dodge, but caught Gylain’s blade with his own and forced it upward. Then, with a strong forward swing, he forced his enemy back. Gylain gathered himself and resisted the Admiral’s charge with a leftward parry: circling the other’s blade, diverting it to the left, and thrusting through the resulting opening into his stomach. The Admiral fell back and whipped sword across his chest, stopping the blow and pushing Gylain back. Before William could regain control of his sword, however, Gylain pushed forward again, giving him a weak blow to the stomach.

“I have you,” Gylain said.

“No, it is a scratch.”

“A test of strength, then; on guard!”

By this time, the water had risen to their waists.

“A test of the will, you mean, for only God can deliver us now,” and William started toward Gylain, his legs held back by the water.

His arms, however, were not impeded, and his sword flew at his opponent’s head. Gylain ducked below water and was saved. But before he could resurface, William had recovered himself and stood waiting. Gylain sprang up with his sword parallel above him. The Admiral’s blow struck the blade and bounced upward under the force. Gylain’s blade, however, also bounced, and came down upon his head. It bled, but the wound was not mortal.

“Well done, but not well enough to kill an old scar.”

The water was now too high for them to move without the use of their arms. Above water, their swords swam the air with thunder; below, their bodies did not move. The Admiral gave Gylain several quick blows, each aimed at his sword. Gylain parried them, but was unable to dodge. Then, with a final burst of fury, the Admiral knocked Gylain’s sword aside and onto the ground. Gylain was left defenseless, and William had but to strike him down. Yet he could not. The water rose above his shoulders, and he could not swing.

“A stalemate,” he said.

“Not yet, there is still time.”

“Where? We are alone in the flood.”

“No, for look! A rope ladder has dropped from above.”

The Admiral turned. “So it has, and by the hand of God. He, at least, has not yet tired of the game!”

Meanwhile, Montague had been swarmed by both Lorenzo and Meredith, each taking one of his sides. Montague dodged their first blows by retreating through the flooding ground. The two ecclesiastics followed him in a desperate chase, but he would not slow until they were apart. If one fell behind, Montague would dash back to charge the other. When Montague reached the tree Lorenzo and his men had come down, he left the flooded ground and started up the ladder to the canopy. By the time they reached it, he was a hundred feet above the water.

“He has left us,” Lorenzo panted.

“And we cannot follow him, or he will cut us loose when he reaches the top.”

“So, let us do the same to him!”

As they spoke, they grabbed onto the bottom of the rope ladder and began to rock it back and forth. Each foot of sway below caused three above, and as it gained momentum Montague began to lose his way.

“That is enough!” he called down from half way up. “You fight with dishonor.”

“And you? We will not spare you your own vice.”

The rope ladder danced like a climbing snake. Meredith jumped onto the first rung to weight it down, and Lorenzo pushed him faster as he swung by. It was too much for Montague; he could not fight gravity as he did mankind. His fingers trembled, then gave way. His feet were thrown aside, and he flew like a leaping squirrel through the branches. But he was not a squirrel. His voice erupted as he dueled the air. Then, it stopped. He was dashed against a tree and floated like a broken leaf to the ground. Dead.

“We have finished him, at last,” Lorenzo breathed.

“And not too soon. Come, we must gain the Treeway and rescue the Admiral.”

They brought the ladder to a stop and began the ascent. It took them several minutes to climb the

distance, even going faster than was safe. When they gained the top, they turned their feet to the north, to the upper Treeway; for the lower platforms did not pass near the Admiral. The platforms were smooth and the way was easy; in a moment they reached the ladder: wooden rungs built into the tree.

"Here it is," Meredith eyed the height with mistrust.

"Hurry, then. We must," and the two began climbing.

This ladder led for another hundred feet, until it came out above the canopy, where the upper Treeway was built. From the height, nothing obscured their view over the forest and the plain beyond. Far to the southeast, the castle was bombarded and the water above its walls. The forest ground was higher, but the flood would not wait much longer.

"Come," Meredith said after a moment of rest, and once more they set off.

For several minutes they ran the Treeway -- more cautious than before -- until they heard a distant clash, the sound of swords. Meredith dropped to his stomach and peered over the edge.

"It is them, let down the rope ladder. We will have to let up our enemy to spare our friend."

The ladder sat beside them, near a break in the rail. Lorenzo pushed it over the edge and it unrolled as it fell. Then, with a distant splash, the bottom hit the surface of the water.

"We can do no more," and Meredith spread himself out on the platform, absorbing the rain in weariness.

Lorenzo joined him. "This is the end, old friend. Atilta is no more."

"May the fish enjoy her, and the whales find rest among her trees. Once more the fate of perfection is revealed."

"I wonder what we will see as we go down," Lorenzo said.

"Paradise, perhaps, but I doubt we will. Look ahead: the fleet is cheering the king, and they rescue those in the castle. If we rise and wave our arms, we might be saved."

As he spoke, William Stuart's head rose over the platform.

"Meredith, Lorenzo! The rope ladder was well-timed. What of the others?"

"Destroyed."

"So it always ends," and he stood beside them as they rested.

Gylain's head appeared over the platform, followed swiftly by his whole body. When he gained his feet, he turned to the Admiral.

"Engage," and the two resumed their melee.

The Admiral drove Gylain before him with a series of powerful side strokes, through which Gylain could not find an opening to strike. The two ran down the upper Treeway, their hearts a boiling pot of emotions. When they were out of sight, Meredith and Lorenzo took to their feet, flourishing their arms to

signal the approaching fleet. The foremost ship spotted them and steered their way; the water level had risen enough that it could come alongside them.

"Come aboard, there," Alfonzo called out as the boarding plank was extended. "Our reunion is that much merrier, for you survive."

"Yes, we live," Meredith panted. "But -- by Beelzebub and the ten princes of the air -- we cannot celebrate yet, my friends."

"No, for the war is not yet over!" Lorenzo added. He pointed to the distant figures of the warring men, locked in a deadly combat. "William and Gylain yet live!"

"So it is!"

"Heave away, men," the wind laughed, "Sail for the Admiral at once!" and Captain Koon turned the ship to the distant melee.

In a moment, The Barber bobbed alongside the upper Treeway, upon which the two old men battled. Water covered the bottom of the platform, and within minutes even the canopy would sink.

"Come aboard, for Atilta is sinking."

The two men did not answer, nor did they hear. Their hearts were in the battle, and the battle in their hearts. Gylain rendered William a vicious overhand blow, and the latter could only block it by kneeling and holding his sword above his head. He sank under the blow, and Gylain lunged forward in hopes of spearing him to the ground.

"Our time is running down, but victory can yet be grasped. For God is not above me, nor his whittled pawn."

"Whittled by the sea breeze, but not its God," the Admiral returned, and he splashed through the water as he rolled beyond Gylain's charge.

He regained his feet before the other's lunge was finished, and fell upon his downed defenses with a series of powerful lashes. Gylain absorbed them with his sword, but his arms were shattered by their force. Yet desperation flooded his heart. He forced himself to his feet, and with his last strength came at William with his sword extended.

"She was beauty and a vassal of desire; feudal fate could not be dodged," and Gylain wept.

He flooded William with three left-handed blows, each ringing off the other's sword.

Gylain continued, "Is it weakness to admit the ways of nature? Is it defeat to be undone by the face of beauty? For even hearts of war can feel love."

His arm circled his head and struck William, who could not block it. His shoulder was badly wounded.

"Yet your weakness proved your madness," William scorned, "For she rejected you even in her zeal." He switched hands and charged Gylain.

"Madness? That is the hand with measures life," and Gylain parried his advance.

William set his face against the wind and his heart against defeat, casting the parry aside with glowing eyes. The path to Gylain's chest was opened, and William ran him through. Gylain would have fallen to his knees, but the water covered his waist and supported his weight.

"If life is madness, it is only so in cause," William lunged with his tongue, "Its effect for Cassondra was love, and her love for me."

"But as you say, her love was but the offspring of madness," Gylain raised his sword.

"As is your hate."

"And yours as well."

"That I do not deny."

"Then you are as guilty as God."

"A fool's defense," and William struck his opponent's sword to the side.

"I, at least, do not defend my sins," Gylain returned the blow. "For they are not mine to defend, but God's. He had written them in bone and blood before time beget damnation."

Their swords played in the water that now covered their chests, but slowed beyond damage.

"The end draws near," William sighed.

His hands fought to lunge at Gylain, but the water blocked the blow. It rose to their necks.

"It comes, yes, but it is not unexpected. It is only what has been declared long ago."

They shared a final melee, but only of the eyes. For they were all that remained above the deluge. They looked to each other and to the shapeless void which was once Atilta. William stood with open eyes, raging in the storm that stole his face; his bearded lips sat open, and his hands still gripped his sword. Gylain's face had fallen into sleep, and his spirit to defeat in the face of fate. His mouth spread in a barely perceptible smile, as did his troubled soul.

Then, with a final surge, the water swelled and covered them.

"It is finished!" cried William Stuart, and was gone. The water had consumed him.

The face of the water was void, and nothing broke its surface save the ships. The rain dried up, and the clouds departed; the winds fled, and the waves ceased their beating. But there was nothing left, even in the sunlight. Far below, the last remnants of the island could be seen as they fled into the deep. The canopy still waved, though it was water, not wind, that threw it to confusion. The forest sank away like seaweed, and the plain like siren's reef; it passed away before their eyes into the nameless, faceless deep. It passed away like the departing dead, but it was Atilta that had died. Then -- with a final, gasping breath -- Atilta exhaled and forever sunk beneath the sea.

"So it is," Willard turned to his silent comrades, "There will never again be a King of Atilta." He turned his face to the north, his armor ablaze in the newfound sun, and pointed to the sky. "Set course for

England. We have won its freedoms, even if we have lost our own. There is nowhere else left for us, now.”

Vahan’s voice came from behind, “My lord, England and Hibernia are left without rulers, for theirs were taken or killed in the battle. By the power of the King of France, I hereby proclaim it ceded to Atilta, and thus to you,” and he raised several papers to show the signed treaty.

Silence came, then Patrick stepped forward and bowed reverently before Willard.

“Hail, Willard Plantagenet,” he said, “The King of England.”

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

A book is a secret passageway that one finds in the attic, concealed behind an old bookshelf and leading into the hidden reaches of the author’s mind -- the store room in which he keeps his eccentric thoughts in neatly wrapped bundles, arranged according to his own pedantic patterns. His imagination is his own personal retreat, his private library in his private castle on his private estate. A book, however, opens the door to this retreat and says, “Come in; but first take off your shoes.” It is the key which fits the lock, and its words the leather-bound chairs which skirt the room. But when you are in a secret chamber, you may happen to wonder what it is like from the outside, what it appears to be from afar. So it is customary for the gatekeeper to tell about himself in a short piece, that those who vacation on his estate can know what he would be like if they met him in the street.

I, myself, am an old, worn shoe: the man who walks the road with his shaman stick, captivated by the beauties around him. I am a student, a discoverer, soon to be enrolled at a certain Hillsdale College in Michigan, USA. I write for a living, and at the current rate will be dead tomorrow morning. I do not meddle with romance, for I am too much of a Romantic to be content with reality, and too much of a Realist to believe love could ever be romantic. Yet were I inclined that way I would meet with little success, for I am neither beautiful nor interesting. My only occupation is thinking, my only wage an observant smile in the face of conversation; for I shun idol speech, and am considered an idiot because of it. Yet, in all, I am a man like other men, and equally vain. If I was not, I don’t believe I would have written this.

Jonathan Dunn,

The Secret Room, July, 2004

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