

Dragon of Skyros

A Study on the Cultures of the Ninth Century through Creative Fiction

A Thesis

presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School

at the University of Missouri

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts

by

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May 2021

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Acknowledgements

To my friends who have read pieces of this manuscript along the way, I cannot thank you all enough. Carolyn Stein and Clarabelle Fields especially deserve my thanks for taking the time to read large portions of the work at different points in the process. Above all, I would like to thank my partner in life and research, Polina Chelpanova, for all the patience and understanding she has shown throughout. I could not have come this far without the support of my family and friends.

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ABSTRACT

To investigate the reception of Classical motifs within the early medieval world, as well as show the multicultural connectivity between peoples, this work of creative fiction explores the tradition of Neoptolemus in the Ninth Century CE. Rather than telling the story from a single perspective, a plethora of cultural perspectives are employed throughout the novel. From the war-ravaged boon companion of the heir to the Abbasid Caliphate, to a far-travelling Scandinavian intersex völvá accompanying multicultural Rus merchants into *Austrvegr*, to a Khazar shaman plagued by her dreams of destruction and her brother's illness, all of the characters in the novel intertwine through imagery and myth, as a Bulgar monk searching out the missing fragments of Neoptolemus' story meets and brings together the patchwork of stories.

Map:



Key:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| 1. Birka | 11. Timerevo |
| 2. Gotland | 12. Bolgar (modern Kazan) |
| 3. Wolegast | 13. Sarkel |
| 4. Truso | 14. Muzej-Zapovednik Sunduki |
| 5. Grobina | Unnumbered |
| 6. Asva | • Two Proposed Sites for Itil, capital of the Khazar Khaganate |
| 7. Iru (Modern Tallin) | • Baghdad, capital of the Abbasid Caliphate |
| 8. Staraja Ladoga | |
| 9. Holmgarðr (modern Novgorod) | |
| 10. Sarskoye Gorodishche | |

Interactive Map Link (ongoing project): <https://arcg.is/11HOnG>

Prologue

“And they in their turn shall come, sacrificing cruelly to the blustering winds the heifer that bare the war-named son, the mother that was brought to bed of the dragon of Scyrus; for whom her husband shall search within the Salmydesian Sea, where she cuts the throats of Greeks, and shall dwell for a long space in the white-crested rock by the outflowing of the marshy waters of the Celtic stream; yearning for his wife whom at her slaying a hind shall rescue from the knife, offering her own throat instead.”

-Lycophron's *Alexandra* (Loeb Classical Library)

Shaman Initiation

April 2, 829

She'd been to places like this before but wasn't sure how she felt about them yet. When a shaman was being trained their master would bring them close to this place, but not into it. Just to the border of this reality and the Otherworlds.

As the swirling maelstrom of images and patters parted ways before her, a yurt's curtains opening wide, she saw beyond the mountain. A massive rockface jutting up beyond the sky into the worlds beyond. The hexagonal patterns upon the carpet were undulating, pulsing with power as she stepped through. The walls of an ancient city glistened in the distance beyond the mountain. A warrior in red fiery armor sprang from the mountain top with axe in hand astride a steed made of bark. A horse and tree, one and the same. The fiery warrior fell from the sky crying out in anger until he struck the city walls with his blade.

Sui had never seen anything like it. A human image so clear, a settlement of men. It was usually beasts and nature which she encountered in these sojourns beyond the veil. But now before her she saw the city crack open, a torrent of blood pouring forth. The waves became riders on swift ochre steeds. Lightning cracked the sky. The mountaintop grew branches of white fire, connecting cloud tops to earth-spear. A giant tree breathed life into all worlds, a lightning storm shattering the borders, branches of a million worlds connecting here. Here to watch the red armored warrior with fire in his eyes ride forth.

She stood her ground as the waves of bloody horsewarriors surrounded her, battered her, tore her limb from limb. Her body broken and reformed in an instant a thousand times. Then as the beasts drew quiet and still. The fire haired one, the warrior in red, emerged from the horde dismounted. Three quick strides forward and he was upon her, with his axe raised high. It came

crashing down upon her brow as she fell back. Back. Back into this world. The reality shared with the living.

Breathing hard, Sui sat up quickly, too quickly, and looked around her. Her vision was still stained with the patterns of the worlds beyond, and her head swam with emotions and vertigo. The light of the sun was peeking through the tent flaps. Her teacher, Yalahala, was the last one left. He must have stopped his throat singing and drumming some time ago. He would have gone all night. His old kind eyes staring at her. The crooked smile on his face helped. But that vision was not what she had been seeking. That was not what she was supposed to see. Was it?

She blurted out with trembling lips, “What...what was that? Who was the fiery warrior?”

The old crackling voice of Yalahala was always strangely soothing. “Who does not matter. What matters is what is he to you?”

His choice of confusing answers was not so soothing though. Closing her eyes again, Sui lay her head back on the pillows, trying to end the spinning. Had she been twirling up the side of that mountain for hours? She couldn't make sense of anything.

To Baghdad

September 20, 829

Breathing in the salty air of the sea, Poseidon's domain, the short monk scratched at his beard while he leaned against the railing of the ship, lost in thoughts of other worlds as he gazed at the coastline sliding past.

Iaphagos had volunteered not really knowing what he was getting into. He'd never been on a ship before, or crossed a desert, or seen a Caliph. He was twenty-five and eager to smell and taste the richness beyond his stuffy monastery, and he knew Arabic and Persian better than anyone else in the Roman capital of Constantinople. So, synkellos John, the right hand of the most esteemed Patriarch of Constantinople, had chosen him to come along as his scribe. All the other monks in Constantinople were terrified to make the journey. But Iaphagos didn't know better, nor did he care, as his curiosity drove his studies as well as his life choices.

The new Emperor Theophilos ordered for synkellos John to travel to the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate, Baghdad. He was to bring a great deal of treasure to the Caliph al-Ma'mun to secure the peace between their empires, purchase lost Greek texts from antiquity, and as an afterthought, maybe purchase the release of certain prisoners. John was not very optimistic about the proposal but had heard that the Caliph had gathered together some of the most obscure texts from the Bactrian, Seleucid, and Alexandrian libraries. Lost texts not seen by Greeks since the height of the Roman Empire or even the time of the great conqueror, Alexander the Great. Seeing these lost texts was worth the journey to John.

Iaphagos was interested in the texts too, just not all of them. He was looking for very specific stories. Stories surrounding one of the ancestors of Alexander. Stories of Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, better known as Pyrrhus, meaning fiery, in Latin sources. Three years before,

when Iaphagos was new to Constantinople, he had been tasked with copying a whole shelf of ancient texts collected by some unknown Athenian scholar. The task was tedious. In direct contrast with Iaphagos' imaginative mind, but once he began the work, a pattern emerged. Neoptolemus was portrayed in many different lights, depending on the author of the work. These conflicting tales of the Trojan War sparked something in his mind. The tales of kindness and brutality, madness and passion, in the young fiery red-haired hero shook Iaphagos' confidence in the common trend within his monastic upbringing of antiquity proving legitimacy.

Other monks who ventured into the depths of the musty storage rooms below the Hagia Sophia found him tirelessly copying the scrolls. Iaphagos forgot meals, forgot prayers, forgot God when he was engrossed in his work. He was certain there was a pattern, a clue, as to the true nature of this heroic youth, of all heroism. Neoptolemus was the killer of king Priam, the second husband to Andromache, the King of Molessia, and the son of the greatest warrior to ever walk the earth, Achilles. Among mortals' minds men such as this strode a hundred spans tall.

The road to Baghdad began with a voyage by ship, first to Ephesus. As they sailed along the western coast of Anatolia, Iaphagos could not but help imagine the Greek ships landing on the Trojan coast. The four armed guards upon the deck became the Homeric heroes, Odysseus, Diomedes, Ajax, and Achilles vaulting from their ships to crush the Trojan armies gathering on the plains beyond. He could see the death of Hector below the high walls of Troy, Achilles' spear impaling him. He could see the death of Achilles to a cowardly arrow. He could see the arrival of Neoptolemus from Skyros clad in his father's armor won by Odysseus, with Philoctetes at his side stringing the Bow of Hercules. As the ship sailed past this historic coast, Iaphagos could see the conclusion of the Trojan War with the swing of Neoptolemus' axe. The

body of a king bleeding out upon his city's holy altar. Was Zeus happy to have such a sacrifice? Would God be?

Iaphagos did not believe these ancient gods still held sway over the world of men, but he did have a feeling that they once did. They once mated with men, as the Bible says the angels did when they created the Nephilim. He had not yet found anyone else in his cloister who would even speak of these matters with him, calling it blasphemy though it was clearly written in the holy scripture. Not even in the dark of night with no one around would they allow him to explain his theories. He was fairly certain that the gods of the Greeks were angels, and the heroes of old were these Nephilim spoken of in Genesis. Scions of power they once shaped the kingdoms of man.

In his youth, his mother and grandmother had taught him the stories of these heroes. Their family had never fully succumbed to Christian beliefs, living deep in the mountains of Macedonia, far from the power of the priests. Though his father's family came from the invading Bulgars, the traditions of his mother's land shaped his world view. It was not his fault that they had given him up to the church. The Greek priests demanded their children, demanded they prove themselves Christians, so Iaphagos had been their sacrifice.

As he readied himself to join these strange priests, his grandmother grabbed his face and said in a whisper, "Never forget what I have taught you. Never forget the history of your people. That is all that matters. That you remember." The memory of her kind, wrinkled face was always a comfort to his troubled mind as he grew up in foreign lands, indoctrinated into a religion he was not so sure he truly believed. The smell of her still filled his head when he remembered the stories which she had taught him. Lilacs and rosemary. As the Trojan coast passed by, this was the only smell filling his head.

The Syrian sun was hot. God-awful hot. Iaphagos had never been so hot in his life and it wasn't even summer. His mind swam with daydreams and nightmares, awake or asleep, he was never alone.

The ghost of the god-man had come to him in dreams. Night after night on the journey since passing Troy by, he was visited by the young hero Neoptolemus. Long fiery red hair lay wet with sweat on the apparition's forehead. The dew of glory dripping down upon Iaphagos, calling him to action. His days wriggled into his dreams, his waking hours and sleeping no different.

As he rode the back of a camel across the hot desert, he tried to compose a letter to his colleague George of Armenia, the only monk he'd ever met who shared some of his wilder theories.

If the soul is a part of the body, then when the living body dies, the soul also dies. The physical body takes time to dissipate back into the earth, so the soul must also take time to dissipate into the cosmos. Hence, as the body deteriorates, the soul wanders the earth, lost, slowly deteriorating. Slowly fading. What this soul's form is, can only be defined as a spirit, or ghost. With this in mind, the spirits of the recently dead must wander or stay put with the body. But what of cremation then? The cremated body is burned in a matter of minutes or hours, spreading across the sky in smoke to fall back to the earth as ash. Where does the cremated spirit go then if it was intended to stay in place with the body? Either there are two different temporary fates to the soul, one for burial, and one for cremation. Or something else.

However, these two do not take into account burials which exhibit parts of both cremation and inhumation. What happens to those souls? Do they partially wander and partially

stay put? The only conclusion for this discrepancy is that the spirit does not wander or stay put, but rather rides within the psyche of kin. A father latches on to the son, a mother the daughter, and so on. But if a person has no kin, no children, or is far from them, they are bereft of a home until the body entirely decomposes.

He could imagine the response he'd get from George; he could see the wizened old man before him in the desert walking beside his camel, questioning him.

Or does cremation send the soul into oblivion or paradise more quickly than inhumation, immediately destroying body and soul to be consumed by the cosmos?

What role do gravestones and inscriptions play in this? Could they hold the spirit to its location? Can remembrance extend the souls existence?

Is the act of translating those words heresy? Do I now condemn myself as I question? Does my soul share the fate of my wicked body?

As Paul says, (Corinthians 5:35) "The body and spirit can be separated with the power of Christ. The Body may lie in the ground or float in the air, while the spirit dwells with the Lord God in heaven or on earth."

As Iaphagos listened to his friend, George's head became that of a jackal bleached white, like one of those Egyptian gods lost in the desert, emerging from a past beyond antiquity. The sun was scorching his mind; the reflection off the sand had burned his eyes. Whoever he was before became lost in the desert. Someone else arrived to Baghdad with synkellos John.

Part 1

“Now at the threshold of the outer court Pyrrhus triumphant stood, with glittering arms and helm of burnished brass. He glittered like some swollen viper, fed on poison-leaves, who chilling winter shelters underground, till, fresh and strong, he sheds his annual scales and, crawling forth rejuvenate, uncoils his slimy length; his lifted gorge insults the sunbeam with three-forked and quivering tongue.”

-Vergil's *Aeneid*

Chapter 1

“And verily, as often as we took counsel around the city of Troy, he [Neoptolemus] was ever the first to speak, and made no miss of words; godlike Nestor and I alone surpassed him. But as often as we fought with the bronze on the Trojan plain, he would never remain behind in the throng or press of men, but would ever run forth far to the front, yielding to none in his might; and many men he slew in dread combat.”

-Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*

Battle of Hashtadsar

June 9, 829

Babak's Khurramite army gathered in their camp on the plateau a mile north from their vantage point atop the escarpment. The sunny plains which stretched out between the two elevations was a perfect battlefield in ar-Razzaq's mind. Babak's forces penetrated far into Abbasid territory, now only five-hundred miles east from the capital Baghdad. He was not likely to march towards it, but he was Babak, the most feared enemy of the Caliphate, who had routed countless armies sent against him.

Why had al-Abbas volunteered them for this task, ar-Razzaq was not sure. Did the prince want a better view of the coming battlefield? Or was he just anxious and wanting to do something other than sit in their tent and wait? He was the governor of Al-Jazira now. He did not need to drag Bilga and ar-Razzaq both up here. Bilga would have sufficed for protection, as the thirty-five-year-old warrior was a formidable fighter. The tall slender nadīm, Ar-Razzaq just wished he were at a salon in Baghdad, composing epic poetry of battles while lounging on a sofa, maybe with a pretty young ghulam feeding him succulent olives, far from real battle. He wished he weren't in leathers girded with sword belt and dagger, but rather in soft silks smoking hookah.

General Muhammad ibn Humayd Tusi had been appointed commanding general for the campaign by al-Abbas' father, making the nineteen-year-old prince furious that he was not put in command. General Tusi was a seasoned general and defeated Babak in a battle several years earlier, so the Caliph had confidence in his choice, but al-Abbas would not relent in his silent anger.

They had been tasked by General Tusi to watch the enemy camp to the north as their own army gathered in the broken ground to the south and east, hidden from the enemy's view. Al-Abbas lay at the edge of the cliff, his eyes staring out across the plain to the enemy camp, with ar-Razzaq next to him, not watching the enemy. The spicy scent of the prince mingled with his musty sweat from their climb was intoxicating. Ar-Razzaq couldn't keep his eyes focused on anything but the man next to him. Al-Abbas lay motionless, his long neck perfectly arched in the fashion he always did when focusing intently. Ar-Razzaq could never quite come to understand his ability with it, it was unnatural, a gift from Allah to the son of the Caliph.

As they lay observing the enemy forces and their secret desires, Bilga watched in every other direction for approaching riders. It would soon be time for them to make the descent as the sun was beginning its decline. The stretch of open plain before them would be the center of action tomorrow, but how the battle would progress, ar-Razzaq had no clue, hoping that al-Abbas was coming up with a tactical plan for General Tusi to adopt.

"A group of horsemen approach from the West." Bilga's drawling voice never intoned any emotion, a common custom in the Turkic mamluk slave soldiers when they spoke Arabic if they learned it at all. However, Bilga was the son of one of the most famous slave-soldiers Bugha al-Kabir, who had made a name for himself by saving the life of the Caliph's brother Abū Ishāq from Persian assassins, so Caliph al-Ma'mun had awarded his sons by placing them as bodyguards to prominent family members. Though ar-Razzaq did not like the morose man, he could not deny his prowess with his weapons or on horseback.

Moving back from the edge, ar-Razzaq made sure not to make a silhouette on the cliff top before sitting up. He looked up at the massive form of Bilga looming over him. His eyes were dead, unyielding to any emotion. The loose dark colored garments which his frame flapped in the

wind. He had positioned himself just far enough back to avoid being seen by the enemy encampment.

“Well then, we better keep a watch on them and see if they join the enemy. They might be part of another force hidden behind that ridge to the west.” Ar-Razzaq responded.

Bilga extended a hand down towards ar-Razzaq and with little effort brought him to his feet with a quick jerk. He certainly did not have the same intoxicating smell. He stank of horse and musty sweat as always. Al-Abbas still lay on the ground looking into the distance. He had not moved for two hours. Not a single muscle it seemed. His breathing had slowed to an imperceptible expanding and contracting of the chest.

The prince’s two companions watched as the group of five horsemen sped across the open plain at nearly a gallop toward the plateau. They brought news to the enemy, never a good thing. As the horses slowed to make their way up the incline of the plateau, a call rang out from the enemy encampment. They could hear the cry of the Khurramites from a mile off, a wailing howl of Zoroastrian fervor to chill any good Muslim’s bones. Ar-Razzaq had grown used to the Arab forces whooping before battle, but it was nothing compared to the fear which crept over him when the forces of Babak began to cry out. Al-Abbas still did not stir. He made no response.

Ar-Razzaq, knew he had to take charge then. “Bilga, will you climb down and let General Tusi know what we have seen. Looks as if they have reinforcements coming in soon.”

He grunted before responding, “No.”

“No, what?” Ar-Razzaq was perturbed.

“No, I will not climb down. I must protect my master. That is my job. Not erranding for you to the general. The man does not like me. He made me wait last time.”

Besides being monotone and morose the mamluks were generally a stubborn lot, and Bilga was not an exception. Ar-Razzaq massaged his temples as he responded. “I know General Muhammad ibn Humayd Tusi is a pompous oaf, but he is in charge.”

Bilga made no response.

Throwing his hands in the air, ar-Razzaq responded, “alright then, I will climb down and inform him.”

“No.” Bilga responded, still with his deadeyed stare at him.

“No, what? What now is objectionable to your tastes my dear barbarian friend? I should toss you down to the general.”

“You can try. But your golden embroidery and fancy words will do you no good. My no is to that the general is in charge. The prince rules here, not the general.”

Ar-Razzaq did not respond to that. No need to recognize his martial prowess. He was still but twenty years of age and no proven warrior as the mamluk was. Nor any need to point out that al-Abbas was subordinate to General Tusi in this campaign.

As ar-Razzaq gathered his pack for the climb down the back side of the escarpment, Bilga spoke up again, “Also, no. The enemy force which hides behind the western ridge will not join the main army. They will wait and serve to ambush us from behind if we attack their encampment. Or, if we proceed with the general’s plan to ambush them, they will strike where we are weakest.”

“That’s ridiculous. They do not know we are here. The general has taken every precaution to hide our forces.” Ar-Razzaq was getting tired of Bilga’s bickering.

“Babak Khorramdin knows we are here. He has spies in our army. They have no doubt told him. The silver you are paid to drink and sing songs does not make you wise, nadīm.”

“You have very little faith in your Arab masters. You shall learn soon enough that Allah watches over his chosen people.” Ar-Razzaq spoke the words but had little confidence in his voice. “My family made the choice to convert when the first Arab armies arrived in Persia. In mere decades, the Sassanid’s power was shattered. These Khurramites are Zoroastrians too and shall be wiped clean from the lands of the holy. Allah shall conquer.”

“As you say. Allah shall conquer.” Without looking at him, ar-Razzaq could imagine the smirking grin hidden behind Bilga’s oversized mustache. He could feel the hate he had for him in his deadeyes. Why had al-Abbas been given this insolent lout to guard him? His father had very strange notions of noble training. Ar-Razzaq might be a paid court companion to the prince, but he was his loyal friend too. He had stayed with the prince for seven years, so far, and had proven his loyalty through discretion countless times.

As he was just about to leave, al-Abbas finally turned around from his prone position and spoke, “Do stay a moment longer ar-Razzaq. I have just finished my assessment, and I need to write some observations down.”

Al-Abbas began to carefully move away from the cliffside, “The general can wait. Does that army not feel as if they are the Danaan Greeks gathering to face the army of Troy? Our escarpment is the citadel of Priam. The plains there the battlefield of legend. Where is Diomedes? What of Achilles? Or is there a Rostam across the field from us? Is he about to strike down his son upon that field of battle before us? Are you sure your father did not convert and join the enemy ar-Razzaq?” Sitting in the dust, the prince was striking, his eyes twinkling with far off tales. The prince had a way of impressing the ancient battles they read of in their poetry upon any current situation, whether that be battles, intrigues, or romance. It was charming

beyond belief, especially to a man such as ar-Razzaq who reveled in the poetic connections between mythologies.

He walked back towards the prince, smiling. “Yes, I am sure. He is far away in Khorasan. I might be able to sing the poems for you in three different languages, but I cannot see the future.”

Once far enough away from the edge, al-Abbas rose and smiled back, his broad mouth growing into a toothy grin showing pearly white teeth beneath a straight nose. His long hair was tucked into his headwrap, except for one lock which seemed to always fall loose and partly cover one of his dark caramel eyes. The proportions of his face emulated the sculpture of the Greek god Dionysus that they’d seen in Antioch last summer, with all its grace and humor.

However, there was always something in the way al-Abbas held himself and addressed others that made you want to strangle him, because he was always right and always five steps ahead of you in every way. His mind never stopped twisting and turning in the most unexpected ways, a maze of winding patterns to be lost in for eternity. Ar-Razzaq resented him for it, but could not help but love him too.

“Please get out my parchment and quills. I must write down my notes on the battlefield. I have a few ideas I want to present to Tusi after we climb down.” Pulling out his writing devices, which were carefully wrapped in a doeskin pouch, ar-Razzaq handed them over. No one else was ever allowed to touch the prince’s most prized possessions. Al-Abbas never went anywhere without them, never stopped strategizing and writing down his epiphanies. If they were not battle plans, his pages were usually a jumble of mathematical calculations and lines of poetry, framed by notations about mythological literature.

“What have you been calculating this time?” Ar-Razzaq asked, genuinely curious, as he unfolded the packet.

“Why what else other than the diameter of the earth.” He laughed. “Eventually, I needed to test the Greek theory against Master ibn Ṭāriq’s hypothesis. He seems to agree with Kankah the Sindhi, but I am not so sure...” Al-Abbas began to do that thing with his head when he cocked it to the side as he slid off into another world of thought.

“Is that part of your al-maqālāt? I cannot ever keep all of the astrological works you are working on straight.” Ar-Razzaq could not keep up with the mathematical elements of his prince’s mind, far too abstract for him.

Waiving a hand at him as he walked away, al-Abbas answered absent mindedly, “Nay, friend. al-maqālāt is more inclined to the heavenly bodies beyond ours, however the same principles apply. Just as the sacred Pahlavi texts or the Persian’s Shahnameh, mirrors the works of Homer, the astrological bodies mimic one another too. All leading me back to what I want to write down, a repositioning of Alexander’s tactics at Gaugamela. If we can mimic his audacity and resolve, this battle is already won.” Sitting on a small boulder, Al-Abbas was then engrossed in writing down his assumptions, his head tilted to the side as it always did when he was recording his findings. The first fringes of the evenings cool winds began to arise as the orange tints in the west began to grow with the suns fall.

As the sun fell behind the hills in the west, a thin Arab soldier from the army climbed up the escarpment’s switchback path. The wind was cold now, especially so high above the Hashtadsar plain. Al-Abbas was still writing when the man arrived. Bilga seemed asleep, but ar-Razzaq would not bet on it being so. The mamluk seemed to never close his eyes completely. The thin slits under his brows had just the slightest glimmer, dark and menacing.

The soldier was breathing heavy as he approached. “Message from the general, sir. He would like you to return and report.”

Al-Abbas began to put away his writing supplies, “Then let us follow you down before it grows too dark to climb.” Throwing a grin ar-Razzaq’s way as the young soldier turned, he said, “We must make sure to follow the generals orders promptly.”

As the wiry Arab soldier descended the slope, Bilga spoke up, “He will not heed your words.” His voice had no bite to it, just toneless disrespect.

The morning light broke as they marched out of camp. The sun’s rays were a diffused glow on the horizon, growing into brightness. From the dust rising from the north, it seemed as if Babak’s Khurramites were already marching out of their camp. Whipping the sleep from his eyes, ar-Razzaq looked about to find al-Abbas dressed for battle in his lamellar armor, long curved Damascus steel sabre at his hip.

“Nadīm, you have been my companion for seven years now, no? Have you ever known me to make a mistake? A miscalculation?”

“My prince, you are quite infallible. I do not doubt Allah smiles down upon you even as you take a piss.” Ar-Razzaq was still trying to straighten his thick woolen undercoat beneath his chain mail shirt. The long thin sword at his waist kept nearly tripping him, until he was able to imitate the noble pose of his prince with hand resting on the hilt.

Al-Abbas smiled, “I hope you are right. And wish that Tusi had the same opinion. I think we are walking into a trap.”

After leaving their camp, the Arab army marched in column past the escarpment which they had observed the enemy from the day before. The Khurramites were already spreading out into battle formation at the opposite end of the plain.

As al-Abbas watched them he spoke up, "I could almost swear that there are less of them than there were in the late afternoon. We saw none leave, correct?" He was visibly upset, his eyes were red, his hair uncovered and tousled. He must have slept badly.

Ar-Razzaq observed the opposing force. "None. And if the force from the west came into the camp, they did it after dark and with no torches. Silent as Odysseus entering Troy or a Pandava stealing a bride." He chuckled to himself, admiring his own creativity.

But al-Abbas was too focused to be distracted by poetic comparisons now though, answering, "there are certainly not more of them. I think less. I think that some slipped out in the middle of the night. They might be scouting or laying an ambush reversal if they know we are here." Though he was disheveled, at least for a prince, al-Abbas still cut a fine figure in his armor. The slight niello silvering around the shoulders and neck were exquisite workmanship. Resting one hand on the hilt of the long sabre at his waist he watched the distant enemy with keen eyes.

"I do not think that likely." Ar-Razzaq was still skeptical of the prince's martial assessments. Neither had any first-hand knowledge of war or armies or soldiers growing up in the palace at Baghdad, though ar-Razzaq was sure that their experience reading of battles instilled at least some knowledge as a commander.

Bilga marched fully armed and armored, a terrifying sight, with his uncle Bagrad, who commanded the Turkic mamluk contingent of their forces and was even more impressive bedecked in steel than his nephew, if that was possible. The night before when General Tusi laid

out his battle plan, Bagrad had been furious, as he had been ordered to fight dismounted with his best soldiers, leaving the freeholder Turkomen as the only mounted units besides the General's Persian bodyguards. Turning to Bilga, al-Abbas called him over and asked, "And what do you think Bilga? Are there less or more of them there now?"

Bilga's keen eyes stared at the enemy army as it began to form ranks across the plain, creating a series of block-like phalanxes out of their heavy infantry with skirmishers and archers beginning to creep out in front of them on the plain. "Less. They are making a show of it. Pretending there are more of them. But some have slipped away in the night. You and my uncle are right, but the fool will not listen to you, just as he did not last night."

General Tusi believed that Babak would lead his forces right into the trap he had set. From ar-Razzaq's assessment, his plan seemed sound. Babak would march his forces across the plain into their massed infantry, and when they were fully engaged, General Tusi would lead his ambushing force out of the eastern foothills to hit them from the flank and rear. However, al-Abbas and Bagrad has railed at the naivete of their commander, emphasizing that Babak was a master at sniffing out an ambush. The General would not budge, confident in his plan.

Babak's Khurramite army, now in their battle lines, was said to be at least fifteen thousand infantry and two thousand cavalry strong. The eight phalanx blocks, of what looked to be near two thousand men each, spread across the entire plain from the foothills to the east to the ridge on the west. The front ranks carried huge sparabara shields which covered their entire bodies, with only the tops of hatted and helmeted heads sticking out over the top. Their spears and pikes rose like eight fields of gore-thirsty crops from above this mobile wall. There would be archers dispersed within that mass infantry also, ready to fire volleys of deadly arrows into the Arab army as it advanced. To ar-Razzaq there looked to be as many as he had seen gather

yesterday in their camp, but who was he to challenge the words of the son of the Caliph and his blood-thirsty bodyguard's veteran uncle.

General Tusi had placed al-Abbas in command of the rearguard, while Bagrad was commanding the vanguard of infantry and cavalry. The general took command of the ambushing force, the place of glory in his mind and ar-Razzaq's.

Bagrad the veteran mamluk spoke up, "Tusi should be with us, leading this force. Hiding for the moment of fame is not the proper place for a general. He cannot command there, and now we are stuck with his shit plan."

Ar-Razzaq certainly had no objections to General Tusi's choices, but al-Abbas was put off by the general's orders, angry at the caution taken for his own life, angry at being protected as if he were still a child. Angry at not having control over the army.

The prince responded, "I know. But you and I will do our part."

Bagrad looked up at the prince, who had a slave behind him leading his horse, just as ar-Razzaq did. "You have the means to flee my prince. You might should now, before the death of our army begins. My men and I have been robbed of our mounts. We will die here today."

That was the last time ar-Razzaq and al-Abbas saw the man alive up close, though they would see his severed head in but a few hours' time.

Once they had cleared the escarpment, ar-Razzaq sent out the horn signal, four long blasts, for the units to take their positions. The Turkomen cavalry units rode ahead of the heavily armored infantry, followed by contingents of loosely spaced skirmishers, while Bagrad advanced his dismounted mamluks in front of the rest of the heavy infantry, which began to fan out into battle formation. A single line of spears and shields, unbroken like the hoplites of ancient Greece.

Ar-Razzaq's lips felt tingly after the call. He did not much like playing the horn, but it was a nadīm's honor to be the signal caller and bannerman for his prince. He looked up at the flapping golden dragon on a blue field above them. He still wondered why al-Abbas had not taken the lion, his namesake, as his sigil. When Bilga was placed in his service, he'd worn a strange bronze belt buckle of a serpentine monster, an heirloom from his father. Ar-Razzaq suspected that the draconic imagery had impressed the young prince greatly. Whenever they'd pretended to be monsters or beasts as children, al-Abbas had always chosen the dragon and was perturbed if someone else tried to choose it first.

Suddenly, al-Abbas sat upright in his saddle. His eyes were keen on the western ridge. Bilga noticed too, his eyes unwavering in the same direction. The opposite direction of the intended ambush site. There was only a bit of dust cloud swirling through the morning air, nothing of note to ar-Razzaq.

"You see it too, don't you Bilga?" Al-Abbas's voice was tight, strained by anxiety.

"Yes. There are many horses moving slowly behind the Western ridge to keep from sending up dust clouds. At least a thousand, I'd say. Maybe more." Bilga's face was a stone.

"A thousand. They've known we are here the whole time." A pallor began to spread across the prince's face.

Before al-Abbas could give any orders to advance, a clamor arose from the broken ground to the east, where the ambush was to come from.

Ar-Razzaq was confused. The enemy army was not in position to be flanked yet. They were still half a mile away across the plain from their main force. General Tusi and his force were not streaming out to attack the enemy. Why were they making so much noise?

Al-Abbas turned to ar-Razzaq, “Seems our commander is beset by the enemy who hold the heights of the hills, not according to his plans.”

Bilga responded, “The enemy must have silently crept to their positions during the night.”

Instead of being the ambushers, General Tusi’s contingent was instead being pelted with arrows from above. Ar-Razzaq could imagine thousands of archers firing into the valleys as their men tried to hide in behind boulders, dying in droves.

At the front of the main force on the plain, Bagrad seemed to have read the situation and was charging. His heavy mamluk infantry unslung their axes as they sprinted forward into the ranks of the cantering Turkomen cavalry and light infantry.

“And there it is. Our ambush is turned by the enemy, and we are thrown into battle too quickly. We have to try to salvage this. Ar-Razzaq, double-time for the main line. Bagrad is charging his vanguard and cavalry. We need to engage the line.”

Ar-Razzaq sounded the horn, and the army began to surge forward, kicking up a cloud of dust. Al-Abbas then led his own guard of two hundred Turkic mamluks behind the left of the line, moving towards a position to engage the hidden cavalry to the west when they emerged from around the foothills. The light dusty mist they had been causing turned into a swirling cloud as they apparently picked up speed.

They could see Bagrad’s men charge into one of the contingents of enemy archers, scattering them towards their own lines. As the mamluk vanguard crashed into the Khurramite line, ar-Razzaq could hear a chant rise from the enemy. “Babak! Babak! Babak!”

As the dust kicked up from their advancing line was hit by a gust of wind, for a moment ar-Razzaq could see Bagrad and an enemy warrior facing off one another in single combat, the

nearby troops nearly stopping their attack, completely in awe of the scene. It was not unheard of to see personal combat before a battle but they were usually mounted and not in the midst of other soldiers fighting. The dust covered the scene again as al-Abbas turned to Bilga, “That is Babak he is facing.”

Bilga only grunted.

“Allah yakhlusuna.” The words were nearly silent leaving ar-Razzaq’s lips, a murmur of hopeless defeat.

They did not see the fate of that combat but could only assume it had not gone well for Bagrad, as the Khurramites let out another great cry, chilling ar-Razzaq’s bones. The undulating, high-pitched yowling of the Zoroastrian rebels was known far and wide, but the Arab army’s soldiers flinched as it was something else to witness.

The main line of infantry crashed into the enemy, a deafening roar of voices and metal clashing. Ar-Razzaq’s nostrils were filled with sour sweat. Burning bile began climbing up his esophagus, as his heart began to race. His vision blurred from the sensory overload. Al-Abbas was yelling something. His helmet was too tight though. He couldn’t make out the words.

As the enemy cavalry to the west emerged from around the hills at full gallop, al-Abbas reached over and grabbed ar-Razzaq by the shoulder, calling out, “Move to block the cavalry! Double-time!” Ar-Razzaq snapped out of his battle swoon and put the horn to his lips.

Al-Abbas led his mamluk infantry westward between the charging cavalry and the rear of the engaged Arab line. There were too many of them though. As the cavalry spread out in a wide line, ar-Razzaq realized they would never be able to stop them all. Well over a thousand, at least two. A faint smell of urine began to waft up from his crotch, sure to make saddle-sores later. Ar-Razzaq finally knew the fear of battle as he nearly turned his horse to gallop away.

The sight of al-Abbas grinning with battle-lust stopped him though. His eyes were wide in anticipation as he snapped out more orders, “Spears forward! Dart throwers blunt the wedge point! Brace for Impact!” Ar-Razzaq wasn’t sure how any of them could hear though.

The enemy cavalry looked like a pair of giant spikes as they split into two wedges, one aimed for the rear of their engaged line, the other charging straight for them. As it neared, ar-Razzaq could see the bowmen on the edges of the wedge rise in their saddles before firing their arrows at full gallop. Men fell to their right and left; ar-Razzaq raised his small cavalry shield just in time to catch an arrow aimed for his chest.

He saw Bilga watching the sky and dodge an arrow coming towards him with an instinctual flowing. Then the horse archers split from the wedge and ran across the front of their line peppering them with more arrows, just before the point smashed into the massed infantry. Bodies of men and beasts flailed as they hammered into each other, a cacophony of horror, metal clashing, dying horse and men crying, the earth pounding--pounding. The sound was oppressive. Ar-Razzaq’s mind swam in madness.

He could barely keep his horse in control as his vision closed to the few feet around him. Then the enemy was upon them. To his left al-Abbas did not fight like his namesake; he was no lion clawing into enemy flanks. But instead, he was a viper in the reeds. He drove his horse into the mass of enemy horses slashing his sword to either side to strike at limb and unarmored flesh, before wheeling round and pushing out of the press. Bilga and ar-Razzaq followed in his wake carving a path of retreat before advancing yet again.

Though al-Abbas and Bilga fought like Achilles and Diomedes, with the dead mounting up after each savage push, ar-Razzaq could not bring himself to do much more than flail to either side with sword. He nearly lost his grip on the prince’s dragon banner with his left hand when an

unhorsed enemy grabbed onto his shield attempting to tear it off his arm. Bilga, of all people, saved him with a swift swing of his mighty axe. The Turkic warrior still had a deadeyed stare for ar-Razzaq though.

None of their heroics mattered though. Ar-Razzaq could see the center of their small spear line buckling while at the same time the enemy horse archers wheeled around behind them to fire into their backs.

“Dismount! We have to make a stand. We have to circle Razzaq!” Al-Abbas was already swinging from his horse’s back. Ar-Razzaq let out the trio of short blasts from his horn indicating to their force to gather round the banner, before dismounting himself. He tried to hold the banner high as he did so. He’d lost his shield in one of their earlier charges. Their horses once left to their own devices fled the battle, likely to be taken by the enemy for their use. Such fine beasts. Ar-Razzaq had always loved to ride; he did not mind slitting a throat here or there, as blood would eventually wash off, but this fighting--the press and din of battle, the ranks stink of blood and bile, piss and offal--it was awful. His head swam as the shouts of voices and clamor of death surrounded them.

Then he found himself looking up into the sky. Men and weapons floated in the air on the edges of his vision. A vulture or some other great raptor was wheeling high above the field of battle. He could feel the ground beneath him begin to grow wet, but there were no clouds, no rain falling.

The next few days passed like a dream to ar-Razzaq, as the blow he took to the head nearly split his skull. But the battle was over two weeks ago now and ar-Razzaq had begun to put

the broken memories back together. Babak had killed first Bagrad then General Tusi then thrown their heads at them, a challenge? He remembered al-Abbas talking first with Bilga, anger on the mamluk's face, then the prince talking with Babak who was dressed in simple unadorned armor, which had seen years of use and repairs. He held a tall conical Persian helm in his right hand as his left fingered the hilt of his scimitar.

With grace and composure, al-Abbas approached the rebel leader, his back straight, his eyes unwavering. "What do you want then?"

They had been able to retreat to one of the small broken hills not occupied by the enemy ambushers after the enemy cavalry withdrew to regroup. He had been carried by Bilga. That was unexpected. Babak had come again and again to them, each day at noon to speak with al-Abbas. A younger Khurramite nobleman accompanied him. Nasr. Yes, that was his name. They wanted something from the Prince, ar-Razzaq just could not remember what.

Why had they spoken so much to the enemy? When Babak spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper, gravely and harsh, cutting through the windswept silence of the battlefield. Had that led to their release? When he tried to press al-Abbas, the only answer he received was silence. Did he remember a promise of coin? An exchange of money? Or was that the trickery of the mind? His own misgivings. His own desires.

By the time they reached Baghdad, ar-Razzaq's head was feeling much better, but the memories of the negotiations for their release still plagued him. He could not ask Bilga, who was more likely to kill him than give him answers, and al-Abbas was closed off to the subject entirely, as a cynicism began to permeate the prince's mind. This would become a memory of their youths, separate and distinct from their time luxuriating in the gardens of the House of Wisdom behind Baghdad's tall walls. Separate and secret from the truth, as al-Abbas never told

his father what he and Babak agreed upon. He never revealed the outcome of their capture but twirled a tale of fighting and fleeing a pursuing force for days. He'd spun a web of lies which would catch all three of them, the only survivors of the Battle of Hashtadsar to return to the Caliph.

Chapter 2

On a statue of Cassandra

“I saw the prophetess Cassandra--but in silence did she blame her father, filled with a wise frenzy, as befits one who prophesies the last woes of her city.”

On a statue of another Pyrrhus

“There was another Pyrrhus, sacker of cities, not wearing on his hair a helmet with horsehair crest or shaking a spear; but naked he glowed, his chin beardless, and raising his right hand in testimony of his victory he looked askance at Polyxena, weighed down with tears.”

On a statue of Polyxena

“Tell me, Polyxena, deceitful virgin, what forces you to shed tears hidden in voiceless bronze? Why do you stand with a veil drawn over your face, feigning modesty, but with sorrow in your heart? Is it that Phthian Pyrrhus won you for his spoil after destroying your city, and your beauty did not strike Neoptolemus’ heart and save you--that beauty that once captivated your murderer’s father and enticed him of his own will into a net of unexpected death? Yes, by your ideal image in bronze, if lord Pyrrhus were to see you like this, he would have taken you to his bed and abandoned the memory of his father’s fate.”

- Anonymous (Iaphagos) *Reactions to Greek Statues*

The Palace of Pleasures

December 3, 830

Al-Abbas walked arm in arm with his mother through the garden. The lush plantlife brought from far off climates at the edges of the Abbasid realm was all diligently taken care of by a host of slaves kept as gardeners. Ibu and Leila sprang to their hiding place behind a hedge of Indus valley bushes as soon as they caught sight of the prince and his mother, the favored concubine. The sun left no shadow as they fled. Only glistening pools and drinking flowers remained by the time Abbas and his mother stood beside the slaves. Leila had once known Sundus. When they were young, they had been playmates in the slave quarters of the royal house, but now Sundus was as powerful as a slave could become. Once Sundus flowered, it was not long before the chief eunuch chose her for the harem. Leila had never left the slave quarters though. She did not have the beauty of her friend. Her wide, awkward features and bulky stature were not what the Caliph desired. He liked them thin, almost boyish, with a quick wit and ear for music. All the features Sundus had acquired with ease. While Leila had squeaked when singing, Sundus's voice was a flowing waterfall. Ibu clenched Leila's hand tight. She'd told him of her once friend before. But now they must be quiet and listen, for the secrets they would hear might pay well.

Sundus led al-Abbas off the path to stand near her favorite fountain surrounded by the Indus hedge. "My son, you cannot wait any longer. You are a man. You have fought in battle. Now is the time to marry."

He shook his head in frustration, "Mother, you know it is not so easy as that. I cannot be cooped up here at the for a year winning a bride. I must act, while I can. I have a life to live, and wars to fight before I have proven myself. You know what my uncle will do if father were to die

before I am ready to face him. He'd take the throne in a heartbeat. And he has too much power for anyone to stop him."

"You will not have to win a bride's heart my son. I know you have plenty to deal with. Just accept the invitations from the father's I have proposed." Her almond shaped and colored eyes looked down at her son with concerned amusement.

Frustrated, he responded, "That would take me halfway across the realm and back five times over. And that is what I do not have time for."

"Ibn Shal Muhammed and ar-Rammoz are both in the city now with their daughters and have each sent you at least three invitations to dine with them. You are avoiding the issue. Not what I taught my son to do."

"Father loses more and more power every day, whether it be to his brother or Babak or the Romans, we are being cut to pieces on every front. I have a duty to secure my province's borders. And I do not have the mind to dine with men I do not know who are just trying to sell off their daughters. Why don't you chose one for me?"

"So, she is just to be sold off by handlers, brokered by parents entirely. Many boys would be happy to have a choice in their wife and never will. I went through great pains to convince your father that you deserved to choose. So, you are going to choose."

He knew the lengths she went through to control his father. Favored concubine did not mean a woman with no constraints, no duties to her master. The bulk of his father atop his mother, rutting about like a wild boar, both disgusted and baffled him. Not the image he wanted to think of while trying to consider his own bride. The concubines of his harem had sufficed since he'd come to manhood, but he'd never become besotted with one. They were all obligated, not entirely unwilling, but certainly coerced. He just wanted to wait until he met a woman he

liked to be around outside of official functions, someone who could be his friend and confidant, like ar-Razzaq was before the battle. But now his mother was putting her foot down, she would have no more of his procrastinating. He had to give in or be broken by her iron will, and he could always choose a second wife once he found one he liked.

“Alright mother, alright. I am here for at least the next few weeks. I am waiting on a scheme in Georgia to come to fruition, but I should have enough time to choose before then.”

“Another scheme. Come now, son. Out with it. Your marriage plans can wait. I want to hear what you are plotting next, so I can plan accordingly.” The look she gave him made him chuckle. She knew just how to change her tune, to make you smile, to make you laugh, to make you agree with her completely.

“I have set in motion a new plan to take control over the Georgian Kingdom in the Caucasus. The Ishkhan has resisted our rule for too long. The only way I can defeat both the Byzantines and Babak is to separate their allies from them.” Lowering his voice, he finished, “There will be more steps to come.”

“So, this is part of your deal with the Khurramites too?” Her tone was conspiratorial as she danced the tips of her fingers together.

“Oh, come now, mother. I cannot speak more of it, no matter how much you plead. These are my intrigues, not yours. If I am caught, I cannot incriminate you too. Father would kill me if he found out what I’ve put into motion. Everything is balanced on the edge of a precipice, ready to rise into greatness or tumble to destruction.”

“Your no fun. Always too overly poetic like your singer friend. Where is your nadīm ar-Razzaq? He always knows how to make me laugh with a tantalizing court secret or two.” She put

her arm in his again as they began to move back towards the path to continue their walk. Proud of her son's abilities, she could not help but scheme for his success too.

“Ar-Razzaq has not been the same since the battle. The injuries have healed, but he... he is scared within. He only sings dirges and writes awful depressing poetry these days. Its epic death scene after death scene, every day.”

“That is most upsetting. What are you doing to cheer him up?”

As they disappeared beyond the foliage, Ibu turned to Leila, “Do you think he'll buy any of that?”

She was sure their true master would.

Ar-Razzaq lay on the couch in his own apartment in al-Abbas' palace in the North District of Baghdad when the Christian priests arrived. He could hear the commotion below in the entry hall from his reclined state of convalescence. Hopefully, whomever had arrived would leave him alone. His head was still pounding though he'd used the salve and smoked the opium the doctor had provided. The cloying smell of smoke still clung thickly in the air. Why was the world so loud? He couldn't quite remember who was supposed to be arriving today, but it was someone important enough to be given the guest apartments in the palace.

The door from al-Abbas' rooms opened, and an elderly servant entered. A swirl of smoke twirled out of the room, an exotic dancer brushing past the servant, caressing his nostrils. Only after bowing did Malik speak up, “My Master would like to inform you of the arrival of our Christian guests, the most esteemed synkellos John and his scribe Iaphagos.” Malik straightened

to reveal his pinched face and disapproving gaze before continuing, “You are to join the Prince immediately in the small hall.”

As Malik spun on around and exited, ar-Razzaq almost threw the platter sitting beside him at the servant. He knew al-Abbas was sick of his removal from daily affairs, but it was his idiotic bravery which brought about this situation. The battle at Hashtadsar hadn’t been his idea. That day of blood and steel was still a horror ridden dream to ar-Razzaq. He just wanted to forget. To become lost in the hazy dreams of the fantasy land he had built within his apartment here. But reality had knocked at his door, and he had duties to fulfill.

Quickly dressing in his most ostentatious green and golden trimmed silk caftan, he then twirled his headdress around his head in the sloppy, lopsided fashion which had become popular among the Persians at court. Was this what they were left with? The once rulers of the greatest empire to ever exist now showed their rebellion with fashion. This is all they were left with. Well, fashion and poetry. His poetry certainly held a certain rebellious spirit within it when framed in this Arab Abbasid court. They knew nothing of the ancient traditions but did appreciate his voice and creativity. He’d take what he could get. All of it.

As Iaphagos followed behind synkellos John, he could not keep his eyes from wandering. The lavish estates of the round city on the banks of the Euphrates had knocked him back. Even Constantinople could not boast of such wealth. This new city built by the Abbasid Caliph was enormous, not to mention beautiful. From the swirling designs of the fabrics to the intricate latticework on nearly every building, Iaphagos had been taken aback at every turn. It was the

very opposite of the desert they'd had to cross to get here, a city of lush green gardens and juxtaposed smooth and hard angles everywhere.

He'd mostly recovered from his heat poisoning episode, though he still felt weak from exhaustion. The painful burns on his face made him look like a ripened fruit, but he was uncaring. Only the song of the city captivated his attention. He was certain he'd made the right choice to come here with the delegation.

Now, as they walked through the hallways of the Abbasid heir, al-Abbas, he could not keep his eyes off the carpets and tapestries surrounding him. The servants brought the two Christians to a modest sized hall with tapestries depicting scenes of war and battle on every wall. Along the back wall stood a dais which held what could only be described as a throne of pillows with a young man sitting cross-legged among the plush cushions. His eyes pierced Iaphagos at first glance. The furtive gaze taking everything physical about him and synkellos John immediately before boring into their souls. The young man had features both sharp and smooth, with the angles of his cheeks piercing through his olive skin as he smiled at them.

A servant stood a few paces in front of him while another richly dressed young man stood behind the prince and to the right. His robes were overly colorful compared to the dress of the seated prince who was all in black, the color of the Abbasid house. Iaphagos could not make out this second noble's features as they were shadowed by a curtain, though the rest of the room was bright from the light of the several large windows along the northern wall.

The servant standing before the prince spoke up, "I present with the grace of Allah, the Prince of the Holy Realm, al-Abbas ibn al-Ma'mun ibn Harun al-Rashid, Governor of al-Jazira and heir to the Abbasid Caliphate." Thankfully, synkellos John had instructed Iaphagos on how

to bow correctly. The young scribe held his robes back as he made his best attempt to perform the greeting ritual.

The servant continued, “My Prince, may I present synkellos of Constantinople John ibn Morocharzanos and his scribe Iaphagos the Bulgar.” When the servant had asked their names and where they came from, Iaphagos had accidentally answered first, saying that he was from Bulgaria, though he hadn’t lived there since his childhood, since his father had sent him away to become a monk. He had misunderstood the question of where he came from, which became apparent when synkellos John answered with his father’s name. Iaphagos felt a fool but did not want to correct himself as it was not as if his father had raised him. He was a product of monastic upbringing. Though some questioned whether his unconventional ideas about Neoptolemus and the Nephilim were blasphemy, his perspective of the world had been shaped by the scrolls he’d found buried in the archives as a child and adolescent. If you make a boy clean the dusty passages of forgotten rooms, he is going to get curious as to what is written down in the endless supply of scrolls.

Iaphagos straightened and saw that the servant was gesturing for them to sit upon the cushions set out near the middle of the room, some twenty feet from the Prince. Did these Arabs fear the Byzantine Emperor would send assassins instead of churchmen? Or was this just convention? Iaphagos took his seat next to synkellos John. Prince al-Abbas stared at the two of them intensely, as the servants retreated from the room. This left only the prince and the other noble with the priest and scribe. The shadowed noble now stepped out from the darkness and took a seat on a cushion just off to the right of the dais the prince sat upon. The scraggly beard and mustache showed that he was not much older than his lord, but his eyes were sunken, and a sickly pallor made his face seem older, exhausted.

The Prince's eyes sparkled as his smile broadened before he spoke in Arabic, "Ar-Razzaq, I do not think they are assassins. I think that new Roman Emperor actually sent us learned men." His voice was a silky smooth, full of a rich timbre.

The noble, ar-Razzaq, then spoke up in Greek, "Let us not offend our guests my Prince; we have nothing to hide from them just as they have nothing to hide from us." Though the sickly look upon his face told a story of sorrow, his voice was a melodious tune, both deep and resounding as well as musical. Iaphagos knew he was going to love being here in Baghdad with so much rich culture and language. Hopefully, they would get to stay all winter.

Chapter 3

“With this proud word the aged warrior hurled with nerveless arm his ineffectual spear, which hoarsely rang rebounding on the brazen shield, and hung piercing the midmost boss- but all in vain. Then Pyrrhus: ‘Take these tidings, and convey message to my father, Peleus’ son! tell him my naughty deeds! Be sure and say how Neoptolemus hath shamed his sires. Now die!’ With this, he trailed before the shrines the trembling King, whose feet slipped in the stream of his son’s blood. Then Pyrrhus’ left hand clutched the tresses old and gray; a glittering sword his right hand lifted high and buried it far as the hilt in that defenseless heart. So, Priam’s story ceased.”

-Virgil’s *Aeneid*

Death of a Monarch

January 29, 831

The blood from his wounds soaked through his caftan. The rich silks were stained red, ruined like his army. Ishkhan Ashot Bagratuni ruler of Georgian Iberia and his thirty mounted bodyguards rode hard for home as the battle still raged in behind them, if battle it could be called, as massacre would be more accurate. He'd seen his men cut down in droves, tearing his ambitions apart with each arrow. He'd never seen so many men die so quickly. He could smell the urine which had leaked out of his bladder as that first volley hit. Old age was taking its toll.

The ambush in the narrow pass of the Southern Caucasus Mountains had been perfectly timed to inflict maximum casualties to the Georgian monarch's forces. With nearly a fifth of his force, two-hundred men, falling to the initial volley of arrows, Ashot knew he had been betrayed. As they galloped from scene, he turned his most trusted guard David who rode to his right, "Someone has betrayed me; someone set us up. I will find the culprits and bring down the wrath of God upon them. I will."

David answered grimly, "The Caliph's spies knew exactly where we would be. We will find the rebels my lord." Looking at the Ishkhan, David knew that he was finished. Ashot had lost his gilded helmet in the swift melee which preceded their flight, and now just looked like a haggard old man fleeing for his life. David knew he'd made the right choice. For a king to walk right into an ambush so blindly was proof of his inability to rule, of his loss of divine right. Hopefully, his sons would rule better.

Just before they rode out of sight around a bend in the canyon, David turned back to see a throng of lightly armored Arab infantry running downhill waving slender swords and sharp spears in the air and flying a blue banner with a golden serpentine dragon upon it. The snow

blanketing the ground churned in the mud made by their boots, making a soon to be stained slush. The Arab troops let out a whooping that chilled the blood before they threw javelins. Then they charged into the rear of the remaining Georgian forces. Like the jaws of their flapping monster the enemy troops swallowed his army in steel and gore. There was no hope for those poor souls, and little more for the fledgling kingdom of Georgia.

Ashot glanced back at David, “The snow is red, the sky grey, the world darkens my friend.” David had guarded the Ishkhan for ten years, and he didn’t regret it. His family had benefited much from his position, but that was not enough. David needed more; he had not only his family but also his clan to think of, to support.

It took three days of hard riding through thickening snowfall to outrun their Muslim pursuers, a game of cat and mouse where Ashot was forced to sacrifice most of his guards to escape. David was just happy he was close to the Ishkhan, so he wasn’t sacrificed. Now, as they arrived back in safe lands, only four bodyguards remained.

Ashot had spoken of plans of escape on their journey, “I faked my death before; I can pull it off again.”

“I’ll wriggle free of this Arab trap and rebuild my army. All we need to do is get back to my sons. They will help me.”

“The Lord will guide me. The Lord will hold us all tight to his bosom. He will hold me close.”

David was not so sure any of his delirious babbling would come true. Since the ambush, the old man seemed more and more like a raving lunatic than a monarch.

They crested a rise to look over the snow covered Nigali valley and the small stone church surrounded by several outbuildings nestled in the crook of the mountain’s arms.

David spoke up, “My Ishkhan, this church will provide us with a good place to rest for the night. Our horses are spent, and the enemy is far behind.” Ashot’s eyes were filled with exhaustion as he looked back at the setting sun, a glowing orb of orange fire slipping below the jagged horizon. He nodded his head in agreement, too tired to reply, too tired to ride on, too cold to endure.

The five riders left their mounts with the stable hand and entered the church, removing their helms and head coverings to pray. The Ishkhan walked with shuffling steps, kicking through the snowdrifts. He mumbled, “Must ask for forgiveness from God. Must seek his grace.” The cold was turning his bones to ice. David could see the grasp of winter stealing away his strength. The Ishkhan’s pride had brought about this disaster. As soon as Ashot received word from his spies that the Caliph’s eldest son al-Abbas was with a small force returning from a failed raid on Trebizond, he could not help but to act. David had seen the lust for glory in his monarch’s eyes. To capture the eldest son of the Caliph al-Ma’mun, the ruler of the Muslim empire to the south of his lands, could turn this never-ending war around, maybe bring about an armistice, a peace for his people.

The old Byzantine emperor had sent what aid he could, providing supplies and weapons often, and naming Ashot Kouropalates, a very prestigious position in the Byzantine court, but the Byzantines had not sent a great army, never enough to end the war, never enough to free Georgian Iberia from the constant attacks from the Caliphate. Now, with the ascension of the new Byzantine Emperor Theophilos, Ashot had hoped the situation would change, but instead, here he was with but four followers. His two living sons had stayed behind to defend their respective regions of the Caucasus kingdom. Ashot just hoped they would be able to raise enough men to rebuild his army.

The inside of the church was modest, iconoclastic, with only a simple silver cross on the altar flanked by a pair of gold candlesticks, no images of Christ or the Saints. Their candles' wicks sputtered, licking up the fatty tallow with a flame's endless hunger. The priest greeted them, bowing to Ishkhan Ashot before leading him to the altar. His large brown eyes were kind, and though he seemed very young for a priest, Ashot felt a peace wash him when he looked into those depthless caramel pools. This holy man, this holy place. They let Ashot finally release his anguish, his remorse, his regret, as he knelt before the altar. Too many losses, too much strain had blunted his intuition, his instincts for survival, leaving him blind to the truth.

As the priest began to pray over him, a door opened causing a slight draft of wind to make the candles flicker. One nearly blew out before rekindling. The door closed softly as the priest raised his voice. He had an interesting accent which Ashot could not place. Even he, the rightful ruler of the Caucasus did not know every tongue of his people. "And by the holy grace of our Lord Almighty, All-Seeing One, Father and Creator, Prince of Peace, 'in šā'a -llāh!"

Ashot glanced up at the priest when he heard these words. That was Arabic. Something was wrong. Someone was quietly stepping towards him from behind.

He half-turned as he tried to rise and saw his end before him. A large mustachioed Turk strode down the center aisle carrying an enormous double-bladed axe glistening with blood. Beyond the killer, three of Ashot's guards were crumpled on the ground, gaping wounds at their throats.

An unknown man in dark green robes stood by over two of them, while David stooped over the third fallen guard, a knife in his hand. His glance up at the Ishkhan was filled with pity.

Stunned, Ashot did not know how to react. He tried to stand as a cry released from his throat. Jerking upwards he felt the hard grip of the priest grab his forearm and pull him forward

to fall over the altar. The Turk with the axe took three long steps forward as he raised his blade and swung. Ashot struggled with the priest, desperate to draw his sword, but the axe came crashing down on his shoulder severing the arm which the priest held from his body.

Ashot's vision faded as he watched his own lifeforce drain out upon the altar of his God.

“Well, that went according to plan. Nearly perfectly except for making a mess of the holy tablecloth.” Governor of Al-Jazira and heir apparent of the Abbasid Caliphate al-Abbas pulled the blood-spattered priests robes off to reveal an austere black caftan pinned with a silver brooch in the shape of a dragon with bright blue lapis lazuli stones set in the eye sockets, the golden veins in the stone struck as lightning through the pupils. The serpentine monster's scales were studded with emeralds and rubies. He smiled at his Turkic bodyguard. “But really Bilga, did you have to take the arm off so close to my grip. You nearly chopped my fingers off.”

“He was reaching for his sword. Might have stabbed you.” As always, the huge man's face was devoid of emotion.

“Always looking out for me, aren't you? Our fathers would be proud to see us today.” The massive mamluk slave soldier had served al-Abbas' family since childhood and as his personal bodyguard since Bilga came of age nearly fifteen years ago. Al-Abbas knew he could trust him with his life, just maybe not his fingers, as Bilga had a wicked mean streak for teaching lessons. He had objected to al-Abbas personally taking part in the scheme.

From the back of the church, crouched near the dead bodyguards ar-Razzaq spoke up, “You two sound like a mentor and his pupil. Fine guidance Bilga can bring to the Caliphate. The wisdom of the barbarian. Before we forget, we need to pay this here patriot,” pointing towards the lone bodyguard of the deceased Ishkhan. The man shifted his feet and sheathed his wet knife,

which had so recently slit the throat of his countryman, without cleaning it off. The blood welled up in the sheath as the blade slid down to overflow from the chamber, dripping down the sides of the scabbard to splatter the flagstones near his feet. The only light left in the Church came from the flickering candles. The air smelled of iron.

Switching from Arabic to Greek, ar-Razzaq continued with a sneer, “You are a patriot my good sir. You have saved your people from a bloody war. You should be proud, for now the sons of Ashot can rule you all in peace.” He laughed while he pulled a small pouch from his belt, checked the weight in his palm, and tossed it to the traitorous guard. “Be on your way, and make sure to tell Bagrat and Smbat that al-Abbas, heir apparent of the Abbasid Caliphate, says ‘hello.’ And that he will be seeing them soon.”

Al-Abbas cut in, “Tell the princes that they may send their delegations to Baghdad directly with proper tribute. No reason to bother Governor Khalid ibn Yazid about all of this.”

The man silently nodded as he checked the dirhams in the pouch and left without a word.

“So, we are going to collect the tribute? Well, that does work out nicely. I thought you would demand more troops instead of cash.” Ar-Razzaq smiled broadly thinking of the coin he would be able siphon out of the prince’s coffers for his own little pleasures, a delicate silk here, a concubine there, just what any man in his position would find proper. He was trying to think of anything but the blood on his hands.

“Yes, we require income not untrustworthy soldiers. The Turks my uncle has been supplying are better than anything we can get from the Caucasus. The governor of Armenia does not lay claim to the Caucasus Mountains, it falls within the jurisdiction of the Caliphate, so I must take all tribute and any treaties with its rulers to my father. I know Khalid lay claim to the victory of our ambush, but he has no true power outside of his province. The ambush technically

took place on Byzantine soil; it was just the chase afterwards which took us through Armenia into Georgia. In any case, he isn't here. I am."

"Abbas, you do not have to justify yourself to me. I am here to but chronicle your exploits my prince. Here, we have the death of a rebel ruler, and the birth of peace with our northern border, opening the gateway to expanding westward. Ishkhan Ashot fell as Priam on the altar, slain with axe and fury by the one and only son of the greatest ruler to ever live, a new son of Achilles, a new Neoptolemus. The new Dragon of Skyros slithered from behind the altar and struck with such ferocity upon the Christian kingdom that it collapsed, that it was subsumed into his divine Caliphate." Ar-Razzaq had approached al-Abbas and put his hand on his shoulder now. "You will be known as one of the greatest general of all Muslims alongside Ali and your namesake and the prophet Muhammed himself. Do not worry my friend. I will make it so."

Al-Abbas might have been blushing, ar-Razzaq wasn't quite sure, as his prince answered him, "And no more could I ask of my Boon-companion, my nadīm. No more can I ask friend." Al-Abbas' eyes had grown soft again after the violence was done. The kindness behind them shone through. This is how al-Abbas had convinced him to come on this venture in the first place. That look was the sliver of hope which kept ar-Razzaq going, the hope for a better world, ruled by a benevolent prince with magnificent deep caramel eyes awash in swirls of amber.

Bilga shook his head as he turned to wipe the blood from his axe blade on the altar's tablecloth.

Part 2

“Then the bright son of bold Achilles led the wife of Hector to the hollow ships; but her son he snatched from the bosom of his rich-haired nurse and seized him by the foot and cast him from a tower. So, when he had fallen bloody death and hard fate seized on Astyanax. And Neoptolemus chose out Andromache, Hector’s well-girded wife, and the chiefs of all the Achaeans gave her to him to hold requiting him with a welcome prize. And he put Aeneas, the famous son of horse-taming Anchises, on board his sea-faring ships, a prize surpassing those of all the Danaans.”

-Scholiast on Lycophron’s *Alexandra*

Chapter 4

“And Neoptolemus is no longer a country boor nor yet growing strong amid filth like brawling sons of herdsmen, but already he is a soldier. For he stands leaning on a spear and gazing towards the ship; and he wears a purple mantle brought up from the tip of the shoulder over to his left arm and a white tunic that does not reach the knee; and though his eye is flashing, it is not so much the eye of a man in full career as of one still holding back and vexed at the delay; and his mind images something of what will happen a little later in Ilium. His hair now, when he is at rest, hangs down on his forehead, but when he rushes forward it will be in disorder, following, as it tosses to and fro, the emotions of his spirit.”

-Philostratus the Younger's *Imagines 1. Achilles on Skyros*

Leaving Home

June 5, 830

Tveggi stood near the back of the longship as it cut through the choppy Baltic sea. He'd not intended any of this, but it had happened. He was here now, flying south over the ship-road. Fleeing his home. Would he see its rolling green hills covered in thick forests shrouded in mists again? Would he ever return?

Turning away from the wide blue-green sea, Tveggi looked at the grizzled old steersman. His long graying hair was matted down to his face, covering most of one eye. How he could see to steer the ship, Tveggi was not sure, but figured it was a feeling the man had when he was holding the tiller. An unseen pattern behind the undulating waves. The lean muscles of the ancient seaman strained and flexed; purple veins snaked up his arms, bulging as they pumped his sword-mead, his raven's-wine, his wound-sea, his blood.

The rest of the ship's crew had stowed their oars and were relaxing on the deck, stretching sore arms and legs, as they'd had to pull the ship out of the fjord with little wind. The low gray cliffs now faded in the distance behind, just as Tveggi hoped his past mistakes would.

Tveggi had shorn his head upon leaving Birka. Only a short stubble had grown back as he wandered through the forests of Svealand. He rubbed his hand over his bristly head remembering his departure. His eyes were still sunken and wild, but he was healed. No longer sick from the loss of his home and his Gods. He was only twenty-five but looked more than a decade older. Had it been three weeks wandering the forests, or four? He had lost count as he drifted, uncaring, until he came to the coast and followed it south.

He'd found a ship at Karlsvik willing to take him across the sea. Away. Away from his failures. The Gods were dead? Or gone? Had they fled from the power of the Kristr God? They certainly were not listening anymore, if they ever were.

The old steersman looked over at Tveggi, his voice cracked and graveled, "Names Knud. What do yer's be calling yerself?"

The address in such a strange accent took Tveggi off guard. He responded, "I am Tveggi. Where do you come from?" He could not place this man's accent, though he knew many tongues of the people living on the coast of the Baltic Sea.

The bright blue uncovered eye of the steersman looked over at Tveggi for a moment, "I come from the land northwards, butted up against the West Sea. North of the land of the Norsemen, Ha!" The cackle slit the air, cracking stone with the bite of a steel axe. "I think it is just about farthest north from here ye can go; it's just about all wastelands beyond. Only Finns and Sami live there, hunting and fishing." The old seaman then spat over the side of the longship.

Tveggi was intrigued, "I have not traveled so far in my short life." He had heard tales of the lands far to the north and always wanted to know more. Hoping the old seaman would impart some of his knowledge, he probed further, "So how would one get to these Finns and Sami? I have known a few near Lake Malaren who come to trade." Tveggi did not tell the rest of his interest but knew the tale the volva Ulla, who raised him, used to tell. His mother was a Sami sorceress, but she died while he was being born.

The old seaman took another longer look at Tveggi with his uncovered eye. "If a man were to go that far, he'd first leave from Helgeland, my home going north alongside the land for six days. Then the land will turn straight east. Or maybe it is the sea turns into the land. I'm not so sure which, but I do know ye can catch a west wind eventually and go along the coast

eastwards for four days. But that'll take ye to a spot where ye might have to wait a bit for a due Northwind, cause the land turns straight south. Or maybe that is when the sea turns into the land? Philosophy! Only the Gods could know. Got to carve out an eye for that one! Ha!" The steersman cackled to himself for a while before continuing his description.

"So, when ye catch that southward wind you goes along the land for as much as five days, that'll take ye to a big river coming out of that land, that's the Dvina."

Tveggi asked, "Is that where the Sami and Finn towns are?"

Thinking for a moment Knud continued, "Now, I haven't seen any towns of theirs on the starboard banks or villages even. But the people are there. The Sami will tell all kinds of crazy tales about what lays beyond, but I haven't seen it so won't go telling ye tall-tales."

Tveggi had always thought the Sami and Finns had towns further north, where they retreated to when they weren't trading with their neighbors to the south, but maybe they just did not have towns at all. "What do you go that far north for? To trade? Hunt?"

Squeaking with another wheezy cough Knud answered, "Why do I go up there ye ask, well, let me tell ye. It's the walruses. That noble tooth-bone makes for good trading far and wide. And their hides make ropes finer than hemp. They got a bit of stretch to them and can hold a whole herd of reindeer down. Now that's a funny beast to catch. Ye know how they catch new ones? The Finns will put out these decoy reindeer, covered in their hides all smeared up with their stink, with a pair of antlers on the head. And they come a running to join the herd. Hahaha!" The old man began his wheezy cackle again.

Knud obviously was making up stories now, to see if Tveggi would bite, so he could continue. How had this conversation even started?

Trying to regain control of it, Tveggi asked, “So what about this place I’ve booked passage to, Rügen? How far is it from here?”

“Ye asking about the East Sea, now, eh? The Baltic.” The old seaman thought for a moment before he continued, “Well, since we started here at Karlsvik with a good wind and fair sea, we’ll be passing through a bunch of islands. We’ll trade at Gotland, Oland, More, Blekinge, then Bornholm, and from there we cut across the open sea to Rügen. Ruled by the Rani chieftains. They speak a strange Slavic tongue there, strange, but less strange than the Finns with all their barking like dogs. Woof! Ha!”

Tveggi had never heard that comparison before but had to disagree. He knew the Finnic tongue very well, learning multiple dialects, but only parts of the language of the Slavs. It was like that of the other Slavic traders from Austrvegr who came to Birka to trade each summer, so he’d been able to pick up a basic understanding.

Knud continued, “That’s all Wendland to the south from there, until ye get to the mouth of the Vistula where Truso stands, which takes about five days from Rügen depending on the winds. Now them Ests that live beyond the river talk more like them Finns.”

“How so?” Tveggi again prodded for information on these Finns.

“They bark like dogs! Woof! Woof! How else? Ha!” Knud cackled on, as Tveggi smiled.

The man certainly knew the coastlines of the seas and the peoples living there. Maybe he hadn’t been lying as much as it seemed at first. Tveggi was starting to like him.

Chapter 5

“One unaccustomed to the taste of misery bears it but suffers as his neck accepts the yoke. For such a one there is more happiness in dying than living. For life bereft of honor is toil and trouble.”

-Polyxena in Euripides, *Hecabe*

Tveggi's Tale

June 8, 830

The gigantic red-haired boy on the cusp on manhood did not flinch as the cold waves washed over the sides of the ship. His fiery beard was growing in thick for one his age; it was a wonder the hair was not sizzling as the sea's dew splashed upon him. Nothing affected the seventeen-year-old Hrorik's stoic gaze into the brightening eastern horizon. The bear's hide coat he wore over his ring mail armor looked both warm and fierce to Tveggi, though maybe a little over the top as it was so hot this summer. The giant single-bladed axe hanging from his back looked too big to pick up, much less wield in battle, unless you were a jötunn like this boy-warrior.

Turning to Tveggi, Hrorik asked in a low melodic voice, "So, how did you come to be on my friend Knud's ship, seiðmaðr?" His eyes were quick, and obviously his mind as well since he spotted the outward signs of Tveggi's profession. Tveggi'd found the best way to make friends with the young was to keep them interested, to keep yourself mysterious. This might be an opportunity for him to make a useful contact.

Dressed in a patchwork coat of furs from various beasts, with a multitude of fetishes and bones tied into the hairs, clutching his seiðr staff, the beardless Tveggi looked up at him from his crouch, "You are Hrorik Fire-Beard, son of the trader Vabka the Far-Traveled."

Hrorik was obviously surprised that he knew his name, much less who his father was, but did not know that Tveggi had sharp ears and was listening to his conversation with Knud before he'd boarded at Gotland. "That's right. But you have me at a loss. I do not know you."

"I am Tveggi, and to your question: how and why I have come here is not so hopeful as the summer's horizon. It was folly to go against the tide of people-thoughts. The community had

accepted them, but I could not accept the change. I could not stay under the rule of one who swore allegiance to the Kristr. I, Tveggi Two-souled, have vowed to find a cure to this Kristr sickness.”

The huge youth nodded. His eyes darted to the amulets hanging from Tveggi’s throat, one depicting the Goddess Freya holding a basket while the other two were large chunks of polished amber reflecting the sun’s rays in a multitude of magical hues.

Tveggi knew he had an audience now. He kept his dulcet voice steady, matched to the rhythm of the waves, flowing over silvery tongue.

With last winter’s thaw, the priests of the deceiver Kristr came to the lands of the Svear near Lake Malaren with lies upon their tongues and hate for the Gods upon their lips. With the help of the Svear’s foolish Konungr Bjorn, they banished the worship of all the Vanir and Æsir. Destroying all the folk’s totems, their jewelry— anything that fit their description of what they kept calling ‘paganus’— in a great fire. Only Ulla and Tveggi were left alone, as even these priests feared their seiðr. However, since their arrival, Ulla had been plagued with dreams, nightmares of their coming fate.

Every time she awoke, she cried out, “All our land is in peril. All the world stands upon the brink. We must act! Where have they all gone?”

Her eyes were bloodshot every morning. Every night she thrashed in her bed. Tveggi watched on, anxious of what was to come. She had raised him since he was a child. He owed her that at least.

The final atrocity committed by the Kristr priests was to burn Ulla's longhouse. It was a spring day, and Tveggi had gone to the woods to gather herbs, when he heard a scream pierce the still air. A knife in the heart. He dropped his basket and ran home, only to find Ulla convulsing from a fit in the mud in front of their house. The longhouse was an inferno. The thick smog choked him as pulled her away. The priests had already fled.

It was not yet the time for the great sacrifices at Uppsala. It had been only three years since they'd spilt the blood of the sacrificial animals. Tveggi remembered watching them swing from the branches of the sacred grove before they were torn down and buried in a pit beside the sacrificial mound. Oðin had been appeased. But Ulla and he needed answers, so they had returned to Uppsala six years early.

As they arrived in Uppsala, the carved doors to the temple stood closed. There was no fire to warm them from the chill of the spring air. The ground was still hard with frost, crunching and crackling beneath their feet, as they climbed to the top of the sacrificial mound nearby. Tveggi could see the crystals of ice clinging to the blades of grass. His heavy breathing became fog before his face. Ulla's strained gasping and coughing showed her age, though her face did not look much older than fifty. She was ancient though. All the villagers spoke of her being alive during their grandparents' day, never to change, never to age. Tveggi brought enough wood to burn a fire for a day or more. Hoping that she would not keep them so long out in the cold.

But they sat atop the mound for eight days. Sat in silence, searching the skies, searching the earth, searching within their thought-vaults for truth. Tveggi only got up to get more wood to keep the fire going. Ulla had told him to not let it go out. She was waiting for something.

Finally, on the morning of the ninth day, thunder pounded the earth, the cloud embraced skies crackled with lightning. Thor's hammer, Mjölñir, struck the lofty anvil, and they heard. Freya and the Valkyries cried upon the winds, calling out from the trees with a howl and a moan, wild and wanting as they searched for heroic souls wandering as their bodies lay dead from battle. Odin's eye roamed beyond the waiting high-barrel-of-rain.

This continued all day, and at nightfall the iridescent lights emerged from the sky. Green and purple ribbons of magic glowed against the fleeing clouds. The gateway to Yggdrasill had opened. The rainbow road, the Bifrost was clear.

Still silent, Ulla stretched out her hand to Tveggi, beckoning for him to give her the herb pouch. Their kin back home at Birka would also have felt the rumble, seen the flashes of power, gazed upon the might of their Gods. How could they deny their power? How could they see their Kristr in lightning cracked skies? In this colorful swirl of lights? This new God was a draugr, an undead brought back from the Netherworld. He'd been killed on a cross by the Romans. How could he still have power?

It was time for answers. Tveggi placed the pouch in Ulla's hand, and she pulled out a pinch of the bhelena. She looked at him with cold eyes, seeing his fear. The hand holding her rune-carved seiðr staff twitched. He could sense her desire to strike him with it. Her anger seethed beneath her furrowed brow. What would such an item of power do in this place, Tveggi did not know.

He felt he was a poor choice in a student, but he was all she had. All she had ever had. Too many parents had grown suspicious of Ulla, first with her unnaturally long life, second with her being a Sami, and thirdly with taking Tveggi in.

Too many times had he overheard mothers whispering to their children to stay away from Tveggi, as they came for Ulla's herbs.

"The Volva's brat." "Ragr." "The half-human." "Strodinn." "Hags-bitch." "Níð."
 "Sorceress's Whelp." "Sordinn." "Stubborn Coward Child."

What did he care what they thought though? Tveggi knew he would one day wield the power of the seiðr. Not just the wisdom of Odin, but so much more.

As the lights danced over them, Ulla took her pinch of herbs and placed them on a depression in a flat piece of rune-carved bone. She then motioned her right hand at Tveggi to get a burning brand from the edge of the fire, while she raised the bone to her face. He knew what she wanted and brought the fiery stick up to touch the bhelena.

She placed her staff across her legs as she inhaled deeply. He would be witness to her visions, not participant. He had years yet before she would acknowledge him as worthy of her status as volva to their lands. He was still untried, untested in the ways of seiðr.

As she rocked back and forth, humming to herself lowly, he began to beat the small drum he'd fashioned specifically for this purpose. He'd spent months gathering the components from far and wide, then constructed it under her direction, adding the cosmic painting on the stretched skin top as the final step. She had taught him the ways to bind the spirits to the rhythm. The ways to chant the *galdr*:

‘Thick blood, arms tire.
 The land cracks of hardship,
 great destruction, men lie,
 the deceivers have won.’

And they had won. Tveggi just did not know it yet.

““An evil stir haunts the world.
 We come to you Gods,
 you Vanir and Æsir
 —you draw us back together
 Lest black the sunbeams become
 in the summers that follow.’

As he began the third stanza, Ulla’s eyes shot open. Her pupils were wide and wildly dancing, unseeing in the light of the Bifrost. The world around had gone from her sight. She gazed into Asgard now. She saw the wide branches of Yggdrasil spanning all universes, covering the nine worlds, living all truths. And she began to scream:

“Ragnarök has come and gone!
 Jörð is swallowed in jaws of Jörmungandr.
 The wily deceivers are among us.
 The Wolf has slain the Bull,
 While the serpent’s eyes search for flesh
 The ending of all draws ever nearer,
 As our fates are sealed in the bite of lies---

They are not there Tveggi! They are not there! We are alone. Alone to stand against these priests and their new God. The Vanir and Æsir will not only ignore us, but no longer exist! They are dead! They are gone! The Gods are dead, Tveggi!”

Still holding the pouch of herbs, she then poured almost all of its contents out into the fire. Bringing her face close to the flames she breathed in deeply. This would be a lethal dose.

As she withdrew from the heat, hacking and coughing, she said, 'Tveggi, make sure you kill a mare in the fashion we did, not two summers past.' Finally, she croaked, 'Bury it with me.' Then she plunged her face nearly into the fire itself.

Within minutes her body began to convulse, rejecting the poisonous smoke from the herbs, but she clamped her hands to her mouth, holding the contents of her lungs within her. Tveggi watched on. He knew his duty. To witness. To return home with wisdom from the Gods. What Gods though? Were they truly dead? Or were they just withdrawn from Ulla's sight? The poisonous smoke wafted into his nostrils only a little as he backed away from the scene, but for days afterwards Tveggi was plagued by cosmic visions. Waking dreams of the past, present, and future.

He buried her near the sacrificial pit. In a grave of her own, she would dwell ever after, with her herb pouch and the gutted dead mare. But he kept her staff, for it had great power. He had no desire to end in the same way, seeking another fate. But how could there even be fate if the Gods were dead? The Norns must still be spinning. How could Miðgarðr even exist anymore if all the Gods were dead?

Tveggi was sure that Ulla had erred in her interpretation. The Krístr God had tricked her, making sure she was severed from her true power. He was sure of it. How else could she have seen such an impossible image?

That day Tveggi made a vow that he would cleanse the land of the deceivers of Krístr. This trickster God's priests would pay for his education being cut short. They would see what the fury of Thor was like. But Tveggi was no warrior.

He was never going to be accepted by the Svear. As his mother died on the birthing bed, his father took one look at his strange genitalia and sent him to Ulla. The curse of Skadi some

called it. Born with the powers of both male and female. Two-souled. Never to be accepted by the clan, but used, that was for sure. His kind were destined to ride the waves of a sea of doubt between earth and heaven, destined to exclusion and exploitation. Destined to find the seiðr inside themselves.

Ulla had not been an unkind master, but she was no mother. Not to Tveggi, not to anyone living. But she taught him the ways of a volva well enough.

Upon returning home from Uppsala, Tveggi found a new confidence growing within him. There was no one else skilled at the craft of seiðr left in their lands. The priests of Kristr were all that was left for the people to depend upon. The priests and him.

As he approached his home in his small boat, Lake Malaren was foggy, hiding the town perched atop the small rise on the island of Birka. But as he landed, he saw through the lingering earth-clouds that they had begun to make themselves a church in the middle of the town. The priests had acquired help. They had timber from their forests, sweat of their men and women, the sacred earth of their home in the clutches of this Kristr God now.

When the priests arrived, everything changed at Birka. Too many of Tveggi's kinfolk and neighbors listened to the spittle-words of these frauds about their undead Kristr. The stories spread as whispers first, only idiots listening. But they were persistent, eventually taking hold of the minds of many, even the Konungr. Tveggi was sure that these tales of forgiveness and mercy of a draugr God were a load of horse shit. But when the Svear began to listen, maybe the Gods began to forget? To be forgotten. Why would they remember such foolish folk as those who mew like milk-cows before a ragged band of wanderers. Why would they exist?

Tveggi had watched one of them preach once. The lead priest's name was Ansgar, and he had a loud resounding voice which carried through the town. He began, "My dear people. Tillers

of the land and crafters of the earth's bounty. The Devil has been here, as you pile evil upon one another, but he, the Deceiver, shall be banished."

He sounded like he had a grudge against Loki, whom he thought was the same God as his Devil. Tveggi had found it quite funny at the time.

"Haste! Haste upon you! The end is near! The apocalypse is upon us all. And you! Yes, you!' A fiery light sizzled in the priest's eyes as he pointed to Hrolf the blacksmith who had just walked up to the edge of the crowd. "You must repent, or you shall be cast into the depths of Hell! Yes, I know what you have done. You have slept with another man's wife. A blaze of horror will consume you all if you do not repent now, for God's judgment has come. Adultery is a sin which will tear you down to the fires of the pit of Hell and they will consume you!' Hrolf looked dumbstruck, glancing this way and that for a subject of the priest's accusations.

Tveggi could not take any more of this Kristr drivel though, so spoke up, "Then I shall be warm in the winter and safe in my pit all year round from fools like you!"

This elicited a smattering of laughter, but more of the crowd turned to him with a look of disdain and horror at his irreverence. The widow who had let Ansgar and his priests into her home when they first arrived, Mother Frideborg, gave Tveggi a glare that pierced like wound-biters. And, as he saw her begin to make her way through the crowd towards him, he decided it was time to retreat before he felt the fists of an angry matron.

The summer after Ulla's death, the cows grew sick, the crops withered. The rains soaked the earth more than memory of the old allowed. And though rain fell all summer long the sky-fire and storm-rumble of Mjölfnir did not shake the earth. Thor was silent. Maybe this proved Ulla's prophesy? Had she spoken true in the moments before her death? Tveggi could only hope that it was not so.

Why had none taken up the smith's remnant, their gore-drinkers, and run these deceiving priests from their lands? Why had they allowed this to happen? Because Konungr Björn did nothing from his seat at Helgö. He might claim to be a son of Ragnarr Loðbrok but was a weakling at heart. A coward wishing to use these priests for his own gains. But Tveggi would have none of this Krístr.

Even the old skald Bragi Boddason would not speak up for their ancestors' ways. His mind was addled these days anyway, lost in a sea of stories. It broke Tveggi's spirit to see the old man shuffling through the church doors one day.

He remembered the cold winter nights when he'd warmed the skald's bed while he taught Tveggi the sagas, while he taught him the ancient tales of their kin, while he taught him to sing, while they'd explored each other's bodies, teaching Tveggi to feel more than nothing. The Svear were his people to protect. His kin and family, though they rejected him now, he could not forget. He could not abandon them but did not know how to heal them or himself.

Tveggi sat in his newly built hut on the village's edge, alone, all summer long, waiting to be consulted. None came though, and he wondered. Did they know the Gods had abandoned them? Or had Björn commanded them to steer clear of him? Or had it been the leader of these priests, Ansgar? He had seen him but once since the sermon he'd witnessed in the village, a tall thin balding man with a haughty look.

The stench of lies wafted about his once costly robes. Faded red and gold, the garment was frayed and patched. He stood out among the wools and furs of our people; he and all the priests in their once fine linens and costly thick furs provided by Konungr Bjorn. All through that summer, Tveggi brooded and brewed nasty potions and poisons to use on the priests. He had

several *galdr* prepared just for that task. He only waited for someone to ask for his help. Did they fear him? Did they think he killed Ulla? They never asked, and he did not offer any information pertaining to the volva's death openly. If he had let slip to one of the Kristr followers that the Gods were silent, absent, dead, they would have reveled in his pain, only confirming their belief in the Kristr.

As autumn settled onto the lands, while winter's bite still rode the winds of the North, he changed his mind though. He would help the fools even if they did not ask. First, he would heal this land. Then, he would deal with these deceiver priests. For the sake of his people, he would act.

Tveggi had learned much from Ulla over the years. He knew the remedy for a sick land, how to save a failing crop or heal ill cattle.

So, on an evening at the start of autumn, at the end of night when the veil between the worlds is thinnest, he began a drum beat in his tiny hut. Using the same drum which he had fashioned for Ulla's vision, he tapped into its second purpose. Making a beat faster than that used for normal visions into the spirit realm, such as had before. A beat that would transport him, that would separate his mind from this reality while still acting within it.

For over an hour he sat by the small fire, drumming. Drumming as if there were no space around him, drumming to transcend. The cosmic painting came alive before him, the central section, *Miðgarðr*, opened wide before him; he stepped through to a hazy reflection of the reality known to most men. To work this spell, he would have to bind the spirits once more to the earth. Leaving his hut, a shadowy figure in the dead of night, he walked to each of the four corners of the island of Birka, taking four large turves one from each side of the island, and bringing them back to his hut. Then he mixed oil, honey, yeast, and the milk of the sick cattle into a goopy

paste. Next, he took a branch from every tree that grew around the sick lands, except for the hard woods, as one knows to never fuck with the hardwoods. How would they build houses and ships if they harmed the hardwoods, which were likely to start dying soon if he could not rid the Svear of these Kristr priests?

On each branch he then fashioned a likeness to Thor's hammer with his bronze knife. Just a small rune to bind the spell. Next, he gathered a leaf from every known plant, all except the bhelena which would poison the brew. Mixing this with the paste in a healthy sheep's bladder, he poured his own blood into it. Not a drop or two, but a gushing of life.

Using the bronze knife, Tveggi cut the veins of his left wrist, allowing the raven's-wine to pour forth, feeding spell. Even though the Gods were gone or dead, he tried, despite his misgivings, desperate to prove his use to the community, desperate to justify his existence.

Taking this concoction and spreading it onto three sides of each turf, he sang:

‘O Vanir, you Bears, you Boars, summon good fortune

the winner's taken the blind man,

Like the lover of a maiden is Freya to me,

since she butchered a hundred and one sheep.

Great is your help, o Æsir, you Wolves, you Bulls

Even the lame do you draw back together,

O mighty ones come to her with your help.

Make the drooping, barren cow,

swell fat with milk for all men.

By your powers bring to Miðgarðr a wife,

the maiden of plenty, with swollen belly.

Let Auðumbla, whose milk never ends, feed you.’

Then, he took each of the turves back to the place he had removed it from, laying the sticks with Thor’s hammer on the bottom, and replaced the turf singing:

‘Spear of Oðin, Children of Ymir, Will of Vili,

Voice of Vé, protect us.

Oðin does not neglect his people.

He is the first to acquire goods.

Let Oðin, Vili, and Vé follow after the cows for us;

let Frey protect the steeds, let none disappear;

let Thor protect the farmers, let none be harmed;

let Freya protect the lands, let none wither and die,

But with unharmed cows come here.

Let Ymir place his right hand around us;

let them heal our lost livestock.’

While Hrolf the blacksmith was away servicing nearby settlements and farms, his lonely wife Bryja was often visited by the Kristr priest Ansgar and provided certain services as well. At the end of night, on one such occasion, Ansgar spotted Tveggi returning the turf to the north corner of the island. Quickly waking his fellow priests and gathering a small group of Svear warriors, Ansgar and his band came upon Tveggi as he was about to set the third turf back into place on the north side of the island. Sven Thorsson, nephew of Konungr Bjorn, grabbed Tveggi’s left arm as he bent to replace the turf.

Tveggi's mind was still in another realm as he sang the words, "The Spear of Odin," and upon being grabbed he spun around, dropping the turf, and reached for his bronze knife. With his *galdr* interrupted, with the turf dropped, the seiðr spell was broken, but Tveggi pulled his bronze knife from his belt and stabbed before he was aware of the world around him, thinking that he was being attacked in the spirit realm.

Ansgar's voice bellowed out, "Stop! Stop this madness you sorcerer! You see my brothers: he is poisoning our fields! This is why we have had such terrible crops. This is why our once healthy cattle die in the fields."

Tveggi snapped out of his trance and seeing the war-ale-of-the-wolf upon his knife and the gash across Sven's throat, he fell backwards in his crouch into the wet dewy grass, unable to comprehend what had happened.

The other Svear there grabbed him and dragged him away, leaving their crops to wither, leaving their cows to die in the fields, while Ansgar railed a sermon of hate down upon the "witchcraft" Tveggi had been using to poison the land.

They took Tveggi before Konungr Björn and the Lawspeaker. And though he argued with them that it was Ansgar who had poisoned their lands with his *Kristr*, they did not listen. No price for the killing was set, only more harsh punishment would appease them. Tveggi was exiled, never to return to the lands of his kin, as Sven had been a favorite of Konungr Björn's relatives.

Upon finishing his tale to Hrorik, Tveggi shook his head in despair, “I tell you Hrorik, if I were one to carry an axe or sword on that day, it would have been loose on my belt, ready to strike mortal blows upon these sweet-tongued priests.”

He then drew himself upright, “But I now embrace my fate, never to be accepted, never to be seen as man or woman. I am Tveggi, the separated, the double-one, the Two-Souled, the shattered and scattered.” He pulled back the sleeves of his coat to reveal the marks of his bloodletting.

Hrorik could see the downtrodden pride of the seiðmaðr swell as he drew confidence from some unseen well, a hoard of knowledge hidden from most but accessible to him.

“So, here I, volva Tveggi, wielder of the ancient secrets of seiðr, sit in a longship bound for Rügen, an exile, telling my tale to you boy-warrior Hrorik. Remember it. These furs are warm, I think I will sleep soon. You will tell me your tale tomorrow, yes?” Tveggi lowered himself to the deck, making a pillow of his small pack.

Hrorik looked down at the beardless man and nodded, hiding his wonder, “Yes, I will tell you why I am also going to Rügen.” He fingered the Mjöltnir amulet stung around his neck.

His voice becoming lazy with exhaustion, Tveggi answered, “Good my boy. We must find out where the gods have fled to or find new gods and bring them back to our homelands. We must fashion new ties to the world abroad, bind foreign spirits to our will. Just as Oðin came from the East, I shall go there. Or maybe I shall search out a new home?” Tveggi’s eyes began to droop as sleep began to take him.

Hrorik turned away thinking, maybe this seiðmaðr would be useful in his quest after all. He had to find his sister first, but eventually had to make his way into the unknown East to find

his father who had not yet returned from his last voyage, though he set out two years previously. There was the possibility that his father was just taking his time returning from some place called Sarkel, the end point of his planned journey, further than he'd ever travelled before. But Hrorik's mother had a suspicion that something had happened, and she was always sensitive to her husband's dangers. She had dreams like that Ulla woman Tveggi had spoken of nightmares from another realm. Hrorik walked to the back of the longship to talk to Knud, his mind swimming with possibilities.

Tveggi peaked out from eyelash shaded eyes. The seed was planted. He'd overheard the boy-warrior explaining to Knud that he was going to Austrvegr to search for his father, and that is exactly where Tveggi hoped to find the Gods or a new home for himself. The tales of old said that Oðin had come from the East, a windswept land of giant skies and endless grasses. He would need a protector on the journey, a companion, and despite his age Hrorik had the skills he lacked. His apparent martial prowess and connections with groups of traders from that region were exactly what Tveggi needed to survive, while Hrorik's age would hopefully make him more pliable to Tveggi's silver tongue.

He closed his eyes, imagining the foreign gods he would find in the distant lands of Austrvegr and beyond.

Chapter 6

“Now at the threshold of the outer court Pyrrhus triumphant stood, with glittering arms and helm of burnished brass. He glittered like some swollen viper, fed on poison-leaves, who chilling winter shelters underground, till, fresh and strong, he sheds his annual scales and, crawling forth rejuvenate, uncoils his slimy length; his lifted gorge insults the sunbeam with three-forked and quivering tongue. Then Skyros’ island-warriors assault the palaces, and hurl reiterate fire at wall and tower. Pyrrhus led the van; seizing an axe he clove the ponderous doors and rent the hinges from their posts of bronze; he cut the beams, and through the solid mass burrowed his way, till like a window huge the breach yawned wide, and opened to his gaze a vista of long courts and corridors, the hearth and home of many an ancient king, and Priam’s own.

Confusion, groans, and piteous turmoil were in that dwelling; women shrieked and wailed from many a dark retreat, and their loud cry rang to the golden stars. Through those vast halls the panic-stricken mothers wildly roved and clung with frantic kisses and embrace unto the columns cold. Fierce as his sire, Pyrrhus moves on; nor bar nor sentinel may stop his way; down tumbles the great door beneath the battering beam, and with it fall hinges and framework violently torn. Force bursts all bars; the assailing Greeks break in, do butchery, and with men-at-arms possess what place they will. Scarce with an equal rage a foaming river, when its dikes are down, overwhelms its mounded shores, and through the plain rolls mountain-high, while from the ravaged farms its fierce flood sweeps along both flock and fold.”

-Virgil’s *Aeneid*

Siege of Wolegast

December 6, 830

After arriving to the island of Rügen with Tveggi, who quickly secured a position as a translator with a wealthy local jarl, Hrorik found himself wandering the market each morning, waiting for his sister Hildr to arrive, looking into the face of every grizzled trader for his father. Tveggi's troubling words about evil priests and dead Gods had lit a fire under his impatience though. His mind swam in a sea of turmoil, a storm of words in his thought-trove. He and his sister planned to meet here on the summer solstice, but as it approached, she still hadn't arrived.

Finally, a week before the solstice, a small fleet of ten ships led by Konungr Ragnvald arrived into the deep harbor. Hildr's Sea Sprint slid through the waves at the front of the pack of sea-wolves. The feast which ensued upon their arrival was unexpected. However, once the drinking began Hildr let slip the konungr's purpose. He had gathered an army to take the settlement of Wolegast, now held by the Veleti. Some Obotrite chieftain had called for allies to take the fortress, which would allow them all to secure the trade route which snaked across the southern coast of the Baltic Sea. With Wolegast in Gotlander allies' hands, trade between Rügen and Truso could more easily be protected and controlled.

Hrorik had been skeptical at first, but his sister knew a good plan when she saw one. And he needed to bloody his axe with the blood of steel-clad enemies, not just wolves and bears. With the loot they received from this expedition, they could pay for the trip east.

Upon arriving to Wolegast, the Veleti shieldwall gathered on a little rise in front of the frozen lagoon which surrounded their fortress. At least three hundred Veleti had left the fortress

to do battle with the two hundred Gotlander, Dane, Norse, and Svear warriors Ragnvald brought with him ahead of his allies' forces who were still in route. Hrorik could see their wojewoda, the war-leader of their tribe, standing before their ranks in an ornate helmet trying to encourage them with yells and violent gestures. Such men did not impress Hrorik. It was killing that mattered in battle, not rally cries or wild gesticulations.

In contrast, Konungr Ragnvald was silent until it was time to charge. His massive frame made Hrorik feel small even though he was a hand taller than the older man. The leader's bulk was just impressive, but not like the wide fatty girth of the Frankish nobles to the west he had heard tell of. No, Ragnvald's arms were like great scarred tree limbs and his legs as thick as stumps and nearly as hairy as a bear's. His impressive countenance was what had drawn Hrorik into his entourage at the feast.

To begin that first battle outside the fortress, one of Ragnvald's grizzled hirdmen began to beat his blade against his shield, and they all began to march forward in step. The middle of their shield wall began in double-time as the sides kept a slower pace, and the tusk, a great spike of steel, wood, and flesh, began to rise, pointed straight at the center of the Veleti line.

Ragnvald had explained it on the ship to Hrorik before they had landed. They would shape their line into a wedge, the tusk, to puncture the shieldwall. The very tip would be led by his most fearsome hirdmen who would break the enemy line and peel off to either side behind them to commence slaughter. It was a quick and brutal plan, one he had made work against Norsemen and Danes, Franks and Frisians, or so he claimed. Hrorik knew great leaders tended to exaggerate, as his father did at times. But as he entered his first battle, he truly thought Ragnvald knew everything there was to know about fighting, about battle, about warfare. He would come to find that he was sorely mistaken, as the Konungr had no clue how to conduct a siege.

Being as young as he was, Hrorik was given a place near the edge of the shieldwall in the third line, but he jostled his way toward the center and front as they all began to pick up their pace into a charge. His bulk made it easier to push his fellow warriors aside. Thirty paces from the enemy those with javelins or bows rushed forward and fired into their line. Many of the enemy had bows also, and a rain of hail-stones-from-the-bowstring began to fall upon the Gotlanders.

The Veleti surged forward at the last moment to meet their charge. There was a tremendous clash of shields and weapons, as the two sides met. Hrorik had never heard such a clamor. The smell of offal and piss filled the air before it was washed out by the irony stench of the wound-sea. He had made it to the edge of the pointed tusk, only behind one man in their ranks. Hrorik pushed upon his back when he fell backwards into him, throwing the man back at the Veleti line. His push straightened the man, but a spear gutted him from the right as he blocked an axe swing from the left. Hrorik stepped into the front line. The center of the Veleti was beginning to buckle. The clamor of shouts and blade-thunder had nearly made him deaf.

Once in the front of the battleline he found that his shield was too high for him to protect the man to his left's legs at all. He did not know the short warrior but saw him fall to an enemy spear thrust into his thigh, an attack he should have been able to block but was too tall to do so without jeopardizing his own protection. The Veleti warrior across from him kept up an onslaught of spear jabs, causing Hrorik to continuously block with his shield. He could barely get a swing in with his large axe as it was truly meant to be swung with two hands. He had thought before battle that he would be strong enough to swing it with ease one handed, but found now that he was fighting, it was not as easy as he had imagined once in the thick of it. The

enemy did not disappear after each swing of his stick like the imagined enemies of his youth or lunge into a spear unconcerned with its own safety like the wolf.

Finally, as Hrorik saw the first of the hirdmen break through the back of the enemy shieldwall, he had enough of this dancing about and slammed his shield sideways into the Veleti's face, using the metal rim to cave in the man's nose. He chopped with his axe into his chest as he fell backwards, and Hrorik rushed into the gap. His shield boss battered another face, leaving a circular cut on the man's forehead. He then threw it aside, befouling another enemy's legs, as he grasped his axe with both hands and began to chop into their line. Like felling saplings, he waded into their mass, uncaring of his own safety. Blades cut at his arms and legs, while his mail shirt deflected the blows to his chest and back. The fury of battle was rising inside him. The red blur of sword-storms overtook his mind. As the faces of the enemy appeared before him, they disappeared in his wound-sea rage. None could stand before him.

As he bashed aside the last rank of enemies, he saw that their line was broken with two punctures through it, where the tusk point penetrated and where his own axe wielding had ripped a bloody hole. Their men were in the slaughter of battle now. The enemy was fleeing back toward their fortress nearly a route but for their wojewoda who rallied a square of fifty or so warriors into an orderly retreat across the ice. Hrorik charged the dense mass of enemies along with several of the other battle-raged warriors. Their shouting blades met shield and flesh, but they could not break them.

Hrorik's axe was beginning to grow heavy, the battle-rage running thin. Finally, he noticed that he had lost his felt cap somewhere in the melee. His ears were growing cold. They could not break the enemy. As the square drew closer to the walls the Gotlanders came into range of the archers who were crowded atop the walkway behind the wall's parapet. A tall

woman commanded them. Her long light brown hair was covered by a skullcap helm, but he could tell her sex from the form of her body underneath her clothing and cry of her voice over the sounds of battle, cutting through like a sweet spring from hard stone.

Like most of their enemy warriors, very few of the Veleti had any armor much less ring-mail. Even the small helm on her head showed she had status. Hrorik could see the icy fire in her eyes as she looked down at him before firing another arrow. He was barely able to block it with his shield before it could skewer him. They must be desperate if they had the women on the walls.

Arrows began to rain down upon them. Hrorik saw Thorbrand and Tjodolf, two of the men he had cross the whale-road with, both struck down as they charged at the enemy wildly. Their battle fury had made them careless and dead. Several more of Ragnvald's men fell to this covering fire before they retreated across the ice to the rest of their companions who were looting the dead enemies for what paltry booty they could find. Hrorik returned with them but could not stop thinking about the warrior woman firing arrows at them. His sister would have done the same, as she was an accomplished though reluctant warrior. Some women took up the scales of trade for their family's benefit, but far fewer took up the tools of war also. Who was that woman with the bow?

Though only seventeen, Hrorik towered over most of his companions. He always had. Every old warrior told him his fiery beard meant that he was destined for battle, for the raging fire of spear-din. But war had not turned out exactly like he had imagined while fighting mock

battles with his friends back on his home island of Gotland. The arm length sticks from the woods had been their swords, the farmhouse and outbuildings the fortress and the surrounding settlements, and every inch of his family's homestead his land to defend from enemies imagined and corporeal.

At ten he put those skills to the test when an old wolf prowled into the yard. He strung his bow quick as lightning and ran out the door with spear in hand also but forgot his arrows in his rush. The great silver and black beast took one look at him and nearly chilled his blood to ice. That was a killer's stare. The kind his father, Vabka, got when he spoke of the horsemen who attacked his ships on the rivers beyond the land of Austrvegr.

The wolf's muzzle was grayed, a beard of age, while one of its eyes was milky white with a scar running down to its nose. The creature had seen battle while the boy had not. The wolf knew the shape of a bow, knew what it could do from a distance, and charged. Hrorik remembered what his father had told him though. "When te be-ast cherges get te butt a' ya spe-ar in te grund and aim te point at i's he-art," His foreign accent always made the village children laugh when he bartered with other merchants. He had this funny thing he did with his tongue, like a click or a clack, whenever he was thinking. Hrorik missed it. But he did not miss the old wolf's heart that winter day seven years ago. He impaled the beast on his spear and proved to his mother that he could protect her, even when father was away in his homelands or beyond trading for a year or more.

His first battle had gone well also, but it was this damned waiting outside the tall timber walls which weakened his resolve. He just wanted to get it over with. To get to the spear-din, to give his blood-ember a drink from battle-sweat. That first day of battle had been glorious for him. He felt his entire life had led up to that moment of blade-song.

Afterward, they made camp in what was left of the village across the lagoon opposite the fortress, and the waiting began. First Ragnvald sent men to negotiate, then the wojewoda sent men out to barter further, until one of the Veleti pulled a knife on Ragnvald, who caught the slim blade barehanded before headbutting him with his helm, cracking the man's skull. All four of the Veleti were then cut down in a flurry of blows by the hird. Negotiations had ended there.

Now, they just waited. And Hrorik hated waiting. He grew sick of Ragnvald's ineptitude in this manner of warfare. Sure, he knew how to break the enemy line, but had no plan of stopping their retreat or breaching the enemy's walls. Why had he not brought horses to chase the enemy once they were put to flight or built a ram from a ship's mast to break the gates, Hrorik could not imagine. The forces from Rügen and Tisso were supposed to arrive soon, but when? Though he had asked the konungr many times, he received no answer but a stare of disdain. Ragnvald blamed Hrorik's breaking the enemy line too quickly for their escape.

"You did not follow orders."

"You should have stayed in the shieldwall."

"Your recklessness caused the battle plan to fail."

These were the only answers he received from the hirdmen who would even deign to speak to him.

After a week went by, Ragnvald announced they would settle into winter here in. Hrorik could see it. The entire winter and into spring they would freeze and starve outside these walls, launching futile, spontaneous assaults upon the fortress at intervals. The stench of the marsh would bring sickness. More warriors would arrive to take their share of the loot. He was not going to just wait here for months, wasting his youth. He'd already wasted months waiting for this assault to start, long enough to cause his sister to have to leave. She could not wait all Fall

and Winter for an assault, so she'd taken her ship to Haithabu to trade, but had yet to return. He needed a plan to break this siege, so he could go find his father.

As the dawn of the third week outside the walls rose above the ring-of-the-earth, Hrorik stood at the edge of the besieging camp watching the enemy sentries peak over the top of the wooden walls of Wolegast. Their icy breath left their beards looking speckled with age. The besiegers had thrown themselves at those walls too many times. The strip of icy ground which surround the fortress had turned to mud, likely a swamp in summer, awash in salty brine from the surrounding lagoon. This place would stink of decay come Spring. If only they could shatter the gates, they could be inside, but Konungr Ragnvald had tried many times and failed.

The Veleti had too many archers and heavy rocks to throw down at them. It was as if they had ten fletchers and a quarry inside the walls. Hrorik had been there during the last attempt and nearly lost his head to a large stone being thrown from atop the walls. The little mousey man who had thrown it grimaced down at the warriors with not a little bit of desperation in his eyes. But Hrorik had caught the stone with his shield. It had left a large dent in the metal boss; a jagged crown now rimmed the circular metal half-sphere. His shoulder was still sore from the blow. Maybe the jagged metal would cut the face of the next enemy Hrorik bashed with it on top of knocking out their teeth. He hoped so because he had been here at this siege far too long. He was not even sure if the booty they would get from taking the fortress would be worth it, but this was his first real war, and he must prove himself.

Not willing to just wait around all winter, Hrorik had spent the last few weeks hatching a plan, which was now finally ready. He'd found a willing compatriot in the chieftain of the

Obotrites who had joined their army. The troop of fifty mounted warriors had arrived after the second week of waiting. As Hrorik was one of the few in the konungr's force who knew their language, he was tasked with negotiating for their help. He'd learned the Slavic tongue from his father, as it was his native language. Though the dialect was a bit different, he could communicate with them.

Their leader was a tall man with a tawny look, both lithe and haggard, as his long dark blonde hair was constantly falling into his face. The strange ring he wore in his ear was of a six-pointed star design.

Grinning, the Slav jumped down from his stocky horse and greeted Hrorik when he met them at the edge of the village which had become their camp, "Heye, I'm Malchin the Quiet. Leader of these dung ridden beasts I call warriors. T'anks for your 'elp with these fools. The Veleti have always been my friends til now. En'mies you and I's peoples were not too long ago, but now were friends, eh?" Some of the terms he used were in Norse, others from his own Slavic language though many of the forms were awkward for the red-haired warrior to understand.

Hrorik responded, "I am Hrorik the Fire-Bearded, as you can see." He stroked his thick facial hair. He had been able to grow a beard since he was thirteen years old, and it had only grown thicker each year. "We have killed many of their warriors in a battle outside the walls, but they were able to retreat."

Malchin struggled for a moment over Hrorik's name, "RRorriik, Khroork... Rurik. I will just call you Rurik my friend. Tell me of t'e battle."

Hrorik got over the butchery of his name quickly as he described the events. Malchin the Quiet was anything but silent, as he talked to Hrorik plenty, asking questions about what had transpired so far and imparting information about the enemy forces and their fortress.

“Malchin knows this land. Knows this berg. Been inside I ‘ave, often, to trade fur and ‘oney. Kobn... or um ‘Orsees too. Slow ones I bring ‘ere, for the Estes to the north of my ‘omeland pay well for the fast ones. Here a strong slow ‘orsee will do. All they do is plow. The Estes race ‘em t’ough. Maybe Malchin show you one day?”

“Maybe later, I know a thing or two about horses myself, but you can tell me how many men are likely to be inside, where the walls are weakest? Maybe how much loot is inside?” Hrorik was keen to find a way to end the waiting.

“A-a-a-a!” Malchin’s laughter stirred memories in Hrorik’s ears, not the low rumble of laughter of Norsemen, but like that of his father, Vabka who had grown up to the north and east of these lands, near Lake Ladoga. He always let out the staccato “A-a-a-a!” After telling a bawdy joke. Hrorik had not seen his father for two years now though. He’d left on the journey to Sarkel in high spirits promising to return within a year, but they had not received word from him since, even when some of the other far-traveling merchants who he associated with returned to Gotland. They too had no word of him.

“Your eyes do look into the distance now. Remember somet’ing?” Malchin was still grinning. “I remember t’ere do be at least t’ree ‘undred fighters that old wojewoda Aetti can muster. But it’s the women you will have to worry about. Nearly doubles t’eir number w’en you make an attack on t’e berg. T’e walls are sound. ‘Ard to crack. Not two summers past, we attacked when their men were gone out raiding. Your shores likely, A-a-a-a-a!”

Hrorik was intrigued. If they had already made an assault and failed, then maybe he could learn from their mistake. “So how did you try to get in?”

“First, we did try and climb t’e walls, but failed cause arrows and stones from t’e ferocious women battered us. So, we built ourselves a umm... ‘ut? A tiny-berg of timber’s

underneath the walls. T'was raining so the ground was wet and t'eir torches would not set it afire. We dug at the base of the walls for t'ree days, tearing up a much earth. But even after t'at we could not bring it down. T'ere are crossways timber's hooking the upright ones toget'er, as well as supports driven into t'e ground behind. T'e men who were raiding returned and drove us off before we could break it down." Malchin frowned, and for the first time fell silent for a while. He'd lost friends in that attack as well as his younger brother, though he was not about to tell Hrorik all of his secrets.

Hrorik chewed on his words. He had considered something similar, trying to undermine the walls enough to make them collapse. There must be a better way though, he was sure. By the third week of the siege, all was set for his plan. Ragnvald had called for an attack on the gate once again. Likely to be haphazard and fruitless. Some of the hirdmen had attached grappling hooks to ropes. They would get stuck full of arrows as they tried to climb the walls if their skulls weren't crushed by thrown rocks.

Hrorik shared his plan with Malchin. The Obotrite chief was ecstatic, convinced it would work. His mounted warriors were more circumspect, but Malchin swayed them. If they could attack the fortress now, they would not have to share the booty with the other allied forces who were supposed to be one their way.

"Rurik, you are a smart man, let me tell you, a smart man. You and I shall be friends after this. I am sure." Malchin's mischievous grin split his face.

The Gotlanders and other mercenaries who had arrived after the initial attack made a shieldwall as they approached the fortress, now numbering nearly three hundred. Hrorik placed himself near the center of the mass of men as he had thrown his shield over his back in order to

grasp the haft of his axe with two hands. He'd honed the blade incessantly for the past two days. The icy cold air made the steel blade into a cold silvery blue.

As they rushed forward to the walls under a hail of arrows, Hrorik stayed behind his companions' shields, waiting for his moment. He could smell the sweat and piss of the other warriors surrounding him, but no nervousness entered his thoughts, only the battle-peace bestowed by Odin. Maybe Tveggi was wrong, and the Gods still lived but just somewhere else? The ritual sacrifices back at Rügen had looked like those he'd seen growing up on Gotland. The same kind of knife, the ancient grove of trees, and importance of sacred blood. But who was he to understand the Gods? He was a warrior, a raven-feeder.

At ten paces from the gates, with rocks and javelins now pelting them, the back row of warriors heard a terrible clattering sound. Ten of Malchin's mounted Obotrites were driving their other horses towards the gates with torches. They'd placed blinders over the horses they were not riding's eyes so they would charge no matter what was in front of them. If the Gotlanders did not move they would be trampled, so they began to peel off to the sides in fright, breaking formation. With five paces to go to the gate Hrorik sprang out from behind the shielded warrior in front of him, rushing forward with his axe raised high.

Arrows whizzed past his head. A spear struck the ground not a span to his left.

In between the gate's timber doors was a small crack, which he'd noticed on their last assault. His eyes were fixed on this sliver of light between the wood. The axe blade cut down into the timber locking the doors with a vicious cracking. Hrorik's muscles clenched as he lifted the blade once more. One more swing. He could hear the thundering of hooves behind him but did not turn. He lifted his axe once more, bringing it down into the crack. A splintering of wood.

The thunder of a horse charge filled his ears though. The timber lock was nearly severed. Would the horses be able to break it the rest of the way?

Hrorik stood alone at the gate as the rest of the force had split in two to let the horses through. Turning around he timed his leap and sprang between the foremost two horses. Grasping out with his hands for saddle or reins, anything to pull himself out of the stampeding beasts. His hand caught hold of the reins of the dappled mare in the second row of horses to his right, and with a vicious tug he was torn from his feet. He could feel the skin of his hand lacerated by the reins. Then he was being dragged forward. He bit his cheek to keep from screaming. The taste of his own blood filled his mouth, while the smell of victory filled his nostrils. Then the world went black as he felt his head slam against something hard.

Malchin had timed it perfectly, he was quite proud of himself. The lead horses' heads and chests smashed into the gates, bursting them open. Both beasts stumbled and toppled to the ground. A worthy sacrifice for the prestige of being the first into the fortress.

He saw Rurik dive between the first two horses and wrap his hand around the reins of a horse in the next row which charged into the packed courtyard. Malchin rode through the gate into the maelstrom of horse and human flesh. Well maybe second inside, but if Rurik lived through this, he deserved the honor. The man was mad.

Malchin's horse's eyes were wild as he pushed her into the press. The Veleti were scattered by the stampede, many trampled by the horses, others fleeing in a panic. But once the horses' rush was dulled with nowhere to go, the enemy would quickly begin regrouping. The Gotlanders poured through the gates though, spear and sword, axe and shield, iron, and fury.

Malchin rode down a Veleti trying to flee from him, jabbing his barbed spear into his shoulder blades, the point punctured deep into his chest. Malchin left it there, then turned his horse back toward the melee pulling his mace from his belt. No shield walls formed in the courtyard, for the horses began to kick whenever anyone came to close to them. The sounds of battle were driving the beasts mad as they could not see due to the blinders. Only Malchin and five of his fellow Obotrites were still mounted on unblinded horses. Gathering they made several charges into the press of Veleti gathering around Wojewoda Aetti.

Malchin had met the man once and hated him. Aetti had forced him to pay a tribute of horses to receive the right for his people to trade in Veleti lands. Maybe Malchin was being petty, but he'd sworn then that he would take the bastard down.

Ragnvald and his hirdmen formed a small tusk before charging into the mass of enemies. Malchin could see the konungr's eyes wild with battle rage as he tore into the enemy swinging sword and shield. Both were deadly in the arms of the stout warrior. Not the kind of fighting Malchin preferred.

As he charged at the enemy once again, having lost his companions in the maze of loose horses, four Veleti surrounded him with spears. As he blocked one spear to the left with his small shield, he parried another coming from his right with his mace. The other two enemies drove their spears into his horse's chest though. As it reared in pain, Malchin tried to fling himself backwards out of the saddle, not wanting his leg to be crushed by the falling beast. He tumbled backwards out of the saddle but did not land well. He fell right onto his back, and something sharp drove into his side. He'd lost his mace but still held onto his shield. The horse had cracked the face of one of the four attackers, but the other three now closed in on him, sharp blades ready to strike.

Hrorik's head was pounding. The sounds of clashing arms, the smells of death, and the taste of blood filled his head. He stumbled to his feet, shaking his head to clear his mind.

Looking around, he saw that he was inside the walls, near the far wall from the gate. The horse he had grabbed ahold of was tossing and kicking into the air few paces off, but his axe was nowhere to be seen. His right hand was a mess of lacerations, covered blood, a wound-sea.

Thankfully, he'd looted a decent sword from one of the slain in the first battle outside the fortress.

He pulled it from its scabbard only to find that the blade had broken in half during his wild tumble into the fortress. As he looked about for another weapon, he caught sight of Malchin. The crazy Slav tried to spring from the back of his horse as it reared up, two spears buried in its chest. Rushing towards them, Hrorik raised the only weapon he had, the half a sword. The pain in his hand screamed, or maybe that was his bellowing voice? Hrorik couldn't tell.

The three attackers were not ready for the giant red-haired berserker. As they surrounded Malchin readying to strike, Hrorik pounded into the nearest one, using his half sword to carve a vicious wound across the man's face. Then, tossing the body into the man to his right, he spun around. The third attacker swung his spear toward Hrorik, trying to cut his face with the blade, but Hrorik's large hand grasped the haft of the spear before it could connect. He jerked the weapon towards himself and to the side then gutted man as he stumbled over Malchin's flailing legs. The Slav had pushed himself across the ground and kicked. As Hrorik threw the gutted man aside, the final attacker had succeeded in extracting himself from his friend with the face wound.

He brought his spear up and began to back away, fearing the red-haired giant who approached him at a steady pace with nothing but a broken sword to fight with.

Malchin got to his feet and picked up the gutted man's spear. He and Hrorik then split to the right and left as they charged the final enemy. The man nearly turned and ran before their onslaught but was caught by a spear in his thigh and a broken sword across the back of his neck. The two sword-brothers then turned toward the remaining mass of enemies, moving in tandem, two serpents ready to strike with deadly fangs of steel. Hrorik picked up Malchin's fallen mace, not knowing it was the Slav's weapon. The small head of the weapon was an array of four dark gray steel points, now matted with the raven-wine of the fallen.

Smiling Malchin said, "That weapon will serve you well."

Hefting the weapon in his hand, Hrorik dropped the broken sword, then picked up a shield from one of the dead enemies. "It will work until I can find a proper sword. Or my damned axe." The blood pouring from his lacerated hand went unnoticed.

The Gotlanders pushed the remaining Veleti in the courtyard into a corner of the fortress. Upon the walkway of the walls, a fierce battle still raged between many of the women of the fortress and the attackers. At the ladder, directly behind the remaining Veleti on the ground, the tall light brown-haired woman stood her ground with spear and shield. Several Gotlanders had fallen to her precise jabs with the spear point, and the others backed off to throw javelins at her. However, before they could strike, a flight of arrows flew into them from across the fortress, as the helmed woman jumped to the ground from the parapet.

When she landed, she twisted her ankle badly. Finally, after recovering her feet, limping, she turned toward her remaining kin and husband, only to witness the death of their wojewoda, Aetti, her spouse.

Hrorik and Malchin rushed into the melee, fighting at each other's side. Along with the pressure from the hirdmen and Ragnvald, the enemy line began to break. Hrorik pushed his way into the very heart of the enemy, his eyes ever fixed on the wojewoda in the ornate helm. Enemies arose to right and left, falling to Hrorik's vicious mace swings and shield bashes with ease. He still had not found a good sword or axe, so he bashed heads and chests. The crunching surprised Malchin. He'd never been able to swing the weapon with such force. He kept behind the red haired giant as he went berserk, striking out with his spear only when the opportune moment struck.

As Hrorik shoved another dead enemy to the side, he found himself opposite the wojewoda. The ornate helm made his face seem as if a great bird spread its wings out over his eyebrows. Two dragon heads with licking tongues emerged from the outstretched wings. Hrorik knew then, that he would choose this as his booty once he killed the man. That helmet would be upon his head by the end of the day.

Not wanting to damage his potential loot, Hrorik rushed forward, swinging low with the mace while he made it seem as if his shield arm was injured, leaving it useless at his side. The wojewoda took the bait and tried to stab into Hrorik's chest as he blocked the mace with his shield. Hrorik twisted his body, half turning as he brought his shield around and up lightning fast to smash the metal rim against the wrist of the wojewoda. A loud crack rang out as the bones snapped. The wojewoda dropped his sword. In that moment Malchin sprang from behind Hrorik

and stabbed their enemy in the abdomen. The wojewoda doubled over. Hrorik then slammed his shield downward into the back of the wojewoda's neck with a crunching of bones. His body began to twitch as it hit the earth.

The sounds of battle were beginning to subside. As Hrorik looked up from his final kill, he saw the beautiful war-maiden from the walls looking on in horror. She ran towards her husband's convulsing body on the ground. Crying out in anger and anguish, she crouched by his side. Looking down at her, Hrorik decided that she would also be his loot from this battle, as would be his right for slaying their leader. Ragnvald would be furious. Hrorik smiled.

Part 3

“When Agamemnon’s party is preparing to sail, Achilles’ ghost appears and tries to prevent them by foretelling what will happen. Agamemnon sets out after making a sacrifice, and puts in at Tenedos, but Thetis comes to Neoptolemus and persuades him to wait for two days and make sacrifice, which he does. The others set sail, and meet with a storm near Tenos, for Athena had besought Zeus to send a storm on the Greeks; and many ships sink.”

-Fragment from Anonymous’ *The Returns*

Chapter 7

“It seems that sleep will hold him before long; see, his head is falling backwards. Yes, a sweat is pouring over his whole body, and a vein of dark blood has burst out from his heel. Come, let us leave him in peace, my friends, so that he may fall asleep!”

-Neoptolemus in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

Cold Conclusions

August 31, 830

She couldn't stand the way they looked at her. She knew the eyes of judgment. The stare of superiority, disappointment. All she could hope for was to get away. To find a new home. It had not been her fault.

The child who died was doomed; she'd done all she could. But they would not listen. First the whispers of "sorceress" were quiet, but they grew in number and decibel every day. Sui knew she had to leave very soon. Before someone acted out against her. That would only cause them all more pain, but she could not help the outcome to a hostile action against her. If they harmed her, the spirits would curse them whether she wanted them to or not. Their power burgeoned within her; she could feel them. Every day, as the rumors spread, her own power grew, more spirits gathered within her.

Finally, before the season's turn, before the chill of Autumn set in, she left. Her brother needed her, and he would not survive alone with none to take care of him. Though they had been born to a minor branch of the ruling clan, the Ashina, that did not promise protection after failure.

And her brother Buqa had failed. Upon the battlefield if a warrior was struck from behind, he'd failed in his duty. The craterous dent in the back of his head, made it clear to the Khagan Beq that Buqa had fled in the midst of battle, or allowed an enemy to sneak up behind him. Either was a failure to a true warrior. But Sui knew the truth. She'd seen it in her vision.

As Buqa had faced three enemies, his rival for the warband he led, struck him from behind with his mace. Her brother had flailed on the ground screaming for minutes afterward. He

had been abandoned on the steppe to die. Sui had seen it all in her trance though; she'd seen every moment of chaos and pain.

Leaving before dawn the next morning, she had ridden out alone to retrieve him. The enemy was long gone by the time she arrived, and her brother still twitched in the blood-soaked mud. She tended to him there under the great blue sky for three days, calling in spirit of healing she could, until she thought him able to survive the journey home.

Though he'd nearly died, he was alive. Just not the same.

Now, she left home again, this time with her brother on the back of a new mount she'd traded her yurt and most of her possessions for. He trailed behind her, his eyes unseeing. But he was alive, just lost in his mind. Lost in the Underworld.

Her visions of that were a waking nightmare, but she did not know how to heal him fully. She'd done all she could, and he was alive. The drool that dripped from the side of his mouth had stained his once fine caftan. Her eyes were raw and red from night after night trying to heal him. Maybe that was why that baby had died? Was she too tired to do her job properly, too tired to perform the rituals? She'd done them though. They just hadn't worked. Time after time, she failed to heal someone.

What else was she to do but flee?

Chapter 8

“The poets say that the victim of Apollo was a dragon posted by Earth to be a guard for the oracle. It is also said that he was a violent son of Crius, a man with authority around Euboea. He pillaged the sanctuary of the god, and he also pillaged the houses of rich men. But when he was making a second expedition, the Delphians besought Apollo to keep from them the danger that threatened them.

Phe-monoe, the prophetess of that day, gave them an oracle in hexameter verse:

At close quarters a grievous arrow shall Apollo shoot

At the spoiler of Parnassus; and of his blood-guilt

The Cretans shall cleanse his hands; but the renown shall never die.

It seems that from the beginning the sanctuary at Delphi has been plotted against by a vast number of men. Attacks were made against it by this Euboean pirate, and years afterwards by the Phlegyan nation; furthermore by Pyrrhus, son of Achilles, by a portion of the army of Xerxes, by the Phocian chieftains, whose attacks on the wealth of the god were the longest and fiercest, and by the Gallic invaders. It was fated too that Delphi was to suffer from the universal irreverence of Nero, who robbed Apollo of five hundred bronze statues, some of gods, some of men.”

-Pausanias' *Description of Greece*

Rock Home

October 13, 830

The dreamscape rolled out before her. The roiling mountains in the distance and purple sun rays illuminating waters laced with geometric patterns pounded into her vision, bright vibrant.

As she stepped from the path of known into the shift. A great city arose as a bull's head from the soil, horns glistening with blood. A chaotic wave of humanity cased in bronze and gold threw themselves at the sharp gates. Spikes skewering them. They broke against it, again and again, until a hero emerged from the ranks, shining, a golden sun. Fiery blaze of desire in his eyes. Axe in hand he slew the bull.

The walls crumbled as the rain of lightning began. Striking the burning hero until he fell dead. Eyes blackened, mouth agape in terror.

She awoke from her dream, cold sweat soaking her furs. The darkness of the cave brought no comfort. Her drum lay smashed at her feet. Her hands were bloody, sliced by the splintered wood.

The moaning began again. Her brother's terror dreams. Even worse than her own. She knew the warrior was coming, but when? Would her brother be able to protect her? He was strong, but uncontrollable. He might be off hunting with his teeth while the red armored, fiery haired man arrived.

Her brother's nightmares never ended, since they'd arrived here, he had become calmer than when they lived with their tribe. His man-child weeping and moaning did not disturb the elders causing them to complain any longer. Every time he closed his eyes he was back in the horrors of battle, every time he died, over and over again.

She had no cure for whatever ailed him though. No special remedy to heal him. After he returned from the Khagan's war with Qipchak, he had never been the same. The blow to his head had addled his wits, while the horrors he had experienced turned human contact into a waking nightmare. Everyone but her was an enemy. Only her soft voice and smile could bring him back from the terrifying rages.

They'd been in these caves for months now. And things were getting better, but she knew the fiery red warrior was on his way to make a new war upon her, upon her brother.

He refused to let even her near him with a knife, so his hair had become a matted mass of tangles and knots. His fingernails had grown grotesquely long, nearly claws of a beast, while his beard was a nettle bush obscuring his face. She pitied him, almost enough to put him out of his misery while he slept. But who would protector her from the fiery warrior of her dreams? Who would face the enemy? Someone had to wield the lightning. Someone had to be the focus of her wicked power.

Synopses:

Chapter 9: Sui and Buqa struggle to feed themselves in winter. Buqa kills several herdsmen nearby, gnawing on their flesh. Rumors spread of a monster living at the Tor which they have made their home in.

Part 4: Iaphagos has in depth conversations with ar-Razzaq about Neoptolemus. Al-Abbas gets married. He travels to Egypt with his father Caliph Al-Ma'mun where they reopen the Great Pyramid at Giza. After a successful campaign against the Byzantines, Al-Ma'mun suddenly dies and his brother takes control of the Caliphate, leaving al-Abbas out of any role in the government as the mamluk's nearly started a revolt to place him on the throne.

Part 5: Tveggi, Hrorik, Hildir, and Malchin go east to Estonia, Staraya Ladoga, and on to the Volga, where some find service with the Khazar Khagan.

Part 6: Sui and Buqa find themselves hunted further into the steppe by angry locals for the killing of herdsmen. Sui struggles to find her answers within her trance states.

Part 7: Iaphagos arrives to the Khazar Khagan's court where Tveggi and Hrorik are serving as mercenaries. Al-Abbas and ar-Razzaq also arrive to the itinerant court as diplomats. Conversion of the Khazars to Judaism scene, which delegates from the other religions arguing, is witnessed by all the principal characters present.

Part 8: The group is given their quest by the Khagan Beq to go kill the monster on the steppes whose lair is hidden beneath the Sunduki mountains far out on the steppes. The party ventures into the unknown.

Part 9: Sui knows they are coming, and Buqa is more agitated than normal. The final scenes mirror the death of Neoptolemus at Delphi, with Hrorik dying to a lightning bolt strike as he tries to kill Buqa atop the escarpment where a stone stands which is said to be the center of the world. Sui is taken captive by Tveggi.

Epilogue:

The Porter's Parable

April 2, 835

By the holy graces of our Lord, after serving in the monastic cell atop Monte Corona for fifteen years, I was awarded the position of porter by the venerable Abbot Bonus Strategius. I did not deserve this high honor but was willing to serve in any way our Lord God directed me. I had gained a reputation for timeliness and patience with our younger monks, and the abbot saw in his wisdom that I would be well suited to guarding our portal into the chaos and turmoil of the world of sin surrounding us. Our previous gatekeeper Brother Simeon, a most pious and stalwart follower of Christ, recently passed away in the last strike of the evil plague which God has sent to fair Italy in order to punish us for our wickedness.

Moving my bedroll and few possessions into the small cell near the gate was strange, as I had shared the sleeping quarters with my brethren for most of my life. My brothers had been my protection against sin, ever present, ever watching. Now, I would sleep alone in this small room and must wake myself all on my own for the Divine Offices, while keeping an ear open to hear any lost souls knocking at the gate. Though still a part of our cenobite community, I would have to endure the loneliness and temptations with the armor of the Holy Word of the Lord, remembering “whatsoever he does in any place is seen by the divine watchfulness and is at all times reported to God by angels.”

I have always envisioned that our small cell stands in direct contrast with the terror of Mount Vesuvius, which lies across the cityscape of Napoli from us. We are the holy defenders to the Gates of Heaven upon God's holy mount, Monte Corona, as Tartarus lies beneath the behemoth volcano, dormant and waiting to fling its destruction once again out upon the world.

Abbot Bonus Strategius has always been, in my mind, the chief porter to the Kingdom of Heaven here in our cell, and now, as his cloister's porter, I would hold some tiny part of that responsibility. With this new duty given to me, I vowed to protect my brothers and the sanctity of our cell.

My daily routine set in easily. I allowed Brother Eulalius, our trusted cellarer, to leave with his small wagon every other morning to procure the fresh supplies from the town which we needed to feed the monks. We could not grow enough to feed ourselves atop our mountain retreat, but the citizens of Napoli were kind to us and traded their goods for all manner of services we could provide. I was freed of my weekly kitcheners duties also, which was a blessing, for I hate to have my fingers wrinkled as prunes from washing. No one else was to leave the cell, unless directed by the abbot, this was my charge, my duty. I found solace in my isolation, even from my own brethren, who could at times be as nagging as the bleating goats we kept.

It was strange for us to receive visitors after dusk, but on my first week of duty a ship lazily pulled into the harbor of Napoli late in the day with three travelers from the East bound for our cell. The first to arrive knocked loudly on the door with his foot. As I was in the newly built Guesthouse attached to the porter's cell, I heard the commotion and quickly went to see who had made their way up the switchback path to our cloistered cell, calling out, "Thanks be to God!" But I received no responsive call.

Opening the gate, I was greeted by the sight of a large man in rich robes with his servant. His large round face was beaded with sweat from the climb up the hill. He revealed himself to be a priest sent from the famous academic Patrician Theodosius in Constantinople to a gathering of Bishops in Rome. His servant with him carried his baggage, but kept to himself, not speaking

any Latin but only Greek. I greeted them both with the peace of our Lord and invited them into our sacred home as guests.

Showing the priest, whose name was Phoebammon, to the Guesthouse, he and I prayed together as the abbot was currently in the middle of his Vespers' lecture with the rest of the monks in the Oratory. I prepared a bowl of water and washed the dust from his feet, saying, "We have received Thy mercy, O God, in the midst of Thy temple."

However, when I turned to clean the feet of his servant, Phoebammon snapped at me. "I have had enough of this Italian buffoonery. Take me to the abbot or bring him here. I cannot stand another moment of your pawing about. And bring some hot food. We will starve to death if you do not hurry yourself."

"I will hurry with the grace of our Lord." I replied.

It had been quite some time since words so sharp and harsh had pieced my ears, but I intended to comply with the priest's wishes quickly, rushing out the door. Their bellies would have to wait, as I was the only monk in our small cell assigned to preparing food for our guests.

Leaving the Guesthouse, I ran up the path towards the Oratory just as a heavenly sound began to waft from the structure. The other monks had begun the Vespers' Hymn. What glory there is in holy words sent up to God the Father!

However, before I could run ten paces out of the Guesthouse, there was another knocking at the gate. This time the foot knocking was softer, almost timid in its calling. Turning about I ran to the gate and called out again, "Thanks be to God!" This time I received an answer but could not make out the words, though I did discern a "Cristus" amid a heavy foreign accent. I opened the door to reveal a road weary monk in rough spun robes. His wild hair stuck out in many strange directions as the stink of sea travel hit my nostrils like the fumes of Mt. Vesuvius,

which loomed behind him. Greeting him with the peace of our Lord, I invited him in also, though I was suspicious of his attire. He seemed to me to be a wandering Gyrovagus. This is the worst kind of monk, who roams the countryside looking for poor peasants to swindle for a few nights' food and rest. However, he claimed his name was Iaphagos and to be from a far-off monastery on the border of Scythia, which his accent attested to as he spoke Latin with an atrocious drawl. Begrudgingly, I led him to the Oratory to join the other monks in the Vespers' Hymn.

The heavenly chorus had lulled slightly as we approached the Oratory, which sat atop a small rise in the middle of the monastery. I led him around to the side door near the dormitory and quietly led him in as another glorious crescendo in the music burst forth from my brothers' lips. The candle lit chamber was filled with God's most holy praises by my brethren, but they were not alone, as the strange bedraggled monk beside me had begun to sing with them. His voice came in the most unearthly tones that have ever touched my ears. I was spell bound while he sang losing all track of time and space as the majesty of our Lord shown through him. The heavenly chorus sung to the shepherds on the first Christmas was revealed to me anew. Our small cell had few visitors, and even fewer who knew the hymns of our Lord. Never had I heard such beautiful sounds, much less from such a meek and mild being. We were blessed upon this day to have such wonderous song emerging from humble lips.

I introduced Iaphagos with the heavenly voice to the rest of the cell, and he was greeted kindly by Abbot Strategius and welcomed to stay with us as long as he desired. Remembering my duties, I then quickly led the abbot to the Guesthouse to meet the priest Phoebammon. However, coming down the hill from the Oratory, we found the gates to the monastery swinging wide open. The creak of the hinges was grating upon my ears, a sharp contrast to the splendid songs of Vespers. I rushed to the Guesthouse fearing for our priestly visitors' safety, but upon

entering I found that neither the priest nor his servant remained. Nor was the reliquary cross which stood upon the mantle of the Guesthouse. Nor the fine silver which we stored in the cabinet. Nor any of the rich gifts which we had diligently collected from the ruins of the old church which stood above the catacombs where the body of Saint Gaudiosus Africanus, founder of our monastic cell, lay. The only item left to us was a painted icon of the Madonna and Child.

This was the only remnant of a past stretching back centuries, which we had vowed to protect. Within a few weeks of the theft, Bishop Giovanni Scriba of Napoli along with the Lombard Prince Sico confiscated the wonderful icon of Madonna and Child from us, saying, “If you cannot hold onto to your riches, pilfered from the catacombs, how can you watch over the sacred tombs of our saints?” The very same day the bishop ordered all of the holiest remains interred in the catacombs, which we had watched over for centuries, to be moved to the crypt below his cathedral. These calamities upon our cell were all my fault. All my doing. For I could not see through the rich pageantry of that false priest. I could not see beyond the splendor of his robes.

Unworthy of my given duties, I soon left the monastery. When Iaphagos readied to leave to continue his journey northward to Rome to look for some ancient scrolls he’d heard might be hidden somewhere below St. Peters, I joined him. I had to find absolution in repentance, in some kind of work for good. Abbot Strategius did not insist upon my leaving, but he understood my need to go. He could see the stain upon my soul. Pride in a cell’s porter to the world’s evils was a most egregious sin. I should have been the protector of my brethren’s holiness, but I had failed in my duties.

In the ragged company of Iaphagos, I would seek forgiveness. There was no hope of recovering our lost treasures. The thieves had more than likely sailed away in the next ship to

cross the sea, but I could cleanse my soul of its wanton nature. It was left unto God that their sins would be punished. Maybe the company of such a humble monk as Iaphagos would do me good, washing away the sin of pride, born of a cloistered, privileged life, from my tainted soul.

I, Gangalando Lamberto, write these words and leave them here for my successor, that he may learn from my most unworthy nature of the duties of a porter. May the grace of God Almighty shine down upon his soul.

-Left for the next Porter of Monte Corona

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