

KNIGHTS OF GOD

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The sea breeze had been strong and robust on that autumn morn when the church bell had rang and the children of the village of Saint Anne's entered its haven. Tom Walters sat on the bench with his slate and chalk at hand, a sharp-witted lad only fourteen but one of the eldest in the class. He had brown locks in tight curls that he took from his father's Saxon roots. Henry Longfellow sat behind him a year younger who had blonde golden hair and as his name suggested a tall but however thin physique. His mother had died at childbirth to him raped by the Norseman invaders and his father long buried, murdered trying to defend the honour of his wife. His hair had not the Saxon trait and this had made the orphan an outcast although the kindly Father Ailean Benedict had taken him under his wing, giving him food and shelter, this had helped Henry survive but the taunts and ignorance of the village children had sometimes cut him deeply. Henry the bastard, Henry the unclean, Henry the Viking and worse for all of these taunts Eairsidh Pendle the son of the blacksmith. Eairsidh the richest lad in the village from his Fathers lucrative trade and like his father was an inherent bully. Many a time Judith Pendle had been seen nursing her swollen beaten face at the hands of her callous and ungodly wife beating husband.

The southerly wind had brought them down from the Hebrides Isle and Ethelred stared upon the shoreline. They had come to pillage and plunder with a murderous loathing for the Saxons coveted in their eyes. His red tangled beard blustered on the sea wind and his back ached upon the oars.

"A settlement ahoy," Ragnall the leader called as the Longboat headed towards land and he knelt to take a hold upon his double headed war axe.

Father Benedict stood before them now as the ten children sat in their pews silently knowing the strict doctrine of the churches schooling rule. This stone building had been the centre and cultural heart of their community for many years. It had a dank taint amongst its old pine beams and a dusty emptiness within its confines.

“Morning,” the Father addressed them in his grey daub cloak and his bald crown circled by a line of hair a Dominican sign of dedication to the Christ.

“Morning Father,” the class replied.

“We shall begin this morning with a story of how two young boys were imprisoned and held in a cage in the City of Rome. Pope Gregory said to the owner of these two slaves “who are they”. The slave trader replied “they are Anglos your eminence”. “They are not Anglos” said Pope Gregory raising his voice “they are Angels have them released at once”. From that story is how I came to be amongst thee for the Pope sent his Priests here to show you and guide you upon the way of light. Now let us continue with the rudiments of Latin and take a reading from the sacred book. We shall all read out a chapter. We will begin with Samuel and Tom you can start us off,” the Father had stated.

Tom fumbled through the Holy book and found the appropriate page. “Fuit vir unus de Ramathaimsophim de monte Ephrain et nomen eius Helcana filius Hieroam filii thau fillii Suph Ephratheus,” Tom Walters read out the chapter loud and coherently. He had only recently settled here at Saint Anne’s, the scarlet plague had took a hold of his former village and his family had to emigrate here nearer the cleaner air of the coast. Tom had a good understanding of Latin, mathematics and alchemy this learning he brought with him. He had become Father Benedict’s most astute pupil and friend within only a couple of short days as the Holy Man had seen something in Toms astute and noble nature.

“Well done Thomas, now let me see yes Henry please continue,”

“Et habuit duas uxores nomen uni Anna et nomen secundae Fenenna fueruntque Fenennae filii Annae autem non errant liberi,” giggles were hushed as Henry struggled with the grammar only managing to form the basics of the words although his teacher knew his upbringing had been harsh and made allowance for him.

“Well done again Henry,” the Father encouraged to the hidden smirks of others.

“Eairsidth you seem keen to carry on for us,” the Blacksmiths son had been the most obvious culprit at belittling Henrys efforts and Father Benedict made a point of making known his annoyance,

“ET ascendebat vir ille de civitate,” the church doors unexpectedly burst open halfway through the reading. A man stood in the doorway it was John Hawks the fisherman.

“The Norseman Father sound the alarm,” he had said the dreaded word.

Father Benedict ushered his class through the back of the church where the belfry stood.

“Run and hide in the woods, do not move from there until I come and find you understood. Tom I hold you responsible lead the way your in charge now,” he had said before turning and toiling the bell of doom.

Peadar Walters kept his line of sight firmly upon the square sail as it closed into the bay. He kept his hand upon his wood axe in readiness with the other men who were prepared to make a stand and defend their homestead.

“From the fury of the Norsemen good Lord deliver us,” he mouthed a few words of prayer as they reached the shoreline.

Tom led them into the Elm wood and they soon became engulfed by the long grass.

“Ouch,” Ceana Drew called out catching her legs upon the nettles and thorns.

“Be quiet you sissy,” Eairsidh teased as his burly frame pushed by her nearly toppling Ceana over.

“Be quiet,” Tom sounded off coming half to Ceana’s defence and he smiled at her lost in her blue glistening eyes. Ceana Drew had pale almost milk skin with mouse brown hair hung in two ponytails that Tom imagined floating ethereally in her wake if ever they untwined.

“Who are you farm boy to tell me to be quiet,” Eairsidh interrupted his thoughts with not liking very much the attention Ceana was showing to this recently arrived boy in his village.

“Farm boy what kind of insult is that you portly and over opinionated oath,” Tom used his learning skills to best his opponents challenge.

“Oath you called me an Oath how dares you. Don’t you know who I am I’m going to teach you a lesson you’ll never forget,” Eairsidh had already took off the classroom smock to give his insulter a hiding.

Eairsidh knew he was larger and stronger and all the children feared his bullying reign of terror however he had not come across Tom before

except in the classroom and they'd not formerly acquainted themselves with Thomas having only just recently settled here in St Anne's.

"If it's a fight your after maybe this is not the appropriate time," Tom responded measuring up his size and having second thoughts as the brute approached him.

Eairsidh though just marched straight up to him and punched him smack on the nose without any warning, which sent Tom flying into a pile of nettles. He lay with blood pouring profusely from his nose as his tormenter laughed out loud above him to his humiliation in front of the others. Especially Ceana who looked away as he had been knocked into the bushes.

"Farm boy wallows like the pig he is," The Blacksmith son now mocked him with.

They watched them with trepidation disembarking their Longboat with their horned helms and roundel shields. These tough bearded Vikings hardened to warfare that had haunted the shores of Britain for many centuries. They grouped together a war party of at least thirty and Peadar looked along the beach at the paltry twenty Saxons of the village only men who had pledged to make a stand. He had a noxious fear gnawing within him and glared at the blue heavens hoping for a miracle.

Tom got to his feet sharply his pride and dignity was at stake even though he had accustomed himself to the fact that he would probably take a massive beating. To Toms surprise his first punch caught the burly lad on the chin and in the eyes of Eairsidh he could discern a sudden terror. He punched again landing one on his nose and the Blacksmiths son stepped backwards now on the defence.

"Come on Tom," Henry encouraged seeing his arch enemy floundering. Tom became brash and followed in his retreating strides but the thundering hammer blow that rattled in his head was unexpected to say the least. The punch so powerful made Thomas see stars and his head spin as another crashed into his mouth splitting his lip. He lay once again in the nettles with the haughty laughter of defeat ringing in his ears.

"Oink for me farm boy while your on your knees," Eairsidh taunted and Ceana now had tears in her eyes.

They ran across the beach roaring like wild beasts with their axes and war hammers brandished. They emerged to become huge giants of men as they drew near and Peadar Walters made a last silent prayer as he gripped his own axe in preparation. Their eyes locked with his red hair and tangled beard coming upon him. Ethelred charged him with his shield knocking the wind from the Saxon as it smashed into his side. Peadar toppled with the blow losing his footing and the Norseman's war hammer followed the momentum of his attack. Peadar made it out luckily catching the glint of the sunlight and rolled to one side as the hammer buried itself into the sand. Agile and alert he swung his right leg back with force catching the Vikings heels and sent him off balance tumbling to the ground also. Ethelred's strong hands gripped the Saxons throat and Peadar heard the red headed man snarl as he spat in his face trying to choke his life from him. Peadar felt himself going blank although he still gripped the axe beneath the weight of his attacker. He used his shoulder to gain some leverage and began exerting his strength lifting the Norseman into the air. He turned the axe blade towards the heavens as his veins in his forehead bulged with the Norseman's hands crushing his throat and the strenuous effort of raising his massive frame. He dropped his weight to the sand abruptly and felt the crunch of bone as the Vikings sternum fell upon the axe head. The strong hands lost their hold and blood ran from Ethelred's mouth, as he lay dead above him.

Tom got to his feet again half blinded in his right eye swollen by the last flurry of blows and the taste of salty blood in his mouth. He came at him again but this time as cautious as a hare with the thumping still reverberating in his head and his vision blurred.

"Give it up Tom." Ceana called not able to stand seeing him take another thrashing but her angelic voice gave Tom a newly found fire within him. He let fly three punches simultaneously the first two were decoys and the third he placed all his might and malice behind. It caught Eairsidh squarely in the face and he lost his legs and went flying into the thicket behind. A cheer went up from the class who had gathered around and Ceana who a moment before had been worried to death now jumped with joy at this change of events.

"Get back on your feet," Tom roared as hungry as a lion.

“No, no more you win,” Eairsdith recoiled in fright and to the shame of the others burst into tears.

Peader pushed the Viking dead weight off him and grabbing the axe headed down the beach. He passed many corpses of his own kin and could see three of them fending off the main body of the Norsemen at the gate of the village. He came at them from behind and had slain three with the axe before the others were aware of this new threat. Seven of them turned with Ragnall the chief to confront him and Peader looked upon them with disdain as blood ran from his leather jerkin.

“Come mighty defilers of women and defilers of the land. I have no fear of thee,” the proud Saxon stated awaiting their onslaught.

The first Dane that took a pace forward got the axe square in the forehead and he collapsed dead upon the earth. The second had his fighting arm severed at the elbow and his war hammer lay at Peader's feet. The Saxon writhed with skill and agility of a warrior as the third came upon him. Peader's axe bounced off his shield and the Vikings axe caught him in his unguarded thigh.

“Aaagh,” the Saxon screamed limping back swinging his axe in his wake for defence.

They set upon him now with more bravado and two charged with shields at their fore but the Saxon ducked and with one mighty swoop took their ankles from them. This had unbalanced himself as well though and he fell, as his wounded leg would no longer support him. He saw the shadows gathering above him and the curved edge of the Norseman's double war axe against the blue skyline as it came down and brought darkness upon him.

The mood in the forest was sombre, the jubilation of Tom's victory had soon ebbed and the fear of what was happening to their village and their families overrode their minds. Then they saw it, the red sky against the dark night that shimmered and flickered as Angels danced amongst the heavens.

“What's that?” Henry questioned.

“I dunno,” Eairsdith remarked gruffly still sulking from his degradation

“Why don't we take a look,” suggested Ceana

“Father Benedict told us to wait for him,” Tom pointed out knowing it was his head on the block for them all even though his own curiosity killed him.

“Bah wait for what,” Eairsidth stated kicking the nettle bushes with boredom.

“Maybe there’s no harm in it, but only two will go the rest will stay here to wait for Father Benedict. Lets draw straws,” Tom proposed the affirmed leader of the group by now.

They collected ten straws of hay and cut two of them short. They all took a turn not knowing in their hearts if they wanted to venture out into the unknown darkness. Henry drew a short lot and Tom picked out the other and it was now there task to discover what had happened at the village.

“Wait here,” Tom reaffirmed to the others as the two of them headed out into the forest.

They crept through the blackness silently until they came to the crest that overlooked Saint Annes. Tom paused and gulped down the dread chasm. He feared the worst, as the stench of the burning timber and caught flakes of floating charcoal upon the wind.

“Lets do it,” he motioned to Henry as they both carefully raised their heads to the scene of unbelievable devastation below.

The village had been put to the torch and it burned voraciously the wooden structures alighted brightly burning across the sand dunned shore. The shadows of the Norsemen could be seen collecting their plunder rounding up the cattle and loading looted goods upon the Longboat. Tom froze as he came to the line of dead bodies lay upon the sand. Even at this great distance and in the firelight he could make out Peadar Walters his father and he wept into his hands. He found an arm on his shoulder and peered to see Henry comforting him.

“I know what it is to bear my friend, I also have lost a father,” he spoke not with the voice of a child but of that of a wise young man who had grown up alone and knew well the rigours of hardship.

“God why have you forsaken me, why my father,” Tom wept long and hard as they stayed below the crest for what seemed an age.

Eventually His tears had run dry and only a bitter rancour stayed within him. He realised they must be thinking about getting back to the others

and Tom hated himself already for having to carry the dreadful news to the others. He got up half heartedly to make a start as they headed back into the Elm Forest they had only gone a short distance when they both stopped in horror as a branch cracked nearby.

“Be still,” Tom whispered to Henry.

Their ears honed into the unearthly silence of the trees and their eyes studied the shadows of the wood with awareness. They stood like statues in the foliage upon baited breath and then a whoosh of branches and a hand grabbed each of them by the scruff of the neck.

“Aaggh,” they both screamed out in shock and terror.

“Be silent you fools,” the voice chastised and they recognised it was Father Benedict’s voice.

“I told you not to stray,” he warned again but held his temper he knew what tragedy had befallen their kin this dark day.

“You were so long,” Tom tried to defend himself but his tutor placed a finger to his lips to restrain him.

A shadow emerged behind them all and they made him out it was John Pendle the Blacksmith who had been hiding in the woods. Tom glared upon him with hate knowing he had forsaken the others and had the same yellow hide that his son possessed now with inheritance.

They found the others huddled in the forest and Father Benedict told them of the great tragedy and their loss. The grief was intense and Tom swore as he made out Eairsidh smirk as he gloated at the others misery. The village women appeared later that day and Flora Walters Tom’s Mother was amongst them. They both cried and hugged for an age not quite believing he had gone-gone forever.

Graves were dug and the bodies buried in the centre of the ruined village. Tom and Henry had helped with the awful duty and the horror of the dead mutilated bodies would enter their nightmares for many a long year. Father Benedict had given each of them prayer and salvation praising them for the bravery they had shown. Unlike John Pendle who now strutted around as if he were a Lord. He had a cart and donkey already loaded as the villagers were moving inland away from the precarious shore. Tom stared down on his Father’s grave with tears on his cheeks as the time had come to leave Saint Anne’s and a hand cupped his shoulder reassuringly.

“In times of great sorrow we all suffer but do not neglect the Lord our Father he will comfort you in the coming days and walk by your side in times of need,” Father Benedict had told him.

“Father you will be by my side and I’m glad your with us,” Tom confided his loyalty to him.

“Alas my boy I’m afraid I will not be journeying inland with you as yet,” he said too Toms sudden horror.” My calling I know is with my flock for I’m their shepherd but I intend to remain here a while longer and repair the church. I’m sure the Good Lord will soon have a calling for me, infact I feel it in my heart inexplicitly and I’m sure my boy that one day we will meet again,”

“Oh Father I will miss you very much,”

“I know Tom It pains me also but sometimes in life we must choose our path the road is not always smooth and well trodden, sometimes the going can be rocky and harsh along unknown trails and arduous to complete. We follow our hearts and the faith in our beliefs upon the journey of life. We will all sometimes make mistakes and even commit sin in these times; you need to turn to the Lord. Ask him for forgiveness and if you keep your heart true and your thoughts pure eventually you will find the journeys end and rest blissfully by the grace of Gods mercy in paradise,”

“Father I will miss your wisdom more than anything else and your friendship very dearly,” Tom had spoken and Father Benedict hugged him with a tear in his eyes these were distressing days with his flock having been scattered and destroyed.

Alexius Comnenus stared longingly with consternation over the battlements of Constantinople his eyes focused upon the west and his thoughts drifting back to his youth and that Terrible Day. The Emperor of Byzantium at that time in the year 1071 had been Romanus Diogenes. Who in March of that year had paraded out of the city gates of Constantinople the capitol of the Holy Roman Empire with 70,000 men to destroy the invaders who had swept from the steppes in the north and had entered their Eastern Territories. The Seljuk Turks had recently advanced from Anatolia in the North and had captured the Holy City of Jerusalem to the South. Alexius Comnenus had then been a

Captain in the Royal Guard and he never envisaged that terrible day that he would be destined to be crowned Emperor of the crumbling remnants of this once mighty Byzantium realm that he had reminisced.

The Army of Romanus had sailed across the Bosphorus on the 2nd week in March and then continued across land passed Nicaea into the lands occupied by the invader. Romanus had divided his forces in two to expedite the search for the main force of the Turkish Army. General Joseph Tarchaniotes an old stern tactician had taken half of the forces with him towards Lake Van while the main body under the direct control of the Emperor had carried on towards the fortress Town of Manzikert. Comnenus had thought even then how the mighty Roman Army had changed only half the Army were now Byzantine born and the majority mercenaries. Norsemen made up the Varangian Guard, Normans and Franks made up the heavy cavalry divisions. Slavs from the North, Turks from the steppes of Russia, Petcheneg, Cuman and Ghuzz made up the auxiliary Companies and Archer Regiments. Comnenus marched proudly with the rest of the Imperial Guard and looked upon this menagerie of other races that were his allies with disdain.

The Emperor Romanus Diogenes had other concerns besides the Turk and his mixed force of warriors. Back in Constantinople he knew Michael Psellus and the Ducas family were resolved to bring his reign to an end and would be plotting against him. He needed a victory to regain back his people's confidence and his own waning popularity. He turned to his Senior Commander General Nicephorus Byrennius a true Noble soldier and loyal friend.

"It is now August my friend how long must we remain out here before we eventually find the Army of these devils," Romanus spoke out his concerns as the Campaign dragged on and his enforced absence from his throne preyed upon his mind deeply.

"Maybe my Liege Tarchaniotes has seen him off already for us," Byrennius answered back more jovially.

General Joseph Tarchaniotes had his own problems though the Cuman Turks had deserted him in the night after his Armies treasury had no more money left to pay them. His Corp d elite the Norman and Frankish cavalry under his command had tired of the venture and had refused point blank to continue any further upon this quest. They turned back

and headed west back to Constantinople. Tarchaniotes left only with auxiliaries and archers knew it would be folly to journey on with such a weakened force and he went in the wake of the Normans back to Byzantium territory.

On the 24th of August Comnenus recalled had been the day the enemy had first been sighted. A small band of horse archers who were pursued across the steppes of Manzikert towards the foothills and gorges at the end of the pass. The Byzantium cavalry came under a heavy counter attack as they reached the foot of the heights to discover to their horror that the whole Seljuk Turk Army stood before them and the chase had been a rouse. General Alyattes who had led the skirmish retreated his horsemen skilfully and reported back to Romanus with the grave news. Alexius Comnenus remembered that night well it still haunted him as he shivered with fear for his first taste of combat would soon be imminent upon the coming dawn. The Emperor too had broken his tent pole on that night and earlier in the expedition his tent had inexplicitly set alight destroying most of his possessions, he had took these mishaps to be bad omens.

Arp Arslan the leader of the Turks had been preparing for war but not with the Byzantium's but with the Fatimed Dynasty now ruling in Egypt. The religious divide of the Shiite and Sunni Moslems had reached an impasse and Arp Arslan had gathered his forces to destroy the Fatimeds forever. He had only reluctantly turned back North to face this new threat and wanted it resolved as quickly as possible. Alexius Comnenus breathed more easily with the coming of dawn as it broke with a Turkish delegation approaching their encampment offering terms for peace. Romanus and Byrennius sat with the Turkish officials in the Emperors tent for most of that day however when one of Arp Arslans concessions was the division of the Armenia Territory Romanus had become enraged and sent them on their way leaving only one option-War.

It was not until the next day on the morning of the 26th August that the battle had begun. The Byzantium's had formed upon the steppe in typical Roman tactical deployment with the Imperial Guard and Infantry Cohorts in the centre under the direct command of the Emperor and the cavalry upon the flanks under Byrennius and Alyattes. The rearguard

had been placed under the command of General Andronicus Ducas a cousin of the wishful usurpers to his crown and fellow conspirator although Romanus had brought him along on the campaign to keep him under his watchful eye.

Arp Arslan had his horse archers in line facing the Byzantium positions and he watched the Imperial Army begin their advance. He gave the signal and his centre retreated into a crescent moon in their wake as his archers harassed the cavalry upon the flanks. The more the Byzantium's advanced the further out of reach the horse's archers gave ground. Alexius could see the black rain and hear the whoosh of the arrows fall even from his position in the centre of the field. The Norman and Frankish cavalry troops became angered by this distant harassing assault and made a hasty charge after the Turkish horse archers. This is what Arp Arslan had expected and from the foothills his spearmen appeared and rained javelins into the heavy cavalymen. Romanus became infuriated by their recklessness and despondent of the vanishing enemy in their wake. With nothing to combat but shadows he ordered the Imperial standard reversed to regroup his Army and he knew also that they had strayed too far from their encampment. Arp Arslan had predicted and hoped for this also as he had waited his time from his vantage in the heights. He gave the order for the attack as the Turks in mass rained down the steppe unexpectedly. They raced after the survivors of the impulsive Cavalymen and the Byzantium force broke in complete surprise and confusion. Many of the Mercenary units fled assuming the worst and not wanting to lay their lives down for the cause of their own greed.

The light cavalry of the Turks had now surrounded the main body of the Byzantine Army and if the rearguard had advanced as would have been expected the Turks at their rear would have been trapped. Instead Andronicus Ducas having his own view of the events spread the word that the Emperor had fallen and the battle lost which when the soldiers under his command heard this subsequently fled the battlefield. Only the Emperor Romanus Diogenes and his bodyguard remained upon the battlefield. Alexius Comnenus had overcome his fears and proved his worth. He had fought bravely amongst the screams of death all about him and the smell of grit, sweat and leather in his midst. He killed many

a Turk but they kept coming and he knew sooner or later they would finish him off and he would pass into the heavens. The Emperor also led by example killing one Turk outright and wounding several others before an arrow pierced his sword hand. Another arrow killed his horse and it fell on top of him leaving him trapped beneath it. The Turks swamped over where Romanus had been cut down and captured him. On seeing this believing the Emperor had fallen, the rest of the Byzantine Army dropped their weapons and Comnenus knew his fate now lay in the hands of the Turks.

Arp Arslan had treated them all with dignity he got the concessions for Armenia from the Emperor that he wanted and after a few months after no ransom was paid he set them all free. In Constantinople on hearing of the fall of Byzantine Italy conquered by the Norman Robert Guiscard and the defeat of their Army at Manzikert evil omens hung over the Holy Roman Empires future. The Emperors wife Eudocia and Michael Ducas declared joint sovereignty in the absence of the Emperor Romanus Diogenes who was believed to be dead. Romanus though on his return to Constantinople was ignominiously arrested and tied upon the back of a donkey and ridiculed as he was driven through the streets of the City. One of his kinsmen poked out his eyes and he died in the summer of 1072.

Alexius Comnenus carried the weight still of that day twenty-three years ago. His hopes and fears now lay with the west in the hands of the Normans and Franks who had taken Italy from his Empire. He knew he must bargain with his enemy if his Kingdom was ever going to survive. The Seljuk Turks were hounding at his doorstep just across the Bosphorus at Nicaea, which they had made their Capitol and his Greek Empire had all but diminished only a miracle could save his Kingdom now. Alexius had written many letters asking for aid to Robert of Flanders cousin to the late William the Conqueror and Robert had been the most promising towards his cause. He had placed his soul within the words he had sent to the Norman Lord.

“To the Lord and Glorious Count Robert of Flanders and to the generality of princes of the kingdom, whether lay or ecclesiastical, from Alexius Comnenus, Emperor of Byzantium,”

“O illustrious Count and great consoler of the faith. I am writing in order to inform your prudence that the Pechenegs and the Turks are daily persecuting the very Saintly Empire of Greek Christians. The blood of Christians flows in unheard of scenes of carnage. Amidst the most shameful insults. I shall merely describe a few of them,”

“The circumcision of Christian babies above the baptismal font letting the bloods mingle with the holy water. Arabs committing sodomy on men of all ages and rank. Fouling of Holy places,”

“Therefore in the name of God and because of the true piety of the generality of Greek Christians we implore you to bring to this city all the faithful soldiers of Christ.”

“Come then with all your men and give battle with all your strength so that all this treasure shall not fall into the hands of the Turks. Therefore act while there is still time lest the Kingdom of the Christians shall vanish from your sight and what is more important the Holy Sepulchre shall vanish and in your coming you will find your reward in heaven and if you do not come. God will condemn you,”

“If all this glory is not sufficient for you remember that you will find all those treasures and also the most beautiful women in the Orient. This incomparable beauty of Greek women would seem to be sufficient reason to attract the armies of the Franks to the plains of Thrace. God be with you.” Alexius had pleaded, begged and black mailed in his appeals. Anyway it had seemed to stir something as Pope Urban had invited the Emperor to send an embassy to Piacenza in the papal state and Alexius waited with untold anguish wondering what his delegates were achieving in Italy.

Nicephorus Byrennius the son of the General at the Battle of Manzikert, Michael Psellus and other dignitaries had formed the Byzantium embassy. Byrennius on entering the frontiers of Rome was taken aback by the mighty homeland this civilization of his roots. Byrennius knew that the Turks occupied their finest recruiting grounds and the breadbasket of fertile Byzantium land. The once mighty legacy that had begun here with the great Caesars was upon the verge of total Annihilation. He had heard how Pope Urban had a reputation as a reforming and activist Pope and hoped he would hear their pleas with decency. Alexius had instructed him to try a gain a force of Mercenaries

to oust the Turk and reclaim their Empire. He hoped they would get what they asked for and that his homeland would be saved.

The Blacksmith John Pendle a gruff thickset man with a full beard as black as coal with his hair long and hanging down his back. He guided them the refugees of women and children into the hills and across the wild lands into the interior of England. The Angelcynn the Saxon name for the people of England had come under the rule of the Norman Barons who managed the Shires and the country had been divided into Thaness belonging to a particular Norman Ruler. They crossed the Willowford and into the Thane of One Hundred under the oppression of the Baron Fitz Osbert. The Sheriff and Royal Officer of this Shire who managed judicial and financial affairs for the people within this domain. They came to an Oakwood and in the pastoral glade before it the Blacksmith halted them all after seven days of arduous travel. John Pendle stood in the meadow and knelt to examine the soil it was peaty and fine for bearing crops of wheat and barley. "We will settle here," he announced. "I hereby name this place Pendlebury," he declared himself the Thane, headman of the Hamlet they were about to build.

Henry Longfellow had latched onto Tom since Father Benedict was no longer amongst them and he admired Tom for the way he had stood up to the Blacksmith's son Eairsidh his one time tormenter. They felled trees together in the forest helping to build the village that would become their home. Their arms were growing strong and they had the first signs of facial hair upon their chins. Life was good and fun at times as they kicked pigskins in the village meadow and hunted game in the forest. In the field the ground had begun to be ploughed into pasture having been churned up daily by a team of oxen bought with the last vestiges of money the survivors had managed to gather before the Viking raid. The villagers shared the harvest and each helped sow the crops of wheat and barley. Vegetable gardens were planted and fruit bearing trees on allotments outside each of their abodes that were still being erected Carrots, Parsnips, turnips, beetroot and many other things were laid in the earth to bloom. Sheep, cattle, goats and pigs were penned in a communal field. A picket fence encircled the boundary of

the Hamlet and a taller inner fence had been constructed to provide a defence from outlaws or villains. Men came to the village to court the many widows and young girls coming of age. Families were welcomed and the whole place had begun to thrive and prosper.

After only two months they had a miller, blacksmith, carpenter, a beekeeper for honey and wax. They had expert farmers who would endeavour to make sure that the harvests were plentiful. They had tinkers, foresters, sawyers, hurdle makers and potters creating trade with other settlements. Peddlers brought salt from the coast to preserve meat. Tom recalled having seen it done salt making using pans to evaporate the seawater he had told Henry excitedly. As Tom walked past the Thanes house of the Pendles the largest and grandest abode he saw women carding, spinning and dying wool that would be made into clothing. He could smell boiling meat, the baking of bread and the charcoal coming from the kiln as pots were fired. People were in the fields milking the sheep and Goats to make butter and cheese. The sounds of Mothers loving and scolding their children. A group of children feeding the hens throwing the grain meal like hail into the air to laugh as it scattered upon the earth and the chickens pecking after it.

Tom passed out the Hamlet through the picket fence which himself and Henry had helped to erect. They had made a wooden abode for their home at this time cleft out of oak and chestnut with walls wattle and daubed with plaster and clay. As a tribute to his father Tom had hung his sword above the fireplace so they kept his memory amongst the warmth of their hearts forever. He entered the oak forest with his bow at hand where he had prearranged to meet up with Henry. They had planned to go on a hunt for hares and they had grown to love the feel of nature all around them.

“There’s one Tom,” Henry called as he caught sight of the rodent’s big ears visible above the leaf clutter.

Tom took careful aim and let the arrow fly true with the sharp barbed head travelling at speed. The barb splintered the hare’s skull and Henry ran over to claim their prize. In only a short time they had collected three hares, which would make Flora proud of them as they headed back towards the village. On the way they came to the glade where the trees opened and a circle of light illuminated the forest. A group of children

sat in a circle the girls were knitting flowers into daisy chains and the boys were sharpening hunting sticks. Tom knelt beside them.

“Good day,” he said to them.

“Hello Tom,” they called the children of the village all loved and adored this charming older boy who protected them and had taught them all how to read and write. He had become at the age of fifteen their schoolmaster and when the opportunity arose they met in the woods where he tutored them devotedly for hours.

“Tom who are the Normans,” Lachlan the son of the deceased John Hawks the fisherman asked as not one of them had seen these strange invaders that owned their homeland.

“The Normans well that’s a question? Father Benedict told me once long ago of a great battle when the Angelcynn Fyrd an army led by our Saxon King Harold had been defeated by the Normans at a place called Hastings. King Harold had died with an arrow in his eye and William the Bastard from Normandy had won the day and won our lands,” the class stayed silent as they listened to him intently.

“Yes Tom but what are they like,” Iseabail Crowther asked with enthusiasm a small girl of only seven and another who had lost her father at the tragedy of St Anne’s.

“Honestly I don’t really know myself. I only know of the history of them being here,” Tom answered to the visible disappointment of Iseabail.

“Do we still fight with them now,” Lachlan asked wanting to hear more of battles and knights vowing for glory as he sharpened his stick on his flint knife.

“No we are at peace with them although Father Benedict told me of one man. An infamous outlaw called Hereward the Wake who had been exiled from Britain by King Harold for committing crimes against his properties. After the Battle of Hastings he returned to his home to discover to his horror that a Norman Lord had occupied his fathers home and lands. He found his brothers severed head had been displayed grotesquely upon a pike at the gateway.” Iseabail winced at his graphic detail of the event.

“It is said that Hereward carried a sword that was feared and he had named it brain biter. He had been so enraged at his brothers murder and degradation that when the Norman Lord awoke on the very next eve and

he looked out of his doorway there were ten Norman heads upon pikes where his brothers had once stood,” Tom paused.

“This is good is there more,” Raibert another of the boys asked excitedly absorbed in this adventurous story.

“There is more,” Tom quashed his anxious nature with before continuing,” Well where was we. Hereward aided by the Danes and other Angelcynn unsettled by the Norman rule occupied the Isle called Ely in the centre of a great marsh. William the Conqueror had sent out an army to capture this outlaw who had started creating havoc in his eastern lands. The Norman soldiers to gain a path to the outlaw’s stronghold laid two bridges and both of them were put to fire and the Normans repulsed. A third bridge got them a foothold but Hereward’s men burned the brush before them and cut them down with arrows. Then the Bishops of Ely tiring of the constant warfare told the Normans of a secret path through the marsh and onto the Isle and they took the outlaws by surprise. Hereward escaped though and hiding in a tavern fifteen Normans entered to arrest the notorious outlaw. Hereward unsheathed his mighty sword brain biter that the Normans feared and he cut them down with it. All fifteen of them as they had entered the tavern to confront him,” Tom paused again to a stunned silence all about him as the children were mesmerised in a land of their own fantasy.

“I want to be an outlaw Tom,” Lachlan shouted.

“So do I,” it came from another.

“So what happened to him Tom, what happened to Hereward you never got to finish the story,” Henry unexpectedly interrupted sat amongst the younger children.

“Well nothing happened to him he’s still out there in the wilds hunting the Normans and coming to the rescue of Saxon folk in need,” Tom embellished not knowing anymore.

It was three weeks after Tom had told that story that they first came. He had been repairing the thatch on the roof of their home when the horn had sounded at the village gate that indicated someone wished to enter openly.

“Normans,” Tom spat out with distaste towards their conquerors and then again he was fascinated at the sight of these Noble Warriors. They looked fearsome with their conical helms with a nose guard covering

their features just the dark shadows of their eyes within. They were clothed in chain mail tunics and carried red triangular shields with bright designs upon their facia. Ten soldiers had entered into the Hamlet nine on foot and one on horseback. The mounted Norman obviously held some significance with an ermine cloak upon his back and under his chain mail he wore a tunic of black cloth. They came into the centre of the village and there they halted, the villagers had all gathered in curiosity and fear. The Thane peered from his doorway nervously, Flora watched from the rooftop and Tom and Henry stopped their thatching to all admire and loathe them.

“Saxons by the order of William Rufus King of England and Duke of Normandy I hereby declare this Hamlet on the Kings Land and under my authority as Sheriff and Baron of Willowford I declare this village be entered in the book of Dome. Is there a spokesman amongst thee,” Baron Fitz Osbert had spoken out from his mount.

All eyes ventured to one abode of the Thane and Blacksmith as a silence hung in the air.

“I say again is there a spokesman amongst thee,” the Baron reiterated becoming angry.

Eventually he emerged from behind his doorway sheepish with fear wrought over his haggard features like a cast of death.

“I am John Pendle Thane of this Hamlet my Lord,” he whimpered as he spoke.

“Well John Pendle I am Baron Fitz Osbert adjudicator of the law and collector of the Kings Tax. I hereby declare this place under my authority does it have a name,” He asked as a matter of course.

“Pendlebury my Lord,” the Blacksmith said with pride.

“Take this John Pendle,” The Baron passed over a scroll to the headman.” I take it there’s someone in this village that can read,” he added as the scroll was handed over.

“Yes my Lord,”

“Then display upon your door and make sure your people adhere to its rules.” The Baron spoke to the Thane before raising his voice and addressing the people.” Saxons this notice lies downs the laws of King William and I hereby place Pendlebury in the book of Dome. Annually my tax collectors will come here on the Kings authority and collect an

allowance of your income,” Faces dropped by this revelation they had always been freemen they barely survived as it stood and hoped these Normans would be sympathetic to their cause.

The Normans began making their survey noting on scrolls who holds and occupies what. How many hides in the village, how many ploughs and how many men. How many villagers, how much woodland they forested, how much meadow, how much pasture, how many mills and how much Pendlebury in total was worth. Tom watched them carefully and greedily measuring up there hard labour he hated them for this alone.

“Mother how have they the right to tax us,” he cursed.

“They can do as they please these Normans Tom. They killed our own King and now rule in his stead. I have long feared them coming here I can see nothing but trouble coming of it and Tom promise me you wont cause mischief by them,” Flora pleaded she had lost a husband and had no wish to lose her son as well.

“I promise Mother,” he said solemnly.

“That goes for you too Henry, they have no love of us and will show us no mercy given half the chance,” Flora had seen the hatred in her boys eyes and knew she would have to hold them to their vow.

The Normans left later that day with their inventory completed and the Blacksmith hammered the notice to the wall of his house by the side of his door.

“What’s it say,” Henry asked never being one for Latin.

“It’s ten laws laid out like the Ten Commandments,” Tom revealed.

“What are they then,” Henry pushed him becoming inquisitive.

“The first about peace between Norman and Saxon and only God will be revered throughout the land,” Tom read out.

“Is it the commandments,” Henry jumped in.

“The second about loyalty to the King and defended him,”

“More like give him an arrow in the eye,” Henry made both their feelings known.

“Something about the men he brought here from Normandy if they come to harm the perpetrator will be put to death and 46 marks of silver fined to the commoners of the land,”

“Pheww that’s a lot,” Henry said whistling out his disapproval.

“Something about the sale of cattle being only allowed in cities something about scot and lot a fine for Nobles,” Tom surmised the details from the list.

“Something about Saxons being accused of murder, theft or rapine by a Norman can defend himself with the ordeal of hot iron or by wager of battle. That the laws of King Edward still stand,” Tom paused again.

“What’s that Tom ordeal of hot iron,” Henry enquired with interest.

“I don’t know but it don’t sound too nice .The next ones about fines of cattle and the others about the prohibition of selling men. So at least they don’t atone slavery.” Tom found something to his approval.

“The last says I also forbid that anyone shall be slain or hanged for any default but let his eyes be put out and let him be castrated. And this command should be violated by pain of a fine to me. So that seems to cover the laws of our new masters,” Tom said dryly.

In the year of our Lord 1095 the Emperor Henry reigned throughout the province of Germany whilst King Philippe held the Throne in France. Throughout Europe many evils were prevalent, as a lack of faith had come upon all as a pestilence wrought upon the land. Pope Urban had then ruled in the City of Rome. A man admirable in life and habits that always strove wisely and energetically to raise the status of the Church higher and higher.

The ever-restful Devil though who continually plots mans destruction and ever searches for lost souls to devour stirred up confusion with a certain rival for Pope Urbans Crown. Wilbert by name incited by stimulus of pride and supported by the shameless Emperor Henry Lord of the Bavarians. Wilbert with the Army of Henry attempted to usurp the Papal office and take over the Church of Saint Peter for his own. Urban who was the legitimate successor to Pope Gregory who had been lawfully consecrated by the Cardinal Bishops was forced out of Rome. The people refused to recognise Wilbert although with the Emperors might behind him they had no power to have him removed. Urban found himself banished from his beloved Church of Saint Peter and he diligently travelled the country reconciling to God all who had gone astray and his popularity soared even higher.

Wilbert puffed up by the primacy of the Church showed him to be indulgent to sinners whilst exercising the powers of the Papal Office. Urban with the help of the Norman Warlord Robert Guiscard helped him gain Papal power and popularity everywhere until Wilbert found his position in Rome untenable and he was forced to move under the protective power of the Emperor in Germany. So there were two Popes and many didn't know which to obey or from which to take counsel from or who would remedy the ills of Christianity. Some favoured the one, some the other but it was clear to the most intelligent of men that Urban was the better for he controlled his passions, humble and radiating piety.

Wilbert had been the Archbishop to the City of Ravenna he was rich and revelled in honour and wealth. He was not the exemplar of righteous living. Himself a lover of pomp, boldly assuming to usurp the Sceptre of Almighty God. Truly! Men thought this office must not be seized by force of arms as Wilbert and the Emperor had tried to accomplish but accepted with fear and humility as Urban had done.

The Church of Rome being the crown of the tree where the fruit is born and flowers flourish, however when the crown is troubled it will no longer bear fruit and it's roots will begin to suffer sympathetically. The whole of Europe was in strife without a guiding hand. Peace, goodness, faiths were boldly trampled underfoot within the church and without. It was imperative that an end had to be brought to these evils and in accordance with a plan suggested by Pope Urban as his office was once again in his trusting hands the first wheels of salvation were being put into motion.

Pope Urban had scrutinized his own clergy finding many wanting, debase and degraded from their holy footing. The Princes of the European Domain were occupying their time engaged in feudal wars such was their greed for land. Many ordinary folk were persecuted some captive and most barbarously cast into foul prisons for ransom. The commoners tormented by three evils starvation, thirst and cold and others left to perish of unseen death as disease spread amongst the towns. The Pope had seen Holy places violated, monasteries and villas destroyed by fire. All over his Holy Kingdom was untold suffering and misery. Both the divine spirit and the human spirit were being held in

derision. It was now time to turn the wheel and put his plans into fruition.

Pope Urban was a small thin man with an almost angelic face if it were not for the rigours of age that had creased his once natural piety. His brown hair was nothing more than a fringe above his brow that had ringed his bald crown. His stature bent and humbled by his years of righteous study. He had been born at Eudes de Lagery in 1042 the son of a Nobleman and he had ascended to the papacy in the year 1088. Seven years he had held the place of duty of figurehead for the Church in the western world and he yearned for a principle to place his footprint firmly upon the annals of history. He had listened to the many Byzantium Embassies which had come with pleas and blessing from the Christians in the East. Alexius Comnenus had written on a regular basis to him appealing and begging for aid. Two years had passed since he had first met the Byzantium delegates at Piacenza and ever since a flame had kindled within him as a quest had been emerging from his noble heart.

Pope Urban had called a church council in Clermont southern France. The council had been a typical tool of Urbans leading style and had been used previously by other reformist Popes. The Church council sat in the formality of a court where proclamations could be read and Papal policies made known. The Pope heard complaints and petitions that always graced these affairs and he the most powerful figure was at hand to adjudicate upon the matters at hand.

This council at Clermont though was somewhat unusual in regard to the fact that Pope Urban had made known that he intended to close the meeting early as he was going to orate an important public announcement and also during the council King Philippe of France was going to be excommunicated for adultery. As well as the customary three hundred clerics, All and sundry were openly invited to attend the Cathedral as rumours and excitement spread amongst the populace. It had been leaked subtly by Papal Officials that his speech expressed concerns in reference to the Holy Land. Everyone knew of Jerusalem it was common knowledge however to most ordinary folk they had no idea where Jerusalem was located or it's current situation. They knew though

that the Umbilicus terrae the Holy City that was heaven upon the Earth had fallen into the hands of the Muslims. They had also heard stories of the Turk this new and fearsome presence in the region. In an age when Saracens and Moors had just been defeated in Spain, the Balearic Isles, Sardinia, Corsica and Sicily Europe had recovered from the brink of invasion. An empathy of Christian unity swelled in everybody's heart.

Peter the Hermit an ugly, small man who wore the vestments of a monk had arrived in Clermont upon the Eve of Urbans speech. People had cheered him as he entered the Town and Children had snatched hairs from his donkey as relics. They revered him the commoners this most kind and generous Holy man. He had been famed for reclaiming prostitutes and finding them husbands providing the dowry himself. What he was given to him by the rich he passed onto the needy. In times of strife his wonderful authority had managed to restore peace and concord. Whatever he did or said was made out to be divine to such an extent that he was hailed as a living Saint.

Pope Urban stood at the pew in the Cathedral on the 27th November 1095 and to his amazement found the place crammed packed to the rafters with thousands of other people waiting outside. He made a decision and the meeting was relocated to a field beyond the City walls. His Papal throne passed through the streets and set upon a platform for what he had to say was for the ears of all. Urban was renowned as a powerful and gifted speaker and he knew how to bring his rhetorical gifts to the fore especially now in this time of need. The people sat upon the grassy earth and the Clergy and Nobles were at the front upon chairs. Silence reigned and an aura of expectancy could be felt all around. This rich atmosphere even astonished Peter the Hermit who looked fixedly upon the heavens as if God himself were listening. His friend Walter Sans Avoir an old knight sometimes called Walther the Penniless for his past vows of poverty stood by the Hermits side and he too was enshrouded by the same religious fervour.

Pope Urban stood on the crest of a small hill so he could be seen and heard by all.

“Most beloved Brethren urged by necessity I Urban by the permission of God as Chief Bishop and prelate over the whole world have come to you. As an Ambassador with a divine admonition to you all, Knights of

God,” Urban now looked upon the Clerics, the Bishops, the Priests, the Cannons and the Cardinals.

“How can I ask those who have dirty hands to clean others who are dirty themselves in these times. For according to Gospel we are all salt of the Earth but if you fall short in your duty. It may be asked can it be salted. O great is the need of salting, it is indeed necessary for you, in fact is it your God given duty to correct the salt of wisdom from the foolish people devoted only to the pleasures of this world. Lest the Lord, when he may speak onto them find them putrefied by their sins unsalted and stinking. For if he finds them riddled with worms that is sin in them because you were negligent of your duty. He will condemn them as worthless and thrown into the abyss of the unclean things and all because you could not restore him of great loss,” Adhemar Bishop of Le Puy became aware he was being scolded by the Pope even though they were good friends and he imagined how uncomfortable the other clergy must feel who did not know him personally.

“A man who applies salt must be prudent, provident, modest, learned, peaceable, watchful, pious, just, equitable and pure. For how can the ignorant teach others, how can the licentious make others modest and can the impure make others pure. We read that if the blind follow the blind both will fall in a ditch,” the crowd were enjoying the roasting that the fat Bishops and greedy Cardinals were having lambasted upon them.

Urban now changed his attentions towards the Norman and Frankish Barons, Counts and Duke.

“Sons of God you have pledged to keep the peace amongst yourselves and no more will we hear of fighting and quarrelling for land-Brother against brother,” He addressed Robert the Norman Brother of King William the Conqueror. Robert of Flanders his cousin. Raymond of Toulouse, Baldwin of Boullion, Godfrey of Boullion, Count Hugh of Vermandois brother of the King of France (who had attended Clermont in his Kings stead to be excommunicated for Adultery), Count Stephen of Blois and many other notable Lords as they listened with interest. Pope Urban had already let it be known using the assembly as his witness that he would excommunicate any of them that drew his sword against another Christian Noble and broke his Truce of God. The

wrangles over land feuds and rents had subsequently ceased and had been left to simmer for more opportune days.

“There still remains important work for you to do. You must apply your strength and righteousness to another matter, which concerns you, as well as God. The noble race of Norman and Frank must come together and aid our fellow Christians in the East. The infidel Turks are advancing upon the eastern Kingdom the heart of Christendom. Christians are being oppressed daily and attacked daily. Churches and Holy places are being defiled Jerusalem is groaning under the Saracen yoke. The Holy Sepulchre is in the hands of the Muslims and has been turned into a mosque. Pilgrims are harassed and even murdered in the Holy Lands.” A great sigh filled the field and absolute shock and distress overcame them all. They were stunned and horrified that the centrepiece of their religion had fallen foul to the unbeliever.

“Yes Jerusalem is captive she calls for deliverance, Christ is calling you for the Holy City is being dishonoured by terrible practises of the people without God. I call upon you all. People of all ranks foot soldiers and Knights, poor and rich to come to rescue of our Brethren and push far back the races of the Infidels,”

“Here, Here,” the crowd heckled in agreement.

“All who die by the way whether by land or by sea or in battle against the Pagans shall have immediate remission of all sin. This I grant them through the power of God of which I am invested. It is a disgrace that if such a despised and base race who worship demons should conquer a people, which has the faith of an omnipotent God and is made glorious with the name of Christ. This victory should have been long before now and the faithful gone against the infidels. Let those who were robbers now become Knights, let those who fought against relative and brother now fight in a proper way against the barbarian. Let mercenaries who forgo pay have eternal reward. Let those who wear themselves out in both body and soul now work for doubles the honour. Behold on one side will be the sorrowful, poor and rich stand together on the other side the enemies of the Lord. Let those who go not put off this journey for as soon as winter is over and spring comes let him eagerly set out on his way with God as his guide. Knights of God, men chosen and blessed among all, combine your forces. Take the road to the Holy Sepulchre

assured of the imperishable glory that awaits you in Gods Kingdom. Let each one deny himself and take the cross with the war cry,” he called out mightily.” DEUS VULT-God Wills It,” Pope Urban had called.

“DEUS VULT,”this cry was taken up from the field Nobles, Clergy, laymen and serfs called in one voice with awe. In their souls the fire of redemption and in there hearts the steel to quash the infidel.

The Bishop of Clermont knelt before the Papal altar begging to take the first vows from the Pope.

“I beg you your Holiness make me the first pilgrim to your cause,”

Urban blessed him and gave to him two strips of red cloth to fashion into a cross upon his vestments. The whole field now knelt as they followed Adhemars example. The Bishops reiterated the vows and by the end of the day the clergy had hoarse voices blessing the multitude by midday the Merchants of Clermont had completely run out of red cloth.

The forest dark and foreboding even though it was the eve of spring and the larks sung though their shrill voices portended doom not glory. Tom listened and it perplexed him as he knew every badger set, fox hole and rabbit warren in the oak wood and it never seemed as haunted and disquieting as this before. Even the creatures of the forest had lurked away from the shadows and his bow found no game to target.

“Come on Henry let’s go,” he told his friend as a cold shiver vent down his spine.

“But Tom we have not caught a hare yet,” his friend remarked unaffected by the dark shadows in toms mind.

“I said we go,” he reaffirmed heading to the glade.

Tom’s class had grown with the many newcomers that had settled in the village and he had managed to procure some battered old manuscripts that they wrapped in leather and hid in the hollow of a tree trunk. All the children saw these as treasures their love of reading and mastering Latin had opened up new adventures to them. They also had slates and lumps of chalk and they copied the alphabet and the calendar upon them.

Imuauis.Mavus.Iumus.Iulius.Novamb.Iasabeil copied some of the months as she saw Tom and Henry coming from the woods.

“He’s here,” she giggled to Ceana who had started to attend the classes and her infatuation with their teacher had not gone unnoticed even amongst the youngest of them.

Tom greeted them all although his thoughts troubled him and his usual flamboyancy for teaching was not to be found so heartily today.

“So how we all getting on with our Latin,” he asked to begin with and got mixed reactions of joy and empathy.

“I want you to split into groups and go through the alphabet with each other then spell out the months which I asked you to practice yesterday,” he suggested wanting a moment to reflect himself.

It had been almost a year since Baron Fitz Osbert had arrived at Pendlebury and entered this Hamlet in the book of Dome. Gaspard Beauregard an obnoxious stout ugly man had the perfect job of collecting the Kings Taxes. The tax collectors were hated and loathed and Gaspard had been loathed all his life. He rode up to the gate and never bothered to sound the horn as he saw himself too important to be trivialised with such niceties. Gaspard a portly figured man who had his body covered in chain mail and wore a conical helm as his business at times could be dangerous and the Norman himself was not one to refrain from murderous violence. He harnessed his donkey on the post of the Thanes house and barged through his front door. John Pendle took a start as the door burst open unexpectedly to see this fat pig faced Norman in the aperture.

“Can I help you,” he asked with fear wrote upon his false smile.

“Fetch me ale and be quick about it,” Gaspard hoarse voice croaked out bitterly.

The Blacksmith fetched a pitcher of mead and the Norman sat at his table slurping it down with gushes of it running down his chin.

“Aaagh I needed that, now to business taxes,” he said fetching a scroll from out of his tunic.

“Pendlebury annual income 30 shilling so that’ll be ten shillings the Kings due,” he informed the Thane.

“I have eight here the other two are still owed to me by the weaver Lady Flora Walters,” he admitted loaning out the Kings money.

“Owed you say,” the Norman sounded suddenly hostile.

“Ill go fetch it I’m sure she has it,” he answered in mitigation.

“Ill go myself where is it,”

Tom couldn't settle and without warning stood and began walking back to the village.

“Tom where you going,” Henry asked.

“Home something's not right,” he admitted his ill feelings.

“I'm coming with you,” Henry declared.

“Me too,” Ceana said and began running behind their wake to catch up.

Flora had begun her own business making clothes and brooches for ladies. She had borrowed money from the communal fund to buy sheep for wool and to purchase the tubs and equipment she had required. Her designs were sought after although her clientele were poor she gave them the goods and they paid her back when they could. The knock on the door nearly sent it off its hinges and the stout man had entered before she could answer.

“Who are you,” she demanded.

“Taxes madam the Kings demands his taxes,” Gaspard hissed out snake like.

“I owe you no taxes,” Flora defended.

“You borrowed money from the Thane that money you borrowed was the Kings tax and the King wants his money back,” Gaspard noticed her face change and enjoyed her anguish.

“I'm afraid my customers are all on tick. Their behind with payment and I'm owed the money I will have it for you next week,”

“Next week is no good Madam the King demands payment in full now,” the Tax collector stated eyeing up her breasts and shapely body.

“Give me a few days then I will have it,” Flora replied becoming nervous of this man who resembled a wild boar.

“How much do you have now,” he enquired and Flora went over to the fireside below Peaders sword and opened her purse string.

“Just over a shilling,”

“It's still not enough ill have to take what's owed from your body as interest,” he leached and then throwing a chair aside grabbed hold of her around the waist.

Flora tried to break his grip although the brute was too strong. They toppled forward with Flora on her knees and she felt her under garment being torn bearing her womanly triangle.

“You’ll have to learn to earn your keep Saxon whore to live on Norman land,” his breath stunk of ale as his weight pinned flora to the floor. Her legs were parted forcibly and with his bulk upon her back she struggled to resist in vain as he entered her.

Tom came up the path and his first cause for concern was the door and gate wide open. He half trotted into the house to see the fat Norman molesting his mother.

“Get off of her you fat sow of a man,” he declared.

Gaspard rolled off Flora who took sanctuary in the corner sobbing and whilst the tax collector stood to unsheathe his sword.

“I’m going kill me a Saxon runt and then I’m going to finish what I’ve started,” he grinned sadistically,

“Over my dead body,” Tom jumped passed him out of arms reach and took his fathers sword from the fireplace.

“So you want me to kill you slowly I see,” Gaspard said coming closer to Tom and in striking distance.

The Norman brought his sword down double handed and with all his might. Tom defended it instead of moving out its way and the clang on his sword made his arms reverberate in pain. The Norman struck again with a mad head crunching blow and again tom countered to jar his wrist.

“Not so cocky now are we boy,” Gaspard mocked.

Tom side swiped his own blade and it caught the Norman off guard who had been forced to take a step back and crushed his insult out of mind.

Tom struck again and again and the Norman retreated. Tom went for the wild boars stomach with a lunge but Gaspard skilful arms cut down with force and Tom’s wrist gave in and he dropped the sword. Gaspard had the blade held at Toms throat and he smiled with cruel satisfaction.

“While your in your grave think of the Norman brother your mother will sire for me,” he said and Tom flinched waiting the death blow.

The Norman head butted Tom in the face breaking his nose and then fell to his knees on the floor. Tom glanced down to see the arrow in the back of his head and Henry clutching his hunting bow at the door.

“At least we caught something today,” he grinned.

They carried the body into the Oak wood at dark and Tom and Henry began digging the grave while Ceana and Flora kept a look out. It was

while they were half way done they heard the rustle of branches and then the flurry of feet running into the distance. Tom dropped his shovel and gave chase. He returned shortly afterwards.

“What was it Tom,” Flora asked.

“Earsidth Pendle I couldn’t catch him before he got back to his home,”

“He’ll tell on you Tom,” Ceana made known what they all knew.

“Tom you’ll have to leave they will surely kill you if they come here now,” Flora her voice held strong but tears were in her heart at the prospect of losing her son.

“I’ll go with you Tom anyway it was me that skewered the wild boar,” Henry had spoken not wanting to lose the only friend he had on this earth.

“I’m coming too,” Ceana blasted her heart too couldn’t bare losing Tom.

“Ceana it would not be wise the road will be hard,” Tom cut her hopes down remorselessly.

“Tom Walters you just try stopping me,” She remarked and Flora smiled knowing that Tom would have a woman’s love by his side.

It had been four days upon the misty dawn when Baron Fitz Osbert and a contingent of Norman soldiers came in search of the Tax collector. The Baron took off his helm and his long black hair fell streaking down his back. He entered the cottage of the Thaness abode elaborately as two of his men knocked the door off its hinges and it landed with a thud on the earth.

“PENDLE,” one of the Barons men had roared who was Xavier Gustave Captain of the Garrison.

The Blacksmith came scurrying from his sleeping quarters with only a hide wrapped around his modesty.

“Where is he,” Xavier demanded with menace.

“Who?” Pendle replied in abstract shock of being rudely awoken.

“You know very well who. The Tax collector.” The Captain stepped forward and with his mailed fists grabbed John Pendle by the throat.

“He’s dead,” a voice called out from the shadows.

“Who said that,” The Baron questioned with his authority.

“Squire it is only I Eairsidth Pendle. I seen em, I did burying him in the forest. I swear it,” Eairsidth had done exactly what Tom and the others had suspected.

Flora had watched them the party heading off into the forest with dread in her heart. She had been having troubled sleep since the wretched Norman had been murdered and now she could only imagine the gallows when she thought of Tom and Henry, as they would be wanted outlaws.

Four Norman soldiers known as Sergens exhumed the body of the tax collector and laid him on the leaf proliferated floor.

“Is that he your cousin Gaspard,” the Baron asked Xavier more through formality as the Tax collector was renowned and known to all in the district.

“That’s him my Lord, God what have these savages done to him,” Xavier had no love for his cousin although even less for the Saxons and seeing his blood caked corpse at his feet a deep seated rage had took hold of him.

“So Thane what has occurred here and who has dared commit such a heinous act,” the Baron quizzed eager to bring justice to this matter.

“Eairsidth my son saw them. That Tom Walters and Henry Longfellow they be trouble them two. He saw them here digging the grave,” John Pendle gave over the facts meticulously.

“Yes, yes go on,” the Baron blustered wanting him to get to the point quickly.

“Well my Lord it began when your tax collector came here to see me and I hadn’t all the money as Flora Walters the weaver had loaned from the fund. Please believe me my Lord if I had known he was coming on that day,” The Blacksmith carried on laying down the facts.

“Yes, yes go on,” the Baron encouraged him again.

“Well my Lord I can only but assume she didn’t have the money and her boys killed him for that very reason,” The Blacksmith relaxed seeing no backlash coming over him loaning out the taxes.

“Where are these boys now,” the Baron interrogated further.

“They left the village the very night of the killing my Lord four days ago and haven’t been seen since,” he added unhelpfully.

“And this weaver woman,” the Baron pulled his gloves on tighter with frustration.

“At home my Lord,”

“Captain go and fetch the hounds and assembly a search party. Send messages down the roads I want to make certain there hung drawn and quartered for this,” Eairsidh allowed himself a cruel smile after this revelation. Subsequently after the Baron had spoken to the Captain he retired to carry out his orders and the others headed back up the path to the village.

Flora Walters was unceremoniously dragged from her abode although with pride in her heart she refused to show her fear or scream. They tied her with hemp to a post outside the Thanes cottage. The Baron approached her as the villagers had gathered to witness the spectacle. Fitz Osbert looked upon the woman’s eyes and saw defiance wrote upon them with one swipe of his gloved hand he struck Flora across the face to the unease of the crowd.

“Where are your sons,” he snarled at her.

“They’ve gone long ago and you’ll never catch them,” Flora spoke with anger spitting blood from her cut mouth.

“Well see about that Weaver Woman all the soldiers of the hundred thanes are being alerted your sons carcasses will soon be rotting in the earth,” the Baron answered with vehemence.

The Baron now turned to the congregation of the village that circumvented him.

“Saxons you live and adhere to the law of King William this I will remind thee. By the authority invested in me as Royal Sheriff I carry out and adjudicate the rulings of the Kings Laws. Rule ten of the law states that I also forbid that anyone shall be slain or hanged for any fault but let his eyes be put out,” The Baron narrated the laws of the Normans before pointing to Flora and stating.

“Put out the murderesses eyes,”

A hot poker glowed in the potters kiln fire and it burnt the very air as it was carried towards the centre of the village. The Norman Sergen placed the hot iron on the woman’s right eye burning it closed forever. Flora screamed and passed out into oblivion as her eye was seared from her and her flesh scarred hideously. She never felt the second eye being destroyed and the smell of roasting meat gave from her blackened disfigured features.

“Saxons you have also broken rule three of the Kings Law. That is That all men I brought with me or who have come after me shall be protected by my peace and shall dwell in quiet and if anyone of them shall be slain let the Lord of his murderer seize him within five days, but if he cannot let him pay me forty six marks of silver and if he cannot then the whole thane in which the murder took place pay what remains in common. So John Pendle if these murderers are not caught by midnight tomorrow you and your village will owe me the Kings fine of forty six marks,” The Baron reiterated the meaning of the law.

“But my Lord we would be bankrupted we could never afford such an amount,” the Blacksmith protested but was cut short.

“You should have thought about that before letting your Saxons Runts off the leash to kill my tax collector,”

The taint of roasting meat made their stomachs churn and mouth water as hunger had overcome them all. The rabbit turned upon the spit above the coals of the campfire and the fire sizzled as grease from the meat dripped onto the hot ashes. Tom knew by experience that their catch had cooked and he took it off the heat to break it up into three pieces. They ravenously took a leg and gnawed upon it and the juicy meal tasted so good on an empty stomach.

Tom, Henry and Ceana had kept within the forest for the last six days under the refuge of the umbrellious oak trees. Tom got their bearings at night by the polar star keeping it to their backs, so they kept to a southerly route. During the daylight hours though navigation was not such an easy prospect in the shadows of this dense and black world. On a few occasions they had semi circled their path or gone north again by mistake. Tom had heard it first this strange cadence above the more ethereal sounds of the forest they had become accustomed too. He descried it yet again far and distant then he caught it the guttural sharp noise he recognised easily.

“Dogs” he yelled, as they all understood the Normans were coming upon their tails.

They ran hard and fast for almost an hour however the clarity of the hunters hounds became even more distinct.

“My God, they must run like the wind,” Henry remarked regaining his breath.

“We then have no time to rest,” Tom pointed out.

“Lets go then,” Ceana said stepping into the lead not wanting the fact that she was only a girl slow the boys down and that also it was her friends necks that would be stretched if they ever caught up with them. She dreaded that thought and her pace became more determined.

“Keep up will you,” she chastised them and they followed in her wake not to be out done.

Xavier ran his men and hounds like a man possessed. Night and day they travelled resting seldomly. Baron Fitz Osbert had taken the old Roman road to Chester and had called out the garrison. So two forces from north and south were closing in upon the outlaws. The hounds had caught the scent in the Oakwood and two campfires one of them still warm had verified to the hunters that they were on the right track.

As night fell they were drawing closer and in the dark the howling of the hounds was frightening to discern. The sky moonless and starless made Tom pray they wouldn't deviate from their path and fall into the hands of the hunters. Another new sound ahead a rushing and hissing that took them aback and they only had the courage to continue through gritted determination. Ceana found out what the disturbance was first as her foot splashed into the water of the river and the cold feel of it made her jump.

“Uggh,” she shrieked in the blackness.

“What is it,” Whispered Tom alert.

“A river, a great blooming river,” Henry said with fascination as he loved the sight of water.

“Well have to swim it,” Tom suggested knowing following its course could lead them into the path of the Normans.

“Are you sure Tom in the dark? Is it safe.” Ceana added more disturbed by the prospect.

“Yes in the dark, if we hold onto one another we will not be separated and drift away. Well have to strip and wrap our clothes in a bundle as wet clothes will slow us on the morrow.” Tom made his plans known.

“Sounds adventurous this,” Henry smirked watching Ceana undress with a broad smirk across his jowls. He had never seen flesh so smooth and pure white as a whole world of undiscovered emotions took hold of him seeing her there naked. He averted his eyes she was too beautiful to

despoil by his gaze and he felt ashamed at looking upon her the way he had first done.

They wrapped their clothing in a bundle covered by Tom's leather jerkin for waterproofing and they held hands as they entered the river. Goose pimples covered their skin as soon as the cold embrace of the water covered their ankles.

"Jesus, Mary, Joseph it's cold," Henry spoke through his shivering mouth.

"Not as cold as well be if them Normans catch us," Tom reminded him sharply.

They sunk their bodies into the freezing wash and started swimming across. It took them a good while to reach the other side as the current had been strong pushing them back from where they had come as if it were a Norman river or had been spooked by the ghost of the tax collector. When they did finally reach the other bank they were grateful to God and fatigued. They sat down exhausted for what had seemed an age since they had last had a moment to rest and they put back on their dry clothes to help stop them shivering.

In the light of dawn the swell of the river changed the water to hues of purples and green with the sunlight reflecting upon its surface. The trees upon the far bank seemed distant. Somehow unreal however the unexpected appearance of soldiers and hounds combing the sides for a crossing point were not so unreal.

"Tom there they be," Henry made them out from their hiding place.

"There must be a hundred of them and those wolf hounds have the devil within them," Ceana added spying the conical headed troops and their large headed dogs.

"Let's get out of here before we are spotted," suggested Tom.

They ran on through the Oaks and Cedars until they came to a clearing. It was a road built six centuries earlier by another invader the Romans. They followed it's course keeping hidden in the woods until they came to a cross road. Where they came across four macabre hanging cages tied to the bole of four tall trees. Within them stood emaciated corpses with a sign below each cage reading OUTLAW. Tom knew they had been hung until they were half dead and then had there stomachs quartered. They were left in these jibbert cages holding their own

entrails in their hands, as they died a slow agonising death. They were no more now than skeletal frames with their bones turning to dust. The open hollow sockets where the eyes had once been held a haunting gape. The skulls stared emptily back at them a stark forewarning of what would befall Tom and Henry if captured. None of them spoke awed by horror as they passed with dread in their heart. Their own eyes gawked upon the remains of these outlaws grotesquely exhibited at the crossing roads to bear testimony to those who dared defy the authority of their Norman masters. A Magpie pecked upon one of the cadavers and it moved as if still alive and it instinctively sent shivers down Tom's backbone.

In the afternoon they strolled all deadbeat and racking with thirst. Tom heard the dreaded yowl of the baying hounds from the hunters behind them although they no longer had enough reserve to run but just trudge on. After only a short time Tom thought his ears were deceiving him and wondered how they had managed to double back upon themselves somehow losing their bearing. Then he realised they couldn't have as they had kept to the road and then the portent of doom dawned upon them all. They were surrounded with hunters behind them and ahead of them.

Xavier had found a bridge on the road to cross the river and it had not taken long to retrace their steps and recover the scent. Baron Fitz Osbert had followed the road from Chester regally whilst his men fought through brambles in the wild as they closed the net in.

"I will enjoy gutting these brigands for ruining my day," he announced to his aid as took a swill of wine from a pitcher.

Tom's head spun with doubt and he couldn't decide which way they should now head.

"Hide in here," he suggested as they lay in a ditch by the edge of the road.

"What do we do now Tom," Henry asked becoming visibly nervous.

"I don't know be quiet I need to think," Tom also had become angry as they realised they were doomed.

They lay there all consumed with terror hearkening the Normans drawing nearer and nearer. The bark of their dogs amplified and the voices of men shouting could be made out as clear as day. Then the

sound of a bell. A jingling bell accompanied by the straining and creaking of wood. Tom couldn't bear it any longer he needed to take a look. Carefully he raised his head to see a donkey with a bell around its neck pulling a cart with a hooded Monk upon the driving seat. Then Tom gazed in astonishment around the Monks head in the half-light of dusk he saw an aura filled with the colours of the rainbow all around this holy man. It must be a sign he conjectured.

"We have nothing to lose," he mouthed to himself before continuing.

"Wait here," he said to the others and before they could question him he was off.

The Monk halted his donkey at the feet of the young man who blocked his passage stood in the centre of the road.

"Good day kind Father," Tom said,

"Good day outlaw of the woods." the Monk stated unexpectedly before explaining.

"I see you have conjured up quite a stir. A hornets nest buzzes all about thee,"

"I know Father we are in mortal danger and beg you for your assistance can you help us," Tom had said whilst Ceana and Henry peered over to the road listening to the conversation.

"Us?" the Father questioned.

"Myself and two friends from my village," Tom revealed becoming perturbed as the sounds of the hunters were almost deafening.

"So outlaw what was your crime," the Monk asked.

"I murdered a Norman Father, however he was attacking my mother at the time," Tom added in mitigation.

"Well Thomas Walters for a moment there I'd thought of all the good people I've known your not one to turn bad," the Monk answered unpredictably.

"Hey how you know my name," it had disturbed Tom the abrupt revelation.

The Monk drew back his hood and beneath laid the familiar face of their beloved tutor Father Benedict.

"Father," Tom spoke with both surprise and joy.

"Quickly, Quickly there is no time for acquaintances get in here and help me," the Father instructed.

On the back of the cart the Father began taking up the planks to reveal a false bottom and hidden compartment.

“Yes my boy for smuggling before you ask. Even a Priest has to earn a living,” He answered Toms questioning gaze with.

“Quickly get Henry and Ceana,” the Father ordered,

“But how did you know.” he had his sentence severed with a reply.

“Hurry get them in I’ve been searching for you now for over three days,” he revealed.

They lay in the back of the cart shoulder to shoulder and Father Benedict laid the planks back over them.

“You will not forgive me for this but you must remain silent now,” the Father ordered untying two sacks and spreading manure over the back of the cart. The stench was horrendous with a warm and peaty nose. Tom, Henry and Ceana only breathed when they had to and their faces were constantly green. They knew he had done this to protect them but they hated him for it at this very moment.

As the cart had travelled only a hundred paces down the road it came across the advance party of the Normans who had come from the garrison at Chester.

“Good day Father were looking for outlaws May I search your cart,” the soldier asked.

“Certainly be my guest my good man?” the Father said and they heard the Normans boots tramping upon the planks above them.

“Jesus,” the soldier cursed at the stench and then thought. “Begging your forgiveness Father but this manure is awfully strong,”

It should be Father Benedict considered at all the mead and vinegar he had used up to preserve its aroma and ungodly bite.

“Everything’s fine Father your clear to be on your way,” the Soldier disclosed glad to be off the cart.

“God be with you my Son,” the Father made the sign of the cross before they continued.

Many times they were stopped that night and it wasn’t until halfway through the next day that the Father eventually removed the boards.

“Whoah,” Tom sucked in the clean air whilst Henry ran behind a bush for a well overdue call of nature.

“Was you trying to execute us yourself Father,” Henry called over.

“That stuff it was very potent,” Tom remarked still gulping in air however Ceana stayed silent she was too modest and embarrassed by the manure to pass any comment.

“Heaven only knows why you two boys and a bonny girl should end up outlaws,” the Father spoke out although more to him self.

“Father I didn’t mean to kill him. Honest we had no choice would you bless me and cleanse me of this sin,” Tom asked with sincerity.

“Tom I know you did what you had to do. I have my spies little Isabail told me when I entered your village how she had followed you from the woods and she had seen Henry let loose the arrow,” the Father had always been well informed and one step ahead of them.

“And as for your blessing,” Tom reiterated his request.

“Tom I could bless you but your sin is beyond me. There is a way though for the full redemption of your sin. A better way,” the Father clouded his mind with thought as he spoke.

“A better way,” Henry butted in interested in redeeming his own soul.

“Yes a better way I am on my way now to the Cathedral at Wells and it would seem that the Pope over in France has appealed for an expedition which they are calling a Crusade to the Holy Land. You cannot stay in England on the run forever so why not go to Europe join in the work of Christ and have the redemption of your sin granted,” Father Benedict wanted them safe and out of harms way. He knew on the Continent they might be able to start a new life.

“Are you going on this Crusade Father,” Tom questioned

“Yes it would appear so the Bishop has summoned me by letter and I can think of no other reason why he would want to see me. Ill ask him to take your vows for you and make you into official crusaders. The Pope has already stated that any soldier of God on returning from the Holy Land will have his crimes forgiven. You can once again become free men or you can remain here tormented and hunted. The choice is yours to make,” Father Benedict left them brooding on the prospect of being free again.

In Clermont the streets still hummed and throve upon the wings of Pope Urbans speech and the Council had granted privileges and protections to those who had took the cross. The Nobles of

the Western World were all invited to bear arms and the ones who accepted were confirmed by Papal letters. Word of the event spread across Europe and many Knights took the vow immediately upon receiving the news. Everyone wanted to join the expedition some from piety, some for adventure and others out of greed, as the spoils of war would be plentiful. The Eastern provinces had flourished and prospered for many centuries and gossip of spices, silks, gems and gold were talked about in every tavern. Dreams of Constantinople and the wonders of the Holy Land were in every Crusaders mind and the coming spring was yearned upon and hoped for.

In the vestiges of the Cathedral Pope Urban held a private assembly. A secret Council with the men he most relied upon to see the liberation of the Holy Land completed. Sat around a square oak table were Bishop Adhemar of Le Puy the affirmed leader of the expedition and Papal legate who would have to keep the Noble Lords working together as a team. Raymond of Toulouse the oldest of the Lords at fifty-five and one of the most powerful Lords of Southern France who was also an experienced warrior having fought against Moors in Spain. Hugh of Vermandois who had attended the council as official representative for his father King Philippe of France who Pope Urban had degradingly excommunicated for adultery. He had been swept away by the emotional pleas of Urbans speech and he wanted redemption for his father's faults and his family honour. Robert of Flanders who had first received the letter from Alexius Comnenus and who from pure religious zeal had made this Crusade his own personal quest. Godfrey of Bouillon son of the famed Godfrey the hunchback outstanding in weapon use and military operations.

"My Lords Christ himself has laid this honourable task upon us," Pope Urban opened the meeting with.

"We must see it that the Holy Land is delivered from evil and furthermore remains that way so God loving Christians can have access to the Holy Shrines," Urban made known the Papal duty he protested.

"And what of the Bzantiums," Raymond of Toulouse wanted the Popes opinions on Alexius was he to be viewed as an ally or an enemy.

"They are frankly a dying breed the last of the civilised Ancients and they do not trust us or will ever give us a free reign in their lands. They

are though above all else Christian and an alliance with the Byzantines is a much better prospect than one with the heathens. So I suggest we embrace them and give them our trust,” Bishop Adhemar conjectured a former Knight who was not one to shy away from war and his opinion on these matters highly respected.

“We though have not made our intentions known to the Emperor Alexius he awaits our answer on what aid he will have against the Turk,” Robert of Flanders felt he had a bond with Alexius from the many letters he had exchanged with him.

“Let him stew our aid will come to his surprise and we will then see his true colours when the Armies of the West are at the gates of Constantinople,” Godfrey of Bouillon a man more of action than words had spoken.

“We will tell him the Armies he asked for are being mustered but they must remain under the control of the Church. The Bishop of Le Puy has the onerous tasks of keeping you Lords in check so see to it that you respect his views as he speaks with my full authority behind him. God will guide you and victory will be ours if you all stay as one,” Pope Urban gave support to his Legate.

“Spring will soon be upon us the defilers of our churches in the east will soon have an army to contend with,” Hugh of Vermandois added his comment but didn’t speak of his dishonoured King.

“I’ve heard the Hermit has formed an army of peasants and a few Knights under the command of Walter Sans Avoir,” Raymond of Toulouse informed the council.

“Yes the pious man has quite a following I just hope they wont stand in the way of the main Crusade,” the Pope added.

“Count Emico and others in Germany have also pledged to send forces although I don’t trust them under the auspices of the false Pope,” Adhemar made known of other forces planning to march east.

“As long as Jerusalem is returned back to the Christian faith and the Holy Lands have been rid of the scourge of the Heathen then we can all sleep in our beds at peace,” Godfrey of Bouillon made crystal clear the main objective of their mission.

The gothic cathedral at wells had gargoyles and ogres in its architecture and Tom stared up at these unearthly demons with trepidation. He glanced above the altar and the divine cross of Christ became emblazoned by the cut glass window of many colours in it's midst. The Bishop of Wells stood above the two would be Crusaders a portly man whose shadow drowned their own insignificance.

"Do you Thomas Walters and you Henry Longfellow pledge to lay down your life, use your health and your wits to free the tyranny of oppression that has despoiled the most holiest of lands,"

"Yes Father we swear it," They both pledged their loyalty as warriors of Christ.

"Stand then Knights of God and receive this token, this sign of fealty," Tom and Henry stood and were presented with the strips of red cloth to form into cross on their tunics.

"Go with God. God be with you," the Bishop blessed them.

Father Benedict had a proud smirk upon his aged features and Ceana held back a tear in her eye as they sat in the vast emptiness of the Cathedral

Tom and Henry remembered the sea with both compassion and hatred as they espied the crashing surfs and white water. They sauntered down the sea front at Lewes and along the harbour were longboats and barges were being loaded and unloaded of their cargo. They both Tom and Henry proudly displayed their red crosses as they walked from boat to boat trying to gain passage. A bearded man in fine silks and wearing ruby pantaloons supervised the loading of his barge.

"Excuse me Sir," Tom interrupted the captain from his duties.

"What can I do you for you Squires," the Captain had a voice as salty as the spindrift air.

"Where hoping to journey to Normandy and join the Crusade and wish to gain passage over the channel," Tom informed him nobly and politely.

"Have you gold Squire to pay for such a journey," the Captain had eyed the two pilgrims up and down knowing they were peasants but decided to tease them for his amusement.

“No Sir we do not have the funds to pay for passage however we have strong arms and backs to load and row your fine vessel.” Tom almost pleaded dropping his air of dignity.

“And how much will this service cost me,” The Captain spat on the quayside showing the empathy to their plight.

“Nothing Sir just passage and a meal although we have two other companions a girl and a Priest,” Tom knew this final nail would ruin the deal.

“A priest you say,” the Captains ears suddenly perked up.

“Yes a fine man Father Benedict,”

“We sail at dawn be here before the cock crows,”

Tom and Henry helped load bales of wheat and wool before the Captain known as Briscard sat them at their station upon the oars. It took them a while to keep in pace with the seasoned crew of ten although as they hit the high seas the square rig sail was hoisted and they laboured only now for navigation. Swirls of white cotton drifted on the air from their cargo and seemed to float back towards their homeland that grew distant. They all glared back to the shore and Tom wondered if he’d ever see England and his Mother again. Henry and Ceana had the same misgivings they were heading towards the breeding grounds of the hated Normans and beyond that a journey to the Holy Lands. Tom had read in the Bible of a thousand mystical places with glorious names Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth being the most well known. They all had never set eyes upon desert, oasis or the Dead Sea and Tom could form no picture of these mysteries in his mind.

The contour of Normandy lay ahead so flat and green without any character.

“They she be land ahoy,” Captain Biscard roared.

“Well this is it Tom a new life, a new leaf,” Henry remarked trying to spark excitement but none was to be found.

“I just pray one day we will all return safely as friends,” Tom replied honestly.

“Rich friends,” Henry added with a smile.

They docked at Coutances and wandered as quickly as they could through the Town. It was infested with drunken sailors, debauched

whores, unscrupulous rogues and smugglers all living immorally from the ill gotten gains the sea trade brought in.

“Welcome to Hell,” Tom announced as they stepped over a dead body in the sewerage swimming streets stepping over the loser of a Tavern brawl.

They slept in fields and Father Benedict bought or was given the few provisions they needed to survive. It was in the spring of 1096 that they entered Toulouse penniless and exhausted only weeks after leaving England. The Town was bustling full of eager Crusaders. Foot soldiers, knights, clergymen and laymen alike. The Cathedral held masses on the hour all the way through the day and night. Everyone waited upon the day of departure and a carnival of excitement ran wild through the Town. Fire-eaters, Jesters and Jugglers entertained on the street corners. The Mayor gave open-air banquets and the food was free and sumptuous. This had been Tom and Henrys first port of call chewing upon mutton and eating warm bread that felt so soft it had been baked to perfection. They were all mesmerised by the soldiers clad in chain mail armour with bright yellow tunics with the red cross of the Crusade upon them. The Knights had yellow cloaks with the Red Cross emblazoned on their chest near the right shoulder and the pennant lances were also yellow. The chosen colour they learnt of this Armies leader Raymond of Toulouse.

“Toulouse,” They shouted as their battle cry.

“Saint Martin,” they prayed to as their guardian a Roman soldier who had fought against the Pagan Gaul’s and then had turned to Christianity and went back to Gaul that dark place as a Priest to convert the heathen.

“Toulouse,” Henry shouted out taking another bite of Mutton and the whole square responded to his chant.

“Toulouse,” Such was the nature that had overtaken them all.

It had not been long when Tom and Henry had found employment as grooms in a detachment of the Army known as the Flower of Toulouse. At night around the campfire they polished swords and armour for their Knights. Ceana became a cook’s assistant under Molly Guiseppe a lively character and Father Benedict joined the gathering of Clergymen under Bishop Adehemars command. It was October 1096 when Raymond of Toulouse paraded the streets welcoming and greeting all on the day

before the expeditions departure. Tom and Henry were mesmerised by this powerful Lord who commanded the great Army. They had heard already from the many rumours from veteran soldiers of this mans valour against the Moors and they looked upon him with both admiration and fear. Raymond tied his mount outside the Cathedral and passing the many praying Crusaders made his way into the back chambers. Bishop Adhemar sat behind his desk placing his seal upon documents unfinished church business before he had to set out to the East.

“Greetings Raymond,” He acknowledged seeing the Lord enter.

“Greetings Bishop,” Raymond responded glad for a moment of peace away from the cheers of the crowds.

“Raymond I have grave tidings the Teutons in the Rhineland led by that Swabian Count Von Leiningen notorious for his cruelty has sacked the Cities of Spier, Worms and Mainz slaughtering the Jews there,” Adhemar paused as this kind of news could spell discontent amongst the masses.

“Why has he done this we are at War with the East not with Bavaria,” Raymond answered with frustration.

“They took it upon themselves to murder the condemners of Christ. The Archbishop of Cologne had given refuge to five hundred in the Cathedral but such was there ferocity that the Teutons axed down the Church doors and slaughtered them in Gods house. This is not a good omen for a Holy mission,” the Bishop shook his head in disbelief.

“Not for the ungodly it isn’t. Wait till I get my hands upon this Count Emich Von Leiningen when we reach Constantinople,” Raymond slammed his fists on the desk in anger.

“The other expeditions are all underway we are the last,” Adhemar added changing the subject.

“God speed to them all,” Raymond replied with. “Well if were fleet of foot and with Gods will well soon join our brothers in arms,” he surmised with.

The Emperor Alexius Comnenus stared at the running waters of the Bosphorus as it gushed and spiralled its way all the way up to the Black Sea. The poisoned sea where nothing lived in the acidic

basin of its depths and then Alexius looked across to the far bank where another poison roamed. His enemy the Seljuk Turks now roamed with impunity across the eastern shore and over the eastern empire. To his north the Patzinak Turks once allied with Byzantium had revolted and his troops controlling the northern provinces had to be placed under martial law. To the west the Franks once his detested enemy who Alexius himself had campaigned against the Norman Warlord Robert Guiscard in Italy and Albania. Alexius knew the power of these knights and that they were a formidable enemy and who would have pushed his own army back beyond the gates of Constantinople if it had not been for the untimely death of their leader Robert Guiscard. His unexpected demise had been fortunate for Alexius for Italy had erupted into civil war as a power struggle broke out amongst the feudal Warlords and the riches of Byzantium temporarily forgotten.

The war in the west had ended but to what cost the province of Italy had been lost and now the Seljuk's beat at the doors of his capitol City. Alexius had seen no alternative but to pursue peace with the Franks he had opened the gates of Constantinople to pilgrims and gave them safe passage through his own lands. On one of these pilgrimages he had met the Knight Robert of Flanders with a company of his men returning from the Holy Sepulchre and they had instantly become good friends. Sharing the same views on the jeopardy the Holy Land was now in. Robert of Flanders had also been sympathetic to the Byzantine cause and had vowed to some day return with a Christian army.

It was spring in the year of our Lord 1096 and that promise was now about to be fulfilled as Alexius gazed to the west with renewed hope and some concern as he knew how avaricious the nature of man could be and he knew he sat upon the pedestal of one of the richest kingdoms in the world.

“There are coming, there are coming” his mind sang out as he reflected upon the irony of his once be conquerors were now pledging oaths with their Pope to defeat the Turks and free his Empire from their tyranny.

The first of the crusaders to set forth had been Walter the Penniless a French Knight with his band of men they had passed through Hungary with the blessing of King Koloman however whilst in Semlen trouble had broken out. Sixteen of Walters Knights a rearguard had run foul of

the law and had been robbed stripped of weapons, armour and monies. Walter on hearing of the affair refused to turn back hearing the incidents story with equanimity. When they reached Belgrade Walter demanded food to feed his starving men but was refused entry or market so they pillaged the countryside stripping it of grain and livestock. The Bulgarians infuriated by the thefts harassed Walters men all the way back to the border. They managed to surround around sixty of his men in a chapel that they set alight to killing them all. Walter continued the journey reaching Constantinople without further incident under escort by Byzantium troops.

Peter the Hermit had set out from Cologne three days after Walter with a massive army of 20,000 followers. Most in the army were soldiers, knights and militia however farmers and ordinary folk had laid down tools to join the Crusade

“Christ’s poor should redeem the earth,” Peter had proclaimed to them as entire families crammed their possessions upon oxen carts. Beggars simply slung their worldly goods upon their shoulders and men of ill repute criminals also attached their selves to this expedition. They were poorly armed they went forth expecting miracles with stories of Charlemagne himself being risen from his grave. The mounted knights led the way with Peter on his donkey, then the foot soldiers and behind with the wagons of the supply train were the multitude of ordinary people.

Alexius greeted the old Knight Walter the Penniless cordially and his band of ruffians. They had not been what he had expected and he was to be further disappointed, as he hadn’t realised what was following in their wake. He had been promised fine battle hardened mercenaries and the thugs outside his gate left little to be desired. The words of his daughter Anna Comnena rang in his ears demoralizing his well-being.

“All the west even the Barbarians who dwell beyond the Adriatic and out as far as the Pillars of Hercules are on the move eastward uprooting their families with them,”

King Koloman greeted Peter’s peasants kindly enough offering markets for them to procure goods and necessities. As they progressed through Hungary they came to Semlen they found to their horror sixteen suits of armour nailed to the City Walls from Walters Knights barring them

entry and the right to a market. A sudden anger and hostility towards the Hungarians spread throughout the ranks and an argument over a pair of shoes broke into a full-scale riot. In a sudden usurp of anger trumpets were sounded and with upraised banners they raced to the City Walls. Hail after hail of arrows in quick succession in such weight that the defenders on the walls had to retreat to the heart of the City where they hoped to hold out. A Gaul Godfrey of Burela who was Master and standard bearer of two hundred foot. Godfrey was a man of great strength who ascended the walls by means of a ladder. Count Reinhold of Broyes a Norman Knight followed with his men who stormed the fortifications and entered the City opening the gates as Peter's followers rushed through the streets. They looted the shops and markets killing hundreds of the townsfolk who stood in their way. The citizens of Semlen ran for their lives exiting at another gate and ascending a high mountain they used for refuge. The peasants still pursued them cutting them down in large numbers until the City and surrounding countryside was in the hands of Peter the Hermit. Four thousand Hungarians had been slaughtered to a loss of a hundred Christian lives. King Kolomen soon heard the news of this treachery and began raising a large army.

Peter stayed in Semlen for six days using up the stores of grain and other supplies. Then they left knowing that a vast Hungarian Army plying for vengeance was hot upon their tracks. They crossed the Sava River into Byzantine territory on June 26th driving the herds of livestock that they procured with them. They stole lumber from houses to build rafts and left the land behind them devastated by their presence.

On the other side of the Sava Patzinak Mercenaries under the Command of the Governor Nicetas of Nish were ordered to escort the Peasants Army through Byzantium. Peter's men resisted every attempt to be domicile and a quarrel broke out between the two forces with the Patzinak soldiers being overwhelmed by the Crusaders. They were either captured or put to death. When the Crusaders reached Belgrade that was still reluctant to offer any aid the Crusaders they looted the town and put it to the torch.

After a week march they arrived at Nish on July 3rd and the Hermits first act was to demand food for his people.

“We are treated with hate and despised throughout your land and we travel with only hunger in our bellies and we deserve a feast for the hardships we have endured,” The Hermit had spoken.

“You walk through the lands like brigands robbing and pillaging in the name of God. I will not deny you supplies but demand hostages as guarantee of good conduct,” Governor Nicetas had no trust in this rabble before him and demanded sureties.

Geoffrey Burel and Walter of Bretteuil lesser Nobles were handed over in due course. Nish a Christian territory welcomed the Crusaders and several local people even joined their ranks.

The next morning the Crusaders set forth for Sophia but as they were leaving Nish a group of Germans who had quarrelled with the townsfolk the night previously took it upon themselves to set fire to a cluster of mills in retribution. When Governor Nicetas heard of this wanton act of destruction he felt betrayed and gathered his troops setting off in pursuit of the Hermit. He intended to attack their rearguard and take hostages for compensation. A man named Lombart came running down the column shouting wildly.

“There attacking us Peter the Patzinaks are upon us,” he yelled.

Peter on hearing the News turned back to talk with Governor Nicetas and to ransom back the captives. They held the Conference on the road however the unruly contingents of the Peasant army were adamant that trouble would break out. Arrows and javelins were exchanged and Governor Nicetas was forced to unleash his army upon them.

The Peasants unorganised and not battle ready were mercilessly torn down by disciplined troops and heavy cavalry. The peasants routed they scattered upon the four winds. Many were captured to outlive there days in slavery and many others lay dead upon the roadside.

A band of five hundred including Peter and Count Reinhold spent the cold night huddled in the mountains believing they were all that had survived. Peter the Hermit shed tears and would not be consoled. The war chest the Armies treasury had been lost and with it all hope of continuing. On the 12th July the Peasant Army in dribs and drabs converged upon Sofia and to Peters relief they had lost only five thousand of his twenty thousand strong force.

On entering Phillipolis they were greeted by the Imperial Army who took Peter the Hermit straight to Alexius who had heard so much about him from Walter the Penniless that he yearned to meet such a wizened man.

Constantinople located on a natural peninsula had been naturally secure from invasion on three sides and its fourth side had three interlocking walls that had withstood invasion for a thousand years. The predominant language was Greek however Latin was conversed frequently.

Intellectuals, writers, poets and Artists were free and encouraged to express their talents. Before the dreadful year of 1071 the Byzantine Empire had been an oasis of peace in the desert of the perilous middle ages. The Imperial Palace still held the awe aspiring grandeur of Ancient Rome and even the humble Peter was taken aback by its splendour. Walking barefoot with unwashed feet in his rags of clothing amid the silks and splendour of the Byzantine courtiers.

“Greetings and blessing be upon you Emperor of the East,” the Hermit had said on entering the throne room.

“So you are he living prophet and illustrious Hermit who gathers his flock to drive the heathen from my door,” Alexius complimented him but on hearing of his Army of farmers with pitchforks and woman and children his true thoughts were `oh Lord what have you sent me`.

“Emperor I am but a humble man who does Gods works in his stead,” Peter feigned modesty although he yearned for infinite glory.

“Forgive me for saying but I have misgivings, your Army however noble and pure their intentions would never stand up to the might of the Turks. For you are not so strong that you can hope to do battle with them. Until the chief host of the Christian armies has arrived I beg you to stay enjoy the comforts of my land and await the Armies of Raymond of Toulouse. Godfrey of Bouillon and Robert of Flanders before you continue the journey east,” Alexius made known his concerns of the weaknesses in the Hermits and Walters Armies.

“Emperor Gods work cannot wait the people hunger for retribution and I alone cannot contain them even in your Kingdom. The Holy Sepulchre cries out from across the water for salvation that is why I come to you to aid us in our Holy cause,” Peter didn’t lie his Army was hungering for

retribution and even in Semlen he couldn't contain them from slaughtering the population.

"So be it I have given you my thoughts I will have my ships begin ferrying your people over the river by dawn." Alexius in a way was glad of washing his hands of them. He had heard of the massacre at Semlen from his spies and had seen the herds and other plunder that they had robbed from other lands and not for one moment did he not envisage them doing the same throughout his Kingdom. Rumours had already reached his ears of buildings being set alight and them stealing what they could even lead being stripped off church roofs.

As Dawn broke nine peasants at a time were escorted through the heart of Constantinople and loaded onto the Ships at the harbour. Alexius fearful of riot or pillaging by these barbarians had decreed this order to keep the peace. His Fleet sailed too and fro many times dropping the Crusaders in the no mans land between the Bosphorus and the Capitol of the Turk Nicaea. Peter and Walter said there farewells and Alexius promised them to send the other Armies in there wake and once again asked them to wait before laying siege to the Turkish stronghold.

"Were in Gods hands," was Peters only response.

Hugh of Vermandois had travelled from France with his Army. Before he had marched he sent an arrogant letter to the Emperor Alexius Comnenus announcing his arrival. His Soldiers of France who wore light blue tunics with a white cross on their chest under the right shoulder the colours of their country. They met Pope Urban at St Lucca who presented them the standard of St Peter. The Prince of Apostles who stands as a rock against the enemies of Christ. "God bless you men of France," the Pope had called.

"For France and for Phillipe," they gave back their war cry.

Godfrey of Bouillon had sent messengers ahead to King Koloman and was granted safe passage through Hungary. He arrived in the Rhineland in the wake of Count Emich Von Leiningsen, Gottschalk and Volkmar. They carried the standard of St Gregory at there head the Pope who had through severe suffering and ill health never stopped working and sacrificing himself for God. The Men of Bologne wore the colour green and their war cry was for their scared city.

Robert of Flanders with his Norman knights delayed their departure to call upon the Monastery of Saint Benedict at Monte Cassino and ask for prayers. Robert knelt at the altar with Count Stephen of Blois. Robert a man filled with pious and religious zeal had followed the Order of Saint Benedict by his thoughts and the way he lived his life. The Rules of Saint Benedict covered seventy-three chapters and Robert chose the one most apt to use in prayer.

“We renounce our own will to take up arms under the banner of Christ,” As they left the Monastery his Knights in red tunics with the white cross were all knelt in submission to prayer.

“Saint Benedict has given us his blessing arise good Knights and we march. We march with God as our shield and Christ as our lance to vanquish the heathen from the holiest of places. Mount up we ride.”

Robert called as the Knights made ready to begin their journey.

At Salerno the Warlord Bohemund ruler of Sicily in which he had liberated from the Moors laid siege to the Castle at Amalfi. Bohemund the eldest son of Robert Guiscard had been embroiled in civil conflict in Italy since his fathers demise. They intended to starve out the occupants of Salerno before having to physically siege its walls. The siege was in its fourth week when they came singing psalms in their wake. Knights and Soldiers in the red tunics of Flanders. Clergymen carrying papal standards and ordinary laymen following this procession devoutly. Bohemund rushed towards them and asked.

“Where are you going,” he said unto them as they passed.

“Constantinople then onto Jerusalem,” a soldier answered him.

“What arms do you bear, what sign of Christ do you carry and what is your battle cry,” he asked the passing Pilgrims again.

“We bear arms suitable for battle,” a soldier answered.

“On the right shoulder or between both shoulders we wear the cross of Christ,” a Pilgrim answered.

“And our war cry is DEUS VULT God wills it,” they all shouted in truth with one voice.

Bohemund ordered his most precious red cloak cut into pieces and had it made into crosses for him as his men. They commandeered a Bishop to give them vows and so many followed Bohemund actions that the siege of Amalfi was lifted.

Tom and Henry marched together in column behind the foot soldiers as they crossed the snow-topped mountains of the Alps.

“Is this Jerusalem,” Henry asked one of the soldiers as they came to rest.

“No lad Jerusalem’s a long way yet but have no fear well get you there all right,” Cesar Rodolphe had answered him who held the rank of Vavaseur above the common soldiery.

Ceana worked at the Camp kitchen under the eye of Molly a large Italian Lady who added spices to her broths that the Saxon girl had never heard of although it tasted wonderful. Tom and Henry always got an extra ladle of stew from her and at night she smuggled back bread to their campfire. Cesar came over some nights to chat with the boys a true Gaul tough and muscular although he was wise to the ways of the world, which had earned him his rank.

“Want some bread Cesar,” Henry offered breaking a piece from the loaf.

“When your Hungry you will not be so keen to share,” the Vasseur warned but still took the bread.

When they set up camp the next day on the frontier of the Italian Border Ceana returned to camp in floods of tears.

“What’s the matter Ceana,” Tom comforted her placing his arm around her shoulders.

“Molly has scolded me for giving you extra rations,” she confided.

“That’s Cesar doing the two faced swine,” Henry cursed.

As the embers of the campfire burned and the moon held full in the night sky the bulky Gaul came to sit at their campfire and a silence fell upon them all.

“Traitor,” Henry had whispered to Tom as he had approached.

Then as the silence became uncomfortable the Gaul looking into the glowing embers spoke.

“You steal a crust of bread today when all is plentiful but further on this march when bellies growl with hunger that same crust of bread will get your throat cut,” Cesar stood after talking and walked into the night.

They all now felt guilty knowing he had done this not through spite but necessity to save their lives from danger and they found a strong bond developing with this clever Gaul.

As the Army led by Godfrey of Bouillon had neared the Hungarian border they had come upon the few survivors from Count Emichs men

who had lay siege to the frontier town of Wieselburg for several weeks until being totally routed by the Hungarian Army. King Koloman was the only European King who offered protection to his Jewish communities and upon hearing of these nefarious groups who left slaughter and death in their wake he had brought retribution down upon them. Godfrey when he reached the border was greeted cordially but respectfully enough and allowed entry into Hungary unopposed. Then they came upon a few survivors of Gottschalks Army who had also run foul of King Koloman and had been surrounded by his Army. They were told if they surrendered their arms safe passage would be granted they did so giving over their weapons without question. They were lead into a field outside Belgrade and ten thousand Bavarian Crusaders were unceremoniously slaughtered. Thus the ungodly bands had been vanquished leaving only the official Crusade to uphold the might of God.

Godfrey of Bouillon with 10,000 Knights and 30,000 foot negotiated passage through Hungary and its dominions with King Koloman. The Hungarian King knowing how destructive and how much injure they had caused to his people demanded hostages. Count Baldwin brother of Godfrey and Godfrey's wife were handed over as sureties of good conduct. The Crusaders acted under the strictest disciplines whilst the people of Hungary furnished them with supplies. Count Baldwin and Godfreys wife were handed back at Byzantium border before they crossed the Sava River. As they approached Belgrade they received a letter from Alexius promising assistance if they would refrain from violence whilst in his territories. At Nish and Sterniz they found abundant provisions and even presents from the Emperor. They arrived at Phillippolis on the 26th November. Adrianpole on the 8th December and then Hellespont where the Army set up camp whilst Godfrey went ahead to meet with the Emperor. Godfrey arrived at Constantinople where he found Hugh of Vermandois there already in December 1096.

Robert of Flanders and his Norman Knights had followed the same route as Hugh of Vermandois boarding ships at Bari. The Normans too were hit by a storm whilst crossing the Adriatic and when they reached the shore they looked out at sea to their horror. The Largest ship loaded

with 400 men, horses and the armies treasury broke and sank to the bottom of the sea.

One night as the moon hung low in the night sky and the chill north wind had Tom, Henry and Ceana huddling together for warmth Father Benedict and the Gaul soldier came to their camp fire. Father Benedict had two orphan boys with him as thin as sticks and adorned in mottled rags.

“Good evening Tom, Henry and Ceana I’ve brought a couple of urchins I thought you could take under your wing,” the Father told them of their new chore.

“These two fine boys here will be taking over your duties with the horses and the armour so I need you to show them the ropes,” Cesar told them to their dislike.

“What I we to do,” Tom mouthed not wanting to lose his employment.

“I haven’t really thought of that, I have you any suggestions Father,” Cesar stroked his chin looking at Father Benedict for guidance.

“I wouldn’t know either I’m afraid there a talent less pair,” The Father too was bemused.

Then Cesar produced the two yellow tunics from behind his back and Tom and Henrys mouths opened agape. The Father and the old Soldier laughed enjoying their moment of triumph.

“Well you two would be Crusaders haven’t come all this way just to sight see had you. I thought you might have wanted a bit of the honour and the glory,” the Gaul added throwing the tunics over.

Tom and Henry placed the tunics on straightaway and paced up and down proudly. Ceana jokingly wolf whistled at them and the two orphans marched in their wake lapping up the pretence. Their names were Albert and Isaac both Jewish and five years younger than Henry. Their parents had been massacred at Mainz by the Teutonic Knights and Father Benedict had found them wandering in the wilds close to starvation.

“I’ll get some beer and half beer for the youngsters,” the Father said disappearing. Beer was drunk frequently as water was not always safe and the dirge of typhoid was rampant. Beer was boiled and the barley mix could be used three times. The first brew a strong ale reserved for the Lords and Knights. The second a table brew reserved for the

Priesthood and common soldiery. The third they called a half beer, which the women and children drank. The Father returned with two wooden pails and the lids were prised off as a small celebration took place as Tom and Henry would now bear arms on the Crusade.

Peter the Hermits Army were sailed across the strait of Saint George to the port of Civetot and ushered into Cappadocian an old army camp where the sick and the women could sit out the oncoming campaign. The Norman Knights impatient for glory had set out on raids against Peters expressed wishes. The raids at first were short lived and timid as they pillaged nearby villages. Then French Knights under the Command of Count Reinhold advanced as far as Nicaea and caught the Turks gathering in the harvest, which they duly commandeered, from them.

The Sultan of Nicaea the sixteen-year-old Kilij Arslan Ibn Suleyman had been engaged in conflict with his neighbour King Danishmend the Wise and had lay siege to the City of Malatya.

Considering the attack by the Franj (the Franks) to be a minor inconvenience he sent a cavalry detachment to deal with the menace. Count Reinhold annihilated the Turkish Cavalry and forced them to retreat inside the citadel of Nicaea which had a 6,000 metre high walls with 240 turrets and invincible to the Frenchman's small band of Knights. The Count raided the suburbs instead and killed all the infidel they could find. The Sultan Suleyman on seeing his men limping back to him had lost his pride and prestige and demanded immediate retribution. "Wait most prudent one and most wise our chance will come," General Elchanes his advisor had counselled him.

Count Reinhold had become bold and with 6000 Knights he took the stronghold of Xerogord as the Turks had fled where he found provisions of grain, meat and wine. The water supply flowed from a stream in a valley beyond the city walls. Suleyman had been waiting this opportunity and dispatched his army of 25,000 Turks under General Elchanes to lay siege to Xerogord. On the day of Dedication to Saint Michael they arrived in droves. First all the Turks did was to deprive the Citadel of water and then they sat in the shade and waited. After eight days the Crusaders were so tormented by thirst that they drew blood

from the veins of their horses and assess to drink. Some urinated into the cupped hands of others to parch their scorching thirst. Many dug pits in the sand and lay in the moist earth covering their chests to cool down. Others placed girdles and handkerchiefs onto the bottom of the dry water cistern and tried to squeeze out water from the cloth.

The Priests and Bishops comforted people admonishing their spirits and asking them to have the strength and not to yield.

“Be everywhere strong in the faith of Christ and do not fear those who persecute you. Just as the Lord saith be not afraid of them that kill the body for they are not able to kill the soul,” they prayed for the Citadels salvation.

Reinhold had not heeded much attention to the priest’s messages and on the 29th September with a group of his men headed out the gate feigning to attack the Turks. Instead to the astonishment of the besieged garrison they surrendered to the Turkish General Elchanes.

“I lay my sword at your feet Lord but would pick it up again gladly to help you end this siege,” Reinhold had offered such was his treachery.

“Christian convert your ways or die now like the dog you are,” Elchanes had said

“I renounce my faith before thee,” Reinhold shamefully agreed to his decree before being shackled and hounded into a life of slavery.

The Turkish archers very skilful in the way they used their bows of horn and bone fired volley after volley over the walls of Xerogord. Many were killed or wounded by this constant onslaught from the heavens.

The gate and wooden buildings were burnings within having been torched by the Turks who laughed at the torment they were inflicting. They could hear the screams of those roasting to death. Others trapped on the walls by the flames hoping for safety leapt out of the citadel but were put to death by the Ishmaelite sword. The Garrison finally surrendered en mass and were all given an ultimatum.

“Convert or die,”

Those that would not deny the Lord were put to death and the others divided like sheep. Some the old and ugly were placed as targets and had arrows shot through them and the rest carted off like animals to be sold in the slave markets of Chorosan, Antioch, Aleppo and even as far as Persia.

The Sultan had two converted French Knights used as spies and sent them to the camp at Civetot to inform Peter the Hermit that Xerogord was still in French hands and Count Reinhold were now besieging Nicaea. Peter the Hermit and most of the leaders however were in Constantinople so the deception failed and then when miraculously a survivor of the slaughter at Xerogord entered the camp revealing the truth the spies were put to death. The camp at Civetot had a natural defence but Godfrey Burel opposed such timid tactics with the anger manifesting by the people.

“The timid by means avail so little in war as of that of the bold,” he ministered to his brethren to avenge the massacre and take battle to the Turk.

On the fourth day after the massacre at Xerogord on October 21st the men were ordered to arm themselves. The dawn awoke with the sound of trumpets and the assemblage for battle. Only the unarmed, the sick, the women and the children remained in camp. 25, 000 foot soldiers and 500 knights marched in six columns towards Nicaea to avenge their brethren and provoke the Sultans army into giving battle. They advanced from left to right with standards upraised. They sang bawdy battle hymns and had boisterous joy about them as they advanced.

In the pass of Draco in the high mountains Suleyman had watched them approaching.

“Behold the Franks against whom we are marching are at hand. Let us withdraw from the mountain and into the open plain beyond where we may freely engage them and they can find no refuge,” accordingly the Sultans commands were placed in motion.

When the Crusaders came to the pass of Draco they had to close file. The road passes through a narrow valley with woods either side and behind the trees the Turkish archers waited. The Knights at the head were not even wearing their armour on such a hot day and the mood was light hearted not one wary amongst them. The abrupt volleys of arrows cut them down mercilessly by the thousands and horses stampeded into the infantry. Walter the Penniless took seven arrows before he keeled over falling from his horse where he died. After the blackness of the arrows abated they descried them. The thunder of drums and the sound of the horns blowing. They came in close rank after rank disciplined

Turkish horsemen. The few remaining Knights fought with distinction and honour against the overwhelming numbers before they were overwhelmed. The Infantry in due course routed and the Turks cut down whom they could find.

In the camp at Civetot women cooked, children played and a Priest held a morning service. A vast dark line grew upon the horizon and the dust cloud came nearer and nearer. Then the survivors stumbled into the camp in headlong flight.

“Flee. Flee run for your lives, save your skin,” They called as the Turkish horsemen came upon them cutting down all in their path. Some of the camp had been sleeping, others ran around naked screaming and the Priest was martyred at the altar celebrating mass. In the midst of the slaughter the Saracens took a liking to a handful of children and spared them. Some were herded away into slavery but most put to the sword. 3,000 took refuge in an old fortress at the edge of the Bosphorus. The fortress had no gate so they piled up shields and piles of rock for defence anything they could find. Armed with lances, slingshots and bows they prepared to make their stand. The building had no roof so the Turks rained down volley after volley of arrows into the fortress. The Turks collected wood on carts to burn them out although with well-placed fire arrows the defenders managed to set the carts ablaze before they were in place. The wind turned the flames and cremated some of the Turks. Miraculously the survivors held out until the Byzantine Navy rescued them. Peter the Hermit's Crusade had ignominiously ended and he hadn't even been there to see the absolute devastation. In the pass of Draco Suleyman had ordered the Christian bodies to be piled high. When the next Christians passed they would see the tower of bones as warning where once a Crusading Army had been.

Lord Bohemund stood six and a half foot, tall, strong-armed and laughed with a roar. He paraded along the docks at Bari with his two cousins Count Tancred and Count Richard trying to procure ships for his men. Whilst they were passing the largest ship in harbour a Venetian galley a sailor heckled down an insult towards them. “Orangatang,” The Venetian had called to the merriment of the crew.

The insult had been directed at Bohemund personally who had long flowing yellow hair but his beard was a bright ginger bush. The Sicilian Norman Count had a penchant for being ridiculed and lead the charge up the gangplank of the galley with a murderous lust in his eyes. A sailor in the hold looked up just in time as a metal bludgeon whistled passed his head that Bohemund had snatched from the gang rail and hurtled at him. It landed in the timber splitting the planks and water gushed in. Tancred and Richard raced upon the deck wrestling with the crew and Tancred had already tossed two of them over the side. Bohemund climbed the staircase to the forecastle where his insulter awaited. Two Venetians blocked his way stood at the top of the stairway. Bohemund with a mighty blow from his huge fist knocked one of their heads onto the others rendering them both unconscious.

“Orangatang well see who looks like an Orangatang,” Bohemund snarled unsheathing his sword however the sailor knew better than to fight this brute. He took his first chance and leapt over the side however it was the dockside and he fell between the hull and harbour wall to be crushed mercilessly.

The ship had lobbed sided as the weight of the water sucked under the bow lifting the deck into the air. Venetians in the water were dragged down with the suction and the whirlpool forming on the surface to a watery grave. Tancred and Richard had managed to get back onto the dockside and could still see Bohemund in a fury punching sailor’s lights out upon the deck.

“Marcus,” Tancred shouted in concern and warning knowing his Uncle could not swim.

Bohemund waded knee deep in water when he realised there was no one left to brawl with. He climbed the steps onto the forecastle and to his cousin’s horror jumped over on the seaward side. A few agonising moments passed and then the small sail of a felucca appeared in the wake of the submerging galleon with Bohemund saluting proudly at the bow. The sailboat took him to the dockside where he strutted up the staircase two at a time.

“Seigniors that ship was a disgrace my living quarters far to cramped and it was a good thing we checked her out first, far too unstable. Come

my good fellows lets peruse some more and find a ship worthy of men like ourselves,” he had said as they continued along the docks.

They managed to negotiate a passage as Captains didn't want to argue with these men who sunk ships and the port of Bari would be glad to see the back of them. They crossed the Adriatic and landed in Bulgaria where they found an abundance of grain and wine. They descended into the valley of Andronopoli where Bohemund spoke to his Italian and Norman men at arms.

“Seigniors, take heed all of you for we pilgrims of God, we ought therefore to be better and more humble than before. Do not plunder this land since it belongs to our fellow Christians and let no one at the cost of the divine blessing promised by the Pope take more than he needs to eat,” Bohemund promised them early martyrdom if they broke his creed as his eyes were focused on the riches on the East. He needed his Army intact to have any bargaining power in the division of spoils and another matter on his mind was that he was in Byzantine territory. The son of Robert Guiscard sworn enemy of Constantinople uninvited and needed to show clean hands of his good intentions.

They journeyed from villa to villa. City to City. Fortress to Fortress until they reached Castoria where they celebrated the Nativity of the Lord in the surrounding fields. On the following morn after expending all their rations on feasts and rejoicing they appealed to the Christian nature of the Town to offer them a market. They wouldn't oblige even though Bohemund himself had humbled before their better nature. So he took it upon himself to take their cattle, horses and everything that he and his men found.

Leaving Castoria they entered Pelagonia in which Bohemund again polite and charming asked them for market.

“Go and shave your ugly head,” a voice called from the battlements and his creed of good intentions had been torn asunder.

“Heavens we've found a citadel occupied by the Devil himself,” he told his men branding the occupants heretics for not sharing grain or wine. The Fortress was assaulted from all sides and it soon yielded to the mighty sway of the Norman Knights. They took food, wine and plundered their riches before putting the town to the torch. They could hear the screams from the congregation of heretics trapped in the centre

of the fortress as they were roasted alive. Bohemund had a bloody mind and a murderous temper but shed a tear at the awfulness he had set in motion.

Reaching Lake Vardar Lord Bohemund went ahead with a cohort of Knights to reconnoitre leaving Tancred patrolling the left bank and Richards Knights patrolling the right. Thereupon an Imperial Army took their chance seeing the Normans had divided their forces. Patzinaks, Uzes and Turcoples Asiatic horse archers came raining down and attacked the flank of Count Richards Knights. Soon the place was a bloody battlefield of melee with men at arms. Tancred of hearing this news from his rearguard went back and hurled himself into the lake and swam to the other side. Thousands followed his lead dismounting and plunging into Lake Vardar. They came upon the Turcoples, Uzes and Patzinaks struggling against their brethren. Tancred ball fisted and dripping wet charged the enemy lines with the others following. With utmost bravery and sheer courage they overcame them. They dragged the Turkish archers from their mounts and pummelled in their faces. Arrows struck a few of the Norman Knights but they ran on as if nothing had hit them with vehemence gritted upon their facial gestures.

Several of the Turcoples were seized and lead into the presence of Lord Bohemund on his return to interrogate them.

“Wherefore miserable men do you kill Christ’s people and mine. I have no quarrel with your Emperor as my father had,” Bohemund told them.

“We cannot do otherwise we are in the service of the Emperor and whatever he commands we must fulfil,” They said in mitigation.

“Go tell your Emperor we come in peace,” Bohemund let the captives depart unpunished.

The Emperor Alexius Comnenus on hearing this message from the captives sent his greatly loved own Imperial Army the Corpalatius to conduct the Norman Knights safely through Byzantine territory. Tancred took command at Rusa whilst Bohemund pressed on to Constantinople.

The outline of the Alps lay far behind them as they entered the lands of the Slovenians in Serbia. It was the very heart of winter and bitter cold. The landscape so barren that the icy wind cut straight through them. The region mountainous that tortured legs into

dead weights on the ascents and limbs moved of their own accord on the steep downward inclines. The paths were seldom and the few that they found were treacherous. Tom scoured the peaks for wild birds and the sparse leafless woods for game but there was no sign of life in this accursed place.

The few Slovenians they came upon were rude and boorish unwilling to trade or furnish them with guidance. Settlements lay empty, abandoned as they approached with cooking pots still boiling on the fires. The inhabitants had fled into the hills, to the towns and Castles. Rumour and gossip of massacre had been left in the wake of Volkmar, Gottschalk and Count Emmich Von Leisingen. The populace had a deep hatred of these people of the West who took what they wanted and murdered who they could indiscriminately.

Ceana had to take deep breaths in the high altitude of the mountains as the going was arduous and she had also been burdened with Albert and Isaac. Tom and Henry marched in file with the other soldiers of Toulouse. A runner came passed them from the rear with such urgency that it caught everyone's attention and then moments later the column came to a halt. The snap of hooves could be discerned then Count Raymond himself, this powerful Lord stopped before the line of troops where Tom and Henry stood.

"Vaveseur bring your men follow in our stead," the Count had ordered. "Men of Toulouse form rank, at the quick pace march," Cesar the Gaul called as they trotted at the rear of the column of Knights.

Circles of flies buzzed and a stench twice as bad as rotten eggs hit the wind turning it foul. They came into a narrow gorge and there they lay. Hundreds and hundreds of bodies. The old and weak that had lagged behind had been ambushed and slaughtered by Brigands. Children's heads had been smashed upon rocks and old men had their brittle bones shattered leaving them in unnatural postures. Mutilated corpses were strewn all along the path-dismembered heads, arms and limbs even of babies were scattered indiscriminately.

"Are you well Henry," Tom asked in concern as his friend dropped to his knees in shock and vomited.

The Counts face was morose and the other Knights were all physically sickened by this slaughter.

“Curse these Devils,” Raymond mouthed with bloody-minded vengeance in his mind.

Two days later as they passed through thickets in a wood an arrow came out of the wilds it passed within a hairs breath of Tom and Henry hitting the man behind in the eye. He died instantly dropping like a stone. Other silent arrows whooshed down unexpectedly finding their targets and when Count Raymond and his Knights pursued them they disappeared from sight. The Brigands were well acquainted with this country and had no cumbersome armour to slow them down.

As the Country turned to wild forests and narrow trails the Brigands harassed the Crusaders constantly. Count Raymond sallied back and forth non-stop coming to the aid of the wounded and stricken. They chased the Brigands away many times and tried their utmost to keep the peace. Then Tom and Henry got to see these wild men as Count Raymond in an illustrious act of bravery had captured six of them single handed. The Wild men had well defined skulls and long black unruly hair. They were small and stout with an appearance of loathing wrought upon them.

Count Raymond employed tactics he had learnt from the Moors and Barbarians and had been compelled to use unorthodox methods to save his peoples lives. He ordered the eyes torn out of a Wild man and left him to roam blindly at the rear of the column. Two captives had their feet severed and were left as a warning signpost to any who dared pursue them further. He cut off the nose of another and the hands were slashed off the last two so they could no longer bear arms. Count Raymond hoped this brutality would slow the Brigands down and hopefully deter them off their tail.

The paths became mountainous again with clouds so dense that you could touch them and push them before you. At Night the campfires were nothing more than blurred lights in the misty heavens and people shivered with both cold and hunger. Tom knew now what Cesar had meant about getting your throat cut for a crust of bread. Isaac and Albert were wise for their years more through the horrors they had already experienced and never once did they cry or complain. They followed Ceana`s instructions explicitly and she loved them for their bravery. She hugged them both close to her and kept them warm.

“There he goes again,” Henry remarked as the horse and rider passed them.

“He’s always the last to make camp.” Tom added.

“As he’s up before the cock crows,” Ceana made her own observation known.

“Count Raymond will not settle, he loves you all and he will not sleep until he knows the camp is secure,” A voice came from the mist.

“He will never rest until we are far from this barbaric country and not one of his flock will die from his neglect or hunger,” The shadow came into the light of the fire. It was the Bishop Adhemar who had spoken to them. A portly man with a monk’s crown and jovial features.

“Good day to you Bishop,” Tom greeted him politely.

“Good day to you and May Gods blessing be upon you fine warriors. Sleep well as the day is bound to be hard upon the morrow,” the Bishop had said and then left as mysteriously as he had appeared.

They crossed the open rugged plains and came upon a town called Scutari where the King of the Slovenians awaited them. The news spread of how the Count had sworn friendship with him and gave him tribute so the Army might seek or buy necessities. The Slovenian King took the money but no market or bonding bore fruit from this meeting. The truce between the Count and the Slovenians did nothing to stop the attacks by Brigands and everyone was thankful as they left Slovenia behind them. The Count had showed constant courage and the Crusaders of Toulouse respected this Great Lord of Men and they were all proud to have him as their leader.

Crossing the Byzantine border into the territory of the Emperor they all felt a little safer in this place. One night Tom heard an undulating scream and the whole camp came alive. A search by torchlight they found their people butchered and robbed in the night by the Patzinaks.

“Is there no end to this madness,” Raymond scowled as more news of Crusaders dragged away in the dead of night to be murdered in secret ceremonies. Supplies and horses stolen under the cover of darkness.

A messenger came with a letter from the Governor of Nish promising safe conduct. Then two arrows destroyed this interval of hope killing Pontius Reinhold and his brother Peter both noble Knights and Princes. When an opportunity presented itself for vengeance as the Counts

Knights encircled a group of Patzinaks in a glade. The Count chose not to avenge their wrongs and the column continued on with the journey. On the way more letters were received talking of peace and assurance. This time from the Emperor Alexius Comnenus.

“Brotherhood and Alliance,” Raymond read out with rancour.

“Does the Emperor know the situation were in,” Bishop Adhemar said in amazement.

“If he does or does not it does not change the fact that the enemy are in number to our front, behind us, to our right and to our left. My spies tell me Patzinaks, Cumans, Uzes, Tanaces and even Bulgars are joining forces and lying in ambush for us,” Raymond gave his report than screwed the letter into ball and threw it upon the fire.

“May God protect us,” The Bishop glanced to the heavens for salvation.

In the valley of Pelegonia a halt was called and camp set up. Tom and Henry were put on guard duty on the camps right flank at the edge of the woods.

“I don’t much like this were asking to be kidnapped and used in some horrible ceremony,” Henry stated blowing heat on his hands and stamping his feet.

“Shut up Henry your giving me the creeps. Hey look there’s that Bishop fellow,” Tom pointed out as Adhemar in his infinite wisdom headed a little away from camp to find a quiet comfortable spot for his resting place.

“Where’s he going,” Henry quizzed.

“I don’t know and I don’t much care as I’m going for a pee so Ill have a look if you’re that interested,” Tom walked into the bushes to relive himself.

Five Patzinaks had watched the tents being erected and they had lain in wait for darkness in the foliage. They couldn’t believe their luck when the obese Bishop on his mule came cantering towards them.

“Wait until he’s closer and then we will kill him,” Abdul the leader instructed them.

The Bishop was alongside the bush where they hid when they sprang upon him. A blow with the side of a spear took the wind from him and it toppled him off his mount. A club smashed into the top of his head and

the second blow hit him square in the back. The Patzinaks eager for loot fumbled through his saddlebags discarding anything not of interest.

"I'm going to gut the fat dog," Abdul said producing his knife.

"Wait I have gold," Adhemar told him seeing the look of death in this mans eyes through blood already gushing down his face.

"Where is this Gold," the Turk asked.

Abdul held the others back keen to get the major prize as the Bishop took a thick chain from under his neck. Tom had descried the snapping of branches and the unmistakable sounds of a struggle and he ran into the woods to investigate. He stopped dead in his tracks seeing the Patzinaks and the blood covered Bishop beneath them.

"Alarm, Alarm the enemies in camp," Tom yelled and charged at them with his spear.

The Brigands were surprised by Toms call and so was Henry who raced into the trees. The Patzinaks didn't know what to make of this new threat and seeing the young soldier racing towards them boldly they scampered. They knew others would soon be here. Tom didn't pursue them but came to the Bishops aid.

"Bishop, Bishop, what have they done," he shouted.

"I'm fine my boy," Adhemar stated weakly.

"Thank God," Tom nodded with relief as Henry and horses came to a halt in the forest. Tom glanced up to see Count Raymond above him.

"Well done boy," he directed to Tom before addressing the Bishop." I suppose such a great Pontiff is still necessary, although only Gods mercy has spared his life and not ones own wisdom," Raymond scolded him for his stupidity and then again his face betrayed his concern.

As the column progressed they came to the fortress at Bulinat. A patriotic man to the Emperors good wishes demanded to see the Count.

"Why you seek my audience stranger," Raymond spoke to the man in his tent had this messenger seemed on edge being within the camp of the Franks.

"My name is Julius I am a Consulate of Byzantine and here in the outside dominions anarchy is prevalent. I come to warn you that an army of mix races is waiting to attack you in the passes ahead." The Consulate spoke but was unhappy, as his own people would kill him for this treachery.

“And why may I ask do you tell me this,” Raymond questioned him further.

“The Emperor sends word for you to pass unmolested but his words fall on death ears and the people are prepared for war,” Julius answered him with honesty.

Cesar told all this to the men as they moved out secretly that night. They circumnavigated the mountain ranges with the Knights leading the way. Count Raymond dismounted at the end of the pass knowing the enemy would not expect to be attacked from their rear. The whole division sneaked through the mountainside along the high and low passes.

“Can you use these,” Cesar handed two composite bows for Tom and Henry.

“Yes,” Tom whispered in reply.

“Good stay out of the melee. You two go and join the archers and keep the enemies heads down for us,” Cesar knew the two youngsters wouldn’t last long in battle and sent them to safer ground.

Tom scaled the precarious heights with Henry moaning as shale fell in his wake.

“Careful,” he had said as stones hit him in the face.

They found a crag to hide behind amongst the shadows of the other archers as the light of dawn approached.

The Count and his Knights took up the lead with the foot soldiers behind them. Tom and Henry with about fifty others waited painstakingly in the mountains arrows at the ready. A group of Bulgars sat eating roasting pig when Count Raymond came round the path upon them. They tore them down and hacked them to death before they had known what had happened. The Foot soldiers now took the pursuit their shields locked pushing any who faltered off the cliff face before them. The horrific screams of the vanquished broke the ambience of the morning and disturbed the enemy from their slumber. Confused and disorientated as death came from behind they were soon routed running for their lives.

Tom now saw them scurrying from their caves and hideouts to flood the valley below. Volley after volley of black arrows sailed down from the heights and Tom had three arrows in the air simultaneously. The Patzinaks, Bulgars, Uzes, and Tanaces fell in their droves as they ran.

Tom saw his own arrows hitting the mark and bodies fell but to him they looked like ants not men from the heavens. The ambush had been turned upon them in the mountains and they fled from this valley of death now. The passage had been cleared and Raymond hoped this would be the last incursion upon the journey.

After the mountain incident more letters from Alexius were received pacifying Count Raymond to continue. The Crusaders reached Thessalonica and by this time Bishop Adhemar was seriously ill from his wounds. The Count had some of his men remained with the Bishop as his guard whilst he received medical aid. After Thessalonica the expedition reached Rusa where arrows and javelins were launched from the battlements upon the column. Tempers were raw and spirits angry through all rank and file. The Counts own calm nature had erupted into anger and he formed ranks to attack the town.

The outer walls were timber and set ablaze and as the fires diminished the foot soldiers were given the order to advance. The Knights upon the flanks making sure the assault would be well protected. Henry could see the smoke in the sky and he could taint the charring timbers as they drew near. His shield held before his face as arrows splintered the wood as they approached.

“Toulouse,” the battle cry was given forth and Henry charged. Tom entered the citadel but the Greeks had already fled. The yellow standard of Toulouse and the colours of Saint Martin soon hung from the battlements unchallenged.

The stores of the Town were unspoiled and Tom, Henry and Ceana had a belly full of food since they could last remember. Isaac and Albert ate one meal and then another such was the gluttony following starvation. Whilst they camped that night Imperial Troops seeing the devastation of Rusa attacked the Crusaders. Count Raymond with his Knights took to the field but the Imperial troops fled facing overwhelming numbers.

In the dawn light a flag-bearing messenger came to Count Raymond who snatched the letter from him with disgust.

“What treachery is this now,” Raymond barked

“What’s it say, My Lord” Cesar questioned.

“It says I should go ahead to meet the Emperor. It says that Bohemund, The Duke Godfrey, Count Robert and Hugh the great have made this

request. Count should hasten to Emperor to agree on March to Jerusalem. They add that a battle is imminent and could use help of such a great man,”

The Crusaders watched their Count Raymond go though not with his Knights who he had left to guard his camp and people. He went alone and unarmed on to Constantinople.

In the Imperial Palace Alexius Comnenus afforded himself a wry smile amidst the turmoil of troubles that were heading his way. He read again the dispatch that Hugh Varmandois had sent him prior to his departure from France.

“Know O King that I am King of Kings and superior to all who are now under the sky. You are now permitted to greet me on my arrival and to receive me with magnificence as befits my nobility,”

Then Alexius read the other message that had arrived before Hugh’s Army had crossed the Adriatic Sea for Durazzo and his envoys had challenged the Byzantium Governor of that region with this proclamation.

“Be it known Governor that our Lord Hugh will soon be here, bringing with him from Rome the Golden banner of Saint Peter moreover know that he is the highest leader of all the Armies of France. Prepare yourself therefore to receive him and the Army obeying him according to the dignity of his power and gird yourself all who are about to meet him.”

Alexius had received the news upon that very dawn from his own envoy who been sent from his nephew John Comnenus. He had stated that Hugh the Great had come ashore in the manner of a drowned rat not that of a Noble King. His ships sunk by storm and his mighty army now scattered all along the coast. John Comnenus himself had seen one ship swallowed by the seas taking with it six hundred French lives.

“I am now trying to salvage them from their destruction, what is your command regarding this great pontiff and his men,” were the words John Comnenus had finished the dispatch with.

Alexius fretted over the enigma of so many Franks coming to Constantinople and his first instruction to his nephew had been: To show

Hugh of Vermandois all the comforts and protection he desired but to hold him there at Durazzo for as long as he could. The phantom of his erstwhile enemy Robert Guiscard had begun to play upon his mind.

Robert Guiscard had been remembered for his tyrannical temper, most cunning, brave in action and very astute when it came to gaining wealth from magnates. He had been unusually tall with a ruddy complexion and flaxen hair. His shoulders had been broad, his eyes shone with fire and in body well proportioned.

Robert Guiscard had departed his homeland of Normandy with five knights and thirty five men on foot. He roamed the wilds and mountains of Lombardy becoming Chief to the biggest band of brigands in the area. They preyed upon travellers acquiring loot and horses and as time went on other undesirables joined their ranks. They grew affluent in this time of much bloodshed and many murders. Whilst in the mountains of Lombardy terrorising innocent people from venturing into the wilds he came to the attention of Guliemus Mascabeles a Prince of this realm with a mighty army and an annual income from his vast land holdings. Guliemus thinking he could manipulate Robert Guiscard to his own ends and hearing how he had the strength and experience of war made an unholy alliance in which Guliemus hoped he might prosper by. The Prince of Lombardy to bond their truce betrothed his own daughter to Robert and gave him a City as a wedding gift along with other marks of kindness.

Robert Guiscard though soon became disillusioned of becoming another mans serf and mediated upon rebellion. From the outset the Norman had befriended this Prince obtaining his generosity whilst he steadily increased the size of his Infantry and Cavalry. Then he deliberately began to pick quarrels with Guliemus until a state of civil war existed between them. Robert Guiscard though soon discovered that the army of Guliemus had been far larger than he had estimated and he realised he had not the numbers to face them in open battle. So he masterminded and came up with a dastardly plot. He begged the Prince of Lombardy for a truce and that they should have council to bring peace once again between them. Guliemus was fond of this Norman and also for the love he had for his daughter he arranged to meet at a peace conference.

The place they had chosen for this conference had two peaked hills rising from a plain where both mountains came to the same height. The intervening ground was swampy and overgrown with trees, shrubs and bushes. On this wild terrain the Norman had carefully planned his ambush. He instructed four armed Knights to run too him once he had grabbed hold of Guliemus. He took fifteen horsemen and three dozen foot telling them to hide well upon the peaks of the hills. He gave his armour, shield and sword to his most trusted Captain telling him to hold them until the time was right.

Prince Guliemus Masacabeles arrived with a cohort of fifty cavalrymen and Robert Guiscard greeted them warm heartedly. The Prince and the Norman rode side by side on horseback and they halted on a slope a short distance from the summit of the peaks as they discussed the proposals of the treaty.

“Why in the world should we tire ourselves by sitting on horseback. Why don’t we dismount and sit on the ground where we can talk leisurely of necessary matters,” Guiscard had suggested and Masacabeles obliged not realising what imminent danger he was being snared into.

Resting upon the ground they started the negotiations afresh. Robert now offered his fealty to Guliemus and called him faithful benefactor and Lord. Masacabeles horsemen had also dismounted on witnessing the friendly atmosphere and they rested themselves in the shade. Amidst this air of calm and tranquillity the Norman now sprung his trap. He unexpectedly threw himself upon the Prince of Lombardy and his expression had changed which now demonstrated the fury of his murderous intent. They grappled briefly with one another before they went rolling down the hill. At that moment Roberts four best Knights ran out from hiding in the swamps where they overpowered Guliemus and tied him up. Masacabeles cavalry taken by the sudden turn of events took to their mounts and came in pursuit. As they reached the very spot where Robert and their master had negotiated when the Norman cavalry came charging from the peak at their rear. Robert jumped upon a moving horse and quickly donned his war helmet. He seized a spear from the ground and charged the approaching cavalry. He struck one of the Lombardy Knights with such a blow it killed him instantly. This act held

their charge as the Knights paused to catch the thunder of hooves coming upon them. They scattered in disarray leaderless and shocked by surprise with the Normans carefully planned attack.

Gulielmus was taken to a fortress that he had given to his Norman son in law as a wedding gift. So that the City held its own master hostage within it. Robert threatened to pull out Masacabeles teeth and demanded a stupendous amount of gold for every tooth in his head. The King of Lombardy eventually considered the ransom too high. When the money ran out so did Masacabeles teeth and Robert also took his eyes for depriving him of a Kingdom and his light upon the world.

Alexius knew the spawn of Robert Guiscard's loins was enroute to Constantinople. Bohemund of Taranto his youngest son and the Emperor knew the fate of Gulielmus Masacabeles would be his own if he let his guard down for one instant to this treacherous Frank. So many evils were coming from the west and he prepared his forces to war with them if necessary. They would come a swarm of locusts laying his lands barren of crops and he instructed his Captains to harass them on there journey to discourage them from pillaging his Kingdom.

Peter of the Cowl the Byzantium name for Peter the Hermit still resided in the grounds of the Palace. The remnants of his own Crusade camping on the outskirts of the City wondering why they had come here at all. To the East the Seljuk Turk still reigned supreme and now occupied many of the coastal places Alexius had managed to regain. The Crusade of Peter had only made matters worse for him not better. His Navy of Triremes had harassed the Turks on the shores of the Bosphorus and sent landing parties to kill any who they outnumbered. Suleyman hand once signed a treaty with Byzantium promising not to venture beyond Nicaea and now even that treaty lay in tatters.

His hopes lay with the Franks and he well aware if they had the opportunity they would ravage his Kingdom without any qualms. How was he supposed to keep the peace with these warmongers and also regain his Eastern Empire. He knew he would have to muster all his diplomatic cunning, charm and finesse. He would need to bring all his resources to the fore in aid to survive.

Hugh of Vermandois who had embarked his troops and men on ships at port of Bari. Whilst crossing the Adriatic his fleet was battered by a

storm and his army scattered on the shoreline. John Comnenus a nephew of Alexius with his Imperial Army rescued the survivors who fed and clothed them before sending them onto Constantinople under guard. Alexius read through Hugh's pompous letter of arrival again as the drabs and drabs of his remaining army were brought to his gates.

Alexius had his strategy in mind when he had finally sent for Hugh to meet with him at the Palace. The brother of the King of France who now walked through the opulent Imperial Palace and through the realm of the Purple mark of Royalty with his heart in his mouth.

"Such beauty, such splendour," he stated gazing with awe at the riches of the Roman Empire.

"Greetings Lord Hugh, one of whom I have heard is great," Alexius welcomed him and hugged him like a brother.

"Emperor your hospitality has been warm and generous with the lavish gifts you have bestowed upon me. I am most pleased by your true nobleness," Hugh had been wined, feasted and given riches to keep him preoccupied by his deferment at Durazzo and since his arriving at Constantinople had been treated with same lavish manner.

"Hugh of France I am a provider, a generous provider who will feed and arm the mighty warriors of Christ and see to it that the Holy City is once again in Christian hands. Although I have my concerns of some who venture on this quest," Alexius had won the mans heart and now he needed to win his will.

"What are these concerns Emperor," Hugh asked with visible anxiety.

"My Eastern Kingdom is Byzantium by birthright. I want it returned to his rightful owners the Roman Emperor and his people. I know others have their eyes and wills bent upon taking my lands from me. I am willing to aid you in your endeavours at a great personnel expense but I want concessions to state that all is returned to Byzantium that is rightly ours," Alexius told him outright his concerns and now he studied his reaction.

"Of course Emperor that would be the prudent thing to do," Hugh agreed whole heartedly without a pause and Alexius knew this man had no designs of taking from him Kingdom.

“Would you swear this? Would you swear fealty to me on this matter as it is my wish all do who now enter my lands,” Alexius now played his next card.

“Emperor I am a man of honour, my word is my bond on the matters you have expressed concern I swear fealty to you,” Hugh pompously bowed his head with the gesture.

The campfires dotted the night sky almost continuously from the Monastery of Cosmidium right up to the Church of Saint Phocas. Alexius had been well informed of the ten thousand Knights and seventy thousand foot soldiers that were encamped around the walls of his Citadel. Alexius had constantly urged their leader Godfrey of Bouillon to cross the straits of the Propontis however Godfrey had made one excuse after another to his envoys.

“He waits for Bohemund,” Alexius conjectured turning to face his General Tacitus and his council of War.

“If the Latin’s concentrate their forces they will attack us,” Tacitus a die-hard General of the old principles that had formulated the Empire of Rome.

“I will ask Hugh if he will go maybe the Latin’s can see sense from each others council,” Alexius proposed.

“The Army of Franks Emperor must cross the strait it is the only way of dividing their numbers,” George Pegasus the Commander of the Royal Fleet made known the only option they had left open to them.

The largest Tent had the pennants of Boulogne and the standard of Saint Gregory at the entrance displayed pompously. This is where Godfrey deliberated his own schemes.

“Where are Bohemund, Robert of Flanders and Raymond? The time is ripe to crush these Greeks whilst they’re on their knees. Such riches and wealth they possess could and should rightly be ours;” Godfrey slammed his fists upon the table in anger. He yearned to attack and despised his position of placating the Byzantine delegates of Alexius who had cut off his market trying to starve him into submission.

“Lord we must be prudent, we are not yet remain strong enough to lay siege,” William Carpenter lay bare his own fears.

“He has closed the markets we will ravage his Kingdom for denying us this right,” Baldwin added in rage as his men hungered for food and war. “Send a rider to find Bohemund we must ascertain his position to make our preparation,” Godfrey ordered.

The horse bolted out of camp with the Knight Crispin of Aquitaine in the saddle. He took the road to Nish although he had not been out of the camp long when the Roman Army with their spies had ensnared him. He halted before the assembly of horsemen with their gold armoured troops blocking his passage.

“Where is it you seem to be going in such a hurry Latin,” The Byzantine Commander asked.

“Get out of my way Greek,” Crispin spat at him.

“I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to do that,” the Byzantine informed him truthfully.

“Then you choose death,” the French Knight drew his sword a falchion and advanced upon them. His horse hadn’t even gone into a trot before six arrows cut him down in his saddle.

The Roman Cavalry gathered above his body.

“So brave but alas so foolish,” the Byzantium Commander saluted his bravery.

Another envoy of the Emperor arrived and Baldwin read the text out loud for all to hear in the Dukes tent.

“Duke Godfrey I ask you to move your camp across the strait where my ships await you so your tents might not become wet, worn from wintry cold and snow as the rainy season is imminent,” Baldwin had dictated.

“This man knows our mind write this down and send it to him,” Godfrey ordered.

“Duke Godfrey to the Emperor trust and obedience, willingly and eagerly would I come before you to look upon the wealth and glory of your household were it not for the many evil rumours which have come to my ears regarding yourself have terrified me however I know not whether these reports have been invented and spread about from envy or malice towards you,” he had said then continued, “Hopefully this despatch will give us time for the other Counts to arrive,”

Two days passed and on Good Friday as within the City of Constantinople the Byzantium’s were busy in prayer. Godfrey decided

he could not wait any longer and he would launch an attack. His men had scouted the walls and had found a gate near the Chapel of Saint Nicholas under the Palace that was ideal for assaulting. Godfrey's men moved under the cover of darkness and hid in the long grass before the humongous walls.

"At dawn's light Constantinople will be ours," Godfrey made known his hopes to Baldwin.

Torches roared along the perimeter and they whistled in the air as they were thrown against the wooden gate. A huge pyre engulfed the gateway and the smoke bellowed thick into the night.

"Bologne," the cry was taken forth as the Franks came out in their multitude to rush the aperture.

Alexius knelt under the battlements with Tacitus and his company of Imperial Archers.

"Wait__Wait__Wait," Tacitus ordered his men who heeded his words with iron discipline.

The Franks were only twenty paces from the walls when the Byzantium General gave the order.

"Ready," he called.

From nowhere a line of golden helms illuminated the battlements and an array of archers made ready their bows. The Franks stopped facing the death looming from above and an eerie moment of suspense took hold of them all. The archers strained on their bowstrings and the Franks gazed at the now impenetrable fortification. Then a voice broke the equanimity of the stalemate.

"Bologne," the war cry was renewed from Count Godfrey himself.

"Bologne," the men bellowed as they resumed the assault.

"Fire", Tacitus called and to the twang of bowstrings that deafened the battlements as they fired simultaneously.

The opening volley had deafened Alexius and he held open his palms staring into them vacantly.

"It is out of my hands now," he mouthed to himself.

The first cascade took down the entire vanguard of the Franks with its accuracy however others were quick to step into their wake.

“Tacitus tell the men to aim over their heads there has been enough slaughter on this Holy day,” the Emperor instructed hoping the Franks would see how fruitless this venture had become.

The second volley passed so close to the Franks they felt the wind of death caress them. The vanguard reached the gate and took axes to the timber to clear a path. The charred planks were dragged bodily or by ropes until they had gained access into Constantinople. The smoke had blinded them and hung ethereally in the archway. It cleared almost instantly a line of bronze etched shields from the Phalanx of the Imperial Guard appeared in the ebbing mist. A hail of hurled javelins killed the first wave into the City and the phalanx advanced blocking any more from gaining entry.

“Cavalry,” a cry issued forth from the ranks of Godfreys men as Byzantium horsemen were racing upon their left flank.

“We are doomed,” Baldwin realised as the field began to rout before him.

At the Propontis the survivors regrouped and Godfrey slunk into his tent embittered by the ignominious defeat.

“Count Hugh is here asking to see you my Lord. He says he brings a message from the Byzantium’s,” A soldier informed him.

“I will see him,” Godfrey acknowledged still breathing heavily with rage.

Hugh gazed upon the devastation with disdain and sympathy. Hearing the screams from the surgeon’s tents and seeing the wounded huddled in the grounds outside. Christians fighting Christians he thought shaking his head in disbelief at the carnage.

“What have we come to,” Hugh stated straightaway as he entered Godfreys Tent.” Make peace with the Emperor unless you want his forces to scorch you again,” Hugh too was annoyed and angry eager to plead the Emperors case.

“You ask this,” Godfrey raged,” you who came from your own country, a King with great wealth who has brought himself down from such a high position to the rank of a Greek slave and as though you have won great successes you come and advise me to do the same,” Godfrey reprimanded knocking over his wine knowing he would not find an ally in this puppet of the Emperor.

“We ought to have remained in our own countries and have not of interfered in foreign affairs, but as we have come so far this is surely where we will need the Emperors protection. Matters will not turn out well for us if we do not fall in line with his wishes,” Hugh gave over his own assessment and could see Godfrey as more of an enemy than his ally. His only friendship lay with Alexius.

“Go from here you sicken me with your pleas,” Godfrey turned his back upon him.

“Very well. So it is war that you crave,” Hugh said as he departed.

Alexius had waited patiently for Hugh and when he reiterated his unsuccessful mission his face went grave. He grasped that the other Counts were drawing near he needed this resolving urgently.

“I have no option but to do the unthinkable. I must do exactly what Godfrey wants and implores me to do,” Alexius made his strategy known.

Dawn christened the plain as the Army of Bologne awoke to gawp upon the three Byzantium Armies in battle formation before them. The soldiers of Bologne didn’t wait for orders they attacked with the blood lust from the previous night still boiling within them.

“Baldwin secure the bridge we may need a means of escape,” Godfrey had ordered sending Baldwin with five hundred Knights to secure the river bridge to Nish in case they had to retreat. Baldwin hurried to seize the crossing fearing a force of the Emperor might destroy it denying them a means to get away. Baldwin had scarcely taken a stand on the middle of the bridge when behold from right and left Turcoples of the Imperial Army were upon them. George Pegasus had brought them over on ships and now they rushed the Franks with arrows and spears. Baldwin unable to maintain his standpoint on the bridge crossed the river and decided to hold it from the dry shoreline on the far side. The Turcoples now had to face them in open battle and the Franks were preparing to hold it steadfastly. The Imperial Troops counter attacked again and again although these Knights were unconquerable in armed combat.

Within an hour the Byzantium’s had won the field at the camp and Godfrey realising he was outnumbered with his back to the sea had no further options. He had watched his men die valiantly for him and now

he needed to rescue what remained of his forces. A messenger came to Count Baldwin from Godfrey demanding him to withdraw and with bitter malice they gave the bridge up to the jubilant cheers of the Turcoples. The Franks in disarray plundered what they could find and set fire to anything in their wake. In the midst of chaos and all out war Godfrey made his decision.

“Order the men to withdraw and send a messenger to the Greeks. Tell them I yield to the wishes of the Emperor,” Godfrey threw down his sword and stamped upon it.

An envoy from the Emperor arrived in the wake carnage and slaughter. The Emperors message read.

“Let enmity between you and me cease, let the Duke upon receiving hostages as a pledge from me advance without any doubt that he will come and be returned unharmed assured of all the honour and glory which we are able to give him and his people,”

The Emperors son John Comnenus was brought, as the pledge and Godfrey had no qualms for the exchange. Then another envoy this time from Bohemund had broke through the Byzantium lines.

“Bohemund, the most wealthy Prince of Sicily and Calabria asks that you by no means enter into peace with the Emperor but that you withdraw to Adrianpole and Phillipolis cities of the Bulgarians and pass winter there. You may be certain that this same Bohemund will come to your aid with all his troops as soon as he can to attack the Emperor and to invade his Kingdom,” upon hearing this message the Duke put off answering it until the next day. He gathered Bohemunds envoy and the Emperors in his tent. He picked up the parchment he had written and read it out aloud to them both.

“That neither for gain or destruction of Christians that I have left my country and kindred but rather in the name of Christ to pursue the way to Jerusalem. I wish to accomplish this and fight for the designs of the Emperor provided he would regain my goodwill and favour,” Godfrey had decided to yield and Bohemunds envoy retired to inform his Lord of these tidings.

A squadron of Imperial Knights in Golden Armour brandishing colourful banners escorted Godfrey to Constantinople and into the Palace. The Duke and his own entourage were honourably clad in

splendid and rich apparel of purples and gold. Their cloaks were bordered by ermine as white as snow such was the glory of these Princes of Gaul. The Emperor admired their pomp and grandeur.

“I have heard that you are the most mighty Knight and Prince in your land. A man most prudent and of perfect trust. Welcome honourable friend, it is such a pity we could not have conducted our business like this from the beginning,” Alexius washed his hands meticulously in a silver bowl as he spoke although Godfrey did not reply.

“I require two things from you if you desire my aid and my goodwill. I want your fealty to me promising that all you conquer that was once part of Byzantium territory and rightly mine shall be returned and second that your forces relocate at a camp across the strait at Pelecanus so I can make sure your men are supplied abundantly, I hope and pray through you Duke Godfrey my lands may be freed and saved”

Godfrey agreed to all the terms as he feasted at the Emperors hearth and left with a gift of a large sum of gold.

A few days later Count Raoul of Burgundy arrived with fifteen thousand horse and foot camping in the smouldering embers of Godfreys wake. He too would not cross the strait awaiting Bohemund and the other Counts. Alexius sent Hugh once again to negotiate but Raoul was as dog headed as Godfrey had been. The Byzantium Army lined up in formation to frighten the Frank General into submission. Raoul though rejoiced hungry for war as a Lion gloats over a carcass. The battle that ensued was bloody and unremorseful.

The Byzantium fleet commanded by George Pegasius had come into the bay to transport Raouls men across the strait. George though could only see Roman and Frank tooth and claw in battle. He disembarked his own forces and attacked their rear. The Franks were subdued although thousands lay dead including Raoul and Alexius understood if Godfrey got wind of this massacre there would be all out war. He sent the survivors across the sea into Greece and had the dead burned and buried immediately.

In the Palace Alexius had called a meeting with the Counts and Hugh, Robert of Flanders who had just arrived, Godfrey, Baldwin and Robert of Paris were present to discuss the needs of the coming Crusade. As the Emperor entered the throne room in his silk robes Robert of Paris was

sat upon the Imperial throne. Count Baldwin stepped in and took him by the hand raising him up.

“It was wrong of you to do such a thing here, when you have promised the Emperor your fealty for it is not customary of Roman Emperors to allow their subjects to sit beside them on the throne and those who are his Majesties sworn bondsmen must observe the custom of the country,” Robert of Paris said nothing to Baldwin but darted a fierce glance at the Emperor and muttered words to himself in his own tongue.

The movement of the Franks lips did not pass the Emperors attention and his interpreter purported his words whispering them in his ears.

“Look at that rustic that keeps his seat while such valiant Captains are standing around him,” when Alexius heard this he took it to his heart and after the logistical meeting had finished he questioned the insolent Latin.

“Who are you and where are you from,” the Emperor had asked him.

“I am a Frank of the purest nobility. Where I’m from there is a crossroad which stands beside an old sanctuary to which everyone who desires to fight in single combat goes and they pray to God in expectation of the man who will challenge him. At those Crossroads I have often tarried waiting and longing for an antagonist but never has one appeared who dared to challenge me,” Robert of Paris replied with some rancour.

Alexius looked upon him for some time before responding.

“If you did not find a fight when you sought for it then, now the time has come which will give you your fill of fighting, but I strongly advise you not to place yourself in the rear nor in the front of your line but to stand in the centre of the phalanx, for I have a long experience of the Turkish methods of war,” the Emperor didn’t give this advice just to the insolent Count but to all present.” Be wary when you camp, be wary whilst you march and never pursue the enemy to far for they are the masters of ambuscade for I taught them,” the room silenced as Alexius gave forth his years of experience as a Byzantium General.

Bohemund arrived just after the Easter festival with ten Counts in his party and the Emperor demanded an audience with him immediately upon him entering the City. Alexius met Bohemund alone and they walked the battlements talking casually.

“Though I certainly was your advisory and enemy at that time, yet now I come of my own accord and free will as a friend of your Majesty,” Bohemund pacified the Emperor with his submission.

The Bosphorus shone and glistened as if it were made of Byzantium Gold as the sun caressed its surface.

“You must be tired from your journey go and rest now, tomorrow we can talk of whatever you like” The Emperor dismissed him with having made a measure of this man.

In Cosmidium a lodging had been provided and a rich spread had been laid for him with all manner of meats and vegetables. The Imperial Cooks brought out uncooked meat of animals of poultry and displayed them before Bohemund and his Counts.

“You see we have prepared the food in our usual fashion but if the feast does not please you, see here is raw meat which shall be prepared in any way you should desire,” The Cooks suggested at the Emperors behest.

Bohemund had a suspicious mind and eyed the food with alarm.

“The feast is fine come sit and eat with us,” Bohemund suggested to the cooks who took a place at the table. Bohemund watched them gloat themselves on the feast but he himself never tasted a morsel expecting a cup of death hidden within the offering.

The next day he bade good day to his fellow Counts and enquired over their health asking if they had fallen ill during the night. To his surprise they were all well and it bemused him why his enemy had not killed him as he would of done.

“When I recalled my wars with him and that terrible battle at Larissa, I must confess I was afraid that he would perhaps arrange my death by mixing poison with my food. I have misjudged him,” Bohemund revealed to his Counts who now felt sick in the stomach from his revelation.

The Emperor sent for Bohemund on the next morning and this time they met in the grounds and lavish gardens of the Palace.

“Count Bohemund as all others have done before thee I demand an oath of fealty from you to return Byzantium Lands back to me,” The Emperor had asked of him. Bohemund knew he had not the Noble upbringing of the other Franks or had vast riches or even a mighty army behind him so

he yielded to the wishes of Alexius. He knelt before him and kissed his hand.

“Majesty I am your loyal subject,” he professed.

“Bohemund arise son of Rome recently awoken,” the Emperor took his hand and lifted him to his feet.

The Emperor had filled a room in the palace with Gold, Silk garments, Silver chains and Polished armour. As Bohemund walked through the marble halls his guide took him deliberately passed this room, which had its doors wide open. Bohemund stopped dead in his tracks in amazement to gawp upon these riches.

“If these riches were mine, I should of made myself master of many countries long before now,” he stated openly.

The guide answered him.

“The Emperor wishes to make you a present of all these riches today,”

In Cosmidium at the guesthouse the treasures were brought to the Sicilian Count and unpacked filling the room with gold and silver he looked upon them now with shame.

“Never did I imagine the Emperor would inflict such dishonour upon me. Take them away and give them back to he who sent them,” He said to the attendants in a fit of honour.

Bohemund watched the treasures being repacked and his mind tortured on his morals and his own avarice.

“Wait,” he abruptly stated,” A gift should not be returned it is a bad omen, tell the Emperor I accept them as a token of his kindness,”

Bohemund used his phrase tactfully to appease his own guilt.

Alexius wanted to keep Bohemund under his wing he distinguished him to be the master in roguery and courage. Alexius held him in high esteem and as an advisory knew that he would be the one who he had most to fear of all the Latin’s. Everyday he sent for him and everyday Bohemund had come up with another cleverly disguised scheme trying to thwart his way into gaining power.

“Emperor I am your loyal servant make me Commander of the Great Domestic of the East, I will crush these Moors from my Majesties Empire for you,” was one of the suggestions to gain control of the Byzantium Army for himself.

“My friend, the time for that has not yet come but by your energy and reputation and above all your fidelity it will come to you eventually,” Alexius had promised bestowing gifts and honours on him to dampen his schemes from ever igniting.

The Emperor had called Council as Raymond of Toulouse had arrived and now all the Noble Counts stood before him.

“You embark on a great quest against the Turk and do not for one instance underestimate them. The Arabic Nation had been war faring since the dawn of time and if you set your battle lines as you do in the fields of the West their archers will cut you down make no mistake. If you pursue them they will lay ambush upon you. You will have to use all your skill and guile to war with them for since the Persian Emperors and Mighty Pharaohs their Generals have vast skills and knowledge that you will not of dreamt of,” Alexius counselled them on the Campaign for the coming months ahead.

“How will you supply us your Majesty in the heart of the heathen lands,” Robert of Flanders asked.

“You will not go without aid and my own Imperial Army will march by your side accompanying you as a sign of my good faith under the command of General Tacitus.” Bohemund knew this was more for the Emperor to protect his own interests but cheered heartedly with the rest.

In the Gardens Alexius Comnenus met Raymond of Toulouse and they each bonded with one another. The Emperor admired this Latin’s superior wisdom, general sincerity and his purity of life. A noble warrior who valued noble ideals, truth and honour. Baptised from blood and valour of the battlefield and he reminded Alexius of his venerated ancestors the Mighty Caesars who had forged the modern world. After the War Council the other Counts had crossed the Bosphorus to Civetot although he had asked Raymond to stay behind as they talked for hours on end becoming good friends. Alexius conversed of tactics and his own experiences of war. Then he opened his heart laying down his soul to this man who the Greeks called Isangeles.

“I fear some of your companions are resolute to do me harm. I know they will break their oath to me and I also envisage a tumultuous war between us if we let these hot heads have a free reign,” Alexius told this Frank his concern of his fellow allies such was his trust in him.

“Godfrey and especially Bohemund are of whom you speak. He has acquired perjury and treachery as a species of ancestral heritage and it would be a miracle if he kept his oath, however I will endeavour as far as it is in me always to carry out your orders Majesty,” Raymond took his leave of the Emperor with these words and went to join the Frankish Armies upon the shores of Asia.

The ancient walls seemed to tower into the heavens and the gigantic South Gate looked foreboding and oppressive as you passed under the archway. Tom, Henry, Ceana followed in the footsteps of Father Benedict as they entered the Citadel of Constantinople.

“This is the home of the ancients, the last of the Romans with an Emperor upon the throne,” the Father held his voice expressly as they gawped in wonder at this bastion of Christendom in the east.

“What language do they speak,” asked Henry.

“Greek mainly but they do readily converse in Latin,” the Father stated.

The streets appeared to be paved with gold as the Saxons had never before seen street lighting with gave this place an unearthly aura. The Senates houses stood grand and had imperial splendour in their architecture. Fluted columns and lintels carved from white stone the buildings stood immortal and most eloquent. The mighty hippodrome where Chariot races were held towered above all else and on their right the illustrious palace of the Roman Emperor.

They halted in astonishment before the Church of Saint Sophia the most beautiful of all the structures and the supreme house of God. They entered solemnly into its hallowed sanctums and the glitter of gold blinded them within. They gazed at the lavish and devote portraits of Christ and the altar gilded and sculptured beyond description. Tom thought this place was heaven upon the earth and was overcome with religious piety. He knelt and wept in divine supplication. His sins lay heavy the murder of the tax collector and he prayed for his mother hoping she was well. Ceana stared in abject admiration to the portraits of the Virgin Mother and Child. Father Benedict too was overcome he had never seen anything so rich and beautiful since he had last been in Rome

where he had took the oaths of Priesthood. Henry prayed for bravery in the coming venture and courage to defend the honour of our Lord.

They had been granted two hours within the City and they spent their time within Saint Sophia. They walked back through the incandescent streets under the glow of the moon and the sparkle of the night sky. They headed to the dockside to catch a ferry back to the Crusaders camp.

“Home I miss it now so much. I feel it burning within me and devouring me,” Tom declared staring into the constellation of Leo in the sky.

“If I close my eyes Tom I can smell the woods and hear the voices of the children playing,” Ceana added her own thoughts.

“I hope Floras well and those Normans have left her be,” Henry aired his own dread as he could still see the arrow cracking open the Tax Collectors skull.

“She’ll be fine I’m sure. God will protect her,” Father Benedict calmed their fears but then felt compelled to add, “It would be well though to pray for her as her heart will yearn for her two wayward sons as much as your hearts yearn for her,”

As the ferry came into sight and moored upon the shore people disembarked carrying with them bundles of their possessions.

“Who art thou,” Tom challenged them.

“We were followers of Peter of the Cowl. We leave the work of God to you now we have seen enough blood to last many lifetimes. We are going home,” came his reply.

“Where is home,” he called into their mass.

“Normandy,” one voice

called. “Burgundy,” another. “Aquitaine,” “Spain,” “Italy and Bavaria,”

came other voices. Then one amongst called out almost meekly. “

England,”

“Who said England,” Tom shouted above them all.

“Who asks,” a hooded man stood before him clothed in rags.

“I do Tom Walters of Pendlebury,” Tom stated proudly to him.

“I am Hector of Northumberland why do you ask me of my origin,”

Hector the pauper questioned him back with.

“Would you do me a great honour and service and take a letter home for me. I can pay you but not very much I’m on soldiers pay but I can give you something for your trouble,” Tom pleaded seeing hope in this man.

“Thomas I will take no money from thee although I will take your letter as a fellow Christian and as a fellow Countryman,” Hector accepted and Tom’s face beamed into a broad smile.

“How long can you wait,” Tom asked anxiously.

“Write your letter Thomas and finish it,” was all that Hector said.

“Ceana, Henry quickly we have work to do,”

In candlelight the three of them composed their message home and when it had been completed Father Benedict sealed it for them in wax.

“Hector this letter is very important to us and Pendlebury is a recently founded Hamlet are you sure you can find our home,” Tom asked their messenger.

“Thomas I swear as long as I still have life your message will be delivered you have my word of honour upon this,” Hector responded.

“God bless you Hector and safe passage home to thee,” Tom hugged him thankfully at least now his Mother would have some word of them.

It was May 1097 when Raymond of Toulouse and his Army marched from Civetot into the heartlands of Asia. Tom and Henry marched with the Gaul’s and Ceana followed the column with Albert and Isaac. Father Benedict had pleaded with her to stay at the Byzantium Garrison with the other women and children but stubbornly she had refused tailing the soldiers into Anatolia. Along the route an advance party of Godfrey of Bouillon had cut down trees to widen the roads and placed wooden crosses to mark the route. The column stopped around the valley of Draco and the sight of the hill of bones gave them all a stark reminder of what fate might befall them selves. Raymond was infuriated and swore to avenge the souls of Walter the Penniless and his brave knights.

Nicaea lay in the fertile basin at the end of the Ascanian Lake over a hundred towers could be discerned rising above the massive walls. A double moat surrounded the Citadel once a mighty Byzantium stronghold now Capitol of the Sultanate of Rhum ruled by Suleyman Kilij Arslan. To the North lay the Constantinople Gate and here Bohemund who had arrived three days earlier had already begun building siege engines. A messenger from Godfrey of Bouillon came to greet Raymond as they had arrived.

“Greetings Count Raymond my Lord Godfrey has instructed me to inform you that his Army and the Army of Robert of Flanders are making preparations for besieging the eastern wall. Lord Bohemund is besieging the North and you have been granted the southern edge of the city.,” the messenger reported.

“Tell your Lord Godfrey I am grateful for him saving me some of the field of honour,” Raymond replied.

The Avdan Daglari mountain range was to the south and in the plain before it Raymond decided to set up the camp. Tents were unloaded from the handcarts and the horses corralled. Tom lay out the canvas and was about to hammer the first wooden peg into the earth when the shout went out.

“Turks,”

Tom looked up to see them pouring out of the woods to their rear. They seemed fearsome with pointed helms upon there sturdy mounts. They heckled and called as they charged into the encampment swinging their curved swords and firing arrows from the saddle. Henry still unawares of the impending danger hammered in another peg when Toms voice came to his ears.

“Henry Henry were under attack,”

Henry got to his feet and only fifty paces before him a Turk with a lance was bearing down upon him. He looked around for his spear but he had left it at the tent cart and then a dead knight with an arrow in his throat fell five yards to his left. Henry raced over and grabbed his fallen sword with the Turk almost breathing upon his back. Henry stood to face the enemy who charged with the lance point aimed squarely at his chest. The Turks contorted face of battle was clearly visible and the lance was about to be driven home. Henry ducked in the nick of time and with a slashing blow took out the horse’s front legs. The animal crashed instantaneously onto the earth with its rider trapped in the saddle. Henry ran over and plunged the sword into the Turks chest who gasped out his last breath. Henry awestruck clutching the hilt watched the blood trickle from his lips.

“Henry look out,” Tom called.

As Henry came from his daze as another Turk bent on avenging his comrade galloped at him swinging his sword. Henry dived out of his

way as he advanced and the rider passed him slowing to turn and strike again. An arrow pierced the Turk in the nape of the neck severing his spinal cord and Henry glanced over to see Tom clutching his bow.

“I see you have mastered the tax collector shot from me Thomas Walters,” Henry called pulling the sword from the Turk he had killed. Swords were for Nobles but now Henry had gained his own spoils of war from the field of battle.

“Stand fast. Stand fast,” came the call as the Turks had ran amok through the crusaders camp although men grabbed what weapons they could and were forming battle lines.

Cesar the Gaul called his two Saxon protégés too him and they joined rank with the pike men to thwart the enemy. The Turks in mass were grouping at the head of the woods and preparing to charge again.

“To the rear,” Came a cry as heads turned to see the Garrisons cavalry charging out the South Gate to expedite the chaos the relieving force had already achieved. These Saracen horsemen had red pantaloons and plate metal hauberks with their heads turban clad. They came upon the few who were stricken already by not getting behind the protection of the pike men and were slaughtered without quarter. They raced through the tattered remnants of the tents and supplies hooting and cheering in jubilation. The Turkish cavalry in the woods hackled their brethren with encouragement as they faced north readying to charge again.

Tom glanced behind and in front and saw they were surrounded and outnumbered isolated here on the southern edge of Nicaea. He clutched his bow with shaking hands and gritted his teeth to stop them rattling.

“Here they come,” Cesar called as the Saracens advanced upon them. Drums were beaten and Islamic war cries discerned as they charged at full gallop across the plain. Then abruptly they halted and in that instance the air turned black with the arrows they had discharged.

“Take cover,” Cesar shouted as those lucky enough to possess a shield held it up in defence. Then the next salvo twice as ferocious hit the heavens as the first began to fall from the sky. Tom glared upwards knowing there was no escape from this hailstorm when he was unexpectedly nudged over onto the earth. He could see darkness then smelt the tan of leather and a face beside him.

“Here it comes Tom death from above,” Henry said holding the triangular shield above them both for salvation. A mighty whoosh came down with shrieks of pain and the sound of arrowheads disgorging into flesh and bone. The second wave preceded drowning the defenders by its sheer weight and force.

“Where’s Ceana,” Tom asked fearing for her safety.

“I don’t know Tom,” Henry answered as three arrows hit their shield at once.

“That was close,” Tom made his comment.

“Too close if you ask me,” Henry flung the shield off them both.” Come on you heathen bastards fight like men,” he roared at them with both fear and rage.

At that moment the Turkish cavalry began to flounder to the West Raymond had managed to gather a band of Knights and got a hold of their horses. To the East Godfrey of Bouillon came rushing down with a strong relief force. The Pike men seeing this gained hope and rushed headlong at the Turks discouraging their murderous archers. The Turks were in shock now cornered and the Franks rushing upon them their leader Abdullah gave the order to retreat back into the mountains. Tom now had other concerns for Ceana he ran into the desolated camp calling at the top of his voice.

“Ceana.Ceana.”He called running amongst the bodies searching for hers.

“Tom over here,” a voice called and he turned to see her emerging with Isaac and Albert from under a canvas tent.

“Thank God your alive I thought we had lost you,” he ran over and hugged her to him this was the first time he had ever showed deep emotions for her and she held him strongly not wanting to lose this precious moment.

Henry crashed to his knees with battle exhaustion that overwhelmed him as the adrenaline evaporated from his body. He wept in both shock and relief as the horrors of killing and living were flashing in his mind.

The men of Godfrey returned after an hour had passed chasing the Turks into the Avdan Daglari range brandishing heads on pikes of any they had slaughtered. They held them aloft to the defenders of Nicaea showing them what fate had in store for them once the walls were breached.

In the Tent of Godfrey of Bouillon the headquarters of the whole army had been established. Raymond surveyed the fortification of Nicaea. It had baffled most of the tactical prowess of his fellow compatriots. In the West they were more adept at dealing with low earth ramparts or a single wall of stone. Nicaea had six-foot thick walls hardened to stone and a hundred towers to impede any assault.

“It is a truly magnificent spectacle,” he stated in admiration at this Roman built citadel.

Raymond entered the command tent still sweating profusely from the incursion with the Turks.

“Good day to you Gentlemen, before I was rudely welcomed by the Turks I had been briefed by the Emperor on our situation here. Apparently these heathens are at war with one another our present host the Sultanate of Rhum Suleyman Kilij Arslan is not at home he’s away fighting with his neighbours the Danishmend for control of Anatolia and Armenia. To the South the Caliph Malik Shah is also at war with our friends the Turks over some religious dispute. The Emperor had informed me that whilst these factions are at civil war we may have a free reign but as we have all just witnessed I was ambushed whilst encamping. We must be vigilant at all times and be ready at all times as I have learnt to my own indignity.” Raymond gave his brief assessment on their current situation.

“What is Turkish strength in Anatolia then,” Robert of Flanders asked with hidden woe knowing he had the weakest force on the far eastern side of Nicaea.

“Our intelligence reports a garrison in the City. The roaming army that ambushed myself is all that we are aware of although the main Turkish Army is with Suleyman and when we confront them we will need to pool all of our resources if we are to stand any chance with them,”

Raymond answered him with honesty.

“Let the devils come and taste Norman steel,” Bohemund grunted in the corner.

“So Raymond let me bring you up to date with things here”. Godfrey took the helm in the debate.” Bohemund is on the Northern sector and has begun constructing a siege tower. Robert has many skilled technicians with him and is building trebuchets for my preparations for

an escalade on the eastern defences. We would hope you would join us and build your own siege engines for the assault,” Godfrey spelled out there dispositions.

“Escalade would be massacre there are a hundreds towers hiding a multitude of archers. Men on ladders scaling the walls would not stand a chance and be cut down without mercy. I’m sorry but that’s how I see this pure folly,” Raymond made his own views known and apologised to Godfrey for bringing his plans inconsistencies to light.

“My siege tower will crush them and overpower their defences. When it is completed it will hold a hundred men at arms and we will raise havoc in their citadel,” Bohemund gave his own opinion on the assault.

“Forgive my presumptions I know your all great Generals but I also envisage doom from this enterprise. You would have to fill the two moats to gain access to the walls and get your tower in place slaughtering many. Once you’re on the battlements towers either side no escape for your men who will be crushed on top of the walls. This Gentlemen is no ordinary castle,” Raymond again dispelled out disaster again.

“So what do you suggest a protracted siege with them sneaking in supplies from across the lake and ourselves left to starve in the wilderness,” Tancred raged coming to the defence of his uncle Bohemund.

“No I don’t. I propose two strategies firstly we’ll build a ram with a penthouse to protect the men from the towers to breach the south gate. Secondly I suggest we build a series of mines on the northern and eastern sides in full view of the defenders. They will believe that were tunnelling in and place the majority of their troops in these sectors,” Raymond made his plans known.

“Mines,” Bohemund howled in disgust unfamiliar with this siege technique.

“Mines yes and for your information they will do more damage than a hundred siege towers could ever hope to achieve. We burrow using timber to hold up the roof we can then if required go straight under the walls although I have misgivings of this as only a small force can breach and are liable for massacre. I propose building chambers under the walls filling them with bails of straw and setting them alight and you can sit

back watching the walls come tumbling down,” Bohemund smirked at Raymond’s suggestion and they all knew this sixty year old Lord who had fought the Moors in Spain was a very astute tactician.

Alexius knew well the strong fortifications of Nicaea provided both by nature and design. On it’s west lay the large Ascanian Lake flowing up to the foot of the very walls. On the other three sides was a double moat fed by many interflowing streams. The walls were of such a height that the Turkish defenders feared neither assaults by men or machine. The ballistae of the neighbouring towers were so placed in reference to each other that no one could approach without imminent danger. Any who dared a direct assault would be easily overwhelmed from the archers in the towers without any hope of retaliating. Alexius looked upon this former Byzantium province with animosity as it gloated at him this capitol of the Seljuk Turks ruled by his adversary the Sultanate of Rhum who had dispossessed him of his eastern territories. The population of Nicaea were still mostly Christian subdued by the resident Turkish Garrison.

General Tacitus had a small token Byzantium force assigned to the Crusaders although he reported directly to Alexius at Pelercanum every evening to inform him of the assaults progress.

“They will never succeed your Majesty as long as that Lake is there to supply the Town,” Tacitus had spoken.

“I know my friend that is why I have arranged for a naval blockade. I have arranged for a small flotilla of boats to be brought overland under Admiral Boutoumites. When they get here there is something that I need you to do for me,” Alexius passed over a sealed scroll to his General.

A thousand miles away on the Sultans eastern border Suleyman was besieging the town of Melitene. Suleyman Kiliç Arslan had been the eldest son of Alp Arslan (heroic lion) the great Turkish General who had routed the Byzantium’s at Manzikert. He had been at war with the Danishmend Melik Ghazi his long time rival for control of Asia Minor. The horseman galloped across the steppe and Suleyman watched him approach with interest. The rider soon dismounted it was General Elchanes who ran up the hill towards the main encampment.

“Sultan the Christians they have returned. They lay siege to Nicaea,” Elchanes had informed him after travelling a hundred miles in one day. Suleyman ordered the immediate end to the siege and the whole army were preparing to move out against the Invaders. Suleymans own family were in Nicaea and this time he was adamant to put an end to these incursions by the barbarians onto his territory.

The Crusaders had not heeded Count Raymond’s avocations and also set about building the usual siege equipment needed for an assault. Raymond’s Army had managed to dig out the foot of one of the southern towers protecting his miners with a wooden tower that had an armoured sloping roof. Archers and crossbow men were placed in this structure on a level with the walls keeping the heads down of the defenders. Tom and Henry got plenty of practice with the long bow at this time. It took a huge amount of strength to draw although the discharged arrow could travel at long range keeping them out of firing distance of the enemy in the towers. The long bow was constructed from one piece of Elm hardwood on the outer and light sapwood on the inner giving the bow it’s tremendous spring. It had a superior draw rate to the general composite bow but was such a thrill to fire watching the missile go for great distances straight and deadly accurate.

After discharging seven arrows at the battlements Henrys vigour was spent such was the force needed to use this weapon efficiently. The Turks tried their best to counter from the towers and walls but were met with such a volley of missiles every time they took to hiding behind the stonewalls. The miners had almost completed the breach by nightfall and Count Raymond planned to assault upon the dawn.

During the night the mood around the campfires was heavy with expectancy and thoughts rested on loved ones and home.

“What’s it like Tom. Going into battle,” Ceana asked curiously hugging his arm lovingly as if for the very last time.

“I have no words to explain it. I feel as if I’m floating light headed and dreaming. My insides are empty consumed by a void. My mind will not rest and I’m scared Ceana, very very scared. When battle comes my fear goes and I find courage where it comes from I do not know. You do what you have to do without thinking about it as it all passes so quickly. Ceana do not fear for me God will protect us I’m sure,” Tom had only

experienced minor skirmishes to knot under his belt although now at seventeen he had grown into a man.

“What’s that,” Tom asked as a vociferous rumbling racket broke the still of the night and roused the whole camp. Men with torches grabbed their weapons and ran to their assigned positions. Tom escorted Ceaná into the centre of the camp with the other non-combatants.

“Take care my love,” she mouthed as Tom went to join his fellow Gaul soldiers.

“What’s happening,” Tom enquired as the whole Army stood before the Citadel.

“False Alarm,” Cesar told him patting him upon his back.

“False alarm,” Tom repeated bemused.

“Those bloody miners tunnelled too deep the whole towers collapsed and blocked the breach they had exposed,” Cesar reiterated what had occurred.

“Does that mean we won’t be attacking at first light,” Tom asked hopefully.

“I’m afraid so my lad it’s a damn shame. Never mind there be plenty more battles yet to be fought,” Cesar told him with a sly smile.

As the dawn came with the sun arising making the lake glisten with brilliance the Byzantium Navy were assembling their boats on the shore of the Ascanian. Admiral Boutoumites oversaw the operation in preparation to blockade the Citadel. General Tacitus came to greet his fellow Officer on the banks of the Lake.

“Greetings friend I have a gift for you from the Emperor,” he revealed handing over the sealed scroll. Boutoumites opened it and read it curtly.

“I will see what I can do,” he commented putting the scroll into his tunic.

“The Emperor is depending upon you to see this through,” Tacitus said saluting and leaving his friend to ponder on the Emperor’s message.

Robert of Flanders had completed the first of the trebuchets a huge catapult with a cantilever weight that could bombard Nicaea with boulders and dead carcasses to spread plague. His Norman men brought out two Turkish spies they had captured in the wilds and placed one of them in the bucket of the catapult. The Turk shouted Islamic curses upon them as the mechanism fired. The Crusaders cheered as he sailed into

the heavens and over the walls to his ultimate demise. The second Turkish spy put up a struggle but was overpowered and manhandled into the bucket. He screamed out as he was fired to rapturous applause and cheers as he too disappeared into the depths of Nicaea.

Bohemund by this time had nearly completed his gigantic tower that would hold a hundred men. Mining had weakened the walls on his northern sector and the moats had been filled in with compacted earth to take the weight of his siege engine. Raymond had also completed the Testudo the battering ram slung on chains with an armoured roof for protection. The citadel was expected to fall on the dawn after five weeks of besieging this place.

Another sleepless night had arrived for the Crusaders and as Tom and Ceana talked liberally Henry came to them with some unexpected news. "Bishop Ademar has arrived he's well and recovered I've seen him," Henry informed them.

"You saved him Tom," Ceana reminded her hero of his deeds.

"God saved him he looks after his Generals with care," Tom deflected her adulation of him with.

The morning arose a bright and hot day with the sky so blue it seemed more like the ocean from beneath it. The Crusaders awoke to commotion as the war machines were readied for manoeuvre and men formed into battle squadrons. The Testudo was assigned to Cesar's men and the Gaul knew they were going to take the brunt of this assault. Inside the roofed battering ram on wheels conditions were cramped and the humidity unbearable. Tom held onto a timber support that he would push from the inside when the time came to rush the southern gate. In this airless hold he perspired profusely and the stench of hot human bodies was overwhelming.

"Are we ready men of Gaul," Cesar gave out the usual battle cries.

"Where going to smash through that door and any heathens in our path will have their blood and guts spilled in abundance for we are men of war and above all men of God," he roared inside the testudo.

Trumpets and horns were sounded and the cry "Make Ready" was carried right around the walls of Nicaea. Robert of Flanders had his men load the Trebuchet with Greek fire this inflammable oil that would set ablaze the citadel and cause untold devastation. Bohemund watched his

men climbing the staircase into his tower and had the ropes and guidelines secured for putting it into position. Godfrey had mined the eastern walls as Raymond had recommended with sunken chambers and he made ready to put them to the torch. He still planned an escalade and prayed the walls would collapse sufficiently to gain his men entry.

“Wait,” Raymond, said abruptly as unexpectedly the Byzantium colours were hoisted from the battlements. Then General Tacitus and his men were visible in the towers.

“What in Gods name is going on? Hold the assault give out the trumpet call,” he ordered bemused by this change of events. A messenger came into the camp of Raymond of Toulouse with a message from the Emperor.

An hour later the leaders met in the command tent for a heated discussion on the eastern sector.

“So while we’ve been constructing a siege you say that Roman has been suing for peace,” Godfrey said in disbelief having listened to the Emperors messenger.

“He states he wanted Nicaea complete not ransacked and has negotiated a surrender, who does he think he is taking matters in his hands like this,” Bohemunds blood was boiling he had spoiled for a fight and now it had been taken from his grasp.

“This is preposterous does he take us for fools. We do all the work placing a stranglehold upon the enemy and he moves in for the glory profiteering from our blood and toil,” Godfrey had fought with Alexius already on this campaign and wouldn’t think twice now of doing it again.

“He has promised us gold for our common fund in retribution he has stolen nothing from us,” Hugh of Vermandois still defended the Emperors motives.

“Fools Gold,” Bohemund rebuked him with.

“Gentlemen we are missing the point this is not about sharing the spoils or how much gold. It is the matter of honour and principle. We have sworn fealty to Alexius and he has betrayed our trust in him. Going behind our backs I respected him once but this is nothing more than treachery,” Raymond gave his measured opinion of the situation.

“He garrisoned the city last night with his own troops using the lake and promised the citizens of Nicaea all would be spared within. Fear of ourselves made them capitulate to Alexius and no matter how you see it the Emperor has spared many Christian lives,” Robert of Flanders gave his own mind to the debate.

“Whatever’s done is done but we still need the aid of the Byzantium’s if we were to push on and achieve the objective we came here for. Jerusalem still weeps and cries for salvation and to that aim we must now place our thoughts and energies,” Bishop Ademar spoke dampening grumbling spirits after all the Bishop was their overall commander and they were obliged to follow his initiatives.

In the war pavilion the leaders of the Crusade now faced the decision of what routes they should take into the heartland of their Saracen enemy. The Emperor’s messenger had urged them to proceed down the Aegean coast where he could resupply from them from the sea.

“Why should we do as he dictates his loyalty thus far has only gone to prove his very derision of ourselves,” Godfrey ranted not wanting to keep his vow of fealty any longer than he had to.

“Who’s to stop him doing the same to us elsewhere as he has done at Nicaea as far as I’m concerned the Greeks lost these lands to the Turks so they should be ours by right of conquest. I am not here to extend an Empire that I have no love for and my father had fought with until the end of his days. I suggest we push inland away from his influences at least then what we do and decide will be in our own hands,” Bohemund made his summary and Raymond could see the bonds made at Constantinople were about to be unquestionably broken.

“If we go on without the Emperor’s aid we will be like headless chickens without anywhere to feed. We will starve in this hostile lands and be left to rot the same way as the hill of bones where Walter and his men were left as an omen of misgiving for us,” Hugh the Great did not condone the prospect of going on alone.

“That hill of bones my friend is there because of your Emperor. In his urgency to rid himself of Peter the Hermit he sent an army of non-combatants out here to face the Turk without any prospect of them succeeding. He has no love for us mark my words he would not think

twice about us being massacred out here,” Tancred sounded off and the mood in the tent was becoming intense.

“Deo Volente. God Willing we will succeed with or without the Byzantium’s and we must now decide in which way we must pursue our venture towards the Holy Sepulchre. I have listened to both arguments and we all know that to follow the coastline with it’s fortified towns will only lead to prolonged sieges and capturing possessions that only the Greeks have interests in. If we go overland our journey will be shorter and I propose this not from malice but from my own assumptions of gaining and achieving our ultimate victory,” Raymond had spoken and his council was the most esteemed and valued by all.

The crusaders had their supplies replenished by the Byzantium’s for the last time as they made preparation to journey further East in to the heartlands of the Saracen domain. The Emperor on hearing of their decision considered them foolish venturing on without his assistance. On the morning of departure Raymond’s Army were paraded and every third man was told to take pace forward. Tom had been a third man and stood there as bemused as the others at what was occurring,

“Today we march east and we will be travelling in three main columns to ascertain each column is of equal strength you men have been selected to join Bohemunds army,” Raymond gave out his reasons for the selection.

Ceana was besotted with grief as her loved one marched away to join ranks with another band of Crusaders.

“Ceana do not fret we are all going the same way. Tom will never be more than stones throw away I’m sure and when we next lay siege you will be able to be with him everyday,” Henry comforted her grief with.

The interior of Anatolia arid and open terrain the perfect place for the mobile tactics of the Turk. The Islamic encampment spread across the steppes with thousands of black tents dotting the landscape. The Arabic tent was the legacy of the nomadic Bedouin an art form mastered over many centuries of traversing through inhospitable terrain and unforgiving places on this earth. The black tents were roomy, cool and spacious. The Sultans own tent had four chambers, a large meeting room, a private chamber decorated in silks where he ate and slept. A room for his four concubines that he took with him to entertain his

perversions on his campaigns and with a torture chamber full of cruel inhumane devices a hobby that he loved devotedly and which he was practised. In this room was a collection of alabaster jars where he kept the heads of his vanquished foes. In one of them lay the head of Walter the Penniless as one of his men had recognised the esteemed Knight and identified him as the Christian leader. So the Sultan had kept it as a token of the battle with the Crusaders. Suleyman Kilij Arslan had made camp on the outskirts of the Town of Dorylaeum and he stared upon his Hram the white robes he had worn on his pilgrimage to Mecca and had made prayer at the Kabala the holy shrine of the Islamic religion. His Marabout Nizam Al Mulk called the Azan his holy man who was renowned for the hafiz knowing the Koran off by heart. Suleyman prayed on his mat and then stood to face Elchanes.

“Allah praise be upon you wise Sultan I have just received news that Nicaea has fallen but not to the Crusaders but the Romans your family is safe and well Sharif.” Elchanes gave over the defeat of the Turkish capitol.

“We will slaughter everyone of these Christians I want them crushed without mercy. Praise be to Allah. They do not just threaten my territories but our beliefs. Have your spies sent out and report back with everything you discover,”

“Yes Sharif it will be done as you profess,” Elchanes bowed in submission and went from the tent.

Bohemund had made the decision to force march his company of ten thousand men ahead of the others as he controlled the vanguard. He was hungry for war and two days distance from Nicaea they had lost sight of the other armies completely. They marched incessantly raked by thirst in the sweltering heat and then upon the evening of the 30th June 1097 they made camp in a grassy meadow beside a river. Pickets were posted and the tents erected as the Crusaders settled in for the night only a few miles from a place called Dorylaeum.

As dawn arose upon the new month the 1st of July the army of Suleyman numbering thirty thousand had closed in after the spies of Elchanes had spotted the camp. The Sultan of Rhum had ordered an immediate attack believing he had encircled the whole Crusading Army and having faced

the Christians before when he routed the Army of Walter the Penniless he expected an easy victory.

The pickets had never known what hit them as from out of the false light of dawn they came charging upon the outskirts of the camp with volley after volley of missiles and darts raining down. The morning broke with mayhem as the Turks had come upon them darts javelins and arrows were thrown from range and some landed with the shrieks of death from stricken Crusaders. The beating of war drums deafened the air and the diabolical war cries of Turks drowned their ears. The sky had turned to darkness with the black death of arrows flying down upon the defenders.

Bohemund came from his tent and gathered around him his most loyal Knights.

“This day if it pleases God you will all have been made rich,” he had said grabbing his broadsword to stand before the swarms of the heathen. He tried to form a battle line as the Turks charged cutting down any disorganised or isolated troops.

“Stand fast. Stand fast,” Bohemund called rallying his men to his call of arms.

Tancred and other knights were preparing to mount their battle horses to counter attack.

“Tancred you fool on me dismount. We will fight them on foot as God intended,” Bohemund halted his cousins rash action he knew they would be cut to pieces any that rode into the mass of the Turkish army on the plain.

Tom had thought he had awoken in hell with dead bodies in his midst and he ran around like a frightened chicken disorientated without any battle group to join. He heard the non-combatants yelling and crying with fear and he too was afraid now for his own life. The booming voice of the mighty Lord Bohemund caught his ears and he ran towards it.

“Stand fast,” Men ran to the call as archers or the Saracen sword had slaughtered already one fifth of his force.

Bohemund sent out runners to find Godfrey and Raymond to send relief as he saw his army being depleted. Every shield had been pierced with Turkish arrows with the volley of fire from the enemy unrelenting. Tom came into the ranks and stood beside the gigantic figure of the Norman

Sicilian Count. Bohemund turned to look upon this young man quivering with fear holding his long bow willing to fight despite his lack of skill.

“Young man take heart if you die this day stare Saint Peter square in the eyes at those golden gates of heaven and tell him this, that you fought besides the mighty King of Sicily and demand that he grant you a rich place in paradise or tell him he’ll have me to reckon with, you can be assured of that,” Bohemund had said unto him.

“My Lord these Devils they do not fight fair why will they not square up to us,” Tom asked frustrated by the constant barrage of missiles strewn upon them.

“These Devils are the experts in harassing their foe. Mark my words if they manage to weaken us they will come upon us and the Saracens cold steel will be in our bellies,” Bohemund abruptly gave his summary of their fate if they failed to hold.

Another volley whistled through the air and a whole rank of men fell the brave souls fell dead or wounded by these torrents of hellfire. Suleyman himself was amongst his horse archers and knew he had his enemy pinned with their backs to the river. They had the advantage now of falling upon them indiscriminately and he swore he would finish them off before the day had passed.

Robert of Paris had gathered a band of forty fellow knights under his command and he could stand the onslaught no longer.

“For France,” he shouted as they mounted and he ordered the attack.

Tom watched them swords and lances held valiantly as they charged at the massive horde of the enemy. The Turks drew back swallowing their advance with arrows and javelins pelting the Knights. Then the Turks closed the trap engulfing them as they were overrun and butchered them without remorse. Robert of Paris had not heeded the advice of the Emperor to be neither at the front or rear but in the middle when battle was given with the Turk.

“Bloody fool,” Bohemund added his own thoughts to his action.

Bohemunds men were being slowly forced back to the river by the continuous assault and women in his party brought water thankfully from the river for his knights as thirst had consumed them ravenously in this heated exchange. In the blistering heat of the day attired in chain mail armour they cooked under the might of the sun. The Turks persisted

their usual tactic of swooping upon the ranks discharging a volley of arrows then riding away again. They came in wave after wave each advancing firing their bows and then retreating. These had a devastating effect upon the defenders who were unable to retaliate fully and were worn down recurrently.

Tom took aim again as they advanced and let go of the bowstring. The arrow flew true hitting a Saracen in the chest and the force of the shot swivelled him backwards from his horse. It was the fourth Turk he had killed on this long morning and Bohemund rejoiced every time he had found the mark.

“You keep at em like this Ill have no one left to skewer with my sword,” he commentated to him.

“Stop them,” Bohemund roared as more impetuous knights mounted and charged only for the Turks to fall back and cut them down with arrows. The army was cut to ribbons and the heat made men crazy with the carnage.

Bohemund had his back to the river with the non-combatants women and children huddled within the reed beds. He formed his men into a protecting circle around them as they made their last stand. The Normans had no means of retreat or surrender this would be the ultimate stand and Knights picked up swords off fallen comrades stabbing them into the ground to mark out the perimeter.

“The only Turk that will cross this line will be the one that crosses when were all dead until that time we defend this line with both blood and honour,” Bohemund sanctioned the terms of their defence.

The chain mail hauberks of the knights were hot to the touch in the high temperature of the afternoon with the full might of the torturous Sun upon them. The Army died slowly but bravely and they held out with bloody mindedness and steadfastness of the chivalrous character of the Paladin Knight. Tom perceived the Turk his eyes were affixed upon Lord Bohemund and his bow taugt. The arrow was released and it coursed through the humid air. He didn't no why he did it but he knew the arrow was aimed at the Norman Lords heart. He stepped out in the line of swords in front of Bohemund.

“Forgive me,” he mouthed as the arrow struck into him.” Aaaaghh,” he yelled as it pierced his shoulder blade going straight through his capeskin coat.

Bohemund grabbed him quickly and laid him gently in the reeds amongst the women and children.

“I salute you brave warrior. Now rest while I avenge thee,” the Norman Lord said to him as he laid gently him upon the soft earth.

The Turkish cavalry were advancing now with such rapidity and picking off any isolated groups who weren’t protected by the circle of Bohemunds defences. The drums were beaten deafeningly and the war cries of Islam were rampant upon the plain. The Saracens charged Bohemunds position with more vigour hammering into them and retreating under a curtain of missile fire. The onslaughts were so ferocious the Normans had to slink into the shallows of the river.

Bohemund dragged Tom screaming in agony with him

“Be quiet, you a shame the men who die all around you. Let them go to God in peace,” The Sicilian Lord propped him up in the bed of the river at his feet whilst the women huddled together in their centre hiding behind discarded shields.

Then two knights in shining armour appeared upon the crest of a hill and the Turks fired upon them but they were impervious to anything that came upon them. Then behind this two man vanguard came the knights of Godfrey of Bouillon, fifty in total. Godfrey came to a complete standstill to witness the scene below with awe and dread.

“We have only just beaten a few of them at Nicaea but here they truly swarm,” he gazed at the small circle of knights and made out the tall figure of Bohemund. In front of him carnage of masses dead Christian and Mussel men bodies. Then he looked at masses upon masses of the Turkish Army completely encircling them. Godfrey turned to his small contingent and called.

“Charge,” they hit the Turkish flanks like a battering ram and the Saracens fell in their sway. They broke through the lines and came to join Bohemunds circle at the edge of the river and stand by their side. Bohemund had held the whole Turkish Army at bay for seven long bloody hours.

“Greetings Lord Godfrey it would seem that I have got into a bit of a fight,” Bohemund welcomed him with.

“The rest of my Army is following this is all I could spare at speed,” Godfrey related too him why his force had been so meagre. The two groups were surrounded but during the course of the afternoon other relieving contingents carried out the same tactic hammering into the Saracen flanks and breaking though the lines. The defenders strength was slowly increasing and they inflicted heavier casualties upon the Turks as the fighting became fierce.

“Your spies are worthless Elchanes I will have them beheaded they told me the whole army was here. So tell me wise General where are all these replacements coming from,” The Sultan had become infuriated victory had been stolen in his grasp.

“Sharif let them come we have them cornered we will slaughter them all,” his General put a brave face on the ferocity that the defenders had shown.

Raymond of Toulouse arrived and took up position next to Bohemund he made eyes on the wounded scamp at the Normans feet.

“That boy is one of mine,” he stated.

“That boy is a man who saved my life and God forgive me if I don’t spare his on this eve,” Bohemund had Tom cling to him there was only way he would let him go and that was over his dead body.

The Bishop Adhemar of Le Puy came to the crest of the hill and stopped aghast at the huge numbers of Saracens and the small force of Knights facing them. He weighed up the situation and decided not to break through but to take another course of action. He swung his men around the battlefield and they followed him heading away from their fellow Crusaders. Nizam Al Mulk the Marabout made prayer to Allah as women dressed in burkas with the traditional Yashmak veil had the cooking fires burning. The Crusaders came upon them unexpectedly and Al Mulk conversing with Allah was beheaded by a two handed sword. The Crusaders then ran into the tents intent on looting what they could although Adhemar grabbed a torch from the fire and proceeded to set the camp on fire.

The Turks were amassing for an immense and final assault as they pulled out their curved scimitars to wash Christian blood upon them.

Suleyman had grown weary of the battle and had wanted it ending as his losses were increasing from the stalwart fight the Crusaders were giving him. Then smoke suddenly covered the southern horizon and the Turkish Army were becoming spooked. Spies rode into the Army telling of mighty Christian Armies coming at them from the West and now an Army had torched their camp to the rear. Unnerved they began to flee huge groups of the Army broke and fled.

The defenders in the riverbed cheered and hugged each other as the plain emptied of the Turks presence and they thanked God for this miracle. They had held against a superior force and triumphed nothing could stop this Holy cause now for they all believed.

The field of Dorylaeum had the War Pavilion and all the other crusaders tents upon it. The bodies of the dead were buried respectfully even those of the Turk who the Crusaders had found a new respect for upon the battlefield. Tom came from out of his slumber to find Henry and Ceana faces staring at him.

“Where am I,” he murmured.

“Tom you’re in camp Cesar needs to take a look at your wound,” Ceana informed him as he stared hazily at his right shoulder to see the shaft of the arrow still in him.

“Yes you foolish Saxon I leave you for five minutes and you turn yourself into a bloody hero,” the Gaul rebuked in the background mixing together a concoction of herbs.

“What happened at the battle we were being slaughtered then I saw them two knights in shining armour coming over the crest of a hill with the sunlight illuminating them,” Tom made out his last vision before passing oblivion.

“Yes Tom all the survivors are talking about them. They say it was a miracle divine intervention. They say one of those two knights was Saint George the Roman General who slew a dragon,” Henry revealed excitedly.

“Enough of this nonsense,” Cesar interrupted with.” Ceana you will have to hold onto his left arm very tightly now. Henry you get a good grip on his right,” the Gaul instructed them.” Tom have few swigs on

this,” Cesar offered him a flask of wine which he gulped down as he was taken by an unquenchable thirst.

“Bite on this,” The Gaul placed a piece of rough leather in his mouth.

Cesar got the hilt of his knife and placed it over the stem of the arrow. He took out a hand axe and with the flat end hit it the hilt of the knife hard. Tom's back arched in agony and screamed as the arrowhead came out of his back. Then he slunk back into unconsciousness laying at peace upon the bed. Cesar took out the herbs he had been chewing out of his mouth and used the balls of aromatic plants to plug the front and rear puncture wounds.

“Ceana you must coat the wounds with honey this will help him heal quickly and when he awakes make sure he drinks plenty of water to drive the poison out of his body. Other than that there is nothing more I can do,” the Gaul, said.

“Cesar you have done more than most would and I'm sure he will be fine. I thank you,” Ceana replied hugging Tom motherly.

“Well now that piece of metal is out of him he stands every chance,” Cesar threw the offending arrowhead onto the floor of the tent.

Two whole days passed before Tom once again opened his eyes to the world and Ceana was still by his side. She and Henry had kept a constant vigil with him.

“How long have I slept,” he asked as he opened his eyes.

“Two days Tom I was becoming worried you would never awake again as I have heard as happened to others,” Ceana smiled she was so relieved he was alive.

A huge figure in bright glistening mail armour with a purple surcoat with the head of an Eagle upon it entered the enclosure. His blonde hair was long and unruly with his skin as smooth as marble.

“Still resting I see while others toil to keep this crusade going,” the Knight scolded as he entered.

“Lord I will arise what must be done,” Tom said coming up from the bed.

“Lie down that's an order,” Bohemund called seeing his joke had been taken literally.

“You do know why I'm here don't you,” the Norman announced his face stern.

“No my Lord forgive me I do not,” Tom felt as if he had committed a terrible misdemeanour.

“Thomas Walters on the eve of battle you showed great courage and I have come to promote you as vavasour to one of my units. The archers are suited to your skills if I remember correctly except your not supposed to catch them with your body yourself. I hope you will point this out to the men under your charge for me,” Bohemund held his tone still serious and Tom didn’t know whether he was fooling him or being serious.

“Yes I will make sure that they learn this,” Tom answered and then Bohemund roared out in rapturous laughter. Tom laughed and so did Ceana who had smirked under the hand the whole time.

“So do you accept my promotion Thomas Walters,” Bohemund asked more sombrely.

“Yes Lord I would be honoured,” the Saxon felt the pain in his shoulder but now smiled upon it with pride.

“Then good day to you and here’s something to help you recover sooner,” Bohemund threw something on the bed as he retired.

“What is it,” Tom asked curiously.

Ceana went to the bottom of the bed and opened the leather purse for a moment she was dumbstruck.

“What is it,” Tom asked again.

“It’s gold Tom honest it is. It’s a bag of gold coins,” Ceana had never before set eyes on such money. Tom to glared upon it incredulously and examined the bezants. The gold coinage of Byzantium turning them around and around not quite believing he was now wealthy.

Hector the Hermit had traversed back across Europe and came upon the English shore in august 1097. He made a pilgrimage to the Cathedral at Canterbury thanking the Lord for his safe passage before continuing north. He came upon the Hamlet of Pendlebury at the end of that month three weeks after returning to his homeland. He sounded the horn at the gates and waited patiently. Eventually after some time a huge brute of a man with a full black beard appeared and called out to him over the fence.

“How can I help you stranger,” John Pendle the Thane had shouted.

“I am seeking out a Flora Walters if you would be so kind to direct me to her,” Hector answered.

“Never heard of that name be gone from here,” John Pendle said abruptly.

“I have been informed she once resided here,” Hector was insistent with his response.

“As I have said or are you impaired of hearing we have never heard that name, now be gone vagabond before I lose my patience with thee” The Thane said threateningly and disappeared.

Hector turned reluctantly and sauntered away shaking his head. He had only gone a little way when a young girl who had been eavesdropping appeared from out of the woods.

“I beg your pardon Sir, if you would come this way please I know where the women is you speak of,” Isabeil had stated tugging at the coat his scapular.

“Thank you young girl your most kind,” Hector sighed relieved he could keep his promise.

The Hermit followed Isabeil into the depths of the forest surrounded by the boles of huge oak trees.

After The Normans had blinded Flora and the village had been bankrupted `De Jure` in accordance with the law for the crimes of her sons the villagers had turned against her also. Flora had been made an outcast and flung from the village gates. She had survived on vegetable peelings and other refuge people had flung at her in disgust. The village children had watched her suffer and struggle desperately on the outskirts banished from the interior of the Hamlet. Isabeil had called a meeting in the glade and swore each child to a vow of secrecy.

“You all remember Tom Walters don’t you,” she had said to them.

“Yes the outlaw,” one of the boys had replied in admiration.

“Yes the outlaw but before he was an outlaw he lived in this village like you and me. He taught some of us to read and write and told us of wondrous things. He gave us hope in this world and he gave us skills that have changed our lives. The library in the hole of that tree was given to us by Thomas,” Isabeil pointed to the hollow trunk where they stored the scrolls and parchments they all read from.

“His Mother is now hapless and dying at our doorstep imagine if that were your Mother. We owe Tom a lot and I think we should help his Mother but if we do we must keep this secret to ourselves as our Fathers have great hatred for her,” Isabeil made her moral gesture.

Flora was lead by the hand into the woods by Isabeil as the children had made for her a makeshift house and she was guided to it. They stole wool and food, which was brought to her and even though blind she cooked treats and knitted garments for them.

Hector traced the same steps Flora had took as he entered the glade where a group of children who were playing suddenly stopped and stared upon this stranger in rags suspiciously.

“Wait here Sir I’ll get her for you,” Isabeil had said before disappearing into the thicket. Moments later she resurfaced leading out an old lady with dirty bandages around her eyes.

“Hello Sir I am Flora Walters forgive me but I am blind so I can’t lay my eyes upon you. How may I help you,” Flora had said with dignity in her voice.

“Good Lady I have just travelled from a place called Constantinople whilst there I was most fortunate enough to meet your son Thomas,” Hector began.

“Thomas he’s still alive,” Flora gasped as if it were beyond all hope.

“Yes Good Lady he’s very much alive and is embarked upon a mighty crusade to rid the Holy City of Jerusalem from tyranny by the heathen,” Hector continued.

“A Crusader,” Flora sighed again she had overheard this name of new men who fought for the will of God.

“That is correct Good Lady I have a letter from Thomas that he asked me to pass onto you,” Hector handed over the rolled up scroll.

“A letter how wonderful,” Flora took it from him as he placed it in her hands.

“Forgive me I cannot stay I have come off my path already and I hope you would excuse me,” Hector was eager for his home.

“I cannot thank you enough for bringing me this news and I know you must have gone to some trouble to do this” Flora stated

“It was my pleasure to do this Good Lady your son is a most noble person full of honour and grace. Good day,” with that the Hermit departed.

Flora sat in the sunlight upon her face in the glade and Isabeil sat by her side. Isabeil broke the seal on the scroll and unrolled it out.

“Are you ready Flora,”

“Yes child I am ready,” as Isabeil started to read out the letter.

Mother this is Thomas I hope you are well and God is protecting you. I will tell you what has happened to us after leaving Pendlebury we headed North with the Normans and their hounds hunting us. God came to our aid as Father Benedict rescued us from them and took us to the Bishop at the Cathedral at Wells. Henry and myself swore an oath to God for saving our lives and we promised to go to Jerusalem and free her from the oppression of the Pagans. After Wells we took a boat where we crossed into Normandy and joined with many soldiers and Knights under a Lord Count Raymond of Toulouse who is a great and noble man. Then we travelled across many barbaric lands until we arrived here at the city of Constantinople. This City Mother is the most beautiful place on the earth.

On the morrow we venture into the lands of the heathens and once Jerusalem is freed so is my oath and I will return a free man as my crusading vows admonishes me of the crime I committed. I must go now. I miss you dearly and my thoughts are with you constantly. All my love and prayers your son Thomas.

Isabeil noticed that Flora was crying from within as her shoulders trembled.

“Flora there is more do you wish me to continue,”

“Yes Child thank you,” Flora said placing her hand upon her reassuringly.

Flora it’s Henry here don’t you be worrying about Tom now he has me to take care of him and we both plan to be back in merry olde England some time soon. I miss you. I see you as my Mother as you were always good to me God Bless You.

“That Henry is still full of bravado he has not changed,” Flora stated still sobbing with joy.

“There’s one last part I’ll finish it,” Isabeil told her.

Hi Mrs Walters Thomas is too modest to tell you but he is very brave and you should be proud of him. He has already saved the life of a Bishop named Adhemar and faced the enemy in battle as we travelled to Constantinople. Henry and Tom are in the archers and wear yellow tunics. They look so handsome and manly you should see how grown up they have become. God bless you Flora and don't worry both your boys are safe and well.

"Ceana was a lovely girl I wonder if her hair is still is as brown and shinny as it used to be," Floras voice shivered with tears.

"Flora is there anything I can do for you. Do you want me to fetch you some water," Isabeil had said but Flora seated her again placing her hand upon her.

"There is something you can do for me child. Would you be so kind as to read it again for me," she asked.

"Of course I will Aunty Flo as often as you like," Isabeil answered.

On July 3rd 1097 Tom sauntered out of his tent nursing his bandaged shoulder to come into the light of the world. Count Tancred a nephew of Lord Bohemund had summoned him and led him to stand before a maniple of fifty archers that were now in his charge.

"My Uncle has placed great trust in you Thomas giving you a command and I hope you will be loyal and not fail his generosity," Tancred himself had been a General at the age of twenty and Thomas now a vavasour at seventeen was pacing in his steps. Bohemund had taken a shine to this brave Saxon and if he continued to prove his worth had plans for him yet.

The maniple of archers were a rag tag bunch with not any of them attired the same or at a similar age. There were young boys and old men amongst the ranks who were the true peasants that made up the girth of the Crusade nicknamed Tafurs.

"Good day to you all," Tom addressed them and he noticed they looked upon him with disinterest." I stand before you younger than most of you and older than some and I can see you stare upon me with derision. Yes I am not of noble birth or a Norman but a Saxon and have not attained the rank or status of a Knight. I am a freeman like yourselves and have

been given charge of you as your Vavasour. I can only assert to you how I intend to conduct my affairs with fairness, pureness and to continue with the noble values what I believe in. Is it not right that our quest is a most honourable and noble deed. I will lead you by example and expect your loyalty and obedience in battle. My name is Thomas Walters and in time I will know each of yours good day Gentlemen,” He left them there but he had left his mark upon them. He had addressed them as equals and in his eyes they saw the passion within him that drove his soul.

As Tom re-entered his tent he had a pleasant surprise as Father Benedict awaited him talking casually with Henry and Ceana.

“Father where have you been we have missed you,” Tom questioned.

“Thomas I have just learnt of your injuries but you seem recovered,” the Father asked with concern.

“I’m fine and better now that you back amongst us,” he stated.

“My apologies for my absence but I was unexpectedly detained at Constantinople. I was under orders from the Bishop Adhemar to await the arrival of a papal bull,” he confessed his absence.

“A bull,” Henry said out loud with puzzlement.

“A bull Henry is not what your thinking it is an edict issued by Pope Urban and the one I waited upon was an encyclical addressed only for the eyes of the Bishop so it had some weight of purpose I guess that’s why it is called such,” Father Benedict smiled as he explained the churches business to him.

“Thomas congratulations on becoming a vavasour I have a gift for you,” The Father handed over a small package and Tom opened it out excitedly.

“It’s the History of the Peloponnesian War written by Thucydides I thought it might come in handy now that you have men to command. It is from the library of the Emperor translated into Latin,” the Father had said.

“It’s a wonderful gift and I will treasure it,” Thomas replied.

Tom got into line with his fellow archers as the Army now split into two groups after the near disaster at Dorylaeum they had consolidated their numbers as they prepared to march across the Anatolian plateaux. He could discern the carts being loaded and the horses being packed in preparation for travelling into Asia Minor. In front of him were the

Byzantium's a token force lead by General Tacitus who had become overseer for the Emperors ambitions and to make certain the Franks kept his oath of fealty to him when any of his estates were recaptured. The Byzantium soldiers were attired richly in gold armour, plumed helmets, ruby tunics and long flowing red cloaks. Tom looked upon his own motley band walking in rags and marching with disdain.

As they camped that evening housed at the rear of the column were where the tradesmen's caravans usually converged. Here Fletcher's feathered arrows, Blacksmiths repaired armour and weapons. Carpenters maintained wagons and during prolonged sieges built the war engines designed to topple the defences, Women dyed wool and wove garments in the cool night air. The Army of the Crusaders were now on the march so most of the trade's people lay idle with their skills going to waste. Tom never the less opened his purse of gold and made some hard bargains.

The summer trek across this inhospitable terrain was arduous and pitiless. After a week had passed they had run out of water and the Turks who retreated at the head of them had filled in the first of the wells they came upon. The inferno of salt desert hit them like a hammer with its might and mouths blistered with dryness. At the night the temperate plummeted to freezing with icy winds cutting through their bodies and turning tents into tatters.

A horse buckled throwing off its knight unceremoniously and lay there with white patches of exhaustion upon its bronze coat to die. Soon after many more pack animals lay upon the sand waiting the turbulent climate to strip them of flesh and the boiling sun to bleach their bones. Strange visions were prevalent as dogs with swords and shields strapped to them sauntered by utilised as pack ponies. A Priest bore his bare chest and flagellated himself with a whip as he walked with blood running down his back like a waterfall from his whip marks. Knights in full regalia riding oxen sauntered by in the heat of the intolerable day. This desert was becoming a bigger enemy than the Turks could ever poise against them.

Ceana had deep concerns for Albert who had contracted dysentery and his bodily fluids refused to stay in him. His skin had yellowed and his

features were sallow and gaunt. Thirst tormented him more than any other and Tom had given him all his remaining water two days hence. "When will this nightmare end," Ceana had asked Tom nursing her charge as they camped.

"I hope soon or I fear we may all perish here," Tom's face was stern and hard-bitten by this unforgiving road.

"The Noble men walk by our side now maybe that's a good omen as God intended," Henry rebuked.

"Good or bad lets pray we all walk out of here," Tom rubbed his hands that had blue'd with the evening cold.

On the next morning Ceana awoke and let out an undulating scream.

"What's wrong," Tom? Asked startled.

Ceana had not the strength to say the words and pointed over to where Albert lay and had died during the course of the night. They buried him later that morning respectfully and Father Benedict read out a prayer over the grave. Ceana wept that much that she couldn't stand for a while and Isaac had become remote withdrawing into himself by his brother's demise. That was not the only death that long night many others had perished and Count Baldwin of Bologne had lain to rest his own wife. Albert and the wife of Baldwin were the last anyone would bury for none had the strength left. As the others that fell would be tersely stepped over and left to rot upon the sand. Heads thumped and ached with the heat and dehydration. Anguish and toil was all the day brought with legs pounding drunkenly on the heavy earth. Shields and armour were discarded cluttering the desert floor. If hope had any mercy they were sorely wrong as they came upon the fertile land to find the Turks had scorched the earth. Burning the harvests, the farms and the orchards in their path. They walked in hell upon the earth an acrid charred surreal landscape devoid of any pity and devoured of all life.

"What ungodly people would do this," Count Eustace called out with streams of smoke still rising into the heavens.

The waterholes had all been buried and those so desperate wasted precious energy fruitlessly trying to claw out the dirt with their hands were left with only desolation of their own hope. Some chose just to lie in the holes they had dug out and die. On the eve of August after three weeks of untold hardship and misery they came upon a river. There was

a sudden commotion as everybody dashed and dived into the water. Lord Bohemund his arm held wide stopped the mad rush and with his booming voice held out a warning to be heeded.

“Do not drink it. Do not drink it,” he had called and people listened dishearteningly fearing it was poisoned as hearts sank with such despotic cruelty.

“If you drink on parched throats it will surely kill you. Just sip the water tenderly like a fine wine,” he advised to great relief and joy returned with relief of their misinterpretation.

The Crusaders set up camp along the banks of the river although still ravished by hunger they were thankful they had survived thus far. Ceaná combed Isaac's hair who still dumbstruck had not spoken a word since Albert's death and this memory brought tears to Ceaná's eyes.

“When we get to Jerusalem Isaac we will kneel together at the altar of the Holy Sepulchre and pray for Albert. We will ask God to make him safe and ask if he's looking down upon us from paradise. Oh my sweet boy,” She wept again hugging him to her.

“Is there a heaven,” Isaac had opened his mouth and his voice subdued and low.

“Thank you God your talking, keep talking Isaac,” Ceaná afforded herself a moment of joy.” Yes there is a heaven a bright beautiful heaven a glorious place with green lush pasture and flowing rivers. No one goes thirsty or hungry and everyone is filled with joy,” Ceaná explained her vision of the afterlife.

“Will Albert see Mama and Papa in heaven,” Isaac asked her in his sweet curious tone.

“Yes Isaac they will be together now,” Ceaná informed him.

“Why can't I go there? Why can't I see Mama and Papa,” his voice raised in anxiety.

“Oh my poor dear,” Ceaná hugged him close again sobbing for his grief.

“Isaac,” an abrupt voice intervened surprising them both.” Isaac,” the voice of Father Benedict sounded this time more softly now he had his attention.” We are each granted our own time on this Earth. Some stay for but a short span of time although we remember them forever. Others stay for all there given days it is the way of the Lord and out of our hands. You must be brave now as your Mama and Papa and Albert

would of wanted. They will be in your heart always and you can pray for them often but you are not ready. God has not as yet decided your time for he has plans for you yet. Tomorrow you will weep no more for you have the gift of life. A gift not to be wasted. Sleep now and dream my boy,” the Father half lectured and half scolded but his time for grieving was over.

That night a group of Armenians attired in white robes wearing silver crosses entered the camp. Their leader Prince Bazouni had enquired why this mighty army was here and whence it was going. He was told they were here because God willed it and they were going to Jerusalem to dispel the heathen from the Christian lands. Bazouni became excited by this news and demanded an audience with their leader.

“What do you want from us friend,” Tancred had questioned him.

“Lord my City Edessa is not far from here and we are also subjugated by the pagan Turk as the Holy City is. We ask deliverance bring your mighty Knights and throw them from our doors,” he had pleaded to him.

Tancred took this proposal to the other Generals as they met in council in the War Pavilion.

“We cannot distract from Jerusalem she is near and Edessa is not on our route. Tell this Armenian we will be more than happy to come to his Cities aid but not until Jerusalem has fallen,” Raymond made clear his views on the matter.

“I disagree I propose leading a small force to aid them,” Baldwin of Bologne suggested.

“We need every man we have for Antioch and Jerusalem you cannot be spared,” Stephen of Blois could see their forces splitting and dreaded the outcome.

“Then again as we move on Antioch the Turks will on our flanks Baldwin could keep them occupied for us by conquering Edessa,”

Godfrey backed his younger brothers proposal it would give them a footing in gaining their own territories here.

“I consider this complete madness,” Raymond had not the time for this foolish proposal.

“Madness or not I have already given them my word,” Baldwin was adamant he would be going to Edessa.

As evening wore on the mood in the encampment had been hostile with heated discussions of betrayal and treachery.

“That fool Baldwin will get himself killed the Emperor wishes us to head east not south why are some of your leaders so hot headed for glory,” Tacitus had stated.

“Is that so, the Emperor wishes,” Tancred said with contempt that held a deep-seated hatred of the Greeks ever since he had fought with them on the Vardar River.

As morning broke two contingents of the Army departed heading south for Edessa with Prince Bazouni riding by Baldwin’s side. Tancred took his men along who did this mainly to defy the Greeks wishes he had been the only Count not to take an oath of fealty to the Emperor and had slipped through Constantinople in the dead of night, Tancred would not become the vassal of his enemy and he had aired his thoughts to his uncle before departing. Bohemund had understood his reasoning as he himself had a penchant for stubbornness and bade farewell with these words.

“You watch that Baldwin doesn’t take all the spoils for himself and Godfrey and carve some out for us Guiscards I’m depending upon you,” the Sicilian had advised knowing that once this conflict was over the feuds would begin over territories amongst them.

The Armenians couldn’t urge them strongly enough to take vast quantities of water with them for the road ahead and after more relenting desert they reached Iconium in mid August. Here they could replenish their supplies and heal their sick. The Turks had fled this town and thankfully left it unmolested. The people mainly Armenian offered them market and the trade caravans were busy for the first time in many weeks. Tom went to see the merchants and find out if his order had been completed.

His men were stood before him and from his original fifty only forty-three remained as the death March through the salt desert had ultimately killed them.

“Men I have learnt many things upon this journey and one lesson of the most importance is not to go anywhere poorly equipped as this is a recipe for death and disaster. I from my own finances want you men to

be equipped and prepared and have procured these items for you,” Tom flew back the sheet on the hand cart with one swift movement as his men gaped with awe at his generosity.

In the cart were purple surcoats emblazoned with a black cross motif of Christ. Sleeveless chain mail coats ideal for archers and a collection of long bows the finest money could buy. Tom donned one of the purple surcoats and a newly smelted sword hung by his side. His men turned into rapturous little children as they put on the wears and when they stood before him again he saw pride wrought in their eyes. They respected him and he began to lead them drilling and bolstering them into organised fighting unit. Using the wisdoms of the Greek writer Thucydides and the battle experiences of the Spartans he modelled his miniature army upon these ancient warriors.

The Cicilian Gate a passage through the Oligocene and Pliocene of the Tarsus mountain range. This mighty cluster of ranges had awoken in a primordial age of volcanic fury when the earth itself had been moulded. The consequent whipping by the austral wind along the Anatolian plateaux had given birth to the two largest peaks Erciyas and Hasandagi that dominated the landscape. Over the centuries the hardened basalt lava had cracked allowing rainwater to seep through the fissures and slowly eroded the core of the range with many meandering passageways.

Phantom cones had been strangely formed by the constant rub of the wind and alternating sordid heat and glacial cold. These hollow cones had sharp peaks and whistled with the whines of the breeze as if haunted. The Turks had a name for these Chimera type structures they had named them Fairy Caves.

The Crusaders began the climb through the ravines following in the footsteps of Alexander the Great. In places the trail became precariously narrow and extreme caution had to be taken. There's had been no room for any to go ahead or behind each other they followed the man in front as if blind. Tom glanced over his shoulder to witness the vast extending line of the army clinging to the mountain ledges. He glanced above to see more on the paths aloft and stared below down the huge chasm of the gorge with his stomach churning with vertigo. Loose shale grabbed his attention and his gaze shifted upwards almost nonchalantly. A pack donkey struggled to regain it's footing and came tumbling down the

sheer cliff face directly above him. He grabbed a hold upon Ceana and Isaac and pushed them into the rock wall. The pack animal crashed into four of Toms men immediately ahead and they tumbled off the mountain with the collision. Their death screams faded away as they fell further into the abyss to their doom.

Other horses had also slid from the ledges and in the ravine below there lay the smashed bodies alongside the supplies they had been burdened with. Intermittently they came upon settlements perched on the mountain slopes most of these were inhabited by the Armenian monks of the black mountain. Their monastery was amongst the many caves that proliferated the mountainside. On the open expanses along the passes they came upon Armenian villages. The Crusaders could not understand them except those of them that had understanding of Greek. The Armenians descendents of Alexander and once Byzantium citizens wore silver crosses that explained to the Crusaders they were Christians as well as themselves. They greeted the Armenians friendly as if they were their liberators and the Armenians in return bartered with them providing cheese, milk, bread and meat. There was never enough food to go around and feed the multitude. Knights sold their weapons and armour for a slice of bread and a cup of water to parch their torturing thirst.

As they passed through the Cicilian Gates leaving the harsh mountain ranges behind they could discern the fertile plains in the valley below. The leaders and people of the Crusade sighed with utmost relief. They had crossed an inferno and as Adhemar said, "like Moses they had come upon the Promised Land".

They were now two thousand miles from their homelands in this strange new world and Raymond contemplated they would need a base of supply if they ever hoped to continue this undertaking. The road to Antioch now lay clear ahead of them.

George Pegasus stood upon the prow of his Trireme and had to narrow his eyes against the harshness of the beating sun to make out the tiny harbour. He glanced from left to right seeing his fleet of thirty vessels in his wake and his men straining upon the oars as they raced towards the shoreline. Ten dhows were moored at the dockside

however a solitary vessel was slipping out the harbour into the deep waters of the Mediterranean. George made a hand signal to the captain of a trireme on his right flank and the vessel changed course swiftly to cut off the path of the fleeing boat. Ten boats under the Byzantium's Admirals command now anchored at the harbour entrance to form a blockade whilst the remainder advanced upon the port of Saint Symeon.

The Arabic sailors in the fleeing dhow had their faces wrought with dread as the Byzantium Trireme closed upon them.

"Go back to the shore," Captain Acticus had balled with cupped hands in Greek but he could tell they had set their minds on attempting to take flight from these fearsome soldiers in gold armour.

"Hooks ready," Acticus called to his men as they rowed with contorted faces trying to gain headway before the dhow could put her sails to the wind.

They had closed now to twenty feet and some of the Byzantium sailors stood swirling the metal hooks to gain momentum. The lines were thrown and two of the hooks landed upon the deck whilst the others splashed into the water. The Arab sailors hurled one back over the side before it could gain purchase although the others iron claws stabbed into the boats timbers as it was dragged. The Arabs pulled upon it until their fingers bled as the Byzantium's hauled in their prize like a huge fish.

"Allah have mercy," they mouthed in fear for their lives as a sandal-footed roman landed upon the deck planks.

"Shore," Acticus said to them pointing to the hub of land and they turned the tiller as requested.

At the Port George Pegasus had landed with his legion of troops as they secured the town with Roman diplomacy he soon gained order as some of the Arabs had protested to him and now they hung nailed to the doors of the of the Port office. Nobody else dared question him or his Roman authority to be here. George knew Antioch was twelve miles inland and this was its major port. Alexius wanted Antioch badly although at present he was busy with his Armies regaining the Citadels along the Aegean coast he had wanted the Crusaders to procure from him. He had sent his Admiral and a legion ahead wanting an upper hand on the Crusaders as he now controlled there only supply route.

On October 20th 1097 the vanguard of the Crusaders forces approached the City of Antioch and immediately the scouts came upon a relieving Turkish Army. The vanguard approached numbering only just over a thousand knights and the Turks laughed in scorn at such a pitiful force. Richard of Principati turned to face his men and of his own accord bitterly angered by the jeering of the Muslims spoke to them.

“Take heart the enemy is before us,” and with that they charged.

The Turks were taken aback being advanced upon by such a pitiful force and the Knights were already raising their lances to run them through. The first wave broke every lance upon a Turk and swords were drawn for close quarter battle. The Turks were unused to these tactics and began to flee in wild abandonment leaving their caravan behind. Many Moslem dead littered the battlefield and now the Knights countered their spoils. There were horses, camels, mules loaded with grain, fruit and best of all wine.

In Northern Syria twelve miles inland from the coast and the Port of Saint Symeon stands the City of Antioch. A powerful fortress with four hundred towers along it's miles of walls and dominated by a impregnable citadel that stood a thousand feet above the town perched on a high mountain. Despite it's formidable strength it had to be taken, as it was vital for any further progress south. Antioch had a formidable reputation of never having fallen in battle and had stood for 1400 years before the Crusaders had arrived. It was so large Crusaders found it difficult to surround it they settled in blockading the three main gates trying to ensure the defenders could not mount a full-scale attack and to help fend off any relieving force. Raymond took command of one of the entrances they called the Dog Gate. Godfrey another called the Duke Gate and Bohemund the third Saint Peters Gate. Antioch a fabled city of antiquity and a seat of one of the great Patriarchies, which regarded Saint Peter as it's first Bishop. The population mainly Armenian Christian held by the Turkish Governor Yaghi Siyan. The Turks had taken control of the City in 1085 before then it had been retained by the Byzantium's and Alexius wanted it returned to his ownership more than other possession.

The City located in the valley of Orontes in the mountainous terrain. Antioch itself lay on the floor of the valley with its citadel high in the mountains above. Bohemund encamped his four thousand knights before the Gate of Saint Peter to watch it dogmatically for any trying to enter or flee the City. Tom stared at the walls the tallest he had ever seen and wondered how they ever hoped to take this place. His men by now had become familiar to him and he knew most of them by name old Harry and young Bill. Pol the poacher. Deadeye Dughall due to his one eye the other having been lost in battle. Antoine the destroyer a Frenchman renowned to be the best shot with the bow. There was Bernard the bear because of his great strength and Marcel the fox who could procure anything for a price. Tom got to drill them in the manner of the Spartans and they enjoyed it as it broke up the monotony of the siege. From the Armenians Tom had got hold of pikes and shields he had learnt from Dorylaeum that even archers can get caught in the thick of battle and his men respected him for thinking of their salvation.

The Turks had not shown themselves at all since the Crusaders had arrived as they were so terrified by this Christian Army that had put a strangle hold upon their City. Ceana and Henry were in Raymond's camp and the mood was unpleasant as the Count had taken ill and was bed ridden. Ceana cooked and looked after Isaac but missed Tom now more than ever. In the surrounding fields were vineyards, pits filled with grain, apple trees laden with fruit, pomegranates and nectarines.

On the fourth night of the siege Tom had been relieved of his watch duties and decided even though frowned upon to venture through hostile terrain along the route of the Orontes River he made his way to Raymond's camp. He searched amongst the pavilions tents and bivouacs asking for the whereabouts of Henry Longfellow and Ceana Drew. At last he found them in their tent in the North East section of the encampment and when he pulled back the tent cover their faces lit up at his unexpected appearance.

"Tom," Ceana cried out coming over and hugging him so hard she was unwilling to let go.

"How's things on your side of the siege," Henry enquired mundanely at the laborious routine he now found himself with.

"Unexciting at the moment," Tom answered smiling brusquely.

“Pretty much same as here,” Henry was sharpening a stick as he had done in the glade it helped him in moments of boredom.

Ceana and Tom took a stroll under the moonlight that had yellowed the ambience of their surrounds. The air had a chill born upon it as the first signs of winter were bearing upon them. Tom laid Ceana in the long grass as they passed the ruins of the Roman Cemetery where both ancient and recent Muslim tombs stood against the backdrop of the City of Antioch. They kissed longingly and Tom brushed back her brown hair over her eyes and looked into them passionately. Affection and love was a rare commodity amongst the misery and hardship of this crusade.

“Tom what are you doing,” Ceana mouthed feeling his hands now were upon her breasts.

“I want you Ceana. ____ I need you,” he pleaded gasping with excitement.

Ceana had not answered but kissed him back and she loosened her petticoat. They made fervent love both of them inexperienced and for both of them for the first time.

They came back into camp a while later still holding hands and love written upon their faces was the warmth they now shared between them. As they were outside of the tent a voice made them suddenly alert.

“Greetings stranger,” Cesar had said stood in the half-light of the fire.

“Cesar how are you,” Tom responded.

“I see your men shine with pomp and enthusiasm in those purple frocks you have dressed them up with. Hope they will fight as pretty as they look,” Cesar smirked and Tom didn’t know whether his mockery of his men’s attire was from jealousy or admiration.

“They will fight and when they do they will fight well. I have done my best to prepare them for it.” Tom spouted off in defence.

“Being a leader of men is a long unforgiving road Saxon. It can be a burden hard to shoulder don’t you become too friendly with them Thomas. Death will come and spread her wings upon some of them even you or me. Every time you lose a man you will blame yourself I know this for many men have fallen by my side. Being a Vavasour is a very grim business in deed,” Cesar spat upon the fire.

“Cesar you are a wise man and a good one at that. I know what you say is to protect me thank you for your words,” It had struck Tom his

message was to keep his own sanity amidst the slaughter that will surely come.

Tom turned to see Henry his face held disdain gazing upon him from the shadows.

“Henry,” Tom shouted to him astonished by the hate he had witnessed in his half brothers eyes. Henry didn’t answer he just turned his back and walked away into the darkness.

“What’s wrong with him,” he asked Ceana who hugged his arm.

“Thomas I think Henry has a place in his heart for me but my heart is with you,” Ceana revealed to him.

“I will have to make amends with him,” Tom was saying still looking into the darkness when something else caught his eye.

“Who goes there,” Tom called and Cesar came to his feet drawing his broadsword.

“Christian don’t hurt me, I am Christian too,” a voice replied as an Arab in a white jezebel came into the light of the campfire.

“What do you want here skulking in the darkness,” Cesar asked him with menace.

“The Muslims my Lord they scourge my people cause us great distress. I have escaped their clutches and come to you to ask for shelter from them,” Abdullah informed them coming to his knees asking for mercy.

“You have just come now from the City,” Tom asked amazed.

“Yes Lord from Antioch I climbed down from the walls,” Abdullah told them of how he had escaped.

“Come sit with us,” Cesar stated noticing the silver cross he bore and realising it was the same as their Armenian allies had adorned upon them in the Tarsus mountains.

“I am most grateful my name is Abdullah my belly cries with hunger have you any spare food,” the Armenian enquired now he had their trust.

They gave Abdullah corn stew, which he wolfed down swiftly and they talked with him until the early hours. He told them of how the Turks oppressed his kinfolk within the walls and how they were governed by a despot a Turkish Governor Yaghi Siyan. He told them how the Turks had took their wives for their own and denied them the right of prayer in the Churches.

“That’s Ungodly,” Tom protested incensed by the cruelty of the Muslims.

As morning arose the Armenian was nowhere to be found and Tom left Ceana still sleeping next to Isaac. He made his way back to his own defences wondering when he would see her again. Old Harry, the Bear and Marcel were busy digging the trench he had requested.

“There he goes that bloody Saxon making us slave away like this,” Marcel moaned not use to hard labour.

“Why are we building defences were supposed to be the attackers,” added the Bear.

“I don’t rightly know and I don’t rightly care. I just know that young man is smarter than most of us put together and if he wants us to dig he must have good reason for it,” Old Harry concluded coming to Toms defence. Old Harry had snow white hair he was far ancient than any other in Tom’s unit. The men turned their ears to him when they needed worldly wisdom.

Out of the wilderness returned Pol Poacher this pocked face man who had deserted his post the night before.

“Where the hell have you been,” chastised Bernard the Bear knowing he had got out of digging this trench work defences.

Pol never said a word he just brought out the two hares he had hidden behind his back.

“You bloody marvel,” The Bear now said beaming who was always hungry for a meal.

In the Sultans Palace amongst the grandiose Islamic arches and fountains Abdullah awaited the summons of his Lord. He had waited tolerantly for the Governor Yaghi Siyan had only just arisen and still ate his morning meal of goat’s cheese and palm dates. He wiped his mouth and then uttered out his command.

“Bring him in,” he instructed his bodyguard with a wave of his hand. Abdullah walked across the marble floored halls encircled by arches into the spacious chamber of the Sultans council room. Yaghi Siyan a bare headed man with a humongous figure sat cross-legged upon a sea of multicoloured cushions whilst his advisors stood behind him.

“So what did you discover for us,” Yaghi Siyan peeled a grape as he spoke.

“Excellency most merciful Lord praise be to Allah. It is how you predicted there Army is not as vast as the sea it would seem. I went into the Western camp unmolested no one watches over the City Walls and the Iron bridge gate is left completely unguarded. They watch the Dog Gate believing it is our only means of access,” Abdullah made known all he had discovered.

“Go on,” Yaghi Siyan mouthed chewing the plum of the grapes.

“Beyond their camp they corral many horses and store supplies of grain. They bring stores down the road from the Port of Saint Symeon as they now control it’s harbour,”

Abdullah was one of thirty spies that had sallied forth that night and the Chief of Yaghi Siyan’s force. The Governors own youngest son now plotted how to use this knowledge to their advantage. Shams ad Daula the Governors eldest son had also slipped out of the city that night. On his white stallion he headed south for Damascus to inform the Persian Sultan of their dyer peril Antioch was now surrounded by the Army of Christians.

In Antioch a Turkish Emir controlled each of the fifty Ivory towers that glowed in the moonlight. These Emirs had another seven lesser towers under their domain, which they gave their orders to a Turkic Knight who commanded the garrison in each one of them. The Ivory Towers had their own garrison of a hundred men meaning they could call upon five thousand knights when needed. The Emir Hamza Ra’ed which meant ‘Steadfast Thunder’ had fifteen hundred Knights in preparation for a raid based upon the intelligence that the spies had brought in.

“Have no mercy upon the heathen,” he said to his Mussel men as they crossed the bridge of the Iron Gate and dispersed into the open terrain beyond the river. Hamza’s forces headed west with over a thousand warriors whilst a lesser force headed North down the road towards Saint Symeon.

To the South of Antioch lay the castle of Harim where under the Emir Shirkuh five hundred Saracen Knights had gathered. They went across the River Bridge and raced down the valley across the open plains. Many Crusaders were scavenging amongst the fields picking fruit and collecting grain. Mostly young Squires and women when they stopped from their chores as an unexpected cloud of dust rose from the south.

They watched bemused but before they could react the Turks were upon them cutting them down with their curved swords and impaling them upon their lances. The Crusaders in the fields had been massacred and the Emir Shirkuhs knights now advanced upon the Dog Gate and the Camp of Count Raymond's forces.

Hamza Ra`ed came towards the Dog Gate from the North Western approaches they came upon the shanty town of tented buildings firing arrows and with torches already in hand set fire to anything in their wake. Horses trampled upon sacks of grain and any foodstuffs were thrown into the river. The noise outside was horrendous when a thud hit the side of the tent making Ceana scream. Henry rolled from his bed space coming to his feet and out of the deep sleep he had drifted into. It took him only a moment to realise all was not well as half the Tent was upon fire. He took hold of his sword and slashed through the coverings of hide into the night.

"This way," he said urging Ceana and Isaac to follow him.

The whole encampment was ablaze and the screams of women and children chilled the night. In the eerie mist Henry made out the Turks rushing through the tents slashing and torching everything they found. "Henry on me," a voice called running past him and the Saxon clung to Cesar's wake as they tried to muster a defence.

The Turks though had already fled it had been a cursory and probing raid to check out their defences. Hamza Ra`ed congratulated his Knights as they amassed back at the Iron Bridge and then his other force returned leading with them hundreds of horses. They went back into the fortification of Antioch laughing and gloating at their victory.

In the War Pavilion the temperature was as hot as the ashes of wreckage that now surrounded it.

"They certainly took us for fools," Godfrey slammed his mailed fists down as this concerned him deeply. Most of his men were trapped upon a bow of land with a river at their back. He knew if this had happened at his encampment it could dispel complete massacre.

"Where did they all come from so soon and from all sides," Stephen of Blois was still in shock from the attack.

"From Antioch where do you think," Robert of Flanders cut him off coarsely.

“Seigniors that is not quite true. They massacred our scavengers to the south I have my suspicions there’s another force of Turks held up somewhere,” Bohemund had surveyed the scene and come to his own assumptions.

“That maybe true they did hammer us from all sides at once,” Adhemar reflected on the carnage that had frightened him half to death.

The raids continued on the following two nights with the Turks striking where and when they wanted. In response the Encampments were moved beyond the river and guard posts set in their stead. The Crusaders were too frightened to forage for supplies and the morale of all plummeted to its lowest ebb. Robert of Flanders and Stephen of Blois on these dismal nights had headed out into the wilds. They had waited in hiding spying the valley with concentration and on the passing of the third night there vigilance paid reward. A war party of Turks galloped along the floor of the valley and the two Crusading Knights carefully tailed them. The Turks took refuge in a fortress a good eight miles distance from Antioch at Harim. Also upon that night Godfrey’s men had found the Iron Bridge Gate where most of their troubles had been emanating from.

Another War Council was convened to discuss all these findings and plan what they must now do.

“Our encampments are being attacked from all sides nightly most of our men flee the Turks they come upon us in such number. They are becoming bold coming and going as they please whilst we grow weak and our men have lost heart,” Bishop Adhemar explained the dilemma that cursed them.

The tent was silent and everyone brooded the thought of failure now and abandoning the quest tore upon their own dignity.

“Seigniors I have a proposal,” Bohemund cut the air with his booming voice taken them all from their thoughts.” The most illustrious Knight Robert of Flanders has provided us with some much needed information,”

“Speak what’s on your mind,” Godfrey demanded wanting some retribution for the suffering of the people.

The Emir Shirkuh had four hundred horsemen with him as they came down the valley over the River Bridge towards the Dog Gate to wreak

carnage. Tom watched them with their spiked helmets, black metal hauberks and gold tipped lances as they disappeared over the horizon. The troops rose from their hiding and began setting up positions on the valley below. Bohemund directed Tom's men to a natural dip in the landscape for them to crouch behind.

"Thomas you know what must be done this night," the Sicilian Count had said to him.

"My Lord we are more than ready," he answered.

"Brave men and Noble men take heart as battle will soon be upon us," Bohemund called down the ranks.

Shirkuhs men ran riot through the encampment under a volley of arrows they had advanced as they torched every combustible item in sight. They raced within the camp screaming out Islamic curses and shrieking out war cries although all about was strangely quiet. The horses running in circles came to a standstill and the Turks fell silent. All that could be discerned was the crackle of fire and they looked at each other bemused by this fact.

"Now," a call cut through shattering the equanimity of the still night.

Cesar stood alongside Henry with his line of long bowmen who had lain upon the bank of the river and simultaneously they let loose such a volley it wiped out the entire first line of the Turkish cavalry. Then came the thunder as a thousand of Godfrey's knights came dashing down the walls of Antioch. They saw the black Saracen Warriors in their stead and Godfrey gave the order.

"Charge," he screamed as a line of lances was held fast to impact upon the flank of the Turks. Lances splintered with the crushing clank of Men and horses crumbled under the might of the charge. Horses yelped and men screamed out in agony either pierced or trampled in the onslaught.

The surviving Saracens in total confusion fled with Godfreys Knights hungry for blood hot upon their heels. They galloped for all there worth along the valley floor and knew in their hearts that the sanctuary of Harim was now within their grasp.

Tom heard the crashing of horse's hooves reverberating throughout the plain and felt his knees knock with fear. He could now even feel the earth move as he laid the palm of his hands upon the cool soil. The dirt lifted from the land and bounced with vibration to the cadence of

hundreds horses hooves beating the ground in unison. The ground trembled so violently now Thomas imagined that a earthquake was erupting in there wake or a huge rumbling tidal was about to be wrought upon them.

“Ready,” tom said but his voice was hoarse so he spat and repeated it again.” Ready,”this time with more authority as his men took hold of the pikes with two hands.

“Ready,” his men called.

“Hoist,” Tom bellowed as a wall of stakes suddenly appeared in the wake of the advancing Turks.

Shirkuh tried to slow his men’s from their mad gallop although the first ranks were impaled upon the line of stakes. Tom watched the horses bearing down almost breathing upon him as they ran upon the sharpened pikestuffs piercing their midriffs and they yelled out indescribably. The Turkish riders were plummeted from the saddle with the brutal abrupt halt and they landed either on the spikes or amidst his men. Tom saw Bernard the Bear bring down a double headed axe upon one of them and split him in two. The Turks on the plain now veered right trying to outflank the pike men when another army of knights under Robert of Flanders bore down upon them. They veered left and from the hills on that side Bohemund and his Knights came out of hiding completing the ambush. After a brief confrontation as four armies converged upon them, the Turks seeing their position hopeless surrendered. Three hundred dead Saracens had died on that day.

Tom congratulated his men individually shaking each one by the hand. They had shown untold valour in the face of the enemy and he was proud of every one of them.

A hundred Turks had been captured and they were unceremoniously marched outside the Gate of the Iron Bridge, which had been the other cause of the Crusaders misery. Bohemund gave the order and had them all kneel in submission as the sun rose up in the eastern sky. He took out his broadsword and went down the line beheading them. He got to the Emir Shirkuh who said to him in Arabic, which he could not understand. “Who is the heathen now,” he mouthed before the bloody sword came down upon him.

The decapitated heads were placed into a pyramid mound and the bodies' left where they lay to stink in the midday sun. Bohemund stood with his foot on the mound of heads and called up to the battlements. "This is what will happen to you if you continue to murder our pilgrims in the dark," Bohemund turned to his Armenian interpreter and nodded as he called out the words in Arabic.

A Saracen on the battlements attired in an orange turban shouted out something unintelligible to Christian ears and the Turkish defenders all began to laugh.

"What did he just say," Bohemund's face had contorted as he asked his Armenian to reiterate.

"He said mighty Lord forgive me for repeating this. That once the Muslims are victorious he will chop off your head and piss on your neck," the Armenian guide had outlined the insult.

"Tell him this," Bohemund spoke to his Armenian communicator angered by his insulter's threat.

"My Lord says he has seen your face and before he cuts off your head he will place your manhood in your mouth. So when you enter paradise you can no longer offend any Noble Christian Lord," just as the Armenian had finished his statement arrows began raining down from the battlements.

The Crusaders retreated but unfortunately a women bystander had been killed with an arrow in her chest. Bohemund though was not satisfied with just rebuking his offender and had some of his men assemble a ballista a little away but in front of the Iron Bridge Gate. He sat there all day beside the Roman designed artillery piece silent and sullen. In fact his mood was so black that even his own men dared not speak to him. At last the orange turban appeared on the battlements once again and Bohemund took careful aim firing the horsehair sprung mechanism. The iron dart a foot in length flew through the air and hit the turban wearer square in the head.

"Aaaagh," he had screamed falling off the battlements to his doom. Bohemund smiled content that Sicilian justice had now been done.

As December approached the weather became harsh with huge torrents of rain turning the camps into rivers of mud. Bitter winds that turned the Crusaders blue and morning frosts that brought on diseases that festered the lungs. Supplies also were running out and the Crusaders were beginning to starve. Tom's wounded shoulder ached with the cold and he had never felt so weary. His stomach panged and gnawed with hunger. He had not the strength now to leave his post nightly and visit Ceaná. The nights themselves were freezing and he sat there shivering constantly in his tent.

The Turks still suppressed them albeit not so frequently as they had been caught off guard more than once to their demise. Ceaná had her own concerns other than Tom; Isaac had become gaunt from both hunger and exposure this compounded by thoughts of poor Albert's death tormenting her mind. Cesar the Gaul this once powerfully built man was now nothing more than a walking skeleton through deprivation. At this time many had deserted morale had vanished and the leaders were faced with total and utter crisis.

Food and grain was so scarce people murdered in the night for it. The foragers dared not stray too far and when they did search they found nothing in Christian lands and none had the courage to search in Saracen lands. At length the Generals called a council to try and resolve the misery of their people.

"Everyday men disappear if this continues we will have no one left to fight," Godfrey stated.

"Where is the Emperor and his forces he swore he would be here," Hugh of Vermandois made his point he felt isolated here in this strange land without the Byzantium's aid.

"He will not come," Robert the Norman, said flatly.

"Worse of all Gentlemen we have nothing left to feed our army with. The Port is empty and we have no aid coming from any quarter," Adhemar stated bluntly.

"Seigniors Lords and wise men amongst you if you favour it and my plans are desirable and good. I shall go out looking for supplies with the most able Count of Flanders," Bohemund had suggested.

The council decided it was the only way to set things right that one army should remain watching the enemy and guarding the siege whilst the other headed off into Saracen lands to bring back supplies.

So following a most glorious celebration of Christmas when hopes were raised around campfires of the expedition going out to get supplies. Bohemund and the Count of Flanders with twenty thousand horse and three thousand foot marched off into enemy lands on the 26th December.

Shams ad Daula had pleaded his father's case and many Turks and Saracens from Jerusalem, Aleppo and Damascus had listened and were already marching upon Antioch to lift the siege. They heard rumours of the Christian expedition that had penetrated their borders and the Commander Emir Daqaq made battle plans to attack them.

Tom marched in the vanguard with the Count of Flanders. They crossed the River Bridge and headed passed the hated fortress of Harim, which the Turks still held and had caused much grief upon the encampments. The Bear walked next to his Commander. Tom had learned that Bernard had led a colourful life. He had spent some time as a strongman in a travelling caravan of performing gypsies. Amongst the fire eaters, acrobats and jugglers. Once he had even held an honoured position as a Royal Guard to the King of Bavaria, which would of, given him great esteem.

In his life he had not stuck to anything for very long and when he heard the news coming from the council at Claremont he made plans for the spring. He had headed south to the border and joined the ranks of the Sicilian Knights upon the road to Constantinople. On Toms other side was Antoine an athletic and handsome man who had come from Rome. He read poetry and prose in his spare time and sometimes he read it out loud capturing the imagination of the men. He was learned in the classical romantic arts handed down by Julius Caesars Romans and the Greeks of Alexander the Great. Why he was here had always puzzled Tom but the bear had told him. Antoine's Father was an old warrior in Robert Guiscard's army and he despised his son's artistic manner. He had sent him on the Crusade against his will hoping it would knock these fancies from his mind.

As daybreak approached they walked through the floor of the valley then the Emir Daqaq watching them from his vantage point executed his

assault. From nowhere horsemen thundered down from out of the mountain passes isolating the vanguard and another force had encircled the rearguard.

The Crusaders of the rearguard seeing them tearing down upon them and formed a defensive circle whilst harassed by constant missile fire being discharged upon them. The Count of Flanders and his Knights choose another tactic and prepared to meet the assault head on.

“Vavasour organise a defence protect our flank,” Robert of Flanders had spoken to Tom.

“Form line,” Tom ordered as his men squared up to the Turkish Knights attacking before them.

“Take aim,” Tom said as the Saracens bore down upon them furiously. He could make out their contorted features and see the blood thrill in their eyes. He could see also the steam rising from the backs of the Arabian stallions as they raced across the tundra.

“Wait,” he said as they drew nearer.

“Wait,” he said again the Turks began to holler out their war cries.

“Wait,” he said as the ground shook beneath their feet and the first Turkish missiles hit the earth before them.

“Fire,” Tom yelled as forty arrows found their mark denting the enemies charge.

“Form Tortoise,” Tom called as bows were slung and shields rose into a square formation with the middle ranks using their shields as a roof.

The instant the square was completed it shuddered violently as a thousand arrows smashed into Toms position.

“Form line,” Tom called as shields were dropped at their feet and the man spanned out into a firing position. The Turks had swooped in halted fired and retreated. The Crusaders now felled them as they turned their backs upon them

They came again hundreds upon hundreds of them in costumes of black, white, yellow blue and red.

“Take aim,” Tom ordered and waited again as they closed.

“Fire,” he yelled again and another forty Saracen horsemen fell from their mounts, as Tom’s marksmen’s aim was true.

“Tortoise,” Tom yelled as they hurriedly shielded themselves for the coming onslaught.

The Count of Flanders and his Knights were more exposed to the enemy fire and many were now on foot as their warhorses had died with the missile volleys.

The rearguard of the Army had been completely slaughtered and the few survivors had run to Bohemund position in the centre. Bohemund eyed their enemy cautiously watching them drag dead crusaders in their wake lugging grotesquely behind their Mounts as trophies of war whilst they withdrew to regroup. He knew he had fought them steadfastly at Dorylaeum and now had the advantage of mobility but how should he use it. The Turks were beginning a renewed charge thundering across the plains.

“Seigniors form line and be honoured to join with me,” Bohemund mounted upon his tan colt called his knights to him.

The Turks now advanced upon him at break neck speed and as they closed so did he. The Men of Taranto lowered their visors and held aloft their lances.

“Charge,” Bohemund deep voice boomed as his Knights went out to meet them and this unnerved the advancing Turk. They now faced a line of poised lancers and a roaring giant swinging his broadsword madly in there midst the two opponents were on a break neck collision course. The Turks unexpectedly broke off unwilling to engage and Bohemund judging there reluctance chased them down the valley. They tried to fire their bows in vain but each time they halted to aim Norman Knights smashed into them with their lances doing irreparable damage and then run them down.

Every minute that passed now on the battlefield the Crusaders were consolidating their forces and each Turkish assault cost them heavily. The Emir Daqaq reluctantly withdrew his armies he knew he couldn't win this battle. The skies had opened and rained poured down and he had only one option to return to Damascus in disgrace.

The famous Count of Flanders stood amidst a sea of dead men yet he was unmarked protected by his faith and the insignia of the cross he wore devotedly. Many other Crusaders though lost their life upon the floor of the valley and many more horses were perished or lame. Toms group of men miraculously had not received a single casualty even though every shield had at least a dozen arrows embedded within it.

Robert of Flanders had noted the bravery and skill of his rearguard. As Tom looked up to him on his steadfast mount he placed his right arm across his chest in salute. An honour only usually bestowed upon fellow knights.

Abdullah stood before the Turkish Governor of Antioch.

“It is true your Excellency their numbers have indeed decreased. Half their army is absent from their defences,” his spy informed him.

“We will attack again tonight in number,” Yaghi Siyan had ordered.

That night the Emir Hamza Ra`ed swarmed his men over the Iron Bridge Gate and moved to attack the Crusaders who still defended the siege. They had already discovered they could probe their weak spots and come away unscathed. The besiegers now though had many more weak spots than they ever had before.

The Camp of Count Raymond had been moved beyond the river although it still wasn't out of range of the nightly assaults. Ceana had been baking a bread mixture of grass and mud her hunger was so rampant when the wall of torches had been flung into the air.

“Isaac,” she screamed running into the tent grabbing him and then going to hide by the river.

The Turks torched the camp looted the tents and murdered all they could. They dragged men behind them screaming and threw babies onto the bonfires. Blood ran everywhere and the few who tried to put up a defence were quickly overran or pelted by javelins.

“Accursed Barbarians,” the Count Raymond spat out still ravished with fever he rose from his bed.

Bishop Adhemar came running into his tent almost hysterical.

They've stole it they've stole it,” he kept saying over and over.

“They've stole what,” Raymond balled.

“They've stole the seneschal from my tent,” the Bishop of the Church of the Holy Mary at Le Puy revealed that the carrier and protector of the banner of Saint Peter had gone.

Then Count Stephen of Blois rushed into his tent with some more important news.

“They've taken all the horses,” he also revealed the domination now had Turks upon them.

Raymond in a rage gathered to him all he could and the few mounts still available that could be utilised. The Crusaders ran or galloped down the shore of the Orontes and came upon the bulk of the Turkish forces amassing at the Iron Bridge Gate. The corridor back into the sanctuary of Antioch was not very wide and they could only enter a few at a time. Cesar had his own men fanned out and they took pot shots of those exposed upon the river crossing. Henry got two with one arrow a sight he still couldn't believe they were so jammed on the narrow bridge. The Turks were shocked to be counter attacked so vehemently and they were bottle necked trapped trying to squeeze upon the crossing to safety. The Emir Hamza panicked bolting into the sanctuary of the town and abandoning his men.

The Crusaders pressed upon them chasing them over the bridge with such strength that some Knights even entered into the City itself. The Horse of Count Eustace at the head of the attackers abruptly bolted backwards and the Crusaders were now thrown into confusion and retreated.

Bohemund took his men up to the Tarsus Mountains still searching for supplies and they found little. Whilst there Tancred and his Knights rejoined his force.

"So Nephew what have you been up to," Bohemund asked expectantly as they traversed the precarious passes.

"Uncle I have gained Tarsus for our family honour I have left a garrison of our men there," Tancred had taken the irrelevant city from a small Turkish force.

"And," Bohemund pressed him his eyes narrowed like a preying eagle.

"Baldwin has taken Edessa," Tancred said without any gusto, ashamed by this confession.

"Baldwin Has It," Bohemund made his annoyance known by raising his tone.

"Uncle let me explain we drove the Turks from the City and they flew to Jerusalem. Edessa though is ruled by an Armenian King named Thoros and Baldwin discovering he had no heir asked him to adopt him as his own son." Tancred narrated the events of the past month.

"Why not just have of killed the old goat and be done of it," Bohemund interrupted with his own solution.

“That would of turned the Armenians against him Baldwin is very devious when it suits him. But Uncle let me finish my story before you admonish my deeds. You see the Armenian clergy are very keen and correct upon their protocol and ceremony of their ancient rites. Before Baldwin could be officially adopted he had to don a huge ceremonial shirt. I’m telling you Uncle that it was so big it would of took the time of a whole army of weavers to create it.”

“A huge shirt what for,” Bohemund asked curiously.

“Uncle you see under their adoption law you have to undergo a certain ceremony and it had not been written for grown men. It had been conceived for a father and a newborn illegitimate son it was an ancient law but still one that to be ratified by the Armenian clergy if Baldwin was going to become the true Heir. So after the prayers were sung and an over long baptismal ceremony performed. Baldwin draped in nothing but his loincloth had to get into the massive ceremonial shirt, which made him look like his tent had fallen atop of him. Thoros his fathering law then joined him both of them donning together in this huge gown. They were naked like the day they were first born and gongs and hymns were sung in the background and furthermore this most despicable thing occurred as they began to rub their bare chest up against one another,”

“You’re lying to me,” Bohemund scolded shocked imaging this Noble Lord doing this unthinkable and ludicrous act.

“No wait Uncle there’s more then with this old man and Baldwin within the massive shirt cavorting in the bonding act are then joined by the bare breasted mother who was an unsightly old hag they formed a circle and the chest rubbing festivity continued. Believe me Uncle it was not a pretty sight to behold,” Tancred had finished his tale but his Uncle held a deadly demeanour wrought upon his face and he looked thoroughly disheartened. A silence fell between them and Tancred sensed an evil intent erupting between them, then Bohemund could contain himself no longer and exploded into a fit of rapturous laughter slapping Tancred on the back. Tancred who had expected a telling off now found himself busy roaring with infectious laughter also. Eventually they calmed downed and Bohemund turned to his Nephew.

“Well Nephew if you ask me your better off with Tarsus if you would of gone through that adoption ceremony I don’t think I would of spoken

with you again, So I suppose the moral of this tale Seignior is be wary of strangers bearing big shirts in these heaven lands” They both laughed at the lengths Baldwin had gone to gain a principality.

In late January the Expedition returned empty handed and with it Tancred brought with him William the Carpenter who had earned his name at the Battle of Hastings. He had swung his axe so valiantly on that day he had acquired the title Carpenter although his past distinctions were now irrelevant. William and with him Peter the Hermit were ignominiously caught deserting and dragged back to the encampment. With the news of Bohemund having an unsuccessful expedition a depression had set in amongst the whole army. Bohemund sent a message across all the ranks to this effect. “You most unfortunate souls and most miserable of people. Many vile people are turning tail so hurriedly. Halt right now. Halt I say. Do not stray, as sheep without a shepherd as the Turks are watching are every move. They lie in wait to ambush you day and night in hope of killing or capturing you. If they find you isolated or alone they will now kill you for certain,” Bohemund had sent this decree in hope of stemming the ever growing tide of desertions.

Tom entered the Tent full of bravado wanting to tell Ceana all about the battle and how brave his men had been. As he entered he found her dressed in black.

“What’s wrong Ceana? What’s happened,” he asked her.

“Tom Isaac has died of exposure and Cesar the Gaul from starvation,” she stated without any emotion it had all been drained from her when Isaac had died her arms mouthing the words over and over deliriously.

“Mama, Papa, Mama, Papa.” He had said until he passed away.

Henry wouldn’t look Tom in the eyes even though he was now a Vavasour in Cesar’s stead. The intemperate weather and excruciating hunger had taken its toil upon many. The rivers of mud were crisscrossed with graves and some storms even washed back up the bodies that were fed into the river.

Then when all hope had been lost like angels descending down from the mountaintops they came. The Armenians lead by Prince Bazouni with Greeks and Christian Syrians who had heard that the foraging expedition

had left the Crusaders destitute; consequently they followed the paths traversing across the mountains and little known trails. There they had scoured the countryside purchasing grain and other foodstuffs, which they carried to the camps. A great famine had struck the besiegers some Armenians gave their food away out of Christian pity others set up market selling at extortionate prices. Many Crusaders still died that month of January who had not the money to purchase food or had been given charity.

William Carpenter had avoided Bohemund like the plague since his recapture and now went up to him shame facedly asking for forgiveness. "Lord do not judge me as others have. Give me another chance," he pleaded.

"You are a most miserable and infamous man of all the Franks. You are the most shameful and wicked man throughout all the provinces of Gaul. You are the vilest man whom the earth has to suffer. Why did you lose honour fleeing most disgracefully from your brothers side perhaps by this vile act you wanted to betray us Knights and the Army of Christ having us surrender unto the enemy," Bohemund gave him a tirade but throughout the scolding William was silent and never uttered a word.

"Leave him be Lord," a few Crusaders mouthed who witnessed the scene knowing if left Bohemund would have killed him outright.

"For you. You honest decent people I will consent to this if he swears unto me with his true heart and mind that he will never again withdraw from the march to Jerusalem whether for good or evil and If Tancred also agrees to this nothing untoward will befall him or his men,"

William agreed to these terms and the matter was settled although two nights later William slipped out of Camp taking a boat from the Port of Saint Symeon and left his fellow Crusaders to their demise.

In the War Pavilion they seemed to be going from one disaster straight into another and they discussed what they could do to prevent disaster befalling them all.

"Let us build a castle on top of the mountain which rises above the Turks who harass us from the Iron Bridge Gate. At least then with a small force we can blockade it and protect the road to the harbour," Raymond suggested after surveying the terrain.

“Yes that would be advisable, ”Godfrey readily agreed who had other matters pressing him.

“Gentleman and most noble of men you can see that we are in the greatest of need of aid and it is coming from no side,” Tacitus said afraid he would perish here or fall into enemy hands.” So permit me if you will, to return to my country of Romania and I will make certain many ships come here by sea, laden with grain, barley, meat, butter and cheese and all the goods you require. I shall also bring horses for sale and market to be brought on condition that you still hold fealty to the Emperor. I will return as quickly as possible.” Tacitus left with his Byzantium’s in such haste that he left his armies tents and servants behind them. In a mind he held a single intent never to return to this God forsaken place again.

“There is yet more good news Gentlemen,” the Bishop said with irony.” a second enemy relief force has been reported to us by our Armenian allies heading for Antioch and we must discuss plans of how we will deal with this danger,” Adhemar gave over the new findings to them all.

“No wonder the Byzantium’s were quick upon their heels,” Tancred rebuked.

“My men are building a bridge of boats so we can respond to the Iron Gate more rapidly if this helps any,” Godfrey informed them of his own endeavours.

“Seigniors most illustrious Knights that is the question burning in everyone’s head what are we going to do. We are now not so great that we can fight on two fronts as once we did. Let us therefore make two lines ourselves. Let a portion of our foot soldiers remain here to guard the pavilions and by feigning there numbers will be able to resist the attacks from within the city. Let the other portion go forth to meet our enemy who advances beyond the river bridge upon us,” Bohemund gave his own assessment of what they must do.

Bohemund and the Count of Flanders marched out of camp under the cover of darkness with seven hundred men. At daybreak he ordered Thomas and his men to scout ahead and find out where the enemy were and where they were heading. Thomas only took Marcel the fox with him for company. Marcel had the shiftiest eyes he had seen and he was

an irrefutable villain and ruffian. Tom knew though as a forward Scout there were none better. He had an uncanny sixth sense that kept him constantly alert which he had inherited from cutthroat ghettos of the Paris suburbs from where he came. After only a few hours of trekking in the mountains Marcel called him over hiding in the crag of the mountain.

“Thomas there they are there, there must be twelve thousand of them at least,” he said expressing his concern.

“Quickly we best get back and report this to the others,” Thomas showed no emotion on his face but his insides were churning with apprehension.

On February 9th the Emir Ridwan of Aleppo accompanied by Daqaq of Damascus, Bolgnuth of Arabia and Hamelnuth of Corazan along with other Princes of Jerusalem were advancing towards Antioch. They were full of confidence and success with their combined armies.

“So what riches will Allah bestow upon us brothers for rescuing our brothers in need,” Ridwan talked with the other Princes jovially.

Bohemund on hearing of Tom’s findings split his force into six squadrons. The bridge had a lake on one side and the river on the other he hoped to trap them within this enclosure. The Turks were advancing in two columns coming from the South side of the river with most of their more valiant knights riding at the rear.

“Behold they come. Be prepared therefore all of you for they are already near us,” said Robert of Flanders to his fellow Knights.

“Seigniors most invincible Knights array yourselves for battle each man for himself,” Bohemund called out as five squadrons lined up against them with the Sicilian Count and the small party of archers lead by Thomas at the rear.

“They are coming,” Tom yelled to his men as they took up their long bows.

The first group of Saracens who crossed the bridge were the common mussel men soldiery as soon as they tried to form battle lines a volley of arrows rained down upon them. They ran around in confusion as more arrows struck, which made them, fall in droves then the Knights advanced falling upon them carving them up. Robert of Flanders had held back his line for the next wave as they crossed the bridge and began to fan out. His men charged breaking their lances into the vanguard.

They slashed and cut t down the Saracen foot with the broadsword from the saddle. Tancred had a sword swinging in one hand and a mace bludgeoning them in the other. He continuously smashed and bashed Turkish skulls right in the middle of their ranks as they began to swarm.

The Saracens were unrelenting with superior numbers and as their Turkic Knights advanced the Crusaders found them experienced warriors that fought with courage and strength. The Saracens with sheer numbers and now confident by the presence of there Knights began to gain ground beyond the bridge. Bohemund on seeing his front line floundering groaned shaking his head with the disgrace. Unhorsed Christian Knights were also beginning to flee the battle the whole Crusader army was upon the brink of a rout. Thomas reacted from his own moral compulsion seeing his fellow Crusaders fall and with determined outrage he called.

“Form wedge,” he ordered his men, as the fighting was now too close for archers to have been of much use.

His well-disciplined men donned their shields and pikes. Bernard the Bear held the front shield with both hands as he formed the pinnacle of their triangle and was used as a human battering ram. They moved forward with their pikes ten foot before them pushing the Saracen horsemen back. The Turks didn’t know how to tackle this new threat and archers pelted the formation. Shields rose up to form a roof making them impervious to the enemy fire. The ancient Spartan Phalanx formation was perfect for combat at such close and extreme quarters.

Bohemund now seizing his chance of regaining the advantage held aloft the colours of Saint Peter above his head and charged with the rearguard into the fray. The men who had been fleeing turned suddenly to the thunderous roars of,” Gods Wills it,” that echoed across the plain. With the battle cry resounding the Saracens found themselves being slaughtered in the enclosure between the lake and the river. There reinforcements couldn’t get over to overwhelm the Christians. Toms wedge had gained a footing on the crossing trapping all those already on this side of the river. They had plugged the bridge but they found they were in the middle of the Saracen Army. They pressed on across the bridge realising they no options being completely encompassed. The Turks before them were also trapped pressed by the hordes behind them

who were desperately trying to cross the bridge to get into the battle. The ones facing the wall of shields discovered they had two choices be speared or jump into the river. They decided to jump into the river and were washed away by the strong current. Horses ran wild on the bridge in all the confusion crushing the foot soldiers underfoot. Bernard groaned smashing his shield into any Turk brave enough to face him. He had broken four already on Saracen heads and replacements from the middle ranks were passed onto him.

Tom halted at the bridgehead and the Saracens backed away from them.

“Hold firm men the Saracens are before us but not will pass by us,” he had called.

The Emirs seeing the line of shields and spear perfectly disciplined and impenetrable. They looked across the river at their brethren and Knights being slaughtered by the Franks. Ridwan signalled the retreat he no longer had a strong enough force to take back Antioch.

As the Army of Bohemund got back in jubilation a huge gathering had assembled outside the Dog Gate and they all stopped to ascertain what was taking place. Four ragged figures in chains the Turks had captured were paraded upon the battlements having been led from their dark festering dungeon.

Yaghi Siyan stood behind the gate said to the captives.

“Ask them how much they are willing to pay for your freedom,” he told Abdullah to relate to them.

Tom recognised Count Ferdinand amongst them upon the walls and it was he that turned and addressed the crowd.

“My Lords it matters not if we die and I pray to you my brothers that you pay these pagans not a penny for us. Through our sacrifice make sure brothers that the Holy Sepulchre is captured and freed from tyranny,” he had stated in defiance to his captors.

“You have killed twelve Emirs and fifteen thousand Saracens Nobleman they have no one left to hold this city,” another of the prisoners shouted out divulging something he had overheard from one of the guards.

After that they were dragged from the walls.

“What did they say,” Yaghi Siyan asked Abdullah his interpreter.

“Nothing of your wishes your Excellency,” he replied.

The Emir approached the four prisoners dressed in mottled rags and all sporting beards.

“Do you not wish to enjoy life honourably with us,” he said unto them through his interpreter Abdullah.

“How can we live honourably amongst you without sinning,” Ferdinand answered to him.

“Deny your God whom you worship and believe and accept Mohammed and Allah. If you do this we shall give you as much gold as you desire. Horses, mules and as many worldly goods as you wish for. As well as pretty wives and inheritance we shall enrich you with great lands,”

Yaghi Siyan was trying his utmost to convert them to gain propaganda upon his besiegers. He imagined their own knights shouting and urging them to convert to Islam would break the morale and resolve of the Franks to hold out against him.

“Give us more time to consider this,” Ferdinand replied and the Emir agreed to this.

The four prisoners then clasped their hands knelt in prayer to the east humbly they asked God that he should come to their aid and transport them with dignity and their souls unto the bosom of Abraham.

Yaghi smiled believing they were accepting his Muslim ways and then his interpreter turned to him.

“They completely deny your God. They also refuse your riches and say they have no need of your worldly goods,” Abdullah told him.

The Emir crimson faced exploded and ordered them to be beheaded immediately. So the Turks took great pleasure chopping off their heads one at a time to a cheer as each head was lobbed off and thudded on the ground. Yaghi Siyan still raged and ordered a hundred Armenian Christians to be brought before him. They came bound with their backs bent in submission to him. He ordered them all stripped stark naked and bound in a great circle. He had chaff, firewood and hay piled around them and then he had the enemies of his God put to the torch. The screams were horrendous and the Crusaders outside the Dog Gate couldn't bear to think what monstrosities were taking place within the City. They made out the telltale fumes of smoke rising and the hideous screams that never seemed to lesson and most Crusaders had seen people

burned at the stake and they didn't have to guess now what was occurring.

Spring came and with it some relief as the fort Raymond had christened Malregard had nearly been completed. Tancred with his men took up position on a gate to the south lessening the night time raids that had haunted them for many months. George Pegasus had blockaded the Port of Saint Symeon diligently awaiting the arrival of the Emperor. They had thus far stopped Frank and Saracen alike having use of this Anchorage. He glared at the Western horizon when they came, the sea of white sails as a Genoese Fleet from Venice arranged by Robert the Norman and Bohemund had finally arrived. Robert the Norman had sent messengers from the Port of Loadicea and Bohemund had used the Bishops Papal Bull that Father Benedict had retrieved from Constantinople to plan ahead of what he had expected they would need. The ships were loaded with men, supplies, horses and siege engines. The Byzantium Admiral not knowing what to do immediately set sail for the Aegean Coast the Emperor would need to know of this unexpected development.

Bohemund went to the Port to bring back carpenters and sailors to complete the work at fort Malregard. As they marched to Antioch across the open plains the Turks ambushed them upon the road. Hamza Ra'ed had changed tactics taking fifteen hundred warriors out at night and riding North. They waited for the day to christen the sky then returned caught supply column by complete surprise upon the open road. It consisted of men ferrying goods who were newly arrived to the Holy Land. Five hundred foot soldiers and two Knights were slaughtered in that raid alone.

The following night one of the many spies who vigilantly had kept watch on the Gates of Antioch ran into camp stating.

"They have crossed the river, they've headed west over a thousand of them Lord," Bohemund on hearing this gathered all his knights and foot together to lay his own ambush in return. The Turks had converged upon Raymond's Camp and they caught they caught more newly arrived Crusaders off guard who were setting up their camp. They encompassed a thousand Crusaders in a death circle. They swooped in pelting them

with arrows and javelins. As soon as the Crusaders were weakened they moved in with the sword and left not one of them alive.

Thomas hid in the reed beds with his fellow archers. They had waited patiently in this uncomfortable spot for some time.

“It’s a cold one this evening,” Old Harry stated blowing upon his hands. “It’ll soon be warm,” Antoine dispelled the thing that brooded in each of their minds the coming engagement.

In the Fort Malregard Bohemund oversaw his men aligning four ballista’s and four catapults being loaded with earthen ware jars of the chemical known as Greek fire. The sailors who he let man these were survivors of the Saint Symeon Road massacre hell-bent upon retribution. It came the telltale thunder of hooves and the nervous dread that came before a battle consumed them all. As the Turkish raiders returned in different marauding parties to regroup at the Iron Bridge. Gate. Bohemund waited his time until the number at the Gate had come to the thousand he had been informed of prior. He gave the signal as his Knights horses went into a full canter. They came down upon the assembled Turks with an Army of mounted Knights. Bohemund in full battle fury drove their number onto the narrow bridge forcing many to take refuge by jumping into the river whilst still upon their rides. As the Saracens were forced onto the crossing Thomas gave his Archers who had hidden in the river bed the order to fire. It wasn’t long before Toms arms burned he had fired so many arrows one after the other on his strenuous long bow. The Greek fire catapulted and it landed on the bridge exploding in a fury of flame. It engulfed many who ran around human torches screaming heinously into the night. These Human torches ran about in the sea of men trapped upon the bridge setting others alight it soon turned the confined space into an inferno that was consumed only with death. The Ballista’s fired cutting through flesh and bone for the missile to disappear through the gateway into the depths of the city. More Greek fire landed exploding in the archway and the austral wind had the stench of roasting human flesh borne upon it. Hamza Ra`ed was caught in the middle of this havoc as another ballista fired it’s missile cutting through the ranks it caught Hamza in the torso driving any wind from him and he took to the air with it’s force. He flew over his mount over the heads of his warriors to be speared upon the gatepost of the Iron

Bridge Gate and instantly he was swamped by a bellow of roaring flames from the Greek fire burning there. The gates closed from inside to the shrieks of the Turks still on the bridge to be abandoned to their doom. The Muslims trapped outside the walls of the city were easily slaughtered most of them taking their own lives under the threat of capture by the Christians. Thirty Emirs, one thousand two hundred and thirty men plus three hundred Turkic Knights were killed. Bohemund had lost only a single man. Thomas had ambushed them with his archers upon the crossing and after the skirmish Tancred had said to him.

“Thomas you have fought against the King of Aleppo, the King of Damascus, the King of Jerusalem and battled at this gate which have all been victorious. This has not gone unnoticed and will not go unheralded,” the words spoken unto him

Then news came from the Armenians that another relief force had crossed the Euphrates River and were heading for them. The supply routes had been much improved and Baldwin’s Armenians had captured the Fort of Harim that had been a thorn in their side since the siege had begun. A steady flow of food now came from Edessa and from Cyprus across the water to the Port of Saint Symeon. The fort had at last been completed and the Iron Bridge finally blockaded. This also gave much needed protection to supply columns coming from Saint Symeon and tightened the noose firmly around Antioch.

“We should storm the walls now while we have adequate supplies and take the City whilst we are still strong,” Bohemund had advocated.

“There is no sense wasting our resources the City is now besieged. The Emperor has promised us support on our road to Jerusalem we vowed what we conquered would be his. He will be here soon and Antioch would of surrendered to us by then,” Hugh the Great still had his grandiose ambitions of impressing the Byzantines.

“What aid, what support has he brought to us here,” argued Robert of Flanders.

“The Emperor is at present consolidating his provinces along the coast line he will be here soon,” Stephen of Blois made known his own defence of his old friend Alexius.

“How soon?” asked Godfrey with rancour?

“Seigniors we should strike now or not at all,” Bohemund stated as the Sicilian Count had designs of keeping it all if they could take it before the Byzantium’s arrived.

George Pegasius landed at Cilicia and immediately made his way overland to the Emperor.

“Majesty the Franks have organised their own supply routes from Italy and Cyprus they plan to take back Antioch without you,” George informed him of the Franks dispositions.

“They are not going to keep their fealty with you Majesty,” Tacitus added now back amongst his own countrymen he felt he could express his loathing of these Franks.

“Tacitus have the army prepared to march they will not get away with stealing my treasured City from me,” Alexius was determined that Antioch this vast citadel province would be returned to his dominions.

The tower was dark and oppressive with no moon upon the black sky. The walls were so high they stretched up to the heavens themselves. Bohemund stared upon them with consternation then a light appeared in the tower and an angel descended down. The angel pointed to a window high up in the tower and Bohemund could see it opening with another dim light emanating. In the shadow of the two towers a ladder made of leather descended down. He stretched his arms out and took hold upon it ready to climb. He glanced above him there was a golden aura within his grasp. He began to climb on the ladders after he had got halfway they broke and he fell down and down. Spiralling and spinning then he awoke with a start wondering what this vision had pertained.

The Tent flap opened to reveal the kindly features of Father Benedict.

“Greetings all,” he announced as he entered.

“Good day Father,” Tom, Henry and Ceana replied at once.

“Thomas, Henry a gift for each of you,” he said handing over two sealed scrolls.

“What are they,” Henry enquired.

“Open them,” was all he would reveal.

They broke the wax and rolled out the scrolls to read.

“Well then what is it tom,” Asked Ceana on tenterhooks.

“Amnesties, Papal Amnesties were free men all over again,” Tom still read it with disbelief they were free to return home once again.

“Thank you Father,” Henry remarked.

“I sanctioned them for you whilst I was detained at Constantinople awaiting the Papal bull. You can at least return home now whenever your ready,” the Father indicated knowing how grim conditions had been here and gave them at least a chance of breaking away from this dire misery.

“Yes Father when Jerusalem is free we will all return as victors together,” Tom added dampening the Fathers ambitions for them.

“Tom have you told the Father our good news,” Ceana remarked seeing this occasion as a mini celebration.

“Ceana is expectant Father, she’s blessed with child,” he announced proudly.

“Congratulations well have to get you two wed as soon as it can be arranged for after all you are Gods Children,” the Father rejoiced although Henry just stood solemnly and walked out of the tent into the daylight.

The next day Father Benedict found himself assigned to a mule train led by Armenians heading south for Edessa. Bishop Ademars words still echoed in Aileen Benedict’s mind.

“Go there for me, go to Edessa and make sure their Churches are following the doctrine of Rome and if there not Father teach them the way, teach them the way, teach them the way,” echoed in his thoughts.

“I will do my utmost to instruct them of the Christian path sanctioned by the Pope,” he had replied although now he contemplated how do you teach Christians here in the holy land who had the gospels passed down to them by word of mouth, who had walked by the side of the disciples. They were more Christian than he could ever hope to be. So who was he to tell them how they should believe in God.

“A fools errand,” he murmured as the mule train crossed the river at night and during the next day traversed across the open plain.

It was here in the midst of nothingness that they ran into the vanguard of the third relief force that had come from Damascus. Even this expeditionary unit covered the span of the horizon. A regiment of Turkic cavalry advanced and had soon encircled them. Their lances poked menacingly at the Armenians who quivered in fear as the Saracens

jeered at them. Father Benedict came off his mule and shouted at the horsemen.

“Leave them be, leave them be if you have any goodness within thee you would leave them be,” he had lambasted but they knew not what he said just an old man babbling amongst the heathen.

Two Armenians made a run for it and as they crossed the plain the Turks at first ignored them. Then two Saracen Knights pounded their mounts across the terrain and were on their tails. The Armenians broke into a sprint but the Arabian horses were faster. The Knights closed and ran them through with the lances piercing their torsos clean through. The other Turks enjoying this spectacle whipped two other Armenians until they too set off and ran for their lives across the plain. This blood sport continued until Father Benedict found himself alone amidst these barbarians with the corpses of the Armenians lying in the sand.

The town of Ma`arrat an Nu`man stood between Antioch and Jerusalem an ancient trading post upon the caravan routes. It was now a fortress held by the Turks and Father Benedict had been dragged here naked. He had been so badly beaten he had fractured ribs, a broken nose and a crust of blood covered his eyes from wounds on his head. He found himself chained in a rat-infested dungeon with other pitiful appearing Arabs that had fallen foul of Muslim law. He could not readily converse with them not knowing their tongue. He prayed for salvation as spine chilling screams emanated from down a corridor where the fat bellied turban Jailers languished. The same jailers who had thrown down the steps of the Dungeon upon arrival as a welcome making sure he bounced off every step and who had reopened head wounds so they bled now profusely. He had seen his captors skinning another hapless soul alive as he was manhandled into the depths. The hideous flaps of skin ripped from their bodies trailing to the earth that left only a bloody repulsive flesh behind where muscle and blood vessels were openly on view. The Guards laughed wickedly as their prisoner cried out for mercy. The image was so vivid he couldn't put it out of his mind and he wept praying for a quick death here in this devils hole.

Tom lay in his tent quite contented chewing upon a piece of bread which he cherished since food had been so scarce of recent. He thought of Ceana and of home glancing upon his Papal Amnesty. He hoped this

Crusade would one day soon come to an end. Without warning three hooded figures barged into the tent overpowering him instantly. He tried to cry out but a huge hand smothered his mouth. He was bound, trussed, gagged and blindfolded before being manhandled and carried off into the night. The wind left his body as he was thrown across the back of a mule and wondered if these barbarians were taking him to be sold into slavery.

He lay there experiencing the bumpy ride of the mount beneath him, as he powerless was lead away from safety of the Camp. Every jerk and jolt knocked his head against the saddle sprawled there bounded in this most uncomfortable posture. Eventually they halted and Tom felt a huge hand upon his head. It shoved him back wards and the wind knocked out of him again as he landed on the rough ground. He was dragged by the feet and sat up against the bole of a tamarind tree.

A deathly silence prevailed moments passed into what seemed an age. Blinded and unable to move he felt helpless and naked and he feared for his mortal soul. He jumped with shock as a water skin was emptied over him and the gag around his head soaked in the moisture making it hard for him to breathe. Sat there saturated and afraid for what seemed another lifetime. He rubbed his head upon the trunk of the Tamarind and discovered he could trap the back of the blindfold. He pushed up with his feet and the blindfold budged just enough to give him vision through his right eye. A fire burned encompassed by a neat circle of stones and then a triangle around that which had been etched into the earth. He had heard of ritual sacrifice upon the trails of Hungary and he gawked upon the crude symbolism with trepidation.

Then confirming his fears he heard chanting and three hooded figures their heads bowed emanated from out of the darkness. They sat at each point of the triangle and they murmured words that tom couldn't distinguish.

"Thomas," a voice spoke to him unexpectedly.

Tom grunted in response still gagged and unable to speak freely.

"Thomas you have been taken from your old life, you have been cleansed by water and reborn. Thomas you have been brought here into the wilderness, into the presence of God and all his subordinates to hear

your vows,” the voice had spoken but Tom was bemused by what exactly was occurring here.

“Thomas do you wish to join our order,” a cloaked figure drew back his hood to reveal Bohemund who walked over from the triangle and cut loose his bonds.

“What’s going on,” tom demanded angrily.

“Be silent Thomas for tonight you will join a brotherhood. Tonight you will become a Knight of the order of Saint Lazius,” Bohemund informed him.

“Saint who,” Tom questioned.

“Thomas I will not tell you again be quiet and listen I will not tell you again. Respect our rules and respond when only asked to do so,” Bohemund went back to rejoin the others in the triangle.

“Thomas do you believe in God and the Holy Trinity,” another of the hooded men asked him.

“You may reply,” Bohemund responded.

“Yes I do,” Tom, said passionately relieved he had not been kidnapped by cutthroat Saracens.

The other men withdrew their hoods as Bohemund sat back amongst them Robert of Flanders and Tancred sat around the sacred fire accompanying him.

“Thomas you have shown bravery in battle and we commend you for this but you must remember to always show valour upon the field of honour,” Robert told him.

“Thomas do you have a betrothed,” Tancred asked him.

“Yes I have a wife to be,” he responded truthfully.

“That is noble but our rules state you must also worship a romanticised Lady,” Tancred had continued.

“A what Lady?” Tom said bemused.

“Thomas every Knight has a wife but we serve a Lady we choose from the fables of old above all to keep our honour and dignity always in our heart,” Tancred explained.

“Thomas come and join us,” Bohemund dictated the ceremony as Tom knelt before the fire.

“Thomas you must forgo an ordeal of fire you must not call out or you will offend us,” Bohemund took a small branding iron from the fire. The triangle shape on the end glowed dramatically.

“Hold forth your left arm,” Bohemund instructed and as tom stretched out his arm Tancred held it firmly. Bohemund placing the hot iron upon his wrist and his flesh sizzled with a pain that nearly made him black out although he never made a murmur.

“Thomas you have done us proud,” Robert of Flanders saluted his bravery.

“Thomas Saint Lazius lived in Gaul a druid at the time when Druids could walk onto a battlefield and raise their arms there renown was so prestigious that men feared them more than the battlefield and the conflict would cease. They were feared and dreaded, as they were so powerful. Then the Romans came unfamiliar with the Ancient codes and laws. A mighty battle was about to be unleashed when Lazius walked amongst them and raised his arms. The Romans ignored him and advanced upon the Gauls. Lazius was so furious that he found a horse and a sword and attacked the Romans alongside his own countrymen at this outrage of ignoring the ancient code of the Druids. He was invincible every battle the Romans fought against Lazius within the ranks of the Gauls was lost. Then one day Lazius discovered God and God said to him.

“The Romans will one day carry the flag of my name. I give them authority to conquer your people and give them my laws,” Lazius didn’t know what to do upon hearing these words the Romans were his despised enemy and the Gaul’s his own kin. Two days later they had amassed to battle again with the Roman Legions and Lazius had walked into the middle of the field of honour. He drew a triangle on the ground and sat within it waiting for the hostilities to begin. When the Romans advanced they chopped him to pieces with their gladius swords and the Gaul’s fled seeing the Druid their invincible Knight meet his maker,” Robert had explained the tale of Saint Lazius.

“That’s what we inspire to become A knight invincible in battle but also powerful enough to stop hostilities when they are not necessary and also submissive to the will of God,” Bohemund unravelled the moral of the tale.

“Thomas do you take God as the only God,” Tancred stood above the kneeling Saxon as he spoke.

“Yes I swear it,” he responded.

“Do you intend to be always valiant and bold,” Tancred slapped him on the back of the neck before he responded. A symbolic chastisement and a reminder to always show courage before the enemy.

“Yes I do,” he responded.

“Arise Thomas of Pendlebury welcome to the brotherhood of Knights,” Tancred finished the ceremony and they hugged him as a brother.

“For you,” Thomas Bohemund gave him a purse of Gold.

“A horse awaits you,” Robert of Flanders made known his gift awaiting him amongst their own magnificent mounts. A russet coloured stallion short and stout a typical Norman warhorse.

“And this from me Thomas,” Tancred handed him over a yellow surcoat emblazoned with a Lion and a hauberk of chain mail the finest that could be bought.

The third relief army approached first laying siege to Edessa commanded by the Turkish ruler of Mosel Kerbogha. This force had been marshalled by the Persian Emperor himself and a call for a Muslim Jihad for Holy War against the Infidel. The army was over two hundred and fifty thousand strong far more powerful than anything the Crusaders had faced thus far. The Emirs all with their own personal militia were numerous amongst them were Arlan Tasch of Sinjar, Qaradja of Harran, Balduk of Samosata, Janah ad Daulah of Homs and amongst them the Emir Daqaq returning to slay the Crusaders who had thwarted him before and eager to redeem his honour.

At the base of Mount Silpius Firouz Beni-Zarri and his family controlled two towers named the twin sisters. One night Firouz climbed out of the tower and walked into the tattered remnants of bivouacs that encircled the camp of Bohemund. He surrendered to the guards and was brought before the great Lord in his War Pavilion.

“What do you want,” Bohemund asked almost with contempt as this Armenian clad in the classical Saracen robes of an Emir stood before him in his tent.

“Christian Lord my name is Firouz I control two towers on the south eastern side of your defences. If you desire it I will let your men into the towers and the City will be yours,” Ben-Zarri made his offer and Bohemund could hardly believe what he was hearing although a warning struck in his mind. The dream, the two towers, the aura of gold and the broken ladder.

“Why do you offer this to me,” he asked suspiciously.

“Lord the Turkish Governor has no love for us Armenians. He is planning to massacre all the Christian Armenians in the city when the relieving forces arrive so he never again has to be faced by Christians within his beloved domain. Even though myself I must confess am a devoted Muslim they Armenian Christians are still my brothers and sisters. I also desire to be rich man and no longer live under a cloud of poverty and servitude to other masters,” Firouz dreamt of palaces of gold and Kingdoms plentiful with women and wine in which he hoped these Christians could provide for him.

“Firouz if you give me this tower I promise to make you a Mighty Lord and give you an income of a thousand gold bezants a year. You will never again want for nothing and you have many castles and many wives. Firouz though I must warn you do not attempt to go to the other Christian Lords with this offer. They are not their own men they are tied to the Roman Emperor with false promises of fealty and they are therefore not in a position to offer you what I am prepared to grant you. I will get back to you within two days as I must make preparation to exploit this fine proposal that you are offering unto me,” Bohemund eyes never showed it but within he rejoiced at this miracle this Mussel man now promised him.

“Two days Christian Lord I will give you no longer or my offer will stand no more and be as useless as a broken spear upon the ground. You must be aware from your sources that a mighty Army now approaches this City and if you haven’t took Antioch by the agreed time it will no longer matter as all of you will be dead,” Firouz bravely gave over his own prophecy elevating his worth to them.

Bohemund went to the Council of all the Lords and Knights as concerns grew daily of the Saracen army that would soon have to be

faced and even Tom knew that they had not a prayer of squaring up to them in open battle.

“Men, most Illustrious Knights see how all of us whither of greater or lesser degree are in exceeding poverty and misery and how utterly ignorant we are from what side we will fare better therefore if it seems good and honourable to you. Let one of us put himself ahead of the rest and if he can capture the city by any plan or scheme by himself or through the help of others, let us with one voice grant him the city as a gift,” Bohemund gave his speech cunningly withholding his own designs and aims.

Some Knights readily agreed to Bohemunds suggestion even though they did not know what plan conjured within his devious mind.

Raymond though was not impressed and aired his own opinions.

“This city belongs to no man, we will share it equally since we have all given equal effort so therefore let us all have equal reward,” a great cheer resounded at this proposal.

Bohemund dismissed himself and once outside afforded himself the wry smile of the cunning fox baiting the hounds knowing he had them within his grasp.

The next morning Prince Bazouni rode into camp and the news spread like wildfire that Kerbogha had abandoned the siege of Edessa as Baldwin had managed to hold out and the colossal force now marched with all haste for Antioch. Another urgent meeting was called for and all that assembled had nerves so taugth with stress that they were on the verge of snapping with angst at the coming storm that was closing upon them.

“How soon before they come,” Stephen of Blois asked but he had secretly already made preparations to leave that night with his men. A boat he had hired was harboured at Port Saint Symeon awaiting him that evening.

“They will be here before the week is out,” Prince Bazouni warned then grimly as he stroked his white pointed beard.

“What must we do,” Godfrey said disheartened shaking his head with annoyance.

“If Bohemund can acquire the city either by him self or with the help of others why not give it to him of our own accord,” Robert of Flanders backed his fellow brother of Saint Lazius.

“Only on one condition that if the Emperor does come to our aid and wishes us to honour our agreements with him as we all swore and promised. We will return it to him by right but if he does not come to our need as promised then let Bohemund keep it in his stead,” Adhemar concluded speaking on behalf of Raymond who was unusually silent. Bohemund was summoned for and he entered the conspirator’s den with an air of the wolf about him.

“Seigniors hear my wishes if Antioch surrenders to me I ask you Lords most gracefully that you grant me this City,” he made his final ultimatum to them.

“You will not be denied it,” most of them said eagerly to put an end to this bitter siege.

“That will never be my will, I have suffered untold misery, famine, thirst and weariness. I still demand my rightful share as it has been bought dearly,” Raymond ranted but he had been overruled.

The great storm of Kerbogha was wrought upon them spreading its wings like a huge locust upon the land. It had brought Edessa almost to its knees but Kerbogha was hungry for Antioch and had abandoned Edessa for the much bigger prize. In the Encampments the people were miserable and filled with apprehension. Stephen of Blois and forty Knights betrayed their brethren sailing away from the shore on the moonless night leaving them to their misfortune. He had no belief in Bohemunds schemes and to him the Crusade had ultimately ended in disaster.

The next day an Armenian boy entered Bohemunds camp and handed over a message to him from Firouz. It read: Keep to our bargain take the city tonight if you wait for daylight to enlighten the earth you will all be dead and the Persians will be here.

Bohemund sent back his own message which read: Be assured my soon to be rich friend tonight our nobles will be ready.

Bishop Adhemar told Godfrey and Bohemund that Raymond had reluctantly agreed to the terms Bohemund had set but now a bad karma existed between them.

That very night Tom was roused with a shove on the shoulder by Robert of Flanders and unexpectedly told to prepare his men. He grouped them together and he had promoted Bernard the Bear to Vavasour. All over the camp bodies were moving in the shadows not knowing where they were going and they followed their Knights blindly wondering and fearing what would befall them.

“What’s happening Master Tom,” the men were addressing him with by now and he had gained their trust and respect.

“I don’t rightly know but I do know it’s got something to do with that rascal Bohemund so I would expect the worst if I were you,” Tom told them honestly he had never lied or hoodwinked them before.

Raymond of Toulouse, Godfrey of Boullion and Robert of Flanders stood before the shadows of the imposing towers of the twin sisters. They waited wanted to know if what Bohemund had told them of his plans were true. At around midnight they stood in the cold of the black still night on the 2nd June 1098.

“Well,” Raymond said gruffly believing he had wasted enough of his time already as they stood there for a considerable time staring blankly upon the fortifications of the city

“Wait until the light of the Sentry watcher has passed,” Bohemund voice was almost a whisper in this air unknown expectancy. He spoke from amongst the shadows knowing from his own observations there were four Turks on the wall above them. Then the lamp he had prophesised emanated a luminous glow that snaked along the ramparts as all night long the Guard Commanders patrolled the defences admonishing and arousing their sentries.

Then the second prophesised light appeared in the window of the Northern tower.

“That’s our signal,” Bohemund stated stood in an expanse of open ground then out of the shadows Knights appeared like ghosts from there hiding places and stealthy approached the walls. They reached the tower and looked aloft to the star lit heavens as a leather ladder descended.

Robert the Norman, Tancred, Hugh the Great and Count Eustace with silken standards flying awaited in the field beyond Saint Georges Gate with the rest of the army. If the camps were attacked tonight the Turks would of found nobody at home. They had marched upon stony ground

with shoes falling apart due to this bitter siege and stood resolute under wan of the calm moonless sky.

“May God have mercy upon us,” they silently prayed, for if this city did not fall tonight they all realised that it never would. With that thought they concluded their sacrifice upon this Crusade and suffering would amount to nothing.

The head of Firouz popped out of the tower window and he called down to the ghostlike figures waiting below.

“Lord Bohemund I give you this city make certain that you take it and you do not waste my generosity,” he had said.

At first the Crusaders were reluctant to climb suspecting a trap but after long moments of anxious hesitation Robert of Flanders took a deep breath and stood before the ladder.

“Whoever dares climb up this ladder will have command of the whole city,” Firouz urged them becoming nervous himself as the time dragged on and he was ever fearful his treachery would be discovered.

“Noble Knights have no fear I left my beloved wife Clemence, my beloved Flanders and my beloved sons to be here. For their honour and the honour of our Lord Jesus Christ I will be the first to climb into the city,” Robert of Flanders hung his shield on his back and ascended.

“Be strong-Fight well,” Bohemund said to each man as he followed the Count of Flanders on the ladder.

Tom took a hold of the leather and scrambled up the wall one hundred feet of ascending and then he squeezed into the small aperture. The room was claustrophobic cramped with Knights as they waited for the others to make the climb.

“With the grace of God Antioch will this night be surrendered to us,” Robert of Flanders coaxed their spirits as they waited here in the heart of enemy territory.

Thirty-five Knights were upon the ladder at once and it snapped as it had done in Bohemund's portent dream. Two Crusaders were killed outright and many more mortally injured. Tom panicked hearing the screams and when they had realised what had happened he counted them the sixty that had managed to get into Antioch.

“What must we do now,” they asked in the confusion.

“Half of you follow me, the rest of you secure the towers,” Robert of Flanders suggested they had no other option than to go it alone.

The lamp could be perceived coming along the battlements that was wide enough to fit four horsemen along its girth. The Captain of the Guard was doing his rounds and he took on a mean countenance when he noticed the sentry wasn't at his post. The Knights in the tower hushed one another and as the Guard Commander came through the archway. The Count of Flanders stabbed him in the throat with his dagger hidden in the alcove. The man rasped and blood spurted from his neck like a fountain. He dropped the oil lantern, which clattered on the cobbled battlements. The count withdrew his blade and the Turk dropped to his knees with a gurgled whimper coming from the hole in his throat. He collapsed and died at the Counts feet.

They moved covertly along the fortifications in groups of four upon their hands and knees. Tom raised his arm as he made out a shadow ahead and everybody froze in their tracks. Tom hesitated as a Turkish guard came strolling along the ramparts. His men all waited for Thomas to make the first move. He lingered for a moment he had never yet killed in cold blood face to face like this before it had always been in heat of battle.

“Hurry up,” Slay him,” the Knights whispered with anxiety as they became perturbed and impatient.

Tom edged forwards in silence making his way inch by inch towards the arch of the next tower. He knelt there contemplating only a few paces from the guard when an abrupt commotion broke out from within the city walls. The Guard leaned forward to peer over at what to gleam where the source of abrupt rowdiness was coming from Thomas used this momentarily distraction to lunge with his sword and he stabbed it into the Saracens abdomen. The Guard began to scream and Tom punched him in panic repeatedly with his left fist in the face whilst he twisted the sword within his abdomen. The Guard stunned by the blows had stopped yelling although he fumbled for his own weapon hung upon his belt. A knife came from nowhere and cut through the Saracens throat like butter the blow delivered so viciously it almost severed his head. Tom glanced to see the bear stood beside him.

“Never trust a Saxon,” he smiled moronically wiping his blade upon his tunic to brush away the blood.

“What the hells going on,” Robert of Flanders demanded at the hold up.

“My fault,” Tom admitted with shame although the disturbance within the city had masked the scream the Guard had let out.

“What is that,” Eustace questioned.

“I’m afraid it has already begun the murder of my Armenian Christian brothers, Much blood will be spilt this night,” Firouz informed them of the Governors plans for genocide as abodes in the town were raided by murder squads putting whole families to the sword.

“Lets get moving,” Robert of Flanders made it clear they still had a job to do here,” You three men get up that ladder hold this tower with your life this could be our only means of escape. The rest of you follow me,” Robert had already commandeered three towers although with less than thirty men he realised his options were truly limited.

They found there way to Saint Georges gate unobserved although Tom eyed the empty streets with trepidation. Metal wedges were placed in the door and Two Knights with lump hammers began to smash the wedges onto the securing hinges. With each thud tom’s heart lost a beat then what he had feared the most appeared before him. A group of Turks one of the many murder squads stepped into the crossroads and gaped warily at the small inconspicuous band hammering at the entranceway.

“We’ve been spotted,” Tom told them all clearly.

A Turk amongst them was the biggest man Tom had ever seen in his entire life. An irrefutable giant who clutched an evil looking curved sword that span the width of two hands at its base.

“Christians,” the giant grimaced with pleasure as his shaven crown glowed in the moonlight. The Turks at least forty of them ran towards them with a blood lust in their eyes. The Bear grabbed a hold of his faithful double axe a twibil and went to challenge the giant with the wicked sword. The Knights with the hammers smashed with more vigour into the door jams with the imminent danger approaching.

Robert of Flanders slashed his sword skilfully in the face of four of them drawing them into a retreat and keeping them at bay.

“Get that door down, get it open,” he called with urgency.

Tom fenced for his life with a lithe Turkic Knight who hissed through his teeth every time he sprung upon him. The Bear was relishing the challenge against a worthy opponent swinging his huge axe with all his strength and brawn. Two Crusaders were killed overpowered by the Turks greater numbers as they advanced to fend the Saracens off and Tom found he now had two assailants harrying for his blood. The door finally gave and crashed with smog of dust rising from the dry floor. Godfrey appeared in the aperture with the rest of his knights behind him. Tom was on the defensive forced back with a flurry of blows from two Saracen swordsmen. A strike came from above and he held out his sword to meet the challenge it clanged with such might that his hand lost his grip. His sword fell and the two Turks had him at their mercy. Two arrows unexpectedly embedded into his assailants foreheads and they fell dead as stones to the earth. Tom glanced over his shoulder to witness Henry at the gateway the two arrow shot was a gimmick they had mastered as children but a gimmick no more. Henry had saved his life and not for the first time. The bear had fought the dual of his life and come out victorious standing upon the Turkish Giant he had cleaved with his axe roaring like a wild man.

The Crusaders slowly thronged through the streets of the city with small skirmishes as they bumped into roving bands of the murder squads. The main garrisons were located in the Ivory towers and luckily had not yet been alerted with all was going on within the city walls. Things seemed to be going well for the Crusaders. Bohemund entered and immediately set out towards the citadel the stronghold upon the mountain. Robert of Flanders led a group of fifty knights on tiptoes into one of the Ivory Towers. They walked with velvet feet upon the spiralling staircase. The wooden door was opened carefully so the hinges didn't creak and Robert afforded himself a glimpse beyond. The cacophony of snores coughs and grunts troubled him. The aroma of hot sweltering bodies turned his stomach as the garrison slept. He crept in making his way steadily to the end of the row of cots. Each man took a bed space and as they were all in position Robert gave the signal. They brought down their swords upon the unaware slumbering troops Of the tower and put a end to their dreams. Some sat up instinctively as death befell them. A certain Turk refused to die with the sword stuck in

his chest he still managed to stand, He was stabbed repeatedly with a knife but his hands still found the neck of his murderer. The Crusaders was turning blue by the strangle hold when Count Robert came to the rescue slashing the Turks tendons on the back of his legs which sent him sprawling to the floor.

“One down fifty to go,” Marcel said cheerfully to them with so many other towers still to be fought for.

All through the night the bloodshed continued either Christian or Muslim slaughtered Armenians upon the street indiscriminately. The Crusaders and Turks alike were taking no prisoners. The only Armenians who stayed untouched were the few who took refuge within the churches. Thomas met back up with Robert of Flanders at the foot of the Ivory tower and they headed now into the centre of the city.

Yaghi Siyan awoke and heard the maelstrom emanating from within his city he instinctively became concerned and went to the veranda that overlooked his domain.

“To arms, to arms,” he called to his bodyguard seeing Christian banners flying from some of his beloved towers.

“It’s too late your excellency the city has already fallen without a lance being broken,” Abdullah informed him as the Crusaders were piling into Antioch unabated.

Tom made them out Yaghi Siyans Bodyguard his elite soldiers spilling from the Palace and they ran to meet them. Then tom saw a face that taunted him as visions of Isaac, Albert and Cesar the Gaul flashed in his thoughts.

“You treacherous bastard,” Tom shrieked with an uncontrollable temper he went for Abdullah. The master spy of Yaghi Siyan.

The Armenian took out his falchion recognising the Infidel and laughing at his anger.

“Christian you gave me bread and I gave you death,” he cursed coming into a classic defensive stance.

Tom though was not in the mood for no fancy footwork he battered his sword down against his and the falchion dropped from Abdullah’s wrist. The Armenian turned tail and ran in flight. Tom hooked off his long bow from his back and in one smooth practised motion got off the shot. It struck Abdullah in the back of the head and he died upon impact. The

bodyguard had managed to get into formation and they had withdrawn tactfully which had allowed Yaghi Siyan to escape unmolested out of the city via Saint Paul's Gate.

As night passed into day the fighting had intensified as groups of Crusaders roamed the streets murdering anyone they could find. Bands of Turks were making stalwart defences in every niche and corner of this City. Tom and the Count of Flanders were near Cleopatra's Arch when from one of the towers a shower of missiles fell upon them. Young Bill got an arrow in his chest and Marcel a Javelin through his neck, which killed him instantly. Pol the Poacher had been in the open and had half a dozen arrows sticking out of his back. Tom called his men into formation but Old Harry clung to the dead body of young Bill weeping with him in his arms. Antoine had taken it upon himself to avenge Marcel launching arrow after arrow up into the towers defences.

"Form Square," Tom blasted again to no response, as most of his hot headed men were resolved upon avenging this devastating loss that had befallen them.

The Bear came to the rescue running through a hail of missiles and unbelievably coming out unscathed. He grabbed Old Harry by the scruff of the neck still weeping with arrows and javelins flying past him. He pulled him across the open expanse and with his other huge hand grabbed a hold upon Antoine also. They could not resist his immense strength and he placed them both in the sanctuary within the wall of shields. The defensive formation had taken shape with the missiles now bouncing off the shields even Robert of Flanders got into the protection of the phalanx unused to this type of warfare.

"What now Thomas," he said handing over to him the gauntlet of leadership.

"Rear three ranks, first rank form wall, second rank fire at the enemy in volleys. Rear rank form a roof for them to cover them from counter fire," Tom gave out his exact dispositions.

"First two ranks form wedge were going to take this tower understood," he called to them

"Deus Volt," they roared seething for vengeance.

The wedge shifted forwards and the Turks took pot shots upon this threat. As the formation had split Antoine had regained his composure in the rear ranks and rattled out the well-drilled orders.

“Prepare,” he called as the wall stood rigid and the rear rank had their shields aloft covering the archers.

“Fire,” Antoine called and in unison the rear two ranks stood with ten arrows flying up towards the defenders on the tower it took them by surprise taking two Turks out of action.

The wedge had reached the doorway and the Bear hammered upon it with his axe until it splintered in half. A crunch broke a shield preceded by a scream as the Turks had lobbed down a javelin that had gone straight through the defensive formation piercing the shield held by Old Harry impaling him in a standing position.

“We need cover,” Tom yelled in desperation to his own defence.

“Fire,” Antoine responded as another flurry of arrows rattled on the stonework above.

Half of Tom’s men were in the tower racing up the winding stairway.

The Bear took the lead cradling his double axe and at the stair top another more robust door hampered their progress. The Bear put his axe to work again the hinges split and his huge foot sent it crashing down.

“Aaagghh,” the Crusaders screamed running onto the fortifications the four remaining Turks atop the tower expected no mercy and jumped to their deaths over the side of the battlements.

Tom gazed across the breadth of the city and nearly every tower had a Christian banner flying above it. This had been Bohemund’s idea to indicate which towers had already fallen. Then Tom peered up to the heavens at the mighty citadel a thousand feet above them.

“Over there,” the Bear had bellowed and Tom turned to the south to witness the most unbelievable spectacle. A huge black horde with a screen of dust rising into the clouds from its wake. The mighty Saracen relief Army they had all been warned that been coming there way was now here upon the horizon. They all froze with dread and incredulity at the immensity of what now faced them.

“God help us,” the Count of Flanders had stated.

Meanwhile Bohemund and Tancred’s men were battling with a thousand Turks under the command of the Emir Al Masada on the main

road leading up to the Citadel. The Turks at first had surged upon them making the Crusaders fall into a retreat. Bohemund had halted them upon the crossroads.

“Stand fast, stand fast,” he had mustered them valiantly amongst the confusion and they had rallied to him. Bit by bit in a bloody engagement they had halted the Turks and were slowly driving them back. Spears were broken, shields pierced, breastplates broken, chain mail hauberks split asunder and horses slice opened with arrows. Streets filled with the vanquished trodden upon and blood ran freely upon the pavements.

Godfrey himself had come upon the main garrison and archers in two towers had cut swathes through his men as they tried to advance. In sheer frustration and blind fury he had called his men together for a last ditch charge leading it him self. The Turks had formed ranks confidently to bear the brunt of the coming assault. One gallant Saracen Knight had come out before the ranks to challenge Godfrey as the Crusaders stormed towards them. Godfrey had swung his sword with such might that it cut the Saracen in two upon his saddle. The Turkish ranks were discouraged never before seeing such an explosive mix of power and anger. The Crusaders were possessed with untold resolve and the Saracens broke and fled for the Iron Bridge Gate. They swarmed out of the city leaving their comrades trapped in the two towers to the fate of Allah.

Raymond and the Bishop of Adhemar had organised the ferrying of the wounded into the safe havens of Antioch that the Crusaders had already taken. The women helped bring what little supplies they had left and setting alight to anything they could not carry. Ceana was one of the last through the Dog Gate when she made out the Counts face twisting with consternation. She followed his trail of vision to the south.

“What’s that,” she asked at the thunder clouds that brewed upon the horizon.

“Misery and death,” he answered grimly seeing for himself how vast this army was stretching across the landscape.

It was mid afternoon before Antioch was completely held by the Crusaders. To Bohemunds aggravation the citadel was still in Turkish hands with the Emir Al Masada and a thousand Turkic Knights still holding it. He immediately set to work having the siege engines that had

been in Fort Malregard brought up the mountain. As far as he was concerned Antioch was now his and he still had some unwanted squatters within it.

The churches were full of Armenians and they did not know how to take these new occupiers who slaughtered everyone in their path. The Knights caked in blood came into the houses of God and the Armenians backed away from them in terror. The Knights though just knelt and prayed they had shed enough blood upon this day.

Ceana found Tom sat in a gutter completely exhausted after the long battle.

“Thomas thank God your alive,” she assured him embracing him to her. “Not for much longer, have you seen the size of that Saracen army they are already busy encircling these walls,” Tom spelled out the concern that now occupied many minds.

“I have seen them also,” was all she would say about it.” Come lets get you cleaned up,” as they walked down the streets they stared in horror at the carnage. There were bodies everywhere and dogs were feeding upon them. Trails of blood ended at a fallen corpse. Ripped off arms, legs and heads were strewn unnaturally everywhere.

“God what have we done,” Tom remarked with disgrace.

“Henry,” Ceana called out noticing him stood rigid before a stack of mutilated bodies that were all that remained of his own archery unit. He made no response to Ceana`s calls and as they got nearer they realised he was laughing to himself upon the brink of madness.

“Henry,” Tom bawled at him.

Ceana slapped him and he came around from wherever his mind had been.

“Is it over,” he asked as a matter of fact.

“It`s over,” Ceana hugged him motherly and Henry began to cry.

The first black streaks of night covered the sky and the city of Antioch lay as quiet as a crypt. Only the occasional whimpering of a hound over its dead master or the petering voices of a distant conversation could be discerned.

“Henry I want you to do something for me .I know we have not seen eye to eye recently but you have saved my life on two separate occasions. I

want to now pay you back and save yours,” Tom spoke to him upon the battlements.

“What you saying Tom,” Henry asked.

“You can now see the Saracen campfires outside the walls they are too numerous for us to have any hope of winning .I have to stay. I’m obliged to my feudal Lords who ordained me, as a knight would never give me leave to abandon them. You and Ceana have no such obligations and Ceana needs protecting,” Tom aired his views and half expected the response.

“You want me to desert now after everything, after everything we have been through” Henry blasted with disgust at the suggestion.

“Henry not for you, not for me but for Ceana if she says here, she will die. I ask this of you as a matter of honour and friendship go with her tonight before it’s too late,” Tom pleaded with him.

“For Ceana,” Henry pointed out.

“Yes brother for Ceana,” Tom confirmed for him.

Tom fumbled upon his belt and untied a purse.

“Take this with you. You will need it to get you home,” he handed over the bag of money he had been presented upon his Knighthood.

“That’s your gold Tom,” Henry exclaimed.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get the chance to enjoy it but you know what, having that metal upon my belt made me feel like a real Lord just for a short while,” he sighed. “Here you take it,”

The rope was secured and thrown from the tower window. Tom looked out and the coast seemed clear enough. Henry scaled down it first and slid the last few feet to the bottom. Ceana seven months pregnant had the extra burden and had to take extra care. She kissed Tom begging him to come with tears welling in her eyes.

“Look after my child for me wont you Ceana,” he said his own voice breaking with emotion. As he looked upon her angelic features and the bump now growing in her belly.

“You fool Thomas Walters come with us,” she cursed him for his stubbornness to stay and this parting was cutting her heart deeply.

“Ceana I can’t do that, I have already explained my loyalties bind me here there is nothing I can do. You and Henry have no such bonds. Now please go before we are caught,” Tom ushered her to the window.

“Thomas we have a bond. An unbreakable bond I love Thomas Walters I always will love you forever,” she said to him as she climbed out the window of the tower.

“I love you too Ceana,” he called down his heart breaking.

Ceana raked the skin off her palms going down the rope and they bled as she ran in Henry's wake as they tried to find a pathway through the Saracen encampments. She glanced back to see the silhouette of her beloved in the torchlight of a tower. He was busy in the window recoiling back the rope to cover up their tracks.

It was dawn when they reached Port Saint Symeon and the Quayside was crammed full with frightened Crusaders who had deserted in the night. Henry went along the harbour trying to find room in a dhow or a barge but there was none to be found. Then in-between two boats a small felucca came to the dockside.

“How much for the boat,” Henry asked.

“No sail today,” the Arab replied.

Henry got out three gold coins from the purse Tom had given him and the Arabs eyes lit up with avarice at such a sum.

“Quickly get in for all three coins I get you back to Venice,” the Arab finalised there bartering.

The felucca manoeuvred out from the quayside and opened its sail to drift towards the open sea. The other ships were readying to leave but greedy Captains tried to drain every penny from their passengers before the departure. Then they came over the hill thousands upon thousands of Saracen horsemen bearing down upon the men, women and children still upon the jetties. Screams emanated from the shores and a mad scramble ensued upon the boats as others were crushed by sheer panic. One of the ships was so over laden it began to capsize. The Captain waved his arms and ranted from the docks at the overcrowding of his treasured ship although a Saracen horseman beheaded him as he swooped past. The arms still waved frantically for a few moments on the headless corpse before it collapsed upon the shore. Mass hysteria broke out as arrows rained upon them and the Turkic Knights cut down the ones still stranded upon the quays. Henry looked back agape to witness the boats on fire in blazing infernos and a sea of bodies in the water. The

capsizing boat had half sunk and Saracens on the bank fired arrows in to the stricken still on board.

“You just made it out of there, your God must be looking upon with benevolence,” the Arab Sailor said to them.

“Lets hope he’s looking upon Thomas with the same benevolence,” Ceana mouthed still staring upon the land.

A Desperate battle had raged since the first ebbs of dawn as the Turks in number had surrounded Fort Malregard and it’s small garrison. The Turks had filled in the double moat with earth and timber to form a walkway where they had carried across a metal-headed battering ram. Three times they breached the makeshift bridge and three times they had been beaten back with crossbows, spears, rocks and Greek fire.

The archer fastened the message with string to an arrow from atop the battlements of Antioch. He aimed the longbow at the struts on the tower of the fort and fired. It shot across the expanse although the cross wind struck it as it glided in mid-flight and it veered off passed the target.

“Damn it,” the archer cursed.

“What’s happened,” Bohemund? Demanded impatient for his orders to be upheld.

“My humble apologies Lord I missed again that wind is being blown by the Devils bellows itself,” the Archer defended his action with.

“Leave it to me,” Bohemund grunted.

The Crusaders watched in bewilderment as Bohemund ran at full belt from the Iron Bridge Gate towards Fort Malregard. The Turks who had fallen back soon spotted the messenger halfway across the open expanse. Arrows and Javelins were slung upon Bohemund who ran the gauntlet of death unmatched and reached the gates of the Fort miraculously unscathed.

“Where’s Bohemund,” Robert of Flanders enquired coming upon the battlements.

“He’s there me Lord,” Crusaders pointed out to Bohemund banging upon the Doors of the Fort as two ranks of Turks closed for another assault.

“Bloody fool,” the Count of Flanders blasted.” Quickly find me Thomas of Pendlebury and get all the archers here you can muster,” he ordered.

The Turks were closing and Bohemund banged the doors harder as he saw them coming from the shadows hundreds upon hundreds of them. Arrows all his huge figure slamming into the timber with a thud as he was stranded there beyond all hope.

“The Gate, at the Gate,”

“Let him in,” the defenders yelled from the battlements of Antioch across to the tower.

Bohemund gave up banging and withdrew his sword the Turks were nearly upon him.

“Come Devils come and taste Norman steel,” he goaded them then the door opened minutely just in time and dragged him through.

In the tower of Fort Malregard Roger De Barnville had kept the Turks at bay with his men for most of that long day. His hands were blistered through handling Greek fire jars that had been flung from the battlements. His fingers had split open through firing constantly with his bow and his face as black as soot from the acrid flames that had arose from the perimeter of the Fort. Bohemund had come up the staircase two at a time and approached the Captain on the tower.

“Seignior you have proved yourself to be most brave and courageous I salute you,” Bohemund slapped his right arm across his chest.

“They’ve been at us since first light with battering rams and escalades but they weren’t coming in without an invitation,” the English Lord responded blandly his humour had evaporated with the sheer exhaustion of the fight.

“Seignior as darkness comes the fort is to be abandoned and put to the torch,” Bohemund reported the message the archer had failed to get across.

Roger De Barnville stared longingly at the Turkish encampment and then to the exhausted men still by his side.

“We can hold them my Lord,” he stated bitterly with resolution.

“I know friend you can although if they capture this fort it will be of advantage to them in besieging the city and we cannot risk that possibility,” Bohemund relayed his response as gently as he could. He knew the tenacity and courage that they had defended this place with.

“Very well,” Roger answered still glaring over to the camp of Kerbogha with campaigning hatred.

Thomas crept along the battlements with a detachment of archers and could see the Count of Flanders looking perplexed at the foot of a tower. “You sent for me Lord,” Thomas reported to him.

“Thomas we need you and your men to create a corridor if the enemy attacks. Were going to try and evacuate the fort tonight,” the Count informed him and Thomas arranged his men along the battlements.

As the first vespers were being presented in Antioch the Turks had withdrew from the perimeter of the Fort. The night was moonless with thick black clouds in the unseeing sky and the air smelt of the sea.

“Get your men out,” Bohemund ordered as the Crusaders were rushing down the staircase to evacuate.

The fort doors that had held so steadfastly were opened and little black silhouettes ran across the open plain and swam across the moat towards the Iron Bridge.

“Here they come,” The Bear called as the men held their bows down. The torch ignited the timbers and smashed jars of Greek fire burned at Bohemunds feet. Roger De Barnville ripped down fabric from the walls and piled up furniture for a pyre within the bastion.

“Seignior you go now ill take care of it,” Bohemund instructed him as the Knight dropped his torch upon his ready made bonfire and ran through walls of flames onto the wooden staircase. He ran out the gate of Fort Malregard to be blustered by the coolness of the night air. He crossed the moat and then paused to stare behind at the intensity of heat coming from the fort with flames alighting the black night and reaching into the heavens.

The moon appeared quite unexpectedly and Thomas became mesmerised watching plumes of smoke rising against the illuminated sky and the licking of flames as they danced in the half-light. Upon this ethereal plain he made out the solitary figure of Roger De Barnville crossing the ghostly expanse. Then amongst the wisps of smoke there emanated steam from the nostrils of a galloping horse and upon it a Saracen Knight in black and silver armour. The horse hooves reverberated a haunting beat as it sped across the plain towards the stranded Crusader as arrows from the battlements whizzed passed its

ghostly rider and where silhouetted in the dim aura of his charge like black rain. Impervious to the hail descending upon him his sword flashed like lightening as he held it aloft and then it turned black as it swung down with proficiency decapitating the brave Christian Knight. Rogers's body fell like a heavy sack and his head rolled before him to the horror of the men upon the walls.

The fort was fully ablaze and the infrastructure of timber beams began to collapse and implode from within. There was still no sign of Bohemund as the inferno enlightened the whole area. The doors were a mass of flames when they burst open with a tumultuous kick and in the opening of this fiery hell stood the Sicilian Count. He ran with fire whipping at his coat tails and leaning back launched a spear that he had clutched with all his might. The Saracen Knight had gawped in amazement as this giant of man that had out of the blue emerged like a phoenix from the flames and he had no time to react to the spear flying in the air towards him. It struck him in his midriff and went straight through his body with the spearhead jutting out his back. The Turk sat dead in the saddle and Bohemund grabbed his arm and dragged him off the mount. Thomas could discern what Bohemund was concerned about as hundreds and hundreds of silhouettes now came into view from the battlements as an army of Saracens were racing from the Turkish camp upon him. He got onto the horse and taking the reins sped off at the gallop towards the Iron Bridge gate.

"Fire," Tom had called as the archers rained down volley after volley upon the Turks dissuading them from venturing too near to the walls of Antioch. The City Gates closed and Bohemund dismounted to great cheers in the courtyard. Fort Malregard still burned through the night as the last outpost beyond the City had been evacuated.

The dripping of water echoed throughout the dungeon and the rattling of chains were Aileen Benedict's only companion to his torment. His tongue had swollen parched with ravishing thirst. His face had manifested a beard which lice ran through making his face itch so much he wanted to scratch it away. His muscles had wasted through starvation and his skeletal frame lay chained upon this floor that had the dank stench of a human cesspit. The Guards had

visited him daily and subjected him to bastinado hitting the soles of his feet with bamboo rods until he had passed out in agony. Every bone in his feet had been broken and he surmised that never again would he have the ability to stand upon them.

“Lord why have you deserted me here I beg you to take me into your arms and carry me from this place. Lord to be with you in heaven is all I now ask,” the Father prayed through his loneliness and desperation.

That morning he could hearken the dreadful screams of another’s torment and the shrieking cries had nearly drove him insane. His eyes were affixed with horror and paranoia flinching uncontrollably as his reason had vanished in this ungodly hole. The key turned in the cell door and two burly guards entered. They had no bamboo rods with them and the Father was thankful for that as they unchained him from the shackle upon the wall. They yanked him onto his feet but he collapsed in agony, as they would not bear his weight. So they dragged him by his bloodied feet, each grabbing a foot and his head banged wickedly upon the stone steps and along the cobbled floor. His ribs were knocked upon the uneven ground and a trail of blood was left in his wake.

They secured his ankles to a rope and hoisted him upside down. He hung their dazed and they spun him around laughing as the world twirled in his minds eye. The circling ebbed and he opened his eyes to see a corpse hanging next to him. The skin had been peeled from every inch of his body leaving a crimson lump of meat like the carcass of an animal. He stared upon this horrific sight in disbelief and then he caught the eyes moving on the skinless man from his fleshy head. He was still alive? Still alive like that, the thought recoiled again and again through his mind and his knife-edge remaining verge of his own sanity evaporated.

A razor sharp knife was brandished under his nose and then it retracted with his eyes moving wildly to follow where it had gone. Then he felt the cutting sensation as it carefully sliced into his back and then the layer of skin being shed as he wanted to scream out in the spine chilling manner the other unfortunates in here had done so many times. Then a blinding light took a hold upon him and a Roman Tribune in Golden Armour stood before him.

“Do thou know me Father,” The Roman asked.

“No I’ve never met you,” Aileen Benedict had begun to think he had gone completely mad.

“Father I am Saint George have no fear the Lord has sent me to stand by your side I’m your moment of need,”

As the Saint had said this Father Benedict’s pain evaporated completely even his feet troubled him no longer and he glared through the blinding light to see his tormenters standing back in astonishment. They had watched his skin fold back into place and heal miraculously.

“Father the Lord protected me through hot shoes of iron placed upon my feet and nails pierced through me. I defied Diocletian for persecuting the Christians and they wanted me also to renounce Our Lord. Be strong in thy faith for it has been tested in this moment,” Saint George spoke unto him as he hung there astounded.

The Guards had become bold and paced forward a cut another strip from his side, which they pulled so it hung down to the earth. Aileen Benedict wanted to scream out again but instead taking to heart the words of the Saint spoke to his tormentors in crisp audible tones.

“God is with me he stands by my side wicked men. May God has the power and compassion to forgive thee for this,” The Turks screamed in horror as he spoke to them as they watched the shredded skin reform itself upon his back.

Then the Guards began frantically running their hands over their backs as their skin began falling from them. They felt the pain of it ripping off them and they ran down the corridors shrieking wildly.

The Father glanced to the skinless man by his side that smiled at him and then the eyes froze as a peaceful death had overcome him. A voice though spoke to him into his ears.

“Thank you for giving me a moment of joy before my death,” the voice had said.

The Saint then appeared again before him.

“You too will die one day Father but not today as the Lord has work for you yet,” The Saint disappeared as swiftly as he had come and blackness fell upon the Priest.

When Aileen Benedict awoke he was lay on a bed with crisp white sheets and by his side was a bowl of fruit and carafe of wine.

“Heaven,” he exclaimed but a voice interrupted his assumption.

“Ahh you have awoken praise be to Allah,” the voice had answered him in Latin.

Father Benedict leaned up to view an Arab dressed in fine robes of silk lay upon some cushions sipping water before him. He had olive skin and noble features with absorbing brown eyes.

“Who are you,” he asked.

“I am an Emir of Damascus my name is Duqaq I’m here for the whole town is talking about your exploits. How you peel the skin off your tormenters with the gaze of your eyes holy man I have come to meet such a miraculous person,” the Emir spoke kindly but pessimistically about the hokum surrounding this Christian.

“That was God that wrought their skin from them. He flayed them for their own cruelty not I,” Father Benedict protested his own innocence.

“So your God saved you. May I ask why he should do that,” the Emir questioned inquisitively.

“I am not the one to question the ways of the Lord,” the Father defended himself again.

“Christian I must admit that you intrigue me that is why I brought you here to my quarters. The Guards have told me your feet were beaten everyday yet you have no injuries upon you I find that puzzling and also that two of the guards have no skin upon their backs also has my interest. With all that though the question that burns in my mind the most is that your fellow Christians at Antioch will all soon be slaughtered but your God sees fit to save you only,” The Emir spoke but the Priest cut him off.

“God will save them,” he protested.

“Maybe he will Christian or may be he wont. Rest here now enjoy your stay at Marrat ad Numan. I have saved you holy man but once Antioch has fallen I may not be able to do so. Your miracles will then be worthless when we carry your head upon a pole in celebration around the City,” the Emir made known his intentions for him.

“I know what your afraid of,” the Father said to him.

“Afraid Christian,” the Emirs eyes narrowed at the question.

“You keep me here locked up with silk sheets as you’re afraid your people will turn from their own Gods if more of your guards begin losing their skin. Let me tell you that you can hide me away all you want

but my God is everywhere and anywhere. You cannot hide me for you cannot hide God,” Father Benedict had sat bolt upright to call out his remarks.

“Christian we will see,” the door shut and the key turned in the lock as the Emir departed.

The Emir of Chorasán who had been amongst the vanguard came into Kerbogha's tent and knelt before him. He presented the leader with a rusty sword, a worn wooden bow and a useless lance.

“Behold the arms which these Franks carry to meet us battle,” he stated.

Kerbogha laughed saying to all the Emirs gathered in his war tent,

“These are indeed warlike and shining arms which these Christians have brought against us and they have tried to drive us beyond the confines of Chorasán and to wipe out our very names. They have driven our kin from Anatolia and the renowned City of Antioch which is the capitol of all of Syria,”

“Death to the Franji,” the Emirs called out in chorus.

“We now have all these Franks holed up at my mercy. I will make them undergo a sentence of death before I strike. Then we will march them to the salt mines of Chorasán to endure the hardest form of captivity. I will swear this to you my brothers by Mohammed that I shall acquire a strong right hand to reclaim the City of Antioch, all of Syria, Anatolia and Romania. I will not rest for the honour and glory of Allah I will erase this race of Frank for all who are of the race of the Turk,”

Kerbogha had stated his will.

“Allah be praised,” the Emirs responded.

Trumpets resounded from the southern sector of the city.

Tom heard the alarm call and ran for all is worth through the narrow streets and as he drew near could hear the cries of death and roars of battle within the very walls of the city. He entered the main avenue where masses of bodies were choking the area in confusion and everywhere engulfed by the relief forces of Crusaders.

“What's going on,” Tom asked the men in his midst.

“It’s the Turks my Lord they’ve broken through the wall,” came his response.

Tom climbed up a staircase of an abode and glared over at Mount Silpius and there he saw them the Turks upon the walls pouring into the city. He knew that breach had to be plugged before the battle in the streets had any chance of being contained. The Bear and Antoine appeared from nowhere and came running protectively to their Lords side.

“We need to get into that tower,” Tom directed his objective to them.

“Why didn’t you say so,” the Bear replied bulldozing a passage with his might through the mass of Crusaders blocking the way. They followed in the empty void of his wake with Tom dragging with him everyman with a bow or a crossbow. Twelve in number they ascended the staircase and upon the parapet of the tower. They could see now beyond the wall and along the mountain pass where a line of Turks stretched to the horizon.

“My God,” the Bear exclaimed.

“We may need your God but first we have to discourage them from scaling that wall,” Tom pointed where the Turks had positioned their ladders.

“Me and my God we’ll discourage them all right for you Master Thomas,” the Bear grinned sadistically.

As the Turks came onto the battlements the men in the tower fired upon them mercilessly. Sending some tumbling backwards and others had formed a mountain of bodies upon the wall that had also to be scaled.

Bohemund had ran into the breach with the trumpet call ringing in his ears as Crusaders fled passed him as the lines of defence were beginning to yield.

“Stand fast. Stand fast,” he called as Tancred and Robert of Flanders came to his side holding their swords out to quell the retreat. Fifty men and three Knights had been formed into a rearguard by this action. They advanced in line and as ranks collapsed in their wake broken by the ferocity of the Saracens they closed upon the breakthroughs holding the line. The fighting bitter, hand to hand with swords, knives and fists. Bohemund could smell the breath of a Saracen he stabbed him in the throat with his broadsword the combat was so close. The Saracen ran in

a tight circle amongst his own men screaming bloody gargles as Bohemund had deterred another breakthrough from advancing. The Turks backed away from him. This mountain of a man who killed with a single blow.

The stem of bodies coming over the wall had been slowed although Tom realised to stop them completely they would have to get onto the battlements themselves.

“How have they all managed to get in so easily,” Thomas asked bemused.

“A secret pass in the mountains that we knew nothing of its existence,” Antoine filled in his answers for him.

“Well at least we know about it now,” The Bear grinned loosing off an arrow from his long bow that hit a Turk in the head with such force he sailed off the walls as if he were flying in the sky.

From the Tower that overlooked the breach the battlements were twenty feet below them although if you overcompensated your fall you fell to certain death down the mountain and if under you dropped between the walls and the tower your met your doom as well.

“Well go over the side and halt them,” Tom decided out loud speaking his thoughts.

They climbed out of the tower hanging onto the parapets and dropped one at a time onto the walkway. A Crusader suspended ready to drop got an arrow in his arm he let go and shrieked as he missed the wall to go plummeting to his death.

Tom and four others had got onto the walkway when a band of Turks charged for them. Tom unsheathed his sword and went to face them. A Saracen sword came crashing for his head as they closed. He ducked just in time to feel it's cut passing over his shoulder. He shoved into the overstretched Turk with his bodyweight onto the other three Saracens as they halted in their strides. Thomas now brought his sword before him symbolically and the Turks backed away from his valiant nature. The Bear and Antoine shot arrows downing two of them and the last one turned and fled with the mounting numbers coming upon him. The Turk at Tom's feet had a swift death as the bear bludgeoned him with his axe.

On the precarious mountain pass the Turks snaked along and at a certain point they had to traverse it side wards facing Antioch it was so perilously narrow.

“Well cut them down there on that ledge Bear take three men and plug that breach where the ladders are the rest of you shoot them down,” Tom gave his orders with urgency.

Volley after volley of arrows pelted into the enemy as they clung terrifyingly upon the mountainside. The screams of death dives echoed chillingly throughout the valley as they hit their marks. Four or five at a time were killed as they attempted to cross the narrow chasm. The Emirs threatened their men cursing them to continue although dissention was spreading fast amongst them at the suicidal task. Tom and his men had it relatively easy the Bear caked in blood like he wore a butchers apron had sealed the breach not one ladder rested upon the walls of Antioch and he had held the Turks off so heroically that the few survivors below the walls had not the courage to climb. The Bear swinging his axe above him now growled in an animalistic howl that even sent shivers down Tom’s spine. The enemy on the pass were in no position to counter the Frankish archers with their own except for the occasional shot fired in vain as they tried to acquire balance on the thin ledges. The ledge now lay empty and only a brief glimpse of a cautious Saracen helmet peering from around a crevice could be observed from time to time.

“What they up to,” Antoine stared at them with unease and suspicion.

“I don’t know but I’m sure well soon find out so be ready,” Tom pointed out to his men.

They came at last five of them edging upon the ledge with long rectangular shields of black and gold.

“Fire at the helms,” ordered Tom and five arrows hit the rock face directly above each one of them.

“Now fire at the feet,” Tom called again and as the Saracen shields had inched upwards they had left their ankles exposed. Arrows hammered into their legs three of them toppled off the ledge down into the abyss whilst two of them limped back to safety leaving a blood trail behind.

In the street below the battle still raged but more and more Crusaders were joining the fray. The Turks began to retreat and Tom switched his men’s attention to defending themselves trapped behind the main body

of the enemy. Arrow after arrow they fired down into the enemy ranks and when they had exhausted their ammunition they defended the tops of the inner staircases. As twilight gripped Antioch the battle was finally over. Tom sat exhausted upon the steps with the Bear and Antoine below them a mound of bodies. They had held out against overwhelming odds and Thomas wept with relief.

“Thomas of Pendlebury,” a booming voice roared.

Thomas glanced up with tears in his eyes.

“Thomas of Pendlebury I salute you the bravest Knight I’ve ever known,” Bohemund called and the whole assembly of Crusaders knelt before him.

“Thomas of Pendlebury we hail thee Knight of God,” they said in one voice.

Thomas stood tall and proud before them all.

“Brave men we are. Brave men we fought for after all we are the Knights of God,” he responded to their call.

The two freshly dug graves stood out from the many others that had been laid in the earth that day. Pol the poacher had been laid to rest. This man who in times of greatest hardship would disappear in the dead of night. He would always return the following dawn carrying hare or pheasant. It was said give him a piece of string and he would come back with the sheep that the string had been made from. He could catch game in any barren environment in deserts, tundra and atop the highest mountain. His cross marker had been carved with images of bird and game. This noble provider had got them through the harshest of times. His hunting prowess would remain in these men’s hearts as none other than legendry. Next to him Old Harry’s marker simply read:

“The wisest man we ever knew,” was written upon it.

They would miss this old goat dearly who gave down to earth guidance and council. Thomas remembered the words of Cesar the Gaul about not becoming too attached to your men. Thomas had tears in his eyes and an arrow in his heart. He felt he had lost two dear brothers that were buried now before him in the ground.

“These two brave souls journeyed here to free themselves of all sin. Let them journey on now into the heavens with peace in their hearts. Sin free

and blessed by the Lord,” Thomas fell silent finding it hard to speak to the grave mounds.

“Burgens,” the Bear roared.

“Saluta,” he called as the men stood rigid holding their pikes to there fore. A sign of highest respect amongst the common soldiery,”

The Church of Saint Mary had become a refuge from the streets filled with debauchery and madness that had preceded the battle.

Thomas went through the door and sat at one of the pews. He listened to the prayers of the others.

“Why has fate brought me to this sorrowful place,” an Old Man had said with eyes red through crying.

“I would of died in honour of you,” A Knight upon his knees had vowed.

“Why didn’t I die in the sea,” a sailor who had landed at Saint Symeon had stated.

“I wish I could have received a happy martyrdom and could have envisaged your most glorious death,” A common soldier a Provençal had said.

“Why was I not stillborn,” a Priest who had lost all his faith had begged.

“Oh God why have you permitted this to happen, why have you abandoned us on this journey from freeing the Holy Sepulchre. Lord do not desert us for if you do not one of us will invoke your name again,” woman cried out passionately then collapsed in tears upon the church floor.

“I am even denied the sight of my beloved wife and children before I die,” a peasant croaked amongst the depression and apathy of the others.

A monk entered solemnly and sat beside Thomas with his hands clasped towards the altar. He was sullen and Tom could tell something heavy preyed upon his mind.

“So what troubles you Father,” Tom asked amidst this place of desolated and disillusioned souls.

“You would not believe me,” the Monk responded.

“I may not father but I am willing to listen with an open mind.” Tom answered him.

“Last night he came to me,”

“Who came to you”?

“Our Lord came to me and then my son one of his Apostles to come to me,”

“Which Apostle,”

“He told me he was Saint Peter he told me something that could hold salvation for us all,”

“What is this salvation Father? This is surely good news for us all,” Tom had become intrigued by this old Priest’s ranting.

“I do not have your expectation my son. I do not know because I do not know if what I am seeing is true. I want to believe with all my heart but who would believe me,” he said despondently.

Tom placed his hand on his shoulder reassuringly seeing he was deeply troubled.

“I believe you Father with all my heart,” Tom replied to him.

“Thank you my son for giving me strength,” and with that the priest left.

A White mist that swirled as you moved within it had begun to clear as the sun cut through the dense clouds of moisture. The Citadel with its bartizans, barbicans and impregnable wall loomed before the few Normans stationed before this Fortress of the Turk. A siege tower had been constructed to overlook the enemy’s defences and siege engines readied for an assault. Bohemund presumed the Turks would be quaking in their boots at the ordinance being assembled against them. Tancred was ready to storm the bastion with an escalade impetuous for it fall although Bohemund had dissuaded him from this rash action realising it would have been suicide against the formidable defences.

“My Lord, My Lord.” a Norman Sergen called out running up the hill.

“What is it,” Bohemund asked bemused by his excitement.

“My Lord we’ve discovered two hornets nests we seek your permission to utilise them,” the Sergen reported.

“Be my guest,” Bohemund sanctioned his request.

The catapults were loaded and tightened with the grey sacks jam-packed with angry Hornets.

“Hey Muslims,” Bohemund voice echoed out up to the citadel.

“Hey Muslims,” he called again until a gathering of Turks stood inquisitively upon the Citadel walls.

“What do you want Christian,” A Saracen shouted back from the defences with hands cupped around his mouth to project his voice.

“We have a gift for you,” Bohemund answered him.

“Go away Christian with your gifts we have food, water and great riches whilst you wallow in starvation and poverty it should be us offering you gifts,” the Turks on the walls laughed at this response.

“Muslims we may we poor but we are generous so we must insist you accept our hospitality,” and with that line both catapults were fired and the grey balls of fury soared through the sky.

The Turks watched these strange things descending and then the hives landed bursting upon impact. The battlements were soon alive with a flurry of activity as storms of crazed hornets and Turks ruining wildly from the swarming insects. The Crusaders laughed heartily watching and harkening the shrieks of the enemy thrown into panic.

Then a Crusader found a Saracens head and that was too catapulted over the wall. This caused others to go out in search parties hacking heads off the dead bodies lay in the streets to bring back as ammunition. This carried on for the rest of the morning with cheers resounding as every shot flew across the Citadel. Bohemund tired of the amusement had gone to oversee the construction of his other siege machines.

The head flinging came to a halt unexpectedly as four Emirs in Golden Armour came out of the Citadel upon horses in golden coats of mail with most of the garrison in their wake. The brave Emirs charged the siege engines that had taunted them that morning and the Crusaders fled faced by this overwhelming force. The Crusaders who stood were soon overpowered and four Knights were trapped in the siege tower with the Saracens ascending the steps. Hugh Le Forsenet shot the darts from his crossbow into the skulls of those that dared try to climb up to the Tower. They collapsed onto the others below who trod over them determined to kill every Christian they could lay their hands upon.

The trumpets resounded and Bohemund ran to the call knowing it was coming from the Citadel. Two Knights defending the tower were thrown from the stairs and hacked to death by the main body of the Turks. A third Knight severely wounded tried to crawl in vain back up the steps

although the Turks trampled upon him and a sword deprived him of his head. Hugh Le Forsenet fought desperately surrounded by the enemy as they climbed up ladders he jabbed at them with a spear. He had broken two spears in the bodies of the enemy and then used the wooden shards to stab to death others coming up the stairs.

A converging force of Crusaders were gathering at the foot of the hill to counter and Bohemund looked upon the Provençal's, Lorrainians, Aquitaines and men of Burgundy although his own Sicilian Normans were not amongst them. They advanced in two ranks up the hill and the Turks having carried out their revenge hastily retreated back into the citadel. Hugh Le Forsenet climbed out of the tower covered in blood with dead Saracens littering the stairway of the tower. Bohemund saluted him with honour at making his stand.

That night the streets were tranquil and deserted. Bohemund had ordered a wall built before the Citadel to prevent the Turks counter attacking them again. He then with Tancred walked through the Town searching for his men who had neglected their duty and fled from their posts. As they entered the Palace of Yaghi Siyan dancing girls with nubile bodies were entertaining the men sprawled upon cushions like kings. They drank and slumbered upon the Royal furnishing whilst others performed sexual acts with harlots who plied their trade. All about was contempt, depravity and misdeed that offended the Christian faith.

"So this is where our brave men languish," Bohemund stated out aloud in seemingly good cheer.

"What has befallen them," Tancred whispered to his Uncle.

"Death has befallen them Nephew they look alive but within they are truly dead men," Bohemund's eyes narrowed with a retributive stare.

"Is they're any hope," Tancred tried to quell his Uncle's temper.

"Not whilst we let them die like this," Bohemund took a torch from the wall mounting and put it against the lavish curtains in the room until they rose into flames.

They roared into balls of fire that went straight to the ceiling with hanging tapestries that alit the whole roof so the Palace became a cauldron of fire.

“Excuse me Seignior,” Bohemund said to a man sprawled on a couch as he sat alight to the furniture beneath him.

The Palace changed from a den of inequity to a place consumed by panic as the Crusaders and their whores ran for their lives. Within an hour half the Town was ablaze as one timber building ignited another like a stack of falling cards. The dried straw roofs were easily engulfed and even the Turks at Kerboghas Camp could see the fire enlightening the night sky. The whole City of Antioch looked as if the hand of Lucifer had fell upon it with thick black columns of smoke bellowing everywhere.

It was early evening when the wind finally subdued that the fires began to abate. Every drinking hole, Tavern and bawdy meeting place had been wrought to ashes by the hand of Bohemund.

“What madness have you done destroying this city,” Raymond ranted when he discovered it was by the Sicilian Counts own arson.

“I have destroyed nothing but repaired it from the defeatism that has befallen us all. Our men have lost their faith in us, in God and in this Crusade. Tonight I gave them a choice to believe and have faith or rot in the flames of their own demise,” Bohemund retorted his accusation.

“Your insane,” Raymond added.

“Maybe I am but who is not here in this place with death all around him,” Bohemund strolled away wryly grinning at his night’s devastation.

Tiny specks of light were dotted in all the encompassing fields as the Turkish campfires burned. Tom gazed across sat beside Antoine and the Bear upon the battlements.

“It’s so peaceful tonight,” Tom spoke out his thoughts.

“Yes Master Tom it’s always quiet before a storm,” Antoine responded to him.

“Let’s pray the storm will hold them back a while longer,” Thomas knew that when they attacked they had little hope of suppressing them.

“When they come we will crush more of them, than they us,” the Bear added optimistically.

“In my village I use to sit in the woods like this in a glade listening to the rustle of the leaves. There I was at home. There I felt at peace,” Tom romanticised.

“By my village Master Tom I use to sit by the river lay in the sun that to me was tranquil,” Antoine portrayed his own vision of bliss.

“I come from the mountains and I would sit upon them like this now elevated upon the battlements. Some days whilst on my own I could believe I ruled the whole world,” The bear passed his own comments.

Tom glared up to the heavens with the stars so vivid and bright in clusters and sporadic mosaics in the night sky. Dreamily he drifted with this celestial ceiling at peace for a brief moment of time amidst the misery of starvation and their ultimate fate here. Then a star fell from the heavens and they all watched it plummet with its glowing white tail. It split into three candescent pieces and crashed upon the earth amongst the Turkish encampments.

“An omen from God,” Antoine mouthed in astonishment.

In the Turkish encampment they had hearkened the unearthly whistle and then the tumultuous explosions that shook the ground as the meteor had landed with a loud bang. Tents burst into flames and the long grass had ignited spreading bush fires all around. The Saracens began gossiping amongst themselves about this portent of doom as ever since they had begun besieging the Christians misery had befallen them all. “Even if Kerbogha gains the City and defeats the Infidel what will we get,” Arlan Tarsch one of many disgruntled Emirs had aired his misgivings. They had gathered here for an easy victory and had been told of how the Christians were lavished with great riches so there would be rich spoils for all. They soon discovered these Christians fought resolutely clothed in rags and upon the brink of starvation. They could imagine this army of beggars possessing any great wealth or hidden treasures.

Bohemund had seen the meteor from his watch station at the Citadel and the Turks had come upon the walls to witness the aftermath of this phenomenon. Bohemund called up to them.

“You see God is on our side. He rains thunderbolts from heaven upon your brothers. I promise you no harm and I promise you great wealth if

you surrender to me,” he used the opportunity to try and gain their surrender.

“Christian look around you, you are surrounded by my brethren. I give you an offer surrender to me I will promise you that I will not kill you,” The Turkish Commandant hailed back.

“We will see Seignior.” Bohemund hung his words with thought before continuing” We will see who is victor and who is vanquished,”

With the Meteor causing a stir throughout the City the Leaders gathered in the round Tower near the Iron Bridge Gate to discuss the impending problems of the siege and the Turks still boldly holding out in the Citadel.

“We are doomed without aid from Byzantium,” Robert of Flanders had declared.

“The Turks have us in their clutches from within and without how can we possibly retain this situation,” Godfrey of Bouillon spread his doubts amongst them.

“Nonsense Seigniors less of this defeatism,” Bohemund interrupted not wanting to give up his Antioch without a fight.

“But we are defeated,” Raymond of Toulouse concluded as heads dropped and tears formed in some of the heartiest men’s eyes.

Then a shadow entered the tower and stood quietly watching the pessimism that had befallen them all. It was a monk Peter Bartholomew who had travelled here in Raymond of Toulouse’s army under the Bishop of Adhemar.

“Seigniors forgive me but May I speak,” he announced to them.

“Yes go on,” the Bishop of Adhemar took it as his duty to invite him to talk.

“If it pleases you I want to relate a certain matter which I saw in a vision whilst we have been besieged in this City,” the audience hushed at this strange pious man who stood before them and related his story.

One night I was lain in the Church of Saint Mary. The Church had no noise within and a peaceful aura had manifested within which made me drift away blissfully. I shivered in the cold and when I awoke a warm purple haze did overwhelm me. This mist was around me and within this

mist a white cloud emanated with Our Lord Jesus riding upon it. With him was his Mother and Saint Peter the Prince of the Apostles.

“Knowest thou me,” a voice came from this cloud.

“No,” I answered and then a blinding flash of light emblazoned before my very eyes as a fiery cross hung above his head.

“Knowest thou me,” the Lord Jesus spoke again.

“I do not know thee except I see the cross on your head like that of Our Saviour,” I replied to him.

“I am he,” he stated and I fell to my knees before Our Lord and Humbly begged him.

“Help us Lord from our oppression,” I said unto him.

“I have helped you in goodly manner and I will now help you. I permitted you to have the City of Nicaea and to win all the battles and I have conducted you hither to this point and I have grieved at the misery, which you suffered in your task of besieging this City. Behold thou with timely aid I sent you safe and unharmed into it’s walls and lo you are working much evil pleasure with Christian and depraved Pagan women whereof a stench beyond measure rises to heaven,” the Lords voice rose and boomed with cracks of lightening within it flashing across the clouds in his wake. Peter knelt trembling in devout fear and then the storm abated and the sun shone within the heavens. The monk lifted his head carefully to gaze once more upon Jesus Christ.

“Go and tell your people to return to me and I will return to them and within five days I will send you great help,” the voice faded and the mist cleared. Peter found himself alone in the Church in absolute silence.

The leaders had listened with intent to this Monk and the Omen of the meteor gave them a vein of hope. They each secretly hoped within five days the Lords help would come and the message of the vision was spread across the City. Peter looked upon his stunned audience questioning if they had believed him but within Count Raymond’s eyes he could witness tears glowing with spiritual awe. The Bishop Adhemar held his own consternation with contempt not at peace with his Monks revelations. Count Robert of Flanders had clutched his cross to his heart whilst Bohemund starry eyed was fixated upon the roof of the tower as if he could pierce the stone into the heavens.

“Seigniors if you do not believe that this is true let me climb up this tower and I will throw myself down and if I am unharmed believe that this is true. If however I shall have suffered any hurt behead me or cast me into your fire,” Peter vowed with a test of faith measured against his own life.

“That will not be necessary have the Gospel and the Cross brought here,” the Bishop Adhemar instructed one of his aids.

The Gospel and Cross were delivered to the tower and the Bishop gave the Cross to Peter Bartholomew who took it in his right arm and held the Gospel in his left.

“Swear that it is true,” the Bishop asked him for his word with the Holy symbols to bear testament to his affirmation.

“I swear it is true,” Peter stated before all to bear witness.

All the Leaders then took it upon themselves to make an oath and pledge their renewed faith in the Crusade.

“I will not flee this City for life or death,”Bohemund took the first oath.

“By my life, my honour and for my people,” Raymond pledged his own vows.

“I will perish here before I let Antioch fall into Saracen hands,” Swore Robert the Norman.

“I will stand here until I die or until the City is saved,”Godfrey gave his word of honour.

“As long as there are forty knights still in battle I will not withdraw and I will never withdraw from the march to Jerusalem,” Tancred made his promise and passed the Gospel along as each Knight took an oath of life of death.

The night sky as black as coal and the stars had vanished slunk into the nothingness above. The streets of Antioch were choked with drunken laughter and debauchery as Harlots were chased through the debris of Bohemunds devastation. Peter shook his head the people were still denying the Lord and he hoped he could do something to bring back his flock from the depths of self-destruction. He though was just a man and the angst of certain death by the Saracen sword had manifested in each person a desire to live for the moment. That very precious moment as if it were their last. Lust had overcome many raping the Armenian women,

plying the pagan dancing girls with gold and spending their last few moments of solace in the arms of a prostitute. Beer and wine were scarce many gold coins were exchanged for a bottle of wine even so inebriated people were everywhere.

Peter slunk upon a rock with his head in his hands and cried with despair. The shadow of death hung upon every one of them even the Monk.

“What art thou doing good man,” a voice came and Peter raised his head with tears welled in his eyes to be greeted by a man with a long flowing beard and white fluttering cloak.

“Who art thou,” asked the Monk.

“I am Andrew the Apostle know my son that when thou shalt enter the town go to the Church of Saint Peter. There you will find the Holy Lance of Our Saviour Jesus Christ with which he was wounded by the Roman Centurion Longinus as he hung upon the arm of the cross,” the Saint had informed him and next Peter found himself alone upon the rock. He glanced above and the heavens were alive with the vibrancy of the stars once again. Peter thou was afraid to reveal this advice unto the people even though he knew the vision had been true. On the next evening he sought solitude again with his heavy heart and he prayed to the heavens.

“Lord who would believe this,” but at that Saint Andrew appeared again and took him to a place where the lance was hidden beneath the ground.

“Wherefore hast thou not yet taken the lance from the earth as I commanded thee, know verily that whoever shall bear this lance in battle shall never be overcome by an enemy,” Peter once again found himself upon the rock and came to his feet. He knew now he must make known the mystery of the Apostle.

The Leaders had waited four days for a miracle and now upon the eve of the fifth Peter once again came before them.

“So Peter why have you called us together,” asked the Bishop.

Peter related the words of Saint Andrew and the Lance hidden in the Church of Saint Peter as his story unfolded he could tell they did not have faith in his words.

“How can we believe this,” Raymond protested for they all were terrified and considered themselves unworthy. Some felt they would die forthwith if they yielded such a Holy Relic.

Then Peter the Hermit stepped into the arena.

“I swear to you that what Bartholomew tells you is the truth as Saint Andrew has appeared to me twice along our journey and in a vision he said unto me, Rise go tell your people of God not to fear but to trust firmly with your whole heart in the one true God and they will be everywhere victorious. In Antioch the Lord will send you such a token that will make the people happy and rejoicing and if they wish to fight let them go out to battle all together and all their enemies will be conquered by them, ”Peter the Hermit revealed his own visions confirming Bartholomew’s story and the leaders now began to stir with enthusiasm.

“Seigniors be brave, be alert since the Lord has sent his word that he will come to our aid in the next battle and will be the greatest refuge to his people whom he beholds lingering in sorrow, Then these men’s words should be taken as truthful ”Bohemund had said as weight to the piety of the Priests.

Through the North Gate amongst the rock of Mount Siliphus lay the Church of Saint Peter the Apostle where a mosque stood before the Holy Cavern that the Turks had built insulting to the eyes of the Crusaders. In the Cavern oil lamps illuminated the dark shadows so many lights making this holy sanctuary as bright as the sun. Thomas looked upon the altar hewn of stone and beyond it a portrait of Saint Peter glaring down upon him. This made him uncomfortable and a little troubled with the task they were now undertaking. Count Raymond had gathered the thirteen of them here in absolute secrecy including Peter Bartholomew, Thomas and some of his own men accompanying him.

“Seigniors we have assembled here for Peter Bartholomew has been granted a vision from our beloved Lord, Jesus Christ. Blessed be his name and Our Lord informs him that beneath our feet lies the resting place of the Holy Lance that pierced his side whilst upon the cross. So we are here to find it and find it we will. For the people, our people need

a sign through starvation, misery and oppression Jesus has come to us with this prize and therefore we must not let him or our Brothers down. So lets begin,” Count Raymond got the proceedings underway as shovels hacked into the thick brown layers of clay earth.

The men dug in shifts of four for an hour at a time the ground hard earth with solid impenetrable clay was arduous going. The Bear climbed out of the pit after the first shift with sweat dripping from his muscular frame.

“Good luck Thomas,” he said handing over the shovel to his Lord. Thomas had dug for only a short time when his shoulder injury burned on his left side and his hands had blistered with the heavy toil. Morning turned into afternoon with men descending into and climbing from the trench, as it grew steadily deeper.

As night crept upon Antioch the trench was head height and still no relic had been found.

“You must excuse me Seigniors I have watch duties,” Raymond made his excuses from supervising as he had lost hope in this venture and Thomas now took charge of the dig.

“Priest come here,” Tom called the Priest to him in a quiet niche of the chapel.

“Yes Lord,” Peter asked as he approached.

“It’s just Thomas, Father not Lord.” Tom put him straight his noble rank lain uncomfortable upon his humble roots.” Father we have dug now until our hands bleed and our backs are broke. I am not questioning your faith but are you sure it’s here that the lance is hidden,”

“Yes Thomas it is here,” Peter Bartholomew stated firmly.

“Think Father back to your vision and point out exactly where the Lord told you it would be found,” Thomas now pressed him.

“I have done this all day Thomas, I have tried to remember” the Priest answered.

“Then pray for us Father for we grow weary and if we fail word will spread of our failure and the people will lose heart yet again. I don’t think they have much heart left to give do you,” Thomas turned walking away pickling a shovel and jumping back into the pit.

The Night passed into the early ebbs of morning when Peter Bartholomew reappeared. He climbed into the pit as the men stopped

toiling leaning exhausted upon their tools to watch him. The men resting lifted their heads as the Priest knelt and began to dig in a corner near the altar with his bare hands. A draft of humid air gushed through the chamber and the candles flickered momentarily as a moment of darkness fell. As the light returned Peter Bartholomew stood clutching the head of a spear and the men came to their knees in devotion.

“The Lance,” Peter mouthed his voice trembling.

The Priest climbed out of the trench and walked almost ethereally towards the altar. He passed by the men swamped in perspiration coating their faces and running down their backs who averted their eyes from this most holy relic. The Priest placed the spearhead upon the white linen of the altar cloth and clasped his hands in prayer.

“This is the lance as shown unto me by Jesus Christ and his Apostles and we thank you Lord for this sign of our salvation.”

In the Chapel the men knelt and prayed before this relic that held the hope of sparing their very lives.

At dawn on June 16th in the Round Tower an assembly of the Crusade Leaders had gathered and they waited with anticipation for Peter Bartholomew to enter the main chamber. Count Bohemund, Count Raymond and Count Robert of Flanders had impatience and expectancy wrote upon them. Bishop Adhemar had a complete lack of interest pacing to and fro mumbling under his breath. Godfrey of Bouillon seemed intemperate wondering why he wasted his time thus. He had seen the Holy Lance once already amongst the relics of the Byzantium’s in Constantinople and had no belief that the true lance would be found here.

The door opened and Bartholomew entered carrying an object before him in his hands draped in a white cloth. Thomas walked at his heels still filthy from digging with mud streaks from his hands smeared upon his cheeks.

“Seigniors, behold the lance” Bartholomew stated uncovering the cloth to reveal a rusty spearhead that they all gawped upon in both wonder and disbelief.

“Bishop Adhemar you are our the Spiritual Father of us all I humbly present you with this sign given to us all from our Lord Jesus Christ unto your trust and safekeeping.” Peter handed over the Lance to him although Bishop Adhemar turned his back upon it with disdain having no faith in this miracle.

“I cannot take this wholeheartedly so I must decline,” and with that he left the Round Tower to attend to other matters.

Count Raymond stepped into the void of silence left in the Bishops wake and spoke.

“Then it is decided Peter Bartholomew we declare you holder of the sacred lance and in this our trust bestowed upon you,” all the Lords and Knights knelt before the pious monk Peter Bartholomew who had the lance held before him.

“We are now in Gods hands,” he said unto them

Throughout the streets of Antioch great joy and celebration gave rise to the news of the discovery of the lance. Their hope and faith renewed being given this divine chance of survival against all the odds. Men who had lived upon boiled fig leaves, cooked the softened hide of saddlebags and sold all their worldly possessions for a crumb of bread in order to have a morsel of something within their bellies. Men who were nothing more than walking skeletons after months of malnutrition through this bitter siege and they cared not for anything, anymore for they were lost. They had looked death in the face so many times and many had left brethren or comrades to rot along the way.

These hardened, disillusioned, weary, and oppressed people assembled in the main square of Antioch. On a raised dais before them stood their Leaders and Priests to inform them all of the path ahead. Peter Bartholomew took the stand and spoke out to the masses.

“You have all deeply offended and have all been deeply humbled and you have all cried out to the Lord,” the People hushed listening intently to this messenger of Christ as he paused to complete silence.

“And the Lord has heard you and now let each one of you turn himself to the Lord because of his sins and let him give five alms (donations) for

the five wounds of the Lord. If you cannot do this let him say the Paternoster (Lords Prayer) five times. When this has been done we will soon begin battle in the name of the Lord by night or by day, as judgement of the Princes deems best, because the hand of God will be with you. If anyone has doubt of victory, let the gates be opened for him and let him go forth to the Turks and he will see how their God will save them. Moreover if anyone shall refuse to fight let him be classed with Judas as a betrayer of the Lord, who deserted the Apostles and sold his Lord to the Jews. Let them fight in the faith of Saint Peter holding in mind that God promised him after the third day he would arise and appear to him and for this reason and also because this land is justly Saint Peters and not the Pagans. Let your battle cry be God Help Us and verily God will help you,”

The masses roared.

“The Lance. Deus Vult and God help us,” and then Peter brought out the Lance fastened at the end of a pole with the flag of Saint Peter flying beside it. The people knelt in humble obedience and devotion with tears in their eyes at the words of Christ’s messenger.

The Hermit left the City gate and walked benevolently across the green pastoral fields towards the thousands of black ant like dots that represented the Ma`nads and pavilions of the Turkish encampment. Hands clasped and devoutly praying as he counted every bare footed pace he made before he strode into the enemy camp. The Saracen pickets glared upon him as he approached and some spat in his face as he passed them although none of them stopped him. He halted outside the most grandiose of Pavilions with four guards blocking his entrance and he waited silently outside the tent of the Warlord Kerbogha. A Guard went within and after a few moments an Emir appeared inviting Peter the Hermit to follow him into the tent.

Through a small enclosure and then through curtained doors opened into a spacious oval room. The inner sanctum of the War Council decorated with fine silks, incense tainted the air and upon the lush cushions the Saracen Emirs sat with lavish displays of food before them. The huge powerful figure of Kerbogha sat in their centre with his hawk nose and broad features staring with consternation at this Christian.

“Kneel before the Emir of Mosul,” the Emir acting as interpreter ordered the Hermit although he stood rigid, hands clasped before him and defiant to the wishes of the Lord of the Barbarians.

“Kneel I say,” the Emir raised his voice reiterating as a room of hateful eyes fell upon the obstinate Frank. Peter ignored this request also and Guards harried forward to force him to his knees in abeyance. Kerbogha though amused by his stubbornness raised his right hand and the Guards stopped in their strides and returned to their posts letting him be.

“So Priest what is it you want from me Kerbogha Emir of Mosul and Commander of the Sultan of Persia’s mighty armies. Is it salvation you seek from me,” Kerbogha had asked and laughed heartily at his own suggestion. Peter though looked straight into the leonine eyes of the Saracen General for the first time and stated.

“The Army of the Lord sends you this message. Leave us and Antioch the inheritance of Saint Peter or thou shalt be put to flight by arms,” as the Hermit watched the Emirs face as it had turned ashen as he repeated the monk’s words to his Warlord.

Kerboghas demeanour went cold and deadly for a moment and then unexpectedly he burst out into howls of raucous laughter at the empty threat. His laughter ceased as fast as it had taken hold and his face contorted with rage. He came to his feet unsheathing his jewel encrusted curved sword with an angry motion and he glared upon this monk’s audacity to threaten him.

“I swear this to you Frank that I shall defend my Kingdom against thee and all the Franks. I own this land and will possess it justly or unjustly. Now get out of my sight before I have you skinned alive and do not dare seek audience with me again until all of your kin have abandoned Antioch, denied your Christ and professed to Persian Law,” Kerbogha had raged as his Emir had struggled to interpret his threats and abuse.

“As you wish,” Peter replied calmly and collectedly before he turned and left.

Morning Masses were celebrated in every single church as the Crusaders marched barefooted presenting themselves before God Almighty in each of the Holy Sanctuaries. The lines of

procession snaked from Church to Church with the queues meandering down the narrow streets of Antioch. The messenger Peter the Hermit had returned with his news and the response from the Saracens, which spread like wildfire throughout the City his message of doom. Each one of them now reconciled himself to the task ahead with no hope of the Saracens granting them peace whilst here within these walls. The last few morsels of their supplies, the bread and the wine were handed over to the Priests as the Crusaders partook in the body and blood of Christ. The Priests in Communion Vestments upon the altars were anointing the kneeling Men with oil saying unto them.

“Do you give yourself to God, to death if he wills it. To the glory of the church and the race of all the Franks,”

“I do,” each man responded taking the bread and wine in oath as testament of offering to God their own flesh and blood.

The Crusaders in full battle honours and Knights with all their panoply gathered in the streets leading to the main square readying for war. Pike men with their spears high aloft to the heavens, Archers filling their quivers with arrows from the Fletcher’s barrow and Monks laying incense-making prayers upon the weapons of destruction.

“Et spiritu sancti.” They fumigated the air with clouds of pungent scent. Upon the pavements women and children wailed for loved ones envisaging the worst. Priests in white robes their faces hooded flagellated themselves in orderly chains of humility to the Lord and a dog barked the last remaining coming out of hiding to cheer on the Soldiers of God. Count Raymond glared back with envy towards the centre of the town. His ill health had returned to haunt him and with a hundred men mainly wounded and elderly they set positions at the defensive wall before the Citadel. They had to contain the Turkish garrison for if they decided to counter during the oncoming battle and Raymond seeing his ragbag force knew even this task would need it’s own miracle.

Men awed in dread and consumed by religious fervour. They were ensnared between perpetual starvation or a glorious death against the great Saracen Army beyond the haven of the City Gates. Tom had dusty knees due to kneeling so many times before so many altars. His purple Surcoat had been freshly washed and his shield and sword glittered in

the new day sun with polish. He strode out into the cacophony of the main square as horses neighed nervously with claustrophobia, Men's voices talked haughtily with false bravado and the cadence of prayers hummed above it all from the clergy. Lord Bohemund appeared stood upon the dais and spoke out to all assembled.

"Seigniors," he called out awaiting silence and after a moment as if the red sea had parted by his very voice the square was void of sound. Even the horses had hushed to listen to this mighty Lord and the mongrel dog sat down attentively.

"Seigniors this is our day of glory. God is marching by our side on both our flanks. We go out those gates not as men but as Disciples of Christ. Before us lies the heathen Kerbogha and his pagan army. He has designs of putting us all in chains and sending us to the salt mines in Chorosan. He does not know us very well if that is his will, for we have travelled afar and fought hard along the way. A long bitter road sanctioned to our duties by our Pope and now God himself has joined our ranks and is amongst us. All our brothers who have fell upon the way will be with us. Chains will not hold us, for when we march out that gate we go to the call __Deus Vult," Bohemund raised his voice to their salute.

"Deus Vult," the Crusaders answered with fire.

"Seignior Hugh you have the honour, lead us on if you may," Bohemund called to Hugh the Great upon his white steed as the gates opened and the French Lord cantered his mount towards it. He raised his sword above his head as he entered the arch and then lowered it symbolically to his side in salute. His Knights followed his example raising and lowering their weapons to greet the enemy before them.

"Form line,"

"In Column,"

"Lead on," orders rebounded in the square as the armies of the Crusade got into file following their Lords onto the field of Orontes.

Hugh the Great attired in the Royal Blue of France with the Count of Flanders lead out the first Army of French and Normans. Godfrey of Bouillon lead out his Germanians followed by Robert the Norman with his Knights. The Army of Toulouse headed by the Bishop of Le Puy with Peter Bartholomew holding before them the Lance of the Saviour.

At the Rear in Burgundy were Tancred and Lord Bohemund until the square lay strangely empty except for the stray dog still sat motionless.

In six battle lines they formed outside the City walls as a procession of Monks and Priests bearing crosses paraded before the Christian Army.

The tent curtain was pushed aside with haste and the Emir Duqaq stood before Kerbogha in his Ma`nad.

“Lord the Christians are abandoning Antioch,” he blurted out.

“This I must see,” the Warlord laughed out getting to his feet.

At the edge of the encampment where the Turkish Soldiers were already gloating at the lines of men leaving the besieged City.

“Look at them run they have no heart to face a Lion,” Kerbogha boasted.

As the Christian Army continued emptying from Antioch to trumpet calls they began assembling into battle formation and the Turks fell suddenly silent.

“This cannot be so,” Kerbogha mused.

“Lord it would appear they are preparing to assault us on the field of honour,” the Emir Duqaq confirmed all their suspicions. Kerbogha looked long and hard upon these emaciated souls dressed in the finery of warriors and brandishing weapons of war in strict order. He felt unexpectedly unnerved by this vision of these men upon the depths of destruction coming out to face him. It baffled his own morality and his own sense of honour.

“This cannot be,” he said once again in shock.

Tom at the head of his archers halted them upon the plain as they stared expressionless across the expanse to the enemy positions. The horizon black with Saracens and Mussel men with their encampment stretching forever into the distance.

Kerbogha himself glared across this vacant expanse with a void look upon his own features.

“Didn’t you tell me that within Antioch there were few Franks left who had not the strength or will to fight, So pray tell me who is this that dares to challenge me ”Kerbogha turned upon his Advisor as fear gnawed within him at the orderly ranks of Christians before them.

“I did not say they would not fight but look upon them they can be easily overcome, we will kill them all,” the Advisor replied in mitigation.

Kerbogha stared hard and long at the silent statuettes of highly disciplined men.

“These men can be killed but they will not be overcome,” Kerbogha held his head down.

“We will drive them back,” the Advisor rallied.

“I fear even if my whole army is sent against them they will not yield one footstep to us without a price,” the Advisor this time knew it prudent not to reply to his Lord.

Along the fortifications of Antioch Monks in sacerdotal garments stood holding aloft the Cross of Christ and singing hymns to the Knights on bended knees beneath them.

“Lustra sex qui jam paracta tempus implens corporis.

Agnus in cruce levatus immolans stipite,”

On the plain before the river priests in pure white vestments with sackcloth hoods invoked God down from the heavens. Toms felt his chest rising and falling as a spell had been wrought upon them all. Wide eyed with deathly thin frames exhausted and withered by the siege their body’s pumped raw adrenaline through them. Emaciated and humbled they breathed in wafts of fear as they transfixed themselves upon the hordes of the Turkish Army that clouded their viewpoint. They could see the Turkic Knights mounting and the Saracen archers forming into ranks. Then a rain fell, a light gentle rain sprinkling upon the Crusaders and as they breathed they became invigorated. Fear and fatigue evaporated from them. Horses heads that had been sagging unexpectedly lifted their brows with pride and all along the Christian lines this divine rain rejuvenated their resolve.

Kerbogha arranged his army into two. A force under the command of the Emir Duqaq were sent to the southern flank to stop the Franks reaching the sea whilst the main force stayed between the mountains and the river to face the Crusaders in open battle. The Saracens outnumbered the Christians ten men to one however every Muslim felt ill at ease with the coming engagement.

Hugh the Great, Robert the Norman and the Count of Flanders took three armies along the water upon the edge of the Orontes River. Tom and his archers were with the foot soldiers at the head of the column. From out of the woods the Turks advanced hurling javelins and arrows.

Many Crusaders fell in this onslaught and the Turks feigned their retreat withdrawing to attack again. The enemy closed again with volleys of arrows and missiles. The Crusaders this time charged them as they struck running full pelt towards them or galloping on horse to meet the assailants before they could tactically withdraw. The Turks utterly surprised by the abrupt ferocity fired as many volleys as they could into the Christians ranks swelling towards them. Tom ran for all his worth with his men by his side as madness had overcome him as with all the others. The Turkish salvos ripped through the ranks of the Crusaders but they ran on with arrows imbedded in them. Another volley cleaved the ranks and men with two to three arrow shafts sticking out their bodies carried on regardless. Through a frenzy of missile fire the Crusaders still advanced most oblivious to the fact that they had been wounded. They had reached a pinnacle where death would become salvation and before they made peace with their maker they were determined to take a Turk or two with them to paradise. This recklessness unnerved the enemy and they began to rout. The Crusaders though ripped fleeing riders from their mounts and those that did withdraw found Christians clinging to their saddles. The Turkic Knights beat them with their swords although their grip would not give until the horse and rider were dragged to the earth.

The Emir Duqaq witnessed his army turning tail and fleeing in sheer terror and the portent of words of Father Benedict the Frank who peeled off skin came to his mind.

“But my God is everywhere and anywhere you cannot hide me for you cannot hide God,” in prudence with those words echoing in his ears he went into a full retreat not intending to stop until he reached Damascus.

The Crusaders in the manner of wild dogs took no prisoners most of them unarmed dropping their weapons in the charge they still gouged out eyes with their fingers and ripped out throats with their teeth. The Turks drawn against such violence and such utter lack of restraint for their own mortality sensed a fright that they had never before encountered. The southern flank of the Saracen Army was in full retreat and the Crusaders murdered any whose legs were not swift enough to take them to safety.

Bohemund gathered his four armies under the True Lance as they confronted the main Turkish force between the river and the mountain.

“Seigniors Deus Vult,” their charismatic leader heckled.

“Deus Vult,” the Crusaders roared with such might the very thunder crack of voices made the Turks quaver in their stead.

A Knight stared up to the lofty mountains and he cried out as he could see countless horses riding amongst the clouds and with them most glorious banners. Amongst the Clouds leading the white horses Saint George, Saint Demetrius and Saint Theodore charging down the mountainside in their glory.

“Behold the Army of the Lord is by our side as promised,” A Crusaders called as all glanced up to witness this heavenly vision.

“Form line,” Bohemund roared.

“Huh,” a line of twenty-foot pikes darted before the head of the Christian Army with spear points gleaming before the enemy.

“Advance,” Bohemund called down the lines.

“Huurrah,” the Crusaders bellowed advancing in steps before the line of pikes.

The sky darkened as the Persian Archers let thousands upon thousands of streaming arrows loose upon the air. The dark clouds of death drifted above ethereally and then fell as a wall of shields were raised and an explosion of arrowheads hitting the defenders. Loud reverberating claps shook the men under the shelter as they held strict formation. The Crusaders footstep by footstep forced the Saracens back as more and more black clouds hit the sky. Death curdling yells emanated as javelins pierced the hide protection and impaled the unfortunates beneath. With vigour and determination the Christians heavily outnumbered steadfastly gained ground.

Kerbogha set eyes on the Frankish Army enclosing upon his encampment and a rider disturbed his contemplation flying into camp from the south.

“Your Eminence the Emir Duqaq has been overwhelmed and his army have fled,” the messenger carried the perturbing news.

“Fled,” Kerbogha scoffed in disbelief.

“The Christians they were possessed they fought like wildcats as if the devil were within them,” the Messenger reported and Kerbogha had a sudden chilling dread grip his whole body. The realization that another

Christian Army was coming to strengthen the one that was forcing his own Army to retreat.

“What is this madness,” he snapped depicting his dreams of possessing Antioch fade like sand running through his fingers to be carried by the austere wind. The messengers report of Duqaqs ignominious defeat and the resilience of the Christians soon had the other Emirs fretting for their own salvation. They hastily grabbed what possessions they could and retired from the battle with their troops.

The Crusaders now held the Turkish Camp and had formed a defensive square within it. The Pike men held the line, the archers the centre and the dismounted Knights shock troops for any enemy counter. The Saracens had bombarded, charged and harassed the defence but the Christians had held resolutely. Hugh the Great, Robert the Norman and the Count of Flanders broke through the morning mists riding into the camp to great cheers from Bohemunds men. The reliving soldiers swelled the ranks and the Turks still ready to fight saw this as the last humiliation. Kerboghas own immense presence couldn't stop his men in their tracks and the Warlord himself soon found he too was running for his life.

With supreme self-discipline the Crusaders didn't break rank to plunder the empty enemy camp and in one body they pursued the Turks into the mountains. The Armenians hearing of Kerboghas defeat came from their villagers killing all the Saracens they could.

As night fell Tom collapsed onto his knees upon the narrow mountain ledges thoroughly exhausted and the Bear came immediately to his aid. “Are you well Master Thomas,” he asked.

“Yes fine get me up,” Tom replied but glancing down his body for the first time he noticed the arrow shaft in his thigh. His trousers were coated in blood and he suddenly felt very weak.

“Your hurt,” the Bear stated ignoring his request to stand.

“By God I am,” Tom smiled to his protector and friend. “Maybe we should all rest now the day has been long,” with that the company of Archers made camp on the mountainside.

Bohemund and his Knights had chased the Turks through the ravine and they galloped into an Armenian village. The white robed villagers

had gathered to cheer them and in the centre of the village a pyramid of Saracen heads they had collected as trophies.

“Great Lord we have made a gift for you,” the Elder presented the mound to Bohemund.

“You have done us proud fellow Christians,” Bohemund congratulated their bravery.

“We have another gift for you that we have kept for sometime,” the Elder now stated and a basket was brought from one of the huts.

Bohemund and Tancred bemused as the Elder reached his hand into the basket and brought out the head of Yaghi Siyan.

“We discovered the Governor of Antioch hiding in our mountains so we deprived him of his head for you,” the Elder commented.

Bohemund laughed seeing harsh justice done here this day.

Three Emirs in Gold Armour came out of the Citadel they cantered forwards slowly on their mounts.

“Christians,” they called.

“What do you want,” Raymond called back in answer.

“Christians we have witnessed your God in action on the field of battle.

Baptise us we surrender the Citadel to you. Your God has proved he is mightier than ours,” they said in surrender after witnessing Kerbogha get trounced on the field of Orontes.

“We will take your surrender and welcome you as brothers,” Raymond said with joy, as at last Antioch was there’s.

As the autumn leaves dropped from the trees and the brown leaf clutter tinted the forest floor, Henry Longfellow and Ceana Drew approached the Hamlet of Pendlebury. They had completed a journey across the known world all the way to the Holy Land to return home once again. The Dhow they had sailed upon from Saint Symeon had ferried them to Cyprus where they boarded a Genoese merchantman that set sail for Europe on June 28th 1098 upon the eve of the battle of Orontes as the Crusaders prayed upon their knees in Antioch. A week later they arrived in Venice where Henry purchased a horse that carried them to the Norman Coast. They landed on the English shore in September of that year and on Thursday 21st they strode along the forest road to their home.

The scented aroma of lemons and oranges perfumed her walk through the lush garden of Gethsemane as Jasmina inhaled the cool air and relaxed amongst the splendour and beauty in this place of sanctuary. Jasmina a young Jewish woman whose bloodline stretched back directly to the time of Solomon and King David. The shrill laughter of children playing in the garden made her smile. Her hair was black as silk and her body lithe and curvaceous. Her face as beautiful as porcelain and her eyes whirlpools of wonder. Arabic and Hebrew urchins played frivolously having fun together as they chased one another through the olive groves. This is how it had been for four and half centuries. The two cultures living under the law of Umar. A Muslim law that had laid down the doctrines of how the Hebrews should conduct themselves and practise their religion under Islamic dominance. The Hebrew were banned from speaking or reading Arabic, they were not allowed to carry palms on Palm Sunday and death would befall any who converted a Muslim into the Jewish beliefs. The rules were simple and protected the Hebrew for if these few were rules were adhered too, where a peaceful harmony of coexistence had been achieved in the Holy City of Jerusalem.

Jasmina watched the children running up to the summit of the Mount of Olives to join others already gathered on the top. The Cities population both rejoiced and reflected as a great new conquering Caliph had made pilgrimage to the City. The Caliph's vizier Al Afdal General of the Fatimid Army of Egypt had come to pay homage at the Dome of the Mount. The sacred Rock that had the hoof mark of the Prophet Mohammed's horse El Burek imbedded within it. Ifikhar Al Daula rode by the Caliph's side in long white robes with a golden thread band on his shameel, as he had been appointed the Governor of Jerusalem. The entourage of this pilgrimage could be seen from the Mount of Olives stretching across to the void of the horizon. Ishmaelite Knights in black armour with red shameels beneath their conical helmets that had a spiked point were the honour guard. Their armour shone in the new day sun. The Saracen bodyguard of the Caliph held their lances down in recognition to this holy place and their roundel shields had the image of a Cobra upon them. The foot army followed in their wake with square Persian war helmets, long lances and square shields with the golden

emblem of the sun upon them. Other contingents preceded Sudanese Archers, Armenian Archers, black skinned Nubian warriors, Bedouin Scouts and caravans of merchants with their wares.

Jasmina fascinated by the spectacle as the black robed Bedouin protectors of the caravan routes, bonded to none although they marched loyally by the side of the Caliphs mighty Army. Then Jasmina glanced over her shoulder as the last of the Turkic Knights were abandoning the City and some Christian pilgrims driven by fear of the Fatimids were leaving also. A former Caliph who had once ruled Jerusalem Hakim who was now renowned as the Mad Caliph had burned down the Christian churches and put Christians to their death. All Pilgrimages into the Holy Land had been under armed escort during his reign and Christians in Jerusalem were made to wear a ten-pound cross around their necks every time they ventured into public. The Pilgrims in Jerusalem were taking no chances with his heir and headed back towards the fortified Citadel of the Holy Roman Empire, Constantinople.

The Ishmaelite upon hearing of the defeat of the Seljuk Turk at Antioch and took this opportunity to retake conquered land. The Shiite defenders of Jerusalem were given an ultimatum by the General of the mighty Sunni Army Al Afdal that had rode out from Egypt.

“Surrender or die,” was his message to the Turkic defenders.

Al Afdal had set out in the summer of 1098 under orders from the Vizier Al Must`Ali ruler of Egypt and the Fatimid Empire. The Turks bargained and surrendered the Holy City for a chest of silver, which they carted out the gates as they left unceremoniously.

That summer the Viziers Court had been overflowing with joy and Poets wrote get sonnets of the Victory of Al Afdal and the restoration of Jerusalem to Fatimid rule. In January 1099 word reached Al Must`Ali that the Christians had set off marching southwards and the poems ceased. The Vizier had a foreboding and wished he had not intervened in this war. Hastily he scribbled a note and sent a messenger on his fastest dhow across the sea to the Byzantium Capitol.

The Egyptian Governor of Jerusalem Iftikhar Al Daula (Pride of State) had planned to take the Holy City with forty siege engines and catapults to repulse the Turk. After six weeks of siege before a shot was fired the Seljuk's had surrendered. The Governor now set his men to repairing

walls and bolstering his defences. He knew the Crusaders had no such machines to besiege him and had every tree for miles around hewn, so they could not build any.

Jerusalem protected by deep valleys on three sides was a formidable place that had natural defences in its very terrain. The crops were planned to be laid to waste and the wells filled in or poisoned. The City was well stocked with provisions and had its own water supply an underground viaduct system that ran throughout Jerusalem an architectural masterpiece designed by King Herod.

His biggest problem facing him had been manpower with many Moslems fleeing when the Seljuk Turk had took Jerusalem in 1076 they massacred a large portion of the population due to an uprising. Almost all the Jews had left and the captured Seljuk's were thrown out. The remaining Christians were told to leave also in case they betrayed a City Gate to the Frankish invaders. All that really remained of the Jews were those belonging to a certain sect that banned them from ever leaving the Holy City. Some Jewish and Muslim civilians mainly wife's with their children belonging to the garrison who refused to parted from there loved ones.

Iftikhar had Saracen Knights, Arab Cavalry, Sudanese and Persian Archers at his disposal. The City could hold seventy thousand but only thirty thousand were now within the walls. Al Afdal the Vizier of Egypt had heard the rumours of the Crusaders approaching. He left the pilgrimage early and promised to bring back a relieving force before the month of July had ended.

The autumn sun shone through the branches illuminating the trees like spiders webs and the dead leaves crunched underfoot as the summer died to make way for the barren winter. Henry stopped in his tracks becoming suddenly alert.

"What's wrong?" questioned Ceana with alarm.

"Shush, I heard something," Henry said inspecting the encompassing forest suspiciously and meticulously withdrawing his sword with silence.

"Come out. Show yourself," Henry challenged calling into the wood.

Agonising moments passed with nothing so Henry challenged again.

“This is your last warning. Show yourself,” he hailed with authority.

A small figure slunk out from behind the bole of a tree and stood motionless in the shadow of the forest.

“Don’t harm me Sir, please don’t harm me,” the girl stated with fright.

“Why would not harm you Isabeil,” Henry answered recognising the little urchin.

“How do you know my name,” the girl asked with surprise looking upon the bearded man with bright eyes and the elegant Lady.

“Isabeil is that really you, little Isabeil,” Ceana gasped running towards the girl.

“Miss Drew__ Mister Longfellow it cant be you,” Isabeil became excited identifying them. She ran towards Ceana unafraid hugging her with tears of joy and then she stopped and said.

“Where’s Master Tom. Where’s Master Tom is he following,” she had said giddily.

“Isabeil not today. Not today anyway we need to see Flora,” Henry stated bluntly although Isabeil could sense the hurt in her words.

“Aunty Flora is this way. Come on follow me,” the Girl said heading into the trees.

“In the woods?” questioned Ceana.

“Yes she lives in the woods now hurry she will be pleased to see you,” so they tagged behind Isabeil into the Oak Wood.

They came to the glade where the hole in the Oak Tree still hid Tom’s parchments and then they catch sight of the ramshackle shelter where Flora Walters had lived for nearly three long years.

“Aunty Flo you have visitors,” Isabeil called excitedly into the shelter.

Henry and Ceana stood speechless waiting and then brow bent she emerged in grey mottled rags with dirty bandages around her eyes to hide her horrific disfigurement.

“Oh my God,” Ceana wheezed placing her hands symbolically to her lips in utter shock.

“Whose there my sweet,” Flora asked and they all paused allowing Henry to answer but his voice wouldn’t respond and he remained sullenly quiet.

Ceana gripped his hand comforting his hurt and she felt him trembling with grief.

“Isabeil my sweet who is it,” Flora asked again.

“Aunty Flo you wont believe it. It’s a miracle Miss Drew and Master Longfellow have come to visit you,” the girl answered her.

“Henry is that really you,” the Old Lady couldn’t believe it and emotion racked in her own voice.

“Mother,” Henry blurted with his distress now discernable.” Who has done this to you,” he added as his suffering turned to anger.

“Henry it is you step towards me my son,” Flo held her arms before her as Henry approached and her hands found his face, which she ran her fingers over again and again in identification.

“You’ve grown a beard and my you’re a man now,” she said as she touched his features.” is Ceana there,”

“Yes Flo I’m here,” Ceana replied.

“And where’s Thomas,” silence fell as the Old Lady spoke these words.

“And Thomas,” she repeated after a few moments.

“He’s dead Mother,” Henry stated knowing he could not of survived the siege of Antioch.

“Poor Thomas,” Floras voice trailed away and her hands fell from Henrys face.

“Now who did this to you and why are you living here instead of our house in the village,” Henry demanded answers of his own.

John Pendle sat in the Thanes hut counting the silver coins the tax levy for that year which ransomed his Hamlet to the Normans for all eternity it would seem.

“Pendle,” a voice shattered his consternation coming from outside and he stood trembling.

“Pendle show yourself,” the voice called again.

John Pendle paced to the door with trepidation and to witness in the square the bearded stranger that stood before him. The villagers hearing the commotion had stopped ploughing the surrounding fields, bakers took their loaves from the ovens and washerwomen dropped the garments to soak in buckets of water to witness what was occurring before them.

“Who are you,” Pendle confronted him with.

“You do not recognise one of your own people but that does not surprise me. As my mother was one of your people and blinded by the Normans you left her to die in the wilds,” Henry ranted off his grievances.

“Who are you,” Pendle questioned again this time nervously.

“Henry Longfellow,”

“The Outlaw,”

“He killed ten Normans with one arrow,” Whispers and fairy stories broke out amongst the crowd as one of their prodigal sons had returned.

“What do you want here? You have no business in my village and you are not welcome,” Pendle made known his discomfort by Henrys return.

“Your wrong I do have business here. Revenge is my business and I’ve come to kill you,” Pendles face dropped at Henrys revelation.

Henry unsheathed his sword bubbling with anger and stepped forward to cleave the Thane in two although from a crowd a figure unexpectedly lunged with a pitchfork taking him by surprise.

The sharp prongs were struck with such force that Henry felt the weapons wind whip across his face as it passed. He had caught the attack in the corner of his eye just in time and withdrew his head as the sharp prongs flashed before his eyes. He had ducked acrobatically before a second strike could be launched and rolled onto his feet to face his aggressor.

“Eairsidth Pendle still sneaking up on people from behind,” Henry snarled glaring at the Blacksmith son before him.

“You’re a dead man Henry Longfellow you should of stayed in the woods with your witch of a mother,” Eairsidth gloated watching his Father grabbing a staff coming upon Henry from behind and he knew between them they would have an easy murder.

“I get to kill the Bastard Father and the Bastard Son at once, how marvellous,” came Henrys repartee.

Eairsidth lunged out again with the pitchfork although Henry with three successive strikes of his sword countered him skilfully. The first blow had broken the prongs, the second had cut the shaft in half and the third had severed his right hand at the wrist. Eairsidth froze in horror looking at his hand on the earth in disbelief as a scavenging dog took its opportunity and whipped away the prize in its jaw.

“You bastard you’ve crippled my son,” John Pendle roared charging Henry with the staff held aloft. Henry though swift of foot and trained in battle sidestepped the charge. He thrust his sword into Pendles midriff and it skewered him completely. The Thane dropped to his knees with blood curdling from his lips. He gasped out his last mortal breath and died.

Henry turned back to Eairsidh who stared at his Fathers dead body before him.

“Henry Longfellow you’ve not seen the last of me,” the Blacksmiths son swore before turning to flee holding his handless arm before him. Henry now found himself surrounded by the entire village and the wailing of John Pendles widow kneeling by his body added to the hysteria.

“People of Pendlebury hear me out,” Henry called and silence fell for him to speak.

“A wrong was done unto me and I have righted it before you all. If you can accept me back I will take over the duties of the Thane,” he had stated but uproar broke out with angry shouts heckled at him.

“What right have to preach to us,”?

“Be gone murderer,”

“How can an outlaw be our Thane,” ?

“You’re an outcast be gone,”

“Yes.Yes,” Henry called to quieten his accusers.” Yes I was an outlaw but never a murderer. I have a papal decree declaring I am a free man furthermore my crimes committed with Thomas Walters God rest his soul have bankrupted this village and you have reason to hate us for that but for that alone. Thomas though in his wisdom gave me this for you to make his own amends,” Henry reached into his purse and brought out three Byzantium Gold coins.

“Wow,” the crowd cooed in wonder.

“The village debt was fifty two marks of silver and this Gold would more than cover it. The ransom on Pendlebury will be settled and from now on what you break your backs to earn will be your own. If you make me Thane you will see this village once again prosper,” Henry was met with cheers and smiling faces by his speech.

The triumphant mood of victory soon turned to despair. A pestilence had been wrought upon the Crusaders from the corpses of the dead that had littered the streets of Antioch for many months. The hot humid climate had made the dead cadavers come alive with disease and a putrid stench stifled the air.

Bohemund and the Count Raymond of Toulouse were in dispute after a bitter quarrel had broken between them. Both wanted to rule Antioch now it had finally fallen. Further divisions amongst the leaders had cast a gloom upon them all. The North Europeans with Hugh the Great, Robert the Norman and the Count of Flanders were still allied with their fealty with Alexius.

Raymond of Toulouse and the South Europeans had put the victory down solely to the power of the Lance, dismissing out of hand the general ship of Bohemund. The Normans scoffed to these accusations against their heroic Lord and the miracle of the Holy Lance was now openly disputed. Godfrey of Bouillon had sworn he had laid eyes upon the True Lance amongst the relics of the Byzantium's at Constantinople. Godfrey even intimated that Raymond and his men had simply unearthed what they had already buried.

The Crusade splitting and diverging into many squabbling factions with the Northern Crusaders dismissing the Lance and the south proclaiming to it's true power. The only man who could bring order out of chaos was the Bishop Adhemar of Le Puy and he died of plague on August 1st 1098.

Peter Bartholomew seeing himself as Gods chosen and at the root of the political turmoil agreed to undergo an ordeal by fire to prove his faith in the Lance was the truth. Clad only in a shirt and bearing the Holy Lance he actually walked into a heap of ferocious blazing Olive branches and emerged on the other side. Twelve days later he died in consequence to his actions. His followers lay blame to his death by excessive handling by the crowd after the event although his enemies declared he died of natural burning by fire. This dispute still continued whilst daily more and more bodies died of the plague. Pyres of human corpses burned throughout the city and death parties gathered the bodies from off the streets.

One day a traveller entered the city and Tom's face broke into a smile upon immediately catching sight of him.

"Father Benedict greetings," Tom yelled running to his mentor.

"Thomas your alive Lord have mercy," the Father responded.

"Father where have you been we have had a great victory against the Turks although now only death and dismay is all around us," Thomas voice trailed off at his summary of events.

"I know well of your victory Thomas my captors were glad to be rid of me through it of this death and dismay we must discuss later," Father Benedict had decided to keep his spiritual events to himself but his belief in God was now confirmed without a shadow of doubt.

As winter approached the harvests were reaped and granaries stocked. It would not be until the coming year they could march upon Jerusalem. Thomas dreamt constantly of home and Ceana brooding for hours alone. Father Benedict was his only consolation sitting here shivering amongst the plague ridden and distraught army of the Lord.

"Thomas I know what you are yearning for but next year Jerusalem will fall and you will be free from your vows. Take heart for soon the voyage of what you dream will soon come about," with those words from Father Benedict Thomas slunk into sleep dreaming of floating across a bright blue ocean.

The humongous walls of Antioch lay in their wake as fifteen thousand Crusaders walked southwards who were iron willed to honour the vows of the crusade. Thomas hobbled like many others crippled by dysentery. Starvation had raked their bodies' wraith thin and the untold torments had made them arduous men. Bohemund atop the tower of the citadel under the purple eagle flag watched the sorry procession saunter out of his City. His quest had ended here with a principality to govern and his fortitude to remain Lord of Antioch had made him a bitter enemy of Raymond of Toulouse. Hugh of Vermandois had also left heading back to France upon the Genoese fleets with his own Knights the plague had taken it's toil upon him. Raymond and Godfrey now joint Commanders had managed to scrape enough of an army together to justify continuing. Count Raymond looked over his shoulder with hatred in his eyes to the man on the tower beneath the Purple flag. Then his eyes softened as he passed the gravestone of his old friend the Bishop Adhemar of Le puy. "Rest well my dear friend, I fear it will not be long now before I will be joining you," he whispered the prayer unto himself then turned his head southwards to begin the journey.

The drudge of marching through the mountainous terrain would have been a burden to a healthy man and the emaciated Crusaders walked with every step wrought with pain. The Crusaders had no compassion or strength spare to assist anyone who faltered. If any poor soul fell and many did they were abandoned on the mountains to there own demise.

In the Imperial Palace the white cloaked emissary with the red cross of Christ on his tunic paced down the gilded corridors with purpose. He bowed politely before the Emperor Alexius Comnenus who sat regally upon his throne. Alexius still had the words of the Fatimids upon his mind.

"Friend of Allah, I beseech thee, hold back these invaders until my Army is strong enough to repel them forever. If you do this I Caliph of Egypt will grant you back the lands stolen from you by the Turk. Peace and prosperity will once again and exist between us. In Allah's name with Mohammed as my prophet I swear this,"

In response to the Fatimids plea and with the prospect of regaining his lost Empire. Alexius had sent a dispatch to Count Raymond of Toulouse the Frank who he believed would listen to his pleas the most.

“Fear not my fellow Christians, I realize you are now few in number hold out at Antioch for me, for I am coming with great aid and assistance,” they were the words of the Emperor.

The messenger before him carried the response and he looked upon the Knight with renewed hope for his schemes.

“I hope your journey has not been taxing,” the Emperor welcomed him.

“I travel with God by my side,” the Messenger responded. Who had suffered at Antioch through the long siege without this Mans promised aid. He had crossed mountains and deserts to stand here before the Byzantium Emperor.

“Here is my Lord’s, Count Raymond’s reply,” with that he handed the scroll over.

Alexius read it then tossed the parchment on the floor in disgust.

“Be gone,” he shouted angrily at the Messenger and with that the Frank turned and stepped down the corridors.

The scroll lay on the floor with ten words wrote upon it.

In Combat Formation we go to Jerusalem....Our Lances raised.

The mountainous terrain was extremely hard going taxing both will and strength. The Crusaders had endured famine; plague and most still bore their sickness. Thomas mind whirled in a blurred haze. His stomach ached then erupted with fire as a clear liquid ran from his backside as he still marched. He dared not rest as the fever took hold. Those who rested on these paths slept for eternity.

“Jerusalem Deus Vult,” Thomas croaked from his dehydrated throat.

“Deus Vult,” his men uttered back admiring his will knowing he was consumed by fever which made there own ills seem trivial.

Tom’s strength though soon vanished with his legs dead weights that carried him blindly. There was no pain with his mind swimming in an abyss of total exhaustion. He knew the danger signs well so many times on the road from Toulouse he had seen men swagger then die stone dead upon the long march. His head spun and the mountain peaks rotated in his vision. The white nimbus clouds raced across the heavens then the

earth came rushing towards him. His legs buckled beneath him and he wobbled with no control over his own limbs.

“Sire,” A hand steadied him before the fall and a flask of water placed upon his flaky lips. The water dribbled onto his hot tongue and it tasted like honey of the Gods. His eyes glued to flask until the last few drops of water had been relinquished from it. The flask emptied his gaze shifted to the supporting arm and the bearded mischievous grin of Bernard the Bear.

“Rest Sire, there is a town ahead and the Count is preparing to take it,” the Bear stated euphorically.

“Quick get the men ready the Count will need us and” Thomas finally collapsed into oblivion.

The Town of Marrat Al Numan had stood in the way of the Count Raymond’s quest to procure a fiefdom of his own in the East. The Crusaders hungry, fevered and tormented unleashed all the rage of war upon this small Turkish stronghold that had imprisoned Father Benedict. The small garrison never stood a chance against the battle hardened Franks and no quarter was given.

Thomas regained his senses as he traced the stench of smoke and an ethereal bonfire alighting the heavens like the entrails of hell. The Bear came running caked from head to foot in Saracen blood with his beard matted by the slaughter, He fell to his Lords side upon his knees and Thomas witnessed this huge gruff man cry. They were tears of anger, rage and disgust that had flooded his conscience.

“Bernard,” Thomas placed a caring hand on his friends shoulder.

“You wouldn’t have believed the carnage with your own eyes. They boiled children in big pots, they gutted the Saracens for gold in their bellies and they ate the flesh of the Turk. The screams in that hell hole will forever echo in this thick head,”

“Who did this,” Thomas asked astonished.

“The Tafurs were feasting off the Saracen dead and making soups from there blood,” The Bear related the events but Thomas knew well of the Tafurs. The savage peasantry that had followed Peter the Hermit. They were infamous rogues but tolerated by the Count to make up the numbers for this expedition.

“Tafurs,” Tom spat out the name knowing how they had only brought misery. They had murdered their way through Slovenia so when the Armies of the Counts followed into the vengeful path of the Slovenia people.

“Not only the Tafurs have shamed us this night. The Count of Toulouse made the captured Saracens carry out the heads of their fallen to build victory mounds at the gate of the town.” The Bear spoke aghast with horror and shame “there was more women and children thrown into fires given no quarter.”

“What in God’s name was the Count thinking,” Thomas spoke with utter disbelief.

Marrat Al Numan lay in ruins, wiped off the face of the earth like a biblical tragedy. The Crusaders took back up the march most with their bowed heads with dishonour although the rag clothed Tafurs seem to find glory from this appalling conquest.

A few days later Thomas’ mind wandered to thoughts of home and the cool air of the night had a new sensation in its breeze.

“Bernard,” Thomas called out in alarm.

“Sire,” the Bear came running at full trot with his axe in his huge hands. Thomas was running too and the Bear raced after him down the steep slope keeping his weapon at the guard.

“What’s wrong Sire, where are the Saracens,” the Bear catching his stride questioned although Thomas just laughed out heartily.

“Come Bear have no fear, there is no danger,” at that the Bear recoiled as a thunderous roar stopped him mid stride.

The crash echoed and hung rolling upon the night air.

“Look do you see it,” Then Thomas waded knee deep into the surf of the sea.

The Bear followed his huge frame crashing noisily into the water and he grabbed hold of Thomas and forced him under the water.

Thomas spluttered as his face emerged from under the water. The bear released his grip and Thomas came to his feet.

“What the hell was that for, he said annoyed?”

The Bear laughed out with roar. So hard that Thomas was sure it must of hurt.

“You scare me half to death to rascal and you have me chasing you all the way down here,” the Bear still laughing” I should of killed you as you nearly killed my poor ole heart,”

Thomas gave him a forgiving smile and then looked with meditation out across the Mediterranean.

“It’s wondrous the sea, it reminds me so much of home, of life and of hope my friend.

I think its because I was born by the sea,” Thomas talked dreamily of his thoughts.

“Father,” Thomas called to the waves remembering that day so vivid and clear. The day the Norsemen had murdered his father.

“Father help me now if you can, give me strength, courage and the will to continue,”

At that very moment a spurt of water shot into the air and the telltale flap of a whales tail rose from the surface.

“The old man of the sea answers your call Sire,” the Bear remarked solemnly.

“Yes bad memories, old memories that’s all,” Thomas explained.

“We are all haunted by our own demons sire, hopefully Jerusalem will cleanse us of them,”

“Let us pray it does,”

The Burguns the brigade Thomas commanded had been bolstered back to full strength from people of Bohemunds and Hugh’s Army.

Thomas looked on the new names and the new faces. Old Harry and the hooked nose of Pol the poacher brought back memories of old friends as he caught similarities from the ones who had now joined the ranks.

“Men some of you know me, some of you have heard of me, only good things I hope,” Thomas addressed the men as they responded with a laugh.” Some of you may not know of me at all. I only ask of you one thing loyalty and brotherhood upon the field of honour. I will endeavour to guide us with skill and fairness. Jerusalem calls not to me but to us all. Knights of God our road to the Holy City is nearly complete so let us travel it with honour. As God would of willed it. Deus Vult,”

“Deus Vult,” they replied and all had heard rumours of their new commander. This man who led without fear, this man who used tactical genius against the enemy. This Tafur who stepped from his rags and now walked with the nobility through heroic deeds.

After the massacre at Marra the Crusade followed the Sea Road past Tyre and came to rest at the gate hold of the City of Arqua. Count Raymond consumed with a hateful envy of his advisory Bohemund had determined himself the task of obtaining his own fiefdom in the Holy Land. His men set to work besieging the Citadel and war machines were erected and ladders were being prepared for an assault.

Other lesser Lords had been swept along by the avaricious greed for property ruling marra and barra as lesser feudal gains.

A mutiny of contempt for the Lords had begun to fester within each noble and humble man. Foul whispers spread amongst the camps as their leaders had turned from Gods purpose to achieve only one goal their lust for gold.

As the fires of insurrection burned amongst the hungry and exhausted Crusaders a priest Peter Desiderius sat upon a crop of a wave breaking rocks hearkening the sounds of the sea and breathing in mediating wafts of spindrift air.

“Lord do not forsake us. Forgive us men of sin and let us bring victory before you,”

In the white spumes of cascading water unexpectedly an Angel glittered in a golden mist emanated before him hovering above the cataclysm of the seas might.

Peter agape with fear knelt hands clasped before this heavenly vision.

“Do not fear Peter I am Andrew sent by our Lord in your hour of need as he has work for you Good man.” the Angel had said with a voice so sweet and soothing Peter felt his whole body warm with religious awe.

“What would our Lord have me do? His word is my command,” the Priest bowed his head in submission to Gods will.

“Peter go seek audience with the Count and say unto him molest thyself or others not. Jerusalem must be the next city to fall or thy shall grant thee no help. Do not trouble thyself over the unfinished siege of this City

let it not weigh upon thee or other cities which will cross your path because a war is raging before thee and many cities will fall by your hand before the end of the day. Furthermore do not trouble thyself or thy men but distribute what you gain freely in the Lords name and be a companion and loyal friend to thy vassals. If thou shall do this God will grant thee Jerusalem and Alexandria and Babylon but if thou dost not obey me thou shalt not acquire these things promised and you will be placed in such straits that thou will not knowest how to escape. This is the word of the Lord.”

Peter went to the tent of Count Raymond and demanded his audience after a few moments the Guard let him pass into the portal of Counts shelter. Raymond sat at a desk studying his plans for the coming assault of Arqua totally engrossed by the riches and greed he would soon acquire. He glanced up almost cursory as the Priest entered before his eyes settled back upon the canvas plan of the cities defences.

“Count Raymond our Lord has sent me here to chastise thee with his words` molest thyself or others not. Jerusalem must be the next city to fall or thy shall grant thee no help. Do not trouble thyself over the unfinished siege of this City let it not weigh upon thee or other cities which will cross your path because a war is raging before thee and many cities will fall by your hand before the end of the day. Furthermore do not trouble thyself or thy men but distribute what you gain freely in the Lords name and be a companion and loyal friend to thy vassals. If thou shall do this God will grant thee Jerusalem and Alexandria and Babylon but if thou dost not obey me thou shalt not acquire these things promised and you will be placed in such straits that thou will not knowest how to escape. This is the word of the Lord.”

“Count your people hate and despise you as you are so tormented by greed. Listen to the words of our Lord save your soul,”

The Count glared at the priest with fire in his eyes then he gazed upon the canvas map of Arqua upon his desk. His gauntleted hand punches the desk with a thunder and he grabbed the map as it were but an old rag. He tore into shreds in a fit of temper and then threw it aside stamping the remnants of cloth into the ground. He then fell to his knees hands

clasped and began to cry. The visions of Marra and the hatred that had overwhelmed him suddenly subsided.

“What have I done Father, forgive me I had lost my mind,”

Thomas smiled as the Siege engines were burned and the People of Arqua defiantly cheered as the Crusaders prepared to march away southwards. The mood of the men was renewed as their leader had abandoned his frivolous mission and turned his aim back to the capture of Jerusalem.

“Thank God Thomas at last we march,” The Bear said tired of the inactivity.

“Yes my friend have the men sing as we march. Today is a day of hope a day the spirit triumphed lets pray our road is glorified with victory,”

The Bear turned to the company of archers and they sang as they marched.

And what if my feet may not tread where he stood
 Nor my ears hear the dashing of Galilees flood,
 Nor my eyes see the cross, which bowed him to bear,
 Yet, Loved of the Father, thy spirit is near
 To the meek and the lowly and penitent here;
 Deus vult fine warriors don't lose heart,
 Jerusalem calls to the sound of our march.

The Mountains of Lebanon rose upon the horizon and the King of Tripoli fearing the Crusaders would wrought havoc upon him offered market to the people. Count Raymond acquired 15,000 Bezants in tribute and 15 horses but did not share them out freely breaking his oath with the Lord. A hundred pilgrims were released from the dungeons of Tripoli and Crusaders rejoiced at the Gates of the City. As the people gorged themselves on fresh fruit and red meats the leaders met in the War Pavilion of Count Raymond. Gathered were the noblemen including Thomas, the Priests and a group of Syrian Christians who had been imprisoned in Tripoli.

“My friends our road ahead is littered with uncertainty as the Saracen Armies will try to ambush us and our Syrian friends are here to guide us upon the way to the holy city,” the Count held open his hand inviting the Syrians to speak.

“The way to Jerusalem through Damascus is abundant with supplies although you will find no water for many days. The other road over the mountains of Lebanon is safe and well-watered but hazardous for pack animal and camels. There is another road by the sea where there are many narrow passes where the accursed Saracens could hold you back against all mankind and yet it is written in the Gospel of St Peter which we treasure as its guardian that if you truly are the chosen people who will redeem Jerusalem back under the banner of Christ, you will pass by the sea road. To us humble Syrians this seems impossible by the hardship and the enemy in strength in your path although you are indeed strange Men who have endured so much already. In that Gospel it states ‘what you have done, but also what ought you must do this concludes my message too the Council,’” the Syrian orthodox Priest had told them of the prophecy they had inherited.

The debate between moral, military and religious needs raged for most of that day. Thomas sat and listened astutely to all the arguments. Then as the storms of debate rested Raymond’s eyes focused on the young English Knight sat in the sidelines.

“Thomas,” the Count said gaining his attention and the assembly hushed waiting for the Count to speak again.

“Yes my Lord,” Thomas came to his feet by the sudden attentiveness.

“Thomas what is your suggestion,” the Count asked his opinion his mind raced with both honour and horror as he did not now what to state. He feared he might suggest a foolish notion, which would be pushed out of hand.

“Deus Vult,” Thomas called” If God wills we go by the sea, then by the sea we go and it will not be for us to fear but any Saracen foolhardy enough to stand in our path but for them to fear us if we are the chosen people,” the Count Laughed out loud at such raw honesty and bravado.

“If all my Knights had such passion for war Jerusalem would have already fallen,” he applauded Tom’s speech with.

“It is decided by the sea we go,” and with that Thomas had decided the course of the Crusade.

The Crusaders loaded donkeys, oxen and camels and turned their march towards Jerusalem. Peter Bartholomew had left with them an omnipotent warning on his deathbed.

“Only approach the sacred City penitent and bare footed,”

Lesser Lords on the March placed their standards on abandoned Castles and Villas. The gruff conversations were mainly of plunder and war. A few however amongst them like Peter the Hermit who held the word of God spoken by Peter Bartholomew close to his heart. He walked bare footed and sighed heavily at the others contempt of the divine word.

As the Mountains of Lebanon stretched towards the heavens before them and the sun tormented down from above Father Benedict came to see Thomas. His company of Archers were acting as scouts for the main column in the foothills of the high passes. The man on the donkey came down the dirt track and then from nowhere Thomas and his men appeared from the undergrowth. “By all the Angels of Heaven Father,” Thomas cried out recognising his friend.

“Thomas you look well,”

“What brings you up here where only the eagles find rest,”

“I need your help Thomas may we speak in private,”

“Certainly Father,” Tom ushered him to one side out of earshot of the others.

“A priest Peter Desiderius who turned Raymond’s will against crushing Arqua has had another vision. He has entrusted me to see its completion will you and your men come with me into the wilderness to complete this task.”

“What task Father,”?

“To find the Church of Saint Leontius and retrieve something there that will aid our quest,”

Tom deliberated between his duties as a Knight and his loyalty to his friend. He decided to send a messenger to Count Raymond reporting finding tracks of an enemy column and going in pursuit of them. He knew it would still look bad deserting his post but better than the truth on some fanciful quest,”

The mountains red and covered in a dust that rose if merely brushed upon. For three days they ventured across the highest peaks until they came across the caves of the Monks.

“This is it Thomas the Monastery of Saint Leontius,” the Father said with vivid excitement.

The caves were honeycombed throughout the cliff face of a mountain where the monks came to live out there lives in penance.

The passage leading to the chamber deep in the mountainside was completely dark Thomas felt his hair stand on end as if he were entering the bowels of Hell not a hallowed shrine. The torches they carried flickered like the breath of a foul demon and the smell of death wrought the air.

“This is it Thomas. This is it where we will find the relics of four Saints as foretold by the vision of Peter Desiderius. The Angel told him to take these and carry them before your army on the road to Jerusalem.”

“Which Saints are here buried within this mountain Father,” the Bear asked with dread in his tone.

“Here lay the bones of four Saints who will guide us on our glorious quest,” was all Father Benedict would reveal unto them.

The chamber came upon them an open space from the confines of the passage and torches lit drifted high above them illuminating this place in mysterious awe. On an altar with golden cross set upon it were four coffers in which the vision had foretold. Father Benedict raced towards them and his torch hung above each as he read out the names inscribed upon them.

“Saint Cyprian,” he bowed his head in respect to this holy mans name.

“Saint Omechios” his voice almost hushed as the vision came true before his eyes.

“Saint Leontius God bless you,” he exclaimed.

“Saint John Chrysostom, Thomas it is true, it is true they are here,” Benedict’s voice was almost a shriek with his disbelief at the confirmation of this new miracle.

“Father over here there is another,” one of Tom’s men finding another coffer with a few bones lay within the smashed lid. Benedict scrambled over his legs weary with the elation that had overcome him. His torch lowered and the inscription had been destroyed on the lid crumbled into sand.

“Whose bones are these,” Benedict called into the surrounding darkness spooking the others.

“Father we don’t know does it matter lets just take them,” Thomas suggested ill at ease.

“No Thomas if this Saint wishes to come with us to Jerusalem let him make his wishes known to us. Otherwise let him remain here why should we burden ourselves with unknown bones,” Father Benedict spoke with a controlled anger over this enigma.

“Father let us go then now I have a foreboding of this place,” with that Tom’s men through the narrow passages carried four coffers.

On the mountainside in the full glory of the day Father Benedict carefully emptied the contents of each coffer into white cloths saying prayers unto them. Tom’s men knelt in prayer to homage these four martyrs who had joined their Crusade.

That night Father Benedict sat alone on the mountainside as the camp slept with the four cloth coverings on the ground before him. He was interrupted from his thoughts as a handsome youth with heroic beauty stood before him.

“Why did you not take my relics as you have done with these others,” the boy asked.

“Who are you,” the Priest questioned.

“Dost thou not know me who guarded you in the dungeons of the enemy and thou who is the standard bearer of your army,” the boy replied.

“Who art thou,” Benedict said with bewilderment.

“You know who art thou tell me the truth of your mind,” the Youth added and the priest felt small and insignificant by the weight of his doubtful spoken reply.

“Sire it is said that Saint George is the standard bearer of our army,”

“Thou has spoken well for I am he. Take therefore my relics and place them with these others,” the youth commanded.

“It will be done Sire,” the boy turned and walked away into the mists of the dark night.

As Morning broke Thomas readied his men as they broke camp. He couldn’t find the Priest and he began scanning the mountainsides for his friend. Then he espied him walking out from the caves clutching the

fifth coffer in his arms. Thomas ran over to assist him and as he neared the Priest was laughing and salivating madly.

“Good God was is wrong Father,”

“Its him Thomas,”

“Who,”

“Its Saint George he has once again joined our ranks hope has not deserted us for God himself is marching by our side.

Count Raymond had got the Crusade through Beirut without hindrance and as they came to a renowned path known as the twisted mouth an archer shot a hawk that fell from the sky. The Bishop of Adle found the dead birds carcass and attached to its talon was a letter. He took it to the Count immediately.

Count Raymond unscrolled the tiny parchment and read it out to the few nobles assembled.

“To the Governor of Jerusalem from the King of Arqua.

A foolish troublesome host without order passed by my city and is heading your way forewarn all our cities and fortresses that the heathen is upon us, Allah Akbar”.

I knew we should of lay that accursed town asunder,” Raymond seethed at the audacity.

“What is done is done,” Robert the Norman stated.

“Jerusalem calls for us we can hearken her call, not even the birds in the sky can harm us such is the watchful eye of God upon us,” the Bishop of Adle responded.

Crossing the river at Ramleh Raymond discovered the Muslims had abandoned the fortifications leaving grain and cattle in their wake such was their fear of the Christian Knights.

The days passed by with little Respite Mountain inclines so steep they felt as if the man above them almost stood on their shoulders. The sun beat down mercilessly and the Knights still adorned in armour cooked as if a roasting fire burned within them. On the 4th June as the crusaders camped in the high mountains of Lebanon the exhausted souls contemplated the vast journey they had embarked upon.

“France yearns for me whilst I sit here amongst the dry infertile earth of this godforsaken place,”

“England...England,” Thomas said the word once again almost dreamily.

“Home is far for all of us but salvation is nearing,” the Bear added.

As he spoke the heavens turned completely black and silence fell amongst every campfire.

“Its an eclipse,”

“An eclipse of the moon,” voices raced through the darkness.

A foreboding shook them all as they contemplated the meaning of this omen in an eerie silence as the earth stood still in utter blackness. Then the moon came back in full glory lighting the earth like a new day sun.

“Deus Vult,” a call echoed and joy spread through each as the Lord had made known his presence amongst them.

As dawn came and the camp fires were extinguished they set off again up the mountain passes then a call. A heckle of almost mad laughter within the cry of the howling southerly wind broke through the ranks. Thomas scrambled on all fours like a mountain goat racing to the peak with his men in his wake. They reached the summit and they heard the call.

“Montonjoe.Montonjoe,” was cried out.

Thomas stared across the horizon from the peak and their it stood Jerusalem with its honey coloured domes and the ancient walls encircling the Holy Sepulchre.

“What’s Montonjoe,” Thomas asked.

“The mountain of joy my friend where many a pilgrim has cried in happiness coming to the end of his long journey,” Father Benedict answered his question.

“Lets us pray men of God,” the Bishop of Orange called mass amongst the summit of Mount Joy.

Thomas could not help but stare across the expanse towards the Holy City during the Ceremonies with tears in his eyes. Antioch, Constantinople, and home flashed in his mind and then he focused on Ceana fearing for her safety.

The Fatimid Garrison had made good preparations they had poisoned every well for miles, moved all the livestock within the city walls and expelled all the Christians from whatever sect.

“Let these Christians come Hakim knew how to keep them in order by burning down their churches and crucifying them in the name of their prophet. They have marched here to their deaths.” the Governor Ifithikar Proclaimed.

Jerusalem upon the mountain where Mohammed journeyed into heaven and the gravesite of the first man upon the Earth Adam. Where King David had unified the Israelite Tribes and Solomon had built a magnificent Temple to honour the Lord. Christian, Jewish and Muslim peoples contend for this sacred site, the cradle of the one God in Hebrew, and Christian and Islamic creed. A city of conflict where King Nebuchadnessar had once took the city and enslaved the people carrying them off in chains to Babylon.

“O`God the nations have invaded your inheritance they have defiled your holy temple. They have reduced Jerusalem to rubble,” a prayer of the Israelites that now sung in the Crusaders heart.

On June 6th the Crusade Armies took up their positions around the City of Jerusalem. Robert the Norman took the North side near the flower gate also known as Herods gate. Robert the Count of Flanders was to his right flank near the Church of Saint Stephen the first Martyr stoned to death in Christ’s name. Duke Godfrey took the west wall near the Jaffa Gate and Count Raymond of Toulouse operated from the South on the slopes of Mount Zion near the Church of Saint Mary the Lords mother. Her son Jesus who had partaken in the last supper with his disciples at this Holy place. Thomas and his men were assigned to Count Raymond’s army to temporary bolster his men, as the South approach was a large area to patrol.

Thomas stood upon Mount Zion watching Jerusalem glow with the moon at its fullest and torches alighting the streets within.

“Its so beautiful a place,” he remarked.

“Beauty that hides a long and bloody history,” Thomas turned to see Father Benedict standing at his shoulder.

“We are here Father, we have reached our Journeys end,”

“Yes Thomas we are here, by Gods grace we have made it here,”

Jerusalem during the Bronze Age venerated the pagan God Shalem and he is still honoured within the name of the City. Then later Jerusalem became a Canaanite shrine to the deity known as Baal. The mountain on which this place had been born was claimed to be Mount Moriah on which Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac. In 1000bc King David unified the Israelite Tribes and chose Jerusalem as his capitol. King David's son and heir Solomon built upon the summit a splendid temple to honour the Lord, composed of successive courtyards each one holier than the next with the final most sacred chamber housing the Ark of the Covenant.

King Nebuchadnezzar the mighty ruler of Persia took this city enslaving the Israelites and carrying them off to Babylon in chains. He took all the treasures of Solomon to decorate his own Royal Palaces.

When the Israelites were released from their five hundred year bondage they returned from exile to rebuild the splendours that the Persians had destroyed. They embraced the one god who involved himself with his creation mankind and wanted his creation to choose the right path. They wrote a book of all his wonders and all his laws and named it the Bible. This is the way of the Lord as debated by the Jews and the Pharisees in Herod's Temple.

The Romans came to Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple of Solomon and during that time King Herod rebuilt the Temple mount. Then Jesus Christ came here to Preach then die upon the Cross-for Gods creation. Next came the Byzantium's, then the Seljuk Turks and now residing in this City lay the Fatimid Egyptians. Since this day Christians, Hebrews and Muslims have all contended for this sacred place. The cradle of the one God of Hebrew, Christian and Muslim alike.

The lights of many campfires illuminated Mount Zion, so many lights that it seemed that this Holy place had breathed a life of its own. Hums of singing and cadences of conversation rumbled upon the wind as if this place now had its own voice. The deep gully between Godfrey's Camp and the walls of Jerusalem glowed eerily alighted by the moon.

Raymond sat deep in his thoughts judging this inhospitable and hostile terrain. The wells poisoned for miles around, the crops torched with no food ready to hand and fifteen thousand people to sustain. At Nicaea the Byzantium's had provisioned them and aided them with siege craft using

there skilled artisans. At Antioch they needed no such assistance they had the cunning of Bohemund and a treacherous Armenian to boot. "Jerusalem," he murmured where the horses had to be rode half a day to water, where food had to be gathered from the wilds and where a natural water source lay at their feet but they dared not use it. The Fountain of Siloam guarded by enemy archers upon the walls and towers of the City. This stagnant pool stood fetid for two days but then on every third day a miracle occurred. The spring came gushing to life as water from the bowels of the earth exploded on the surface. This one source the Saracen couldn't blockade or poison but they guarded it ruthlessly.

Wild animals and stray livestock were instinctively drawn to this well of life. The water spouting and bubbling to life called to them. The Saracens would kill these beasts testing their archery skills destroying needed supplies from the Crusaders. They cheered mockingly from the battlements as men so drawn by thirst could discern the fountain of water singing. On one such day Thomas looked across the landscape where the Lord God had dried out the riverbeds and now these tiny ravines blended with the rest of the bleak wilderness. The Saracens had aided the Lords wickedness as they filled up the wells, destroyed the cisterns and dammed up the brook behind the walls of Jerusalem.

Thomas watched with great anguish at the desperate ones driven mad by thirst, the lame and the crippled awaiting to run a gauntlet of death in the hope of soothing their parched lips. Dead bodies picked upon by birds lay along the path to the Fountain of Siloam of those who had dared and failed before. One of the new challengers an old man began hobbling down the slope towards the spring.

"Wait," Thomas called "Wait, you old fool," he added under his breath. The challengers looked at this Lord with the madness of thirst in their eyes without taking his heed they ran in a mob for the water.

"Wait, wait please and I promise you today that you will drink without danger. I swear it," his words were all but in vain as the single mind of the mob had begun to dash for the prize.

"Bernard call out the men, have them form line on me," Thomas shouted as the first Saracen arrows were being shot from the battlements.

The impatient old fool who was first to run was ironically the first now to fall. Of the fifty or so who made a crazy stampede only half were still alive by the time Burgens had got into line.

“Men this day, the rabbits take the bow to the hunter, good hunting,” he said as his men responded taking out the Saracens bowmen in the towers.

The Saracen archers were surprised at the accuracy of the missiles that were being launched against them. If they dared take a shot an enemy arrowhead would either find them or miss them by such a tiny distance that they felt its flight path upon their cheek.

The people reached the pool where a sheep and two goats were already drinking. A whoosh and the sheep bleated as an arrow pierced its skull. The carcass fell and floated on the water that was now tainted by the crimson of its blood. A Saracen Archer grinned broadly as his good aim and good fortune as a Christian arrow hit him on his temple and mashed his own brains. The people drunk and drunk there till before they scrambled back up the slope with Thomas and his men still covering. One man dragged large heavy pigskin on his crippled back. He reached the top breathless and exhausted. He placed the pigskin of water at the Lord Knights feet.

“For you and your men my Lord, thank you for giving us grace from this madness,” with that he hobbled away with the others.

On June 7th Tancred rode in from the south bringing with him a whole flock of sheep to the bewildered and welcome eyes of the ravenous Crusaders. He was greeted with rapturous cheers and for the first time in many weeks they felt substantial food in their bellies. Tancred reported to Godfrey and Raymond of his expedition.

“I have taken Bethlehem it was relatively unprotected but we have denied the Saracen privilege of this town,” he reported solemnly.

“Well done Tancred let us rejoice with the food and good tidings you have brought us,” Godfrey was genuinely elated.

With the pangs of hunger sated the parched throats of thirst had been their greatest enemy. Drinking sheep’s blood had to some extent kept them going but the only nearby source of water being the fountain of Siloam. This fetid pool miraculously gushed fresh water from

underground streams on every third day. This was the one area that the Fatimids couldn't poison had they done so with the other wells or like the streams that flowed from the mountain they had dammed within the City. Fetching water from the fountain had been a hazardous affair as Saracen archers kept a constant vigil and the pool was in easy range of their arrows. Mainly Armenian traders who charged extortionate amounts of money for just a cupful had ferried in water from afar. Governor Iftikhar had placed special attention to the water convoys and his troops in the wilderness attacked every caravan that carried goods to the Franks. The Armenians though resourceful had used long forgotten passes to reach Jerusalem but by the time water reached there it was blood warm and fetid infested by flies.

As time drew on the water caravans were less frequent and as they arrived men with burning mouths stampeded them. The cost had rose so high with water so scarce that a single denarius the silver coin purchased only a mouthful.

Thomas scooped up the dry earth and cupped it in his hand. He then let the coarse grains of sand run through his fingers and drift upon the wind. "This land is lifeless, this land is dead," he murmured through cracked lips of dire thirst.

"All the wells in every direction are blighted my Lord," the Bear stated. They knew no water meant a death sentence upon them all. The men now looked upon Thomas of Pendlebury this noble Knight that conjured miracles upon the battlefield. He stared upon their gaunt and tortured features.

"Bernard," he said turning to his most trusted soldier.

"Yes Sire,"

"Pick three strong men, take this and go and find water. No matter how far bring back water," Thomas handed over all of his gold he had earned in his share of the spoils. It was an absolute fortune and he had no remorse for its loss with the anguish in the faces of the men under his command.

"Yes Sire, we will not fail you," the Bear knew how desperate things had become he hand picked the three most able men and headed to the North.

The scorching sun at its full might hung in the eternal sky it spread a carpet of golden death upon them all. Men sucked upon bone-dry pebbles to try and bring moisture to their mouths. Everyone looked gruesome with dry crusted lips and red swollen faces as they sat too exhausted by heat to stand in the midday sun. The coolness of dusk brought no respite from the demons of thirst driving some men's minds to madness.

As the dreaded hot dawn came on the 10th June and the unrelenting sun bore down many curled up in suffering waiting to die and end this unbearable torment. In the fires of sun-baked desert upon the horizon blurred dots or shadows could be espied. Thomas squinted his eyes as these mysterious shadows took shape. He became fascinated as the shadows grew tall then he could distinguish what he was seeing like a mirage. Donkey driven carts were rolling in from north bumbling along on the uneven tundra. The Bear at the reins of the lead cart he whipped the animals into a trot as they approached. Hope filled Thomas and his dry eyes and lips bled as he forced out a moronic smile. The Bear brought the wagon to a sudden stop as desperate Crusaders rushed around it.

"In line ordinary scum" he threatened drawing his axe ready to swing at the first brazen enough to question his authority.

He dropped down from the wagon and poured out some life giving water from the pigskins on the back and emptied it into a bowl.

"Wait your turn," he snarled as he walked over to Thomas and handed him the bowl.

"Worth its weight in gold that is my Lord," he winked and dropped the pouch of gold bezants still untouched at his feet.

"Thank you," Thomas grimaced with the bowl of liquid trembling in his hands.

The Bear then returned the wagon and stood upon its cart.

"Alright wait your turn there's plenty for all, any mayhem and I swear to God I'll drive this wagon away," he stated to the crowds to try and get some order.

He measured out a wooden spoon for each person and they took it ravenously. One man died and choked upon a leech his throat had become so constricted. Two more just simply died, as their bodies were

such with dehydration that the water simply killed them. The wagons that had rolled in with the Bear had brought enough water if rationed to see them through last several days.

The sheep Tancred had brought from Bethlehem had staved off hunger but only for a brief respite. So regular foraging parties were sent out daily to score the wild for game and plunder. Tancred always volunteered for these expeditions. The waiting at Jerusalem antagonized him and had come to much to bear. He needed to be active and further to quelling his monotony he was also suffering terribly from dysentery. The fever had weakened his resources but with stout hearted resolve he fought against its deliberating effects constantly. As they scoured the mountain passes of Mount Zion Tancred's bowels rumbled like a fiery volcano and he needed to relieve himself with desperation. He halted his foraging party and he ran with all haste to a nearby cave. He squatted with relief as a pungent black liquid came from his backside that burned as it exited his body. His eyes watered with the stench of his own excrement and he remained motionless as he regained his composure. He for the first time casually glared into the extremities of this cave and he rubbed his fevered eyes in bewilderment then he looked again. "Bring some ropes," he shouted to his men.

In the cave lay in neatly piled stacks were over forty lengths of prepared timber that had been hastily hidden away with the fear of the Crusaders approaching Jerusalem. The wood a vital and rare resource in building the siege engines they would need in a full-scale assault. The ropes were attached and each timber was carefully dragged back to the Crusader camp.

Thomas had been summoned to the Camp of Raymond of Toulouse as he arrived on Mount Zion Tancred and Robert the Norman were there to greet him.

"How is our English Prince," Robert asked.

"I am well Sire,"

“So Thomas you have come here for the great gathering.” Tancred said with irony. As the Last Supper of the Lord Christ was taken here and so Raymond had chosen symbolically twelve Crusaders to accompany him.

“Why are we here,” Thomas questioned.

“You will see,” was all Tancred was willing to add.

They walked in procession up the Mount of Olives with Raymond at the head. The Bishop of Orange by his side and eleven knights in their wake.

The tiny cave seemed oppressive and claustrophobic. Even the torches they held in their hands spread little light in this dark abyss. They sat in a circle before an old Hermit who it had been said was gifted with the art of prophecy.

“So Menalithias, why have you called for us,” Raymond spoke to the Hermit whose beard stretched to his knees and his toes protruded out at the end that were unkempt. He was attired in rags and led a solitary existence in this dark hollow. People had brought him food and he rewarded them with knowledge. Most of his visions had turned out to be of value so his fame as a Prophet had been well known in the region. Menalithias didn’t respond to Raymond immediately he stared with maddening eyes for a long time into the whirling flames of the fire.

“You must Attack Jerusalem before the dawn,” the Hermit spoke as if he were in a trance.

“Nonsense we are not yet ready, we have neither the Siege engines or the supplies,” Godfrey scoffed at his statement. He was not a taken to soothsayers as much as Raymond did.

“Your God has spoken with me. He will grant you victory if you have faith,” the Hermit asserted the rest of his vision.

The three armies were arranged before the great City At Saint Stephens Gate. They stood in formation with the walls in there midst as the sun arose in the heavens.

“Dawn is here,” Raymond said expectantly.

In Godfreys Army the men held the only scaling ladder. Forty foot of precious timber held by many.

“For God and glory,” Tancred roared.

“Blood and honor,” Godfrey rallied his men with.

“Deus Vult.” Came the cry of the multitude.

The Army moved forward towards the Gate of Saint Stephen, as the Egyptians on the wall looked astonished by this suicidal attack. Thomas had his archers guarding the ladder bearers who were in a wedge shaped formation at the head of the Army.

Whoosh. A noise resounded from within the walls as the dreaded tormeni Catapults released their torsion. Then whoosh, whoosh in harmony as many missiles proliferated the sky with them accompanied tiny black clouds of death. Balls of fist-sized rocks were hurled onto the Crusaders smashing into the ranks then the storms of arrows began to fall. The huge ammunition of the catapults made massive tracks in the compact Army as the stone pummelled and crushed its unfortunate targets. The black rocks felled men in their stride and the arrows flew with a venomous force into skin and bone.

“Form Line,” Thomas halted his men amidst the chaos of the debris being wrought upon them as they knelt and strung their bows.

“Fire,” he called and his archer’s arrows whistled above the head of his fellow Crusaders toppling the Enemy on the defences, which brought great cheer.

The vanguard had reached the wall and the scaling ladder was being hoisted. Then cauldrons of hot oil rained down upon the hapless souls below. Some Knights exploded immediately into a furnace of flame and others stood there with their features grotesquely boiled away.

“Bastards,” Thomas yelled as his men fired vengeful volleys trying to kill the cauldron bearers.

The scaling ladder had fallen and they lay dishearteningly upon dry earth. It was lifted once again by fresh hands and it began to rise up towards the defences. Then a new menace javelins flung from the towers and more oil this time a sulphur liquid known as Greek fire. Many Crusaders fell but the ladder hung vertical in the air like a colossus as a battle of wills arose. As one Crusader fell another took his place to support it.

“Heave,” Godfrey yelled as the defenders used poles to push the ladder back.

Then with a mighty crash the ladder toppled and crashed upon the walls. The defenders in panic threw everything they could lay hands upon the men at the foot of the ladder. A bloody slaughter developed as Crusaders

braved the murderous hail to try and purchase a footing on the scaling ladder. The ladder though held firm as men stoutly began ascending its frame.

A blazing sphere erupted furiously into an inferno as bails of ignited hay were flung from the battlements. Crusaders ran through walls of flames to climb the ladder.

“Take them out,” Thomas motioned to the fire throwers as they attempted to stop more cargos of inferno coming from the walls.

Two knights were upon the wall hacking at the Saracen defenders keeping them at bay with more Crusaders coming in their stead. Resounding cheers came from the battlefield as the wall had been breached.

The Crusaders had gained a foothold in Jerusalem and all was going well when the ladder soaked in oil and surrounded by burning bails of hay unexpectedly erupted. The Knights on the scaling ladder were ignominiously set ablaze and the ones on the battlements above were hopelessly stranded. To the dismay of all the ladders collapsed consumed by fire and screams of the men beneath as the furnace swallowed them.

The Priest Peter Desiderius sat in contemplation as the shroud that covered him was buffeted uncontrollably by the sirocco wind with it roaring about him. The Fountain of Siloam the giver of life and the bringer of death was no more than a stone throw from him. In the water a mist arose and came alive. It hugged the ground like a serpent and snaked its way until he found himself cloaked in a white mist. The winds intensity suddenly abated and in this haze a hooded figure now stood before him.

“Peter,” the voice called and the Priest face lit up in unexpected recognition.

“Eminence is that you before me,”

“Yes Peter on this earth I was Adehmar of Le Puy and now I am a humble messenger of the Lord,”

“Bishop I had been informed that you had gone,”

“I am gone from your world and I speak to you from the next world,”

Peter came upon knees before the Bishop in religious awe.

“Peter the Lord has sent me with a mission for you.”

“What is this mission your Eminence, I am humble and servile to Our Lord,”

“Go and speak to the Leaders and people and say unto them, you have travelled here from distant lands to worship our Lord. You have come here unclean and many evils are rampant amongst you. Purge yourselves of uncleanness and from your evil ways. Then bare footed you must march around the Holy City in repentance and invoking God to grant you admission. If you do this and make great preparations for an attack upon the City it will be captured. If you do not do this all that you have all ready suffered will be multiplied by the Lord,” with that Bishop Adhemar vanished and the howling wind came back.

Peter Desiderius was at odds at what to do. He went to William Hugo with his confession. Who in turn told Count Ysoard and others in the clergy? Eventually it reached the ear of Count Raymond who summoned the Priest wanting to hear his vision word for word.

On July 8th a collective meeting was arranged before the Mount of Olives and mass was held for all. The Bishop of Orange stood before the podium and addressed the assembled people. On bended knee the Crusaders made penance as they were told of the vision that had been told to Peter Desiderius. Then clergyman after clergyman delivered a sermon. Peter the Hermit was the last to address the crowd.

“A mountain of bones is all that stands testament to the devout people who stepped out first on our noble quest. Those people lay in limbo crying out for vengeance and deliverance. Lords, Eminences, people of the cross look, look before thee Jerusalem stands before us with tears in her eyes. This is written in the holy gospel; and I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth were being passed away. And there was no more sea and I John saw the Holy City New Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven.” Peter’s words were like spiritual fire upon every heart.

“So Stand Godly people if the Lord demands we walk around his City than no man will stand before us. Arise and purge yourself of sin,”

The thousands of Crusaders bare footed followed the procession of white robed priests who carried the Holy Lance before them. The Egyptians watched this mass procession with bewilderment as it came to

the walls and began following its course. The Saracens called out vile insults with brought cackles of laughter from the battlements. The Christian people in the procession had their heads bowed and were deep in meditating prayer as they circled half of the great City. The Saracens were breaking crudely made crosses and stamping upon them in blasphemy to try and get the attention of the Franks. After the insults and blasphemies failed to work they dragged a Christian Prisoner from the Dungeons and crucified him upon the walls. The procession could hear the mans screams as nails were hammered through wrists and feet. They hoisted him with great cheer from within the City as the poor man screamed in agony. Thomas shivered at his cries and the Priests chanted out.

“Espirito Sancti,”

The procession continued all that day until feet bled and the man on the cross-had died. Thomas shed a tear for him remembering Jesus Christ’s own suffering and the fortitude to take Jerusalem had instilled itself upon all.

The Falcon the flagship, with the Osprey and Perequin made up the three-boat flotilla had set sail from English shores in January 1099. They had preceded across the Channel and followed the coastline of Normandy until they bridged the Pillars of Hercules of the Island of Gibraltar. They sailed a course through the straits of Sicily and passed the foot of the Roman peninsula. They came to dock in the port of Venice in March of that year where two other ships of the Genoese Navy joined them in passage to the Holy Land. Captain Archibald Turrel had aboard a cargo of fine horses and skilled men. He had also provisions of arms, food, Armour plus a quantity of white surcoats with the Red Cross emblazoned upon them. A gift from the King of England himself William the Conqueror. Archibald had been at sea all his life it seemed. He started as a cabin boy to work his way to a privateer Captain who had smuggled wine and honey across the Channel when England and Normandy had been at war. Though he had learned his sailing skills

the hard way he had earned the respect and admiration of his crew. He had gained his wealth as a smuggler but now he was in the service of the King bringing aid to the Crusaders across the other side of the known world. Archibald a practiced navigator had never ventured this far from home and that's why the rendezvous with the Venetian's the most experienced navigators of these waters had been prearranged.

"The wind is chill and fair Sire," the boson spoke out into the clearing skies that carried cold draughts upon it.

"It will be an easterly wind that sways our course lets hope her bellows are blowing hard when we break sail on the morrow," the Captain replied his face haggard with crevices by the many storms he had too suppress.

On the dawn of March 30th 1099 the fleet of five Merchant vessels broke sail upon the Mediterranean Sea and set sail for the Christian land of Cyprus. It was not until June 10th they sighted the sea birds and the telltale signs of land with breakers turning the spume into a whitewash. They docked at the Cypriot town of Constantina awaiting news of the Crusade when the Byzantium Trireme came into port with General Tachiotos at the helm.

"Good day fellow mariner," Archibald said to the man attired in golden Armour sauntered up the pier.

"Greetings what is your business here. Whose are those ships," the General asked disgruntled.

"They sure be my ships but why do you ask me of my business here. I must presume you don't mind me questioning your own," Archibald responded.

"Ill tidings my friend have befallen our Latin brothers across the sea. They will see no sense of wisdom as they march ill equipped to their doom. Our glorious Emperor has offered them supplies, Men, machines and horses but they continue on foot to their death," Tachiotos spelled out the plight of the crusade.

"What you speak of means I must move with all haste for they shall receive supplies," Archibald said before turning to his boson.

"Have us ready to make sail within the hour," The Captain had been well informed by the Venetians of the politics of the Byzantium's. He knew their glorious Emperor Alexius had betrayed his own kinfolk at

Antioch and couldn't help himself rancour this Roman now with urgency to be in the thick of it.

"See what you make of that," Archibald stated to himself as General Tachiotos had stormed away seeing his tactic of dissuading these Franks had badly backfired.

"For England, God and the Crusaders," he raised his arm to salute his compatriots in earshot of the Byzantium who hastily headed inland to gather more information to relay back to his Imperial Master.

The Morning dew trickled off the fronds of exotic plants and palms. The fleet of Merchantmen opened the sails to fill with the easterly wind and turned their tillers to the Holy Land. The Falcon took the centre whilst the Perequin had role of scout flanked ahead searching for unknown vessels that could endanger the flotilla. The fleet caught sight of the Holy Lands brown shoreline and stonewalls of the Port of Jaffa. Captain Archibald had his crossbow men and pike men at the ready as they entered the harbour. They anchored offshore not willing to risk their ships and daring not to venture further until a scouting party had been inland to investigate. Marc Axsom a sturdy square faced man Captained the Lead scout boat as they straddled knee deep in seawater to walk onto the Holy Land. Sword at his side with crossbow men at his flanks they entered the Town. Only silence greeted them. Doors banged in the wind and groaned on their latches. A few possessions littered the streets, which the people here had dropped in panic.

"Sire the town is completely abandoned," one of the scouts reported to Captain Axsom.

"Good Lord our Crusaders certainly have put the Fear of God onto the Saracen," he remarked.

Godfrey of Bouillon received news of the Merchantmen anchored at Jaffa from Armenian traders. He needed desperately to find out if these rumours were true and he summoned for Count Geloemar Carpanel and told him to gather a small force and make all haste to Jaffa. A messenger from Count Carpanel came running to locate Thomas of Pendlebury.

"Sire the Count wants you and your men ready to move on Jaffa with all speed." the messenger had stated.

"Jaffa why we going there," Thomas questioned the order.

“Ships me Lord, food and fresh supplies for all hopefully,” the Messenger smiled as he gave the hopeful news of the rumours.

Count Carpanel set off with fifty men on foot towards the coast. No sooner had they vanished over the horizon Raymond of Toulouse came galloping down to Godfrey’s encampment.

“What news of the ships,” he asked before even stepping from his horse.

“The Armenians tell me there are five ships at anchor at the port of Jaffa. I have sent men to greet them,” Godfrey informed him matter of factly.

“How many men have you sent,” Raymond raised his voice with urgency.

“Fifty men under the Command of Gelemor Carpanel he’s a fine soldier,”

“A fine soldier I daresay he is not, but fifty men is that wise with the Saracen so abundant in the wilds. If they learn or have learned of these ships they will send an Army,”

“Are you suggesting we should reinforce them.”? Godfrey gave way to Raymond’s concerns.

“It would be prudent the cargo on those ships is vital to our needs and it would mean a lot for morale to further our cause,”

“I will send Count William of Ramleh to reinforce them with another fifty men. I can spare no more,”

As Count Raymond had suspected the Crusaders were not the only ones privy to the news of the arrival of the fleet at Jaffa. Ifitikhar had also received information of the Franks Moored off the coast and he sent his men out on watch astutely. It hadn’t been long before the Governor of Jerusalem’s men had spotted fifty Franks heading west.

“Have the black lancers leave the City,” He told one of his Generals as 400 Persian Knights of his finest cavalry and two hundred Turkish mercenaries were sent to destroy them. The General Emir Arshad a long faced Egyptian who had come from the town of Thebes had command of the Egyptian force. He waited patiently at Ramleh on the Crusaders road to Jaffa ready to ambush the accursed Franks.

Thomas and the men were light hearted and they chatted of frivolous things that they hoped the ships had brought with them.

“Cheese and eggs. I would kill for that,” the Bear made known his brutal intentions to highlight his fondness of these delicacies.

“Wine would be mine, buckets of sweet red wine,” another Crusader spoke out as they approached the plain of Ramleh.

Toms mind was more humble thinking of fresh water from the wells of Jaffa instead of the stale brine they had survived upon. Food enough to fill his belly from the ships provisions seemed almost a dream.

“If they have brought horses we should eat a whole one each,” the Bear spoke his glutinous thoughts with a serious tone.

“Just one horse bear, you would need a ship full to fill your belly,” a voice said in reply.

“Six ships full,” someone else butted in and they all laughed even the Bear laughed at the affront as a new hope had returned to their hearts.

It was Count Carpanel who first became aware that the valley of Ramleh was unusually quiet. No birds flew in the air and no hares scampered on the tundra.

He halted his party of men as he descried a strange sound hearkening on the wind. Then he looked in their wake to witness Count William running at double pace with his Crusaders behind him. Count William had his flag on the town here and was the Lord of Ramleh.

The voice on the wind reached all there ears.” Ambush,” William had screamed as his voice came into earshot.

“Form a square,” Carpanel roared as a thunder of hooves shook the valley around them.

“Make ready,” Thomas yelled to his archers as they each took out five blunt headed arrows and lay them on the ground within reach. The flat heads were vicious and designed to bring down and cripple horses.

“Here they come,” came the shout as a horde of Arabian horsemen raced down the valley from the East.

Saracen Knights in black body armour with long sharp lances at there fore. Turkish horse archers supported them covering the flanks and harassing the enemy.

“God help us,” the fearless Bear ushered as the valley just kept piling up with the enemy.

“Thomas we stand our ground, don’t let me down,” Carpanel ordered.

“Victor or vanquished we will not yield Sire you have my word,”

Thomas answered him watching the line of Black Death draw nearer.

“William form your men with mine, be bold brave warriors,” the Count turned his attention to Williams fifty which had just managed to reach them.

The Mounted Emir stood noble upon a hilltop and he raised his sword then chopped it down through the air towards the Crusaders. It was the signal for the Turkish Horse archers to advance a manoeuvre Thomas had witnessed too many times on this journey already.

“Take careful aim Lads, Steady steady,” the archers of Pendlebury who knelt under the honoured purple flag of Antioch as they hoisted there battle colours.

They drew their bowstrings at his command and waited with the tension of the bow straining their arms.

The turf was chewed underfoot by the countless Arabian horses as a cloud storm of debris and dust shrouded their wake.

“Steady your arms men of England, the heathen is upon us we will not be overthrown in might or will for we are men of God. Rise up Men of honour the dead of our kin will rouse our vengeful spirit,” A Knight of William made a battle prayer as the thunder of hooves became deafening towards them.

The Turkish Horse Archers came at break neck speed as a rumbling pack then in an instance they came to a complete halt only two hundred foot from the Crusader line. A thin stream of arrows came like lightening towards the Christians.

“Fire,” Thomas had called almost simultaneously as the flat headed arrows were let loose. The Turks were taken by surprise as these projectiles cut into the horseflesh and they heard bones shatter on their mounts upon impact. Some horses died directly while others of the domicile animal’s legs collapsed under them and the Turks crashed to the earth atop their dead and mutilated mounts. Other horses went into a panicked frenzy and others injured hobbled away from the battlefield.

“Shield,” Thomas cried as a wall of shields shot up as the Turkish volley hammered into there own defences. Arrows pierced a swathe of Crusaders although most stood there resolutely.

“Saracens,” a fresh yell resounded as on the plain the Black Knights were charging at full pelt towards them.

“Point,” Thomas called out as the Archers took out the gruesome missiles with sharp pointed thin metal heads that could penetrate armour. They laid their quivers on the earth and loaded ready to begin firing. “Ready,” the cry came forth.

As the Saracens neared gained ground they let out a whooping war cry and the black lances were brandished poised for the kill.

“Quick fire,” Thomas ordered as the sharp pointed arrows hit the front ranks of the advancing cavalry.

In rapid succession they fired again and again. Horses cried as men were swept from the saddle. Dead ghost riders wobbled unnaturally in their saddles as they died on horseback.

“They’re closing,”

“Closing,” came the voices in the Crusader Square.

“Prepare for impact,” Thomas warned as his archers lifted up their shields and then lay under them forming a crude ramp.

CRUNCH the first lances smashed into the shield wall and the horses hit the ramp trampling the men beneath them as they tried to scramble over. Men under the shields cried out with the strain as a full horse’s weight bore above them. The Knights of William and Carpanel fared no less favourably as the lances pierced and skewered their men’s armour as they stood there ground. Count Carpanel had dragged a Saracen from his mount but it was one brave effort in a sea of death all about him. Achard of Montemerle was killed outright with his entire band of French knights upon the left flank. The Knights who had stood steadfastly were mercilessly slaughtered. The Saracens had overridden the shield wall but the men under it now emerged. Thomas scrambled out relatively unscathed apart from the bruising of being charged over. They scrambled out coming to their feet to repel the Saracens who had now drawn their curved blades.

Only thirty souls of the one hundred remained and they fought desperately for their lives. Thomas had abandoned his defences and drew his sword as the enemy closed in all around.

“You hear that,” the Bear got Thomas’s attention and even the Saracens paused in the midst of battle.

A cloud of dust rose upon the horizon and the air had a resonance of the sound of trumpets blaring. The Crusaders on the field of Ramleh now

fought with more ferocity with a vestige of hope emerging. Charging across the plain with fifty mounted knights commanded by the Knight Raymond Piletus who had come to the rescue of his comrades in their plight. When he saw the Saracen army he realized they were outnumbered at least five to one. He rode on regardless of the danger as Raymond of Toulouse had given him just one order.

“Crush the Muslims upon the field of honour where ever you may find them,” were his words.

“Visors down.” Piletus called as the blue lion with a flame came to a full picture upon his helm.

The few Knights who were riding with him realized these were the last of the horses the Crusaders now possessed.

“Raise lances,” The pennanted lances of the Crusader Knights came into the attack position.

“Charge,” Piletus called as he whipped his horse into a full gallop.

The hooves beat the dirt like a thousand drums and the earth trembled with the power of the charge.

The Saracens seemed frozen in a moment of lost time and then the tempest was unleashed upon them. The heavy mounted Crusaders hurtled into the left flank of the Egyptian army. Saracens were systematically brought down by lance or sword and slaughtered. The Emir seeing his beloved lancers decimated called a withdrawal. The Egyptians began leaving the plain of Ramleh but soon there ordered plight had turned into turmoil. The Crusaders of William and Carpanel closed ranks to battle the remaining Lancers. Thomas meanwhile concentrated of organizing what remained of his archers.

Upon the plain of Ramleh two hundred Fatimid soldiers had been slain and Richard Piletus had pursued them so hard they fled almost to gates of Jerusalem. A well-known fact is that when an Arabic Warrior is in retreat first discards his weapon, then his shield and lastly his saddlebags. The survivors now plundered the plain looking for food and gold on the dead Muslim corpses. They fed upon the Arabic rations and out of the one hundred brave souls who stood there ground with Count Carpanel only twenty-nine now remained. On the field horses were rounded up and each man had a mount to carry him onwards upon the road to Jaffa.

They rode steadily in a long line and Thomas could taste the salt on the air long before the vision of the sea came upon them. There in the harbour of Jaffa were two caravel ships and the men cheered that the rumour had turned out to be true. Count Carpanel welcomed Archibald Turrel and his men to the holy land.

“I am Count Carpanel the sight of your ships is a joy to our eyes. We were told that there were five ships alas I only see two,” the Count made known his concern.

“Aye that be true there were five ships, but two were Venetian escorts they only carried men at arms so they dropped them here and sailed away. My third ship the Osprey is away scouting the coastline,” Archibald lied the Osprey was plundering the coast under his direct order as he tried to gain some extra riches.

That night a great rejoicing took place and a whole pig that had voyaged from England now roasted on a big open fire. The Crusaders mouths drooled by the smell of the roast pork and then the Captain broke open two large casks of wine. Thomas was overjoyed by the sound of so many English voices and he chatted briefly to glean trivial information of things that had happened in his homeland. The stories were all mainly from the Port towns which were as strange to Thomas as the Holy land but he listened intently reminiscing the green fertile soil of England.

On the following morn all were worse for wear then they were abruptly awoken by the alarm call of the ships bells clanging. Thomas scrambled to his feet and ran to the beach. He could make out Captain Turrel on the Forecastle of the Falcon waving his arms to gain attention. He pointed out to the open sea and they’re blockading the harbour were a large number of Egyptian galleons.

“The Osprey is still out there,” the boson said with concern.

“Aye God speed to her at least we have saved one ship” Archibald stated on a lighter note.

“What now Captain”

“Well those ships wont dare come close to shore with all the men at arms here. Tell the men let’s salvage what we can,” he gave out his orders then added.” Looks as if were going to Jerusalem,”

The captured Muslim horses and horses from the ships were used as pack ponies. They were loaded with arms, food and equipment. Thomas

ordered forty pigs slaughtered and their skins used to hold water. He knew hunger they were accustomed to that malady but thirst killed a man in very short span of time. The pork was salted and also placed upon the caravan.

They marched back across the plain of Ramleh without hindrance and towards the Camps of Godfrey and Raymond. The Genoese engineers were put to work whilst Captain Archibald had his sailors utilised as water bearers travelling back and forth from Jaffa.

The timber Tancred had discovered and more timber coming from the Port of Jaffa at regular intervals as the Ships of Captain Archibald Turrel were slowly broken down were now being put to good use. William Embriaco a Genoese Engineer and other English artisans were organizing construction parties. Gaston the Viscount of Bearn had been honoured with the charge of building Godfrey's Siege Tower he soon had the shipwrights and carpenters hard at work. William Ricou supervised the Construction of Raymond's Towers, which the Crusaders proudly named "bad neighbours". Other working gangs were busy engineering Trebuchets, catapults, ballisteri, mantels and battering rams. Thomas had his own men building palisades lightweight wooden shields they could use on the battlefield. "Old George is going up fast," Bernard remarked as the siege tower grew like a mountain behind them.

Then a huge train of one hundred men came carrying a huge beam that could not be pulled by four teams oxen this had been main bulwark of one of the ships. This massive timber would be hewn to form one of the battering rams however the road to Jaffa now was relatively safe. Mark Axsum and Captain Archibald had their men guarding the route and regular water carts were also running to and fro for the Crusaders.

Al Ifitikhar now watched with keen interest as these weapons of war were being erected on the plains before his City.

“Secure our defences, I want every able bodied person put to work on our fortifications. We must hold out until the Army of the Caliph arrives,” he stated knowing a Fatimid Army would be coming soon to his aid. What he didn’t realize due too the scheming of the Byzantium Emperor the relief force had been unduly delayed.

Jasmina was put to work with the other women still within the city. They tied bails of straw tightly together whilst children baked mud bricks in the zenith of the sun to supplement the outer defences. Vats of oil were carted by oxen and then hoisted upon the walls where fires were lit to keep the liquids constantly boiling. Catapults were assembled and placed on ramps atop buildings to get the best arcs of fire.

Thomas strained with exertion helping the Engineers complete the Tower of George. A huge castle upon wheels that went high into the air. Three levels within were accessed by ladders, each level could hold up to fifty armed men. The topmost level of the tower stood ten foot taller than the walls of Jerusalem where archers could rain death upon the defenders. On the second level an assault force would be unleashed upon the enemy as a huge collapsing ramp that would fall making a firm platform to breach the battlements. The lower level housed the reinforcements to pursue any foothold with sheer numbers, as they would keep advancing up the ladders into City.

To supplement the towers hundreds of scaling ladders were made and to protect the advancing army Mantels were built. These hardy sheds would offer some protection from the missiles that would come from the towers and walls. The mighty machines of siege warfare were ingenious and the Crusaders placed all their hope and faith upon them.

The prickling heat of the day irritated men as they laboured from dusk until dawn. Water supplies were now more frequent as regular caravan route had been established although each man still had raging thirst burning within him. The clack and thump of hundreds of hammers and the whining yawn of ropes tensioning could be clearly heard within the walls of Jerusalem. Ifitikar watched with consternation for the first time since these Franks had arrived here he now truly began to fear.

In the shady coolness of Count Raymond's pavilion the Lords of the Crusaders began planning the assault on the City. After many arguments and long dispositions they reached a mutual accord on the plan of attack. "At dawn tomorrow fellow Warriors with God's stead we will take back our Holy City," Raymond addressed the assembled Lords with. "Good luck my friend," Godfrey grasped Raymond's hand it was the first sign of brotherhood between them. "Good luck and good hunting," Raymond remarked with the thought that this battle could be the very last one they ever fought.

The long night was accompanied by the groans and exertion of men as the siege towers were rolled along the valley of Josephat. The huge trebuchets had been painstakingly dismantled with the timbers, supports and the stone munitions moved and reassembled. The huge battering ram named "thunder of the Lord" was arduously manoeuvred up the steep incline onto the flat plain. Men lumbered and toiled without rest under the cover of night sky.

The Dawn broke with a thin stiletto line of glory upon the horizon. The clouds were golden arrays and the sky blood red. The mighty orb caused an ethereal mist as the freezing dew from the bitter cold night melted. Thomas looked upon the honey coloured walls of Jerusalem with both awe and dread. The Egyptian defenders stared back with complete bewilderment as the whole Crusader War camp had taken root overnight and moved facing the west wall in front of the Jaffa Gate. They rubbed their eyes in disbelief as the huge Siege Engines, mantels, trebuchets, pavilions, water carts and every other piece of equipment appeared in the mist before them. They knew this had been no light undertaking and it was not far short of a miracle.

This was the morn of the 15th July 1099 a day that would haunt Thomas until the end of his days. In the morning mists spectres of men moved like ghosts as they formed into battle positions. The battering ram thunder was heaved into motion; its timber-hewn wheels creaked as it gained momentum on the tundra. The ram surrounded by mantels protecting the pushers and the defenders of the huge war machine. The rams head coated in metal glistened with the new day fire of the sun.

The Siege Tower with the cross of Christ aloft stood like a mighty goliath following the battle lines of men at the rear. A wraith like figure emanated from the fog of war.

“Morning Thomas” the wraith spoke.

“Good day Sire” he responded to Tancred.

“A fine day for glory and God willing Victory Thomas”

“A fine day indeed” he spoke with vigour but his insides churned with mortal fear.

As the first rays of light christened the Temple mount the tormenti and petariae catapults from within the City began firing. So many arrows came from the defenders it fell continuously like heavy rain. The Crusaders responded with their own artillery with the whiplash of trebuchets screeching the air. The mantels were turned into hedgehogs by so many spent arrows stuck out of them and the Egyptian fire suddenly became deadly accurate. Catapult stone hit two mantels direct and a trebuchet had its timbers smashed just before it was about to launch. The firing mechanism triggered as the support collapsed and the huge stone fired point blank into the backs of the Crusading Army.

Two dark figures were upon the battlements attired in robes of the Bedouin. The two women had henna engraved faces and they screamed out chants and curses upon the Franks. The attack was like weathering a fierce storm and the witches on the wall were stirring up the torrents of chaos. The louder they chanted the more the skies became heavy with rainfalls of death. A missile from a trebuchet flew like an arrow instead of its usual arc. It roared above the heads of the stricken Crusaders and hit the two witches turning them into a puree of red human mess instantly. The next barrage of trebuchets firing blindly smashed the two best-placed catapults hidden in the City.

“The spell is broken” Godfrey remarked.

The Mantels, Towers and Battering ram made the Earth rumble as they rolled precariously towards the walls of Jerusalem. The clank of metal as men in arms followed the Siege Engines in procession and the cries of war emanating all around.

“Deus Vult” came the battle cry.

Thomas had his archery company within one hundred foot of the wall they moved into fixed positions as they carried wooden fences for protection they had built during the night. The palisades had firing slits and gave protection from enemy missile fire. Thomas set about getting his men to target any defender brazen enough to show him self upon the outer wall. The Ram now fifty foot from the wall when an array of Saracen heads stood at once at the ramparts and fired a deadly volley from the East side of Herods Gate. Many of the men manoeuvring the ram were killed or mortally wounded and Thunder came to a complete halt.

“Thomas deal with them” Godfrey raged by the standstill at the most vulnerable part of the assault.

“Archers form line” Thomas commanded as his men broke from there cover formed up a firing line on the open tundra before the wall.

“Prepare to fire” he directed.

They waited as if all eternity had stood still then the Saracen Archers showed them selves again.

“FIRE” Thomas roared.

Volley after volley was ranged onto the point of the wall killing most of the enemy directly whilst the others now cowered on the battlements. In support the trebuchets pelted the walls rocking Jerusalem to its foundations. At that brief moment in time the defenders upon Herods Gate were residing in the worse place upon the earth.

“Deus Vult” came the cry from the plain as men took the helm on the battering ram and with strenuous vigour creaked the wheels back into momentum. Within a few minutes the first thud of the metal head hitting the masonry of the outer walls could be described.

“Heave” came the cadence from the sweat of the men pulling the chains of thunder as it swung on its mounting and began to smash into the fortification.

BOOM BOOM BOOM.

The sound of thunder became steadily louder and more progressive and the shouts of the men more hearty.

“Heave too,” they called.

Eventually the wall fractured and masonry crumbled into dust. Men were already mining the foundations chiselling huge support rock to

weaken the structure. The outer wall defences were ominously silent, as the Egyptians had abandoned their posts.

Raymond and Tancred in position at the Zion Gate were facing a far more formidable defence in the south. As they tried to manoeuvre there ram named "Ole Bastard" upon the uneven ground a volley of Greek fire erupted upon the contraption. Pottery smashed and the hot sticky liquid fire splattered upon both timber and flesh. Spine curdling screams ripped through men's courage as human torches ran about amongst the ranks. The Ram had burned and was irreparable and Raymond had decided to bring his siege tower to the fore. As it came within fifty foot of the wall when the sulphur bombs hit it again and again. Pitches of water and vinegar were brought forth but the tower's fire would not abate.

Darkness was falling, the day had been long and Raymond withdrew his forces to safer ground.

Duke Godfrey had finally breached the outer wall but now the Ram whose wheels had collapsed distressingly blocking his siege tower from progressing any further. The longer he kept his main force on the tundra the more the Tormenti of Jerusalem wrecked havoc within his ranks. A messenger came to Godfrey upon horseback.

"Lord Count Raymond appeals to you for Council," Godfrey glared at the messenger with a murderous trait as the thought of halting the assault abruptly then it dawned on him slowly as his battle fury lessened that they needed to regroup.

Duke Godfrey ordered the battering ram to be torched and the ditch between the outer wall and inner filled in. These were both hazardous tasks and he promised any man that laid three stones in the ditch one dinari.

The heat from the timber ram burned with immense energy but the wind blew the smoke onto the defences shielding the crusaders who were taking fallen masonry from the outer wall to fill the deep trench.

Duke Godfrey entered the pavilion and his rage had not fully abated. Raymond had his head in his hands with frustration.

"Our Machines are mostly destroyed those heaven catapults have the aim of the Devil," Godfrey Remarked.

"My efforts today have all been in vain we made no progress whatsoever" Raymond added his own contemplation.

“We have breached the outer wall but that bloody ram now blocks our progress and by now the Saracens will be well prepared for our assault. What must we do if we continue rashly we could end up massacring our own people,” Godfrey set the depressing scenario as the long night with a clouded moon passed by.

In the Dawn Raymond and Godfrey prepared to assess their positions and see if this futile assault could be made to somehow break the enemies will. On the Mount of Olives a great piercing horn blew and all eyes turned to the Knight attired in a white tunic bearing a red cross on his chest. He waved his shield that glistened like fire aloft and then brought it down towards his fore. He gave the signal for attack and across the Tundra men rose and gathered for War.

“Who the Devil is that “Godfrey retorted.

“I have no idea but any thoughts of abandoning this assault are now out of the question. The men have fire in there hearts,” Raymond replied.

The breach in the wall had been cleared and a ramshackle bridge had been placed across the ditch. All night Thomas had spent felling enemy archers and fire throwers on the walls. Whilst retched souls hidden by smoke from the Battering Rams burning timber crept to lay rocks in the ditch. Thomas turned his head as a rumbling noise to his rear had gained his attention to witness the siege tower rolling forward to the breach with the Army in its wake. Thomas drew his sword and clamoured up the ladders to join the fifty souls in the confines with the heady aroma of leather and sweat. The battlements loomed offensively they were crammed with Saracen defenders and everyone knew the next twenty foot of ground would be hard fought over. A wall of shields held aloft encircled the Tower named George as the final push towards the defences began.

The air hung heavy and an ominous almost godly silence fell. No one dared even breathe then it came; Thousands upon thousands of projectiles like a swarm of locusts brought upon them from the Great plague. The skies darkened instantly and the whoosh of incoming death could be discerned like a thunderclap before the lightening strike. Rocks, Arrows, oil, fire, stones and even excrement were flung upon the Crusaders. The shields braced as the lightening came upon them. Men were crushed by rocks, stabbed by arrows and burned by fire but still the

tower moved onwards. Then hawsers bails of hay coated in wax and oil were ignited and hung from the battlements. Greek fire the pottery grenades of sulphur and resin exploded as they pebble dashed the siege engine. A sea of fire blazed and hung above heads of the shield bearers it seemed as if Hell had visited upon this place.

In the confines behind wet hide coverings Thomas could feel the temperature rising rapidly and the animal skins glowed red with tempestuous fury. A line of men stretching to the water carts chain ganged pale after pale of water. They moved so fast it was as if they were a human river. The battle to save their last remaining Siege Engine had begun. The assault was at an impasse with the Tower still and blazing. The fire from the hawsers raging making any progress impossible with the inferno ahead. The pales of water and vinegar were at first vaporized upon contact with the intensity of Greek fire and the hot steam filled atmosphere in the confines became almost unbearable as sulphuric gases were produced. Men were scalded by extinguishing water and some so consumed by smoke inhalation they just croaked and died. Gallons and gallons of water were hauled down the line and very slowly the fires on the tower began to abate. Then the black sulphur laced gases of choking smoke made Thomas go into a fit of heavy coughing.

“Were going to die like rats on a sinking ship in here,” said Gilbert of Tournai.

Thomas thought it was his turn to die. His chest constricted so tightly and his face had turned to a pale shade of blue. His eyes stung with the acrid smoke and he gasped into the breathless air, then he wheezed in a draft of life giving ventilation as Gilbert’s sword had cut through one of the hides.

“Thanks” Thomas said through his hoarse throat as the tower lurched forward in motion.

In the flames, smoke and the acrid smell of charred flesh set a ghoulish theme as the Defenders witnessed the golden cross upon the Tower George come upon them like a mythical Titan. A huge tree on chains was pushed off the battlements and set ablaze. It had been soaked in sulphur resin of Greek fire. It burned blue like a furnace and roared with might upon ignition. Crusaders used pike heads to attack the chains but

the fire was so intense only those covered by wet hides could get near it. Molten metal dripped from the chains and the red-hot rain fell upon the men trying to unhinge this ferocious beast.

The Tower was getting closer to the burning tree and the men inside were consumed by heat once again. The Egyptians too suffered as the wind blew fire and smoke towards the ramparts. Then with the mighty crash the chain was finally weakened and the tree crashed upon the earth.

“Deus Vult,” came the battle roars as the Tower edged to the battlements. Men on the top floor were breaking off timbers trying to construct a bridge onto one of Jerusalem’s Towers. Gilbert of Tournai and Litold two Flemish Brothers were on the apex of the siege engine. They could see the defenders only ten foot beneath them.

Duke Godfrey stood before the ramp and beneath the Cross of Christ. “Be stead of heart,” Godfreys voice boomed.” Men of Christ prepare to Charge,”

With that a mighty cry came from the thousands of Crusaders gathered between the inner and outer wall.

“Deus Vult for God and Glory,” Voices reverberated the war cry. As Godfrey had spoken the tower lurched forward with superhuman effort into motion once again. In the thick unseeing smog the tower seemed like a huge ghostly banshee that crept ever closer to its objective. Then the tumultuous crash, as the chains holding the bridging ramp were unleashed. However it only fell partially as defenders on the walls held aloft timber to block its falling momentum. Litold and Gilbert of Tournai straddled the top of the siege engine towards the Golden Cross. Litold jumped first onto one of Jerusalem’s towers and he slid down the wall-gaining foothold at an aperture.

“Gastion make haste,” he called to his brother as they manhandled timber across to him making a makeshift bridge into the City. In the background Litold heard Saracen footsteps coming towards him from the stairs within.

Gastion like an acrobat crossed the flimsy bridge and other Knights followed in his wake. After a brief scuffle on the stairwell where the Saracens were hacked down by the Flemish Knights the first of the Crusaders had gained access into the interior of Jerusalem they emerged

unexpectedly from the tower to assault the Saracens at the ramparts. The defenders keeping the ramp at bay dropped their poles and went for their arms. The ramp crashed down in their wake with Godfrey riding it steadfast to be first to engage the Enemy.

“We’ve breached the walls came the cry,” from aloft as Thomas ascended the ladder to come upon the honey coloured walls of the Holy City.

In the ethereal light and fog of war a figure brushed past Thomas running along with the charging Crusaders.

“It can’t be,” Thomas, whispered astonished as the ghostly figure of the Bishop Adhemar lead the men into the City.

Godfrey of Bouillon beheaded one defender and cut another in half so violent was the conflict. The hordes of Crusaders behind him ran left and right along the battlements engaging the Enemy.

The Egyptians on the southern wall witnessed the carnage of the breach and fled their posts retreating into the citadel of the Tower of David. Raymond of Toulouse could sense the panic in the air like an old wolfhound. He seized the moment and his men arose scaling the wall with ladders. They too were soon within the City to find the opposition gone. Raymond immediately set siege to the Citadel where Governor Ifitikhar had taken refuge with his men.

Tancred swept along the North wall as the Moslems fell back to the temple area. They sought refuge in the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosque. Tancred pursued them trapping those in the Mosque with his men whilst he himself sacked the Dome of the Rock.

Raymond had completely sealed the Citadel and the Count wanting the Tower for his own offered the Egyptian Governor protection if he surrendered to him under the protection of his banner. Within an hour the three pronged cross flag of Toulouse stood flying atop of the Citadel.

Thomas followed the cries of battle like in some surreal nightmare he found every street littered with dead and no enemy to engage. As he passed the dwellings screams of horror emanated from within them. The Crusaders in a blood lust were ransacking, murdering and looting the City. A madness of mayhem had ensued with mutilated limbs on every street and blood splattered on the honeycombed abodes. Thomas ran from street to street trying to escape the insanity but all he found down

every turn were severed heads, torsos and arms. Crusaders drunk in some ungodly sickness wandered in mobs from house to house to kill the occupants and acquire plunder. Thomas knew he had not the power to stop this and intervention would have probably cost him his own life. The intolerable toils and sacrifice of the last few years had turned these men into savages possessed of a hellish fever. Thomas descried the wails of women and children that froze his very heart. He turned his back from the horrendous screams and ran on. Tears welled in his eyes; this had not been glory he had envisaged. He felt ashamed, unwashed and criminal by his own actions. Running the many steps of the Temple complex built by King Herod he made his way to the mount. Here he thought before Temple of God the Holy Sepulchre he could find sanity. The Temple appeared oppressive with storm clouds mirrored upon the horizon. On the steps Thomas could see a river of blood flowing down the steps onto the mount. He entered the sanctuary and it smelt of an abattoir. Mutilated bodies were strewn everywhere, as the Saracens who had taken refuge in here had been brutally slaughtered in rage for the untold blasphemous horror stories that Pope Urban had uttered to fire this Crusade. Thomas knelt in the river of blood before the Shrine of Christ Our Lord.

“Lord forgive them, they know not what they do,”

Thomas knelt there penitent for the rest of that day and when he lifted his head he found the Temple crammed packed with Crusaders at prayer. Tears in their hearts and eyes as the madness that had succumbed them vanished.

THe night sky clear as day and the stars were visible forever pinpricked upon the tapestry of the heavens. The acrid stench of burnt timber held prevailing in the air. Thomas needed rest he had not slept in many days and he could think of no greater plunder than finding a bed to collapse upon. A Large Merchants house appeared on the next corner and its door ajar where the looters had entered and now vanished with their ill gotten gains. Thomas opened the door with his shoulder fully and entered the house.

The rooms were ransacked and fresh bloodstains were splattered on the walls. There were no bodies of the occupants and it crossed his mind how their carcasses would have been unceremoniously dragged onto the street. Thomas inadvertently kicked an orange and it rolled along the floor coming to rest upon a pool of blood. He found a stairwell and slowly crept up it in these ever cautious and troubled times. He entered the first room he came too and there stood a bed, untouched like a miracle. The blankets were of finest sheep's wool. Crisp and soft a dream to fade away into and rest his fatigued soul. He wanted desperately to fall upon it and disappear forever in a world of slumber. Then he heard the faint creak of a board. A subtle noise but it had caught his battle-toned awareness and the sound had given forth from the next room. He instinctively unsheathed his sword and made his way silently towards where the noise had emanated. The door of the next room was closed shut and Thomas placed his ear against it. He could hear breathing, shallow breaths of fear that raced out an impatient beat. Thomas kicked the door fully open with a mighty thrash and charged in with all his might.

The piercing scream of a woman, a beautiful young Mediterranean woman stood in front of him. On either side of her were two children who came up to her waist who were trembling in abstract fear. She held a knife in her hand and had it pointed towards the intruder.

"Drop that" Thomas threatened.

"Drop the knife," his tone lowered as his nerves calmed.

Jasmina had sharp alluring eyes, deep brown millpond eyes with black satin hair that shone in the moonlight. Her complexion of olive that gave her skin the lustre of a goddess.

She held the dagger before her for protection but Thomas watched her hand quivering involuntary with terror. The two children were frozen in shock and they stood there like statues trembling like an earthquake whilst never uttering a whimper.

"Please put the knife down, I mean you no harm," he begged her to listen.

"I don't believe you Christian. Your kind are all butchers," she spat the words at him.

Abruptly both their attentions were disturbed as the thunder of footsteps resounded on the stairs.

“Someone’s coming, please hide, keep the knife. Just hide ill deal with this,”

Jasmina ushered the children into a corner and stood there as Thomas had directed.

“Who’s there,” he now called.

“Sire, we’ve been searching everywhere for you. Someone said they thought they seen you enter here. Lord Tancred requests your presence,” with relief the Bear had come into the abode.

“How many do you have with you,” Thomas asked..

“Seven of us sire,”

“Guard the entrance to this house with your life. No one and I repeat no one is to enter. If they do they will have my wrath to contend with. Now go post your sentries I will be with you and follow shortly,” Thomas stated clear his intentions.

“Sire it will be as you commanded,” the Bear replied knowing something very important lay within this house.

As the Bear descended to post sentries Thomas re-entered the room and turned to his three captives.

“Your safe, I have granted you sanctuary my men are good and honourable you will not be harmed,” with that Jasmina held out the knife for Thomas to take.

“You keep it, just in case,” he stated before leaving.

The streets had been a tranquil escape compared to the raucous coming from the temple area. From the Al Aqsa Mosque there came an almighty commotion and throngs of Crusaders were heading in that direction. Thomas made out Tancred’s banner amidst the masses where he stood distraught circled by a company of twenty of his finest men. Tancred in a foul mood had tried in vain to inflame some honour upon the rabble of the night.

“Were men of God, Men of honour. We did not come here to sin at the navel of the world. We came here as its saviours,” Tancred prostrated with his men.

“Sire you summoned for me,” Thomas interrupted as Tancred drew a breath.

“Thomas ill tidings and evil omens are occurring. I gave the Saracen sanctuary who were trapped in the Al Aqsa mosque shielded beneath my own banner, my banner flew from that tower as a sign of my word my sacred oath. Evil men have broken my vow as they broke my truce and smashed the doors to the Mosque. This is the sin of all sins where they have directly affronted my very honour. I want the ringleaders arrested and hung,” Tancred in a furious rage made out the events of the long day. “Sire this night and dawn have brought a malady upon many. I washed my hands of this insanity in the Temple of the Lord and prayed for own mortal soul. I am not suggesting we do not do as you wish but I’m saying no matter how terrible this plague of madness is upon us it will come to pass soon. If we go hanging our own we will only join in with the dance of these sinners. Were Men of God, Men of Faith, let us now have faith in the Lord,” Thomas expressed his views knowing Tancred on a killing spree would erupt Jerusalem into civil war.

“Thomas I asked for you here as your council is always from the heart. You’re a man of true honour and you always speak from your soul. Your suggesting I ignore this effrontery and swallow my pride forsaking my oath like it were but dust in the wind,” Tancred turned on Thomas his anger still consumed him.

“Sire every man amongst us knows you’re a man of true honour. You did not break your oath, others have and if you show humility to the Lord. May be he will forgive us all,”

“Thomas I am concerned my lust to vent my outrage is compelling and I see your fear that this act would only cause more mayhem. So I will relinquish my wish to see the perpetrators hang but I cant just stand here and do nothing. So from now on we must concentrate in regaining order to this city,”

“I will assemble a muster of good men we will secure all the main areas and get other Lords to get there follies under back their wing.”

“Thomas I asked you here as I know your words are always true of heart. Your suggesting I swallow my pride and shame my honour this I cannot do,” Tancred was eager for blood to vent his anger at his oath being broken.

“Sire every Christian in the Holy land knows you are a man of true honour. You did not break your oath. Others have broke there’s,”

“Thomas I am concerned my desire to gain retribution would most certainly cause further mayhem. So I consider this we must restore order to this City with as little bloodshed as possible,”

“I will assemble a muster of good men. We will scout all the main arenas of disturbance and try to get there allocated Lords to bring their sheep back to the flock,”

Thomas spent all that day restoring order out of the chaos. As dusk came he made his way through the streets back to the Merchants villa. He observed the Bear and his men stood resolutely around the building as he had left them.

“All seven of you are here.” Thomas questioned the Bear who only nodded in reply.

“I only presumed you would set two or three guards at a time and rest the other men,” Thomas whispered this to him quietly.

“You said guard it well Thomas and it has been done,” the Bear smiled a knowing smile.” Plus it stopped your boys joining in the mischief of the robbers,” he now gave his true reason.

“Well done my friend, rest them now the Town is quiet at last,”

He entered the abode with one single overpowering thought on his mind, Sleep. Then he thought it prudent to check upon his guests in the other room and reassure them of their safety. The massacre at the mosque came into his thoughts and Tancred face filled with bitterness as his oath was trashed. Thomas knew he would have been distraught if anyone had laid hands on these people who he had granted sanctuary. He opened the door slowly and gently whispered his arrival.

“Have no fear,”

“Lord we are grateful for your protection,” Jasmina responded.

“My name is Thomas I am not your Lord and I am a Frank and you are not my chattel,” he responded.

“I am Jasmina this is Samuel and this is Jacob they are my nephews,”

“Greetings Jasmina but I desperately need some rest. The house is yours to move about freely. There is bread; meat and wine downstairs take what you need. My men are guarding you so you have no reason to fear they are noble men,”

Thomas found the bed he had longed for and he fell unconscious before his head had even hit the straw.

Every Christian in the Holy Land had travelled to the great City of Jerusalem as horns bellowed and drums beat within its interior. The air filled with electricity and anticipation of the coming day. Knights were attired in white linen with the symbolic red cross of their struggle to be here in the Navel of the World. Maidens held fresh cut flowers along the main thoroughway and children played games their voices filled with excitement that had been awaiting this day.

The aroma of incense with the holy incantations coming from the priest's vigils and the sombre nobility that now shone upon every Lord's feature. Thomas looked unusually splendid with his white linen tunic bleached to perfection by Jasmina's caring touch. He wore his purple cross with pride and on his shoulders was a cloak of animal fur. His face smooth of hair and his complexion tanned bronze by the eastern sun. His hair shone with the oil of olives and his sword glinted it had been polished so highly.

The church of the Holy Sepulchre was so crowded it looked fit to burst. Nobles had taken the most prestigious place at the front, priests lined the interior and the ordinary crusaders spanned out across the Temple mount. The day was glorious with the sun alighting this holy of holies with heavenly fire. The trumpets called in the time and everyone awaited the crowning of the King. Godfrey of Boullion had been chosen but he refused to be ordained as King of Jerusalem and settled for the lesser title of Defender of the Holy Sepulchre, although with all the pomp and ceremony in everyone's mind Godfrey was being proclaimed their King. Raymond of Toulouse had been offered Jerusalem at first but he had stoutly refused.

"I have no time for Kings, even less to become one," he had said as he desired his own estates however Jerusalem seemed to complicated to manage as he pondered upon it. There were too many feudal estates and too much multiculturalism for his sense of complete order.

Godfrey attired in an ermine cloak shipped in especially from Cyprus for this very occasion. He stood tall and proud in his white tunic and red

cross-attired in the same manner as his brethren. His pointed beard made him astute and serene in appearance. As he entered the Church the people hushed, bells were rung and Priests chanted out their incantations to the almighty. Godfrey sat upon the throne, humble before the burial place of the Christ as the Bishop presided over this ceremony.

“Godfrey of Bouillion. Man of honour. Man of justice and man of men. It is bestowed upon thee by declaration of the Church and the Lords the grand title of Defender of the Holy Sepulchre.” The people listened as the vows of office were read out.

“Do You Godfrey promise to guard the resting place of Our Lord Jesus Christ by blood or by death,”

“I do,” Godfrey replied.

“Do You Godfrey solemnly swear to be a just and a fair Lord in the administration of the Kingdom of Jerusalem,”

“I do,”

“Do You Godfrey promise to uphold the Holy State of Rome and Gods Protector of the faith our Pope,”

“I do.”

The ceremony drew on as the list of vows written up by all the Lords in unison and ratified to bring a status of Law upon the New Kingdom. Godfrey continued with his vows of acceptances to God, the Church, the Pope, his estates, his Lords and his people. Then the bishop lifted the golden crown with the red sapphire at its centre reflecting the candlelight. The people drew in a breath as the crown hovered above Godfrey’s head in the culmination of the ceremony.

“Godfrey of Bouillion I now proclaim thee. Defender of the Holy Sepulchre. Lord of Jerusalem. Arise Lord Godfrey,”

Godfrey’s face turned ashen at the words “Lord of Jerusalem” as in his noble opinion only God or Christ could be Lord here.

The crown handcrafted of pure gold, decorated with finest gems was placed upon the head of the King. Trumpets blared, people cheered and celebrations erupted throughout Jerusalem.

The vast line of men, animals and camp followers stretched to the southern horizon. A thin black adder of war coiling back and forth. The mighty Army of Al Afdal the Vizier of Fatimed Egypt. The Vizier himself travelled in the centre amidst the splendid caravan with banners and his bodyguard protecting their leader. 25, 000 strong Seljuk Turks, Arabs, Persians, Armenians, Kurds and Ethiopians. Each cohort travelled under their honoured or tribal banners. The many coloured flags of orange, black, purple and every colour of the rainbow headed with strong mind with one aim to besiege Jerusalem and rid the Eastern provinces of the dreaded Frankish Crusaders. Under horseback, on camel or on foot they marched with vigour of regaining the Egyptian realms.

The Many towers of the seaport town of Ascalon loomed and the people of the City rejoiced as they envisaged their saviours upon the Southern horizon and to the west a fleet of sails as the Viziers vast Navy lay offshore. The ships laden with supplies and vital equipment to besiege Jerusalem.

Thomas had bore witness to the long procession with both awe and horror. The beast of the camel made him smirk by its bobbing motion as the ship of the desert although the beast of the war drums made him edgy, as battle would not be long off.

“You must go back and warn the King, Thomas,” Tancred remarked with his gape firmly on the enemy as his astute mind estimated their number.

Alexius Comnenus had been in secret talks and deals with the Fatimids. His Envoys sailing back and forth across the Mediterranean Sea. He had vowed to the Egyptians that they would gain Jerusalem and Palestine if they in turn protected his southern border. The deal had been cast with stone allegiance and declared by wax seals. Alexius had been under the misguided impression that oaths to him that the Crusade Leaders had taken with loyalty would be honoured to his authority. He held firm his belief that he could forestall the Crusader Assault on Jerusalem while he worked the fine details of his treaty with the Fatimids. The Fatimids who controlled Jerusalem at that time promised access to the Holy Sepulchre for all Christian pilgrims and Alexius promised he would stop more Frankish Armies coming from the West. The deal was secured, every fine detail had been worked through but

those documents became scrap paper when the Crusaders took back Jerusalem. Al Afdal felt bitterly betrayed by the Byzantium Emperor and outraged by the Frankish invasion. He mustered his Army, recruited mercenaries and carried his treasury northwards to Jerusalem.

King Godfrey who refused to be crowned King of Jerusalem but had taken the lesser title of Defender of the Holy Sepulchre. In the hearts of most Crusaders they referred to him proudly as their King. He sat in the Tower of David, which had become the Crusade Leaders temporary Headquarters and the Leaders gathered in the meeting hall. "So Tancred estimates twenty thousand men and foot. We must go out and meet them before they have us trapped here like rats. I do not desire another Antioch we must defeat them on the field and we must defeat them quickly. Every day that passes we lose more men as they have fulfilled their vows and prayed in the Holy Sepulchre and I have no power to detain them from returning home. They made their vow with God not with me and I have no fealty upon them but to God above all other". Godfrey spoke like a true and noble statesman.

"Our Forces are not yet ready Godfrey, we must not go into this without pause. We must wait until we are fully prepared," Raymond replied who viewed he had just as much right to be viewed as King and viewed Godfrey as nothing but his equal. He had made habit of protesting against most of Godfrey's demands as he felt bitter rancour within.

"Raymond I will march then, with my own forces if you wish to wait here then do so, but if you linger too long this crisis will have either consumed us all or secured our presence here for eternity," Godfrey defiantly spoke his own point of view. Raymond did not respond he knew deep down Godfrey had Jerusalem at his heart and felt any more dissent would fall upon stony ground.

On the following morn Godfrey in his full regalia rode out from the Jaffa Gate with six thousand men. Raymond of Toulouse and Robert of Normandy watched from the walls of the City as the Army marched off to the South.

“God dam that obstinate man, Raymond clenched his fists in bottled anger.

“He is as stubborn as a cantankerous old mule, but he is also as bold as the oldest badger,” Robert replied with an admiring smile.

“Muster the men, let’s go to War with this old fool,” Raymond also admired Godfreys gall and didn’t want to miss out on the glory.

Tancred and Eustace were enroute with their men to a prearranged rendezvous with Godfrey. After Tancred had left Thomas they had captured the small town of Nablus. It was one of Tancred’s new possessions as Godfrey had granted him lands in Bethlehem.

Raymond of Toulouse and Robert of Normandy were also enroute to converge with the main force. Messengers had rode ahead informing Godfrey of there progress. They had decided to regroup at Ramla a distinguished landmark known to all. On August 11th the Crusader Scouts came upon an abundance of oxen, sheep, camels and goats. Tancred and Thomas watched this mighty herd and they also espied the small number of Fatimid troops who had been assigned to guard the herd.

“There so blatant, their sentries are asleep we have caught the Saracen off there guard,” Tancred remarked.

The Guards were mainly of Armenian and Ethiopian origin. They were lightly armoured and numbered no more than fifty. They were in four distinct camps on the cardinal points surrounding the menagerie of beasts on the outskirts of the grazing area.

“Thomas take your men and assault from the east,” Tancred ordered and Thomas knew he’d been assigned the hardest terrain to get into an attack position with the steep cliffs of the coast at their flank. Tancred had the nearest camps at the north and the west. Eustace had to edge west to ambush the guards to the south.

Midday as the sun burned furiously in the sky the Crusaders were ready at their start positions. Thomas had led his men along a narrow beach with the echoing and crashing on the surf beside them. They had scaled a sheer cliff face disturbing an Eagle that hovered above them contemplating whether to dive upon these strange intruders of his eerie.

They had crawled on all fours until they were an arrows flight from their quarry. All that lay between Thomas and his men to the Ethiopians was a vast sprawl of open tundra. The black-faced Ethiopians sat by their makeshift tents and campfire. The aroma of berries filtered the air as they brewed karcador tea in the ashes.

Thomas looked upon the Ethiopians from his hiding place with awe. These black skinned Nubian Warriors were an oddity to him. He descried there guttural laughter and it dawned on him the enemy were no different to themselves in many ways. His thoughts vanished as an eruption of screams emanated from North and West as Tancred and Eustace had launched their attack.

“Fire” Thomas ordered as his longbow men let loose a deadly volley. Two of the herd watchers dropped and the animals scattered from the uncertain danger that had culled their keepers. Two other men stood from the campfire and attempted to flee but the keen eyed Crusader marksmen brought them down. One of the men fell into the fire and the dead body cooked as popping fat noises issued from his roasting corpse. The four Nubians who had been sleeping in the shade made a run for the cover of the tent. One fell instantly upon coming to his feet as three arrows simultaneously ruptured his chest. Another had an arrow sticking in his back and he wheezed a blood gurgling scream as his lung had been punctured. His two comrades dragged him by the arms into the cover of the wool tent.

Thomas had already unsheathed his sword and he raced across the tundra. He reached the tent where two Ethiopians stood guard at the entrance with round shields and short stabbing spears. Thomas heard the wheezing groans of the injured man behind them.

“Effendi, Effendi”, they cursed at the Christian then one threw his spear, which Thomas managed to dodge only by a whisker.

“Drop your weapons or prepare to meet Allah,” Thomas yelled at them in battle rage in the pidgin Arabic that Jasmina had been teaching him.

The Nubian still poised wielding the spear had brown eyes that were wide and which mirrored his fearful uncertainty.

“Lower your spear Warrior of Allah you will not come to any harm”

Thomas opened the palm of his hand to him an open gesture of his good intentions. Next an arrow buzzed passed his ear striking the Nubian in

the heart. He dropped like a stone his spear dropping on the earth at the feet of Thomas. Another Arrow took the other Nubian until Thomas who had stared upon the vicious weapon at before him came to his senses. "Hold Fire" he commanded.

The wounded Ethiopian had been treated and during this process Thomas had tried to question him at length but within a short span of time he had died of blood loss.

Tancred sat eating at the Persian Campfire ingesting some exotic fowl that tasted greasy but filled his empty stomach. Juices ran down his mouth with every bite of the meat.

"Thomas come join me and feast," he gestured and Thomas sat by the fire with him.

"We had a prisoner who died of his wounds. He told me these herds are to feed the Fatimid Army and the Army is now encamped at Ascalon."

"Good Work Thomas we know little of these Fatimids capacities but these few warriors put up a fierce fight," Tancred trailed off to eat more of the captive food.

The news spread to Godfrey via messenger of the Fatimid Army camped at Ascalon and he choose to march upon them with all haste. Messengers bolted their horses across the tundra to the various camps as twelve thousand knights and nine thousand infantry roused for battle.

On the plain of Al-Majmad within a valley on the outskirts of Ascalon the Fatimid army were encamped. Tents, mastabas and corals for the horses could be discerned for miles. The Crusader scouts were already highlighting enemy positions on a crude map. Godfrey decided to split his own army into nine divisions. Godfrey had the left flank with a combination of Knights and Infantry. Raymond was given command of the right. Tancred and Robert of Normandy had cavalry to make the centre. Eustace and Gastion of Bearn controlled the Infantry at the centre. Thomas himself had a command of a small company of Infantry. He set his pike men as a vanguard with his archers in the centre. From the five infantry divisions Thomas held the left with Godfrey. Eustace and Gastion held the Centre. Tancred and Raymond with one of his own Captains holding the right.

The crusaders marched in formation into the plain. They appeared like a spectre of doom and the panic to the Fatimid encampments as they

became apparent. The Crusaders had caught them completely off guard. The Egyptian Generals though rallied their men and a defensive line began to form across the horizon.

The Persian Archers attired in the black robes of the Bedouin let fly an immense volley that hung in the air like a storm cloud before hurtling down from the heavens.

“Shields” the cry went forth as men dropped their weapons to hold shields aloft to stem the hail of death. The whoosh of air and the splintering of wood followed. That was quickly followed by screams of agony. Men had lost fingers as the arrows hit there uncovered hands, men had forearms shattered as the arrows pierced the hide covering and went straight through the shield covering. The few not swift enough to have protected themselves were silent now forever and lay like human porcupines on the earth. Thomas looked around with arrows protruding from his men’s bodies as his attention turned as a great cry echoed from the plain.

“Ushh , ushh, ushh “a melodious chant preceded as the black faced Nubian warriors chanted out there war cry.

They advanced steadily with round shields, short spears and knobkerries. Then they charged filling the plain running at full pelt towards the Christians. On the right the heavy Persian Cavalry in white robes and ivory Armour came pounding down the valley with Persian lances braced at there front. Thomas had his sword at the ready as the black horde came screaming upon his left flank. The Persian cavalry crashed into right and the Crusaders scattered by the severity of the attack. It was so immense that the Arabian knights rode straight over them.

“Right flanks broken” a messenger came racing to Godfrey with.

“Thomas hold the left. Keep it like a rock,” he ordered before he too raced along the rear with his knights at his flank.

“Form Line,” Thomas called as his pike men and swords men prepared to hold back the coming onslaught with no cavalry support.

The Ethiopians were so close now you could mask the battle fury in there eyes. There crude obsidian clubs raised ready to pummel the Crusaders and there tan cow hide shields at there fore.

“Now,” Thomas ordered as his well-rehearsed plan had been drummed into each of his men’s hearts.

The Pike men launched a line of javelins into the unstoppable stampede of advancing enemy. The heavy javelins pierced the frontline some skewering the man behind as well they had been thrown with such force. The impetus of the charge suddenly paused and Thomas knew the shock had stalled the inevitable melee.

“Archers” he now ordered.

The longbows at short range fired deadly missile after missile head on into the Enemy ranks. A few brave warriors fought through the missiles and reached the crusader flank and they tussled then like demons possessed. Sword, club Pike and Spear. The Enemy came but the men battle hardened and disciplined never faltered by Thomas’s side. Bernard the Bear relishing the ferocity of the enemies challenge went forward axing to death any his path. The Nubians were skilled at warfare and the Bear found him self overpowered and subsequently clubbed to death. The Nubians hurled their knobkerries in frustration as shields pushed them back with vigour but they still came on fighting like wild beasts with bare hands. Thomas had a club catch him full on the chest it winded him and his legs gave beneath. Still in shock his aggressor came upon him with bare hands searching for his throat. The strong hands got a strangle hold upon him and began to squeeze his life away. Tom’s adrenaline flushed through his injured body and he found the fortitude to grip his knife. With one powerful thrust stabbed his assailant through the throat. The choking grip released as the Nubian coughed up blood over his face before he died.

On the right the Crusade army had been routed into total disarray. The Persian Cavalry had broken through the ranks and Armenian heavy Infantry had added to the thunderclap charge. The Christians were fleeing for their lives or be ran through by the Saracen lance or hacked to pieces by the Saracen blade. Then the echo of hooves as Godfrey upon his white horse rode into his retreating men.

“The KING” voices called.

“On men of stead, Men of God...Deus Vult,” Godfrey called and his voice boomed as men in full flight suddenly stopped dead in their tracks.

They about turned and ran by the side of the Kings Cavalry back into the fray. The Knights of the King charged at full pelt and their lances shattered upon the Arab cavalry. The Armenian Infantry were unceremoniously rode down and trodden underfoot by the Norman warhorse. The once retreating Army of men from the right flank returned as a horde of invincible brave souls with their King at the charge. The Fatimid success on the right crumbled and now they began to flee for their own lives.

The Persian and Arab Infantry at melee in the centre seeing their right break began to panic and soon they too were on the run in the footsteps of their brethren. On the weakened left the Nubians still fought on like devils until they realized they were alone on the plain of war with Crusaders from the centre coming down upon their rear. They retreated too and Crusaders collapsed with battle fatigue too weary to pursue the fighting had been so intense.

Al Afdal who had witnessed his mighty army broken on the plains of Ascalon mounted his horse and with his bodyguard in toe headed for the coast and the sanctuary of his fleet of ships. The other Egyptians were not so fortunate hunted down and unceremoniously slaughtered by the Crusaders.

Thomas found Tancred at the viziers abandoned camp. Thomas ached all over and he knew that Nubian club had broken his ribs.

“Thomas you wont believe it,” Tancred kept saying.

Tancred beckoned Thomas into the Viziers tent and he entered the domain of opulence. The floor covered by Persian rugs and silk panels of many colours splendour the walls. Cushions of sheep wool embroiled with obscene and exquisite beauty.

“Such a find Thomas your eyes will weep with the splendour,” Thomas wasn’t certain if his Lord had been hit too hard on the head but he followed him blindly into the interior.

As he entered the next chamber in the viziers tent Thomas stopped in his tracks and he couldn’t find any words but just gave forth a low moan. The room was head height in Gold as if all the treasures in Egypt lay in this room. Gold bars, chests of jewels, statues of ancient Gods, pharaohs and a throne that was encrusted with glittering diamonds.

“It would seem Al Afdal has been collecting tribute on his march to fund his army. There’s enough wealth here to lay siege on a town for all of our lifetimes,” Tancred spoke out loud his thoughts

“If they had bottled us up in Jerusalem he could of recruited the whole of Persia with the amount of this wealth,” Thomas added his own admission.

Tancred realizing they had captured the entire Egyptian treasury had posted guards to protect the booty before it could be divided equally amongst the Lords.

Thomas had buried Bernard the Bear upon the field of Ascalon he had been the last of the men who had made up his original unit. He buried him respectfully and solemnly.

“Go in peace mighty warrior your heroic deeds will be remembered for all eternity,” Thomas shed no tears as he had none left within him.

On returning to Jerusalem he entered the Merchants house to find Jasmina cooking whilst Isaac and Jacob sat at a table waiting expectantly for the meal. The room was permeated with the aroma of exotic spices and it made his stomach rumble for sustenance. He glanced at a peeled yellow fruit and took it. He bit into sucking in its juices. His lips felt like they wanted to curl over his head with the tang and his throat burned in a dry fire. His eyes watered and he seemed to be in physical distress.

Jasmina smirked at his stupidity and the children laughed.

“What is this it tastes like the Devils carbuncle,” he ranted as the overbearing zest abated.

“It’s called a lemon,” Jasmina informed him curtly.

“Now watch,” she added taking another lemon and squeezing its juices into a goblet. Taking a pitcher of water she poured in a steady measure She sliced the fruit and placed them into the cup. She took some ground sugar cane and sprinkled it over the top.

“Now drink,” she demanded offering him this devils brew.

Thomas took it hesitantly and glared upon it as if someone had given him poison. He still felt the memory of the burning fire in his mouth and dryness of his throat. All eyes focused on him as his lips cautiously were

placed upon the cup. He sipped it timidly like a deer at the waters edge looking out for the wolves. He tasted the sweet exotic concoction and waited for the kick but it never came. He drank again and still nothing. He wolfed it all down enjoying every drop.

“Hmm I’m confused how have you tamed that devils fruit and turned it into such an angelic brew. You are surely a conjurer of magic to do such a miraculous thing,” Thomas smiled kindly at Jasmina and the twins now looked upon her as if she was a powerful witch that had hidden powers bestowed on her.

A dog carrying a sword and shield ambled by and then a priest flagellating himself and then preceded by a knight in full regalia upon the back of an ox. In the fog he caught sight of the backs of Isaac and Albert.

“Wait,” he called into the mist but they had disappeared.

Pol the poacher stood before him and from behind his back he produced a pheasant and a hare. Old Harry sauntered by his side mumbling with senility. Ghosts more ghosts sauntered by faces of the fallen and then upon the top of a huge mountain he witnessed Bernard the Bear swinging his axe. Thomas ran but the haze was everywhere closing in upon him.

Thomas came to an oasis his throat parched his body exhausted. His clothes were caked in the blood of battle and his body stank of perspiration. He desperately wanted to drink and swim in the water cleansing his body of physical and spiritual sin. He threw handfuls of the cool water over his head and his long hair dripped back upon his shoulders. He scrubbed his blood soaked clothing trying to rid it of every drop. He washed his hands repeatedly trying to cleanse his soul but the water kept turning back into blood.

On the sunlit horizon mirroring upon the calm of the pool he saw the shadow that steadily became larger. He glared into the blinding distance as this shadow took form it was a Bedouin Knight in black robes, black head scarf that ravaged his dark piercing eyes and a jewelled sword of an Emirs stature. He had a gold band on his right upper arm, a gold belt upon his waist and a gold band around his head. He dismounted his camel and he held the scimitar-curved blade in his right arm.

“Inshallah Effendi,” the Bedouin Knight had said to him on the far side of the palm tree oasis.

“Come on, don’t just taunt me you devil,” Thomas shouted back drawing his own blade.

The Bedouin stabbed his sword into the sand and sat cross-legged before it waiting patiently.

Thomas was confused and in defiance stabbed his own sword into the earth and sat before it. Both men sat for an age staring at each other from across the watering hole.

Darkness fell and they still sat there silent with the full moon as their campfire. Dawn came with the sun rising mightily in the heavens and still the Saracen and the Crusader had not budged.

“Infidel,” the Bedouin eventually called ending their battle of wills Thomas didn’t respond so the Bedouin shouted over again.

“Christian let us converse freely as Noble men.” the Bedouin spoke in eloquent Latin.

“Is this a trick Saracen why should we talk? We are enemies of the blood and enemies of the faith,” Thomas answered him bitterly.

“Christian we sit upon this same sand together,” was all the Bedouin had said.

Thomas couldn’t answer his logic and better judgments were being tested in his own heart. Jasmina was a Saracen and he loved her dearly like any other Christian.

Thomas stood and took his sword and began walking around the oasis towards the Arab. The Bedouin too stood taking the curved blade and walked towards this defiant Christian. They stopped facing each other in battle poise.

“Let us talk then,” Thomas announced throwing his weapon upon the sand. A clang followed as the curved blade fell beside his own.

The crossed swords lying symbolically upon the dead earth of this desert.

“Where are we,”? Thomas asked.

“We are at the well of destiny,” the Bedouin responded.

“Christian what were you before you became a valiant knight,” the Arab asked inviting the Frank to sit with the sweep of his hand.

“I was a farmer,” Thomas said without any thought.

“Your eyes Christian are too astute too be a plower of the field. What was your desire to fight and to kill like a warrior,” the Arab goaded.

“No, No, No,” Thomas shouted, “To teach was my ambition why are you asking me these questions,”

“For I am Mustafa Ibrihim I was not born to war against your people. I was born to preach,” he stated.

Thomas left the well of destiny bonded like brothers were the Christian and the Moor.

He awoke startled and he knew his time in the Holy land was drawing to its end

The rushing of waves colliding upon the pebble-beached shore was the last vision Thomas had of the Holy Land. He had gained passage aboard a Genoese Merchant vessel from the Port of Jaffa that would get him back upon European soil. Jasmina had wept with the thought of leaving her homeland forever but her love for this Frank had changed her world forever.

“Jasmina you have tears in your heart leaving your home and I have tears in my heart that I will once again see my home. England,” Thomas stated with deep filled emotions.

” Across the ocean is a home for us and the twins if you will accompany me,” These were the words Thomas had said as Jasminas face lit up when this Frankish Lord had invited her to be with him forever and the new Jerusalem now had no bonds upon her.

“Lord I will come to this England and serve you forever,” she replied with a broad smile but now upon the ship the reality of this commitment was frighteningly mysterious.

Jasmina looked upon the fading coastline with the ghostly lights of Jaffa diminishing in the distance. She could smell the scent of olive groves and the dusky aroma of the windswept deserts that stretched far beyond. The twins who had never been aboard a ship before were giddy with excitement. They stared with bewilderment at the huge sail as it filled with the wind.

Knelt before King Godfrey the Defender of the Holy Sepuculture he looked upon the English Knight taken aback with Thomas’s intentions.

“Lord I ventured upon this quest from its very beginnings. I fought my way through Slovenia as a humble soldier, I besieged the Town of Antioch as a Vasever and I stormed the walls of Jerusalem as a noble Lord. I have served my God and this Crusade. I now seek your grace and your permission to return home with your blessing,” those were the words Thomas had said before the King.

“Thomas of Pendlebury you are one of the first knights and one of the most courage. We have been honoured with thyne presence of accompanying us upon our great adventure. I will be much saddened to lose such a fine and noble warrior. However I have no wish to detain you here without your consent. You are free to return to your homeland with my blessing. Before you stand there is one last task I wish of you,” Godfrey made a hand gesture to one his of subordinates who turned and walked briskly away. He returned within a few moments carrying a small wooden chest.

“Thomas your noble service cannot go unheralded a small farewell gift for you” the chest was opened before his eyes and the glint of gold almost blinded him.

“Your are too generous my Lord,”

“Arise Sir Thomas and go in peace,”

As Thomas came to his feet all the assembled Lords and dignitaries stood also.

“Three cheers for Thomas of Pendlebury,” Tancred called.

“Hip hip hooray,” came the rapturous call.

Thomas hustled and bustled in congratulation by the Lords all wishing him well.

“You will miss Christmas here Thomas,” Tancred stated knowing he had planned to sail on the 21st and he knew he would miss this dear friend.

“Yes I will be upon the sea during the festivities but I will be with Jasmina for company. Getting drunk with you bawdy bunch will be sorely missed but I don’t think I can stand the joviality of torching anymore more cities to ground afterwards,” Thomas said in humour. Tancred laughed.

“Talking of the mightiest of City burners there’s someone here who wants to see you,”

Thomas turned to see the giant frame of Lord Bohemund stood before him towering like an ogre.

“Thomas I’m here to start this fire but where should we light the first bonfire,” Bohemund laughed and gave him a great bear hug.

“Lord Bohemund I thought you were now the grand Prince of Antioch and would have been imprisoned there for all eternity,”

“I am master of that Antioch you speak of but come here on pilgrimage as I’m getting short of Saracens to slaughter. I thought the old man upstairs would help me find a few if I came here to his altar,”

“I’ve heard he needs a Good Knight to conquer another battle,” Thomas stated seriously.

“And what battle may this be if I dare to ask,”

“I’ve heard the Flemish have stored great quantities of fine wine in their barracks,”

“Those evil Flemish keeping it for themselves I consider that to wholly unchristian of them and cannot be tolerated. Lets go and save their souls from damnation and drink it for them. They will thank us when we tell them we do this to save their very souls”

With that Bohemund, Tancred and Thomas sleeves rolled for a brawl headed towards the Flemish quarter.

Christmas Eve night upon the Mediterranean with the moon full and the stars so clear it seemed you could reach out and touch them. The venation sailors sung harmonious hymns and the sea was still as a peace had fallen upon the earth. Thomas held Jasmina close to him.

“Jasmina will you give me the honour of becoming my wife,” Thomas asked with love in his eyes.

“Lord I am,” Jasmina hesitated taken aback by the sudden question.

“Will you,” he goaded.

“Yes Lord you know I will because I love you deeply,” at that they embraced so tightly that even a hurricane couldn’t tear them apart.

The journey from the south coast to Pendlebury had been uneventful after the splendour of the east. Thomas just had a burning eagerness to set eyes upon his mother once again and to see Henry and Ceana. Jasmina though had been mesmerized by

this strange world of the Franks. The cold of winter that pained her hands and feet had been something she was not accustomed too. The greenery of this land took her aghast and the hamlets were more ugly than the villages of her homeland. On horseback with Jasmina upon his lap they headed north stopping only to camp under the stars. The two twins rode on a donkey in their wake enjoying the adventure of travel for the first time. Thomas deliberately evaded the townships a Moor woman and her children in a Christian land would bring unwanted attention.

The village lay at the end of woodland path and as Thomas came closer to home his world of the past seemed miniature to how he had remembered it. The village he had left had been his known world but after laying his eyes upon the wonders of Constantinople, Antioch and Jerusalem he realized this place was but a tiny dot upon the Earth.

He came to the gate and blew upon the welcome horn that echoed out its dull blare and caused birds to scatter from the trees. Sometime passed before a familiar brutish face appeared looking over the fence.

“What is your business,” Earsdith snarled at them.

“I am Thomas of Pendlebury, do you not recognize me you oath,” Thomas remarked as he stated his name he noticed the blood drain from the Thanes face.

“What is your business here,” Earsidith now sounded frantic as he repeated his challenge.

“I came to visit my mother open these doors immediately,” Thomas worried by the Thanes reluctance suddenly became alarmed.

“She is no longer here and you are certainly not welcome in my village, now be gone” Earsidith now made clear his intentions then the ugly head vanished from the fence line.

Thomas placed Jasmina on the ground and gave her the reins of the horse.

“He’s lying, stay here I will return shortly,”

“Yes my Lord Thomas,” Jasmina responded realizing all was not well. Thomas stood on the horse and with one athletic leap vaulted the fence and he landed in the village compound.

Earsidith turned seeing his old enemy and ran to the village as Thomas stomped a steady pace after him on the path. The Thane ran into his abode and grabbed the double-headed axe with his one good hand that

he kept in the great hall. Thomas immediate concern though lay with others and as he passed the Thanes residence he headed to his old house. He could see the grave before he read the gravestone he already knew his mother had perished. He knelt before it in silent contemplation and a single tear fell from his eye. Unexpectedly a hand rested upon his shoulder.

“Why are you sad,” a little voice spoke to him.

Thomas turned his head to see the small boy with brown curls no taller than his bended knee.

“This Lady buried here was my mother,” Thomas answered solemnly
 “She was my granny,” the boy stated then it dawned upon Thomas that this young creature was his own son. He grabbed him with both hands by the shoulders and the boy was startled.

“What is your name,” Thomas demanded.

“Guy Sire,” the boys voice quaked slightly.

“Guy I am your Father Thomas. I know I’ve been away but I will make certain that we will get to know each other,”

“Father,” the boy croaked and then hugged this strange man.

“Where is your Mother,”?

“In the house bedridden she’s been very ill since Master Henry left,”

Thomas came into the house briskly and raised his voice with a quieting tone,

“Ceana,”

“Who’s there, that voice is that you Thomas,” she recognized his voice immediately.

Thomas entered the bedchamber to find a frail figure as grey as a ghost lay under a rough blanket.

“Ceana what has happened,” he stated with dread.

“Thomas I know I look a sight you gave me no warning of your arrival,” she joked but then coughed out with exertion. “I have consumption don’t come near me. If anything happens to you my love who would take care of our son Guy,” she stated her fears.

“Where the hell is Henry,” he questioned.

“I tried to stop him but he went on some foolhardy quest with the aim of ridding Pendlebury of its debts. He thought he could reason and make a deal with that bastard Fitz Osbert. I do not know if he is alive or dead.

He never returned from his meeting with Osbert,” Ceana informed Thomas roughly of the past events.

“Ceana I will be right back something I need to urgently attend too,”

Jasmina had waited with the twins patiently and when Thomas opened the gate she simply smiled.

“Jasmina there is a woman here dieing. She loves me very dearly and if she knew I had taken you it would break her heart. You are my servant only in her eyes can be no more until she passes away,” Thomas explained his woes when a scream behind him made him turn. Earsidth stood there clutching Guy with his stump roughly.

“Your Bastard of a brother murdered my father and took my hand. I’ve waited this moment to see your eyes as this offspring is gutted before you,” Earsidth gave a guttural laugh of insane triumph.

“You have not changed, in all these years you still prey upon the weak I see,”

Earsidth held the axe blade at Guys throat as Thomas walked slowly towards him. Thomas could see the madness in the Thaness eyes and he realized he had gone insane was beyond all reason. He needed though but a few seconds.

“Where is Henry my brother,” Thomas knew Earsidth would relish giving out bad news so he fed him a lead.

“Ha ha that fool murdering bastard you mean. He rots away like your mothers corpse in the dungeons of the Baron. They’ve trained him to do tricks he’s a pet monkey of the Normans Ive heard,” Earsidth head lolled backed as he laughed then the arrow hit his crown dead centre. Thomas in one swift movement had taken the bow and arrow that Jasmina had placed in his hands hidden behind his back. Bringing the bow forward with his left arm as it came into Earsidths view. The right hand pulled the bowstring and the arrow flew off all in the blink of an eye. That’s all Thomas had needed a sickening laugh to catch the Thane off his guard.

Two days passed and Thomas dug a new grave next to flora Walters. Ceana Drew had died peacefully during the night in her sleep. Guy wept all that day his known world had ended abruptly. Thomas went into silent lamentation holding a vigil by the graveside. Jasmina understood death too well and she hugged little Guy and talked him through the night, as he grew accustomed to the bonding of his step mum.

The walls looked foreboding and the only entrance was the huge door on the far side of the moat.

“Normans certainly know how to build castles,” Thomas remarked under his breath.

The night was clear with the head of the plough visible in the moonlit sky. The water was dank and fetid. It froze Thomas to the bone as he swam across the moat. He scrambled onto the far bank, which was no more than an arms length in breadth to the castle wall. He took out the metal staves he had forged himself in the Blacksmiths hearth of Pendlebury. He had learned of these devices from the siege engineers on the Crusade. Using his hands as hammers he punched the metal pikes into the mortar and used them to gain purchase on the wall. He punched in stave after stave until his fingertips bled with gripping the metal and his hands throbbed with exertion. He dared not look down holding on by toes and fingertips one slip would have been fatal. He reached the battlements and heard the guttural cadence of snores. He peered over to witness a fire burning and three watchmen all lay around it deep in slumber.

Thomas cat like slipped onto the battlements. He lowered his legs slowly and tip toed passed the sleeping guards. He entered the dark stairwell and had a foreboding that reminded him of dark passages and ethereal air of the Church of Leonitus. He came to the chamber where his informant had highlighted to him for payment of two gold coins. He opened the oak and metal lined door by the ring turn catch. A four-poster bed stood prominently in the room with the walls covered with tapestries of hunting scenes. There colours discernable still in the candlelight and Thomas knew he was the hunter.

Baron Fitz Osbert was rudely awakened by the cold steel pressing at his throat.

“Good Evening,” Thomas remarked as the Baron woke with a start.

“What the devil,” the Baron mouthed.

“Cold heart and bloody hand now rule England’s land” Thomas replied.

“What do you want,”?

“Baron I have come to wish you goodnight forever,” with that Thomas slit his throat.

The Dungeon was far below in the depths of the castle. Thomas descended stairwell after stairwell. He descried sleeping grunts and drunken laughter from behind the many doors he passed. Luckily he never came across a single soul. The dungeon gate was locked securely and Thomas had a new enigma of where to obtain the key.

“Damn it,” he cursed.

His mind raced for solutions.” Would the Baron have the key,” the mere thought of ascending all those steps and he scolded himself for not thinking of this eventually before. Then he recalled the drunken laughter. It was only a hunch but he knew from experience that most gaolers were hard drinkers with the debauchery of the trade.

Heading back up the stairs and he froze as the telltale click of footsteps echoed coming towards him. The Norman turned the bend of the staircase to be stabbed in the throat without warning. Thomas caught his body with his hand covering his mouth until he lay limp in his arms. He placed him down gently so his chain mail wouldn’t clang upon the floor. He had no choice but to leave the dead Norman on the stairs, as Thomas knew his time was running short.

He entered the door where the drunken laughter had emanated from. Two Normans were playing dice shaking the cup and throwing the crude cut number cubes. A third guard who had obviously lost all his stake was asleep sat bolt upright in a chair. They hadn’t noticed Thomas enter the room as the game was in full flow. Thomas threw the knife at the guard facing and grabbed the guard with his back to him around his neck. The knife hit the Norman in the throat but it hadn’t killed him. He stood making a spine chilling gurgling noise and sprang forward to attack the assailant. The man in the chair was much stronger than Thomas had anticipated as he yanked on a cord he had around the mans neck. The man struggling violently and the Norman with a knife in his throat had drawn his sword. The strangulated man managed to give out a call and the slumbering third guard woke abruptly to see the confusion.

At last the chair stopped rocking and Thomas stepped back as a sword thrust was launched towards him. He kicked the leg of the stool from the Guard who had awoken and the Norman crashed to the floor and instantly fell back into a drunken slumber. Blood spurted from his throat wound as the Norman tried to curse the intruder and he slashed out with

his sword in a renewed frenzy. Thomas unarmed quickly rummaged in his knapsack pulled out an iron-climbing stave. He ducked under the next sword swing and popped up to hammer the stake into the mans chest. The metal so sharp penetrated the rib bones and the man died instantly. As he fell ironically Thomas heard the jangle of the bunch of his keys on his belt. He figured this man must have been the Head Watchman with access to the whole of the castle by the number of keys.

Thomas grabbed the keys moved swiftly back down to the dungeons. He found the correct key to the Dungeon unexpectedly after only a couple of tries and he entered into the rank smelling interior. Manacles hung on the wall; torture contraptions were in the main floor and the aroma of human faeces made this place have a grotesque feel that gave Thomas the shivers. He imagined the human misery than cast it from his mind he knew he had more to do before he was done here. The cell doors had a round spy hole and Thomas carefully spied into each of them. He saw wretched beings tormented and tortured behind each door. They had committed crimes against the Norman over lords and now they suffered indefinitely. Each cell had been crammed to capacity with at least twenty occupants but the last cell looked empty until Thomas noticed the solitary occupant. A bearded bedraggled being who was nothing more than bone.

“Henry, Henry is that you,” Thomas whispered into the spy hole.

“Yes that was my name once,” a frail voice replied.

“Henry its Thomas we have to move quickly,” Thomas slid the latch bolt across that held the door.

Henry tried to stand but his wasted legs battered by the Gaolers failed to steady him and he fell halfway to his feet. Thomas ran in placed his arm around for support and escorted him out of the door. They left the dungeon when Thomas heard the commotion coming from above.

“The duty Watch are all dead,” came a voice.

“Quickly,” Thomas sounded calm as he dragged Henry to the Keep Door. The wood beam securing the door was heavy and took all of Thomas’s strength to heave it clear. He opened the door and the night air filled his lungs.

The commotion above had grew steadily louder has the Normans arose from slumber.

“Call out the Guard,”

“Inform the Baron we have intruders,”

Thomas knew as he hit the mechanical lever the entire castle would be able to hear the drawbridge lower and the grate raise. He drew a deep breath then kicked the lever. The chain wheel rattled loudly and the counter balance dropped. The bridge began to lower and the metal grate lifted into an aperture above.

“Shush,” Thomas mouthed in vain as the deafening mechanism came to life.

“The Gate,”

“Someone’s opening the gate,”

“The Intruders are escaping.” Calls rang out throughout the whole castle.

“The Barons been murdered,” came a new call from further aloft.

It seemed an eternity for the drawbridge to lower and Henry fearing the impending danger straddled across.

“Go”. Thomas motioned. “Good luck old friend,” as he turned the mechanism onto close. As the Bridge began to rise and the grate lowered then Thomas held the lever steady.

In the Arch of the stairwell the first Normans appeared.

“There he is the Murdering Saxon runt,” they called.

Four Normans drew swords and a fifth had a crippling Hal staff.

Thomas let go of the lever and ducked under the falling grate as it hit the floor with a heavy clang. He ran up the rising drawbridge and vaulted onto the far bank.

“Lets move swiftly Henry. We have only a brief respite,”

“Deus Vult.” Henry using all his reserves rose to his feet.

They ran through the empty streets of Chester as a flock of chickens attempted flight startled and dogs barked by the disturbance. It was though the sound of the hecklers behind that unnerved them the most. Lit torches illuminated the night as the Normans scoured the town for them.

“We need to cross the river Henry,” Thomas informed his brother of their destination.

The cacophony of the town died away as they reached the woods.

“Where we going Thomas, where can we run too,”

“Were going to Jerusalem Brother a new life awaits us both there,”

On the far bank of the river Jasmina waited with the horses. They mounted and sped off into the sunset.....

The End