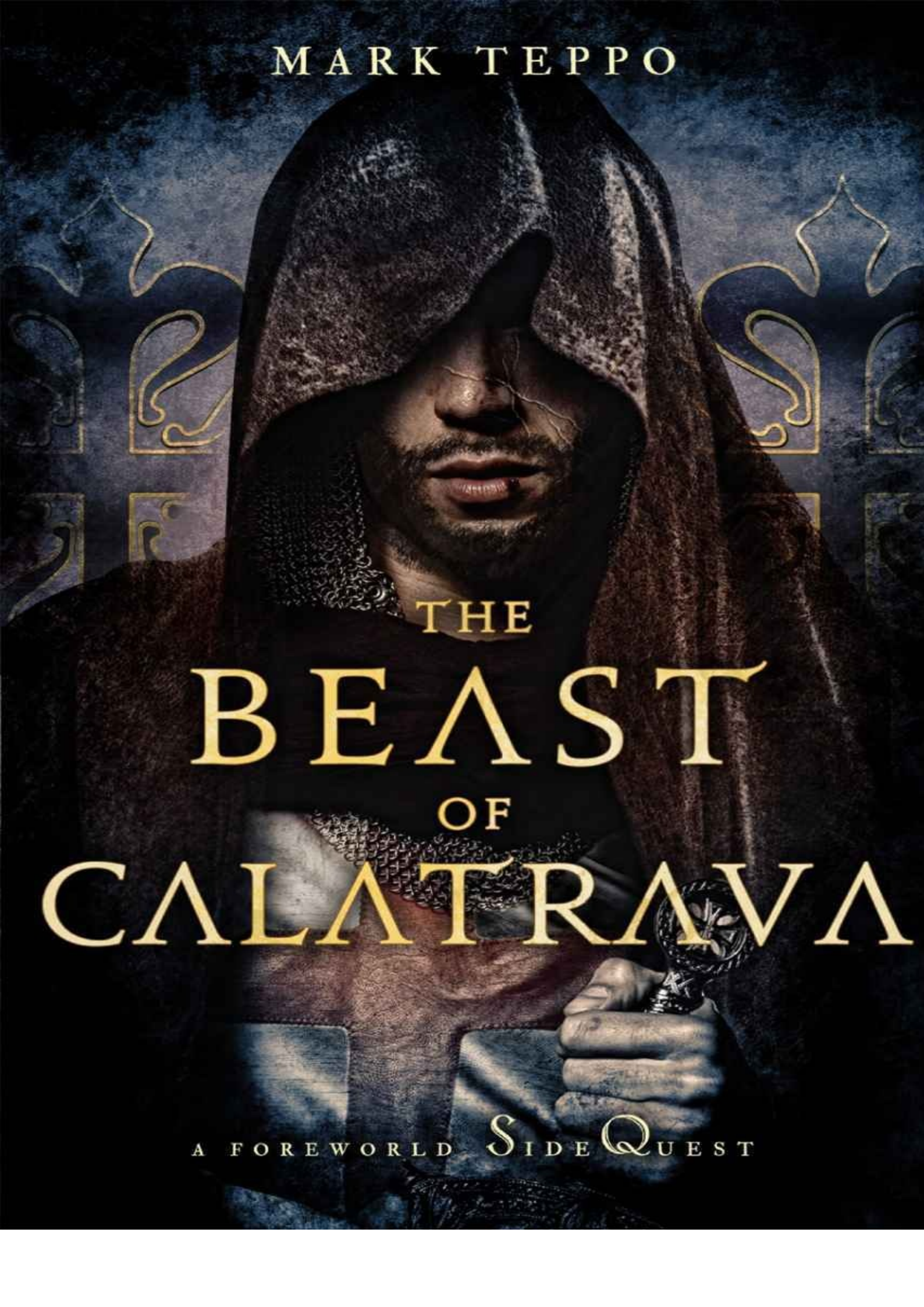


MARK TEPPO



THE
BEAST
OF
CALATRAVA

A FOREWORLD SIDE QUEST

The Beast of Calatrava

The Beast of Calatrava

Mark Teppo

47NRTH

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*Whoso had seen that shattering of shields,
Whoso had heard those shining hauberks creak,
And heard those shields on iron helmets beat,
Whoso had seen fall down those chevaliers,
And heard men groan, dying upon that field,
Some memory of bitter pains might keep.*

—The Song of Roland

“I am not a mountain goat, Brother Lazare,” the rounder of the two priests complained as they skirted a wash of loose rock, detritus left in the wake of the ice and stone that had once flowed down the mountains into the valley behind them.

“Yes, Brother Crespin,” the first priest replied. “Much like last week when you informed me you were not a badger.” He paused, glancing back at his companion.

Crespin stopped several steps behind Lazare and leaned forward, one elbow on a knee, trying to catch his breath. They had been climbing for more than an hour now, and the camp below was small enough that it could be obscured with an outstretched hand. The bowl of the cirque was filled with lush forest, and on their left, a silver cascade of water tumbled down. It flowed through the trees, emerging at the edge of the bowl—not far from where the Templars had set up their camp the previous night—and proceeded in a winding course down into Gascogne. On the other side of these mountains lay Aragon and Iberia.

“Is it not a magnificent view?” Lazare asked, his hands on his hips. “Were you indeed a mountain goat, you might be inured to the beauty of such an expanse, but how fortunate is it that you are not?”

Crespin turned slowly, placing his feet with care so that he didn’t step on a piece of shale that might slip beneath his weight. “My heart trembles to be the recipient of such fortune,” he said, breathing breathlessly.

Lazare skipped down the slope and clapped Crespin on the shoulders, startling the stouter man. “We congratulate ourselves with our ability to build churches, but what are they but hovels of mud and stick compared to the majesty of these mountains and the valley below us?”

“An observation you could have made an hour ago before we had started this climb,” Crespin said, glaring at Lazare.

“Yes, but you would have accepted my words on faith, Brother Crespin,” Lazare said. “Are they not imbued with much more gravitas now that you have seen God’s majesty for yourself?”

“’Tis a lesson I would not have minded skipping,” Crespin replied.

“And missed the opportunity to see what lies at the top?” Lazare shook his head. “Come now, Brother Crespin, we are almost there.” He clapped Crespin on the shoulder once more and resumed his climb.

From the valley below, the upper rim of the mountains was an unbroken ring of stone cliffs impassable to a company that included horses and wagons. Nor had their guides suggested they try to cross the Pyrenees here. The valley—with its bouncing spring of glacial runoff, open fields, and verdant forests—was simply a good location for a camp, and the Templar commander, Helyssent of Verdelay, had meant to stay for several days to replenish stores. While the senior religious officer accompanying the army was the archbishop of Toledo, the task of providing sermons fell to Abbot Arnaud Amalric, the master of the small group of Cistercians, and the abbot was a priest who took his role as orator very seriously. Lazare and Crespin had dutifully offered their services to the knights, but as the company had seen no combat, nor had it ridden hard, there was little for the small company of Cistercian priests to do.

During his morning prayer, Lazare had noticed the notch in the cliff, and when he had inquired

of the local guides about it, he had learned that it was known as Roland's Breach. From the valley floor, it did look like a cleft caused by a blade striking a stone.

And, of course, learning this, he had to climb up and take a closer look. Crespin hadn't even tried to talk Lazare out of going; he knew that was a fool's effort.

The first part of the climb was the most strenuous, and for the last hour, the route had been much steeper than walking from the outer wall to the abbey at Clairvaux. The mountain air was crisp, and Lazare enjoyed the feel of it in his mouth and throat as he breathed deeply during the hike. Much like the water from the stream that ran by the camp, the air seemed purer as if indicative of its proximity to Heaven.

Unlike he and Crespin. Their white habits were streaked with dust from the rocky climb. Filthy creatures scrambling up the aged bones of God's creation.

As he reached the cleft, Lazare marveled at the precision of the cut through the rocky spur to the peak. While he waited for Crespin to catch up, Lazare paced off the width of the gap—just over twenty-six paces—and inspected the marbled wall of the cleft, running his hands over the rough stone.

Crespin reached the cleft and stood in the shade of the left-hand wall, looking at the mountain range the company of knights still had to cross before they reached Aragon. "Well," he said after he had caught his breath. "Here we are. Is it as marvelous as you hoped?"

There were loose stones at the bottom of the cleft, shards that had fallen from the walls; on the left-hand side, a knob of stone protruded from the cleft-face like a pustule waiting to burst; at the top, the edges were straight and there was no overhanging stone lip. Lazare left his hand on the rock, feeling its texture under his calloused hands.

"The guide told me the story of this breach," he said. "It was supposedly made by Roland when he tried to break his sword to keep it from falling into Moorish hands."

Crespin glanced up at the walls of the cleft. "You have heard a different version than I," he said. "I don't recall Roland being a giant."

"Of course, he wasn't," Lazare replied. "Looking at the stones of battlements and walls, haven't you seen cuts like this and wondered what happens when steel meets stone?"

"I haven't for I know that—in most instances—stone wins. Even if notches like this are made," Crespin admitted, his mouth turning down as if he had sampled something sour. He looked up at the knob of rock above his head. "Is this why we came up here? For you to fondle the stone?"

"No one knows where his sword went," Lazare said. "When the Saracens overran Charlemagne's rear guard, Roland rallied the Christians with Oliphant and Durendal."

"He had an elephant?"

"No," Lazare laughed. "He had a hunting horn."

"And he called it *Oliphant*?" Crespin frowned. "I suppose *Durendal* was the name of his sword."

"Yes, it was. Supposedly its hilt contained relics that gave its wielder great powers."

"But the Saracens killed him," Crespin pointed out.

"It took a great number of Saracens," Lazare responded. "Thousands."

"Thousands," Crespin repeated. His gaze roamed around the loose rock in the cleft between Gascogne and Aragon. "I don't see it," he said. "I fear the magic sword with a name isn't here."

"No," Lazare said wistfully, "it isn't. Nor did I find it in Rocamadour where the monks think it landed after Roland threw it."

"Rocamadour," Crespin said. "That's quite far from here. Even for a giant, which he wasn't." He sighed and levered himself to his feet and approached the other priest. It was his turn to rest his hands on Lazare's shoulders. "It's just a sword, Brother Lazare, and one that was, most likely, of much lesser quality than the blades you have made. You shouldn't trouble yourself so much with the

obsession with magic swords. Magic isn't what makes a sword strong. Faith is. Let your faith reside with God. God will guide your arm. God shows you how to make strong steel just as he directs my hand when I place the stones and raise my arches. We are His instruments."

"You are right, Brother Crespin," Lazare said, sighing. "It is just a sword."

"Come then," Crespin said, squeezing Lazare's shoulder. "Let us make the much less arduous journey back to the camp. Perhaps the Templar commander has discovered a spot of rust on his blade and he will need you to clean it."

"I am but a mere instrument of God's," Lazare said wryly. "It is my duty to serve."

"Precisely." Crespin idly knocked some of the dust from his robe as he started back down the trail. Behind him, he heard Brother Lazare mutter quietly, "Though, to name a sword..." Crespin shook his head as he kept walking.

TWO

Ramiro Ibáñez de Tolosa followed the dry river bed along the base of the hill. The ground was rocky enough that he kicked up little dust as he moved, and with his dun-colored clothing, he could be mistaken for a large stone should he stop and raise the cowl of his robes. The only sound he made as he walked was a light tapping of the butt of his oak staff against the rocks.

His torso was thick and short, out of proportion with his long arms and legs, and his head was a sturdy block atop his broad shoulders. His dingy gray hair was long and untamed, unlike his beard which was neatly trimmed along the edge of his jaw. Unlikely allies, the beard and hair conspired to hide the long scar that pulled the left corner of his mouth down, but little could be done to hide the missing tip of his nose.

Scar tissue notwithstanding, his sense of smell was not diminished, and it was the odor of cooking meat that he was following. The river bed wound around the base of the plump oak-covered hill, and he knew it turned to the west just past an outcropping of splintered rocks that served as a dependable windbreak against the storms that drifted up from the south. He could have approached the lee of the rocky break from above, but the oaks were not dense enough on that side of the hill to conceal his approach. The rocks obscured the course of the dry river bed, and unless they had posted a lookout, he would be able to sneak up on the camp without anyone noticing him.

He saw no watcher in the obvious position atop the rock, and as he came up on the edge of the ragged edge of the splintered stone, he heard voices and the crackling of a fire. The smell of roasting goat was much stronger. Even before he came around the rock, he had decided there would be at least three men sitting around the fire.

There were four—one was lying on his back a little distance from the fire, and judging from the bloodstained rags clutched to his stomach, he had a reason to be less talkative than the others. The other three wore stained tunics that militia typically wore under maille hauberks, though Ramiro saw no evidence of chain shirts in their scattered baggage. They wore no colors, showed no insignias or seals, and their swords were plain and worn. *Deserters*, Ramiro decided as he cleared his throat and tapped his staff lightly against the nearby rock.

“Pleasant day to roast a goat,” he said, nodding toward the smoking carcass hanging over the recently made fire. He spoke slowly and carefully, making sure that his lips closed when they should, with each word so that the men would be able to understand him.

Two of the four scrambled to their feet, their hands falling on their worn sword hilts. The dying man flinched, reacting more to the sudden movement from the others than from Ramiro’s words. The other man remained seated beside the fire, though his hand drifted toward a long knife stuck through his belt. The two standing were nervous, their eyes bouncing back and forth between the seated man and Ramiro, waiting for some signal.

“It is,” the seated man said. “Did you—” He swallowed his words, and his eyes slid off and then returned to staring at Ramiro’s angular nose.

“Yes,” Ramiro said, nodding politely. “You can smell it for quite some distance. If there are scavengers in these hills, I suspect they’re already watching you.”

“Is that what you are?” the man asked. “A *scavenger*?”

“Diego!” one of the standing men hissed.

“He’s not a priest,” the seated one—the one named Diego—said. “Not with that face. And—”
—“Why not?” Ramiro interrupted. The man stared at him, and he gestured at his scarred visage.
“Why couldn’t a man like me be a servant to God? Does God care what I look like?”

The one who had hissed at Diego tried to smile as he stepped toward Ramiro. “My friend means no disrespect,” he said. “He—we—have been traveling for some time. We have not eaten a decent meal in days. It makes us forget our manners.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Ramiro said. “That goat, for instance, was not yours to slaughter.”

The halfhearted smile on the man’s face faltered and he hesitated, licking his lips as he glanced over his shoulder at Diego. Looking for a signal. Diego inclined his head a fraction and the man’s hand tightened on the hilt of his sword.

As the ruffian began to draw his sword, Ramiro stepped forward and rapped him smartly on the knuckles with the tip of his staff. The tip then caught the man in the chin, knocking him back into the arms of his friend. Ramiro took another step, letting go of the staff with one hand and whirling around his head. Diego, half rising, leaped back to avoid getting struck in the head by the fast-moving end of the oak staff, and he ended up on his ass beside the dying man.

Far enough away to not be any concern for a moment or two.

Ramiro swept his staff around, keeping the pair of swordsmen at bay, and then he brought the staff back into a two-handed grip. The one who had spoken managed to pull his sword free of its scabbard on his second attempt, and he came at Ramiro with a clumsy thrust. Ramiro stepped to the side, using his staff to knock the man’s sword blade away from his chest. He snapped the staff back with his hands, catching the man on the side of the head, just below the ear, with a vicious hit. The man’s teeth clicked as they snapped together, and he collapsed instantly, his limbs flopping like those of a child’s rag doll.

The second man had to step over his fallen friend and his attention dropped to his feet as Ramiro came, his sword raised high. Ramiro closed the distance between them, catching the man under the arm with his staff. He shoved the staff up, forcing the man to raise his arm over his head. Ramiro flicked the end of his staff not once but twice, smacking the man in the face with each strike. After the second hit, the man staggered back, his sword hanging loosely in one hand.

Ramiro scooped up the first man’s discarded sword and turned to assess the situation. Diego had gotten to his feet and drawn his knife, but when he was confronted with both sword and staff, his grip loosened and the knife fell to the ground. “My sincerest apologies to the owner of this goat,” Diego said, bowing his head. “Would that I could return what has been lost, but alas the beast is dead and burned.”

“Who is your master?” Ramiro asked, ignoring the other’s efforts to ingratiate himself.

Diego flushed, and he gazed down at his discarded knife for a second as if he were considering picking it up again. “We’re not slaves,” he said. “We’re free Castilians.”

“We’re not in Castile,” Ramiro pointed out.

The two men on the ground had both recovered from their ignominious treatment at Ramiro’s hands and had carefully crept out of range of both sword and staff. The one who had been struck beneath the ear tried to glare at Ramiro, but his eyes kept wandering. The other one had tried to wipe away the blood from his nose, leaving a red smear across his left cheek.

“Don Enrique Rodríguez de Marañón,” Diego said.

“He’s dead,” the one with the bloody face blurted out.

“Not by our hand,” Diego said quickly, forestalling a conclusion that he feared Ramiro might be leaping to. “When the Moors took the citadel at Puertollano.”

“When?” Ramiro asked, his heart quickening. Puertollano lay to the north and west; while the land was claimed by both the Almohad caliphate and kings of Castile and Aragon, there had been fe

skirmishes between Christian and Moor in the last few years.

—“A week ago,” Diego said. “They overwhelmed us. We only had a dozen knights and”—he gestured at his companions—“not enough men. They captured Don Enrique and two other caballeros. The rest of us were not worth ransoming, and they would have killed us had we not fled.”

Ramiro let his gaze wander across the supine member of their group, taking in the bloodstained bandages, the pale skin, the thick sheen of sweat. The man had sustained his wound more recently than a week ago. “And where are you going?” he asked, his gaze returning to Diego.

“North,” Diego said, lifting a hand and pointing along the verge of the forest behind Ramiro, if such motion might make up for the lack of specifics in his reply.

It was the wrong direction, but it was away from Ramiro’s villa and orchards. Ramiro nodded. “Then you should continue on your way,” he said.

“Now?” Diego asked.

Ramiro nodded.

“But what about the goat?” one of the two men complained.

“It’s not your goat,” Ramiro reminded him.

“But—” the man continued, and Diego cut him off with a hiss. He gestured for the others to gather their gear as he strode around the fire toward their scattered baggage. The pair followed him in lead and began gathering up their meager belongings.

Ramiro walked around the other side of the fire to inspect the wounded man more closely. He was bleeding from the belly, and his breaths were shallow and slow. His eyes remained closed. Ramiro knelt and touched his forehead, feeling the heat of his fever.

“What of your friend?” he asked. “He certainly won’t last *another* week.”

The man beside him, as if summoned from the depths of his fever by Ramiro’s voice, slowly opened his eyes. They grew even larger as he saw Ramiro’s disfigured face, and his chest rose and fell with increasing desperation. He opened his mouth, and if it was to speak or scream, none of the others would ever know as his life ended before he could draw enough breath.

The sight of Ramiro frightening a man to death spooked one of the two men, who left off gathering his belongings and ran, sprinting for the forest along the hillside. The second man followed in suit, and only Diego lingered for a second, sneering at Ramiro in a fit of false bravado. “Monster.” He spat into the fire before he followed the others.

Unmoved by the reaction of the men, Ramiro calmly closed the corpse’s eyes and mouth before turning his attention to the goat roasting on the fire. It was one of six he kept; earlier in the day he had noticed it missing. The mystery was now solved, but the reason for its disappearance was troubling.

The Almohads were moving north. War was coming to Iberia again.

THREE

Upon hearing the commotion at the rear of the cathedral, Brother Lazare raised his head from his silent prayer and looked over his shoulder. A messenger was in earnest conversation with the archbishop's steward, and both kept glancing toward the choir of the cathedral where Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada, the archbishop of Toledo, continued to pray. Kneeling behind the archbishop, Helyssent of Verdelay, the Templar commander, stirred slightly but he did not succumb to the same curiosity that had overtaken Lazare. On the archbishop's left, Abbot Amalric was intent on matching the archbishop's focus in prayer.

Lazare sensed that Crespín was trying to get his attention with a wide-eyed glance and surreptitious head shake, but Lazare ignored him. He was done with his vigil; he didn't have the same need to impress the archbishop with his religious fervor. Levering himself to his feet, he walked stiffly toward the nave. *How long had they been praying?* he wondered. *Two hours?* He was out of practice with such demonstrations of piety, though he felt that God would forgive him. Some of His servants were meant for duties other than personal sacrifice and rigorous abasement. As he reached the wooden gate that separated the choir from the nave, he waved at the pair.

The messenger scurried over, his head bobbing up and down as he attempted to bow and wave at the same time. "His Majesty, King Sancho the Strong, has received word of your arrival in Pamplona," the messenger said hurriedly. "While he regrets he cannot receive the archbishop immediately, he hopes that you will join him at his estate for a late supper."

Lazare's stomach sounded noisily at the idea of dining at the king's table, and he quietly lamented that he hadn't anticipated the archbishop's tenacity. Somewhat sourly, he glared at the archbishop's steward, Bartholo, a thin man with sunken cheeks, who now appeared beside them. "Do you press upon this gentleman the earnestness of the archbishop's desire to wait right here for the arrival of the king?"

Bartholo nodded, one eyebrow raised. When he spoke, he moved his lips as little as possible. "I did."

Lazare knew better than to wait for the archbishop's steward to elaborate. The man was incredibly sparing with his words. During more than a few of the abbot's endless sermons, Lazare wished that the abbot could take his cues from Bartholo's reticence. But, in fact, perhaps he had; the last few hours had been the quietest period Lazare had ever spent in the abbot and archbishop's presence.

The messenger scratched the side of his neck and shuffled his feet, nervous gestures that Lazare immediately read as signifiers of guilty knowledge. "Is there a response you would like me to take back to His Majesty?" the messenger asked.

"No," Bartholo said, and Lazare raised his hand to forestall the messenger's departure.

"A moment," he asked, considering how to resolve this impasse between church and king. He didn't know the details of any history between the archbishop and King Sancho, but there was clearly some unresolved enmity that was driving each man to pressure the other. The archbishop was going to remain in the cathedral, praying and fasting, until the king of Navarre deigned to present himself. King Sancho was pretending to be too busy to see the archbishop, making the Church wait upon his leisure. Lazare had seen this sort of nonsensical behavior compound difficulties between rulers and

churchmen. The simplest disagreement could turn into armed conflict over these sorts of slights. Was attempting to mediate this dispute within the bounds of his role as a monk of the Cistercian order, would doing so reveal his own interests in a way that would draw unwanted attention?

The archbishop needs the support of Navarre, he thought, trying to figure out the priest's motivation. The army of northern knights the archbishop had assembled wasn't enough; the kingdom of Iberia needed to work together. *How was this impasse helping the crusade against the Moors?*

"What's going on?"

Lazare turned to greet the Templar commander who had finally succumbed to temptation. Helyssent de Verdelay thought he was taller than he was, and he carried himself with his head back so that he could look down his nose at those with whom he spoke. And when he did speak, his large teeth were prominently displayed.

"A messenger from King Sancho," Lazare said.

"Where is he?" Helyssent demanded, as if the king of Navarre were nothing more than a truculent manservant.

"Perhaps it might be best if I were to accompany you," Lazare said to the messenger, ignoring the Templar's query. Answering it might provoke Helyssent into a diatribe about the arrogance of provincial rulers—a rant Lazare had no desire to suffer through. "I would be more than happy to offer my apologies to the king in person," he continued. "There is no reason for you to be burdened any further by this delicate conversation."

The messenger nodded vigorously. "Yes, Father," he said. "I think that would be best."

"Please," Lazare corrected him. "I am a just a lay brother of the Cistercian order. *Brother Lazare is fine.*"

"You still haven't told me what is going on," Helyssent demanded.

Bartholo raised an eyebrow as he glanced at Lazare.

"Very little," Lazare said with a sigh. "The archbishop is praying, the king is not here, and I wonder if the possibility of a visitor, such as myself, might help bring all of this to a much more expedient resolution."

Helyssent stared at him for a moment and then looked back at the archbishop and the abbot. "Very well," he said. "My men and I will be continuing on to Toledo in the morning, with or without the priests. I am not interested in local politics. They have no bearing on our crusade."

Meaning there are no spoils to be won, Lazare thought, biting his tongue to keep the words from coming out of his mouth. Helyssent narrowed his eyes as if he suspected what was on Lazare's mind, and his nostrils flared in an imperious sniff. "I am going to the inn," he announced to Bartholo. "God knows of my love for Him. I do not need to continue prostrating myself."

Bartholo inclined his head, and Lazare stepped quickly out of the way as the Templar commander shoved open the gate between the choir and the nave. With a final sniff of derision, Helyssent departed.

Lazare was somewhat taken with the idea that the Templars might go on without the rest of the archbishop's party. He tried not to let his enthusiasm show.

The messenger apologized for not having more suitable transportation from the cathedral, but Lazare dismissed the other man's concerns with a wave of his hand. It felt good to walk, and the messenger's pace made him stretch his legs to keep up. Pamplona was not unlike Paris or Carcassonne—

burgeoning city that was not so far from its ramshackle youth that the accretions of growth weren't readily visible. Around the Cathedral of Saint Mary, the buildings were made from stone and sunbaked brick, and the streets were straight and wide; as Lazare and the messenger moved north, their route traced a path through a maze of crooked alleys and haphazard lanes that made no sense to Lazare. The buildings that crowded the street were newer than the aged stone structures near the cathedral, but they weren't built as robustly. Some of them leaned slightly, as if they were looming over the street.

And then the architecture changed again. The streets became wide boulevards, lined with walls that marked the edges of villas owned by landowners and Navarrese nobility. Ahead, the street opened into a round plaza; in the center were three fountains surrounded by low hedges. Beyond, Lazare spotted the towers of the castle keep, the residence of the king of Navarre. Soldiers patrolled the plaza wearing the king's colors.

The messenger led Lazare toward the castle, and when they neared the main gate, he gestured that Lazare should wait while he spoke with the guard. Lazare idled out of earshot, quietly examining the swords carried by the guards. French blacksmiths were much less inclined to fanciful cross guards and pommels on their swords.

"Come with me," one of the guards said, waving Lazare over. Lazare nodded and let the man lead him through the gates and into the castle proper. There was the usual bustle about the grounds of the castle yard, and Lazare found his attention straying toward the smithy when he heard the sound of the smith's hammer ringing against a piece of unfinished steel. Lazare lost track of his escort momentarily and looked about for the man, somewhat confused that he wasn't being taken to the main keep. When he spied the man once more, he hurried after him.

They went around the main keep, slipping between a barracks and the stables, until they reached a secluded yard, set off by a low wooden wall. The arena had a floor of hard-packed dirt, and it was large enough to exercise several horses or perform martial drills with dozens of men. Four men stood in the center of the arena, and a dozen or so more were arranged along the nearest fence; they were all watching the single horse and rider who were galloping around the circuit of the yard. The rider was the tallest man Lazare had ever seen, made taller by the height of his proud mount. The horse was as gray as a winter sky, and its mane and tail were long and luxurious, combed more often than Lazare attended to his own hair.

"King Sancho," his escort pointed out in case Lazare was oblivious to the identity of the rider.

Lazare nodded absently as he wandered close to the railing, where he became aware of a swell of noise from the watchers. He couldn't make out any individual words; they were like the wind moving through trees in the forest. The men in the center of the arena were calling out individual words of praise at least, though Lazare could not fathom what activity of the king's was eliciting such boisterous approval.

The third time the horse and rider passed, Lazare noted that the king was looking at him. King Sancho had a broad face with wide-spaced eyes and a flat nose. He didn't appear to be enjoying his ride all that much, and Lazare thought he saw a flicker of curiosity in the king's gaze as he galloped by. On the fourth pass, the horse came to a complete stop directly in front of Lazare with no sign that the king had given the horse any direction.

Lazare took such mystery as a sign that he should abase himself, and he did so, touching his forehead to the rough wood of the railing. His Castilian wasn't nearly as good as his *langued'oc*, but he stuttered out a few honorifics, focusing his efforts on praising the beautiful horse.

"I wasn't aware the Cistercians knew much about horses," Sancho said in *langued'oc*.

Lazare kept his head down. "Not as much as the king of Navarre knows of the land beyond the northern mountains," he said.

“Bah,” Sancho said. “It was my sister’s husband. He couldn’t even bother to learn his own tongue, much less his bride’s native language.” He shook his head. “You have an eye for horses. Are you one of the knights of Calatrava?” he asked.

Lazare looked down at his once-white but now rather dingy robe, momentarily wondering if the king saw something that no one else in the last few years had discerned. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” he said. “I am merely a priest. I pray for God’s mercy; I don’t go to battle in his name. Not like the Order of Calatrava.”

“Why not?” Sancho asked. “They were monks once and then they became knights. The Templars are priests, are they not?”

“They are,” Lazare said. “But they study the arts of war and not the arts of piety and devotion.”

“Can a man not be devoted to God through feats of battle?” Sancho inquired.

“Yes,” Lazare said. “Well, no. It is not...proper devotion to God...” He trailed off as he realized he was not presenting himself very well.

Sancho laughed at his discomfort, and several of the nearby courtiers tittered in kind, echoing the king’s mirth with a vapid hollowness. “Is this how the archbishop means to sway me? By sending a dottering fool of a priest?”

Lazare flushed and raised his head. “I am not the archbishop’s fool,” he snapped, denying the king’s accusation even though the very thought was making his cheeks sting with embarrassment.

“No?” Sancho raised his right eyebrow. “Then who are you, and why have you interrupted my morning ride?”

It was a very good question, and Lazare realized he had mere moments before his effort pushed the archbishop and the king farther apart. The delay in arranging an audience with the king had nothing to do with the monarch’s busy schedule. Lazare did not know who had offended whom, but it was clear there was an unresolved dispute between the two—one that was probably more about an imagined slight than any real injury. Each man wanted the other to show contrition first. “Your horse is truly magnificent,” he said quickly, focusing his attention on the mount more than the rider. “As for your city and its people. They reflect the love you have for them.”

Sancho’s horse tossed its head and pawed the ground, eager to return to running. The king said nothing, though his gaze remained on Lazare.

“Archbishop Rodrigo is on his knees at the Cathedral of Saint Mary,” Lazare continued, “and he gives every sign that he will be there for some time. The abbot of my abbey, Arnaud Amalric of the Cistercian order, prays next to him. It is regrettable, Your Majesty, that neither can step outside the house of God and see the same things that I have seen. Your city. Your people.” Lazare raised his hand gingerly toward the horse who extended its head and blew air on his knuckles. “Your horse.”

Sancho laughed and nodded curtly at the guard standing behind Lazare. “You will join me for a meal when I am finished,” he said, “and we can discuss my city and my people. And whether or not you are a fool.” Without waiting to hear Lazare’s reply—not that any reply was necessary—he tapped his heels lightly against his steed’s sides. The animal tossed its head and trotted off, gathering speed as it returned to its run.

Lazare managed to extract some of the story from the king’s steward while he waited for the king to finish exercising his horse. There was a complicated history between the kingdoms of Navarre, Aragon, Leon, and Castile that went back more than ten years. A treaty with the Almohad caliphate

had allowed the kings of Spain to quarrel amongst themselves, and there were some lands that both Castile and Navarre claimed as theirs.

Almost as an afterthought, Lazare mentioned the king's sister and was rewarded with a name: Berengaria. He mentally chastised himself for not recalling this detail earlier. Berengaria had been married to the king of England, Richard the Lionheart, and he recalled the tension that had swept the Frankish lands during the English king's unexpected stay at the court of the Holy Roman Emperor. The French king, Philip, had taken it upon himself during Richard's incarceration to annex some of the lands that had belonged to Berengaria, and by extension, Sancho's family.

Some time later, Lazare mulled over what he had learned as he waited in an audience room. This sort of internal conflict among Christian rulers was not uncommon, but he sensed there was something more complex about the disputes between the Iberian kings. The steward had intimated that, on occasion, the various kings had allied with the Moors against other Christian rulers. He was starting to wonder how safe it was to insert an army of French crusaders into this complicated history when the door to the chamber was thrown open and King Sancho entered, ducking to clear the doorway. Sancho held a goblet in his hand, and several servants scurried in behind him, bearing trays of food and pitchers of wine. Sancho swaggered over to the balcony and stood beside Lazare, slurping noisily from his goblet. "Has my steward explained everything to your satisfaction?" he asked.

Lazare flushed. He had felt quite clever in how he thought he had managed to get the steward to tell him of recent events. "He has, Your Majesty."

"Why are you participating in this charade? Not because you hope to save men on the field of battle." He said the latter matter of factly, and Lazare appreciated his outspoken brusqueness.

"No, Your Majesty," he admitted. "My Cistercian brothers and I hope to be of assistance to the Order of Calatrava—they are our brothers, after all." He left off mentioning Amalric's role in the procession from France to Toledo, deciding that since Sancho had not asked specifically, he would not volunteer any information. "But we are not knights like they," he said, keeping the conversation focused. "Brother Crespin is a stone mason, for example, and I am knowledgeable in the artifice of steel."

"Stone and steel, eh?" Sancho drank from his goblet. At Lazare's elbow, a servant tried to give him a goblet of wine as well, and Lazare hesitated for a second before accepting. The wine was warm and red; it wasn't sour at all, and he found himself gulping it all too readily. "So they mean to retaliate against Calatrava?" Sancho asked.

"The Templars do," Lazare said. Which was true.

Sancho nodded, his lips pursed in a grim line. "What was once theirs must be theirs again," he said.

Lazare nodded. He knew the history of the Order of Calatrava. The citadel at Calatrava had been a Templar stronghold, but they had relinquished it many years ago when they could no longer muster the knights to keep it secure. The king of Castile had offered it to anyone who could defend it, and two Cistercian priests—Father Raymond, abbot of the monastery in Fitero, and Father Diego Velázquez—put aside their previous duties and had taken up the sword. Naming their order after the citadel, they had stood fast against Moorish invaders until 1195 when the Almohad army swept across the plain of Alarcos. The Templars had been gone long enough from Iberia that their claim to Calatrava was fairly specious, but who was to deny the Templars what they wanted? Especially when getting what they wanted meant driving the Moorish threat out of Iberia?

"Do you know that the Pope sides with the king of Castile in this crusade?" Sancho asked. "His offer of holy redemption for those who fight in God's name comes with the decree that no Christian may take up arms against another Christian during this conflict."

"I think that is not an unwise decree regardless of any crusade, Your Majesty," Lazare said.

“And yet, the lands that Alfonso has taken from me remain his, and the lands that the archbishop and these Templars seek to conquer will become Castilian. What benefit is there for Navarre in this crusade?”

“Before I met Your Majesty, I would have said that the security of all Christians is benefit enough, but I fear I do not know enough of the history between Navarre and Castile and the Moors to make such a claim,” Lazare admitted. “The Pope, in Rome, sees the Almohad caliphate as an enemy that must be destroyed, but Rome is very far away, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Sancho said. “Rome knows little of the history of the peninsula. His proclamations of crusade, along with his threats of interdiction and excommunication, can be as readily abused as they can benefit the kingdoms of Iberia.”

Lazare nodded, thinking of the ongoing struggle between the people of England and King John. At the Cistercian abbey in France, there was little awareness of the complex issues that separated king and subject. How could anyone—especially a spiritual ruler hundreds of miles removed—issue broad proclamations against a perceived enemy and not fail to misread the nuances of the conflict?

“I remember stories, from when I was a child, about Richard the Lionheart and the treaty he made with Saladin,” Lazare said. “He was pilloried for failing to conquer the Holy Land, but he managed to secure assurances that Christians could make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem safely. I thought that was a satisfactory victory.”

“Aye,” Sancho said. “It was.” He gazed at Lazare intently as he drank from his cup. “The archbishop of Toledo went to France to gather an army to aid the king of Castile and, on his return, he deigns to stop in my kingdom to speak to me about setting aside my differences with Castile against the Moors. Why did he not seek this audience with me *before* he went to France?”

Lazare swallowed another sip of wine before answering. “Because he didn’t have an army with him before he went to France,” he said carefully. Without an army, any conversation between Sancho and the archbishop would have been between Navarre and the Church in an attempt to set aside differences between Navarre and Castile; now, it was not a conversation, but a veiled command to join the crusade against Castile’s enemies.

“The archbishop can come to me if he seeks my assistance,” Sancho said. “Otherwise, he and his army of marauders should march on to Castile as swiftly as possible. And you”—he pointed his finger at Lazare—“I hope you are a better smith than you are a diplomat.”

“The last is undoubtedly true, Your Majesty,” he said before he gulped the rest of his wine. “As to the former, I will deliver your words to the archbishop, and I am certain the Templars are already inclined to move farther south expeditiously.” He bowed to the king, and turned to depart.

“Priest,” Sancho called, bringing him up short. “What you have said about aiding the knights of Calatrava, does that extend to other people of Iberia as well?”

“Why wouldn’t it?” Lazare asked, though he wondered if he fully understood Sancho’s question.

FOUR

Rain water sluiced off the narrow overhang of the porch, spattering the muddy ground around the villa. The clouds were portentous and gray, and they hung low in the sky, trapping the chilly air close to the ground. It had been raining since the previous night, the skies weeping a continuous stream of water as if hidden dams that had been frozen shut since winter began were now open.

Ramiro sat on a wooden stool, a wool blanket wrapped around his aching shoulders. He always felt the seasonal change coming, a dull throb in his jaw and left shoulder. It had been a week since he had run off the deserters and buried the dead man in the hills; two nights ago, the dreams had come back. Nightmare memories of the battle at Alarcos. The last defense of the old citadel. The waves of armed Moors scampering up the siege ladders. The lines of archers sending volley after volley of arrows over the walls. The screams of the dying Christian soldiers to whom no succor could be given.

And then the dreams would change. The Moors would grow furry legs and their helmets would turn into glowing eyes. Their curved swords would become wicked fangs, and they would scramble across the stone bulwarks of the citadel with a nimbleness that defied rational thought. The dead would reanimate, and the shambling ranks of rotting soldiers were a solid wall behind him, constantly pressing forward against the few living knights. They couldn't fall back, not with the ranks of the moaning dead behind them. They could only stand their ground against a monstrous enemy that boiled over the walls.

In the dream, he already had his scars and the dead flocked to him because he was the leader, the most disfigured of them all. He was their radiant king, and they all rallied at the sound of his beautiful voice. He always woke just after he gave the command to push the eight-legged invaders back, the throaty sound of his shout echoing in his ears.

Several of the goats called out to him from the pen, and he shifted his weight on the stool, shivering slightly beneath the blanket. He knew he should go back inside the villa; he should crawl back into bed with Louisa and wrap his arms around her swollen frame and hold her tight. She would be unlikely to suffer the constraint—especially in sleep—and for a little while the dreams wouldn't come back.

The child was due sometime in the next month. He had hoped to give it a lifetime of solitude and peace, a simple life free of the conflict that had left its mark on him, but what he had learned from Diego the deserter continued to gnaw at him—a persistent poison that infected his dreams. A reminder that the war would never stop.

“You didn't sleep,” Louisa said as she waddled across the main room of the villa. She was a fine-boned woman and her distended belly seemed to constantly endanger her balance.

Ramiro shook his head as he inspected the heavy pot suspended over the fire in the hearth. “I didn't have the dream again,” he said.

When she reached his side, she ran her long fingers through his hair and he closed his eyes.

she stroked his head. She was half his age; in the beginning he had questioned her desire to be with him. What could a woman like her see in an old crippled soldier like him? Was he a convenient shield against the suitors in her village who had persistently taken an interest in her late father's farm? Was he like the wounded lamb that could no longer care for itself? Worthy of love because he was so clearly an outcast and pariah? He had resisted her affection for so long that, when he finally allowed her to touch his face, he wept for having denied himself the simple pleasure of another's touch for so many years.

"You are awake now," she said soothingly. "It cannot hurt you."

He nodded slightly, leaning into her ministrations. She stroked harder, running her nails across his scalp. Like she did with the goats when she fed them scraps of carrots and beets from their garden. "The Almohads are back," he murmured, finally telling her what he had learned a week ago. "There is an army on the plain. They mean to march on Toledo."

"They won't come here," she said.

He didn't share her conviction. The ache in his shoulder told him otherwise. He glanced down at the wooden spoon in his hand. He was holding it loosely, fingers wrapped around the shaft, thumb resting on the wood. The same way he held a sword.

It was buried out past the orchard, wrapped in the white tabard of the order with its red cross and fleur-de-lis. Along with his maille. He half hoped the roots of the oak would have claimed the oilskin bundle, but he knew the tree would give back its secret cache readily enough.

The thaw had come. The ground would be soft.

FIVE

For the first few days after the army reached Toledo, Brothers Lazare and Crespin remained with the army, assisting in the menial work of establishing camp. Helyssent was eager to press on and cross the mountains that lay to the south, but the archbishop reminded him that the Templars and the rest of the crusaders from the north were here to assist the king of Castile. They would wait for the other allies that Alfonso VIII had convinced to join him in his war against the Almohad caliphate.

While the army waited outside the city, the archbishop and Abbot Amalric retired to the archbishop's estate within Toledo. Several of the other lay brothers accompanied Amalric, but Lazare opted to remain with the army, as did Brother Crespin. The pair had become friends during the travel from Toulouse, and while Crespin was not as intellectually curious as Lazare, his stolid belief in the Scripture and his dedication to God provided an engaging counterpoint.

It was with some shame then that, one morning, Lazare crept soundlessly out of the narrow tent he shared with Brother Crespin an hour before sunrise. The sky was clear, brightening in the east, and he set off toward the city at a brisk pace. It was a chilly morning, and his breath steamed around his face as he walked. It would take him until shortly after dawn to reach Toledo; by that time, the cold grip of night would be loosened from his bones.

In time, he hoped he might be able to bring Crespin into his confidence; but for now, he had to keep secrets from his fellow Cistercians.

Lazare had seen the sigil scratched into the soft sunbaked brick of the alley several days ago when he and Crespin had come to the city's markets. The farmers and merchants were still setting up their wares when he reached the marketplace, and none of them paid any attention to the sight of a priest wandering through the near-empty square. He turned down the alley without hesitation, his eyes flicking up to the wall as he passed, noting once again the lines scratched in the brick. As he walked down the alley, he kept watch for another sign like the first and he spotted it scratched into the upper corner of a dark wooden door after the first turn. He paused, glancing back over his shoulder to make sure no one was following him, and then he stopped at the door and rapped lightly.

There was no immediate answer, and he waited, a tiny spark of fear blooming in his heart. Had he misunderstood the signs? Was no one here? And then he heard muffled sounds behind the door and it slowly opened, revealing nothing but dim shadows and the dim light of a banked hearth.

"I am a good servant," Lazare said quietly, "who seeks a good master."

"A good master is he who accepts no students," came the muffled reply after a moment.

The door did not move, but Lazare stepped up to the portal and pushed it slightly. It swung inward and he stepped into the dark house. The door shut behind him, and he stood still, letting his eyes adjust to the lack of light inside. He heard and felt more than he saw the presence of the other person. Several twigs and a log were added to the slumbering blaze in the hearth and it slowly woke, orange tendrils of flame curling around the thick slab of wood. As the growing fire illuminated the

room, Lazare got his first look at the man who had answered the door.

—He was entirely nondescript: robes neither too threadbare, nor too refined; hair and beard kept in the prevailing style of the day; neither too fat nor too thin. Dark blotches of ink stained the fingers of his right hand.

The room, while sparse, contained a tall cabinet filled with books and a lectern and bench along with a table covered with sheets of paper and various writing implements and ink pots. A heavy tapestry hung on the wall opposite the cabinet, and it depicted a fantastic scene of woodland creatures in a forest of tall trees with slender branches and silver leaves.

The man, having fed the fire, returned to Lazare, squinting at him as if the light was still not strong enough to bring the Cistercian's features into complete focus. "I am Marcos," he said, linking his fingers together as he examined the Cistercian priest.

"Lazare. I come to you from Paris, by way of Clairvaux. I have read some of your work."

Marcos grinned at him, tilting his head to the side. "My work?" he echoed. "I have written nothing and created even less."

Lazare raised his hands, showing his palms. "I, too, create nothing."

Marcos grabbed Lazare's right hand and felt the calluses at the base of his fingers and along the edge of his thumb. "A smith," he divined. "And a philosopher." He let go of Lazare's hand, nodding. "Wine?" he asked, wandering toward the table.

"It is too early for me," Lazare begged off, his stomach rebelling at the idea of sour Iberian wine.

Marcos shrugged, taking no offense at Lazare's refusal of his hospitality, and he poured a measure for himself from a jug on the table. "You are not the normal courier," he said.

"I am not here to carry books back to Paris," Lazare explained. "I am with the crusaders."

Marcos shook his head. "Rodrigo returned with an army, did he?" he sighed. "How can he have failed us so?"

Lazare wandered over to the table and glanced at the scattered pages. They were covered with fine flowing script he knew was Arabic. "How has the archbishop failed?" he asked.

"How much of the history of Iberia do you know?" Marcos said.

"I know the story of Roland," Lazare admitted. "And I have learned that the king of Navarre is not on the best of terms with the king of Castile and the archbishop of Toledo."

Marcos offered a short laugh as he raised his cup. "You know so little," he said. "Who killed Roland?"

"Saracens," Lazare said.

"Saracens," Marcos repeated, shaking his head. "It was the Basques." He sat down on the bench, idly looking at the cup in his hands. "The Basques are neither Christian nor Moor. They're *Basques*. They've been here for hundreds of years; they remember the Visigoth kings. The Muslims tried to rule them and failed. The Christians tried, and their hero, Roland, was butchered along with hundreds of knights—all of whom were slain as Charlemagne's army was retreating, having failed to conquer Iberia for the Frankish kings. The Muslims came from the south and they, too, have tried to subjugate the Basques and failed."

"But the crusade is not fighting the Basques; it is to drive the Almohad caliphate out of Iberia"

"And replace it with what?"

"A Christian nation," Lazare said.

"And the Basques?"

Lazare said nothing, for he knew—as well as Marcos did—what would eventually happen. The Church would be unsettled by the presence of non-Christians and would make an effort to bring them under the rule of Rome.

“This land—from the Pyrenees to Gibraltar—is neither Christian nor Islamic,” Marcos explained. “The Basques are a distinct people, but they are a part of the peninsula. Do you see? This land has its share of Jews and pagans in addition to those who believe both the Bible and the Qur’a. Some call this land *Iberia*; some call it *Al-Andalus*. Most call it *home*. A Christian crusade isn’t going to save Iberia. Putting this land under the sway of Rome is going to destroy what has been carefully cultivated for the last four hundred years.” He raised his cup, hesitated, and lowered it again. “Roland was an invader,” he explained. “He was driven out by those who belong here.”

“But there are songs about Roland. Stories of his virtuous stand against the infidel,” Lazare protested.

“There are songs about El Cid too,” Marcos replied. “And most disregard the fact that he fought for both Muslim and Christian coin.”

“Who?”

“Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar,” Marcos said. “A Castilian who fought many campaigns against either side until, in the end, he fought for himself.”

“A mercenary,” Lazare said. “But why did they write songs about him?”

“He conquered Valencia and made it his home, and said he would be beholden to neither king nor caliph. His people would live freely, coexisting with each other. That is Iberia.”

“And you think the crusade will destroy this Iberia?”

“Toledo has been a center of learning for more than a hundred years because Christian, Jew, and Muslim can all live in harmony. We have an understanding with the archbishop. Tolerance provides us with access to the literature and sciences of the Muslims.” He gestured at the pages on the table. “If I want to read Plato and Aristotle, I don’t learn Greek, I learn Arabic. There are many translations and commentaries written by Arabic scholars—easy to find. The original Greek?” He shook his head. “Lost to Christendom.”

“That is where you are finding the material you send to Paris,” Lazare realized.

“Aye, we have the library collected by Gerardo da Cremona, but it will take years to finish translating it all to Latin.” He stood up and shuffled through the pages on the desk, showing Lazare a sheet covered in Arabic that looked much like any of the other pages on the desk. “This is part of the *Almohad Creed*. It argues for the existence of the Islamic God in a cogent and reasoned manner; to disagree with the author’s conclusions is to disagree with the methods of rational inquiry as laid out by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*. Translating it is...both illuminating and terrifying.” Marcos sighed and put the page down. “I am committing heresy every time I translate a passage into Latin,” he said. His words spoken proudly but his voice was soft.

After a moment, the translator raised his head and stared at Lazare. “Why are you here?” he asked, finally realizing the import of something Lazare had said earlier.

“I am looking for a sword,” Lazare said.

Marcos’s brows pulled together. “Durendal?” he asked, recalling the mention of Charlemagne’s champion, Roland. When Lazare offered a tiny nod, Marcos shook his head. “It is myth,” he said. “Such a sword doesn’t exist. You would have better luck looking for Tizona.”

“Tizona?”

“El Cid’s sword.”

Lazare raised his shoulders. “Perhaps I will seek that blade as well.”

“Why?”

Lazare looked down at the page of Arabic script. “How much news do you hear from Christendom?” he asked, considering how much to tell Marcos. “Regarding France? And England?”

Marcos shook his head slightly. “Our queen is English, named after her mother—Eleanor of Aquitaine. Leonor, as she is known here in Castile, is the sister of both the Lionheart and John, who

king of England now. I know that John is concerned about Philip, the king of France, and he seeks allies to forestall an invasion by the French.”

“Yes,” Lazare said. “They used to be friends, but that friendship has been strained of late. King John’s subjects are ill at ease too. There is talk of a revolt.”

“There is always talk of revolt,” Marcos said. “Countered only by the cost of such an uprising.”

“Some happen without much bloodshed. Provided the people have a clear symbol to rally behind.”

“Ah,” Marcos said. “Like a sword, perhaps. Like that one in England, once upon a time.”

“Excalibur,” Lazare said.

“Yes, Excalibur. Why aren’t you looking for that one?”

“I have been,” Lazare said. “I’m looking for any of the swords of legend.”

“Why don’t you make one instead?” Marcos asked.

“If it were that easy,” Lazare pointed out, “I wouldn’t be here now.”

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