



**Thomas E. Bellavance Honors Program**

**Honors Thesis**

An Honors Thesis Titled

**In the Wake of Heroes**

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**Dan Norris**

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Signatures of Honors Thesis Committee

Mentor: 

Dr. Timothy Miller

Reader 1: 

Dr. Susan McCarty

Reader 2: 

Dr. John Wenke

Director: 

Dr. James Buss

Signature

The fire of dried oak doesn't warm my body like before. So, I draw the bearskin rug closer and cast my mind back to memories of Mediterranean climes; back, into the ebbing tides of time. Thank the Christian God I learned to read and write from my master, Urudje. Unlike most seafaring men, both then and now, he believed that the best way for his slave to be of service to him was to be proficient in all the arts that he himself possessed. The very idea left lesser men quivering in their beds at night. Knowledge of the written word, among his nautical and other sundry skills, was my inheritance from my erstwhile father. The patterns of words on a page have kept me company in my near isolation. Now I bend the written word to my will; it serves to record the events of my life. I endeavor to make a record of them in the same manner which any literate sea captain would log the events of a long voyage. My words here are the tools that I've used to solve the puzzle-box of my lineage. Writing the story of my early life has depressed the remembered lever of one event in my mind, in order that another might fall to the side and thus reveal a shaft sliding from a third direction, which unmasked a truth necessary to fathom the whole. My life's entire purpose appears to have been tucked inside a gaudily embellished, meticulously carved Turkish box of tricks.

I have no heirs that plague me with incessant questions of lineage. Neither am I required to fend off their curious queries. Questions of why they might tend to darker skin than their fellows? My mother's Turkish blood is strong in me in that way alone. That is the simple answer. The actual mystery comes from my true sire. When I lived among the Hospitallers, on the island of Rhodes, I was told that my father was a Turk. And as a slave boy, I had few occasions to ponder that pronouncement in front of a mirror. I never compared my physical appearance to

those I served. Because the city of Rhodes was known for its hospitality, its safe passage for pilgrims and traders, little mention is made of the slaves who made such high-minded generosity possible.

I was a captive Turk; held in servitude by the gauntleted fist of the Knights of Saint John. I lived and worked among the sailors who manned the great galleys for the Knights, who crewed the smaller galiots that raided Turkish shipping in the North Aegean. Looting merchant ships in the north was warfare; bloody, protracted warfare and the Knights fought well. In part, I was their plunder, snatched from a Turkish galley and my childhood. Then I became their tool; a slave serving the corsairs of the Knights of Saint John, the Hospitallers. We were state sanctioned pirates, who sailed against the Ottoman Empire for booty. In spite of where I was born, I came of age spilling Turkish blood into the Aegean, and the taste of it remains rather sweet in my memory.

So, here I sit to write my record. Elbows propped on the carved dragon's feet that wrap around me and form the arms of my cushioned chair, stuffed with the hair of the finest Arabian steeds. Over the sheets of paper tacked to my angled desk, and my ink well, is a view of the Carpathian foot hills. They tumble away from the bedrock foundations of this dragon's perch, and stretch down to the Black Sea. My view of the sea's distant mist is framed in square-cut stone, shutters flung wide. Peering into that foggy distance, I picture our passage into the Sea of Marmara all those years ago. I still feel the crew holding their collective breath as we sailed past the Dardanelles and through the Bosphorus under Ottoman guns, among the swarming Turkish galleys. But the chill of my castle's open window, magnified by eighty feet of carved stone and the distance of my Mediterranean memories bring me back to Poenari Castle. Its south-east wall

still stands in its entirety, though it is the only one left whole. I am comforted by the minute adjustment which it provides in proximity to my maker.

Last month, maybe the month before, I was reduced to trundling my own firewood along the hallway that leads out to this tower in a single-wheeled barrow. The effort, however tedious, allows me the luxury of filling these pages with my memories. Although I believe I am but forty-one or two years old, most times I look as old as the men of sixty who sit outside the town tavern. They warm themselves in the early afternoon sun, while my bones are chilled through in this stony mausoleum. Once a week the farmer Viordec's sons still deliver mutton, bread, wine, even a few vegetables. He will continue in that endeavor as long as I can still pull a few of the silver Wallachian aspri from my meager purse, but soon enough they will be gone as well. If I write more than I day dream, the story will be written complete before I run out of food and fuel. I have no yearning for confession or absolution though. Only to leave a record of these puzzling events, and perhaps dispel the rumors that turn to legend in the mouths of mother's, whispered to make children hurry to their beds at night. Oh, I've heard them. But my narrative is limited by that hoary dragon time. At my back, I can feel it breathing fire in the brief hours that I can still warm my hands to grasp the pen.

My feet dangled from the end of a worn wooden bench. The lone bench, where I normally slept, stood upright on the tavern floor. It had been my bed ever since Miriam shooed me from the pallet she made for me in her room. Throughout my childhood in Rhodes, the most consistent measure of my age seemed to be the mutable location of my bed. Over the course of the last year, my feet nosed from under the wool blanket and hung in the air, as if sniffing out a proper resting place. No matter how I curled them under me, I woke to find them reaching beyond both blanket and bench. What took me by surprise was when they twitched and ran in collaboration with my dreams.

Every other night I spent in Rhodes I swept the tavern floor, carried buckets of sea water to wash the errant wine, the crustacean shells into the street. I shoved the inn's juniper plank tables to squat against the inn's stone walls before I lay down to sleep. The table's stout legs were split at their feet, split from the daily dragging across a stained stone floor that was perpetually anointed with the perfume of rotting fish. Last thing of the evening, I overturned the benches and a few scattered arm chairs on top of the tables. Raucous laughter, spattered wine and the after dinner farts of sailors prepared the inn's longest bench to be my bed. My dangling feet, calloused on sides and soles, had yet to accumulate the numerous scars that decorated the feet of seamen, who routinely staggered through the inn's low arched doors.

I moaned and felt my eyelids twitching, but was unable to wake from my dream. The dream landscape swirled around my feet as I ran along the slope of a rock strewn incline to stand ankle deep in the rubble of a destroyed well. As I scanned the horizon, a lone rider cantered up the hillside from the forest below. There were many trees; more trees than I'd ever seen, spread

past the stream at the foot of the hill. Old oaks grew into the sky with gnarled branches, bark scabbed into ridges around knots and branching forks. Majestic hickory was overlapped by maples and spruce, and by white pines that grew straight up into the clouds. The Black Sea shimmered beyond the miles of forest and shouldered up against the bruised sky. Thunder heads drove into themselves ahead of a wilding wind that muffled his oncoming hoof-beats. He rode a warhorse that was adorned with chain-mail breastwork and leather saddle skirts; a horse that pummeled the earth with hoofs the size of pie plates. The rider circled me once, and I was pinioned to the earth with my fear. Then the rider leaned in to see my face and a deep sense of recognition rose up in me.

“Uncle?” I asked.

The mounted man spat and pulled the horse’s head around full-circle to glower down on me again.

“Uncle?”

“Aye,” he nodded, “That I am.”

I watched him dismount and wrap the reins of his horse around a post cantilevered out of the stones. A rope that led to the bail of a crushed wooden bucket was still knotted to the post and he twisted the reins into the rolled hemp. Looking up from the task, he stroked the blowing horse’s neck with the smooth palm of his leather gauntlet, knuckles studded with iron. Leaving off the calming horse he turned on me, still looking down, and pulled the glove from one hand to touch my cheek and smile.

“This is your land, boy. Every tree, every meadow, every brook is yours, all the way to the sea. You’ve always been apart from us, but we can feel you close now. You’ve escaped the

Turk; that is well and good, but we need you. Here,” and he gestured with one arm to encompass the hill and forest.

His mahogany locks, streaked with gray, hung from beneath a tarnished and battered helm. When he pulled it from his head and set it on the remainder of the well’s stone wall, the plume of the helmet bent in a gust and rebounded, flinging off dried mud. His eyes were so deeply blue that they melded with the dark centers, flecks of grey catching the sun, just like mine. He reached back for the two handed battle sword from the scabbard on his saddle and looked hard at me.

“Your knees, boy. Get on your knees.”

He laid the blade along my left shoulder then my right. With the sword cradled in his mail encased arms, he said; “Now you are one of us. Leave the islands to the fisherman and come for your estate, your castle.” When he reached back to lay the blade aside, a wound below his collarbone gaped open. The chain-mail was sawn half way down his chest and hung from his shoulders. He knelt close to me. The rich earth and rank mold mingled in my nose and mouth as he pulled me into his arms and held me to the wound. My eyes crested the peak of his shoulder and focused on the ruin of my inheritance: battlements fallen; gate flung open; smoke rising from wood houses and tower roofs. The looted castle burned and he grew into me, a witness of the past and a condemning future.

I woke from the dream left eye first, peering in panic through my lashes. Every one of my muscles jerked with a start. Feigning sleep, I held my body still and watched through the lace curtain of my eyelashes. The ploy often saved my poor indentured soul from whatever mayhem was brewing outside my dreams. Watching through my eyelashes like that was a skill I acquired

soon after my mother and I were taken by pirates. After all these years, my first memory of waking is on a pallet of straw in the dark, knowing that I had screamed for my mother until I slept. I don't know if that left eye was looking for her or looking for trouble, but it always looked before I came fully awake. The long eyelashes were my sole inheritance from a father, who had faded into the shadows of my childhood memory. He was little more to me now than a stain on an over-washed nightshirt, almost visible to the eye until examined closely in the daylight. Then he disappeared.

All my memories before I was taken by corsairs are vague. But when I was learning to walk and talk with the Ottomans, I had been regaled with stories of my father's exploits. Seldom, though, was I graced with his physical presence. I always heard he was at this camp or on that campaign while my mother and I idled in luxury at what must have been a royal court. I learned not to miss him at such an early age that I certainly don't miss him now. Early in my captivity on the island of Rhodes, however, I was soft. And I missed the linens and silk sheets spread over down filled mattresses. At the inn on Rhodes, I made my bed on a juniper bench with a blanket. Nightly, I slid the bench against the inside of the stone wall that bordered the alley, one scraping end at a time.

When I finally opened my other eye, I saw that a crescent moon washed gape-tooth shadows of the city's inner battlements across the inn's floor. Limestone blocks in the walls were close fitted to avoid mortar, and the stones shed the summer heat for the cool of evening sea breezes. The wind filtered south from the Balkans and riffled through the Aegean's burgundy swells. Then delicately brined air sailed up between the moles of the harbor like a corsair's galley. It blew over the walls of St. John's Sea Gate, and carried off the stench of sewers and



cooking-pits and hospitals into the foot hills to the south-west of the city's bulwark and dry moat.

Shivering slightly, I reached around my shoulders to hold myself against the chill, as will many children bereft of their mothers at an early age. My knees were squeezed against my chest to make me a fetal ball on the bench. But my fingers stuck to my arm when the flesh should have slipped beneath their grasp. It was sticky, like drying molasses to my searching fingers. Feeling around in the dark, my testing palm stuck to more places on my shirt, in my hair.

I rolled upright and heaved myself to my feet, only to wobble with the grogginess of sleep. Rummaging around in my mind, I tried to remember everything of the night before. Often enough I had drunk myself into morning illness and was no stranger to the wine-soaked shivers. I drank plenty of the local red wine last night, but not enough to feel this bad. This morning my dreams were filled with demons. I tottered to the banked fire in the hearth and poked at the coals with a piece of kindling. Blowing on the red embers, I lit a thin taper and held it up to examine the sticky goo on my arms. Rusty splotches crusted over the ooze that smeared from my tunic sleeves onto my exposed flesh. I dropped the taper in a panic and skinned out of my tunic and rough undershirt in one quick shrug, looking for a wound. Twisting under an upraised arm and peering over my back, I pulled the flesh tight over my bones with an opposing hand. But I found no cut, no seeping wound, and exhaled with relief.

I snatched the guttering taper from the floor where I crouched naked except for the short braies around my hips and upper thighs. I remembered when Captain Urudje had rummaged around in his sea trunk and tossed the garment at my head two, no three summers ago. Dressed in my usual child's smock, I was bent over ladling soup to the crew and displayed my newly

pendulous scrotum to half the ship. After a few guffaws and a cheer I was admonished to keep my privates from dangling over their food and ran a gauntlet of their smacking, pinching, and flicking fingers until I could wriggle into the constraining garment. Already grown through one pair of the under garments, the brais were too small again and hugged my loins like a second skin. I'd soon have to prevail on the ship's captain, for a larger pair. My immediate problem, however, was that the un-dyed wool of my tunic was spattered with dried blood and its left shoulder and arm were saturated in the gooey gore. Snatching both garments from the floor, I bolted through an arched passage way and into the narrow street that wound through the Jewish Quarter toward St. Catherine's Gate.

I ran through the dark alleys paved in round stones, past looming walls of stacked apartments and staccato shadows of archways that shouldered the Jewish Quarter's limestone walls into place. Smells of cast off mussel shells, fresh pitch on boat hulls, and hulled wheat from the ranks of windmills, flowed over the city's outer wall. Two or three rods from the foot of the inner battlement the stone road disappeared into darkness, as if the light had been kidnapped and whisked away by the evening breeze. The overhang of stone at the foot of the wall appeared to cover a storm gutter. But when I slid under the square cut stone ledge, my feet swung out over open air and my body followed into a sewer that ran along the length of the wall. The sewer wall stepped down onto slick natural stones. I felt along the mossy stone walls until the sewer turned seaward to exit under the city wall. Moonlight trickled through irregular squares that blocked my path out to the pile of rocks I saw high on the beach. Thumb size rivets, that had once secured the sewer's grate, were rusted through with truce and forgotten in the rushing rainwater of the Knight's prosperity. When I shoved on the grate, their neglect allowed my egress under the city wall that encompassed the south and east borders of Rhode's Jewish Quarter. After clearing the

tumble of rocks and brush that masked the sewer's drain, I stepped into the open air and glanced over my shoulder at the city's turrets to see if anyone was watching. Only the guards atop the wall could have seen the east side of the island. But they dozed against the limestone blocks at this early hour, wrapped in their cloaks against the cooling northwest breeze. The line of windmills that led down the eastern most mole of the harbor to the Tower of France was barely visible against the night sky to the north. Any early morning activity in the harbor was hidden from the eastern shore by the city wall which I had just crawled under. It was the narrowest part of the wall, bordered by a thin rocky beach where the waters of the Aegean Sea dropped to depth just off shore. Waves broke directly on the rocks, preventing boats from landing except in the calmest of water. I crawled unto a flat sloping rock that jutted into the slapping waves and scrubbed at my body and clothes with what little sand I could scoop from the sea floor.

After spreading my stained tunic on the rocks, I sat beside it and gazed out at the deep blue wash of sky that was peaking under the blanket of stars on the eastern horizon. The early dawn sparked memories that were ten years distant and curtained by time, recollections of being kidnapped by the corsairs of Rhodes. My memories were more like apparitions than a coherent series of events: the acrid smell of pitch smoke blown under the shaded awning in the stern of a long Turkish galley, crossbow bolts thudding into the hull, guns exploding, men's voices cursing in defiance or wailing in anguish. As a pup of five years, I had crouched swaddled in my mother's skirts. She and I traveled with many women in the luxury of gilded wood and silk and goose down. I believe that she was the concubine of a rich merchant or influential pasha. Before we were taken by the Knights, I didn't have a word for hungry, or cold, or lonely. She passed me among the harem like a favorite doll, calling me back to her with kisses and honeyed cakes. Then men came on board under billowing red crosses. I cowered among the screaming and weeping

women until my mother was dragged off the ship in Rhodes and attached to a slave coffle. The Knights loaded them into the hold of a Genoese round ship. I learned later that it was headed north to Florence. The Captain of the galiot that had cornered our Turkish galley, with its row upon row of Christian slaves pulling at the oars, grabbed my arm and lifted me from my open-mouthed mother's arms.

"This one is not going to be diddled by some Florentine cardinal. I need a ship's boy; we'll throw his lot in with the crew's."

The growled pronouncement still grates in my memory, and I added my voice to the chorus of wailing that was left in the wake of the roped women as they were herded along the stone dock toward the bobbing merchant ship. Captain Urudje tucked me under a massive forearm. Later, I was told that I kicked and flailed at the empty air until he tossed me onto a mound of fresh mown hay in the corner of a very dark closet. The door was pushed to and bolted on my screams.

Waking from that dark cupboard-sleep, my eyes were opened to my new life on the sea. From that episode forward, my memories are of salt spray over the gunnels as the galiot's prow sliced through whitecaps, leaping free of the waves, only to splash into the next briny trough. When the oars were shipped and the sailors sprung to the rigging I was freed from my duties. Then, I would crawl forward and cling to the forward cleats of the boarding platform mounted over the foredeck. I'd bounce on its thick wooden spar. My gaze skittered over the waves to the distant shoreline, where the land disappeared and reappeared from my view on the heaving prow. When the shadow of the lateen sail fell away and the crew picked up the greats sweeps to row for their destination, I ran. Up and down the gangway I ran. The gangway planks were suspended over keel and hold, between the banks of rowing benches. I ran along those planks with buckets

of wine diluted with fresh water to fuel the massive men who drove the galiot forward. These were not the lethargic slaves from my earliest memories of sea life at mother's skirt hem. Galley slaves were pathetic creatures, lashed into motion by titans with whips striding the wide gangways. The corsair's were Greek islanders and renegade Turks. They were Hungarians from and Florentines come south. They were Nubians and Arabs come north. They were Latin and Portuguese and itinerant travelers from all points of the compass who paid their way in the city of Rhodes by fighting against the allies of the Ottoman Sultan Mehmet. The Knights of Saint John, especially the Grand Master D'Aubbuson, encouraged the corsair's forays against Turkish shipping. Shipments of wheat, antelope and goats, honey and dried fruit and lumber were the regular reward for the corsairs' raiding in the north Aegean. Goods were sold to the city's merchants at bargain prices, which had the effect of driving down food prices across the city. It was the Grand Master's answer to inflation and escalating prices as the city's population increased. The Knights didn't relish the thought of losing any of their great galleys raiding against the Turks. But they certainly rewarded the corsair's plundering with safe harbor in a well provisioned city. If not quite collegial, Rhodes' coexistence with the corsairs kept its citizenry well fed.

Memories of the past, however, seldom solve pressing dilemmas. I had to return to the city and see what kind of bloody mischief I had been up to. To wake from a walk in my sleep was one thing, and not really so unusual of late. Demetrius often arrived at the inn late in the evening and guided me back to my blankets on the bench. But this time, I woke splashed in gore. As if I had frolicked in a fountain of blood. That was much more than troublesome, especially

for a cabin boy on a ship full of assorted cutthroats sailing under a letter of mark for the Turcopolier of the Knights of Saint John.

His name was John Kendall, one of the English Knights, and he owned the galiot *Ravenna*. He took thirty percent of the goods that we were able to “retrieve” in return for the use of the boat and state sponsorship for our patrols north of Rhodes. There was a variable tight-rope that Urudje, the *Ravenna*’s captain, walked in his efforts to strike solely at Turkish shipping. Both Sir Kendall and eventually Grand Master D’Aubusson would be required to pay recompense for trespass on allies of the church in Rome. That length of figuratively swaying hemp, which Urudje walked along with Sir Kendall, was variably dependent upon which ship we had commandeered, where we brought her to heel, and what connection the merchants, whose goods were on board, had to the ear of the Pope. If they were Venetian did they have a representative in Rome? If Florentine, did a percentage of their purloined cargo’s profit find its way back to the Papal coffers? If the booty caused more trouble than it was worth, if it brought demands for remuneration and the ransom of persons enslaved—and already sold to some distant shore-side port in Granada or Aragon—then we were costing the illustrious Knights of St. John silver that they could ill afford. That silver would pay for the ship loads of grain and beef that sailed weekly into the port under friendlier flags. The food that filled the bellies of the Knights and their sergeant-at-arms, their servants and the nursing brothers at hospital, the merchants and pilgrims who rested and provisioned at the last Christian enclave on the Eastern Mediterranean.

As a cabin boy, I was privy to the demands from the office of the Turcopolier, for written proof locating a ship taken so many leagues from a certain coastline. The Turcopolier of the Knights of Saint John had to report this information to the Grand Master, who required a chain of documentation which could be used to legitimize the confiscation of a ship and its cargo.

Written inventory of the exact cargo, which household markings were on what crates, and how much was transferred from the pirated ship's hold into our galiot to sustain the crew. The galley in question may have been Greek, on its way to the island of Lesbos and then on to Constantinople, but the brocade and silver from Florence were not legitimate booty and must be returned to the merchant who had financed the expedition. The Venetian crew was to be freed, although the Turkish merchants could be sold as slaves to the southern Mamluk markets in Egypt, or north to Florence or to the Franks. The Greek seamen could work their way back to their home on a passing merchant round ship or be hired out to one of the corsairs for duty at the oars against Turkish shipping in the Aegean. Many of the Greek islanders had been enslaved by the Venetians or the Turks in the past and relished a chance to use their rowing skills to drive a bowsprit across the decks of a Turkish galley. Once subjected to a barrage of arrows from the short Janissary bows, however, they usually lost all stomach for the fight and were put ashore with the rest of the Greek fisherman and farmers who had been enslaved to row under the Turkish flag.

## Water from the Well

I couldn't clean the tunic. So bare-chested and smeared with sewer muck, I crept back into the city through the angled stone drain. My naked shoulders recoiled from the caress of hanging slime. Rolling under the wall, I stood and strolled from the pitch black of the parapet into the waning starlight of an empty market street. The city stirred, fishermen headed for their boats, and a few women were already kindling cooking fires. I crept along the outer wall's lowest steps, spotted a line of wash and rolled an errant hogshead across the street to a head high courtyard wall. Peering over, I relieved the household of a plain white tunic with a few tea stains, a roughly sewn rip along the shoulder, and the lingering odor of mackerel. A dog, hiding behind stacked limestone steps and plotting my demise, bolted along the wall and leapt at my exposed wrist. I jerked the tunic over the wall and heard the cur's jaws snap on empty air behind my retreating hand.

I heard a clatter as the dog tumbled backwards into a pail of wash water that I had just seen perched on a cabinet by the wall. Squatting on the barrel, I leaned into the shadow of the stone wall. Footsteps slapped along the wood landing behind the wall, down the stone steps and into the yard. Someone swung a straw broom. It swished through the air; the dog yelped; I heard its claws scrabble over wet limestone. The feet from the house must have slipped on the wet limestone. Their owner dropped into the puddle from the overturned washbasin with a sharp oof. I heard the dog lap the puddled water and the broom wooshed again. Something solid, probably the broom handle, thudded on the dog's head; this time the cur growled. A clatter erupted behind the wall, maybe the door from the freshly lit clay stove. White pine popped and feet shuffled in



scattered sparks, sending up the acrid scent of scorched cotton. Hands shushed along cloth, cleaning sparks from the hem of a singed dress.

A woman's voice called, "Samuel," raising her pitch at the end. "Come save me from your beast. The God above will surely set me ablaze for my anger with him."

Both of my hands held the shirt across my mouth to hold in the laughter. The cur kept barking and its claws scrapped at the opposite side of the wall. I imagined it leaping after an intruder that the woman could not see lurking behind their wall. When she struck the dog again, I dropped from the barrel, kicked it away from the wall, and the dog's barking and yelping trailed down the alley after my running retreat.

I kept running, across two cobble paved streets and back to the inn. Salt men already stumbled downstairs to the common area, and the smell of flatbread baking in the hearth beckoned to me from the kitchen door.

Old Isaac and Bartholomew held court at one of the stalwart tables. They had been drug back into the center of the floor and mounted with candles in the false dawn of the very early morning. They sipped warmed cider and picked at scraps of cold mutton on the table between them.

"Djem," called Isaac, grinning with the comic cruelty of the name, "Where've you been. Do you think you can laze about like royalty all day? Miriam needs you for water and such. Be at it now." He tossed a nonchalant thumb toward the kitchen.

I vaulted across the table, snatched the last bit of the cold mutton from the table and stuffed it into my mouth. Before Bartholomew could grab my arm, I spun away from the table and picked up the two wooden buckets that always waited for me outside the kitchen doorway. As I tried to duck through the side door and head for the well, a tin plate wanged off the door

frame an inch from my head. Coming from the kitchen, Miriam stopped short and grabbed the collar of my new tunic. The seams held. At least, I had stolen a well-made garment. Her other arm was wrapped around a tray, which she held to her waist. As she eyed the plate wobbling to rest on the swept stone a pitcher of tea sloshed onto the bread and fruit. She clanged the tray onto a bench. Still holding a handful of my collar, she said to the two men, "You old fools can come and get breakfast yourselves if you want to accost my person with the dishes." Then, she mumbled something about useless sea-hands back on dry land.

Miriam pulled my head close and used a voice sprinkled with more sweetness than ire to say, "Where have you been? I thought you would come back last night. And put those pails down!"

Confused, I dropped the buckets and said, "I did. I slept on a bench like I always do," pointing over my shoulder to the far corner of the room.

Bartholomew pushed himself up from the table with the swollen knuckles of both fists, forever curled in the grasp of hawsers and sheets, supporting knotted brown forearms crisscrossed by white battle scars. He addressed the old plate thrower in a voice for me to hear, "Bounce the plate off his skull next time, so it's worth getting our own breakfast. That one's fast enough to skitter aloft and too old to be hiding behind her highnesses skirts." He pointed at Miriam with his chin.

Isaac chuckled as he rubbed one red eye, "She's made our breakfast you moron, don't start complaining now."

Miriam brushed at the dried filth on my neck. "It wouldn't hurt you to wash up some. You smell like you just came out of the harbor." Looking daggers over at the two sailors, she said, "As for the *Ravenna's* rigging, there's plenty of you for such as that. My deal with Urudje

still holds. I look after him while you're in port. You two layabouts can play at repairing that undersized galley of yours all day long; the boy stays with me until you sail."

"Awe, Miriam," Bartholomew said, "If he's sly enough to take a cutlass to a . . ."

Bartholomew woofed a little as Isaac elbowed him in the side.

Her eyes narrowed at the grey bearded salt, "He what?"

"He's still waking up, Miriam. Don't know what he's saying," said Isaac. "Boy has always done a fine job of carrying water and food and such. Captain Urudje just dotes on him and doesn't let anybody try to use him for pleasure on a long sail."

"Better hadn't. They should be randy enough to bring their pay back here when they need a poke. Besides, that little thing of yours is no bigger than that pretend galley you all row about the harbor. And you can do about as much damage with either one of them."

Miriam released my collar and brushed at the wrinkles in the coarse fabric. "Now, go get cleaned up and get your breakfast." Her eyes flashed back to the early risers at the tables and she took a soft swing at my head, but I had already grabbed the buckets and ducked through the door.

Once I cleared the kitchen door, I had a choice of two wells within a minute's sprint. One had a low stone parapet wide enough to prop a bucket, a board roof for shade, and surrounding walk with wooden benches polished by plaza gossip. The well was just around the corner from the arched wooden doors that opened onto the courtyard of Miriam's inn. Four or five of the city's young women would be lazily drawing water and chatting. I would be the only boy there. Before I could fill my own, I'd have to pull a dozen buckets of water up by the slick rope that was slung over a beam supporting the roof. The other well was just a wide spot in a narrow alley. Stone and mortar swelled into the alley from the back wall of a house to form the raised well. It

was covered by a few boards, with a bucket turned over on top. Both wells ran through an aqueduct from the same sweet spring in the mountains south of Rhodes.

I went to the well in the alley, scuttling through the rabbit warren turns and under buttressed second story passageways. My mind raced faster than my feet, trying to understand what had happened last night. I was much too impatient for the small talk and attention that waited at the larger well. The dream of my uncle filled my head. I had barely been able to remember to come back to the inn and do my chores, much less what happened the night before. I tried to picture myself coming back to the inn last night and then follow my steps back to where I had been, but I kept running into my uncle with that wide gash in his chest.

Skidding into the last corner before the well opening, I gaped at the sight of a knight and the galiot's pilot, Timo, squatting beside what appeared to be two shoes tumbled amid a pile of clothes. There was a Turk's turban unwrapped and dumped on top of the rags, and a leather belt with its steel buckle, sword gone missing. The jumble of clothing seemed to have been white, but was now scuffed into the road's filth, smeared with clay or maybe dried blood. In the early morning gloom, I saw what looked like the wild hair and earrings of a Turkish oarsman from the *Ravenna's* crew. His head was pushed back into the cobbled gutter to show the man's split spine inside a raw neck wound. Blood speckled the cobblestones to look like shite stains on hen's eggs in a market stall. The knight of the Hospitallers turned toward a tunnel, where the alley ducked under an attic passage and into the street. While the knight's attention was directed into the street, Timo saw me and held up the flat of his hand.

"Stay there, Djem. Did you see anyone going the way you've just come?" The Knight was a head taller than the squat Greek pilot. He loomed over us both like the very hand of God.

When he turned his attention to me, I saw he had a red clay beard that pointed to the cross bisecting his shirt. He whispered to Timo and then motioned for me to come closer.

Timo motioned to the corpse with his chin and asked, "Do you know who did this?"

I could only shake my head and stare at the corpse, mute, until Timo turned my head by the chin and asked, "Did you see who did this thing?"

I shook my head slowly. My eyes stuck to the lifeless bundle of clothes in the gutter, but my mind saw the last breath of the dying man. In my mind, I watched the life fleeing from behind the Turk's clouded eyes as his blood speckled lips prayed their way into hell. Two slaves from the Quarter, both Turks as well, arrived to prop the body up in a large barrow that they had dragged into the alley. The towering knight told Timo to get me out of there. But as the cart bumped over the cobbles, the dead oarsman's head lolled over his shoulder and off the edge of the cart in a grotesque parody of the Pieta. I speckled the cobblestones with bile and bits of the mutton that I had snatched from the inn's table for breakfast. My pilfered breakfast now covered the cobbles and added to the rough patina of the early morning back alley in the Jewish Quarter of Rhodes.

I didn't have nightmares. I went to sea with thieves and marauders, what would I fear in my sleep? Neither did I dream. I was pulled from my mother's arms at the ripe old age of five, what could I hope for? Never the less, the dreams about my uncle began with horses' hoofs that pounded down forested trails under a waxing crescent moon. Two soldiers were mounted on winded and blowing horses on either side of me. The three of us rode for a low stone wall that hid scattered soldiers and supported their loaded crossbows. Their helmets poked up from behind the wall's moss spotted stones in the evening mist. The fur-lined capes and glimmering metal helms of the riders on either side of me were unfamiliar, as were the long straight blades that slapped their sides as we rode. Stealing a glance over my shoulder, I was terrified at the ranks of mounted Janissaries riding at our backs. Flogging their mounts with quirts, they raced after us. Several miles behind them, and high in the rocks of a mountain cliff to the west, a fortress burned behind its ramparts.

Our horses leapt the stone fence in unison and an arrow thrumped into the shoulder of the rider on my left. He gasped in pain when we wheeled the horses in opposite directions and dismounted to meet the onrushing enemy. The third rider of our troika called to the man with the extra arrow in his armor, "Count, can you still fight?" After the wounded rider nodded, his companion drew the long blade at his side, clapped his horse on its flanks. He shouted the horse away from the stone wall. Still kneeling behind the wall, the row of soldiers at our sides loosed their crossbows into the oncoming cavalry. Then they dropped the spent weapons of wood and iron at their feet, picked up swords and axes. Sporadic arrows from the charging horsemen

danced off the rock wall; some buzzed overhead. The Count's soldiers squatted low, knees flexed, their backs or shoulders pressed against the low wall.

Much of the first rank of Janissaries fell under the crossbow bolts. Horses stumbled and soldiers skidded across the turf on their chins. With his unwounded arm, the count drew his own sword straight up from its scabbard. He switched his grip on the pommel by digging the sword point into a tree root, etched random runes into the live bark in the process. Then the Count turned to me, leaning hard into the blade. He had a beautiful face, bisected with a full mouth half hidden beneath huge moustaches. His eyes were lined in pain, his jaws clamped shut and I heard him say, "They've taken everything from us."

He turned away to chop at the first horse that came over the wall and was stabbed in the leg by a lance from the Janissary that followed behind the first horseman to charge over the wall. Wounded a second time, the Count went to one knee and swung his sword in horizontal arcs under a shield he had cinched against the back of his head and one shoulder with the dead weight of his skewered arm. A seven-foot tall Janissary threw a comrade's body, which the Count had cut through both thighs, back across the wall at him. The crippled soldier's body knocked aside the Count's shield and grounded his sword. Before he could recover, the huge Turk finished him with a scimitar stroke that broke his collar bone and cleaved through the ribs around his heart. His head went back as the Turk yanked the curved blade free of the wound. The Count's mouth open in a silent scream that ended with a sigh. He collapsed onto his heels and appealed to me with a bloody whisper, "Vengeance, nephew. Avenge me against the Porte."

A far away voice reached into the dream world and drew me back. "You going to sleep the day away, boy? Get up. The *Ravenna* sails with the tide." I rolled away from Timo's toe and

struggled from the blanket. I rolled out of the hay, tumbled into the manger, and plunged my head into the animal's trough, brimmed with clear water. Salt air wafted into the warm barn and worked to clear my mildewed memories. But a flickering flame had been lit inside of my chest. I didn't know exactly why back then, but it smoldered for revenge. I ducked away from the rising sun that blinded me through the barn's open door and splashed more water from the trough onto my face.

Through the barn's open door I watched Bartholomew, Isaac, and several other members of the galiot's crew round the corner and head for the Saint Catherine Gate. I could barely stand upright in the low stable. Last night I had slept in the barn on the northeast side of the Jewish Quarter. It was a few streets closer to the harbor than Miriam's inn, and I normally slept there the night before we went to sea. Urudje kept an ass here for hauling supplies from the market out to the *Ravenna* before she sailed. His practice was to wake me and take me with him. But both cart and donkey were gone. I came to the barn early last night, after filling the inn's cistern and cleaning the inn. Miriam would have certainly taken a switch to me if I hadn't. And now Timo found me high in the new mown hay that was piled above the manger. Urudje just hadn't seen me lying so deep in the hay.

I brushed hay from my tunic. Shaking my head to clear it, I almost fell to my knees, dizzy in the floating bits of straw. I sat there in the hay; eyes closed, waiting for memories to catch up with me. Clarity finally arrived in my addled brain and I jumped to my feet just as Bartholomew peered around the door way.

"Djem. Get off your lazy ass and grab Urudje's sword and armor. He's already aboard the *Ravenna* and sent me back to get them. You're his whelp. You haul his shite." He rolled a shoulder to relieve himself of the strap that held the padded leather bag, and let it fall into the



layer of hay on the floor. Taking the measure of something he hadn't seen before, he cocked his head to look at me and said, "And don't be all day about it."

I watched him disappear from the barn door, grabbed the familiar weight of the bag, and headed down the road myself. As I walked, I tried to make sense of the dream. Then I stopped walking. In the middle of the road I stopped, and a fishmonger pushing a cart down the hill behind me swerved so he wouldn't run me down. He cursed going by and I thought, "He would have kicked me as he went by if he hadn't been struggling against the weight of the cart." The man in my dream was my uncle. He had called me 'nephew.' For ten years I had not heard from anyone who might be family. I had kin. Even if I had only seen him in a dream. I had family. And now he was dead. I watched him sliced almost in two. My body revolted. I drug the sword bag to the side of the road and gaged, unable to vomit anything but a dribble of water.

"Better get off the road if you're sick boy," called a voice from behind me. I looked up and recognized Neilos from the crew.

"Djem," he said, "What in our savior's name is wrong with you." He picked up Urudje's gear with one arm and let me come to my feet.

"Here," he said, uncapping a flask, "drink this." We stood in the road and shared the bite of his brandy. "Not too much. I want some for the cool nights ahead. You better keep the Captain's sword off the road. I've never seen him so much as raise a hand to ye, but that would do it." He was brushing the road dust and a smear of manure from the bag. He slung the bag onto my shoulder and said, "Come on now, we'll walk out to the ship together. You're not so much a boy anymore. You drink when you come home, not before we leave." I was ready to protest, but he said, "No, don't say it. I'm not so old that I don't remember. Just do your share and all will be forgiven if not forgotten."

We walked down the Kisthiniou Road to Saint Catherine's Gate. Having Neilos at my side buoyed my spirit and I tried not to think of what had happened. I was going on board the galiot *Ravenna*, my only true home since Urudje dragged me from my mother's arms. We walked through the gate and the windmills greeted us, standing sentry along the mole. As their arms seemed to rise in salute, we walked to the line of ships that were either moored in the shallows or tied along short wooden piers that jutted into the harbor. The white sleeved arms rose in salute again and again and the wind turned the blades to drive their mill stones. Our sleek little craft was nudged against a pier beside a squat fishing dhow that was half again her beam but only half the length of the sleek galiot.

Their heads wrapped in rags, Turks passed kegs of fresh water, baskets of vegetables and oranges and limes along a gangway into the *Ravenna*'s hold. They worked under the critical eye of the ship's cook Georgios and had always been next to invisible to me. Now I watched them for signs that we had anything in common. I found nothing besides that we were all bound to the island. No fetters were required to keep us at our appointed task. The insular society knew us all for what we were. I could not sign onboard a foreign ship and sail away any more than they could walk south and find labor with a farmer. When I realized I had more in common with the men loading the boats than with the ones with whom I would sail out of the harbor, I felt the bonds of my servitude most sharply.

The boat was moored along the sand washed over the stone mole that extended into the Aegean and bordered the east end of the commercial harbor. Thirteen of the windmills, in a row heading north, groaned against wheat hulls in the early morning breeze. The circling arms of the mills cast flickering sunrise shadows across the thirty-eight foot version of the larger galleys. Shipped oars and sails were furled along two gaff-rigged yardarms. Crisp muslin hung from the

extended booms like shrouds from a cross bar, as if the dangling horizontal beam was part of the executioner's device and had been lowered after a crucifixion, only absent the expired felon.

Feeling my sea legs, I vaulted the row of battle shields that bulwarked the low sides of the small galley. Landing on a rowing bench just forward of the pilot's housing, I jumped onto the afterdeck and laid the armor and sword in the captain's locker. Captain Urudje leaned from the edge of the pilot house into the hold and shouted directions to the cook.

The captain didn't look up. "Djem, help the cook stow the food."

Urudje stood before I could whirl away and caught my tunic in a fist, pulling me close. "Timo told me you were in the hay loft of the barn. I had to pay one of the market boys to help me load supplies this morning. If you're going to sleep down at the barn, then you have to stay where I can see you. I called, but you must have been sleeping like the dead."

I looked into my master, my benefactor, my owner's eyes and lied, "I couldn't sleep in the back of the cart last night, so I went to the loft early this morning. I'll never do it again."

Urudje looked at me for a long moment. "It's alright. You're growing so fast, I forget that you are still a boy sometimes. Now off with you. After you help Georgios stow the limes, bring my chart table up from below. You know he needs time to put the stores just so. While he does, make sure all the water jugs are clean, no fresh water going into fouled cups. We sail north, so make sure you have a blanket and jerkin." Urudje shouted at the sailors lashing kegs of gunpowder by the foremast, then pulled me closer and said, "Come back to me before we sail."

The captain released my tunic and missed an openhanded swat to my backside. I was too quick and jumped from the raised pilot house onto the main deck. Pivoting on my heels to face aft, I dropped through a hatch into the low hold as another slave was about to hand through a basket of fruits. I grabbed the basket and as I separated out the ripest limes and oranges for

immediate preparation, the eyes of my uncle bored into my head. I had seen bodies, lots of them. Most killed in battle, horribly. But I felt that I had watched my own uncle die from a horrible wound. Yet he directed me as he died. My uncle's last words were to take up a sword in his cause. He had never met me, never even seen me as far as I knew. Why would he come to me now, as he died?

"Damn your eyes, Djem." The cook, Georgios, roared as limes rolled along the lower deck and under the thwarts. "Pay attention to your task, boy. You're normally not so dreamy, not as most boys, and you'll not practice getting' better at it down here. Pick the fruit up, then let me finish. You have tasks on deck." The old fighter shouldered me over and lashed more baskets against the bulkhead; their woven lids opened far enough for air to circulate. I pulled four ceramic water jugs from racks tucked underneath the deck. Row after row of bench legs were pegged through the overhead from the deck above, like so many square rock formations hanging from a cave ceiling. I ducked under one of the protruding bench legs and popped into the sunshine on deck. Bounding up the four ladder steps out of the hold, I clutched the rush-wrapped jugs to my chest with both arms.

"Djem," called Urudje. "My chart table. Get the chart table up here or we'll be half-way to Granada instead of after a load of Turkish silver. Quick now boy." I set the jugs on the deck, just inside the gunnel of the rocking ship, and turned back into the hold. As the hold's darkness closed over my head, the mustached face from my dreams rose in front of me like an apparition. Again, I saw the fortress burning in the background and my uncle swinging a two-handed sword into throngs of high hatted Janissaries. Men fell to both sides as my uncle's hussars cut into the ocean of the oncoming elite Turkish troops. The vision vanished though, when my eyes adjusted to the dark hold.

Stepping farther into the hold, my head struck the same protruding bench post that I had ducked under on my way out. Lights flashed in behind my eyes, and I sat down hard on the hull. Georgios pulled me away from the hatch and rifled through my thatch of jet black hair.

“Djem, it sounded like you struck the deck with a hammer.” He peered at me through the gap between his sausage thick thumb and forefinger, held a half-inch apart. “Slow down just a little. It’s a good thing you’ve a thick skull. Well, I see no blood. Crawl in for the table, easy now, and hand it out.”

Doing as I was told, I hauled the planed table to the pilot’s platform and watched where I put my feet and head. I hooked the table onto the ships railing and sat on the deck, resting my head in my hands. A weighty hand rested on my shoulder.

“Be still a while,” Urudje said, “I do not care to slide your body into the sea to end my day. I may bark at you, but you have been too close to me for too long to see you harm yourself.” He stood over me like that for a while. I think he must have watched me for some time. Then I heard him breathe heavily, a sigh, and he squeezed, finding more new muscle wrapping my shoulder than was there even a week ago.

A waist high rail ran round three sides of the pilot house on the Ravenna, for balance in a rough sea. More porch than house, an arbor of rounded oak beams created the frame of an open roof. We stretched wool blankets, woven with the red cross of the Knights of Saint John, over the arch of the beams for shade. Those beams were anchored with pegs into the deck rail where they curved down into walls. On the Island of Rhode’s shortest winter days, Demetrious would split locust branches, and he taught me to weave them into tight lattice work. My hands grew thick callouses twisting the green ribbons of wood. Then, we hauled these thick mats to shoulder

height over the upright beams. They wouldn't withstand an arrow, but hid the pilot's exact position from archers and boarders, and repelled thrown bombs of flaming oil.

I stepped into the cool of the pilot house and affixed the chart table's two hooks onto the rail toward the stern of the after deck. A single pine leg swung down from the table to prop the table level, where Urudje could slip in his parchment drawings of the coast. The loom of the steering oar, as thick as his calf, bisected the width of the deck and jittered as eddies of current tickled the oar's blade. Once under way, we threw back the wool from overhead and lowered the lattice walls to allow the Aegean's breezes to cool the pilot and Captain, their guests.

Occasionally, one of the Knights wandered north with us and used the short bench along the opposite rail from the chart table. Usually though, it seemed that the ship's owner, John Kendall, hurled our ship like a javelin into the Aegean Sea, the breach between the adherents of Mohammed and of Christ. Our little galiot was too small to warrant a nobleman in the pilothouse.

After, Urudje clapped me on the shoulder; I basked in his warm touch for a moment. Then, I pivoted out of the Captain's way so he could lay out his charts: a box of pens and an ink pot. I watched him make changes on the gazelle hides while we sailed, redrawing portions of the charts more than following them. As food and water were stowed, the crew hoisted the giant yardarms into place, unfurling the sails to straighten lines and then re-furling the giant muslin triangles, ready to be deployed at sea. Lines were rolled and tied at the corners of the pilot house. Two chests bound in iron, with hasps the size of fists, rested against either side of the stern. They were filled with sleeping blankets, armor, swords, and personal effects of the captain and pilot. Six crossbows and row upon row of bolts were stowed in the low chest that was bolted aft, below the thole where the steering oar exited the aft deck rail. The knurled butt-ends of two 12-pound

Venetian *aspides* poked into the pilot house and the business ends of cannons menaced outwards from each corner of the galiot's stern.

My mind wandered through this inventory until a short whistle snapped my attention forward. Demetrious's gap tooth grin and barrel chest showed over the forward edge of the pilot house. He winked once before rolling a 12-pound ball for the stern guns toward my feet. I stopped the shot with the sole of my foot, flipped up a lid along the starboard rail, and stowed the ball just as another came rumbling across the deck. That toothless bowler aimed twenty-six balls at my ankles before he raised his fists in triumph, and danced down the bank of rowing benches that ran toward the bow. Laughing at the squat wiry fellow, I did my own little dance, waved my fists in the air too. I went to the edge of the platform again for the stacked cotton bags of powder, gently wrapped them in oiled cloth, and stowed them beside the iron balls.

## A Sailor's Wake

An easy breeze from the Turkish mainland blew warm air our way throughout the day. The sun baked the ciurma as they dug their oars into the low swells. Urudje watched over the starboard bow as the island of Kos rose from the water and the wind shifted to blow the hair up on the back of his neck. He signaled to Demetrious, and the crew unfurled the two triangular sails that hung bunched on the yardarms. Their forward ends were sheeted low in the bow of the boat and the trailing ends reached aft and into the sky. As the sheets from the clew of the sails—the points flapping over the deck—were made fast and then hauled in, the galley heeled to port and the entire ciurma lifted their oars out of the water as one, sliding the looms across buttock worn benches.

Wind filled the sails, and Timo, the pilot, waved me over to help him hold the steering oar against the pressure of the wind. I'm almost sixteen now, getting stronger in the shoulders, and I am just able to span the loom of the steering oar with one hand. The vibration of the ocean flowing around the blade hummed into my hands and I grinned at the sailing master. Timo pointed to the farthest tip of Kos, charging me with our direction. Then, he scanned the rigging. The galiot's masts dipped a little farther toward the sea, and I shifted the oar, falling off to the east some. Timo allowed the shift. Although the galiot's deck leveled a bit, she continued to fling spray from her narrow bow, making good way under both sails.

A line flapped loose in the rigging where the forward yardarm crossed the pinnacle of the main mast. Timo shouted at a sailor who leaned at the rail beside the starboard deck. The idle ciurma had shifted to those rising windward benches to balance the boat's trim as it cut through the water. Sweating men cooled in the breeze as they stretched shoulder and calf muscles,



cramped from the morning's row. The sailor nodded, pointed to the loose line, and with a running hop grabbed a knotted line, which was tied to iron staples in intervals along the height of the main mast. He clambered aloft. Captain Urudje counted aloud as the man went up, he shouted, "Sixty-seven," when the sailor touched the top of the mast. The sailor stepped out onto the rigging below the yard, wrapped a leg into the lines, and began to secure the cordage holding the yard hoist to the main mast.

Timo nodded at another sailor and he leapt for the same knotted rope. Urudje began his count again, this time echoed by the crew. As they passed the number ten some fell silent; at the twentieth count more voices dropped away. Some continued to grunt with the count while others stamped the deck with their feet. Urudje alone remembered the numbers into the sixties and seventies, and the second sailor wrapped his legs in the rigging and worked alongside his mate. They were so high that they looked like squirrels storing nuts in a knot hole. Timo whistled and called, "Photious go," and yet another of the Greek sailors snatched the knotted line from the mast and shinnied his way toward the top of the mast.

My hands were sweating on the steering oar now. Timo continued his pressure on the handle, but shifted to allow my corrections to keep the boat downwind. I tried to not breathe too hard, and concentrated on holding the ship steady with three men aloft. Demetrious, the first up, came scrambling down and was thumped many times on his wide back as he skipped from rowing bench to rowing bench until he reached the pilot house.

"Timo, we need another length of line and a block. The cursed thing split, and the halyard is bound in the housing."

"Can you fix it under way?"

“Ne, we tie the yardarm to the mast first, then replace the pulley. It will not slow us much.” He wiped sweat from his hair. His grin creased a hundred lines that were etched into his face by years of salt wind, and he turned back toward the mast.

Timo caught the man’s shoulder, still quivering from his exertions on the mast. “Demetrious, you rest; get what you need and send Neilos up.” Demetrious packed the pulley and line in a cloth bag, with another fid for prying at the knotted lines, and Neilos took his turn at the knotted line. He was at “fifty-two” when the water pressure on the steering oar softened abruptly. I took a step back as if pushed. Timo held against my sudden weight shift on the oar, but the mast rose ponderously toward vertical. Neilos’ feet slipped from the mast and he crashed head long into the tarred round surface. He lost his grip and fell backwards, one foot wrapped in the knotted climbing line. His head and back bounced off the mast this time. When the wind picked up, after the intermittent lull, the mast leaned toward the sea’s surface again. Neilos dangled in the open air for a moment, and then the pendulum swing of the mast slung his body out over the water. Falling toward the sea, his head and shoulders crashed through the battle shields over the oarlocks, decapitating his body, which tumbled into the galiot’s wake. I watched his hero’s head bounce on a bench and disappear into a hidden corner where hull met deck. The crew all looked at the blood spattered bench for a silent heartbeat, then two, and a low murmur of prayers drifted through the seamen. Urudje motioned to Timo; hold the course.

The rudderless sweep of the *Ravenna*’s hull was beached in the shallows of Kalimnos’ eastern coastline. Stern secured to two trees, her extended pilot house hung, cantilevered over the black stones of the empty beach. Steering oar retracted along the length of the empty deck, the boat kept her nose into the Aegean waves by way of the trench her hull dug in the stones. The

crew ate, told lies, and watched the flattened sun bleed into the Aegean. They rested easy, reclined on severed pine boughs, while the *Ravenna*'s bow guns menaced the sea over the beak of her bowsprit. She was more than forty feet, from stern rail to the end of her massive prow. Eighteen rowing benches down her length and each of the men at the oars used a sword well. Away from Rhodes, the *Ravenna* cared for us like a mother and demanded our attention like a queen, though no sailor would admit to such a thing.

I stepped from shin deep surf onto the bounding deck ladder and brought Urudje a bowl of stew from the giant kettle that Georgios simmered over an open fire next to the tree line. The smell of thyme and arbutus wafted down to the shoreline and mingled with the wood smoke. Exploring with the hunting party when we landed, I found an inland stream which provided a jug of fresh water to set alongside Captain Urudje's stew.

When I turned to go eat ashore, Urudje said, "Sit with me, Djem." He sipped at the broth from the bowl, stirred and spooned out a chunk of lamb. He watched me while he ate: patient.

"Urudje," I said at last, "tell me more of my father."

"Your father?" He paused for another spoonful. "I know no more than the last time you asked me, or the time before that. Your mother, stayed aboard the Turk's galley after we boarded it. I piloted this ship back; so, I only saw your mother for a few hours before she was sent north from Rhodes. I've told you this before."

"And she said nothing of my father?"

"Why do you push me, boy?"

"I'm sixteen. Close to it, anyway. I want to know where I belong. Who is my family? My father's a Turk like yours, no?"

“Don’t forget yourself, Djem.” He pointed at me with the spoon, waggling it a bit. “Your life belongs to me until I say otherwise.” But he became subdued, looking at the watery horizon. “Your mother had large dark eyes behind her veil; she must have been, no I saw her face that once, she was a great beauty. She was just too valuable in Florence or Rome to hold her in Rhodes for ransom, and I had no interest in any of the women on that galley. To me, to the Knights, they were the spoils of war, nothing else.”

I clenched my jaw and refused to weep, but still had to brush away tears with my fist.

“When I saw a woman from that galley holding a child by the hand, I knew the child would be separated from her in Florence, if not before. It happens when people become property. I could do nothing for the woman, but, I could make the child’s burden easier. Not because we shared Turkish blood, but because I needed a ship’s boy. Yes, my father was a Turk. But my mother was from the Greek islands, like Timo’s mother and Dimi’s. That doesn’t make me love the Christians or hate the Ottomans. Who your father is only changes what you look like out here,” and he tapped my forearm with his forefinger. “Who you are in here,” and the tip of his wide finger deliberately rose to rest lightly on my forehead, “is what matters to men of consequence. You make sure that you become a man of consequence and no one will bother about your father. Not anyone who is of consequence to you.”

Urudje drank from the jug, passed it to me and said, “I was aboard a galley very much like the one I took you from ten years ago. But, I was no little prince. Oh, no. My father, the Turk, he had debts he could not pay. So he sold me to redeem them. I squeezed water and vinegar from a sponge into the mouths of Christian galley slaves as they rowed the breadth of the North Aegean Sea. From Constantinople to Thessaly and back, I watched the ciurma row. When they died, I tied rocks to their bodies with what rags they wore before they were thrown

overboard. They did that so Venetian ships couldn't follow our trail of sun swollen carcasses to attack the galley. My father's Turkish blood did nothing for me on that galley. Did my mother's Christian blood inspire me to ease the suffering of the galley slaves? I think not."

Urudje pointed with his chin to the Knight's red and white banner that hung from the stern rail. "Your blood matters only to them, to the rich, the clergy. It is their way of seeing you among all the many other people. They wish to have us adopt this idea of pure blood and tainted blood; that allows them to decree who this king or that prince must treat with preference. Do not be confused by the ideas of the priests. They speak of saving souls for heaven, but they want to control your actions so that you will do their bidding on earth. All for the glory of the Lord."

"Then why do you sail for them," I asked?

"Where else in all the world can I sail the sea and take from the Turk at will. Take from the ones who cast me aside to water their emaciated galley slaves. The Knights allow me a sturdy galiot; they buy the goods that I bring back and don't ask very often if I pray for my own soul. If I wanted to live in a city with my wife and raise babies," he spread his arms with the stew in one hand, "then this life would not be for me."

My eyes were fastened on Urudje, so the Captain went on. "When the Latins were loading your mother and you onto the ship to sail for Florence, I saw a little boy about to become a galley slave. I barely escaped that world thanks to the pity of a Knight of the order. He fought aboard the Christian galley that finally ended my master's piracy. I took you from your loving mother to save you from the hell that I grew up in. Yes, you are my slave. But doesn't the crew laugh and call you Djem? They named you after that Turkish prince, who has become a household name because of his misadventures. A little bit for the way I treat you, yes, and a little bit for who you were on that Turkish galley. And you, my dear prince, have been a sublime

investment. You learn every minute that your eyes are open. I can see it. Don't ask your heart; ask your head if I did not do the best thing for you when I kept you with us."

It felt like he had slapped me. I looked at my feet and said, "I am only curious about my father; but mostly I worry about my mother."

Urudje nodded, smiled. Perhaps something glimmered in his eyes, "I understand, I bet your father was royalty. Maybe a Bey. Yes, a Bey from the interior who foolishly sent his young wife and child on the journey home ahead of him. Of course," he snapped his fingers, "because she missed her parents. I'll wager that's the way it was. Your mother was very young. Not yet twenty, I would say. She fought like a tiger when I took you from her. I'll also wager she has a rich mistress now. She combs her hair and lays out her dresses. And, I don't know what all else she would do, but it must be easy enough, in a fine house, with her own room. Not just a slave's pallet in the kitchen."

Looking off into the setting sun I told Urudje, "I have dreams about him. I think I see my father or perhaps an uncle calling me to come home. But, I am not sure it is him. He is very angry."

"Your father would definitely be angry with me."

"Maybe," I said, still not looking into Urudje's eyes.

The captain pushed my shoulder with the bowl of stew and laughed, "So what in God's name does he look like, your father?"

I searched the Captain's eyes for a second before dropping them, "I think he is from the north, where the Sultan fights the Byzantines."

“The north, you mean the Hungarians? Why would you say that? No, your mother was a Turkish princess on a royal galley. I say that makes your father a highland Bey, with herds of camels and goats and servants. Probably more wives. Why he didn’t come after your mother.”

Clenched fists tightened my neck muscles, gave away my ire again.

“Now don’t be like that.” Urudje cuffed me lightly on the head. “Slave or no, I’ve given you a life you can live and look at people in the eye. Well, most people. If you went with your mother you’d have spent the last nine years getting buggered by some bishop. You have more freedom than most of the town boys in Rhodes. I see you at the well, working the bucket for the women and talking to them all. I bet you have a favorite. Surely you do. She’s beautiful too, am I right?”

I blushed. “It’s true. I like many of the slave girls, but I have no hope of ever living with a woman. I will never earn enough to have a wife. Although my life is good for a slave, and I am very grateful for that, I remain a slave.”

Urudje said, “You are a slave that much is true. But, you are my slave. That makes you very different from most slaves. There’s no time in life for feeling sorry for yourself. Remember that; it will serve you.”

“I know, Captain Urudje.” The Captain just grunted. A sarcastic grin started in my eyes, but moved to a corner of my mouth. “I do think I was born to the raiding boats though. Timo, Dimi and Bartholomew and Miriam are my family, but I do not like living in Rhodes. I love the sea; I think I could live all the time on the *Ravenna*.”

“So do I, boy. So do I. You feel the eight directions of the wind in your blood. Like me, it makes you yearn for the sea.” He held his arms outstretched and said, “The *Ravenna*’s sails are our wings out here, and we can fly like doves. No, like falcons. Hunters.”

“And then row like oxen in the other direction,” I said.

Urudje choked on the stew he was swallowing, tried to keep it from coming out of his nose. We laughed, and he slapped my back with his huge open hand while his eyes watered.

When he could talk again, he said, “Besides, your father is probably some effeminate dandy with jewel handled daggers in his silk belt instead of a proper hammer in his pants.” He laughed again and grabbed my inner thigh. “He likely has more young boys in his harem than women. And you, my boy, are not like him. No, not at all.”



## Soldiers, Sailors and Thieves

The *Ravenna* sailed due north, in search of stragglers. Merchant ships had been crossing the Aegean in groups for decades, sometimes with armed escorts. With the proliferation of pirates lurking in the coves of the Greek Isles, a lone merchant ship was difficult to find. Considering corsairs under letter of mark to the Knights of Saint John or Turks supplied by Mehmet Ghazi himself, there was more risk from attack to a commercial vessel than from the ill-tempered Aegean herself. Turks often hunted in packs of smaller galiots, while the Knights only braved the Aegean in force, several larger galleys side by side. Urudje liked the autonomy of sailing alone. He stood in the *Ravenna's* pilot house like a watch dog, scanning the sea for either trouble or opportunity, whichever came to him first.

Every soul on his after deck searched the waves for that lone merchant ship. Eyes shaded, they watched for the vessel that had become separated from its escort by storm or circumstances at sea. And there were always circumstances at sea. Whether a particular merchant had stayed in port to wait for a shipment of silks to arrive from Syria, or a rich lord had fallen for the charms of a sloe-eyed serving girl among the Ottoman tribes, there were always circumstances at sea. The *Ravenna* sailed up the coast, between the mainland and the island of Kalimnos to our west. When the mainland fell away, our pilot Timo, held Leros on our port. Then we bounced along the smaller islands of Lipsi, bearing more to the west, until the land fell away on both sides of the narrow galiot. Then a favorable north-west wind drove us into open water as night fell.

Urudje would not have risked the open sea, but for the calm sky and unusually warm easterly breeze. We changed our point of sail to the north-east the next morning, but currents pushed us back south until Samos rose from the sea off our port bow. We spotted a poor village

along the coast of the mainland, thatched roofs at the foothills of a mountain range that jutted out into the Aegean. Those mountains stretched toward the island of Samos. There were two diminutive looking minarets visible against the mountain background, so going ashore to loot the Islamic town was an option for Urudje. But, I had never known him to raid a town, though many of the Knights would have favored such an easy target. Urudje preferred his quarry on the open sea. If villagers remained ashore, he felt they did not fall under his mandate from the Knights of Saint John. His purpose was to deprive the Ottomans of trade goods; therefore, the landed folk were unworthy of his attention.

I sat in the shade of our mizzen-sail to watch Urudje plot our position after the night's sail and make adjustments to the coastline that was drawn on his chart. The map of the Aegean coastline and islands was inked on a tanned gazelle skin. It remained flexible and resilient in the alternately humid, then arid salt air. Urudje unrolled the hide on his slanted table, held it down with strips of pine and took measurements with an astrolabe that he had won from a flamboyant Genoese captain. The mariner's had put into Rhodes for supplies in a galleass, its deck teeming with Christian pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. Unfortunately for them, their captain was given to gaming with dice and lost his ready funds. It was either the astrolabe or their food.

"We're going to thread the strait between Samos," Urudje pointed north, "and those mountains. The sun will be down soon. You and I," he looked toward the steering oar, "and Timo. We will search for lights along either coast where a round ship or petite galleass might be anchored for the night, something heavy with cargo. Either one will be slow enough for us to overtake, especially in the early morning calm. Now, you tell me the rest."

My gaze wandered along the rocky coast of the mountains. "We lower the sails when we spot a ship in port and watch her until she puts to sea. She will not see us with the sail down. We

row to follow her past this point on the far end of the island, out of sight of the dock that she leaves." I almost touched the chart with my tar stained finger where the re-drawn lines of the island's coast snaked away from the mainland. "If dawn is close, we can come at her on the first watch with the rising sun at our backs. She won't see us until it is too late to change course. But, if she leaves port too late in the day, we will have to follow from a long distance until we see where she goes."

Urudje scratched his ear with the pencil, "It's a good enough plan for now. You're keeping your eyes open like I taught you. Now, I want you to help Georgios get some dried meat into the men. No wine, only vinegar and water. We'll rest an hour, and then start into the strait. Go, help Georgios. And no noise from here on."

"Urudje?"

"What."

"I'm glad we won't go ashore to raid that town."

Urudje grunted, "Never would've," then turned and murmured to Timo, gestured to the island. Timo nodded once and turned the galiot into the wind as far as he dared. The *Ravenna* laid over on her starboard gunnels, and her wake spread and bubbled with the added speed. Timo whistled staccato bursts through his teeth, and Demetrious turned from where he waited at the starboard sheets. A motion from Timo and the sheets were loosened; both sails rotated to the fore, and spilled air from their trailing edges. Then the *Ravenna* settled on the sea and began her slow crawl toward the point where the mountains of the mainland seemed to overlap the island of Samos in the gloom of dusk. The setting sun dropped below the islands that speckled this part of the Aegean Sea, where it stretched to the west. There would be a sliver of moon in the sky, but

not for hours yet. Men ate and settled to sleep a few hours on the bobbing deck, their movements muffled in the fog of the cooling night air.

The island grew over our galiot's prow and a channel between the island and mainland opened to the starboard. Timo whistled again, long and low and both of the sails went slack, flapping from the angled yardarms. We furled the sails along the yards, which were in turn cantilevered and tied down to the deck. The ciurma ran shipped oars through oarlocks and waited at the rowing benches as Urudje raised his hand in the starlight. He held it high until every man of us was watching him. Each one of the corsairs at the oars waited, enraptured with the wallop of waves on the hull and the promise of action coiled in their poised torsos.

Urudje dropped his arm and I watched by his side on the raised deck of the pilot house as thirty-six oars lifted toward the bow. Thirty-six men reached for the lower back of the man in front of him. They all reached toward their captain, where we stood together in the stern. As one, the men rose into a crouch over the benches and then flung themselves backwards. One foot pushed against the bench in front, while the other foot balanced against the exposed thwart that crossed the deck between each bench.

Every oar dipped into the water with the practiced perfection of thirty-six men who rowed and fought together. Thirty-six men, who ate and defecated together. Ashore, these men drank their wine and bedded their whores and nursed their battle wounds together. At sea, eighteen sets of men sat shoulder to shoulder to thrust their oars into the Aegean and the galiot shot forward. With that first stroke of the oars, the *Ravenna* was transformed into our beloved killing machine. Our machine of death prowled toward the rock that rose from the wine-dark sea: the island of Samos.

Urudje's hand rose again a full minute later, poised and fell. Oars kept up the cadence with their slow methodical caress of the water and eased the boat into the strait. Some said men could sleep at the oars at this rate; hell, some said soldiers slept on the long march. Perhaps this is possible. How does a man move in time with another without conscious awareness of his movement? He would have to join with some subconscious collective awareness that could regulate all of their sleeping movements. I knew of no captain or crew chief capable of such control. I did, however, know that I had been controlled by someone else's thoughts. I had been compelled to do another's bidding without my waking knowledge in the city of Rhodes. I knew it was only a matter of time before I would be compelled again by the same mind. I was not sure, though, if that person would be able to affect my actions while I was at sea. Perhaps dozing on a bench between oar strokes was similar to the control that my uncle was exerting over me. The pause between oar strokes was languorously long, like the emptiness of a lung between meditative breathes. Waiting to be contacted again was like that long pause, gasping for the next breathe after I had been punched in the stomach. Maybe the ciurma slept in the pauses and then woke to row. Hopefully I would remain awake, not under the control of an outsider during this voyage. But, I know the oarsmen rested, like I rested now, anticipating the inevitable fight.

Well into the strait, before the sky lightened to our east, a light flickered and grew on the coast of Samos. Timo steered us closer to the light until Urudje stopped the oars, paused to see what would happen. Another fire flickered to life and we could just hear the chains of galley slaves moving onto a ship and bolted in place. The galley must have been in port for several days to go to the expense of finding slave quarters ashore. As the clouds began to reflect the barest hint of light from the horizon, the galley rowed away from the security of the port, moved into the strait and headed north. The unknown galley moved slowly and the *Ravenna* trailed her along

the island's coast until the shoreline rounded to the west. Our prey continued north. She was a small merchant galley and rode low in the water. Her pilot steered a straight line for the northern shore, where the mainland also swung west into the sea. We sailed to the windward of the galley, closing in between her and the possible protection of the eastern coast. Just before dawn, Demetrious raised the long yardarm on the main mast and unfurled our lateen sail. Timo turned the *Ravenna's* stern fully to the wind, the sails filled and our crew rowed hard after the galley.

The sun rose over our stern and no apparent alarm was raised on the galley as we closed in on their stern. About forty-lengths away, the larger ship turned to run. She dropped a huge striped lateen sail that filled with wind, but it was too late. She pitched forward under sail and oars, and showed the gilded spirals of her stern decoration. But, she was much too beamy and heavy with cargo for quick response.

Urudje smiled and clapped me on the shoulder. "She's a Turk. Look, the scroll work on the stern plate and the way the sail is rigged forward. She's rigged for taking weight up the coast, not for speed." I heard the drum beat faster on the Turkish galley, increasing their rowing rate. The galley was only ten feet longer than we were and I saw none of the feared Janissary bowmen on her deck yet. Perhaps they preferred to run rather than fight. When one of their stern cannons turned toward our boat, Pero and his gunner fired both of our forward guns. As the beak of our prow rose on a wave's crest, the *Ravenna* lurched under our feet and belched smoke. One ball sailed over the galley's stern, holed the main sail and punched into the foredeck. I watched with my hands clamped to the stern rail, as clouds of splinters spewed into the air. Four bodies, separated from their spinning turbans, whirled overboard from the starboard side of the Turk's bow.

Our second shot ripped through the stern railing and sent their rear swivel gun careening into the water. Rending timber wailed in parody of the screaming gunner. Splintered woodchips and iron nails cartwheeled through the air, sliced through canvas and flesh alike, and pitched their pilot away from his tiller. Unmanned, the rudder freewheeled in the waves, and the galley slewed broadside to the wind. The galley's huge yardarm broke free, swung across the deck and flicked the rowing crew from the forward benches into the water—one by one. From our pilot house, it looked like the slaves were leaping into the sea. Unmanned oars crossed active oars, and more of their *ciurma* shouted as the looms were ripped from their grasping fingers. Oars cracked together and flailed free of the water. The wind turned the triangular sail parallel to the galley's deck, blowing her over to the leeward. Her deck tilted away from us, disappeared from view.

Timo aimed our prow diagonally along the near line of the Turk's oars where they spanned down the galley's bulwark. I flexed my knees and grabbed a line tied to the deck with my free hand in anticipation of the coming collision. When the Turk's oars had just completed their stroke and were about to clear the water, the *Ravenna*'s bow plowed into the stern-most looms, and ripped them from the hands of the *ciurma* as well. Powered by one last stroke and a full sail, the *Ravenna* rode up the angled bank of oars and her prow crashed across the larger ship's stern. Our prow locked across the galley's foundering gunnel. Hanging precariously onto the galley by her bowsprit, the *Ravenna* pirouetted in the water against the galley's side.

Afraid of capsizing, the Turks cut away their sail and the galley ricocheted upright as Urudje led twenty bellowing corsairs, toward the *Ravenna*'s bow. Six of our crew were already kneeling, sighting down cross-bows, on the narrow bow platform as the galley's deck leveled back into view, driving our bowsprit farther across the galley's deck. They shot three of the

Turkish swordsmen who got to their feet on the pitching deck. Urudje's boarding force leapt onto the galley's deck. His back disappeared from view as they hacked their way through the few oarsmen who rose with swords. I'd never followed him before; had always been content to wait for my master to reappear somewhere along the deck of the boarded ship. This time though, calm settled into my lungs and my breathing slowed. The fear of being left on the *Ravenna* was greater than the fear of jumping into the melee. I turned to Timo and he nodded to me. "Go on."

I grabbed a straight blade from the arms box, and leapt after the captain onto the galley.

Urudje pointed at the slaves who sat huddled together. Some were bloodied; some held limbs broken by the swinging oars. Most had dropped to the safety of the lower deck, below the benches and the oar's handles, below where the looms took on a life of their own as the oar blades were shoved this way and that from outside of the galley.

"Cut them loose," he said.

Then, he turned to face a Turk whose curved blade was already bloodied. The captain stepped in fast, instead of backing away from the man's screaming charge. By the time the soldier swung his sword; Urudje caught its path on his long blade and pivoted to deflect the blow. He let the downward pressure on his blade swing his arms through a full circle around his body, and then he sliced his sword across the Turk from near shoulder to far knee. The high hatted turban flew from the soldier's head and the Janissary fell in two. Then the killing began in earnest. I'd protected myself on the pilothouse before, chopped with a sword at men who tried to come aboard the pilot house in a fight. But never before had I fought among the whirling, screaming banshees that were once my jovial friends aboard the *Ravenna*.

Hooks grappled the *Ravenna* against her quarry. Turbaned sailors and soldiers were thrown into the sea: alive, dead or dying.



A roar, low in the back of my head, turned me from the chained galley slaves in time to see the galley's slave-master running up the gangway. He was swinging the iron studded handle of a slave whip over his head like a mace. The whip wrapped his gauntleted forearm, and he aimed the iron ball at my head. I ducked under the gangway, but reached up to clatter my sword along its overhead surface. My knuckles and the sword's pommel thumped along the wood surface and I felt hesitation in the blade as it bit into his toes and instep. The slave-master stumbled howling onto the galley bench beside me, and I cut him across his unprotected neck and chest before he could twist away. His flesh opened to the sword, and he gasped at the wound. Blood bubbled from his mouth and into his beard as it worked on empty space. His eyes stared directly into mine for a moment until his head, severed from his chest muscles, rolled to the side and led the rest of his body to slide wetly onto the lower deck.

A voice called me back to the roar of the battle. It spoke evenly in my ear, "Slice, turn and cut. Don't stab. You'll trap the blade. Now go, go." His voice was the one from my dreams, my uncle directing the fight from deep inside of me. He knew I had never crossed onto a boarded ship during a fight, and became my second sight. I whirled and swung the blade at an oncoming soldier's legs, and he fell to the benches as well. The galley slaves throttled him in their chains, yelled encouragement, and I ran from bench to bench, head low, chopping at shins and slicing hamstrings. My Uncle's voice kept up a constant vigil: warning where I could not see, advising what I did not know. He entered my mind and directed my limbs, so that I fought with all of his accumulated acumen. Almost to the galley's pilot house, I jumped onto the blood-slicked gangway two paces behind Urudje. Turning my side to him I held the sword low and crouched to protect his back. My eyes watched Urudje bend the Turkish captain backwards over the galley's tiller while my uncle scanned the fight behind me on the main deck. Searching for an attack

directed at us. Urudje pushed the Turk's sword arm aside with his sword's hilt and pulled a ten-inch dirk with the other hand to drive into the man's exposed belly. The Turkish captain held up the free hand.

"Wait, wait . . . the berserker boy. I know his father." He pointed at me, shaking, already feeling the steel in his flesh.

"He looks exactly the same as his father did when he was a boy. Just exactly how he looked when I met him twenty years ago."

Pero, faced blackened with powder from the bow guns, strode up with a shield and sword. Relaxed now, he wiped his blade, "Let me kill him Urudje. He is lying because he is afraid to meet Allah."

"No, no," said the Turk's Captain. He held out both hands to ward off the blades. "His father will pay to see him again. More than this poor boat is worth. He told me that he lost a son ten years ago. From a galley that never found its way to Crete. His father is a Janissary Chorbaji, please; he captains hundreds of men. I can help you find him."

I sneered at this sniveling man with his paunch poking out, shaking as he breathed saliva in spewing gasps. I picked up the weapon he had dropped; the blade was gouged and dark with corrosion. "How is it that you know a Captain of the Janissary?" The noise in my head roared again. My uncle wanted control of my body. As if a soldier rose inside of me to strike, I drew the sword back to run into his quivering stomach, but held.

Urudje held up a hand and said, "No, we put him in his own hold. Chain him." He turned on me. "And you will leave him. You did well. Do not sully that with more killing. He may be valuable to us." My uncle was strong in me; he screamed in my mind for more Turkish blood.

The captain saw my eyes flicking back and forth and pulled me close. "Understand this; he is valuable . . . to me. We need the Turkish captain. Today, we let him will live." Between Urudje's command and my wavering will, the roaring in the back of my head spilled down my spine, pooled around my feet and washed overboard into the sea.

Looking down from the deck of the Turkish boat, our galiot bobbed like a toy alongside. Up close, the elaborate scroll work on her stern plate read, *Daburiyan*. She was named for the wind that blows to the east, toward Turkey from the Aegean Sea. The *Daburiyan* had half again the freeboard of our smaller vessel, which nestled its long prow under the galley's stern-most oars. The long point of the bowsprit was now gnarled by its trip across the Turkish galley's deck. The *Ravenna*'s bow rode close against the port side of the *Daburiyan*'s fat stern, just past the last of its oars. The ones that we hadn't broken off in the attack. Steps fastened onto a platform at the leading edge of the *Daburiyan*'s pilot house hung a foot or two above the short foredeck of the *Ravenna*. Her bow was made fast and bobbed under the steps.

Demetrious and Pero went below to search the cargo. Urudje stayed on the galley's deck with Timo, and I watched him walk down the gangway between the rows of slaves who were still chained to their oars. Behind him Isaac and Bartholomew led a gang of our crew passing bread and water to the slaves once they were unlocked from their fetters. Many of the Christian slaves were obviously identified by their sunburned but recognizable Latin features. The Greeks were harder to figure; several who worked for the Turks had actually locked themselves into fetters as the battle went poorly, hoping to pass themselves off as slaves and be freed. When one of the freed slaves turned to Bartholomew and pointed out such an imposter in the ranks ahead, Urudje left the suspect man in his chains.

“Two more of you must condemn him, or we will set him free among you,” Timo said to the men eating and drinking on the gangway. A rangy Florentine stood and grabbed the whip that lay discarded on the gangway. He stepped passed Timo and swung the iron butt of the handle into the face of the man that Urudje questioned. The captive sailor’s head snapped back with the blow, several teeth and strands of blood spattered the man next to him on the bench. That man was a Nubian, who quickly slid closer to the oar lock where it penetrated the gunnel of the boat. Leaning away from the bleeding man, he pointed at a knife that the Greek sailor had been holding at his side to silence him. The knife fell to the deck as the sailor’s hand spasmed and then dropped on the bench, limp.

Urudje grabbed the man’s arm before he could swing again. “Enough. How are we going to get this galley back to Rhodes if you kill all the Turks?”

The Florentine relinquished the whip but pointed to the unconscious man. “He raped my sister when they took me captive. I do not know if she is alive, but I will not wait any longer to avenge her.”

Urudje nodded, put his hand out for the knife. Bartholomew unlocked the Nubian and the black man locked his eyes on Urudje’s, picked up the blade, and handed it to the captain handle first. Urudje put the small knife in the Florentine man’s hand and said, “Finish him. Then you will row, unchained and fed, but you will row all the way back to Rhodes.”

The man nodded and stepped down onto the bench. After Isaac unlocked the unconscious sailor, the Latin man swung his captor’s head and shoulders over the water. He bowed the sailor’s back over the gunnel and sawed the blade across his throat. Then, he threw both the knife and body into the water and turned to sit on the rowing bench. He picked up a piece of chalk that rolled on the floor and rubbed his hands with it, drying them, and rested them on an oar.

Urudje laughed, "Good. You'll get to row again soon enough." Raising his voice he said, "We are agents of his excellency Pierre D'Aubusson, Grand Master of the Knights of Saint John. If you are not an enemy of Christianity, you will be freed from your chains. The cargo, of course, is ours. We do need all of you to get this tub back to Rhodes. The more vengeance that is wrought on your captors, the harder each of you will have to row." He shrugged, pointed at the Florentine sitting at his oar. "It is up to you, as it was up to him. If it were me, I would save my vengeance until you are safely on the streets of Rhodes."

He turned to Bartholomew, still talking to the whole galley, "No more dead bodies, I need live souls at the oars." More subdued, he said directly to Bartholomew, "Chain the Turks and any Greeks working for them at the oars closest to the pilot house. Free men row in the bow. After you feed every one of these free men," his finger swept an arc of the ciurma that had been relieved of their chains, "if you don't have a body at every oar, dismount the oars and put them under the gangway. We probably damaged enough of the oars coming aboard that it will come out about even. Make sure that you save a hole for the Turkish Captain at the oar directly in front of the pilot."

"Slave now, just like any other slave," muttered Bartholomew.

Urudje straightened two fingers and poked him in the shoulder with every word. "In your mind he is; in his mind he is still free. Mark my words. He will try to escape, at least once."

Bartholomew nodded and held his shoulder like he'd been stabbed.

Urudje walked to the galley's pilot house, motioned for Timo and me to follow. When he passed the hatch into the galley's hold he paused and told me, "Tell Pero to come see me as soon as he knows what the cargo is. Not a full inventory, just in general. What is the bulk of the load?"

I dropped down the hatch ladder into the hold, barely touching the rungs. Pero was prying open a large crate against the starboard bulkhead.

I called to him, "Urudje wants to know what the cargo is as soon as you have an idea."

Pero stuck his head into the crate and waved a hand at me. Wanting to be in the strange pilot house with Timo and Urudje more than in this dank hold, I turned and ran back up the ladder.

When I came out of the hold, I saw that Urudje sat on an embroidered cushion which graced a rough wooden chair in the pilot house. The horsehair stuffing was coming out of a loose seam and dribbled food smeared the needlework. Urudje's eye's roamed over the activity of the ship. Freed galley slaves wolfed down dry biscuit, and shared out some of the sweet limes that were left on the *Ravenna*. Most of the Turkish galley's crew who remained alive had been chained to the rowing benches at the foot of the pilot house. Timo stepped onto the raised deck and said to Urudje, "They look healthy enough to row back to Rhodes. Might even fetch a fair price when we get back. The key is getting back in one piece."

"True," said Urudje. "Perhaps we should sail to the west of Samos. That means rowing south through the islands to Patmos. There, we might be able to catch a breeze we can ride some of the way to Kos. We don't dare take this galley back through the strait at Samos."

"We could take the cargo and scuttle the ship. Leave the crew to swim? Bastards deserve it. After the Janissary guards went down, all the fight went out of them. They're old women; they should drown with their rat trap ship."

"Let's see what Pero finds below, first."

Timo nodded.

Urudje picked his nails and said, "I'll need you to pilot this galley back to Rhodes."

"I figured that. You going to take Djem with you?"

"Sure, might have him steer. Can't pilot, but he can man the steering oar fine."

"You'd be surprised Urudje, he keeps his eyes open." He winked at me. "You'll be following behind me no doubt?"

"Don't want to lose anyone overboard. Plus we could outstrip you, and then have to sit waiting. I'd rather keep an eye on your stern. I'll give you some of the ciurma to row and replace them on the *Ravenna* with the sailors. They won't like it, but we're coming back with a prize."

Timo made a show of how he looked around the beat-up galley. "Not much of one."

Pero came out of the hold, sweating and smiling. He leapt onto the pilot house deck, ducked under the leather awning they had rolled out onto the overhead frame, and whispered to Urudje. The captain stood, smiled and told Timo, "Oh, we're taking the galley. We are most certainly taking the galley."

## A New Helmsman

Our little convoy made a compact and relatively elusive target. With sails furled, yardarms lowered and tied along the gangways, only the pencil line of our masts waved against the horizon. We were nearly invisible in the night's fog and every last soul on board pulled at the oars in turn, rowing and grunting and sweating in the sliver of moonlight. But with the dawn, sunlight sparkled on the water that dripped from the *Daburiyan's* synchronous oar blades. The Turkish galley rode high in the water, a pig of a ship, and we could be seen for several miles now that it was light. So we gave the western tip of Samos a wide berth and had an uneventful row along a small island chain to the north of Patmos. The sun was arcing toward the islands to our west and though we still had much daylight remaining, I wanted to land as much as the *ciurma*. We were all *ciurma* now, a single gasping machine stroking toward the safety of Kalimnos. The Knights had held the islands and waterways from Rhodes north to the island of Kos for a hundred years or more. Their galleys had frequent business on the islands of Kalimnos and Leros, to the north, ever since their league with the Genoese adventurer Vignolo. No Turk would follow us or attack once we were abreast of Leros.

Following the *Daburiyan* did not require much attention. I watched for shallow water and held the *Ravenna* just off the galley's starboard beam. Urudje pointed to the channel formed between the island currently on our starboard and another to the southeast.

"That small island will keep us hidden from any ships heading up the coast. We'll look for a good beach there." I followed with my eyes as he pointed to the west side of the channel. "What do you see in the water?"



"There are no ripples from the wind and the current doesn't drag us to the south as much here," I said.

"Good," said Urudje, "You can see that the island protects us from the wind and currents here. That's what you look for to protect your ship when you need to go ashore for a night. Steer to the leeward side, away from the prevailing winds and put land between you and the currents."

With my hands on the loom of the steering oar I stood a little taller. "So, I will look for a beach where we can pull both boats close to the shore."

Urudje grinned, "You will go around that rock peninsula just off the prow. There you will find a good beach. We ducked in here three years ago, but you were a boy and busy with the last job that you had."

I looked at Urudje, the question shouting from my eyes. "My last job? You're telling me this is my new job?"

He just slapped my shoulder and pointed to the shore with his chin, "We'll talk about it later. But, pay attention or I will take it back."

The beach was inside of a sandy point; sand that had been deposited around a natural rock jetty after decades of steady currents. With very little variation in the tides, there was no risk of our waking to find the galley grounded in the morning. Both crews were exhausted when we raised the steering oar and backed the *Ravenna* onto the sand of the small island. After beaching the galiot, Urudje had four of the youngest of our crew swim into the quiet bay and dive to check the depth of the bottom. Then he pointed out to Timo in the *Daburiyan*, where one of the men was still paddling about in the water, his head disappearing when he bounced his feet off the bottom to show the water's depth.

Timo wanted to pull the Turkish galley onto the beach as well, but Urudje had the *Daburiyan* anchored in the shallows where we could walk up to her side. Maybe swimming a few strokes. The captured crew remained in chains on the galley; offshore the boat would remain an effective prison. Staying chained at the looms was a just reward for their brutal treatment of the Christian slaves. Of course when they became our galley slaves, the brutality remained. Either way, life on a galley was a damn brutal business. Many sailors had their turn at the enemy's oars. There were two live goats aboard the *Daburiyan* and salted meat that had most likely been rations for the Turkish soldiers. The meat was tough and left me thirsty. There were also small casks of raki in the galley's hold that worked to cut the salt taste. The Turks on this ship must have taken the prophet at his word and avoided wine, but drew the line at the liquor they made from the wine leavings. After some hurried fortification with the salt meat and spirits: we built fires, roasted the goats and ate our fill of the fresh bread that the galley had taken on board at Samos. Urudje posted guards on the *Daburiyan*; four men swam out to relieve them every two hours. Not so much to watch the chained Turks, as to guard the barrels of quality Rhodian wine that Pero found stacked in kegs the length of the galley's hold. Every man was allotted one of the large carved water cups full of wine, and we had a fine night of it.

Away from the meat fires and raucous laughter, I brooded on the beach. The sand was still warm, so I scooped out a seat to watch the *Daburiyan* bob in the slight surf. As the captive Turks shifted against their chains, they created hypnotic ripples that washed onto the beach. The wavelets rebounded from the slope of the beach sand like echoes. On Rhodes, I would climb to the peak of Mount Philermos and shout names just to hear the echoes. Toes at the edge of a cliff, I'd shout the names of the crew and the women at the well, all the names of the Knights that I could remember. I'd shout the names of the fishes and boats and the names of all the eight winds

I could remember—Yildiz, Karayel, Daburiyan, Lodos and Kible, Suluk and Poyraz—that made a sailors life possible and impossible all at the same time. Water flowed from several springs high on the mountain and into the city on its way to join the sea. Water in the sea was ruled by the eight winds, but on land, water ruled itself. If it flowed down the other side of the mountain, it still attempted to join itself with the sea. Water could be trapped, its path could be changed, but only for so long, and then it would once again endeavor to join with itself. Water had a thirst all its own, and constantly moved until it could quench that thirst with more water.

Dense pine forests shaded the streams that tumbled down the mountain and the road that climbed to the highest spot on the northern end of Rhodes. Miriam liked to walk there on the Sabbath when she was younger. She would get Isaac or Bartholomew to borrow Urudje's donkeys. Then the three of us would leave for the mountain before the sun came up, to avoid the disapproving eye of the rabbis. We bounced for miles on donkeys and laughed in the early morning chill. The road ended just short of the mountain's pinnacle, at the gate of a small fortress, and we would walk out to a rocky precipice that overlooked the city. The path was surrounded by myrtle and arbutus, with the pungent odor of thyme wafting up from the gardens tended by local monks. We breakfasted on figs and pomegranates, flat bread and cheese in the cool morning breezes. I climbed to the top of a lone gnarled juniper, whose ancient roots were pegged into the solid rock, to shout for Urudje to look at us. Miriam didn't mind when I shouted at the mountain. Everywhere else I was told to remain quiet. Work hard but take care not to be seen or heard. On the mountain, I could voice my suppressed rage at the world. Rage that I would never know my mother. Rage that my father had left us to our lot as slaves, separated from each other forever. I could not say those words, but I hoped the sounds carried my fury to

the city. Reverberating back over themselves, the echoes asked the same question, all the time in a fainter and fainter voice, and waited for the creation of another ripple.

I helped Georgios feed the crew. Urudje was not to be found. He had disappeared earlier in the evening. If I had received some sort of promotion, it appeared to be both temporary and tenuous. Although I was usually treated well enough as Urudje's slave, it was never far from my mind that I remained the property of another man. Urudje's station on Rhodes, as a prosperous sailor, was in complete juxtaposition to mine, as his slave. No one had searched for me when I was taken as a young child, nor had they tried to pay a ransom for me. As a child, I was aware that no one from my family was interested in my freedom, or for that matter my mother's. Perhaps that had changed? Georgios accepted my help serving dinner, but shooed me away like a proprietary scion looking for his favorite scullery maid when it came time to clean the pots. Instead of using my labor, he called for one of the captive young Turks to be paroled to his custody. I fed myself after looking from fire to fire for the Captain, anxious to see to his person as I normally did when he was away from the island of Rhodes. There was always another task to be performed at sea and I felt deserted when the chores didn't queue-up for me as they had every other time we sailed. Caring for Urudje and the crew was my job. It had been since my earliest memory. I was lost without the direction of that drudgery.

Thirty or so paces to my right, two figures came out of the rocks. Their figures seemed to overlap because my perspective was flattened in the darkness and they created a four armed, four legged monster shuffling toward me. As the pair closed the distance between us, the figure in front either stumbled with regularity or was unused to walking in the sand. I looked back into the water, at the *Daburiyan*, and considered its Turkish master. That ill-kempt, greasy excuse for a human being was hardly a likely candidate for the captain of a fishing dhow. It was much less

likely that he was the owner and captain of a galley, with a full complement of rowing slaves, however decrepit. It had incensed me that he would know my father, much less recognize him in me. I might have been a slave, but I was a proud slave.

I had been in many fights on the *Ravenna*, but always remained on her deck, handed gunpowder and shot to Pero or staunched the bloody wounds that resulted from close combat. I didn't know if it was normal to want to keep killing after the fight was won. If others also wanted to keep hacking away at bodies, whirling away from attacking blades and sliding my own into the enemy. I had felt a frenzy that I had not seen in the other men fighting on our own deck. I had heard a voice in my head telling me how to move, warning of the next threatening attack. I had been powerful. For the first time in my life, I saw another man's fear. They were afraid of me, and it fed me, gave me strength.

I looked back at the two figures coming down the beach again, and they parted as the one wavered toward the water. When the shadows separated, I recognized Urudje's gait from his silhouette and jumped to my feet.

"Master, Captain. I've been searching for you. Have you had your dinner, sir?"

The figure laughed and waved a hand. "Yes, don't worry Djem. I needed a few words with this dog of a galley slave," and the figure in front of him stumbled again as if pushed from behind. When he protested, I recognized the voice of the galley's captain and Urudje cuffed the back of his head, pulling back on the chain stretched between them.

"Come, sit with us," said Urudje. He pushed the other man down at the foot of a small dune, drew a long stiletto from under his vest and sat over him.

"This dog doesn't just bark. It appears that he tells interesting stories as well. I, for one, would like to hear his tale in your company. Fortunately, our guest is not as illiterate as he may

look and I know your Lingua Franca is as good as your Greek. Let's hear what he has to say." He rested the point of the vicious looking blade on the base of the Turk's neck, just where his collarbone fit into his shoulder and said, "If you want continued use of this arm you will tell this young sailor what you have told me. From the beginning, if you please." He jabbed once and a drizzle of blood welled around the knife point.

The Turk flinched, and began, his eyes darting around in the sand. "My name is Turgut Ali. I am a humble merchant and it is my business to carry certain cargoes of questionable origin to the city of Adrianople. I trade with," he shrugged, eyes still dancing like sand crabs, "various other merchants."

I asked, "The Ottoman city?"

"Yes, young prince, indeed. In many of my stays in the northern home of the Sultan I have had the pleasure of . . ."

I interrupted him again, "You mean *the* Sultan Mehmet?"

"Indeed, excellencies." His eyes rose to look on me, then they clicked to Urudje. "May I go on?" After the flat of the blade tapped his collarbone several times, he continued.

"In cosmopolitan areas, vast cities of accumulated culture, there is a thriving market for certain commodities; commodities which are otherwise proscribed by a nation's sovereign. I provide such commodities to the fair citizens of Adrianople who do not *exactly* adhere to the edicts of the prophet. Therefore, I am often in the company of men of quality in that western most of Ottoman strongholds. These men are free individuals who also come and go, sometimes as traders, sometimes as emissaries of their governments. As I met with such men, I have also had occasion to keep company with a very few of the most high echelon of the Sultan's Yeni-Cheri, the feared young foreigners who guard the Sultan's person and his properties. The men I

have met are officers of the corps, soldiers none the less, who associate with and protect the official guests of the Sultan. One of those soldiers, effendi, looks exactly like you, or did when I first met him." He gestured with both hands open to Djem.

"You look so much like him when he first returned from the siege of Constantinople, the new seat of the Sultanate. I have watched him grow in importance within the ranks of the Yeni-Cheri until he recently became a captain of his own unit, a Chorbaji. I also heard rumors, ten years or so after the fall of Constantinople to the Sultan's armies, of a bastard son with a concubine from the Sultan's very own court. Such men, as you may or may not know, such soldiers, do not have wives nor do they father children, not until they . . . retire. After that I heard nothing further, assuming the Sultan had silenced the rumors, perhaps had the bastard son drowned. The reason I am so sure of the relation is that this man is no Greek. Like so many of the Yeni-Cheri, he is of Christian lineage from the cities across the northern border of the empire. This soldier of the Sultan is the youngest son of a Wallachian prince." Turgut turned and spat, "who only sat on his throne at the behest of Sultan Mehmet. When Mehmet first invaded north of Adrianople, he made a bargain with this prince. Mehmet Ghazi allowed him his continued rule in exchange for a rather large sum in coin and a steady flow of whelps for his Yeni-Cheri.

"Not one to trust an infidel, the Sultan required an assurance of the yearly remittance. That assurance came in the form of the prince's own sons. The youngest was named Radu. You, young effendi, have Radu's high cheekbones, his sweet face, and you have his thick, how would you call them, eye lashes. Eyes that make a man want to—" but the point of the knife cut him short again.

Urudje murmured, "Care now old man. If I don't gut you, the boy just might."

"You also have his blood lust. I have seen you fight and I was terrified for my life. I know. I soiled myself just before you would have killed me. My eyes are not as young as they once were, but I am very sure that you are the son of Radu, Janissary of the Sultan."

My eyes narrowed and I asked, "So where did you last see this Radu, son of a Wallachian prince and Janissary to the Ottoman Sultan?"

Turgut looked away for a long time, until the knife resumed its tap, tap, tapping on his collarbone. "You will surely kill me when I tell you."

Urudje said, "I will surely kill you anyway. Why not die with the truth in your mouth pirate?"

"Alright. Almost a year ago, I saw him in Adrianople. He was bragging about an extended foray to the Carpathian Mountains. Sultan Mehmet had evidently ordered him to retake the Wallachian provinces from the Hungarians. It is said that the Sultan wants to declaw that Hungarian beast Hunyadi once and for all. Wallachia will evidently be his staging ground for that venture. The Sultan's other young hostage, Radu's older brother, was placed on the Wallachian throne after the death of their father." He pointed at me and said, "Your . . . grandfather," turning his hand over and back several times, suggesting that the relationship was tenuous at best. Mehmet Ghazi believed he had converted him to the Ottoman cause as he had the younger Radu. But, the other boy was in his second decade when he came to Adrianople, much too old to be a Yeni-Cheri. He was not truly converted to Islam in the way of the Yeni-Cheri, so when he returned to Wallachia he eventually joined with the Hungarians against us. Evidently the older brother—he would be your uncle—did not relish the memory of his five years as hostage of the Porte. He was separated from his parents and his homeland, and then his



brother accepted our ways. The young prince must have been very much alone and I think he became displeased with his situation under the Ottomans.”

“After the Wallachian prince took your grandfather’s throne, the Sultan received no more payments and no more whelps for his palace guard. The best part of the story, young effendi,” the Turk said with a cackle, “is that your father was sent with an entire division of the Sultan’s best troops to kill his own brother.” He turned to Urudje then. “And, if I am a pirate, then there are more than one of us sitting here, eh?”

I didn’t know how much truth was coming from Turgut, but he might as well have been reciting a century old legend. My only connection to these princes from distant countries was the visions that I had, the disembodied voice that commanded me from somewhere inside my skull. Mostly, that thing in my head provided an overwhelming desire to take some action. No real command was necessary. Like right now. I wanted this sniveling Turk off the face of the earth, to breathe no more. Yes, he proclaimed to know something about my father. But, the power inside me was confident that it would eventually draw me to where I could find the answers to my genealogical questions for myself. Then I would know them to be true. Until then, I should dispense with anyone who might spread unhealthy rumors about my lineage. This Turk was speaking about a renegade Byzantine prince. Not a very useful connection on an island that the Christian Knights had stolen from the Byzantines. My mind made up. I brought my eyes up to regard the Turkish captain.

Urudje shifted his gaze from me to the Turk, “No Turgut, the very best part of this story is that the shipment of wine you carried in the *Daburiyan* is the very best wine from the vineyards on Rhodes. Did you get a taste of it?” he asked me. “Turgut here must have arranged for a shipment of wine to meet him on Samos, and was heading for the Ottoman coast with it

when we arrived with our little galiot. Turgut, you should hire more Jannisary guards for the next trip. Or, wait," he put his finger to his chin, "the Sultan assigned those troops to your ship. I can't wait to see the Grand Master's face. When word reaches him that the largest shipment of wine ever to ship from the Island of Rhodes was on its way to the table of that lush Mehmet, he will soil his robes."

Turgut whirled and grabbed at the blade, but Urudje was much faster. He punched him so solidly in the nose that the old captain sank to the sand without a whimper. Urudje looked over at me with a smile and closed my gaping jaw with the one blooded knuckle.

"You'll draw flies with that mouth. So, he tells quite a tale, doesn't he?"

"Yes, Captain, he does," I said.

"And I half believe him." He actually scoffed, "You, the nephew of a prince."

"My dreams, I told you I saw my father in my dream. Now I'm sure it was my uncle."

"Don't be so hasty to believe him, Djem. You don't know how much of his shite is lies that he dreamed up."

"Urudje, it is so strange. Sometimes, it feels like the devil gets in me."

"Like yesterday, in the fight?"

"Yes, then, and just now. I wanted to kill him." I looked at my hands. "I want to kill him still."

"So did I, Djem. So do I. But look," he gestured at Turgut. "I did not. You must control your anger, use it. Don't display your anger as a lever for your enemies to use against you. Yesterday in the fight, if that was the devil? Then you had better keep him close. Let him out only when we have need of his wrath."

"What do I do about my uncle?"

Urudje slid down next to me in the sand, "Those are just dreams, Djem. This," he pointed to the body snoring through a broken nose, "is reality. We will deal with it in the same way as we always do. Get a cup of that good Rhodian wine, get some sleep, and say a prayer that Saint John will watch over us as we do the work of his namesake. Now, help me to carry this sack of shite to the fire. We'll lock him there until morning."

Urudje drank little of the wine that night and he was kicking the crews awake when the sun burnished the horizon. With both crews rested, if not very fresh, we made good headway under oars until late-morning, the sun directly overhead. Every able bodied hand was rowing. Sweat poured from the sailors who were unused to extended time at the oars. The cross-wind pushed the boats from the west and picked up to create a vigorous chop as Patmos grew on the horizon. Between watching the large needle of the compass mounted in front of the steering oar and the telltales flapping in the wind, I held the *Ravenna's* bow steady. Both hands were wrapped around the oar to keep the galiot from wandering in her course, making the ciurma's work as easy as possible.

I flexed my knees, and rolled with the waves. My feet were planted wide on the pilot house deck at the end of the steering oar which reached aft into our trailing wake. All my attention was focused on remaining erect, so that I could nudge the oar without being thrown against it's handle by the wave jostled deck. The work consumed my attention, and I reveled in the power that I wielded over the lean galiot. My body melded into the boat. Feet became the wood of the deck and my hands were married to the oar. I felt the wind push the bow to one side in my neck. The slap of the waves on the hull resonated in my bowels and my lungs heaved with the pull of the oars. I steered with my entire body, not just my arms. That morning it seemed that

I could stand affixed to the pilot house deck and point her prow south forever. Timo, however, looked like he was having a harder time holding the ungainly galley on point. The *Daburiyan* slowed and as we pulled alongside, Timo pointed toward the east and shouted between the rocking boats.

“Set sail to the west, with the wind, and rest the ciurma. We will row south again once we pass Lipsi, if the wind doesn’t change. If the Yildiz comes to blow us to the south, it will come this evening. Remember Djem, hold the *Ravenna* to the south as much as you can. We don’t want to get blown back the way we just rowed. Your crew will pitch you over the side for wasting their energy.” Several of the crew on the closest benches laughed and threw up some bawdy challenges about dangling me over the rail. But, I felt more like one of them than I ever had and yelled a quick affirmation to Timo.

I raised a hand, and Urudje called to Demetrius to hoist sails. We hauled the two yardarms up the main and mizzen masts, and waited until the *Daburiyan* unfurled its giant sail before we dropped ours and hauled both clew sheets to opposite sides of the galiot. The sails filled with the westerly breeze, the galley’s namesake, and the ciurma shipped their oars with an audible sigh of relief. I held the galiot’s stern directly into the wind with the steering oar and we must have looked like a giant white winged bird taking flight from the blue surface of the Aegean. The spread sails looked like the robe billowing from the welcoming arms of Christ, which was painted on the wall of the Saint Catherine hospice in Rhodes. We sped along with the wind, even though my sight was obscured by our sails until a wave pitched the bow up and I could catch a glimpse of the *Daburiyan* plunging along at our head.

The captured galley began to crawl to our starboard a little at a time, and I saw Urudje watching me out of the corner of his eye. I held the *Ravenna* straight down wind, but the galley

continued to creep to the south of our tack. With her huge single sail, she was holding course a few points to the southwest more than the *Ravenna* could. I couldn't follow her without dumping the wind out of the main forward sail, which was rigged to the port. That would risk whipping it back into the mizzen sail, breaking a yardarm or even worse a mast. Now, Demetrius was watching me as well. I waved Demetrius over and Urudje said, "No, no, just yell it out!"

If I got it wrong, I wouldn't hear the end of it. Ever. In my idle moments I was still telling myself that if I had held the galiot steady, that Neilos wouldn't have lost his grip and fell. I knew that the crew counted on the helmsman to hold their world steady as they worked. It's what I expected of Timo and what they all now expected of me.

I shouted, "Hoist fore-sail," at the top of my lungs. My voice cracked at the end of "fore," but without any further orders the clew sheet was released and the sailors drew the fluttering sail up to hang from the yard. The forward yardarm was pivoted to the starboard, but the sail remained furled, allowing me to steer to the south and follow the galley. Demetrius ordered the clew sheet hauled in as we turned and the narrow galiot heeled to the starboard but slid forward faster. The resting crew moved to the port seats to hold the galiot stable in the water. Demetrius looked back at me and when I nodded, the sailors dropped the foresail and drew it into trim as well. Now I could follow the spreading white wake of the deeper drafted galley.

We held course a few points to the southwest, until I noticed that now we were slipping sideways to the south much faster than the galley. I knew that with her deeper hull the galley would track better under sail than the shallow-hulled galiot. Thinking back, I remembered watching the water as it flowed around the steering oar, days ago when it was still in Timo's hands. Instead of steering back toward the galley's wake I raised the loom of the steering oar as high as I could. I wrapped an arm around the huge handle and pulled up, driving the blade deeper

into the water behind us. Urudje looked at me like I'd lost my mind. I could see he was ready to say something when the galiot began to track better, not slipping as drastically to the leeward.

Urudje called over two of the larger men from the resting ciurma, who were now scattered around the rowing deck, and had them hold the oar higher in its thole. Then he waved Pero back from the bow and they lashed a crossbar above where the steering oar penetrated the stern deck rail, holding the oar at its current higher elevation.

Urudje leaned over the starboard side to watch the bow wake. "Just so we don't lose more forward speed by sinking the steering oar into the water like that, than we gain by not slipping to the south." He shrugged and went forward with Pero to watch the galley and the bow wake. I could steer without the burly oarsmen holding the steering oar up now, but it was hard to move the steering oar side to side in its thole. The entire crew was watching as we gained on the *Daburiyan*. Before long Demetrious had to spill the air out of the mizzen-sail and haul it up so we didn't overrun the galley.

"Urudje," I said, when he had moved back to the pilot house. "I can barely move the oar. It's jammed too tight in the thole."

"I know," he said. "We'll have to figure that out. Tell me when it gets bound up so much that you can no longer follow Timo. We'll cut it loose. Until then, we'll grease it. That should help." Pero stood beside me after the lashed cross member was greased, and watched as I shifted the steering oar in the improvised channel. A slow dance of constant minor adjustments was necessary to keep the galiot on its best point of sail. That kept me shoving back and forth on the jammed steering oar.

"Might as well rig it with a rudder," he said. "But then we can't back her right up on the beach so easy. Instead of getting caught in a running fight, you put her stern on the beach and

then you have all your firepower protecting you from a sea attack. Let the ciurma worry about guarding the beach. Am I right?"

"I think you're right, Pero. But I have another idea."

"Well shite, aren't you just full of them then. Alright, out with it."

"I've been playing with, I mean, I've been working on a rudder with a wide blade that goes straight down into the water amidships. We don't have to change the steering oar; we just have to fix a blade to the galiot's gunnel on the leeward rail." I motioned with the blade of my left hand, right hand still steadying the bound oar, to show the motion of a rudder cutting through the water.

"That way she won't slip sideways from the pressure of the wind." Pero looked at me like I was turning into a Cyclops.

"What's wrong, Pero"

"Djem, that's either a damn fool notion that will drown us all, or the answer to staying under sail when the wind changes against us." He eyed me again. "When we put in tonight, come see Timo with me. We'll work it out. It's worth a try." He scratched his head and watched the blade of the steering oar in the water. "Hell, yes," he muttered, "Well worth a try."

The afternoon wind fell off to the northwest and we untied the steering oar. Wing in wing again, both sails spread with the wind directly behind us. We rounded the eastern tip of Kos and spent the night under the guns of the Knight's fortress at Chateau St. Pierre. It took two more days for the fat old *Daburiyan* to make the Porto del Mandraccico at the northern tip of Rhodes. She was too big to be unloaded in the smaller commercial harbor. The Grand Master's Palace directly overlooked what we affectionately called the Mandraki, and we all new that unloading

that shipment of wine under the nose of the Grand Master would bring some attention our way.

We just had no idea how much attention.



## Miriam's Inn

Windmills waved their multi-armed greetings to us. They were planted in a row, like olive trees in a grove, along the eastern-most mole that jutted north into the Aegean. It was a good omen, that the windmill's faces were turned toward us, welcoming us into the Porto Mercantile. An early Etesian wind from the northwest—what the Turks called the Karayel—hurried us toward the windmills and the harbor's eastern border. The crew furled the galiot's sails. Urudje steered the *Ravenna* while the ciurma slow-rowed into the harbor and up to one of the wooden piers that jutted a few boat lengths into the water. Once the crew made the boat fast, he told Georgios, "She's yours now. Get her unloaded and washed down. I don't want her stinking of blood."

"Djem, you help Georgios get the galley emptied. He trusts you. Remember the galiot that burned to the waterline last fall. No old coals left scattered about." He leapt onto the pier and ran in the opposite direction of the city walls, toward the Tower of France that guarded the very end of the mole. The rocks that formed the mole shimmered in the early afternoon sun. From where I stood on the deck, it looked as if Urudje was running across the blue Aegean like a God, bent on retrieving a lost hat from the water. When I shaded my eyes I could see that he moved with purpose too; for all I knew he would continue to run all the way up the coast, to the very gates of Constantinople. Then, as I squinted against the glare, I saw past Urudje's pumping limbs; a lone boatman who leaned against his dhow came into focus. His rowed boat had a peak at either end and was beached next to the harbor's chain. The chain was thick as my calf and green with algae. It rose from the water and passed into the tower where it was anchored against the winch that raised it to the surface to block the harbor. The old fisherman, no longer able or

willing to work his nets, waited to ferry a galley's captain or the odd knight across the harbor for a coin or two. The Naillac tower housed the winch at the other end of the chain, which now lay along the inlet's floor. The Turkish galley was in the Mandraki, a short run across a separate mole that led out to the forward bastion of the harbor, the Tower of Saint Nicholas. Georgios drew my attention away from Urudje's receding figure. He waved to two other dhows that had been rowing hesitantly toward the *Ravenna* and beckoned them close to unload the galiot. We began the dreary task of unloading the remaining stores of food, water, and the five carved caskets that we had liberated from the hold of the *Daburiyan*. Last into the dhows were a few casks of the Rhodian wine that Georgios had taken from the galley's cargo for our evening festivities.

I was suddenly demoted to scullery maid again and crawled around in the hold handing up the empty water kegs, vinegar jugs turning to sour wine and wine jugs with dried sediment in the bottom. Some rotting fruit went over the side and I scrubbed the hold of leftover crumbs, spilt wine and grease. Rats were bad enough in the city; we tried not to feed them at sea as well. What bread was left, they took to the Saint Catherine hospice to give to the begging poor. The other sailors finished the work of sluicing the decks with salt water and scraped at the dried crud that usually caked the deck after a raid. They dried the sails on the mole and rolled the tarred hemp lines and stacked the oars on the gangway out of the water. Pero and Georgios and Timo's wives came running and waving toward the boat along with other wives and children of the crew. Timo's wife stayed along with the other families, even though her husband was in the Mandraki with the captured Turkish galley. The relief that he was safe was on her face as she got the youngest children, who were now playing in the shallows, out of the way of the unloading. Fresh water was passed around in wide-mouth jugs, drowning the thirst that we could never quite

quench with vinegar and wine and stagnant water that sat in covered jugs in the ship's hold. Most of us spilled as much down our fronts, over our heads, as down our throats. We poured it over each other by the jug full. I spat streams after squealing children and generally lavished in the abundance of the stuff.

The jubilant mood of homecoming was a contagion and spread wildly among the crowd that gathered around the galiot. Bucket brigades were formed. Children dipped hemp wrapped buckets into the seawater and handed them up to women with skirts tucked into their sashed waists. They stood in thigh deep water and handed the buckets into our reaching arms as we washed the galiot's deck. Sons helped fathers gather their weapons and a few single women flaunted around the compact little galiot, bare-footed in their skirts and flying hair. They goaded and enticed the unattached men to join them at Miriam's inn. One by one, their tasks were accomplished and, anxious to be about the welcoming fanfare, sailors and their families made a slow procession down the sandy center of the mole. In clusters of families and sometimes in pairs, two lovers clinging to each other in defiance of the Hospitaller's strict religious code, I watched as they moved under the Saint Catherine Gate and into the city of the Knights of Saint John.

I was left empty as the *Ravenna*'s hold when the last of them left. There was no one to run to the harbor and greet me, but I was part of the crew and welcomed along with them all, buoyed by the infectious joy of homecoming. Now, I felt separate from them again. My sudden advancement to the steering oar from the vinegar jar had taken me by surprise. I imagined that they were even more aghast at who they found piloting their craft, even though it was under Urudje's watchful eye. I wondered how I could walk up to the inn. Did they think one of them

should pilot the galiot? It was Urudje's decision, but the crew always had its own ideas of what was right and proper.

Hours after our arrival, but not long after the departure of the last of the crew, I hefted Urudje's armor and sword, and drug my feet toward the inn. The sun was low and it scumbled colors along the horizon where the Aegean seemed to melt into the sky. My stomach began to rumble again, so I headed for Miriam's instead of going all the way to Urudje's house with his armor. He wouldn't want it until I had cleaned everything anyway. As I strode up the incline, lights flickered in all of the inn's windows. The tavern on the lower floor was tucked behind arched wooden doors that were recessed into the stone facade. The block building seemed to swell with the warmth that radiated from the rectangular windows that extended tall as a man on the upper floor. The party toppled out into the street and a sailor named Ayme, not much older than me called out, "Hail Djem, the new pilot of the *Ravenna*." Then he turned up a cup of wine and staggered back into the raucous crowd at the door as he drank. I stopped, unsure of whether he was mocking me or not.

Another voice came from around the stone archway, "Djem, you get your ass in here and sit down to eat." Bartholomew's wide face poked out of the doorway with an even wider grin and he grabbed the sword bag with one hand and me with the other.

"What a sail we had back, eh? Nothing but a fresh tail wind and not too much pulling at the damned oars. Now that's a good omen for your first trip at the steering oar."

I looked into Bartholomew's face. "But what about Neilos. Did everybody forget about Neilos?"

Old Isaac spun around on a bench and stuck a finger out at me. "Djem, you know that the winds think for themselves. What are you a God now? You can't take responsibility for what

they do. That Turkish galley, the *Daburiyan*. That ship is named for the treachery of the wind that comes out of the west. An ill-wind that blows toward the Ottomans is what I say. We all saw what happened, it was the wind and nothing more; Timo couldn't have done any different. Neilos's family will get a double share, and he hadn't a wife or children, so God must have need of him more than we do."

"Yes, only God himself could have hung on to that bucking mast when the wind shifted like that," said Bartholomew. He stood and raised his cup, "Neilos, may he sail with the angels and never meet the devil."

Quiet came over the inn, and everyone raised a cup to shout in unison, "Neilos." The room rang with the shout, and there was a second of silence before the hubbub continued.

Miriam came in to the room carrying a bowl of steaming mussels with tomatoes and set them alongside a half-eaten platter of grilled mutton with peppers and onions.

"Djem, sit you down and eat. Bartholomew, you blaspheme upstairs if you want to, but not here where the prior might wander by at any time."

"Miriam, we're in the Ovriaki, this is our neighborhood. They don't lock it up like the Venetians do their Jewish quarter, but the Knights have no interest here until the Sultan comes to poke his nose over that wall." He motioned in the direction of the eastern wall with a knife, glistening with mutton fat.

"Bartholomew, if you want to eat at my table you'll keep a civil tongue. I have a knife too, and I think mine's longer than yours." She turned to wink at me and picked up a blade from the meat tray that was as long as my forearm and peppered with charred meat crumbs. She shook it at Bartholomew, "You can sleep in the street, too, as far as I care."

Bartholomew frowned, furrowed his brow and winked in my direction as well, "Aw Miriam, I was just having fun." He laid the knife on the plate and put his greasy hand over his heart. "You know you're my one true love and I'll always strive to please you." He grinned at me and elbowed Isaac. "In any way I can."

Isaac and several of the crew at the table howled with laughter and I grinned at the joking. I felt at home again. The dreams that had been plaguing my thoughts and all the wondering of what the future held fell away, as I curled into the jostling voices of my friends. One of the slave girls brought in a tray of whole broiled garfish surrounded by pink prawns from the kitchen. She laid it on the table in front of Bartholomew and I as Miriam turned for a board with a loaf of fresh bread. She cut two slices and placed them on my plate, then whirled and stuck the blade into the plank table close enough to shave a few hairs from Bartholomew's arm.

"Have your fun old man, but you'll want to keep an eye open in the bed tonight, won't you." She smiled and pulled her skirts up enough to show her ankles and sashayed away to the kitchen, swinging her full hips as she flipped her skirts side to side. She looked over her shoulder before disappearing into the kitchen door. Her face abandoned the mischievous grin and she dropped her skirts before she turned the corner. A boot crossed the bench to my right, and Urudje sat next to me, pulled a plate from a stack on the table and grabbed a few turnips, fresh asparagus and a fistful of the prawns.

"So, Georgios says you are worth keeping around." Urudje poured a glass of the wine and smiled, raising the cup to me. The room was full to the hearth with bragging sailors, and a few women, all talking and laughing and drinking. But when Urudje lifted the cup, the room went quiet and Urudje said, "To Sir John Kendall, our benefactor, to the Grand Master D'Aubusson, long may he live, and to the Knights of Saint John, long may they prosper."

The room erupted in cheers and Urudje held up his free hand.

“The Grand Master himself thanked me, thanked us for the service of returning the shipment of wine. His stewards are in the process of selling it again as we speak.” A few snickers and guffaws spread around the room. “This represents quite a windfall for the brothers and Grand Master D’Aubusson showed his appreciation by paying us a percentage of the last sale.”

This pronouncement was followed by a cheer that he couldn’t silence with a hand.

“Now, now, when you have eaten your fill and warmed your bellies with some of this excellent wine, I will be paying out shares of our bonus tonight. Your usual percentages all around and I will pay the balance of the profit out when everything is sold. I’ll be in a room upstairs. Miriam, maybe with a little desk? And don’t all come at once, I promise I won’t get too drunk to count before you’re all paid.”

Easy laughter rippled through the men and the normal buzz of conversation continued. Urudje leaned over to me and said, “This was an important prize for us. I need to talk to you. Come upstairs after the rush.” He rose and headed for the stairs that ran up an outer wall of the court to a second floor where rooms were positioned around a narrow balcony. Hallways ran to the back of the inn on either side to more rooms, but Miriam showed him to one at the top of the stairs. Some of the men were already pushing toward the stairs and the process of paying out the profits to the crew began.

As the men filed into the room at the top of the stairs, the dinner in the tavern downstairs became a party. The food slowed to sweet cakes, fruit preserved in sugar and last year’s apples, but the wine flowed free. A dice game started in the far corner of the courtyard as sailors returned with their share of the windfall. Men stood around watching the players and chatting

with the women who twirled from arm to arm. Cards came out at several tables and Bartholomew and Isaac began a game with the youngest sailor Ayme and Demetrious.

Isaac said, "Dimi, sit right here, we're going to show this young lad how it's done. Djem, you can play next hand if you don't catch on first," and he raised one eyebrow.

"I think I'll go see if Miriam needs me to do anything, she hasn't given me my chores since I got back."

"You go on and find her," said Isaac," but I think she'll have one or two of those young Turks we brought back at her beck and call soon enough. Maybe already has. I think I saw Urudje walk in with one of those boys from the *Daburiyan*. And, what the devil kind of name is that for a ship anyway. You might consider yourself out of a job here."

"But, where will I stay when I'm in Rhodes, who'll keep me?"

"Djem, after our last trip, you'll be able to keep yourself. You go give Miriam a kiss, talk to her a little, she likes that from you. Then go upstairs to see the Captain. If you don't get a healthy share of the profit I'm blind and daft both."

A woman of twenty-six or seven with a curling mass of raven hair kissed Isaac on the top of his bald head and said, "You may be daft, but let me see if you're blind." Her name was Amara and I had lost my virginity to her over the winter. I had seen her twice since even though I had little money, so I believe that she was partial to my youthful and energetic efforts. She hopped up on the table beside the card players and started swaying to the rhythm of the laouto player as he strummed the flat face of his bulbous instrument. Another man with a lyra sat down beside him at the next table over and laid a warbling melody over the rhythm with his bow. Then, a third with a flat pipe that I had never seen before followed along.



Amara turned the rhythmic sway of her hips into a twirling dance as the pitch of the music rose and fell. She spun on her toes and then rapped the wooden table with her heel so that the bells around her ankles jangled with the down beat of the music. Her skirts flew up around her thighs and Ayme's head was so frequently under the whirling fabric that he looked up and blushed red as the wine. Demetrius laughed until tears ran down his craggy cheeks. The music climbed to an insistent gallop then was reduced to a rambling trot and back again. When the musicians finally gave out, Amara threw her arms over her head and dropped backwards into the arms of the sailor standing closest. He was already keeping time with his hands so her slow motion collapse gave his wine addled reactions time to respond. She planned her trajectory perfectly, though I doubt Amara ever came close to striking the floor.

Drinkers settled into their quest for Dionysus, lovers drifted off to quench their passion, and I went upstairs to talk to Urudje. He had settled himself into a cushioned armchair with his feet propped on a plain wooden stool. When I peered around the door, he pushed the stool towards me with his foot and said, "Djem, come in and sit with me."

He had never offered me a seat before, and I wasn't sure if he was playing with me or not. But he wasn't normally cruel in his jests, and it was cruel to play with me, cruel to treat me like an equal.

"I know, I know," he said, "You have seen some major changes in your life the last few days. I hoped this would come more gradually, but," he shrugged, "God has his own way with things."

I sat on the edge of the stool and he gestured to the wine and cup on the table. "Take some wine." I watched his eyes, his face muscles for any sign of that prankster's grin he got

when he was up to mischief. There was none. So I filled his cup first, then about half of a cup in front of me and sat down.

“Boy . . . no, Djem, you are evidently neither who you seem, nor who you have been brought up to believe that you are.” He held his hand up as I opened my mouth to protest. “Your work at the steering oar on the way back from Samos was acceptable for a pilot who had worked at the helm for ten years. For a cabin boy, it was genius. Even if that cabin boy watches over my shoulder all the day long, and incessantly asks questions of every member of the crew that he works with. In the past year you’ve grown past my expectations, and I am well pleased.”

There was a small bag of coin on the table and he pushed it over to me. “This is your portion of the profit. Just like any other seaman on the *Ravenna*. You are close to your sixteenth birthday, as close as I can figure, anyway. Today may indeed be your birthday, so let us celebrate today. We’ll choose this day as your birthday. When I took you from your mother, all those years ago, I thought you’d be better off with me. If you went with her, the best you could hope for was that you would not end up seated at an oar on a Venetian or Genoese galley. After you served me for a year or so, I began to love you just a little bit, like a nephew perhaps. Over the years I’ve grown very fond of your company and have watched the growth of a young man who would not remain a slave.” Urudje was a little drunk, even though he had said he would not be.

“I have come to realize that you would grow bitter towards me and possibly, eventually, slit my throat in the night.” I tried to protest again, but he just waved the cup at me and said, “Sit down, Djem. Now where was I? Oh, to keep that from happening, I’m going to let you buy your freedom.” He placed the bag of coins back in front of him. “There. Then I’m going to give you a gift for the years of service you have given me.” He waved the cup again, slurred the words just a little. “Well, I took those years from you, but look here; getting you was like fishing with a net.

I caught a gem in with all the other fish. Who am I to throw away such a gift? It became my responsibility to do the best I could for us both.” He slid the bag of coins back in front of me.

I drank from the wine at last, needing the fortification. Before I could speak, he went on.

“You may now do as any free man of the sea does. You can spend this money downstairs on wine and with the whores. Or, you can walk into the city and find your way among the shopkeepers, the merchants. I’m sure that your wits will serve you well in whatever you choose to do. Or you can stay with me and take the job of helmsman on the *Ravenna*.”

Urudje waved me out of the seat, drug the stool closer to him and put his feet back on the edge of it. “Until you make this decision I have nothing else to say to you,” and he watched me as I backed a step away from the chair.

“You mean now?” I asked.

“The offer stands for a day,” he said. “Til sunset tomorrow.”

“Urudje, I don’t want to leave, you or my friends,” I was stricken with the idea of separation from the only world I had known. “I don’t hate you and I won’t, I wouldn’t kill, not you. Not anybody here.” I hung my head and said quietly. “I don’t want to leave.”

“Ah,” he said, “But, do you want to sail for me as a free man?”

“Yes,” I said softly.

He cocked his head, “What’s that?”

“Yes, I want that more than anything else. I didn’t think it was possible. I’m your slave, and slaves don’t pilot boats.”

“You’re a slave no more to me, and no longer a boy, either. Don’t act like such a wavering weed. I want you by my side now, not at my back.”

I drew my shoulders up and tried to forget the dreams of my uncle, to focus on the captain's offer. "Why me? Why not Pero or Demetrius?"

"I'll forgive you questioning my judgment just this once Djem." He held up a single digit. I was surprised how creased and scarred it had become over the years that I had belonged to him. "From here on, you follow my orders, not because you are my slave, but because I am your captain. Before, it was my responsibility to feed and clothe you for your loyalty. Now, as your captain, I will pay you to do as I say, you owe your loyalty to yourself. Pero is a fine soldier and he handles cannon better than any man I know. That is why he is more valuable to me in the bow of the boat than the stern. The same thing is true of Demtrious. He is the best bosun I know, and we need him to be exactly that. You, however, have the makings of a great helmsman and will sail at my side on the *Ravenna*. Timo is now captain of the *Daburiyan*, though the ship itself belongs to the English knight John Kendal. For now, Timo will sail the *Daburiyan* alongside the *Ravenna*, with several Knights serving on board the galley. That means we will fight alongside Knights of Saint John, a great honor. They will come with to raid Turkish ships with us."

"That is very fine for Timo, but I shall miss him."

"Ha, you shall sail shoulder to shoulder with him. Your life as a seaman is just beginning, though you cannot see that now." Urudje took a long drink of the wine, and then said, "Talking is such thirsty work. You ask Miriam, very nicely mind you, to find you lodging here. Or, if you please, you may go elsewhere."

"No, I like it here."

"Good, then I will know right where to find you." He put his feet on the floor. "Sit down again, I need you to listen to me closely."

I returned to the stool and drew close to the table.

“Remember the carved boxes that you saw Pero opening in the hold? Yes, yes he told me you didn’t see anything, but you’re smart enough to guess that they contained something rich. Am I right?”

I nodded my head a little.

“They hold tusks of ivory from the country south of the Mamelukes and the great deserts. One of those trunks is worth more than all the wine that Turgut had on the galley. I have to sell it, but we will all be wealthy sailors once I do. Grand Master D’Aubusson wants me to lead more raids to the north and I will buy two or three more galiots to chase down Turkish ships. The *Daburiyan* has been renamed the *Isabel*, and will sail with us to legitimize our letter of mark. Not only do we have the blessing of the Knights, now we’ll have the Knights themselves. No Christian will be able to claim we are only pirates. You would be smart to keep your money close and invest it in the ships as well. Then get a nicer place to live in the winter, when we stop sailing for the storms.”

“That’s all.” And I got up to go. “Djem?” I turned. “One more thing. You need to choose a new name.”

“Urudje, I like my name well enough. What would people call me?”

“The crew named you Djem because I treated you like a Turkish prince compared with any other slave. You have heard of the Sultan’s younger son Djem?”

“Oh yes, last year I heard about him. Off warring somewhere, he has a following among the Janissaries, yes? I didn’t think it odd that we had the same name. We are, or I thought we were both Turks.”

“You certainly listen closely to the talk in town, don’t you?”

"I do. What about my name. Surely he and I can share the name. Many people do that. I like having a Turkish name, like you.

"Well, the name was a joke. You can't pilot my ship with a name that came from a joke. You are no longer one to joke about. Pick your own name. Not many Christian men get to do such a thing. Only, I think, the Pope."

## Turgut Ali

I picked up the purse and tied it to my belt. I felt lighter and heavier, all at the same time. Urudje was still watching me, eyes hooded, so I went over to the chair and said, "I will be the best helmsman you have, after Timo. Demetrious said I should tell Timo about my idea," Urudje just gazed at me with his face open. "From when we lashed the steering oar deeper in the water." No reaction, so I pivoted the flat of my hand fingers down in front of me, and explained, "With the rudder on the side of the boat."

Urudje said, "Oh yes, Timo has plenty to worry him, outfitting his galley. We'll work on the idea, you and I. But, right now I want to finish getting drunk. It relieves me that you are properly your own man. Owning a slave did not sit right with me, not here in the city and not out on the boat. I hope most of the ciurma on Timo's galley will be convicts and bankrupts from the Knight's jails, and not slaves. But that's Timo's problem. Timo and the new Turcopolier, Sir Kendall. It appears that our ship's owner and factor is also coming up in the world. But, I don't think that the Turcopolier has any slaves of his own. Hopefully he won't care for the idea either. I don't relish getting in a fight where your own ciurma might turn on you at any moment. We've used that ploy often enough ourselves. "

"Urudje, I'd like to talk to the Turk, Turgut Ali again."

"No chance you still want to kill him is there?"

"He knows my real father. I want to ask him more about my father."

"You know, that could all be pig shite; his way of making himself more valuable than the common slave he has become."

"Yes, I know he could be lying. But you don't think he is, do you?"

Urudje looked up and smiled, "You know me too well, Djem. Pick a name soon, so we can get used to it." He wave his hand again, "Now go away so I can get drunk in private." I put my hand on the door and he picked up the wine bottle to pour. "You know, there are many ways to get drunk," he said. "You probably know the way of celebration well. Everybody loves to get drunk in celebration of good fortune. Like on your birthday. Tonight, you could get drunk to celebrate your birthday and your most excellent turn of fortune. Though, I don't think that you will."

He poured his cup full, looking up at me as he did. "Maybe you know the way too, where you get drunk by accident. You start by having one drink with your friends. Then someone comes along with good fortune or bad fortune and there you are. Everyone is drunk, and nobody knows what happened but the barmaid. I'm almost too old for either one of those," and he took another drink of the wine. I could smell it now, but made no move to pick up my cup.

"But there are two other ways of getting drunk that you probably don't know of as yet. One way that begins with regret, and the other one that ends in regret. I think that this drunk that I am embarking upon is going to be the one where you want to be happy, but your soul tells you that this will not end well. A drunk of regret is the favorite of old men and I'm feeling old tonight. Go; go hear about your father. The Turk is in the common slave quarters until the Grand Master decides what is to be done with him." He waved again and poured another cup of wine. I pulled the door closed and headed for the street. I was sure that Miriam would have a place for me when I got back; I needed to walk. Walk and clear my head.

The moon rose over the city walls. It was full and pinioned atop the highest tower of the Grand Master's Palace. I meandered down the street, acting drunker than I was. The freedom of



the purse on my belt and a job that paid me to be at sea was heady. I admit that I even swaggered a bit as I walked. I was as drunk on my new found freedom as on the wine.

Moon shadows bounced from the crenelated parapets over the palace and along the sparse walls of the Inn of the English Knights. The shadows cut their serrated edges across the English shields that were carved in relief along the wall and then stepped down across the cobbles under my feet. I was not far from the Sea Gate and the common slave quarters were on the far side of the city, but I had to walk past the residences and meeting rooms of several of the different langues or nationalities of Knights.

Several times Urudje had sent me to the English Langue with a message for Sir Kendall. Their inn was just inside the Sea Gate, and south of a small shipyard where some boats were still built inside of the city walls. There were slave quarters alongside that old shipyard. Many of the shipyard workers, both carpenters and laborers, were housed there and I could only guess that if Sir Kendall was keeping the Turk, Turgut Ali, then that is where he would be. I cut between the Inn of Auvergne, its deep set doorways like giant maws gaping onto the street, and the arsenal bordering the shipyard. It was late, and the guards in the arsenal would be asleep. I crept along the back wall of the quarters and peered through the barred windows into cells strewn with straw and blankets. The moon shown through the barred gates that opened onto the shipyard, but I concealed myself along the dark alley that ran down the quarter's rear wall.

At the very end of the stone wall, through the last barred window, I saw a figure pacing alone in a cell. He reached the end of the wall and turned to continue his circuit. It looked to be the squat, round figure of Turgut Ali. I circled the building and looked into the first locked gate. I had brought a half-full bottle of the wine with me and I reached through the bars to set it on the floor.

Turgut confirmed his identity when he asked, "Who are you?" He was struggling to talk with the swollen nose.

"The son of Radu, as you said."

"Ah, the little Wallachian." He sat down at the gate and drank small sips from the bottle as I watched.

"My father then, he is really from beyond the Black Sea? He is not a Turk, such as you or a Greek?"

"Oh, no. He was taken into the Yeni-Cheri very young, from a Wallachian noble family. His brother was sent back to his kingdom when he came of age, to rule for Sultan Mehmet, but he turned against the Ottoman Empire and is now hated by both the Turks and the Hungarians whose borders he guards. Some say his soldiers fell upon an entire village of Turks where the land that he should govern for the Sultan ends. He killed the people of the village, women and children too, and put them on stakes for the mounted sipahis to see as several troops of the elite soldiers rode toward Wallachia to collect the Sultan's taxes."

"You mean young boys for the Janissaries."

The Turk shrugged, "Taxes are taxes. What is agreed upon." He held the cool bottle against the swelling in his face.

"What happened?"

"They said you could smell the dead from five miles away. Some of the corpses were fresh, some still bleeding, and covered the hills along the road for a mile or more. The sipahis were so sickened that they turned back." He scratched at his beard, thinking, then said, "Last spring I think it was, Mehmet Ghazi sent your father at the head of a division of Yeni-Cheri to teach the Christians whose land they live on."

A dog barked several times around the corner and I held up my hand to quiet Turgut. I half rose to my feet in order to move closer to the bars. When I settled back on my haunches, I laid my knife behind the leg that faced away from the cell. I motioned for Turgut to come closer, and whispered, "Quiet."

The Turk nodded and took another drink, then moved next to the bars.

"You mean to say that my father was taken from his home as a hostage of the Sultan's, but stayed with the Ottomans when he could have returned?"

Turgut shrugged, then winced, "He is Yeni-Cheri. Trained to be the finest warrior. He would not abandon his comrades."

I scoffed. "I killed two on your boat myself, and I am a boy."

"Don't be fooled. The Yeni-Cheri do not send their best to guard barrels of wine."

"So," trying to draw him into a lie, "Mehmet sent my father, this Radu, to war against his brother, my uncle, because my uncle was not paying his taxes?"

Turgut laughed quietly, enjoying the irony of it, then choked and moaned in pain. Wine dribbled down his chin as he cupped his broken nose with his fingers. He rocked for almost a minute, and then said through his hands, "Yes, that is it. Just so."

"And, my uncle killed many Turkish peasants, crucified them to scare away the Ottoman soldiers?"

Turgut slowly stuck one extended finger into the clenched fist he made with his other hand. "Impaled them. Alive."

The dream came back to me, only it overlaid my vision of Turgut this time. I was still conscious as I watched my uncle jump the stone wall, dismount with an arrow in his shoulder and turn to face the mounted Turkish soldiers. Horse's hooves pounded in my head and rows of

high hatted screaming men with European features swung arced blades as they rode through the line of my uncle's hussars, who were waiting for them, dismounted, behind a low stone wall. As the fight faded to a ghost in front of me, I asked Turgut, "What is my uncle's name?"

He held one hand to his nose again and said, "His name is the same as his father's name, Vlad. His father belonged to the 'Order of the Dragon' that was perpetuated by that butcher John Hunyadi. The order began with Emperor Sigismund, but your priests would know the infidel's history better than I. Your grandfather was a voivode; the English might call him a duke, the French a count. Your uncle, he insisted on calling himself Vlad Dracul, keeping the dragon title in his name. The last news I heard was that your uncle and Hunyadi have bad blood between them; however, your uncle still uses Sigismund's title, Dracul. They are at each other's throats as well as warring with the Ottomans. The great Sultan Mehmet Ghazi must be rubbing his hands together in glee. But who knows what is happening now. It is so far away."

I was pushing my face and chest against the corroded iron bars, listening to his mumbled speech, when the dream solidified across my vision again. The tall man in armor laid the flat of his sword along my shoulder. Then he suddenly rocked back, raised the blade, and whirled it over my head, yelling in my ear, "Kill the Turk now. I want his blood."

My left hand shot through the gate and grabbed the collar of Turgut's robe. I pulled him against the bars by throwing my weight back on my heels. He was heavy. But I caught him off guard, overbalanced as he whispered the tale to me. I closed my right hand on the dagger. Pulling myself back to the bars with my left arm, I pushed the blade into his throat. When I cut to the left his blood gushed over my hands, arms and face, over my clothes. My uncle's image smiled at me and vanished, as I released the body of Turgut Ali. He fell away from me and into the straw with a sigh, his head canted over onto his left shoulder.

Nothing else moved in the darkness of the cells, and I remained for only a second before I sprang to my feet. This uncle of mine had driven me to a grave error. If the Turkish captain's body stayed here, Urudje would know who had killed him. He would have to tell Kendall and that would be the last time I saw the pilot house of a galiot. I might have just earned myself a rowing bench and chain on the very galley I had just helped to capture. Some other bastard-son would be pouring vinegar and water down my throat, feeding me moldy bread as I ruined my back and hands on one of the great oars. Over the years, I would waste away and my body be tossed overboard with the galley's waste when I was longer able to propel the vessel.

Panicked now, I hunted in the dark for the iron bar along the wall that unlocked the barred gate of the cell. After levering up the hinged latch, I opened the gate slowly, lifting the swinging gate so the hinges wouldn't squeal. In the dark, Turgut's body would look like any bundle of laundry once it was wrapped in his robe. I tied his feet a shoulder width apart and drug him from the cell. After I turned over the bloody straw and closed the gate, I dragged his corpse south through the alleys of Rhodes. It was not uncommon for a sailor to be found murdered and abandoned in the street. Gambling debts and fights over prostitutes and a seaman's meager wages were all occasions for an unidentified foreign corpse to appear in a back alley. The graveyard on a little rise outside the Saint John Gate was dotted with the unmarked mounds of travelers and pilgrims who would never return to the land of their birth.

The shadows and maze of dark streets that led back into the Jewish Quarter provided good cover for my escape. I dragged the corpse as far as I could into the poorest section of the city, dodging the night watch by rolling the body into the sewage ditches alongside the road and then blending into a shadowed doorway. The wine wore away and fatigue drove me mad as I fought the body down dirt alleys, bumping over cobbled cross streets until I was dragging a

bloody mass, beaten beyond recognition. When I could move the corpse no farther, I left it in a ditch and went home to the inn.

Timo took me to sit in the shade of a wooden balcony braced over the alley. He held a cup of water for me to drink. It seemed as if suddenly I was his charge. He whispered to me.

“Clear your head.” He turned my head to him. “Djem, look at me. You must not say anything to this Knight that gives you away. I can see what this is, but keep it to yourself.”

Unclear of his meaning, I stared over his shoulder at the two empty water buckets, one overturned against the opposite wall of the alley. Then the night’s memories began to trickle into my mind. I nodded to Timo and he left to talk with the huge Hospitaller who shrugged and walked away. Striding back across the alley, Timo said, “Now listen to me. I have my own ship now and we all share the good fortune of the Turk’s galley. My galley. It is very convenient that the galley’s previous captain is gone now. Everyone here will see that.”

He got close to my face, “If I have to come back to pilot the *Ravenna*, I lose this chance for my own galley. Keep your mouth shut. You know nothing about the body. Understand?”

I nodded again.

When I roused Urudje later that morning, I looked into his bloodshot eyes and told him, “I would be called Vlad now. No more slave names. When you can get out of your bed, we will go kill some of the Sultan’s Turks. Only the Sultan’s, agreed?” He nodded, held his head, and I left him with his eyes little bloody slits and his mouth wide open in surprise.

November, 1501

I began this account, crowing that we rowed past Constantinople like we owned the Marmara Sea. Mehmet had loaded his armies aboard every galley that he could scrape together by the beginning of 1480. He sailed south to try to dislodge the Knights from the island of Rhodes and we slipped past the empty harbor in a stolen Turkish galley. We banged the big painted drum that was perched like a cancer on the front edge of the pilot house, and rowed straight past the city. Their blind arrogance has been the one thing that I have always counted on when I planned an encounter with the Turk. They didn't fail me then, either. I had one of the crew strut down the gangway flailing a whip at the floor for good measure. But, no one paid a bit of attention to us. We were just another galley that had been lucky enough to escape the Sultan's furious assault preparations. We sailed in one end of the straits and out the other without stopping. It was our last bit of luck, though.

Urudje had been right; the boyars wanted nothing to do with the bastard son of the very Janissary who had been sent to make them submit to Mehmet's demands. Those of the ship's crew who weren't drowned in the early winter storm on the Black Sea were murdered after they dragged themselves ashore from the wreck of what the local people clearly saw to be a Turkish galley. The only thing that I find more certain than Turkish arrogance is Christian treachery. Word of the lone Turkish galley must have followed us from one township to the next along the western coastline. Not a soul accosted us when we came ashore at night, until the storm came out of the mountains. We turned for the shore when the snow came at us sideways, but the increasing winds wailed directly in our faces. The storm held us offshore, pummeled the galley with hail and then swamped the boat with waves that seemed to come from every direction at once.

I alone survived the predations of the disbanded hussars who gathered among the rocks and waited for the galley's gasping survivors with cudgels and cleavers. They must have still smarted from the last attack by my father's Janissaries and the crop of young Wallachian lads that the Ottoman soldiers made off with to swell their ranks. When I swam ashore after the shipwreck, my memory of past events began to fade. It was only when I began to write the story of my past that I remembered the early events of my life. They have led me to the recent past, but the shipwreck and everything within sight of my grandfather's homeland is still a blur. I wandered north through the snow covered forest and followed a vague recollection of the direction of the castle from my uncle's subdued presence. It seemed that once I was in Wallachia, he could not have cared less how I fared.

I only know how long I have been in my uncle's castle by the increasing age of Viordec's sons and daughter. As they grew in stature, I left the castle for weeks at a time to ride the forest roads of the southern border. I always returned bloodied, my hair and clothes laced with twigs and pine needles. Rumors spread to me, through Viordec, of a wraith that dispatched Turkish soldiers in border towns who were loyal to Mehmet's son Beyezid. I have no memories of these journeys, but my body shows the scars upon my return and spends as long as a month to heal, to recover its strength. During these recovery periods I lay in a daze for hours at a time, eat some food and then fall back into a dreamless swoon. Several years ago, I'm not fully aware of how many; I dreamed that I had a son. I can't tell you how I know this, other than that I pictured him in my mind in the same manner that I used to see my uncle Vlad.

He is Amara's boy and makes his living on the water in Rhodes. I believe that he grew up fishing, but joined with a ship of corsairs who preyed on Turkish shipping in the north. I can see the familiar islands of the Aegean through his eyes on the foredeck. The galley's striped



triangular sails and red banners with white crosses only appear in his eyes when he turns to answer his instructions from the Knight at the helm. It appears that the Hospitallers have developed more of a taste for the open sea; now they captain their own raiding ships. My son, he loads two cannons that are twice the size of the ones Pero manned. We revel together in the mayhem he creates when he touches them off. He inhales the sulfurous smoke and watches the flying debris for a split second before he ducks under the bow shields to brace for the prow's impact with their quarry. Splinters and body parts leap into the air, and then all I see are his hairy knees pressed to his nose as he waits for the thunder of a return volley and the grind of the bowsprit as it grates across the deck of another ship.

I called out to him one day last year. He was absorbed in watching the spray from the bow wave; just as I have a thousand times before. He looked back into the galley, as if a shipmate had called to him, but no one was looking his way. I have come to him in his dreams with more frequency of late. The excitement of a fight draws me to him. With time I have learned that I can rise overhead and watch the fight from a distance. Tell him when he is in danger. He is developing quite a reputation for his skill in the fight, and I have been able to keep him unscathed. It is unsettling when he shouts out loud to me as he wields his sword, unlike anything I ever did with my uncle. But men follow him across the gunnels in a fight, and I am sure that he will have his own galiot in time. Then I will call him to me. Then, he will rule where I could not. And he will carry on the legacy of the Dragon.

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