

TOWER OF WINGS

SEAN MCMULLEN

Baron Raimond arrived at the Tower of Wings with his army on the morning of the last day of June in 1303. The summer solstice was not long past, and the weather was clear, warm and windless. The village near the tower was subdued and occupied so very quickly that there were no casualties on either side, but a runner reached the tower long before Raimond's men had any chance of mounting a surprise attack. Lady Angela herself stood listening as the exhausted peasant gasped out his warning for a second time.

'English, strong force, dozens, dozens, dozens,' he panted as he lay against a stack of barrels. 'English, under Raimond.'

Lady Angela wore a fur-trimmed mantle over a kirtle and girdle, with an open veil over her parted, plaited and rolled black hair, and there could not have been a greater contrast than with the armoured fighting men milling around her, yet she was their leader.

'I ordered the drawbridge raised and all archers to the walls as soon as he came through the gate,' reported the seneschal. 'You can see them from the bailey wall. The tower is surrounded. I estimate three thousand English, and they are already clearing ground for a camp about three hundred yards to the south.'

They climbed the steps to the bailey wall, and looked out over the fields to where the English were at work clearing bushes and erecting tents.

'The sun will be behind them for much of the day,' commented Lady Angela, 'and they are well outside the effective range of our archers.'

'Indeed, my lady, the baron is a brave and clever warrior.'

'And he can read and write. He read all of my books as we nursed him back to health here two summers ago.'

'Now see how he repays your kindness.'

'I expected nothing else. It is the way of the world.'

The seneschal never ceased to be amazed by Lady Angela's grasp of matters that other women paid no heed. She spoke eleven languages, had ruled the Tower of Wings and its estates since she was nineteen, and had led her people through two sieges. She had also written four books, on mathematics, medicinal plants, the principles of levers, and the way that birds fly. At the top of the Tower of Wings she had a pigeon coop, and she spent many hours sitting at the windows watching her birds soar and circle about the tower and sketching them on slate and parchment. Sometimes, however, the birds that circled the tower were devices of red silk and slivers of wicker. There had been mutterings of witchcraft by peasants, churchmen and nobles alike.

'The baron read your book on wings and flight as he lay regaining his strength,' the seneschal pointed out. 'He must have denounced you to the English king as a witch, using your work as an excuse to mount this attack.'

'If not he, then someone else,' replied Lady Angela.

* * * *

Baron Raimond and his master engineer Wat paced a stretch of hard, flat ground some two hundred yards from the curtain wall of the Tower of Wings. Two of his knights stood watch as they walked, but no arrows were fired from the fortress.

'A good surface for your great machine, lordship, and an ideal distance from the walls,' declared Wat. 'Just beyond the range of their archers, yet just within the useful limit of a trebuchet.'

Raimond gazed at the fortress, his arms folded and his expression grim. There was a moat encircling the curtain wall, and at the very centre was a single, slender, elegant tower that was said to be the tallest in Scotland, England or Wales. In the summer of 1301 he had spent two months there after being found wounded and fevered in the nearby forest. Lady Angela had been twenty-eight years of age then. She had treated him with oils and philters of her own devising, some brewed from herbs and plants collected in the fields nearby, and other ointments brought from as far distant as the Holy Land, Africa, and even legendary Cathay. They had cooled his fever, drawn the angry scarlet blush from his wounds, and restored his strength.

'What say you, lordship, is she indeed a witch?' asked Wat.

'The bishops say as much,' replied the baron. 'She builds fearful machines and studies forbidden arts.'

'The machine that we are about to build is fearful,' replied Wat, rubbing his neck. 'In a single afternoon it can bring down castle walls that took a dozen years to build.'

'Ah, but my siege machine will do the work of Edward Longshanks. He is a Christian monarch with the blessing of the church, and the church is not anxious to offend Edward. Thus I cannot possibly be in league with Satan by building such a machine.'

Wat opened his mouth to reply, yet his mind still wrestled with the convolutions of Raimond's words. He closed his mouth again, frowning with concentration, and finally scratched his head. Raimond laughed.

'It is a way with words and facts called logic. The Moors learned it from the writings of the ancient Greeks, and I learned it from Alren.'

'The Moor friend of yours? He'll bring you no good, lordship.'

'He just might bring me the Tower of Wings, that I may give it over to my king. Alren is within the tower now.'

Spying on Lady Angela, lordship?

'One might say that. Order the peasants to clear this ground and commence felling timber in the forest.'

* * * *

At the top of the Tower of Wings Lady Angela stood beside her pigeon coop, her wheat-filled hand smothered in hungry, flapping, jostling birds. Nearby, her Moorish guest leaned on the southern battlements and gazed across at a second encampment that was being built by the English invaders. Guards had been posted to patrol the perimeter, tents were up, latrine pits were being dug, and carpenters were building hoardings to guard against the best of Lady Angela's archers. The thud of axes echoed faintly to them, followed by the sound of trees falling.

'The English are felling oak trees,' said Alren.

'I have been counting the number of axe blows for each tree,' replied Lady Angela. 'They are very big trees. Not the sort that one cuts for firewood.'

'Ah, well observed excellent lady. What are we to conclude from this?'

'They are building a siege engine. Baron Raimond is an expert on siege engines, and he means to take this tower.'

'Ah, admirable. Just as I would deduce. The conventional wisdom would be to have your men issue forth and destroy the device when it is near completion.'

'I have five knights, nine dozen archers, twice as many men at arms, and five hundred peasants with pikes. My estimate is that the baron has three thousand veterans and as many peasants and artisans again to support them. We cannot do anything against odds like that, we must let the walls fight for us.'

'The walls are but frail allies, excellent lady. A well fashioned trebuchet could have them breached within a day.'

'I could design a trebuchet that would fling stone back at theirs,' said Lady Angela listlessly. 'We have stores of timber within the walls.'

'Ah, then you shall do so?'

'No. Nearly all of our carpenters were living in the village while the bridge across the river was being rebuilt. We only have two carpenters in here. Baron Raimond has perhaps sixty, from what I can see. His engine will be ready to fling stone within a week or so. I could not hope to have one finished within a month.'

'Sad but true, my excellent lady. What will happen when the walls come down?'

'King Edward wants this tower taken, Baron Raimond wants the king's favour, and many in the church want me burned as a witch. When the first stone ball smashes into the curtain wall, my seneschal will surrender the tower and beg clemency from Baron Raimond for all of you.'

'Us, most excellent lady? But what of yourself?'

'I shall join my birds.'

* * * *

Baron Raimond walked the length of the ground that his peasants were clearing, placing marker stakes at measured intervals. Wat walked beside him, watching and assessing. The rectangular oak base of the great trebuchet was already complete, and the carpenters were attaching four wheels, each half the height of a man.

'As these markers are placed, lordship, you will miss the outer wall of the tower by twenty yards,' Wat pointed out.

'Good, and we shall use that cart as a target,' said the baron, pointing to an abandoned ox cart near the moat.

He folded his arms behind his back and stared at the Tower of Wings.

'T'would be a pity to damage such a beautiful tower,' said Wat following his gaze.

'Yet the tower must be taken.'

'It's said you once courted Lady Angela,' ventured Wat. 'Did you not journey to France and win a tournament in her name?'

'I won three tournaments in her name.'

'Oh bravely done, lordship!'

'She did not even reply to my letters,' sighed Raimond, shaking his head.

'But most ladies are greatly impressed by deeds of arms, lordship.'

'Not Lady Angela. Her neglect, her coldness rendered me ill and angry.'

'Perchance she neglects all men thus.'

'No, this lady is impressed only by scholarship. When travelling through Oxford in 1292 she met an elderly friar, a great scholar named Roger Bacon. He moved her far more than the bravest, most chivalrous knight could have. He filled her head with dreams of what he called 'engines for flying', and also with disrespect for authority in general and the church in particular. Alas, I can read and write, but I am no scholar and I cannot even compete with an old friar who is a decade dead. Thus here I am with a siege engine, determined to secure her attention by other means.'

* * * *

Corf and Guy inspected the twelve sandstone blocks that had been placed in neat rows before their tents. Each weighed about four hundred pounds.

'Fine, hard stone,' said Guy.

'Nothing but the best for the baron,' agreed Corf.

'Stone te punch a hole through the most mighty of castle walls.'

'Castles is on the way out. Soon there'll be none.'

'Then how's te keep the peace?' asked Guy, scratching his head.

'Standin' armies. Castle walls makes a prince lazy, walls need no bread or shelter. Make a wall with men, though, and he must keep grain in barns an' gold in coffers. That means wise rule an' hard work.'

'Baron Raimond has a castle.'

'Aye, but he don't *need* a castle.'

They both looked across at the Tower of Wings that stood tall and slender above the summer-green fields. Pigeons lazily circled the summit, and smoke from kitchen fires rose from behind the walls that encircled its base. A hundred feet away, the baron squatted down, lifted a quarterstaff weighted with stone blocks, stood up, raised the weight above his head, then squatted and set it down again. After thirty repetitions he paused to rest, and Wat handed him a drinking horn.

'What's bein' done?' whispered Corf.

'He means te be stronger,' replied Guy.

'Surely his muscles be big enough as is?'

'Seems not.'

'Aye. A brave man, he be.'

'Well, time te get workin'.'

They sat before a sandstone block each and began to chisel. By the time Wat came past to inspect their progress, two stone balls of three hundred pounds sat amid chips and rubble, and the masons were hard at work on the next two blocks.

* * * *

Three days after Raimond arrived a team of oxen approached, drawing a long pine trunk lashed to five carts. Wat inspected the trunk carefully. It was two feet in diameter, quite straight and virtually without flaw. Having accepted it, Wat had four support frames built beneath the beam and the carts removed. Twenty carpenters, each with an adze, stripped away the bark, then began to chop through the pale, moist wood. By evening the trunk had been fashioned into an octagonal beam.

Wat took a knotted cord and charcoal, measured two points near the base, then called over a master carpenter.

‘Bring an auger, pierce here and here,’ said Wat. ‘By morning I want the axles for the frame and counterweight to be fitted.’

‘We’s te work in torchlight?’ asked the carpenter. ‘Why’s the hurry, m’lord? Working by daylight we’ll be done on the morrow.’

‘Without a doubt the lady within the Tower of Wings will be building her own trebuchet. We must finish first.’

‘A woman can build but a poor device, m’lord. She has no skill, no experience, no art.’

‘The woman who commands the Tower of Wings is also mistress of mechanics, mathematics, and flight through air. Should she complete a device such as this, she could most certainly cast stones with such refinement that our own engine would be smashed to splinters, along with not a few carpenters such as ourselves.’

By morning the holes had been bored and reamed out, just as the heavy wooden axles came off the treadle lathes. Under clear blue skies the peasants finished digging a saw pit, and soon the oak beams were being shaped from the raw logs by teams of peasants and carpenters working in shifts, while carpenters shaped the wooden pins, handles, axles and struts.

* * * *

Lady Angela knelt on the floor of her chamber at the top of the tower, carefully placing an acorn in a silk sling. Working a tiny ratchet she wound down the throwing arm of a trebuchet just twenty inches high. Alren stood watching from the other side of the room. He was dressed as an English noble in a tabard surcote, but with Moorish headwear.

‘The secret of a good trebuchet is that it should be adjustable,’ Lady Angela explained without looking up. ‘It must be on wheels, so that the rough alignment is easy to change and casting leverage is optimised. Fine adjustment can be made by pushing the shot race a little to either side. The real elegance of the design is in the counterweight box, however.’

‘It is identical to the engine that is being erected two hundred yards beyond the tower walls,’ observed the Moor.

‘The counterweight swings on the short end of the catapult arm, which is raised up as the arm is wound down. The weight of the stones in the box are the muscle that drives that mighty arm and flings the stone shot. The descending weight drags the machine forward a little, too, adding power to the cast. Add a few stones and it fires further. Take some away and it fires shorter. Nothing could be simpler, it is a marvel of good design, just like my beautiful pigeons.’

‘Excellent lady, this marvel of good design is being raised to smash down your tower. Surely that must make it as ugly as a demon’s frown.’

‘How so? Is a hawk ugly because it kills pigeons? Is a cat ugly because it kills mice?’

‘Your words are full with embroidery, excellent lady, but need I remind you that the Tower of Wings is now in the position of a mouse or pigeon?’

‘Life is short, dangerous and ugly, Alren, and then we die.’

‘Yes, and generally in pain.’

‘Indeed. I could die with my throat slashed open by a peasant’s knife, or I could die as a stone ball from Raimond’s trebuchet smashes into the Tower of Wings.’

‘More likely it will smash a hole in the curtain wall, his men will swarm in, and you will be captured.’

‘And burned as a witch.’

‘Excellent lady, you fashion things of silk and wicker that fly like birds, yet are not alive. It is considered that a noblewoman of your standing ought to be at embroidery or the harp, not ruling a fortified tower and commanding a thousand fighting men, and certainly not mocking the flight of angels.’

Lady Angela shrugged, but did not look up from her model. ‘My impiety is well known. What opinion do you harbour, Alren? What should I should do?’

‘Excellent Lady, I am a Moor. It is not my place to venture such an opinion.’

‘But it is *my* place to ask. This is my tower and you are my guest.’

‘I ... wish that you should meet a man who is ... worthy of you. Your peer, perhaps even your better. A soul mate who understands you, some lord who would charm you rather than rule you.’

‘Does such a man exist, wise and impartial Moorish scholar?’

‘Each day I pray for Allah to make it so, excellent lady.’

She looked up at last, gesturing to a window. Alren walked across and looked out.

‘Look down on the bailey wall’s battlements. You should see an archer sitting at rest, eating bread and cheese. Beside him is a bowl of soup.’

Alren looked down, then glanced back in time to see Lady Angela pull on the model’s release cord. The counterweight box full of stones and sand dropped, hauling the throwing arm down. The sling arced around and slipped open, flinging the acorn past Alren’s nose and through the window. A moment later it splashed into the archer’s soup. The man cried out, then cursed. He glanced about, looking for whoever nearby was snickering. Seeing nothing suspicious, he removed his helmet and scratched his head.

‘That was quite masterful accuracy,’ said Alren, genuinely awestruck.

‘It was mathematical accuracy,’ replied Angela.

She stood, went to a large chest and opened it. She drew out a bundle of green silk cloth and cords.

‘Alren, last year, on your second visit to this tower you told me a story. One hundred and

forty one years ago, in Constantinople, a Turk fashioned white sail-wings with many pleats and foldings, and stiffened by willow wands. Wearing these sail-wings, he leaped from a very high tower.'

'Excellent lady, he also plunged straight to the base of the tower, broke many bones and died in agony. My great grandfather was there.'

'And his description of the sail-wings was passed down to you, who passed it to me. I have considered the matter, and have refined the design. A human body may now fall in safety from a great height with a device such as this model.'

She held up a triangle of grass-green silk about half a yard on a side with strings attached to each corner. A tiny harness of leather hung from the strings, but one string was shorter than the other two.

'It looks like a little cape,' said Alren. 'What is it?'

'It has no name, but by its use one may leap from a great height yet plunge through the air in safety. Perhaps I shall call it a plunge cape.'

Now she lifted a mouse from its box and held it up to her face.

'Hullo Archimedes, do you realise that barbarians are about to break into our home?' she said to the tiny, whiskered face. 'You know what happened to the first Archimedes, do you not?'

'A Roman soldier killed him as he sat contemplating geometry,' said Alren on behalf of the mouse.

'We cannot have you sharing his fate, Archimedes, but never fear. The plunge cape will carry you to safety.'

She went to the window and sat on the sill. Deftly she strapped the mouse into the little harness.

'Come now, and watch,' she said to Alren. 'The harness is designed so that Archimedes is held only while his weight is unsupported. On the ground, he can struggle clear in a thrice.'

Lady Angela released the mouse and its plunge cape. It dropped sharply at first, then flew outwards in a long, shallow curve, about as fast as a pigeon soaring. The Moor cried out with surprise.

'A mouse, flying!'

'Given enough silk, pigs could fly as well,' Lady Angela laughed.

Archimedes floated over the bailey wall, then the curtain wall and moat. Several men shouted and pointed, but no archer shot at the aeronaut mouse. All archers in the Tower of Wings were forbidden to shoot at anything that could fly. In the fields just beyond the moat the silken triangle collapsed into the grass.

'Goodbye little friend,' said Angela sadly. 'At least one of us shall survive the siege.'

'That was quite wonderous,' began Alren.

'But not witchcraft. I have nearly finished a much bigger plunge cape.'

Alren went to the chest and looked down into it, his hands on his hips. It was filled with green silk and fine cords.

'Do you mean to escape like the mouse?'

'On the day that the walls are breached, I intend to strap on my plunge cape and attempt to fly.'

'Excellent lady, you may be killed!' Alren exclaimed. 'A mouse flying is all very well, but your weight is more than a thousand times greater.'

'Men have flown before. Nearly three hundred years ago the Benedictine monk Elmer of Malmsbury leaped from a church tower wearing wings and flew six hundred feet.'

'And broke both of his legs!'

'But lived. Four hundred and fifty years ago the Moor Armen Firman of Cordoba flew too. His canvas wings took him in a great circle, so that he came down safely at the base of the tower from which he leaped. His countryman Ibn Firnas performed a similar feat two decades later.'

'And crashed. Excellent lady, we have no detailed description of their wings, or those of Elmer of Malmsbury.'

'But I *may* fly. God will be my judge, and I shall be innocent of both witchcraft *and* suicide.'

'But to what end? The mouse can hide in the grass, but you would have to fly many miles to escape Raimond's men. Can you do any better than the mouse?'

'No, I shall probably land in the moat. When I am seized by Raimond's men I shall be covered with green slime and smelly mud.'

'It will achieve nothing!'

'Oh no, I might become the first woman to fly.'

Alren waved his hand dismissively. 'Not so. Witches fly, through forbidden arts.'

Lady Angela sneered. 'Because you are a Moor and beyond the trust of Christian magistrates, I suppose I can confide in you. I have disguised myself and kept company with witches on occasion. They make a paste of aconite, belladonna and hemlock then rub it between their thighs, upon their most intimate parts. I followed them as they ran through fields with brush brooms between their legs, all in a delirium from the poisons and shrieking that they were in flight, but I saw that they were merely deluded.'

'Your scepticism shines in the darkness as bright as the morning star, excellent lady. Why

do you then place so much faith in your plunge cape?’

‘So that I might become the first woman to fly before I am burned as a witch, and that is surely an achievement. If my plunge cape fails when I jump from the tower, I shall die anyway. What would be your choice?’

‘Were I a beautiful, clever and wily Christian woman, I ... I would throw myself on the mercy of Baron Raimond, and the bishops of your Christian church.’

‘Which is no less dangerous than throwing myself from the tower wearing my plunge cape. Learned Moor, when I die I shall die attempting flight or I shall die having flown. My name is Angela: who ever heard of an angel without wings and what are wings if not to fly with? In secret, in the depths of my heart, I am grateful to Baron Raimond. He has forced me to put my life behind my postulations and theories.’

* * * *

By the end of the first week of the siege the peasants of the surrounding countryside had realised that the invaders were disciplined and well behaved, and were intent only on taking the Tower of Wings. They returned to their work, some men shearing or rooing the sheep in the shade of the trees, while their wives and daughters rolled and stored the fleeces. Others cut hay in the fields, hastening to have it mown down before the sap had left it, while some beat and combed flax into long, silky strands. Raimond’s men watched for any signs of rebellion, particularly among those wielding the scythes, but otherwise left them alone. The skies continued to be clear, and the weather warm.

On the seventh day of the siege the mighty trestles to support the throwing arm’s axle were hauled erect onto the wheeled base of the rapidly forming siege engine and pinned in place. Using scaffolding, ropes and pulleys, the throwing arm and its axle were raised to the top of the trestles in the afternoon of the same day. The light of the following dawn saw carpenters securing the clamps and bands that would hold the axle firm. By then Baron Raimond had a very important guest, but a guest who was in disguise and meant to be elsewhere.

‘The engine now has much of the shape of a weapon,’ observed Edward Longshanks as he and Raimond circled it.

‘All the other parts are complete, including yonder counterweight box,’ replied the baron. ‘By the end of this day its assembly will be at an end.’

‘Does this mean that I may see a stone cast should I stay a day longer?’

‘Sire, should you stay a day longer you will see the tower surrender, undamaged.’

The king beamed with delight, then frowned. ‘Undamaged?’ he asked suspiciously.

‘Observe that long, inclined ramp behind the trebuchet. That is for my new and clever missile.’

‘Ah yes, a huge and fearsome missile that your Moorish friend Alren has built for you.’

‘You know of it, sire?’

'You have often sent Alren to spy within the Tower of Wings, and I have often sent my own spies to observe your own works and loyalty.'

'I trust they spoke well of me, sire.'

'In truth, they did not understand much of what they saw but they were satisfied that you are loyal. I shall wait for another day. Where is your Moor's wondrous missile?'

'Behind the ramp, beneath tentcloth, sire. Does our agreement still hold firm?'

'When the Tower of Wings is delivered into my hands, you may do as you will with the strange, haughty and irreverent Lady Angela. As for Alren, however ... I am uneasy with trusting the work of a Moor.'

'We have great need of his skills, experience and mathematical learning, sire. Does the faith within his heart really matter if the castles of Scotland are laid open to you?'

'I suppose not.'

* * * *

From a window in the tower Lady Angela saw newcomers arrive. There were at least two dozen riders and six pack horses. They appeared to be neither Scots nor allies of Raimond. Presently the seneschal arrived, panting from his long dash up the steps of the tower.

'Sir Philip of Nottingham has arrived to fight in your name, my lady,' he announced.

'Fight? Two dozen against three thousand?'

'Fight, as in trial by combat. Sir Phillip challenges on your behalf, and Baron Raimond has accepted the challenge. A messenger from the baron asks if they may have a truce to fight before the tower.'

'Tell Raimond's messenger that my answer will arrive presently, then send him back.'

* * * *

Baron Raimond had no sooner spoken to the messenger when Wat cried out and pointed to the tower. A large bird, with wings the span of an eagle's had left the top of the tower and was flying in their direction. They all watched as it approached, slowly descending in the calm, warm air. It was bright green, and he soon realised that it was little more than a stick between wings.

'Bring it down!' barked Raimond to the archers nearby, and half a dozen arrows shot skyward. Two struck the silk and wicker bird and it tumbled to the ground, landing only feet from Baron Raimond and Sir Philip. It was just a pole between two silk and wicker wings, with a fan of feathers tied to one end.

'That thing flew further than an archer can shoot,' whispered the disguised king to Sir Philip as they watched the baron stride over to the device.

'It has the look of a broomstick with wings,' observed the somewhat unsettled Philip.

'Do witches fly on broomsticks, then?' asked the king.

The baron examined the broken model, then stood up and held a scrap of parchment high for Philip and Edward to see.

'It seems we are welcome to fight within Lady Angela's view,' called Raimond.

'Do you truly believe her innocent after seeing *that*?' Edward asked Philip.

'Oh no, but I truly believe her to deserve mercy,' replied Sir Philip firmly. 'My victory in trial by combat will show that God's will is that she should be spared and put into my custody.'

'To become your bride?'

'Each day, each hour, I pray as much.'

* * * *

Work on the trebuchet went ahead without interruption while preparations for the trial by combat were made. Baron Raimond and Sir Philip confessed themselves to a priest, heard mass, and began to get into their armour. This consisted of a full suit of mail over a heavily padded aketon, an iron pot helm, and one of the new breastplates that were becoming increasingly common. All of this was covered by a brightly coloured surcoat. At either end of a measured stretch of level ground they mounted their warhorses, and were handed their shields and lances.

'Most worthy lordship, I must again advise against the use of this strange, heavy African wood,' said Wat quietly as he stood waiting with Raimond's lance. 'It weighs too heavily, yet may shatter more readily than English timbers for all of that.'

'I shall be the judge of my own weapons,' replied Raimond from within the confines of his helm.

To Wat's trained eye the weight of the lance in Raimond's hand stood out like a bright pennant on a battlefield, and the eyes of those watching from Sir Philip's party were no less well trained. Wat watched them conferring, probably speculating about the nature of the weight of his master's lance and the way it might be deflected. At last both combatants were ready. Both glanced to the windows of the tower as the trumpets sounded a fanfare.

* * * *

Lady Angela gazed down at the distant spectacle, carefully stitching red silk over a piece of wicker the length of a quarterstaff. Beside her, a maidservant was forcing a heavy needle through the leather straps of a harness, under instruction from Alren.

'To support my weight in the most ideal of modes, two additional straps should go between my legs,' said Angela without looking away from the distant combatants.

'My lady, that would be most gross and unseemly,' protested the woman, shocked at the mere suggestion.

'I could wear trousers, such as men do.'

'You would be condemned as a wanton.'

'Is this worse than being condemned as a witch?'

The woman frowned down at her work.

'Excellent lady, I feel as if we are preparing your funeral shroud,' said Alren.

'You have little faith in my former suitor, Sir Philip. He has a strong sword arm.'

'He would have made a fine and valiant husband. Why did you spurn his advances?'

'Have you ever met him?'

'No, but -' he began, but Angela held a finger to her lips.

'Hush! Raimond's trumpets announce my fate.'

Both riders hunched behind their shields and urged their mounts into motion. As cheers and the drumming of hooves reached the Tower of Wings, Lady Angela stopped sewing and held her breath. The stallions closed, the lances came down, and there was a sharp, splintering crash. Fragments and fittings flew through the air as Sir Philip was knocked from his saddle. He fell heavily to the ground, rolled and tumbled, but then got to his feet. A great cheer went up from the baron's men. As the baron came around in a circle Philip tried to draw his sword. The baron dropped his broken lance and dismounted. He stood ready, sword and shield raised. Philip tried to draw his sword again, but was unable to. Now Lady Angela realised that Philip's sword arm had been broken in the fall.

It was quickly obvious that Sir Philip could fight no more that day. He was put on a litter and carried away to the tents of Baron Raimond's camp. Raimond walked across to speak with his marshal.

'Raimond is victorious,' said Angela as she returned to her sewing.

'Such a brave and valiant effort,' said the maidservant, tears streaming from her eyes.

'Were one tenth of the effort put into jousting to be put instead into the study of birds and wings, why within a hundred years we would be flying in preference to riding horses.'

'My lady, how can you say such a thing? Sir Philip risked his life to save yours.'

'Sir Philip risked *his* life? For *me*? Merciful God, does nobody ever stop to ask what *I* want? Whether *I* would like to risk *my* life?'

'You already risk your life, my lady, studying dark and disturbing arts as you do.'

'Enough!' barked Angela, standing and pointing to the door. 'Get out!'

When the maidservant had gone Alren picked up the harness and began forcing the needle through the leather.

‘She was right, excellent lady,’ he said as he worked. ‘You risk being tied to a stake and set a-fire.’

‘There are other risks, exhilarating risks. Imagine this, imagine fifty spirited horses in a single team, thundering down a long, straight beach at low tide. They are pulling a cart and on that cart is a flight engine, not merely a yard from wingtip to wingtip but *fifteen* yards. Upon the back of the giant flight engine is strapped my very self.’

‘A grand scheme, most excellent lady,’ said Alren, looking up but seemingly not surprised.

‘As the speed increases the flight engine rises high into the air. I work a lever and drop the tether rope, I fly free, working the attitude of the wingtips with cords attached to my feet. I soar out over the water, I fly back over the land. I fly in circles, then I come gently down to the wet sand, sliding to a stop on a skid of springy wickerwork.’

‘Armen Firman has already proved that such flight is possible, excellent lady.’

‘Indeed, but inefficiently, with mere wings. Fifty years ago a colleague of the great Friar Bacon postulated a flight *chariot*, with flapping wings. He even built one, and tested it from a high cliff.’

‘Did it fly?’

‘Straight down.’

Alren said ‘Ah’, then looked back to his sewing.

‘I have studied all aspects of flight, Alren. Humans *can* fly and live to tell of it, Armen Firman and Elmer of Malmesbury proved that. Humans are too weak to flap wings as birds do, however, Friar Bacon’s friend died proving that fifty years ago.’

‘So did al-Djawhari of Nisabur, three hundred years ago.’

‘Yet birds may soar by merely holding their wings in a shallow v-shape, and my silk and wicker models fly equally well,’ insisted Angela, blazing with enthusiasm. ‘Models prove that machines can fly. Friar Bacon’s colleague was almost right. A flight chariot can be built to soar like a bird with its wings held in a v-shape, something that can *carry* a human. Just consider, a man cannot ride a goat because he is too heavy -’

‘But a man can ride in a cart pulled by a goat,’ said Alren, closing his eyes and wearily putting a hand to his forehead. ‘A man cannot wear wings big enough to support his weight, but he can fly within a flight *engine*, that has sufficiently big wings.’

Angela stared at the Moor, her eyes shining.

‘That is from my book,’ she commented.

‘That is where I read it. Your reasoning is without fault. Dangerous perhaps, but without

fault.'

Angela gestured to her own sewing.

'I have been slowly building just such a flight engine for a month past. What I am sewing just now is the left wingtip, ah, but I shall have to abandon it now. In a year it would have been finished, then fly I most certainly would have.'

'And died, perhaps.'

'Sir Philip and Baron Raimond ventured into the borderlands of death when they dueled, but nevertheless returned.'

'Have you no gratitude to Philip?' admonished Alren.

'No more than his late wife had.'

'What do you mean?'

'Sir Philip believes that pain drives out evil. He has himself whipped every day by a well-muscled young squire. He used to whip his wife before he went a-bed with her, so that the evils of lust and passion would be driven out of her before the holy act of procreation. One night he apparently purged the evil from her rather too enthusiastically. She died, yet the church praised Philip as a pious and holy man, and did not punish him. You can imagine what would happen to me if I were to become his wife.'

Alren shook her head.

'Had Sir Philip won, you might have felt differently.'

'Had he won I would have kept the drawbridge up. Wherever I turn, death awaits me.'

'What of Raimond?'

'Raimond is brave and clever, but misguided. When he courted me, he tried to impress me with martial victories, not comprehending that a short, scholarly tract on the nature of feathers would impress me more. The man wastes himself on wars and tournaments - and sieges. Alren, Alren, tomorrow I shall die and there is nothing more certain. As soon as the first stone ball from Baron Raimond's trebuchet smashes into my tower's walls, I shall order the gates open, the barbican's drawbridge lowered, and all arms laid down. Then I shall leap from the top of the Tower of Wings wearing my plunge cape. It is but a poor substitute for a full-sized flight engine, but it is all that I have.'

'It may very well not work, excellent lady.'

'In that case, death by falling from a great height is a great deal quicker and less painful than death by being burned alive. Before that I shall burn my books before the bishops get the chance.'

'Why, excellent lady?'

'Sheer spite.'

'Excellent lady, I wish I could help.'

Quite suddenly Angela knelt down, put a hand beneath his chin and kissed him upon the lips. Alren gasped and pulled away, dropping the almost completed harness.

'Excellent lady, this is not seemly!' he exclaimed. 'Your honour would be tarnished.'

Angela sat back and hung her head, staring at the rug on the floor.

'Of all the men in my life, why is it that only an elderly, dying friar and a pious but heathen Moor have been able to win my regard?'

Alren clasped his hands and shook his head miserably.

'I cannot say.'

'Alren, tomorrow I shall die. Should you wish it that I not die a virgin, you alone may visit my bedchamber tonight.'

'I - I wish it, excellent lady, but honour forbids it.'

Angela sighed, rested her elbows on her knees and her chin on her clasped hands. A tear ran down one cheek.

'Is there indeed anything I can do for you? Being a Moor, you may be treated badly when the tower falls, but you can escape tonight. My people can get you over the walls and across the moat. After that the villagers will hide you.'

'It is you who should flee, excellent lady.'

'No, if I escaped the English would begin to slaughter those in the tower until I returned,' she sniffled, tears now on both cheeks. 'Nobody will know about you.'

'Excellent lady, may I take your books?'

'My books?' she asked, looking up.

'Raimond and the bishops will surely use them against you, then burn them anyway. I shall take them back to Spain so that at least Moorish scholars may remember you.'

Angela stood up. 'Then take them and go, and take my blessing too. I shall make the arrangements for your departure.'

* * * *

Baron Raimond was roused an hour before dawn, and Alren was shown into his tent. The Moor had a pack on his back, and was dressed as a peddler.

'I expected you earlier,' said Raimond.

'I had to secure her books,' replied the Moor. 'It was not easy.'

Raimond watched as Alren unpacked Angela's life's work. He flicked through the pages by lamplight.

'It is as I remember,' said Raimond. 'Enough to send the bishops reaching for the brushwood and firebrands.'

'I am glad to be away from her,' sighed Alren. 'For a year I have been in her confidence. I have been her friend, welcomed every time I have visited the Tower of Wings to study her writings. The strain of deception has been heavy upon my conscience.'

'And I am grateful for your trouble, my loyal and faithful conspirator.'

* * * *

The throwing arm of the trebuchet stood almost vertical, towering over Raimond's camp as Wat inspected it in the cool morning air. Satisfied, he nodded to the trebuchet captain who gave an order.

A dozen men pushed at the levers of the trebuchet's windlass. The ratchet clacked rapidly at first, but as the arm began to depart further from the vertical the work became harder. After ten minutes the heavy box of stones that was the counterweight had risen several feet, and the throwing arm was horizontal. Wat paced around the huge, wooden machine again.

'No cracks, no warping,' the captain declared proudly.

'There had better not be,' Wat replied.

'Where is the baron? I had thought that he would want to command this engine himself.'

'The baron is busy elsewhere, there is more to breaching a castle than smashing the walls. You have been named to carry out his instructions.'

The team continued to wind. Within another ten minutes the throwing arm's head was nearly touching the ground. A sling containing one of the stone balls was hooked to the arm, then a rope was tied to the release catch. This rope was handed to the captain as trumpets blared a fanfare. The captain gave the rope to a team of peasants.

'Clear the surrounds,' ordered Wat.

The men of the windlass team hurried to one side. Everyone else was already clear.

'At your word,' said Wat to the captain.

'Have the trumpets sound a warning.'

The trumpets brayed another brief fanfare. The captain raised his hand, then brought it down sharply. The team of peasants hauled at the rope attached to the release pin. The pin clinked free, releasing the throwing arm. The box containing twelve tons of rocks descended,

hauling the throwing arm around with a mighty creaking of joints and axles. The whole trebuchet rolled forward as the box came down, then back as its centre of gravity passed behind the axle, then forward as it returned again. The sling was whipped around, flinging the sandstone ball in a great arc and releasing it. The three-hundred-pound ball hissed through the air, rising high and dark against the blue sky, then thudded into the rich turf twenty yards to the left of the outer wall of the Tower of Wings, and a yard short of the abandoned cart. Those in Raimond's camp cheered.

* * * *

'A miss!' shouted the tower's seneschal, and the men at arms with him cheered.

'He aims at the cart!' retorted Lady Angela impatiently. 'Had he been aiming at the outer walls he would have struck true the very first time.'

They were standing at the top of the Tower of Wings, and had a better panoramic view of proceedings than anyone else. Already the arm of the trebuchet was being wound down again by the windlass team.

'So, he means this just as a warning?' said the seneschal.

'Yes, and if I do not heed his warning he will soon bring that thing to bear on the walls. See that long, light ramp behind it? He must mean to use it to span the moat. This is the end.'

'There is always hope while -'

'Get two servants, carry my trunk up here.'

'My lady, you cannot mean to do this!' exclaimed the seneschal.

'Need I repeat my order, Stephen?'

'No, my lady.'

The trebuchet took twenty minutes to wind down again. A maidservant was buckling Lady Angela into her harness as the distant trumpets sounded, and they all turned to the south. The mighty machine's arm swung up as the box dropped, and the trebuchet rolled forward as a second stone ball was flung into the sky. It rose in a smooth arc, almost like a feather lofted by a strong wind, then descended. There was a heavy thud as the cart was splashed apart into a cloud of fragments and splinters. Again the English besiegers cheered.

'That was only his second cast,' said the seneschal. 'Why, with such accuracy he could choose which individual stone he wanted to hit in the curtain wall.'

'Or put a stone ball through my bedchamber window,' muttered Lady Angela.

'They are winding the arm down for a third cast,' said the seneschal.

'The baron has issued his warning,' said Angela grimly as she climbed up between the crenellations at the edge of the tower. 'The next cast will be to show what he can do against stone walls. Secure the cords to my harness, and tie good knots. After that, hold out the plunge

cape to either side of me, hold it high spread out over the edge of the tower on pikes, as I have shown you.'

Beside the trebuchet the captain was shouting for the attention of his cheering, dancing crewmen.

'Back to work, ye buggers! Shoulders to the windlass!'

Wat put a hand on the captain's shoulder and gestured to the ramp.

'That proves it holds together and casts true. Now we'll use the master's special missile. I'll uncover it and fasten the tether.'

* * * *

They stood ready, Lady Angela crouched between the crenellations while her people held the plunge cape spread above her like a huge, green awning. In the distance they could see men tending something on the ramp that had been built behind the trebuchet. It was a red thing, luridly bright red. In the summer heat it seemed to shimmer like ... flames.

'I do believe they mean to cast a fire missile next,' said the seneschal.

'A burning ox hide filled with oil,' cried Lady Angela. 'It will burst in a carpet of fire, it will kill dozens.'

'No, the trebuchet is still aimed wide. He means to smear fire all over the fields before us, to frighten us into surrendering.'

'Well then, after I jump surrender the tower. Not a single one of those fire missiles must come over the walls.'

The trumpets blared again. Lady Angela whispered a brief prayer and clenched her fists. The arm of the trebuchet swung up, the machine rolled forward - and something huge and red was drawn up the ramp, something far wider than the trebuchet, something with vast, red wings that rose up into the clear air more steeply than the heavy stone balls. The tether slipped free and the flight engine continued to ascend in a steep, impossible trajectory. Lady Angela very nearly fell from the wall in sheer surprise. From below and behind her came cries of amazement, while cheers echoed across the fields from Raimond's camp. The device had shot straight out of the pages of her book on flight.

* * * *

Strapped into the wicker cradle of the flight engine, Baron Raimond was aware of no cheers, only of the air buffeting his face, hissing through his hair and roaring in his ears while the horizon tilted and rocked before his eyes. Off to the right and below was the Tower of Wings, suddenly presented from a totally alien perspective. He was within bowshot, in spite of his speed and height. Lady Angela had ordered that no archer of hers should ever shoot at anything flying, yet did that order extend to him?

The ground was a patchwork of greens, he had never realised that the countryside looked like a quilt until he had flown. Everything seemed to be moving slowly, yet it was only because

the ground was so far away. Even on the fastest horse that he had ever ridden, the air had never moved past so rapidly. When I come down I will still be moving as fast, passed through Raimond's mind. His heart was hammering, his mouth was dry. This was the heady thrill of battle, the intense fright of charging another knight in a tourney, this was knowing that death was at his shoulder, kept from claiming him by no more than some red silk and wicker. In a sense the flight engine was not hard to control, it practically flew itself. A warhorse was more difficult to ride, yet a warhorse was slower and closer to the ground. The world seemed so far away that no sounds reached him but the wind in his ears, yet everything that he *saw* was quite stark and lurid. This was his third flight, yet he had not noticed the effect before. A bird needs eyes more than ears while in flight, perhaps our ears become dormant while we fly, he thought.

Suddenly realising that he was past the Tower of Wings and descending, Raimond pushed back against the right control cord with his foot, raising a flap at the right wingtip. The flight engine began curving around, circling the Tower of Wings. At its summit were several figures holding a large, green awning over the side, just as Alren had warned. Fields, trees and hedgerows passed below. Newly shorn sheep, intensely white against the green fields, scattered as the monstrous shadow passed over them. He was only twice the height of the tower's summit by the time he had turned back upon his initial path, and in the distance was the trebuchet, the mighty siege engine whose twelve tons of counterweight had given his flight engine its speed and flung it into the sky. He continued to turn, circling the tower again. The green awning was still there but was now just draped over the edge, and the figures were watching and pointing. Other tiny, dark figures swarmed about the walls, barbican and bailey, like ants disturbed by a boot on their nest. The flight engine was still performing well, but there was the matter of landing to attend.

Raimond was still high and fast enough to return to his camp, but that was not his intention. As he caught sight of a clearing ringed with trees that he had scouted days earlier, Raimond reached under his wicker cradle and tugged at a cord, spilling sand from a sack fastened beneath him. Very quickly the prow of the flight engine tilted up, and it began to lose speed and drop. He descended below the level of the treetops.

* * * *

Angela watched the flight engine vanish from view, the harness of the plunge cape now discarded at her feet.

'The flight engine turns purposefully, as if being guided,' she whispered to herself. 'Someone must be riding upon it.'

* * * *

Pushing his feet against the cords controlling the wing flaps, Baron Raimond straightened his frail craft, glanced at the grassy ground rising up to meet him with familiar but terrifying swiftness, then felt the wickerwork skid scrape turf, bouncing the flight engine back into the air before it came down more gently and slid to a stop. It tilted over onto its right wing as Alren came running over to unfasten the buckles that had held the baron secure during the flight. Raimond was drenched in perspiration.

'Must return,' he stammered as the Moor helped him to his feet.

'Excellent lordship, your horse is behind those hawthorne bushes. Are you sure you can

ride?’

‘Ride yes, walk no. If you please, help me to my mount.’

The baron set off at once, leaving Alren to guard the clearing and flight engine. As he reached the trebuchet the news arrived that the Tower of Wings had surrendered, and that the drawbridge was being lowered.

‘You have your tower sire, undamaged,’ Raimond said to Edward.

‘Yes, they have capitulated!’ exclaimed Edward. ‘Why?’

‘Because Angela is a lady of great scholarship, and I flattered her by building that device. With the rest of the Scottish castles we *shall* have to smash the walls down, however. There is now, ah, the matter of...’

‘Yes, yes, I shall deal with the bishops.’

With that Raimond reeled, nearly fell, then dropped to his knees and vomited at the feet of his king. Edward helped him back to his feet.

‘Raimond, you are soaked with sweat, pale and exhausted, trembling like a newborn foal even though there has been no fighting,’ said Edward. ‘You flew on that thing, did you not? You hid within the long wicker basket and flew.’

‘Between us alone, sire, yes,’ said Raimond hoarsely.

‘What was it like?’ asked the king eagerly.

‘Death’s hand rested upon my shoulder while I was aloft, I felt the chill of his fingers like knives of ice.’

‘I would like to know the feeling, Raimond.’

‘No you would not, sire.’

* * * *

By the time Lady Angela rode across the drawbridge Baron Raimond was waiting to greet her. Dismissing their escorts they rode away together, alone, and initially in silence.

‘You brought my theories to life,’ Angela remarked guardedly as they reached the trees. ‘You are indeed remarkable.’

‘Not so, my lady. My friend Alren the Moor studied your work and helped me render your designs into silk, pine and wicker.’

‘Alren!’ exclaimed Angela.

‘Given the circumstances, we decided it was not wise to reveal just why he was studying in the Tower of Wings.’

‘Understandable,’ replied Angela frostily, her eyes narrowing.

‘I provided the gold to build the devices, and - ah, and here is the engine itself, with Alren standing guard.’

Alren was standing beside the flight engine, but he avoided Angela’s eyes as she dismounted. She put her hand out to grasp a wing, but being lighter than she realised, the flight engine swayed alarmingly. She drew back, alarmed that she might have damaged something.

‘By trial and error we learned to build much lighter and stronger than your drawings specified,’ explained Alren. ‘And we used flexible wicker joints so that the wings would bend instead of being torn off during the launch.’

‘At first we launched it weighted only with sandbags,’ added Raimond. ‘There were crashes, but presently the engine flew straight and gently.’

‘But today the flight engine was being controlled!’ said Angela firmly. ‘Somebody was lying within the wicker cradle. Alren, it was you, it must have been you.’

‘Ah ha ha, but I have no courage for such feats and adventures, excellent lady. It was Baron Raimond who flew both trial flights, then again today.’

‘Raimond, two flights?’ echoed Lady Angela, staring at the baron.

‘You witnessed the third,’ said Raimond.

Lady Angela turned back to the silken wing, running her hands over what she could scarcely bring herself to believe could exist.

‘So much risk ... but why?’

‘Why, to win your favour, my lady. Compliments, feats of arms and jewellery cannot move your heart, that is well known. Thus I complimented you by bringing your design to life. Rather than trying to prove my bravery in battle, I flew your flight engine instead.’

‘Oh, and instead of jewels you give me the completed flight engine,’ said Angela hopefully, caressing the wing teasingly instead of falling into Raimond’s arms.

‘Ah, that and more. Instead of jewels, I give you the *idea* of launching flight engines with a trebuchet. I am not sure that any man has ever given his beloved an idea as a gift before. Are you pleased?’

Lady Angela stared past Raimond for a moment, her eyes unfocused, then she put a hand above her left breast, swallowed, then gasped loudly.

‘Are you not well, my lady?’ asked Raimond, full of concern.

‘It is no serious matter, my lord,’ she said, now smiling and without guile. ‘My heart has just been moved, and the feeling is quite new to me.’

Raimond felt as if his body was a fist unclenching. He knelt in the grass, took Angela's hand and kissed it.

'Edward Longshanks was delighted when I delivered the Tower of Wings to him without loss of life or damage,' explained Raimond, still holding her hand. 'He will shield you from charges of witchcraft, he gave me his word on it.'

'Which is more than my fellow Scots would do for me,' snapped Angela, her annoyance undisguised. 'My lord, thank you indeed. In all the world I thought it impossible such a man as you could exist, yet... here you kneel before me. For me you studied, for me you flew, and most incredibly of all, for me you actually thought.'

She drew him to his feet and at last they embraced, standing beside the red, silken wing of the flight engine. Alren stood with his arms folded and his back to them, his face impassive. Presently Raimond rode off to fetch men to dismantle and carry away the flight engine. While she and Alren waited, Angela made a pretence of examining the wingtip flaps.

'Did - did you tell him?' she asked.

'Tell him what, excellent lady?' asked Alren, his back still turned to her.

Angela rocked the wings in a parody of flight.

'About... that I weakened.'

'Did you want me to tell him?'

Unable to allow herself to approach him, Angela brushed her lips against the silk wing that his hands had helped to fashion.

'In all of England and Scotland, only Raimond could teach you anything of chivalry, most gallant Moor. Keep my books when you return to Spain, and my blessing as well.'

* * * *

Alren returned to Spain after the Tower of Wings was surrendered, and he took with him Angela's books and his own notes and account of the siege. Until Alren's archives were rediscovered in 2003 there was nothing known of the quite fantastic achievements of Lady Angela, Baron Raimond and Alren himself. Alren died of a fever only months after returning to Spain, and from the end of his chronicle of the siege there are very few details.

We know that Angela and Raimond were married late in that same summer. They had two children, and quite probably lived in happiness until August 1305, when Angela died from what a chronicler of the time described as 'a most heavy fall'. Raimond died at Bannockburn in 1314, when the English knights were routed by King Robert the Bruce and his Scottish pikemen. When Alren's manuscripts came to light I ordered the family tombs opened in the hope of finding more of her books buried with her. None were there, but examination of her skeleton revealed that her death had resulted from an impact that had caused a total of seventeen fractures. I think it is beyond doubt that she died in the crash of the flight engine designed by her and built by Raimond and Alren. Even at a distance of thirty generations I still feel pride when I read the chronicles of my distant ancestor and look at her designs. Each time I read of what Raimond did

to win her love, it brings tears to my eyes.

Historians are currently debating why all traces of the flights were sponged from the contemporary chronicles so completely. We can only speculate about what must have happened, but my theory is that after Angela's death Raimond did not want their children to grow up with dreams of piloting flight engines that might one day kill them. All her remaining notes, drawings and devices were probably swept from his castle and burned with the wreckage of the flight engine. Servants were forbidden to speak of flying, and the two boys are known to have been sent to court and brought up to be models of medieval nobility. The church was certainly not interested in documenting the works of someone considered to be a witch, so soon the tale of the siege was told only by villagers and soldiers. Generations passed, it slipped into folklore, then faded into stories about witches flying on broomsticks.

Until now.

Many modern scholars have questioned the truth of Alren's chronicles, branding them allegory, wishful thinking, or just plain lies. These people lost credibility when Angela's skeleton was found wrapped in red silk and lying in a long, narrow basket which showed severe damage. Other questioned the designs themselves, saying that the plunge cape would need a drop five times the height of the Tower of Wings to open fully, that being launched by a trebuchet would tear a flight engine apart, that the craft would not be stable in flight, that the materials would be too heavy, that a medieval warrior such as Baron Raimond would not have had the piloting skills to fly it twice around the Tower of Wings, or that nobody could have landed the flight engine without being killed!

Some of them were proved right. A month ago the carcass of a pig about the weight of a human was pushed from the summit of the tower strapped into a reconstructed plunge cape while six people with pikes held the fabric out. The carcass dropped straight to the stone courtyard before the plunge cape could open properly, and its neck and spine were broken. The bigger the plunge cape, the further it has to drop before opening. Lady Angela would have died had she jumped, there is no doubt of that. Dropped from a helicopter, however, the device opens and flies like a primitive paraglider after falling five hundred feet. It is actually becoming fashionable with skydiving clubs, and people even dress up in medieval costumes before using it. The flight engine is a different matter. Models of it glide surprisingly well but land too fast and heavily. There is also the issue of whether being launched from a trebuchet would tear it apart, and of whether it could be flown by an untrained pilot such as Raimond.

All of that is about to change. It is just after dawn on 11 July, 2005, just a month from the seven-hundredth anniversary of Lady Angela's death. I am standing before the Tower of Wings, and behind me is a reconstructed trebuchet, capable of hurling a three-hundred-pound stone over two hundred yards. Behind the trebuchet is a ramp, and on that ramp is a full-scale flight engine, built to the specifications of Lady Angela and Alren the Moor. I can ride a horse, but I have never had a single flying lesson. I am also clothed in a medieval costume so authentic that I am not even wearing a bra.

I believe that the flight engine will survive being launched, that I can control it in flight, and that I can land it gently by dropping enough sand ballast to raise the nose and shed speed. Even if the worst happens and I crash, however, I am sure that my skeleton will show the same pattern of fractures as Angela's bones display, and she will be proved to be the first woman to have flown. My MBA lecturers would have called it a win-win situation for my distant ancestor. Instead of flying in secret, however, the cameras of the BBC, CNN, National Geographic, and

dozens of other sponsors are already following my every move, and at dawn the prayers for the success of the flight were led by an Anglican bishop. Times have certainly changed. Most notably of all, it is now a woman who is about to be flung into the sky in defence of Lady Angela's honour. In 1303 this would have been unthinkable, yet even this supports her place in history. At the dawn of that ancient century, a woman should not have been able to look from a window in the Tower of Wings and dream of wings made from silk, pine and wicker, yet this was her greatest triumph.

First published 2001.