

# The Logistics of Carthage

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*/ have put this document together from the different sources included in the Ash papers, and have again translated the languages into modern English. Where necessary, I have substituted colloquial obscenities to give a flavour of the medieval original. Let the casual reader, expecting the Hollywood Middle Ages, abandon hope here.*

Pierce Ratcliff, a.d. 2010

MOST women follow their husbands to the wars. . .I followed my son."

Yolande Vaudin's voice came with the grunt and exhalation of physical effort. Guillaume Arnisout looked at her down the length of the corpse they were carrying.

He grinned. "Your son? You ain't old enough to have a grown-up son!"

She appeared a wonderfully perverse mix of male and female, Guillaume thought. The clinging of her belted mail shirt, under her livery jacket, showed off the woman's broad hips. Her long legs seemed plump in hose, but were not: were just not male. Shapely and womanly . . . He got a kick out of seeing women's legs in hose: entirely covered, but the shape so clearly defined—and hers were worth defining.

She had her hair cut short, too, like a page or young squire, and it curled sleekly onto her shoulders, uncovered, the rich yellow of wet straw *She* had been able to slip her helmet off before the sergeant noticed: it was buckled through her belt by the chin strap. That meant he could see all of her wise and wicked face.

She's willing to talk, at least. Can't let the opportunity go to waste.

He put his back against the Green Chapel's doors and eased them open without himself letting go of the corpse's ankles. Yolande held her end of the dead woman's body tightly under the arms, taking the weight as he backed through the door first. The blue-white flesh was chill against his palms.

Not looking down at what she held, Yolande went on. "I had Jean-Philippe when I was young. Fifteen. And then, when he was fifteen, he was called up in the levy, to be a soldier, and I followed."

The partly open door let in the brilliant sunlight from the barren land outside. It glittered back off the white walls of the monastery's other buildings. Guillaume twisted his head around to look inside the chapel, letting his eyes adjust, unsure of his footing in the dimness. "Didn't he mind you being there?"

Her own sight obviously free of the morning glare, Yolande pushed forward. The legs of the body were stiff with rigor, and they shoved against him. Bare feet jabbed his belly. There was black dirt under the toenails.

He backed in, trying to hold one door open with his foot while Yolande maneuvered the dead woman's shoulders and head through it.

"He would have minded, if he'd known. I went disguised; I thought I could watch over him from a distance. . . . He was too young. I'd been a widow five years. I had no money, with his wages gone. I joined the baggage train and dyed my hair and whored for a living, until that got old, and then I found I could put a crossbow bolt into the center of the butts nine times out of ten."

The chapel's chill began to cool the sting of sunburn on the back of his neck. His helmet still felt excruciatingly hot to wear. Guillaume blinked, his sight adjusting, and looked at her again. "You're *not* old enough."

Her chuckle came out of the dimness, along with the shape of the walls and tiled floor.

"One thing a woman can always look like is a younger man.' There's her," Yolande said, with a jerk of her head downward at the rigid dead body between them. "When she said her name was Guido Rosso, you'd swear she was a beardless boy of nineteen. You take her out of doublet and hose and put her in a gown, and call her 'Margaret Hammond,' and you'd have known at once she was a woman of twenty-eight."

"Was she?" Guillaume grunted, shifting the load as they tottered toward the altar. He walked backward with difficulty, not wanting to stumble and look stupid in front of this woman. "I didn't know her."

"I met her when she joined us, after the fall." Yolande's fingers visibly tightened on the dead woman's flesh. There was no need to specify which fall. The collapse of Constantinople to the Turks had echoed through Christendom from East to West, four years ago.

"I took her under my wing." The woman's wide, lively mouth moved in an ironic smile. Her eyes went to

the corpse's face, then his. "You wouldn't have noticed her. I know what you grunts in the line fight are like—Archers? Oh, that's those foulmouthed buggers hanging around at the back, always saying "fuck" and taking the Lord their God's name in vain. . . .' I dunno: give you a billhook and you think you're the only soldier on the battlefield."

Guillaume liked her sardonic grin, and returned it.

So . . . is she flirting with me?

They staggered together across the empty interior of the Green Chapel. Their boots scraped on the black and white tiles. He could smell incense and old wood smoke from the morning's prayers. Another couple of steps . . .

"I used to help her back to the tents, drunk. She was never this heavy. There!" Yolande grunted.

Just in time, he copied her, letting the stiff ankles of the body slide down out of his dirty grip. The body thunked down onto the tiles at his feet. No one had cleaned it up. The bones of her face were beaten in, the mess the same color as heraldic murrey: purple red.

His skin retained the feel of hers. Stiff, chill, softening.

"*HeDieux!*" Guillaume rubbed at his back. "That's why they call it *dead* weight."

He saw the dead Rosso—Margaret—was still wearing her armor: a padded jack soaked with blood and fluids. Linen stuffing leaked out of the rips. Every other piece of kit from helmet to boots was gone. Either the jacket was too filthy and slashed up to be worth reclaiming, or else the charred and bloodstained cloth was all that was still holding the body's intestines inside it.

Yolande squatted down. Guillaume saw her try to pull the body's arms straight by its sides, but they were still too stiff. She settled for smoothing the sun-bleached, blood-matted hair back. She wiped her hands on her peacock blue hose as she stood.

"I saw her get taken down." The older woman spoke as if she was not sure what to do next, was talking to put off that moment of decision—even if the decision was, Guillaume thought, only the one to leave the corpse of her friend.

The light from the leaf-shaped ogee windows illuminated Yolande's clear, smooth skin. There were creases at her eyes, but she had most of the elasticity of youth still there.

"Killed on the galley?" he prompted, desperate to continue a conversation even if the subject was unpromising.

"Yeah. First we were on one of the cargo ships, sniping, part of the defense crew. The rag-heads turned Greek fire on us, and the deck was burning. I yelled at her to follow me off—when we got back on our galley, it had been boarded, and it took us and Tessier's guys ten minutes to clear the decks. Some Visigoth put a spear through her face, and I guess they must have hacked her up when she fell. They'd have been better worrying about the live ones."

"Nah . . ." Guillaume was reluctant to leave the Green Chapel, even if it was beginning to smell of decomposing flesh. He felt cool for the first time in hours, and besides, there was this woman, who might perhaps be an impressed audience for his combat knowledge. "You never want to leave one alive under your feet. Somebody on the ground sticks a sword or dagger up and hits your femoral artery or your bollocks— Ah, 'scuse me."

He stopped, flustered. She gave him a look.

Somewhere in his memory, if only in the muscle-memory of his hands and arms, is the ferocity with which you hack a man down, and follow it up without a second's hesitation—*bang-bang-bang-bang!*—your weapon's thin, sharp steel edges slamming into his face, throat, forearms, belly; whatever you can reach.

He looked away from the body at his feet, a woman to whom some soldier in the Carthaginian navy has done just that. Goose pimples momentarily shuddered over his skin.

"Christus Viridianus! I couldn't half do with a drink." He eased his visored sallet back on his head, feeling how the edge of the lining band had left a hot, sweaty indentation in his forehead. "Say, what *did* happen to your son? Is he with the company?"

Yolande's fingers brushed the Griffin-in-Gold patch sewn onto the front of her livery jacket, as if the insignia of their mercenary company stirred memories. She smiled in a way he could not interpret. "I was a better soldier than he was."

"He quit?"

"He died."

"Shit." *I can't say a thing right!* "Yolande, I'm sorry."

Her mouth quirked painfully. "Four months after he went to war. What was I thinking, that I could *protect* him? He was carrying shot in the first siege we were at, and a culverin inside the castle scored a

direct hit on the powder wagon. When I found him he'd had both his hands blown off, and he'd bled to death—before his mother could get to him."

"Jeez . . ." I wish I hadn't asked.

She's *got* to be ten years older than me. But she doesn't look it.

He guessed Yolande had not, like "Guido Rosso," even temporarily tried to pass as a man.

Because she's a woman, not a girl.

"Why did you stay with the company?"

"My son was dead. I wanted to kill the whole world. I realized that if I had the patience to let them train me, the company would let me do just that."

In his stunned silence, Guillaume could hear goat bells jingling outside and some shuffling noises closer to hand. A warm breeze blew in through the Green Chapel door, which had lodged open on a pebble. The smell of death grew more present now, soaking into the air. Like the back of a butcher's shop in a heat wave.

"Shit." He wiped at his mouth. "It's going to get hot later in the morning. By evening . . . she's going to be really ripe by Vespers."

Yolande's expression turned harsh. "Good. Then they can't ignore her. She's going to smell. *That* should get the bloody rag-heads moving. The captain's right. This is the only thing to do."

"But—"

"I don't care what the fucking priests say. *She's going to be buried here like the Christian soldier she is.*"

Guillaume shrugged. For himself, he would as cheerfully have chucked all the bodies overboard, to go with the Carthaginian Visigoths and feed the fish; evidently this wasn't the thing to say to Yolande right now. Especially not if you want to get into the crossbow woman's knickers, he reminded himself.

"If the abbot can ignore the stink she's going to make . . ." He let his grin out, in its different context. "What do you bet me he'll send for the captain before Sext? Hey, tell you what. . . I bet you a flagon of wine she's buried by midday, and if I lose, I'll help you drink it tonight. What do you say?"

What she would have answered wasn't clear from her expression, and he didn't get to hear a reply.

The scuffling noise that had impinged on his consciousness earlier grew louder, and he spun around and had his bollock dagger out of its sheath at his belt and pointing at the altar a full second before a boy rolled out from under the altar cloth and sat staring down at the woman soldier's corpse.

"Aw—shit!" Guillaume swore, exasperated.

He saw the thin iron ring welded around the boy's throat. Some slave skiving off work. Or hiding from the big bad Frankish mercenaries—*not that I blame him for that.*

"Hey, *you*—fuck off out of here!"

The youth looked up, not at Guillaume, but at Yolande. There was a quiver about him that might have been fear or energy. He looked to be anywhere in his early or middle teens, a pale-skinned Carthaginian Visigoth with dark hair flopping into his eyes. Guillaume realized instantly, *She's thinking he's fifteen.*

"I wasn't listening!" He spoke the local patois, but it was plain from his ability to answer that he understood one Frankish language at least. "I was foreseeing."

Guillaume flinched, thought, *Were we saying anything I don't want to hear back as gossip? No, I hadn't got round to asking her if she fucks younger men—* And then, replaying the kid's remark in his head, he queried: "Foreseeing?"

Silently, the young man pointed.

' Above the altar, on the shadowed masonry of the wall, there was no expected Briar Cross. Instead, he saw a carved face—a Man's face, with leaves sprouting from the creepers that thrust out of His open mouth.

The carving was large: perhaps as wide as Guillaume could have spanned with his outstretched hands, thumb to thumb. There is something intimidating about a face that big. *Vir Viridianus: Christ as the Green Emperor, as the Arian Visigoths prefer, heretically, to worship Him.* The wood gleamed, well polished, the pale silvery grain catching the light. *Holm oak, maybe?* The eyes had been left as hollows of darkness.

"I dream under the altar," the young man said, as hieratic as if he had been one of the monastery's own priests, and not barefoot and with only a dirty linen shirt to cover his arse.

Guillaume belatedly realized the scrabbling noise hadn't ceased with their stillness. The hilt of his bollock dagger was still smooth in his hand. He stepped back to give himself room as the altar cloth stirred again.

An odd, low, dark shape lifted up something pale.

Guillaume blinked, not processing the image, and then his mind made sense both of the shape and of the new smell that the odor of the corpse had been masking. A pale flat snout lifted upward. A dark hairy quadruped body paced forward, flop ears falling over bright eyes. . . .

The young man absently reached out and scratched the pig's lean back with grimy fingers.

A pig-boy asleep under the Green Man's altar? Guillaume thought. Sweet dead Jesus on the Tree!

"I had a seeing dream," the young man said, and turned his face toward the living woman in the chapel; toward Yolande. "I think it is for you."

Yolande glanced down at the dead body of Margaret Hammond. "Not in here! Outside . . . maybe."

She caught the billman's nod, beside her. He said, "Yeah, let's go. We don't want to be in here now. We got this place under lockdown, but there's going to be *plenty* of shit flying before long!"

The pig's sharp trotters clicked on the tiles, the beast following as the Visigoth swineherd walked to the left of the altar. The young man pushed aside a wall hanging embroidered with the She-wolf suckling the Christ-child to disclose a wooden door set deep into the masonry. He opened it and gestured.

Yolande stepped through.

She came out in the shade of the wall. The world beyond the shadow blazed with the North African sun's fierceness. A few yards ahead was a grove of the ever-present olive trees, and she walked to stand under them, loving their shade and smell—so little being green after the company's previous stopover in Alexandria.

She heard Guillaume stretch his arms out and groan, happily, in the sun behind her. "Time enough to go back to Europe in the summer. *Damn*, this is the place to have a winter campaign! Even if we're not where we're supposed to be . . ."

She didn't turn to look at him. From this high ridge of land she could see ten or fifteen miles inland. Anonymous bleak rock hills lifted up in the west. In that direction, the sun was weak. The blue sky defied focus, as if there were particles of blackness in it.

*The edge of the Penitence.* Well, I've been under the Darkness Perpetual before now . . . , *We have* to be within fifty or sixty leagues of Carthage. Have to be.

Guillaume Arnisout sauntered up beside her. "Maybe Prophet Swineherd here can tell us we're going to wipe the floor with the enemy: that usually pays."

She caught the billman's sardonic expression focused on the pig-boy. Guillaume's much better looking when he's not trying so hard, she thought. All long legs and narrow hips and wide shoulders. Tanned face and hands. Weather-worn from much fighting. Fit.

But from where I am, he looks like a boy. Haven't I always preferred them older than me?

"If you're offering to prophesy," Yolande said to the swineherd, more baldly than she intended, "you've got the wrong woman. I'm too old to have a future. I haven't any money. If any of us in the company had money, we wouldn't be working for Hiiseyin Bey and the goddamn Turks!"

"This isn't a scam!" The boy pushed the uncut hair out of his eyes. His people's generations in this land hadn't given him skin that would withstand the sun—where there was sun—and his flush might have been from the heat, or it might have been shame.

She squatted down, resting her back against one of the olive tree trunks. Guillaume Arnisout immediately stood to her left; the Frenchman incapable of failing to act as a lookout in any situation of potential danger—not even aware, perhaps, that he was doing it.

And how much do I do, now, that I don't even know about? Being a soldier, as I am . . .

"It's not a scam," the boy said, patiently now, "because I can show you."

"Now look—what's your name?"

"Ricimer." He'd evidently watched more than one Frank trying to get their tongues around Visigoth pronunciation and sighed before she could react. "Okay—Ric."

"Look, Ric, I don't know what you think you're going to show me. A handful of chicken bones, or rune stones, or bead-cords, or cards. Whatever it is, I don't have any money."

"Couldn't take it anyway. I'm the Lord-Father's slave."

"That's the abbot here?" She held her hand high above the ground for theoretical illustration, since she was still squatting. "Big man. Beard. Loud."

"No, that's Prior Athanagild. Abbot Muthari's not so old." The boy's eyes slitted, either against the sun off the white earth or in embarrassment: Yolande couldn't tell which.

She frowned suddenly. "What's *priest* doing owning slaves?"

Guillaume put in, "They're a load of bloody heathens in this monastery: who knows what they do? For

fuck's sake, who cares?"

Ric burst out, "He owns me because he saved me!" His voice skidded up the scale into a squeak, and his fair skin plainly showed his flush. "I could have been in a galley or down a mine! That's why he bought me!"

"Galleys are bad." Guillaume Arnisout spoke after a moment's silence, as if driven to the admission. "Mines are worse than galleys. Chuck 'em in and use 'em up, lucky if you live twenty months."

"Does Father Mu—" She struggled over the name. "—Muthari know you go around prophesying?"

The boy shook his head. The lean pig, which had been rooting around under the olive trees, paced delicately on high trotter toes up to his side. Sun glinted off the steel ring in its black snout. Yolande tensed, wary.

The vicious bite of the pig will shear off a man's hand. Besides that, there is the stink, and the shit.

The pig sat down on its rear end, for all the world like a knight's hound after a hunt, and leaned the weight of its shoulder against Ricimer's leg. Ric reached down and again scratched through the hair on its back, and she saw its long-lashed eyes slit in delight.

"Hey!" Guillaume announced, sounding diverted. "Could do with some roast pork! Maybe the rag-heads will sell us a couple of those. 'Lande, I'll go have a quick word, see what price they're asking. Won't be much; we got 'em shit-scared!"

He turned to go around the outside of the Green Chapel, calling back over his shoulder, "Kid, look us out a couple of fat weaners!"

The thought of hot, juicy, crunchy pork fat and meat dripping with sauce made Yolande's mouth run with water. The memory of the smell of cooked pork flooded her senses.

If you burn the meat, though, it smells exactly the same as the Greek fire casualties on the galley.

"Demoiselle!" Ricimer's eyes were black in a face that made Yolande stare: his skin gone some color between green and white. "Pigs are unclean! You can't eat them! The meat goes rotten in the heat! They have tapeworms. Tell him! Tell him! We don't eat—"

Yolande cut off his cracking adolescent voice by nodding at the long-nosed greyhound-pig. "What do you keep them for, then?"

"Garbage disposal," he said briefly. "Frankish demoiselle, *please*, tell that man not to ask the Lord-Father!"

So many things are so important when you're that age. A year or two and you won't care about your pet swine.

"Not up to me." She shrugged; thought about getting to her feet. "I guess the fortune-telling is off?"

"No." Still pale and sweaty, the young man shook his head. "I have to show you."

The determination of a foreign boy was irritating, given the presence of Margaret Hammond's dead body in the chapel behind her. Yolande nonetheless found herself resorting to a diplomatic rejection.

Young men need listening to, even when they're talking rubbish.

"If it's a true vision, God will send it to me anyway."

The boy reached out and tugged at her cuff with fingers dusty from the pig's coarse hair. "Yes! God will send it to you *now*. Let me show you. We'll need to sit with Vir Viridianus and pray in the chapel—"

The face of the woman came vividly into her mind, as it had been before the bones were bloodied and the flesh smashed. Margie— Guido—grinning as she bent to wind the windlass of her crossbow; mundane as a washerwoman wringing out sheets between her two hands.

"Not with Margie in there!"

"You need the Face of God!"

"The Face of God?" Yolande tugged at the leather laces that held the neck of her mail shirt closed. She fumbled down under the riveted metal rings, between her gambeson and linen shirt and her hot flesh, and pulled out a rosary. "This?"

Dark polished beads with a carved acorn for every tenth bead; and on the short trailing chain, carved simply with two oak leaves and wide eyes, the face of the Green Christ.

The boy stared. "Where'd you get that?"

"There's a few Arians in the company: didn't you know?" She laughed softly to herself: "They won't stay that way when the company goes north over the seas again, but for now, they'll keep in good with God as He is here. Doesn't stop them gambling, though. So: you want me to pray to this? And then I'll see this vision?"

He held his hand out. "Give it to me."

Reluctantly, Yolande passed the trickle of beads into his cupped palms. She watched him sort through, hold it, lift the rosary so that the carved Green Man face swung between them, alternately catching shafts of sunlight and the darkness of shade. Swinging. Slowing. Stopping.

A pendant face, the carved surface of the wood softly returning the light to her eyes.

Where I made my mistake, she thought later, was in listening to a boy. I had one of my own. Why did I expect this one to be as smart as a man?

At the time, she merely slid under the surface of the day, her vision blurring, her body still.

And saw.

Yolande saw dirt, and a brush. Dusty dirt, within an inch or two of her face. And it was being swept back with a fine animal-hair brush, to uncover—

Bones.

Yolande was conscious of sitting back up on her heels, although she could not see the bits of one's body one usually sees out of peripheral vision. She looked across the trench, conscious that she was in an area of digging—someone throwing up hasty earth-defenses, maybe?—and not alone.

A woman kneeling on the other side of the gash in the dirt sat up and put a falling swath of dark hair back behind her equally dark ear. Her other hand held the small and puzzling brush.

"Yes," the woman said thoughtfully. "I suppose you would have looked just like that."

Yolande blinked. Saw cords staked a few inches above the ground. And saw that what also poked out of this trench, blackened in places and in some cases broken, were teeth.

"A grave," Yolande said aloud, understanding. "Is it mine?"

"I don't know. How old are you?" The brown woman waved her hand impatiently. "No, don't tell me; I'll get it. Let me see. . . . Mail shirt: could be anywhere from the Carthaginian defeats of Rome onward. But that looks like medieval work. Western work. So, not a Turk." Her shaped thick eyebrows lowered. "That helmet's a giveaway. Archer's sallet. I'd put you in the fifteenth century some-where. Mid-century . . . A European come over to North Africa to fight in the Visigoth-Turkish wars, after the fall of Constantinople. You're around five and a half centuries old. Am I right?"

Yolande had stopped listening *-ax. helmet*. Reaching up, startled, she touched the rim of her sallet. She fumbled for the buckle at her jaw.

Why do I see myself dressed for war? This is a divine vision: it's not as though I can be hurt.

The helmet was gone. Immediately, all the sounds of the area rushed in on her. Crickets, birds; a dull rumbling too close to be thunder. And a clear sky, but air that stank and made her eyes tear up. She ruffled her fingers through her hair, still feeling the impress of the helmet lining on her head. The cool wind made her realize it was morning. Early morning, somewhere in North Africa . . . in the future that exists in God's mind?

"Is that my grave?"

The woman was staring at her, Yolande realized.

"I said, is that my—"

"Don't know." The words bit down sharply, overriding her own. The dark eyes fixed on her face in concentration, evidently seeing more of it now the sallet was off.

Yolande drew composure around her as she did before a fight, feeling the same churning bowel cramps. / *thought it would be like a dream. I wouldn't be aware / was having a vision. This is terrifying.*

"I won't know," the woman said, more measuredly, "until I get to the pelvis."

That was curious. Yolande frowned. *Some of this I will only discover the meaning of by prayer afterward. Pelvis? Let me see: what do I remember of doctors—is that what she is, this woman, grubbing in the dirt? Odd kind of medic.*

"I have borne a child," Yolande said. "You don't need to find my bones: I can tell you that myself."

"Now that would be something." The woman shook her head. "That would be really something."

The woman wore very loose hose, and ankle boots, and a thin doublet with the arms evidently unpointed and removed. Her Turkish-coffee skin would take the sunlight better, Yolande thought. But I would still cover up long before Nones, if it were me.

The woman sounded sardonic. "Finding a female soldier who was a mother—what kind of an icon would that be?"

Yolande felt a familiar despair wash through her. Why is it always the women who don't believe me?

"Yes, I've been a whore; no, I'm not a whore now." Yolande repeated her catechism with practiced slickness. "Yes, I use a crossbow; *yes*, I have the strength to wind the windlass; *yes*, I am strong enough to shoot it; *yes*, I can kill people. Why is it so hard to believe? I see tradeswomen in butcher's yards every

day, jointing carcasses. Why is it so difficult to think of women in a similar trade? That's all this is."

Yolande made a brief gesture at what she could feel now: her mail shirt and the dagger and falchion hanging from her belt.

"It's just butchery. That's all. The only difference is that the animals fight back."

She has been making the last remark long enough to know that it usually serves only to show up any ex-soldiers in a group. They will be the ones who laugh, with a large degree of irony.

The dark-haired woman didn't laugh. She looked pained and disgusted. "Do you know what I was before I was an archaeologist?"

Yolande politely said, "No," thinking, *A what?*

"I was a refugee. I lived in the camps." Another shake of the other woman's head, less in negation than rejection. "I don't want to think there has been five, six hundred years of butchery *and nothing's changed.*"

The wind swept across the diggings. Which evidently were not defenses, since they made no military sense. They more resembled a town, Yolande thought, as one might see it from a bluff or cliff overlooking it from a height. Nothing left but the stumps of walls.

"Every common man gets forgotten," Yolande said. "Is that what this is showing me? I— Is this her grave, not mine? Margie's? I know that few of us outlive our children's memories. But I—I need to know *now* that she's recognized for what she is. That she's buried with honor."

Margaret would have died fighting beside any man in the company, as they would have died at *her* shoulder. This is what needs recognition, this willingness to trust one another with their lives.

Recognition—and remembrance. *Honor* is the only word she would think of that acknowledged it.

The woman reached down and brushed delicately at the hinge of a jawbone. "Honor. . . yes. Well. Funerals are for the living."

"Funerals are for God!" Yolande blurted, startled.

"If you believe, yes, I suppose they are. But I find funerals are for the people left behind. So it's not just one more body thrown into a pit because cholera went through the tents, and it was too dangerous to leave the bodies out, and there was no more wood for pyres. So they've got a grave marker you can remember, even if you can't visit it. So they're not just—one more image on a screen."

*Screen?* A little sardonically Yolande reflected, We are not the class of people who are put into tapestries, you and I. The best I'll get is to be one of a mass of helmets in the background. You might get to be a fieldworker, while the nuns spend all their skills embroidering the lord's bridle and all his other tack.

"If you believe?" Yolande repeated it as a question.

"If there was a God, would He let children die in thousands just because of dirty water?"

If the specifics evaded Yolande, the woman's emotion was clear. Yolande protested, "Yes, I've doubted, too. But I see the evidence of Him every day. The priests' miracles—"

"Oh, well. I can't argue with fundamentalism." The woman's mouth tugged up at the side. "Which medieval Christianity certainly is."

A voice interrupted, calling unintelligibly from somewhere off in the destroyed village settlement.

"I'm coming!" the woman shouted. "Hold on, will you!"

The settlement's layout was not familiar, Yolande realized with relief. It was not the monastery.

So if I am fated to die on this damned coast, it isn't yet.

The woman turned her head back. There was an odd greediness about the way she studied Yolande's face.

"They'll put it into the books as 'village militia.' Any skeleton with a female pelvis who's in a mail shirt must have picked up armor and weapons as an act of desperation, defending her town."

There was desperation in her tone, also. And self-loathing; Yolande could hear it.

And this mad woman is not even a soldier. What can it matter to *her*, digging in the dirt for bodies, whether Margie and I are remembered as what we were?

The woman pointed at her. Yolande realized it was the mail shirt she was indicating. "Why did you do this! War? Fighting?"

"It. . . wasn't what I intended to do. I found out that I was good at it."

"But it's wrong." The woman's expression blazed, intense. "It's sick."

"Yes, but. . ." Yolande paused. "I enjoy it. Except maybe the actual fighting."

She gave the woman a quick grin.

"All the swanning around Christendom, and gambling, and eating yourself silly, and fornicating, and *not working*—that's all great. I mean, can you see me in a nunnery, or as a respectable widow in Paris? Oh, and the getting rich, if you're lucky enough to loot somewhere. That's good, too. It's worth risking getting

killed every so often, because, hey, *somebody* has to survive the field of battle; why not me?"

"But killing other people?"

Yolande's smile faded. "I can do that. I can do all of it. Except. . . the guns. I just choke up, when there's gunfire. Cry. And they always think it's because I'm a woman. So I try not to let anyone see me, now."

The dark-skinned woman rested her brush down on the earth.

"More *sensitive*" The last word had scorn in it. She added, without the ironic tone, "More sensible. As a woman. You know the killing is irrational."

Yolande found herself self-mockingly smiling. "No. I'm not sensible about hackbuts or cannon—the devil's noise doesn't frighten me. It makes me cry, because I remember so many dead people. I lost more than forty people I knew, at the fall."

The other woman's aquiline face showed a conflicted sadness, difficult to interpret.

Yolande shrugged. "If you want *scary* war, try the line fight. Close combat with edged weapons. That's why I use a crossbow."

The woman's dignified features took on something between sympathy and contempt.

"No women in close-quarters fighting, then?"

"Oh, yeah." Yolande paused. "But they're idiots."

Guillaume's face came into her mind.

"*Everybody* with a polearm is an idiot. . . . But I guess it's easier for a woman to swing a poleax than pull a two-hundred-pound longbow."

The other woman sat back on her heels, eyes widening. "A poleax? *Easier?*"

"Ever chop wood?" And off the woman's realization, Yolande gave her a *there you are* look. "It's just a felling ax on a long stick . . . a thinner blade, even. Margie said the ax and hammer were easier. But in the end she came in with the crossbows, because I was there."

And look how much good *that* did her.

"Not everybody can master the skills of crossbows or arquebuses. . . ." This was an argument Yolande had had before, way too often. "Why does everybody think it's the *weapons* that are the difficult thing for a woman fighting? It's the guys on your own side: Not the killing."

The fragments of bone and teeth in the earth had each their own individual shadow, caused by the sun lifting higher over the horizon.

"The truth is important." Yolande found the other woman watching her with wistfulness as she looked up. Yolande emphasized, "That's the *truth*: she was a soldier. She shouldn't have to be something else just so they can bury her."

"I know. I want proof of women soldiers. And . . . I want no soldiers, women *or* men." The woman recovered her errant lock of hair and pushed it back again. Yolande saw the delicate gold of an earring in the whorl there: studded barbarically through the flesh of the ear's rim.

"Of course," the woman said measuredly, getting to her feet, "we have no idea, really. We guess, from what we dig up. We have illuminations, dreams. I visualize you. But it's all stories."

She stared down at Yolande.

"What matters is who tells the stories, and what stories never get told. Because people *acton* what the histories are. People live their lives based on nothing better than a skull, a fragment of a mail ring, and a misremembered battle site. People *die* for that 'truth'!"

Moved by the woman's distress, Yolande stood up. She rubbed her hands together, brushing off the dust, preparatory to walking forward to help the woman. And it was the oddest sensation possible: she rubbed her hands together and felt nothing. No skin, no warm palms, no calluses. Nothing.

"Yolande! *Yolatukr*

She opened her eyes—and that was the most strange thing, since she had not had them shut.

Guillaume Arnisout squatted in front of her, his lean brown fingers holding her wrists in a painful grip. He was holding her hands apart. The skin of her palms stung. She looked, and saw they were red. As if she had repetitively rubbed the thin, spiky dust of the courtyard between them.

A cool, hard, flexible snout poked into her ribs, compressing the links of her mail shirt. Yolande flinched; turned her head. The sow met her gaze. The animal's eyes were blue-green, surrounded by whites: unnervingly human.

What have I been shown? *Why?*

A yard away, Ricimer lay on his side. White foam dried in the corners of his mouth. Crescents of white showed under his eyelids.



Yolande turned her wrists to break Guillaume's grip on her forearms. The sow nosed impudently at her. *It will bite me!* She knelt up, away from it; leaned across, and felt the boy's face and neck. Warm, sweaty. Breathing.

"Kid had a fit." Guillaume was curt. "Lande, I met your sergeant: the Boss wants us. The report on Rosso. I had to say you were praying. You okay? We got to go!"

Yolande scrambled up onto her feet. It was cowardice more than anything else. There was no assurance that the boy would live. She turned her back on him and began to walk away, past the chapel.

Visions! Truly. Visions from God—to *me*—!

"No. I'm not okay. But we have to go anyway."

"What did you see? Did you see anything? 'Lande! Yolande!"

The captain's wiry brass-colored beard jerked as he bellowed at the assembled monks.

"She will have a soldier's burial!" His voice banged back flatly from the walls of the monastery's large refectory. "A Christian burial! Or she stays where she is until she rots, and you have to bury her with a *buckets*

Johann Christoph Spessart, the captain of the company of the Griffin-in-Gold, was the usual kind of charismatic man. Guillaume would not have been in his company if he had not been. He was no more than five feet tall, but he reminded Guillaume of a pet bantam that Guillaume's mother had kept—a very small, very bright-feathered cock that intimidated everything in the yard, chicken or not, and gave the guard mastiffs pause for thought.

He was a lot more magnificent back in France, Guillaume reflected, when he wore his complete, if slightly battered, Milanese harness. But even highly polished plate armor doesn't lend itself to the hot sun of the North African coast.

Now, like half his men, Spessart was in mail and adopted a white Visigoth head cloth and loose trousers tucked into tough antelope-hide boots.

Still looks like a typical Frankish mercenary hard case. No wonder they're shitting themselves.

"You. Vaudin." The Griffin captain pointed to Yolande. The woman's head came up. Guillaume's gut twisted at her blank, bewildered stare.

Dear God, let the captain take it for piety and think she's been praying for her dead friend! What *happened* back there?

"Yes, sir?" Her voice, too, was easily recognizable as female. The monks scowled.

Spessart demanded, "Is Margaret Rosso's body laid out before the altar of God?"

Guillaume saw Yolande's mouth move, but she did not correct the captain's mangling of the dead woman's name. After a second, voice shaking, she said, "Yes, sir."

It could have been taken for grief: Guillaume recognized shock.

"Good. Organize a guard roster: I want a lance on duty at the chapel permanently from now on, beginning with yours."

Yolande nodded. Guillaume watched her walk back toward the main door. / *need to talk to her!*

He found himself uncomfortably on the verge of arousal.

"Arnisout?"

"Yes, Captain." Guillaume looked down and met the German soldier's gaze.

"What does the Church say about Christian burial, Arnisout?"

Guillaume blinked, but let the sunlight coming off the refectory's whitewashed walls be the excuse for that. "Corpses to be buried the same day as they die, sir."

"Even a foot soldier knows it!" The Griffin captain whirled around. "Even a billman knows! Now, I don't go so far as some com-manders:—I don't make my soldiers carry their own shrouds in their packs—but I keep to the Christian rites. Burial the same day. She died *yesterday*"

"I appreciate your point of view, *qa'id*" The abbot of the monastery hid his hands in his flowing green robes. Guillaume suspected the man's hands were shaking, and that was what he desired to hide. "I hesitate to call anyone damned for heresy. Christ knows who worships Him truly, no matter what rite is used. But we *cannot* bury a scandalous woman who dressed as a man and fought—killed."

Guillaume found himself admiring the small spark of wrong headed courage. The abbot spoke painfully, from a bruised and swollen mouth.

"*Qa'id*, the answer is still no."

And now he calls Spessart *qa'id*, general!

Guillaume grinned at the plump abbot: a man in his early middle age. *Not surprising, given what happened yesterday . . .*

Guillaume had been up on the ramparts, squinting across the acres of sun-scalded rock to see what progress the hand chain was making. From up here, the men had looked tiny. A long line of figures: crates and barrels being passed or rolled from one man to the next, all the way up the chine from the desolate beach. Food. And—

One of the men ducked out of line, arms over his head, a sergeant beating him; shouting loudly enough that Guillaume could hear it. A water barrel had splintered and spilled. *Okay, that's down to nine hundred-odd. . .*"

Guillaume, squinting, could just see part of the hull of the beached galley. The round-bellied cargo ships were anchored a few hundred yards offshore, in deeper water; the side boats ferrying the stores ashore as fast as they could be rowed. White heat haze hung over the blue sea and islands to the north.

A shadow fell on Guillaume's shoulder. *The corporal, of course: he has to catch me the one minute I'm not doing anything.*

"If we're really lucky, there could be any number of Visigoth galleys out there, not just the two that bushwhacked us . . ." Lance Corporal Honore Marches came to stand beside Guillaume, gazing satirically out to sea. "Not like we're up the Turkish end of the Med now, with their navy riding shotgun on us."

"We could do with the Turkish shipwrights." At Marches' look, Guillaume added, "Carpenters say they were right, sir. Patching up the galley is going to need skilled work. They can't do it. We're stuck here."

"Oh, Boss is going to love that! How's the unloading coming along, Arnisout?"

"Good, sir." Guillaume turned around, away from the coast. It was obvious to a military eye: the monastery here had taken over an ancient Punic fort. One from the days when it had been a forested land, and any number of armies could march up and down this coast road. Now the fort was covered with monastic outbuildings as a log is covered with moss, but the central keep would be still defensible in a pinch.

"I've got the lances storing the cargo down in the deep cellars, sir."

A large enough cargo of food that it could feed an army<sup>^</sup>or at least a Turkish division coming up from Tarabulus, somewhere to the east now, which is what it's intended for. And *water*. On this coast, water. The days when you could bring an army up the coast road from Alexandria to Carthage without resupplying by sea are gone with the Classical age.

"Yeah, that should do it." Marches turned, signaling with a nod, and led the way down the flight of stone steps from the parapet to the ground. Over his shoulder, he remarked, "Fucking lot of work, but the Boss is right: we can't leave it on board. Not with no galley cover. Okay, Arnisout, get your team and come along with me; Boss ' is going to have a little talk with the abbot here."

Guillaume nodded obedience and bellowed across to Bressac and the others who shared the ten-man tent that made them a team. Bressac waved a casual hand in acknowledgment.

Marches snapped, "Now, Arnisout! Or do you want to tell the Boss why we kept him waiting!"

"No, sir! Bressac!"

There was some advantage in having one's officer be part of the captain's command group, Guillaume thought as he yelled at his men, pulling them out of the chain of sweating mercenaries swearing with all apparent honesty that physical labor was for serfs and varlets, not honest soldiers.

One is never short of news to sell, or rumors to barter. On the other hand—we get to be there when Spessart proves *why* he's a mercenary captain.

Guillaume had arrived sweating in the big central hall the monks used as their refectory, and not just because of the heat. A barked order got his men into escort positions around the captain—a round dozen European mercenaries in jacks and hose, most with billhooks resting back across their shoulders in a gleam of silver gray, much-sharpened metal.

"Nothing until the Boss says so," Marches warned.

The familiar tingle of tension and the piercing feeling in the pit of his belly began to build into excitement. Guillaume halted as Spessart did. A great gaggle of entirely unarmed men flooded into the hall from the door at the far end, wearing the green robes of the heretic Christianity practiced here. All uncertain, from their expressions, whether these Franks considered them proper clerks and so a bad idea to kill.

The hall smelled of cooking. Guillaume's gut growled as he stood <sup>1</sup> at Marches' shoulder. The older man kept his gaze on the hefty oak doors by which they had entered, in case someone should try to interrupt the captain during his deliberations. A wind blew in from the arid land outside, smelling of goats and male sweat and the sea.

Guillaume was conscious of the stiff weight of the jack buckled around his chest and the heat of plate

leg harness, articulations sliding with oiled precision—and of how *safe* one feels, ribs and groin and knees protected. A delusional safety, often enough; but the feeling obstinately remains.

"I understand there's trouble with the burials," Spessart rasped. His eyes swept over the African priests as a group, riot bothering, evidently, to concern himself with who exactly might be their Fa-ther-in-Christ. "What's the problem? Bury the bodies! We're not working for your masters, but common Christian charity demands it. Even if you are the wrong sort of Christians."

*Ah, that's our tactful captain.* Guillaume bit his lip to keep his smile from showing.

A tall man with a black-and-white badger beard stepped forward, waving his arms. "She isn't a man! She is an abomination! We will not have her soil the rocks of the graveyard here!"

"Ah. It's about Rosso. Now look, Father Abbot—"

A shorter, plumper man, perhaps five and thirty years old, stepped past the bearded man to the front of the group. He interrupted.

"I am abbot here. Prior Athanagild speaks for us all, I am afraid. We will bury no heathen whores pretending to be soldiers."

"Ah, *you're* the abbot. Tessier! I ordered you to find this man for me before now."

"Sir." The knight who was the officer of Guillaume's lance glared at Corporal Marches.

Before there could be recriminations, which was entirely possible with Tessier—the Burgundian knight was not a man to keep his mouth shut when it was necessary—Spessart turned back to the plump abbot.

"You, what's your name?"

"Muthari," the monk supplied. Guillaume saw a flash of annoyance from the man's eyes. "Abbot Lord-Father Muthari, if we are being formal, Captain."

"Formal be fucked." Spessart took one step forward, reversing the grip he had on his war hammer. He slammed the end of the shaft into the abbot's body between ribs and belly.

The monk sighed out a breathless exclamation, robbed of air by sheer pain, and dropped down on his knees.

"How many messengers have you sent out?" Spessart said. He stared down, evidently judging distance, drew back his boot, and kicked the gasping man. It would have been in the gut, but the abbot reared back and the boot caught him under his upper lip. Guillaume bit his own lip again to keep from laughing as the captain nearly overbalanced.

"How many of your rats have you sent off to Carthage?"

Blood leaked out of the abbot's mouth. "I— None!"

"Lying shitbag," Spessart announced reflectively. He shifted his grip expertly on the war hammer, grasping the leather binding at the end of the wooden shaft, and lightly stroked the kneeling man's, scalp with the beaked iron head. A streak of blood ran down from Muthari's tonsure.

"None, none, I haven't sent anybody!"

"All right." Guillaume saw the captain sigh. "When you're dead, we'll see if your prior's any more cooperative."

Spessart spoke in a businesslike tone. Guillaume tried to judge if that made it more frightening for the abbot, or if the chubby man was decoyed into thinking the captain didn't mean what he said. Guillaume's pulse beat harder. Every sense keyed up, he gripped the wooden shaft of the bill he carried, ready to swing it down into guard position. Constantly scanning the monks, the hall, his own men . . .

"Tessier." Spessart spoke without looking over his shoulder at the down-at-heels knight. "Make my point for me. Kill one of these priests."

Guillaume's gut cramped. Tessier already had his left hand bracing his scabbard, his thumb breaking the friction seal between that and the blade within. His other hand went across to the hilt of the bastard sword. He drew it in one smooth movement, whipping it over and down, aiming at a tall skinny novice at the front of the group.

The skinny novice, not over twenty and with a badly cropped tonsure, froze.

A tall monk with wreathes of gray white curls flowing down to his shoulders and the face of an *ex-nazir*, a Visigoth corporal, straight-armed the skinny guy out of the way.

The novice stumbled back from the outstretched arm—

Tessier's blade hit with a chopping, butcher's counter sound. Guillaume winced. The *nazir's* arm fell to the floor. Cut off just below the elbow. Arterial blood sprayed the six or seven men closest. They jolted back, exclaiming in disgust and fear.

The *ex-nazir monk* grunted, his mouth half open, appalled.

"*He Dieux!*" Tessier swore in irritation. He ignored the white-haired man, stepped forward, and

slammed the yard-long steel blade toward the side of the skinny novice's head.

Guillaume saw the boy try to back up, and not make it.

The sword's edge bit. He dropped too fast and too heavily, like a falling chunk of masonry, smacking facedown into the flagstones. A swath of red and gray shot up the whitewashed wall, then dripped untidily down. The young man sprawled on the stone floor under it, in widening rivulets of blood.

There is no mistaking that smell.

Tessier, who had brought two hands to the hilt on his stroke, bent and picked up a fold of the dead man's robe to clean his sword. He took no notice of the staring eyes a few inches away from his hand, or of the shouting, screaming crowd of monks.

Two of them had the white-haired man supported, one whipping his belt around the stump, the other talking in a high-pitched voice over the screaming; both of them all but dragging the man out— toward the infirmary, Guillaume guessed.

In the silence, one man retched, then vomited. Another made a tight, stifled sound. Guillaume heard a spatter of liquid on the flagstones. Someone involuntarily pissing from under their robes.

The tall, ancient prior whispered, his voice anguished and cracking. "Huneric! *Syros...*"

It looked as if he could not take his eyes off the young novice's sliced, bashed skull and the tanned, freckled forearm and hand of the older man.

The limb lay with the body on the stone floor, in wet blood, no one willing to touch it. Guillaume stifled a nauseous desire to laugh.

He saw Tessier glance back at the captain, face red. Anger and shame. *Messy. Not a clean kill.* The knight sheathed his sword and folded his arms, glaring at the remaining monks.

Guillaume understood the silence that filled the refectory. He had been on the other side of it. Men holding their breaths, thinking, Not me, oh Lord God! Don't let me be next! One of the slaves back at the kitchen door sniveled, crying wetly. His own chest felt tight. The captain of the Griffin-in-Gold has long held to the principle that it's easier to kill one or two men at the beginning to save hassle later on.

Guillaume wiped his mouth, not daring to spit in front of the captain. *He's right. Of course. Usually.*

"Now." Spessart turned back briskly toward Abbot Muthari, signing to Tessier with his hand.

"*Wait!*" The Lord-Father sprawled back untidily on the floor, his bare legs spread and visible under his robe. "Yes! I sent a novice!"

"Only one?"

The man's eyes were dazed. Muthari looked as though he could not understand how he came to be on the floor in front of his juniors, undignified, hurt, bleeding.

If he had any sense, he'd be grateful. Could be *him* dead or maimed. The captain is only keeping him alive because his men are used to him as their leader.

"No! Two! I sent Gauda, but Hierbas insisted he would go after."

"That's better. Which way did you send them?"

"Due west," the abbot choked out. Not with pain or fear, Guillaume saw, but shame. *He's betraying them in front of his congregation.* "I told them to stay off the main road from here, from Zarsis—"

Ah, is that where we are? And is it anywhere near where we *should* have dropped the supply cache?

Close enough to Tarabulus for the Turks to get here in time?

Guillaume kept his face impassive.

"They will be aiming for the garrison at Gabes. But traveling slowly. Because it is so far." The Lord-Father Muthari sat motionless, terror on his face, watching Spessart.

"There. I knew we could come to a mutual agreement."

The German soldier bent down, which did not necessitate him bending far, and held out his hand.

Too afraid not to, the fatter and taller man reached up and gripped it. Guillaume saw Spessart's face tense. He hauled the monk up onto his feet with one pull and a suppressed grunt of effort.

"This place will do as well as any for us to wait for our employers. Tessier, take your men out and find and capture the novices."

"Sir."

Tessier beckoned Marches. Guillaume glanced back and got his team together and ready with only eye contact.

"You cannot behave like this!" he heard Athanagild protesting; and Muthari's voice drowning the

bearded man out: "Captain, you will not harm any more of us; we are men of God—"

Three or four hours' searching in the later part of the afternoon had brought them up with the fleeing novices. To Guillaume's surprise, Tessier kept them alive. Guillaume, mouth filled with dirt by far too much scrambling up rocky slopes and striding down dusty gullies, was only too happy to prod them home with blows from the iron-ferruled butt end of his billhook.

He had seen the fugitives as he marched back into the refectory today. One, his gaze full of hatred, had whispered loudly enough to be heard. "I'll see you in Hell!"

Guillaume had grinned. "Save me a seat by the fire . . ."

Whether or not it was deliberate, today the German captain halted on the spot where the skinny, tall novice had been killed eighteen hours earlier.

The flagstones were clean now, but the whitewashed wall held a stain. The scrubbed, pale outlines of elongated splashes.

"I have no more patience!" Spessart snapped.

"Captain . . . *qa'id* . . ." Muthari blinked soft brown eyes as if in more than just physical pain. "Syros is dead. Huneric has now died. There must be no more killing—over a *woman*."

At the mention of the *cx-nazir* monk Huneric, Guillaume saw Tessier assume an air of quiet satisfaction. Vindication, perhaps.

"I don't want to kill a monastery full of priests," the captain remarked, his brilliant gaze turned up to Muthari. "It's bad luck, for one thing. We're stuck here until the Turkish navy turns up with expert carpenters, or the Turkish army turns up as reinforcements. Meantime, I'd rather keep you priests under lockdown than kill you. I aw//kill you, if you put me in a situation where I have to."

The abbot frowned. "Who knows who will come first? Your Turkish masters—or a legion from Carthage?"

"Oh, there is that. It's true we won't be popular if some *Legio* turns up on the doorstep here and finds an atrocity committed."

Johann Spessart smiled for the first time. Guillaume, as ever, could see why he didn't do it that often. His teeth were yellow and black, where they were not broken.

"Then again, if Hiiseyin Bey and his division come up that road . . . they'll want to know why we didn't crucify every last one of you on the olive trees."

Prior Athanagild looked appalled. "You would kill true Christians for a Turkish bey?"

"We'll kill anybody," Spessart said dryly. "Turk, Jew, heathen; Christian of whatever variety. I understand that's what they pay us for."

Abbot Muthari stiffened.

The fat priest is getting his balls back, Guillaume thought. Bad idea, Abbot.

Abbot Muthari said, "We *are* priests. We *are* gifted with the grace of God. You cannot force us to perform the small miracles of the day here. *You* may not need them. Can you know that all your men feel the same way?"

"No." Spessart's voice dropped to a harsh rasp. "I don't care. They're my men. They'll do what I tell them."

The captain raised his head to gaze up at the monks. It might almost have been comic. Guillaume would have bet Johann Christoph Spessart couldn't even be seen from the back of the crowd: he would be hidden below other men's shoulders. *But that isn't the point:*

Guillaume felt his chest tighten with disgust. Ashamed, he thought, On the field of battle, yes. But killing in cold blood turns my gut. Always has.

Spessart raised his voice to be heard all across the refectory. The voice of the commander of the Griffin-in-Gold was used to carrying through shrieks, trumpets, gunfire, steel weapons ripping into each other, the screams of the dying. Now it eradicated whispers, murmurs, protests.

Spessart said, "Understand me. I know very well, the sea is only a half mile from here. There are caves under this fort. Plenty of places to dispose of an embarrassing corpse. *Don't do it*"

Spessart paused. An absolute silence fell. Guillaume could hear his own heart beat in his ears.

The mercenary captain said, "If her corpse is moved, if you even attempt the sacrilege of touching her body except to inter it, / *will kill every human being over the age of thirteen in this place.*"

Yolande's lance handed over to Guillaume's at the Green Chapel without any opportunity for him to speak to her.

He fretted away three hours on guard, while Muthari and his fellow monks celebrated the offices of

Sext and Nones, the abbot with his nose screwed up but singing the prayers all the same, carefully walking around the blackening, softening body of Guido Rosso/ Margaret Hammond, as if she could not be deemed to share in the previous day's prayers for their own dead.

Guillaume and the squad occupied the back of the chapel, restless, in a clatter of boots, butt ends of billhooks, and sword pommels rubbing against armor.

"Spessart'll do it," the gruff northern *rosbif* Wainwright, muttered. "Done it before. But they're *monks*."

"Wrong sort of monks!" Bressac got in.

Wainwright scowled. "They're Christian, not heathen. I don't want to go to Hell just because I screwed some monks."

The Frenchman chuckled. "How if it were nuns, though?"

"Oh, be damned and happy, then!"

It was, to give them credit, ironically said. *And I have a taste for gallows humor myself*. Guillaume allowed himself a glance down the chapel at the celebrants: all white-faced, many of them counting out prayers on their acorn rosaries. "He's left us no choice, now."

There were murmurs of agreement. No man as reluctant as one might hope; long campaigning numbed the mind to such things.

All of the priests sang as if they were perfectly determined to go on this way through Terce, Sext, Nones, Vespers . . . all through the long day until sunset, and beyond. Compline, Matins, Prime. Every three hours upon the ringing of the carved hardwood bell.

I could pray, too, Guillaume reflected grimly, but only that they'll have given in before my next shift on guard. This place is getting *high*.

When Nones was sung—with some difficulty, down by the altar, because of the clustering flies—the Lord-Father Abbot paced his way back up the chapel, and stopped in front of Guillaume.

Before the Visigoth clerk could speak, Guillaume said grimly, "Bury Margaret Hammond, master. All you have to do is say a few words over her and put her under the rocks."

The boneyard was just visible through the open chapel doors—distant, away on the southern hill slopes. Cairns, to keep jackals and kites off. Red and ochre paint put on the rocks, in some weird Arian ceremony. But nonetheless a sort-of-Christian burial.

"Tell me, *fans*" the abbot said. "If we were to offer the heretic woman's heart in a lead casket, to be sealed and sent home to her family and buried there, would that content your captain?"

Guillaume felt an instant's hope. The Crusaders practiced this. But . . .

"No. He's put his balls on the line for a burial here. The guys want it. *Do* it."

"I would lose my monastery—the monks, that is."

Guillaume had an insight, staring at Muthari perspiring in his robes: Power always appears to lie with the leaders. But it doesn't. Under the surface, they're all trying to find out what the men need, what the men will leave for if they don't have it. . . .

Guillaume shrugged.

The abbot pulled out a Green Emperor rosary, kissed it, and returned to the altar.

When Guillaume's shift ended and he came out into the blazing afternoon sun, he thought: Where the hell is Yolande!

His mind presented him with the sheer line of her body from her calf and knee to her shapely thigh. The lacing of her doublet, stretched taut over the curves of her breasts. He felt the stir and fidget of his penis under his shirt, inside his cod-flap.

"Good God, Arnisout," the lanky blond billman, Cassell, said, walking beside him toward the tefits. "We know what *you're* thinking! She's old enough to be your grandmother."

"Yours, maybe," Guillaume said dryly, and was pleased with himself when Cassell blushed, now solely concerned with his own pride. Cassell was a billman very touchy about being seventeen.

"Catch you guys around." Guillaume increased his pace, walking off toward the area where the camp adjoined the old fort.

Yolande Vaudin—oh, that damn woman! Is she all right? Did she really have a *vision*?

He searched the clusters of tents inside the monastery walls, the crowded cook wagon, the speech-inhibiting clamor of the armorers' tent, and (with some reluctance) the ablutions shed. He climbed up one flight of the stone steps that lined the inner wall of the keep, with only open air and a drop on his right hand, and stared search-ingly down from the parapet.

*Fuck*. He narrowed his eyes against the sun that stung them. *Where is she?*

Yolande walked down the shadow of the western wall, in the impossible afternoon heat. She pulled at the strings of her coif, loosening it, allowing the faint hot breeze to move her hair. Off duty, no armor, and wearing nothing but hose, a thin doublet without sleeves, and a fine linen shirt, she still sweated enough to darken the cloth.

The rings in their snouts had not been sufficient to prevent the pigs rooting up the earth here. Fragments, hard as rock, caught between her bare toes. She paused as she came to the corner of the fort wall, reaching out one arm to steady herself and brushing her hand roughly across the sole of her foot.

As she bent, she glimpsed people ahead under a cloth awning. Ricimer. The abbot Muthari. Standing among a crowd of sleeping hogs. She froze. They did not see her.

The priest swiftly put out a hand.

What Yolande assumed would be a cuff, hitting a slave in the face, turned out to be a ruffle of Ric's dark hair.

With a smile and some unintelligible comment, the Lord-Father Muthari turned away, picking his way surefootedly between the mounds that were sleeping boars.

Yolande waited until he had gone. She straightened up. Ricimer turned his head.

"Is that guy Guillaume with you? Is he going to kill my pigs?"

"Not right now. Probably later. Yes." She looked at him. "There isn't anything I can do."

He was white to the thighs with dust. Yolande gazed at the lean lumps of bodies sprawled around him in the shade cast by linen awnings on poles. Perhaps two dozen adult swine.

"You have to do something! You owe me!"

"Nobody owes a slave!" Yolande regretted her spite instantly. "No—I'm sorry. I came here to say I'm sorry."

Ric narrowed his eyes. His lips pressed together. It was an adult expression: full of hatred, determination, panic. She jerked her head away, avoiding his eyes.

Who would have thought?. So this is what he looks like when he isn't devout and visionary. When he isn't meek.

The young man's voice was insistent. "I gave you God's vision. You left me. You owe me!"

Yolande shook her head more at herself than him as she walked forward. "I shouldn't have left you sick. But I can't do anything about your pigs. We won't pass up fresh pork."

One of the swine lifted a snout and blinked black eyes at her. Yolande halted.

"I want to talk to you, Ric," she said grimly. "About the vision. Come out of there. Or get rid of the beasts."

The boy pushed the flopping hair back out of his face. The light through the unbleached linen softened everything under the awning. She saw him glance at her, at the pigs—and sit himself down on the earth, legs folded, in the middle of the herd. . "You want to talk to me," he repeated.

Yolande, taken aback, shot a glance around—awnings, then nothing but low brick sheds all along the south wall, driftwood used for their flat roofs. Pig sheds. Stone troughs stood at intervals, the earth even more broken up where they were. *A dirty, dangerous animal.*

"Okay." She could not help her expression. "Okay."

She stepped forward, ducking under the awning, her bare feet coming down within inches of the round-bellied and lean-spined beasts.

The boar is the most ferocious of the wild animals: that is why so many knights have it as their heraldry. And what is a pig but a tame boar?

And they're huge. Yolande found herself treading up on her toes, being quiet enough that she heard their breathy snorts and snores. What had seemed no more than dog-sized, walking with Ricimer, was visibly five or six feet long laying down on its side. And their heads, so much larger than human heads. It's not right for *a face to* be so big.

"Now—you can tell me about the vision." Yolande kept her conciliatory tone with an effort. "And I mean *tell* me about it. No more putting visions in my head! I don't know what I'm meant to make of that. What God wants me to do. But I do know it scared me."

The young man ignored her.

"I'm getting a farrowing shed ready." Ric nodded across to the huts against the wall.

Yolande saw one with the wooden door standing open, and bracken and thin straw piled inside on sand used for litter.

So those strip fields do yield a grain or two—I thought we were never going to eat anything else but tunny.

"Screw your goddamned farrowing shed! I want to know—"

"So I ought to be working," he interrupted, glancing around, as slaves do. "I want to speak to you."

"What about?"

Another nod of his head, this time taking in the sprawled and noon-doing swine. "These. They *have* to be safe!"

"Ric, they're .. />zgs." Yolande took her courage in both her hands and squatted down. This close, there was a scent to the pigs—more spicy and vegetable than those back home; Particularly the boars'. And they were not dirty. A little dusty only.

Mud—that's what I'm missing. I expected them to be covered in mud and shit. . . . Maybe they have dust baths here, like chickens.

She felt the shaded earth cooler under her hands, and sat down nervously, shifting her gaze from one to the other of the large animals. "Your church is different; Leviticus, I suppose. 'Unclean flesh.' We just. . . eat them."

"No, not these!"

His vehemence startled the animals. One of the younger swine got up from a heap of gilts, with much thrashing and rolling, and stood with its head hanging down, peering directly at Yolande. It began to move toward her, agile now it was on its feet.

About to jump back, she felt Ric's large hand grip her upper arm. If she had not been so disturbed, he would not have come that close. She restrained herself only an instant from smashing her elbow into his nose.

"You can stroke her."

Held, Yolande was motionless on the ground for just long enough that the pig ambled up to her, wrinkled its slightly damp snout forward and back, scenting her.

The boy's hand pushed her arm forward. Her fingers touched the sow's warm flank. She expected it to snap; tensed to snatch back her hand.

It slowly moved, easing itself down toward the earth—and fell over sideways.

"What?" Yolande said.

The boy's hand released her. "Her name is Misratak—like the salt marshes? Scratch her chest. She likes that."

Misratak had her eyes closed. Yolande sat, more terrified by the animal's proximity than by the fight on the deck of the galley. It shifted its snout closer to her thigh and—eyes still closed—gave a firm and slightly painful nudge.

"Hell!" she yelped.

Ricimer's strained face took on a grin. "You don't want her to rootle you hard! Scratch her!"

Yolande reached out again to the slumped, breathing body of the pig. She encountered a warm, soft pelt. She dug her fingers into the coarse hair over the pig's ribs. The body rolled—leaning over, disclosing the teat-studded belly. A grunt made the flesh vibrate under Yolande's fingers. The dense, solid body shifted. She startled.

"You just got to be careful. They're big and heavy." The young man spoke with a quiet professionalism, as if they were not in the middle of a quarrel. "She would only hurt you without meaning it."

"Oh, that's a comfort!"

The sow's long body rolled over even further onto its side, with a resonant short grunt. Misratak stretched out all four long legs simultaneously, as a dog stretches, and then relaxed.

"It's solid." Yolande pushed the pads of her bare fingers against meat-covered ribs. "Hard."

"It's all muscle. That's how come they move so fast? *Bang!*" His illustration, palms slammed together, made a couple of the larger boars lift their heads, giving their swineherd a so-human stare.

"One minute they're standing, next second they're in your lap. All muscle. Three hundred pounds. You can't force them out of the way. If they want something, they'll push their way to it." Ric gave her a mock malicious grin of warning. "Whatever you do, don't stop scratching. . . ."

There was something not entirely unpleasant about sitting on the dry ground, surrounded by breathing clean animals, with her fingers calling out a response of satisfaction from Misratak.

"Oh . . . I get it." Yolande ran tickling fingers down the hairless skin. The pig in front of her let its head fall back in total abandon, four legs splayed, smooth belly exposed. It grumped. "They're like hounds."

He pounced. "So how can you *eat* them!"

"Yeah, well, you know what they say about hounds—eight years old, they're not fit to do more than lick ladles in the kitchen. Nine years old, they're saddle leather."



"*Shit.*" Ric put his hand over his mouth.

"No one's going to listen to me, frankly," Yolande said. "If I go to Spessart. . . He's over in the command tent right now, thinking, 'Rosso's giving me trouble even when she's *dead.*'" What's he going to say if another woman comes in and asks him to please not slaughter the local swine? I'll tell you what he'll say: 'Get the fuck—'"

"All right!"

Her thoughts completed it: Get the fuck out of here and back to the baggage train; quit using the crossbow, because you're plain crazy.

Prostitution again, at my age?

Ric glared at her, rigid and angry. His fury and disappointment stung her in a raw way she had thought could no longer happen.

"Ask Guillaume Arnisout." The words were out of her mouth before she thought about them. *But it isn't that stupid an idea.* "Guillaume's a man. He might get listened to. If you can get him to speak for you. Wouldn't the abbot try to speak for you? He's your master?"

"My master—"

He broke off. A different pig heaved herself up, walked forward, dipped her snout to Ric's knee where he sat, and with slow deliberation let herself fall down with her spine snug up against his leg.

"Lully . . ." The boy slid his fingers down behind her ear, into the soft places. Yolande thought, Dear God, I recognize *a pig*. This is the one he had at the chapel.

"I've been here since I was eight." Ric's girl-long lashes blinked down. "I don't remember much before. A banking house. The men used to travel a lot. I used to hold the horses' reins for them."

Yolande could picture him as a page, small and slender and dark-haired. He would have been attractive, which was never an advantage for a slave.

I wonder how much the fat Lord-Abbot paid for the boy? And how much he would ask for him now?

She caught herself. No. Don't be a fool. The most you can afford is a few deniers for someone from the baggage train to help armor you up. You can't pay the price needed to get a full-time page or varlet.

Maybe I could borrow the money. . . .

"And then," Ric said. "And—then. The Lord-Father came. Abbot Muthari. I have to know!"

Her expression must be blank, she realized.

"My *master*: Your *qa'iifs* going to kill him, isn't he?"

"If he doesn't bury Margaret."

"He won't do that." Ricimer wiped at his face, leaving it white with dust, his eyes showing up dark and puffy. "He won't. I know he won't."

"Look, you'll be all right; you can pass for under thirteen, if you try -"

"That's not it!" His anger flashed out at her. "The Lord-Father— he mustn't be killed! You're *not going* to kill him. Please!"

"Muthari?" Yolande found herself bewildered. "You want *Mudari's* life, too? Your master?"

"Yes!"

He spoke vehemently, where he sat, but with a restraint unlike such a young man. Certainly her son Jean-Philippe was never prone to it.

He doesn't want to startle his animals.

"I'll tell." His eyes fixed on her. "I'll tell my abbot and your *qa'id*. You had a vision. You did sorcery."

Yolande stared. A threat. ^ "You said it was from God! That's what I came here to ask—what it means—what I'm supposed to do with— *Sorcery?*"

"It was from God. But I'll say it wasn't."

Slaves have to be shrewd. She had seen slaves in Constantinople who maneuvered the paths of politics with far more skill than their masters. Being able to be killed with no more thought than men give to the slaughter of a farmyard animal will do that to you. Slaves listen. Notice. Notice what Spessart says to Muthari, and how the Lord-Father reacts, and what the mercenary captain needs right now . . . because knowledge, information, that's all a slave has.

Ric said, "I counted. There's a hundred of you. There are seventy monks here. Your *qa'id* needs the place kept quiet. If he hears about a woman having visions from God . . . that's trouble. He can't have trouble."

Well, damn. *Listen* to the boy.

Yes, the company's no larger than a *centenier* right now. And, yes, he can threaten to tell Spessart. The captain's always been half and half about women soldiers: wants us when we're good, doesn't want

any of the trouble that might come with us.

"I'll tell them you made me do it," he added. "The sorcery. They'll believe it."

"They will, too." Yolande gazed down at him. *Because I'm old enough to be your mother.* "They probably would burn me. Even Spessart wouldn't tolerate a witch," she said quietly. "But Spessart doesn't have any patience. He solves most problems by killing them. Including heretic priests who have heretic visionaries in their -monastery."

Ric stared, his face appalled.

Yolande put her hands in the small of her back, stretching away a sudden tension. "The Griffin-in-Gold is a hard company. I joined to kill soldiers, not noncombatants. But there's enough guys here who just don't care who they kill."

A crescent of light ran all along both underlids of the boy's eyes.

A gathering of water. She watched him swallow, shake his head, and suppress all signs of tears.

"I *won't* have the Lord-Father die. I won't have my pigs *eaten*"

"You may not be able to stop it." Yolande tried to speak gently. , "I had another dream."

For a second she did not understand what he had said.

His voice squeaked: adolescent. "I don't understand it. I didn't *understand*'the *firstone*."

Yolande's breath hitched in her throat. No. He's lying. Obviously!

"Another dream for me?"

*Another vision?*

This is some kind of threat to strong-arm me into protecting his pigs and Muthari's arse. . . . *Muthari.*  
His master. His pigs.

He's just trying to look after his own.

Without preamble, not stopping for cowardice, she demanded, "Give me this second vision, then!"

The wind blew the scent of rock-honey, and pigs, and she was close enough to the young man to smell his male sweat. Ric's dark eyes met hers, and she saw for the first time that he was fractionally taller than she.

He said, "*I have* to! It's God's. If I could hold it back any longer, until you promise to help . . . I *can't*. We have to go to the Green Chapel!"

There's no time. I'm on duty again in an hour. And how can I sneak him in there to have a vision—if I do—with the captain's guard on the place?

The next thought followed hard on that one, and she nodded to herself.

"Meet me outside the chapel. Two hours. Vespers. We'll see if you're lying or not."

A young voice emerged from the depths of the dimly lit Green Chapel. "Christ up a Tree, it stinks in here!"

Guillaume grinned as he entered from checking the sentries. "Cassell, I think that's the idea"

Ukridge and Bressac snickered; Guillaume decided he could afford not to hear them. *The more bitching they do about this duty, the less likely they are to slide off to the baggage-train trollops and make me put them up for punishment detail in the morning.*

Bressac got up and paced around on the cold tiles, evidently hoping to gain warmth by the movement. He did not look as though he were succeeding. Now that it was past Vespers, it was cold. Guillaume pulled his heavy lined wool cloak more securely around him. The other Frenchman walked over to the woman's body, where it lay swollen and chill in front of the altar, under a lamp and the face of Vir Viridianus.

"You'd think she wouldn't smell so much in this cold."

"This is nothing. You want *real* smell, you wait until tomorrow." Guillaume, feeling the tip of his nose numb with cold, found it difficult to remember the blazing heat of the day. He kept it in his memory by a rational effort.

Bressac paced back to the group. "I went to an autopsy once. Up in Padua? Mind, that corpse was fresh; smelled better than this.... They were doing it in a church. Poor bitch had her entrails spilled out in front of two hundred Dominican monks. And she was some shop owner's wife: doubt she even showed an ankle in public before."

"Some of those Italians . . ." Ukridge gave a shrill whistle at odds with his beef-and-bread English bulk. "Over in Venice, they wear their tits out on top of their gowns. I mean, shit, nipples and everything . . ."

"So that's how you know the Italian for 'get your tits out for the lads'?" Cassell's chuckle spluttered off into laughs and yelps as the big man got him in a headlock and ruffled his coarse brown hair.

A voice over by the door exclaimed, "Viridianus! I prefer the company of *real* pigs to you guys."

*Yolande!* Guillaume saw Bressac look up and chuckle with an air of familiarity as Lee and Wainwright,

outside, passed the crossbow woman in. *She certainly picks her moment.*

Bressac called, "Come on in, 'Lande. Bring a bit of class to the occasion."

Guillaume managed to stop himself from bristling at the other Frenchman's informality. It was no more than the usual way of treating her: somewhere between a whore and a friend and a mother. For a moment he felt shame about his desire for the older woman.

A shorter figure emerged from the dark shadows behind the crossbow woman..Ric's still alive, then, Guillaume thought sourly.

Not that much shorter, he abruptly realized. Is she really no taller than a youth?

"You ought to be pious," the boy said, with an apparent calm that Guillaume found himself admiring. It took courage to face down heavily armed Frankish mercenaries. "If she's your friend, this dead woman, you don't want to disgrace her."

"Little nun!" Ukridge jeered, but it was sotto voce.

Guillaume judged it time to speak. "The boy's right. Rosso's still one of the company. This is a dead-watch, no matter why the Boss put her here. Let's have a little respect."

There was muttering, but it seemed to be in general agreement, with no more than the normal soldiers' dislike for being told to do something.

"She's still working for the company," Guillaume added. "Or she will be, when the sun comes up."

Bressac snickered approvingly.

Guillaume nodded to Yolande, feeling awkwardly formal in his command role—even if it is only five grunts and the metaphorical dog... . *hardly company commander.* He studied her as well as he could in the light of two pierced-iron lanterns. Even with the door of one lantern unlatched—he leaned over and unhooked the catch—it was difficult to read her expression by a tallow candle's smoky, reeking light.

Yolande's mouth seemed tightly shut, the ends of her lips clamped down in white, strained determination. Her eyes were dark, and they met his with such directness that he almost flinched away, thinking she could read his lust.

But she doesn't seem to mind that.

She's afraid, I think.

"I might need you to bring me back, Guillaume."

Ignoring the puzzled remarks of the other men, Guillaume exploded. "You've come here for that? You're not letting that damn pig-boy practice sorcery on you again!"

She flinched at the word. "It isn't sorcery. He has grace. It's prayer."

"It's dangerous." Guillaume blinked a sudden rolling drop of sweat out of one eye. The moisture was stingingly cold. "You were somewhere else, 'Lande. Your spirit was. What happens if you don't come back? What happens if he has another fit! What if you do? What if God's too much for you?"

The holm-oak carving over the altar was only a collection of faint highlights off polished wood, not distinguishable as a face.

With a shudder he would have derided in another man, Guillaume said, "I believe in God. I've seen as many miracles as the next man. I just don't believe in a *loving* God."

"It's all right." Her smile suggested that she was aware of his reasons for being overprotective. He searched for signs that she was angry. He saw none.

"I'm going to pray now." She walked to the altar. Guillaume saw her reach for the lantern there. She bent down, holding it close to the corpse.

"*Shit...*" The stench made Yolande clamp her hand over her mouth.

By the lantern's light, Guillaume saw that Margaret Hammond's bare hands and feet were white on top, purple underneath, flesh shrinking back to the bone. On duty here, you could watch her flesh shrink, swell, bubble. The front of her head, where her face had been, was black, lumpy, wriggling with mites. Her slim belly had blown out, and contained by the jack she wore, it made her corpse look ludicrously pregnant.

Yolande's voice sounded low, angry. "She should have been buried before we saw her like this!"

She knelt down clumsily on the cold stone tiles by Margaret Hammond's reeking body. The knees of her hose became stained with the body fluids of her friend. She closed her eyes,, and Guillaume saw her place her hands across her face—across her nose, likely—and then bring them down to her breast, where she still wore the mail shirt over her gambeson and doublet.

Layers of wool, for the cold nights . . . under which would be her breasts, warm and soft.

Breasts pulled with the suckling of one boy who would be older now than Cassell, if he had lived. *I need to forget that. It's—confusing.*

"What's she doing?" Cassell asked in a subdued voice.

"The boy gets visions. *Gives* visions," Guillaume corrected himself.

A mixture of respect and fear was in the air. God has His ways of sending visions, dreams, and prophecies to men. Usually through His priests, but not always. It is not unusual for someone born a peasant, say, in a small village near Domremy, to rise to be a military prophet by God's grace.

Guillaume shivered. And if Ricimer is that, too? The Pucelle put the king of France back on his throne. The last thing we need is a male Pucelle out of Carthage, knocking the Turks arse over tit. Not while we're signed up with the Bloody Crescent.

The young man brushed past Guillaume, toward Yolande, catching his gawky elbow against the heavy wool cloak. Guillaume watched Ric's back as he walked up behind her. His voice was gruff, with the cracks of young manhood apparent in it.

"I still have your rosary."

"Yes. Yes, of course." Yolande put her hand to her neck. She let it fall down onto her thighs, where she knelt. "Show me more."

"But—these men—"

"Show me more."

*It's nothing but the repetition of the words in a different tone.* Guillaume doubted she even knew she was doing it. But her voice carried the authority of her years. And the authority that comes with being shot, shelled, and generally shat on, on the field of battle. *The pig-boy doesn't stand a chance.*

"I need to pray first." Ric's thinner frame was silhouetted against the altar, where the second lantern stood. He knelt down beside the crossbow woman. Out of the corner of his eye, Guillaume saw that Bressac and Cassell had both linked their hands across their breasts and closed their eyes. Sentimental idiots.

Ukridge put his water container to his lips, drank, wiped his face with the back of his hand, and suppressed a loud belch to a muffled squeak.

The pig-boy sat back on his heels and held up the woman's rosary. The dark wood was barely visible against the surrounding dimness of the chapel.

"Look at the light." Ric's voice sounded more assured. "Keep looking at the light. God will send you what is good for you to know. Vir Viridianus, born of the Leaf-Empress, bound to the Tree and broken ..."

The words of the prayer were not different enough. They skidded off the surface of Guillaume's attention. He found himself far from pious, watching the woman and the boy with acute fear.

Yolande stood up.

She said, very clearly, "*Shit.*"

She fell backward.

She fell back utterly bonelessly. Guillaume threw himself forward. He got his sheepskin-mittened hands there just in time to catch her skull before it thumped down on the tiles. He yelled with the pain of the heavy weight crushing his fingers between floor and scalp-padded bone. Bressac and Cassell leaped forward, startled, • drawing their daggers in the same instant.

Guillaume stared at the pig-boy across Yolande's body. Yolande Vaudin, laid out beside Margaret Hammond's corpse, in precisely the same position.

*"Get her back!"*

Sand had sifted into the gaps between the small flat paving stones so no grass or mold could grow between them. Dry sand. No green grass.

One of the old Punic roads, Yolande thought. Like the Via Ae-milia, down through the Warring States, but this doesn't look like Italy. ...

The oddest thing about the vision, she thought, was that she was herself in it. A middle-aged and tired soldier. A woman currently worrying that hot flushes and night sweats mean she's past bearing another child. A woman who curses the memory of her only, her dead, son because, God's teeth, even stupid *civilians* have enough sense to stay alive—even a goddamned *swineherd* has enough sense to stay alive, in a war—and he didn't. He died like just another idiot boy.

"Yeah, but they do," a stranger's voice said, and added in a considering manner: "*We* do. If shit happens."

The stranger was a woman, possibly, and Yolande smiled to see it was another woman disguised as a man.

This one had the wide face and moon-pale hair of the far north, and a band of glass across her eyes so

that Yolande could not see her expression. Her clothes were not very different from those that Yolande was familiar with: the hose much looser, and tucked into low, heavy boots. A doublet of the same drab color. And a strange piece of headgear, a very round sky-colored cap with no brim. But Yolande has long ago discovered in her trailing around with the Grif-fin-in-Gold that all headgear is ridiculous. Between different countries, different peoples, nothing is so ridiculous as hats.

"This is Carthage," Yolande said suddenly. "I didn't recognize it in the light."

Or, to be accurate, it is not far outside the city walls, on the desert side. A slope hides the main city from her. Here there are streets of low, square, white-painted houses, with blank frontages infested with wires. And crowds of people in robes, as well as more people in drab doublets and loose hose.

And the sky is brilliant blue. As brilliant as it is over Italy, where she has also fought. As bright and sun-infested as it is in Egypt, where the stinging power of it made her eyes water, and made her wear the strips of dark cloth across her eyes that filter out something of the light's power.

Carthage should be Under the Penitence. Should have nothing but blackness in its warm, daytime skies.

This is a vision of the world much removed from me, if the Penitence is absolved, or atoned for.

"What have you got to tell me?"

"Let's walk." The other woman smiled and briefly took off the glass that shielded her eyes. She had brilliant blue cornflower eyes that were very merry.

Yolande shrugged and fell in beside her. The woman's walk was alert, careful. She expects to be ambushed, here? Yolande glanced ahead. There were six or seven men in the same drab clothing. Skirmishers? Aforeriders? Moving as a unit, and this woman last in the team. They walked down the worn paving of the narrow road. People drifted back from them.

This is a road I once walked, a few years back, under the Darkness that covered Carthage.

And that, too, is reasonable: it's very rare for visions to show you something you haven't seen for yourself previously. This is the road to the temple where she sacrificed, once, for her son Jean-Philippe's soul in the Woods beyond the living world.

A stiff, brisk breeze smelled of salt. She couldn't see the sea, but it must be close. Other people passed their chevauchee, chattering, with curious glances—at the woman in the loose drab hose, Yolande noted, not at herself. The woman carried something under her arm that might have been a very slender, very well-niade arquebus, if such things existed in God's world. It must be a weapon, by the way that the passing men were reacting to it.

Topping the rise, Yolande saw no walls of Carthage. There was a mass of low buildings, but no towering cliffs. And no harbors full of the ships from halfway around the world and more.

*No harbors at Carthage!*

Of the temple on this hill, nothing at all remained but two white marble pillars broken off before their crowns.

A dozen boys were kicking a slick black-and-white ball around on the dusty earth, and one measured a shot and sent the ball squarely between the pillars as she watched.

That's English football! Margie described it to me once... .

Yolande watched, walking past, trailing behind the team. Children playing football in the remains of Elissa's chapel. Elissa, called the Wanderer, the *Dido*; who founded this city from Phoenician Tyre, eons before the Visigoths sailed across from Spain and conquered it. Elissa, who was never a mother, unless to a civilization, so maybe not a good place for a mother's prayer.

Nothing left of Elissa's temple now, under this unfamiliar light.

"Is that what I'm here to see?" she asked, not turning to look at the woman's face as they walked. "Do you think I need telling that everything dies? That everything gets forgotten? That none of us are going to be remembered?"

"Is that what you need?"

The strange woman's voice was measured, with authority in it, but it was not a spiritual authority; Yolande recognized it.

"Is *that hi*: That you're a soldier?" Yolande smiled with something between cynicism and relief. "Is that what I'm being shown? That we will be recognized, one day? You're still disguised as a man."

The woman looked down at herself, seemingly startled, and then grinned. "Of course. That's what it would look like, to you. And you'd think my dress blues were indecent, I should think. Skirts at knee-level."

Yolande, ignoring what the woman was saying in favor of the tone in which it was said, frowned at what she picked up. "You . . . don't think I'm here, do you?"

The other woman shook her head. "This is just a head game. Something I do every time we check out

the ruins."

The woman's strange accent became more pronounced.

"We're not over here to fight. We're here to stop people fighting. Or, that's what it should be. But. . ."

A shrug, that says—Yolande fears it says—that things are still the same as they ever were. Yolande thought of the "archaeologist," her hands muddy with digging, her face impassioned with revulsion at the prior behavior of what she unearthed.

"Why *are we* doing this?" she said.

"You mean: it's such a shit job, and we don't even get the recognition?" The woman nodded agreement. "Yeah. Good question. And you can never trust the media."

A grinding clatter of carts going past sounded on the road at the foot of the hill. No, not carts, Yolande realized abruptly. Iron war wagons, with culverin pointed out of the front, like the Hussites use in battle. No draft beasts drawing them, but then, this is a vision.

"Judges, chapter one, verse nineteen!" Yolande exclaimed, made cheerful. Father Augustine used to read the Holy Word through and through, at his classes with the prostitutes in the baggage train. She remembered some parts word for word. "And the Lord was with Judah; and he drove out the inhabitants of the mountain; but could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley, because they had chariots of iron!"

"K78s." The other woman grinned back. "Counter-grav tanks. They're *crap*. The K81's much better."

Yolande peered down toward the road. Dust drifted up so that she could no longer see the pale-painted chariots of iron. "So why not use the—K81—instead?"

The other woman's tone took on a familiar and comfortable sound. Soldiers' bitching.

"Oh . . . because all the tank transporters are built to take the K78. And all the workshops are set up for it, and the technicians trained to repair it. And the aircraft transport bay pods are made to the width of the K78's tracks. And the manufacturers make the shells and the parts for the K78, and the crew are trained to *use* the K78, and . . ."

She grinned at Yolande, teeth white below her strip of dark glass. "Logistics, as always. You'd have to change everything. So we end up with something that's substandard because that's what we can support. If we had the K81s, we'd be stuffed the first time one of them stripped its gears. . . ."

Yolande blinked in the amazing Carthaginian sunlight. "To change one thing . . . you have to change everything?"

The other woman stepped back from the edge of the bluff, automatically scanning the positions of the men in her team. "Yeah. But, be fair: the K78 was state-of-the-art in its day. It just takes decades to get the next version up and running and into the field—"

A black hole appeared on the woman's shoulder, far to the right, just below the collarbone.

In a split second, Yolande saw the woman's white face turn whiter and her hand go to her doublet. Saw her scream, her hand pressing a box fixed to her breast. Saw the neat wound flow out and darken all the cloth around it. And heard, in the dry morning, the very muffled crack that was too quiet, but otherwise resembled gunfire.

Soldiers shouted, orders erupting. The woman took three long, comically staggering steps and ended rolling into the shade and cover of one of Elissa's pillars. There were no children. The slick-surfaced ball remained, perfectly still on the sun-hardened earth.

"Doesn't anything change?" Yolande demanded. She stood still, not diving for cover. "Why *are we* doing this?"

The woman shouted at the small box as if it could help her.

Not a serious wound, unless things have gravely changed—and yet they may have: obviously have, if an arquebus ball is no longer heavy enough to shatter the bones of a shoulder joint.

Yolande saw puffs of dust and stone chippings kick up out of the old Punic road toward her. The hidden man with the arquebus is walking his shots onto target, like a gun crew with a culverin. Sniping, as she does with her crossbow. But the reload time is amazing: *crack-crack-crack!*, all in the space of a few rapid heartbeats.

I can't be hurt in a vision.

The world went dark with a wrench that was too great for pain, but pain would come afterward, in a split second—

No pain.

Dark . . .

It's dark because this is the chapel, she realized.

The dark of a church, at night, lit only by a couple of lanterns.

She was lying on the glazed tiles, she discovered. Or at least was in a half-sitting position, her torso

supported against the knees and chest of Guillaume Arnisout. He was shivering, in the stone's chill. His wool cloak was wrapped around her body.

She thought she ought to be warm, with his body heat pressed so close against her, but she was freezing. All cold—all except what had been hot liquid between her legs, and was now tepid and clammy linen under herwoolen hose.

Embarrassed, she froze. Bad enough to be female, but these guys can just about cope with thinking of her as a beautiful hard case: a woman warrior. If they have to see me as a fat, middle-aged woman, cold white buttocks damp with her own pee . . . No romance in *that*.

Ah—the cloak—they can't see—

"You had foam coming out of your mouth." The youngest man, Cassell, spoke. She could hear how scared he was.

"You had a fit." Guillaume Arnisout sounded determined about it. "I warned you, you stupid woman!"

Ukridge peered out of the dark by the door. "It isn't Godly! It's a devil, in't it!"

Yolande snickered at his expression: a big man wary as a harvest mouse. She extricated her arm from the cloak and wiped her nose.

"It'sgrace," she said. "It's just the same as Father Augustine when he prays—prayed—over the wounded. Calling on God's grace for a small miracle. A vision's the same."

Guillaume's voice vibrated through her body. "Is it? 'Lande, you have to stop this!"

She thought Guillaume sounded the least scared so far. And way too concerned. She moved, unseen in the near dark, wrapping the cloak's folds around her now-chilled thighs.

I hope they can't read him as easily as I can. He'll be ribbed unmercifully. And he's . . . well. He doesn't deserve that.

She looked around. "Where's Ric?"

"Ric is the swineherd?" Bressac enquired, looming up into the candlelight from the darkness by the far door. "We threw him out. No need to be afraid of him, Yolande. We can keep him away from you."

"But—did he have a fit? Was he hurt?"

Guillaume shrugged, his chest and shoulder moving against her back, unexpectedly intimate.

She realized she was smelling the stink of meat gone off.

Lord God! That's still Margie, there. Tell me how this vision helps *her*.

"I don't understand," she whispered, frustrated.

Guillaume Arnisout grinned, mock consoling. "'Salright, girl. Me neither!"

Yolande reached her hand up and touched the rough stubble on his jaw.

She would pray, she would sleep, she would question the boy again, and maybe one of the Arian priests, too: she knew that. For this moment, all she wanted to do was rest back against the man who held her, his straggling black hair touching her cheek, and his arms shuddering with cold because he had covered her.

But it's never that easy.

She got to her feet, fastening the cloak around her neck, and walked to the altar. She reached up and took the carved Face down from the wall.

She heard one of the men curse behind her. It came down easily. Someone had fixed the Face there with a couple of nails and a length of twisted wire, and under it, covered but not expunged, was painted a woman's face.

Her nose was flat, and her eyes strangely shaped in a way that Yolande couldn't define. The worn paint on the stone made her skin look brownish-yellow. There were leaves and berries and ferns in her hair, so many that you could barely see her hair was black. Her eyes, also, were painted black—black as tar.

There was no more of her than the face, surrounded by painted flames. Elissa, who died on a pyre? Astarte the child-eater goddess?

"Elissa," the young man Cassell said, prompt on her thoughts. Still holding the Face in her hands, she turned to look at him.

He blushed and said, "She founded New City, *Qart-hadasht*, before the Lord Emperor Christ was born. She set up the big temple of Astarte. The one the Arians took over, with the dome? She took a Turkish priest off Cyprus, on her way from Tyre—a priest of Astarte. That's why they think Carthage is their Holy City. The Turks, I mean. Like Rome, for us. Even though there's no priests of Astarte there anymore."

Yolande lifted the carved oak Face and replaced it, with a fumble or two, against the bitter chill stone wall.

"They'll be pleased when they get here," Guillaume's gruff voice said behind her. "The Beys. She looks one tough bitch, too."

"They used to burn their firstborn sons as sacrifices to her," the Frenchman, Bressac, added. "WAatP'Wha.t did I say?"

"I'm going back to my tent," Yolande said. "Guillaume, if you don't mind, I'll give you the cloak back in the morning."

Guillaume Arnisout slipped out in the early morning for his ablutions.

If I move *fast*, I can call on Yolande before rollcall. . . .

It was just after dawn. The air was still cool. He picked his way among the thousands of guy ropes spider-webbing between squad tents. A few early risers sat, shoulders hunched, persuading camp fires to light. Moisture kept the dust underfoot from rising as his boots hit the dirt. He scratched in the roots of his hair as he walked down past the side of the monks' compound to the lavatory.

It was a knock-together affair—whatever the Arian monks were, they weren't carpenters. A long shack was built down the far. side of the compound on the top of a low ridge, so that the night soil could fall down into the ditch behind, where it could be collected to put on the strip fields later.

Best of luck with mine, Guillaume thought sardonically. Usually, with the wine in these parts, I could do it through the eye of a cobbler's needle. Now? You could load it into a swivel gun and shoot it clear through a castle wall. . . .

The lavatories were arranged on the old Punic model: a row of holes cut into wooden planks, and a sponge in a vinegar bowl. With a sigh, Guillaume pulled the lacing of his Italian doublet undone. He slid doublet and hose down in one piece, to save untying the points at his waist that joined them together. Slipping his braies down, he sat. The morning air was pleasant, cool with just his shirt covering his torso.

So—am I going to make my approach to Yolande? Because I think the door is unbarred. I *think* so . . .

He sat peacefully undisturbed for a number of minutes, having the place to himself. He listened to the clatter of pans from the monks' kitchen, and heard a rustling of rats here and there across the courtyard and below him in the ditch. There was more movement now the sun was up, but this yard remained deserted.

Abbot Muthari and his monks rang for service every hour through the night. They *can't* keep that up; they're bound to quit today and plant her . . . she's starting to leak over the floor.

If it was me, I wouldn't worry about a dead archer, no matter how smelly she's getting. I'd worry about the live archer. *Two* visions! You can't tell me she didn't have another one, in the chapel. I need to get Lande away from that damned kid. . . .

"Ah, *DieuxV* Guillaume folded his arms across his belly and bent forward a little to alleviate his sudden cramp. A spasm eased him. He sighed with happiness, feeling his body begin another.

A cold, hard object suddenly shoved up against his dilated anus.

It hit with surprising force, lifting him an inch off the plank. Before he could react in any way, something warm and wet wiped itself almost instantaneously from his scrotum down the crack of his arse, and finished at his anus again.

He was not conscious that he screamed, or that his flesh puckered up and shut in a fraction of a second. The next thing he knew, he was hopping out into the courtyard, his hose trapped around his ankles, hobbling him, and the rest of his clothes pulling behind him through the dust.

"It's a demon!" he shrieked. "It's a demon! *I felt teeth.\**"

Two monks came running up at the same time as Bressac and one of the company's artillerymen.

"What?" Bressac yelled. "Gil!"

His shirt was caught under his armpits and the wind blew chill across his bare arse.

I *knew* we shouldn't have left an unblessed corpse in a chapel, I knew it, / *knew it!*

"It's a demon!"

"Where?" The foremost monk grabbed Guillaume by the arm. It was the abbot, Muthari, his liquid eyes alert. "Where is this demon?"

"Down the goddamned shit-hole!"

The abbot goggled. "Where?"

"Fucking thing tried to climb up my arse!" Guillaume bellowed, hauling hopelessly at his tangled hose. He gave up, grabbed the abbot by the arm, and hobbled back across the courtyard toward the long shed. "You're a fucking *monastery!* You didn't ought to have *demons* in the *lavatoryV*

Once under the tiled roof, the abbot pulled his arm out of Guil-laume's grip. Guillaume glared, breathless. The abbot leaned a hand against the wooden pillar that supported the lavatory's roof, and peered down the hole. His shoulders convulsed under his robe. For a split second Guillaume thought the monk was becoming possessed.



Bressac shoved past, pushed the abbot aside, and stared down the hole. A cluster of monks and soldiers was growing out in the yard. Guillaume stood with his clothes still around his ankles. He yanked the tail of his shirt down, gripping it in a fist with white knuckles. The feeling of cold, unnatural hardness prodding at his most vulnerable area was still imprinted in his skin. That, and the warm, wet sensation that followed. He felt he would never lose the belly-chilling fear of it.

"God damn it, let *me* see!" Guillaume heaved his way bodily between Bressac and the Visigoth.

The hole in the plank opened into emptiness.

Beneath the plank was a shallow gully full of rocks and the remnants of night soil. And something else. A recent-looking landspill from the far side had raised the level of the gully here, until it was only a yard or so under the wooden supports.

As he watched, a quadruped shape turned back from waddling away down the slope and lifted its head toward him.

He gazed down through the hole at a brown-snouted pig.

It gazed back hopefully at him, long-lashed eyes slitted against the bright light.

"Jesus Christ!" Guillaume screamed. "It was *eating* it. // *was eating my fucking turd while I was shitting it!*"

Bressac lost it. The abbot appeared to control himself. His eyes were nonetheless very bright as he waved other approaching monks back from the shed.

"We feed the pigs our night soil." Muthari raised his voice over Bressac's helpless and uncontrolled howling. "It appears that one of them was anxious to, ah, get it fresh from the source."

The faintest stutter betrayed him. Guillaume stared, affronted. The Lord-Father Abbot Muthari went off into yelps and breathless gasps of laughter.

"*Its not funny!*" Guillaume snarled.

He bent down, this time managing to untangle his dusty hose and his doublet and pull them up. He dipped his arms into his sleeves, yanking his doublet on, careless that he was rucking his shirt up under it. He shuddered at the vivid remembrance of a hot, overlarge tongue. *Apig's* tongue.

Taken by surprise by a realization, Guillaume muttered, "Oh, *shit*—!", and Bressac, who had got himself upright, sat down on the plank and wept into his two hands.

"*Shit*," Guillaume repeated, deliberately. He ignored all the noise and riot and running men around him. Ignored the mockery that was beginning as the story was retold. He stared down the shit-hole again at the thoughtfully chewing pig.

"Shit. . . we were going to *eat* one of those."

There was no more talk of pork. But there was endless discussion of the incident, and Guillaume glimpsed even Spessart smile when one of the archers yelled "Stinker Arnisout!" after him.

"Animal lovers are never appreciated," Bressac said gravely, strolling beside him. "St. Francis himself was exiled, remember?"

"Ah, *fuck* you!"

Bressac whooped again. "Only—trying—to help!"

Guillaume passed the day in anger and hunched humiliation, going through his duties in a haze. He registered another row between Spessart and the monks—the captain swearing quietly afterward that it would be better to kill every man of the Visigoths here, and that he would do it, too, if the company's only priest had not been killed on the galleys. Guillaume thought ironically that it was not just he who missed Father Augustine.

He stood escort for the captain again after the hot part of the day, when tempers flared in another confrontation at the chapel door, and Spessart knocked down Prior Athanagild, breaking the elderly man's arm. That would have been the signal for a general massacre, if Gabes had not been uncomfortably close to the west, and men difficult to control when they are panicking and dying. Both parties, monks and soldiers, parted with imprecations and oaths, respectively.

Off duty, Guillaume hung about the fringes of the camp as the evening meal was served, and afterward found himself wandering among the ordered rows of tents that led out from the fort's main courtyard to the sand that ran unobstructed toward Carthage. Tent pegs had been driven hard into the ocher earth. The outer ring of the camp should have been wagons, if this were a normal war, but arriving by sea meant no wagons to place. They had settled for stabling the few knights' horses at that end, knowing that any strange scent would have them bugling a challenge.

Guillaume found Yolande sitting between two tents, in a circle of men, playing at cards round the fire pit. She smiled absently as he sat down beside her. He put his arm around her shoulder, heart thudding. She

didn't object. She was playing hard, and for trivial amounts of money, and losing, he saw.

Toward what short twilight there was in these parts, the woman ran her purse dry and threw her cards down.

"Nothing to spend it on here, anyhow," Guillaume said, trying to be comforting.

She gave him a sharp look.

"So . . . ah . . . you want to walk?" he asked.

A slow smile spread on her face. His belly turned over to see it. He knew, instantly, that she had heard the nickname being bandied about the camp. That she was about to say *Walk with you, Stinker? The idea's a joke.*

"I don't mind," she said. "Sure. Let's do it."

There was no privacy in the tents, and none in the cells of the fort; none, either, down among the packed cargo-cog stores—far too well guarded—and the desert itself would be chilly, snake-ridden, and dangerous.

The woman said, "I know somewhere we could go."

Guillaume tried to read her expression by starlight. She seemed calm. He was shaking. He tried to conceal this, rubbing his fingers together. "Where?"

"Down this way."

He followed her back past the keep, stumbling and swearing, and quietening only when she threatened to leave him and go back to the tents. She led him to the back of the fort, and a familiar scent, and he was about to turn and go when she grabbed his arm and pulled him down, and they tumbled on top of each other through a low doorway.

"A joshed?" Guillaume swatted twigs out of his hair—no, not twigs. A familiar scent of his boyhood came back to him. Bracken. Dried bracken.

"It's been cleaned out." Too innocent, the woman's voice, and there was humor in her face when his eyes adjusted to the dimness. "The occupant doesn't need it yet. It's not going to be in use tonight."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that. . . ." Steeling himself to courage—*I have known women to back out at this stage*—Guillaume reached out his arm for her.

"Now you just wait."

"**What?**"

"No, wait. We should sort something out first. What are we going to do, here?"

Despairing, he spluttered. "What are we going to *do*? What do you think we're going to do, you dumb woman!"

He intended it as an insult, but it came out comic, fuelled by his frustration. He was not surprised to hear her snort with laughter. Guillaume groped around in the dark until a white glimmer of starlight on skin allowed him to grab her hand. Her flesh was warm, almost hot.

He pushed her hand into his crotch.

"That's what you're doing to me! And you ask me what we're going to do?"

His voice squeaked with the incredulity that flooded him. She laughed again, although it was soundless. He only knew about it by the vibration of her hand.

"That isn't helping...."

"No." Fondness sounded in her voice, and amusement, and something breathless. Her face was invisible. Her voice came out of the dark. "I find it helps to sort out these things in advance."

Guillaume almost made a catastrophic error. *You mean you're arranging a price?* He bit his tongue at the last minute. She used to be a whore—but this isn't whoring.

His understanding of how much hurt the question could inflict on her drained his impatience of its violence.

"Am I going to suck *this*," her voice continued, out of the darkness, "and then you lick me? And that would be it? I'm past the age of having a child, but you never know. Or are we going to fuck?"

Guillaume heaved in a harsh breath, dizzy. Her fingers were kneading his crotch, and he could not speak for a moment. He clamped his hand down on top of hers. The throbbing of his penis was all-encompassing, as far as his mind went.. His fingers and hers around his cod: oh dear Lord, he prayed, completely unselfconsciously, don't let me spill my seed before I have her!

"I want you," he said.

He felt his other hand taken, and pressed, and after a second realized that it was pushed up between linen shirt and hot flesh, cupping the swell of a heavy breast. His fingers touched a rock-hard nipple.

"I want you," Yolande said, out of the dark. "But is it that easy?"

The sounds of the monastery were muffled: the bells for Compline from the Green Chapel, the groaning chorus of hungry pigs, the rattle of boots outside as men went past to the refectory.

"You can have sex whenever you want," she said, long-eroded anger in her voice. "And it doesn't change anything. If I have sex, it changes everything. If I 'belong' to a man. Or to many. Whether I'm safe to rape. Whether I'm going to be trusted when we're fighting ..."

*All true, but. . .* Guillaume grunted in frustration. In comic despair, he muttered, "And on the *good* side?"

A chuckle came out of the darkness.

She likes me. She actually likes me.

He felt her rest her arm down in the warm, dry bracken, close to his arm. A sudden shine of silver—moonrise—let him distinguish her face as his eyes adjusted.

"On the good side . . ." she finished, "you're not in my lance. You're not another archer. And you maybe won't commit the cardinal sin if we get into combat.. ."

Guillaume kept himself still with an effort. "Which is?"

"Trying to protect me."

He stopped with one hand on her shoulder, the other still inside her shirt. Actually stopped. After a second, he nodded. "Yeah. I get it. You're right. I won't."

Some expression went across her face, so close now to his, that he couldn't properly make it out. Amusement? Lust? Liking? Respect?

Her nipple hardened under his palm. An immense feeling went through him, which he realized after a moment was relief.

She can't deny she wants me, too.

*She wants me.*

A little too straight-faced, Guillaume said, "But it's not a problem if you can't have sex often, is it? *Men* want it all the time, but women don't really like sex. . . ."

Her anger was only half mockery. "So it doesn't matter if I have to go without?"

Deadpan, he said, "Of course it doesn't—"

She threw her arms around his chest. He abandoned caution, tried to kiss her, but she rolled them both over in the bracken. He ended on his back: felt her straddling him.

"Lande!"

Her voice came out of the darkness, full of joy. "You should have listened to the monks—women are *insatiable*."

"Good!" he grunted, reaching up.

One of her hands clamped down on his groin. The other grabbed his long black hair, holding his head still. She brought her mouth down on his.

Guillaume cradled her against him when she fell asleep in his arms, in the rising moon's light; her clothing half pulled up around her, bracken shrouding her bare shoulders. He was dazzled and aroused again by the glimpse of her rounded belly, striated silver here and there; and her surprisingly large and dark-nippled breasts.

He tightened his embrace and looked down at Yolande's sleeping face. All the lines were wiped out of her face by relaxation. She appeared a decade younger. It was a phenomenon he was familiar with: it happens when people sleep, and when they're dead.

"I *did* know him!" Guillaume exclaimed aloud.

Yolande's eyes opened. She had evidently picked up the soldiers' trick of coming awake almost instantly. She blinked at him. "Know who?"

"Your Margie Hammond. *Guido Rosso!* Bright kid. All boy!"

The moon's light, slanting into the pen, let him catch a wry smile from Yolande. Too late to explain his definition. *Impulsive, dashing, daring.*

"You know what I mean! I just didn't—" Guillaume shook his head, automatically pulling her close and feeling the sweaty warmth of her body against his. "I guess there was no way I was going to recognize the face."

"When we put her in the chapel, she didn't *have* a face."

Guillaume nodded soberly.

He remembered Rosso now, a young man prone to singing in a husky boy's voice, always cheerful, even

in the worst weather; who would sit out any dancing on the excuse of his very minor damage to one hip and thighbone, and use the time to chat up the women. / *prefer to dance with the enemy*, he'd say, priming the girls to regard him as a wounded hero—the limp, of course, was very small; enough to give him a romantic, dashing air, but not enough to keep him out of the line fight. He had gone to the archers anyway, and Guillaume had not, at the time, known why.

"We used to call him Crip," Guillaume said. "He limped. And *he* was a girl? That girl^—that woman—we carried into the chapel . . . ? *That's* Crip Rosso, and he was female?"

"She wouldn't marry the man her parents picked out for her. Her mother locked her in her room and beat her with a stick until she couldn't stand. That's where she got the limp." Yolande stared past him, into the darkness of the pig shed, apparently seeing pictures in her mind. "She limped to the altar on her bridal day. When she'd had a couple of children that lived, her husband said he'd let her go to a nunnery, because she was a bad influence on them. She ran away before she got there."

Guillaume whistled quietly.

"He—she—always seemed so cheerful."

"Yes. Well." Out of the silver shadows, Yolande's voice was dry. That was not so disconcerting as the feeling of withdrawal in all the flesh she pressed against him: skin and muscle tensing away from his body. "Wouldn't she be? Misery gets no company."

"Uh—yeah." He reached over to touch her cheek and got her mouth instead. Wet saliva, the sharpness of a tooth. She grunted in discomfort. He blushed, the color hidden by the dark, but the heat of it probably perfectly apparent to her.

Does she think *I'm* a boy? he wondered. Or is she—I don't know— Is this it: over and done with? Do I care, if it is?

"Lande..."

"What?"

"Doesn't matter."

"I'm awake now." She rummaged about in the dark, and he felt her haul at something. She pulled the woolen cloak that covered them up around her own shoulders, uncovering Guillaume's feet to the cold. He said nothing.

The moon rose on up the sky. The strip of white light shining in between the hut's walls and roof now barely let him see the shine of her naked flesh in the darkness. He put his hand on her, stroking the skin from thigh, buttock, belly, up to her ribs. Warm. Soft. And hard, under the soft surface.

"So Crip joined the company because no man would have her?" He hesitated. "Oh . . . *shit*. That was meant to come out as a joke."

He couldn't distinguish her expression. He didn't know if Yolande heard his rueful truthfulness and credited it.

After a second, she spoke again. "Margie told me she ran away on the journey to the nuns. I don't know how she got as far south as Constantinople, but she was already dressing as a man. That's why she got raped, before she joined the company. Revenge thing, you know?"

Guillaume froze, his fingers pressing against her warm skin. He heard her voice falter.

"They had the fucking nerve to tell her she was *ugly*, while they were doing it. 'Crip.'"

The bracken moved under him and crackled. There was a grunt from the next shed over. One of the sows rising, with a thrash of her trotters, and then settling again.

Guillaume winced. "Nothing I could say would be right. So I'll say nothing."

There was the merest nod of her head visible in the dim light. Yolande's muscles became tense. "The name stuck, after she signed on with the company."

"Stuck?" He felt as if his pause went on for a whole minute. His heart thumped. Incredulous, he said, "It was one of *us* who raped her?"

"More than one." She kept her voice deliberately bland. Still she shook, held within his arms.

Guillaume felt cold. "Do I know the guys that did it?"

"I don't know their names. She wouldn't tell me."

"Do you *think* you know?"

"How could Ttell?"

He almost burst out, *Of course you can tell the difference between one of us and a rapist!* But recalling what she would have seen at sacks of . towns, he thought, Perhaps she has cause to doubt.

"We wouldn't have treated her like that," he said. "Not when she was one of us."

Not out of morality—lives depend on loyalty. Men-at-arms and archers together, each protecting the

other, and the bows bringing down cavalry before it could ever reach the foot soldiers. And the billmen keeping the archers safe from being ridden down. *Safe*.

Yolande's voice came quietly as her body leaned back against him. "I guess she didn't think about the rape much, later. We could all die any time, the next skirmish, field of battle, whatever. What's the point of remembering old hurts if you don't have to?"

An obscure guilt filled him. Guillaume felt angry. Why must women always *talk* at moments like this? And then, on the heels of that, he felt an immense sadness.

"Tell that to your Ric," he said. "When his master's dead."

She was silent momentarily. He was fairly sure she thought he had not been listening to her recounting the day's happenings. She confirmed it, a note of surprise in her voice.

"I didn't think you were paying attention."

"Ah, well. Full of surprises."

A small, spluttered chuckle; her relief apparent. "Evidently. You're—not quite what I expected you to be."

He didn't stop to work out what that might mean. Guillaume hitched his freezing feet up under his cloak. "His pigs are safe. But. . . Spessart might not kill Ric, but I'd take a bet with you that Muthari won't make it—or I would, if I had any money."

She gave him a look he couldn't interpret at *money*.

"Yeah. At least the pigs won't die." She sounded surprised by her own thought. "These pigs, I mean . . . more like dogs than pigs."

"All pigs are." Guillaume could just see surprise on her face. He shrugged. "We had pigs. My dad always got in a hell of a black mood when it came to slaughtering day. Loved his pigs, he did. Hated his sons but loved his pigs . . ."

"So what happened to you and Pere Arnisout and the pigs?"

"What always happens in a war. Soldiers killed my father, raped my mother, and took me away to be their servant. They burned the house down. I would guess they ate the pigs and oxen; it was a bad winter. . . ."

Her arms came around him. Not to comfort him, he realized after a second of distaste. To share closeness.

She said dispassionately, "And now you're on this side of the fence."

He put his hand up past his head, where his sword lay in the bracken, and touched the cross-hilt. "Aren't we all. . . ."

"I'll have to see Ric again." The moonlight was gone now, her face invisible; but her voice was sharp and determined.

"About Muthari?"

"About the visions." Her hands sought his arms, closing over his muscles. "Two of them, Gil. And I don't understand either. Maybe things would be clearer if I had another." Her tone changed. He felt her laugh.

"Third time lucky, right? Maybe God believes things . . . come in threes, too." "Well, fuck, ask him, then—the pig-boy," Guillaume clarified. "Maybe he *can* see you when the enemy's going to drop on us from a great height. I'd also give money to know who'll turn up first, Hiiseyin Bey or the Carthaginian navy. If I had any money." He grinned. "Poverty doesn't encourage oracles, I find."

She sounded amused in the dark. "And he might know why God bothers to send visions to some mercenary soldier. . . ."

"Or not."

"Or not. . . ."

He depended on sensation—the softness of her waist under his hand, the heat of her skin against him. The smooth, cool wool that sheltered them from the night's cold. The scent of her body, that had been all day in the open air.

He felt his way carefully, as if speech could be tactile. "What we were saying—about Crip Rosso?"

"Yes." No hint of emotion in her voice.

"I was going to ask. . . . were you ever raped?" Guillaume was suddenly full of raw hatred that he could not express. "I—hope not. Just the thought's made my prick wilt, and talking about that *isn't* the way to bring it up again. Not in my case. Though I've soldiered with men who would come to attention instantly at the thought."

His eyes adjusted to starlight. It illuminated shapes—the precise curlicues of bracken, and the crumpled linen mass of his doublet under them, colorless now; and her own hand, where it rested on his chest.

Guillaume whispered, "I'd take all your hurts away if I could," and bent his head to nip at her heavy breasts.

"Yes . . ." Yolande smiled.

He felt her body loosen.

Her voice became half-teasing. "But that's because you're one of the good guys. I think."

"Only think?" he gasped, mouth wet from trailing kisses across her body, under her pulled-up shirt. He reached down and put her hand on him, to encourage his prick upright again. "I'm good. What do you want, letters of recommendation?"

She spluttered into a giggling laugh.

"You see? In the dark, you could be sixteen." He put her remaining hand to his face, and let her fingers trace his grin. "I knew I could make you happy again."

With Prime and Vespers always at six a.m. and six p.m. here, it made the hours of the day and the night the same length, which Guillaume found odd.

On the cusp of dawn, he began a dream. Forests where it was hot. Holm-oak woods. Dwarf elephants, no bigger than horses. Men and women in red paint, who burned their children alive—sacrifices to deforestation, so that cities could survive. A scream that was all pain, all desolation, all loss. Then he was lost in the African forests again. And again.

He woke with a start, the nightmare wrenching him awake. Cold drafts blew across the pen, counteracting the bracken's retained heat. Cool blue air showed beyond the half door.

Morning.

"*Green Christ!* What *time* is it? 'Lande." He untangled himself gracelessly, shaking her awake. His breath showed pale in the cold air. "'Lande! It's past roll call! We're meant to be on duty—oh, shit."

Running feet thumped past outside. Lots of running feet. Men shouting. Hauling his clothes on, wrenching at knotted points, clawing under the bracken for a missing boot, he gasped, "It's an attack! Listen to them out there!"

Loud voices blared across the morning. He cursed again, rolling over, trying to pull on his still-laced-up boot.

Damn! Hiiseyin Bey's division ought to be a fortnight behind us at most. At *most*. We can stand a siege—if there hasn't already been a battle to the east of us. If Hiiseyin's Janissaries aren't all dead.

"Don't hear the call to arms!" Yolande pulled her shirt down and her hose up. She finished tying off her points at her waist, and knelt up in the bracken like a pointing hound.

"What? What, 'Lande?"

"That's at the chapel!"

"*Bloody hell.*"

He struggled out of the pig shed behind her, shaking off bracken, not worrying now if anyone saw them together. It was a bright crisp morning, sometime past Prime by the strength of the dawn. So the rag-head monks would be there, to celebrate mass, and this racket must mean—

"Rosso! Margie!" he grunted out, having to run to keep up with Yolande.

"Yes!" Impatient, she elbowed ahead of him, forging into the crowd of mercenary soldiers already running toward the chapel doors.

He tried to catch a hackbutter's arm, ask him what was the matter, but the other man didn't stop. Guillaume heard the captain's voice way ahead, piercing loud above the noise, but couldn't make out all the words. Only one came through, clean and clear:

"—*sacrilege!*"

Yolande barged through the black wooden doors into a rioting mess of men and—*pigs?*

She reared back from the smell. It hit her as soon as she was through the doors. Hot, thick, rich. Rotten blood, fluids, spoiled flesh. Dung. And the eye-watering stink of concentrated pig urine. Yolande gasped.

In front of her, an archer bent down, trying to stop a sow. The small, heavy animal barged into him and knocked him away without any effort. Yolande caught at his arm, keeping him upright.

"What the hell is this?" she shrieked over the noise of men bawling, pigs shrieking and grunting, metal clattering and scraping against stone.

"The fucking pigs et her!" the archer bawled back. His badge was unfamiliar, a tall man from another lance, his face twisted up in rage or anguish, it was impossible to guess which.

"Ate her?" Yolande let go of him and put one mud-grimed hand over her mouth, muffling a giggle. "You mean—ate her body?"

The archer swore. "Broken bones of Christ! Yes!"

Another pig charged past, jaws gaping. Yolande jumped back against the Green Chapel's wall as the gelded boar, mouth wide open to bite, chased a green-robed monk toward the open doors.

"Grab it!" the monk yelled, holding the Host in its holm-oak box high over his head. "Grab that animal! Help!"

Yolande's hand pressed tight against her mouth, stifling another appalled snicker.

Ten or twelve or fifteen large pigs ran around between her and the altar, screaming and honking and groaning. And two dozen soldiers, easily. And the monks who had come in to celebrate Prime. A sharp smell of pig dung filled the air. There were yellow puddles on the tiles where pigs had urinated in fear or anger.

"Who . . ." she stuttered. "Who let them in here?"

The nearest man, a broad-shouldered elderly sergeant, bellowed, "Clear the fucking House of God! Get these swine out of here!"

Yolande shoved forward, then slowed. Men moved forward past her. The lean-bodied pigs were not large. But heavy. All that muscle.

A knight had his legs and arms wide, trying to herd a young black sow away from the altar. The animal shoulder-charged past him, bowling him over in a tangle of boots and armor. Yolande realized, on the verge of hysteria, that she recognized the beast—Ric's favored sow, Lully.

The black-haired pig scabbled past her as Yolande dodged aside. The tiled floor was covered in dark dust. Boot prints, the marks of pigs' trotters, the prints of bare feet. Dust damp with the early morning's dew.

And something white, kicked and trodden underfoot.

Yolande bent down. She kept close to the wall and out of the way of the struggle ahead—men flapping their arms, clapping, shouting, doing everything to harry the pigs away from their focus, a few yards in front of the altar. She squatted, reached out, and snared the object.

It had a rounded, shiny end. The back of it had a bleached stump, and blackened meat clinging to it. She recognized it all in a split second, although it took moments for the realization to plod through her mind. It's a bone. A thigh joint. The thigh bone's been sheared off it—

By the jaws of pigs.

That guy was right. They ate her.

She thrust her way between the men, ignoring the skid of her heels in pig dung on the floor. She got to the altar. What was in front of her now were pig backs, lower down than anything else. Hairy sharp rumps. Pigs with their snouts snuffling along the tiles, wrenching and snatching things between them. Heads lifting and jaws jerking as they swallowed.

Bones.

*Meat.*

There was not enough left to know that it had been a human skeleton.

The pigs had had her for a long time before they were caught, Yolande could see. Almost all of the flesh was gone. *He did say his pigs ate carrion . . . 'garbage disposal.'* Most of the bone fragments had been separated from each other. There was nothing left of Margie's skull or face. Only a fragment of bottom jaw. Pigs can cut anything with their shearing teeth.

"Margie," she whispered under her breath, not moving her fingers away from her mouth. Her breath didn't warm her stone-cold flesh.

Now there is nothing to bury. Problem solved.

She felt wrenching nausea, head swimming, mouth filling with spit.

I didn't always *like* her. Sometimes I hated her guts. There was no reason we should have anything in common, just because we were two women. . . .

The body of Margaret Hammond, Guido Rosso, such as it was now, was a number of joints and bones and fleshy scraps, on the floor and in the jaws of pigs. She saw the captain, Spessart, reach down to grab one end of a femur. He yelled, cursed, took his hand back and shook it. Yolande saw red blood spatter, and then the brass-bearded man was sucking at the wound and swearing at one of the monks while it was bound up.

"You knew this would happen!" Spessart bawled.

The round face of Abbot Lord-Father Muthari emerged into Yolande's notice. She saw he stood back from the fracas. One white hand held his robe's hem up from the mess of rotten flesh and dung on the tiles.

"I did *not* know," Muthari said clearly.

"You knew! I swear—execute—*every one of you over thirteen*—"

"This is an accident! Obviously the slave in charge of the animals failed in his duty. I don't know why. He was a good slave. I can only hope he hasn't had some accident. Has anyone seen him?"

Yolande stood perfectly still. Memory came back to her. She could hear it. The shrill complaints and groans of hungry pigs. The stock know when their feeding time is. And if they're not fed ...

We *heard* them. They weren't fed last night. That's why they're so hungry now. That's why they've—eaten everything in here.

Her hands dropped to her sides. She made fists, pressing her nails into her palms, trying to cause enough pain to herself that she would not shout hysterically at the abbot.

Ric would have fed them last night.

And these animals have been locked in here, she thought, dazed, staring back at the door where the crowd was parting. Or they'd be off at the cook tent, or foraging ...

Someone stabbed a boar, sending it squealing; others, flailing back from the heavy panicking animal, began to use the hafts of their bills to push the swine back and away.

A European mercenary in dusty Visigoth mail pushed through the gap in the men-at-arms, grabbing at Spessart's shoulder, shouting in the captain's ear.

Yolande could hear neither question nor answer, but something was evidently being confirmed.

Spessart swung round, staring at Abbot Lord-Father Muthari.

"You're damned lucky!" the captain of the Griffin-in-Gold snarled. "What's coming down the road now is the Legio XIV Utica, from Gabes. If the Turkish advance scouts were coming up the road, I'd give them this monastery with every one of you scum crucified to the doors!"

Yolande began to move. She walked quite calmly. She saw Muthari's face, white in the shadows away from the ogee windows, blank with shock.

"So consider yourself fortunate." The captain's rasp became more harsh as he looked at the fluid pooled before the altar. "We have a contract now with the king-caliph in Carthage. You and I, Muthari, we're—allies."

He's going to pull that one once too often one day. Yolande numbly pushed her way between taller men, heading for the small door beside the altar, under the embroidered hanging. Mercenary companies who change sides in the middle of wars get a bad rep.

But then ... six thousand enemies a few miles away, no support for us: time to say 'Hey, we have supplies, *atidwe* can tell you where there are food caches farther down the coast. . .'

The handle of the door was rough in her palm. A ring of cold black iron. She turned it, and the heavy bar of the latch lifted. Yolande stepped through.

The air outside hit her. A smell of dry dust, honey, and olive trees. The sun was well up. Did I just spend so long in there?

She walked calmly and with no unnecessary speed down past the olives, past the broken walls of this end of the monastery, and down to where the pig shelters stood.

Here, in the shadow of the southern wall, there were still patches of frost on the earth.

She walked up past the first low hut. The boy was lying at the foot of the flight of stone steps that came down the fort's wall. His back was toward her. She stopped, reached down, felt him quite cold and dead.

Dead for many hours.

She maneuvered his stiff, chill body around to face her. He was almost too heavy. Frost-covered mud crackled underfoot.

It was not the first time she had felt how someone's head moved when their neck was broken. Snapped, with the neck held, the jaw clamped into someone's hand and jerked sideways—

No one will prove it. It looks perfect: He had a fit, and fell.

Spessart will accept it as an accident. It solves all his problems.

No woman's body to bury; no living man to blame.

She heard the voices of men coming after her.

Yolande turned her head away and stared up at the flight of steps, leaving her fingers on Ric's smooth, bitter-cold flesh. How easy to take hold of a young man by the iron ring around his neck. Just get close, inside his guard.

He took this from someone he trusted to get close. He was a slave. He didn't trust many people.

Yolande's thoughts felt as cold as the boy's dead body.

I hope Muthari broke his neck from behind.

I hope he let Ric die without ever knowing he had been killed by someone he loved.



Guillaume Arnisout leaned his hip against the rail on the galley's prow. He braced the burden that he carried.

The thing that had been part of him for so long—his polearm, the hook-bladed bill—was no longer propped beside him, or lying at his feet, or packed in among the squad tents. *Because they won't put me into a line fight now. Not with a broken knee. And I can't say I blame them.*

The warm wood under his hand and the salt air whipping his hair stiff were part of him now, so long had the *Saint Tanitta* been on its way to Italy. The brilliant sun on the waves was still new—the ship having been Under the Penitence as far as Palermo, on the coast of Sicily.

He looked back down the galley, finding Yolande Vaudin. *But nothing fills the gap, after Zarsis monastery—not for her. Nothing.*

Archers sprawled on the deck, their kit spread out around them. Every plank was covered with some mercenary, or some mercenary's gear. Men arguing, drinking, laughing, fighting. Yolande was squatting down with her hand in the crotch of a blond Flanders bowman.

Guillaume could not hear what she said to the big man at this distance! By now, he didn't need to. It was always the same—and one of the reasons for keeping a distance in the first place.

She tries everything. . . .

Yolande hauled the man up by his arm. He laughed. Guillaume watch them lurch as far as the butt end of the ship. Yolande touched the man's chest. The two of them vanished behind a great heap of sailcloth and coiled ropes. As much privacy as might be found on shipboard, when all of a mercenary company is crowded into one galley.

He turned back to the rail, shifting his leg under him.

Threads of pain shot through his knee and the bone beneath it.

Better than two months ago in Carthage: at least I can stand up without it giving way.

Guillaume shifted the burden he carried against his chest, moved his shattered and mending knee again, and swore.

"Bressac came and leaned on the ship's rail beside him. He had lost a lot of weight. The other Frenchman made pretense of looking out across the milky blue sea toward Salerno. He sniggered very quietly. "Got left holding the baby again?"

Guillaume looked down at his burden—the child in its tight swaddling bands, resting against his chest.

The lengths of linen bands bound it to a flat board. He had had the carpenter drill a couple of holes in the wood, and now he had loops of rope over his shoulders to hold the swaddling board against his body. It left the child facing him. All that could be seen of her were her bright eyes that followed his movements everywhere.

"I don't mind. She's all right, for a Visigoth." Guillaume spoke carelessly, edging one linen band down and giving her a finger to suck. "Have to find the wet nurse soon. Right hungry little piglet, she is. Ain't you, Mucky-pup?"

"Daah," the baby said.

Bressac snickered again.

The red tile roofs of Salerno became distinct, floating above the fine blue haze. Birds screamed.

Bressac said, not laughing now, "She ought at least to come and *look* at the damn brat, after we went to so much trouble to get it."

Guillaume took his finger back from the hard gums, and the baby gave him a focused look of dislike. He said, "First time in the entire bloody voyage this little cow hasn't been crying, or puking up all over me. Looks cute enough to get her interested in it again."

At Bressac's look, Guillaume admitted, "Well, maybe not *that*. . ."

"She's drinking too much to have the infant. Drop it overboard, probably." Bressac glanced over his shoulder and then, sentimental as soldiers anywhere, said, "Give it here."

Guillaume slid the ropes of the swaddling board off his shoulders and handed the baby over to rest her nose against Bressac's old and smelly arming-doublet. To his surprise, she neither cried nor puked. *Can't win, can IP*

"Yolande's drinking too much," he said. "And angry too much."

Bressac joggled the baby. "She keeps going on about that pig-boy—'Oh, the abbot killed him; oh, it was murder.' I mean, it's been half a year, we've had an entire damned campaign with the Carthaginian legions; you'd think she'd get o—" His voice cut off abruptly. "Damn! Kid just threw up all over me!"

"Must be your tasteful conversation." Guillaume took the baby back as she began to wail, and wiped her face roughly clean with his kerchief. The wail changed from one of discomfort *to* one of anger.

Bressac, swiping at himself, muttered, "Green Christ! It's just some slave's brat!", and wiped his hands on the ship's rail.

Above him, the company silk pennant cracked, unrolling on the wind: azure field merging with azure sky, so it seemed the gold griffin veritably flew.

Bressac said, "'Lande was *drunk*, remember? Kept saying she wanted a baby and she was too old to have one. She *insisted we*, haul this one out of goddamn Carthage harbor. Now she's bored with it. Green Christ, can't a bloody slave commit infanticide in peace?"

"You think it was a slave?"

"Hell, yes. If the mother had been freeborn, she could have *so/d it*."

"Maybe we should find a dealer in Salerno, for the Turkish harems." Guillaume was aware he was only half joking.

If she's got bored with the kid . . . so have I.

Merely being honest about moral failings is not an excuse.

It's not boredom. Not for Yolande. It's just that the kid isn't Ric —or Jean-Philippe. Saving this kid . . . isn't the same. And that's not the baby's fault.

"This *isn't a* place for a baby." Guillaume looked guiltily around at the company. "Kid deserves better than old sins hanging round her neck as a start in life. What can she ever hope for? Like 'Lande keeps on saying, to change anything—"

The words are in his mind, Yolande repeating the words with the care of the terrifyingly drunk:

*"To change anything. . . we'd have to change everything. And I don't have the time left that that would take."*

Blue sea and white foam streaked away in a curve from this side of the galley's prow. He went as far as unknitting the ropes from the swaddling board and sliding them free.

Splash and gone. So easy. A lifetime of slogging uphill gone. When we meet under the Tree, she'll probably thank me.

Bressac's voice broke the hypnotic drag of the prow wave. "So. You going to talk it over with the master gunner? Ortega will have you for one of the gun crews; they're shorthand ed now. Not much running about, there . . ."

There was a look in Bressac's eyes that made Guillaume certain his mind and proposed action had been read. Not necessarily disapproved of.

A seabird wheeled away, screaming, searching their wake for food. The perpetual noise of sliding chains from the belly of the ship, where the rowers stood and stretched to the oars, quickly drowned out the bird's noise.

"Sure," Guillaume said. "A gunner: sure. That'd suit a cripp, wouldn't it?"

The baby began to wail, hungry again. Guillaume looped the board back on one shoulder and slid a finger under the linen band. He tucked the baby's still white-blond birth hair carefully back underneath.

"Maybe I could do with a vision," he said wryly. "Not that they helped 'Lande. Or the kid. What's the point of seeing things centuries on? He needed to see what that son of a bitch Muthari was like now."

"One of us would have to have done it," Bressac observed, his long horse face unusually serious. "You know that? If there wasn't going to be a massacre?"

Guillaume heard sudden voices raised.

Farther down toward the slim belly of the galley, Yolande Vaudin was standing now, shouting—spitting with the force of it—into the face of the company's new priest.

The priest evidently attempted to calm her, and Guillaume saw Yolande slap his hand away, as a woman might—and then punch him in the face, with the strength of a woman who winds up a crossbow for cocking.

"*Ey!*" The sergeant of the archers strode over, knocked Yolande Vaudin down, and stood over her, yelling.

Guillaume felt himself tense his muscles to hand the baby to Bressac and run down the deck. *And. . . run}* The sergeant abruptly finished, with a final yell and a gesture of dismissal. Guillaume felt frustration like a fever.

Yolande got to her feet and walked unevenly up toward them at the prow. One hand shielded the side of her face.

She halted when she got to them. "Stupid fucking priest."

Bressac reached out to move her hand aside. Guillaume saw him stop, frozen in place by the look she shot him.

"Want to take the baby?" he offered.

"I do *not*." Yolande moved her hands behind her back.

A bruise was already coming up on her cheek. Red and blue, nothing that arnica wouldn't cure. Guillaume didn't stand. He lifted the baby toward her.

Her gaze fixed on its face. "Damn priest said I was asking him to do fortune-telling. It isn't fortune-telling! I wanted to know if what I saw was *real*. And he won't tell me."

"Maybe he doesn't know."

"Maybe." Yolande echoed the word with scorn. "He said . . . *he* said none of it was a half millennium in the future. He said the heathen boy had been telling *my* future—that *I'd* never be recognized. That *I'd die*. a mercenary soldier, shot by some hackbutter. And that foretelling my future was witchcraft, and so it was right the abbot should kill such a boy—that's when I hit him."

Guillaume found himself nodding. The sensation of that possible future being truncated—of it being a translated form of this woman's desires and terrors—eased some fear he had not been aware he still had. Although it had given him nightmares in the infirmary, after his wound.

I don't like to think about five, six hundred years in the future. It makes me dizzy. But then . . .

. "Priest might be frightened it *is* true foresight," Guillaume said quietly. "Either way . . . as a future, are you so in love with it?"

The old Yolande looked at him for a moment, her expression open and miserable. "You know? I can't think of anything better. Recognition. Acceptance. And a better death than disease. I wanted it for so long. . . . Now I know I ought to be able to think of something *better* than this. And . . . I can't."

Guillaume rested the baby back against him. He didn't say anything about families, farms, retirement into city trades.

What's the point? Neither of us are going to stop doing what we do. No matter what. This is what we are now.

No wonder she drinks. I wonder that I don't.

"Been doing it too long." The other Frenchman's voice was gently ironic. Bressac nodded down the deck toward the sergeant of archers, who was standing with his fists on his hips, talking to one of the corporals, glaring after Yolande Vaudin. "All the same . . . That isn't the way to behave to a sergeant."

"Oh, so, what am I supposed to be afraid of?" Scorn flashed out in her tone. "A black mark against my name on the rolls? It's not like they're ever going to make *me* an officer, is it? A woman giving orders to men!"

So easily caught by those old desires, Guillaume thought. If I could go back into the line fight, as the team's boss . . . How long would I hesitate? A heartbeat? Two?

Bressac grinned. "You want to do leadership the way Guillaume here does it—he finds out what we're going to do, then he tells us to do it!"

There was enough truth in that that Guillaume couldn't help smiling. Bressac's face clouded.

"As Guillaume here *used to* do it," Guillaume commented.

The wind smelled suddenly of fish and blood as it veered—the stink of the fish-shambles, in Salerno. A brown-haired woman, the wet nurse, approached from the direction of the other rail. Guillaume noticed she ignored Yolande pointedly.

In a stilted French, she said, "Master, I'll take the baby; she needs changing npw."

"Oh—sure, Joanie." Guillaume shifted, grunting with his knee's pain, and handed over the infant. Whatever was passing between the two women was not accessible to him, although he could see there was unspoken communication. Condemnation. On both sides?

He watched the wet nurse kneel down, untie the swaddling bands from the board and then from the child, and coil up the soiled wrappings and set them aside. The smell of baby shit and milk was way too familiar for a billman-turning-gunner.

"Joanie will keep it with her," Yolande announced, over the other woman's bent head. "I don't want anything more to do with this."

"Lande—"

"It was a *mistake*. She isn't. . . I'm sorry for the child, but. . . Joan, I'll bring you money, out of my pay; you'll continue to feed it, and keep it by you—yes?"

The brown-haired woman nodded without looking up. "As long as I'm paid."

She fumbled down her bodice for clean linen bands. The baby, laid facedown on the warm wooden deck, hitched with elbows and knees and made a slight wriggling progression. Evidently she had not been used to swaddling bands before she fell into the hands of a Frankish nurse.

Guillaume bent down, picked the baby up from under so many feet, and tucked it under his arm. The infant made vague, froglike motions.

"How long will that last?" he demanded.

Joanie got up, dusting her hands on her skirt. "I have forgot the new bands. Look after it now, master, while I fetch them." She walked away toward the head of the gangway.

Yolande shrugged.

She turned and leaned her forearms on the rail, beside Guillaume. She had something in her hands—the Arian rosary, he saw. She trickled it from one hand into the other, while the wind and spray whipped her short hair into her eyes.

"Some people have the grace of God," she said, just audibly. "Some people can look down the chain of our choices and tell us what might happen in future years." She held the use-polished Christus Imperator up in front of her face. "I'm not one of them. Never will be. Ric was. And he ..."

She opened her hand. The carved holm-oak rosary fell and disappeared, lost in spray and the Gulf of Salerno.

Yolande cast an eye up at Bressac. "Shall we walk?"

It was an invitation, although not as whorish a one as Joanie had been giving earlier in the day, Guillaume noted. The other Frenchman began to smile.

"See you," Yolande said neutrally, looking down at Guillaume. She was more than mostly drunk, Guillaume could see, if he looked at her without illusion.

Too many months' practice in hiding it, that's all. And now she's brawling with priests, and fucking who she pleases, and out of control. She'll cause fights, and bad discipline, and she *wants* to.

Someone has to pay for Ricimer—and if it's not going to be Muthari, I guess she's decided it's going to be her. . . .

Yolande walked away across the deck. Bressac gave Guillaume a look compounded both of apology and of disbelief in his own good luck, and followed her.

The woman wore a pleated velvet doublet against the wind's chill, and the sunlight illuminated how it nipped in at her waist, and the skirt of it ended just short of her lower hip, so that the curve of her lower buttocks could be seen as she walked away. And all the long length of her shapely legs. A woman in doublet and hose: the cast lead Griffin badge pinned to her upper arm and even the sunlight showing the worn patches in the velvet could not spoil her attraction.

She'd still fuck, if I asked.

I think she knows I won't ask.

That's not what I ended up wanting from her.

Guillaume sat back on the oak chest, his spine against the rail, the infant firmly in the crook of his elbow. He felt her warm, solid, squirming. If I put her down now, she'd be across this deck in a heartbeat, no matter how few months she has to her. It's in her. It's in all of us, surely.

He looked at the carved black walking stick beside him, and with his free hand eased at the muscles above his knee.

"Well, now."

With some awkwardness, he shifted the baby out from under his arm, and plumped her astride his other knee. She kicked her heels against his old, patched hose. The sun, even through this fog, would scald her, and he looked up for Joanie's return—and saw no sign of the wet nurse—and then back at the baby.

Knowing my luck, it's about to piss down my leg. . . .

The master gunner, Ortega, appeared out of the port gangway, two or three of his officers with him, and stood talking energetically, gesturing.

"Well, why not?" Guillaume said aloud. "The pay's as good, as a gunner. What do you think?"

The baby, supported under her armpits by his hands, blinked at him with her human eyes. She weighed less than a weaner piglet, although she was weeks older.

"Maybe I'll put a few shillings in, with Yolande," he said quietly, his eyes scanning the deck. "A few a month. Joanie'll probably soak me dry, telling me you've got croup, or whatever infants have." His mouth twisted into a grin he could feel. "At least until I'm killed in a skirmish, or the Italian diseases get me ..."

The salt wind blew tangles in his hair. He wiped his wrist across his mouth, rasping at stubble. Joanie, coming back, was accosted by Ortega. Guillaume heard her laugh.

"Fortuna," Guillaume said, prodding the baby's naked round belly. The infant laughed. "The chain of choices? It's not a chain, I think. Choices are free. I believe."

The baby yawned, eyes and nose screwing up in the sunshine.

Feeling self-conscious, Guillaume brought the infant to his chest and held her against his doublet, with both his arms around her.

The weight of her increased—becoming boneless, now, with sleep, and trust. She began a small, breathy snore.

"It's not all sitting around in the gunners, you know," Guillaume lectured in a whisper, watching Italy appear from the mist. "I'll be busy. But I'll keep an eye on you. Okay? I'll keep a bit of a watch. As long as I can."

## 1477 and All That

Sellars and Yeatman's wonderful book *1066 and All That* says that History is all you can remember from your schooldays. *Ash: A Secret History*, of which "The Logistics of Carthage" is a piece of flotsam, says that History is all you can remember . . . *and its wrong*.

The links between alternate history and secret history fiction run deep. With *Ash*, I wanted not only to consider a moment at which history as we think we know it might have turned out differently, but to think about the nature of history itself. History as narratives that we make up—aided, of course, by things we take to be evidence—to tell ourselves, for one or another reason. "History" as distinct from "the past," that is.

The past happened. It's just that we can't recover it. History is what we can recover, and it's a collection of fallible memories, inconvenient documents, disconcerting new facts, and solemn cultural bedtime stories.

I went a stage further with *Ash*—the past didn't happen, either, not as we're told it did, and the scholar Pierce Ratcliff uses history to work that out. Well, history plus those inconvenient things upon which history is based: memoirs, archaeological artifacts, fakes, scholarship tussles, and quantum mechanics. It's different for a writer, thinking of an alternate history point of departure in these terms. History is not a road on which we can take a different turning. The road itself is made of mist and moonbeams.

And then there's a.d. 1477. And a.d. 416. And between the two of them is a.d. 1453, which is where "The Logistics of Carthage" got its genesis, even though the story itself takes place four years later in A.D. 1457.

In a.d. 1477, Burgundy vanished.

This is straightforward textbook history. The country that had been Burgundy—a principality of France, according to France; an independent country, according to the princely dukes of Burgundy—vanishes out of history in January of 1477—1476 in the pre-Gregorian calendar. Duke Charles the Bold (or "Rash," as 20:20 hindsight has it) lost a battle to the Swiss, was inconveniently found dead without leaving a male heir, and, to cut a short story shorter, France swallowed Burgundy with one gulp.

And rich and splendid and *powerful* Burgundy vanishes instantly from the history books. You would never know that for large periods of medieval history, Western Europe was not solely divided between the power blocs of Germany, Spain, and France. I'm not the only writer to be fascinated by this phenomenon. M. John Harrison's splendid and non-alternate-universe novel *The Course of the Heart*, for example, revolves around it in an entirely different way. Tropes of history and the past and memory are endlessly valid. But it was my starting point for *Ash: A Secret History*, which is, of course, the *real* story of why Burgundy vanished out of history in a.d. 1477, and what took its place.

Of course it's the real story: would I lie to you?

I am shocked—shocked!—that you think I would. . . .

And then there's a.d. 429. In history as we know it, this is the start of Gothic North Africa. A Vandal fleet sails over from mainland Europe under Gaiseric, who kicks the ass of the Roman inhabitants, and—becoming pretty much Roman himself in the process—establishes the rich and powerful kingdom of Vandal North Africa, with its capital established in Carthage by a.d. 439. In a.d. 455, Gaiseric sails east and sacks great Rome itself.

For *Ash*, I thought it would be neat if it hadn't been the Vandals who invaded North Africa.

I preferred the Visigoths—a rather different Gothic people who had ended up conquering the

Iberians and running Spain, and whose elective-monarchy system by the early medieval period is, as one of the characters in *Ash* says, "election by assassination." I decided I'd have a Visigoth North Africa instead.

Then, while wandering through a book on post-Roman North Africa, I discovered there had indeed been a vast Visigoth invasion fleet that set off toward North Africa. Thirteen years before the Vandals.

It was sunk by a storm.

So I had a.d. 416, a concrete and inarguable point of departure for an alternate universe that I would have been perfectly happy to set up as a hypothetical what-if. History plays these wonderful tricks, always. I love it.

And then we come to a.d. 711, when in our timeline the Muslims decided, quite reasonably as they thought, to invade Visigoth Spain. This resulted in a long occupation of chunks of Spanish kingdoms, a number of *taifa* buffer states that were part-Christian and part-Muslim, and a self-defined "entirely beleaguered and all-Christian" north. It's a story that doesn't end until a.d. 1492, when the last of the Moors leave Granada, and one of the most fascinating mixed cultures of Western Europe goes belly-up.

However, for *Ash*, having had my earlier point of departure set up as a non-Arabic North Africa, I ended up with a Visigoth Arian Christian invasion of a Spain that was part of the Church of the Green Christ. That rumbled along nicely from a.d. 711 until the 1470s, with the North African Visigoths largely taking the place of the Byzantines in our history. It may say in the KJV that nations have bowels of brass, but we know that history is endlessly mutable. . . .

And then there's "The Logistics of Carthage." Which I had not intended to write, after *Ash*. No way! When a 500,000-word epic is over and done, trust me, you do not want to see any more of it. Two walk-on characters tugging at one's elbow and remarking that they, too, have their story that they would like to tell, is something guaranteed to have the writer running off gibbering.

So I gibbered, and I decided I wouldn't write it, because the story of *Ash* is over. *Over over*, not here-is-a-sequel over. Not nearly over, but really sincerely over.

Ah yes, they said to me: but this isn't a sequel. For one thing, it's set twenty years before the main action of the book. For another, one of the people whose story it is was a minor character, and the other appears solely for a half sentence in one place in the book. And it's set somewhere we didn't get to in *Ash*. And, and . . .

And there's the Fall of Constantinople, you see.

a.d. 1453, and one of the defining points of Western European history. The great capital of the Byzantine empire, Constantinople, falls to the Turks and becomes Istanbul. Among the things that come out of the city with the flood of refugees are all the Hermetic writings of Pico and Ficino, who themselves have what amounts to an alternate-universe history of what the world is *really* like. The fall of Constantinople (in some theories) turbo-charges the Italian Renaissance, which kicks off the Renaissance in the rest of Europe, and leads to the Scientific Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and hello modern world.

But "The Logistics of Carthage" isn't about that.

It's about the war *after* a.d. 1453, when the Turks move on the next obvious enemy in the *Ash* history: the Gothic capital of Carthage, under the Visigoth king-caliphs. A war taking place on the coast of North Africa, where a troop of European mercenaries heading toward Carthage in the pay of the Turks find themselves with a corpse they cannot bury because of a religious dispute, and we start to get a look at a love story—and pigs—and the mechanisms of atrocity.

Carthage, you will note, is another entity that vanishes out of history. Frequently. There isn't anything particularly mysterious about it. The Punic city of Carthage gets flattened by the Romans in 146 B.C., in a very marked manner, and sown with salt. Roman Carthage gets sacked, in turn; Gothic Carthage is taken by the Arabs in a.d. 698. Tunis grows up in the same area, and has its own troubles. History has a way of happening to cities.

But, mystery or not, Carthage has fascinated me for rather the same reasons as Burgundy does: here is something completely gone,

its people do not remain, and how do we *know* that the history we hear is anything like what really happened?

In "The Logistics of Carthage," one of the soldiers has what she takes to be dream visions, sent by God. It wasn't possible to bring on stage, in a novella, the reasons why they're not dreams—they are glimpses of the real future, five hundred years ahead from where she is—but the rationale is present in *Ash*, and for the purposes of these people, it doesn't matter whether what Yolande sees is scientific or theological. What *she*, *feels* about it is real.

And I get to push the history that runs from these points of departure on a stage further, which I naturally couldn't do in *Ash*, and am therefore glad to have the chance. Yolande sees future-Carthage, future-North Africa, and they are not our twenty-first-century Carthage and North Africa, just the up-to-date version of what the history would become, if it was to become our time.

But the alternate-universe story isn't always about "Cool, a POD!" Stories of people's experience are only rarely about seeing history turn. This story, which wouldn't let me go until I wrote it, is about a woman who followed her son to the wars, and how it feels to her then to be working for the worshipers of the child-eater goddess Astarte (which is where, in this history, the Turks get their red Crescent Moon flag). Military history gives short shrift to mothers—but then, Guillaume, finding himself with a reluctant appreciation of a woman's usual role in history, is as much a mother as Yolande.

And pigs. Never forget the pigs.

They don't know a damn thing about history, pigs.

They just become its victims—as people without power tend to.

And for those readers who have read *Ash* . . . yes, you do recognize a few names. And, yes, this is the early life of those particular people. I didn't know it either, until I came to write the story.

Oh, and the baby is precisely who you think she is. But she isn't important to this narrative. For these people, it could have been any nameless baby at all.

For most of us, after all, names are the first thing lost by history.

Mary Gentle was born in 1956, in England; one of her mothers was a housewife and local cinema employee, the other is a professional astrologer. She left school at sixteen, but has since returned three times; the first time for a BA in politics and English, the second for an MA in seventeenth-century studies, and the third for an MA in war studies.

Her first book, *A Hawk in Silver*, was written when she was eighteen. After an initial period in the workforce, she has been a full-time professional writer since 1979, and considers it very well said that the self-employed person has an idiot for a boss. However, since this beats having any *other* idiot for a boss, she plans to stay self-employed as long as she can get away with it.

After her books having been regularly on the short list of more awards than she cares to think about, she is extremely pleased that *Ash: A Secret History* won the British Science Fiction Award and the Sidewise Award for Alternate History. *Ash* was also one of the *Locus* listed fantasy books for 2000. She is immensely cheered by having science fiction, fantasy, and alternate history accolades for the same book.