

**THE THREE
KINGDOMS
THE SOWN SEED**

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Mark J Musser Books
2020*

THE THREE KINGDOMS: The Sown Seed

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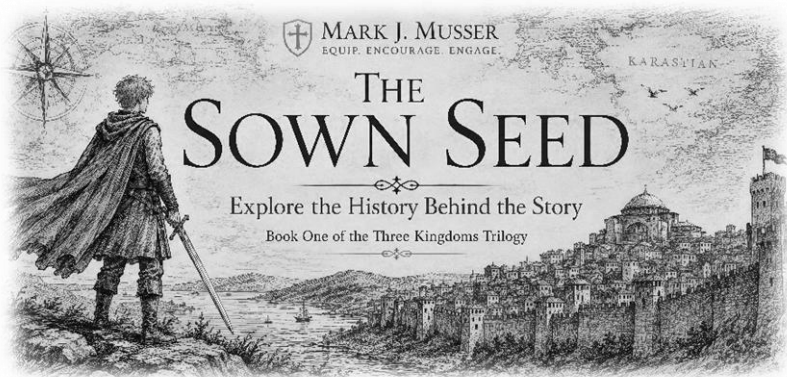
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Thanks also to my mother and my son (Kyle) for working through some early drafts with me.

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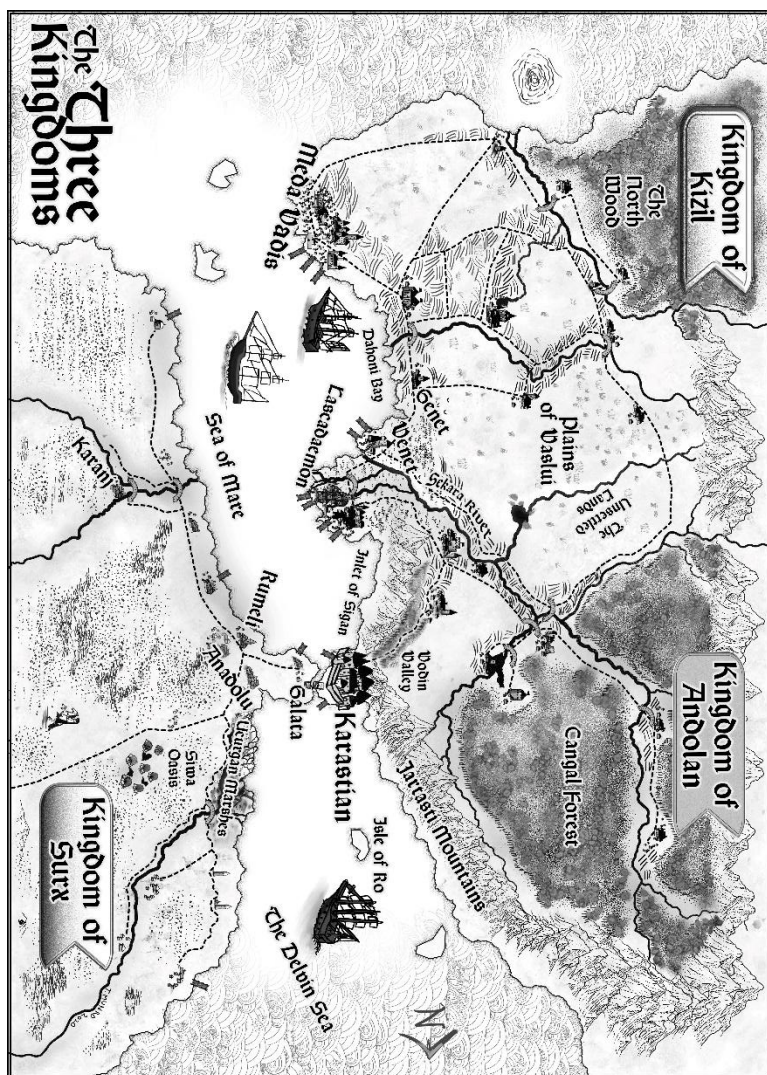
And, finally, thanks to God who is there for me no matter how many times I screw up!



This is more than a novel. It's a doorway into a historical adventure that will take you well beyond the pages of this book! Check out the companion website for historical links, resource cards, detailed maps and illustrations, enriching articles, immersive videos, and so much more!

markjmusser.com/sown-seed-history

MAP ONE



Three Kingdoms

Plains of Vastui

The Jarraeti River

The Unsettled Lands

Escadachion

Inlet of Sigan

The White City

Trepamia

Jarraeti

Vadin Valley

Isle of Ro

Karastian

Canal Forest

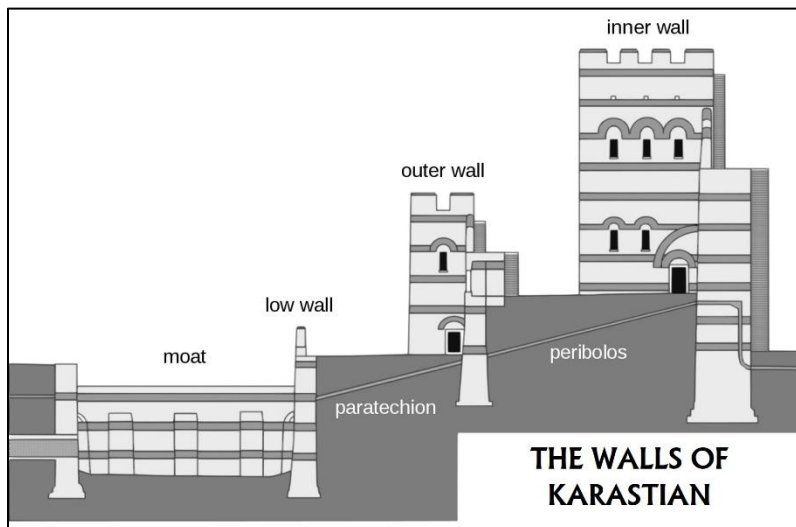
Lake Pileobis

Binda

Jarraeti Mountains



MAP THREE



PRONUNCIATION KEY – PEOPLES AND PLACES

Andolan – Ahn-DOH-lahn

Andolian – Ahn-DOH-lee-yahn

Anadolu – Ah-NAH-doh-loo

Dahoni Bay – Dah-HOHN–ee Bay

Delvin Sea – DEHL-veen Sea

Galata – Gah-LAH-tah

Genet – JEH-neht

Inlet of Sigan – Inlet of SEE-gahn

Isle of Ro – I-ehl of Roh

Jartasti Mountains – Jahr-TAHS-tee Mountains

Karanj – Kuh-RON-juh

Karastian – Kuh-RAHS-tee-yahn

Kizalian – Kee-ZAHL-yahn

Kizil – Kee-ZEEL

Kopuro – Koh-POO-roh

Lascadaemon – Lahs – cuh – DAY – mon

Meda Vadis – Mae-DAH VAH-dees

Rumeli – Roo-MEHL-ee

Sea of Mare – The Sea of MAH-ray

Sekara River – Say-KAHR-ruh River

Siwa Oasis – SEE-wah Oasis

Surx – Soo-URKS

Surxii – Soo-URKS-ee

Tamasa – Tah-MAH-sah

Ucurgan Marshes – Oo-COOR-gahn Marshes

Venet – VEH-neht

PRONUNCIATION KEY – MAIN CHARACTERS

Anna Notaras – AH-NAH Noh-TAHR-uhs

Dimetes – Duh-MEE-tays

Emperor Karas – Emperor KAHR-uhs

Father Gennad – Father JEN-nahd

Feres – FEHR-ehs

Notaras – Noh-TAHR-uhs

Phrantzes – FRAHN-zays

Steffan – STEH – fahn

Sulla Falaak -- SOOL-luh FUH-Lahk

Sulla Murad – SOOL-uh MOO-rahd

Tenniani – Tehn-NEE-ahn-ee

Thomes – THO-mays

Vizier Aksham – VEE-zeer UHK-shahm

Vizier Basid – VEE-zeer Buh-SEED

PROLOGUE

Once there were three kingdoms – Kizil, Andolan, and Surx. Kizil, with its opulent capital city of Meda Vadis, was known far and wide for its learning, art, science, and commerce. Andolan, meanwhile, teemed with farms, forests, and mountains, yielding grain and fruit and timber and ore. The kingdom of Surx, however, was a desert place, having neither the commerce and culture of Kizil nor the raw resources of Andolan.

Even worse for the Surxii, the people of Kizil and Andolan lorded their position and privilege over them. The Kizilians made trade difficult and tariffs high. The Andolians charged an exorbitant tax to pass through the city of Karastian in order to enter the trade routes that ran through the Vodin Valley. In time, the people of Surx grew tired of feeding off

the scraps that fell from the tables of the north and, instead, began to hunger for something else—vengeance and war.

Thus, long ago, a ruinous and devastating war raged. The Surxii were defeated, but each kingdom had paid a grievous price. So grievous, in fact, that the northern kingdoms spared no expense to transform the city of Karastian into a bastion city, fortified by miles of thick walls, moats, and killing fields. So grand was the accomplishment that when the final stone was set in place, the calendar began anew on that day. For the next 1103 years, Karastian endured twenty-two more attacks from the Surxii, repelling each.

Finally, enraged by these repeated usurpations, the kingdoms of the north vowed consequences so severe that the Surxii would lose all taste for war. The kings of Kizil and Andolan put every fourth man to the sword, set aflame every Surx ship, broke every Surx bow, and melted every Surx blade. Then with one last humiliating act, they split the tongues and wrenched the teeth of each noble so that whenever food touched their lips, there could only be the bitter taste of defeat. The punishment was so exacting and cruel, it seemed the Surxii would never again seek after war. But twenty-five years have since passed, and things are not as they should seem.

CHAPTER 1

Two white horses galloped across a dusty landscape. Even though autumn had arrived, the sun, high in the blue sky, burned down on the horses and their riders as they made their way to the oasis city of Karanj in the kingdom of Surx. Situated between two tributaries, it was a patch of green sewn into a tapestry of barrenness.

In the far distance, the riders caught a glimpse of the palatial fortress on the eastern edge of the city. Sitting on a knoll, the massive adobe citadel boasted thirty-eight watch towers that jutted above the twenty foot walls. Atop those towers, sentries could see for miles across the flat windblown expanse that lay beyond the tributaries.

As the horsemen drew near, the familiar details of the

fortress sharpened. A single row of slits, thin rectangles cut into the brown brick, ran along the top of the wall like dark stitching across a sandy tunic. Behind the walls, a walkway rose and curled to the palace itself which rested at the very top of the knoll. A single mud-brick bell tower projected from the pinnacle of the palace. The riders could hear its faint din as it rang out that their arrival was near.



The hooves of the muscular white horses clacked rapidly across a sturdy wooden bridge as their riders forced them to continue the journey at full pace, even though the destination was so near. Soon the two men were inside the walls and galloping up the walkway. They should have left their horses below, where more than a hundred other horses could be found in stables, but time could not be spared.

The pair dismounted their steeds in front of a thick

wooden door—the entrance to the palace residence. It was guarded by four soldiers clad in black and red with curved kilijes at their sides. They promptly pushed open the heavy doors and stepped aside for the horsemen who strode rapidly through a courtyard centered with a bubbling fountain. Quickening their pace, the two moved through a series of halls draped with woven tapestries and lined with statues of bronze and clay.

Standing before an ebony door, each man removed his turban helmet, known as a tolga, which tapered to a pointed finial at the top. The helmet of the first to enter was gold while the second, black. That first man pushed open the door, advancing into the large room. Sunlight wedged itself through the window slits, cutting through the darkness with hazy rays. Dust seemed to dance in the thin beams.

He made his way over to a wide bed at the opposite side of the room. The second man stayed near the door. “Prince Falaak! Thank the Holy One! You have made it,” shouted a man wearing a red open-sleeved coat over a dark robe. His beard was long and pepper in color. It was the vizier, chief counsel to the Sulla of Surx.

“Is that my son?” uttered a weak and lispy voice from the bed.

“Yes, my sulla,” replied the vizier as he leaned closer

to the sickly figure. “Prince Falaak has arrived in time.”

Sulla Murad feebly lifted his head inches above a tufted pillow. “This is good,” he began, his voice choked by coughing. “Leave us, Basid.”

Vizier Basid stepped back, placed his hands together in front of his chest, offered a slight bow, and moved through the shafts of light out the door. Falaak took Basid’s spot at his father’s side. The young man, just nineteen, had long flowing black hair which stuck in clumps to the sweat and sand on his forehead. With wide brown eyes, he peered down at his father. “My lord, say your time is not yet at an end.”

“I am not entitled to say such a thing, my son.” The sulla’s voice trembled, which further skewed his words already distorted by weakness, lack of teeth, and a forked tongue. “But this I do say. While you lived away to learn and train, I have labored in secret.”

Falaak inched closer. “Labored in secret?”

“When we lost the Great War long ago, they called it a war to end all wars. Yet, I vowed that it would not be so. The atrocities committed by Kizil and Andolan begot a shame that drug many of our people to their graves...and so it must now be for the north.”

A wheezing cough sprayed a mist of blood over the sulla’s lips and beard. But he continued on, detailing the

growing rift between Andolan and Kizil, the surreptitious creation of a small but swift fleet of ships, buried weapon caches, hidden metal foundries, concealed training grounds, and covert...

“Sulla! My sulla!” Basid burst into the room with a shout.

“Not now, vizier!” screamed Falaak.

“A thousand pardons, my prince,” Vizier Basid stated breathlessly, as he inserted himself next to the bed, between the prince and his father. “My sulla, they have found them! Found them deep in the southernmost regions.”

“The legends are true.” Murad’s eyes grew wide, but his voice was barely audible now. “If they can be tamed for use, it would melt the courage of the north as fire melts wax.” He turned quickly to his son, reaching out with an unsteady hand. Falaak moved in, allowing his father’s quavering fingers to grab hold of his sand-mantled coat. “Son, you must do all that is in your power to...” Murad’s hand released. Grabbing at his chest, his head whipped back onto the pillow. Gums pressed together as he gritted. His torso lurched for a moment then stillness.

“Father!” cried Falaak. “Father!” He fell back into a chair next to the bed, burying his face in his hands. When he finally raised his head, long tears had cut rivers through the

grit baked into his cheeks. “Vizier,” the new sulla began, his voice firm yet caught with sadness. “You must tell me everything you know. Leave nothing out.”

The arms of the descending sun spread across the western horizon, filling the sky with brilliant hues of red and purple. Three weary travelers camped just outside the eastern most city of Lascadaemon—one of the twin cities situated on the Sea of Mare—ruled by Emperor Karas XI’s younger brothers, Thomes and Dimetes. Seated around a small but warm fire, the three men had much to discuss. The fire crackled as they spoke, sending tiny orange sparks into the air which soon faded into the growing darkness of evening.

No one but Sulla Murad knew of their mission. So much depended on secrecy. But they had neared the city gates without anyone the wiser, having passed through the bastion city of Karastian under the guise of peddling wares to the people of the north. They traveled easily through the scenic Vodin Valley with the majestic Jartasti Mountains to the east and the lesser Jartasties flanking them to the south and west. From there, it was a three-day journey around the peaks and down the coast along the Inlet of Sigan to the eastern city of

Lascadaemon. All told, their journey had lasted twelve days. Tomorrow, they would be inside the walls.

Dimetes had been despot of the city for almost four years. After Emperor Jantas, Dimetes oldest brother, died without an heir, he sought the throne even though Karas sat next in the line of succession. With relations strained between Andolan and Kizil over a dispute regarding the Unsettled Lands, Karas had been off on a diplomatic mission to the capital city of Meda Vadis many miles away. Dimetes seized the opportunity and maneuvered to gain control. His plan failed almost instantly when the nobility refused him outright. After Karas finally returned to the Andolian capital, the nobility called for Dimetes' head. That consequence, however, was not within Karas' character. Instead, he banished his youngest brother to Lascadaemon with an admonition. "Many wish to hold power, yet so few contemplate its weight. I send you to Lascadaemon with a prayer to God that you might understand such a burden can only be carried with strength that comes through humility."

One would think that being spared his life would fill a person's heart with gratitude. But such was not the case. It was well known, even to the three distant travelers, that Dimetes' heart blazed with bitterness. That it still glowed as red as a baker's oven was welcome news to the Kingdom of Surx.

With fortune, after tomorrow's meeting with the resentful despot, the three men would begin the long journey home with even more welcome news.

After the Great War, the Kingdom of Andolan built two sentinel towns at the base of the Tamasa—the sole land bridge that connected north and south. These dual sentry posts – Rumeli and Anadolu—were tasked with keeping their eyes open to travelers and their ears open to any news that mattered to the north. For two decades, the soldiers and citizens fulfilled these duties—what little of it there was to do. In the last few years, however, everyone had settled into a quiet complacency. For the people of Anadolu in particular, their biggest worries revolved around whether or not the fish in the Delvin Sea were biting and whether or not strange spirits actually dwelled among the dead trees in the Ucurgan Marshes.

“Ready or not, here I come!” Father Gennad pulled his thin and aging fingers away from a grey-stubbed face. A wide smile fell across his lips as he moved across the creaking wooden floorboards of the orphanage. “I wonder where they all could be hiding,” he thought aloud with a scratch of his

balding head. Little giggles sprung up from the edges of the sparsely furnished room.

Spying a dirty pair of feet poking out from under a fraying yellow tablecloth, Gennad angled quickly that way. He grabbed the cloth and flipped it up in one motion. “I found you!” he announced with a full-teethed grin. Jena, a six year-old girl with rosy cheeks and knotted blonde hair, smiled back, clutching a straw doll with a burlap dress against her chest. “Come, now you must help me look.” In truth, Jena did not mind being found. She preferred to hold the father’s hand and seek rather than sit alone waiting to be found.

With her doll wedged in the crook of her right arm, Jena grabbed Gennad’s beckoning hand with her left. Together, they ambled through the orphanage looking for the remaining thirteen orphans, moving through the main area that held just two large tables and several lean-legged chairs, through the three bedrooms that had nothing in them but beds to hide under, and even into a rather bare kitchen that contained more empty shelves than full ones. One by one nearly all the children were found and became seekers. There was just one child left to discover—the oldest, fourteen year-old Steffan.

Back in the central room, Father Gennad called out, “Okay, Steffan, my son, we give up. You may come out now.”

The children all spun their heads, looking in every direction to see from where Steffan would come. He soon appeared, proudly striding down the hall from the furthest bedroom, a look of satisfaction growing across his tan face.

“We looked in there!” griped eight year-old Stahl.

“Where did you hide? Where did you hide?” cried out the rest.

“Now, now, children,” Gennad quieted. “A good hiding spot is not a secret quickly shared.” He flashed a quick wink to Steffan while the others groused. “Come now. Everyone, I need you to do your chores to get ready for supper. Steffan and I shall be back shortly. We must fetch water.”

Without being asked, Steffan grabbed two wooden buckets and moved toward the door. As they stepped out onto the dirt street, Gennad looked down at the boy. He was a handsome young lad with wavy brown hair. Bright green eyes, like emeralds, contrasted with his bronze complexion. “Where *did* you hide, my boy?” the old priest asked as they made their way to the well.

“Father,” Steffan started with a smirk, “you know a good hiding spot is not a secret quickly shared.”

“Indeed, my son. Indeed.” Gennad placed his arm around the boy and squeezed his shoulder. Steffan had always been a smart, quick-witted boy who learned his studies fast and

then would patiently help the others...on most occasions.

It is good to see the young man smile, thought the old priest. *His has been a hard life*. Gennad thought of the boy's parents who had died five years prior in a wave of sickness so terrible it was known simply as The Black. In fact, most of the children in the orphanage were there because The Black's diseased hands choked the life from their parents. It took Steffan years before he would even smile again, but now...

The clapping hooves of trotting horses brought Gennad back to the present. He looked up to see a dozen soldiers riding toward the town's main gate that opened to the south of the city. Each were clad in charcoal grey chainmail with cobalt blue undercoats. "Where are you off to, my fine men?"

The leading soldier, a squat figure on a tall horse, stopped. Raising his fist, he called the rest of his party to yield. "Greetings, father!" the figure started. It was Bostal, one of the captains of the guard. "There is news of events near the Siwa Oasis. We are tasked to discover more."

"Events?" Steffan asked, though quickly thought better of it when all the soldiers peered down at him at once.

Bostal offered a small chuckle. "Events...rumors...tales...call them what you will. The Surxii have done well to recognize their place in this world. I am sure it is nothing. But

if it is something, we shall remind them of the proper order of things.”

“It has been many months since there’s been such a journey. Is that not so?” Gennad offered.

“True,” started Bostal with disdain. “And, hopefully, this shall be the last for some time. I despise the desert places of this land.” With that, the captain gestured to his iron helmet and rode off with his men toward the southern gate.

“What do you make of that, father?”

Gennad gave the teen a quick pat on the head. “It is certainly nothing that concerns the likes of you and me. Your main concern, my son, is to fill these buckets. And mine is to figure out this hiding spot of yours.”

A teenage girl on a dappled grey horse looked over the familiar sights of the Golden Gate, the grandest of nine gates built for the bastion city of Karastian. It was said that this gate was once the finest in all the world. In a time long since passed, it stood as the triumphal entryway used by emperors and kings coming in from the sea. Created from huge square blocks of polished marble, it formed three enormous arches with the middle arch higher than the others. No matter how many times she had seen

it, the young lady still awed at its size and at the intricate artwork that surrounded it. Sadly, it had been sealed off years before as the fortunes of the city waned. To exit or enter the city now from the southwestern side, one must travel further west to the second gate—the Belgrat Gate. It lacked the exquisite nature of the Golden Gate, but at thirty-five feet wide and sixty feet high, it still impressed.

The girl, her flowing auburn hair waving like a banner in the wind, moved toward that gate, knowing her father would soon be exiting from there. As the time passed, she began impatiently picking at particles which stuck to her new blue gown. Since it was light and lacy, she now wished she'd listened to her handmaiden and worn a jacket or a shawl. Winter was not far off, and its cold hands had begun to grip the air.

Such thoughts were soon forgotten, however, as she caught sight of her father and his party riding toward the gate. He looked quite noble, she thought, in his dark vestments trimmed and riveted with solid gold buttons. He was the Grand Duke Notaras after all, one of Emperor Karas XI's most chief advisors.

When he noticed her, a look of frustration swept across his clean-shaven face. "Anna! How many times must we discuss this?" His words dripped with annoyance. "I have

important business in Galata, and I cannot be bothered to keep eyes on you.”

“Oh, father,” Anna pulled strands of blowing hair from her face, “I shall not be a bother. I just cannot stay shut up in this city a moment longer.” She paused to gauge his reaction, hoping that his tense features would soften. “I so love little Galata. It has such charming shoppes and the most delightful pastries. If I can...”

“Fine!” Notaras interrupted in frustration. “But you must be careful!” The Grand Duke grabbed the reins of his horse with black leather gloves and proceeded without further word, a half dozen men tight behind him.

Anna only replied with a short “Thank you” knowing that anything more might risk her chances of continuing.

The town of Galata sat on the nose of a cape just south of a wide canal that split the Tamasa in two. A massive drawbridge, known as Kopuro, that raised for ships and lowered for travelers was the only way to cross from one side to the other. It took more than twenty oxen to turn the giant cranks and wheels so enormous was the bridge. For Anna, just to see that sight was almost excitement enough.

After a little more than an hour, they entered into the town. The main square bustled with activity as vendors shopped their wares and farmers peddled their produce. A

steady hum of chatter floated on the cool breeze as dozens bartered in every nook and cranny. As her company moved down an alleyway lined with indoor taverns and shoppes, her father pointed a gloved finger to her right. PASTRIE SHOPPE announced a sign in fading red letters. “You may go in there,” stated Notaras. “Do not go elsewhere without informing me. I shall be across the way in this tavern.”

Anna looked at the tavern. Through a square hole in the wall that served as a window, she could see several people sitting at tables talking, eating, and drinking. “Okay, father,” she replied with a smile and a nod.

For many minutes, Anna stayed in the little shoppe. The smell of sugary confections filled her nose. Such a light and airy smell. To her, one just felt better having taken in such an aroma. She looked at the almond cakes, the tarts, the cooked fruit, the cheese pies, the custard cups, and more. She settled on a marzipan made from sugar, honey, and almond. So delicious it was, she simply had to tell her father.

Stepping from the shoppe, she moved across the cramped cobbled street toward the tavern. But just then, her eyes drew to a small boy leaning on a crooked crutch, a split wooden cup at his feet. *I should put a coin in that cup for him,* thought Anna. Walking a short distance from the tavern, she passed by a narrow alleyway to the boy. Dropping in two silver

coins, she asked him his name but could not understand the reply, so poor was his speech. Nevertheless, she smiled and bid him a good day then turned to leave.

Nearing the alleyway, the voice of her father sped on the wind to her ears. *He must be standing in the alleyway*, her thoughts raced. She stood still, pressing against the wooden front of an odd looking store.

“You must ensure that Vizier Basid tells your new sullen that rash decisions lead men to ruin. There is a path that can benefit us all.”

“You mean ‘there is a path that can benefit the wealthy of this world,’” answered a raspy voice with a strange accent. “You have many business interests, do you not?”

“You need not concern yourself with my interests,” her father’s voice sharply replied. “Your task is only to relay the message.”

There were no more words after that...at least none that Anna could hear. She waited a moment longer then made her way quickly to the tavern.

Night drew near. It was time to go.

The city of Karastian had stood as a bulwark against invasion

for more than 1100 years. Once the largest and most populous city in the known world, it spanned nearly six square miles within the towering and solid walls. Time, however, had been unkind to the Andolian capital. The population that had once burgeoned to over 500,000 now stood closer to 50,000. Repeated attacks by the Surxii through the years caused many to search for more peaceful places to build homes and raise families. Then, five years prior, came the fierce plague known as The Black. Nearly a third of the population succumbed, including Emperor Jantas. Others fled the crowded confines of the city hoping to find health in the rural areas of Andolan.

Karas XI worked tirelessly to rebound his people, but the task proved difficult. So many had died or dispersed. There were fewer hands to till the soil, to cut the timber, to mine the ore, and to run the shoppes and taverns, all of which generated revenue on which taxes were paid. Money ran low, and the hands to make money ran lower. Repeatedly, the emperor sent envoys and ambassadors to Kizil imploring aid or assistance. All pleas fell on deaf ears. The west busied itself with empire building and few worried anymore of war. To the south, the Surxii had become a secretive and distant people after the Great War. Trade between the kingdoms was shrouded in distrust. Notaras, it seemed to the emperor, had made some inroads, but there was still much more that could be done.

Perhaps now that a new sulla sat on the Surxii throne, things could be different. Perhaps now the world could move forward. Karas was only fourteen when the Great War had begun. It lasted until his seventeenth birthday. He prayed much for that time to slip from his memory, but his nightmares held it close.

Regrettable was the choice of his father and the king of Kizil to exact such a wretched price from the Surxii. For years, Karas endeavored to dam up the dark memories behind walls more solid than his city's, yet they barraged the gates like an unrelenting horde, breaking through in bloody and violent snatches—his father's bejeweled dagger splitting a tongue, screams echoing from inside a burning home, his own sword running through every fourth prisoner, and...

The emperor squeezed his eyes tight, working to push the memories back behind the walls. He had sent emissaries to the new sulla—Falaak. They left bearing gifts of peace, reconciliation, and, of course, condolences for the loss of Murad. Those gifts were costly to Karastian. Yet, with any luck, well worth the price.

Karas stopped his walk along the marbled colonnade of the palace which stood at the top of a terraced hill on the far eastern side of the city. He placed a hand on the cool white of a thick marble pillar, looking out over the expanse of the

Delvin Sea. It shimmered in the sun like the glinting armor of ten thousand men. To the northeast were the majestic Jartasti Mountains. So high and so jagged were they that no army had ever been able to cross them for an attack on the north of the city.

“My lord, my lord!” The words roused Karas. He turned to see Phrantzes—a learned man, wise from many years of study and experience. He stood nervously in front of the much taller emperor, still attempting to tie his red vest which was sloppily thrown over a blue tunic. Karas noticed trembling fingers working the strings.

“Careful, my troubled friend,” the emperor offered with a smile. “Your beard has no more room for gray hairs.”

Phrantzes made no note of the comment. He only looked at his emperor—tall and regal with a closely cropped brown beard. A mustache flowed over top the beard and down to the sides of his chin. The advisor could see in the pale green eyes of his king that he should reply, but he could not. He simply turned his head to a soldier some distance behind him holding a large wicker basket. With a quick wave, he summoned him close.

As the soldier drew near, Karas could see the tense features of his face—a jaw as tight as a fist and unblinking eyes. The soldier placed the basket down and hurriedly

departed when the advisor dismissed him.

Phrantzes finally found his words—a trembling few, at least. “My lord...the emissaries you sent to the new sulla have...” He could not bring himself to finish. Instead, he grabbed the weaved basket top and removed it. Inside lay three bloody heads, their teeth removed and their tongues split.

Falaak had given his answer.

CHAPTER 2

The chill of the coming winter was not the only unpleasant thing to fall on the sentinel town of Anadolu. Nearly two months prior, Bostal, one of the captains of the guard, and a dozen men had ridden out to the region of the Siwa Oasis some thirty-five miles south. All had assumed that they would return within two weeks.

They did not.

After twenty-five days, a dozen more riders were sent in search. They also had yet to return. What's more, rumors had begun to spread through the town like weeds through an untended garden—a new sulla desiring war, large groups of men clad in black and red moving restlessly in the south, and strange creatures with eyes like giant amber stones stalking the desert expanse. In response to the growing unease, the mayor sent dispatches north to Emperor Karas. Nothing could be

done now but wait.

Steffan, however, tried to push all such troubling thoughts aside. It was nearly Christmas after all. Besides, Father Gennad assured that no wars ever start in winter when water is as cold as stone and ground as hard as iron. Further, the father had charged him with setting the proper example for the other children. He was the oldest and soon to turn fifteen just two days after Christmas. Gennad said it was a grand thing to celebrate a birthday so close to Jesus' own.

Steffan did not know why it was so grand, since neither he nor Jesus would be getting any presents out of it. Nevertheless, Christmas and his birthday did mean special oatcakes with fig cream after dinner. The boy often waffled back and forth between taking pleasure that he could have such a treat just two days apart or hating the fact that, after his birthday, he had to wait so long to taste it again.

"My boy, it is time to fetch the water for dinner," Gennad informed.

Steffan rose from one of the tables in the main room of the orphanage and grabbed the two buckets. Crisp evening air met them as they stepped outside. Since the orphanage sat at the eastern edge of town, and the well was situated near the town's center, the trek was not a short one. Gennad pulled his full-length grey robe tighter around himself. The breeze

stiffened, causing Steffan to wish that his own brown tunic was as long. His, however, went only to the knees and was no thicker than his slight undergarments. Steffan knew better than to complain, though. The father would just reply, “You have bones that are young and warm, my son. Mine are old and have lost all heat.”

Without warning, there were sounds all about. The cool air filled with women screaming as though in the pain of labor. Men, too, shouted...this way and that. People were running in all directions, turning the city center into what Steffan thought looked like an ant hill after being struck by a rock. A burly man slammed into Father Gennad, bowling him to the ground. The man did not even stop long enough to help the elderly priest up.

“Are you alright, father?” Steffan asked, helping him to his feet. Gennad replied, but Steffan did not hear, his attention fully drawn to the scene unfolding around him—the screams, people bolting in panic, horses at full gallop, smoke starting to build at the southern end of town, clouding the sky with a black fog.

“You must get out of the city, father! You must get out now!”

Steffan turned at the sound of the command and saw a soldier on a tan horse, his head spinning in all directions, fear

pulling at the features of his face.

“Head out the West Gate and race for your life to Galata!” the soldier continued.

“But the children. The children are east,” Gennad replied in a wobbled voice, his palm pressed against a growing lump on his forehead.

“There is no time for that, father. We are attacked! You must take the boy and run with all haste.” With that the soldier drew his sword and raced south toward the towers of black smoke that were overcoming the sky.

Gennad grabbed Steffan by the shoulders and turned him to get his attention, but the boy’s eyes were locked on the scene unfolding around him. The old man placed icy hands on Steffan’s face to force a connection. “My boy, you must listen to me. Flee through the West Gate and head out as quick as a wink.”

Steffan was already shaking his head.

“You must, my boy,” the father insisted. “I shall gather the children and meet you on the road.”

“No!” Steffan shouted. “No! I am staying with you.” He grabbed Gennad’s wrists and yanked them down and away from his face. “You can gather the others faster with my help.” He turned swiftly toward the orphanage before the priest could even reply.

The pair worked their way back through the chaos. Screams grew louder, shouts more desperate. Steffan's head spun. All around were howls of pain, the clangor of swords, and smoke building, ever building.

Flinging open the orphanage door, Steffan found the children huddled by a table, some in tears, all of them frightened. Gennad was right behind him. "Quickly children. Quickly. Grab your coats, then we must be off. Steffan see to it." The priest did not wait for a reply. Instead, he sped to the kitchen and began throwing food into a cloth sack.

"What's happening, Steffan?" asked one of the children.

"The spirits of the marshes!" cried another, and then they all were talking at once.

"Stop! Stop it now!" Steffan exclaimed, throwing up a hand. "You heard, father. Now, get to it."

The orphans scattered to the three back bedrooms, Steffan right behind them. "Fetch your coats only. Nothing more," he called out as he stooped next to his bed to grab his own which lay underneath. "Hurry now."

Back in the main room, Father Gennad counted the children. "Ten, eleven, twelve..." His eyes hurriedly searched faces. "Who are we missing?...Jena...where is Jena?"

Stahl pointed a small finger down the hall, too

frightened to open his mouth.

“Steffan!” the priest bellowed toward the boy’s room.

“Get Jena. We must be off!”

The boy moved speedily into the room Jena shared with three others and found her sitting on a bed, clutching a straw doll against her body. “We must go, Jena. We can delay no longer.”

She looked up, her round blue eyes glistening with tears. “I take my dolly, too.”

Steffan prepared to shout at her but, instead, paused to swallow a deep breath. “Fine. You may take the...”

CRACK!

The sound of shattering wood followed by high-pitched wailing roared down the hall from the main room. Steffan dropped instantly to the ground and summoned Jena to do the same. Peering out the door, he spied a half-dozen men draped in black and red. Father Gennad stood in front of the children. A sword thrust into his belly. He fell with a thud. A man stood over him, raising his sword again. The young orphans screamed and sobbed as men grabbed at them. One by one their cries were silenced as more swords did their work.

Heart pounding like heavy hooves, stomach churning like clothes spun in a cleaning pot, Steffan could barely move.

But I must!

He lifted a single finger to his lips to instruct Jena, then he slid under the bed across from her and stuck his fingers into a crevice between the floorboards. This was how he hid so well in his own room for hide-and-seek—under the floor. He strained to yank up the board. It squealed in protest. Steffan thought for sure that could be heard down the hall. Stretching out his hand, he whispered for Jena to hurry.

She sat frozen next to her bed.

“Jena!” Steffan hushed firmly.

Nothing.

We could be discovered any minute! Thoughts flew around his mind like a flock of swallows after one of their own had been caught in a net. *Are those footsteps?*

He grabbed Jena by the arm, dragged her under the bed, picked up the board, and pushed her down into the opening. With quick movements, he grabbed some clothes to lay in front of the board, slid in, pulled the clothes close to the opening, then gently released the board.

The footsteps were close now. Jena whimpered. Steffan put his hand over her mouth and tried to hold his breath. At least two were in the room, their footfalls dropping dust down on top of the hidden pair.

THWACK!

The rickety bed above them crumpled against the

wall. Steffan could see the brown rawhide shoes of a soldier through a narrow spacing. The metal heels made a distinct sound on the boards. The man stood right above them, poking at clothes with his curved sword.

Kicking the clothes aside, he thrust his sword between two slats. It stuck in the ground less than a foot from Steffan's arm. Jena winced but made no sound. Steffan still tried not to breathe. The soldier examined the end of his weapon as though looking for traces of blood.

He thrust it again between the slats. It hit the ground right by Steffan's face. He could see his eye in the metal as dirt spit into his ear. The boy braced for what would surely be the killing stroke, but indiscernible words came from down the hall. The soldier sheathed his sword and hurried away with the other.

Steffan finally exhaled.

The Grand Hall in the palace at Karastian was a wonder of the world. As visitors entered, they were greeted by a stunning statue of the first Emperor Karas—Karas the Great—nobly seated on a marble horse rearing up for battle. To round the corner into the main reception area was to be amazed. Bronze

pillars as thick as tree trunks capped with solid gold capitals lined the sides, holding up massive archways nearly twenty feet high. Intricate gold filigree interwove around and above each arch.

A second level stood atop the first just as fine a spectacle, leading to a vaulted ceiling some sixty feet above a marble floor which was painted with every kind of design. From the majestic ceiling hung a towering octagonal chandelier with six levels, each smaller than the one below. Made of solid gold and laden with candles, it took the appearance of a mountainous bell.

At the far end of the ornate hall lay a massive marble staircase. The steps were wide and low. Ten steps took one up just six feet off the ground to a solid wood throne laid over with gold and bronze. On this day, however, the throne was not the central focus. Instead, men gathered around a gilded principal table which sat under the chandelier. The new sulla's response had echoed through the city like a thunderclap through the Vodin Valley. Could there be war again? Surely, it could not be so. Yet, Emperor Karas XI knew it could mean nothing but. Seated at the head of the table, he grabbed at one of the maps spread haphazardly about. Grand Duke Notaras sat to his right with Phrantzes at his left. Others filled in beyond those three.

“As we speak, messengers journey up the Vodin to our fortress in Buda and to Hunyadi at the White City. Further, we have sent ships to my brothers in Lascadaemon seeking aid,” Karas started, rubbing a hand down his mustache and through his beard. “Still others have been sent off to Genet and Venet. From there, they shall also travel to Meda Vadis.”

“My lord,” Notaras began, dressed in silken brown. He tugged at a green armlet that flowed to a golden cuff at his wrist. “You know that Kizil shall not offer assistance unless we cede all claims to the Unsettled Lands. For that, I would rather see a Surxii in the center of this hall than a Kizalian!”

“You are speaking like a fool again, Notaras,” answered Phrantzes, his red vest on much more neatly than before. “If we do not have help from the Kizalians, the Surxii shall indeed be standing in this hall. Only, it shall not be to kiss your ring, but to cut off your head!”

Notaras shouted back. “Phrantzes, once again, you’ve proven your disuse...”

“Enough!” boomed Karas, banging the table with a taut fist. The thump reverberated through the chamber. The emperor lifted his hand to his chest and breathed deeply as the rest of the room ran silent. “The Scriptures declare that a house divided shall fall. There is no hope in division.” He fixed his gaze on Notaras. “My friend, you are most likely correct. Kizil

has long laid claim to our northern lands and would assuredly use our duress to press their advantage. Yet, Phrantzes, too, is correct. We have mighty walls but need men to defend them. Now, what of Galata? You have many connections there. Shall they join us should the battle come?”

Notaras did indeed have many connections there, and further south as well. Even in Kizil he did much business, for as deeply as he despised them, their money could be spent the same. “My lord, the people of Galata shall always do what is...best.”

Phrantzes groaned. “My lord, the people of Galata would sell their mothers for a loaf of bread and two gold pieces. It is a city that cannot be trusted.”

Notaras’ chair screeched backward as he rose angrily to speak, but Karas shot up a hand to stop him. “Regardless...Notaras, I need you to head there this very day and speak with the mayor. May I count on you for this?”

The Grand Duke nodded, then glared at Phrantzes before angrily tossing his thick black cape to the side and reseating himself.

“Speaking of mayors, Emperor, we have a troubling report from the mayor of Anadolu regarding missing riders and rumors of a gathering army,” Phrantzes stated, holding a rolled parchment in his hand.

Karas nodded contemplatively. “We can have no doubt that these rumors are true.”

“We should send soldiers at once to discover what they can, my lord.”

“Very well,” the emperor agreed. “Make it so, for we must know more from our eyes in the south.”

Steffan did not know how long he and Jena had been lying under the floor when it started to glow. At the opposite end of the house, he could see boards turning red. Gray ash fell in clumps between the slats, as smoke crept along the ground like a thick black snake. *The house is on fire!*

Pushing up the loose floorboard, Steffan squeezed out then grabbed at Jena to follow. The teen stopped at the doorway and peeked around the corner. He saw nothing but flames. Sizzling orange fingers pulled the fire upwards along the walls and ceiling, hissing as it grabbed at everything in its path. Dense smoke poured down the hallway, grabbing at Steffan’s throat and choking him.

He dropped to the ground and hacked. His eyes burned and watered as he reached for scattered clothing to cover each of their mouths. There was no going out through the main

room. Steffan hurried Jena across the hall to an adjoining room and kicked at the wall with all his might. His thin pigskin shoes provided no buffer from the pain, but he did not stop kicking until a portion of the wall broke free. He pushed Jena through the opening then pressed through himself.

Taking Jena by the hand, he moved several feet away and tucked in behind some large barrels and a stack of horse hay. Their faces glowed in the shadow of the flames. In minutes, the structure—their home—collapsed in on itself with a sizzling crash...Father Gennad and the others inside. Steffan could not keep from crying. Jena held him tightly, refusing to let go.

Three soldiers in black and red stopped just feet from them, watching the orphanage burn. Their complexion was that of the Surxii which Steffan had seen often, but never had he seen such outfits topped with an odd hat—red with an embroidered gold band and a long flap that came out of the top and flowed down behind the neck. Their speech also was that of Surx, which Steffan did not know. He could pick out only one word, “Galata.”

When the men headed off, Steffan knew that Jena and he could tarry no longer. Though his foot throbbed in painful pulses, he needed to get them out. The pair skulked along the sides of houses not yet destroyed. Steffan made sure to stay in

front and always be in or near the shadows that grew with the coming night. Whenever they heard the sounds of Surxii warriors, they dropped low to the ground and waited.

Passing behind a small barn, Steffan caught sight of an Andolian soldier dead on the ground still gripping his sword. “Stay here and do not move,” the teen commanded Jena in whispered tones. The little girl was too overwhelmed to protest or even speak. Silently, she tucked herself into a shadow and squeezed the doll to her chest.

Steffan sidestepped along the edge of the barn until he was across from the slain man. The steel of the sword glowed, reflecting the nearing flames. Looking left then right, Steffan crept rapidly through the growing darkness to the soldier’s side. The death grip would not release. No matter how hard Steffan worked to pry away fingers, the sword held fast.

Surxii soldiers approached.

Steffan dropped flat to the ground on his stomach. He could not hear what the soldiers were saying over the pounding of his own chest. His breathing quickened. His breath morphed into little clouds of white air as it puffed from his nose. *Will the soldiers see me in the gleam of this sword?*

The men lingered for a moment and were gone. With all his strength, Steffan pried loose rigid fingers from the hilt of the sword. It was heavy and straighter than the swords he’d

seen at the sides of the men in black and red. He moved furtively through the shadows and back to Jena. She had not moved a single inch.

In a few moments, they were near the east corner of the northern wall. Steffan could see that there was no way he could kick through this wall as he had done at the orphanage, even if his foot was not throbbing in near unbearable pain. Grabbing the sword, he stuck it fast between two thick planks and pushed on it with all his might. The wood groaned under the strain. *Can they hear this?* he wondered, but there was no stopping now.

There sounded a mighty snap as the plank gave way from the framing. Steffan did not wait to see if any of the Surxii had heard. He forced Jena through the gap and followed right behind her. They were out...but far from safe.

The two moved west, staying tightly along the outer wall for several minutes until Steffan could see his way to the Tamasa. "Everyone who escaped should be heading that way," Steffan said out loud, though he wasn't sure why.

Scanning that direction, he caught a terrifying sight. Townsfolk surrounded by horsemen. Every figure recognized only as silhouettes against a town aglow with flames. In the blackness, Steffan gazed out at his people dropping like figs shaken from a tree. It was a slaughter.

There was no choice now. They must make for the marshes. Many had convinced themselves that the marshes were haunted by spirits. But Father Gennad insisted there were no such things as spirits. And even if there were, *God is stronger than the spirits of this world and prayer is a mighty weapon*, he would say.

The thought of Gennad pulled tears from his eyes. Steffan hurriedly wiped them away. Time could not be spared to grieve. He knew that he must get Jena to the Ucurgan Marshes and trust that prayer proved a mightier weapon there than it did in Anadolu.

The teen grabbed Jena by her hand and led her back to where they had come through the wall. The horizon was now completely dark with light coming only from the flaming city.

“Eh!”

The shout found Steffan off guard. *A soldier must have come through the wall in search of us*. Turning, he saw the soldier reaching for his sword. Steffan thrust his own into the man’s chest. Time stood still. The two figures stared at each other in a grotesque pose—Steffan, two hands on a sword pressed into flesh, the other gritting in pain, eyes made wide by shock and fear.

The Surxii fell, and the sword came free as the man struck the ground in a heap. Steffan’s eyes fixed on the end of

his weapon. It was covered in blood and some sort of goo. He could not stop looking...but more shouts came loudly from the other side of the wall. The teen grabbed hold of Jena's hand again, and they sped east toward the marshes. It felt like the bite of a tiger fish each time his right foot hit the ground. *If we can just get into the darkness, they won't find us!*

Jena tripped. Her doll flung upwards, lost in the black of night. She cried out, and Steffan tried quickly to shush her. Just as he quieted her, there came a whistling sound...and pulpy thud. Jena gasped and dropped into Steffan's arms; an arrow wedged between her scapulae. Her body lay lifeless almost instantly.

Another whistle then pain. A second arrow ripped through Steffan's tunic, grazing his upper arm. Blood soaked into his sleeve. Hollers echoed in the distance. They were after him. Steffan left Jena on the ground and sped to the marshes. Voices and sounds came from all sides, but after a few moments, no one could see anything so far from the flames of the town.

Steffan did not stop until he reached the edge of the marsh and pinched himself into a tangle of dead branches.

At the northeastern edge of the town, two men sat atop sturdy white horses, flanked by dozens of others. One wore a tolga made of solid gold. The other, one as black as the shadowed horizon. The returning riders reported that one of the two children was killed, the second could not be found.

“Aksham,” started the one in the gold helmet. He would not bring himself to speak directly to the men who had failed him.

“Yes, my sulla,” the black-helmeted man replied.

“Why have these men returned without completing their task?”

Aksham, Sulla Falaak’s closest friend and advisor, looked out into the veil of darkness. “They fear the spirits of the marshes. They shall not venture in.”

“Superstitious fools!” Falaak roared, spit shooting from his mouth. He paused a moment then spun his horse. Gazing at something barely visible in the orange and black shadows of the fire, he turned back to Aksham. “If men dare not enter the marshes, then we shall send something else.”

“My sulla?”

“Let loose one of the beasts.”

CHAPTER 3

Make not for the marshes where crawling things crawl, creeping things creep, and spirits conspire to steal men's sleep. That was the saying Steffan heard time and again in Anadolu. Yet, there he was in the Ucurgan curled in a tangle of branches that creaked in the wailing wind. He felt alone and helpless, like a lamb caught in a thicket.

His right foot throbbed as though it was stuck by a burr that could not be removed. His left arm burned with pain from the slice of an arrow. His sleeve clung to the wound as drying blood glued gash and tunic together. Every time he closed his eyes, flashes of horror pulsed in his brain—Father Gennad dropping to the floor, the orphanage crashing in a sizzling heap, silhouettes cut down in the distance, dead fingers wrapped around a hilt, Jena falling into his arms, the point of his sword piercing flesh...

“Stop it, Steffan! Stop it!” he muttered silently to himself. He could not give in to despair. Bringing his knees up to his chest, he pressed his hands together and rubbed. The darkness provided safety, but it stole all heat. He could not stay still long, or the numbing of his fingers would spread through the whole of his body. Moreover, he needed to move under the cover of night.

I must make my way to the coast of the Delvin Sea and follow it to the north. Having heard the Surxii soldiers speak of Galata, he decided it would be dangerous to cross to the western side of the Tamasa. He would need to stay along the eastern coast and head straight to Karastian. *I need to travel some distance tonight, or I shall be found.*

He pulled himself out of the underbrush and grabbed his sword. He stuck it into the ground to use as a crutch, but it sunk deep into the moist and spongy soil of the marsh. There was no use for it as a staff. Steffan could see nothing, but he turned his head to listen for the sound of the sea. However, with the whistle of wind and the thrashing of branches, he could not be sure of its direction. Yet, he knew he must stay moving, so he began walking and prayed he was right.

Travel proved arduous through the heavy, mushy marshland. Steffan’s thin pigskin shoes quickly filled with cold dripping muck. Still, he slogged on. Using his sword to

cut through twisted branches and tangled weeds, he made slow but steady progress through the veil of night.

A sound came from his right.

The teen stood deathly still, his eyes searching the blackness in vain.

There it was again.

Instinctively, he crouched down and listened. His teeth chattered with cold and fear. He rapidly cupped a hand over his mouth to quiet them.

A third sound.

He swung his head around again even though he could not see three feet in front of himself. Now, his legs were shaking and not just from the cold. Spying something, he rose up warily. Two circular eyes, glowing in the night. Blue.

Hoo-hoo.

An owl.

Steffan breathed again and continued on. After some time, the soggy ground gave way to deeper water. *I hope this means I am getting closer to the shoreline.* The water stood eight to ten inches deep and was as cold as stone just like Father Gennad had said. Steffan's whole body shivered. His only solace—the numbing of his extremities deadened the pain in his foot and arm.

A tangle of branches struck Steffan in the face and

chest. He reached out an arm to feel around it. He moved left, then right, then back left. There seemed no end nor gap in that dense thicket. Grabbing the hilt of the heavy sword with two hands, he gave a mighty whack, then another, and another. Sticking out a hand again, he felt for a way through. A small opening had been cut, but Steffan could not squeeze through. He stepped back and wielded the sword again, and again, and again. Nearly breathless, he paused to catch his wind.

A splash in the water rose up in the distance behind him. Had the owl snatched a fish? But the splashing continued...growing louder...and closer. Steffan turned and spied two eyes glowing as yellow as amber. They bobbed up and down as a horse's did when it raced.

It is racing toward me!

A deep, throaty snarl unlike anything Steffan had ever heard pierced the darkness and struck him in the heart. He reached out in panic for the opening he hoped his sword had created. Trembling fingers felt along the labyrinth of twisted branches. The splashing behind him continued...louder...eyes growing bigger.

His hand found where his sword struck. He jabbed a leg through and then an arm. The beast was nearly on him. He could hear its panting breath between snarling growls. With all his strength, he pressed his torso into the opening. Sliced

branches scratched and dug into his back and chest and face. Still, he squeezed and squeezed with every last bit of effort.

Falling through, he tumbled into the water on the other side. The creature crashed into the thicket crunching and cracking branches with the impact. It unleashed an unholy roar. Steffan's throat choked with fright as giant yellow eyes pushed through. He reached for his sword but could not find it. On his knees in a foot of freezing water, his hands swept through the silt in search of something metal.

The snarls intensified, deeper and louder. Steffan could hear more branches snapping under the weight of the creature pressing forward. His hands frantically churned through the water desperately feeling for the weapon.

Yellow eyes glowed in the darkness, casting light on the branches around them. They were nearly as big as figs with a black pit in the middle. Hot breath panted from the creature. Steffan could see it turn to faint clouds in the chill so close it was.

His hand felt metal. From his knees, he raised the sword and brought it down on the beast's head with a sickening thud. He heard the fracturing of bone but did not feel the sword penetrate. Steffan raised the sword again, but the animal cleaved the air with a deafening shriek and pulled its head back through the mesh of branches.

Steffan leapt to his feet and ran for all his worth.

Notaras sat alone in a dimly lit tavern on the edge of Galata, slicing into a plate of mutton with a dull knife. Several others sat at various planked tables throughout the one room tavern, chattering, eating, and drinking ale. A bearded figure in a flowing brown robe entered and moved to the Grand Duke's table, his hood up. He seated himself at the table without acknowledgement from Notaras and pulled back the hood.

"I told you that rash decisions lead men to ruin," Notaras stated without looking up from his meal.

"The vizier spoke with the sulla, but he is young and convinced he cannot lose," replied the bearded man. His eyebrows grew wildly above his eyes, his beard just as unkempt.

The duke finally pulled his head up from his plate, "We all lose in war." Notaras' clean shaven face was tense with concern.

"Some more than others," said the bearded man with a crooked smile. He stole a piece of dark bread from Notaras' plate and bit in. "It is said that you are the richest man in Karastian with gold piled higher than even the emperor."

“This is not about me!” the duke spit back in hushed anger. Though not hushed enough. Some around the tavern were looking over the rims of their goblets at him. “Peace can be profitable to all in both kingdoms. War threatens everything,” Notaras finished in muted tones.

“My master, the vizier, wants me to make this clear. The sulla does as he wishes. He thirsts for revenge...as we all do.” The bearded man sunk his teeth into the bread once more. “But the vizier understands what is at stake and readily counsels Sulla Falaak to show force *only* so you sue for peace.”

“Sue for peace?”

“Certainly,” grinned the bearded man. “The north must cower in shame and admit its weakness in the face of our army.”

Notaras dropped his knife on the tin plate in disgust. It clanged loudly, causing more stares from those around. “For a man with such great position, he knows very little.”

“And what does your emperor know?”

The duke stared across a pair of candles. Small flames undulated on blackened wicks as though dancing to some hidden music. “My emperor knows that he descends from an unbroken line that has held the fortress city against your kind for over one thousand years. And he further knows that he rules over a proud city that shall not flee in the face of naïve

sullas who dare challenge its walls.”

There was a long pause as both men eyed one another. “Your emperor should also know that once the siege begins, there shall be no more time for escape...for something is coming that has never been seen before in war.” With that, the bearded man stood from the table and pulled up his hood to leave.

Notaras pushed a piece of bread through a patch of gravy on his plate. “I have heard it said that pride goes before the fall and haughtiness before destruction,” he whispered, taking a bite of the bread. “You should ensure the vizier speaks sense into your ignorant sulla before all that has been gained is lost.”

“The vizier shall do what he can, but here is a truth for you that is more potent than ale. Should surrender be refused, one of the first things to be lost may very well be your own head.”

Steffan reached the shoreline of the Delvin Sea just as the early morning sun began to beat back the darkness. As the purple sky of dawn lightened to a hazy blue, the teen hurriedly dug a trench in a sandbank. He needed a place to hide and rest. In

minutes, he had crawled in, covered himself with sand, and fell fast asleep.

When he awoke, he did not know how much time had passed, but the sun was already in the western half of the sky. Steffan deduced that it was at least the afternoon. His whole body ached—foot throbbing, arm stinging, chest, back, and face burning with scratches and gouges that filled with sand. Wrenching himself from the trench, Steffan batted away thick brown clumps of sand from his clothes and body. The sun felt warm on his skin, but the chilly sea breeze quickly stole that feeling away.

Working his way west along the coast, he made sure to stay on the seaward side of the dunes and hoped that no Surxii sought to catch any fish this day. *Fish*. The thought rumbled in his empty stomach. *Everything happened last night just before dinner*. He looked out at the expanse of water. So vast, yet not a drop could be drunk. It glittered like gold in the sun yet offered him nothing of value.

Wait. The sword!

He waded out knee deep into the cold water. Holding the sword up with two hands in front of him, he hoped to stab a small sunfish. After several tries, nothing. They darted too fleetly to skewer. Steffan knew he could not stand there in the sea any longer. Stillness was the enemy. Movement was his

only chance.

Seeing a flock of gulls congregated on the shore, Steffan sped to chase them away, hoping one would leave a meal behind. Sure enough, a gull had been working to crack open a black-shelled mussel. Steffan pried it open with the point of his sword and sucked out a brownish white glob. It tasted salty and slimy, but the teen did not need to force it down. He would gladly have eaten more, but he could find no others.

He kept moving and forced himself to think of pleasant things, otherwise his mind spun with despairing forms. He tried to imagine the city of Karastian. He'd heard so many things and once saw its likeness sewn into a tapestry. But that had been long ago, and only snatches of the image came to mind. Mostly, he remembered a series of ever-growing walls spaced by high towers topped with blue banners. And he thought there might also be a moat.

In the distance, the sun exited with salutes of reds and oranges on the horizon. The thought of fire smacked Steffan. He shook his head to jar the memory loose. *Stay focused*, he urged himself. Before the heaviness of night descended, he crept slowly up the side of a dune. Thick blades of grass grew in clumps across the top. Steffan lifted his head just above one such cluster and peeked beyond. He could see the embers of

Anadolu to his east. Wisps of dark smoke still rose from the ravaged city. Many men were moving around and about it. Steffan slid back down the embankment.

If Anadolu is east of me now, I am making progress. I am nearly to the Tamasa. The thought warmed him with a glimmer of hope, which again the chilling sea breeze quickly whisked away.

The teen labored onward, each step more exhausting than the last. He felt his body shutting down—hands and feet tingling with numbness, body thrumming with pain, stomach panging with emptiness, throat constricting with dryness. He could barely swallow, and no matter how hard he tried, he could no longer make spit in his mouth.

Darkness had fully enveloped the surroundings, and that's when Steffan saw it—a dot of yellow ahead. Instinctively, he dropped to the ground, the sand cool against his body. Thoughts of the beast tore at his mind, creating tatters of memory—growling snarls, unholy wails, hot breath, and amber eyes with black pits for pupils.

Steffan crawled along the sand clutching his sword tight. Inching closer, he realized it was no creature. It was a small fire near the shoreline. The teen sidled up a dune and crept near. As he approached, the sound of voices hit his ears, Surxii voices. But it was not only voices that he heard. There

was something else also—the grunting and nickering of horses.

Four men sat cross-legged around the fire. A make-shift spit hung across it, dangling a pan. Advancing further, the boy could see some small fish sizzling inside. *Of course, they can catch fish!*

Were they sentries? Were they guards? Were they simply hungry and came to find a meal? Steffan did not know. But spying the horses, an idea grew in his mind. In his condition, he would never make it to Karastian on foot. He needed a ride.

Cautiously, he slinked across the top of the dunes, staying low to the ground in the tall grass. Four horses were tied to a large stake that had been driven into the ground. Two of the horses gnawed on grass, the others were looking right at him. He slid further from the shore to keep the animals between him and the soldiers. Reaching one of the horses, he swiftly searched the saddle. No food. Nothing of use. Carefully, he moved to the next. Still nothing.

At the third, though, Steffan could see a sack tied to the saddle. Hastily, he untied the bag and peered inside. It held a leather flask and two small loaves of bread. The teen grabbed a loaf and tore out a chunk with his teeth. Pulling the stopper out of the flask, he took a long, deep drink. He smacked his

lips together in satisfaction. The horse bucked slightly and snorted in response. Steffan crouched immediately and tried to spy the soldiers from under the belly of the animal. The men did not seem to notice.

Steffan sucked in a deep breath and slowly released it. It was time to leave. Cinching the sack back up, he turned to the stake and painstakingly started unraveling the rope of the first horse, then the second. As he reached for the third horse's rope, one of the logs in the fire popped loudly. Sparks shot high into the air spooking the horses. The four all neighed in fear, and one of the free horses reared back.

The soldiers stood and stared up at the dunes. Steffan saw one of them pointing and then they all grabbed at their swords. The boy whacked the first horse with the flat of his weapon. It sped off into the darkness. He reached for the second, but it was too far away. Hurriedly, he unwound the rope of the third, stepped into the stirrup, and mounted.

The soldiers raced up the hill, their swords swinging overhead. Steffan kicked at the sides of the horse, and it jetted into the night. Looking back, he caught a quick glance of two soldiers mounting their steeds while two others kicked angrily at the sand.

At full gallop, Steffan's horse snorted and wheezed, sending bits of snot back at him. He worked to hold the reins

and the sword with two hands, but it proved impossible at such a speed. He released the sword, and it clanged to the ground. With a firm grip, he tightly seized both reins. The horse would now be his weapon and the darkness his shield.

Shouts and the rumble of hooves echoed behind him. Steffan looked back but could see nothing. *Even if they cannot see me either, they can hear me just as I can hear them.* He knew the chase could only last so long, still he urged the stallion onward with thrusting heels to its sides.

After several minutes, the soldiers still chased in pursuit, refusing to give up the hunt. Steffan could hear them just as clearly as before, and he could sense his horse beginning to tire. He needed a new plan. “If they want to chase something, then I shall let them chase you, horse.”

Untying the sack from the saddle, he clutched it to his chest in one hand and kept the reins in the other. Pulling his left foot from its stirrup, he swung it over the horse while working to free his other foot. His bottom jostled in the saddle, then he flung himself into the night. His body slammed hard into the ground, flipping him into a tumble until he landed flat on his back.

Steffan’s ears rang, and his head swam, but he refused to move. Peering up into a black sky covered with stars, he listened for the sound of rumbling hooves through the shrill

buzz still whirring in his ears. After a moment, the drumming of hooves beat by him on his left. Sluggishly, he brought himself to his knees still clutching the sack. Standing up, his feet wobbled beneath him. The earth seemed to shake, everything unsteady. He fell back to the ground. *I need to get up*, he told himself. *The soldiers could be back any moment.*

His eyes closed.

Steffan's eyes opened to a sunbaked sky then quickly closed in protest to the glare. Using an arm as a shield, he peeked them open again. A shadow crossed over his body, then another. The moist breath of horses warmed his cheeks as they sniffed him. Looking higher, Steffan squinted at the outline of a soldier blurred against the beaming blue canopy.

Panic washed over him, cascading a chill down his spine. The teen strained to get up, to run. But his body felt like little more than puddled water, and he without a flask to collect it.

There was nothing left but to close his eyes once more and pray the end would come quickly.

CHAPTER 4

Evening settled cold and violet over the Merchant Road, as the last light of day withdrew behind the darkening horizon northwest of Krusevec. There, where the road bent between a deepening forest and fields lying dormant under a frigid blanket of winter air, twelve messengers from Karastian made camp beneath a wind-whipped sky. They had ridden hard since dawn, bearing words too important to entrust to ink alone and too urgent to wait upon better weather.

Huddled around two fires with flames twisted by unfriendly gusts, six men at each, found more caution than comfort in the yellow-orange light. Cloaks drawn tight, low voices passed between the fires. In the morning, the company would divide. Half would turn north through the Vodin Valley, where the frost-bitten earth would crunch under their horses' metal hooves, and ride on toward the fortress city of Buda. The

rest would keep northwest along the Merchant Road, pressing toward the massive White City whose pale walls were said to catch the sun before any other tower in the west.

Their message was the same in both directions, carried in memory and sealed phrases, each man trained to speak only what his destination required. That was the plan, and for a time, with the fires alive and the road empty, it seemed enough.

Then the horses stirred.

From beyond the rim of firelight came the scrape of iron and the soft crush of boots on frozen ground. Shapes gathered in the flickering glow of the fires, first as shadows, then as men. They wore cobalt blue, the same deep color as the soldiers who guarded their lands and homes. For one white puff of breath, the messengers stared in relief. But this was no friendly force, for their faces were hidden beneath helmets, their blades already bare, and not one of them called out a greeting.

The first sword struck before anyone could rise. A second found the man nearest. The messengers seized for knives or swords, but they had been chosen for memory and secrecy, not for standing against trained soldiers. When it was over, the two fires burned on as if nothing had changed. As growls of wind swept sparks across lifeless bodies and into the growing blackness, somewhere far beyond the camp, a

traitor's design held firm, knowing that message and messenger died together along the Merchant Road.

Phrantzes stood at the gilded table in the Grand Hall, his hands pressed against its polished wood. "My Lord, clearly Falaak desired to lay waste to our sentinel towns before the snows of winter, so we could not deduce his movements, his numbers, his munitions, his..."

"Do we not have spies?" Karas interrupted impatiently, rubbing his left temple. "How could the Surxii move so very easily without our knowing?" Eight other council members seated around the table turned their eyes back to Phrantzes.

He scratched at gray whiskers in his beard, shaking his head. "Sorrowfully, it seems the sentinels were asleep at the gates, dreaming there would be no more wars."

Karas made no reply to his prized advisor. Instead, he turned to the Grand Duke seated to his right. "The scouts we sent out noted vessels along the Surx coastline. What have your ships seen of this?"

As Grand Duke, Notaras commanded the Andolian navy. Ships he often used for transporting goods from city to city. "Some three dozen vessels have been discovered, my

Lord, headed north toward the Inlet of Sigan...”

“They wish to block aid coming from the west,” Phrantzes interjected.

“But they shall *not* block aid,” Notaras stated firmly. “We shall keep them at bay, sire.”

Karas lifted off his crown, a domed hat inlaid with gold and etched with religious symbols. Two long dangles came down from both sides of the crown, designed to fall just behind the ears and to his shoulders. Placing it on the table, he ran a hand through long curly hair. “This is troubling. We have heard nothing as of yet from Count Ulrich in Buda nor Governor Hunyadi. This coupled with hearing nil from my brothers in Lascadaemon, from Venet, nor from Meda Vadis. We only know that seven hundred men are coming from Genet with Captain Tenniani, which still gives us less than six thousand soldiers.” Shaking his head, he stood from his seat. “We must double the training for our men and begin reinforcing the walls with all haste. Furthermore, the Delvin Sea, too, should be searched in earnest for Surxii vessels. And, certainly, before the thaw of spring, the destruction of the Kopuro is essential. The Surxii advance must be stalled in order to buy time for reinforcements.”

“My lord,” Phrantzes started, “we should torch the bridge now.”

“Torch it now!” The Grand Duke stood aghast. “What of refugees from our sentinel towns who may still be striving to escape? What of our scouts? How shall they keep us informed? What of the people of Galata themselves who, at this very hour, may be laboring to provide us with the resources we shall need to survive a siege? And what of...”

“Your point has been made,” Karas interjected with a wave of his hand. He paused to lock eyes with his aged counselor. “Even rash rulers would not be foolish enough to march in winter. Yet, we must be sure to inform the people of Galata that in the coming months, they must evacuate or else be trapped in the south like doves in a net.”

The sound of rapid steps across the decorated marble floor silenced any possible responses. Gabrielle, one of the handmaidens to his daughter Anna, strode briskly past the statue of Karas the Great and into the expansive hall. Swift steps slowed, however, when she caught sight of the principal table filled with men all staring at her. The maiden stopped several feet from them, imploring the emperor with her eyes. With a slight nod, he summoned her.

Head down, she edged past the table and whispered some words to Karas. A small smile came to his lips.

“We shall continue this conversation later. It seems our new arrival has finally awoken after three days,” he informed,

picking up his crown from the table. "I wish to learn from him directly."

Sulla Falaak stood in the center of his war tent leaning over an unfurled map which sat atop a mahogany table. The tent itself was enormous. Some fifty feet by fifty feet, it took twenty soldiers a full day to erect and furnish it. Thick red and gold drapes formed the four walls, hanging down from a wide-beamed frame. Black wrought-iron standing candelabras, each holding five fat candles, were situated every eight to ten feet for light. Furniture, placed on top of ornate rugs, filled the room—a desk, two sofas, several chairs, credenza, and the sulla's large bed spread over with thick furry hides. Finally, three broad bamboo poles lifted a heavy canvas top some eighteen feet high.

Vizier Basid stepped through an open tent flap and moved toward Falaak, his black robe swishing as he neared. The sulla did not lift his head from the map. "What is it, Basid?"

"You should not have burned the sentinel cities, my sulla," he replied. "They would have proven useful to us."

"They shall still prove useful," Falaak answered. He

stood upright, pulling at his black undercoat. A slate grey breastplate shifted as he did so. “Our soldiers are rebuilding them even as we speak...but, first, a statement was necessary.”

“A statement, my sulla?”

“Yes, a statement.” Falaak stepped closer to Basid, just a foot from him. “That the Surxii shall raze the Kingdom of Andolan to the ground and rebuild on its ashes.”

Basid’s face scrunched, and he grabbed at his long black and grey beard.

“You disagree, vizier.”

“Andolan is weak, my sulla, but the fortress of Karastian is strong. Even if it could be taken, the cost would be great. We need only show force and signal our dominance, then offer terms of peace. Such a course would save many lives, fill our land with treasure from the north, and ensure the love of your people.”

Falaak placed his fingers inside the collar of his armor, his palms resting on the chest piece. “I had a vivid dream last night, Basid.” He turned his back on the vizier and moved over to the table once more. “In the dream, a bright red apple, ripe and full, hung from a tree. No man had ever been able to pluck it in order to enjoy its delicacies. But as I stood under this tree, the fruit fell off into my hand.”

“My sulla, Karastian shall not simply be handed over,”

Basid began, remaining right where he entered. “When threat of snow in the north ceases, you shall endeavor to move tens of thousands of men up the Tamasa. These men shall be away from their families. They shall need food and provisions for weeks or more.” Falaak turned, disdain tensing his features, but the old vizier continued. “No one has ever been able to sustain a siege long enough to breach the walls of Karastian. Not even your blessed and honored father. I beseech you, my sulla, to take the counsel that your father refused. Show force but seek peace.”

Falaak grinned but showed no teeth. “It is true that no one has succeeded before me. But no one has ever held what I now hold.” Again, the young sulla moved closer to Basid, placing his hands on the vizier’s shoulders. “Nevertheless, I shall carefully consider your counsel.” He released his hands. “Now, leave me...and fetch Aksham.”

In just a few moments, Aksham entered. Removing his black helmet, dark brown hair stuck to his forehead and around his ears. He wiped a hand across his brow to push the hair aside. “You sent for me, sulla.”

Falaak stood back by his map, staring down at the miniature models of boats and men and armaments. A croupier stick in his right hand, he pushed a series of model boats into the Delvin Sea towards the Jartasti Mountains, his mind

churning with how he would keep the people of Karastian from fleeing north out of the city. “Yes, has the beast returned from the marshes?”

“Not yet,” Aksham answered, taking a seat on a cushioned chair with high armrests. He lifted his forearms up and down a couple of times, uncomfortable with the position of the rests. “Shall we send another?”

“No,” the sullen stated, his eyes stuck to the map. “We have so few. They must be saved for a journey that no human army can achieve.”

Steffan’s eyes opened to a strange sight. Stretched out six feet above him hovered a wooden panel decorated with elaborate golden lines that weaved around and about each other. He squeezed his eyes shut then reopened them. The same image appeared. Turning his head, he spotted spiraled poles to his left and his right that disappeared into the canopy above him. Picking up his head, he observed two more identical poles by his feet that also rose up, connecting to the canopy as well. Ornate curtains draped down from either side but were pulled back and tied to the posts at the end of the...the bed. He was in a bed, one like he had never seen before in his life.

Across the room, his eyes laid hold of a gaping stone fireplace filled with logs and flame. Two squat chairs and a small circular table were situated in front of it. *Where am I? Is this Heaven?*

Suddenly, a fair-skinned girl with long auburn hair moved into his view. *An angel?* Dressed in a pastel green gown with wide arm sleeves, she placed a slender hand on his forehead. Her fingers felt warm and delicate. *She must be an angel.*

“Your fever has broken,” she beamed. “And it is about time, too.”

Steffan rubbed his eyes to make sure he was not dreaming. When they reopened, blurred vision cleared to the same scene. “Where am I?”

“You are in Karastian,” said the girl. Steffan thought her voice sounded soft and pleasing. “In the palace of Emperor Karas.”

The teen could not believe his ears. He propped himself up slightly with a fat pillow. “How did I come to be here?”

The girl with the fair skin and pleasing voice explained how Emperor Karas had ordered soldiers south down the Tamasa to gather news from the sentinel towns. Those men found him lying alone in the middle of a field clutching a sack.

They brought him back to the city, believing he must have escaped from one of the towns. Steffan learned that he arrived in the capital at the brink of death—cut and scratched, bruised and burning with fever. Such was his condition that the emperor insisted that he be brought to the palace and tended to by the best physicians. “And for these three days, I have volunteered to care for you,” she finished.

“Three days!”

“Yes, three days,” she nodded. “You would not eat, but I could get liquid medicines and some water into you...” The girl scanned the room as though looking for someone then lowered her voice, “And I gave you some milk too, even though the physicians said only water.”

“That was kind of you. Thank you,” he smiled. Just then, he realized that he was no longer dressed in his old tunic, but, instead, was clothed in a long blue gown that ran almost to his ankles. He instantly worried that the girl might have stood in the room when he’d been changed. The thought flushed his face with embarrassment.

“Are you upset?” the girl’s voice broke into his thoughts. “You seem pained.”

“No, er, uh, no.” Steffan fought to recover. “I just was wondering where this tunic came from.”

The girl grinned. Her teeth were as white as clouds in

a blue sky. Before she could reply, though, a tall and stately figure entered the room clad in cobalt blue. A purple cloak, trimmed in deep orange, attached around his neck to a ringed brooch that sat fastened just above his right chest. Steffan locked in on a golden domed crown and the dangles that flowed down behind his ears. *It must be the emperor.* The thought would have completely terrified him had the man not been smiling wider than the girl.

“Anna!” the man shouted happily. “It seems your patient has finally awoken.”

Anna. That is her name. I should have asked that. The teen silently chastised himself as the regal man stepped to the edge of the bed.

“Yes, my lord,” Anna curtsied. “It seems so.”

My lord? It is the emperor. A tinge of fear oozed down his spine as a cold chill.

“Bring a chair from over there,” the emperor directed, pointing over near the fireplace. “And then, please, leave us a moment.”

Anna swiftly did as she was instructed. As she exited, Steffan wanted to shout out his name to her, but the emperor sat just feet from him, and all courage had left him.

“My friend, you came here in quite a state.” Karas leaned back in the chair. “My physicians did not know if you

would last the first day. Clearly, there is some strength in you.”

In his nervousness, Steffan could only offer a weak smile and feeble shrug. He certainly did not feel strong.

“Tell me. What is your name?”

“St-Steffan.” He could not bring himself to look directly at the emperor. His eyes focused on the door over the emperor’s right shoulder. There, Steffan could see three men, guards he assumed, and Anna waiting.

Sensing the boy’s apprehension, Karas removed his crown and placed it at his side, then he leaned closer. “You are safe here in this city, Steffan. I pledge you my protection.” The emperor’s pale green eyes met the emerald eyes of the teen. “And I never...never abandon a pledge.”

Steffan did not know the emperor. But his voice so filled with conviction, Steffan knew the words to be true.

Karas leaned back into the chair again. “Now that we have that out of the way, my friend, please tell me how it is that my soldiers came to find you.”

Steffan worked to pull himself up higher against the head of the bed, but the emperor beckoned him to stay as he was. The teen was glad for that. Though he was awake, his body felt as frayed and limp as an old rope.

The best he could remember, Steffan started with the raid on Anadolu, detailed the events in the orphanage, and his

escape with Jena through the wall. He described what happened outside the wall—the townspeople cut down, stabbing the soldier, fleeing into the darkness, and Jena felled by the arrow. Pausing, he drew a deep breath in a vain attempt to keep tears from falling. He wiped them away with quaking fingers and tried to continue.

Steffan related the dark journey through the swamp and the strange creature within it. At that part, he noticed the emperor's eyebrows raise, causing lines to crease his forehead. But he said nothing, so Steffan then described his travel along the shoreline, the men and horses by the fire, and his attempt to evade capture by the Surxii who pursued him.

Karas reached out and placed a hand on Steffan's shoulder. The size and strength of that hand contrasted greatly with the frailty Steffan felt inside of himself. "I knew it. There *is* strength in you." The emperor withdrew his hand and adjusted a broad gold ring with a double-headed eagle emblazoned across it. Another image flew into Steffan's mind from the tapestry he'd seen of the city. The crisp blue banners that waved above the towers held that same eagle.

Karas rose to his feet. The teen once more attempted to prop himself up in respect, only to be gestured back down. "You rest. Tomorrow, we shall talk again. For now, anyone who has slept for so many days must surely be hungry." He

called to Anna. In a few steps, she was back in the room and next to the bed. "Make sure this boy gets some meat and milk into his belly...though," his voice lowered to a whisper, "do not tell the doctors about the milk."

Falaak and Aksham sat under the war tent in two chairs separated by a square trunk that now doubled as a table for their goblets. "I am soon to name you my second vizier, Aksham," the sulla announced, grabbing hold of his goblet.

"Basid shall be quite pleased," Aksham laughed sarcastically. He grabbed his own goblet and clanked it against Falaak's. "How much longer must we endure him?"

"He commands many men who are loyal to him." Falaak stood up and strode over to the map he had been examining for days. "He must remain until those very men become loyal to me...and that can only happen with victory."

Aksham joined his sulla at the table. He stuck a finger on top of Karastian. "The walls of this city have stood for over a thousand years. For there to be victory, first, our army must breach the initial wall only to then be confronted with a moat thirty feet wide and fifteen feet deep. Overcoming that leads to what the Andolians call 'the low wall,' taller and stronger

than the first. Should our men succeed in breaching that, they run into a killing field where soldiers stationed on a twenty foot outer wall rain down arrows and stones and Junoni fire.” Aksham squeezed his hand into a fist. “To get through such a gauntlet is nearly impossible. And, even if so, the men would be confronted with the greatest task of all, scaling the Great Wall—a wall forty feet high and fifteen feet thick—all while standing in yet another killing field.” Aksham shook his head, his long brown hair swinging across the back of his neck. “Even with beasts, it seems a fool’s errand.”

Falaak nodded in understanding, “You are fearful, my new vizier, because you have yet to meet Orban.”

“Orban? That is a name for a northman.”

The sulla called for one of the guards and instructed him to send for Orban and his schematics. In short order, a round man with thin straggly hair entered the tent with a bow. He tugged at the edges of a dirty tan shirt to ensure it covered his protruding belly. “You beckoned me, sulla.”

“Unfurl your renderings for Vizier Aksham,” Falaak ordered with a grin for his companion.

Orban opened the scroll and moved to the table only to notice a map already on top of it. He speedily knelt to the ground, placing the scroll on the carpeted floor. “I call it Basilica,” announced Orban proudly.

Aksham slid around to the other side of the scroll to get a fuller view. It appeared to be plans for a massive cannon, thick and round and heavy.

“When I ‘ave completed it, it ‘ill fire a thousand pound stone full over one mile.”

“Impossible!” Aksham squalled.

“No, vizier,” Orban shot back, finding his nerve. “It ‘ill do as I ‘ave said.”

“If so, northman,” Aksham started again, “then why have you not offered this to Karas?”

“My lord, uh, I mean vizier, tis well known that Karastian ‘as very great walls but very small coffers. This weapon is beyond the price of that city.”

“How much beyond?” Aksham questioned.

“The sulla promised me ten thousan’ gold pieces for the gun...and four times that much when it takes down the walls.”

Aksham’s eyes widened, incredulity washing over his face. Falaak was quick to notice. “And it *shall* take down those walls, Orban!”

The chubby cannon maker rose to his feet, lifting the scroll triumphantly over his head. “I ‘ave examined the walls of Karastian in great detail, and I assure you that my weapon can not only shatter ta dust those walls, but the very walls of

Babylon itself!”

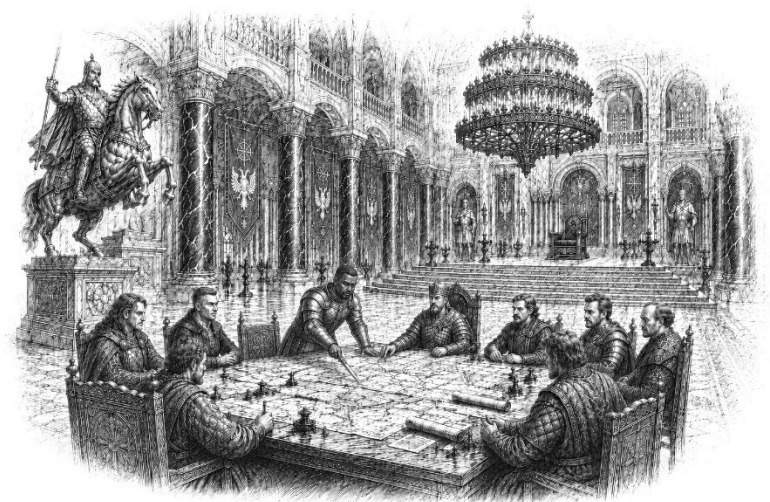
CHAPTER 5

His vaunted fame proceeding him, the arrival of Captain Tenniani and his men lifted even higher the strong spirits of the city. Still only in his thirties, he held a reputation far and wide as a courageous warrior and skillful tactician, having led his men to countless victories in distant lands. His first course of action was to survey the walls. It took him two full days to circle the city by horse. As he, the emperor, and their contingent inspected the defenses to evaluate their condition, the citizens of Karastian viewed him with awe. The captain's height fell just short of Karas'. His cheek bones were high and thin with deep creases angling off them. Those features seemed to age him, but his broad shoulders and toned physique emanated strength and capability.

The already completed defensive preparations pleased Tenniani. Frigid weather and the falling of snow had not

diminished the effort with the emperor rousing his people to the task. Men, women, and even children worked alongside soldiers and engineers to see the job through.

In the Grand Hall, standing over an extensive map of the city, the captain offered his thoughts to Karas and the other leaders gathered around him. Though it was late into the evening, energy filled his voice as he spoke. “A great deal has been accomplished. The walls are strong, and the people prepared. We are ready for attack.” Using a long dagger with a bronze hilt, he pointed to the east and west side of the city. “These walls along the sea pose the least concern. We shall place only a few cannons along them. Coupled with the duke’s ships, that should dissuade any strong attack from the sea.”



Sliding the tip of his weapon to the southern walls, Tenniani gazed intently at those encircling him. “Then, there

are these walls.” He moved his dagger across them. “They are many and they are thick, but yet, here is where the attack shall come.”

He tapped the point of his weapon at the center of the walls. “Here, at the mesoteichion, this shall take the brunt of the assault.”

“Then that is where my men and I shall be,” Karas interjected.

“As you wish, my lord,” the captain nodded. “I shall place the bulk of my men to the west of your position, and we shall further need to place men and cannon here, here, and here,” he added, dropping a knifepoint on three locations along the southern edge of the city.

“Very well, captain. It shall be done,” Karas stated resolutely.

“Finally, my lords, is the north wall,” the tactician began again, pointing the dagger at that section of the city. “No army has ever traversed the Jartasties with enough men and cannon to attack these walls. Men freeze at such heights and cannon are stuck firm in the jagged passes. There can be no major attack from there...but...” Tenniani looked into the face of each man around him. “Should even a small force muster on the north side, we shall be compelled to spread our men even thinner. And should a breach come from there, no matter

how small, the force could devastate along the city grounds while our soldiers are engaged above on the walls and in the killing fields. Because of this, I recommended a small contingent be stationed at the north, and *all* gates to the city be locked once an attack begins.”

Notaras shook his head in protest. “Lock the gates and trap the people like pigs in a slaughter pen!?!”

“Do your own doors not have locks for protection, my lord?” the captain interjected.

“Tenniani is right,” Phrantzes stated, doing his best to focus on the emperor and not Notaras. “Our people are understanding and wise. They know that should the city fall, a crashing wave shall surge up through the Vodin, washing away all hiding places. They are safer within the walls than without.”

Karas stood silently contemplating, his eyes searching the map as though an answer lay within the brown drawings. He knew his duty was to all of Andolan, not just to the city. But should the city fall, and hordes pour through, would there be hope for any of his people? “I shall make that decision when the time comes.”

A momentary silence threatened to bring a heaviness to the room, but Tenniani smiled broadly, widening the creases on his face. “My lords!” he exclaimed dramatically. “No

weapon has ever proven capable enough to lessen these walls, and no army has ever proven grandiose enough to breach them.” He thrust his dagger into the air above him. “And I certainly do not intend to allow an upstart sulla to be the first!”

The men around him shouted their approval...

...except for Karas who only nodded in hopeful agreement.

Water splashed in the distance behind him. Steffan turned and caught sight of two eyes glowing as yellow as amber. They bobbed up and down as a horse’s did when it raced.

It is racing toward me!

A deep, throaty snarl unlike anything Steffan had ever heard pierced the darkness and stabbed him in the heart. He reached out in panic for the opening he hoped his sword had created. Trembling fingers felt along the labyrinth of twisted branches. The splashing behind him continued...louder...eyes growing bigger.

His hand found where his sword struck. He jabbed a leg through and then an arm. The beast was nearly on him. He could hear its panting breath between snarling growls. With all

his strength, he pressed his torso into the opening. Sliced branches scratched and dug into his back and chest and face. Still, he squeezed and squeezed with every last bit of effort.

Falling through, he tumbled into the water on the other side. The creature crashed into the thicket crunching and cracking branches with the impact. It unleashed an unholy roar. Steffan's throat choked with fright as giant yellow eyes pushed through. He reached for his sword but could not find it. On his knees in a foot of freezing water, his hands swept through the silt in search of something metal.

The snarls intensified, deeper and louder. Steffan could hear more branches snapping under the weight of the creature pressing forward. His hands frantically churned through the water desperately feeling for the weapon.

Yellow eyes glowed in the darkness, casting light on the branches around them. They were nearly as big as figs with a black pit in the middle. Hot breath panted from the creature. Steffan could see it turn to faint clouds in the chill so close it was.

Razor fangs stabbed into his shoulder, tearing at his flesh. He screamed in...

The teen thrust himself upward, sweat clinging to his brow. He whipped his head around left and right, up and down. *It is the bedroom, Steffan. You are fine.*

Pulling up the collar of his blue tunic, he wiped away the sweat from his forehead. The teen swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat there for a moment with his head buried in his hands. He had been “back among the living,” as Anna put it, for nearly a week. She fed him well and tended to his every need during that time. His strength returned, and all seemed to be improving...until she asked him his age.

His lips were forming the word “fourteen” when he realized that he’d been unconscious through his birthday. *Fifteen. I am fifteen*, he realized, then it all struck him at once. The Surxii had stolen everything—Father Gennad, Jena and the others who were like family, his home, his town, even his birthday. Since then, anger filled his days and horrors his nights.

Steffan grabbed a blanket off the bed and wrapped it around his shoulders. The fire in the hearth had died much earlier in the evening, so the air was cool. He stepped onto the cold stone floor in his bare feet and walked out the door...for the third night in a row. Just as the previous nights, he followed a couple of hallways to a wide corridor. Marble busts on thick stone pedestals lined both sides of the passageway. It almost felt like being in a parade to Steffan, as he ambled down the center. The thought helped bring a tiny smile.

The face and chest of every Karastian emperor formed

each bust. Steffan paused at the opposite end of the corridor, eye to eye with the very first ruler—Karas the Great. He had a strong face with big eyes and a cleft chin.

“Do you think he looks like me?” asked a voice from behind.

The teen’s shoulders shook from the startle, and he spun swiftly around. It was Emperor Karas, standing as tall as ever in a flowing blue robe, though not wearing his crown. “Um, no...” Steffan muttered, “I mean...I am not sure. You wear a beard, and he does not. At least not in this.” He was convinced he sounded incredibly stupid.

“Do not fret, my friend,” the emperor consoled, putting a hand on the boy’s shoulder, and sliding next to him. “I do not believe there is much in common between this Karas and myself.”

Steffan looked up at the man next to him. “You do not believe that you are great?”

Karas chuckled and offered a smile. “Great? No, I do not believe so.” He turned and stared down the corridor for a long moment. “And what determines greatness, anyway?” The emperor peered back down at Steffan. “Ninety-eight emperors have ruled the people of Andolan. And, surely, many of them desired renown. I, instead, desire to be faithful.”

Steffan liked listening to Karas speak. This was the

third time they had spoken. First, when he had just awoken. A second time when the emperor returned the following day as he promised, and now. The teen did not know any other emperors but thought much of this one. “Perhaps when you win the coming battle against the Surx, you shall be known as faithful *and* great.”

Karas continued smiling, but his look was one of contemplation. “So you believe what determines greatness is winning battles?”

Steffan did not like the question because he did not like the Surxii. He wanted to see them defeated and humiliated. The thought of such a vicious end to them seemed very much a great thing, but he could not bring himself to say any of that to the emperor.

Karas, however, read Steffan’s words from his face. Moving slowly down the hall, he beckoned the boy to follow along beside him. “You know, Steffan. Many a young man hungers for battle, thinking it shall taste like honey...only to discover that it turns to gravel in his mouth.”

Steffan was not sure what the emperor meant but stayed silent as they continued down the wide hall.

“The Surxii have done you a great harm, and it is natural to seek revenge. But be wary of revenge, Steffan. It promises much. Yet, in the end, it only takes.” Karas stopped

and stared down at the boy, examining his tan face and piercing green eyes. “And should you pray and beseech God to avenge those who do you wrong, you might be surprised at how He answers.”

Steffan scrunched his face as confusion grew in his mind. “I am not sure I understand.”

“You among many,” the emperor laughed softly to himself. “Let me explain it to you with one of my favorite stories in Scripture, from the book of Habakkuk. Have you heard of it?”

Steffan nodded. He knew of that book from Father Gennad.

“In that book, a man named Habakkuk prays, imploring God to punish a nation that had done great harm to his people. He angrily informs the Almighty that He *must* give consequences without delay to those who have done such wrong. And believe it or not, the Almighty replies, stating that He shall indeed give consequences to all who do wrong, starting with Habakkuk and his own countrymen.”

Steffan stopped, stunned by the turn in the story. “Is that true?”

“Yes, very much true,” Karas nodded. “And as you can imagine, Habakkuk did not approve of this plan! But the Almighty’s point is clear. If we wish the sin of one to be

avenged, then we must expect the sin of all to be avenged--even the sins of those who would call themselves good.” The emperor put his hand on the boy’s back and led him further down the corridor. “We must be careful when calling for judgment, for that judgment may very well begin with ourselves.”

Karas stopped near the end of the hall. There, stood a bearded bust. The figure had a long nose and curly hair like himself. “This is my father, Steffan. He ruled during the Great War.”

The teen studied the marble features as the emperor shared how he was just a young teenager when that terrible war began. Then he explained that for three devastating years, battles raged a grievous cost to all. So much so that Kizil and Andolan desired revenge as a result. They believed retribution would bring about lasting peace, but retribution only brings about retribution. “When you plant an elderberry seed, Steffan, what is produced?”

“An elderberry shrub.”

“That is right. A seed only produces its like. And, indeed, decades ago, a seed was sown. It was a harsh seed, so I fear it shall produce a harsh harvest.” Karas turned and looked right into the boy’s emerald eyes, “But my prayer, Steffan, is this. That such seeds shall no longer be planted, and

the fields permitted to lie fallow.”

“What do you mean, sire?”

“I mean my father and the king of Kizil planted revenge, so revenge now grows in the fields. Our sentinel towns were its first fruits, and I believe the harvester’s sickle is now poised over this city. When the battle is over, no matter how it ends, I pray there shall be rest...not revenge...or else no kingdom shall ever recover. Do you understand now, Steffan?”

“I think so,” the teen started, gaining the courage to look the emperor in the eye more frequently. “If someone wrongs me, and I take revenge, then those I take revenge on shall only be the madder, and it shall start all over again.”

Karas grinned brightly. “You are wiser than I when I was your age.” He spun the boy so they were both facing forward and put his hands on Steffan’s shoulders. “Now, let us march you off to bed. I have work for you come morning.”

By midmorning, the sun had just begun to rise above the high walls of Karastian, pouring in welcome slices of warmth that cut through the frosty shadows. The emperor requested Steffan to meet him at the soldiers’ barracks which sat below the

palace at the base of a large, terraced hill.

The teen yawned. He did not sleep well. The emperor had given him much to think about. He did want revenge...but what would revenge lead to? He did want the Surxii to suffer...but did that make him just as bad as them? If he implored God to punish Surx for its sins, would God say, “I shall, but allow Me to deal with your sins first”? So many questions, they circled wildly in his mind like dragonflies caught in a mug.

Steffan did not want to think on those questions any longer. He wheeled around to scan for the emperor and found him just yards away surrounded by a host of men and soldiers. Dressed in full battle regalia, he was an impressive sight. The bronze lamellar pieces that made up his armor sat in dense horizontal bands across his chest and torso. Those rectangular pieces overlapped each other to provide optimum protection. Contoured bronze plates poured off his shoulders to his mid-bicep. Around his waist wrapped a wide and sturdy leather belt that held a sheath. Steffan could only see the hilt and pommel of the sword protruding from the top of it. The teen felt practically naked in comparison, garbed in just a short cobalt blue tunic and a strange leather item that he’d never worn before, but he heard someone call it “pants.”

Karas escorted him through a wrought iron gate into

the courtyard of the barracks. Stands holding weapons scattered the area, and several soldiers engaged in drills. They wore outfits similar to the soldiers of Anadolu—the same color tunic as Steffan, covered with dark grey chainmail.

“Steffan, I have brought you here this morning for an important reason. I told you when we first met that I believe there is strength in you, and we shall need that strength in the coming months.” The emperor guided the teen over to a weapons’ stand where several steel swords gleamed brightly in the sun. Though, the tall ruler did not grab one of those. Instead, he picked up a wooden sword that was jagged and splintered around the edges from repeated use.

“You must learn to use a sword,” Karas began. “But first, you must understand its purpose. It is not a weapon of revenge, but a weapon of protection.” He dropped the wooden sword at his feet. It bobbed on the ground before coming to rest, then he unsheathed his own. Steffan thought it majestic—ruby red pommel, thick intertwined grip, golden cross guard, leading to a tapered steel blade. Karas turned it in his hand as though examining all sides of the gleaming weapon. “I, too, once misunderstood its purpose and used it to exact my father’s revenge.”

He brought the sword down to his side. Steffan’s eyes followed. “Though something happened eleven years ago, and

I wish for you to hear the story.”

The teen lifted his head to give his full attention.

“My duties for my brother Jantas, who was emperor at that time, had taken me far from my home. But news arrived that my wife was in labor with our first child. I could not have been happier as I galloped home with all haste. However, I did not return to the jubilant household I expected, but rather to one in despair. I soon discovered that my wife and newborn daughter had not survived.” Karas’ head shook slightly, lips pursing. “I cannot explain to you what it was like to go from such anticipation to such devastation. But as I sat on the end of the bed where they both still laid, a realization struck me.”

Steffan could feel his eyes growing wider as he listened.

“I had run through countless Surxii with this sword. Some of whom my father ordered executed even after surrender, and never once had I considered the cost—the cost to those left behind. I tell you, Steffan. A sword has not sat at my side since the day my wife and daughter died...until now. And I only keep it now to protect my people.”

Steffan’s mind flung him back to Anadolu where he, as a young boy, stood at the gravesite of his parents, tears flowing down puffy cheeks. Then he remembered those times he assisted Father Gennad at the funerals of others—faces

clouded with sadness, eyes red with tears, the melancholy chorus of sobs. Death indeed stole more than just the breath of one person.

The boy did not hold words in his heart to share all those many thoughts with the emperor. Instead, he bent down and lifted up the wooden sword. Holding it in his hand and examining it as he had seen the emperor do, the teen simply said, “I shall use a sword to protect, sire. And since we are in the right, God shall give us victory!”

Karas’ face had been solemn as he shared his story, but now a smile crept along the edges of his mouth. “Steffan, my young friend, most conclude that God is with them because most conclude that they are right. Yet, even for the right and the righteous, the Almighty does not promise all battles shall be victorious. He only promises to be with us in all battles. Our duty is solely to remain faithful until the verdict is decided.”

Steffan wondered if he would ever understand things as the emperor did. But before he could contemplate further, Karas spoke again. “Enough of such talk. We are here to train, so let us begin.”

In six weeks’ time, Falaak’s men rebuilt the sentinel towns,

converting them into sturdy fortresses that would serve as supply bases for the coming siege. The sullen allowed eighty percent of his forces to return to their homes for the winter and divided the remaining twenty percent between Rumeli and Anadolu. There was much to prepare in each town, but the new Anadolu had an additional preparation.

Falaak ordered Aksham to construct an arena of sorts—one with sturdy metal barriers and unyielding iron cages. The beasts needed further training, and the captured citizens of the town would provide it. At first, just one Andolian would be forced inside the metal barriers, and a beast or two released from the cages. A few days later, Falaak ordered three or four prisoners thrown into the arena. Later, he raised the number to six.

With nine prisoners left, he commanded a final test. “Give the Andolians weapons and release the beasts.”

Standing high on a viewing platform with Aksham, Falaak gazed below, awaiting the arrival of the captives. As he did, Vizier Basid clambered up a bamboo ladder and stood near. “My sullen, have you considered my proposal? It has been some time.”

Falaak shot an icy stare at the greying vizier, as a solid metal gate groaned open under the effort of three straining soldiers. Nine people, in tattered and ragged clothes, were

pushed inside the makeshift arena where swords sat randomly piled in the center. “I’ve been wondering something for some time now, Basid. How is it that my father and the rest of our leaders had their teeth removed and tongues split, and yet your mouth remains unchanged?”

“Sulla?” Basid shifted uncomfortably, staring down at his black robe. “I was away on an errand for your father, blessed be his memory.”

With six men and three women inside the arena, the gate groaned again as it closed with an echoing bang. “How fortunate for you...and for your family,” Falaak replied, his words dripping with disdain. “Unlike your children, however, I did not have the benefit of a father who could talk and eat and sing as we all have been created to do. I did not sit and share meat with my father. He could only eat mush and gruel. I was nine years old before I could fully understand his words, so garbled was his speech. I remember his life as only misery.”

Falaak nodded to operators below who pulled open rectangular metal slats, revealing several beasts inside their cages. High pitch screams of horror rose up. One of the female prisoners fainted dead away, her sword falling beside her. A man fled frantically to the barrier, jumping in vain to scale the wall. The others circled around with their backs to each other, swords positioned outward.

Amber eyes glowed wide and gave way to a long snout and protruding jaw filled with teeth like a saw blade. Thick brown saliva dripped from black lips. Splashes of blood stained brownish grey fur. A dozen beasts leapt high in the air landing on or among the captives. Frantic blades swung at the animals but had little effect.

It was over in minutes.

Falaak scowled at Basid. “I have considered your proposal, vizier. There shall be no peace until the north burns.”

CHAPTER 6

The sun awoke, yawning out orange and yellow rays which bounced over the rippling waters of the Delvin Sea like small stones across a pond. Falaak stood on the sandy shoreline, his long black hair twisting in the sea breeze. He formed a brim against his forehead with both hands and watched a dozen Surxii warships disappear in the distance. They were filled with one thousand men as well as eighty beasts, making their way east of the Isle of Ro toward the Jartasti Mountains.

Aksham, as ever, stood by his sulla's side. "Can they succeed?"

Falaak continued searching the watery horizon. "Even if only one hundred men survive along with the beasts, that shall be enough."

"They are calling them 'wanadghu.'"

"What?"

“The men,” Aksham clarified, “they have taken to the name ‘wanadghu’ for the beasts.”

Falaak finally dropped his hands and turned away from the sea. “Wanadghu,” he smiled. “Whatever they are called, let us trust that they are built for this journey.”

“And if so, sulla, how shall we know they are in position?”

“I have provided them a single cannon. They need only fire it when in position, and we shall know.”

“How close we are to victory!” Aksham grinned widely.

“Yes, my friend, soon we shall wipe away the indignities of the past with the blood of the north.”

Karas knelt, leaning his elbows on a wooden altar rail in St. Stephen’s Chapel—a small sanctuary connected to the palace where he often went to think and pray. He’d been spending increasing time there as the days of spring drew near. Two columns of backless benches separated by an aisle were behind him. Phrantzes and Notaras sat impatiently, but silently, on opposite sides of that aisle waiting for their emperor to finish. The old advisor repeatedly tapped a rolled scroll against his

leg in agitation but stopped after a glare from the duke.

After some time, Karas stood, pulled at the edges of his purple and gold robe, then turned to leave. He was instantly confronted by his two chief counselors. “My lord,” Phrantzes began before Notaras could speak. “We have received troubling news from Lascadaemon.”

Karas perked his features. “What news?”

“Sire, your brother, Thomes, designed to send us four ships loaded with two hundred men and supplies, but those ships have been burned in the harbor.”

Alarm swept across Karas’ face.

“And what’s more,” Phrantzes continued, “when he attempted to send the men and supplies overland, Dimetes refused them passage, stating he had heard reports of spies and robbing bands along the eastern road.” The grey-haired advisor tossed the scroll to the ground. “Sire, it is clear that your brother is in lea...”

Karas shot up his hand to silence Phrantzes. “I know what you would say. You would accuse Dimetes of treachery, but there is no time for that.”

“And there is no evidence for Phrantzes’ intimation,” Notaras interjected.

The old counselor scoffed. “And there is no evidence that you could think your way out of an open jar, but that is

neither here nor there.”

The duke’s face grew red. “You demented, ancient fo...”

“Enough!” Spit flew from Karas’ mouth and stuck in bits to his beard as he bellowed. “Both of you, quit your incessant bleating!” He turned his back to run a hand through his beard and calm his nerves. Both men stood without a sound. “We shall no longer discuss Dimetes...but I know my brother, Thomes. Certainly, he has devised new means to provide us what we need, for he well understands that we cannot spare men to go to him.”

“Yes, sire,” Phrantzes spoke, though in a much more muted tone. “Four new ships are being refitted and restocked under heavy guard. They shall be ready to sail within the week.”

“Very well.” Karas answered, his back still to his counselors. “The time fast approaches...Leave me now. We shall discuss more later.”

Phrantzes offered a slight bow and stepped from the sanctuary. Notaras lingered.

“Not now, Notaras,” the emperor stated, still facing the altar.

“I beg just one moment.”

Karas turned to face the duke. “Quickly, Notaras.”

“Thank you, my lord,” he replied with a nod. “I only wish to say that we must have a plan of escape in place. Our forces are few, and our pleas to the west are largely unanswered. Should the battle turn, it would be wise to leave this city so that we may one day return with a reasonable force.”

Karas’ mind stepped into the corridor where his ancestors stood in stone and marble, representing eleven hundred years of watchcare over the city and its people. The words he spoke to Steffan in that hall reverberated in his soul. *Ninety-eight emperors have ruled the people of Andolan. And, surely, many of them desired renown. I, instead, desire to be faithful.*

“And then, where shall we go, Notaras? Shall Falaak content himself with just Karastian? No, and I shall not be found looking out over the prow of a ship, or across the plains of the Vodin, watching my people leveled with swords and my city leveled by fire. My place is here. My stand is here. So help me, God.”

The duke lowered his head and fought for words that he could speak to persuade his emperor. Before he could battle hard enough for them, however, a hand rested on his shoulder. “Fret not, Notaras. Contingencies shall be planned...but let us not yet lose heart.”

Steffan sat on a short stone wall that ran along the Lycus River, a small river that flowed down from the Jartasties and into the heart of Karastian through a barred viaduct in the northern wall. He could hardly believe that it had been just over three months since he first arrived on the brink of death. He came wearing an old torn tunic and pigskin shoes. Now, he dressed in sturdy leather boots, a cobalt tunic with golden threads woven at the collar...and pants. (Though, truth be told, he was still getting used to the idea of pants.) More importantly, the emperor himself informed that maillers were fashioning a suit of chainmail for him. It, unfortunately, would take some time since thousands of wedge-shaped riveted rings needed to be joined together to complete the armor. Once finished, the emperor noted, there would be few weapons that could easily penetrate it.

In the meantime, each day he learned more and more about what was required to protect a city. He mastered how to grip the tear-shaped shield of the Andolian soldier and how to wield a sword—the footwork, the movements, and beyond. Most days he trained with the captain of the guard, a gruff and grumpy soldier named Feres. He was a lean but muscular man who liked to spew words that Father Gennad would say could

make a sailor blush. A couple of days a week, though, Steffan trained with the emperor and then followed along while Karas inspected the defensive positions. Later, they would talk, and the teen would always come away astounded that one person could know so much. Steffan also marveled at the ruler's energy and enthusiasm as he moved about the city constantly encouraging the soldiers and the people, seeming to never tire.

Steffan, however, did tire—more than tire in fact. His back and shoulders and arms and legs ached from daily shield holding, sword swinging, lugging supplies to and fro, and endless walking from place to place. This meant the stone wall he sat upon at the moment was very much a blessing. And as an extra blessing, Anna planned to meet him there.

The only person he enjoyed talking to more than the emperor was her. He learned quickly that she was the only daughter of the Grand Duke, a man who seemed almost as grumpy as Captain Feres. Her mother, and an older sister, had been taken by The Black—something Steffan knew all too much about. Though, neither of them liked much to talk about such things.

At first, their conversations revolved around pastries and desserts and city fashions, which Steffan knew nearly nothing about, but Anna gladly filled him in. However, as the city braced for battle over the previous weeks, the young

duchess's focus gradually shifted. She talked more about the people and did not seem to care much that her clothes were dirtied and sometimes torn by labor and toil.

Today, however, there was no labor or toil for Steffan. The teen drank in the blue sky and welcomed the feel of warming air that the start of April brought. However, he knew also from the emperor that the start of April would also bring the Surxii. The thought burned a pit in his stomach.

"You made it!" Anna's voice splashed cool water over the burning in his gut. She smiled brightly; her hair tied back behind her ears. Steffan instantly noticed the streaming green dress she wore was covered in splotches of dirt and dust. Anna would not be denied helping, and her energy level almost matched that of the emperor. When she took on a task, like mending him back to health, she did not relent until it was seen through.

"Have you been sweeping chimneys again, my lady?" Steffan smirked.

Anna smiled back. She loved the way his beaming eyes twinkled in the sunlight. "Someone must keep the flues clean while you polish this stone wall with your bum."

Steffan feigned shock while trying not to laugh. "Did a duchess of Andolan just say 'bum'?" The teen turned to a random passerby. "Did you just hear her say 'bum'?" He was

laughing fully now. “Oh, my lady, the duke shall hear of this, and he shall not be pleased with this bum bummery of yours.”

Anna’s mouth gaped, and she lightly smacked him in the shoulder. “You shall not!”

Steffan dropped to one knee, grasping tightly at his arm, and working to force a pained expression. “Oh, the agony! It is bums and assaults all at once!” he wailed loudly.

Growing in embarrassment, Anna swung her head in all directions, looking to see who might be watching. “Shh! Stop it now,” she whispered through gritting teeth, but Steffan was lost in laughter. “And to think I liked you.”

The teen stopped chuckling and looked up at Anna from his knee. “You like me, my lady?”

Anna lifted her chin to the sky and turned away. “I said ‘liked,’ but the feeling has passed now.” The young duchess pretended to flick something from her shoulder and tried to keep a straight face.

Steffan rose to his feet and grabbed her hand with both of his. “Then I shall seek to earn that feeling back.”

Anna could no longer hide her smile. “And how might you plan on doing that?”

“Well, there is a pastry shoppe over there, but I think a new broom would suit you better.”

“Steffan!”

Brisk was the early morning air. The sun had not yet risen, but a purple glow building on the horizon announced that its arrival was near. As the day set to dawn, Falaak set his army to march. Lines of men flowed up the Tamasa in rivers of black and red and metal. The footsteps of ten thousand upon ten thousand thundered on the ground, churning up dust and sending dark clouds into the sky as though the whole plain was on fire. More than five thousand horses strode along with the soldiers. Hundreds of brown and grey and white oxen pulled cannons, munitions, supplies, and food. Uncountable green banners, centered with two white curved swords touching each other at pommel and tip, stood on poles and rippled above the mass of men and animals.

Dressed in full battle regalia with their tolgas fixed atop their heads, Falaak and Aksham sat on their powerful white horses watching the procession. “Are all the men accounted for?”

“Yes, sulla,” Aksham answered. “All but the ones you sent ahead.”

“Excellent. We shall spread out before Karastian as the dawn spreads across the mountains and melt their hope as the sun does snow.” The sulla thrust his heels into the sides of his

horse to send it forward, “Come, it would be a shame to keep Lord Karas waiting.”

His hands resting on the stone parapet, Karas stood on the wall-walk, or allure, of the Great Wall at the southern end of the defenses as dusk settled on the city. To his left and right, he could view the vast expanses of both seas in the distance until they were lost over dual horizons. Ahead of him lay the Tamasa. For miles beyond him, he scanned fields, flowers, and orchards—greens and reds and yellows and blues—like a watercolor painting. What he was looking for, however, were riders—riders sent past the Kopuro to scout the movements of the Surxii. Once they began their march up the Tamasa, the bridge needed to be destroyed to slow the advance.

Phrantzes by his side, along with the royal guard, the emperor searched the distance again. Suddenly, his eyes caught small billows of dust kicked up by a half-dozen horseman galloping rapidly toward the city. In a few moments, the men were through the wall, with the head of the detachment standing next to Karas. He bowed rapidly and spoke with labored breaths. “The Surx army marches, my lord. Their arrival is imminent,” he stated, still working to catch his

breath.

“And the Kopuro? Is it torched?” Karas asked expectantly.

The soldier shook his head. “The people of Galata insisted on handling it themselves, my lord.”

“The people of Galata!” Phrantzes gasped.

Concern swept across Karas’ face as he turned to his trusted captain. “Feres, ride with all haste. The Kopuro must be destroyed within the hour.”

“Yes, my Lord!” Feres put fist to chest, bowed, and was off. Within ten minutes, Karas watched as two dozen men emerged below him and galloped hurriedly down the Tamasa.

Night had swallowed up the land by the time Feres and his men arrived at the Kopuro. They quickly dismounted and grabbed their saddle bags in search of flint and oil. Time was of the essence. The massive structure needed to be set aflame without delay. Swiftly, the soldiers spread out over the Kopuro, pouring oil over the wide slats in preparation.

In the darkness, the horses jostled, letting out small snorts and grunts. All the men instinctively paused. Disquieted horses usually meant trouble. The muffled grind of swords

slowly being released from their sheaths moved along the bridge, as, one by one, the soldiers readied themselves. Heads turned and ears perked to listen. Moments passed.

Silence. Stillness.

Cautiously, the men sheathed their weapons and prepared again to ready the Kopuro for destruction.

FFFFFT! FFFFFT!

The telltale sound of arrows sliced through the air. Screams resounded across the bridge as arrows found their marks. Men fell to the ground; others were lost over the side of the wooden rails. Shouts arose from the southern end of the Kopuro. A mass of shadowy figures stormed toward the Andolians. The clack of their metal heels echoed across the bridge as it vibrated under their feet. Men donned in black and red leapt on anyone still standing, overcoming them with thrusts of swords and spears.

Feres stood at the northern edge of the bridge, shouting at two Andolians soldiers frantically racing towards him. A boot tip caught on an uneven slat, sending one of the men tumbling to the ground. He could not get to his feet in time.

“Grab the first horse you find,” the captain hollered to the second man. “Ride for all your worth and warn the emperor! I’ll hold ‘em off.”

“Captain, you shou...” A screeching arrow stuck

fast in the soldier's neck, silencing his words.

Feres yanked a knife from his belt and hurled it into the darkness. A pained yelp rose into the air as the captain spun toward the horses. Reaching for the first one he could find, Feres mounted in a single swift motion. Like a shot, he took off into the veil of night and rode the horse until it collapsed. Speeding the final distance on foot, he breathlessly announced that the bridge remained intact.

Falaak's arrival would not be delayed.

CHAPTER 7

Eighty-thousand Surxii filled the plain below Karastian. Soldiers crushed the early spring bloom of flowers underfoot and cut down greenening orchards for wood to make fires, strengthen ramparts, and restock arrows. White tents sprawled from the Inlet of Sigan to the Delvin Sea like an innumerable flock of gulls. The sound of shovels striking earth and stone chorused with the crashing of trees and the buzz of gathering soldiers.

Falaak immediately set about placing the cannons. The heavier guns lagged days behind. In particular, Orban and his Basilica. So massive was the weapon, it took sixty oxen to laboriously drag it along. Nevertheless, there were nearly seventy standard cannons that needed to be readied. The sulla divided the cannons into a dozen batteries spread across the formation, saving the center for Basilica. Master crews

skillfully crafted pulley systems to raise and lower the lumbering weapons into position onto sloping platforms, while others fashioned makeshift defensive palisades from planks of wood to shield the cannons from counterattack.

Five thousand men were given to Aksham to dig a defensive trench nearly the entire width of the Tamasa. As they dug, the soldiers tossed the soil in front of the trench to form a sloping rampart to shield the camp from Andolian bombardment. Still another thousand men carved the end of branches and poles into points and stuck them into the rampart to dissuade a frontal attack by mounted troops.

Surxii warships deployed from their northern coastline on both sides of the Tamasa to guard the army's flanks from attack by sea. The ships were swift, but shorter and lower than the tall ships of the north. Curving upwards on both ends with a swale in the middle for a single large mast, they cut easily through the water when the wind gusted. When there was no wind, a hull lined with oars on both sides provided man-powered propulsion.

Falaak stood in the shade of his war tent. He ensured that it sat directly behind the center of his lines, right near where Basilica would be stationed. He wanted a front row seat to its capabilities. Silently, he urged the sun to descend below the horizon. Not for want of the evening chill, but because

what he planned for tomorrow could not come soon enough.

As they had done often over the previous months, Karas, Notaras, Phrantzes, Captain Tenniani, and several other leaders circled the principal table in the Grand Hall. Today, however, the map of the city had been exchanged for an expansive battle map eight feet long and five feet wide. Miniature models representing ships, men, and munitions were spread over it. Tenniani, with croupier stick in hand, pushed models around until they duplicated the positions of Falaak's forces and batteries.

"The Surx army is large and formidable," Tenniani's voice surged with strength and energy. "But so are our walls." He peered around the table, smacking the croupier stick against his gloved hand. "The Surx despise long sieges. Never in history have they persisted outside the walls for longer than thirty-three days. We shall either outlast them or hold until the West arrives with the means to attain all-out victory."

Everyone nodded in agreement, a few called out, "Hear! Hear!"

Karas gazed intently at the map, his eyes not leaving it even as he spoke. "Notaras, what do we know of their fleet?"

“My lord, they have launched ships from both sides of the Tamasa and are taking up along their flanks,” Notaras began, confidence in his voice. “Our ships are blocking their path further north and are prepared to engage should they attempt to situate themselves along the sides of the city or interfere with aid from the West.”

“And what news of Thomes’ ships?” Karas asked, his eyes still fastened to the map.

Phrantzes stepped in to answer. “We expect their arrival in the coming days, my lord.”

“Very well. Notaras, keep a watch for these ships. Their safety is of utmost importance.”

“Of course, sire.”

There were more questions that Karas wished to ask—what has become of the messengers to Buda and the White City? What about news from further west? Any reports from Venet or Meda Vadis? How will our less than seven thousand men defend against their eighty thousand? What should we see that we do not yet see? What should we know that we do not yet know? The questions were too many and the answers too uncertain. They would be kept hidden for now, like troubling news kept from friends so that only one need worry, instead of all.

The emperor at last looked up from the map and

painted a smile on his face. “What we must do now is go about the city to bolster both soldiers and people. To see this siege through, our greatest weapon must be courage. Go now and instill it.”

As men bowed and departed, Karas called for Phrantzes to tarry.

“Yes, my Lord.”

“One last order, Phrantzes...you must ensure the gates are locked.”

“All of them?”

“All of them.”

As night fell, Karas, in his bronze lamellar armor and dangled crown, once more stood on the allure of the mesoteichion, hands resting on the rough stone of the parapet. Troops flanked him on his left and right. Tenniani could be seen off to his west, further down the wall, the steel of his full plate armor reflecting the torchlight around him. Straight ahead, less than one-thousand yards away, the Surxii campfires overspread the Tamasa like a plague of fireflies. So close, one could nearly hear their spoons clanking tin plates.

As he looked out over it all, Karas contemplated a

Scripture passage in his mind. *Look, I go forward, but He is not there, and backward, but I cannot perceive Him; when He works on the left hand, I cannot behold Him; when He turns to the right hand, I cannot see Him. But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold. My foot has held fast to His steps; I have kept His way and not turned aside.*

“You called for me, sire?” Steffan’s voice emerged from behind.

The statuesque emperor did not turn. Instead, he called for the teen to join him with a gesture of the hand. “What do you see, Steffan?” Karas asked as the boy drew to his side.

“I see fires too many to count.”

“What else do you see?” the emperor continued, his eyes still scanning the scene.

There seemed too much for Steffan to mention as the glow of firelight revealed one frightful thing after another. In the face of it all, he could feel his legs losing strength. “I see soldiers around the fires...and there are ramparts and palisades...and cannon too, I see.” The teen’s voice trailed as a catch of anxiety grabbed at his throat.

He soon felt a soothing hand on his shoulder. The emperor gave a quick squeeze and held it there.

“Yes, there is much to see that threatens to steal our

breath and weaken our resolve.” He looked down at the teen with a small grin, “...and you seem to have noticed it all...but that is not everything there is to see.”

Steffan worried about what more might be hidden in the enemy camp that his eyes had yet to spy, but the emperor pointed upward.

“Do you know the name of that star...that bright one, right there?” He pointed up and above.

Steffan raised his eyes to see. He caught sight of a beaming white spot surrounded by a dim halo. “Is that the Sailors’ Star?”

Karas nodded. “It *is* the Sailors’ Star, though my tutors scolded me when I neglected to call it ‘Stella Maris’ which means ‘Star of the Sea.’ Do you know why it is called that?”

“Because sailors use it to sail by. It always aims north.” Steffan felt a satisfaction deep within, glad he could finally answer some of the emperor’s questions.

Karas slid his hand off the teen’s shoulder and joined it to the other behind his back. “Indeed, you are right, my boy. It does guide sailors by sea *and* travelers by land because it always points north.”

“Is it lesson time again, sire?” Steffan smirked. Karas returned his own.

“You are beginning to know me well...Yes, there is a

lesson in all of this.” He peered back up into the heavens. “When you seek true north, you need only look up to find the star. But sometimes, oftentimes it seems, the sky is dark with clouds, and the star obscured, leaving us to wonder how we shall ever find our way.”

Steffan nodded. There were many times he felt like that.

“Sometimes, God can be like Stella Maris. When skies are clear, and all is well, we look up and see him easily. But when the storms of life threaten around us, we feel as though we have lost sight of Him, and He is gone. Yet, the Sailors’ Star still shines even when there are clouds, and God, too, still works even in the storms.”

Karas waved his hand out in front of him. “When you first arrived, and I asked you what you saw in the distance, you focused solely on what lay in front of you and so missed the star that shines above.” He turned toward Steffan, leaning down to be nearly face to face. “During this time, Steffan, so much shall threaten to steal your courage and turn you to dismay, so I challenge you. I challenge you to keep your focus above and know that the star still shines even when you cannot see it.”

Steffan stared up into the sky, homing in on Stella Maris gleaming in the night. His own short life had been full

of storms—storms so dark and strong that he wondered if he might ever find his way. When the Black stole his parents, the ground seemed to give way beneath him, dropping him into a bottomless chasm. Falling in that lightless void, it felt like years until Father Gennad’s love and goodness shined through...only to have it all lost again. *Yet, everything has led me to right here, right now.*

Before the teen could express any of his thoughts and emotions, Karas motioned to a guard standing in the shadows. He held a dark mass in his hands with a scroll on top. Silently, the guard held out his hands to the emperor, who took the items. The guard then bowed, turned, and moved back into the shadows from which he’d come. As Steffan looked back at the emperor, the dark mass took a recognizable shape—chainmail.

“Steffan,” Karas began. “I am sure you have heard tales of knights and their squires off on grand adventures. That is the tradition of the West. In the East, we have another tradition. It is called pronoia.”

Steffan had not heard of pronoia, but Father Gennad had told many stories of how knights from the West went on crusades and battled dragons to save princesses.

“In this system, the emperor grants the title Pronoiar to a worthy person. Such a title allows that person to serve as an officer in the military, to own land, and to collect taxes from

those who dwell in that land.” Karas held up the scroll. “This, Steffan, documents that I now give you the title of Pronoiar.”

Steffan’s eyes grew wide as he reached for the scroll. “Thank you, sire” were all the words that the teen could force out.

The emperor then held up the chainmail, it clinked and jangled in his hand. “And this, Steffan, shall keep my newest Pronoiar safe.”

The teen grabbed the armor with his free hand, but the weight of it drove that hand to the ground. The emperor had held it with such ease, Steffan did not realize the heft of it.

Karas chuckled lightly. “I trust you shall wear it better than you hold it.”

Steffan stood up, leaving the chainmail on the ground. Pride filled his heart. “I shall serve by your side with all that I am.”

“By my side?” Karas shook his head. “Oh no, I have other plans for you.”

The teen said nothing, but the emperor could read the disappointment on his face. “There shall be two regiments in reserve, and I am placing you in the first reserve regiment. It shall be situated behind the mesoteichion by a field infirmary. And while you are stationed there, I have a special responsibility for you.”

Steffan still worked to mask his disappointment. He wished greatly to fight alongside the man who had provided him so much. “Special responsibility, sire?” he asked, trying to sound at least partially pleased.

“The duke’s daughter has requested to lead the effort at the infirmary. It seems she wants to put to use all she learned while tending to you...and she was quite persistent about it,” Karas grinned.

The teen smiled. He could easily see Anna pleading until she got her way.

“Since it appears that you and Anna shall be in the same place, I task you with the safety of my Grand Duke’s daughter.” Karas put his hand back on the boy’s shoulder. “Should a young Pronoiar prove successful in such an endeavor, it could soften the heart of a certain father.”

“Sire?”

Karas’ smile was nearly ear to ear. “Do you think an emperor does not know what happens in his own capital city, especially when it concerns a pretty duchess and a boy who lives in the palace?”

Steffan flushed with embarrassment, his face reddening like a metal shaft sitting in fire. This only served to grow Karas’ grin. “Oh, my boy, only a teen could fall in love on the eve of war.”

CHAPTER 8

Early morning crows pecked at rotting flesh as the sun's rays stretched past the Delvin Sea and began to crawl across the Tamasa. Nearly two-dozen bent bodies were suspended six-feet in the air, their backs run through by the very stakes that hung them off the ground. Falaak had ensured that the men ambushed at the Kopuro would provide a dawn salute to the Andolian soldiers stationed on the southern walls.

The sulla stood at the center of his lines in the very place he planned to install Basilica. His tapered golden helmet gleamed in the low rays of the morning sun. A long red mantle, trimmed in gold with thick black stitching, flowed down from his shoulders. The bottom edge scraped along the ground as he walked. Aksham stayed by his sulla's side clad almost entirely in black from the tip of his tolga to the soles of his knee-high boots. The only color on him came from a wide

red belt that wrapped around his midsection and held a sword in a brown sheath.

“Time to rouse the city, Aksham,” Falaak smirked.

The vizier raised his hand high then thrust it downward. Artillery men lit the ends of their linstock sticks and tapped them against the touch holes. Gun powder sizzled and flashed as it ignited, followed by rumbling booms. Smoke poured from the mouths of cannons and rose into the air, creating a foggy haze. The balls squealed as they slashed through the chilled air and landed with thuds on the ground or with splashes in the deep moat.

The guns were not aimed high enough.

Pully men heaved with all their might to lift the big guns, so crews could hurriedly add wooden wedges to steepen the angle. After more than twenty minutes, the cannons were again ready. Falaak ordered them to fire and to keep doing so until he signaled a halt.

Twenty and thirty pound round shot screeched through the air for the next hour, striking the mighty inner and outer walls of Karastian with little effect. Bits and pieces of stone split away, but only occasionally did greater damage. This was not unexpected by Falaak. He knew well why no campaign against Karastian had ever proven successful.

The sulla called for a stop to the bombardment.

“Aksham, send in the azaps.”

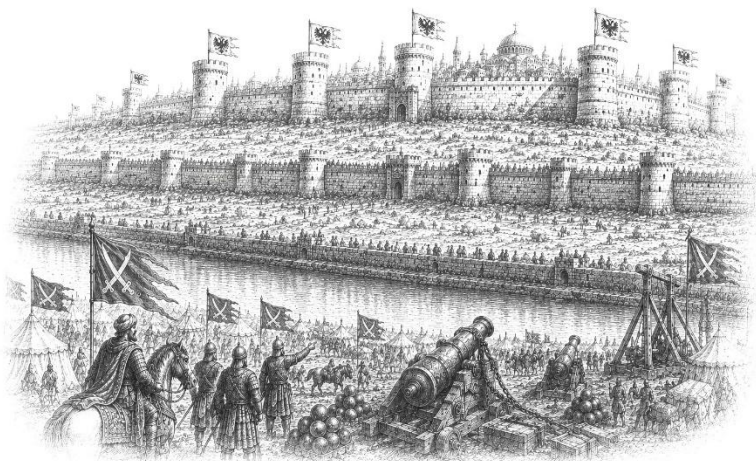
“The azaps?” his new vizier questioned. “They are the most poorly equipped of all our men.”

Falaak offered a tight-lipped grin. “Would you test the sturdiness of a bridge with your best horse? Send in a brigade of azaps. If such easy prey lulls the Andolians to sleep, then all the better.”

In minutes, two thousand azaps began to march through the Surxii trench and over the rampart. They held sabers, maces, spears, and siege ladders but had no shields. Their armor consisted solely of dense leather or bamboo chest pieces. They screamed and shouted wildly, moving forward, ever closer to the first wall.

Steffan angrily kicked a stone across a cobbled courtyard then slumped his body against an empty inn that had been turned into an infirmary. He stared up at the forty-foot wall in front of him, wishing he stood atop it. Down below, he could only guess at what was happening. Earlier, there were cheers as cannon balls simply glanced off the walls, and now shouts arose that a force advanced toward the moat. He scanned the ground again for something else to kick.

Above, Tenniani understood that the city did not have enough soldiers to protect each wall, so he commanded one hundred archers and crossbowman along with three hundred of his men to move down from the inner wall. Placing the archers atop the twenty foot outer wall, the captain stood with his men in the first killing field, known as the paratechion, between that outer wall and the low wall in front.



His men were expert soldiers, mercenaries who had battled in distant lands wherever defenses were needed and money for services provided. Their steel plate armor, covered in dents and gouges, attested that each man could boast of many campaigns, of skill with a blade, mace, and battle axe, and of being well worth his pay.

With howls and hollers, the azaps leapt over the initial

wall, only to find themselves in water fifteen-feet deep and thirty-feet wide. Tenniani called for the archers and bowman to release their arrows and bolts.

FFFFFF! FFFFFFF! FFFFFFF!

Speeding darts ripped through the air above the captain and his men, some smacked the water, kicking up splashes. Others pierced their targets, causing men to crash into the water and sink. In increasing numbers, the Surxii flooded over the first barrier and forced their way across the moat with weapons in hand. Arrows continued to fly, striking azaps in shoulder, chest, neck, and thigh. Howls and hollers of advance transformed into screams of pain and groans of death.

Reaching the low wall, the azaps tossed siege ladders to the other side to use against the outer wall and frantically grabbed hold of top-stones, straining to climb over. The creased face of the captain stood tense and ready. As the enemy ascended the wall, he handled his sword and shield with savage artistry.

At times, forty or fifty Surxii cleared the low wall, swiping and swinging at Tenniani and his men with sabers and maces and spears. Their weapons had almost no effect against the defenders' solid armor, while the Genetan men easily cut through the leather and bamboo of their attackers.

Soon, the few still left fled back across the field to the

safety of their camp. A cheer arose from atop the Great Wall. The danger abated, Tenniani searched the killing field to assess his men. All still stood. Not a single man was lost.

Hissing screeches overhead drowned out the sound of cheering Andolians, signifying the launch of a second bombardment. The Genetans, archers, and bowman raced for the safety of the city before the blasts could find their targets.

Over the next few days, Falaak continued to test Karastian's defenses. He repositioned cannons to probe various areas along the walls and initiated skirmishes in different sectors, searching for weakness. The confidence of Karas' advisors soared, except for Tenniani who urged cautious optimism. The emperor, however, viewed Falaak's actions as the circling of a lion before the pounce.

In the meantime, there was precious little to do at the infirmary, and Steffan had run out of stones to kick. He spent the bulk of his time training with his regiment and talking with Anna. And, certainly, his admiration for the auburn-haired girl had only grown. The way she took care of the few who were injured, the order she brought to the infirmary, and her calm demeanor in the face of incessant mortar fire, it all impressed

the young Pronoiar.

Anna was quite glad to discover that the emperor had bestowed such a title on him. Her father was none too pleased with all the time they had spent together. She hoped this might change things. Steffan instantly assumed that was the emperor's intention all along.

As Anna and he strolled the courtyard next to the makeshift field infirmary, he caught sight of a rippling image of himself in a large puddle. He was still getting used to how he looked in chainmail. Frankly, he did not know which was harder, learning to fight in the heavy armor or learning to view himself as a Pronoiar.

"You shall be a brave fighter one day," Anna announced, bumping her shoulder into his.

Steffan scoffed. "Brave fighter! Brave reserve, you mean."

"I said 'one day,'" she replied in a serious tone, "but I did not mean one day soon. I pray this siege quickly ends without need of the reserve."

"Yes, of course," Steffan grumpily conceded, "but I want to help. I want to do my part."

Anna placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. Steffan wished he could feel it. But with the armor, he could only sense the weight of it, not the touch of it "You are helping the

emperor...by continuing your training and watching over me.”

“That is not what I mean.”

“What is it that you mean then?”

“I mean...” the teen paused. He gazed up at the massive wall where Karas stood keeping an eye on the enemy camp below. Steffan had arrived in the city several months earlier alone and broken. Everything he’d known dead or burned. How different things might have been had the emperor not personally seen to his recovery. And as if that were not enough, Karas provided a room, clothing, training, armor, and now a title. Standing in reserve did not nearly seem like repayment enough, not for this man that he respected so deeply and cared for so much. But he could not share all of that with Anna, not then anyway. “I do not know what I mean.”

Before Anna could respond, Karas’ guards moved quickly off the wall and down the stone steps of the mesoteichion, the emperor in the midst of them. Steffan sped over with Anna right behind. “What is happening, sire?”

Karas did not slow his brisk movements. “My brother’s ships have been sighted in the distance.”

In short order, Karas and his guard had made their way to the western wall above the harbor. The Grand Duke stood further down the wall with a signalman to provide instructions to warships in port. Notaras shot a brief look at the two teens

but was too preoccupied to engage them. He quickly turned his attention back to the sea and barked orders at the signalman.

Steffan spotted four ships sailing in from the west. They were long, tall ships known as carracks. From each, a peninsular snout, called a beakhead, protruded from the forecastle. Jutting up from the wide deck arose a mighty foremast, followed by a towering mainmast. A smaller mizzenmast stood on a raised quarterdeck at the stern.

From the south, a fleet of Surxii ships sped toward them. Steffan counted at least twenty, maybe more. The duke hastily worked to direct the six warships in port to intercept. Three sets of ships from three directions were about to collide. Atop the wall, overlooking the vast Inlet of Sigan, Steffan knew a great naval battle would play out before him.

Surxii ships swarmed the carracks like wasps around a hive. But their ships were smaller in size and much lower to the water. The decks of the Lascadaemon vessels stood fifteen feet higher, forcing the attackers to toss grappling hooks to climb aboard. Andolian soldiers and crew swiftly worked to cut the ropes with daggers and swords, while archers rained down arrows.

Others threw jars filled with Junoni fire that exploded open, spraying the contents in all directions. Not only was Junoni fire impervious to water, but liquids actually served to spread the flames. Burning sailors leapt into the sea only to continue aflame. Their agonizing cries shot up from all around the boats, until they sank beneath the waves.

The Surxii, however, pressed the attack. They were under orders from Falaak himself not to fail. More grappling hooks dug into deck rails—fore and aft, starboard and port. With the supply of arrows and Junoni fire dwindling, more black and red clad men made their way up the ropes. Swords clashed on the deck, and men fought hand to hand along the rails.

The Andolian captains ordered their ships to merge together. Surxii vessels caught between the giant carracks were squeezed. The snapping of timber and the screams of men rose into the sky, as violent fighting continued on deck.

Watching from the allure of the western wall, Steffan could not tell which way the battle would go. Thick flames and dense smoke overwhelmed the scene. Thomes' ships sat surrounded by the Surxii, like wounded prey encircled by a pack of snarling and drooling hyenas...

...then it happened.

Karastian warships slashed through the smoke and

slammed into the smaller Surxii vessels, smashing them to tinder and kindling. The Lascadaemon ships pulled free, as arrows and Junoni fire showered down on attackers from the duke's ships. Notaras raised his hands in jubilation, and Steffan could hear the emperor shouting in excitement. Everyone on the wall cheered. The four ships would soon be safe inside the port.

As the teen soaked in the picture, he thought surely the siege would come to nothing.

In the shadow of the majestic Jartasti Mountains stood a thing almost equally majestic—the Cangal Forest. Spanning hundreds of miles, it ran along the curtain of the mountains to the very northern reaches of Andolan. Teeming with beech, pine, birch, fir, and oak, some trees grew more than one hundred-fifty feet tall and twenty-five feet wide. Woodcutters often set up camp in those woods to supply timber for building, for weaponry, and for warmth.

Near the edge of the forest, at the base of the mountains, a group of eighteen such woodcutters sat around three separate campfires. They tugged at rough meat with their teeth, warming themselves. Evening had settled in after a long

day of sawing and chopping. Several sore-armed men yawned over their meals, hoping their chatty companions would soon fall silent.

Cracking sounds to the east interrupted their supper. Men stood and turned, peering into the dark woods that enveloped their camp. Someone spotted yellow in the blackness. He pointed and shouted. Soon, more yellow, glowing amber stones appearing to hover in the brush. First, four stones, then ten, then twenty, then too many to count.

Deep, throaty snarls cleaved the night, penetrating to the joint and marrow of the men. They grabbed at axes and saws with trembling fingers, their eyes dilating with fear. Teeth, fangs, and fur sprung from the shadows. The woodcutters swung their tools in a frantic fight for survival. One wedged his axe between two ribs of a creature, but before he could remove the weapon for a second blow, another leapt upon him.

In moments, all fell quiet.

The wanadghu had made it safely over the mountains.

CHAPTER 9

Before the Lascadaemon ships entered the harbor, Emperor Karas had already ordered Anna and Steffan back to the infirmary. Men, wounded from the battle at sea, would be taken straight there. Within an hour, sailors and others arrived with all manner of injuries. Anna went straight to work assigning beds, sending runners for supplies, and aiding physicians however she could. Her light blue gown was soon stained crimson with blood, her fair-skinned hands equally so.

Once more, Steffan wondered at her strength and dedication. She moved with purpose, tended with compassion, and worked with resolve. “Steffan, we need more dressings. See that we get some,” Anna called out.

And she is also not shy about bossing people around, the teen said to himself, as he sped off to find dressings.

Despite the injuries and fatalities from the recent battle,

the people of Karastian were jubilant. Two hundred much needed troops marched into the city, their ships' hulls bulging with grain and supplies. Additionally, the walls had deflected every cannon ball. Tenniani and his men had pushed back every assault and skirmish, and now a decisive sea victory. Even the emperor allowed himself to celebrate the recent successes.

Falaak's face flushed in rage. So incensed by defeat, he rode his horse into the sea screaming profanity at his admiral, Baltoghlu, who could not have possibly heard him. When the remaining Surxii vessels returned from sea, the sulla immediately ordered the admiral and his entire retinue to the front of his war tent.

Soldiers drove Baltoghlu to his knees before Falaak, who was flanked by his two viziers—Basid and Aksham. The admiral's uniform was ripped and charred. He smelled of smoke and burning flesh. An ooze trickled from where his right eye used to be.

"You shall be executed at once for your incompetence," hollered Falaak, his voice booming like one of his cannons.

“My sulla,” a crew member timidly started, “your servant fought bravely and lost an eye in the battle.”

Then another spoke up and still another, detailing the admiral’s bravery even after receiving such a grievous injury. Knowing he would need the support of his soldiers and sailors, Falaak finally relented.

“It is settled then,” he began, his voice returning to its normal tone. “Baltoghlu, out of respect for your men, I shall spare your life. However, you are stripped of your rank, your title, and your lands. Leave my presence and this camp. Let me never set eyes on you again under pain of death.”

Falaak turned and strode indignantly into his tent, Basid and Aksham directly behind. Once inside, the sulla furiously kicked a chair, sending it flying into a draped wall ten feet away. Yanking both leather gloves off with his teeth, he threw them to the ground and seated himself in a chair near a large desk.

No one spoke a word for several moments.

Basid, ever in his long black robe, was first to break the silence. “My sulla, you are young and sieges are difficult. It is not too late to save face and remove ourselves from this place.”

Falaak made no reply. He sat silently with his fingers interlocked against his chest. Aksham could see his sulla’s

knuckles turning white as he tensed.

Suddenly, a guard pushed through a tent flap. “A thousand pardons, sulla, but Orban arrives.”

Falaak shot from his chair and out of the tent. There stood the chubby cannon maker with a dozen mighty guns and his enormous Basilica. Crews were unhitching team after team of oxen and preparing to move the weapons into position. The young sulla ran his hand along the cool black iron of the monstrous weapon. At nearly thirty feet long, no living man had ever seen a larger weapon. The barrel, augmented with eight inches of solid bronze to absorb each blast, had a diameter of close to three feet. So gaping was the mouth of the cannon that a full-grown man could climb inside on his hands and knees.

It took an entire day for the thirty-seven thousand pound gun to be maneuvered into position. Orban’s crew needed to separate Basilica into three sections for it to be moved onto a sloping platform. Once there, they painstakingly pieced it back together and secured it with eighteen inch wide reinforcing rings. Finally, specially chiseled boulders, weighing as much as one thousand pounds, were rolled by ten men each to the side of the cannon.

By the time all was ready, more than a day had passed since the disaster at sea. Now, dusk settled on the camp,

causing yet another delay for the impatient Falaak. Nevertheless, given the lack of daylight, he decided to wait until dawn to fire Basilica, so crews could better gauge its accuracy and adjust accordingly. As he prepared to enter the war tent to begin his restless wait until dawn, a distant sound echoed from north of the city.

The sulla grinned widely. Man and beast had crossed the mountains.

No cannon had ever fired on the northern wall. It seemed almost an impossibility to the people of Karastian. More impossible, however, was what stood outside the gates. Three to four-hundred Surxii soldiers along with dozens of strange creatures. The beasts were thick and furred with muscular haunches that rippled as they stalked along the ground. Their tails slithered like cobras behind them, while long sinewy arms flowed down to four fingered claws, curved and sharp like black eagle talons.

The watchmen on the northern wall immediately sent a runner to inform Karas who quickly mounted his silky black horse and galloped north at full speed. Seeing the amber-eyed beasts, he exclaimed, “What unholy thing has Falaak

unleashed upon us!?!” then called for one of his guards to summon Steffan.

As the teen made his way to the emperor, his mind raced in all directions like untied horses scattered by cannon blast—*Why does the guard’s face seem so pale? What does Emperor Karas want? Is he finally tasking me with something other than drills and stone kicking?*

Steffan took the steps running up along the wall two at a time. Arriving on the allure, he advanced swiftly to Karas who stood overlooking the parapet. Peering thirty-feet down, the teen gasped at what he saw moving beneath him only a couple of hundred yards away.

“Is this what you saw in the Ucurgan Marshes, Steffan?” Karas asked, his gaze fixated on the beasts.



“It was very dark, sire,” Steffan began. “I could not see much of the creature...” the teen focused in on the eyes, the round amber eyes with black pits for pupils. “...but I shall not forget those eyes.”

Karas turned to Feres, the captain of his guard. His angular body was tan and dark complected like Steffan. “There must be two hundred men kept on this wall at all hours and ensure there are runners at the ready to send immediate word of movement.”

Feres brought a tight fist to his breastplate in response and hastily moved toward the stairs. The emperor then looked to Steffan, “Did you not tell me that you struck one with your sword in the marshes?”

“Yes, sire,” Steffan answered as his mind shoveled at memories he wished to stay buried—hot breath panting, his hand grasping metal in the frigid waters, raising the heavy sword, and bringing it down on the beast’s head with a sickening thud.

“And it was slain?”

“I do not know, sire. I only know that I heard the cracking of bone.”

Karas nodded as though agreeing with himself on some issue.

“Sire? Why do you ask?”

“If their bones can crack, then they can be killed like any other creature. Such knowledge shall strengthen our people once news of this spreads.”

Before another word could be spoken, Phrantzes stepped up onto the allure. Sweat beaded on his wrinkled forehead and rolled into his thick grey eyebrows. He peered over the barrier as he worked to catch his breath. “My heavens!” he panted. “The rumors are true.”

Karas sighed. “So quickly this news has spread. But Phrantzes, we must make certain that sister news travels with it. These beasts are not spirit nor demon. They are flesh and blood and can be slain.”

As Steffan and the emperor made their way back to the mesoteichion, they were surrounded by citizens. People shouting from all directions.

“Is it true, my lord?”

“Are there demons at the gates?”

“Can they scale the walls?”

There were too many questions for the teen to keep track of. They piled on top of each other until he could not discern one question from another.

With each question, however, Karas sought to reassure. He pointed to Steffan and called out in a loud voice, “This Pronoiar struck a deadly blow to one such animal in the

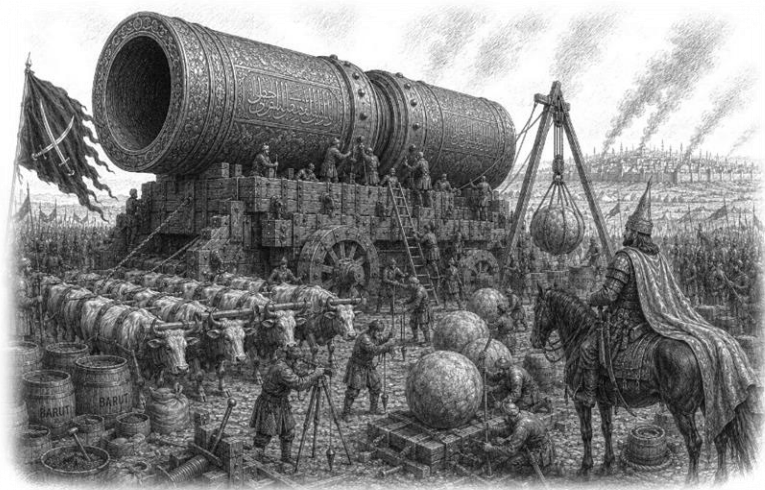
Ucurgan Marshes. They are mortal, and we shall drive them away just as we shall drive away the Surxii.” The noble ruler, high up on his horse, spoke emphatically, anchoring his words with fortitude and strength, then he encouraged those present to pass on his words and not give in to fear.

For the rest of the evening, Karas met with Tenniani, Phrantzes, Notaras, and the rest of his war council. There was much to discuss. Falaak had effectively put two strings on one bow by blocking a key route for supplies as well as blocking a key route of escape should the city fall.

Thick grey clouds masked the dawn sun, but the steady brightening of the sky told Falaak that the time had come. He stood near Orban who chose to head the Basilica crew himself. Setting fire to the end of his linstock stick, the cannon maker slowly moved it to the touch hole. Hissing and flash preceded a titanic blast that shook the ground and rattled cannons in their wooden cradles a half-mile down the line. A blinding conflagration exploded from the mouth of the weapon, scorching the planks of the defensive palisade twenty feet in front of it. A massive stone missile streaked across the sky, cutting through the air with a thunderous rumble like the sound

of a hundred horses galloping all at once.

It smashed into the Great Wall with such force that it seemed the whole structure convulsed. Gigantic pieces of the fifteen-foot thick wall shattered in all directions. Soldiers standing nearby were flung through the air and crashed to their deaths forty feet below. Splintered chunks of rock ripped through buildings and people. Other debris fell in great heaps to the ground, crushing anyone or anything that was below. Citizens and soldiers darted in all directions, shouting and wailing and crossing themselves. It seemed like Armageddon had come.



Steffan rushed into the infirmary and grabbed his charge by the arm. “I must get you to safety, Anna!” he urged, as she worked to pry her arm loose.

“I am not leaving where I am needed,” her voice wavered, shook by the fear of the blast. But her resolve was not shaken.

“Anna!” Steffan shouted. “I have to keep you safe!” Tears flooded his eyes.

“Then do not leave this place, because here is where I shall be.”

High-pitched squealing whines filled the air. Steffan knew the sound. More cannonballs were hurtling toward the city. Thuds and cracks and groans came from the walls. “Do not leave the inside of this building, Anna!” the teen ordered and headed out the door to inspect the situation. Instantly, screams of pain and cries for help grabbed his ears. He dashed to the nearest person while calling to those around him to assist with others.

Kneeling beside a boy younger than himself, perhaps around ten, Steffan worked to assess his condition. The teen could see a hole through the boy’s right shoulder the size of a plum. Steffan tried to ask him questions, but the child only moaned in delirious pain and shock. Sweeping him up into his arms, the young Pronoiar raced into the infirmary and slid the boy onto a bed. “This one needs help!” he shouted before sprinting out the door again.

“Fire again, Orban!” ordered Falaak.

The cannon maker skulked over the sulla. “My sulla, the gun expends a great deal of ‘eat and must cool,” he started; his words pushing unsteadily through a tightening throat. “Even as we speak, my men are rubbing the barrel wit’ oil ta ‘elp it cool more quickly and ta prevent cracking.”

“How long?” Falaak growled. He was prowling back and forth like a caged lion.

Orban paused, wondering how the Surxii ruler would take the answer. “Four ta five ‘ours.”

Falaak halted in his spot and spun so rapidly that dirt kicked up three feet in the air around him. “Four to five hours! You have...”

“But dear sulla,” interjected the cannon maker, hoping to calm the man who held his life in his hands. “While we wait, may I offer a suggestion?”

“Your life depends on its worth!” Falaak spat back.

Orban swallowed hard. “Use one ‘a my newly arrived guns,” he began, holding up his left hand out in front of him toward the city walls, “and aim it ‘ere at the wall. Then take another such gun,” he rose his right hand out separated from his left by three feet, “and aim it ‘ere at the wall. Allow these

guns to weaken the sides of that section, then we 'ill aim Basilica into the middle so that she may 'ave 'er utmost effect. A few days of such blasts, and we 'ill be through the walls."

Falaak stood in silent intensity for a long moment, then finally mouthed, "Let it be so," before stepping back toward his tent where Aksham and Basid stood near the entrance. "What do you think, Basid?" the young ruler sneered. "Shall we still flee with our tails between our legs?"

A gaping hole in the Great Wall had not been seen in its eleven hundred year history. The sight of it sent shockwaves surging through the city. Panic filled the streets with shouts and screams. Citizens filled churches beseeching the Almighty to spare them, and seasoned soldiers filled corners, crouching down with their heads buried in their hands. With strange beasts stalking the northern gates, it seemed as if they were trapped like birds in a cage. Such a thought caused the will of the people to crumble with the walls, leaving majestic Karastian spiraling into terror-stricken hysteria.

Karas acted quickly. He ordered residents at the southern end of the city to temporarily relocate farther north, safely away from the cannon fire. Further, he vacated the

palace and erected a war tent five hundred yards behind the mesoteichion. There, the emperor announced, he would stay among his people until the siege ended. Once the final post of the tent was set in place, he convened his council. Through the day, they devised a plan to shore up the walls in the midst of the bombings. It quickly became apparent that the Surxii's biggest weapons could only fire sparingly. Between those times, soldiers, men, women, children, and even the emperor himself labored to shore up the defenses.

Day and night, using rubble, wood, dirt and more, they filled in the voided areas. Later, fat barrels topped with soil were placed at intervals to provide firing positions. As the bombing wore on, the improvised fortifications proved amazingly effective. The looser reinforcements muted the destructive impact of the cannonballs. Like a punch into a pillow, the impacts were smothered and less damage occurred.

The heart of the people steadily returned, especially as they took sight of their leader working among them, his hands sliced and bleeding from the jagged rocks he carried to refortify the walls. Steffan, too, strained alongside the emperor until his muscles burned and his legs could no longer hold his weight. He fell carrying a chunk of wall, and the strength did not exist within him to stand.

A moment later, he felt large hands under his armpits,

lifting him up off the ground. He looked up to see Karas holding him. Slowly, the emperor led the teen into the war tent. In the center of the enormous tent sat a broad and long table covered with maps. Surrounding the table, along the wide edges of the pavilion were a desk, several chairs, a small sofa, a sizeable dresser, and a bed spread over with colorful blankets and grey-black furs. The emperor placed Steffan down on the sofa. Its black backing was firm but comfortable.

“I can help, sire,” Steffan offered weakly.

“I know,” Karas gently replied, “but only after some rest.”

Steffan closed his eyes, but his mind filled with images of the boy he found in the courtyard and the others he tried to help. Each life flashed like muzzle fire in his brain. He shot open his eyes to shake the images loose and caught sight of the emperor tending to his bleeding hands with a damp cloth. “Sire, why does God allow this? Can He not let us stay free?”

“It is very late for such deep questions,” Karas answered, “so I shall answer like this for now.” He grabbed a wooden chair with a red cushion and slid it next to the sofa where Steffan lay. “When life is well, we often find that we have no need of the Almighty. It is only when there is strife that we come to understand two crucial things. First, we learn that we are not capable of living life alone. Some trial or

circumstance larger than our capabilities shall always enter our lives. And so, each time, we are reminded anew; we can only handle such things with God's help."

Karas paused to remove his gold signet ring before wrapping a cloth around his left hand. "Second, trials and sufferings remind us that this world is not our home. This is not the Eden we have been promised. Oh, we wish to make this world our home and dwell in its many comforts, but those comforts were not meant to last, and, indeed, they never do."

Karas stood and moved to the entrance of the tent, staring up into the night sky. "None live on earth forever, Steffan...not even emperors. So if our earthly lives and our earthly homes are lost, this is no cause for alarm. Because we were fashioned for elsewhere."

There was silence for a moment, then the emperor moved close to Steffan, leaned down, and spoke softly into his ear. The teen was so worn and sleepy that it would not be until much later that he remembered what had been whispered.

CHAPTER 10

Ordering an unrelenting bombardment of the city, Falaak pushed his beleaguered cannon crews to their very limits. Falling to them was the laborious task of adjusting the hulking guns on pullies and loading cumbersome stones and balls. Occasionally, a cannon recoiled so fiercely that it ripped from its cradle. It took hours of arduous lifting for the crew to fit it back in place. In the process, some were crushed or severely injured. In response, the sulla rotated three sets of crews every eight hours, so there was never a break from the effort.

After six days and nights of ceaseless shelling, he unleashed a massive assault. Thousands upon thousands formed in front of the trench and defensive rampart. Falaak placed the yayas, his regular infantry, in the lead columns. They were easily identified by their black and red uniforms, razor-sharp kilijes, and leather tolgas with protruding flap that

rose from the top and flowed down the back of the neck.

Once the yayas fully engaged the enemy, the janissaries—the Surx elite fighting force—would follow. Each janissary swore an undying allegiance to the sulla and vowed a life of celibacy so that his sole focus could be war. Recognized by their thick blue pants and fiery red coats that stuck out from under stout armor, they were fierce fighters who did not know the word “mercy.”

The Andolian soldiers manning the walls looked out over what seemed to be a forest of spears waving in the air. Tenniani reacted quickly. Understanding that the focal point of the attack would center on two gaping holes in the outer wall, he called for cannons from the east and west walls to be moved south. Karastian, however, had only thirty cannons to defend the entire length of the walls, and Notaras vehemently objected, wanting the guns to protect his ships in the harbor. The two men nearly came to blows before the emperor silenced them both and commanded the guns be moved.

The captain then ordered a regiment of archers and crossbowman to the allure of the outer wall, while he and all his men would stand in the paratechion between the low wall and the outer wall. Meanwhile, Karas and his forces remained on the Great Wall with the remaining archers and bowman. Finally, the emperor gathered all the siphonarioi—men trained

to pressurize Junoni fire in a specially designed weapon, called a cheirosiphon, that could throw flames fifty feet or more onto attacking forces.

The howling war cries of the yayas echoed through the plain as they advanced amid drumbeats and crashing symbols. Karas ordered cannon fire to drown out the Surxii and disrupt their advance. Rumbling booms reverberated down the wall. Fire and smoke poured from the big guns as their projectiles hissed through the air, exploding where flowers and orchards once spread. Shrapnel jettisoned in all directions, felling groups of yayas.

The ranks closed back up in seconds, and the advance continued. Line after line of men rolled forward like one unending wave after another against a shoreline. In moments, the first wave splashed against the initial wall and poured over into the moat. Bloated bodies from the first attack still floated on the surface.

The yayas stretched their long siege ladders across the moat and sought to dash across in single file lines, but the action made them ducks in a row. Tenniani ordered archers and bowman to release their weapons without end. The simmer of darts slicing the air turned to thuds and screams, as they struck target after target. Men splashed into the water or fell to the ground, yet wave after wave continued to surge over

the initial wall and into the moat. More arrows and bolts. More anguished cries. Archers and bowman found their mark again and again, as a myriad of runners provided a stream of ammunition.

Even so, hundreds of black and red yayas crossed the moat and grabbed at the low wall. Tenniani and his soldiers were waiting. Spears and polearms thrust into any Surxii who scaled the wall before their feet could hit the killing field, then swords did the rest. Still, the yayas poured forth, one cresting wave after another onto and over the low wall.

The Genetans' steel armor deflected blow after blow, as lightly armored yayas mounted an increasing attack. Soon, the killing field teemed with the enemy, overwhelming a few of Tenniani's men. Grabbed by four or five yayas and thrust to the ground, their bulky armor made it difficult to quickly stand. Often, they could not before an axe, mace, or sword found a weak spot.

From above, Karas inspected the scene—Genetans battling among a swarm of Surxii with two thousand janissaries—covered in chainmail and plate armor—pressing forward toward the moat. He knew well the reputation of the janissaries from the Great War, so he called loudly for Feres. “We must reinforce Tenniani and his men. Inform the first reserve to take our place and have the second reserve moved

to the infirmary.”

“At once, my lord.” Immediately, the captain signaled for trumpeters and signalmen to do their work.

Karas drew his sword for battle, a thing he had not done in many years. He held it in front him, thinking of what would come next then ordered doorkeepers at the bases of towers to open the doors. It was no simple process. Heavy metal doors were braced closed by three sets of steel rods that were bolted to the opposite wall. For anyone to enter or exit, those solid six-inch thick bars must be lifted, and two men were needed to pull open the stout doors.

“Advance!”

A thousand men poured through wide tower doorways, descended spiral staircases, and stepped onto the second killing field known as the peribolos. Karas rushed for the gap in the outer wall where he knew the Surxii would surely come.

Steffan stood in the courtyard with his reserve regiment. All heard the hollers of the Surxii, the clanging of swords, the screams of wounded men, and tried to picture what was happening outside the walls. Anna had been in the courtyard also, but soon injured fighters were filling the infirmary. She

had only exited once since and that was to order three soldiers to run and fetch dressings, salve, and catgut to stitch wounds.

The sound of trumpet blares blew from the Great Wall. Steffan looked up to see a signalman with red flags calling his regiment forward. The teen rushed into formation with the others and hurried toward the stone stairs. Looking back, he thought he saw Anna watching from the doorway of the infirmary. But when he glanced again, she was gone.

Soon, he stood atop the colossal wall and stared out over the parapet. He could barely take in the sight. A dozen siphonarioi stood in the peribolos below spraying fire at Surxii who crawled over the rubble at a decimated part of the outer wall. Men burst into flame, flailing their arms, and wailing in terrible high-pitched screams. They fell to the ground writhing. A moment later, a Surxii arrow sliced a cheirosiphon, exploding the pressurized Junoni fire inside. The siphonari blew backwards like a falling star, burning as he careened through the air.

Arrows and crossbow bolts flew by the hundreds, striking defenders and attackers. Dead men filled the moat. It seemed as though the Surxii could run across the width of it on the backs of floating bodies. In the distance, Steffan laid eyes on hundreds upon hundreds of red and blue men, bound in armor, pressing forward with snarls on their faces.

How can they all be stopped?

The teen frantically searched for Karas, looking this way and that until he finally spotted him in the paratechion. He had run through the opening of the outer wall to join with Tenniani. Gleaming sword and teardrop-shaped shield in hand, he fought furiously. Without much armor, attackers fell all around Karas and his heavily armored men, but still they kept coming.

Janissaries began to scale the low wall, causing Karas to order the Andolians back through the gap into the peribolos. He called for the siphonarioi to join archers on top of the outer wall and lay down flame on the coming horde. As the red and blue warriors entered the paratechion, they stepped into a sea of fire. Screams rose up with the flames and smoke. Arrows continued to fly from both the outer wall and now the Great Wall as well.

On top of the Great Wall, Feres barked orders to Steffan's regiment then sped across the allure to the closest tower in order to reach his emperor's side. Steffan followed. The captain of the guard heard noise above him as he rapidly descended the stairs. He stopped to look and instantly spied the teen. "Boy, get back up on the wall at once!"

"I can help," Steffan implored.

"The only thing you'll help with is shoveling out the

barracks' latrines if you do not return to your post!" Feres bellowed, then bolted down the remaining stairs, through the groaning metal doors, and out into the fight.

Steffan grudgingly made his way back to his post, looking out over the carnage below. Bodies covered the ground so densely that it became impossible for soldiers to move without tripping into or over one. Blood flowed across the dirt and grass like a shallow creek. The teen's heart stuck in his throat, yet he wanted to be in the midst of it, to stand by his emperor, and to avenge the deaths at Anadolu.

Then Karas' words flooded into his mind. *Be wary of revenge, Steffan. It promises much, but, in the end, it only takes.* He instantly thought of the Surxii's thirst for revenge and the bodies below that were paying the price for it.

As he contemplated these things, something grabbed his attention. The Surxii were withdrawing. Black and red, and blue and red men retreated through the plain with arrows and cannon shot chasing after them. An echoing shout rose up from the defenders, while Steffan searched the scene to find Karas.

It took only seconds. He stood next to Feres and a few others, alive and unharmed. There was no time to rejoice, however, for Falaak quickly resumed his bombardment.

Karas commanded that the breeches be reinforced with all haste, that every usable weapon be collected, and that no dead or wounded Andolian soldier be left outside the walls before the tower doors were barred once more, then he retreated into his tent and refused to allow anyone in for several minutes. Inside the tent, he threw off his bronze armor stained crimson. Unsheathing his sword, he drove it into the ground, blood and sinew slid down the steel blade and soaked into a grey fur rug. Moving to a large white bowl filled with water, he slid in both hands, closed his eyes, and splashed his face and beard to wipe away remnants of the battle. When he reopened his eyes, the water had turned red, chunks of dirt and flesh undulating on the surface.

The first person he allowed into the tent was Phrantzes. He knew his old and trusted advisor would have the casualty report. Four-hundred and seventy-three men had been killed or wounded. As terrible as that number was, Karas thanked the Almighty that it was not as high as he thought. And, certainly, much lower than the thousands of Surxii who lay on the ground outside the gates. Still, it was roughly one-fifteenth of his force—a force that desperately needed an increase.

After more moments of conversation, he dispatched Phrantzes to the harbormaster with letters pleading once again for help from Lascadaemon, Genet, Venet, and Meda Vadis.

With the Surxii navy in disarray after the sea battle, now was the time to send out messengers on such a journey. The West needed to understand the weaponry—and the creatures—Falaak possessed. Such news, he prayed, would bring the help that was desperately needed.

Next, Notaras, Tenniani, and the rest of the war council took up around the large table in the center of the tent. Despite the intense nature of the battle, the general tenor was one of hopeful optimism. Tenniani, as enthusiastic as ever, reminded everyone that the siege was now over two weeks old, and no enemy siege had ever gone past thirty-three days. Moreover, Falaak threw his best at the city, and they repelled those best, inflicting ten times the casualties that they received. “Big guns and beasts, it matters not! We shall bring the upstart to his knees!”

The council strategized for several more hours. It was deep into the night when Steffan received a summons to the tent. Sitting behind a dark ebony desk trimmed with gold filigree, the emperor waved the teen over and motioned for him to sit. Steffan took a seat in a chair next to the desk.

Karas folded his hands in front of himself, looking over at the teen. Steffan thought it to be an unhappy look. “I understand from Captain Feres that you left your post during the battle,” the emperor stated tersely. “Such behavior is not

acceptable.”

Steffan opened his mouth to lay out a defense, but Karas hushed him with a glare and a gesture. “As a consequence, you shall be confined to simply two duties for the next three days—shovel out the latrines in your barracks each morning and evening and train with Captain Feres until your arms can no longer wield a sword or hold a shield.”

The teen slumped in his chair. “But the captain said...”

“The captain said!?!” the emperor resounded, leaping up from his seat. “I do not care what the captain said. I am the emperor—the emperor who entrusted you with the title of Pronoiar. And, as such, you must set an example for others. How can I expect my soldiers to follow orders while a Pronoiar does not?”

Karas moved from behind the desk and stood right next to the seated teen, towering over him. “You must recognize that with title comes obligation. Many happily accept titles but refuse to accept the responsibilities they contain. This cannot be. If you wish the former, you must embrace the latter. Do you understand me, young man?”

“Yes, sire,” Steffan meekly replied.

“Very well.” The emperor sidled back around his desk. “When your consequence is complete, you may resume your watch over Anna, and we shall *not* need to have such a

conversation again.”

“No, sire, we shall not.”

Karas reseated himself and offered a small smile.

“Then good night. You may return to your barracks.”

Steffan arose sullenly from the chair, saddened that he had disappointed the emperor he desired so much to please. Making his way silently to the tent opening, he searched for some words to say. “Sire?”

“Yes, Steffan.”

“I promise to make you proud,” the teen uttered, then headed out into the night.

Karas breathed deeply while running hands through his curly hair. He had placed Steffan in the reserve to keep him safe. When he first received the report from Feres, the thought of the teen, so new with a sword, in the pitch of battle affected him more deeply than he realized.

Yet, the boy was in a steep training regimen with his best man—a regimen that was most certainly necessary, for it would only be a matter of time until all the reserves would be called upon.

CHAPTER 11

Infuriated over the defeat, Falaak stormed up and down his lines threatening to construct catapults to hurl retreating soldiers back into the walls of Karastian. It took Basid and Aksham nearly half an hour to calm him down and move him into the war tent. Once there, Basid was quick to speak.

“My sulla, we have proven our ability to inflict heavy damage on Andolan’s most precious city,” the old vizier began in earnest. “But the red apple you dreamed of has not yet ripened. In time it shall, but, for now, I implore you to send envoys to Karas, stating we shall end the siege in exchange for tribute.”

Falaak rubbed both hands down his face and through a thin black beard before staring down at the large battle map spread across a table. “What say you, Aksham?”

“Sulla,” Aksham began, “the siege has only just begun,

and we have already accomplished far more than any other force before us. No army has ever broken through the walls, and we have done so,” his voice rose as he spoke. “We have weapons that can undo thick stone, beasts that can rip flesh, and soldiers ready to die to avenge the fates of their forefathers. Why settle for tribute when glory lay ahead?”

“But sulla...” Basid interjected. “We have already...”

“Quiet, Basid!” Falaak brusquely shouted through gritted teeth. “Give me a moment to think.”

Silence fell heavy over the tent for seconds that seemed held fast by a bear trap, then Falaak pulled out a box containing several rolled maps from under the table. Grabbing one, he unfurled it over the battle map. It displayed the southern edge of Karastian. Red lines were drawn from the bottom of the map up to the walls. “Aksham is correct. This siege is young...and we have not yet tested every avenue.”

Falaak tapped his forefinger on the lines. “We must do two things. First, we must attempt to dig tunnels underneath the walls in these areas. Word must also be sent to the north. Should a tunnel be dug from there, that would alter everything. Second, we must fill in the moat.”

The young ruler immediately sent Aksham out among the soldiers to find any who lived in the southern mining towns. Their knowledge would be crucial to the building of

tunnels, then he turned to Basid. “In time, what you suggested may occur. For now, however, we stay the course.”

As before, the city fell into a routine. Whether the afternoon sun burned, the night air chilled, or a driving rain fell, if cannon shot breached a wall, soldiers, men, women, and children worked to fill the breach. Steffan, too, was in the midst of his own unfortunate routine. Wake up, shovel latrine contents into disposal buckets for hours, be avoided by everyone throughout the day, except Feres, because he smelled, then shovel the latrine contents into disposal buckets for hours before bed...only to start it all over again the next day.

Three days never moved so slowly for Steffan. Nevertheless, after shoveling that final morning, a warm sense of accomplishment washed over the teen as he stepped into the training grounds. It didn't last long.

“Boy, you call that an attack!” Feres hollered in his usual cranky tone. “I thought your smell was the worst thing about you, but you’ve proven me wrong yet again!”

Steffan stood on the edge of the sparring pit just outside the soldiers’ barracks. Dozens of men engaged in all

manner of drills with all manner of weapons that could be found leaning up against stands scattered about the courtyard. The teen's opponent at that moment was a wooden dummy, though Feres called it a pell. It was supposedly carved to resemble an enemy soldier. However, it had been struck so many times that it passed for nothing but a giant whittled piece of wood.

"How can I attack with just this?" Steffan complained, holding up a jagged and splintered oak sword.

Feres snatched it from the teen's hand and struck the ragged pell so fiercely that Steffan thought it might break in half. As the block quavered on its pole, the captain stuffed the sword back into the astonished teen's hand and grumped once more, "Set your feet and attack again."

Steffan placed his feet as Feres had taught and whipped the sword across his body, striking the pell with rattling force. The teen turned to the captain with a satisfied look but received an unhappy shake of the head in response. "Should we be invaded by a flock of sheep, you *might* prove useful. If by men, you'll have to do more than tickle them, boy."

Feres set himself before the pell once more, placing his feet just so in preparation for a strike. "Stand like this and perceive what lies before you not as a pell, but as your enemy. It is a gutless Surx soldier, the very same that burned your

home, destroyed your town, chased you through the Tamasa, and, at this very moment, sits outside our gates prepared to slaughter everything we hold dear.”

Steffan grasped the oak weapon with white knuckles and took his stance. Lunging forward, the weapon sliced through the air and cracked into the pell. A hand-stinging vibration shuddered up the teen’s arm and into his brain.

“Now, you’re making progress, boy,” Feres declared, though his surly tone did not make it sound like much of a compliment.

As the captain strode away, Steffan eyed the pell once more. Only, it was not a pell. It was a Surxii soldier; a black and red devil bent on stealing his new home. The teen set his feet and struck again...and again...and again. His hand throbbed at the repeated blows. Yet, still, he thrust at the one who sunk a curved sword into kind Father Gennad, plunged at the one who stabbed the small bodies of Stahl and the other orphans, slashed at the one whose arrow impaled Jena, and battered the one who would dare to take Anna and the emperor from him.

Seething with emotion, Steffan double handed the sword and screamed until his throat burned. Lashing at the black and red murderer, his wooden weapon whooshed violently through the crisp air. “I hate you! I hate you! Die! I

hate you!” he shrieked repeatedly as tears ran like rivers down his face.

Smashing the sword into the pell again, a fat shard snapped off and twirled ten feet through the air, leaving Steffan holding what remained of the weapon in his stinging hands. He crashed to the ground in a quaking heap and did not know how long he’d laid there when a long shadow passed over him.

“Steffan, with me.”

The teen peered up through eyes blurred by tears to find his emperor towering over him. Steffan dragged himself off the ground, wiping a sleeve across wet cheeks. When his vision refocused, it seemed every soldiers’ gaze was locked on him. He wanted to melt into the ground but could not. Karas was moving toward the courtyard exit, and Steffan needed to be next to him.

In his sturdy lamellar armor with contoured bronze plates, the emperor exuded every bit of his office, standing tall, stately, and intimidating as he waited for Steffan at the edge of a terraced hill. Steffan crept up beside him and could do nothing more than peek at Karas from the corner of his left eye, too ashamed to turn his head.

“Do you know where the deadliest of all poisons can be found, Steffan?” the emperor asked, his eyes scanning the

vast city that spread out before him.

“No, sire,” the teen answered weakly, then waited for the lesson that he knew Karas would bring. But Karas said nothing in reply, leaving only the sounds of swords clanging and soldiers grunting in the distant background. Seconds seemed to plod by as sluggishly as oxen straining to pull a heavy load. Steffan’s own breath grew louder and louder in his ears until he thought it would deafen him. When he could take it no longer, he angled his head just enough to glimpse if Karas might speak.

The emperor, however, was no longer next to him. Steffan found him sitting on the stone retaining wall of the terrace, his hand patting the empty space next to him. Steffan hadn’t even seen him move. Embarrassment prickled the back of his neck as he hurriedly settled in by Karas’s side.

“Steffan,” Karas finally started again, “you may be tempted to think that the deadliest poison is found in the fangs of a hissing viper or the serrated teeth of some sea creature, but do not be mistaken. The deadliest of all poisons is found in bitterness.”

“Sire?”

Karas looked at Steffan with his pale green eyes. It took all of the teen’s strength to hold that gaze with his own. “If you were to pour poison around a tree, the roots would soak

up that poison and kill the tree. Bitterness is no different. It surges in as though injected by piercing fangs and poisons all hope, all peace, and all strength. If not remedied, the only outcome can be despair and hatred.”

Steffan buried his chin into his chest and tried not to think about how his emperor was describing him. Noticing little black ants coming and going between the crevices of the stone wall, he chose instead to wonder what they were doing and where they were going.

“There is only one remedy for the poison of bitterness, Steffan.” Karas’s broad hand fell on the teen’s shoulder. Steffan forced himself to lift his head and follow the emperor’s arm up to a face filled with contemplation. “Forgiveness.”

Steffan’s brilliant eyes grew wide, sliding back and forth in their sockets as his brain raced through all the many reasons he could never forgive those who had stolen so much. He was sure that his emperor could see his jaw muscles rippling under his skin as he fought to keep his mouth from screaming, “No!”

“Forgiveness severs all shackles,” Karas assured, “cleaving the poisoned root of bitterness and shattering the chains of hatred and despair. True, you may shout out, screaming from the top of your lungs, that the Surxii deserve no forgiveness. And you would be correct.” Steffan was glad

that he and his emperor finally agreed on something.

“But...do *you* deserve forgiveness, Steffan? Think through the course of your life. How many lies have you uttered? How many lustful fancies have swum in your heart? How many cruel words have barreled from your angry lips? How many times have you sinned in word, in thought, and in deed? And, yet, when you come low to the Almighty and beg forgiveness, he offers it to you. Steffan, no one could ever sin against us as often as we have sinned against the Almighty. Nevertheless, despite our multitude of sins, the Lord freely and mercifully forgives us, so how can we then withhold forgiveness from another? You might think that you are causing your enemy harm by refusing to forgive him. Yet, when you drink in a poison, it is only you who are harmed and no other.”

Tears pushed from Steffan’s eyes and slid down under his chin. He could feel them beading up on his collar. “It is hard, sire...to forgive.”

Karas leaned forward. Holding a hand to Steffan’s face, he brushed away a tear with his thumb. “Yes, it is a hard fight, Steffan. But freedom must always be fought for, and there is great freedom in forgiveness.”

Steffan pulled the sleeves of his cobalt tunic over his hands and wiped his eyes and face dry. “How do I fight this

battle, sire?”

“With me by your side and with prayer...with much, much prayer.”

Steffan turned to Karas, his throat tightening as he worked to hold back a question beating for release. It did not take the emperor long to notice.

“You may speak freely, Steffan.”

His throat relaxing, the teen exhaled deeply. “Have you forgiven them? The Surx, I mean.”

Karas lifted his chin to the sky and allowed the sun’s rays to pour fully over his face. “Tell me, Steffan. Do you believe the Surxii have forgiven us for what my father and the King of Kizil exacted during the Great War?”

“No, sire,” Steffan replied with a shake of his head. “If they did, they would not be here now.”

Karas lowered his head and gazed into the teen’s emerald eyes. “You are right, my boy.” A small smile pulled at the edges of his lips. “To offer forgiveness or to withhold it. Those are the diverging paths that lie before us when we are wronged. One path ravages, the other restores. One destroys, the other heals. One brings war, the other leads to peace.”

Karas stood to his feet and held out a calloused hand to the teen. Steffan grabbed hold and was pulled rapidly to his feet. “Who we are. What we become. That is determined by

the path we choose, Steffan. Which path will be yours?"

"I want to be with you, where you are, sire."

"Very well." Karas' smile widened. "Though, at this moment, my path must take me back to the lines. Your path, my friend, must take you to water because you...you really smell!"

After a much needed dip in the Lycus River, Steffan dried himself off and went to find Anna. She had a way of bringing everything back to the center for him. Even after his conversation with the emperor, the emotions in his heart still churned like a storm-tossed sea, the thoughts in his mind still rattling like dice in a gambler's cup. Yet, all of that faded like smoke on the mountain at the thought of a touch from her hand and auburn hair sweeping across slender shoulders.

Steffan found her where he always did—at the infirmary. Though, it was no longer the only one, as the emperor ordered two more made ready. Anna seemed exhausted, but she smiled at Steffan anyway. Her usually silky, flowing hair was pulled back tightly behind her head, though several strands had come loose and waved haphazardly about. Splotches of dried blood spread over her fair skin; her

palms practically stained red.

She wiped her face with a cloth as they took a walk to the stone wall by the river in the safety of the city's northern sections. They were both struck by how much things had changed since their first meeting by that little barrier. Anna took a seat on the wall and surveyed the mostly closed shops that surrounded her.

"You look like you have much on your mind," Steffan said softly.

Her eyes stayed locked on the vacant buildings with boarded up windows. "I used to think only of dresses and pastries and tutors. I thought nothing about the people of this place. But now...now, I know I must be about the people. I must help them however I can."

"You have worked very diligently, my lady."

"Oh, do not start calling me 'my lady' again," she smiled once more, gently pushing his shoulder with her hand.

Steffan smiled back. "It is good to see you cheerful."

"And it is good to see you do not smell."

"Actually," the teen's lips spread in a mischievous grin, "I do not think I was able to clean everything that smelled. My hand has a spot...right here." He shoved his hand close to her face. "Do you see it?"

"Steffan, do not dare!" she squealed as she ran

playfully away.

Steffan chased after her only to have them both run into the Grand Duke. He stood, along with three others, dressed in dark green vestments and a wide black cape. His face scrunched with displeasure. “Young sir, do you not have duties to attend to?”

Steffan stiffened. “I am fulfilling them, my lord. The emperor has tasked me with...”

“Yes,” Notaras waved his hand up and back. “I know. The emperor would have you look after my daughter. But she is quite well taken care of at the moment. You may leave us.”

The teen looked at Anna then back to the duke. “Yes, my lord,” he uttered and moved toward a small courtyard several yards away.

Notaras watched Steffan until he was some distance then turned back to his daughter. Before he could speak, Anna interjected, “Father!”

“Anna, you are not to encourage him,” the duke announced sternly.

“Father, he is good and honest and noble.”

Notaras groaned. “A good and honest boy, maybe so. But a nobleman, he most definitely is not.”

Anna strained to keep her composure and show him respect, especially since he stood in the company of others.

“And what makes someone a nobleman, father?”

“Ugh, Anna!” Notaras grumbled. “You are sounding like the emperor.”

“Such a thing is good, is it not?”

Notaras breathed in deeply and slowly released. “This is the last I shall speak on the matter, Anna. The boy has been charged with your safe-keeping. You shall allow him to fulfill his task as the emperor decreed, but you shall not allow him to court you.”

With that, the duke stepped away, his three companions taking up alongside him.

Under the cover of night, dark lines of Surxii soldiers snaked through the plains. Like columns of ants moving to and from their colonies, they carried buckets and cannisters of dirt to fill the moat. Simultaneously, Aksham had gathered several hundred men from mining towns. They, too, were fast at work digging beneath the earth, using the darkness to shield their efforts.

Further, Falaak developed a strategy to keep the Karastian defenders harassed, distracted, and exhausted. The cannons fired without ceasing, with Basilica able to thrust out

five monstrous rounds a day. He sent azaps to skirmish at various points along the wall at any hour of the day or night. He would give no rest to the defenders while also ensuring that much Andolian cannon shot was spent before the next major assault. Dimetes had ensured his own kingdom's supply routes cut and messengers silenced. Every round expended and every soldier killed could not be replaced..

Late one clear evening under a sky filled with stars, two Andolian soldiers patrolled just outside the southern edge of the Great Wall, arguing in whispers about the length of the siege. One insisted it was twenty-three days, the other twenty-five. Either way, it was nearly May. And, surely, the Surxii could not hold out much longer. In the midst of their conversation, one of them felt a small tremor beneath his feet.

“Did you feel that?” he asked his companion.

“Feel what?”

“Stop a moment.”

Both stood still. Vibrations tingled the soles of their feet. Putting an ear to the ground, it seemed like banging emanated from below. Instantly, they sent for their commanding officer, who arrived carrying a bucket filled with

water. Placing it down, he stared silently at the surface of the water. Within seconds after settling, it rippled.

He called for more buckets to be spread along the wall at fifty foot intervals. Soon, water rippled in two more locations. “Tunnels!” the commander shouted and swiftly called for a runner to inform the emperor.

Karas arrived along with his palace guard, a half-dozen siphonarioi, and barrels of gun powder. He ordered soldiers to dig where the buckets had rippled. In minutes, they were through to the tunnels.

The emperor laid out a simple plan. Two siphonarioi would pour fire into each tunnel to push back any Surxii. When the flames died down, then soldiers would race in with the barrels to explode and collapse the shafts. As the men around him busily worked to fulfill his commands, Karas told Feres to take two members of the guard and head with all speed to the northern wall. There was no need to worry about the sea walls. Should beasts enter through a northern tunnel, however, chaos would reign in the city.

As Feres and the others sped off on horseback, fire poured into the tunnel openings. Muffled screams could be heard amid the roar of the flames.

Three miles north of the emperor, near where the western and northern walls adjoined at a point known as the Marble Tower, another group of patrolling soldiers had already discovered an additional tunnel...*inside* the city. Since the Grand Duke stood atop the western wall keeping watch over the harbor, he was immediately summoned.

He called at once for men with shovels, archers, and armed soldiers. It did not take long for those shoveling to break through into a tunnel three feet below the surface. Notaras tossed down a torch which dimly lit a passageway heading north back underneath the walls.

“The Surx wish to bring the beasts inside our walls!” the duke declared. “This tunnel must be quickly collapsed.” Notaras’ eyes scanned each face around him that flickered in the torchlight. He needed someone to enter deep into the tunnel, venturing out past the walls, to set the charge. Then a thought struck him. “Someone fetch me the young Pronoiar, Steffan of Anadolu.”

The riveted rings of the teen’s chainmail jangled as he scrambled to the scene. “You called for me, my lord?” he asked through tired breaths, still not used to moving quickly in heavy armor.

The Grand Duke threw his arm around Steffan and swept him away from the group. “I have a task for you, my

boy. One that can show your worth to both me and the emperor. The Surx are working to bring in the beasts through a tunnel. We must destroy it without delay, but it must be destroyed outside the walls, not inside the city, or else they can easily dig into our midst once more.”

The teen desired greatly to please Karas. He had vowed, after all, to make him proud. If completing this task could do that *and* show the duke that he was worthy of Anna, then all the better. “What would you have me do, my lord?”

“You must take a keg of powder down through the tunnel at least one hundred yards. Once that far, place the keg, light the fuse with flint rocks, and hurry back with all that you are.”

“Why flint rocks, my lord, and not a torch?”

“My boy, you cannot hold both a keg of powder and a torch. You would not make it ten paces before you blew yourself to pieces.”

Steffan instantly felt stupid and said nothing else.

“We have dropped a torch into the tunnel. It should provide sufficient light for most of the distance,” Notaras informed as they made their way back to the others.

The teen’s feet tickled the edge of the opening in the earth. A dread grew in his stomach, growing heavier than his armor. Nervousness tightened the muscles in his neck and

drained the spit from his mouth. He could barely swallow air. He had faced a beast before in the dark. Now there could be many. *It is just one hundred yards. You can do this in a couple of minutes. Hurry and stay focused.*

Before he could dwell any longer, he dropped himself into the breach. Kicking the torch away from himself, he reached up to take the powder keg and two black flint rocks. The keg was a little larger than the buckets he used to get water in Anadolu and lighter than he expected. Placing the rocks on top of the keg, he started down the tunnel.

The faint glow of the lone torch lying atop the dark soil bounced shadows on the carved walls and ceiling of the tunnel. The passage was wide, a good four to five feet, but not so tall that Steffan could stand. To move effectively, he had to stay steeply hunched. In order to avoid the jangle of chainmail, he moved cautiously, every so often passing hastily constructed support beams that ran along the sides and spanned above him.

The deeper he traveled; the more darkness closed in around him. His mind catapulted glimpses of the marshes against the back of his eyes—flashing teeth, the cracking thicket, snarling growls, amber eyes glowing. Steffan thrust up a shield in his brain to deflect them away.

Placing the keg at his feet, he squatted down and drew in a long slow breath, then he listened. At first, Steffan could

only hear the pounding of his own heart. But as his pulse slowed, there was only silence. He closed his eyes and rested the back of his head against the cool earth forming the sides of the tunnel. *You are at least halfway. Just keep moving.*

The teen stood back up as much as he was able and started forward. His foot kicked against the keg that he forgot was there, and he fell hard to the ground. The ringed armor clanked and clattered, the sound echoing down the tunnel.

Steffan lay on the ground completely still, refusing even to breathe. He perked his ears searching for any sound that might say he'd been heard. Time seemed to be caught like a cat by its tail, an invisible hand not allowing it to move forward. He strained his eyes to pierce the dark veil of the tunnel that lay in front of him but could see next to nothing. *I need to finish this in case I was heard!*

Seconds, or maybe even minutes, ticked by, then Steffan finally pushed himself off the ground and sat on his knees, resting his buttocks on the back of his calves. Reaching behind him, he grabbed the keg and the flint rocks and slid further down into the tunnel. The darkness swallowed him whole. He held out his free hand to feel for the wall. His fingers soon brushed against the side. The earth felt moist but firm against his fingertips. He continued moving, keeping fingers running along the wall.

Then nothing.

He waved his hand into an empty space. *This must be a junction. The tunnel diverts here in different directions.* He spun to check the wall on the other side...

...and something touched his face.

CHAPTER 12

Feres held his hand over Steffan's mouth and slid in close, his lips almost touching the teen's ear. "Don't scream," the captain whispered ever so slightly. "Speak only softly."

Steffan nodded, his clenched muscles relaxing.

As Steffan calmed, Feres released his hand. Even with faces just inches apart, they could see just the outlines of each other. "Boy, what fool's game are you playing coming down here by yourself?" the captain uttered gruffly but faintly.

"Lord Notaras said that..."

"Lord Notaras!" Feres replied, more loudly than intended, then uttered nothing else.

Two low finger snaps hit Steffan's ears followed by the sound of boots moving away. *Captain Feres must have come with someone else as well.* "There is more than one tunnel. They must be collapsed," the teen stated in quiet earnest.

“And they’ll be,” Feres hushed back. “For now, sit and say nothing more.”

Steffan inched back against the wall, slowly and quietly drawing in breath. His fear ebbed away knowing the captain sat in the pitch black with him.

A small light in the distance pushed a glow down the tunnel that scattered the shadows around it. Silhouetted in the light were three figures—two soldiers and a siphonari. While one soldier held two torches, the other held two powder kegs. The siphonari, as Steffan expected, grasped his cheirosiphon.

As the torches grew closer, the teen quickly saw that Feres and he were indeed sitting in a junction area. The tunnel split in three directions—east, west, and south. Using hand signals, the captain motioned for the siphonari to stay with the now three kegs of powder. The two other soldiers were directed to take a torch and inspect the east tunnel. Meanwhile, Steffan and Feres would take the second torch and inspect the west.

The lean captain immediately grabbed a torch and pressed forward into the west tunnel. The teen moved in behind him. After several yards, the passage snaked south toward the city. It steadily grew narrower, lacking any support beams. Clearly, more recently dug. Soon, the tunnel dead-ended, so Feres signaled to head back to the junction.

“Aaahhh!!!”

A grotesque wail rung through the tunnel followed by a flash of rippling light. *The siphonari?*

Feres dropped the torch and grabbed his sword. With his free hand, he gestured for Steffan to stay put. The teen hurriedly unsheathed his own sword, as the captain moved out of sight around a bend in the passageway. More ghastly screams echoed through the tunnels. Steffan could not tell if they came from the siphonari again or from another. He squeezed the hilt of his sword so tightly that his fingers ached.

Then he heard it.

That unholy roar. A beast, at least one, lurked in the tunnels. Steffan’s back stiffened against the cool earth of the tunnel. He stared at his reflection in the torchlit gleam of the sword. Green eyes growing with dread; his face taut like a fist, shoulders heaving with heavy breaths.

“Steffan!” His name shot down the tunnel like an arrow. It was Feres. “We must hurry!”

As the teen scuttled around the bend in the west tunnel, he caught sight of a beast laying in flame at the junction entrance. The smell of burning flesh and fur hung in the air with the smoke. Steffan covered his mouth and nose, trying not to look.

The junction itself crackled with flame. Several

support beams glowed red and orange. The siphonari lay on the ground; his body torn by long claws honed like daggers. Steffan could see another soldier laying in the east tunnel, unmoving. He did not see the other.



A sizzling ember hit Steffan on the cheek. He quickly batted it away, but more took its place. Hissing ash and hot cinders dropped from the engulfed supports above him. Some landing dangerously near the powder kegs.

“Steffan, we must set the fuse and...”

Pain burst like cannon fire in the teen’s side as hot breath, moist with saliva, smacked his face. Amber eyes suddenly gave light to a blood-soaked muzzle. A deafening

roar pulsed through Steffan's rattled brain.

His body jerked from the ground. Black claws slashed into his chainmail. The beast swung him round, slamming him into the side of the tunnel. Steffan crashed to the ground, his sword falling to the side.

The teen looked up in time to see Feres drive his own sword through the neck of the distracted creature. It spun toward him, took two steps, and fell with a gargling snarl. The captain hurriedly grabbed the flint rocks. One in each hand, he prepared to send a spark into the fuse of a powder keg.

“UMPH!”

Man and beast collided and smashed into the ground, knocking over one of the kegs. The lid dislodged; a small pile of powder sat exposed in the dirt as embers continued to fall. A mouth full of bladed teeth latched onto the captain's forearm, savagely thrashing its head trying to rip through the chainmail. Feres yelled in pain. “Get off the ground, boy!”

Steffan shook the daze from his brain and felt for his sword. Gripping the hilt, he plunged the sword into the creature's shoulder. It lurched upward, the sword still in embedded, and unleashed a titanic howl. Steffan braced for an attack. But only a pained yelp came from the beast. Feres had taken the dagger from his belt and thrust it up into the animal.

“You must go,” he exclaimed, pulling Steffan's sword

out of the beast. He hurried it to the teen then grabbed the cheirosiphon. “Move for all you’re worth, and don’t stop til you see the stars above your head.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Use this weapon to blow the powder and collapse these tunnels,” the captain shouted. “Now move!”

Steffan placed a hand on Feres shoulder. “We do this together, captain.”

Feres shook his head, his features as stern as ever. “If anything happened to you, boy, the emperor would not forgive me. Now go!” He pushed hard at the teen. “I’ll do my best to follow behind you.”

Steffan dropped his head and turned, scrambling as fast as he could to the opening.

BOOM!

The ground shook under the teen’s feet. Dirt exploded in all directions. A torrent of smoke enveloped him like a shroud, strangling his breath. He dropped to the ground and hacked. Crawling on his belly, he followed the voices above him through a curtain of dust. Hands pierced the debris and pulled him upward.

He heard his voice screaming out for Feres, then nothing.

Steffan awoke to a familiar sight—a fair-skinned girl with long auburn hair smiling over him. Only, this time, he was not laying on an immense four-post bed in a palatial bedroom. Instead, he lay on a small, hard cot in a field infirmary. He tried to sit up, but a sharp pain radiated from his ribs and pulsed through his whole body. Groaning, he dropped his head back down on a small, coarse pillow.

“Lie still, Steffan,” Anna stated, her voice soft and soothing. “You have a deep bruise on your ribs and some punctures that need healing.” She ran a warm hand across his forehead, tenderly sweeping hair from his brow.

Steffan, however, was too distracted to take pleasure in the gesture. “Feres? What about Captain Feres?” he asked, surprised at how weak his own voice sounded.

Anna smiled again. “He is fine, Steffan...and as grouchy as ever...though his left arm does have some muscle and bone damage.”

The news lightened the teen’s pain. Then another thought crossed his mind. “How long have I been here? Not three days again.”

“No, just the night.”

Steffan tried to let out a deep sigh of relief, but the ache in his ribs kept him from doing so.

Anna went on to explain that he had been brought to

the infirmary caked in dirt and debris. It took the doctors some time to get his mail off to inspect his wounds. At that, Steffan's mind flew back to his first encounter with the duchess, when he realized that his outfit had been changed. He quickly scanned himself as Anna continued talking. Realizing he was still in his leather and cloth underclothing from the day before, he relaxed.

When he refocused on her words, he heard her describing an argument that the emperor and her father had some distance away from everyone. No one could be quite sure what was said, only that it lasted for some time. Afterward, Karas arrived to check on him and Feres, tarried a bit, then left to inspect the refortification effort.

“Where is the captain now?” Steffan asked.

“He refused to stay...as you can imagine...but the emperor told me that you may not leave until I say so.”

The teen wanted to argue, but the pain in his ribs would not let him. “Well, it seems like we are taking turns watching over each other, my lady.”

Anna moved her hand and placed it gently on his ribs. The touch of her hand warmed his heart, until she pressed. Steffan grimaced, as pain tensed his body. “I think we talked about you calling me, ‘my lady,’” she grinned coyly.

“And I think your bedside manner needs improving...”

Anna.”

A scrawny grey mouse scurried across the desert brush, its nose twitching as it sniffed about on the coarse sand. The eyes of a small boy were locked in on the scrounging rodent as it sat up on its hind legs holding a miniscule grain between tiny paws.

A piercing shrill piqued the mouse’s ears. It stood deathly still. The boy gazed up into a bright blue sky and caught sight of a circling hawk, wings outstretched, eyes locked downward. Suddenly, its wings pressed against its banded body, and it cut through the sweltering air like a double-edged sword. The bony rodent dropped its meager meal and sped through the brush, but it was no match for the screeching predator. Curved black talons sunk through grey fur in fluid motion.

A look of wonder spread across the boy’s face as he watched the bird of prey fly off toward a blazing sun. Little feet raced across the sand, through the gates of Karanj, and up a curling path toward the palace. Bursting through thick ebony doors, he excitedly prepared to tell his father of all his eyes had just witnessed.

But it was mealtime, and his father's face sat covered in drool. A spoon flung violently from the man's hand and clattered against ceramic tiles as he screamed garbled words that the boy could not understand.

"Now is not a good time, Master Falaak," mumbled a servant in nervous whispers.

Falaak looked up at the servant then back to his father. Murad had buried his face in his hands, shoulders heaving. The boy lowered his eyes and...

"Sulla? Sulla? Did you hear me?" Aksham asked.

Falaak rubbed a hand down his face and looked up at his vizier from the padded chair which occupied his body, but not his thoughts. "One more time, Aksham," Falaak stated, rising to his feet.

The vizier stood studying maps that lay spread across the table in the massive war tent. "The Andolians have discovered every southern tunnel, killing or capturing our men inside."

"What of the north?"

Aksham shook his head. "We have heard nothing from north of the city. Over the past seven days, we have sent messengers on three separate occasions. None have returned."

Falaak grabbed a towel and wiped his face, hoping it might also wipe away bitter memories. "And the moat?"

“We are making steady progress, sulla. But it is deep, and it is wide.”

Falaak threw the towel to the ground. “Do you know what today is, Aksham?”

“It is Sunday, my sulla. May the 6th.”

Falaak stepped over to the entrance of his tent and stood in a beam of sunlight staring out toward Karastian. “Today is the thirty-second day of the siege. No army of the Surxii has ever lasted before these walls for more than thirty-three. Do you know why?”

“There are many reasons.” Aksham walked over to Falaak’s side, standing next to him in the sunlight. “The soldiers become restless, missing their homes and families. Food and munitions run low. Threat of disease grows in the camp. The army is needed elsewhere to suppress a rebellion or advance against invasion, and the list could continue.”

“No, Aksham.” Falaak’s deep brown eyes stayed locked in on the city as he spoke. “Those are excuses, not reasons.”

“Then why, sulla?”

A moment passed, before Falaak broke eye contact with the city and turned to his friend, “Which fears the owl, Aksham, the mouse or the hawk?”

“The mouse, of course.”

“And why is that?”

“Because the mouse is prey, sulla, and the hawk, a hunter.”

Falaak’s lips curled into a wide grin. He placed his hand on the vizier’s shoulder. “Many an army has flown to these walls as hawks only to scurry away like mice. The excuses you mentioned caused them to lose sight of who they were and what they had come to do. But a true hawk understands that it is always a hawk and never ceases to hunt for as long as it lives.”

The young sulla released his hand from Aksham’s shoulder and paced back to the maps. “We, my friend, we shall not forget who we are nor what we have come to do. We shall never fear the owl because we shall always be the hawk. Ready the men, for tomorrow morning we shall remind Karastian, and ourselves, why we have come.”

CHAPTER 13

The dawn songs of doves, plovers, and swifts fell silent under the beating of drums, clashing of cymbals, blaring of trumpets, and war cries of the Surxii. Once more the azaps marched across the plain toward the half-filled moat carrying their swords, maces, and siege ladders. Cannon shot exploded all around them, sending smoke, shrapnel, and soldiers flying in all directions.

Tenniani and his men stood in the paratechion, while arrows and crossbow bolts soared like huge flocks of birds over their heads. Karas and his men waited on the allure of the outer wall with the first reserve atop the inner wall. Steffan, standing with the first reserve, watched as more than a thousand azaps hit the initial barrier and poured over it like boiling water bubbling over the sides of a dinner pot.

Hundreds waded in, joining the bloated and distended

bodies already floating in the moat. More azaps, seeming unaware of the previous assault, laid down their ladders across the trench and attempted to scramble rung by rung atop them. The single file line was mere target practice for the Andolians.

With azaps beginning to engage at the low wall, Falaak ordered five thousand yayas to advance along with fifteen hundred unmounted sipahis. Expert cavalrymen, the sipahis could not fight the battle on horseback. However, on foot or on horse, they were vicious fighters, well-armed with round shields, razor swords, and bronze plated armor.

To Steffan, the oncoming yayas and sipahis looked like a plague of locusts swarming the plain. As they thronged forward, Karas and his men disappeared through tower doors down to the paratechion, while signalmen and trumpet blasts called for the reserve to move to the outer wall. The teen rapidly fell in line with the rest of his regiment, speeding down spiral stairs, across the peribolos, and up onto the outer wall.

With runners racing frantically back and forth to refill arrow and bolt quivers, buckets of rocks, and cheirosiphon cases, Steffan searched the killing field below for the emperor and Feres. He knew they would be close to one another. After a moment, he spotted them, fully immersed in battle. Bodies were strewn at their feet and across the killing field. Arrows and bolts filled the paratechion, sticking out of the ground or

out of bodies like quills on the backs of porcupines. Flames crackled all around. Black smoke rose to Steffan's nostrils, burning his nose. Yet still he could smell death all around him.

THWAP!

A siege ladder slapped against the parapet of the outer wall feet from the teen. "Ladder!" he shouted. Andolian soldiers thrust it backwards as archers fired.

"Aah!" An arrow struck the man next to Steffan. He stumbled and fell from the wall, his screams ending in a crunching thud.

Another ladder smacked against the stone wall. The teen grabbed for it, feeling the heavy vibrations of someone storming up. Muscles straining, he pushed with all his might to dislodge it. For a moment, it stood straight up then toppled to the side. Steffan prepared to breathe out in relief when a cheirosiphon ruptured. Fire erupted like lava from a volcano, dousing the siphonari and three others around him. Tortured cries pierced the air as they flailed about and fell like flaming meteors to the ground below.

"They are advancing over the refortification" cried out the commander of Steffan's unit. "We must hurry!"

The teen grabbed his shield and followed twenty other soldiers who scurried swiftly down steps onto the peribolos toward the breach. Steffan passed the men who had just fallen,

one still twitching as his skin charred. The odor of burning flesh nauseated him.

“Ready your weapons!” cried out the commander as black and red soldiers descended over the rubble into the peribolos.

Steffan grabbed the hilt of his sword and pulled it from its sheath. *Am I really going to use my sword in battle?* Tension grabbed at his body like a hundred hands striving to freeze him in place or sink him into the ground. His whole body shook as though trying to free itself.

Arrows and bolts flew overhead from the top of the Great Wall, leveling the yayas who tumbled down the rubble at Steffan’s feet. More Surxii crested the debris, diving from the pile onto the Andolians. A flash of black and red flew at Steffan. He lifted his sword which plunged through a leaping yaya. Both smashed to the ground. The teen’s shield stayed tight to his forearm, but his sword bounded off to his side.

With the ache in his ribs pounding like a Surxii battle drum, he struggled to pull himself out from under the much larger man as the killing field flooded with black and red soldiers. The gleam of a kilij swung over him. Steffan instinctively lifted his tear-drop shield to deflect the strike. The buffer rattled with the blow. Rolling hard left, he grabbed for his sword. Reaching it, he turned to stand, catching a blade in

the upper arm, but the chainmail absorbed the blow.

Face to face with a man intent to kill him, the teen's brain spun in all directions, working to recall his training. He set his feet and swung his weapon. It impacted with the yaya's in an echoing clang. Several more clangs, then the soldier took a mighty swing. Steffan lifted his shield to deaden the blow, spun around, and slashed the crazed warrior across his back. The teen whirled back ready for the next attack, but the man staggered to the ground.

Steffan desperately scanned the area for his commander. He lay motionless in the dirt. Others in his unit, however, were racing to the top of the rubble. The teen started up the thick chunks of stone, stepping over bodies strewn about. Making the top, he hurried down, not wanting to be an easy target for enemy bowmen.

At the base, he caught sight of Tenniani and bolted that way. A mountainous sipahi in bronze armor surged at the captain. The sipahi lashed with his sharply curved sword and sliced Tenniani just under his helmet. The Genetan grabbed at his neck as the huge man came forward for another blow.

Steffan lost sight of the attack as four men flashed across his field of vision. When he eyed the scene again, the sipahi lay on the ground, an axe embedded in him. Feres pulled it out and picked up his fellow captain.

FFFFFF!

An arrow whistled past Steffan's face. Turning, he saw a half dozen enemy soldiers sprinting forward. The first crashed into him shield to shield. A second raked his weapon across Steffan's shoulder, but, again, the chainmail did its work. The teen twisted, lashing out with his weapon, and ripping into a lightly armored yaya.

A third soldier struck at Steffan. The teen tumbled backward over a fallen body. Collapsing to the ground, he lifted his shield awaiting the next impact. It did not come. Steffan looked up to see the emperor and one of his guards engaged with the enemy. He rose to his feet and rejoined the fray.

The battle raged on into the afternoon until the sound of Surxii trumpets called retreat. But before Steffan could even think of resting, Karas ordered every killed and wounded Andolian soldier removed from the field of battle along with every usable sword, shield, arrow, axe, and more. Dusk had settled on the plain before the job was complete.

Exhausted, the teen stood outside the infirmary. Dozens and dozens of men lay dead in the street. He stared at their bodies—clothes and skin blackened by smoke and streaked by sanguine fluid, some missing deep chunks of flesh. The arm of another hung only by tendons and sinews. Spit

built up in Steffan's throat. His head spun. He raced around to the back of the infirmary, leaned over, and threw up.

The words of Karas filled his spinning mind. *You know, Steffan. Many a young man hungers for battle, thinking it will taste like honey...only to discover that it turns to gravel in his mouth.*

"Sulla, it is time to send envoys to Karastian as we previously discussed," Basid implored.

Falaak sat in a high-backed chair under his tent, a black-booted foot resting on a box. The sounds of his cannon reverberated as he listened to the old vizier.

"We have inflicted heavy casualties on the city, and they shall most certainly sue for peace should we petition them," Basid continued, pacing back and forth, his flowing black robe kicking forward with each step. "You must act now before you find yourself in a battle, not with Andolan, but with your own people."

"And why would I find myself in battle with my own people, Basid?"

The vizier stopped his pacing and turned to face the seated Falaak. "Sulla, we have lost many soldiers during our

time here. The men can only endure so much loss.”

“So much loss?” Falaak stood to his feet, kicking the box out of the way. It tumbled into the side of his bed. “I have done much to prevent loss.” He moved nearly face to face with the vizier. “I could have sent half our forces, forty thousand men, to the walls the first week. They would have drowned in the moat, or been killed by fire, or arrow, or cannon, before a single ladder was laid against the outer wall. But I did not do that.”

The young sulla surged forward, forcing Basid to step quickly back. “No, instead I have bombarded Karastian ceaselessly, skirmished without end, and sent assaults unpredictably. All the while, the Andolians are losing men and cannon shot that cannot be replaced. All the while, they are without sleep while much of our force rests. All the while, we fill the moat, tumble the walls, weaken their resolve, and starve the people of both food and hope.”

Falaak stepped menacingly close, causing Basid to back himself into the curtain wall. Again, the sulla stood toe to toe with his vizier. “Understand well my words, Basid. I shall not forsake the way of the hawk. When the time is right, I shall descend with one last violent thrust. Then either I shall take this city, or this city shall take me.”

“My lord, you must flee this place,” Phrantzes insisted.

The advisor had found Karas in his favorite spot—the marble columned portico on the eastern side of the palace. He stood overlooking the Delvin Sea which faintly shimmered in the pale light of the moon. Memories swept him up and carried him back to a time when he was just a boy running along the colonnade, attacking imaginary dragons with a wooden sword. It was a time when the word ‘worry’ held no meaning.

Karas ran his hand along the smooth stone rail of the balustrade. He had seen his father do the very same more times than he could count. Perhaps his grandfather, great-grandfather, and beyond had also done likewise. “You would have me leave the city that my forefathers have protected for over a thousand years?”

“The city was nearly breached today, my lord,” the advisor began. “We lost over a thousand more men, and our cannon shot is nearly depleted.”

“And Tenniani?”

“A flesh wound. He shall be fine...however, had the blade struck an inch differently, it would be another story.”

Karas nodded. “He is a brave man. And he, along with his men, have been a great blessing to us...Steffan, too, he

fought bravely...”

“My lord,” the old advisor interjected, “you are changing the subject.”

“Am I?”

“Sire, I have known you since Mathilda was your nursemaid, and you sat on her knee learning your numbers.”

The emperor bristled. “Mathilda...a dreadful woman.”

“My lord...” Phrantzes tugged impatiently at his vest. “Regardless of what happens to this city, you must survive.”

“And what of everyone else?” Karas turned to face his grey-bearded counselor. “Phrantzes, old friend, my course is set. I have resolved to fight for this city, and the people within, without regard for my life.”

CHAPTER 14

The Grand Duke, again in his dark green vestments and thick black cape, walked speedily down a cobbled pathway that curved past the eastern edge of Karastian to its harbor on the Delvin Sea. Dark skies lightened to purple with the first blush of morning as Notaras' boots stepped from the stone path to the wooden planks of the dock. A lone man stood there watching the smoke from his pipe float away on a soft breeze.

The duke wasted no time. He pulled out a parchment from a deep pocket within his cape and thrust it at the man. "You must take this to the leeward side of the Isle of Ro. A ship awaits there to take this message on the rest of its voyage."

The man took the scroll and said nothing. Tucking it into a leather pouch at his side, he turned to leave. Notaras grabbed him by the arm. "Tell no one of this errand."

“It seems Falaak’s plan is clear,” Tenniani stated, his voice lacking its usual energy. Standing around the sturdy table in the center of Karas’ tent, he swept a hand across a white bandage that clung to his neck, spots of blood seeping through here and there. He peered around the table at the emperor, Phrantzes, and the other war council members, before returning his eyes to an expansive map of the city. “He is weakening the fortifications along the whole of the southern perimeter.”

The Genetan captain poked at several places along the map with a dirtied and bloodied finger. “There are at least eight sections of the outer wall that are precariously low...and two more along the Great Wall...with most of the damage concentrated at the center of our lines.”

“It has been nearly forty days,” Phrantzes interjected with a shake of his head. “Surely, he cannot sustain his army here much longer.”

“Agreed,” Tenniani affirmed. “Within the next two weeks, he shall strike—and that strike shall be with all that he has.”

“That just leaves us with two questions. Only one of which we can answer with any certainty,” Karas declared. He

still wore his bronze lamellar armor, crusted with blood and soil and smelling of smoke and pitch.

Phrantzes knew well the unanswerable question. “I do not know where our Grand Duke is off to at this moment, my lord, but I can tell you that we have scout ships on the western horizon, keeping watch for any vessels sailing from the West. When they are sighted, we shall know.”

“Very well,” Karas nodded. “Let us all pray that they are on their way and that their arrival shall be in time.” Those around the table bobbed their heads in agreement. “Now, for the question that *is* in our control. Will we be prepared to meet this attack when it comes?”

Tenniani cleared his throat to answer the question but was interrupted by the swishing of the tent flap. Notaras had arrived and was making his way to the table.

“Out for a morning stroll, or trouble in the latrine again?” the old advisor asked, his tone dripping with sarcasm.

“Inspecting the fleet,” the duke answered without looking at Phrantzes.

Karas, however, shot an annoyed look at his advisor then turned his attention back to the duke. “And what is the word?”

“We have seventeen serviceable vessels, sire,” Notaras began. “Six in the Delvin Sea and eleven in the Inlet of Sigan.”

“Very well,” the emperor replied. “Now, before you arrived, Notaras, the captain was readying to discuss our preparations for the next Surx offensive.”

Tenniani took the cue and launched into his plan. He spoke for several minutes, with all listening carefully, until he mentioned the need for more cannon to be placed on the southern wall.

“We *must* have cannon to protect the sea walls *and* our ships in the harbor,” Notaras rang out.

“Grand Duke, the seas themselves, along with your ships, shall provide protection for the sea walls, and the weapons on your ships shall provide for their own safety,” Tenniani shot back.

Notaras’ face tightened like a drum. He clenched his fists to contain his growing anger. “We cannot leave the men on those walls to defend with arrows and rocks alone.”

“My lord,” Tenniani countered briskly, his own face clenching with exasperation. “The enemy shall not attack in force along the sea! They have not done so before, nor shall they do so later. They shall attack where they have weakened the walls—along the southern perimeter—that is where *all* cannon must be moved.”

“This is an outrageous...”

“Enough!” thundered Karas, thrusting a hand into the

air. "I have endured this argument once already. I shall not endure it again!" He lowered his hand and drew in a few deep breaths to calm himself. "There are ten thousand upon ten thousand outside our gates that would readily do battle with us. We cannot afford to battle amongst ourselves."

He moved around the table so that he directly faced the southern edge of the map. "All cannon shall be placed along this perimeter. Our cannon shot is already grievously low. As we speak, I have stone smiths fashioning rubble into fist size balls to shoot by the dozen from our guns. Such shot would not be effective against ships, Notaras, but should prove quite effective against men."

"In regard to men," Tenniani jumped in. "Phrantzes, where are our numbers?"

The advisor thumbed through a stack of brown papers until he spied the correct one. Pulling it from the pile, he informed, "We have nearly forty-five hundred able-bodied men."

The captain grimaced at the news. "Emperor, with this number, some sections of the wall can only be manned by a handful of soldiers. We must move among the citizens, finding every man and boy over the age of twelve...and every woman willing to defend her home."

The comment brought audible gasps.

Karas gazed around at his war council. Some faces scrunched with displeasure over Tenniani's words. The eyes of others opened wide in disbelief that such a suggestion should even be thought of, let alone uttered aloud. Karas, however, knew the day might come. "My brothers, the captain is correct. Since the onset of this siege, Falaak has opened his fathomless mouth seeking an opportunity to devour not just us around this table, but this entire city—this city that once bloomed like a proud rose and sheltered people under its petals for eleven hundred years.

"You are well aware that this sullen beheaded our ambassadors who arrived in peace to greet him. He further destroyed the fortress towns of Rumeli and Anadolu, slaying or enslaving all inhabitants...but one. And now, he camps outside our walls to inflict daily harm upon us. So understand, just as a tiger cannot change its stripes, so this man shall not change his course. Should he breach this city, all shall be in peril. Since this is so, all must have the right to defend themselves and their families."

"That is very admirable, my lord," Notaras nodded. "However, if we wish to give every citizen the right to defend, we must endeavor to also give every citizen a means of escape." He pointed a gloved finger at the Inlet of Sigan. "As I stated, there are eleven ships in the inlet. Should the city be

overrun, we could evacuate only a small portion. And there is no guarantee that all eleven ships would be available should the time come.” The duke moved his hand across the map to the north of the city. “We must do something about the north. We must clear a passage there.”

Karas nodded in agreement. “It is good of you, Notaras, to mention that. My Captain Feres has devised just such a plan.”

As the sun fell into its bed deep in the west, Vizier Basid paced the shoreline of the Delvin Sea. A few gulls squawked overhead while others pecked away at the wet sand in search of crabs or mussels. A stiffening breeze churned the seawater into a frothy soup and rippled through his long beard.

He had been waiting for some time when a dark figure approached, wrinkled parchment in hand. The man, short and thin, held out the paper. Basid snatched it quickly and buried it in his heavy black cassock.

Without uttering a single word, both men departed in opposite directions.

It was nearly supper time when Steffan received word to make his way to the war tent. Pushing back a thick flap, the teen spotted Karas sitting behind his dark ebony desk trimmed with gold filigree. The emperor waved Steffan over and motioned for him to sit. Steffan hurriedly moved to a chair in front of the desk and dropped into it with a wince, grabbing at his ribs as an aching pain pulsed through them.

The scene was eerily familiar to the young Pronoiar. The last time he had sat in that chair, the emperor berated him for leaving his post...and assigned him latrine duty. The memory caused him to wince again.

Karas clearly noticed. "Are you alright, Steffan?"

"Um...just sore ribs, sire. I am fine." The teen nervously ran a hand through his wavy hair. It had not been trimmed in some time and nearly fell to his shoulders. "They are mostly healed."

"I am pleased to hear it," the emperor grinned as he stood up and moved around the desk. Partially leaning against the edge, he continued. "I apologize that I have neglected to speak to you since the last attack, but there has been much to do."

Steffan opened his mouth to readily accept the apology, but Karas had only paused briefly.

"Nevertheless, I stood near your age when I first tasted

the bitterness of battle. Afterward, it seemed my mind swung more wildly than the swords that were wielded against me that day.” The emperor looked upward to the cream canopy of the tent, as though pictures of that first encounter were painted on the canvas. “I desired greatly to speak with my father about it all. However, he was not the sort to do such things.”

Karas turned his attention back to the teen. “But Steffan, I would ask you to explain your experience to me.”

The teen looked up at the emperor wishing that he could reply that he felt brave standing at his post, that he fought fearlessly when called upon, and that, when it was over, he did not throw up. Such words, surely, would make Karas proud of him. But those words would not be true ones.

“I must confess, sire,” Steffan started hesitantly, “a great fear welled up in me and threatened to freeze me in place. When the battle worsened, it was all I could do to keep up the fight. And, afterwards...afterwards, seeing so many bodies, I, I retched.” He lowered his head, staring down at his muddy boots. “I suppose that I am not brave like you, emperor.”

Strong fingers pressed against his chin and lifted his head. As he looked up, his eyes grabbed hold of Karas smiling warmly. “Oh, my boy, you are no different than I.”

“Sire?”

“Steffan,” Karas moved both hands to his sides, his

palms resting on the desk. “I have vomited after many battles, and there has not been a single battle where fear has not welled up within me. You must understand that bravery is not the absence of fear. No, bravery is doing one’s duty despite fear. What need of bravery have we if there is no fear? One can only be brave when fear exists.”

The words heartened the teen, bringing a small grin to his lips.

“And you, Steffan, you were quite brave in battle.”

“Does that mean that I made you...” he stopped mid-question, embarrassment cutting his words short. He could feel his face flushing with heat and self-consciousness as he silently chastised himself for starting to speak without thinking. The teen scratched at a pretend itch under his nose to partially cover his face.

Karas reached for a chair and pulled it over. He sat down in front of Steffan so that their knees almost touched. “You would ask if you made me proud.” His pale green eyes stared into the teen’s emerald ones. “The answer is that I have been quite proud of you for some time. You have borne great hardship, Steffan. Losing your parents so young to The Black, enduring the destruction of Anadolu, and fleeing for your life, only to end up here in a city under the uttermost duress. Such things would steal the substance of lesser men, but not you,

Steffan. You have remained strong. And, in your strength, you have brought encouragement to this city, love to Anna, and hope to me.”

Steffan’s eyes clouded over with tears. He wanted to burst up from the chair and wrap his arms around Karas. But the tent flap flew open, and Phrantzes rushed in. “My lord, we have news from Venet!”

The emperor leapt to his feet. “Ships have been sighted!?!”

“No, sire, but next best,” Phrantzes countered. “The envoy we hastened to Venet has returned with word that they are mustering a force and shall come to our aid.” The aging advisor was practically dancing. “What’s more, the ship upon which the envoy returned is loaded with food and supplies!”

Karas could hardly contain his joy. Steffan watched as his emperor worked to keep himself composed. “Very well! Excellent news. We must make it known to the people at once and begin beseeching the Almighty for the help to arrive in time.”

As a baker permeates dough with yeast causing it to rise, so Karas permeated the city with the happy news from Venet in order to rouse the flagging spirit of the people. Criers stood on platforms in every corner of Karastian spreading the message. Great cheers could be heard rising up from all

around.

More cheers ascended a day later when the mighty cannon, Basilica, exploded. After six weeks of use, the fissures, caused by the extreme heat generated from each blast, grew too many and too large. Falaak, however, insisted that it keep firing, so Orban bound the colossal weapon in thick rope. But that was no more of use than trying to catch flowing water with a net. The gun shattered in a thundering eruption, rifling colossal chunks of metal in all directions. The cannon maker and his entire crew stood no chance. None survived.

For many in the city, it seemed the fortunes of war had finally turned. Though Karas understood full well the mind of Falaak. The sulla would indeed realize that without Basilica, he could no longer inflict heavy damage on the walls. Since that was so, there would be no reason to delay the final assault. It would most assuredly come sooner rather than later.

Should that assault turn ill, escape routes would prove vital. The fate of his people could not be left to a merciless foe. He ordered that one scout ship return every other day with updates from the Sea of Mare, then he called for Feres.

Time had come to enact the captain's plan.

CHAPTER 15

As they had done many times over the past several weeks, Anna and Steffan walked casually along the Lycus River which cut through the safer north of the city where many of the residents had relocated. It was unseasonably warm even for late May, and the young Pronoiar's weighty chainmail caused sweat to easily build on his forehead. He wiped it away as Anna spoke.

“What shall you do when this is all over, Steffan?” she gently asked.

Steffan looked at her and smiled. He remembered the first time he laid eyes on her. As he lay recovering in bed, she offered a tender face surrounded by flowing hair, porcelain skin, and immaculate dress. So much had changed. Her features were surely still tender, but the once flowing hair was held with ties and clumped by knots. Fair skin stained red as

though sunburned. And her immaculate clothing exchanged for a smeared and discolored nurse's smock.



“I think I shall find some land, purchase chickens, and tend to them,” he joked. “Do you know how to make an omelet?”

“Steffan, I was serious,” Anna replied, bumping playfully shoulder to shoulder as she liked to do with him. “Though, why do you ask if I can make an omelet? Am I with you on this land of yours?”

Nervousness filled his stomach as he battled whether to share his feelings. A million responses crashed around in his

brain, each one sounding worse than the previous. He settled on something safe -- “Would that be so bad?” – then looked down at his boots pretending to see if they needed tying.

“Well, I am not sure. Exactly how many chickens would there be?” she teased.

“My la...” Steffan halted, instinctively covering his still sore ribs. “...Anna...you are too quick witted for me, so let me ask you of your plans.”

Anna grabbed his hand, and they both stopped walking. She turned him toward her, earnestness brightening her eyes. They stood nearly the same height with Steffan just an inch or two taller. “Steffan, I desire to stay here—to stay here and help my people rebuild and begin anew...” the duchess gently brushed his cheek with her fingers. “And I wish for you to stay here with me.”

The touch sent a warm glow down his spine. He grabbed her left hand with both of his. “The emperor told me that when the Surx leave this place, he shall see to it that I am tutored and trained in both books and battle...if I wish to stay.”

“And what did you say, Steffan?”

“I told him ‘yes’...but I did not...” the teen halted again, chastising himself once more for starting a sentence that he didn’t think through. Surely, Anna would not just let the unfinished thought pass.

She placed her right hand on top of his so that all four hands were joined together in front of them. “But you did not what?”

He pulled in a deep breath and pushed it out slowly through his nose. He had given his heart to his parents only to see them stolen away by sickness. But like water coming to a slow boil over a small fire, he steadily warmed to Father Gennad, Jena, and the other children at the orphanage. They, too, were stripped away. Could he bear to give his heart once more with the lives of everyone hanging by a thread?

Suddenly, words that Father Gennad often spoke rang deep within him. *God gives each person breath, my son, yet it is love that makes each heart beat. So as long as God gives you breath, you must seek to fill the heart with love. Otherwise, you breathe for nothing.*

“I told the emperor ‘yes,’ but I did not tell him why I wish to stay.”

“And...why do you?”

“Because...I love him...and I love you.”

As he had done countless times over the previous seven weeks, Falaak hunched over maps in his war tent. This night,

however, he did not stand alone. Aksham, Basid, and several division commanders crowded around him as he spoke. “We shall unleash our full fury in three days,” he boldly announced. “Tomorrow, we continue with the bombardment. The next day we rest our men and our cannon, then, on the third day, we bring Karastian to its knees.”

“How shall the attack unfold?” Aksham asked.

The sulla grabbed handfuls of model blocks for the map to detail his plan. “When I was a young boy, I often played a simple game with my friends. We would find a hill, and one would stand atop it striving to maintain his position. The rest would attack and seek to drag him off so to become the new person atop the hill.” Falaak looked at those gathered around the table. “In that game, I found it was easy to deflect the first assault and the second. By the third or fourth, however, I would begin to tire and lose the strength to keep the high ground.”

“Why talk of games, sulla?” Basid interjected.

“I am saying, Basid, that this is the game we shall play with the Andolians. The first assault comes from the azaps who shall begin to tire and harass the defenders. Next, the yayas and then the sipahis. By this time, Karas shall have most certainly called for all of his reserves. Having fought for hours, their will and energy to hold the city shall be sapped, leaving

our janissaries, fresh from a day of rest, to strike like cobras at the exhausted enemy. They shall pour through the burning gates and plant a flag of victory atop the highest tower.”

Falaak ordered his commanders to inform their men and make the necessary preparations. They left at once to fulfill their sulla’s wishes with Aksham following behind them. Basid, however, lingered.

“What is it now, Basid?”

The old vizier held his hand to his chest and bowed slightly. “Forgive me, sulla, but I would ask of the contingency in the event the city does not fall.”

Falaak took a seat in a wide chair and tapped his forefinger on the wooden armrest. “Contingency?”

“Certainly, my sulla,” Basid started, measuring his words. “Should the attack fail, there should be a plan in place to ask for terms of surrender.”

“There shall be no surrenders, vizier. In three days, one shall be the victor and the other the vanquished.”

“But sulla, I have an understanding that Karastian would surrender rather than be overrun.”

“You have an understanding?” A scowling glower sharpened Falaak’s eyes and pulled his lips into a frown. He rose to his feet. “What news have you that your sulla does not?”

The vizier worked quickly to rephrase. “Sulla, I have lived many years and have many connections.”

“Connections?” Falaak’s frown turned into a sneering smirk. “There is only one connection that should concern you, Basid. And that is your connection with me. Take care that your actions do not sever it.”

Basid uttered nothing else. With a hurried bow, he stepped silently from the tent.

Falaak moved back once more to study his maps.

When Steffan discovered Captain Feres’ plan, he begged to join. Feres, however, shouted some words that Father Gennad would say God-fearing men should not use and then vehemently denied the request. Undaunted, the teen went straight to the emperor and begged again. Karas did not use Feres’ words, but his no was just as firm. Though, he did give Steffan permission to stand with him on the northern wall as the sortie unfolded.

Under the cover of darkness, Feres and his contingent exited the city through the western port gate, known as the Gate of Petrion. Without sound, they crept along the western wall to the north, making their way to the Marble Tower.

From above, Steffan watched as they furtively slid into the darkness toward the Surxii encampment. One by one, twenty crossbowmen, twenty siphonarioi, and thirty soldiers disappeared into the veil of night. Karas whispered to the teen that the plan carried great risk. In the coming days, every soldier would be desperately necessary. Those seventy men could not be replaced without aid from the West, and Feres could not be replaced period.

Steffan's eyes strained, as he fought to pierce the night to catch even the smallest glimpse of the captain and his men. It was pointless. Beyond the dim light of the flickering torches along the wall, a thick black curtain stretched across him. His mind stumbled back to the Ucurgan Marshes where he could not see three feet in front of himself...

...yet the beast tracked him anyway.

How was it that the beast could find me in such a place? I could not see a thing, so how is it that it could see me? Can those yellow eyes see what we cannot see? Or can its snout smell what we cannot smell? If so, then the darkness is no cover for...

"Sire, I think you should order Captain Feres to return."

Feres' plan was simple. He would lead the thirty soldiers on a lightning assault, briefly engage the Surxii, then make a tactical withdrawal. The crossbowmen would provide cover fire for the soldiers as they led the pursuing force into the waiting arms of the siphonarioi. Junoni fire would be unleashed from the shadows, engulfing man and beast in scorching flame.

With the crossbowmen and siphonarioi in position, the captain led his unit toward a clump of small campfires that faintly glowed in the darkness. With a forceful shout, he unsheathed his sword and burst forward. The thirty followed, charging rapidly with him into the camp. Feres leapt over a fire with a mighty holler and slashed into the canvas of a tent. It was empty. He turned in confusion only to find the others with no one to attack.

There were no Surxii standing on guard duty, no Surxii sitting around fires, and no Surxii laying in tents. Feres spun his head in all directions. On the ground, massive stakes driven into the earth held thick chains with nothing on their ends but empty shackles. Men and beast were nowhere to be found.

"It's a trap, men! It's a trap!" he yelled. "Fall back, now!"

Before anyone could react, screams and flames rose up

in the distance. Feres bolted toward the cries. Deep throated growls roared around him. Yellow eyes began to dance in the shadows.

FFFFFF! FFFFFFF! FFFFFFF!

Arrows and bolts zipped left and right, Feres could not tell if they were from his own men or the Surxii. Soldiers around him hollered and fell. He reached down to pick up a man stuck by an arrow in his lower right shoulder, only to see him struck again through the neck. A beast rocketed out of the blackness, crashing into another soldier. Feres thrust his blade into the back of the creature's skull. It dropped to the ground with a grunt.

As the captain bent down to check on his man, the night lit up with more flame. A dozen siphonarioi were spewing their fire. Shrieking wails split the air. In the orange glow of the blaze, Feres saw soldiers and creatures transformed into flailing pyres.

There was nothing he could do for his fallen soldier, so he raced toward the city calling on his men to retreat. Spotting a ravenous animal bent over one of his men, he raked his sword across its neck. It tried to rise but collapsed to the ground next to its victim. Its claws dug at the earth, trying to pull itself forward. Feres stepped forward for a killing blow.

A bolt plunged through his chainmail and drove deep

into his left bicep. The impact dropped him to a knee. Driving his sword into the soil, he leaned against it to pull himself up. Yellow eyes appeared in his periphery. He twisted just as the beast crashed into him, driving his left shoulder into the ground. The bolt in his arm snapped with a crack as the tip pressed through.

With his sword still stuck in the ground, he grabbed frantically for the dagger in his belt with his right hand but could not grasp it with the beast on top of him. Feres strained to turn his body, but the creature was too heavy. Hot breath poured over his face, and a menacing roar blasted his ears. The captain reached up, grabbing the animal by the throat. Fingers squeezed around flesh and fur. The beast wildly whipped its head back and forth trying to free itself and slashed at Feres' side with its claws. But it could not fully pierce the armor.

FFFFT! FFFFFT! FFFFFT!

Three arrows bore into the beast. It slumped on top of Feres who struggled to wrench himself free. When he got to his feet, he could see Karas standing with fresh archers, calling on them to fire.

Back safely in the city, there was little good news. Only thirty-

four returned from the sortie, leaving thirty-six soldiers, archers, and siphonarioi who could not be replaced. Though the emperor was quick to point out that had it not been for Steffan perhaps no one would have returned alive. His insight into the beasts' abilities most definitely saved lives, including that of the captain.

On the Surxii side, they could only estimate. It seemed as though at least sixty to eighty of their men had been killed and perhaps twenty or more of the creatures. Regardless, a northern escape route had not been secured. The only trusted escape route was still through the Gate of Petrion to the harbor. Even then, any evacuation by sea would mean potential attack from the Surxii navy.

In the end, only one thing was clear. The arrival of Venetan ships was more crucial than ever.

CHAPTER 16

Two days after the failed sortie, an eerie calm fell over the city. The unrelenting rumble of cannon fire ceased. For the first time in weeks, the sounds of chimes clinking in the breeze and birds singing atop buildings could be heard. At first, Steffan thought it meant the Surxii planned to retreat. One glance across the plain of Tamasa, however, told him that was not the case. Tents, cannon, and men remained unmoved.

Meanwhile, priests, monks, and nuns processed through the city praying for the people and sprinkling holy water on the soldiers. Tenniani moved about the peribolos and paratechion encouraging and supervising the soldiers and citizens that labored on the refortification effort, while Karas walked the allures on the inner and outer walls inspiring and galvanizing his men to stand fast and true. All of that activity amid such inactivity from the enemy confused the teen, but

Captain Feres called it “the crouch before the pounce.”

He explained that a lion circles its prey until it is primed to strike. Then it quietly crouches down, readying its muscles for the attack. When the body is just so, it leaps for the kill.

“But it is not so quiet a crouch...if we know,” Steffan replied, still confused.

Feres adjusted the sling his bandaged left arm sat in. “It is a brazen move, boy, as bold as brass.”

“He wants us to know that he is coming?”

“He wants us to know that he does not care that we know.”

Steffan did not fully understand but decided to simply nod and answer with, “Very well.”

Feres shot the teen a sideways look.

“What?”

“Should I call you Steffan or your majesty?” the captain chortled, clearly noting the teen’s attempt to sound like Karas.

Steffan did not respond. His eyes spotted the emperor descending the stone stairs of the Great Wall to meet Phrantzes who had just arrived. The teen could not tell exactly what the conversation entailed only that the trusted advisor seemed upset, and the emperor’s head fell with the news he received.

Karas then pointed to his left, and Phrantzes headed in that direction as the emperor moved briskly to his tent.

Feres tapped Steffan on the shoulder and motioned for him to follow that way. Together, they presented themselves at the entrance. Karas waved them in as he stood behind his desk. Shoulders slumped and concern coloring his features, the ruler looked across at the two standing before him.

“There is no sign of the Venetans, is there, my lord?” Feres asked.

Karas shook his head. “A scout ship returned having spotted only empty seas.”

“But the Venetans still may come, sire,” Steffan jumped in, hoping to cheer his emperor.

He offered a weak smile in return. “That is true, Steffan. Now, however, their earliest arrival would be in two days.”

“We shall hold, my lord!” Feres firmly announced.

The emperor nodded. “Captain, I need you to inform Tenniani of this news and have him double the refortification effort.”

“Yes, sire.” Feres tapped his right fist against his chest and moved swiftly from the tent.

“Steffan,” Karas started, moving from behind his desk. “Take a walk with me.”

The two strode from the southern walls toward the palace and soon found themselves at the massive statue of Karas the Great sitting atop his marble horse. Their boots echoed in the cavernous Grand Hall as they stepped through the empty space, passing the great principal table that stood covered in milky colored dust from disuse.

After a couple of hallways, they turned down the wide corridor lined with stone pedestals and marble busts. Walking through it no longer felt like a parade to Steffan as it had so long ago when he first arrived. The teen looked up at his emperor who appeared to be taking in each statue as they slid by. Steffan tried to think of something to say but came up with nothing.

Karas led the teen out to an enormous portico colonnaded with thick marble pillars and edged by a white stone balustrade. Clouds filled the sky, and the air felt heavy. Taking in a breath, Steffan thought it smelled like it might rain. The Delvin Sea appeared dark and murky under the dense cloud cover. Rippling gently in a light breeze, it lay like a wrinkled black sheet spread out over a large bed.

The emperor leaned against the balustrade. He closed his eyes and let the soft gusts blow through his hair and beard.

For some time, the only noise came from gulls calling to each other as they flew unevenly on the current.

“Steffan, do you remember the pledge I guaranteed you the first time we spoke?” Karas asked quietly, opening his eyes to stare out over the sea.

The teen rested both of his hands on the balustrade and looked down at the handful of ships sitting in the harbor. The stone felt cold and damp under his palms. “Yes, sire. I remember. You pledged to protect me.”

Karas kept his eyes straight ahead, but Steffan could see a small smile grow on his lips. “I am pleased you remember because, if the coming battle should turn against us, I shall keep that pledge.” The emperor turned his head, at last eyeing the teen. “And you must guarantee a pledge to me, Steffan. You must pledge that, should I command you to take Anna and lead our people to the ships, you shall obey without question or hesitation.”

“But, sire, I can...”

Karas thrust out his arms and grabbed Steffan by the shoulders. So quick was the motion that it startled the teen. “No, Steffan!” the emperor interjected. “You must guarantee this pledge for me.”

Steffan’s eyes blurred with tears until one spilled over and trickled down his cheek. He did not wipe it away. “I can

fight,” he answered back with a quaking voice.

Karas placed his broad palms on the teen’s cheeks and wiped away the falling tear with his thumb. “You can fight, and you shall fight. But if we must endure the bitter harvest reaped from the seeds sown so long ago, then you must make this pledge for me...and for Anna.”

Karas dropped his hands and waited for Steffan to answer, but the teen could not speak. Instead, he twisted his body back to the sea, resting his elbows on the balustrade with his fingers folded in front him. His eyes peered into the distance, thinking about what safe places might exist beyond the watery horizon or over the mighty mountains—places where no cannons fire and no armies siege, places where he could have more time with those he loved.

The emperor slipped in next to him, extending his arm across the vast expanse of the sea. “It would take several days to sail across this sea, so spacious it is. But what do you think, Steffan? A fish swimming near this wall, is it concerned with the whole or just its own small part?”

The teen understood a lesson was coming. He did not have the heart to take it in but answered, nonetheless. “Its own small part.”

“You are right,” Karas continued, “yet it is the whole that affects its life, not just the part. We could drop a stone

from this height, and it would crash into the water at great speed, bringing upheaval to the fish. In that upheaval, the fish would retreat far into the distance and realize, perhaps for the first time, that there is much more to its life than that one small patch of water.”

Steffan gazed at Karas. His lips moved as he tried to speak, but sadness tightened his throat, blocking all words.

The emperor put a strong hand on the teen’s shoulder and squeezed. “Steffan, we are no different than the fish. Our perspective is limited to only the present and to what occurs directly in front of us, and so our decisions are made with only those things in mind. Yet, all the while, there is an infinite world around us that the Almighty has created with consummate skill and care. His purposes for this infinite world are not established upon our present circumstances nor upon the small patch of land we occupy. No, they are established upon the whole. A falling stone may seem unpleasant to those against whom it strikes, nevertheless what comes of it may very well be designed to prosper the whole. We do not know the things that belong to God’s providence. We can only trust that He is good and what He does is good...even if it appears, from our finite view, that the contrary is so.

“Whatever happens, Steffan, we must trust that it is within God’s purpose. And if, like the fish, you must flee when

the stone strikes, then know that it is to show you more than you can see right now, and that it is for your good, even if your very soul shouts that it is not.”

Again, the teen did not reply. He only stared into the enormity beyond him as tears cut paths down his cheeks and rolled under his chin.

Karas grabbed his young Pronoiar again by the shoulders and turned him face to face. “Steffan, you must grow beyond yourself and beyond what you can see right now. And you must cease living for your wishes in order to live for what is right. Think, Steffan! Think past your own patch of water. What would happen to Anna should the city fall? Unspeakable things! And what of the rest? Who shall see them to the ships? Who shall help them settle and rebuild? Who shall continue the fight? I am charging you with these tasks, Pronoiar. So, once more, I implore you to guarantee your pledge.”

Unable to answer with his voice, Steffan simply nodded as he wiped away the tears.

“Very well. I shall hold you to it then,” Karas stated. “Further, since your unit is without a commander from the last assault, I am placing you in that station. You and your men shall hold the Great Wall above my position on the peribolos. Should I call on your unit to fight, you shall fight. And should I call on your unit to usher our people to safety, you shall do

so.”

Karas straightened himself, standing to his full height. “Now, Pronoiar, go and prepare your unit. I shall follow momentarily.”

Steffan pivoted to leave, overwhelming thoughts flying around his mind like leaves spinning and tumbling in strong winds. Fear, hope, loss, love, responsibility, purpose—each whirled erratically about, and he could not catch any long enough to put them into words. He made it just five paces before turning around. Throwing himself into Karas, he wrapped his arms tightly around his emperor until he felt hands patting his back. Without uttering a single word, Steffan pulled himself away and made for his unit.

Karas tarried on the portico for a few more minutes before walking to St. Stephen’s Chapel. Moving between the backless benches, he stepped up to the wooden altar rail and knelt. His fingertips pressed into the knuckles on the backs of his palms as he clasped his hands firmly together. “Almighty, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. But if it cannot pass from me unless I drink it, then Your will be done. But not for the boy, Lord. Not for the boy. He must live.”

CHAPTER 17

At midnight, church bells bonged in towers throughout the city, signifying the start of May 29th, the fifty-third day of the siege. A growing breeze tugged at the colbalt and gold banners flying high over each tower. Light rain began to fall, splattering on top of the stone parapet and off bronze and iron armor. Untired, Karas strode along the allure of the outer wall spurring the soldiers when, one by one, the Surxii campfires extinguished. Darkness descended across the plain, turning it as black as the clouded night sky above.

The emperor shouted out, “You know well that the hour has come. Our enemy wishes to oppress us with the entire strength of his siege force. As a snake about to spew its venom, he is in a hurry to devour us. For this reason, I am imploring you to fight like men with brave souls, as you have done from the beginning up to this day. My brothers, feel no cowardice,

even if small parts of our fortifications have collapsed from the explosions and cannon blasts, as you can see, we made all possible, necessary repairs. We are placing all hope in the irresistible glory of God. Some have faith in armament, others in cavalry, might, and numbers, but we believe in the name of the Lord, our God, and second, in our arms and strength granted to us by divine power.

“I know the countless hordes shall advance against us, according to their custom, violently, confidently, and with great courage and force in order to overwhelm and wear out our few defenders. But you are all experienced and seasoned warriors—courageous, brave, and well prepared. You are protected inside the walls, while they shall advance without cover and with toil... Yet, should this day be our last, consider, how the commemoration of our death, our memory, fame, and freedom shall be rendered eternal. For these reasons, my fellow soldiers, prepare yourselves, be firm, and remain valiant.”

The emperor ordered the tower doors shut and barred closed. As if on cue, the blackness rang out with the blaring of trumpets, crashing of cymbals, and howling war cries. Muzzle blasts flashed across the plain, followed by thundering booms. Screeching whistles filled the sky ending in fiery explosions.

“Sulla, our men near the walls. Shall I order the cannon to cease?” Aksham asked. In the darkness, without the light of campfires, he was nearly invisible in his black attire.

Falaak shook his head. “No, the cannon shall not cease until our banners fly atop the towers.”

“What of the men?”

“They shall do their duty until death or victory release them.”

Steffan stood atop the Great Wall catching glimpses of screaming azaps running wildly across the plain amid the fiery bursts. Artillery commanders around the teen yelled for their men to fire. The wall lit up as the big guns unloaded. Stones shook from the wall with each recoil. Without enough cannon balls, some unleashed a spray of fist sized rocks that blew first through a row of azaps and then those behind before slowing.

Ladders and weapons in hand, the first surge hit the nearly filled moat, pushing aside decaying bodies. Arrows and bolts cut through the night and through men. Scaling the low wall was death for the azaps. Siphonarioi vented an inferno

across the paratechion. Men raced back to the moat uselessly hoping the water would extinguish the flame. Wave after wave broke upon the paratechion only to be evaporated by heat, flame, arrow, and bolt. Those that did manage to place a ladder against the wall met defenders who stabbed at them from the allure with pikes, spears, and glaives.

The azaps fell back only to have their commanders' chains whip them forward to their deaths. Wails and squeals rose with the flames and fell with arrows, bolts, and cannon stone. Once more the azaps withdrew, but again their sergeants pressed them forward. The result was no different.

The lightly armored azaps were no match for the Andolians, yet they were soon passed by thousands of stout yayas and heavily armored sipahis who poured over their own dead and flooded onto the first killing field. Arrows pierced flesh. Bolts plunged through armor. Cannon stone ripped attackers to shreds. Fire scorched bodies. The smell of flame and flesh and death wafted through the battlefield on the building smoke. Still siege ladders slapped against the outer wall one after the other. The emperor and his men spread out to Tenniani's left and fought them back.

A mighty eruption blew stone shrapnel up and out from the wall like a volcano. Andolian soldiers spun through the air and slammed into the ground. Others were cut through by the

debris. As grey-black smoke cleared, a gaping hole appeared. Hundreds of Surxii poured through into the peribolos. Swords clashed and clamored. Maces swung, thudding into shields. Steffan could see the Surxii being pushed back through the gap as Andolians swarmed around them like a nest of hornets.

Once the peribolos was cleared, the emperor hastily called for a trumpeter to advance the first reserve. Soldiers manning tower entries swiftly lifted steel bars and strained to push open the weighty doors. Steffan, along with hundreds of others, raced down spiral staircases inside four separate towers and spilled out onto the killing field. The doors creaked shut with an echoing slam behind them. Muffled thuds of bars fitted back into place told all there would be no going back.

The teen looked over his shoulder at the towering Great Wall. The second reserve had stepped into place along with hundreds of citizens ready to drop rocks and burning oil on the enemy.

“Move your unit to the allure!” someone bellowed at Steffan. He instantly refocused and ordered his men up the wall to the emperor’s left flank. They arrived just as the Surxii were regrouping to attack again. With the raised parapet as his shield, Steffan put down his own and grabbed a polearm. Shrieking soldiers rushed across the paratechion to place ladders against the wall. The teen jabbed at climbers while

others worked to topple them.

A reverberating blast smashed into the base of the wall, blowing stone, ladders, and Surxii in all directions. Steffan fell as the whole fortification shook. He rolled backwards, spinning toward the edge. For an instant, he peered breathlessly over the brim at the twenty-foot drop then quickly sprang to his feet.

More waves rolled into the paratechion and smashed against the wall with weapons and ladders. Steffan and the others fought them back again and again, hour after hour. The teen heard another trumpet blare signifying the second reserve advancing to the field of battle, leaving only citizens atop the Great Wall.

Dark skies turned faint blue as the sun began to stretch its arms across the eastern horizon, clearing away the storm clouds. It seemed to be a signal for Falaak who summoned his janissaries. Sturdily armored over their red and blue uniforms, they lined up by the thousands and shook the ground with their shouts. All at once, they stampeded across the plain. A soldier next to Steffan cried out, "They charge like lions, not like men."

A barrage of arrows, as thick as a horde of locusts, soared over top of the janissaries. The teen ducked behind the parapet, raised his shield, and closed his eyes. The sound of

darts breaking on stone and the pained screams of his fellow soldiers resounded around him.

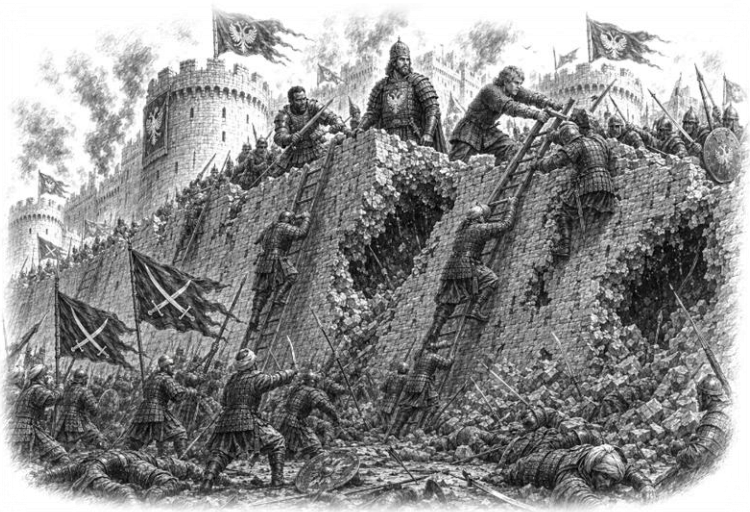
Steffan stood back up in time to see the elite fighters beginning to clear the low wall. He picked up a glaive with a thick blade and waited. His stomach growled from lack of food, and his arms and back ached from hours of fighting. But adrenaline coursed through his veins giving him strength. To his right, he could hear Karas shouting to his men to hold the wall. There would be no more soldiers behind the janissaries. This was their moment to end the siege.

The red and blue fighters pushed their way through the gap that the yayas and sipahis had entered earlier. Karas grabbed Feres and his men to hold the breach then ordered Steffan to slide his unit in along Tenniani's left flank. The teen moved so hastily to obey that he left his shield, but there was no time to retrieve it. Janissaries were scaling the wall. He rammed his glaive into one. The dark warrior tried to scream but could not, then Steffan swung at another. The blow cut into man's shoulder, and he fell taking the ladder with him.

Bolts and arrows were nearly depleted. Runners scrambled about the peribolos grabbing what they could find sticking out of the ground or the dead. The supply of Junoni fire also dwindled and could not be replaced. Those that ran out threw their cheirosiphons aside and grabbed swords or

polearms.

The janissaries fell back. But like the string of a bow drawn back only to rocket forward, they launched again, spreading out along the outer wall testing for weaknesses. The thinning Andolian lines kept up the defense. Here and there, Surxii crested the wall or raced through breaches only to be slashed by weapons or thrown down to the peribolos.



Another janissary pulled himself over the parapet. Steffan unsheathed his sword and reached for his shield that was not there. The plate-armored soldier swung his kilij at the teen who instinctively lifted his shieldless left arm to deflect the attack. The weapon raked across his chainmail which absorbed most of the blow. Yet, Steffan could feel warm blood running down his arm. He kicked at the Surxii brute to drive

him back. The man staggered backward, lost his balance, and tumbled over the edge.

The shrieking whine of incoming cannon fire grew in Steffan's ears. Before he could react, the ball smashed into the parapet to his right. A deafening boom shattered the air. Smoke and fire mushroomed. Splintered stone ripped into defenders. A sliver tore across the teen's face, slicing his cheek. Blood dripped as he raised his hand to feel the damage.

Seeming only superficial, he grabbed his sword and turned to check on his men. In his periphery, though, he glimpsed Tenniani laying on the peribolos below. Steffan sprinted down the stairs and bolted for the captain. The Genetan grabbed at his right shoulder. Under a bloody glove was a walnut-sized hole through his armor. *A stone from the blast must have caught him*, Steffan instantly thought.

"Get me to my feet," Tenniani ordered as two of his men also arrived. With great effort, they lifted him up. The captain's face had lost its color, and Steffan could see a hole through the back of his armor as well. The fragment had gone straight through. "Fetch me the emperor."

The teen rushed to Karas, scrambling around prone bodies and ownerless weapons. Almost to the emperor, he noticed a shield and picked it up. In a haze of smoke, he found a blood-spattered Karas issuing commands to Feres.

“Sire!” Steffan yelled between pants.

The emperor glanced at the teen, noticing the blood dripping down his cheek. “Steffan, are you alright?”

“I am fine, sire,” the teen began again, his breath returning. “But Captain Tenniani is not. He calls for you.”

Karas’ eyes widened. He finished his order to Feres and followed. When they reached Tenniani, he could only stand with aid from his men. “My lord, I must be taken from the field.”

“Your presence is greatly needed along the lines, my friend,” the emperor stated earnestly. “We have nearly driven them back.”

“The wound is grievous, my lord,” Tenniani weakly replied. “Allow a physician to review me, and I shall return if at all able.”

Karas uttered nothing for a long moment. He knew how simply the sight of Tenniani on the walls sparked the men, but the hole in his armor was obvious. Finally, he relented and ordered the captain be allowed to exit through a tower entry further down the wall, far from the main action.

The emperor sped up the stone stairs to the outer wall with Steffan right behind him. He moved along the line emboldening the men to fight on. Once more, the janissaries’ advance halted. In the momentary lull, however, news of

Tenniani being led from the battle spread through the men like fire through dry hay. Fearing panic in his men, Karas once more strode briskly up and down the allure, calling on all to outlast the enemy who were swiftly regrouping to renew their attack.

Tenniani and the two others made their way to a distant tower entry, banged on the metal portal, and offered the password provided by the emperor. This led to the squeal of bars lifting, and the mighty door heaving open. The soldiers manning the tower were shocked to see the white-faced captain who could barely stand on his own.

“I must be taken to a ship at once,” he instructed.

“A ship, my lord?” a soldier questioned.

“We cannot hold, and the Venetans are still some distance away,” the captain stated. “You must get me to a ship and fetch a physician.”

The tower keepers stepped briskly up the stairs along with Tenniani and his men.

The doorway still open.

CHAPTER 18

A beaming sun pulled itself higher into the sky, fully burning away the cool morning air. Heat grew, further tiring the weary defenders. Sweat poured from Steffan's body, and his eyes stung as perspiration flowed over his eyebrows. In the bright of day, Steffan gaped at the carnage. Bodies were strewn so thickly that he could hardly see the ground. Janissaries strained to move their dead away from the walls to make space for their ladders. Yet, they continued on.

Steffan thrust a glaive into a scaling soldier. The man grunted, grabbing the thick shaft of the weapon with both hands. He wrenched it from the teen and dropped out of sight. Steffan unsheathed his sword once more. Another janissary rose above the parapet. Steffan found a gap in the armor by the armpit and stabbed. The soldier howled in pained anger yet cleared the wall.

Pulling a double-sided axe off his back, he lunged at the teen with a two-handed swing. Steffan raised his shield to catch the blow. The jarring impact would have knocked Steffan to the ground, but the wide blade wedged in the shield keeping him upright. The solidly built janissary pried the axe loose with such ferocity that the teen flung forward, sliding several feet across the allure on his back.

Steffan looked up in time to see an axe head glinting in the sun. He rolled; the weapon smashed into the stone, spewing rock into the teen's face. He jabbed his sword into the warrior's exposed calf then kicked at his knee. The janissary stumbled backward and dropped over the edge.

Steffan rose unsteadily to his feet. A weight smashed into him like a sledgehammer striking an anvil. As in Anadolu, when he killed his first yaya outside the city walls, time stood still. Red, blue, and bronze filled his vision. His body floated in the air while his brain labored to figure out what was happening.

UMMPH!

His breath evaporated at impact. The janissary slammed into the peribolos with Steffan on top of him. The teen twisted off and lay staring up at a whirling blue-white sky. His eyes spun in their sockets; a piercing whine screaming in each ear. Steffan tried to stand, but the world reeled around

him, and his wobbling legs could not hold him.

On his hands and knees, he shook his head working to jar loose the stinging ring and see-sawing dizziness. As he steadied himself, he searched for his sword. He noticed one a few feet away. It was not his but would be good enough. Steffan crawled his way to it, squeezed the hilt firmly with both hands, stuck the tip into the dirt, and used the weapon to pull himself to his feet.

He twisted around in search of the emperor and caught sight of something in the distance, rising above a far tower. The green and white flag of the Surxii swayed in place of the double-headed eagle. Steffan closed his eyes and pressed the base of his palm against his forehead as though pushing away a mistaken thought. He reopened his eyes to the same scene.

Has the Great Wall been breached?



It was an impossible thought to him.

Steffan felt a jerk on his left shoulder. He instinctively pulled away, raising his sword with tense muscles.

“Steffan! Steffan! It is time! You must go! Now!”

It was Karas. It was his emperor.

“Steffan, there can be no more delay.”

The teen looked up at Karas. His face was sprayed with blood and dirt and bits of flesh, bronze lamellar armor covered in the same, and his purple chlamys tattered and smelling of smoke. One dangle on his helmet had broken off. “Sire, have they breached us?”

Karas pulled a thick silver chain out from under his armor. A heavy black key sat at the end of it. He lifted it over his head and handed it to the teen. “You must use the password you heard me give Tenniani and go through the nearest tower door. Fetch Anna at the infirmary then make your way to the Gate of Petrion. I have stationed Phrantzes there. He has papers that must leave the city. You shall use the key to unlock the gate and get as many people to the ships as you can, then head for Genet.”

Karas grabbed Steffan and wrapped his arms around him for a long second, then pushed him back with both hands. Looking at him eye to eye, he spoke again, “My hope for these people and this land is with you now.” He pulled the signet

ring off his left hand and handed it to the teen. “Put this on the chain with the key. This is proof that Phrantzes and you speak for me. Now, go, Steffan. Lead as many of our people as you can to Genet.”

Before Steffan could say a word, Karas raced up the stone steps of the outer wall to rally his men to stand their ground and fight on.

With the key and ring around his neck and under his armor, Steffan rushed to the infirmary with all the energy he could muster. The sight of the lone Surxii flag flying high above sent the people into a panic. Some ran to the top of the Great Wall to help with the defense; most ran every which way screaming and crying and praying all at once.

Steffan found Anna soaked in the blood of the wounded. He grabbed her tightly by the arm and yelled, “We must go! Now!”

She reached up with her free arm and touched the dried blood crusting on his cheek. “Steffan?”

“The emperor has spoken. I have his signet ring and gate key. We must get as many as possible to the Petrion and lead them to safety on the ships.”

Urgency filled Steffan's voice, and Anna could see the resolve in his emerald eyes. She knew he would not leave the emperor unless there were no other recourse. The duchess shouted to all around her in the teeming infirmary. "Those who are able, take hold of those who are not and move with all haste to the Gate of Petriion."

Steffan never released his grasp of Anna. He was pulling her to the door before she had finished speaking. As they hit the courtyard to the north of the infirmary, both were shouting for all to follow them to the harbor gate without delay.

"How is Tenniani?" asked Steffan as they sped northwest to the gate.

"Tenniani?" Anna scrunched her face in confusion. "Has he been injured? He did not come to my infirmary."

Steffan tossed the thought away, assuming the captain had been taken to one of the other field infirmaries.

"We must get my father as well, Steffan. He shall be on the western walls."

Steffan knew better than to argue with her. Since it was where they were headed, he saw no point. Instead, he continued to call for people to follow them out of the city. To his left, he saw bronze-plated janissaries flowing through a tower gate. Andolian soldiers swung their swords at them,

while a handful of citizens jabbed at them pitchforks and poles. The teen desperately wished to join them but knew he could not, so he raced on.

Steffan and Anna neared the Gate of Petrion with a throng of terror-stricken people around them. Once more, Steffan's mind crashed back to Anadolu to the time when Falaak and his yayas first attacked. Women screaming as though in the pain of labor. Men, too, shouting...this way and that. People running in all directions, turning the city into what looked like an ant hill after being struck by a rock. Screams growing louder, shouts more desperate, howls of anguish, the clangor of swords, and smoke building, ever building.

Again, he was forced to flee. Again, he was forced to run from the place he loved.

This time, however, he vowed not to fail the people of Karastian as he believed he had failed Jena. He would get them to safety and honor the emperor's command.

"Steffan! There is Phrantzes!" Anna's words broke through his thoughts.

Steffan shoved the past into a dark corner of his mind and quickly spied the grey-bearded advisor in his pale red vest. Fear pulled at the old man's face as his fingers tightly squeezed a leather satchel. The teen opened his mouth to speak, but Anna beat him to it.

“Where is my father, Phrantzes?” she hurriedly asked, gasping for breath. “Where is the duke?”

Phrantzes eyes were wide with fright. His words sputtered out haltingly, “He le, left the walls, my lady. Some, some time ago. He has gone. I, I know not where.” More people stampeded to the door, jamming around it. Their screams grew. Dozens of hands pounded against the massive wooden doors reinforced with iron. “He head, headed east. Perhaps to, to check on the Delvin fleet.”

“He would be safe with the eastern fleet, Anna. We must get the people out,” stated Steffan adamantly. “There is no more time.” He pulled the key from under his armor and moved toward the doors. “Make way!” he shouted again and again. “Make way so that I may open the gate!”

Steffan wedged through the crush of people. Putting the key into an intricate locking mechanism, he turned the lock, then placed a hand on the massive wooden brace spanning the gate. But the people surged forward, cramming against him. As the full weight of the crowd pressed into him, Steffan’s breath squeezed from his lungs.

Dozens of shaking hands heaved the brace aside. The heavy doors creaked open slowly, allowing the frantic mass to spill out like a dam burst. Steffan hugged himself against the left door to avoid getting trampled. More screams rose into the

air from outside the gate. Steffan heard something else also. An all-too-familiar sound. The howling growl of beasts mingling in the air with terrorized screams.

They must have come from around the Marble Tower to cut off our escape!

Anna and Phrantzes were on Steffan. He unsheathed his sword and poured out with the rest. Beasts and black and red yayas were driving into the fleeing citizens who fled in panic down the wide cobbled pathway that curled around a steep embankment to the harbor. A flash of teeth and fur flew in front of Steffan and smashed into a crowd of six or eight people. They cried out in shock and horror, tumbling down the embankment toward the water.

A short yaya slashed through a middle-aged woman just feet away from Steffan, Anna, and Phrantzes then turned toward them. Steffan two-handed his sword to meet the grunting yaya. Metal clashed against metal, until the teen found an opening and struck. The yaya's weapon fell from his trembling hand, and he dropped to the ground.

A beast leapt at Steffan, catching him in the shoulder and spinning him around. Wide amber eyes sat deep behind a sneering snout and razor teeth. Steffan raised up to slash at the snarling creature, but it was not necessary. The light vanished from the creature's eyes with a squealing yelp. Anna had

driven the dead yaya's sword into the back of its neck. It collapsed in a twitching heap.

They raced on. Steffan could see eight ships in the harbor, though two were already pulling away from the dock. Phrantzes yelled out, "Find the furthest ship still at port. It shall be the easiest to board."

As the three raced forward, they could see panic-filled citizens jumping into the water after the ships that had pulled away, completely missing the ones still docked. Others tried to push their way onto small rowboats and tiny vessels also in the harbor. The overloaded boats sunk under the weight. Those who could not swim, drowned.

Steffan stopped at the last gangway. It rose steeply up from the dock to a towering carrack. He could hear the captain of the vessel bellowing at his men to prepare the masts and remove the hawsers from their moorings. The teen hurried to get people up the gangway as fast as possible. In the distance, he noticed no more beasts or yayas. They had abandoned their chase to storm and plunder the city.

Karastian had fallen.

Karas stood on the outer wall staring up at the majestic Great

Wall behind him—a wall that guarded his city without fail for over eleven hundred years. The sixty foot towers that once waved cobalt blue flags centered with a golden double-headed eagle were waving green flags with white swords. Bronze-plated janissaries cut down his people along the wall above him while in the killing field below his fine soldiers were overrun. Dozens upon dozens of red and blue fighters streamed through chasms in the outer wall. Only handfuls of Andolians stood in the gaps to push them back.

Karas threw his helmet to the side, ripped away his purple chlamys, and pried off his emblazoned wristlets. He would die as one of his men and not be drug through the city as a prize.

“The choice is now yours, for I am no longer your emperor,” he announced to Feres and his two remaining guards. “You may follow me one final time or seek safety on the ships.”

Feres tightened the grip around his sword with his one good hand. “You’ll be my emperor to the last.”

Karas gave a fast smile and took for the breach. His captain and two guards right behind him. They slashed into the middle of the fray and battled valiantly...

...until overcome.

Standing on the quarterdeck at the stern, Steffan gazed back at the city. Smoke rose like billowing black towers from dozens of places. Frantic and desperate people continued to stream out of the gate, but there were no more ships left in the harbor. They flooded the dock anyway, crying and wailing and screaming. So loud and so many were the pleadings that Steffan could still hear them even as the ship sailed some distance away.

The captain of the carrack wanted to kick the gangway into the water and leave immediately. Phrantzes had raced up the ramp to plead with the captain who refused to relent until Steffan pulled out the emperor's ring. Filled with grief and pain, the teen lashed out at the captain, indignant at a man who would so easily leave those Karas fought for. Not even knowing if a Pronoiar had such authority, Steffan loudly threatened to assume command and have the captain thrown overboard.

The stout captain's face burned red at the insolent teen. His brown eyes grew wide as a glowering sneer angrily curled his thin lips. He seemed to be reaching for his sword when Phrantzes pulled out a paper from his satchel and showed it to the man. He scanned it for a moment, cursed under his breath,

and stormed away. Wasting no time, Steffan called for people to board the ship, while Anna ushered them down below to safety in the hold. All too soon, however, the captain returned stating his ship could safely hold no more. He impatiently ordered his men to shove the gangway into the water. A half-dozen citizens crashed into the inlet along with the wooden ramp. Two dropped under the waves almost immediately and did not resurface. The other four splashed and flailed, begging to be saved. Steffan and Phrantzes lifted the thick hawser ropes and tossed them over the rail, but only two were able to grab hold before the carrack pulled from the dock.

Steffan lashed out at the captain once again, branding him a coward. The captain's face clenched tightly. He looked ready to say much in reply but, instead, spit on the deck and started barking at his men to make sure every sail was raised and catching wind.

Now, on the quarterdeck, sadness had overcome anger in the teen. As the city grew small on the horizon, he fell to his knees, his hands and forehead resting on the wooden rail. Tears poured down, mixing with the blood on his face. His whole body heaved with sorrow until he thought he might throw up. Then he did.

CHAPTER 19

“Surx vessels approaching to port!”

The words broke Steffan from his grief. He lifted himself from the deck and moved to the portside of the carrack. Four Surxii warships were cutting quickly through the water in their direction. The captain shouted gruffly for everyone to man their stations and ordered the helmsman to keep a steady course so as not to lose speed. The sailors, some dressed in the cobalt blue of Andolan and others in ordinary dress, scattered rapidly across the main deck or disappeared below to the gun deck. Archers ran to the forecastle at the bow and prepared to fire.

Steffan bolted across the main deck and took the steps up to the forecastle two at a time. He arrived just as the Surxii vessels came into range. Only, they made no attempt to attack. All four ships cruised past without so much as an arrow fired.

“They shan’t attack?” a bowman wondered aloud.

Steffan, who had been unsheathing his sword, slid it back into his scabbard. “They wish to pillage the city more than block our escape.”

In Karastian, soldiers overrun atop the walls leapt over the sides to their deaths to avoid being sliced with swords or enslaved. Citizens jumped down empty wells rather than be captured. Families that could not escape locked themselves in homes. However, their rickety doors proved no match for the heavily armed Surxii. Door upon door was ripped from its hinges, leaving janissaries, sipahis, and others to ransack the houses and kill all who hid inside.

Hundreds barricaded themselves in churches throughout the city. But again, battle axes made quick work of the doors. Pouring into sanctuary after sanctuary, soldiers stole everything of value, killed those deemed useless as slaves, and bound the rest in chains.

At the massive Belgrat Gate, Falaak headed a procession with his two viziers, dozens of generals and commanders, and thousands of his elite forces. He rode high on his muscular white horse wearing pristine deep grey armor.

His golden tolga gleamed in the sun while a thick red mantle flowed behind him and off the back of his horse. Flags and banners waved. A sea of spears surrounded him, bouncing up and down in the air as though possessed with the joy of their owners. Surxii warriors shouted, cheered, and chanted Falaak's name, their raucous voices resounding off the crumbling stone walls.



The victorious sulla made his way slowly through the city, moving northeast toward the palace. Arriving at the Grand Hall, he first noticed a toppled marble statue of horse and rider. The sight angered him to the point that he vehemently ordered that pillaging could continue but the destruction of their new prize must cease at once.

Stepping into the main hall, he was struck by the bronze pillars, as thick as tree trunks and capped with solid gold capitals, holding up massive archways nearly twenty feet high. A second level stood atop the first just as great a marvel, leading to a vaulted ceiling some sixty feet above a marble floor. From the majestic ceiling hung the towering octagonal chandelier. At the far end of the ornate hall lay a marble staircase. The wide and low steps led to a solid wood throne laid over with gold and bronze.

As he climbed the staircase, Falaak's metal-heeled boots clamored through the hall. Flipping his mantle to the side, he dropped into the throne. Rubbing his palms and fingers across the cool smooth armrests, he smiled down at his two viziers who stood at the base of the stairs. "We have avenged our people and proven that our power reaches even where emperor's dreams cannot." He clapped his hands together in delight. The sound reverberated above and around him. "Speaking of emperors, let loose word that I shall give one hundred gold pieces to the person who brings me Karas' body...dead or alive."

Falaak had barely finished talking when two of his soldiers led in a man wearing dark green clothes and a thick black cape. He was holding three parchments in his right hand. Basid flinched at the sight of him.

“A thousand pardons, my sulla,” one of the soldiers nervously started, “but this man says he is an Andolian leader and wants to meet with you.”

Falaak rose from the throne, a half grin on his face. “Is that so? And how much gold did he promise you, for you to keep him alive and bring him here?”

Both soldiers lowered their heads and said nothing.

“Leave us,” Falaak ordered. The two hastily scurried out of the hall.

“My lord, I am Loukas Notaras, the Grand Duke of Andolan,” Notaras began, holding up his parchments. “These documents show that I endeavored to bring peace and save us all from war and death. They also show I have great wealth to offer for my freedom.”

Falaak motioned for the papers to be brought to him which he quickly scanned, then turned his wide eyes to Basid, looking down at him from the raised platform. “I see your name in these parchments, Basid. Why is this so?”

The old vizier raised his hand in preparation to speak, but Notaras hastily cut him off. “We worked in concert, my lord, seeking a peaceful resolution by whatever means right up to the last.”

The sulla’s shoulders hunched in anger, his brown eyes piercing the vizier. “Consorting and fomenting while our

soldiers perish, Basid? You place your right hand on my shoulder in friendship while enacting treason with your left.”

“My sul...” Basid began, only to be swiftly shut down by Falaak.

“Silence! I shall not hear your stammering apologies,” Falaak forcefully declared, then brought his attention back to the Grand Duke who stood trembling before him. “I see from these parchments that you possess all this wealth and yet denied it to your lord, the emperor, and to the city, your homeland. And now, with all your intrigues and treachery, you are trying to avoid the fate you deserve. Tell me, impious man, who has granted possession of this city, and thus all your treasures, to me?”

“Surely, it is God who has given you this city as payment for the sins of our emperors,” the duke answered, working to keep his faltering voice steady.

Falaak smiled. “Well, since God saw fit to enslave you and all the others to me, what are you trying to accomplish here with your chattering? As you have clearly stated, God, not you, has granted me your treasure, so what need of you have I?”

“But, my lord,” Notaras broke in, only to be cut off as Basid had been.

“No more!” the sulla shouted. “I shall take your

gold...and your head.”

The duke dropped to his knees and raised his hands to plead for his life, but Falaak continued speaking. “And Basid, since you desired to partner with this dog in life, you shall partner with him in death! Take them from my presence!”

Both men begged pitifully for their lives as they were drug from the Grand Hall.

Darkness set in over the Sea of Mare, leaving the white light of a halfmoon to spread across the rippling waters. Steffan stood on the quarterdeck, taking in the sound of the sea sloshing against the boat. The smell of salt water filled his nostrils, as his eyes fought to penetrate night and distance to see the city. It was a futile effort. He rubbed his left forearm where a Surxii blade had caught him. The chainmail deadened the blow, but Steffan definitely felt a wound. Now that shock and adrenaline were wearing off, an aching throb pulsed through his arm.

He had not slept in more than a full day. Yet when he closed his eyes, his mind would not let him rest. Was his emperor captured, or did he die in battle? What was a fifteen year-old without parents or gold to do? What would happen to

him now? Where would he end up?

A figure slid in beside him. It was Phrantzes. “You honored our city with great bravery today, Steffan. Certainly, you were much braver than this old fool.”

Steffan said nothing, nor did he turn to look at the aging advisor. He kept his eyes staring out over the faintly glistening water.

“We must keep our faith,” the advisor started again after a pause. “I, myself, know not if my wife and two children are safe aboard a ship or were left in the city to...” Phrantzes voice trailed off.

The teen turned to Phrantzes who looked tired and ragged as though he had aged ten years in a day. “I am sorry. I did not know.” Steffan silently berated himself for being wrapped up in himself alone. Karas’ words smacked him between the eyes. *You must cease living for your wishes in order to live for what is right. Think, Steffan! Think past your own patch of water.* A city had fallen. The stone crashing into the water upheaved tens of thousands, not just himself. What of Anna’s father, the duke? What of Tenniani? How many on this ship and others now sailed into uncertainty with nothing but the clothes on their backs, not knowing if loved ones were dead or alive?

“We shall reach Genet in a few days, and things shall

become clearer.” Phrantzes’ words broke through Steffan’s thoughts.

“Why Genet and not Lascadaemon?” questioned the teen, working to change the subject.

“The emperor knows his brothers, Steffan. Dimetes cannot be trusted. And while Thomes is loyal, he is weak. Lascadaemon may very well end up as Karastian has...if it has not already been ceded to Falaak. Lord Karas knew that he could not send his people there only to see them uprooted again. We have good relations with the people of Genet. Many noble families and merchants of Andolan have done business and hold interests there. It shall be a good place for us.”

“So you and I are to bring our people safely into Genet and then make for Meda Vadis to beseech the king for men to retake the city?”

Phrantzes nodded his head slightly as a small grin moved across his lips. “You are growing rapidly in wisdom, Steffan, to foresee our way to Meda Vadis. However, like the rest of us, you are still not quite to the emperor’s full thinking yet.”

Steffan scrunched his face in confusion.

The advisor placed his hands on the rail and stretched his back before letting out a deep breath. “Lord Karas knew that should Karastian fall, King Frederick of Kizil would not

give men to retake it. The cost would be too great, nor do we have the mighty siege engines of our enemy. Nevertheless, it was the emperor's hope that we would raise an army from Kizil to cross the Sekara River and join with our northern cities to block Falaak's movement across the Vodin Valley."

"Then we must be quick to it!"

"Patience, young man, and fret not. Falaak shall need time to rest his men, to allow them to return to their families, plant crops, and savor the spoils of victory...as well as refortify all he has destroyed. No ruler can keep control should he take his men from battle to battle. This gives us some time. Though, assuredly, we must be diligent."

Refortify all he has destroyed. Those words stabbed at the teen's heart. Anadolu, Karastian, Father Gennad, Jena, Karas...all destroyed. His eyes clouded once more with tears. "I shall do everything, Phrantzes, to honor the emperor's last wishes."

Phrantzes placed a sympathetic hand on the teen's shoulder. "He was very fond of you."

Tears began to drip from the corners of Steffan's eyes. He could hardly believe there were still tears left to cry. "I never told him the same."

Phrantzes clasped his hands together and stretched his back yet again. "As a man of words, take truth when I say that

words are often overpriced. In the scheme of things, words are much like copper coins while deeds are pure gold. When men take stock of our lives, they shall reckon the weight of our deeds, not the weight of our words. And, certainly, by the deeds of you both, it was clear to even the blind the bond you shared.”

The grey-bearded advisor pulled a folded parchment from a deep pocket in his blue tunic and held it out to the teen. “And here is one more gold-plated deed from the emperor to you.”

Steffan grabbed the paper from Phrantzes and turned it in his hand. “What is this?”

“You must read it for yourself. But I shall say, in it is the reason this ship’s captain has been much kinder to you than he wishes to be.” The advisor flashed a quick smile. “Now, I am off to speak to that captain, offer prayers, and then turn in for the night. You should read then seek also to rest.”

Steffan nodded to Phrantzes while keeping his eyes on the letter. “I shall, Phrantzes.”

“Good night...my lord,” the advisor offered as he walked away.

My lord? It was a strange way for Phrantzes to address him, but the teen was too focused on the letter to dwell on it. He stepped to the mizzenmast which rose mightily above the

quarterdeck. A billowing sail tugged hard on the ropes that held it to the yard. Two lanterns hung on the thick mast below the sail and shed enough light for Steffan to read. He slid his back down the pole and sat. Pulling his knees close to his chest, he unfolded the parchment.

TO THE HONORABLE STEFFAN OF ANADOLU,

I HAVE NEVER, UNTIL NOW, WRITTEN A LETTER THAT I WISHED NOT BE READ. YET, IF YOU ARE READING THIS LETTER, STEFFAN, IT MEANS THAT THE CITY HAS FALLEN AND OUR TIME TOGETHER IS NO MORE. I FEEL VERY MUCH LIKE THE OLD PROPHET MOSES WHO STOOD EXPECTANTLY ON THE EDGE OF THE PROMISED LAND ONLY TO HAVE THE ALMIGHTY INFORM HIM THAT HIS JOURNEY HAD ENDED. HOW HE MUST HAVE FELT KNOWING ALL THAT LIE AHEAD, ALL THAT HIS PEOPLE STILL MUST ACCOMPLISH IN THAT NEW LAND, YET HIS PART WAS FINISHED. THOUGH, I BELIEVE HE TOOK COMFORT FROM THE FACT THAT YOUNG JOSHUA WOULD ASSUME HIS MANTLE AND LEAD HIS PEOPLE WELL. I, TOO, TAKE THAT SAME SOLACE, STEFFAN. I TOLD YOU ONCE THAT YOU BROUGHT ENCOURAGEMENT TO THE CITY, LOVE TO ANNA, AND HOPE TO ME. NOW I SAY TO YOU THAT THE HOPE YOU GAVE ME WAS THAT OUR PEOPLE SHALL NOT BE LEFT AS SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD. YOU SHALL BE THEIR SHEPHERD. YOU SHALL BE THEIR PROTECTOR—THE ONE WHO FIGHTS FOR THEIR SAFETY. BUT FIGHT BECAUSE YOU MUST, NOT FOR PASSION OR REVENGE. THIS WORLD HAS FAR TOO MANY CONQUERORS AND FAR TOO FEW DEFENDERS.

IT IS NOT WITHIN MY RIGHTS, EVEN AS EMPEROR, TO SELECT MY OWN HEIR APART FROM THE NOBLES' WISHES. BUT THIS I MAY DO. I HAVE PROVIDED PHRANTZES WITH DEEDS TO MY INTERESTS IN GENET AND CERTIFICATION SHOWING THAT I BESTOW UPON YOU THE TITLE OF ARKHON (PRINCE) OF ANDOLAN AND ITS ASSOCIATED POWERS. STEFFAN, I IMPLORE THAT YOU DO NOT USE OUR PEOPLE TO HOLD THESE POWERS. INSTEAD, USE THESE POWERS TO HOLD OUR PEOPLE IN THE SHADE OF YOUR WINGS.

OH, STEFFAN, THE SAND DRAINED FROM THE HOURGLASS TOO QUICKLY FOR US. THOUGH, I AM FOREVER THANKFUL, FOR I FEARED I WOULD NEVER KNOW THE HOPE AND PRIDE OF A FATHER. YET THE ALMIGHTY GRANTED ME THIS LAST KINDNESS THROUGH YOU, SO I LEAVE THIS EARTH A MAN GREATLY BLESSED.

I KNOW YOU HAVE ENDURED MUCH PAIN AND HARDSHIP. SINCE YOU ARE READING THIS LETTER THAT CAN ONLY MEAN YOU ARE ENDURING STILL MORE. YET YOU SHALL COME THROUGH THIS DARK NIGHT TO THE BRIGHT OF DAY, FOR YOU ARE GOOD, STEFFAN, AND STRONG. INDEED, YOU SHALL BE THE BEST OF US.

MAY GOD KEEP YOU CLOSE,

KARAS XI

A memory suddenly beat on the door of Steffan's mind. It was from when he lay on the small sofa in Karas' war tent. The emperor had carried him to it after he collapsed in

exhaustion. As he wearily drifted to sleep, Karas had whispered something in his ear. At the time, fatigue kept him from catching it clearly, but now it rushed to him. *You shall be the best of us.* That was what Karas had whispered. *You shall be the best of us.*

The teen pulled the letter close, buried his face in it, and wept until he thought the ink would run.

CHAPTER 20

Gripping his forearm that had deepened its ache, Steffan stepped lightly over sleeping bodies sprawled across the hold of the ship. The captain had offered the new arkhon his own quarters for rest, probably in an attempt to atone for his previous behavior, but Steffan wanted to find Anna. When he did, she was handing out strips of cloth and instructions to a few women. Her face had been washed, but her hands were pink from blood that could not be cleaned away. Her stained nurse's smock sat crumpled in the corner of the hold, but the sanguine fluid of the dead and dying had soaked through to her light green dress.

She smiled at the sight of Steffan, but her look soon changed to concern as she watched him grab at his arm and grimace. Anna insisted he take a seat on a small barrel and allow her to inspect his wound. Steffan refused at first but

relented when it became clear that Anna would not take no for an answer.

Unbuckling his belt, he removed his sword and sheath and then pulled the heavy chainmail over his head, dropping it to the ground. It clattered louder than expected. He shot a look around the hold. No one seemed to notice. Grief and sorrow had depleted their strength. Sleep was the only peace now.

Steffan sat down on the barrel, and Anna turned up his sleeve. Streaks of dried and crusting blood led to a three-inch gash. Anna made no reaction. She had seen far worse over the previous days and weeks. Dipping a cream colored cloth in water, she gently wiped away the blood and cleaned around the wound. Her free hand rested on Steffan's wrist. The warm feel comforted him, until she swept the cloth over his laceration. He squeezed his eyes in a wince.

"Should the Arkhon of Andolan be so sensitive?" she quietly joked.

"So you know?"

"It is a great honor to be given such a title. There are few positions higher in our kingdom," Anna responded, wrapping a wide strip of cloth over the wound and tying it off with well-practiced movements.

Steffan sat silently as Anna began to delicately clean around the slit on his cheek. "Has the position made you

speechless? If so, I should have asked the emperor to give you the title weeks ago.”

Steffan wanted to smile at the comment, but the thought of the emperor could only bring sorrow. Anna was quick to notice.

“Steffan, our emperor only ever did what was best for the people. If he granted you this honor, it was solely because he knew that best was you.”

“Am I?” Steffan thought of the words Karas had spoken to him after he left his post. *Many happily accept titles but refuse to accept the responsibilities they contain.* Could he really accept and fulfill such responsibilities?

Anna put down the cloth and slid both of her hands into his. Staring into his emerald eyes, she spoke earnestly. “Everyone on this ship is here because you stood for them. Phrantzes and I are here because of you. When news of your title spreads to our people, those on this ship, the emperor’s advisor, and this duchess shall support you wholeheartedly.” A wide smile pulled at her lips. “So much so that even my father shall have to agree.”

Steffan tried to match his smile to Anna’s. She still clung to the hope that her father had found safety on one of his ships, that she would not be left an orphan like him. He would not steal that hope from her. “When he finds out, do you think

he shall hug me then kiss my cheeks, or kiss my cheeks then hug me?”

Anna swept some dangling strands of hair behind her ear and offered a wry grin. “I think he shall be grumpy. But so you do not feel a loss, I shall be the one to kiss your cheek.”

She leaned in and pressed a soft kiss just below his cheekbone alongside his wound. Steffan did not know how much time had passed as he sat there debating if he should kiss her back. The ship’s first officer, however, called through the hold that the captain wanted him above deck. Vessels had been spotted in the distance.

The teen hurried to the bow, meeting the captain on the deck of the forecastle. Several ships, silhouetted in the moonlight, cut through the sea toward them. Seeing the red flags flying atop their masts reflecting the white light, the captain cursed and exclaimed, “The Venetan Fleet! As useless now as a half-baked cake!”

Within the hour, despite the time of night, Phrantzes and Steffan were in a small dinghy crossing over to the Venetan Admiral’s ship. The tiny vessel bobbed up and down in the water, rocking the teen with waves of nausea.

“Steffan,” began the advisor, “you have been given a great position by the emperor but remember that you are unknown to these men, and these types of dealings are unknown to you. In times like these, it is good to remember something our emperor said to me on many occasions. ‘Men often regret when they have spoken but seldom regret having remained silent.’”

Steffan only nodded, not to show that he understood Phrantzes’ message, but fearing that opening his mouth might cause him to retch.

With the advisor’s words fresh in his mind, the teen stood around a high table in the Admiral’s quarters. Admiral Loredan, a tall, clean-shaven man with black hair turning grey, wore a crisp red uniform. He was positioned across from Steffan and flanked on either side by other crisply uniformed officers and finely-robed officials. Steffan, in a dirt and blood crusted blue tunic and brown leather pants, felt woefully underdressed and underprepared, more like a charred stick plucked from a fire than an Arkhon of Andolan. He grabbed through his shirt for Karas’ ring that still hung from a silver chain around his neck. The feel of it, even through cloth, heartened him.

Phrantzes, looking equally tattered, introduced himself as chief council for the emperor and the teen as “the Arkhon

of Andolan, Steffan of Anadolu.” It sounded strange for Steffan to hear it out loud. But the strangeness quickly passed as Phrantzes shared news of the siege—wall-shattering cannons, fanged and clawed beasts, great loss of life, and the likely demise of Karas along with thousands of others.

Steffan could see the shock of Phrantzes’ words seizing those gathered. Eyes widened; brows furrowed; the mouths of some gaped, while others audibly gasped in disbelief. One official squeezed his quill so tensely that it snapped near the tip. The idea that such a bastion city, one that stood as a bulwark for over eleven hundred years, could fall seemed an unfathomable thought. If Karastian could taste defeat, then any city in Kizil or Andolan could as well. Moreover, the position of the city gave the new sulla a formidable base of operation to attack the northern kingdoms from both land and sea. For the next several minutes, those around the table talked this way and that, despair gnawing away at hope with every word.

Still holding the ring through his shirt, Steffan stepped from the table over to a spacious multipaned window. Remembering words from his emperor again, he wished to look up into the night sky and catch sight of a certain star. However, with the backlight of the room, he could not clearly gaze out to the sea or sky. Instead, the panes filled with a

reflection of himself and the people behind him.

“Something troubling you, young arkhon,” Admiral Loredan asked, his voice deep, yet tinged with kindness, quite unlike the captain of Steffan’s ship whose name he still did not know.

For a moment, the teen stared quietly at his reflection and at those standing behind him, debating if he should speak or remain silent. Phrantzes loudly cleared his throat, either to begin filling the dead air or to cue Steffan. The teen was not sure which, but he swallowed a quick breath and started to speak. “Shortly after the Surx arrived on the plain of Tamasa, Emperor Karas took me atop the Great Wall one evening and asked me what I saw. I told him that I saw too many fires to count. Then he asked what else was there. And I must confess, all that I saw made me nearly too frightened to speak—cannon, men, ramparts, palisades, and more.”

Steffan reached up with his left hand and ran his fingers across his right shoulder. “At that moment, he placed his hand on my shoulder and said that there was indeed much to see that threatened to steal our breath and weaken our resolve, but that was not everything to see.”

Steffan raised a finger to the sky and turned around to face the smartly dressed men in front of him. “He pointed upward and asked if I knew the name of the star up and above

us. I am sure you know it since I called it the Sailors' Star, though he called it Stella Maris, the Star of the Sea, the one sailors have looked to for centuries because it always points north."

The teen gazed upward as though he could see it above him. "But, sometimes, the emperor said, the sky is dark with clouds and the star obscured, and we wonder how we shall ever find our way. Likewise, he said, God may seem the same. When skies are clear, and all is well, we look up and see Him easily. But when the storms of life threaten around us, we feel as though we have lost sight of Him, and He is gone. Yet, the Sailors' Star still shines even when there are clouds, and God, too, still works even in the storms."

Steffan brought his eyes back to those around the room. "My emperor reminded me that when I first arrived on the wall, and he asked what I saw, I focused solely on what lay in front of me and so missed the star that shined above. Then he spun me toward him, looked at me face to face, and told me that much shall threaten to steal my courage and turn me to dismay, but I must keep my focus above and know that the Star still shines even when I cannot see it."

Steffan clutched the ring tightly. "I realized then that through all the darkness in my life, I had been led to that moment on the wall. And now, through more darkness, I have

still been led, and it has brought me to this moment here. Will there be more darkness yet to come? Yes, I believe so. But I trust that if I...if we...stay focused on the One that guides us, we shall find our way into the bright of day, even, if at first, we must pass through greater darkness.” The teen looked over at Phrantzes, fearing he spoke too much, but the old advisor was beaming widely.

A hush fell over the room, the only sound coming from the creaking wooden hull rocking on the water. Loredan was first to break the silence. “On three occasions, while his brother Jantas ruled Andolan, I had the privilege to meet and speak with Karas. Each time, I felt as though I had met with one of the wisest men of our day. I am pleased to see that, should he have been taken from us, his wisdom shall continue on in you, arkhon.”

The discussion then turned to getting the Andolian vessels to Genet, situating the people, and ushering Phrantzes and Steffan to Meda Vadis to beseech King Frederick to raise an army. All agreed that a formidable Kizalian force could be raised within six to eight months’ time, meet up with gathering Andolian forces, and block the Surxii from advancing up the Vodin Valley.

The meeting finally finished as early morning sunlight started to stream through the ample window in the Admiral’s

quarters. Steffan wanted nothing more than to return to his ship and sleep, even though it meant climbing back into the dinghy.



Falaak walked along the marble colonnaded portico of the palace. Placing a hand on the cool white of a thick marble pillar, he looked out over the expanse of the Delvin Sea. Eyes closed, he let a refreshing morning breeze wash over his body and ripple through his long black hair.

Aksham moved in next to him. “My sulla.”

“Yes, vizier,” Falaak replied, his eyes still closed.

“We have finished sweeping through the city and have collected all of value. The walls are being rebuilt, and most of

our men shall be ready to return south on your command.”

“Return south?” Falaak opened his eyes and turned to Aksham. “No one is returning south.”

“Sulla?” Aksham questioned, folding his arms across his chest as a barrier against the breeze. He much preferred the desert heat of Karanj.

“We must continue on.”

“The men need rest, sulla.”

“Rest?” Falaak spun his body east to face the sun. “One does not rest while the sun is out. And Aksham, my new first vizier, the sun has just risen on our kingdom. There is much day left for us, and much more to be done, before there can be talk of rest.”

“The men have fought hard and at great cost,” the vizier delicately reminded.

“And they shall do so again,” Falaak declared. “I am certain that Kizil, and what remains of Andolan, believe we shall take time to rest and regather. By next spring, they shall seek to oppose our march through the Vodin Valley. But we shall not wait until next spring. Our men must be ready to move in three months. Before Kizil has time to act, we will march through the Vodin to sift Andolan like wheat and scatter her people like chaff in the wind.”

EPILOGUE

Steffan sat high on a magnificent palomino horse. Its stunning golden coat and bright blonde mane gleamed in the early summer sun. As the steed trotted along the ridge of a steep rocky coastline sloping toward the Genetan harbor, the teen felt the press of Karas' ring against his chest. The touch of it provided comfort.

Much had happened since Steffan had last been in the harbor. He, along with 1672 Andolians, arrived battered and weary with little more than the clothes on their backs. It did not take long for them to discover that Tenniani had succumbed to his injuries aboard one of the vessels, and neither the Grand Duke nor Phrantzes' family had made it onto an escaping ship. Nevertheless, Steffan, Anna, and Phrantzes held out hope for safe arrivals and busied themselves with resettling their people. Among the advisor's papers were

accounts for holdings in Genetan banks for both the Grand Duke and the emperor. They were turned over to Anna and Steffan who used much of those resources to care for the refugees, to purchase farmland, and to provide food and housing.

Three weeks into the effort, a physician, who worked with Anna in Karastian during the siege, arrived along with a handful of others. After the fall of the city, he saved the life of a Surxii general's son who had been gravely wounded during the final siege. The act eventually bought the doctor his freedom, and he hastily left the city and made his way to Genet with sober news. The emperor was most assuredly dead, though his body could not be found. Still, the sulla chose a body from among the corpses, identified it as the emperor, and drug it through the city before hanging it on the Great Wall.

Meanwhile, many of the citizens had been killed or sold as slaves. Among those sold were Phrantzes' wife and two children. The physician had learned that they were moved south to the Surxii homeland, but he knew not exactly where. Among the dead was Anna's father, the Grand Duke, who lost his head alongside the sulla's first vizier. Both Anna and Phrantzes were nearly inconsolable at the news. Phrantzes informed Steffan that the young arkhon would need to go to Meda Vadis alone, then he left almost immediately aboard a

Genetan trading vessel with the lean promise of locating his family.

Steffan waited a couple of days to support Anna. But he could not wait any longer, for the doctor also shared that much of the Surxii force remained in the city, while rumors spread on whispered voices about a march through the Vodin before winter. If such reports were true, Steffan needed to make haste to the Kizalian capital and plead with King Frederick to muster his forces as swiftly as possible.

Many battles surely lay ahead.

Andolan must be ready at all costs.

*The adventure continues in
The Three Kingdoms: The Harsh Harvest.
Available now!*

LET'S LEARN SOME HISTORY

**(And be sure to check out
markjmusser.com/sown-seed-history)**

INTRODUCTION & CHAPTER 1

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below.*

In 1453, the known world was divided into three main groups based on religion (distinct from nations or empires). What were those three religions?

The kingdoms of Kizil and Andolan imposed harsh consequences on the people of Surxii in response to their aggression. This caused the Surxii to develop a deep resentment. This mirrors what occurred after World War I. How did the harsh consequences imposed by the Allied Powers on Germany essentially ensure there would be a World War II?

The palace in the Surxii capital city of Karanj is based on the desert palace of Arg-e-Bam. What can you discover about the history of that impressive building?

Sulla Murad called the Great War fought between the three kingdoms “the war to end all wars.” What historical war was actually nicknamed that?

Sulla Murad, minus the wrenched teeth and split tongue, is based on Sultan Murad II. What kingdom did he rule, and for how long did he rule it?

Falaak is based on Murad II's son who took the throne upon his death? What was his name, and for how long did he rule?

The twin cities of Lascadaemon are based on a Byzantine land known as the Despotate of Morea. Who was ruling that despotate in 1453?

Dimetes is based on one of those rulers whose name also starts with a "D." How did this man try to take the throne from his brother (not once, but twice)?

The bastion city of Karastian is patterned after the city of Constantinople. Where is this city, and what is its name now?

In Chapter 1, you read about "The Black." What terrible sickness stalked the Middle Ages and also had the word "black" in it? How did this sickness affect Constantinople during that time?

Anna, along with her father the Grand Duke, are actual historical figures. What was the importance of the Notaras family in the 1400s?

How does the decline of Karastian compare to the actual decline of Constantinople during the Middle Ages?

Karas XI is based strongly upon Constantine XI. What empire did he rule, and in what year did he begin?

When Karas sends envoys to Falaak, he responds by sending their heads back in a basket. How did Mehmet II respond when Constantine XI sent ambassadors to him?

CHAPTER 2

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

Falaak destroys the sentinel towns of Rumeli and Anadolu as a precursor to war. How did Mehmet II's dealings with the actual fortresses of Rumeli and Anadolu show Constantine XI that the Ottomans were readying for war?

In the book, Rumeli and Anadolu were strategically located at the base of the Tamasa land bridge. What strategic positions did the historical fortresses hold?

Phrantzes is a character patterned after a historical figure also named Phrantzes. Why is this man a key figure for understanding the events that transpired between the Ottomans and the Byzantine Empire?

The description of the Grand Hall is based on the central area of the Hagia Sophia. How does the book's description compare to that section of this impressive building?

In Chapter 2, you are introduced to Aksham, Falaak's friend and most trusted advisor. This character is based on Zagan Pasha. How influential was this man in Mehmet II's life?

CHAPTER 3

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

In this chapter, Notaras is seen trying to protect trade and wealth. How wealthy a man was the historical Loukas Notaras?

What were the main trade routes during the time that Mehmet II and Constantine XI were ruling?

What influence did Western Europe have on Eastern Europe and the Middle East at that time?

Why were relations often strained between the Middle East, East, and West?

CHAPTER 4

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

Did the historical Notaras command the Byzantine navy as the fictional Notaras commanded the Andolian navy?

How large was the Byzantine fleet when Constantine XI was emperor?

As the chapter unfolds, Karas begins extensively preparing for war through both reinforcing the city and seeking aid from the West. How did Constantine XI prepare for war against the Ottomans?

Vizier Basid represents the historical figure Candarli Halil Pasha. He is portrayed in the book as having served Falaak's father. Did Candarli serve Mehmet II's father, Murad II?

Why did Mehmet II not particularly care for Candarli?

In this chapter, Falaak speaks of a dream about a red apple falling into his hand. Historically, what does a red apple have to do with Constantinople?

Aksham details Karastian's defenses and walls. How does his description of Karastian's walls compare to Constantinople's in 1453?

Aksham also mentions "Junoni fire" which based on Greek fire. What made Greek fire such a devastating weapon?

Orban is a historical figure noted for his impressive cannon making abilities. How does the Basilica in the book compare to his actual Basilica?

Orban makes a statement about the power of his weapon. How similar is that statement to what he historically told Mehmet II about his cannon's capabilities?

CHAPTER 5

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

In this chapter, you were introduced to Captain Tenniani. He is patterned after Giovanni Giustiniani Longo. How do Tenniani and Longo compare?

Steffan notices a bust of Karas the Great, who is based on Constantine the Great. What was it about the first Constantine that caused history to remember him as “great?”

Karas tells Steffan that there have been ninety-eight rulers of Andolan. How many rulers of the Byzantine Empire were there? How many were women?

Find one ruler from among the many Byzantine rulers and dig a little deeper into his or her life and rule.

CHAPTER 6

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

In the book, Phrantzes and Notaras do not seem to get along. What can you discover about their real life relationship with one another?

Karas' brother Dimetes seems to be in league with the Surxii. Was Constantine XI's brother Demetrios in league with the Ottomans?

The Surxii army marches to Karastian with a force 80,000 strong. How many Ottoman soldiers were involved in the 1453 siege of Constantinople?

The city of Karastian seems to have very few defenders compared the Surxii. How many defenders did Constantinople have against the Ottomans during the 1453 siege?

In Chapter 6, the people of Galata betrayed Karastian. How did the actual city of Galata betray Constantinople at the cost of many lives?

CHAPTER 7

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

The Surxii begin their siege in early spring. On what date in history, did Mehmet II begin his siege of Constantinople?

The ships of both Andolan and Surx are described in this chapter. How do those descriptions match up with Byzantine and Ottoman ships during the 1400s?

Tenniani states that no army has ever breached the walls of Karastian. In history, how many times was Constantinople unsuccessfully attacked?

On the eve of battle, Karas dwells on the biblical book of Job. Why do you think he would choose to dwell on that book?

Karas points Steffan to Stella Maris, today known as Polaris. Why is this star important to nautical history? When was it first described as a useful tool for nautical navigation?

In this chapter, Steffan is granted the title Pronoiar. How did the Byzantine system of Pronoia differ from the feudal (knighthood) system of Western Europe?

CHAPTER 8

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

This chapter opens with the Andolian soldiers, who were killed at the Kopuro Bridge, hung on stakes. What did Mehmet II do with the soldiers captured after Galata's betrayal during the ill-fated Golden Horn attack?

During the initial assault, the azaps were the first wave of attack. This is also true in the siege of Constantinople. How does the historical description of the azaps compare to the book's description?

The first assault on Karastian came to nothing. Is this true of Mehmet II's first assault on Constantinople?

In this chapter, a great sea battle occurs as four ships attempt to enter the Karastian harbor. During this battle, Admiral Baltoghlu's ships, though greater in number, are at a disadvantage because of their size. Was this true of the actual sea battle?

Falaak is so enraged by Baltoghlu's failure that he threatens to kill the admiral. Yet, he relents when Baltoghlu's sailors defend him. Was the actual Baltoghlu injured during the sea battle, and what did Mehmet II do to him after the defeat?

Chapter 8 ends with Falaak's surprise move, to send wanadghu over the Jartasti Mountains, proving successful. In the actual siege, Mehmet II did not have fantastical beasts at his disposal, but what ingenious plan did he devise in order to have his army be the first to successfully surround Constantinople on all sides?

CHAPTER 9

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

Basilica is used for the first time in this chapter, and it inflicts incredible damage on the city of Karastian. However, it is limited in how often it can fire. During Mehmet II's siege on Constantinople, why could Orban's gun fire only once every 4-6 hours?

The citizens and soldiers of Karastian react in horror to the destructive power of Basilica. How did the citizens and soldiers of Constantinople react to Orban's cannon?

In response to the siege, Karas moves out of the palace and sets up a war tent near the city's defenses. Did Constantine XI do something similar?

The entire city of Karastian becomes involved in the refortification effort which proves to be remarkably successful. This mirrors the work done in Constantinople. Historically, why did the refortification efforts prove so successful in deadening cannon blasts?

CHAPTER 10

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

In this chapter, you are introduced to the yayas and the janissaries. How does the book's description compare to these historical military units?

This chapter also introduces siphonarioi and their cheirosiphons. In history, how did the Byzantine's utilize siphonarioi during battles?

During the siege, cannon, arrows, crossbow bolts, swords, maces, battle axes, and more are utilized. There is no mention, however, of firearms like rifles or muskets. Could those have been used during the 1453 siege?

In what historical battle were firearms first used as a decisive weapon in battle?

CHAPTER 11

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

As this chapter opens, Falaak wants to catapult his retreating men back into the walls. Did Mehmet II wish to do likewise during his siege of Constantinople?

Basid and Aksham differ in their strategies for Karastian. In history, how did Zagan and Candarli differ in their plans for Constantinople?

As the book unfolds, Anna develops a growing heart to help her people. How does this compare to the historical actions she took for her people?

Falaak begins to fill the moat in Chapter 11. How did Mehmet II go about doing this during his siege?

Tunnels are also being dug. In the actual siege, what means did Constantinople use to detect tunnels? What was the name of the man put in charge of locating Ottoman tunnels during the siege?

CHAPTER 12

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

Aksham lists reasons why sieges never last overly long. Is his list a historically accurate one? What other reasons can you find for why sieges did not last long in antiquity?

What was the longest siege in history? How long did it last?

Falaak talks with Aksham about hawks, owls, and mice. Mehmet II has a famous quote about hawks and owls. What is it?

What do you think Mehmet II was trying to say through this quote?

CHAPTER 13

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

In this chapter, you are introduced to the sipahis. How were the sipahis used by the Ottomans?

Siege ladders take a prominent role in an assault detailed in this chapter. In history, siege ladders were used to “escalade” (climb over) walls. The purpose of escalading was not to get an overwhelming force over the walls (that was nearly impossible.) Instead, what did attacking armies hope the few who got over the walls would do?

What defensive measures did fortresses employ (both in weapon creation and architectural design) to hinder escalading?

Steffan is struck at least three times by swinging swords yet suffers almost no injury. What made chainmail so effective against swords?

Near the end of the chapter, Falaak states, “Either I shall take the city, or it shall take me.” How close is that quote to Mehmet II’s actual quote about Constantinople?

The chapter finishes with Karas declaring that he shall fight for the city without regard for his life. Under what circumstance did Constantine XI also say similar words?

CHAPTER 14

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

The Kingdom of Andolan receives little to no help from the Kingdom of Kizil. This mirrors Western Europe providing scant assistance to the Byzantine Empire during Mehmet II's siege. What event, that occurred in 1054, greatly strained relations between east and west for several hundred years?

Tenniani and Notaras argue over the placement of cannon. Did such an argument occur between Longo and Notaras during the actual siege?

Karas mentions his father, who was involved in the previous war with Surx. Constantine XI's father, Manuel II, also fought against Mehmet II's father, Murad II, when that Sultan besieged Constantinople. How did that historical event end?

CHAPTERS 15 & 16

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

In Chapter 15, Falaak gives his plan for the final assault on Karastian. How does that plan compare with Mehmet II's plan for a final assault on Constantinople?

As Chapter 16 begins, there is calm across the city and the battlefield. Why did Mehmet II allow his men to rest before the final assault? What did the Ottoman soldiers do during that time?

Karas received devastating news from Phrantzes that the Venetan fleet would not arrive in time. What news did Constantine XI receive about a Venetian fleet shortly before the Ottoman final assault?

When Karas and Steffan talk on the portico overlooking the Delvin Sea, the emperor implores the teen to look past “right now” and his “own patch of water,” so that he can start making decisions based on a bigger picture. With that in mind, how do you think viewing the “bigger picture” kept Constantine XI from surrendering his city?

At the end of the chapter, Karas quotes from Jesus' famous prayer. Under what circumstance, did Jesus pray those words?

CHAPTER 17

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

In the book, the final assault on Karastian begins on May 29th. What is the date of Mehmet II's final assault on Constantinople?

Karas makes a speech on the precipice of battle. Look up Constantine XI's final speech given before the battle (though some historians dispute the speech was actually given). How does it compare to what is written in the book?

A soldier is quoted as saying the janissaries "charge like lions, not like men." How close is that to an actual eye-witnesses account of the final assault?

During the last great assault, Tenniani is gravely wounded by a piece of wall ripping through his armor. In the final assault of Constantinople, Longo is also gravely wounded, though the manner of the injury is unclear. What are the various ways his injury is described?

Karas is hesitant to let Tenniani leave the battle. Similarly, Constantine XI did not want Longo to leave the walls. Why was that the case?

The emperor is seen rallying his troops multiple times during the final assault. How does this compare to Constantine XI's actions during the last push from the Ottomans?

CHAPTER 18

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

As Chapter 18 begins, the sun is rising and the battle has been raging for six or seven hours straight. How long did the Byzantines hold out on May 29th before the walls were overrun?

In the book, the first major breach occurs when Surxii forces enter through an unlocked tower door. Historically, how is it surmised that the first Ottomans entered the city to raise their banner?

As Anna and Steffan lead people to the harbor, chaos unfolds all around them. Many overload boats and drown in the sea. How close is this to what happened after the Ottomans stormed Constantinople?

Karas throws off his royal regalia and charges into where the fighting is fiercest. This coincides with many historical accounts of Constantine XI's last moments. What other theories are there for the Byzantine ruler's final moments?

CHAPTER 19

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

This chapter opens with Surxii vessels bypassing fleeing ships. In history, Ottoman ships did the same during the fall of Constantinople. Why is that?

Some citizens of Karastian commit suicide, others try to hide in homes or churches when the Surxii enter. What did the citizens trapped in Constantinople do as the Ottomans poured in?

The book describes the Surxii as vicious pillagers of the city. How did the Ottoman soldiers treat Constantinople and its people when they entered?

When Falaak enters the city, he travels to the Grand Hall. This is not where Mehmet II first went. Instead, he went to the Hagia Sophia. Why do you think that is?

When Falaak sits on Karas' throne, he states that the power of the Surxii extends beyond where emperors can dream. This is an allusion to a similar quote by Mehmet II. What did he say about his power and emperor's dreams?

Notaras pleads for his life and offers Falaak gold for his freedom. This, too, occurred between Notaras and Mehmet II. Notaras' final moments are recorded for us by history. How does Notaras' conversation with Falaak compare to his conversation with Mehmet II?

Basid and Notaras receive the same fate? Likewise, Candarli and Notaras also end up beheaded. Why did Mehmet II have his grand vizier (also known as grand pasha) put to death?

The fleeing citizens of Karastian headed for the western city of Genet instead of the Andolian cities of Lascadaemon. In history, the Byzantines who fled Constantinople fled to Genoa and Venice and not to the Despotate of Morea. Why was that?

In the book, Phrantzes escapes aboard a ship with Anna and Steffan. Did the historical Phrantzes escape the city?

In a letter, Karas informs Steffan that he has been given the title arkhon (prince) of Andolan. Where does the rank of an arkhon fall in the Byzantine hierarchy?

CHAPTER 20

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

The Venetan fleet finds the fleeing Andolian ships heading west. In history, how late to Constantinople was the Venetian fleet?

How might the battle have been different had that fleet arrived a couple of days earlier?

Phranzes states that Emperor Karas liked to say that “Men often regret when they have spoken but seldom regret having remained silent.” Who is the true author of this quote?

Steffan meets Admiral Loredan. How does this character compare with the historical Admiral Alvise Loredan?

As the final chapter ends, Falaak shows no intention of slowing his army’s movement. How quickly did Mehmet II begin to advance on other lands after defeating Constantinople?

EPILOGUE

*Use the internet or library to find
the answers to the questions below*

Anna busies herself with caring for her people with her father's money left in a Genetan bank. Where did the historical Anna get the means to care for her people?

Phrantzes leaves to find his wife and children who were sold into slavery. When the actual Phrantzes found freedom from his own slavery, he, too, tried to free his family. Was he successful?

The Ottoman Empire expanded greatly after the fall of Constantinople and continued for an extended period. When did this empire finally experience a defeat so decisive that it brought an end to its existence?

How did the fall of Constantinople lead to the spread of The Renaissance?

How did the fall of Constantinople lead to the discovery of "the New World" (present day North and South America)?

