

CHAPTER ONE



NOVEMBER 1192

Off the Coast of Sicily

They were dangerously close to the coast of North Africa, so the ship's master had warned his crew to keep a sharp eye out for pirates. When the sailor perched up in the rigging shouted, men instinctively dropped hands to sword hilts, for they were battle-seasoned soldiers, returning home from Outremer after a three-year truce had been made with the Sultan of Egypt, Salah al-Din, known to the crusaders as Saladin. They crowded to the gunwales, but they saw no sails upon the horizon, only the slate-grey sea and a sky mottled with winter clouds.

Finding no sign of pirates, the knights glanced toward the man standing in the prow of the ship. He would always attract more than his share of attention, for he was taller than most men, his hair and beard a striking shade of red-gold. But he was in need of a barber's shears, and the costly wool mantle draped about his shoulders was frayed around the edges, stained with sweat and sea salt. While these weeks at sea had taken their toll, his hollowed cheekbones and pallor testified to his near-fatal bout with quartan fever. He might be almost invincible in hand-to-hand combat, but he'd not been able to stave off the deadly maladies and miasmas that stalked the Holy Land. Twice he'd come close to dying from sickness in Outremer, the fate of their crusade rising and falling with his every labored breath, for all knew they had no chance of prevailing without him—even the French lords, whose loathing for Saladin paled in comparison to the intensity of the hatred they felt for the Lionheart, Richard of England.

The animosity between the kings of England and France had burned hotter

than any Saracen flame. Unable to match Richard's battlefield brilliance or utter fearlessness, Philippe Capet had broken the oath he'd sworn to God and abandoned the crusade after the fall of Acre, returning to France with his honor in tatters and his heart filled with bile. He soon began to conspire with Richard's younger brother John, hoping to take advantage of the English king's absence to lay claim to his domains in Normandy. When he learned of their treachery, Richard was desperate to get home, to save his kingdom while he still could. But he'd remained in Outremer, bound by a holy vow that fettered him more tightly than any chains could have done, and after he'd managed to retake the crusader city of Jaffa from a much larger Saracen army, Saladin was ready to discuss peace terms.

Richard won some significant concessions. When he arrived in Outremer, the Kingdom of Jerusalem had consisted of the city of Tyre and a siege camp at Acre. When he departed sixteen months later, the kingdom stretched along the coast from Tyre to Jaffa, Saladin had lost the powerful stronghold of Ascalon, and Christian pilgrims could once again worship in the Holy City. But they had not reclaimed Jerusalem from the Saracens. The most sacred city in Christendom still flew the saffron banners of Saladin, and even before he'd left Outremer, Richard's enemies were declaring the crusade a failure.

What they did not know was that he, too, believed he had failed. He'd been one of the few to refuse to visit Jerusalem and pray at the Holy Sepulchre, confiding to his queen that he'd not earned that right. He'd promised the new ruler of Jerusalem, his nephew Henri of Champagne, that he would come back as soon as he'd dealt with the unscrupulous French king and his faithless brother. And on that October night as his ship headed out into the open sea and Acre receded into the distance, he'd whispered a fervent prayer that God would keep Outremer safe until he could return.

The ship's master was conducting a shouted dialogue with the lookout in the rigging, translating for the English king's benefit. Turning toward his knights, Richard tersely informed them that a storm was nigh. A muted sound of dismay swept through their ranks, for most men were convinced it took more courage to set foot on the wet, pitching deck of the *Holy Rood* than it did to ride onto a hundred battlefields. So far they'd been lucky, not having encountered any of the fierce gales that made winter travel so hazardous. But they all had vivid memories of the violent storms that had battered the royal fleet on their way to Outremer, and many of them now hastily made the sign of the cross.

It was said that sailors could predict bad weather in their very bones, and this

one's forecast was not long in proving true. The wind began to rise, catching the ship's sails and rippling the dark surface of the sea with frothy whitecaps. Black clouds gathered along the horizon, and the day's light was soon blotted out. The crewmen scrambled to obey their master's commands, the helmsman hunched over the tiller like a priest at his altar as he struggled to keep the bow headed into the waves. The Bishop of Salisbury and some of the others sought the dubious shelter of their canvas tent. Richard remained on deck, for he always chose to face his foes head-on, and so his Welsh cousin Morgan ap Ranulf and the Flemish lord Baldwin de Bethune stayed loyally by his side, holding tight to the gunwale as the ship dropped down into troughs and battled its way up again. The ship's master had told them that their local pilot said there was a safe harbor up the coast at Sciacca, and as they raced the storm, more and more men sought out the clerics on board, asking to be shriven of their sins while there was still time.

By now the wind was howling like a wolf pack on the prowl. They'd reefed the sails, but the *Holy Rood* continued to heel dangerously. When they tried to lower them, one of the downhaul lines started to come loose. With courage that left even Richard dumbfounded, two sailors scrambled up into the rigging and somehow managed to reattach it. With both masts bare, their ship was still propelled by the force of the wind on the hull and rigging, but it no longer skimmed the waves like a bird about to take flight.

Rain had begun to fall, needle-sharp against their skin; within moments, all on deck were drenched. They'd not be able to reach Sciacca, the master told Richard, shouting to be heard above the roaring of the wind, and were heading for a cove a few leagues below the town. The men on the *Holy Rood* had often faced down Death. Most had thought themselves doomed at Jaffa, caught outside the city walls by an army seven times the size of theirs. Richard had saved them, though, gaining a victory that should have been impossible. As joyful as they'd been by that miraculous reprieve, they felt even more grateful when their ship at last dropped anchor in a small inlet that offered shelter from the worst of the storm, for they feared death by drowning more than being slain by an enemy's blade.

They awakened at dawn to a Sicilian sunrise that tinted the sky a pale gold, the occasional cloud spangled in copper and bronze. With the prospect of a fair day for sailing, spirits rose and they made ready to break their fast with bread, cheese, and figs. But it was then that a warning yell came from the rigging, and they soon saw the lateen sails of two large galleys heading toward the cove. The ship's master, a grizzled Pisan who'd lived most of his life on the deck of a ship,

started to curse under his breath. Had they encountered pirate galleys in open water, they'd have had a good chance of outrunning them, but their sails had not yet been hoisted, making them a tempting target for sea rovers, who were now maneuvering to block the entrance to the bay.

Richard had joined the older man at the gunwale, his gaze fixed upon the wind-whipped flags flying from the galley mastheads. And then he smiled. "Not pirates," he announced to his watching men. "They are King Tancred's galleys." Turning to the master, he gave the order to run up the banner of the English Royal House. The galleys were close enough now for them to see the reaction of the men aboard, the easing of tension as they realized the *Holy Rood* was not a threat. The largest of the ships was soon within hailing distance, and after getting confirmation that the King of England was indeed a passenger, they invited Richard to board their galley to confer with their lord, the Count of Conversano. He gladly accepted, hungry for news of his kingdom and his enemies, and, taking the Bishop of Salisbury and two Templar knights, he jumped into their long-boat and was rowed across to the galley.

Aboard the *Holy Rood*, there was relieved laughter; no man who'd taken part in Richard's attack upon a huge Saracen ship off the coast of Tyre was eager to experience another sea battle. Morgan ap Ranulf helped himself to a chunk of bread smeared with honey and watched as his cousin the king boarded the galley and was given a respectful welcome. He was soon joined by a crusader comrade and friend, Warin Fitz Gerald, and obligingly broke off a piece of the loaf for the Norman knight as they joked who was more wretched, a knight on the deck of a ship or a sailor on horseback. Warin had a ribald sense of humor and he was soon speculating who would be unhappier, a virgin in a bawdy house or a whore in a nunnery. Morgan elbowed him in the ribs, reminding Warin of their mock pact not to speak of women whilst they were stranded on shipboard, having an itch but no way to scratch it.

Such talk turned Morgan's thoughts to the woman he loved, the Lady Mariam, who'd sailed from Acre on Michaelmas with the king's sister, Joanna, widowed Queen of Sicily, and the king's wife, Berengaria of Navarre. Surely they'd safely reached Sicily by now, intending to continue their journey overland, for Joanna was very susceptible to mal de mer; when she'd sailed for Sicily at age ten to wed William de Hauteville, she'd become so seasick that they'd been forced to land at Naples and travel the rest of the way on horseback. That homesick little child-bride was now a stunningly beautiful woman of twenty-seven, and Morgan, who was very fond of his cousin, wondered what fate would await her

upon her return to Richard's realm. She'd be a rare marital prize, and he hoped the English king would choose a man who was worthy of her.

Royal marriages were matters of state, of course, and compatibility was not a concern when diplomatic alliances were at stake. But if they were lucky, a high-born husband and wife could find contentment together. Morgan thought Richard seemed content enough with his queen, who'd traveled from her small Spanish kingdom with Richard's formidable mother, the celebrated—some would say notorious—Eleanor of Aquitaine, joining Richard in Sicily and wedding him in Cyprus on their way to the Holy Land. Morgan suspected, though, that Berengaria would never lay claim to the king's heart in the way that Mariam had laid claim to his. Richard revered his mother, who was as astute as any ruler in Christendom, but Morgan did not think women mattered all that much to the Lionheart, who seemed more at home in an army camp than in any of his palaces.

Both men turned as Warin's squire, Arne, approached, carefully balancing two cups of wine. He lingered afterward, until Morgan, who liked the boy, gave him an encouraging look. "May I ask you a question, my lords?" Taking their consent for granted, for he was optimistic by nature, he squatted down beside them. "I am puzzled," he confessed. "This Tancred is the King of Sicily. He took the throne after Queen Joanna's husband died? And then he seized her dower lands and imprisoned her in Palermo? So why is King Richard friendly with this man?"

Warin rolled his eyes, for Arne's habit of making many of his sentences sound like questions both amused and annoyed him. Morgan was more indulgent, for the boy had spoken no French at all upon his arrival in the Holy Land. He'd come to the siege of Acre with Duke Leopold von Babenberg, squire to a knight of the Austrian *ministerialis*, Hadmar von Kuenring. The duke was a devout crusader, having taken the cross twice. But he was a very proud man and after a quarrel with Richard that left his pride in shreds, he'd abandoned the crusade and returned to Austria in high dudgeon. Arne's knight could not accompany the other Austrians, though, for he'd been stricken with Arnaldia, the malady that had almost killed Richard.

The camp doctors had held out no hope for him, and Arne was encouraged to sail with his countrymen and his irate duke. But he would not desert his lord, tending the man faithfully until his death. The crusaders were touched by the boy's loyalty and the Flemish baron Jacques de Avesnes had accepted Arne into his household. After Jacques's death during the battle of Arsuf, Warin had

taken the boy on as his squire. He'd turned out to be conscientious and cheerful, and once they were safely back in Richard's domains, Warin and Morgan meant to ask Richard for funds to pay for Arne's return to Austria, if that was his desire. Richard was very openhanded, as befitted a great lord, and since he liked the boy, too, they thought he'd consent.

Now it was Morgan who took it upon himself to explain the intricacies of Sicilian politics to Arne. "What you say is true, lad. King Tancred did indeed hold Queen Joanna in confinement and took her dower lands, for they controlled the roads from the alpine passes, the route the Holy Roman Emperor would have taken when he led his army into Italy." He started to tell Arne that the Emperor Heinrich had claimed the Sicilian throne after the death of Joanna's husband, for their only son had died and the heir was therefore the king's aunt, Constance de Hauteville, Heinrich's wife. He remembered in time that Arne likely knew that, for the Austrian duke was one of Heinrich's vassals.

Taking another swallow of wine, he offered the cup to Arne, who accepted it happily. "Tancred bore Lady Joanna no ill will, and made sure that she was treated well in captivity, holding her at one of her own palaces. He'd feared to release her because of her close bond with the Empress Constance, but he was given no choice when King Richard swept into Sicily like one of their hot *scirocco* winds, demanding that his sister be freed at once and her dower restored to her. Tancred wisely sent her to Richard in Messina and offered gold for her dower rights."

Arne was listening with interest, his head cocked to the side. "Thank you, Sir Morgan. But how did Tancred and our king become so friendly?"

Morgan noted the boy's use of "our king" and wondered if Arne would even want to return to his Austrian homeland. Those who'd fought alongside the Lionheart in the Holy Land had been bedazzled by his bravura exploits, for in their world, nothing was more admired than prowess on the battlefield, and so it made sense that this Austrian youth would have been bedazzled, too. "Tancred and King Richard found they had much in common, lad. They are both soldiers, both men who are accustomed to speaking their minds, and both hold the French king in great contempt."

Arne grinned. "Who does not?" he asked cheekily, and all within earshot laughed, for Philippe Capet had done irreparable harm to his reputation by deserting the crusade; even his own French lords had refused to accompany him back to France, putting their crusaders' vows above their fealty to their king. In light of what transpired, Morgan thought it would have been better had they

followed Philippe, for the men he left in command, the Duke of Burgundy and the Bishop of Beauvais, would prove to be as much of a danger to Richard as Saladin's Saracens. Burgundy had paid the ultimate price for his treachery, dying at Acre just before the peace terms were agreed upon, but Beauvais had sailed for home in September, spreading lies about Richard in his wake, accusing the English king of every sin but the murder of the sainted martyr Thomas Becket in his own Canterbury Cathedral. And if Richard had not been just thirteen when his father had uttered those heedless words that would result in the archbishop's death, Morgan did not doubt that Beauvais would have blamed him for that, too.

Guillain de l'Etang wandered over, suggesting a dice game while they awaited the king's return, and they cleared a spot on the deck as he dug in his scrip for the dice. Not all of the knights had liked Guillain at first, for he was so taciturn that strangers sometimes thought he was mute. His size was intimidating, too, for he was even taller than Richard, with shoulders so broad that men joked he had to enter doors sideways and powerfully muscled arms that a blacksmith might have envied. He'd kept to himself, seeming aloof and even arrogant. But then he'd attracted Richard's attention by lifting a Cypriot soldier over his head and throwing him into a horse trough during the fighting in the streets of Amathus. When they saw that he had the king's favor, the others began to show him greater friendliness, and discovered that he was not haughty, merely shy, with a placid, easygoing nature and a very dry sense of humor. He still was not much of a talker, and he was observing Warin's antics with quiet amusement as the Norman knight loudly bemoaned his bad luck and offended Richard's chaplain by asking him to bless the dice.

They were beginning another game when a sailor signaled that the king was coming back. Getting to his feet, Morgan was brushing off his mantle when he glanced toward the men in the approaching longboat and felt a sudden unease, for both Richard and the bishop were as impassive as statues carved from stone, their faces utterly blank. If the king was employing his court mask, that meant the news he'd gotten was not good.



RICHARD HAD BEEN GIVEN a wine cup, but he set it down, untasted, as his men crowded into the tent. "We dare not land at Marseille," he said abruptly, for he knew no other way than to say it straight out.

His words stirred a startled ripple, one of alarm and confusion, for Marseille

was under the control of an ally. They exchanged baffled glances and Warin Fitz Gerald exclaimed, “Why not, my liege? I thought you and the King of Aragon were friends!”

“So did I,” Richard said, with a tight smile that held no humor. “Whilst we were in the Holy Land, some of you may have heard a Saracen proverb: ‘The enemy of my enemy is my friend.’ Well, that cuts both ways, for ‘The enemy of my friend is my enemy, too,’ and it seems that Alfonso has become friends with the Count of Toulouse.”

The mere mention of the count’s name was enough, for they all knew that Raimon de St Gilles was an inveterate foe of the English Royal House. The dukes of Aquitaine had long advanced their own claim to Toulouse, and Richard was more than England’s king; he was also Duke of Aquitaine and Normandy, Count of Poitou and Anjou. They still did not understand why King Alfonso would have chosen to deal with the Devil, but they waited for Richard to answer that unspoken question.

“St Gilles is a cankered, malevolent weasel,” Richard growled, with a vitriol he usually reserved for the French king and the Bishop of Beauvais. “When that treacherous whoreson balked at taking the cross, I knew he meant to take advantage of my absence to ravage my lands in Aquitaine, and that is indeed what he did. He got those malcontents the Count of Périgord and the Viscount of Brosse to rebel after my seneschal took ill. Fortunately my queen’s father came to my aid, sending his son Sancho to put down the rebellion. Sancho had such success that St Gilles realized he had to take Navarre off the chessboard, and so he approached the King of Aragon, whose rivalry with the Navarrese king proved stronger than his friendship with me. Alfonso accepted St Gilles’s offer to ally with him against Navarre, which means that the entire southern coast of France is barred to me, as are Barcelona and the other ports in Aragon.”

“Where can we land, then?” Richard’s admiral, Robert de Turnham, was not a man easily shaken, but he could not keep the dismay from his voice. He was more familiar with maps than most, and was quicker, therefore, to realize that their options had just narrowed dramatically and dangerously.

“A very good question, Rob,” Richard said, with another of those mirthless smiles. “The Count of Conversano says that I cannot land at any Italian port, for that hellspawn on the German throne has the Genoese fleet patrolling the coast in search of our ship. Moreover, Heinrich has made a new pact with my erstwhile allies at Pisa in preparation for his invasion of Sicily, so it is out, too. And

needless to say, we cannot sail directly to England or Normandy or any ports in Aquitaine.”

There were nods of agreement, for even those with a weak grasp of geography understood that much. To attempt to pass through the Pillars of Hercules out into the Atlantic Ocean would be utter madness. The currents in the straits flowed toward the east, with a speed no ship could hope to match, and beyond lay winter storms of unbelievable savagery, with waves towering as high as sixty feet.

A stunned silence settled over the tent as they began to comprehend the full extent of their peril. The three de Préaux brothers conferred in whispers, and then Jean cleared his throat. “Sire . . . it might be best to pass the winter in Sicily, at King Tancred’s court. You’d be welcome there and that would give us time to find another route home.”

Several of the men winced, for there was a glaring flaw in Jean de Préaux’s plan and their king’s temper could be as combustible as sun-dried straw. Richard surprised them by saying without anger, “If I did that, Jean, there would be no kingdom waiting for me when I did reach home. My brother and the French king would thank God fasting if I gave them such an opportunity, claiming I was dead and John the legitimate heir to the English throne.”

Morgan understood why Richard had reacted with such unusual patience. If it was true that the Lionheart never forgot a wrong done him, it was also true that he never forgot a kindness, and Guilhem de Préaux had saved his life in the Holy Land. Richard had delayed his departure beyond the point when it was safe to sail as he sought to ransom Guilhem from Saladin, and Morgan was sure the de Préaux family would be basking in royal favor until the English king drew his last breath. He glanced at the Préaux brothers and then back toward his cousin. “What mean you to do, my liege?” he asked, sure that Richard already had a plan in mind, for he’d never known another man so quick-witted or coolheaded in a crisis, one of the reasons for his spectacular successes on the battlefield.

When Richard looked over at the Bishop of Salisbury, Morgan saw that they’d discussed this, either during their visit to the Count of Conversano’s galley or immediately upon their return to the *Holy Rood*. “We have few choices open to us,” Richard said bluntly, “since we cannot land in France or Spain or Italy. After studying the count’s map, it was obvious that we must turn back. We will have to sail up the Adriatic coast, land at a port where I am not likely to be recognized, and then try to reach my nephew and brother-in-law’s lands in Saxony.”

There were a few gasps and then an eerie quiet as the men tried to come to

terms with their new reality. It was not easy, for they'd been just a three-day sail from Marseille, and now suddenly they found themselves facing a sea voyage that could last for weeks, at a season when even experienced sailors like the Genoese and Pisans did not venture far from port, and then a long and dangerous overland winter journey through territories hostile to their king.

One of the Templars, Sir Ralph St Leger, asked if they had a map and Richard's clerk produced one, unrolling a parchment sheet that offered only the bare outlines of the lands bordering the Greek, Ionian, and Adriatic seas. "I agree that Saxony would offer us a safe haven," the Templar knight said slowly. "Your brother by marriage and his son are in rebellion against the Emperor Heinrich again. But how do we get there?"

Richard drew his dagger and leaned over the map, using the blade as a pointer. "By way of Hungary, whose king is my kinsman by marriage, and then Bohemia, for its duke would never do Heinrich a good turn." He paused, smoke-grey eyes moving intently from face to face. He saw what he expected to find; they looked troubled but resolute. He'd known they would be loyal, theirs a brotherhood forged on the battlefields of Arsur and Ibn Ibrak and Jaffa; they'd fought with him and bled with him and would die with him if need be. His throat tightening, he summoned up a smile, saying, "But if any of you have a better idea, for God's sake, speak up now." None did, for what was there to say?

As they rose to go, Richard told the Bishop of Salisbury and his Welsh cousin to remain. Once they were alone, he studied Hubert Walter in silence for a moment, knowing the prelate would not like what he was about to say. "I want you to return to Tancred's court with the Count of Conversano, Hubert. He'll provide you with an escort to Rome."

Caught by surprise, the other man shook his head vehemently. "I want to accompany you, my lord king!"

"I know you do. But I have greater need of you elsewhere. I want you to confer with the Pope, do what you can to stiffen the man's backbone. Now that he's finally offered papal recognition to Tancred, I do not want him to renege for fear of Heinrich. And then I want you to get to England as quickly as you can. My lady mother will be doing her best to rein my fool brother in, but that's no easy task, not with Johnny bound and determined to entangle himself in Philippe's web. You ought to be safe enough, traveling under the Pope's auspices, and the protection Holy Church offers a man who's taken the cross should serve as your shield." White teeth flashed in what was not a smile. "It ought to protect me, too, but I'd as soon not put it to the test."

Hubert looked unhappy, but he did not argue, knowing it would be futile. Richard was already turning toward his cousin. "I'd say you got more than you bargained for when Joanna beseeched you to keep me out of trouble on our journey home."

Morgan had not realized Richard knew of Joanna's entreaty that he sail on the *Holy Rood*. Ostensibly her concern was for her brother's health, as he was still recovering from the quartan fever, but Morgan knew she was also worried that Richard would not be traveling with their cousin, André de Chauvigny, who seemed to be the only man able to curb Richard's more reckless impulses.

"I fear, sire, that would be a task beyond my capabilities." Richard assumed he was joking, but he was speaking nothing less than the truth, for the king's family and friends did not understand how a man so careful with the lives of his soldiers could be so careless with his own.

"The count did have some good news midst all the bad," Richard said, with a sudden smile. "My sister and my wife landed safely at Brindisi, and were given a lavish welcome by Tancred and his queen, doubtless trying to make amends to Joanna, as well he should. It happens that the Count of Conversano, Hugh Lapin, was Joanna's gaoler in Palermo. He'd treated her well, though, and he said, in great relief, that she was very gracious when he arrived at Brindisi to escort her and Berengaria to Tancred's court. . . ."

Richard paused, for Morgan was beaming, and it occurred to him that this might be the last real smile any of them would see for some time to come. After dismissing both men, he sank down on his bed, grateful for this rare moment alone. He'd put up a brave front for his men, but he was shaken, too, by this sudden downturn in their fortunes. How many more weeks would they be at sea now? His memories of their stormy voyage to the Holy Land were still so vivid that he'd declared sailors ought not to be allowed to testify in court, for they were clearly quite mad. The *Holy Rood* crew had laughed uproariously, taking his jest as a great compliment. But Richard's knights saw too much truth in it for humor, for none of them understood how any man could choose to spend more time on shipboard than absolutely necessary.

Richard lay back on the bed, thinking grimly of the winter trek that they'd face, assuming they landed safely at some Adriatic port. He was not as confident as he'd sounded when he'd insisted that the Hungarian king would be friendly. It was true that Bela's queen was the widow of Richard's elder brother. But Marguerite was also the sister of the Lady Alys, the French princess who'd been betrothed to Richard in childhood and repudiated so he could wed Berengaria of

Navarre, and he supposed she might feel that Alys had been treated rather shabbily. Would her feelings matter to her husband? He had no way of knowing. At least Bela was known to be very hostile to the Duke of Austria and no friend to the Holy Roman Emperor. His bleak musings were interrupted by the entrance of Fulk de Poitiers, his clerk of the chamber, and he sat up hastily.

Fulk frowned at the sight of the map, which had fallen to the deck. Retrieving it, he gave Richard a probing look, but said nothing, carefully putting the map away in a coffer and then beginning to straighten its contents. Richard watched with a smile, for he knew the other man well; Fulk had been in his service before he'd become England's king. "You may as well say it, for I know you're busy contemplating all the ways we can come to grief," he gibed. "What are you envisioning? The *Holy Rood* going down in a gale? Taken by pirates? You see me buried by an avalanche in a German mountain pass? Or rotting in one of Heinrich's dungeons?"

The clerk was unperturbed by the sarcasm. "Those are all possibilities," he said, "although you left a few out. We could encounter bandits on those mountain roads. You could end up in a Viennese dungeon, too, if we stray across the Austrian border, for their duke is said to bear you a bitter grudge."

Richard had heard that, too, and was puzzled by it, for his quarrel with Duke Leopold had been a minor matter, not worthy of a vendetta. "Tell me, Fulk, do you ever allow yourself to believe that the worst is not a certainty? Just for a change of pace?"

"We balance each other out, my liege, for you can never conceive of defeat."

Richard didn't deny it. "Well, you know what the Romans said. 'Fortune favors the bold.' And the lucky. You will admit that I am lucky, Fulk?"

The older man glanced up from the coffer. "Aye, you've been lucky, my liege," he agreed, before adding, "so far."

Richard shook his head, torn between amusement and exasperation. But they both knew he valued the dour Poitevin for the very trait that could be so irksome—his candor. He always got from Fulk de Poitiers what kings were rarely given—unsparing honesty.



BY NOVEMBER 11, the *Holy Rood* was approaching the island of Corfu. The sight of its mountains and lush greenery was both welcome and disheartening. The men were thankful to have crossed the open waters stretching between

Sicily and Greece, but they could not help remembering that they'd landed at Corfu just a few weeks ago, never dreaming they'd see it again so soon. On their earlier visit, they'd dropped anchor at Kerkyra, where a small town had grown up around the castle; this time they meant to avoid the Corfu Channel and sail up the west coast. Corfu, notorious as a pirate's den, was also honeycombed with spies and they did not want word to spread that the English king's ship had been seen in the Ionian Sea.

They would have to stop hugging the shoreline before they reached the castle of Angelokastro and the ship's master decided to halt in a small cove and replenish their supply of fresh water. The anchors were thrown overboard and as their longboat rowed toward the beach, the passengers took advantage of this brief respite from the waves and wind to amuse themselves. Martinmas in their homelands was usually chilly and wet, offering a foretaste of the coming winter, and so they were all enjoying the warm sun and mild air, many of them stripping off their mantles as they watched Guillain de l'Etang take on another challenger. A trestle table had been set up on deck and the Norman was locking arms with Hugh de Neville, an English knight. The wagering had stopped, though, for Guillain had already defeated two of the Templars and a burly sailor and now no one was willing to bet against him. Hugh put up a valiant fight, but his hand was soon forced inexorably down onto the table. It ended quickly, as the other matches had done, and Hugh mustered up the unconvincing smile of a man trying to be a good sport.

Glancing around for another contender, Warin Fitz Gerald grinned as his eyes lit upon the man leaning against the gunwale. "What of you, sire? Why not teach Guillain a lesson in humility? We do not want him to get too puffed up with pride, do we?"

Richard was tempted. But he'd learned that few men were willing to defeat a king, be it at chess, arm wrestling, or jousting, and the only thing he hated more than losing was being allowed to win. Deciding that Guillain was too honest and too honorable not to give his best effort, Richard was reaching for his mantle's clasp when their lookout yelled, "Sail ho!"

The game forgotten, the men squinted and shaded their eyes against the sun's glare until they spotted the galleys heading their way. The ship's master spat out an oath, for no merchant would choose a galley to carry his wares; they were seagoing weapons of war. There were three of them—sleek ebony hulls riding low in the water, triangular sails the color of blood, bronze spurs meant for ramming glimpsed each time they rode the crest of a wave. No flags flew from their

mastheads and they were close enough now for those on the *Holy Rood* to see that the men on deck were holding crossbows, swords, axes, and grappling hooks. But Richard had already given the command, “To arms,” for one glance had been enough for him to discern their predatory intent.

His young squires, Jehan and Saer, were awaiting Richard in their tent, and hurried to help him don his gambeson, the padded tunic worn under his hauberk. Other knights were crowding into the tent to retrieve their armor, carefully packed away in coffers to protect it from the corrosive sea air. Once he’d buckled his scabbard and fastened his helmet strap, Richard snatched up his crossbow and hastened back on deck.

The anchors had been hauled up and the sailors were unfurling the sails; on the beach, the stranded crewmen were dragging the longboat onto the shore, apparently hoping to hide from the pirates if the *Holy Rood* was taken or sunk. Richard’s arbalesters were awaiting his orders, their crossbows spanned and bolts aligned. Some of the knights had not taken the time to put on the mail chausses that protected their legs, although all were wearing their hauberks and helmets. They were combat veterans, but unlike his sailors, they had no experience in sea warfare. Glancing around at their tense faces, he pitched his voice so all could hear. “Defending a ship is no different from defending a castle, lads . . . aside from the risk of drowning, of course.” As he’d hoped, that dispersed some of the tension; soldiers usually responded well to gallows humor.

Morgan pushed his way toward the king. He was still fumbling with his ventail, seeking to draw it across his throat. He usually felt more secure once he was clad in mail; now, though, he could not help thinking that if he slipped on the wet deck, it would drag him down like an anchor. Richard was studying the pirate ships as intently as he studied battlefields, and Morgan hoped he was formulating a strategy for another unlikely victory; the odds were not in their favor.

He reached his cousin just as Richard beckoned to the ship’s master, saying that he needed a man who spoke Greek. The Pisan nodded, for that was the native tongue of half a dozen members of the seventy-five-man crew. Before he could summon any of them, Hugh de Neville offered another candidate. “What of Petros, sire? You remember—the sailor from Messina. He acted as translator when your ladies were shipwrecked on Cyprus and proved to be very useful. He might even know some of those cutthroats, for I heard him boasting that he has a cousin on a pirate ship out of Kassiopei.”

“Get him.”

The words were no sooner out of Richard's mouth than a youth materialized as if by magic before him. Petros's black eyes were shining, for he was never happier than when he was the center of attention. "You ask for me, lord king? I speak Greek from the cradle, but my French . . . it is very good. When we were in Cyprus—"

"I need information about these pirates. Do they know about Saladin? The war in the Holy Land?"

"Of course they do, lord! They care about the recovery of Jerusalem, too. Why, some have even taken the cross. A man can be a pirate *and* a good Christian."

"Have they heard of me?"

Petros grinned. "I daresay they've heard of you in Cathay, lord. After what you did at Jaffa—"

Richard usually enjoyed hearing his battlefield prowess lauded, but now he cut off the sailor's effusive praise with a gesture. "I hope you are right, Petros. I want you to tell them that this is the *Holy Rood* out of Acre, commanded by the English king."

Petros blinked in surprise. He obeyed at once, though, calling out to the closest of the pirate galleys. A reply soon came echoing across the waves. "They ask why they should believe that, lord."

Richard had expected as much. Turning to the ship's master, he told the man to raise his banner and, within moments, the royal lion of England was fluttering proudly from the masthead. The knights were murmuring among themselves, uneasy about the king's decision to reveal his identity. "Now tell them this, Petros. Say the English king is called Lionheart because he does not know how to surrender. He will never yield to them. To take this ship, they will have to fight to the death."

For the first time, Petros hesitated. "They are proud men, lord. I do not think they can be—"

"Tell them," Richard said, and Petros did. His message appeared to stir up a lively debate among the pirates. Richard waited a few moments, and then nodded again to Petros. "Now tell them this—that it need not come to that. There is a way by which we both benefit and with no blood being shed. Tell their chieftain that I would speak with him."

As Richard had anticipated, that was a challenge no pirate could refuse, and Petros was soon negotiating a meeting, while the knights clustered around their king, the bolder ones expressing their misgivings, fearing that he would agree

to meet the pirate chieftain on his own galley, for they well knew Richard was quite capable of such a reckless act. He shrugged off their protests, and it was eventually agreed that he and the pirate would meet at midpoint between the two vessels. Their longboat was summoned from the beach, and much to the dismay of Richard's men, he and Petros were soon being rowed out toward the approaching pirate longboat.

Morgan and Baldwin de Bethune stood at the gunwale, never taking their eyes from the tall figure in the prow of the longboat. They'd both been loyal to the old king, Richard's father, had stayed with Henry until he'd drawn his last anguished breath at Chinon Castle, and while they were pragmatic enough to recognize Richard as their lawful king, they'd been wary at first of this man they knew only by repute. But that was before they fought beside him in Messina, Cyprus, and the Holy Land. Now they watched anxiously as he conferred with the pirate within range of the latter's crossbowmen; that the pirate was taking the same risk was no comfort to them. The conversation was an animated one and Petros was kept busy translating from French to Greek and back to French again. It was not long, though, before a reassuring sound drifted back on the wind—laughter. Morgan and Baldwin exchanged glances, marveling that once again Richard had managed to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.



CLIMBING THE LADDER, Richard swung himself over the gunwale and grinned at the men crowding the deck. "It is all settled. I have hired two of their galleys and crew for two hundred marks."

There was an immediate outcry, exclamations of shock and alarm and bewilderment. Raising his hand to still them, Richard explained that he was known to be sailing on the *Holy Rood* and his enemies would be on the lookout for it. Switching to the galleys was one way to throw them off his trail. That made sense to his men, but they did not find it as easy to trust in the word of a pirate chieftain as Richard apparently did. None voiced objections, though, for kings were not to be questioned.

Richard headed for the tent, with Baldwin and Morgan right on his heels. The others watched, hoping that a highborn lord and a kinsman might dare to do what they could not: express their misgivings about this new alliance with sea rovers. Jehan and Saer had already begun to remove the king's hauberk. He

was in good spirits and answered readily enough when Baldwin asked how he could be sure these pirates could be trusted.

“Petros was right. They do care about the fate of the Holy Land, and for the past few months, soldiers have been passing through Corfu on their way home, all of them carrying tales of the French king’s perfidy and the battles we fought against Saladin. At the risk of sounding immodest,” Richard said with another grin, “I come off well in those stories and Captain Georgios and his men are eager to hear my own account of them. They still want the two hundred marks, mind you, but they also want to help us escape our enemies. Georgios was actually indignant to hear of my plight, pointing out that men who’d taken the cross are under the protection of the Church. Ironic, is it not, that a pirate should have more honor than kings or emperors?”

Baldwin’s qualms were assuaged, for he believed Richard to be a good judge of character, a survival skill for those who wore crowns or commanded armies. Morgan was still shaken, for he’d just spent an hour fearing for the king’s safety and wondering how he was going to tell Joanna that he’d merely watched as her brother went off alone to meet with pirates. “But you did not know this Georgios was a man of honor when you got into that longboat,” he blurted out. “Are you never afraid for your own life?”

Richard’s eyebrows shot upward in surprise. “Surely you’ve not forgotten that Good Friday storm that scattered our fleet after we left Sicily? Need I refresh your memory, Morgan? The wind keening like the souls of the damned, the waves higher than church spires, all of us sure we’d breathed our last. Or the tempest we encountered in the Gulf of Satalea, where our ships were blown backward by the force of the wind. You show me a man who claims he was not afraid during those storms, and I’ll show you a liar.”

That wasn’t what Morgan needed to know; he’d taken it for granted that Richard feared storms at sea, not being insane. He’d gone too far to retreat, though. “But what of the battlefield? I’ve seen you take chances that . . .” He paused, then said simply, “Do you never fear for your own safety?”

Richard was quiet for a moment, considering whether that was a question he wanted to answer. He suspected it was one many a man had long wanted to ask, although the only person who’d ever dared had been his wife. It was easier just to brush the query aside. But he liked his Welsh cousin and knew that Morgan’s concern was genuine. “Well,” he said at last, “when a man’s blood is running hot and his heart is racing, it can be difficult to tell excitement from fear.”

There was a silence and then Baldwin said, very dryly, “Passing strange, for I have no trouble at all telling them apart.”

Richard laughed, handed his gambeson to one of his squires, and then made one final effort to explain what seemed to him quite obvious. “It is simple, really. In a storm, we are utterly helpless, at the mercy of the wind and waves. But on the battlefield, my fate is in my own hands. What happens is up to me.”

Morgan agreed that a lack of control would be frightening to any man, especially a king. But he was convinced that Richard was surely the only one on God’s earth who felt in control of events on the battlefield. Seeing that there would be no satisfactory answer to a question he ought not to have asked in the first place, he changed the subject and asked when the switch from the *Holy Rood* to the pirate galleys would occur.

“On the morrow. I need to provide our men with enough money to make their way home. The *Holy Rood* will take them to Brindisi, where they can choose to travel overland, pass the winter in Sicily, or even take passage on a ship sailing for one of the ports that are barred to me. They are not the quarry in this hunt, after all.”

Seeing that Baldwin and Morgan were confused, Richard explained that he was only taking twenty men with him, heading off any objections with some blunt speaking. “We do not have enough men to keep us safe, just enough to attract unwanted attention. The only chance I have to reach Saxony is to travel as fast and as inconspicuously as possible.”

Their first reaction was to protest, horrified by the very thought that their king would be venturing into enemy territory with only twenty men. Their second was a reluctant realization that Richard was right. Their third was to insist that they both be amongst the twenty men. Richard feigned displeasure that they were overstepping themselves, but he was touched that they were so willing to follow him into the frigid, far reaches of Hell, the German empire of Heinrich von Hohenstaufen.



THE MASTER AND CREW of the *Holy Rood* were obviously relieved that they’d be spared a harrowing voyage along the Adriatic coast. But Richard’s knights and crossbowmen and men-at-arms responded as Baldwin and Morgan had done, all clamoring to accompany him. “You are daft, the lot of you,” he said huskily, “for no man with his wits about him would choose snowdrifts and bad

German ale over Palermo's palm trees and bawdy houses." But he did not let sentiment influence his selection of the twenty men, hardening his heart against the tearful pleas of his own squires and choosing those who he thought would be most formidable in a fight, calmest in a crisis. He made exceptions only for his chaplain, Ancelm; his clerk of the chamber, Fulk de Poitiers; and—much to the boy's delight—Arne, whose ability to speak German was sure to be an asset. The others chosen were Morgan, Baldwin, Hugh de Neville, Warin Fitz Gerald, his admiral Robert de Turnham, Robert de Harcourt, Guillain de l'Etang, Walkelin de Ferrers, four Templars, and his five best arbalesters. They would be facing dangers, hardships, deprivation, and possible death, but they reacted as if they'd been given a great honor, any fear they may have felt firmly tethered by pride.

Of all those who'd not been chosen, none were as devastated as Guilhem de Préaux. While the other men lined the gunwales to watch as Richard sailed away on a pirate galley, Guilhem retreated to the tent to rage and pace, tearful one moment, cursing the next. "How could he have left me behind?" he cried as his brothers, Pierre and Jean, followed him. "How could he ever have doubted my loyalty?"

"He did not, you fool," Pierre said, and left it to Jean to console Guilhem, for Richard had entrusted them with the care of his squires and they were now in need of solace, too. As Pierre withdrew, dropping the tent flap to give them a small measure of privacy, Jean rummaged around until he found a wineskin and tossed it to his brother.

"Pierre is right. The king would never doubt your loyalty or your courage. You ought to know better than that."

"Then why would he not take me with him?"

"Why do you think, Guilhem? Your loyalty cost you nigh on a year of your life, and whilst you rarely talk of it, we know you had no easy time in confinement. It is true that we owe a debt of fealty to Richard, our liege lord. But he would not have you pay that debt twice over."

Guilhem studied his brother's face, then took several deep swallows from the wineskin. "I would have paid it gladly."

Jean reached over, clasping him on the shoulder. "I know, lad," he said quietly, "I know. And so does the king."

"Did he say that?" Guilhem challenged, his head coming up sharply at the unexpected confirmation.

"He did. When he charged us with looking after his squires, he said,

‘Guilhem has already been a guest of the Saracens.’ He made a grim jest, then, about Heinrich being a less gentle gaoler than Saladin.”

It had been intolerable for Guilhem, thinking that the king had judged him to be unworthy. But now that he knew better, he found it brought him little comfort, for the king’s need had never been greater and he would be hundreds of miles away, unable to help. When he slumped down on a coffer chest, Jean squeezed his shoulder again and then left so he might have some time alone.

Guilhem did not linger long in the tent. Draining the wineskin, he followed his brother back on deck, where he shoved his way toward the gunwale. There he stood, neither moving nor speaking, watching until the pirate galleys had disappeared from view.