

THE  
LORD  
OF  
CREQUY







THE  
LORD OF CREQUY

*by*  
Lady Gwendolyn



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# CHAPTER I

“Please! Please tell me that it’s not true!” The beautiful countess broke down in bitter sobs.

“Please do not weep like that, my love.” Her husband pleaded. “You act as if the world were to end.”

“Mine is!” the poor lady cried. “I cannot bear the thought of you leaving me. And there is no guarantee that you will ever return!”

“Of course, I will return,” his voice was strong and encouraging. “With victory, I promise you.”

The lady lowered her pale face. “And what if you are among those who pay for the victory with their life? Oh, Raoul, if you should die, I would not live. Why I’ll...” Tears broke forth anew at the mere contemplation of the dreadful thought.

Sir Raoul, the young Count of Crequy, France, looked helplessly at the trembling figure of his wife - The Lady Mahtilde. Her very name (in the medieval French known as Mahaut) meant *strength* in battle. And yet, no such courage seemed to fill her soul, and she wept for him as if he were already a defeated corpse! Did every Crusader receive such a desolate reaction? Was there always such a battle to be won before a war could be fought?

It was the year 1147 and the 2nd Crusade had already begun.

King Louis VII of France had just recently enrolled his country under the banner of the Crusader’s Cross. In fact, it was due mainly to the influence and encouragement of St. Bernard of Clairvaux himself, that King Louis the Young heeded at length the call of God, voiced by Christ’s Vicar, Pope Eugene III, who had summoned all the Kings of Europe to take up arms in defense of their Faith.

It was in answer to this example and exhortation of his king, that the Lord Raoul of Crequy had enlisted himself into the Crusaders’ ranks.

Though Sir Raoul was only thirty years of age, he was already regarded as a prominent member of the Crusaders. He was not, however, the only high ranking man in France who had undertaken this endeavor. Dukes and counts, barons and knights, all the young nobles assembled with their followers, and an army of eighty thousand men were soon to be on the move towards the Holy Land.

This particular knight was conspicuous as well by his illustrious name and noble origin, as by his



handsome person and military air. His father, Gerard, Count of Ternoy, was still living. He had shone amid the army of Godfrey of Bouillon (an eminent leader and martyr of the first Crusade), and Sir Gerard's spirit seemed revived in his young son Raoul.

But the Lady of Crequy shared neither the sentiments of her husband nor his father. She had only been wedded to her dear lord for a blissful six months, and already she was to be bereft of him. Though her noble husband endeavored in vain to persuade her to consent to his departure, she simply could not bring herself to do so. With her head buried in her trembling hands she let fall the tears that Raoul knew would come. The poor knight was at a loss. He had told her every good consequence and reason that he could think of, and still she could only dread how she would miss him, *especially* if he should be killed.

Count Gerard had stood silent, quietly witnessing the sad discourse between the young married couple. His elderly heart was moved with pity for the lady, and yet his natural sympathies were more with his son. He could identify with and understand Raoul's desires and duties, and the pitiful plight that they had put him in.

All was quiet in the somber, stony bed chamber, except for the woman's heartbroken sobs. The old count stepped forward.

"My dear girl," he whispered softly, his dry voice cracking a little. Lady Mahtilde raised her tearstained face, as her father-in-law laid a kind hand upon her shoulder.

"When I was Raoul's age, I too joined the ranks of the Crusaders and fought in the Holy Wars. My own mother was sore at heart, but when I returned, victorious and covered with honors, both my parents were overjoyed beyond measure."

Lady Mahtilde said nothing, but she had also stopped weeping. Her father-in-law then took on a graver, yet gentle air.

"You must understand your husband's duty," urged Sir Gerard. "He does it, not heartlessly, but *driven* by his love - his love for God, for his Faith, for his country, and even for *you*." This seemed hard to believe, but the old Count insisted.

"Surely, lady, your husband could not see his king lead this expedition and remain behind. Is that the sort of lord and husband, you would wish to call your own? A man who shirks his duty and flees danger. Would you then wish him to remain safely home on this estate to reap nothing but shame and dishonor?"

The room was still. Gravely still. The earnest questions put by the elderly knight received nothing but a sigh from the disconsolate Mahtilde. All remained silent, and the lovely lady of Crequy made no initiative to reply.

And yet, in his wife's silence, Lord Raoul permitted himself to hope. His father had spoken truly, and yet in light of his duties, Raoul could not bare the thought of leaving his beloved wife in such a state. With his eyes fixed upon her thoughtful expression, he watched her lower her head. *Please*, he prayed. *Please, God fill her with your strength. You know I will not leave with peace or courage if she has none.*



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Count Gerard too was watching Lady Mahtilde's thoughtful face. Lowering his own eyes, he spoke his final and, in fact, most significant point:

"God wills it."

Raoul's eyes turned to his father. Hearing those three words, solemnly spoken by the aged Crusader, Raoul realized more keenly than ever, the significance of that phrase. "God Will's It!" - the marching order and battle cry of the Crusades - had been echoed by many a knight, pope, and even Saint. Dawning the garb of a Crusader meant that Raoul would be fighting not merely a patriotic battle for his country, but a holy war for God Himself.

The earnest thoughts of the young knight were gently but suddenly interrupted by a quiet whisper:

"God wills it."

Raoul turned. The voice was his wife's, though he scarcely recognized it. It was strong. Her weeping and trembling tone had been replaced by a steady calmness. Slowly, she raised her sorrowful face from her hands. With her eyes still downcast, Lady Mahtilde said:

"God wills it... And so will I. I have no intention or desire to go against what He wants." She paused, idly pulling back a loose strand of hair. "I know He only would ask what is best. And so no matter how - " Her voice trembled, and she caught herself. Raoul stepped forward, his hand outstretched to her, but she did not see him. "And so," she continued. "No matter how hard it may be for me, I give my consent."

Speaking quickly, lest she changed her mind, Lady Mahtilde finished and looked up just as Lord Raoul approached her. Her eyes met his, and smiling through her tears, she said:

"Go with God."

By now though, the young lord had already caught her up into his arms, pressing her head against his grateful heart.

Count Gerard looked on, smiling. Then, with a modest nod, he quietly took his leave; hearing as he did so, the gentle tones of the weeping lady:

"Go with God.. and my love and prayers."

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All too quickly did the precious days pass, and before long the dreaded moment had come when Sir Raoul and his fellow Crusaders were to leave. Also joining him were his own two brothers, Roger and Godfrey, with twenty-seven squires following in their company.

As was permissibly custom, the Lady of Crequy and the aged Count Gerard accompanied the knights to their place of departure. But when the terrible moment of separation arrived, the lady, despite her resignation, could not refrain from weeping bitterly.

Lord Raoul, keenly pained to see her suffer from such grief, took her by the hand.

“Mahtilde,...” he ventured softly.

“Oh Raoul, I cannot bear it,” she wept inconsolably.

“Do not ask me to stay,” Raoul interjected quickly, his voice as helpless as her own.

“No I could not. I gave my word, that you may keep yours.” Her words were strong, but her tone was heartbreaking. “I could bear it perhaps, if I knew somehow you would return. That you would be safe. But even then...” her words trailed off as the tears returned. “Is it weak of me to love you so?”

Though her husband displayed no demonstrative grief, the Lady Mahtilde would little have guessed the sorrow that was wrenching his heart. The nobility of soul that young Raoul was blessed with - in no way deprived him of the tender emotions that courage and valor seem to suppress. And it was, in fact, his compassion that wrought the greater agony in his heart, than any battle wound or terror could inflict.

Audibly, Sir Raoul sighed and, inwardly, he prayed.

“My love,” he said at last. “My Mahtilde.” He gently took her other hand, preventing her from covering her eyes, which perforce put a pause to her tears.

“My Mahtilde,” he said “If you are to be my *Mahaut* - my strength in battle - you must open your heart to the courage I know God will pour into your soul. But you must ask... and let Him.”

The lady said nothing. Sir Raoul, looking down at her hands, took a gentle hold of her wedding ring. Lady Mahtilde watched him as he slowly removed the precious jewelry from her finger and then, to her mild confusion, broke it in half.

Keeping one part himself, he returned the other half to her. Holding his piece of the ring with one hand, and with the other, grasping the hand of his dear spouse, Sir Raoul looked deep into her eyes.

“This half of the ring, “ he said “ which was blessed at our marriage, I will always keep as a true and loyal husband. And when I return from my pilgrimage I will give you back this pledge of my constancy.” His voice was so strong and confident, and yet burning with such emotion, that the Lady Mahtilde felt he was leaving also one half of his heart. She felt at last, though her eyes streamed with tears, that God’s strength would stay with her, while His voice called her husband.

Still holding her hand, Sir Raoul led her to his father, and besought him to love and cherish her as his own daughter. Sir Gerard would never have refused this request of his good son, and promised to care for her. The old count then took the weeping lady into his own arms and embraced her. Then, Sir Raoul knelt before him, saying:

“Dear sir, and father, that my days may be blessed and happy, give my your blessing; and may your good desires and fruitful prayers accompany me on my journey.”

Spreading his aged hands over the brow of his noble son, the loving father invoked the blessing of God upon him.

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“Almighty Lord,” said he, “bless my son in this war, which he undertakes in Your Holy Name.” He paused a moment, in which only the braying of horses and tears of the lady could be heard. Sir Raoul did not rise though, for his father, with renewed and inspired fervor, continued his blessing:

“And you, dearest Virgin Mary, our Sovereign Lady, be his guardian! Protect him from danger, and bring him back without blemish to his native land.”

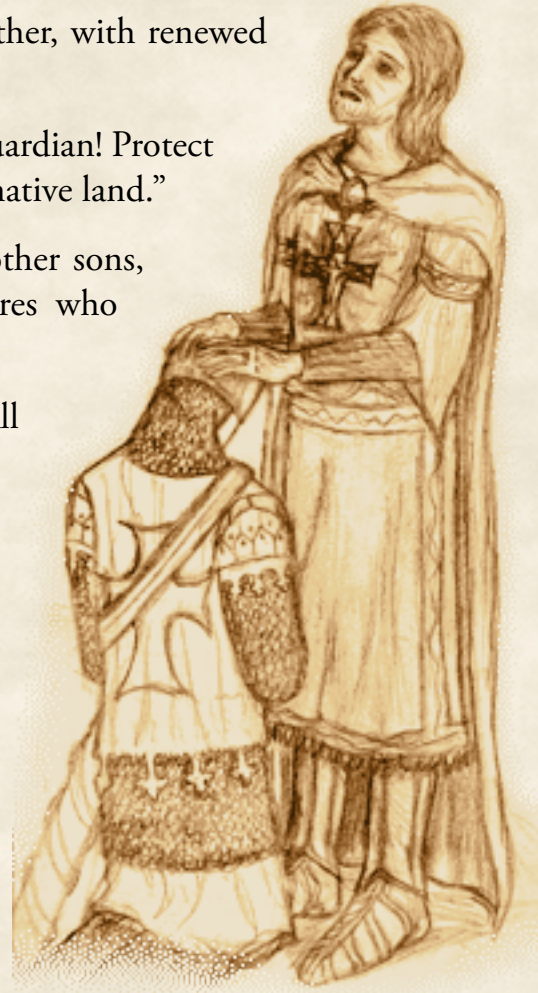
After thus blessing Sir Raoul, Sir Gerard also blessed his other sons, and embraced them. He similarly bid farewell to the squires who accompanied them.

The Crusaders then turned and leapt on their horses. All waited. A melancholy and yet anticipatory silence hung in the air.

This was soon broken by the clear ringing of clarions and trumpets which announced the time had come. With a last look at his beloved wife and father, Sir Raoul raised his sword and signaled the men. Immediately, the troop of knights and horses set forth on their way, preceded by a herald who bore the standard of the cross.

“Never,” say the ballads of the day, “was seen such a host of noble, gentle, and valiant youths.”

They rode hard, for the main army was in advance by several day’s march. God’s speed was with them though, and Lord Raoul and his companions soon had joined the others.



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“Raoul! Roger!” A distant voice came hurrying toward a certain Crusader tent. “Brothers!” Sir Godfrey exclaimed, rushing in. “Here you are!”

“Shh!” Sir Roger cried instinctively. He glanced at the reclining figure of his older brother Raoul. “Not so loud,” Roger muttered, sitting up himself.

Sir Godfrey looked at their older brother. “What? Is he sleeping?”

“Not any more, Godfrey.” Sir Raoul smiled without stirring.

“No, he has not slept,” assured young Roger.

Godfrey grinned. “Daydreaming again, is it? On the battlefield already?”

“Don’t you know Raoul by now, brother?” Sir Roger stretched. “He is back in Crequy.”

The knight in question looked down at a worn bag around his neck. “Part of me never left there,” he admitted.

Sir Godfrey nodded understandingly, “Thinking of Mahtilde again?”

“Praying, dear brother.” Sir Raoul emptied the little bag into his hand. “My thoughts alone would profit her little.”

Sir Roger leaned on his side. “You still worry for her?” he asked, looking down at the fragment of the ring in Raoul’s hand. His mind went back to the day of departure. “You fear she is still rapt in grief.”

Without a sound, Sir Raoul pressed the half-ring to his lips. “I pray for her,” he said simply, slipping the ring back into its bag.

“You wonder how she is taking it all?” asked Sir Godfrey.

Raoul nodded. “I cannot help it,” he confessed. “But I entrust her to Our Lady and leave the rest to God. He wills this sorrow now, that He may reward her later.”

“And what if He wills a respite?” Sir Godfrey strove to keep a casual tone. “What if some of the reward comes in advance?”

“Do you have something in mind, Godfrey?” Raoul asked, half-smiling.

In answer, Sir Godfrey held up a rough looking, thin rectangular pouch.

“What is that?” asked Roger, sitting up. But Godfrey’s keen eyes were fixed upon the young lord of Crequy - whose astute mind was rapidly surmising the envelope’s contents.

“Godfrey! Can it be?” Raoul exclaimed.

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Satisfied with his surprise, Godfrey announced proudly “It just came by an express messenger from Crequy. See for yourself,” he said, handing the letter over to Raoul. “I would have opened it already, but there is the trivial detail that it is addressed to you first.”

“*And* it is from Mahtilde,” Roger shot an amused smile at Godfrey, who returned it with the correction:

“*And* it is from our father.”

In those days long past, correspondence was not a frequent or easy matter. Every letter that safely made it to its destination was a precious thing indeed. And in the several months that he had been away, Raoul and his brothers had already traveled over 2,000 miles from their home. They were at present temporarily stationed at the port of Satalia (in modern day Turkey). Keenly aware of the distance that lay between him and his beloved wife, the Lord of Crequy felt the bitter pang of separation. Grateful beyond words for this extraordinary surprise, Sir Raoul calmly, yet eagerly, read the letter.

His brothers, however, could not hear his thoughts and young Roger fidgeted impatiently.

“Well for goodness sake, aren’t you going to read it?”

“Aloud,” clarified Godfrey.

But it was as if Raoul did not hear them. Just the sight of his dear wife’s handwriting was enough to carry the young count back to Crequy. In his heart, Raoul was home. And he could almost hear Mahtilde’s gentle voice as she penned the words he read.

Hopeless now of getting his older brother’s attention, Roger sighed disappointedly. “Well will you at least tell us if Father is still alive?”

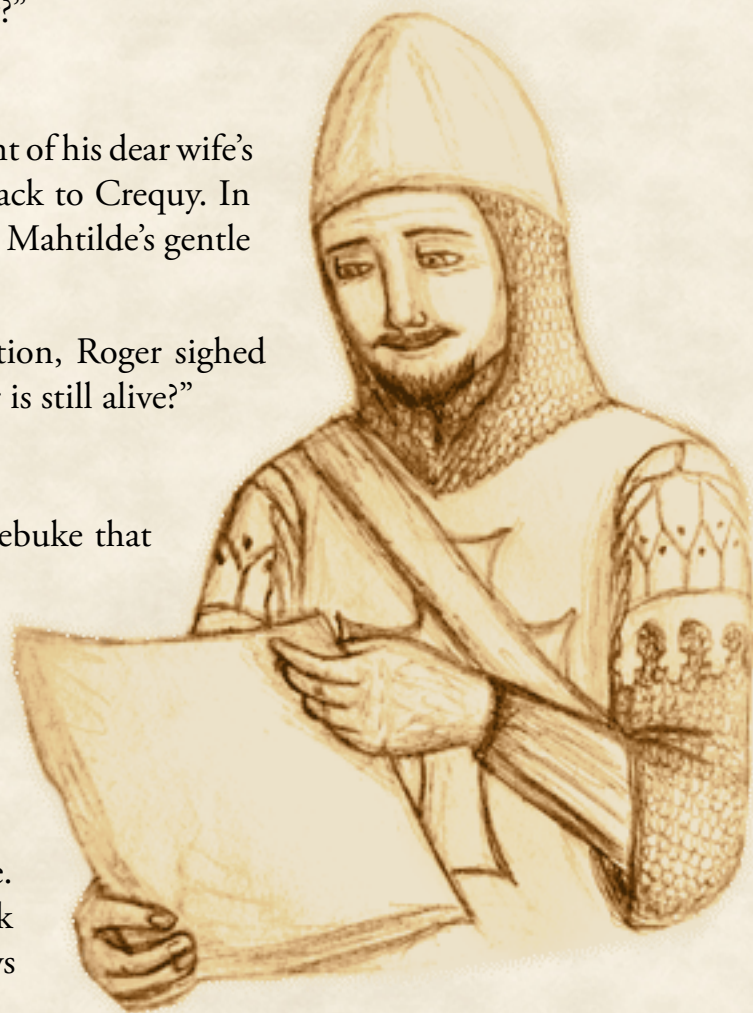
“Hush now, Roger, let Raoul read.”

Contrary to his intention, it was Godfrey’s mild rebuke that shook Raoul from his thoughts.

“Oh, I’m so sorry brothers. Here, let me see. . . .” He looked further down the letter. “Yes father is doing well. His spirits are high and strong. He feels youthful and glad, for his thoughts are always with us. And also because. . . .” His voice trailed off, as his widened eyes swiftly scanned the rest of the sentence. His poor brothers’ curiosity was insatiable, but the look on Raoul’s face was enough to dispel any fear. The news could only be good.

“Blessed be God!” Raoul cried out at last. “I am a father!”

Instantly, Godfrey snatched the letter from his brother’s hand.



“My dear Raoul!” exclaimed Roger exuberantly. “I congratulate you! Tell me, is it a boy or girl?”

“A son,” Raoul said, his face beaming as only a new father’s can. “I have a son.”

“And his name is Baudouin,” read Godfrey.

“Is it?” Raoul turned around with a smile.

“What!” Roger was most displeased. “Mahtilde named your son after our worthless younger brother?”

“Roger!” cried Raoul. “What on earth makes you say a such a thing?”

“What should I say? How else do you describe the only coward in our family?”

“Roger, that’s enough.” Raoul insisted. “It isn’t true.”

“Well then why is he not here with us? There’s no good reason for him to have not taken up arms. Why did he stay home?” The words came out with evident vexation and frustration.

Raoul did not answer at once. “Baudouin is young...” he began slowly.

“And we are not?”

“Now, Roger,” Godfrey interjected, “I’m sure Father had a great deal to do with naming Raoul’s boy. You know the place Baudouin has in his heart.”

“Perhaps,” admitted Roger. “He is almost as bad as Raoul in such things. But then, I am sure that Mahtilde raised no objection! She knows how Raoul would feel about it.”

“And she is absolutely right!” said Raoul. “I look forward to when I kiss the brow of my own baby Baudouin.”

“I note they did not name him after me,” Godfrey looked teasingly at his older brother.

Raoul turned and smiled. “I plan on having more than one son, brother.”

But Roger would not yield the disagreement and he murmured aloud to himself. “I still find the whole business disgraceful.”

“My dear Roger,” Raoul’s words took on a tone of irony. “The way you talk of our young brother back home, one would think you were jealous of him. Would you like to go back and join him?”

“Jealous! Join him?” Raoul’s sarcasm had had its desired effect and Roger was quite indignant. “I am disgusted! It’s dishonorable to our family name!”

“Ah, now there,” Raoul said calmly, “That is your mistake, Roger.”

Finding himself without a prompt reply, Roger was glad that Godfrey intervened.

“Come now, Raoul and Roger!” cried Godfrey, taking hold of the conversation. Grasping the letter

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in one hand, he set the other firmly on Raoul's shoulder. "This is a wondrous occasion! Can I not share the great news with our friends, dear brother?"

Raoul smiled. "Please, Godfrey, but of course! There is indeed much to celebrate... and be grateful for." This last comment was added with a glance at young Sir Roger. The begrudged knight caught the look, and said nothing as Godfrey hurried off with the letter in hand.

"What did you mean by that, Raoul?" Roger asked. In answer, the young lord held out his hand.

"You forget that we are the ones to be envied, Roger." Raoul pulled the knight to his feet. "If Baudouin chose not to join us, his lot is to be pitied not scorned. Who knows but that God did *not* call him to the task He has for us?"

"Now how would you know that?" Roger was skeptical at his brother's kindness.

Raoul shrugged his shoulders. "I cannot know for sure. But it is not for us to judge that. Our only peace should come in doing God's Will *ourselves*. We cannot let the faults or even the failures of others to destroy our good will. If our hearts are pure, what have we to fear?"

The younger knight found truth in the elder one's words. But disappointment was clearly still written on his face.

"I doubt that Baudouin could do *anything* to displease you. You love him so!"

Raoul, taking the intended complaint as a compliment, shook Roger by the shoulder. "I trust that I would feel the same for any of my brothers." He stopped and looked past his brother. A smile spread across his face in anticipation, as the sound of proud and congratulating friends and lords was drawing near. Roger heard them too and, with a grin, headed towards the growing commotion. Raoul followed.

"Besides, Roger," he said, slapping him playfully on the back, "one *can* still love and be displeased with the same person."

Roger smiled. "However unlikely it may be." He was calmer now, as the sting of his anger had passed. He now began to feel foolish for casting a shadow on so joyous an occasion. How could he complain in the face of such a blessing? As they drew near to their fast approaching friends, one question yet remained in Roger's mind. With a slight nudge, he whispered to his brother.

"What were you talking about before, Raoul? What was my 'mistake'?"

With a discreet bow, the young lord of Crequy, returned the whisper. "Your focus on shame and disgrace. We are here for *God's* honor, not ours." Raoul answered. Then with a look at once both grave and tender, he nodded. "Remember that, little brother."

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The days that followed were truly joyful ones for the brothers of Crequy. The wonderful news from Mahtilde of the birth of Raoul's son was the cause of great rejoicing and celebration among the

knight and his friends. Nothing, it seemed, could steal this happiness from him. With a beloved family awaiting his return, Raoul was prepared to face anything. But he could not have imagined what was waiting to face him...

Shortly after the message from Crequy had reached its lord, the Crusaders continued on their journey to the Holy Land. It was January, 1148, and the French, with hopes of refreshing their supplies, were headed for the city of Laodicea. On this journey they were forced to travel through the tall barrier mountains which cut between the regions of Phrygia and Pisidia. And it was in these deadly and perilous paths that the Crusaders were dealt a mortal blow by the enemy. The Saracens, constantly lurking and following their every move, had seized upon this occasion to trap them in the mountains' treacherous ravines. It was during that terrible ambush which befell the unsuspecting Crusaders, that many a man's life was taken or changed forever.

In this sudden battle that ensued, Sir Raoul headed a small band of lords and knights. In addition to his own brothers and esquires, he was followed by two small military units which were led by the lords of Breteuil and Varennes. These three companies together numbered only a hundred lances.

Spying a narrow path that could lead them to safety, Sir Raoul spurred his horse towards the passageway.

"Hurry!" he called out, as he rode ahead.

The other companies followed, with both speed and stealth. But had the brave men seen the hoards of Saracens that littered the mountains peaks, scrambling into attack positions - they would have known without a doubt that escape was hopeless.

One by one, the Crusaders entered the pass. And in the heights above, their enemy crouched and crawled out of sight... waiting. Slowly, the Saracens reached for their arrows, eyeing their unsuspecting prey far below. As they watched the last of the Catholic knights pass between the mountain walls, they silently drew their bows.

Then, without warning, they let fall their shower of death.

A sudden cry and confusion rose up among the Crusaders.

"My lord Raoul!" a squire cried. "What is happening?"

Sir Raoul raised his armored head towards the cliffs. "The Saracens!" he cried. "They're in the mountains!"

"What?"

"We are trapped!"

"There's no way out!"

Sir Raoul's determined eyes looked to the end of the passage. They were indeed trapped. Death lay at every side. But if they could reach the other end, they would escape the mountains' grasp, and even



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bring warning of this ambush to the other Crusaders that were ahead. It was the only way.

“Forward!” Sir Raoul cried out. “For your lives! Make haste!”

It all happened so rapidly. In only a manner of moments, the Crusaders found themselves fleeing from a deadly ambush, with men falling at every side. But, encouraged by the example of the young lord of Crequy, every lord, knight and squire fought manfully to gain the passage. And each soul prayed as never before, for every man knew that he may not live to see the other side. Many of them were, indeed, correct.

Roger and Godfrey were two brave men among many who pressed on with their brother. Arrow after arrow struck them brutally, and the relentless Saracens did not cease shooting until the knights' stricken bodies could take nothing more. They fell mortally wounded, along with twenty of the squires who accompanied them to the pass.

The remaining Catholics would not pull back. Although they saw nothing but death before them, they earnestly pressed forward.

God's ways are not our own, and to the human eye, the whole venture would appear miserably in vain. For in the encounter, besides Raoul's two brothers, the lords of Breteuil, Varennes, Montjoy, Maumey, Brimen, Bauraing, Esseike, Mesgrigny, Sempey, and Suresnes perished; and many a beardless youth lay stretched upon the ground.

The Lord of Crequy, breaking his gaze from the pass' end, glanced anxiously at his men.

“Dear God,” he prayed, when he beheld with dismay how few men yet walked with him. His eyes fell too upon his dead brothers.

“Godfrey! Roger!” he cried. Another arrow came whizzing by and penetrated his shoulder. But it may as well have struck his heart - so pierced was he with grief. Shutting his eyes, he commended their noble souls to God. As martyrs, his brothers were already enjoying the joys of Heaven. But as Raoul stood there, bleeding, exhausted, and filled with grieving fear for his men, death took on a more earthly and dreadful countenance.

Yet, as a man of high and undaunted valour, Sir Raoul would not give in. Raising his sword on high, he summoned the courage of his surviving men.

Invoking our Lady's aid, with the same desperate perseverance with which he fought, the lord of Crequy led the Crusaders to their only hope and escape.

One of the Saracens peered over the jagged cliff's edge. They had nearly finished off the miserable squall of Catholics. But his dark eyes were drawn to their staunch - and stubborn - leader. The obstinate knight was already riddled with arrows, and yet he not only stood tall, but he hastened to the pass' end. Raising his bow, the Saracen pulled back an arrow. With a few moments he aimed for the brave man's heart. The next moment, the arrow was sent flying to its victim.

“Forward, men! To the end!” Raoul had cried, his sword in hand. But as his men looked on, the

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young lord of Crequy was struck with his fatal and final blow. Collapsing under his wounds, Sir Raoul fell lifeless to the earth.

As their leader fell, so too did the courage of the remaining Crusaders. The cry “Sir Raoul has fallen!” went up like the voice of doom, and the seven knights who still yet breathed life, turned back and fled.

Later, When they at last came bursting into the army camp, the seven knights announced their sad disaster. But they discovered that theirs was not the only tragedy. Countless others, caught in the perilous mountains, had been slaughtered and wounded by the ferocious infidels. But, by a mercy and miracle of God, King Louis the Young had survived and the French army regrouped.

While every soldier suffered the loss of a loved one or friend, they overcame their defeat, and continued bravely and courageously on their Crusade.

But the further successes and victories of the French Crusaders could not bring back their valiant dead. And as was possible, various messengers were dispatched to carry the dreadful news to the appropriate relations.

Such a courier sadly made his long way to the solitary northern city of Crequy. With a heavy heart, he rode across the castle moat, knowing full well the grief that he brought with him.

An excited maid rushed into the Lady Mahtilde’s chambers.

“Come quick, my lady!” she cried breathlessly. “There is a herald waiting in the hall for you.” An instinctive smile spread across the young maiden’s face. “He looks like he comes from the crusades. Oh my lady, he may bring news from the Lord Raoul!”

The Lady of Crequy clasped her hands with joy. “An answer to my letter! Here,” she nodded towards the infant’s cradle. “Watch little Baudouin, will you?”

Her father-in-law, the Count Gerard, was already waiting for her in the hall. To her eye, he was stooping a little, but she could not see his face. She thought little of it though, as she sought out the courier.

“You have news, good sir?” she asked the messenger. Her gentle voice echoed in the somber hall. “You bring news from my husband, Lord Raoul of Crequy?”

The messenger glanced awkwardly at the count, whose face remained downcast. Seeing himself thus



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alone in his dreadful duty, the courier looked back at the expectant lady. Being what he hoped was gentle, he said at last “Not *from* him... But of him, my lady.”

The lady’s charming smile was replaced by an inquisitive look.

“*Of* him?” she asked. Her voice did not yet falter - for whatever possibilities ran through her mind, nothing could have prepared the Lady Mahtilde for what she next would hear.

The courier stood tall and faced her squarely.

“Your lord was slain in battle, my lady,” he said. “Sir Raoul is dead.”

In a single moment, both terror and grief swelled up to consume her soul. Their torment was brief though, for the bitter and violent shock instantly sent the poor widow to the ground in a dead faint.

Several servants immediately rushed to their lady’s aid. Sir Gerard himself endeavored to help her, but he himself could barely stand. Stumbling back, he clutched at a chair.

“And Sirs Godfrey and Roger?” he forced himself to ask.

“Both perished, good Sir,” was the dreaded response.

“Oh no,” the old count whispered. “Say that it is not so.”

“Only seven survived the terrible ambush,” the courier went on to tell. “But you should have heard what they saw. None were more valiant than the three brothers of Crequy! And the Lord Raoul was the bravest of them all - leading them on in the face of the danger...” The courier continued the tragic tale, expounding for the grieving father the last moments of his precious sons’ lives.

He went on to describe every detail of the fateful scene up until the very moment when the seven knights fled the battle. Barely escaping with their lives, the Crusaders’ narrative ended... but for the victorious Saracens, the story continued, as they triumphantly watched their enemies flee.

Remaining masters of the field, the Saracens did not bother to chase down those few petty survivors. Instead, carefully descending the rocky slopes, they came down from their perch and began looting the defeated dead. Like spiders surveying their catch, the Saracens spread out among the fallen Catholics and scoured for anything of value.

One archer in particular hurried towards the body of the lead knight. *It was my arrow that struck him down*, he thought *I shall get first say on his bounty*.

Eagerly searching his lordly victim, the Saracen found a little bag hanging around the knight’s neck. Snatching it off, the short man emptied its contents into his dark hand. With some disappointment, he held up a small piece of jewelry. Though it appeared to be broken, the plundering Saracen merely shrugged his shoulders.

“Better than nothing,” he said to himself. “Though I would expect more...” He reached down again towards the knight, but then suddenly stopped short. Something had caught his eye.

“Wha-?” he said aloud. “What is that?” Rubbing his eyes lest they had deceived him, the short infidel looked around.

“Come here!” he cried out to a fellow Saracen. “Look what I found!” The strain in his voice hurried his comrade’s steps.

“What is it?” this second archer asked, “What have you found? Is it the king of France?”

“Oh stop it, no!” the archer snapped; then pointing to the coat of arms, “Although he is a great lord.”

“And what has the dead dog got on him?” his companion continued. Spotting the broken ring, he laughed. “That’s all? That has gotten you so excited?”

“No!” the archer now grabbed the bleeding shoulder of the fallen knight. With a heavy shove, he rolled the Crusader over onto his back. The other Saracen shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, I don’t know him,” was his sarcastic reply.

The short archer, although in no mood for such humor, kept a proud and calm composure. “Then take a *good* look at him.”

Obediently, the Saracen leaned forward and peered at the young knight’s face. Then he suddenly stepped back and looked at his short friend. “Did he just...?”

The archer had a sinister smile. “Give him another look.” Both Saracens then turned towards the fallen Crusader.

“He is breathing.” the short captor said proudly. His friend nodded in disbelief.

There was no doubt about it. *The Lord of Crequy was still alive!*

# CHAPTER 3

It was with an anxious yet measured stride that a young maidservant hurried down the hollow, somber halls of the Crequy Castle. There was no reason for fear, yet the very air in that grief-sticken abode breathed of a silent and menacing doom.

Making her way through the familiar corridors, the maid at last came to the bedchamber of her mistress. Raising her hand to knock on the ornate door, she hesitated. Quietly placing her veiled head against the wood, she listened. Nothing. At least, not what she was listening for. During those bitter days, the servants strove to never come upon the Lady Mahtilde while she was grieving.

With a gentle rap against the door, the maid called out to her ladyship. The natural reply came from within, and the young servant entered the room.

The bedroom was dimly lit, for the window was closed and shuttered to keep out the cold winter air, leaving the fire in the hearth as the only light. Her ladyship's sitting chair was naturally very close to the warm flames. But the maid was surprised to find the chair empty, and Lady Mahtilde instead sitting beside it on the stone floor.



The reason was self evident though, for the tender mother was huddled against an elaborately decorated crib nestled by the fireplace. With her head resting upon the little cradle, Mahtilde slowly rocked it. Her damp eyes were closed, but the maid could not see them, for the widow's face was obscured by a dark, yet partially transparent veil, which was evidently thrust into service at the sound of the door-knock. At the sight of her chambermaid, though, the lady partly raised it.

“My lady?” the girl stepped forward with a slight bow. “Am I disturbing you?”

“Hardly.” Mahtilde responded, sitting up with a smile. “I was just singing my little love to sleep. I fear I may have joined him.”

“Then I awoke you.” The maid sighed disappointedly.

“No,” the lady assured her with a touch of sadness, “I enjoy no real rest.”

A brief but uneasy pause followed, and then, with

another bow, the servant relayed her message.

“I was sent to inform you, my lady, of the arrival of the Lord of Renty.”

“The Lord of Renty?” Mahtilde rose to her feet.

“His business, he said, took him near Crequy and so he has stopped by the castle to inquire about your ladyship. He also brought some food and things for the old count.”

“How kind of him. And he is still here?”

“Yes,” the girl bowed. “He hoped to see you. But he said that if it were inconvenient to be graced by your presence, he would readily take his leave.”

Lady Mahtilde nodded understandingly. The Lord of Renty was one of Sir Raoul’s good and dear friends. Though all consolation was fruitless to her, his sincere sympathies and dependable friendship were a sure support in this difficult time. Of course she would go see him.

Leaving her handmaid to watch the infant Baudouin, Lady Mahtilde went straightway to the Great Hall.

When she arrived, she found her dear friend standing in wait.

“Lady Mahtilde” he said, reaching out. “You came.”

“As did you.” Mahtilde smiled graciously, as the knight kissed her hand. “You are kind to think of us, sir.”

“Neither you nor Sir Gerard leave my mind,” the lord assured her. “I hear his health is failing.”

Mahtilde lowered her face. “Yes,” she admitted. “Every day he grows worse. Ever since that... dreadful day.” Slowly, she raised a soiled kerchief to her eyes. “He has never been the same.”

At the sight of the poor lady’s tears, the knight’s hand instinctively went for her shoulder.

“Nothing has,” he said quietly, looking sadly at the young widow. Several painful moments passed, as he sought for a word or thought that could ease her sorrow. But in such grief, there is little that brings comfort. Nevertheless, there was an overwhelming urge within him, almost a need, to console... and even protect the Lady Mahtilde from her sorrow.

At last the words, simple though sincere, came.

“My lady,” he said. “You have suffered a terrible blow. Never has there been so noble a man as Raoul, and therefore never has there been such a loss.”

Through her mourning veil, the Lord of Renty saw Lady Mahtilde raise her eyes.

“You carry a heavy burden, Mahtilde” he said solemnly, “If there is ever anything I can do to help you, I implore you to tell me.”

Before Mahtilde could assure him of her gratitude, their conversation was interrupted.

### CHAPTER 3

“Sir Baudouin is here, my Lady!” A young courier announced briskly, entering the Hall.

“Baudouin?” Mahtilde asked, her face lighting up at the name of her dear husband’s brother. “Please, show him in.”

With a curt bow, the herald left the room.

“I shall not detain you, Mahtilde,” the Lord of Renty said, graciously excusing himself. “Please give my best to the count Sir Gerard.”

“I will, my dear friend.” the lady extended her hand. “You do more good than you know.”

The noble lord took the delicate hand and pressed it to his lips. “I only beg, good lady,” he looked now into her eyes, “that you remember me when the burden becomes too heavy to carry alone.”

Deeply affected, a gentle nod was her silent, yet significant reply.

When the Lord of Renty had gone, Lady Mahtilde had little time to wait for her brother-in-law.

“Baudouin!” she cried, her hands extended out at the sight of him. And a smile, the brightest yet to have graced her lips in many days, spread across her lovely face. “It is so good to see you.”

“And you, Mahtilde,” the young man embraced her cordially. “It is good to see your pretty smile.”

Another one followed his compliment, and the lady led him to a table. Motioning to a passing maid, Mahtilde ordered some wine to be brought for Sir Baudouin.

“Don’t trouble yourself, Mahtilde.” he interjected. The lady of the castle ignored his protest and sent the servant off.

“You must be tired,” she insisted, sitting down beside him. “It certainly is a surprise to see you here,” she began pleasantly.

But Baudouin took a defensive tone. “What do you mean? You act as if nothing had happened! Of course I should come here. Why wouldn’t I?” He eyed her impatiently.

Mahtilde turned away, hurt. “I am sorry, Baudouin,” she said sincerely, “I meant no harm.”

Her brother-in-law, seemingly affected by her sorry countenance, took her hand. “Neither did I, Mahtilde,” he said, his voice soothing and compassionate. “And I am sorry. It is just that...”

Mahtilde quietly met his somber gaze. He stuttered a moment.

“How - How is father?” he asked, coming to the dreadful subject at once. The lovely lady frowned.

“Very poorly,” she admitted, standing up. “He has not enjoyed an hour’s good health from the moment he heard the dreadful news.”

“And nothing helps him?” His tone was more inquiring than compassionate.

“He has been tended to by the most learned physicians.” Mahtilde wrung her hands impatiently. “I’m just afraid...” tears welled up in her eyes. “You cannot heal a broken heart.”

“And yet he does not seem to die,” was the sullen response.

Mahtilde softly turned towards her brother-in-law. His set face betrayed a great deal of thought and anxiety, and the tender woman’s heart went out to him. Submerged in her own grief, everything was viewed in a compassionate light.

Baudouin remained silent though till the servant girl returned with the wine.

“Will you join me, Mahtilde?” he asked, breaking out of his sudden mood.

“No. Thank you, Baudouin.” she said sadly.

“But you must have something,” he insisted.

Mahtilde simply shook her head. Then, drying her eyes, she said, “I must go and tell Gerard you have come! He will be so glad to see you.”

“Gently, though, Mahtilde,” he cautioned. “He is very weak. And I would not startle him.”

Mahtilde nodded mournfully. Then, with a sudden smile, Baudouin tactfully broke the melancholy.

“Tell me, how is my nephew?” he asked.

“Oh your little namesake?” the lady smiled through her tears. “He is my only consolation in this nightmare. And, thanks be to God, his health is excellent. Would you not say so?” Mahtilde now turned to the maid standing in wait.

“Oh yes, my lady!” the girl heartily agreed, glad to join in some cheer. “The little Lord of Crequy is doing manfully well!” she said proudly. Her mistress, however, gave her a sharp look.

“Pray do not call him that!” Mahtilde said quickly.

The young servant reddened. “Very good, my lady.”

Then, with a weak smile, Mahtilde added, “Not yet.”

An uncomfortable silence ensued. At length, Mahtilde excused herself with the repeated offer of telling Sir Gerard of his son’s arrival. When she had gone, Baudouin turned curiously to the maidservant.

“What did the Lady Mahtilde mean by that?” he asked, with a strange look on his face.

“Oh. Well,” the girl awkwardly picked up the wine jug and went to fill Baudouin’s emptied glass. “It’s just that... well, her ladyship refuses to believe her husband’s death.”

“I see...” Baudouin reached for his wine. “Perhaps such illusions are the only thing that can sustain her in such grief.” He sipped his wine.



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"I - I am sure that is so, good Sir," the maid stuttered in agreement.

"Still," the young man set down his glass. "It is a foolish hope to flatter herself with. The Lord of Crequy is dead."

Then, with a look and a tone whose subtleties were lost upon the simple maidservant, Sir Baudouin added thoughtfully, "And it is a foolish title to bestow upon an infant."

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It was a dark and ominous sleep from which Lord Raoul awoke. Slowly, almost painfully, consciousness returned to him. His waking thoughts came gradually, as his mind began to grasp the reality that he was still alive. Thinking back through the hazy darkness, Raoul recalled his last memories in the dreadful mountain pass: the sudden ambush, the surrounding enemy, and the merciless slaughter of his men. His heart fell as he remembered the death of his brothers, riddled with so many arrows. But then, Raoul looked back upon his last memory, when that final arrow had struck him, casting him to the ground. He assuredly should have died. And yet, he clearly still lived.

*How was I rescued?* he wondered. Lying on his back, he saw only the roof of his abode. For many months he had lived in tents and their interior was indeed familiar to him. But to Raoul there was something in this mistily lit tent that made him uneasy.

A sudden pain in his head broke his thoughts and brought home to him the reality of his wounds. Uncomfortable though he was, Raoul could feel that his wounds had been bandaged. Instinctively reaching towards his forehead, the young knight heard a sound that made his blood run cold.

It was the heavy and hard clank of the chains fastened to his arm.

Raoul had been captured.

A flood of questions and fears rushed through his anxious mind. Where was he? How long had he been caught? What had happened to his fellow Crusaders? Or the rest of the Catholic Army? Why had his enemies saved his life? What did they want with him?

Shutting his eyes, Raoul strove to calm himself. *Blessed Lady*, he prayed, *Holy Virgin Mary, I am in your hands. Strengthen me. Protect me.* A dreadful thought broke through his prayers. What if the Saracens had healed him so as to kill him? Raoul had heard many a tragic tale of captured Crusaders who had been tortured to deny their Catholic Faith and accept the Muslim religion of the Saracens. Those who refused were martyred, but often only after enduring the most excruciating pains.

*Dear God*, the Crusader whispered inaudibly. *Please save me from my enemies - and Thine.* Then with a sudden conviction and grace, he added, *But not as I will. Thy will be done.*

A strange sound caused him to turn his head. It was a little slave boy, who had wandered into the tent on an errand. Glancing at the captive knight, his young eyes widened. He turned on his heels and hurried out, shouting something that the Frenchman could not understand.

As Raoul watched, a stout looking Saracen stepped into the tent, with the little slave at his side.

“You are awake at last,” the Saracen beamed. “I almost feared you would not live. It would have been a pitiful waste of my money. But you are young and strong. Surely Allah was protecting you,” he nodded proudly. Then, looking at his prisoner’s face, he realized that the knight could not understand him.

“You do not speak Syriac?” the Muslim asked. Receiving no answer, he motioned for his slave to translate.

Hearing the question in French, Raoul answered him by shaking his head.

“It is not important,” the Saracen said, speaking a little French. “The important thing is that my new slave is alive.”

Speaking again in Syriac, the Arabian began asking Raoul many questions. All of them were translated by the boy, and Raoul in response gave the essential details of who he was and where he had come from. Yes, he was a lord - Sir Raoul of Crequy, France. And he had domain over its lands, as well as the neighboring provinces of Fressin.

His master seemed very pleased at what he heard and the boy, in turn, briefly explained to the prisoner how it had happened that Raoul was caught, captured and sold. It was confirmed, to Raoul’s distress, that he had been the only survivor of the ambush. Raoul also learned that for several days he had been unconscious, due to loss of blood from the wounds inflicted by the Saracen archers. It was likewise Saracens, skilled in the medical fields, that had tended to and healed his near fatal injuries. But why?

“A ransom!” Raoul’s master spoke the French himself. “I will win a great ransom for you, Crusader!”

So saying, he approached the cot on which his lordly prisoner lay chained. As best as he could, Raoul attempted to sit up. Then, without a word, the Saracen held out a proud hand for the Crusader to kiss.

A strange feeling came over the young lord. Here he lay bound and wounded, while his enemy, without even a noble rank, was humbling Raoul to venerate his oppressing hand. The struggle within him, however fierce, was brief; for he suddenly received the grace to yield to the humiliating trial that God had reduced him to.

Smothering his pride, Lord Raoul bent forward and kissed what was now his master’s hand. This he did with such apparent willingness, and even cheer, that the Muslim was impressed. The knight sensed this, and felt emboldened by it.

“May I request a favor of my master?” he asked suddenly. The boy relayed the question and the Saracen gestured for him to continue.

“There was a ring - or rather half a ring - in a bag around my neck.” Raoul spoke slowly, his eyes fixed on the Arabian. “May I have it back?”

### CHAPTER 3

The boy looked from the master to the slave. There was silent and thoughtful pause. Without a reply, the Saracen turned and stepped towards a nearby table. After a moment's search, he pulled out a tiny well-worn bag.

Raoul recognized it at once and looked hopefully at his master. The Saracen returned the look with a simple nod and handed him the precious treasure.

"Take it," he said indifferently, "I shall get more than that for your ransom."

Mildly puzzled at the eagerness with which his slave took the bag, the Saracen simply shrugged his shoulders. With his arms bound, Raoul could not easily empty the bag, but he could feel the ring inside. As his master turned and left him, the knight pressed the little bag to his heart with a fervent and grateful prayer.

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In the days that followed, Raoul was well taken care of by his captors. His master watched him eagerly, as the young knight's strength slowly returned. As soon as he was sure his prisoner would live, the Saracen set a price on Raoul's head.

"I will accept 200 gold pieces for you," said the Muslim. "And not a single coin less. You can write?"

"Yes, sir." Raoul nodded.

"Here then." A parchment and pen were set before the French prisoner. "Write a letter to your friends. Set the amount in clear terms, mind you! And I will send it off with a messenger."

Humiliating as it was, a certain hopeful thrill went through Raoul as he penned his ransom note. What joy it would give his friends and the other Crusaders to know that he was in fact alive. Once freed from his captivity, he would surely repay their kindness. In fact, he would never forget it! The little time he had spent as an infidel's slave had given him a gratitude and longing for the free air.

The message was instantly dispatched via a hired Arab and Raoul and his master both anxiously awaited the answer. It was not long in coming.

One day, shortly thereafter, a breathless Muslim came hurrying into the tent of Raoul's master. All eyes were immediately fixed upon him; Raoul especially strained to see his face. It was filled with fear.

"The Crusaders!" the man announced quickly. "They have routed our army!"

Raoul sat up, his eyes wide. Though unable to completely understand the Arabian, Raoul caught the word for Crusader. Gesturing for the little slave boy, the knight whispered,

"What is it? What did he say?"

The little slave did not answer him at once, and Raoul's eyes turned towards his master, who was questioning the newcomer impatiently.



“What is this nonsense? What are you talking about?”

“What I say is true,” the man insisted, “Our armies have suffered a defeat in an attack against the Catholics. Our men have been routed into retreat and are not far behind me.”

Raoul felt a nudge against his arm. It was the slave boy. “They are talking about the war,” he explained. “Our armies have fled a battle.”

This news of victory sent a thrill through the imprisoned Crusader’s heart. But it was soon clouded by the terrible realization that no answer to his ransom had returned. His master too wondered at his messenger’s delay.

“Well if the attack was as near as you say,” the stout Saracen retorted hotly, “Then I would have known. I sent a man to the Crusader’s camp not long ago and he has yet to return.”

But what Raoul and his master did not know was that the messenger who carried the letter of ransom had arrived at seemingly the worst possible time. Caught up in the midst of the battle, the Arab was mistaken for an attacker and slain with the other Saracens. And then, with the roles reversed from those of the perilous mountain ambush, the Muslim

armies fled the victorious Crusaders.

No sooner had Raoul’s master spoken, though, then the newcomer’s words were proven true. A sudden sound of horses and armored men came bearing down upon the little camp. Raoul turned eagerly towards the mouth of the tent. The pursuing Crusaders had found him!

His sudden hopes, however, were mercilessly crushed by the rapid footfall and entrance of a Saracen soldier.

“Our armies are in retreat,” he stated forcefully, “The Catholic troops are in pursuit and this encampment is in danger.”

A terrible quiet fell upon the Muslims. Raoul scanned their pale faces - focusing especially on his master’s. The Saracen fingered his sword nervously, his mind filled with thought. For a single moment, the French captive permitted himself once more to hope. With the Crusaders so near, negotiations for his ransom could easily be arranged.

But his master broke the ominous silence with a nervous whisper.

“Hurry!” he breathed. “Prepare to leave at once!”

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“We are escaping!” the little boy cried out excitedly to Raoul.

Raoul stared at his master in dismay. Leave? He could not be serious! What about the money? The 200 pieces of gold?

“Master!” The young lord stumbled through the terror stricken Arabs, who now fluttered about their tents like frightened hornets from an overturned hive. “What of the ransom?” he pleaded, catching hold of the Saracen’s long tunic.

The master knew what it was his slave wanted, but he refused to give him so much as a look. Terror had seized his timid heart. Freeing his robe from the knight’s grasp, the Saracen motioned to a passing servant.

“See that the Frenchman is securely bound!” he pointed impatiently at Raoul. “We must travel at once and with great haste!”

Immediately, the French lord found his hands quickly thrust and fastened behind his back. Almost in a daze, Raoul offered no resistance. His mind was in a whirl. It was like a dream. A nightmare.

*Please God... he prayed. Please God, no! This cannot be happening. I'm so close. So close to King Louis' army. They could simply rescue me. If there was just a little more time?*

A sturdy rope was thrust around his neck, and with a shove he was herded outside. Like a harnessed cattle, the knight was gathered with the rest of the Saracen’s possession. Raoul shut his eyes in desperation.

*Please, Blessed Virgin, Please!* the poor captive begged. *Blessed Mother, don't let them take me! Just a little more time and my friends will break my chains without a ransom. Please!* Raoul pleaded like a child to his Mother’s tender heart. *Save me! Delay the infidels or hasten the Crusaders. But please! Do not let them flee with me!*

But flee the Saracens did, as if Death itself was at their heels. For what seemed an unending string of days, their flight continued. And with each passing hour, Raoul grew sick at heart; his courage waning with each step he took. For with every mile, the French lord was being dragged further and further away from his rescuers... and freedom.

## CHAPTER 4

“Come... Come in!” the old count’s voice echoed weakly through the stone room, “Come in, Mahtilde.”

At once, the door opened and the lady’s silhouette silently glided towards the tall bed.

“You sent for me, Sir Gerard?” The young woman gently knelt beside him.

“I did,” the old man nodded, stretching out a shaky hand. The lady took it in her own.

“Oh your hands are like ice,” she whispered. “I will send for more firewood.” She called out for a servant as she went to rise. But she stopped midway, for the weak hand would not release its strong grasp.

“No,” the old count protested. Then after a few breaths, he added, “No, just stay with me a while.”

Mahtilde knelt back down. With her hand still in the count’s, she squeezed it gently. Sir Gerard smiled faintly and weakly returned it. He said nothing though and for a while Lady Mahtilde just knelt by, quietly staring at his still face.

With his eyes still closed, the old man at length whispered, “I must apologize, Mahtilde.”

“My dear Gerard,” she said kindly, “You need not apologize for anything.”

“And yet I do,” his breathing was laboured. “Perhaps in more ways than one.” His eyes were open now and staring off into the darkness.

“Maybe... Maybe Raoul would have not gone,” he said dryly, “if I had not persuaded you to let him go.”

“But, sir!” Lady Mahtilde objected quickly. A brief moment passed however before the words came. Her mind raced back to that fateful day, of which every detail was enshrined in her heart. “Remember what you yourself told me?” She paused before answering the question herself. “God willed it.”

Though her father-in-law’s face was covered in shadow, Mahtilde could hear the trembling in his voice.

“Yes,” he cried. “God willed it.” Clenching her hand suddenly, he whispered, “I believe it! I do.” The conviction in his voice betrayed the struggle within him.

“There is nothing more painful that God could have asked of me. He has taken the most precious things in my life. There is nothing.... nothing...”

Mahtilde shut her tearful eyes in prayer; not with thoughts of the mind, but with the wordless pleadings of the heart. Their effects came at once and the old count’s quickened and laboured breaths

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became steadily calm. His grasp loosened and he put his hand to his eyes.

“Mahtilde,” he said at last. “I must still ask your forgiveness.”

“I refuse to accept it,” she said, weeping.

“No,” Sir Gerard shook his head. “Not for Raoul.” He turned and looked at her. “For myself, Mahtilde.”

With fresh tears, the lady ran her hand over the count’s wrinkled brow.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“It is time, Mahtilde.” his voice was as steady as his gaze. “It is time to call the priest.”

“But Ger-, Gerard, the... the prie-,” Mahtilde choked back her tears, “He was here just this Sunday. You...you even went to Confession.”

The dying count nodded. “But it is time for the last Sacrament.”

“But you do not need Extreme Unction.” There was no authority in her voice, just desperation. “You are not going to die. You cannot.”

The old knight raised his trembling hand and gently stroked the lovely face beside him. “God wills it,” he whispered.

Mahtilde bit her lip. For a moment, those three words raged a silent battle within her. How could God expect her to accept this? Was not a dead husband enough? At length, though, her anxiety gave way to a sudden peace. And in the quiet of her heart, she silenced those questions with an act of faith. God wills what is best.

Unknowingly relieved by the fervent prayers of the count, Mahtilde resolutely rung the bedside bell.

A manservant, summoned from before by her cry for firewood, came in promptly to the bell’s call. Receiving the urgent order, he quickly departed with a solemn nod.

Mahtilde turned back to Sir Gerard. His eyes had shut, and his head was still. For a moment, the poor lady feared the worst. Taking hold of his thin shoulder, she was relieved to see his subtle, but regular breathing. She gratefully ran her hand down his arm, and the old man at once gently awoke from his sudden slumber. Smiling into the tearful eyes of his loving daughter-in-law, the count confessed his one regret.

“I only wish that I could have fulfilled the last desire of my dear son.” He took hold again of Mahtilde’s slender hand. “That I could have cared for the widow he left behind, and... protected the one... whom I have cherished... as if she were my own child.”

Lady Mahtilde leaned forward as the count spoke, for each word grew steadily quieter. His tired eyes, heavy with grief, were gradually closing as sleep overtook him.

“It is for this, my dear,” Sir Gerard said softly, “that I beg... your forgiveness.”

Mahtilde watched the old man tenderly as his gray head slowly nodded forward. With her hand still clasped in his, she gently leaned him back against the pillow. Then with her free arm, the lady covered the sleeping count in his warm blankets.

Silently rising to her feet, young Mahtilde leaned forward and kissed the beloved old brow. The quiet squeeze she felt in her hand assured the lady that her parting words were heard.

“Be at peace, dear Gerard. You are already forgiven.” Her tears wetted his brow as she gave one last kiss. “Go with God... and my love.”

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“Hold on there! Where do you think you are going in such a rush?” An angry Arab caught hold of the ragged slave running by.

“The master sent for me,” was the breathless reply.

“What for?” a nearby serving girl grunted.

“I do not know.”

“Not to write another ransom letter?” the Arab jabbed roughly at the tall man’s arm and squinted up at his calm face. “The name’s Raoul, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” the knight answered, slowly releasing his arm from the Saracen’s grasp.

“Well you are crazy,” the slave girl spat out. “Crazy to think that someone is still looking for you. How many letters have you sent?”

Raoul just looked at her without a word. The blank expression on his face brought a smile to the Arab’s. “You talk too fast, little girl” He laughed. Then, waving jeeringly at Raoul, he said, “our French lord cannot understand you.”

The child joined in the laughter, and Raoul, who was able to pick up most of what the man had said, smiled good naturedly. It was true. Several months amidst the Saracens had given him a rough understanding of their language, but not a fluent one. Taking advantage of this merriment at his expense, the young knight quickly slipped away.

“Oh go on!” the man cried after him. “Send another letter for help. Perhaps you are too expensive!”

But their laughter faded rapidly behind him, as Raoul hurried into his master’s house. Making his way through the various rooms and passing servants, the tall Frenchman came at last to the stout Saracen who owned him. Fanning himself, the short man waved for Raoul to approach. As he did so, the nearby guard made sure the tall slave kept his distance.

“You sent for me?” Raoul bowed. A gray haired slave, whose task it was to interpret, glanced sullenly



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at the Frenchman. Raoul had spoken in simple Syriac.

“Yes.” His master sighed at the heat. “It is about your ransom.”

The old slave quickly translated the answer into French before the knight could answer it.

“You have a response?” For a moment, hope shone in Raoul’s eyes.

“No,” the Saracen frowned, “There has been no answer.” Raoul attempted to hide his disappointment, as his master continued.

“And that is just it. It has been many months since we settled down safely here in Syria. But despite the fact that you have sent just as many letters to plea for your ransom, and we have received *nothing*.” He swatted emphatically at a fly settled on his chair. He waited for the translator to finish, before adding thoughtfully:

“I sometimes wonder if your friends want you back? Perhaps your king does not really care for a lost Crusader.”

Raoul stiffened at the suggestion. “I assure you, sir,” he said firmly, “My countrymen will free me.”

“And if not?” the Saracen asked. “They haven’t so far.”

“These things can take time,” Raoul began to explain, with the old slave repeating his every word in Syriac. “The war itself has presented many obstacles, I am sure, in their ransoming me. And if they have come for me, they may have gotten lost in their search. Personal matters and losses may also have a more urgent demand on their attention, before they can at length deliver me.”

“That all may very well be true,” the stout man fanned himself impatiently. “But in the meanwhile, what? You must have sent them enough letters for several prisoners. And I for one, am not going to waste my time waiting.”

Raoul did not dare ask him what he meant. But he did not need to. His master gestured to one of his higher servants.

“I will not waste my investment any further. Until you hear from me otherwise,” he said, looking at the waiting servant, “I want this French slave to be more productive. Send him to work in my fields. He can spend his time tending to my flocks.”

“Yes, my lord” the man nodded. He took hold of Raoul’s arm, but the knight hesitated.

“Master...?” Raoul had not fully understood what had been said.

“You can wait for your friends while watching my sheep,” the Saracen master explained. Then at the sight of the slave’s crestfallen face, he became impatient. “You are not the only one who would like to see the ransom paid! I would rather have 200 pieces of gold in my pocket than a French lord as an incompetent shepherd of my flocks! But if you are going to be of any use to me, there is no use in waiting for your ransom.”

When the old man went to translate, he said simply “You are a slave, my lord. Time to work like one.”

Raoul had caught some of what his master had said. And before the servant could take him away, the poor knight dropped to his knees before the stout Muslim.

“Please sir” Raoul pleaded in broken Syriac, “Let me send one more ransom note.”

The servant went to pull the slave to his feet, but when he saw his master’s raised hand, he slowly let him go. Still looking at Raoul, the Arab asked with a smile:

“What? Do you think they have not read the other letters? What of all those you have already sent?” His tone was calm, and there was a hint - just a touch - of pity.

“Please.” the knight persisted humbly, “I know they will hear me.”

All was quiet in the stuffy room, save for the buzzing flies and the thoughtful tap of the Saracen’s fan. The slave and master remained in a silent stare for what seemed an uncomfortable length of time to the others waiting around them. At length, the stout Saracen nodded abruptly.

“Very well, you may send another.” He spoke in French and Raoul, in gratitude, promptly took hold of his dark hand and kissed it.

“We will see what happens,” the Saracen mumbled as Raoul rose to his feet. “I will be even happier than you should your friends respond.” He added, and then motioned for the Frenchman to be taken away. “It is possible...” the little Arab muttered, “It is possible...”

Soon thereafter, the Lord of Crequy found himself out in the wide fields of Syria. He squinted up at the sun, or rather the cloudless sky. His faith and heart told him that somewhere up there, Someone was looking back down at him.

A distant call brought the knight’s eyes back to earth. Quickly approaching him was another slave, driving a herd of sheep. It was his master’s first shepherd. With a quiet sigh, Raoul stepped out to meet him. In his care of the flocks, Raoul would be answering to this first shepherd – whose task had been promoted to watch the master’s cattle.

“It is really not too difficult,” the man said at the end of his instructions. “More tedious than challenging.” Handing Raoul the staff, he added, “if you have any trouble, you can find me over there somewhere,” he waved vaguely out over the fields. “Just look for the cows.”

The Frenchman nodded, and silently watched the Arabian head back to his herds. And for the first time in a long while, Raoul was all alone. *Though, not really.* He grinned at the noisy animals around him. *The sheep are here.* His smile slowly faded though, as he looked back up towards the sky.

He just stared for while, saying nothing – unaware that his soul was engaged in one of the deepest forms of prayer.

*Dear God, I know that you see me. Blessed Lady, I know that you hear me. What am I doing here? What*

## CHAPTER 4

*is it You want me to do? Why is it that my friends have not come for me? Is my faith weak? Or are You testing it?*



His eyes gazed searchingly at the pale blue above, now speckled with some errant clouds.

*I will not lose Faith in You, Lord. But neither will I fail to implore Your mercy. Oh, my beloved Lady! The lonely exile clasped his hands in a fervent plea. I beg you to deliver me from this captivity. Please bring me back to the arms of my dear family. Think of the joy with which you held your infant Son, and have pity on these father's hands that have yet to embrace their own dear child.*

Lowering his eyes, Raoul sank against a nearby tree and let his staff fall aside. His heart yearned for freedom and grew heavy at the prospect of a delayed ransom. His mind went back to the home he had left behind, dwelling especially on his wife and son. His thoughts fell also on his dear father and brother Baudouin.

*My brothers...* Raoul's his gaze turned once more to the heavens. "Oh Godfrey and Rodger," he said aloud. "Look down with pity on your older brother. Did God take from me the martyr's crown so as to clasp my hands in fetters? Have I survived you only to end my days as a Syrian slave?"

His only answer was the simple bleating of the sheep.

The young lord looked down to find several of them crowded around his feet. With a sigh, Raoul turned to his staff, leaning against the tree.

"If this is Your will, dear God." He took hold of the shepherd's rod. "So be it." Another sigh escaped him as he looked out over his flock. Yet no sooner had he spoke, then a soft breeze swept across his face.

"But I will keep praying!" Raoul cried out suddenly, invigorated by the silent reply. "I *know* You want me to. I will continue to hope, my Lord, in Your mercy. I know that You will heed my cries for help. Even if..." he added sadly, "You are the only One who does so."

He thought now of all the ransom letters that had gone unanswered. But this trial of abandonment was not due to the disloyalty of his friends. Grieved as he was by this belief, Raoul had neither resentment nor bitterness. And he resigned himself to the exile that their apparent negligence had reduced him.

But the simple truth was one that the poor knight would never have imagined. Despite the countless

letters he had penned for his ransom, not one of them ever reached his king or country.

And so, the Lord of Crequy stood day after day in the fields of Syria, hourly praying for his deliverance. And all this while, he little suspected that his death was universally believed by the entire French army and grievously accepted by the whole of Crequy.

Not only, in fact, did his poor provinces mourn the loss of their Lord, but their sorrow was doubled at the soon to follow death of his noble father – the count Sir Gerard of Ternoy.

All throughout the town, people talked of the terrible tragedies plaguing the castle. And everyone wondered what would become of the Lady Mahtilde.

“She may take ill herself any day now after so dreadful a blow! They say she does naught but weep day and night. She may follow the old man to the tomb.”

So the speculations went. But as the lady Mahtilde stood staring at the freshly chiseled tombstone of her dear father-in-law, she *was* tempted to envy his lot.

“*Let me go with you,*” she had pleaded to the dying count. “*Let me leave this miserable earth behind!*” And in her heart, the answer given in life came echoing back – “*God gave you a son - Raoul’s child,*” Sir Gerard had told her. “*Trust in Him, for this is His will for you.*”

As the Lady of Crequy opened the door to her empty home, she looked down to the sweet child resting in her arms. “For his sake and Yours, Lord, I will go on.”

“My lady, you have returned.” A maidservant hurried up to greet her. “And I see the little master enjoyed the air?”

“It put him to sleep,” Mahtilde nodded, and gently handed the precious bundle to the maiden. “He can finish his nap in his cradle.”

“Very good, Madam,” the girl replied softly. She had taken but a few steps, though, when she turned around with a sudden thought.

“Oh, I nearly forgot,” the maid exclaimed quietly. “Sir Baudouin was looking for you. He is waiting in the Master’s room.”

Mahtilde looked curiously at the servant girl. “Sir Gerard’s chamber?”

“No, my lady,” came the humble reply, “Lord Raoul’s.”

Puzzled somewhat at the girl’s answer, the lady of the castle made for what used to be her husband’s bedroom. To her mild surprise, she found it just as her maid had said. Baudouin was sitting at a large table, with several papers before him. Catching the sound of his approaching sister-in-law, the young man rose to his feet.



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“Ah, Mahtilde, good of you to come. Please,” he gestured towards a chair, “sit down.” The woman took a step forward.

“You wanted to see me?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, sitting back down, “There is a matter we need to discuss.”

“But why your brother’s room?” she asked, looking around. Baudouin smiled.

“It better suites the issues at hand.”

“What issues?”

“A matter of inheritance,” he said, shuffling the papers. “My father’s death has left many things to be put in order.”

“Oh, Baudouin,” the lady held out a compassionate hand. “We have just buried the dead, let us leave the matter until later,” she said, gently approaching the table.

“No, it is not my father’s estate that needs attention.” The young knight raised his head. “It is Raoul’s.”

Mahtilde simply returned his gaze for a moment and said nothing. “I am afraid I don’t understand,” she said, genuinely confused.

“I did not imagine that you would.” A mild grin played upon his thin face. Then with a superior tone, he endeavored to explain, “My father has just died, leaving me as his only surviving son and heir. In turn,” he continued, staring down at the table, “the estates and provinces of Crequy and Fressin by rights have passed on to me.”

The lady shook her head. “The lordship passed to Raoul,” she calmly corrected.

“And he is dead” Baudouin said simply.

“He had a son.” Her mild tones were marked with uneasiness.

“An infant,” the knight laughed sarcastically.

Mahtilde involuntarily stepped back. “Baudouin, you know full well that the law demands – ”

“- that a House should fall to ruins at the whims of a witless widow?” The smile had fled from his face, and his words rang out with defiance.

The noblewoman looked at him in astonishment, her voice filled with a certain abhorrence. “You would hide your greed behind my grief?”

“Think what you like,” the young man shrugged. “You always have. But I know my duty.”

Mahtilde just stood staring, as if she did not recognize the man who stood before her.

“What would your father say?” she said aloud. Her brother-in-law laughed at the thought.

"I can only imagine," was the disdainful reply.

"Have you no respect for the dead?" Mahtilde cried. But Baudouin was wearied with arguing.

"I am not going to waste words with you. I have explained the situation and there is nothing further to discuss."

"Or rather, nothing you have the courage to discuss." The initial shock having passed, the words came out like a challenge.

"Your lack of virtue makes little impression upon me, Mahtilde. I expected trouble from you. Nothing more." He sat back down in Raoul's chair. "You will not easily relinquish your life of luxury."

"Do you think I care of luxury?" Mahtilde cried, thrusting her hands upon the table. "Do you think anything in this wretched world holds any attraction for me?"

"You are a living corpse," was the dull reply. "Crequy deserves a lord."

"It has one." Mahtilde answered emphatically.

"Ah yes," he smiled, "My phantom brother." There was a taunting look in his eye. "The Lord Raoul who never died. Poor Mahtilde. I have heard of your fanciful dreams."

"I was speaking of his son," said the noble lady, her face set as stone.

"If he is so lordly let him defend and claim the title himself. Do you think you can take from me my heritage? Who will stop me?"

For the first time, it dawned on the young widow how defenseless her position really was. Militarily speaking, Baudouin had the sufficient force to assert his claim. His blood was legitimate in the Crequy house, and he would indeed have been its lord, had not his elder brother left behind an infant son. With many of Raoul's knights and squires having joined him on the Crusade, the lady Mahtilde had no armed resistance under her command, and the house of Crequy lay vulnerable to a usurper.

"Baudouin, please," Mahtilde entreated him, "Think of your father. Think of Raoul. They loved you so. Though they be dead or gone, do you think your actions are hidden from them? Or from God?" She looked searchingly at his face. But his eyes were hard and his tone was firm.

"I have no cause for shame." He said, looking away from her. Then, with a haughty air, "And I did not summon you for a lecture. My mind is set. There is nothing you - What on earth!"

To his surprise and repulsion, Baudouin suddenly found his sister-in-law collapsed and kneeling at his feet.

"Please, Baudouin," she pleaded, "Please! I am begging you not to go through with this. I... I know you are upset," she said, tears forming in her eyes. "I assure you that I shall forget everything that has passed between us if you quit your resolve. Do not do this, I beseech you! For the sake of the family, if not for your own sake... or for God's."

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Baudouin rose from the chair, removing Mahtilde's support. Thrown off balance, the woman caught hold of her brother-in-law's cloak, interrupting her fall. Moments passed, as the two were locked in a fixed gaze. Then, slowly... deliberately, the young man took hold of the lady's wrist and pulled it from his garment.

"Poor, pitiful Mahtilde." He smiled down at her. "It will not work. You are wasting your time and your tears." With a thrust, he released her arm. Stepping away, he waved his hand and called out, "Guard!"

Suddenly, Mahtilde noticed for the first time a man-at-arms, standing out of sight, now emerging from the shadows. It was one of Baudouin's soldiers.

"The lady is finished here," Baudouin said, gesturing towards Mahtilde. "Show her to her room."

Without a word, the guard approached and stood beside the kneeling figure. The rough mercenary would have caught her by the shoulder, had not the lady raised an authoritative hand as she lifted herself from the ground.

Once standing, however, she made no move to leave. As if to warn her, the soldier set his spear threateningly between her and Baudouin. All were silent.

"Goodbye Mahtilde," Baudouin said at last. He attempted to maintain a commanding air, but Mahtilde's dramatic appeals had shaken his pride.

Without a sound, Mahtilde simply turned and headed for the door. As though she had gotten the last word, her brother-in-law called out scornfully.

"Poor Mahtilde!" He shook his head in pity. "I am not one to be swayed by your grief or charms." He watched her unbroken and graceful steps continue for the door. Mortified at her fortitude, and with a cruelty to which his greed had reduced him, Baudouin sent out a final stab.

"I am not so easily seduced! I am not Raoul."

His words struck like a knife, and the lady's stride faltered. With her hand upon the door handle, she halted. Slowly she looked back, a single tear streaming down her solemn face.

"True." Her calm voice rang out with a powerful dignity. "Raoul was a noble man."

The knight's gaze became a bitter glare. "Get out!" he threatened. "Crequy is mine. And you cannot stop me."

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Unjust though they were, Sir Baudouin's words were true. For the Lady Mahtilde and her infant son were indeed powerless to prevent this youngest brother of the Crequy family from seizing lordship and dominion over its lands.

Though in her heart, Mahtilde sought nothing for herself - she grieved at the thought that her child, Raoul's son, should suffer this injustice. But, despite her hopes, help would not be soon in coming.

For she had no living relatives who could assert and defend her son's rights. Except for her Father – Sir Renaud, the count of Craon. But he was an aged, though powerful, noble in far off Brittany, nearly 300 miles away. When news reached Count Renaud of the injustice done to his grandson, he wrote at once to his daughter.

With eager hands, Mahtilde tore open her father's letter. His consoling words were welcomed by her mournful soul. But he had little assistance to offer. Pained to see his widowed daughter so afflicted and unprotected, Sir Renaud advised her to a particular solution.

*“The Lord of Renty,”* he wrote *“is a good and worthy friend of your late husband's family. He will, I am sure, defend your son Baudouin's rights, if he could call this child his own. I recommend that you heal and protect yourself by offering your hand in marriage to this noble man. He is, I am aware, very anxious for your welfare and has told me ...”*

But Mahtilde had stopped reading and the letter involuntarily fell from her lifeless hands.

“Dear God,” she cried. “What is this? They want me to marry. Is that what You really want?”

Without a thought, she reached for a jeweled box beside her bed, and solemnly set it on her lap. Gently opening it, she took out the precious token it enshrined - her half of the wedding ring.

Fingering the small jewelry in her hand, fresh tears fell from her eyes. “They want a father for my son.”

A cry other than her own caught the mother's ear and she turned to the little baby in the cradle beside her. Tenderly taking her son into her arms, Mahtilde slowly hushed and rocked him. Happy and secure, little Baudouin's tears dried, as his mother's wetted his face.

“Oh, my son,” she wept, pressing him to her heart. “You *have* a father.”



# CHAPTER 5

Many years had passed - long and bitter ones for the lady, hard and painful ones for the knight. And yet their passage seemed to effect little change for either the Lord or the Lady. Raoul's master still entertained hopes of receiving money for his lordly slave, and so made the knight wait on and serve him until he should be ransomed. And with each passing day, Sir Raoul continued to ardently pray for his deliverance. By the grace of God, time would not diminish his hopes.

But time eventually did bring a change to Raoul's life. After seven long years of waiting, his Saracen master passed away. Unfortunately, the death of his master still gave no opportunity for freedom to the captive knight. He was still the property of his deceased owner. Inheritances were claimed, property divided; before long, most of the Saracen's possessions had been distributed among his friends and family. Anything that had gone unclaimed was quickly put on the open market for profit.

And so, not long after his master's death, Lord Raoul found himself being jostled along, bound by thick ropes in a veritable human chain of slaves, all being led to the slavemarket for auction.

"We've got a fine lot of prospects here for the serious slave owner. Every one of them a bargain." The thin voice of the slavetrader rang out above the crowd, his large turban bobbing as he attempted to make himself heard over the noise, pacing before the stand lined with his human merchandise. "Now take this pair of brothers here," he pointed to a couple teenage slaves. "I'll give 'em for a packaged deal of six gold coins. Now which wise man is going to take me up on that incredible price?"

Sir Raoul shut his eyes. His lot as a slave was now quite familiar to him. But the ordeal of being auctioned at a bustling marketplace, displayed and subjected to the scrutinizing eye of possible buyers, was altogether a humiliating one. Almost instinctively, the knight opened his eyes, only to meet with a keen stare from a shrewd looking Arab. The man was a stranger to him, but the well-dressed Muslim was no stranger to the slavemarket. With a confident stride, the dark Arab resolutely approached the trader.

"How much for the one in the middle there?" he asked, pointing his walking stick at the row of slaves. The seller tilted his wide headdress to the side as he contemplated the price.

"Four gold pieces," he said at last, giving a nod that jolted his turban.

Without a word, the determined Arab thrust his hand into a leather pouch and retrieved the necessary amount.

"There," he said, completing the transaction by setting his money on the table, "Done." The trader calmly swept the coins into his hand and motioned for an attendant to hand over the purchased goods.

Somewhat surprised, though not in the least bit disappointed, Raoul noticed it was the man beside him being untied from the ropes.

The knight was not the only one to notice this, and the Arabian turned angrily to the slavetrader.

“What!” he yelled, “four pieces of gold for that half-grown pig! I am not interested in that runt, I want the tall one next to him.” His staff shook again in the air, announcing his statement.

“That tall one?” the seller squinted, pointing towards Raoul. “That one costs seven pieces.”

“Seven!?” The Arab’s stick came thudding loudly back to the earth. “That’s outrageous!”

“Then you need not buy him,” the proud salesman tossed the four coins back onto the table. But the Arab’s interest was not a passing one.

“What are you trying to pull here? He may have height and stature, but he’s certainly not worth more than five.”

“Make it eight then.” The vendor sneered haughtily.

“And why would I pay you eight gold pieces?” The Arab’s words came out with amazing restraint and composure. There was an explanation, however, for the trader’s apparent greed.



“Because the handsome brute has a ransom on his head.” The round turban swayed at the proud proclamation.

“Really?” The Arab asked, in an altogether different tone. “A ransom?” He glanced over at the tall knight. “Where is he from?”

“France.” The slave trader answered. “He was one of those Crusaders.”

“Is that a fact?”

Raoul instinctively lowered his face, as he became once again the focus of the Arab’s inquisitive stare. Although the seller and stranger were some distance away from the stand, the knight had been following their entire conversation. And though their discussion competed with the hubbub of the crowd, Raoul had, after seven years of slavery, acquired a keen understanding of, and ear for, the Syrian language.

Maintaining to appear ignorant, however, of their discussion, the knight listened as the slavetrader went on to extol his lordly prize and the great potential for profit.

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“He’s really a steal,” the vendor tempted, “I ought to make it nine.”

“Make it ten,” was the unexpected response.

The slavetrader’s face lit up in surprise. “Ten?” he asked, impressed by his own successful tactics. “Throw in a couple more coins, and I’ll give you the ‘half grown pig’ with him.” His business instincts knew when to press a bargain. But his customer now seemed disinterested in any ‘deal’. His decision was made.

“No... all ten for the Crusader.”

A few more words and the deal was set, the payment was made, and Raoul had been sold. With fettered hands, the tall Frenchman obediently followed the Arab away from the market to his new home.

Home...

As Lord Raoul cast a yearning glance at the Syrian sky, his eyes squinting in its piercing brightness, his thoughts drifted once again to his beloved Crequy. How gently that same piercing sun was surely gleaming in his homeland. Oh, how often had he dreamt of flying over the vast expanse of thousands of miles which lay between him... and *home*! But no such flight had come. Instead, he had waited and prayed. Seven years of patient, persistent prayers, fervent hopes, long-sufferings... to what end? A new master. Yet heavy though it was, the knight’s heart lost neither its courage nor its faith. Enduring this bitter disappointment, Raoul was unknowingly receiving the fruits of his perseverance – little guessing how soon those virtues would be put to the test.

For little time would elapse before Lord Raoul discovered that he had fallen under the control of a severe and cruel master. Harsh punishments were swiftly dealt for the most trivial mistakes. Rules which had never existed would suddenly become written and executed with brutal force. But there was more to it than that. Little by little, Raoul found himself the target of a silent war. Of all the harsh treatment endured by the other slaves, none compared to the heap of affronts made daily upon the person of the knight. He would receive blame for faults never committed; punishment for offenses never made. Loaded with the most loathsome and difficult tasks, bereft at times of his own food rations, and driven nearly beyond his strength, the young lord was effectively reduced to the least of the slaves.

Yet through it all, his spirit was not shaken, nor broken. Whatever it might be that had singled him out as a target of his master’s cruelty, the string of persecutions served only to increase his fervent prayers for relief and deliverance.

His fellow slaves, however, were quick to notice the peculiar quality of the French slave that seemed to constantly get him into trouble...

“All right, come on! If you don’t claim your bread it goes to the dogs!”

A few servants carried their master’s leftovers out into the yard. Several hands quickly shot out amidst a swarm of filthy slaves, who struggled with one another to catch their evening meal.

After receiving his share of the scraps, Raoul quietly sat down on the ground away from the commotion. A couple of the younger slaves eyed him curiously as they watched him silently bless himself and shut his eyes.

“What in the world was that?” one of them asked rudely. But the knight made as if he had not heard them.

“Was that supposed to mean something?” another one chimed in.

“I was thanking God for the food.” Raoul explained simply. He picked up his bread.

“Why? Did God give it to you?” one of the boys laughed.

But an older slave looked firmly at Raoul. “Were you thanking Allah?”

The knight paused. He knew what the slave was getting at. Firmly, he shook his head. “No, the True God,” he answered. “I was making the ‘Sign of the Cross’.”

“Well you had better make no such signs,” another man warned. “The master does not tolerate Catholics.”

“The master already knows who I am,” he said with a shrug. “I am a Crusader.” He went to eat his food. A grey haired slave shook his head gravely.

“You *were* a Crusader... out there, long ago. But here,” his old voice quivered, “You can no longer be. Every man embraces the faith of Mohammed. Unless he...” The gray head shook again, a mysterious stare upon its wrinkled face.

Raoul looked up at the slaves now crowded around him. “Unless he what?” the knight asked.

A few whispers were exchanged among the slaves. Some smiled. Others stared. And the old one simply answered. “*Every* man here adores Allah. There are no exceptions.”

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“But my dear, why *else* do you think I have come? Of course we must discuss it!” The aged Sir Renaud sat shivering by the fireplace. “You refuse to address the issue in any of your letters. And I cannot let you continue on like this.” He turned his face towards the source of the heat.

Lady Mahtilde could not help smiling affectionately at the huddled figure of her noble father.

“How else could I force you to come up and see me in person?” she kissed him tenderly on the back of his head.

“And it is no short distance!” the old man grumbled, grinning besides himself. “Only my dear daughter is worth such a journey.”

“Then for her sake,” Mahtilde suggested slyly, “Let us not quarrel.”

“It is not a quarrel!” her father insisted. “We are discussing your son’s future! Surely *you* have more care for it than I do.”

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“Of course I do, father.” The lady sat down at a tall table.

“Well then,” the old count rose to his feet, “We must face the issues at hand. Now, for these many years, the Lord of Renty has firmly adhered to his offer of marriage. Why do you not accept his proposal?”

“Because,” Mahtilde reached for the ornate box beside her, “I am already married.”

Sir Renaud suppressed a sigh. With a calm stride he crossed the room and sat beside his daughter.

“He fell, my dear,” His kind eyes were as penetrating as his words. “You are a widow.”

“I cannot believe that,” his daughter answered, her voice drained of any emotion.

“Raoul was slain,” the count repeated. “There were *witnesses* to his death. How do you explain that?”

“I don’t know.... I can’t,” her sad eyes fell wearily upon the little chest in her hands. “But somehow my heart tells me that he is alive.” Then, as if realizing the implications of that reality, she added with a shudder. “Although God alone knows where.”

“Mahtilde,” Sir Renaud began, “We can’t go scouring the eastern world for a French captive. There’s no evidence that he even *was* caught. If he were, he surely would have pleaded for a ransom; yet throughout all these many years, we have received none.”

“He may have escaped captivity,” Mahtilde suggested.

“Then why is he not here? It *has* been seven years. And that’s assuming,” the count added, suddenly returning to his original point, “that he is somehow alive! He isn’t, my love. Those knights *saw* him slain... mortally wounded. He did not go missing in battle. His tragic end was witnessed.”

The elderly father gave pause to his words. Though touched with frustration, he spoke with reluctance, for the dreadful subject was a grievous one. And his daughter had suffered enough already.

“Think of the future, my love,” he said pityingly.

“God will care for us, as He has thus far.” Mahtilde answered. Her eyes remained downcast.

“Yes,” the old count agreed. “But God also wants us to care for *ourselves*. He is offering you security in this marriage.”

“God is my security. And my hope.”

“And He is showing you now His Will for you,” her father insisted.

“Oh, if you knew how I prayed every day for His Will.” The young woman sighed, staring off listlessly. “*And* His mercy.”

“You must think with your head, Mahtilde,” Sir Renaud cautioned, “and not with your heart.”

His daughter nodded. “I know. You are right.” She turned towards him with a gentle smile, “But it is for the head to think and the heart to hope.”

“But you cannot *live* off of that hope. You must be realistic!” Catching himself, his old face softened, “I love you dearly, Mahtilde. You know I would not cause you any grief.”

“Nor I you.” Her words trembled with emotion.

Affected himself, her father assured her, “I am only trying to remove the dagger imbedded in your heart.”

“Leave it.” The lady shook her head sadly. “You cannot fill its wound.”

“You could if you tried.” Sir Renaud corrected. “If you *wanted* to.”

“That can never happen.” Her voice was firm. Looking down at the half-ring in her hands, she added quietly “If Raoul is truly gone, then half of me is dead.”

“But is it fair to inflict that on your son?” the nobleman asked. “He deserves a father!”

“He *has* a father.”

The poor man simply moaned hopelessly. Then, with renewed patience, he laid his hand gently upon the table.

“Yes. But his true, great and noble father is gone.” He spoke with sincere compassion and conviction. “And God has given you little Baudouin, my dear, to *prevent* you from ceasing to live.” His hand now rested upon her own. “You *must* go on.”

“I am resigned, Father, to this sad life,” Mahtilde answered, though taking care to avoid his gaze. “God wills it.”

“You are resigned, but you will not *live*.” Anxiety was creeping back into his voice.

“But I can only live with a hope.” The lady now sighed helplessly. Slipping her other hand now on top of the count’s, Mahtilde slowly raised her eyes and faced his.

“If I made this step, Father,” her serious tone was mingled with a certain apprehension. “If I silenced those hopes forever, I tell you that half of me would be forever dead. I want to keep that alive... *for* Baudouin. Oh don’t you see?” she cried as Sir Renaud quickly rose to his feet. “I must. Or my Baudouin will lose both his father *and* his mother. ”

But the old count’s back was to the table as he gazed into the fire. “Seven years...” he muttered, running his hand over his beard. “Seven years hoping for a miracle. If God was going to answer your prayers, He certainly would have done so by now.”

“But in His silence I can still hope,” Mahtilde ventured softly, “I could not have endured it for this long without His grace. He has given me faith, so that He may reward it.”

“But not by granting the impossible!” the count exclaimed, turning around. One look at his daughter’s face, though, and the father’s anger was completely disarmed. With a despairing wave of his hand, he surrendered.

“I feel that my pleas have fallen on deaf ears.” He sank wearily into his chair, and Mahtilde stretched out a consoling hand.

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“They have not, father!” But her assurance was hardly convincing.

“Then why don’t you *listen* to me!” the old man pleaded with her. “You think I am senseless to your grief? That I pass over the death of Raoul as if he were a stranger? I loved him too, Mahtilde, as dearly as I love you. But he is gone forever and I can do nothing for him - except see to it that the one woman we both treasured does not succumb to a living death. It is for *his* sake as much as your own, that I try to secure happiness for you and young Baudouin.”

The father’s earnest pleas had struck something deep in his daughter’s heart. And though she offered no reply, silent tears streamed down her face as she looked once more to the ring in her hand.

Suddenly, a child’s voice was heard echoing down the hall.

“Mamma! Grandfather! Let me show you! I can catch the ball!” With the sound of young Baudouin’s footfalls rapidly approaching, Mahtilde hastened to finish the discussion.

“Let me think about it,” she whispered quickly. “A little time, Father; I promise I will think it over. *Please* give me just a little more time.”

Sir Renaud sighed. He had heard *that* over seven years ago. In the next moment, however, his grandson came hurtling into the room. Clashed in his hands was the large bright ball, a present he had received earlier that day from his beloved grandfather.

“Grandfather, watch! I can....” However, after one glance at their somber faces, the little seven year old put an abrupt halt to his steps, and words. He knew well what was being discussed. Hardly a day could pass without the sight of his mother’s tears, reminding him of his family’s loss.



For a while, all remained silent, though many words suggested themselves to Sir Renaud's mind. Yet something touched his fatherly heart. An inspiration of grace.

*Do not press her now.* The inward voice seemed to say. *It is not yet time. Be at peace.*

Rising from his chair, the old count strode over to the grieving and bent figure of his daughter. Slowly, yet firmly, he laid an understanding hand upon her trembling shoulder, as if to say "You know I love you."

In answer, the lady at once took hold of the aged hand and pressed it ardently against her tear-stained cheeks.

A smile warmed his solemn face. Raising his other hand, Mahtilde's father gently stroked her veiled head. "Very well then," he said, kissing it softly. "A little more time."

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Raoul could not help but feel some anxiety as he made his way to his master's chamber. For the first time, the knight had been personally summoned to appear face to face before the man who owned him. Approaching the curtained entrance, Raoul identified his purpose to the two armed guards standing sentry.

"Is that the Frenchman?" a voice called out from within the room. The soldiers' answer was an affirmative.

"Send him in!" was the abrupt command.

Raoul obediently stepped into the luxurious chamber.

"You sent for me, master?" the tall slave bowed. The Arab was seated on a carpeted chair beneath an indoor canopy. Though reclining, he was very much awake, and he motioned for the knight to approach.

This Raoul did, and further knelt down by his master's outstretched hand. The Muslim hesitated to retrieve it. Sensing his intentions, the French lord softly kissed it. Satisfied, the master waved him to his feet.

"Tell me," the Arab asked. "How came you to be a slave?"

"I was captured in battle," answered the knight. "In the mountain passes that stretch beyond the city of Laodicea."

"Ah yes," the Arab mused, "Your country suffered a crushing defeat there. When was that?"

"In the early winter of the year 1148." Raoul said quietly. That fatal date had long been burned into his memory.

"1148?" the Arab took on a surprised tone. "That was seven years ago!"

Raoul nodded pensively. "Yes."



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His master poured himself some wine. "I am told that you are great knight," he said, eyeing his elaborate glass, "A lord even, of a French estate?"

Returning his gaze towards Raoul, the Arab watched his slave nod once more. He paused a moment and thoughtfully stroked his pointed beard. Slowly scrutinizing his tall captive, he sipped his wine.

"Though not born to a life of servitude," he said slowly, "you have done well." He set his glass on the table beside him.

Raoul said nothing, but found himself subconsciously observing every movement of his master. Fruitlessly he tried to fight the infinite number of thoughts that clamoured in his head, each louder than the first. He would *not* let his mind come to any conclusions. Still... what *was* this all about? Was his master goading him on? Or was this the answer to the persecutions? Was it all a challenge... or a test? To Raoul's relief, the Muslim himself explained his own words.

"You are a strong man," he commended the knight, "And you have proven your strength. I am of a mind..." he sent him a searching glance, "to give you your freedom."

In an instant, a long forgotten sensation surged through the captive knight's soul. For the *first* time in over seven years....

"My freedom?" Raoul was nearly breathless, his mind racing to grasp its full meaning. His master eyed him with calm satisfaction.

"You are too noble a man to waste in slavery. That is clear. Your every feature is marked with dignity." The Arab reached again for his goblet. "I can promise you your freedom on one simple condition," he raised his cup in the air as he spoke.

Raoul hesitated. Without a word, the knight's searching eyes asked the condition. His master slowly emptied his goblet before turning to the expectant slave. There was a very pleasant smile on his hard face.

"Deny your faith and invoke our prophet."

The fatal words fell upon the air like a death knell. The French lord stood in horror and disgust. *So that was it*, he thought to himself. A bitter chill swept through his noble veins, crushing every remnant of his hopeful joy.

"Embrace our faith," the Arab continued, "and I will confer on you a new life!" He boldly and generously went on to explain how he would give the French nobleman his own land, a wealth of money... and a beautiful new wife.

"Why, what use is liberty without love?" the Muslim laughed.

But Raoul did not return his smile.

"I already have a wife," he answered coldly.

"One?" The Arab scoffed. He shook a mocking finger "Now that is part of the religion you must

shed. Leave that law to those fools still enslaved by it. Enjoy this freedom of *our* creed! Your manly strength and qualities deserve more than a single wife.”

“I do not want another,” said Raoul simply.

“Ah,” a more hostile smile played upon the dark man’s face. “But does *she* want you?”

Raoul’s sad eyes glistened at the mere memory of his Mahtilde. “I am sure of it,” was his confident response.

“Yet how many ransom letters have you sent back to your country?” His master asked abruptly. The slave opened his mouth to speak... but then looked down, his noble face flushed. The Arab cruelly pressed his advantage on the tender wound. “How many of your faithful *Catholic* friends have rushed to your aid? How many have offered to pay the price for your return? Does your king always reward his Crusaders thus? So much for the Charity of the Christians.”

Raoul made no answer, his fixed eyes remained downcast. But that was the only response the Muslim wanted. With an authoritative and yet persuasive air, he stated, “Your life in that country is over. You can begin anew here.”

“I will never deny my Faith,” the knight answered boldly.

“To what end?” the Arab taunted. “Do you think your wife has *waited* for you these seven long years?”

“I will not deny my Faith,” was once again the firm reply. Raoul would not let himself be tricked into a debate with his master.

“Your country has been as faithful as your wife,” the Arab scorned, his pretended patience rapidly deteriorating. “I hold out little hope in ever receiving your ransom! You’re worthless to me.” he grumbled. Then he added, almost as an afterthought, “*And* to your family and friends!”

His temper rising with each passing moment, the Arab snatched up the pitcher of wine. Refilling his goblet, he glanced with irritation at his slave. “It’s true! They have *all* deserted you.”

After a hesitant pause, Raoul quietly whispered, “God has willed it.”

“Ah, so your God is the One Who betrayed you!” This amused the Muslim even more. “At last we lay the blame where it *truly* rests. Though,” he reflected, as a smirk crept across his sinister face, “why am I surprised? It is a fitting God for a deceitful religion that so quickly abandons its members.” The Crusader looked up and met his master’s arrogant gaze.

“Not so.” His deep eyes flashed like fire. “God is merely testing my fidelity.”

“Your God *has* abandoned you,” ignored the Arab, confidently raised his glass to his lips.

“Your efforts are in vain,.” Raoul declared, shaking his head, “For I will *never* abandon Him.”

“Ah hah!” the Muslim shouted triumphantly, thrusting his cup onto the table, “You admit *He* has abandoned you!”

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“I did not say that! It is *you* who have rejected Him and His Truth.”

“You wretched fool!” his master spewed furiously. “I have offered you *everything*! Win your freedom by renouncing your detestable Faith.”

“Never!” the staunch resolution came swiftly.

“You dare refuse me...” the Arab threatened, rising to his feet.

“I defy your false religion,” challenged the slave, “and your futile tyranny.”

“Those are dangerous words,” the master responded, his voice trembling with rage. “Choose now... between your freedom... and your treacherous God.”

“I remain ever a loyal servant of my loving and *faithful* God.” the knight answered staunchly. “I am a Crusader of Christ.”

“The crucified vermin,” the Arab grimaced with hate.

“Don’t you dare,” Raoul shot back, a holy indignation gleaming in his eyes. “You hold your blasphemous tongue!”

“Wretch!” the master screamed. “Don’t threaten me!” He lashed out at the knight, knocking him to the ground. Snatching an elegantly decorated vase, he hurled it angrily at his victim’s head. Unsheathing his knife, he stood over him fuming. Poised with his weapon drawn, the Arab watched as Raoul slowly lowered his own protecting arm from his face. Their eyes met. Gradually, the master’s contorted face took on a more ominous expression. His piercing eyes grew black with hate. His pride had been crossed... his will had been challenged.

With an air of calculated restraint and control, the brutal Arab called out for his nearby sentries. The mercenaries were quickly at his side, as they had already entered to investigate the commotion.

“Guard!” the master pointed disdainfully at the prostrated knight. “Remove this filthy slave from my sight.”

The leader nodded obediently, and dealt a harsh kick to the fallen noble, “On your feet!” he bellowed. The other sentinel hastened Raoul’s efforts by roughly yanking his shoulder.

Raoul’s already tied hands were quickly chained behind his back, as the guards hurriedly hustled him away. The Arabian master called out after him.

“Give in, my French Crusader,” he warned, fingering his knife, “Or you will face a different proposition.”

The knight glanced back at the Muslim, fixing his gaze firmly upon him. “You have already failed. I will *never* renounce the True God.”

“Oh, you are mistaken.” The Arab motioned his soldiers to continue, lest the slave should have time to counter his threat once again. “You are in my power. And you *will* surrender.”

That night, Raoul could sleep but little. His mind and heart were wrapt in fervent prayer. At length, with some difficulty, the knight sat up; his bound hands were tied to a heavy post before him.

“Dear Lord,” he whispered in the darkness. “Is now the time for my deliverance? How long, O God, must I wait?” Raoul clasped his weary hands together. “Blessed Mother, I am under Your protection. For seven years now I have called out to You... I have trusted. You know my heart,” his voice trembled with passion. “I am not afraid of my master’s hatred. And I will endure any outrage rather than deny You or Your Son!” Slowly his hands glided towards the little bag hanging ever faithfully around his neck. “But I cannot silence the yearnings of my heart. The longings... The hopes...” He emptied the tiny pouch into his hand, exhibiting his sole and prized possession. As he gazed tenderly at the fragment of Mahtilde’s ring, he continued. “Somehow, I *know* You hear me, Blessed Virgin. And one day You *will* answer me. Why not today? Seven years, my Lady...” his tone was faltering, “Is not seven years enough?”

Once more, his earnest questions were answered by a dull silence. But Raoul sensed a certain shadow in this darkness. Suddenly clenching his treasure in his fist, the knight shut his eyes. With all the powers of his soul, he swiftly banished the despair which had stealthily crept into his sorrow. He *was* a soldier of Christ. His constancy from years long past had not yet died away. And if he could be shot half to death, riddled with arrows for Jesus’ sake... then he could bear the contempt and cruelty of his master. With renewed resolve, the Crusader set his will on God. “I will never give up, dear Lord. And I will *never* give in. Blessed Lady, pray for me! With Your strength, I will endure until the day You set me free.”

Slowly, as Raoul slowly opened his eyes, they fell upon the tiny piece of jewelry in his hand. Gently, almost reverently, Raoul raised the half-ring to his lips. “Some things are worth waiting for.”

And in the humble lord’s heart, the flame of hope was once more rekindled, flickering boldly before the menacing storm which loomed ahead.

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News of the argument between Raoul and their master had spread like wildfire among the other slaves. None held any real admiration for the bravery of the knight. Indeed, only a silent terror gripped them as they contemplated the anger he had aroused in their harsh master. What if that temper caused their owner to lash out at them? But their fears were short lived; for soon thereafter, an armed soldier approached the Frenchman. The nervous slaves watched with some curiosity, but with little surprise, as the mercenary gruffly order Raoul to follow him - the master had sent for his slave again.

As Raoul was led to the Arab's chambers, he overheard the humiliating comments and jests of the slaves.

"Poor fool," some of them muttered.

"Serves him right!" others chided. "Now he'll suffer for his pride."

"The master will show him."

"Stupid Crusader!"

"He will see!"

"He'll whimper for mercy like a dog!"

And so the jeers continued, as if Raoul were being taken to a long delayed yet well-deserved punishment. But as the knight passed by the old slave, the elderly Muslim just shook his head.

"You will learn," he warned solemnly, "You will learn the strength and power of Allah."

When Raoul arrived at last in his master's room, he found the Arab already standing, dressed in light garb and ready for travel. Without so much as a word, he motioned for the soldiers to withdraw, leaving the slave alone with him. Then, grasping the rope which bound Raoul's hands, the master led his slave away from the house.

Silently, the knight followed the Arabian. Before long, they came at last to what appeared to be an old and nearly abandoned tower. Fumbling in his pocket, the Muslim retrieved a single key and thrust it quickly into the rusted iron lock.

The large door squeaked open to reveal a small, dark corridor. At the far end, Raoul could make out a single beam of light spilling down a dilapidated set of steps, somberly winding their way to the turret's top. As his master stepped into the tower, Raoul distractedly tripped after him as he was jolted along by the rope. Slowly, the Arab led him up the musty stairs, long untrodden. With every step he took, a prayer instinctively escaped the Crusader's heart. For all this while, his master had maintained a menacing silence.

When they at last reached the top, Raoul noticed that the decaying tower had long since lost its roof - hence the light which spiraled down the stairwell.

“Sit there!”

Sir Raoul’s gaze returned to the interior of the turret. His master, sullen and impatient, had finally broken the silence.

“What! Have you become deaf as well?” he questioned angrily, untying the rope which bound Raoul’s hands. “I *said* sit down! Over there.”

Raoul’s eyes followed the Arab’s pointing finger to the location indicated. He stiffened slightly when he beheld the iron hooks and chains which covered the appointed wall. Calmly, the knight strode across the sunlit chamber and obediently sat upon the low bench which was built into the wall.

With a proud, set face, the Arab briskly crossed the tower room and seized up the chains. One by one, he clasped first the knight’s hands, and then his feet, linking them together in pairs. With wicked glee, he proceeded to load the slave down with even heavier and needless chains, until Raoul bent beneath their weight. The tall nobleman said nothing as his master carefully executed his cruel designs. At length, the Muslim, seemingly satisfied with his work, stepped back to eye his prisoner.

He then noticed, to his pleasure, that the Crusader was striving to avoid eye contact with him. Delighted, the master continued to scrutinize his slave. A sinister grin flickered across his wicked face. Yes, it was well nigh impossible for the wretched knight to move, much less leave the tower. Yet the master’s cruelty was still not satiated.

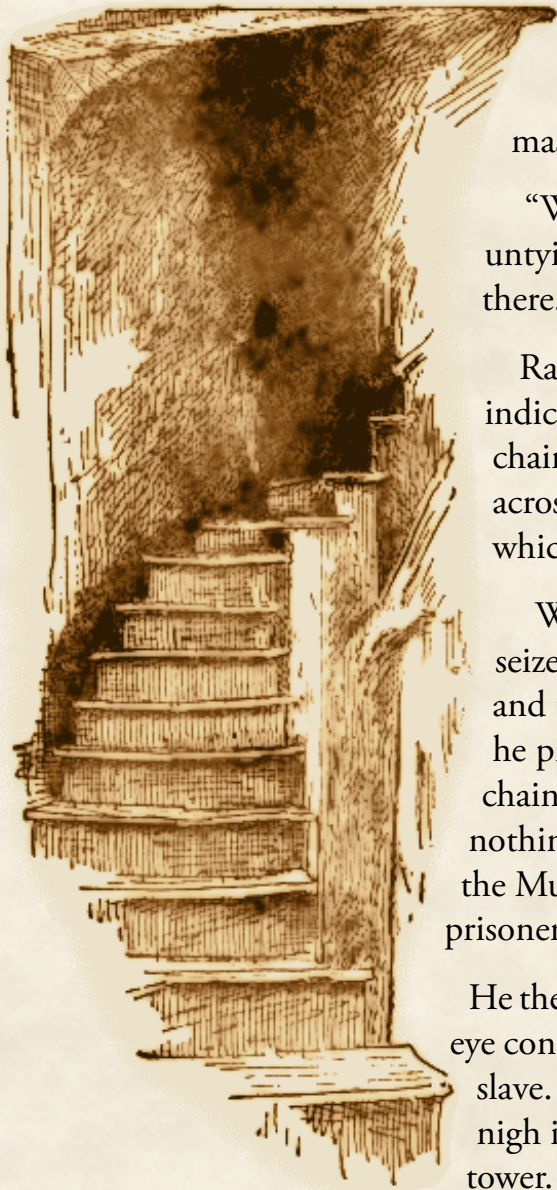
Picking up three more loose chains, the Arab hooked them onto the iron rings embedded in the wall. Then, grasping Raoul’s shackled wrists, he separately linked each one to an opposing chain. Lastly, he fastened the third chain around the knight’s waist, completely securing Raoul’s body to the wall.

As the last echo of the clanking irons died away, the French lord braced himself for what lay next. There was a quiet pause. Sensing his master’s stare, Raoul forced himself to raise his head. A broad and taunting smile awaited him on his master’s face.

“Well then,” the Muslim grinned, closely approaching him. “You will see what happens to those who dare to defy me.” He leaned forward towards his captive.

“I will suffer the opposition of no man... much less a slave.” With a sneer he spat in the knight’s face. Instinctively, Raoul tried to turn his head away, but his master caught him by the beard.

“No one,” the Arab breathed, pulling him forward, “refuses me, my foolish Crusader.” His dark eyes locked on Raoul’s. “And you will pay dearly for your offense.”



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Quickly jerking his hand aside, the Arab released his hold on the prisoner's beard. Straightening himself, he looked down upon the knight with disdain.

"I will leave you now to contemplate your insufferable crime."

So saying, the Muslim promptly turned around and left the miserable cell. The French lord listened until the sound of his master's footsteps, reverberating back up the stairwell, faded away completely. Next, he heard the door at the base of the turret being re-locked and securely fastened. Straining slightly, the last noise he could detect was the jangling of keys at his warden's side, as the proud Arab triumphantly strode away from the towering prison.

Then... all was still.

In the quiet which ensued with his master's departure, Raoul felt at peace. Looking at the chains which covered him, a calm look, almost a smile, came over the knight's face. Despite this newest cruelty of his master, something inside the slave was filling him with peace... and strength. For the first time in his many years of slavery and captivity, Raoul was being punished solely for his Catholic Faith.

There is a quiet excitement which a soldier experiences when he is honored with suffering personally for the sake of his king, even if his sovereign will never learn of it. But as a Crusader, his King knows all things – and nothing will ever pass by unnoticed or unrewarded.

Still, there is a burden to every trial, and some more so than others. Raoul sighed... It was very difficult to find joy in bearing this cross, and he felt its weight keenly. But his heart was filled with such a courage that he did not need joy. He was a Crusader of Christ. If his Heavenly Master could suffer torture and death for his sake, then Raoul would endure this punishment for His.

"Just give me Your strength, O Lord." Raoul prayed. "Blessed Mother, I entrust my heart to You. Protect it and shield it from every fear of pain or loss. I dread nothing - except losing Your Love. And in this new trial, I find hope for my deliverance. I *know* that You are merely testing Your servant before his exile is over."

The storm had begun... and still, the flame in his soul burned bright and strong. But the knight little realized that the darkest was yet to come.

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The next day, Raoul was awakened by the blinding rays of the sunrise. It did not take long for the morning desert air to burn under their piercing heat. The knight's solitude was eventually broken by the sound of footsteps ascending the tower stairs. As he watched, the door slowly opened and a somber faced slave entered, carrying a cracked jug and an old plate. The French lord shifted himself into a sitting position as the servant hurriedly placed his burdens on the ground. The knight silently surveyed his rations; a handful of rice and a piece of black bread barely covered the clay dish, while the chipped pitcher beside it sat filled with water.

"That's your breakfast," the slave muttered gruffly. Then, thinking perhaps the chained prisoner

could not reach the meal, he shoved the dishes closer. But though Raoul's arms were separated, they still had some liberty, and the knight slanted himself forward as he reached for the jug.

"Don't eat it all at once!" the man warned. "That's all you're getting today."

Raoul stopped, glancing first at his companion and then back at the food. The scanty amount would barely make a meal, much less stay his hunger all day. And the liquid in that cracked earthen jug of water...? In this heat?

As if reading the knight's thoughts, the man wiped the sweat from his own brow.

"Yes, this is all, so make the most of it." He squinted in the bright sun. "A week of this, and you will know better than to fight with the master. He is *very* angry." He paused, eyeing the Crusader pensively. "It is a punishment... a very great punishment. You will find it wiser to hold your tongue from now on. A slave must show respect."

Raoul said nothing as he watched his companion hasten towards the stairs. Shooting a final warning glance at Raoul over his shoulder, the gruff slave shut the door behind him as he left the sweltering prison. His rapid footfalls could be heard scurrying down and away from the tower.



"So this is my master's revenge." Raoul said aloud to himself when he was alone. "It is a torture," he admitted, shutting his eyes from the piercing sun. "But if my master thinks this will teach me a lesson... then he has a great deal to learn himself."

Opening his eyes, the knight's gaze fell upon his daily meal. Already his parched tongue was burning with thirst, and he reached eagerly for the water. The jug had barely touched his lips though when he suddenly, but thoughtfully, stopped. Leaning forward, he gently set the pitcher beside him and closed his eyes. Though he couldn't quite make the Sign of the Cross, Raoul thanked God for the food he was about to receive - being possibly the only one in that poor wretched country to do so.

As he wisely took a moderate sip from the jug, he looked at the meager meal before him.

"Thank you, God," he said aloud. "Considering my master's mood, it could be nothing at all."

But to sustain the energy of a tall, strong knight, it might as well have been nothing. And his master's generosity never exceeded the sparse ration of arid food. Every day, without fail, Raoul's meal consisted of water, black bread, and a handful of rice.

And thus it continued, day after day.



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Glad at first that he no longer was subject to the long hours of exhausting slave labors, the knight quickly realized that his solitude was a slowly becoming a steady torture. At the mercy of the weather, Raoul was forced to spend each passing hour without a single sound or sight to distract him from his agonizing torments. The suffocating air surrounding him only taunted his mind with the shade he could not feel, the water he could not drink and the heat he could not escape. His tough skin rapidly sweltered with burns from the scorching sun. Sweat fell from his blistered face like rain. And in the blinding, ceaseless rays beating down upon him, the knight's mind was flooded with, and tormented by, the memory of those from whom his captivity held him.

It was in such a state of existence, not long after his imprisonment in the tower, that Raoul was revisited by his master. Though he anticipated his return, Raoul was surprised to see his master escorted by a rough looking companion. The armed man appeared to be one of the Muslim's mercenaries.

Upon entering the cell, the master silently eyed his prisoner. He nodded with a certain satisfaction.

"Has your pride been broken?" he asked haughtily. The knight looked at him warily.

"Has yours healed?" was the guarded response. The soldier glanced awkwardly at the master, who merely tossed his head back with a resentful laugh.

"I see your arrogance has not died," the Arabian answered with disdain. "Perhaps," he added thoughtfully, "another month in this prison and you will be prepared to listen to reason. Or can we bring you to your senses now?" He motioned for his accompanying guard to lengthen Raoul's chains.

Without resistance, the knight was shoved from his seat and onto the floor. Wiping the sweat from his face, Raoul noticed his master fingering something beneath his tunic. The Muslim, however, had his eyes fixed on his slave.

"Tell me truly, Frenchman," he said, "have you had time to think things over? Are you prepared to win your freedom?"

"If your conditions are the same," replied the slave, "then so is my answer."

The Muslim shook his head in pretended sympathy. He remained, however, in perfect control of his temper. And in calm and coaxing tones, he began to list off all of the many riches and gifts that he would bestow on the noble lord, if the Crusader accepted his offer. Again, the brave knight refused. With feigned patience, the Arab only smiled. In an entreaty coated with flattering praise, he urged his lordly prisoner to return to a life of grandeur and honor.

"Your will is strong," his master admitted approvingly. "But your pride does you no good here. Yours is the strength and splendor that deserves a host of subjects and admiration." He went on to promise the land, estate, servants and family that would so readily be Raoul's to command and enjoy. If the Crusader would only say the word....

But once again the answer came without hesitation.

“No, master,” said the slave. “You are wasting your time.”

Proud disappointment flooded the Arabian’s face. His promises would have been enough to turn the heart of any man, much less a tortured and enslaved one.

“Are - are you so base?” the Muslim stuttered. “That none of this... magnificence, appeals to your noble nature?”

“It is a greater glory that I seek,” the knight replied staunchly.

“The glory of a crucified God?”

“The glory of a God Who nobly and willingly submitted to such a death; and then, gloriously arising, defeated it!”

“Oh spare me your disgusting doctrine,” the Arab scoffed.

“And spare me your fruitless lies,” responded the weary Crusader.

“Fool! Will you never learn...?” Anger was breaking through the Arab’s charming facade. “I will accept no refusal.”

“And I refuse to accept your proposal.”

“You do not understand. I *will* draw this out of you. You will stay in this tower until your will is broken.” There was a terrifying power behind the Muslim’s words. His dark eyes came piercing from under his silken turban.

But Raoul made no answer. Nor did he return his master’s gaze. He realized now that this was not the punishment of a single offense. It was a planned persecution to break Raoul’s will and conquer his Faith.

Exhausted, and burning from the heat, Raoul’s head drooped wearily as he passed a hand over his sweaty brow. His master, irritated at his silence, continued to threaten him.

“And I will not let you enjoy a premature death!” he taunted. “You will grow old and gray, rotting away beneath this ferocious sun. You will die alone and forgotten.”

At this, the nobleman raised his face, which answered clearer than his words. “So be it,” Raoul responded with a nod.

“You do not know what you are asking for,” the Muslim warned, reaching again beneath his robes. But Raoul took no notice.

“Neither do you!” the slave answered vehemently. “You may have no faith in the True God. But you will not rob me of mine.”

“No...” the Muslim’s concealed hand now came out from behind his tunic. He was holding a long whip. “I will destroy it.”

With a silent gesture, he beckoned for the guard. Raoul’s eyes quietly followed the husky man as he

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came around from behind and approached his master. Still staring at Raoul, the Arab slowly handed the whip to his soldier.

Then, like a vulture, the master began slowly circling around his captive, resuming his interrogation.

“Once more then,” the Muslim said, stopping behind the knight, “Will you embrace the faith of Mohammed?”

With downcast eyes, Raoul firmly shook his head. “Never,” was the quiet response.

His master too, turned his head. At this signal, the guard obediently unleashed the whip with a startling crack across the knight’s shoulders.

Lurching forward, Sir Raoul bit his lip against the sudden pain. His parched and swollen skin, burnt from hours in the desert sun, made even the least movement rife with torture. But as another whiplash came thrashing upon his back, a surge of courage swelled throughout the Crusader.

Raoul’s master had circled back around and was now standing before him, as the soldier continued adding blow upon blow. After some time, the Arab raised his hand and gave pause to the whipping. With grim satisfaction, he eyed his prisoner’s staggered efforts to raise himself.

“Are you ready?” he asked the knight. “Are you ready to claim your freedom?”

Slowly regaining his breath, Raoul looked up at his master. “God is my freedom.”

“Don’t be a fool...” the Muslim threatened. But the Crusader was not so easily intimidated.

“I do not fear you,” he answered boldly.

“Then you *are* a fool,” the Arab sneered. “And your pride has blinded you to my power.”

“You have no power over me but what God permits,” the slave replied, almost to himself. “And you can only do what He has ordained for my salvation.”

“It is Allah who is punishing you,” his master retorted, snatching the whip from the soldier’s hand. “And if you do not yield now, you will feel the full fury of his wrath.”

He glared menacingly at his slave, who for a moment responded with nothing but a silent, peaceful look.

“Do what you will,” Raoul said. “I have no fear of your false god or faith.”

Rigid with pride, the Muslim calmly handed the weapon back to his soldier. “So be it,” he whispered.

The armed guard, receiving another commanding nod, took up the whip and resumed his attack with greater fervor. Squaring his shoulders against the onslaught, Sir Raoul whispered a fervent prayer. He did not pray because he feared a failure, for his will was as set as iron, but rather out of instinct; a plea for strength in this hour of trial.

Steadying himself from the blows, Raoul shut his eyes. Amidst the hissing of the whip, his ears were flooded with a continued stream of threats and promises. At length, he looked up, only to see his master was once more encircling him. Bent over from another whiplash, the knight turned away from his master's taunting glare and relentless urges to deny the Catholic Faith.

"Renounce Jesus Christ," the Arab prodded, "and I will let you go."

But the knight, bracing himself from the beatings, turned towards him with unwavering resilience. "You will have to kill me first."

"Praise Allah and I will release you!" pressed the Muslim, torn between rage and astonishment at the French Lord's fortitude. "Embrace Mohammed's faith."

The whip cracked on Raoul's face, and the knight quickly clenched his teeth, stifling a cry. His head shook vigorously. "No."

And thus the battle continued between master and slave. Feeding off his master's fury, the guard's strong arm quickened and blood soon began to flow from the slave's open wounds.

At length, exhausted by his own efforts, the mercenary dealt a blow to the knight's head and Raoul collapsed to the ground. At this, his master put a hand on the guard's arm.

"I don't want to kill him," he muttered angrily, snatching the whip out of his hand. Then with an impatient gesture, he ordered the soldier to take hold of Raoul.

"Bring him over here!"

Half conscious, the knight was dragged back across the open chamber and fastened to the wall.

"Pull them more tightly," the Muslim ordered, pointing at the chains, "The wretch can sit when he sleeps."

The soldier obediently strapped Raoul's bleeding arms directly to the wall. The master then approached his slave and, with the whip's handle, raised the nobleman's chin. A moment passed, and the two said nothing, except with their eyes. The Muslim, with seething emotion, repeated once more, "Will you renounce your foolish faith?"

Squinting from the piercing sun, the Crusader shook his head.

"I would rather suffer... every outrage," he breathed, "...and every torture."

The Muslim stared. With a flick of his wrist, he pulled the whip from beneath Raoul's chin and pointed it squarely between the slave's eyes.

"And you shall, my stubborn knight." A menacing smile lit his dark face, "You will feel the punishment reserved for those who reject Allah."

With a snap of his fingers, the Muslim turned towards the doorway, followed by his summoned guard. Raoul lowered his head as the two left his cell.

Listening to their fading steps, the Crusader felt something trickling down his face, and instinctively

## CHAPTER 6

went to wipe it. His hands, however, merely yanked in place against the chains. A shadow of smile crossed the weary man's face. He had forgotten about his arms. Not knowing if what he felt was sweat or blood, the knight gently shook it from his eyes and peered out over the tower's edge.

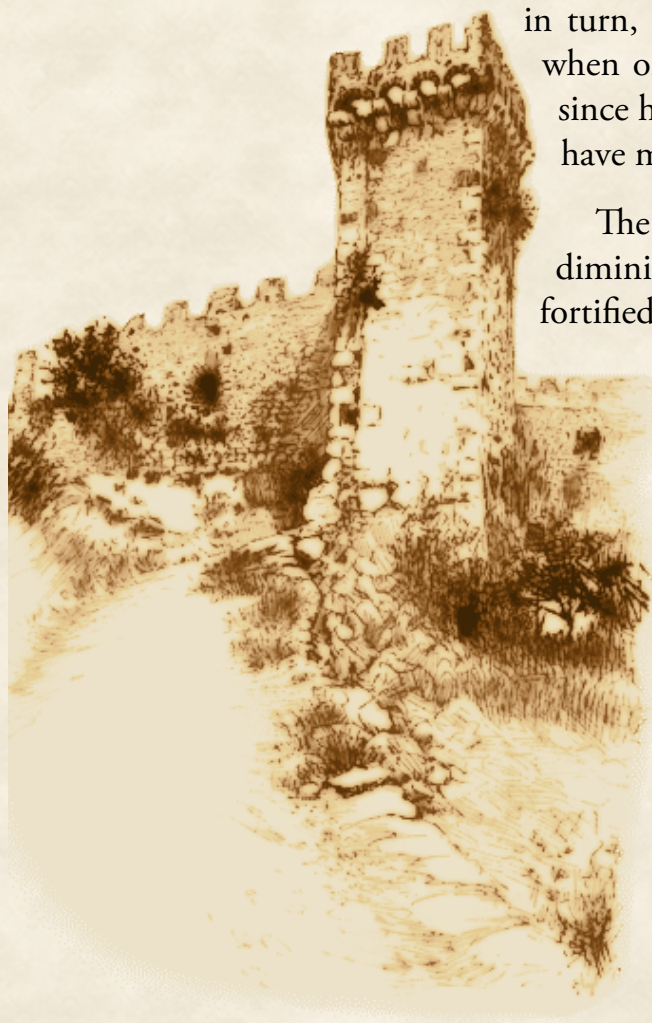
"This is Your desire, God." Raoul's voice was as strong as his will. "So be it. I shall prove that Your confidence in me is well placed. For I will never betray You. And I..." the French lord looked longingly at the distant horizon. "... will wait." He wiped his bloody cheek against his shoulder. "And I only wait... because I know that You will answer me. Blessed Mother," his eyes shut once more, "my hope is in you."

In the days which followed, Raoul discovered his master to be true to his words. A host of hardships and torments were inflicted on the captive, every one of them executed with the single purpose of crushing his spirit, and conquering his will. Through it all, Raoul remained confined in the tower. Sometimes his fetters kept him pinned against the wall, allowing him no movement or rest. And when his chains were loosened, it was only to give him a taste of the liberty he could not enjoy. His cruelest oppressor, though, was the sun, for its relentless and piercing rays prolonged and intensified all of his other pains.

And so time passed... at an agonizingly slow pace. For in his very hope, Raoul was afflicted by a most acute torture. As is the nature of pain, it lengthened the days into seeming as if they were weeks, and, in turn, prolonged the weeks into feeling like months. And so when one day, Raoul's master declared that a year had elapsed since his imprisonment in the tower, the weary Crusader could have mistaken it for a lifetime.

The courage that sustained him, however, in no way diminished his sufferings. And though his noble heart was fortified by God's grace, the grief he endured weighed down heavily upon it. But this was sustained by the fervent and constant hope that, one unexpected and wonderful day, his ransom would come at last... and he would be *free*.

But the crown of all his tortures was the continual visits of his cruel master, who would incessantly exhort him to deny his faith. And upon each refusal, Raoul was mercilessly whipped until the blood streamed from his lacerated flesh. But despite these tortures, each of Raoul's refusals was as steadfast as the first; his confidence in God was not shaken; his staunch resolve only intensified; and his ardor... his love for God was silently, steadily increasing - in purity and strength, as gold in the fire.



“An entire year,” the Muslim shook his head. “And yet you still cling to your errors,” he said, pacing before his slave. “Or is it your pride? You believe yourself to be so strong for enduring so long? A year is nothing!” He paused and stepped towards Raoul, who calmly faced him as he spoke “Do you think I will let you die? Oh no,” the Muslim fingered his whip. “You will give in, or you will live a long and *painful* life.”

Yet while he taunted and tormented his slave, the Arab could not help but wonder at the Crusader’s fortitude. But his astonishment had no admiration, for in his infuriated heart the Muslim was as determined as ever to conquer the resolute knight. And his frustration manifested itself in even more cruelty and torture. He would *not* be defeated by this French Catholic!

But what the poor wretch did not understand, was that the fury raging within him was fueled by a power other than his own. The Muslim’s cruelty was merely an outlet for the vehement hatred satan had for the steadfast Crusader. The devil saw, in the battered nobleman’s soul, Christ’s sacred Image - radiant and strong. And it was against Our Lord Himself that the demons directed the full vent of their loathing and malice. This they did by attacking His faithful servant.

Incensed at his failure and the knight’s strength, the devil resorted to a more deceptive and subtle means of assault. If he could not break Raoul from without, he would conquer him from within. Of course, he had already assailed the Crusader with the usual temptations and doubts. But these had not been enough to overcome him... yet.

Waiting like a lion for his prey, the evil spirit bided his time, searching for the first opportunity to slip in through his victim’s defenses. Being the coward that he is, satan would strike when Raoul was at his weakest... when his tortures were at their height and when his heart was the most vulnerable.

He would attack when Raoul thought of home...

# CHAPTER 7

Throughout the castle of Crequy, all seemed quite still - save for the sound of a young maid hurrying through its dark but familiar passageways. Her swift strides echoed somberly in the stillness as the girl made her way to her ladyship's chamber.



“Please be alright...” she whispered aloud as she took hold of the large door and firmly pushed it open.

With a mixture of both sorrow and relief the maiden saw that her mistress, though still asleep, was evidently in the midst of a fitful dream. Tossing restlessly in her blankets, the lady's pitiful moans suddenly broke into another piercing cry.

The poor maid stumbled back, “... My Lady?”

But Mahtilde, still captive in her nightmare, only groaned wordless fears. The girl was hesitant whether or not to awaken her; then, without warning, her ladyship cried out Raoul's name and lurched forward, sitting bolt upright in bed. A silent moment passed.

“Raoul...” Mahtilde softly called again, staring listlessly into the midnight darkness. Tears streamed down her pale cheeks as she slowly realized that she was awake. Only this nightmare was no dream.

With a shiver, the Lady pulled her disheveled blankets towards her. Spotting the maid standing off to the side, Mahtilde involuntarily gasped.

“Oh, you startled me! What are you doing?” she asked quickly.

“I'm sorry,” the girl said meekly, “I thought I heard you call for me.”

Mahtilde shook her head. “No, not for you...” she said to herself. Then turning back to the faithful young servant, she sighed wearily. “So I woke you again?”

“Oh, think nothing of it. It's not my welfare that I am concerned about, my Lady.”

Mahtilde only smiled. “Nevertheless, you should rest.” The maiden watched her reach for a wayward pillow. “Tomorrow night, we will move you to a chamber further down the hall.”

With that, Mahtilde gave her a dismissing nod, and settled beneath her covers. The girl, however, did not leave.

“*My rest...*” said the servant wearily. “And *that* will help *you* sleep?”

Mahtilde sensed a tone in the question; a tone that at once struck deeply into the heart of the lady. Slowly, Mahtilde sat up, the smile gone from her face. If they were speaking their minds...

“What would you have me do?” Mahtilde asked firmly, but not angrily.

“Let it go.” came the unhesitating reply. “With all due respect, my Lady, it *has been* eight years.”

Mahtilde opened her mouth as if to speak, but in the dim light all the maiden heard was her quiet breath, followed by a sad silence. At length, the gentle command ‘Get some sleep’ issued forth from the darkness; but the girl still perceived no change in her ladyship’s distracted voice. She was still clinging to a fanciful dream.

Obediently bowing, the servant stepped away and turned for the door. Opening it slightly, she quickly glanced back towards her mistress.

“What’s done is done, Lady Mahtilde.” the maid whispered somberly, “He’s never coming back.”

The door thudded shut before any reply could be made, and the maidservant’s nimble feet carried her swiftly back down the hall.

But the girl needn’t have worried. There was no answer coming. For the lovely lady remained very still, as if she was frozen, staring into nothingness. Exhausted, she wanted neither to move nor to sleep - her mind was fixed on the numbing reality that she was alone. For years, she had battled the depression... the despair. But in that lonely hour, the darkness was closing in around her.

Slowly, without thinking, Mahtilde lied down again. Her eyes focused thoughtlessly on her bed curtains, as the fire from her hearth cast dancing shadows upon them. Watching the shapeless figures, her mind could not help but envision them... yes, a host of Crusaders riding closer, galloping through the fields of Crequy. And at the head of them all rode her love and lord. Sir Raoul. As her imagination turned towards her husband, however, she pictured him with his face concealed – hidden behind his helmet. With tears in her eyes, she remembered how he had turned towards her as he left, with his visor raised and his noble face shining with a confident yet compassionate smile.

Mahtilde closed her eyes. Her imagination strained to raise the helmet from her lord’s face... but it couldn’t. Eight years... and slowly it was happening. Mahtilde was forgetting the clear features of her husband’s face.

“No!” she cried, sitting up suddenly. “I will never forget!” Remembering her maid, Mahtilde placed a trembling hand over her lips, as she began to weep.

“Oh Raoul,” she fell back upon her bed, “Raoul, where are you? Oh my lord, come home! I cannot wait any longer.”



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Her hands were now clutching at her blankets as she pressed them to her face. “Raoul! Raoul!”

Her muffled cries echoed dimly through the stone room. Lowering the blankets, the lady gasped for breath amidst her sobs. “Dear God... Blessed Mother...” Her words choking as she spoke, “Where is he?” Then, as if her husband was standing within her grasp, Mahtilde looked out, staring again at the muted glow of the fire.

“Come home, Raoul...” she whispered. “What are you waiting for? Oh please,” she pleaded at the flickering shadows. “Come back to me, Raoul! Oh Raoul!” Her arms shot out helplessly into the darkness. “Raoul!”

But as she reached, the darkness changed, and her cries vanished like echoes in the night. The outstretched arms were all at once weighed down by so many chains... and in that instant, Raoul suddenly awoke.

“Mahtilde..?” the knight breathed sharply, glancing about him. It was dark. Dawn was barely breaking.

With a sigh, he looked down at his fettered arms, which, in reaching out for the vision of his wife, had yanked against his chains, jolting him from his nightmare. And as the dream vanished, the luxurious bed transformed into a hard wooden board; the curtains faded into the prison walls; and the burning fire was lost in the dim glow of the rising sun.

But the memory of the dream would not vanish easily. Anguish suddenly gave way to anger as the captive Crusader struggled desperately against his chains.

“I’m here, Mahtilde!” he cried. “Oh what would I not give to be with you. Mahtilde! Mahtilde, I am here!”

The strong knight heaved against his bonds until his swollen wrists bled. But the unyielding chains absorbed his futile strength, holding him bound in place. Raoul expected nothing less. He was no fool, and seldom did he fight against his insurmountable captivity. But this time his heart would not surrender to reason. The thought of his dear wife’s grief caused him more agony than all his years of slavery combined.

“Oh, my Mahtilde.” The French Lord thrust himself forward again. “Oh my love... I’m here...” Nothing in the whole world mattered as much to him as his family.

And yet, here he remained – chained, and completely powerless to protect her.

*Not completely powerless...* His thoughts were abruptly but quietly turned to the Muslim’s offer for freedom, if he would deny his Faith. *But of course!* the same interior voice was quick to add, *that is out of the question.*

Raoul’s face grew hard at the thought of his cruel master.

“Death first!” the knight said fiercely, thrusting himself back upon the rough bed. He shut his eyes, and at once the Muslim’s gloating face seemed to hover right before him. Fighting the emotions that

justly swelled within him, Raoul turned towards the horizon, his eyes still closed.

“I will not do it...” he muttered, shaking his head. “I will not betray God.” His eyes squinted open. “Even if it costs me my freedom.”

The thought of Mahtilde’s tears came back to him and he sadly lowered his head.

“God, You know I can do nothing. Please help her. Unless,” he looked up at the cloudless sky, “You want to let me go home.”

Silently the moments passed - as the forlorn prisoner stared searchingly into the dark morning sky, a few remnant stars studding its infinite expanse.

“Why won’t they come for me?” Raoul found himself asking aloud. “What have I done that I should stay banished here?”

A sullen answer came echoing through his mind. *They have deserted you. She does not want you back.*

“That is not true,” said the knight quickly. “I *know* it’s not.”

*Then why are you still here?* the voice insisted. *Where is your ransom?*

“It will come... It will come,” Raoul nodded confidently. “One beautiful day.” He shut his eyes again and leaned his sunburned head against the wall. “I know she still loves me.” There were no further arguments in his mind. Instead, the vivid image of his Mahtilde, trembling with grief, suddenly flashed before him. And with it surged an intense desire to grasp her in his arms, shielding her from every pain and sorrow. His swollen arms reached out through the air, as far as his shackles would permit.

“Mahtilde,” he whispered, “Come to me”.

In answer, the image of his master returned. In his mind, Raoul envisioned the cruel figure of the Arab scoffing disdainfully at the weeping lady. Assaulting her with so many insults and jeers, the Muslim seemed to turn towards the captive lord with a taunting smile.

“Save her if you can.” He challenged. “Or have you not the courage?”

Raoul’s heart raced as he watched the torment continue. It was as if Mahtilde, blind to her own pain, was consumed with a burning desire to save Raoul from the Arab’s malice. And the Muslim, keenly aware of his control, delighted in tormenting the one spouse - so as to torture the other.

“What are you waiting for, Frenchman?” The Arab seemed to sneer. “Deny your Faith. Or watch her die with grief.”

With a cry, the knight’s outstretched arms once more jolted against the chains, this time just short of his master’s mirage.

Raoul’s eyes opened with a start. Immediately though, he shut them again. Breathing hard, he made a supreme effort to suppress the anger seething within him.

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“I cannot go down that road,” he said firmly. Eight years in captivity had taught him the warning signs that must always be heeded. “That road has no return.”

A heavy silence hung in the air, as the first rays of the sun broke through the prison walls. The knight sat motionless, leaning against the cold, hard stones. Within him, the tempest subsided and the demons quietly retreated, stealthily eyeing the weary prisoner.

At length, Raoul’s head fell. “My God... what am I doing here?” he looked wearily at his chains. The iron bonds had long since burned blistered sores around his wrists, which were now bleeding.

“I am so ready to go home. But instead, I languish here, feeding a hope that dies every dawn I awake in this prison.” He peered out at the desert sun which was just barely clearing the horizon.

“I have waited so long...” Raoul licked his parched lips. He reached down for the water jug. One glance said enough though, and he quietly set it back. The jar was empty.

“What is it that You want from me?”

A stifling wind swept through the prison and a heavy feeling came over him.

*God wants nothing more than what you have already given Him.*

The knight’s brow furrowed thoughtfully. Silent and attentive, he did not interrupt the thoughts running through his mind. They *seemed* to be his own... *But He has put your freedom in your own hands. He is waiting for you to act.*

Puzzled at this ambiguous answer, Raoul questioned aloud, “What can I do?”

*Yield your will,* was the immediate reply.

“To my master?” the Crusader was at once suspicious. “Deny my Faith?”

*No, of course not!* the demons were quick to defend themselves. *God would **never** want that! But the Muslim will give you your freedom if you simply appear to embrace his religion.*

Raoul’s shock was replaced by a curious expression.

“Meaning if I lie...” It was as if the concept had never occurred to him. The dreadful sin of apostasy suddenly and stealthily took on the innocent face of a harmless fib. Though the lie in and of itself was instinctively repulsive, the reality that it could easily and immediately bring him back home...

*Once you are safely away from this prison, and have been given the land and a new wife - the voice continued - then you will be free to escape and return home. And for whatever trifling falsehood is required, you can ease your scrupulous conscience by going to Confession back in Crequy.*

Without even thinking, the mere concept of an escape so long dreamt of, and of that freedom so ardently desired, sent a thrilling sensation through Raoul. The demons sensed this and carefully pressed their advantage.

*You’ve earned it. God is more than pleased with your sacrifices. And if you remain Catholic in your heart,*

*God cannot hold you accountable for a necessary deception. Think about it... home at last.*

The poor Crusader quietly took hold of the little bag around his neck. "I wouldn't even need to take another wife. I would have my freedom long before that. Besides," he clasped the fragment of his wife's ring, "I could not endure even pretending to betray Mahtilde's love."

As he spoke, a sad look stole into his eyes and he silently raised them.

Anxiously yet cautiously seeking the knight's full consent, the demons flooded him with intense yearnings for home. But it was too late. For in that moment of decision, grace had broken through the mist of lies and touched the Crusader's faithful heart.

"Are you even listening to yourself, Raoul?" the knight upbraided himself fiercely. "You would not play the part of an unfaithful husband to Mahtilde, for that would betray *her* love. But what do you care for *God's* love? Is the betrayal any less? No," Raoul shook his head, ashamed of the cowardice which he presumed was responsible for the treacherous thought. "You will not lie, Raoul. You will not add sin upon sin."

*What sin?* the wicked spirits whispered feverishly. *Your master is just looking for words. Say what you want, and you will remain Catholic.*

"If I deny Christ before men, He will deny me before His Father. It would be a denial."

*God knows your heart.*

"And He will take me at my word." the knight argued. "No. I will not do it."

Incensed at his fortitude, the demons spat back vehemently: *It is just because you hate your master! Isn't it? You would rather die than yield your will to him!*

Raoul did not answer at once. His honest heart could not deny the feelings that dwelt there... but was it hatred? His conscience had never rebuked him with that.

Disheartened at his hesitation, Raoul shook his head and quickly answered, "That is not why."

*Ah! Then you admit your hate!* the voice was stronger now. *How do you know it has not been your pride all of this time? You think it has been faith. I tell you it has been folly.*

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Raoul heaved a sigh. His eyes were thoughtful, with a touch of agitation. The accusation disturbed and humbled the Crusader. Deeply.

"I have served my master willingly as his slave." The knight's mind wandered back to before his imprisonment. "And for seven years before, I endured the yoke of slavery. No, it is not my pride."

*Very well then...* the voice prodded, *Prove it.*

The sun's rising ascent had raised it above the walls, evaporating every shadow in the bare prison. It silently pelted the quiet prisoner with its piercing rays.

For a while Raoul said nothing, the challenge still echoing through his mind. By the grace of God,

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His Faith was firm. And his will was strong. This he knew. And he did not doubt the reason for his perseverance. It was not pride.

But for the first time, the enslaved Crusader found himself powerfully confronted with the accusation of hating his master. Did he? Before he could even answer, to his dismay, feelings of anger swelled up within him against his Muslim lord. *If anyone was ever worthy of hatred...*

The Frenchman suppressed the feelings immediately... almost vehemently. His anxious mind was racing.

“Dear God,” Raoul prayed. “Please tell me this is not hatred. I know it’s not... It is merely righteous anger. I have never desired any evil for my master... not even vengeance.”

Yet even as he spoke, doubt was silently gnawing at him. However, the demons were careful to *say* nothing. It was important that Raoul believed these convictions were his own.

“Very well,” Raoul nodded firmly. “I *will* prove it. And henceforth I will pray not only for my deliverance - but until then, for a full dominion over my emotions, that I may truly pray, ‘Father, forgive him, for he knows not what he does.’ ”

The heavy air suddenly grew thin, as a gentle breeze swept through the open prison. But the heavy-hearted knight noticed nothing. His challenge had been silently and confidently accepted.

And it was no accident that very soon thereafter the tower was visited once again by its Muslim master. Had the Arab been more keenly observant, he would have noticed an unusual darkness weighing upon his weary captive.

He must have sensed a weakness, though, for the torture this time seemed unusually brutal. Or perhaps Raoul had suddenly become more sensitive to his master’s cruelty. For the relentless commands, constant jeers and incessant beatings were now seething with a burning and vehement hatred for the French knight. And Raoul found himself exerting all of his strength - not just to sustain his torments, but to battle the hatred that was raging within him to retaliate.

But in the end, the Arab was once more the one who suffered the defeat. For, in answer to all



the threats and promises, the knight had not only refused them, but had remained insolently silent. Loathe, however, to betray his wounded pride, the irate master simply punished his slave by taking hold of his daily rations.

“Until you find your tongue...” the Muslim said, spilling out Raoul’s water onto the hot stone floor, “I see no need to wet it.”

Raoul looked up to see his master strewing the food just out of his reach. Then, with a laugh, the Arab tossed the emptied plate towards him.

“Don’t forget to thank your God before eating,” he sneered as he turned to leave. Had he remained, though, he would’ve seen a look on his slave’s face that might have caused his confidence to falter.

When the Muslim had finally gone, the French lord painfully crawled back to his wooden bench, his heavy chains dragging behind him. With a chorus of dire threats still ringing in his ears, Raoul slowly lowered his head upon the rough board. For a good while, he said nothing, even though he was alone... or so he thought.

“I will not do it...” he whispered at last, as if answering the hollow, urgent commands echoing in his head. “I will not deny my Faith.”

*And now you know why you supposedly ‘defend’ your religion...*

Raoul bit his parched lips. “That is not true.” There was little conviction in his voice though. For, try as he might, the knight could neither dispel nor deny the struggles within him.

*You see... what did I tell you? the voice was triumphant, but not arrogant. At last you see the truth. Your unbridled passions have betrayed your rebellious pride. You have no choice now but to admit it and yield!*

Wincing at his fresh stripes, Raoul buried his face beneath his arm, shielding it more from his thoughts than from the glaring sun.

“Yield to what?” he said aloud.

*You want your freedom? the demons asked. Harness your hatred... and kill your master.*

Despite his burning pains, both within and without, the Crusader smiled. “Oh Raoul, what have you descended to?”

*Do not lie! You know you want it.*

Raoul faced the passions clamoring within him. “As an animal would devour a beast,” he said calmly. “But God made me a Man.”

*And a strong one! When next your master comes, simply cast these chains about the brute’s neck and strangle him.*

“And how would that help me?” Raoul confronted the temptation with logic. “I will not escape with him dead.”

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*You will not be free if he lives!*

“Either way... it leaves me here.” The prisoner reasoned.

*But at least you will have avenged yourself!* The demons insisted.

“I don’t want revenge!” Raoul sighed wearily. “I want to go home.”

*You never will, not with him alive. And you will spend decades in this wretched prison.*

“Please God! Please!” Raoul cried, breaking free from the dispute, “Now is a good time for the ransom to come!”

The voices, forcibly silenced, had momentarily retreated.

Though victorious, Raoul was disheartened at these struggles. They came from so deep within him. His humility did not doubt that his heart was the coward - never suspecting that the real cowards were invisible to him. The fears felt so real.

Could there really be decades left in this prison? His nature shuddered at the foreboding thought.

“Oh Blessed Virgin,” he prayed, “You hear me. I know you do.” With a confident nod, he gently closed his eyes. “And I know that my freedom will come.”

But even as he spoke, something within the Crusader cringed. He was beginning to grow weary of the yearnings. His hope had been crushed too many times.

Deep within, he knew the truth... He could not endure this much longer.

## CHAPTER 8

“Hey, wake up!”

Raoul felt a foot press against his shoulder. Instinctively, the knight recoiled, even before fully awaking. Instantly the shroud of slumber dissipated, and he peered above him. Inaudibly, Raoul sighed with relief. It was just a slave bringing him his food. Other mornings did not always begin so calmly.

“Finally!” the slaveboy grumbled. “I thought you’d never wake up. How can you sleep with all those chains on anyway?”

Raoul did not answer him aloud. *Too much experience*, he thought to himself, forcing a weary smile.

Pushing himself up to a sitting position, the knight reached out for the platter. The young slave handed it over, eyeing him as he did so. Raoul caught the look, but said nothing. The boy, however, needed no prompting to speak his mind.

“How long do you plan on staying in this wretched place?”

It was rather bold for the child, but hardly surprising. Though the enslaved nobleman was easily three times the boy’s age, the knight’s position made him an easy target for idle arrogance.

“As long as it takes,” Raoul said simply, setting the plate beside him. He turned back for the water jug, but the young slave would not hand it to him just yet.

“What? Are you thinking of your ransom?” he asked haughtily. The Crusader nodded.

“Well!” the boy scoffed, “A lot of good it does for you. You are still a slave.”

“Some have waited a long time, and in the end - “

“And others have died waiting!” the child retorted abruptly. The knight slowly looked up at his young, authoritative interrogator. With a tone and look the child could never understand, the poor exile calmly answered:

“It will come.” He reached out for the water. The little slave handed it to him with a laugh.

“Almost nine years as a slave, and you still think someone will come? You really *are* as crazy as they say!”

The Crusader’s downcast eyes glanced thoughtfully at the earthen jar in his hands. Actually, it had been well over nine years since he was captured in battle. And more than two of those years had been spent in this torturous prison. Over two years... *nearly three*... And every day hoping that each one would be the last. Raoul gently shook his head. He would not give up... he could not. Not now.



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His deep thoughts were gradually distracted by the boy's continued chattering. Raoul blinked and squinted up towards him. Humiliations were not lacking for the French lord, and there were plenty of volunteers to gloat over his misfortunes. For instance, this young slave spoke with such authority, and yet the child's entire lifespan could hardly have exceeded the duration of Raoul's slavery. Evidently, the French Crusader was a frequent subject of disdainful conversation.

At length the slaveboy, not waiting for the tall knight to respond, turned away with a sneer.

"No one is coming for you," the boy said, as he reached down for yesterday's empty plate and jug.

"Oh," He stopped suddenly, a mischievous look on his dark face, "except for the master."

The noble captive involuntarily became tense and rigid.

"What do you mean?" He eyed the young slave cautiously.

The boy merely cocked his head and asked with a smirk, "Do you hate him as much as he hates you?"

But Raoul was not even listening. "What about the master?" he pressed.

"I heard him talking about you," the slave replied, innocently shrugging his shoulders. "He's coming later for a 'visit'."

Quite pleased by the pain he had evidently inflicted on the Crusader, the grinning boy scurried out of the hot prison.

At the mere thought of his master's coming, all of the knight's valiant resolutions and nerve seemed to crumble. For a moment, his courage tottered.

A tiny shadow suddenly passed over Raoul's face. Tilting his head, he watched as a large bird flew far overhead, a distant speck in the vast blue sky. Without a thought, a longing sigh escaped him.

And then he smiled. It was a mournful smile though, one which would have elicited no pleasure from any soul, only pity. For the noble knight was grinning at the envy he felt towards the simple creature soaring above.

"What freedom," he whispered, "is given to the humble animals."

He could still remember back to when he had been captive in this dungeon for *only* a year. He had had such strong hopes for his rescue then. His needs had been so great; his pains, unbearable. They still were. But even in the past, he didn't have recourse to the security or safety of his own mind. His torments had long since surpassed the realm of physical torture.

"And now it has been over two years," he moaned, "Almost three, really, since I was chained in this miserable tower." His eyes wandered listlessly about his cell.

"God, what are you waiting for? What is lacking? I know that it will happen. I just cannot see when." His head fell. "I do not think I can endure this much longer."

## THE LORD OF CREQUY

A bitter sigh escaped him as he listened to himself. How often had he said such things. So many countless times in the past he had found himself at “his strength’s end”. And yet here he sat; facing, for all he knew, decades of imprisonment and torture. The knight involuntarily gasped at the thought.

“Oh dear God!” was all he could say. “Please...”

The solitary stillness was broken by the sting of a burning wind. But Raoul did not feel it. Instead, he felt an all too familiar heaviness slowly invading his mind.



*It would have been much easier if you had simply embraced your fate years ago.*

Raoul instinctively grit his teeth. He had grown quite weary of these silent debates.

“This is *not* my fate,” he answered the voices quietly. “This *will* change.”

The demons, however, did not respond so meekly. With anger and vehemence, they challenged the willful prisoner.

*How much longer will you feed such dreams? they demanded. God has already answered you again and again. Do you not know denial and judgment when you see it? How dare you defy His Will! What pride! What if He **wants** you to stay here until death - what is your response? Others have endured worse torments than you. What have you done to deserve liberty?*

For a moment, the captive lord said nothing. The dreadful possibility that his ransom may never come had often presented itself to him. For all these years, he had been so sure... so hopeful. He had always banished that despairing thought. But now, after almost ten years of slavery, the knight could not ignore its challenge. What *would* he do if God had already decided that he must end his days as a slave?

In answer, these same voices, - who had just seemingly defended God’s Sovereign rights over His creatures - now swarmed around the Crusader with incessant and blasphemous accusations:

*What kind of God would betray His faithful servant and abandon him to this fate?*

## CHAPTER 8

*And after all that you have endured for Christ?*

*Yet where is the loving God you have served so well?*

*How long have you waited and prayed?*

*Where is God's justice?*

***He is a liar! He is the Father of Lies!!!***

Their clamoring grew to an almost senseless din. The knight waved his hand through the hot air, in a desperate attempt to chase away these thoughts - for each one was taking a stronger hold on his soul. He was tired - tired of everything. He felt abandoned and lost; hopeless and helpless...

... and *angry* - angry at these incessant battles, and so weary that he felt no strength against them. But despite the lifelessness that threatened to consume him, his will still had the power to command. And in the face of the abject despair which strove to engulf him, the desperate knight, like Job of old, refused to curse his God.

"I will not hate Him. Neither will I blame Him for my sorrow. He is just. He does all things well... and with love."

Raoul lowered his burning face into his hands. He felt empty inside - dead. Yet his mind remained a battlefield. The seclusion of his own mind was more torturous of a prison for him than the sweltering tower chamber ever could be. And when the din had, at length, subsided, new, and quieter "thoughts" stealthily rose above the rest:

*What courage! Yes! You **are** faithful... Ten times a martyr's reward awaits your valiant soul!!*

The knight ignored the deceptive flattery and folded his scarred hands. Such talk was almost as disgusting to the humble Crusader as the blasphemous shrieks.

"God owes me nothing." Raoul said aloud. "And if somehow my sins have forced His hand, then I plead for His Mercy. I have *been* pleading for mercy." His firm voice faltered though as he spoke and the next instant his eyes were staring pleadingly into the bright sky. "I don't deserve it. I know I don't deserve it. But I *need* Your mercy! Oh dear God, I need it!"

I am willing to sacrifice my life to You. I am ready to win the martyr's crown. My life is Yours - but You will not take it! My master has condemned me to life-long tortures in this prison. If I am to die..." His sad eyes blinked slowly. The thought that ten years of yearning and praying should end in this... Raoul shook his head.

"Can I not live, my God?" he asked. There was a pause, as if he would hear an answer. "Please. I am *begging* You. Despite this despair, I *must* hope. I cannot help but hope. Is that so wrong? Please show me... tell me what I must do to win my freedom. Blessed Mother, please protect me. And when my master - oh... my master..." The Crusader remembered what the slaveboy had said earlier.

He looked over at his food. It may not still be there once his master was through with him. But grief

had so wrung his empty stomach, that the feverish knight merely stretched himself out upon his hard bed. He did not feel like eating.

“Please, my Lady,” he whispered. “Not today.” His weary eyes closed. “I cannot take him today.”

The rest of the day was spent in anxious anticipation. By evening, though, Raoul was relieved to discover that the little slave boy must have been lying. Either that or the knight’s prayer had been answered, and the grateful prisoner was able to pass an otherwise restless night in moderate peace.

The boy was not completely wrong though, for the French knight was evidently on their master’s mind. Raoul was not the only one acutely aware of, and exasperated by, the duration of his imprisonment. And over the next few months, the master seemed to visit him with ever increasing frequency, scarcely allowing the knight’s wounds to heal before tearing them open anew.

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“I must warn you, Frenchman, that I have little patience today.” The Muslim paced slowly before his chained captive, whip in hand. Two of his mercenaries stood off to the side nearby. He had specifically fastened the knight securely upright against the prison wall. The tightened shackles gave but little, and the prisoner’s already bleeding arms were outstretched far beyond any possibility of self-defense.

“I will not tolerate any insolence or disrespect,” the Arab continued. “And you will answer me when I speak to you.” A fiery glare shot out from beneath the tall turban. Raoul met the look, but did not return it. He had neither the pride nor foolishness to incite his master’s anger. He knew his tormentor well enough to know that the Saracen’s hatred was already insatiable - it needed no further goading.

When the Muslim had finished pacing in front of his slave, he stood still a moment... staring into his eyes. Then, without a word, the Arab tilted his head and Raoul suddenly felt a seething pain in his side. The mercenaries had both been armed with whips; and, at the master’s signal, each had begun scourging the knight.

The Muslim watched silently for some time, shielding his eyes from the burning light of the late afternoon. In its descent, the desert sun flooded the decrepit cell with its fading rays; and the heat, though bearable, was creating a heavy and suffocating air.

At length, as the beatings continued, the Arab squatted down to eye level with his prisoner and continued to stare.

“Are you ready to stop this foolishness?” he said at last.

Held captive in his bonds, Raoul could turn from neither the scourges nor his master. Clenching his teeth against the pain, he leaned breathlessly against the wall.

“Answer me,” the Arab warned. The knight opened his mouth to speak when a whip lashed against his neck. Lurching forward, his fettered hands reached in vain towards his lacerated shoulder.

“Answer me!” his master demanded. But the slave was bracing himself against the blows. The hunched Muslim stood up again and raised his own whip, aiming it at the knight’s head.

## CHAPTER 8

“Now!” His cry rang out among the hisses and cracks. Raoul’s face instinctively turned but his master’s whiplash caught him fiercely by the chin.

“M- my... my ans-” Raoul’s dry voice cracked and he bit his lip. The two guards had not ceased. The Muslim gave them no heed, and instead pressed his question.

“Will you abjure your senseless faith?” He stood close to him now. The Crusader shook his head no in response, but his master was in no merciful mood.

“Answer me...” he threatened. Raoul gasped for air.

“No!” His eyes locked on his master. “The answer - is no.”

“Fool...” the Muslim clutched his whip “Opposition is useless!” His words came out like the hiss of snake, but with the vehemence of a lion. He *hated* the Crusader. He hated him for his will... for his courage... and for his Faith. Even now, as the wretched slave struggled helplessly beneath his tortures, the sight of his cruel torments did not satiate the Saracen’s hatred - it only aggravated it.

“Yield, my French knight. Or be destroyed.”

Raoul said nothing. He was hardly listening. For the Muslim’s was not the only voice clamoring in his head. And the two mercenaries, who had been alternating their blows, began to strike more rapidly - at times nearly at once.

“It is in vain,” grimaced the master. “*You cannot win this fight!*”

The knight, quivering involuntarily from the pain, raised his face towards him. His blistered lips parted, and his hoarse words merely echoed the look already in his eyes: “You... have already... lost.”

Enraged, the Muslim raised his whip to strike, but one of his henchmen preceded his vengeance with a brutal thrash over the slave’s shoulders.

A moan escaped the knight as he strained against his chains.

“What was that?” the Arab sneered. “Already admitting your defeat? Was that a yes?” But his gloating taunts were ignored.

“My God,” Raoul breathed, “I trust You. I *love* You...”

“Call upon *Allah* as God,” the Muslim coaxed, “and your trust will be rewarded and your love fulfilled.” When his suggestion was greeted only by silence, he unleashed his whip across the Frenchman’s face.

“Jesus... Jesus,” Raoul’s voice was barely above a whisper. “Jesus, my God.”

The Muslim answered all the louder with the whip. Again and again, the bitter blows thrashed against the prisoner’s bloody body.

And while the master attacked from without, the demons surrounded and suffocated the Crusader from within.

*This man deserves your hatred!* they goaded. *Curse this evil man! The curse of God! As Christ cursed the fig tree.*

Outwardly, the slave groaned. But inwardly he did not hesitate to answer them: “*Revenge is Mine, saith the Lord.*” But even as he thought this, Raoul experienced such a seething desire to avenge himself suddenly surge up within him ...

*Only lucifer can help you,* whispered the same force that strove to fill his heart with revenge. *Give him your consent and he will free you...*

“Embrace our religion, and I will let you go!” The Muslim’s offer rang out like a command. “Just say the word and I will release you!”

Raoul clenched helplessly at his chains.

“Please... Please...” His weak cries were inaudible above the relentless scourges. His master desperately urged him to end it all.

“Deny your Christ!” he bellowed, while the demons howled from within, *Send this man to hell!*

Exhausted, the knight shook his head. “No!”

His eyes slowly grew dim and his full weight began to sag against the iron bonds. The Muslim immediately raised his hand and the two men-at-arms lowered their weapons. He was intent on breaking the wretch, not killing him.

“Unchain him,” the Arab commanded, “And bring him to me.”

The sun had descended beneath the horizon and an eerie twilight began to settle into the prison. Sufficient light remained to see by, however, as the two mercenaries, panting to regain their breath, fumbled with the heavy chains. Then, taking hold of the half-conscious knight, they dragged him into the center of the room.

“Let him go.”

Raoul slumped onto the hot dusty floor and his master slowly stepped back.

“I am not a heartless man,” he said, eyeing his bloody slave. “And as your tongue is evidently too parched to speak, I shall permit your release without a single sound. Here,”

Raoul watched the Muslim purposefully run his foot along the floor. Still trembling from the scourging, the knight lifted himself up to see what his master was tracing in the dust.

It was a cross.

“You have no fetters,” the Arab explained. “You are free to walk out that door, so long as but a single step lands on this cross.”

The French lord had been slowly inching nearer his master, who had backed away from the tracing. The two guards stood ready, and for a moment all was still in silent anticipation.

## CHAPTER 8

But Raoul did not at once rise to his feet. His eyes instead turned towards the symbol in the dust. He set his bleeding hands on the sweltering stones and slowly leaned against them. He did not raise himself upwards -, but forwards. At once the Muslim understood what the knight was doing, but too late. Raoul's blistered lips had already fervently kissed the precious Sign before they received a fierce kick for their loving act of reverence.

The stark pain made Raoul wince, but he did not mind it. It stirred his soul. And suffering this affront for Jesus brought to the Crusader's mind all that his *Divine* Master had endured for *him*. The only difference was that his sinless Lord had suffered infinitely worse.

Touched by the thought of such Love, to which he could quite keenly relate, the knight had but a moment to dwell on it. Instinctively and without even a glance towards his master, the slave hastily wiped the cross from the floor just as the Muslim's foot came down on where it had been.

"Wretched worm!" the Arab fumed, and again kicked the knight in the face. Raoul recoiled and the two mercenaries instantly caught him by his wounded shoulders.

Though the French lord offered no difficulty, his arms were pinioned mercilessly behind his back as the Saracen motioned for him to be brought near.

Standing before him, the Muslim did nothing to hide his feelings nor to suppress his anger.

"Three years..." He shook his head, "Three years I have kept you in this tower... and you are as stubborn as the day I imprisoned you."

He spoke slowly, his voice trembling with rage. Raoul shifted slightly, striving not to betray the agony of his wounds. The armed men did not loosen their hard grasp. But his master did not seem to notice.

"And to think of the money and food I have wasted on you. Ten gold pieces... for a phantom ransom and a wretched slave with less sense than a beast. A French lord indeed!" He spat in the slave's dirty face.

"It is no wonder they don't want you back," the Muslim sneered. "You think of no one but yourself and your vain honor. Well, you see where your pride has gotten you! And this, my *lord*," he mockingly bowed towards the chained wall, "is where your pride will keep you."

He nodded at his men, who led Raoul to the splintered bench.

"Not too tightly," cautioned the Arab. "I want him to imagine his freedom." The brutes were still none too gentle and roughly strapped the iron bonds around the slave's swollen wrists and ankles. When finished, they looked towards their master, who beckoned them to the door. The Muslim himself was about to leave when Raoul caught a look in his fierce eyes.

"This is not over," the Arabian warned. "And I will return."

With that, he turned his back on the prison and left the torturous tower.

Raoul, however, felt no peace at his departure. For his chief tormentors had not gone. Burning with fever and with pain, the knight collapsed upon his board. His mind was haunted with a hundred thoughts; his passions trembling with a thousand desires. But in the midst of it all, one torture reigned supreme: his noble heart, more sore than all his lacerated flesh, felt utterly alone.

“What have I done...” Raoul whispered aloud. “Why has Heaven turned its back on me? Can I win mercy? Or will there be no end to this...”

*End it now.*

Raoul moaned and covered his head beneath his arms.

*If your master will not murder you and your God will not take you, then end your own life.*

The concept of suicide was painfully appealing to the tormented knight, but he knew to take one's life was forbidden by the God Who created it. The cowardly deed had eternal consequences that would rob him forever of the happiness of Heaven.

Heaven! The noble lord eagerly raised himself upon his bench and stared up into the dimming sky.

“Rodger! Geoffrey!” The thought of his two martyred brothers brought hope to his eyes. “Oh look down with pity on your Raoul! If the courts of Heaven remain deaf to my cries, surely they will listen to you. You gave your lives for God, and for ten years have been in His blissful company. Ten years I have waited in this misery... ten years, praying that God... would hear me...”

The defenses Raoul had built for himself were slowly crumbling. The hopes he had clung to were evaporating like water beneath the scorching sun. And he felt that he was not *only* alone - but purposefully abandoned. Sensing his weakness, the demons furiously buffeted him with temptations, like hammers on an anvil:

*How dare you call out to God... they reeked with indignation. You defy His will - clamouring and complaining against His decree. He has condemned you to die in this prison! You should never have left Crequy! This is your reward. It is you who have betrayed your wife and son. You could be home in their arms, but instead you have clung to your chains.*

The Crusader leaned back against the wall, “...I am here - for the sake of Christ...”.

*Ah, now who is this holy martyr? the demons were vehement Except that you are seething with anger at your wretched God for abandoning you! He betrayed you and you hate Him!*

The knight clenched his hands in bloody fists. “Stop.” he commanded. “Be silent!” But the demons retaliated with their full strength.

*What? You think this voice is not your own? That these thoughts and feelings are not from the center of your being? Search your soul. Do you deny the hatred, despair and longing that consume it? Oh but you are a liar!*



## CHAPTER 8

Flooded with despair, Raoul hid his face behind his hands. “Dear God help me.” His head shook violently. “I don’t hate You. You know I don’t.” The horrid thought brought tears to the brave man’s eyes. “And You,” he steadied his sad voice, “I *know* that You love me.”

*Why should He!* the demons raged. *You have already betrayed Him. Your pride and hatred has won for you the pit of hell.*

Raoul turned desperately to the starlit sky. “Holy Virgin! Blessed Mother!” His fettered arms were reaching out now for aid. “My Lady! Save me!”

*Go ahead and call to Her,* the evil spirits goaded. *She is the liar that you are. It would have been safer if you had been placed under the protection of satan!*

“**No!**” The blasphemy against the honor of the Mother of God and the Queen of All Creation filled Raoul with a noble knight’s outraged indignation.

***Curse Her! Free yourself!***

But the Crusader, with the last of his strength, set his eyes and will on Heaven. His trembling tone bespoke a passion and struggle that none on this earth could grasp.

“Jesus... Mary...”

Utterly spent, Raoul fell limp upon his hard bed.

Silence.

Both within and without.

But there was no courage in this silence. Nor strength. If hell retreated, it was not because Heaven had advanced.

A solitary wind whistled through the silent tower. And for the first time in ten years, the lonely exile faced and accepted his enslaved future. There would be no ransom. There would be no escape. And in that moment, the lordly slave embraced his humble, yet ardent desire.

“Lord,” Raoul whispered in the darkness, “let me die.”

Heaven’s silence was not broken. And for once, hell seemed still. Perhaps it felt its victory had been won.



In the days that followed, Raoul's longings for death only intensified. He was convinced of his fate and prayed now that God in His mercy would hastily bring him a martyr's reward.

Not long thereafter, Raoul heard the sound of the tower's main door being unlocked. His anxious anticipation was short-lived, for the visitor was swift in climbing the prison's long and winding staircase. With a heavy heart, Raoul watched his master enter the cell.

The Muslim seemed equally glad to see his slave. There was an interesting look in his eye though, and a confident step to his stride as he approached his waiting captive. Raoul was not sure whether to prepare for a beating or a lecture.

His master, however, simply stopped short and stood silent for a moment.

"I have given it all much thought," he said at last. Raoul did not care to ask what. It was not necessary. The Muslim knew what he had to say.

"And I do not think that your ransom is coming." Again, Raoul did not answer. His master, however, eyed him carefully.

"Neither do I think that you will change your mind."

Silently, Raoul returned his master's stare. They both knew each other far too well to think that the Muslim should expect an answer. And he wasn't.

"So!" the Arab's voice was strong and decided. "Seeing as how I will not likely receive your ransom, and you are obstinate in adhering to your pernicious faith, I shall have you strangled tomorrow."

A dark smile lit his master's sinister face. With gloating pride, the Muslim eyed, for the last time, his torn and beaten prize. In a twisted way, there was a greater victory in killing him. Taking a ransom for him would have almost been painful. And in this sense, the Muslim consoled and convinced himself that he was the victor. The Frenchman would die in his wretched prison.

Confident and content, the Muslim triumphantly turned a cold back on his condemned slave. Departing for the last time, he left the old tower with greater satisfaction than when he had come. But he would have lost it instantly had he known that his prisoner shared this joy.

Such a peace. A quiet, calm peace glowed in the captive's eyes. At last, his prayers had been heard. After ten long years, Raoul would be free.

And not just free! The Crusader's heart raced in joyful anticipation. He was being martyred for his Faith. That precious Faith he had defended so dearly and so boldly was now going to crown him with a martyr's reward. His soul would be taken directly to Heaven, where he would reign gloriously with those who, for the love of God, had been similarly generous with their lives. "*Greater love than this no man hath, ...*"

Raoul smiled. God could not possibly be angry with him if He found him worthy of such a death.

## CHAPTER 8

And he would join his brothers' Heavenly ranks! For the first time in years, Raoul would be with family.

His family.

The gleam faded from the knight's deep eyes. The French lord's mind and heart once more turned to Crequy. And once more, his happiness was changed into sorrow. But there was no bitterness in this grief. Just regret.

How he would have loved to have seen Mahtilde, one last time at least. Or to have held just once in his arms the sweet boy that was his son.

Raoul sighed. He had not anticipated this fresh trial awaiting him. But it would be the last. Come morning, the Crusader's long pilgrimage would at last be over. With a firm nod, he resigned himself to his death.

"God wills it."

That night, his evening prayers were said with a fervent and peaceful resolve. The humble Crusader confidently commended his soul into the hands of his Creator.

"And thank You," he whispered, "For bringing me home."

With his last hours before death, the noble lord turned his mind and heart towards those few, precious beings left to him on earth.

"Blessed Mother," the knight prayed, "I beg You to take my dear family under Your special care and protection, since I will never again see them in this life."

He paused a moment, and looked down. His shackled hand gently reached for the little bag faithfully hanging around his bruised neck. What a precious mercy that God had permitted him to keep his tiny treasure to the end. The last and only tie he had with his beloved family. "Holy Virgin, please help my dear Mahtilde. Help her to mother our son. Oh my son..."

With a smile, Raoul let fall the pouch, which returned to its resting place around his neck. "My little Baudouin. Ten years old... still a child." The loving father then sought a special protector for his boy. And his mind instinctively turned to the trusted St. Nicholas, beloved patron of children.

"Dear St. Nicholas," the Crusader prayed. "I entrust my son to your care. Watch over him and guide him with special dedication. As a father would."

There was a quiet still as the last of Raoul's prayers died off.

"The end of the storm," he thought. Calmly, reverently, he made the Sign of the Cross. With a parting glance at the desert sky, the knight breathed forth his final prayer.

"Blessed Mother," his voice was strong and peaceful, "I commit myself to Thee as I was entrusted to Thee by my father ten years ago."

## THE LORD OF CREQUY

The Lord of Crequy stretched himself one last time upon his hard bed. He no longer seemed to feel the instrument of torment, or even be aware of it. His tired eyes slowly closed.

“In life or death, dear Lady,” he prayed, “I am Thine.”

And then, without any effort, a deep and peaceful slumber gently but firmly took hold of him.

His well-earned rest was not to last though; for, in the dead of night, it was suddenly and unexpectedly disturbed. Though surrounded by darkness, Raoul could sense that someone was in the tower. Without a sound, he glanced cautiously about the small prison. Lit only by the desert moon, the knight slowly realized that there was someone in his cell, standing right across from him.

Raoul found himself staring into the deep, gentle eyes of a woman. Quite unknown to him, she said nothing as she slowly approached the puzzled captive. Something seemed hauntingly familiar about her, but the bewildered knight could not place it.



“I know that face,” he thought to himself, “I have seen it once before. In a chapel, maybe? Ages ago, though, in Crequy.”

The mysterious lady, however, remained silent. And to the knight’s further surprise, she leaned forward and took hold of his chains. In the few brief moments that followed, Raoul seemed to feel his fetters falling, and his bonds breaking.

So intense and instantaneous was the thrill this sent through his whole being, that the joyful captive suddenly and instantly...

Awoke.

He was not prepared for what he saw ...

# CHAPTER 9

Stunned, Raoul lay motionless. It all had happened so quickly! In one blissful instant, the sweetest dream he had ever enjoyed in his long exile was abruptly shattered by the thrill of his own joy. And in the next astonishing moment, the awakened prisoner found himself staring in silent amazement.

Yet was he really awake?

The alert knight quickly fumbled to his feet. Where was his wooden bed? His stifling prison? The decrepit tower? Instantly, the slave's eager hands shot searchingly to his neck and wrists. The chains! They were gone.

The intense delight of his dream suddenly surged once again through the bewildered Crusader like a violent wave. It was all *real!*

But... could it be?

Raoul looked up into the rich blue sky. Yes, the sun was there, shining brightly - but it was not the harsh, oppressive blaze that he had known for so long. And the air! It was so breathtakingly clean and mild.

"I must be dreaming," he stuttered at last, his heart bursting with joy. "But then ..." he glanced around. "It all seems so real... whatever it is."

He did not know where he was, though he appeared to be in a forest of some sort. All he knew for certain was that he was *free!*

"Oh my loving God!" the knight dropped to his knees, "Blessed Mother!" His soul was grateful beyond words. He felt such exhilarating bliss. *Surely*, he thought, *Heaven could not be a happier place!*

"Surely I *am* dead?" the joyful exile wondered. "... And this *is* Heaven." The beautiful scenery seemed to shine now with ethereal splendor in the ardent Crusader's eyes.

"I must have been strangled to death in the night," Raoul said softly. A sweet breeze brushed against his red cheeks, and the knight turned.

"But was I?"

In the rustling wind, Raoul could detect the distinct and dear sounds of animals, grazing peacefully in some distant meadows. There were noises closer at hand, though as well; shy and lively creatures that occasionally poked out their furry heads or went darting amidst the thick foliage. The trees surrounding him also seemed quite natural, their strong branches waving gently in the warm movements of air. And the birds... Raoul's smile turned to the skies. He had nearly forgotten how sweet and exhilarating their chirping chorus could sound.

"Then this *must* be earth," he thought. "And I am alive. And free!"

The nobleman's soul soared with joy. But the magnitude of his freedom was far exceeded by the love he felt in his thankful heart.

"Holy Virgin -" Raoul raised his serene eyes to Heaven. But he could only sigh with happiness. His joy had rendered him quite speechless. In fact, he did not know which brought him the greater joy – being touched by Heaven, or being freed from his master.

His master!

The sudden remembrance of his hostile enemy swiftly returned Raoul's mind back to earth. Somehow he had been miraculously freed from his prison... but how far? Was he safe from his master's swift pursuit? It was already day, and the Muslim surely by now had learned of his escape.

The liberated prisoner now cast an anxious glance at his beautiful surroundings, a host of worries rising furiously in his mind. Where *was* he? How would he return home to Europe? And what if his master were to catch him!

Instantly regaining his composure, Raoul shut his eyes. "Everything is all right. My Blessed Lady has already brought me this far. How quickly I forget," he half-smiled to himself, "how powerful She is."

A sudden noise caught his attention, and Raoul turned. Squinting ahead, he saw that he was, in fact, not alone. At the far end of the tree-studded pathway, there *was* someone, a peasant it looked like, chopping wood.

"Thank you, my dearest Lady" Raoul sighed gratefully. Surely this local could help him – at least by answering his urgent questions, if nothing else. Wasting not a moment, the lordly fugitive hastened towards the stranger as fast as his legs would carry him.

The woodcutter, hearing quickened footsteps, glanced up from his work. But no sooner had he laid eyes upon the knight than a look of terror spread over his face. All color draining from his cheeks, the woodsman stared in petrified horror at the approaching knight. And then, to Raoul's further astonishment and confusion, the trembling peasant instantly dropped his sturdy hatchet and took to his heels, as if running for his life.

For a moment, Raoul's steps faltered. What on earth was the matter? The French lord had no memory of ever meeting this fleeing stranger before in his life. It was therefore quite impossible that this man could possibly have somehow recognized him!

*Recognize me?*

Then, with an amused grin, it suddenly dawned on Raoul.

Darkened and burned by the fierce Arabian sun; half-starved; unshaven; bloody and filthy, with only a coarse, ragged tunic stretched over his wounded body - the runaway Syrian slave was certainly a sight to behold! And most assuredly, an uninviting one.

"I did not even think of that," the poor knight realized. But as the Crusader looked on towards the woodsman fleeing for his life, the thought of his *own* deadly pursuers instantly returned to his mind.

## CHAPTER 9

Raoul shook his head resolutely.

“I simply *must* speak with him,” he sighed. “There is no time to lose.” And though still reluctant to frighten the poor woodcutter, the determined knight nevertheless pressed on with his fervent chase.

Breathing hard, the fleeting peasant cast not so much as a glance behind him as he darted amongst the trees. His fearful haste was in vain though, for despite the many scars and wounds, Raoul’s legs were rapidly closing the distance between the two runners.



Finally now within reach, the knight shot out his long arm and tightly caught hold of the terrified man’s shoulder, bringing them both to a stumbling halt.

“Please,” Raoul hastily assured the peasant as the latter turned to face him. “Please! I am lost,” he explained. “Can you show me the way out of these woods?”

But the man just stood staring, panting for breath. Though somewhat calmer, a bewildered expression still lingered on his puzzled face. Hearing the knight speak was enough to convince him that this was no dreadful ghost, as he apparently had feared. But still! What a frightful appearance! Tragic circumstances had clearly befallen the towering stranger standing before him. But what was more peculiar...

“I... I am sorry,” the baffled woodsman stuttered with confusion, “but I do not understand what you say!”

At these words, Raoul instantly released his grip on the man's shoulder. Confounded, the knight slowly stumbled backwards. The man had answered him... but not in Syriac, as Raoul expected him to. The woodcutter had spoken in *French!*

"My... my good man," the words came slowly, as the long exiled lord rediscovered his native and beloved language. "Please help me. Tell me whether I am dreaming... or under some terrible delusion." His firm voice nearly trembled with astonishment. "Tell me," he pleaded, breathing hard at each syllable, "where am I? I am lost, and I know not a soul in this country."

The woodsman, greatly relieved by the stranger's ability to speak his own civilized tongue, waved his hand at the surrounding trees.

"Why, we are in France, my friend, near the borders of Flanders," he answered. "And this wood where we now stand is called the forest of Crequy!" Then, with a pitiful eye, the peasant smiled at his companion. "But tell me, poor man - who are you? You must be some Catholic captive. Escaped, perhaps, from a shipwreck off the neighboring coasts?"



But the kind inquiries fell upon deaf ears.

For the moment that Raoul learned he was truly and at last in his own country and native place, he was filled with a sensation such as few in this life ever experience. In a miracle altogether unexpected and wonderful, the faithful Crusader had not only been rescued - he had been brought home.

Falling to his knees, the grateful knight extended his arms and raised his eyes and voice to Heaven.

"O Almighty God! O most Holy Virgin! My sweet Protectress, my help, and my deliverance! By what miracle have you brought me here?"

The confused woodsman respectfully and silently kept his distance. For a moment, a reverential stillness lay upon the forest. With kind compassion, the peasant watched as the Crusader knelt for a time before rising. But his astonishment was far from over, for the ragged stranger turned once more to this considerate companion and proceeded to launch a rapid succession of eager and excited questions -



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questions which for nearly a decade had lain unanswered on many an agonizing night.

“Please, my good man, tell me of the Lord Gerard. Does he yet live? Is he still reigning as the Lord of Crequy? And what of the Countess Mahtilde?” Raoul pressed eagerly, “Tell me. Are she and her son still living? Are they in good health?”

“What! You know them?” The poor man was now receiving *his* share of shock and surprise. However, out of consideration for this mysterious stranger, he endeavored to answer his odd questions.

“It has been many years since the old count died of grief, bewailing the loss of his three eldest sons. They were slain in battle, you see,” the peasant explained, his anxious listener evidently moved and grieved by the news of the old lord’s death. “Nearly ten winters have passed since our young lord led his brothers to battle in the Crusade. But unfortunately,” the man’s face grew hard. “Not *all* of the count’s sons died.”

Listening in rapt attention, Raoul looked sharply at the woodcutter. Unfortunate! What ill will was this? Why should he desire the death of Lord Gerard’s sons? His unspoken questions, though, were quickly answered.

“Count Gerard’s youngest son, Baudouin, has taken possession of the title and estate, proclaiming himself Lord of Crequy.” A frown crossed the woodsman’s cheery face. “He has behaved most dishonorably and treacherously to his late brother’s widow and child. It is disgraceful... as well as disgusting.” His angry eyes glanced distractedly at a rustling bush, from which scurried an errant and equally agitated woodland creature.

But the attentive stranger said nothing. Distressed by this bitter betrayal, Raoul’s mind turned at once to his wife and son. What fearful pains had they endured these many years? And what had become of them?

“But the lady,” Raoul ventured to ask. “Is Lady Mahtilde yet alive?”

The woodcutter’s focus returned to the knight.

“Yes,” he nodded, “and her father, who still lives, is now with her at the castle beyond these woods. He has traveled to Crequy from a great distance - his home is in far off Brittany. He came expressly to persuade his daughter to secure her future and her son’s rightful inheritance. Indeed, for some time now, Sir Renaud has tried repeatedly to convince the young widow to marry again.”

The riveted knight stood breathless. His Mahtilde remarried? After all of these years... Raoul bit his lip. His weary heart froze! He dared not ask...

“It is to the Lord of Renty that he seeks to entrust his daughter’s happiness,” the woodsman continued. “For the noble lord has promised to protect her boy’s rights, and to cherish him as the son of his dear friend - our late Lord Raoul, God rest his soul!”

An awkward but charitable pause ensued, as the knight watched the loyal peasant offer a prayer for

the repose of his deceased lord's soul, unaware that the object of his charity was standing before him. Only the echoed cry of a distant hawk broke the solemn silence. Then, after a moment, and with brighter spirits, the man went on to extol the generous and noble Lord of Renty.

"He is rich and powerful, and our lady cannot do better than to accept his hand! But for lo these many years, she has refused his proposals. She would not listen to *any* prospect of marriage. That is..."

There was an expectant pause, as the air was filled with the fluttering and flapping of several flocks of cheery birds clustering suddenly in the neighboring trees. The woodcutter gave them an idle glance, keeping his listener in breathless, yet brief, suspense. For the next moment, Raoul's hopes were instantly crushed at the sight of the woodcutter's proud smile.

"Until a few days ago," he beamed, "when, for the sake of her dear son - the little master of Crequy - our Lady Mahtilde at last consented to wed the Lord of Renty."

Raoul stared earnestly at his companion, his ears deaf to the exuberant chorus chirping around him. His mind was numb, and yet racing at the same time.

"When is the marriage?" he asked, subconsciously and fervently praying that the answer was not a date in the past.

"This very day!" The peasant boasted happily. A thankful sigh imperceptibly escaped the Crusader - yet his gratitude was accompanied by the immense and stark reality of his extraordinary situation.

"But *when?*" Raoul maintained remarkable composure.

"At the hour of six," was the prompt reply. "And there will be a grand celebration on this wondrous occasion - for our lovely lady will, at long last, have married the knight who shall finally bring joy and fulfillment to the house of Crequy!"

A low wind whistled solemnly through the dense forest, leaving behind an eerie silence which seemed to shudder at the proud and joyful proclamation.

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During the course of their conversation, the knight and peasant had remained quite stationary. But now, Raoul was slowly and solemnly accompanying the woodcutter back through the forest, as the latter went to retrieve his fallen hatchet, still lying from his hurried and unexpected flight.

Silent and thoughtful, Raoul found himself battling an entirely different host of anxieties than those he had just been facing. He could hardly believe it. How rapidly his life was changing in just a matter of minutes. Who would think that coming home would be such a crisis?

Sensing a distinct disturbance in his tall companion, the unknowing peasant attempted to raise his spirits.

“Now, you know something?” the woodcutter grinned kindly. “The countess Mahtilde is a *most* charitable soul. And the Lord of Renty is equally gracious. I understand that all will be welcome at the castle today for the grand fete – the magnificent party!” Bending towards his ax, he glanced casually at the knight, but disappointment continued to reign supreme upon the sullen face of his companion.

More puzzled than perturbed, the woodsman endeavored to convince Raoul that this wedding posed a great opportunity! “... And not only for our gentle lady,” the peasant continued, “but for everyone! It is tradition, of sorts, for the pious nobles to not simply receive, but to *give* on such occasions as this. And I am sure, my poor man, that if you will, you may receive some alms at this celebrated event.”

Raoul, however, maintained a cautious though polite silence at the well-intentioned remark. Undaunted, the woodcutter swung his hatchet over his shoulder.

“Come now!” he offered. “Let me show you the way out of this forest,” he gestured with his hand. “And I can take you as far as the castle gate.”

A moment passed while the expectant woodsman awaited a response. Then, with quiet reserve, the smiling lord gave his peasant a simple and grateful nod. Pleased to have at last brought some cheer to the stranger’s face, the woodcutter, still shouldering his heavy ax, proudly headed off through the maze of trees.

His short strides were swift, and the knight found himself hurrying to keep up. Raoul’s steps were somewhat distracted, though, as the scenery of his homeland became increasingly more familiar to him. The astonished noble was surprised at how much he recognized it all. But what rekindled the fire in the exile’s heart was the first glimpse of the towering turrets, soaring majestically over the humble village. Once in sight of the Castle of Crequy, Raoul’s pace quickened.

At last, with a gracious smile and a cheery nod, the woodcutter unknowingly returned his long-lost lord to his castle and home.

“Godspeed to you, my friend,” the peasant waved. Raoul returned both grin and gesture, thanking him for his kind help.

“And God bless you, my good man,” the knight called out. He watched him a moment before turning to the castle. Yes, his kind deed would not be forgotten.

Hastening towards the lowered drawbridge, Lord Raoul was almost breathless with excitement, and nearly bursting with joy. *Imagine the look on Mahtilde’s dear face! After all of these years! What an amazing and incredible surprise!* His confident step faltered though, as the thought of her marrying another sharply reoccurred to his mind.

*Well the Blessed Virgin has saved me just in time, hasn’t She?* He was walking now across the lowered bridge over the moat. His doubts, however, were not so easily dismissed. Was he *sure* that Mahtilde would be glad to see him?

The thought so disarmed him that, for a moment, he stood still. The next moment however, he was shaking his head.

*Oh, what are you thinking, Raoul?* he gently reproved himself. *Of course she will! Why else do you think God has returned you here?*

Dispelling his ridiculous fears, the knight hurried on toward his own beloved gate. Somehow it was even more wonderful than he had imagined! Why it seemed -



But his eager thoughts were abruptly scattered by a startling and commanding voice.

“Stop! Hold on there!”

It was the castle guards - two of which were swiftly, and somewhat angrily, approaching the newcomer.

“Yes?” Raoul kept a respectful but firm tone. The two men had drawn their weapons.

“What are you doing here? What do you want?” one snapped gruffly. The other sentry, a thin man with a piercing gaze, eyed the tall stranger suspiciously.

“Where did you come from? And how came you to be in such a wretched state?” he inquired disdainfully. Raoul glanced instinctively at his rags.

“What is it then?” the first soldier gave a thoughtful twist to his mustache, “Are you some prisoner escaped from slavery?” The short fellow cocked his round head and stared.

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Raoul looked from one to the other. *I must appear the most miserable beggar*, he thought wearily. *But if I tell them who I really am, they will laugh me to scorn. His eyes turned to their poised spears... Or do worse.*

“Well, come on!” the skinny guard demanded impatiently, “Name your purpose!”

“Speak up man! What business have you here!?”

The knight casually wiped the dust from his face, “I come,” Raoul began slowly, “from the east. I am a pilgrim from the Holy Land,” his words took on a solemn, and even commanding tone. “And I must see the Lady of Crequy on a matter of the greatest importance!”

His fervent appeal, however, was met only by a harsh and disbelieving laugh.

“What?” the soldiers bellowed, “you think a man in your condition may enter the castle?”

“Urgent business indeed!” the little guard scoffed. “You’ll receive your share of alms with the rest.”

“And besides,” the other added, “No one can speak with her Ladyship today. Even now she is being clothed in her wedding garments.”

“So be off with you now!” the sentinel threateningly waved his spear at him, and Raoul stepped back. For a moment he eyed the two of them, but then quietly turned away. Opposition would be quite useless.

“Go on!” they jeered, “And don’t let us catch you bothering anyone else!”

“Go and wait by the side of the road,” the lean guard shouted after him. “You can get a glimpse of her Ladyship later when she passes by. So go take your place with everybody else.”

“Do you hear, beggar?”

“Important matters... Ha!”

Their mocking laughter was little more than wind to the bewildered knight’s ears. What was he to do?

Obediently, the lord stumbled away from his own castle, and stood waiting just beyond the drawbridge. Not too close though, for an occasional glance at the guards showed Raoul that he was still under their surveillance.

“There is nothing I can do then... ” he sighed, “...but wait.” And so he did.

But what a painful wait it was.

The knight strained to appear calm and at ease, but a hurricane of thoughts and emotions was raging within him.

“Be at peace, Raoul. Be at *peace*,” he whispered, putting a hand to his flushed face. “The good God and His sweet Mother have not brought you this far for nothing.” Yet as he prayed, doubt gnawed at

him. He could not shake off his fears. His experiences that morning - first with the woodcutter, and then repeated by the guards, had left him very ill at ease. What if Mahtilde did *not* recognize him? Ten years was a long time to tax anyone's memory under ordinary circumstances... much less these...

"Oh..." Raoul moaned a sigh. "Holy Virgin, please help her remember me."

Then his darker fear returned. What if Mahtilde did not *want* him back? The poor lord's heart sank like a millstone. After all... what had become of his letters for ransom? And if somehow Mahtilde believed him to be lost forever... did she care? After all... what were her plans and where was she going now? ...to the neighboring abbey to be married. What if...

The Crusader gazed anxiously at the castle. *What if this is what Mahtilde really wants?* Suddenly, the terrible thought that she would be disappointed to find him alive became a dreadful possibility.

*Oh what have I done?* Faint traces of guilt overshadowed the knight's worried face. Before God, he and Mahtilde were still married - and she could not wed another. But if, after ten years, he had lost her love...

"Blessed Mother..." Raoul instinctively, almost unknowingly, called out to his Protectress. And faint though it was, the inspiration was swift in coming.

"The woodsman!" The lord's eyes lit up with hope, "He said that Mahtilde was acting only for the interests of our son. And until now, Mahtilde *has* refused a marriage. Although... was she driven more by duty or desire?"

At length, Raoul slowly shook his head, as a sudden grace made him smile. "If it was not for You, Holy Virgin Mary, I would not be here." His eyes were still set on his home. "I trust that You will help me... and her."

The French lord suddenly realized that he was staring at his castle. The guards' watchful gaze still held him under tight scrutiny, so Raoul blinked idly in feigned thoughtlessness. Casually turning away, a shadow flickered in the knight's hopeful eyes.

"Oh please," he sighed, "*Please* let Mahtilde recognize me."

As time passed, the number of bystanders gathered about the pathway steadily increased, as more and more of Crequy's inhabitants assembled before the castle gate. The quiet country air was gradually filled with a buzzing hum; yes, the time had come and an excited and mirthful chatter prevailed among the excited throng. And as the people arrived, the lonely and wild-looking beggar found himself imperceptibly pushed to the outer fringes of the crowd. Although absorbed in his own thoughts, snippets of nearby conversations nevertheless penetrated his pensive mind.

"Oh, I thought this day would *never* come," one woman sighed happily. Her companions were quick to agree.

"And I do believe it's what she wants."

"It's what's best, really," one of the men chimed in.

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“The poor lady Mahtilde,” an elder woman shook her head sympathetically, “She deserves it. She’s been so patient.”

“And after waiting *all* of these years!” A tactless young lady was not so gentle in her opinion. Her comment was quickly followed by a milder one.

“Well her Ladyship has certainly paid her respects to the dead.”

There were several solemn nods, and a stout man proudly declared “And now at last something shall be done!”

“Yes! No thanks to her wretched brother-in-law!” the first woman fumed, and a general murmur ran through her companions. “Lord of Crequy! I daresay *he* won’t be attending the wedding.”

“I should think not,” they agreed. “Now that justice shall prevail...”

And as the chatter continued, no one seemed to notice the intent looking beggar nearby. Raoul could not help but feel a certain uneasiness, or at least an awkwardness, while his family’s affairs were the common talk of the gathered peasants. Try as he might, the poor lord could not ignore their gossip, and for once he was glad that his true identity remained unknown. Patiently and silently, he resigned himself to the long and lonely wait... where the minutes passed like hours... as he listened, watched and prayed.

At long last, the clear and joyful blast of a trumpet pierced the air. A loud, bustling commotion ensued; and the distinct, heavy creaking of the large gate being pushed open echoed through the causeway.

Instinctively, the crowd pressed forward and yet made way at the same time. Raoul’s head still peered above most, and all of his anxious thoughts were temporarily silenced by this long awaited moment.

Slowly, the solemn and elaborate procession came forth. Headed by the finely attired Lord of Renty, a company of guards accompanied the noble convoy, of which Sir Renaud and his young grandson Baudoin took part.

But just as Raoul could make out another horse coming through the gate, the excited throng suddenly sent up a joyful cheer. Several people pressed forward eagerly, jostling Raoul and sending him stumbling back. The air resounded with ‘hurrahs!’, and the astute knight presumed upon their recipient. But, despite his tall stature, Raoul was having difficulty seeing past the enthusiastic crowd.

“Excuse me,” he pleaded earnestly to his seemingly deaf companions. “Please excuse me. I just need to – ”

“Long live the Lady of Crequy!”

Several voices rang out and the jubilant multitude pressed forward all the more. But almost immediately the trumpets sounded once again; and authoritative, exultant soldiers bellowed above the din “Make way! Make way for her Ladyship!” To Raoul’s relief, the crowd respectfully obeyed. In the commotion, the heads parted...

And then he saw her.

It was no dream. There was Mahtilde. His Mahtilde. Not even a hundred yards away, astride an elegant decorated mare.

The tense knight unconsciously breathed forth a deep sigh... for all of his hopes and longings of ten endless years seemed suddenly realized in that single moment. For it was not until his eyes fell at last upon his precious Mahtilde that Raoul was truly, finally *home!*

But was it the same Mahtilde? Clearly, time had aged his young wife. Yet there was something more... a change that he could remotely sense, but which his uneasy heart could not as yet understand.

Adorned though she was for her wedding, there *was* a melancholy in the lady's beauty. Riding through her joyful people, she remained silent to their buoyant cheers.

And while many in the crowd astutely noted the attentive glances she cast on the young boy following distantly behind her, the poor knight's attention was riveted solely upon his wife. Instinctively, his bruised and battered soul reached out for hers. But when it detected only a strange and stone-like stillness, Raoul gazed searchingly for the lady's solemn face. And though she was steadily approaching nearer, her downcast eyes made it difficult to catch a glimpse beneath her veil.

The knight, looking more like a beggar than a lord, slowly began making his way through the crowd. He had little success though, for their eager focus could not be broken, and most ignored him. But Raoul hardly noticed. He could not take his eyes off of the somber figure that was his wife. Breathless, one question alone gnawed at him. The long and painful years had indeed taken their toll on Mahtilde... but how far? Would he really *know* her?

An exuberant "Long live our noble lady!" rang out from the crowd, not far from Raoul. Several others excitedly echoed the cry when they observed that the decorated mare was slowing down. Barely halting her steed, the lovely lady waved her hand at the cheering peasants. And as she turned, with a kind and gracious nod, Raoul caught a clear yet brief glimpse of her pale face before she moved on.

That one look ... and all of his clamoring doubts and fears vanished forever. For in all the world, Raoul was sure of one thing...

He *loved* her.

And by God grace, he had remained faithful to that love. Time and torture had only enflamed his ardor. For unknowingly, in his long, hard exile, the Crusader's lonely heart had been ennobled and purified by True Love's only source – the Divine and Infinite Love of God.

And doubt has no place in a lover's heart. For Love will love, not counting the costs... or consequences. It seeks no reward. And in its selfless ardor... it conquers.

Gazing upon the passing lady, the veil was lifted from his eyes... or rather, from his heart. For beneath all the festive bridal elegance and somber pale complexion, Raoul saw only his Mahtilde - that young loving wife he had left so long ago, whose gentle heart had nearly broken with grief at the mere thought of their parting.



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He had promised her that he would return. And by the mercy of God and the hand of Blessed Mary, His Mother, he had. But to what? To stand by in silence as she ignorantly married another?

Raoul firmly shook his head as his eyes flashed once more with a fire that time and tribulation had nearly extinguished. The face of his true love had rekindled within his noble heart a strength that he had all but forgotten. In the face of the impossible, his great love for his wife enflamed his resolve. Heaven had miraculously sustained, protected and brought him this far. He would not stop now!

Mastering his emotions, Raoul broke out from amidst the crowd and headed towards Mahtilde's horse. Several alert eyes were quick to spot him, but the nimble lord was already by his wife's side, grasping her mare's reins.

Instantly a cry arose from the armed guards, as the festive procession came to a grinding halt.



“How dare you!”

“Keep your distance!”

“What is the meaning of this?”

For a moment, confusion reigned – as all responded with great shock, indignation, and no slight irritation at this unexpected and untimely interruption. And in that instant of chaos, Raoul seized his only opportunity.

“Noble Lady!” He cried out, reaching for her horse. “I come from the East. And I bring news of the Lord of Crequy, who has endured a captivity of ten years.”

Stunned by such a strange and incredible announcement, the Lady Mahtilde instantly dismounted

from her horse. The soldiers, on the other hand, had immediately descended upon the tall beggar. Swarmed by a host of commands and threats, Raoul was compelled to back away.

“You scoundrel!” they snapped angrily. “We warned you!”

“We said no trouble!”

The concerns, however, of the men-at-arms lay more with the displeasure of the Lord of Renty, who had turned back towards the commotion. With abrupt and humble nods, the guards apologized for the disturbance.

“Please forgive us, my lord.”

“It won’t happen again, we can assure you.”

“Yes, we’ll take care of this fool.”

These last comments were accompanied by several fierce glances at Raoul, who they attempted to drive away from the procession. What impudence! So *this* was his important business, was it? News of the Lord of Crequy! Not only was his outrageous claim absurd, but it was a most embarrassing one to make at a wedding procession.

But the lady had remained standing by her steed, her wide eyes professing her desire that the beggar remain. Observing her interest, the attendants reluctantly retreated somewhat from the intruder. They kept, however, a near, cautious and ready distance.

Her initial shock having passed, the Lady Mahtilde heaved a silent sigh... or rather a moan. The impossible claim served only as a brutal knife in her forlorn heart - a heart which had finally laid to rest its tender dreams. Years of anxious, doleful dreams had at length yielded to reason. And now this...

*“God is simply asking one last sacrifice of me,”* Mahtilde dryly told herself, *“before the wound is sealed forever.”*

With great composure and final resignation, the lady looked calmly and earnestly at the pathetic creature standing before her.

“Alas, I fear your report is incorrect,” she sighed, her weary tone betraying a bitter disappointment. Yet there was a resolution in her voice; that of a woman who, after a decade of valiant combat, had finally yielded to an impossible fight.

“My lord fell,” she continued to the ragged stranger, “together with his two brothers, many noblemen, and their squires. He was leading them on in the cause of Christ when... death took him.” Her sad eyes momentarily wandered at the thought. Looking back towards the pilgrim, she sorrowfully shook her veiled head, “All who accompanied him perished, with the exception of seven who escaped by flight.”

The crowd, close and pressing around this strange discourse, murmured in sympathy at the lady’s words. Many stared angrily at the ignorant stranger who had so thoughtlessly pained their mistress *and* marred her wedding. The soldiers, too, only awaited their lady’s command or a look from her mounted bridegroom to send this insolent beggar taking to his heels.

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But the 'pilgrim' neither apologized nor retreated. His earnest eyes were strangely fixed upon those of the lady. There was a hesitant, almost pensive, air about him. Keenly aware of the scene he was creating, as well as the situation he was facing, he strove to focus his racing mind. The decisive moments were quick to pass though, and a calm, yet ardent look soon came over his scarred face. And through the still, anticipating silence of the crowd, his voice echoed like a ringing trumpet.

"Raoul of Crequy did not perish, noble lady," declared the tattered pilgrim. Then, in a tone as tender as it was powerful, he exclaimed:

"Behold him! He stands now before you."

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It would be impossible to express the shock which swept through that vast multitude. But their stunned silence almost instantly gave way to excited murmurs. Many of the guards, on the other hand, remained strangely quiet, and several glances were exchanged among them. Some of the bolder ones instinctively drew nearer to the pilgrim.

But Raoul gave them no heed. He cared little for the opinions of the crowd. In his heart, the long lost Lord of Crequy had proclaimed his identity to one person, and one person alone. Riveted and breathless, Raoul's focus remained fixed upon his beloved wife.

The Lady Mahtilde was returning his gaze, her pale lips parted in open-mouthed astonishment. For what seemed an eternity, she just stood staring. In only a few moments, however, the initial shock had passed, and Raoul watched her raise a trembling hand to her face. While the pensive crowd yet watched and awaited her response - in the depths of his soul, Raoul silently moaned. He still knew his Mahtilde quiet well. And one look from her sad eyes told him all...

She did not know him.

After their initial surprise, however, the soldiers, seeing their lady's downcast face, lost all patience. Evidently this cruel beggar had heard about the wedding, and no doubt had decided to play the part of the long-lost husband. Well! *They* would not allow her ladyship to be deceived by such a wretched fool. And while an indignant hum ran through the throng, many of the guards began barking at the beggar:

"Wretch!"

"How dare you, man!"

"Do you take us for fools?"

"You'll pay for your insolence!"

Though the stranger remained unaffected, their threats aroused Mahtilde's attention. Her eyes invariably, yet briefly, met the pilgrim's. Raoul would have spoken, but Mahtilde lowered her face almost at once. Her somber breath had evidently quickened, and there were silent tears streaming down her cheeks.

*"Is it possible,"* she asked herself, *"that after all these long and terrible years, Raoul yet lives?"* She glanced back up at the wretched looking beggar. That such a miserable creature would even claim to be her loving lord! Without a sound, Mahtilde slowly wrung her hands.

*"It cannot be. No! My Raoul is...gone."*

And it was impossible, cruel even, to expect such a hope from her. A decade was enough. Long enough, indeed, to play the part of a fool. For years she had refused to bury the past - in spite of

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friends, family and reality. And for years she had deprived her only son of a good and noble father. No. She was *going* to be married. Nothing could change that now.

Still eyeing the pilgrim, the Lady lowered her veil over her solemn face. Her resolve resounded in her silence as she deliberately turned away from the poor pathetic creature. There would be no more false hopes. At last, her heart would be still. And her dreams, so forcibly silenced, would lay obediently and forever dead... "*They must!*" Shutting her eyes, Mahtilde suddenly pressed her clasped hands against her lips.

"*Dear God,*" she prayed, as fresh tears rolled down her flushed cheeks, "*will my heart not die in peace?*"

Raoul however, grieved and dismayed by this rejection, would not accept her silence. Instantly, he called out to her:

"Look at me! *Please!*" His fervent entreaty caught the lady by surprise, and she turned back. Without thought or restraint, the desperate knight began to plead with his beloved - for prudence would no longer hold his heart in check.

"Despite so much misery," he cried, "and the countless hardships which I have suffered, can you not recognize your faithful husband ..." his eyes locking with hers, "*once* so dear to you?"

His every word burned with ardor, but these last darted out like fire from his forlorn heart. No impostor could even imagine the pain behind those words, much less imitate its passion.

Yet the audience of this tragic scene remained unmoved by his pleas. On the contrary, his striking performance served only to increase the suspicions of the crowd, and the anger of the soldiers. Itching for action, they tensely eyed their weeping Lady, who was clearly affected by the stranger's drama.

"*It cannot be true*". She told herself. "*Raoul is dead! His men saw him die. How can this poor vagabond even claim such a thing?*"

Gasping for air, Mahtilde laid a hand upon her heaving chest. If her love was indeed dead, why then was her heart breaking at this man's words? "*It cannot be.*"

The Lord of Renty, hitherto silent, cast a pitiful glance at his bride-to-be. His watchful face grew hard. He knew not who this beggar was, but all this was certainly a cruel joke to play on a heart-rent widow. Slowly, the mounted lord turned towards his awaiting guards.

Though keenly sensing this, Raoul would not take his eyes off of Mahtilde. He could not. She appeared ready to answer his plea, though stifled moans delayed her words.

"*Blessed Mother, help her!*" His fervent prayer remained silent within him, due to the rising murmurs of the angry crowd. If Mahtilde did not acknowledge him now, it would be too late... forever. And nearly every soul in Crequy would seek to avenge her grief. As it was, a single command would soon have him imprisoned as a lying fraud. Yet Raoul gave no thought to his danger. The sight of his wife's bitter tears blinded him to everything else. But though he stood just a few steps away, he was once

again powerless to protect her. There was nothing he could do.

“Please, Mary...” One moment longer and the poor knight would not be able to restrain himself. Even now, it took all the powers of his noble soul to master the ardent passions surging through him; to suppress his emotions, as he helplessly watched Mahtilde fall victim to her own.

Almost instinctively, Lady Mahtilde turned to the beggar. For the space of a single sigh, the two were locked in a searching, and yet heartrending gaze. In her eyes, Raoul caught a glimpse of the agony which had rent her soul for all those years, and it tore through his heart like a dagger.

Yet in this moment of sorrow, Raoul was inspired and touched with a consolation so powerful - it was a strength in his torments. For at last, his greatest fear was forever banished. Mahtilde *did* love him. And the violence of her grief was itself the greatest and truest testimony to the vehemence of her love.

Slowly, the Lady Mahtilde began to stutter amidst her tears. “I... I can hardly believe you. There’s -” she choked back a sob. “There’s no proof... no proof that my Raoul is even alive.” With a muffled cry, she buried her face in her trembling hands, leaving Raoul speechless with dismay.

This was enough. Without even a word, the Lord of Renty signaled to his eager soldiers, who at once turned as one man on the ragged stranger.

Instinctively, Raoul stepped aside, but too late. The rough guards had seized upon him instantly and fiercely, as if expecting strong resistance. And they received some - though not all of what Raoul could give. For strength would not save him now and force could not win him Mahtilde. So it was with great restraint that the desperate beggar attempted to break free of their grasp. But the armed men would not yield, and Raoul suddenly understood: It was over.

“Virgin Mary...” His whisper was barely audible. After everything, could it truly end this way? “Please!” His eyes were riveted on his beloved, who in that instant suddenly raised her pale face.

“Wait!” Lady Mahtilde cried. The obedient soldiers were at once still, but without relinquishing their firm hold on Raoul.

“If you *are* my husband...” she clenched her trembling hands, “then answer me one question.”

A sudden hush fell upon the entire crowd, as all listened with curious attention. The Lord of Renty turned inquisitively towards his bride-to-be. Mahtilde could not possibly believe this miserable wretch of a beggar! The guards were themselves eyeing their Ladyship intently. Her pained face had grown strangely calm. There was something in her eye that revealed a certain strength; a peace, perhaps, in believing that she would at last answer this question... *forever*. With confident composure, Mahtilde faced the expectant stranger.

“The day on which you departed for the Holy Land...” She spoke slowly, cautiously almost, as she formulated her question. “Tell me - what did you do before you left me?”

The bright rays of the evening sun cast very still shadows of the vast and motionless crowd, wholly

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captivated by the extraordinary scene unfolding before them. Intrigued beyond words, it was as if none dared even to breathe. Every eye was turned in an incredulous stare upon the tattered, unkempt stranger. The soldiers too, with curious anticipation, had instinctively loosened their hold on him.

No heart, though, was as still as the one which beat within the lovely Lady of Crequy. Her every feature bespoke a fierce struggle between doubt and hope. With consuming focus, she stared at the tall man before her who calmly, though silently, was returning her gaze. To her mild surprise, instead of answering, a smile lit his weary face - and his bleeding hands clasped slowly near his heart.

Then, as everyone looked on, the beggar pulled off from around his neck a tiny and filthy pouch. But still he did not speak. Straining to see, the crowd impatiently watched and waited as the stranger stood thoughtful with downcast eyes. The soldiers frowned at one another. If the fool was going to speak, then he'd better answer her Ladyship at once.

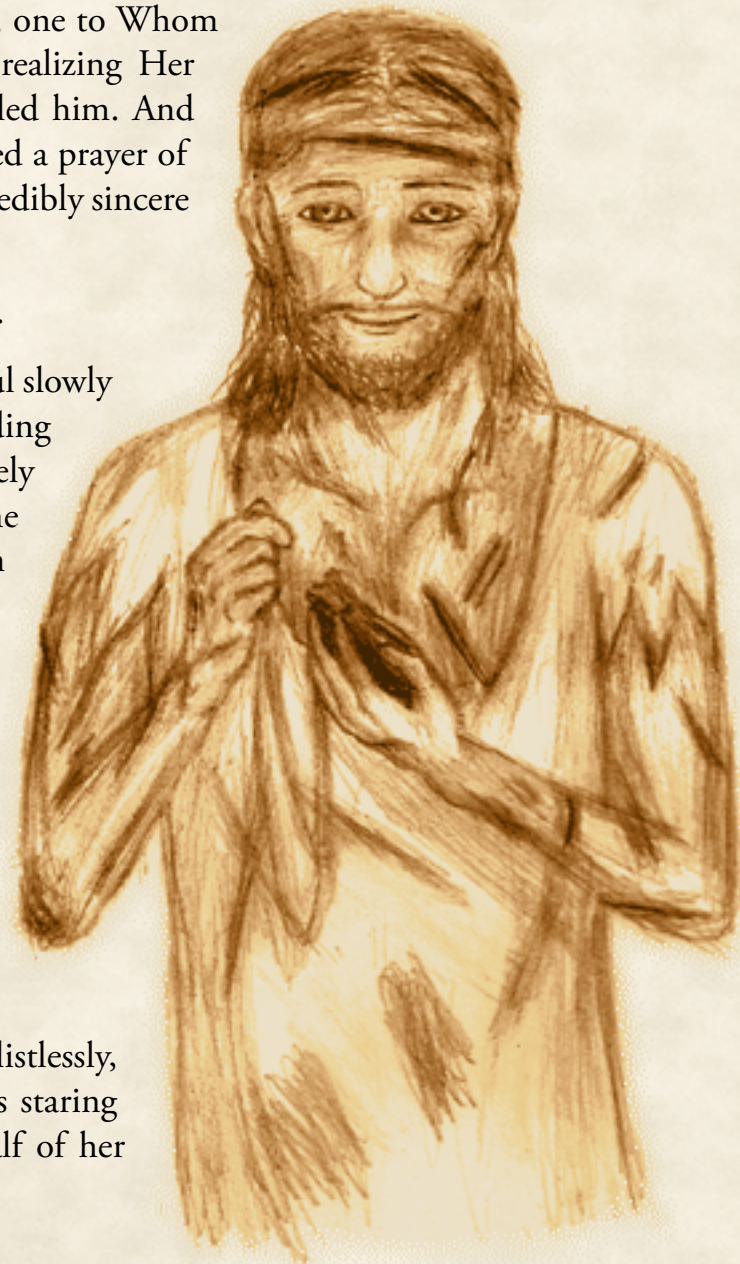
But Raoul *was* speaking, or rather his soul was. Speechless with awe and gratitude, his first thoughts were of another Lady, one to Whom he owed once more his heartfelt thanks. Suddenly realizing Her answer to his prayer, adequate words of gratitude failed him. And from the depths of his soul, Raoul unknowingly offered a prayer of the greatest eloquence and power: a single, simple, incredibly sincere act of love.

The next moment, the hushed suspense was broken.

“On that day, ten years ago, before we parted ” Raoul slowly raised his face as he spoke, “I took from you your wedding ring and broke it in two.” The crowd looked instinctively towards Mahtilde, expecting some response. But the trembling lady stood silent, her wide eyes fixed upon the pilgrim steadily approaching her.

“I left you one half of the ring,” he continued, “and took the other with me. And...” His strong voice faltered slightly as he glanced down at his hands. He was standing right before her now. “And I have preserved it as a pledge of my love. Here it is.”

Reaching out, Raoul gently placed the well-worn pouch in the lady's open hands. She had been listening intently, hanging on his every word. Gazing now at the tattered and frayed little bag, Mahtilde slowly, almost listlessly, emptied it into her palm. The next moment, she was staring at what she instantly recognized as the remaining half of her wedding ring.



As if in a daze, the lady silently traced her finger along the broken jewelry. The sight of this long-protected treasure touched something deep within her. That part of her - that half - which had for so long had lain dead, was now awakening. Claspng the ring firmly in her hand, she suddenly felt surging within her the unknown sensation and return of life. It was an imperceptible heavenly light - flooding her soul and mending her heart which, for the first time in ten years, was again whole.

Her stunned gaze rose up from the ring and rested upon its ragged, bloody owner. In that moment of illuminating grace, the years seemed to melt away, and she saw past the scars and beyond the sorrow which shrouded him.

And it was then, with a look forever after burned and treasured in Raoul's memory, that Mahtilde finally knew him. The shock remained; but the doubt had vanished, obliterated by indescribable joy.

Without further thought or hesitation, the lady instantly cast herself into the beggar's ready arms.

"You are, indeed, my beloved husband!" Mahtilde exclaimed, amidst fresh but sweeter tears. "You *are* my dear lord!"

The awestruck crowd looked on, moved with the deepest emotion. The fetters of despair had been broken, and the flood of Mahtilde's anguished love came pouring forth. Raoul was alive! He was here, safe in her arms. For ten years she had known it, and for ten years she had waited. Now her heart, so often rebuked for its foolish hopes, was at last rewarded for its unconquerable faith. And it lavished the full force of its insatiable love upon her beloved.

Among the bystanders, however, there were those unmoved by the reunion. Not far off, the Lord of Renty watched the couple with a certain incredulity. He had known Raoul quite well, back when the latter reigned as Count of Crequy. For nearly a decade, he mourned for Raoul's death as his own kin. Yet now that this stranger was depriving him of a long-sought wife, a struggle arose within the Lord of Renty's heart between his loyalty and friendship to Raoul, and his love for the countess.

"He certainly possesses the form and size of Raoul," he thought, "but that does not make him Raoul de Crequy. And I, for one, do not recognize him."

The lord was cautious and wise enough, though, to keep his doubts to himself. But his reserved silence spoke loudly to his uncertain soldiers - who stood torn between disbelief, wonder, and a ready obedience to his command.

The balance between their doubt and belief was suddenly swayed by the assertion of another and influential witness - Mahtilde's father.

Sir Renaud had been intently following the amazing discourse between the beggar and his daughter. Passing through the guards, he drew nearer now to the joyful couple and saw plainly the stranger in question.

"I see now the features of my lost son-in-law!" The count of Craon had raised his voice for all to hear. Raoul turned towards him at these words, and the elderly lord looked warmly at the younger. "Although," Sir Renaud nodded softly, "suffering has somewhat altered them." Turning again to the



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crowd he proclaimed, "When we see him dressed as is befitting his noble rank, I think you all will recognize in him your long-lost lord!"

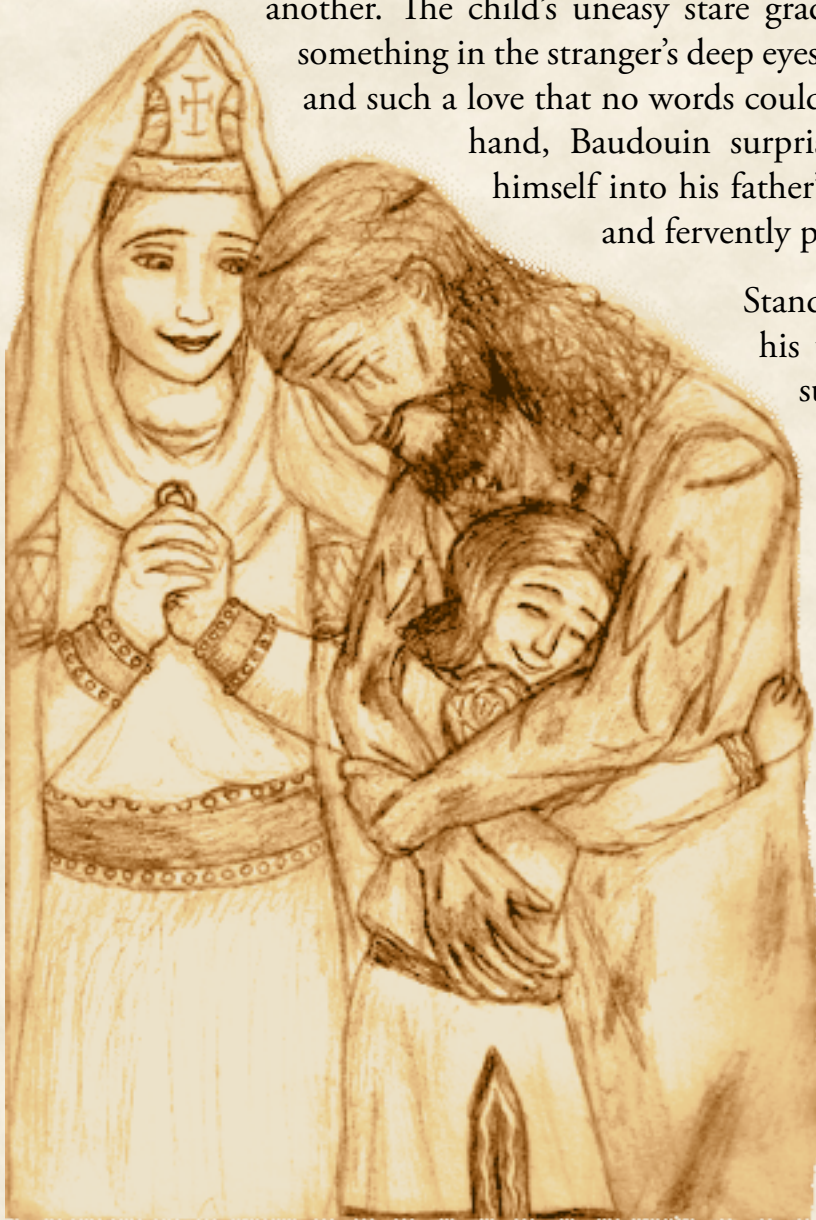
A deafening cheer resounded from the throng. Mahtilde, who had been eagerly watching her father, turned excitedly back to Raoul. She gently raised her hand to his scarred cheeks when something caught her mother's eye. It was the sight of a young, curious, timid face cautiously approaching. Upon hearing that his father yet lived, little Baudouin, now ten years old, had silently slipped between the soldiers to catch a better look. He became somewhat hesitant though, and grew nervous and bashful at the odd sight of the beautiful lady and filthy beggar that were his parents. His mother, however, as soon as she saw him, joyfully took hold of his small hand.

"Oh my dear son!" she cried, drawing him closer, "It is your father! Come and show him how much you love him."

Raoul watched the young boy stand shyly beside Mahtilde. At his mother's words, Baudouin's eyes turned obediently towards the knight. And for the first time in their lives, father and son beheld one another. The child's uneasy stare gradually became a steady gaze. For there was something in the stranger's deep eyes that the boy recognized at once. It was love - and such a love that no words could ever express. Quickly releasing his mother's hand, Baudouin surprised both parents by impulsively throwing himself into his father's wounded arms. Raoul caught him at once and fervently pressed him against his heart.

Standing there, beside his dear wife and embracing his young son, Lord Raoul thought he would surely die of joy. In awe of God's generosity and that of His dear Mother Mary, Raoul covered the face of his son with sweet tears of thankful happiness. All the countless hours of torture and years of slavery seemed as nothing compared to this bliss. To the humble and grateful knight, this reward far exceeded all of his trials.

By now, Baudouin had locked his arms around his father's neck; totally fearless, if not oblivious, of Raoul's coarse and even frightful appearance. Leaning back a moment, the boy looked closely at the knight. Then with the candor and simplicity that only a child can possess, he eagerly told his father, "It was for *you* then that my dear mamma wept so often!" His thin voice was nearly shouting



above the excited crowd. Raoul glanced at Mahtilde with aroused compassion. Baudouin solemnly nodded his head, "She always told me again and again, 'We have lost everything, my son, in losing your father, my beloved husband.' "

Raoul smiled, saying nothing as he pressed Baudouin close. Even if he had spoken, the child would hardly have heard him due to the general commotion of the crowd, which was closing in fast around the reunited family. It seemed as if every invited knight and lady was vying with each other to get near them. In no time at all, the poor count was completely surrounded by guests who merely wanted to catch a glimpse of the long-lost Lord of Crequy.

At length, Lord Raoul was triumphantly escorted back to his own castle, amidst a cheering throng and accompanied by his dear family.

At least... *most* of his family. Peering from an open window high in the castle, Raoul's younger brother, Sir Baudouin, nervously watched the approaching procession. Though absent from the occasion, the knight had heard the excitement and wondered as to its cause. Anxious at his own dread, Sir Baudouin strained to calm himself. But in all his darkest dreams, the young usurper could never have imagined the incredible turn of events that day.

As the large gates rumbled open, he glanced down into the courtyard. Horror gripped his cowardly heart as he recognized - despite the filth, rags and blood - his eldest brother, Lord Raoul.

Stumbling away from the window, Sir Baudouin's blood went cold. A thousand frightful thoughts ran through his mind - each one revolving around the memories of the past. When his aged father Gerard had died from sudden grief, nothing had prevented Baudouin from seizing the lands of Crequy. With ease and freedom, he stole the title from its rightful infant heir and proclaimed himself Lord of Crequy. For years hence, the thieving lord enjoyed his reign without opposition. Not once did he doubt his rule would endure, for the sole challenge to his unjust claim remained his little nephew and namesake - the young and only son of his long dead brother. At least, until now....

"Raoul is alive?" The knight spoke aloud to himself, but he was hardly listening. His mind already anticipated the inevitable moment when his crimes would be discovered, and he himself confronted by the *true* Lord of Crequy.

All at once, though, his fearful face grew hard.

"And what difference will it make?" he scowled. Did Raoul think he could just lie in hiding for ten years, then suddenly return from the dead and steal his lordship? The vagrant crusader had no right to reclaim his long-lost title! Or at least... he had not the power...

The knight peered back out over the window's edge.

"I won't let him! I still have control - and the means to enforce it." He glanced back towards his armed guards by his door. The fear in Sir Baudouin's eyes was all but gone, replaced now with a cold confidence.

"I will not be so easily defeated."

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“Well for goodness sake! Did anyone remember about the abbot?” One of the castle’s servants stopped short at his sudden thought.

“The abbot?” a kitchen maid asked from behind a tall stack of plates.

“Yes!” the man replied, somewhat anxiously, “He is still waiting at the monastery. Remember, Lady Mahtilde’s would-be wedding?”

The busy girl just shrugged her shoulders. For over a decade, Crequy’s castle had remained dull and lifeless. Now, at last, its greatest celebration was underway! There would be festivities and entertainment, food and drink, song and music... and guests! The Great Hall had not hosted such a crowd in years, and there were countless tables which required her preparation and attention. The young maid simply did *not* have the time to worry over the canceled marriage. Fortunately for her companion, their brief conversation was overheard by a passing nobleman.

“Do not worry,” a calm voice reassured them. “Lady Mahtilde’s father - Sir Renaud – has taken care of that.” The two servants looked up to see who had answered them. It was the Lord of Renty.

“A special messenger,” continued the lord, “was dispatched not ten minutes ago to bring his Excellency the extraordinary news of Lord Raoul’s return.”

The manservant flushed slightly, realizing whose wedding it was that had been canceled. He gave a low and grateful bow. “Thank you, my lord. I did not mean to trouble you.”

“It was no trouble. It was an important question,” nodded the knight. “And you need not worry about the other guests either. All have been re-invited to the... celebration.” A small smile broke out on his bearded face. But despite his pleasantry, there was a preoccupied look about the nobleman. After a hesitant pause, one of the servants asked him:

“Can I help you with anything, my lord?”

“Actually,” the knight gazed across the large decorated room, “I was looking for his lordship, Sir Renaud.”

“I can find him for you, sir,” volunteered one of the maids, glancing up. But the Lord of Renty waved a reassuring hand.

“No. There is much to do, and little time to do it. I shall find him myself.”

Thus dismissed, the servants resumed their work, and the lord continued his search. It turned out to be a more difficult task than he had first imagined, though, for the entire castle was teeming with activity. Fortunately, many of the preparations for this sudden celebration were already well in hand. As for the banquet itself, Divine Providence had already arranged everything. The splendid dinner prepared for the wedding, though no longer a marriage feast, would supply a magnificent banquet for the many guests soon to throng the Great Hall. Indeed, all that was lacking to the festivities was the Lord of Crequy himself.

Almost as soon as he had returned, Raoul was escorted to one of the private chambers deep in the castle. There, several skilled servants carefully tended to his many wounds. Cleansing his blistered skin of the filth and blood, they bandaged his larger injuries with strong, soft linens. It had been so long since the crusader had felt such relief; and, even longer since the servants had the pleasure and privilege of attending to their lord. They worked quickly and well, eagerly anticipating the victorious feast ahead.

And the servants were not the only ones who awaited the banquet with enthusiasm. Everything was moving swiftly and it was not long indeed before the numerous and excited guests began streaming into the Great Hall. The vast room was soon filled with the pleasant and yet deafening sound of chatter, laughter and music, as several hired musicians and court jesters wandered amidst the tables to entertain the waiting guests.

During that time, which seemed to pass far too quickly, the poor Lord of Renty continued his search for the lady Mahtilde's father. Making his way through the private quarters of the castle, the Lord of Renty at last caught sight of the face he was looking for.

"Sir Renaud!" he called out. The old count turned from his attendants, his brow wrinkled with curiosity. "My friend, what brings you to *this* part of the castle?"

His innocent question was met with an odd and almost pained expression.

"Oh I see," The Lord of Renty's calm tone was mildly strained. Things were different in Crequy now... and he was *not* family. "I suppose I don't enjoy the same privileges here as I did before."

Sir Renaud waved aside the strange reply. "I expected you would be waiting in the Great Hall, along with the other guests," he clarified kindly.

"They are arriving quickly. The Hall is nearly full," the knight nodded in agreement. Then, with a cautious scan of the corridor, he whispered - "Any sign of Baudouin?"

With a playful shrug of his shoulders, Sir Renaud turned back to the servants.

"I believe he is with his mother," he grinned. His merriment, however, was not returned by his companion.

"No," corrected the Lord of Renty, "I am not referring to the child." Sir Renaud raised his head.

"Ah," the smile left his serious face. "Come," he nodded, stepping away from the servants. The knight discreetly followed and, when at a safe distance, he pressed his question.

"Has Lord Raoul heard of his brother's treacheries?"

"He knows," was Sir Renaud's solemn reply, "I have spoken with him myself."

"And?"

"Please. Let us not ruin this wonderful day for Mahtilde."

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“It is for her sake that I ask,” the knight whispered impatiently. Then, calming himself, he continued, “Do you honestly believe that the coward will accept Raoul’s lordship?”

The old man shook his head, “Of course not. But Baudouin will know better than to cause trouble... today anyway. Oh,” he sighed, “As if Raoul had not endured enough already. Could he not come home in peace?”

“If Baudouin raises so much as a finger - ”

“- he shall answer for it!” Sir Renaud agreed, “But for all of his cruelty, Baudouin *is* a coward. And in this hour of defeat, he shall sulk in his pride.”

“Yes, he shall sulk... *before* he strikes. He will not give up his lordship so easily. The brute will create some sort of havoc, if not incite a rebellion! That is... if he does not stain his own hands first.” The Lord of Renty peered down the hallway, “Something *must* be done! Where is Lord Raoul?”

“Preparing for a banquet, not a battle,” answered Sir Renaud, growing somewhat impatient himself. “You tell me that guests are assembling in the Great Hall now.”

“All the more reason to act,” insisted the lord, “If Sir Baudouin - ”

“Lord Raoul will deal with his treacheries. *That* I can promise you.” The old man put his hand on the knight’s arm. “But let him first enjoy this day. Sir Baudouin is no immediate threat.”

Mahtilde’s father was firm and confident. Yet even as he spoke, the elderly count knew well how the future would pay for the mistakes of the past. Treacheries such as those of Sir Baudouin often condemned years, even generations, to endless jealousies and blood-filled feuds.

“But hush now!” Sir Renaud suddenly awoke from his thoughts and spoke quickly, preventing any reply. Several bustling servants were heading towards them, but it was the sight of something far more precious that caught his fatherly eye - the face of his daughter.

The Lord of Renty also turned, and his open mouth discretely dropped in sudden surprise. But it was not the inspiring beauty of Mahtilde that aroused his astonished admiration - but rather the tall and lordly man at her side. Stunned at how quickly he recognized him, the disillusioned knight rubbed his eyes, lest they deceived him. What had become of the ragged, ghastly beggar? Was this the miserable impostor that had boldly disrupted the marriage procession?

But no, here was no impostor, *nor* beggar. The truth was at last unmistakable, undeniable... and unbelievable. Here was Raoul, alive and home. *Sir* Raoul... the Lord of Crequy. Though clearly aged, a single glance was enough to assure him that the lord had lost none of the vivacious, noble spirit that won the hearts and esteem of all who knew him.

With newfound respect, the Lord of Renty stepped back with the attendants and bowed to the noble couple. A strange yet satisfied expression crossed his face, as he watched them go by. There was something... a certain feeling almost... that swept through the corridor as Mahtilde’s husband passed. It was as if the castle was reawakening, sensing that its long-lost lord had returned.

Proudly eyeing his radiant daughter, Sir Renaud gestured toward the Lord of Renty. “Come now, my

friend,” he smiled. “Today we celebrate how wrong we *both* have been for all of these years.” Joining in the little group behind the lord and lady, Sir Renaud followed them down the hall. His companion, however, hesitated. For the briefest moment, a pained look came over the Lord of Renty’s dismal face. But then, a heavy sigh quietly escaped him, and the shadow passed as quickly as it had come.

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Accompanied by the trumpets’ blast and welcomed with a jubilant cheer, Sir Raoul had the distinct and long-forgotten honor of leading his lady into their crowded Great Hall. His father-in-law and son were soon to join them at their banquet table upon the dais, a slightly raised platform, at the head of the entire hall.

The many musicians throughout the room quietly gave pause to their music. The jugglers and entertainers also stood still - and every head in the hall bowed as a reverential silence ensued. Then, with a gratitude perhaps never experienced before in that castle, grace before the feast was intoned. As he blessed himself, Raoul could not help but smile at the sudden memory of other meals not so long ago. The humble knight fervently shut his eyes. He had *so much* to be thankful for.

Once the prayers were finished, the festivities began.

Raoul, however, had barely a moment to sit before he was overwhelmed with a host of greetings and questions from his numerous guests. Despite their variety, the many questions in essence voiced the crowd’s single wonder:

“What happened?”



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For a moment, Raoul sat speechless. What *had* happened? His thoughts drifted back to the day when he first left for the Crusade. He saw himself bidding Mahtilde farewell and gently leading her to his dear and now deceased father, Sir Gerard. His father...

Raoul smiled as he recalled the old man's kind words and solemn blessing before sending young Raoul off in the service of God. And then the smile slowly faded from the knight's face as he realized the significance of their parting: Sir Gerard had especially entrusted Raoul to the care of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

"You ask me what happened..." Raoul slowly emerged from his thoughts. He raised his eyes to the expectant crowd.

"A miracle," he answered, his voice was strong and yet serene. "The most wondrous I have ever known, and wrought by the Mother of God Herself. For it is by Her merciful Hand that I have been returned to you."

"But how?" Sir Renaud insisted eagerly. "News came that you were dead!"

"The battle, Raoul," Mahtilde pressed. "We received word that you had fallen... Your men fled at your death."

"I did fall," nodded Raoul, "But by the providence of God, I did not die. I was taken prisoner. Then, before I could be ransomed, our Catholic armies drove the enemy back. Still held captive, I was forced to flee with the Saracens."

"Ransomed?" The lady Mahtilde's cheerful face went pale. "You wrote for a ransom?"

Lord Raoul hesitated. "Many times," he answered, his gentle voice was like a whisper. His father-in-law's response, however, was not so calm.

"What!" the poor count cried, "You cannot be serious, Raoul! We never received *anything*. The only message brought to us was that Mahtilde was a widow!"

"Nothing...?" Strangely, there was a peace in Raoul's voice, a joy even. Painful though it had been, it was a relief for the crusader to know that his countless cries for help were *never* rejected. He had not been betrayed by those he loved. Smiling now at what had been a torturous thought, Raoul turned towards his wife. "Then there is nothing to regret. It was God's will, Mahtilde, that the letters never reached you."

Tears were already welling in the poor woman's eyes. "I suppose so," she answered softly, wiping her wet face. Raoul quietly and firmly took her upraised hand in his own.

"God willed it, my love. I *know* that He did."

A beautiful smile broke out on the lady's sad face. She could not help herself. The strength in Raoul's voice alone was enough to dispel her doubts and fears. But to see his courage, and to feel his faith, made Mahtilde totally convinced that he was absolutely right. God had accomplished more than she knew.

“But Raoul,” Mahtilde’s father pressed, “did the Saracens escape from the Crusaders?”

“My captors did,” the knight explained. “And they fled with me to Syria.” A general murmur arose among the guests and several leaned forward with eager curiosity.

“Then have you been there for all of this time, Lord Raoul?”

“Were there any others captured?”

“Did you remain the infidels’ slave?”

“How was it that you escaped, my lord?”

So quickly did the questions come, that Raoul, hesitant and open-mouthed, had no chance to speak. Smiling sweetly at his confusion, Mahtilde laid her hand upon his arm.

“Tell us *everything*, Raoul,” she implored him earnestly. “From the very beginning.”

“Everything...” The lord looked out upon the expectant faces before him, “... and how it all started.”

Turning again towards his wife beside him, his gaze fell instead upon a young and eager pair of eyes. Reaching past Mahtilde, Raoul took hold of his son’s small hand.

“My adventures truly began the happy day I learned I was a father. And it was a consolation I would never forget in all the long years that followed.”

Blushing with delight, little Baudouin smiled. It was a serious one, though, for so young a face. For in all his short life, the child had grown to covet the ability to comfort his parent. Too often had his helpless desires been in vain.

The lady Mahtilde was both surprised and joyful at her husband’s words. “Then you did receive our letter, Raoul?” She had nearly forgotten that she’d written it.

“Yes, and just in time. For it was not long afterwards that we made our way through the mountain pass.” He paused a moment, his voice growing quiet. “And from that hour forward, my life was forever changed...”

Thus the story began, as the Lord of Crequy recounted in every detail the chain of events that in time became the legend that would live on for centuries hence.

He first recounted the deadly ambush that had slain his dear brothers and how the hopeless fight had ended in his own capture. He explained how he was later able to obtain the broken half of Mahtilde’s wedding ring from his master, before writing the first of many letters for ransom. Then, as each one had remained unanswered, the knight went on to tell of the many years he had spent in labor as a shepherd, each day filled with false hopes of rescue - dreams which both sustained and tormented him.

“Then my master died,” said Raoul slowly, “seven years later.” Mahtilde closely watched his thoughtful expressions.



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“Were... were you not then free?” she asked quietly. Her voice was weak and anxious; for without realizing it, the loving wife was reliving those painful years with her husband.

Raoul shook his head. “No. My exile was only just beginning. I was then sold to a man who detested God - and who would not rest until I had done the same.”

Then came the time of persecution from his new master, which quickly resulted in the knight’s imprisonment. Raoul described the high tower, the dire threats, the cruel tortures - all solely intended to destroy the crusader’s Faith. Though in vain, the cruelties were not completely fruitless, and the knight admitted his ardent desire for death.

“In the end, after three years in that prison, I was finally hopeless of ever regaining my freedom,” Raoul explained. “It was then that I discovered my master had himself decided to end my captivity - with my death.”

As Raoul continued to relate the last conversation with his master, the stark memories flashed vividly in his mind. With amazement, the knight realized that it was only yesterday, barely twenty-four hours ago, that he had lain chained in his sweltering prison, sentenced to a bitter death. How his heart had ached at the thought of never seeing his family again. But his regret had transformed into resignation, as he calmly and prayerfully awaited his last dawn.

Slowly continuing, Raoul carefully related the strange events of that memorable night - only last night - down to the smallest detail. Most especially, he described the mysterious visit of the beautiful Lady in his cell and how She seemed to break his chains. Inexplicable though it was, the crusader then spoke of his sudden awakening and realization that he *had* truly been freed!

The long and fascinating tale concluded with Raoul’s encounter and conversation with the woodcutter in the forest, and how the latter had led and returned Raoul to the castle; where the lord’s story and his lady’s were finally and once more intertwined.

“The rest you know,” Raoul finished at last, “and you see how your lord would this very day be a corpse in far-off Syria, had not Our Blessed Mother Mary rescued me,” he looked toward Mahtilde, “... and returned me to you.” Tearful and silent, the lady leaned into her husband’s shoulder.

The entire room was still.

Then, in nearly one accord, every chair was emptied as all stood and raised their goblets high. Strong and triumphant, the guests filled the hall with a grateful toast and many a loud “Long live the Lord of Crequy!” The jubilant cries were accompanied by a burst of melody, as the various musicians and entertainers throughout the banquet room took up their instruments and resumed the jubilant festivities.

“And long live the Lady Mahtilde!” several voices cried out amidst the cheers. The lady, however, seemed oblivious to everyone except her husband. Her father, on the other hand, was not deaf to her praises.

“God has rewarded her faith.” Sir Renaud nodded, his voice was solemn but proud. “She was more true than the rest of us.”

Something in his tone caught the lady’s attention. Still resting upon Raoul, Mahtilde raised her head towards her father. “God is rewarding *all* of us, father.”

The elderly count was not so easily put off. “She was faithful, Raoul,” he addressed himself to his son-in-law, “and she suffered bitterly for it. In fact, she would not have yielded to the marriage at all had it not been for our insistence.” There was a tone of regret in his low voice, and his old eyes blinked sadly. As he raised them, though, Sir Renaud caught a look from his daughter that at once reassured him. The past was already forgotten - for there was nothing to forgive.

“We *all* acted out of love,” the lady smiled. “So has God. And He has repaid us all,” she turned now to the young boy beside her “by returning your *true father*, my son.” Mahtilde leaned over and gently kissed Baudouin’s head.

Quietly and happily watching, an intent look suddenly came over Raoul and he turned towards the full and chattering hall. Quickly scanning the room, his keen eyes spotted the object of his search. Sitting at a nearby table, silent and relatively alone, was the Lord of Renty.

“Yes,” Sir Renaud nodded, “And thank God that He did bring him home. We all needed you back, Raoul” he added, glancing over at the boy’s father. But to the count’s surprise, Raoul, staring off, inexplicably rose from his chair. Mahtilde sat up as she watched her husband make his way past rows of elegant tables. Her brow furrowed thoughtfully when he slowly approached the place where, not far off, her ex-groom-to-be was seated.

“My lord Raoul!” The knight quickly made as if to rise, but the crusader laid a preventing hand on his shoulder.

“No, please,” answered Raoul, “That is not necessary.” The Lord of Renty shifted somewhat uneasily as Raoul sat beside him. A moment or two passed and the two men stared searchingly at each other as if anticipating what the other would say. So intent was their focus that they did not notice the countless heads giving occasional, curious, but discreet turns towards them. Despite the crowd’s curiosity, though, there remained a polite decency and the cheerful din throughout the hall continued, making it impossible to hear the knights’ conversation.

Raoul meanwhile clearly sensed the Lord of Renty’s suspense, and would not keep him in it. That was why he had come.

“Today,” Raoul said seriously, “has brought great change for *both* of us.” His uneasy companion caught the tone in his voice and misunderstood it. Fearful that Raoul would discuss the canceled wedding, the Lord of Renty quietly steered the awkward focus away from himself.

“Ah yes,” he agreed. “What a dark exile you have escaped from, Sir Raoul!”

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The crusader nodded, "I have told you much of my captivity. Yet for all the bitter persecutions, I said little of my greatest torture. Nothing brought me more agony than the thought and worry of my family." His eyes drifted as he spoke. He was seeing himself now chained in the stifling tower. "How ardently I desired to see my wife and son, to hold them one last time... to know at least that they would be safe, even if I could not protect them myself."

Respectfully silent, the Lord of Renty watched his friend seemingly grow lost in his memories. Looking at the vivid scars on Raoul's face, a strong compassion arose in his noble heart and he easily imagined his friend's cruel imprisonment. His admiration, however, turned to a subtle apprehension and the dark shadow from before returned to his face. So engrossed was he in his thoughts, that he did not at once notice when Raoul emerged from his.

"In a way," the crusader sighed, "it was a mercy I did not know all that Mahtilde was suffering. I may not have been able to endure it, knowing that I could do nothing." Raoul looked now at his companion, with an earnest and penetrating gaze. "But while I was gone... you were here at their side. So it is with sincere gratitude, and a great debt, that I thank you for the service you rendered my wife and my son."

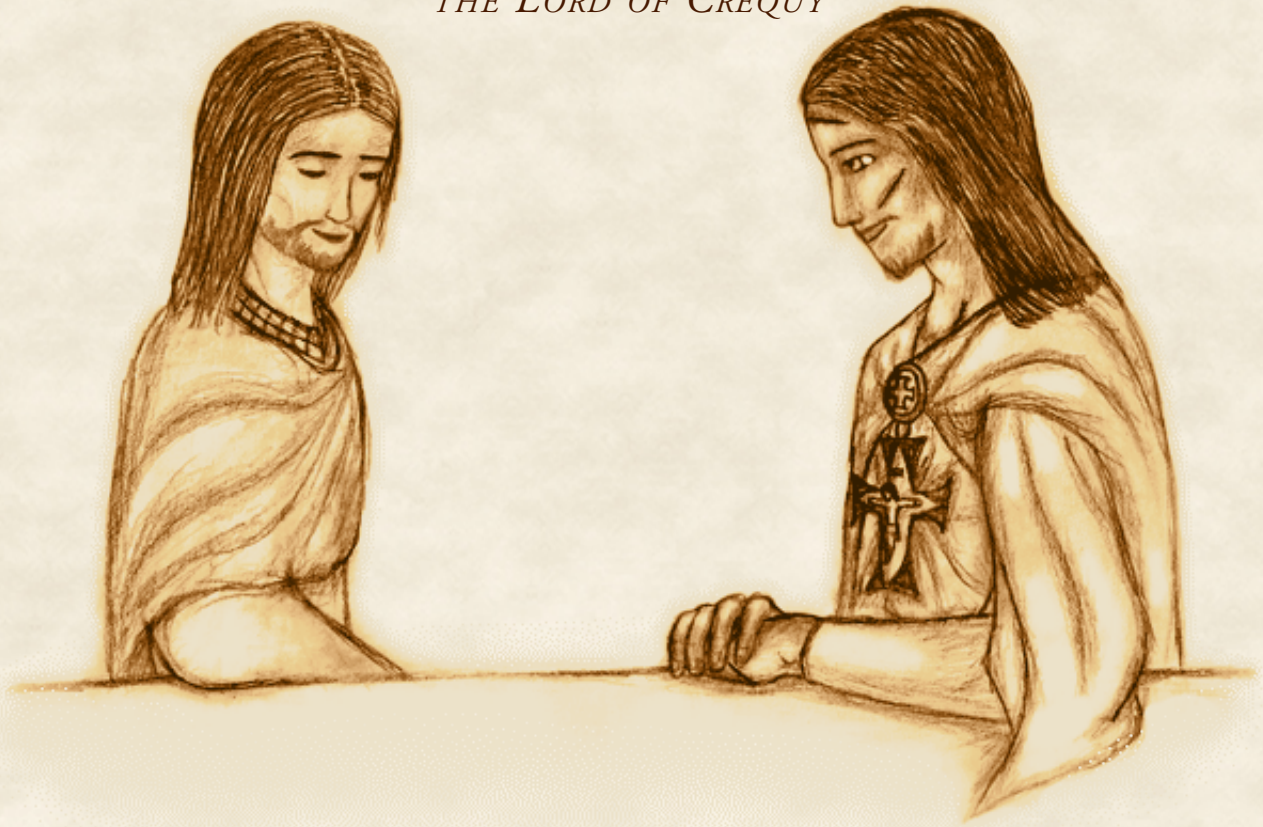
The Lord of Renty, tense and alert, started. His narrow eyes peered in disbelief. He was not an impulsive man, and this was no slight matter. He had nearly married Raoul's wife after years of her resistance. How could the long-lost lord not be angry? The Lord of Renty was hardly expecting thanks, nor did he appreciate joking of the matter.

But Raoul was in earnest. After a decade of slavery, justice held a prominent and precious place in his heart.

"Despite Mahtilde's grief," Raoul explained, "you sought only her welfare. In our hour of great need you did not abandon my family. You were faithful even when they were betrayed by those closest to them... by my own blood." The strain in his voice revealed only a shadow of the bitterness of this wound. The crusader, however, immediately resumed his former focus. "In our darkest trial, you, my friend, were there for Mahtilde and my son. In truth, how can I ever thank you enough?"

The music and laughter throughout the hall had continued its cheerful din, creating a certain privacy for the two lords' conversation. And yet, though no one was listening, there were several proud nods as many of the astute guests accurately and merrily deduced the knights' discussion. Mahtilde especially, smiled with touching satisfaction at her noble husband and at her dear friend.

None, however, were as moved as the Lord of Renty. No longer doubtful of the crusader's sincerity, he felt strangely humbled for his previous fears. Ever since Raoul's sudden return, he had been plagued with a silent dread. He felt that somehow he himself had become the villain and would be considered an enemy of Crequy. Raoul's gracious words were not only a relief, they were a shock. Even now, a struggle flickered briefly on the Lord of Renty's face. Then, all at once, the shadow vanished... never to return.



“I... Lord Raoul, I am - “ he stuttered with mild emotion. “You are most gracious. And I am grateful beyond words that the Holy Virgin has returned you to us alive.” He glanced past Raoul and at the lady Mahtilde. Staring a moment, a sincere, but no longer spousal, love shone in his eyes. “She deserves you, Raoul,” he nodded solemnly. “And nothing less. I could wish no more for her than that. She has earned it. Indeed...” his gaze wandered as his mind dwelt on someone else, not present at the party. “She has suffered much for it.” His hard face softened as he looked back towards Raoul. “You *both* have.”

“Your friendship is a grace I have not earned,” Raoul protested. “Rather, I am forever indebted to God and His dear Mother for it.”

The fellow knight shook his head. “You would have done no less,” he insisted. “I acted out of love and friendship. And I -” he hesitated, but only for a moment, “I shall consider myself exceedingly rewarded if I may claim yours, Raoul.”

In answer, the Lord of Crequy extended his scarred hand. Without a word, the other nobleman gently took hold of it in a firm grasp. Raoul smiled. Moments passed as the two men once more gazed at one another, this time without an uneasy anxiety.

Then, though sitting, the crusader pulled his clasped hand nearer and cast his arm about the other knight’s shoulder. The Lord of Renty returned the strong embrace, while remaining mindful and cautious of his friend’s wounds. A sudden gratitude swelled within him, and a heartfelt prayer escaped him. “Thank God you are alive, Raoul,” he whispered fervently, “... and home!”

When Mahtilde saw her lord rise, her discreet gaze quickly returned to their own table. Had she continued to watch though, Mahtilde would have seen Raoul hesitate. For, the moment that he rose, his keen eyes had spotted a sullen figure, hiding in the shadows. The lord instantly stiffened. Though older and somewhat thinner despite his unjust luxuries, Sir Baudouin was easily recognized by his brother Raoul.

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No one in the banquet hall seemed to notice the Lord of Crequy looking towards the side corridor. More importantly, they did not notice his face. Neither, for that matter, did Sir Baudouin. He was quite ignorant, in fact, of his brother's grim stare. His own thoughtful gaze was proudly turned towards the floor. Raoul, meanwhile, eyed him as one would a despised and pathetic vermin, somehow painfully familiar and yet strangely unknown to him. Moments passed and still Sir Baudouin did not notice him. Without realizing it, Raoul was relieved. Neither brother seemed willing to face the other.

All at once though, a fire sparked within the crusader's deep eyes and his breath quickened. With graceful discretion, however, Raoul quietly turned away and hurried towards his table. Raising a hand to his flushed face, the knight's resolute steps faltered as he approached his seat. His mind was like a whirlwind and he struggled to focus it.

Mahtilde had only noticed Raoul's approach when he stumbled, and she looked up at him anxiously. His eyes were closed. Mahtilde said nothing, knowing Raoul would speak when it was right. Judging by his calm, though pale, exterior, the lady would not have believed the battle raging within her husband. She could never have imagined the fierce temptation that now confronted him: to condemn, if not hate, his wretched brother.

Curious though, at Raoul's odd behavior, Mahtilde looked over to where he had been. Squinting in mild confusion, she saw that the Lord of Renty was now feasting happily; his face was beaming and his spirits were high. The lady frowned. Evidently, the cheerful lord was not the cause of Raoul's strange mood.

Relieved, and yet puzzled at the mystery, Mahtilde sighed as she turned back towards Raoul. Her passing gaze, however, fell across the open and nearby corridor. Her curious expression vanished the instant that she saw Sir Baudouin standing in the shadowy passage. Cautious not to be seen, Sir Baudouin was stealthily hiding while peering out into the Great Hall. A shiver ran through the lady, for his dark eyes were fixed solely on Raoul.

Mahtilde looked fearfully at her husband, who was now seated beside her. A host of frightful thoughts flooded her mind, as she wondered if her treacherous brother-in-law had dared to threaten her lord.

Yet Raoul said nothing of any such evil. In fact, he acted as though he did not even know of her worries, for a quiet smile warmed his face. Calming herself then, Mahtilde silently sighed in relief. She confidently reassured herself that all was well... for the moment anyhow. Although in reality quite mistaken, she felt certain that Raoul had not noticed Baudouin.

Unbeknownst to Raoul, however, his younger brother *had* been observing him... very closely. Watching and waiting for his opportunity, it was not by accident that Sir Baudouin, with ever-increasing intensity, gazed boldly at the noble lord. Tightly fingering the hilt of his sword, the treacherous knight appeared ready to step out into the banquet hall at any moment.

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When the grand feast and celebration for Raoul's return first began, the one thought on everyone's mind was to hear the whole story, down to the last detail, of what had happened to their long-lost lord. And so, throughout the course of the Lord of Crequy's speech, every soul in the Great Hall had remained spellbound, as it were, with riveted attention. Amazing as the story was however, it was the crusader's own simple sincerity that gave life to his extraordinary tale and captivated his listeners. At last, after ten years, the mystery and miracle of the Lord of Crequy was coming to light.

There was, however, one person in the entire castle that stood unmoved by Sir Raoul's adventures. Hidden just outside the Great Hall, the lord's brother Baudouin had listened to the long discourse from a near and unused corridor. Proud and distant, the sulking knight looked on with disgust at the emphatic sympathies and reactions of the crowd. It was like an absurd drama! The 'oohs' and 'aahs' at his pathetic brother's tale were enough to turn his stomach.

"They would think the man a *hero* for enduring a little pain," Baudouin scoffed, though quietly and to himself. "What did Raoul expect when he joined the Crusade? To wage a bloodless war? Ha! At least I had the honesty and wisdom to stay home. I reserved my strength for where it was needed. Where it was *useful*." He sneered at his brother's long, bitter and fruitless captivity. "Here I ruled and *saved* a land! I did not waste every waking hour of each miserable day feeling sorry for myself!" Sir Baudouin's head shook in mock dismay. "Oh what a child the champion has become."

There was worse, however, in store for the complaining knight. When the Lord of Crequy spoke of his bitter imprisonment in the tower, the 'performance' of the horrified crowd was almost unbearable for Sir Baudouin. It was as if none of the fools had ever heard of a prison before! Slaves *do* get chained up. And as for those terribly cruel tortures...

"No doubt his master was driven to excess," Baudouin muttered to himself. "I do not fancy Raoul was at all humble in his stubborn refusals. More pride than piety, I am sure. The arrogant brute only got what he deserved. Well! He is certainly reaping his pity now..."

Thus the knight had continued to murmur beneath his breath. Every now and then, he had even risked an occasional closer look out into the banquet room. Such ventures were never long, though, and his cowardly head would quickly dart back into the shadows.

Although he would never have admitted as to why, the proud knight was terrified of being seen - by anyone. Baudouin masked his cowardice behind the excuse that it was not his time to act. Not when Raoul had such an advantage. There would be a better moment; a proper time when Sir Baudouin would be able to claim his rightful authority. Ten years he had ruled Crequy, and all had prospered beneath him. Let Raoul enjoy his supposed victory. The hour of illusion would pass.

"Crequy *is*, and will remain, mine."

Yet something deep within the treacherous man, despite his repugnance, compelled him to hear all

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of Raoul's speech. Somehow, he had to know what had happened to his brother. Hence Sir Baudouin had decided to remain and endure the entire tale. If he had known though what the reason was behind this resolve, he may have changed his mind. For he was being influenced by the long-forgotten, abandoned and despised voice of what he had long since betrayed: his conscience.

Thus Sir Baudouin remained. But at the end of the entire story, when the whole hall echoed with a triumphant chorus from the grateful throng, his proud face fell. He just stood there stunned, staring at the cheering crowd. For all of his disgust and mockery, he had not anticipated so strong a response from the people; and his disbelieving ears rang with their vibrant cry: "Long live the Lord of Crequy!" In that instant, all of the usurper's clever, scheming plans were shattered.

Yet in spite of this apparent defeat, a smile broke out on his sullen face.

"Raoul was always a crowd pleaser," he smirked. "He knows how to manipulate the fools to get what he wants." Baudouin's piercing gaze swept over the hall. It was pointless now to deny it. All of Crequy would doubtlessly accept Raoul as their lord.

"Amidst tender and pitiful tears to be sure." A bitter laugh escaped Sir Baudouin's lips. "They said *I* was cruel and heartless. Ha! *I* at least treated my people like *people*, yet Raoul leads them on like cattle. Oh, the deceit of it all! It's disgusting."

The knight was livid with anger, yet silent as a corpse. His hard eyes turned from the feasting mob to his brother sitting in the chair of authority and lordship; the one where *he* himself had once sat.

"This isn't over, Raoul. A will of iron runs through our family. You are not the only one that is willing to *persevere to the death!*" He ran a thin hand over his pointed beard. "And now you finally have a match for your will."

To his surprise, it was at this moment that Raoul suddenly rose from his seat. Sir Baudouin instantly and nervously stepped back into his black hole and watched his brother, a short distance away, quickly pass him by. The spying knight peered out from behind the corridor's entrance. From the back, he saw Raoul sit down at a nearby table. Baudouin's brow furrowed and a curious grin twisted his thin lips.

"The Lord of Renty?" He chuckled to himself. "My brother is even more vengeful than I imagined. It's that unconquerable spirit. Every opponent, even in defeat, remains a threat to his ultimate authority. And now the poor lord who nearly married Mahtilde and claimed her son will no doubt taste Raoul's powerful revenge."

Amused at the Lord of Renty's fate, Sir Baudouin only hoped that Raoul would be vocal in his punishment and rejection. Perhaps Raoul would dismiss the lord from the banquet in shame.

"Oh, if only Raoul would be that obvious in his conceit," Sir Baudouin squinted at the two lords. "But no. I imagine we'll get a show of mercy in front of the crowd, while the banishment is executed in silence. I do wish I could hear his heated rebukes now. It's only right that the - "

In an instant Baudouin's words died on his lips; whatever they were. He could not even remember them. His mind went completely blank and his wide eyes, solely fixed upon his brother, blinked in

stunned surprise... Raoul had unexpectedly clasped the Lord of Renty in a warm embrace.

For once, Baudouin stared in silence. He was trembling, yet he did not know it. A burning jealousy consumed him, but he would rather die than admit it. His guilty heart was encompassed by a seething hatred, fiercely repelling the remorse that tried to penetrate it.

“The wretch! The liar!” In a violent attempt to suppress his emotions, the knight broke his gaze from the lords and lowered his face, casting his icy glare on the stone floor. He did not see, then, when Sir Raoul rose at length from the Lord of Renty’s table. He was not watching when Crequy’s lord passed by... and spotted him in the corridor. Instead, Sir Baudouin had continued to stare at the ground, fuming within himself.

“Oh Raoul, you holy hypocrite! So you’ve caught another fly in your web of supposed charity. I don’t believe a word of it. Any of it! All of your pitiful tortures, your heartbreaking sorrows, your ‘miracle’ and escape! I don’t know where you’ve been hiding the past ten years, but you are not going to come back and reclaim the life that you have lost through your own fault!” Sir Baudouin was silently vehement. Hate swarmed through his mind like the blood in his veins, crushing all hopes for pardon.

“You will never ensnare *me*, Raoul!” Sir Baudouin raised his resolute face just in time to see Raoul walking back towards the head table.

Completely unaware that Raoul had just discovered his shadowy lair, Baudouin boldly glared after the crusader. So the long lost lord had returned to reclaim his title, had he? With a pitiful lie to enforce his claim? A cruel smile contorted Sir Baudouin’s proud face. He would expose his wretched older brother for what he was.

“You’re a coward, Raoul, and a fraud!”

The menacing whisper had hardly left his mouth, though, when Sir Baudouin saw his brother’s firm steps falter. He continued to watch curiously as the lord raised a hand to his face. For the briefest moment, the wretched knight was frightened. Had Raoul heard him? He seemed too far away for that. Yet the reaction was so immediate to Baudouin’s threat. And Raoul did appear to be in some sort of distress... and even pain.

The next instant though, Sir Baudouin’s anxiety gave way to a haughty pride. Embarrassed at his fears, the coward confidently assured himself that Raoul had *not* heard him! His actions were coincidence only. And as for Raoul’s distress... Perhaps his *conscience* was troubling him. Sir Baudouin nearly laughed at the thought, when his scornful glee was totally and abruptly shattered...

... An indescribable pain had suddenly wrenched his soul.

The shock was so powerful that it sent the mocking knight stumbling back, his hard eyes squinting in pain.

“Wha - what is wrong with me?” Sir Baudouin’s fearful whisper was barely audible, for the sorrow he felt was almost unbearable.



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Yet these were not sudden feelings of remorse on his part. It was... strangely, and yet undoubtedly... a sense of grief coming *from* his brother. To his dismay, Sir Baudouin could no longer deny Raoul's agony. Somehow... he could *feel* it! All of it. Every crushed hope, every heartbreak and every bitter torment that the crusader had endured in his long exile now mysteriously flooded Baudouin's soul like a torrent. And at the height of all the sorrow, Baudouin felt Raoul's agony... and anger... at Baudouin's betrayal.

The sudden pain was so stark that it pierced through the smothering shroud of his pride, totally disarming him. In a desperate attempt to defend himself, Sir Baudouin repelled the feelings with anger and tried to justify himself.

"It's Raoul's own fault! He should never have left Crequy. He did not have to go on that crusade! *He* is the one who abandoned his family. It was *his* stubborn pride that kept him in exile! I had nothing to do with that! He's the one who was... that was..."

Yet with every excuse he gave, the crushing reality of his betrayal swept over Baudouin's broken defenses and penetrated his conscience.

This inner turmoil, however painful, hardly lasted a minute; and when Sir Baudouin looked up again towards Raoul, the lord was standing hesitantly behind his chair. The lady Mahtilde, seated at their table, was scanning the room, about to inadvertently discover Baudouin's hiding place. But the trembling knight took no notice. Sir Baudouin's focus was fixed solely on his elder brother, whose tilted head and closed eyes showed that he was clearly dwelling in his own thoughts.

And then Sir Baudouin was touched once more with a powerful grace. He realized – though he did not know how – that Raoul was thinking of *him*. This final grace, at last melting his frozen heart, had come from the Blessed Virgin Mary's Own hands, and had been won by the struggles of Her brave crusader who, in that moment, had conquered the temptation to despise his treacherous brother.

"Oh dear God!" The first true prayer in years fell from Sir Baudouin's trembling lips. "What have I done?" The knight's eyes fell. His soul was filled with a bitter contrition.

Now, in a new and painful light, the Lord of Crequy's speech ran once more through Baudouin's mind. And with each of his brother's tortures came the echo of Baudouin's own wretched mockery. A dark shadow covered his ashamed face. The fool and coward *he* had been was at last so clear to him, as well as the agony that he had unjustly caused his own family!

Speechless with disgust and grief, Sir Baudouin raised a hand to his closed eyes. He saw himself seated in Crequy's chair of authority and power... while Raoul was chained to a bench of slavery. His vivid imagination brought to mind the countless tortures his brother had endured for years on end. To think that, for all the time that he had been living off the misery of his family, Raoul had been dying for his Faith!

Sir Baudouin's conscience reproached him bitterly for his countless denials of Mahtilde's pleas for mercy and justice. Her tearful pleadings echoed through his guilty mind, as Baudouin sadly envisioned the bloody, trembling figure of his captive brother. Then it was as if he saw himself, heartless traitor that he was, holding the whip of torture in his own hand.

## THE LORD OF CREQUY

*“What have you done, Baudouin?!”* The knight angrily clenched his face, *“What have you become! You wretch! It is you who have disgraced the house of Crequy! You are the one who has brought dishonor to our family’s name... to our father’s name.”* Lady Mahtilde’s rebuke of ten years past returned to haunt him. What *would* Count Gerard have done if had he lived to see his youngest son’s betrayal? How would the noble father have handled his treacheries ...

Slowly, the anger that had given way to grief was replaced with a soul-gripping fright. Sir Baudouin realized that his crime would not go unpunished. Lord Raoul had returned, and Baudouin’s reign had ended. The same Justice that had rescued Crequy’s lord from the bonds of slavery would now condemn its usurper to the bowels of prison.

Breathing hard, the miserable knight lowered his hands from his face. Somehow, the coward was still convinced that no one had yet seen him. It was with this false sense of security that Sir Baudouin, in the depths of his fearful heart, was seized with a desire to flee.

Anxious and uneasy, the knight assured himself that there was still a chance of escape. He could easily slip away in the midst of all these loud and long festivities. Or could he?

*“Even if I were to leave,”* the knight thought to himself, *“Justice would be swift to follow me. I have won too many enemies in the hearts of Crequy. And now that their lord has returned...”* His hand instinctively went to his sword, as he fearfully glanced at the throng of cheerful faces. There would be no stopping the people of Crequy from avenging their injured lord and lady.

Sir Baudouin sighed impatiently. There was not much time to make up his mind. Sooner or later his hiding place would be discovered. *“And then...”* The guilty knight did not want to finish the thought; he only shuddered.

Wiping the nervous sweat from his brow, Sir Baudouin strained to calm himself. If he was going to escape, now was the time. Yet despite his desperation, he hesitated. There was something within him that did not *want* to run away. The same conscience that had compelled him to stay before was now urging him to seek and obtain his one secret desire: Raoul’s pardon.

The young brother groaned. To even admit this desire was a great humiliation for the proud knight. He was torn between denying his feelings and believing forgiveness was possible.

*“Oh don’t be a fool, Baudouin!”* He thought to himself, *“You will be doing well to escape with your life.”* His nervous grasp was still hard on the hilt of his sword. *“Just leave while you can.”*

Crushed beneath the weight of his guilt, the miserable knight was on the brink of despair. Then, at the height of his indecision, grace penetrated his anxiety with a calming inspiration. For the first time, Baudouin’s thoughts and memories turned to Raoul with *hope*.

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“If Raoul is the man I remember, he will not attack a contrite and unarmed man.” Baudouin looked down at his sword. Slowly, he pulled the weapon out and held it in both hands. He stared at it for a moment, his mind struggling with the risk he was about to take. “If I surrender,” the knight thought to himself, “perhaps my punishment may be less severe...”

Slowly, he turned his downcast eyes towards the seated Lord of Crequy. Without any decision, his resolve was at last made. Breathing hard, with eyes fixed on Raoul, Sir Baudouin stepped out into the Great Hall.

For a moment or two, the cheerful chatter of the banquet continued. One by one, though, some of the voices began to falter as the keener guests recognized the knight who had just joined them.

Sir Baudouin, however, was purposefully ignoring any glances from the crowd. He walked firmly, like a man afraid to lose his resolve. Yet he was careful to not walk *too* quickly, lest he should seem afraid or guilty. With calm composure, he simply stared directly ahead. His full attention was on one man alone.

So focused was he on Raoul, that Baudouin did not even notice how the music stopped playing, or that the laughter was giving way to a stunned silence. He was barely halfway to his goal, when this somber air descended upon the party. It was, in fact, the strange hush that aroused Raoul’s attention. With nervous apprehension, Baudouin watched the tall lord raise his head and survey the quiet hall. The next moment, Raoul’s deep eyes turned and, for the first time in ten years, met those of his brother. In that same tense instant, Sir Baudouin suddenly heard a cry behind him:

“Hold there, you fiend!”

Every head turned, and Sir Baudouin’s as well, towards the author of the fierce command. With a mix between a groan and a sigh, Sir Baudouin found himself staring into the stern, angry face of the Lord of Renty who had leapt to his feet and was quickly approaching him. The angry pursuer did not mince words.

“I knew you would show yourself, you wretch! How dare you come thus armed into Lord Raoul’s hall!”

Sir Baudouin glanced down at the unsheathed weapon in his hand. He had nearly forgotten he was holding his sword. There was an awkward and sullen pause. Despite his previously honest intentions, Sir Baudouin looked angrily towards his accuser. His pride swelled. For years, a silent enmity had existed between the two knights, amidst a constant battle over the lands of Crequy. As Mahtilde’s chief defender, the Lord of Renty had ever remained a thorn in Sir Baudouin’s side. There was no love lost between the two of them. Now, the mere sight of his adversary’s face was rekindling Baudouin’s ill will and anger.

“I have come on my own accord, sir.” Sir Baudouin answered. “And I *will* speak to Raoul.” His proud aloof tone, however, did not impress the Lord of Renty, who in no way attempted to restrain his feelings.

“Over my dead body!” was the threatening reply. “You *will* not take another step.”

Sir Baudouin gently cocked his head with an ironic grin, "When last I looked, you were not lord of this land."

"Bold words for a usurper." The Lord of Renty's retort was quick and biting. He understood Baudouin's intended mockery. His burning eyes fell again on the wretched man's sword. "Are you not *yet* satisfied with your evil? What more pain must you inflict upon your kin?"

The accusation rang out like a peal of thunder throughout the dense hall, which was entirely fixated upon the confrontation. Despite the ominous air around him, Sir Baudouin simply shook his head.

"This time, my friend, you are wrong." With that, Sir Baudouin turned a cold back on him and continued towards Raoul.

He had hardly taken a step, though, when there was the distinct sound of metal scraping as the Lord of Renty whipped out his own sword. A hushed cry immediately went up from the crowd and several of the noblemen quickly rose to their feet. Sir Renaud, too, glancing protectively at his daughter Mahtilde, had risen from his chair. He looked beside her toward Raoul, who stood staring with an intense focus upon the two knights. The Lord of Renty did not wait to speak.

"Your treachery is at an end, Baudouin."

At these words, the halted knight slowly turned around. Staring at the steady blade held inches from his heart, the young usurper whispered, with feigned decorum.

"*Sir* Baudouin, my lord."

Any reply, however, was abruptly prevented by a loud, brusque command from the head of the hall.

"Stay your swords!" Lord Raoul demanded firmly. "I will have no bloodshed in this castle." The Lord of Renty nodded humbly and lowered his weapon.

"I would not allow myself the pleasure," he answered. "*Sir* Baudouin's treachery deserves the gallows."

To Sir Baudouin's dismay, several bold and loud murmurs of agreement rose up from the crowd. Frightened, and with growing anger, he eyed his would-be executioner.

"My issue is not with you, my lord."

"No," the nobleman corrected. "It lies with all of Crequy, which has endured your tyranny long enough."

"I was never a tyrant to these people!" Sir Baudouin's voice rose in agitation, for more of the guests were now standing.

"You dare defend yourself! To what end?" The Lord of Renty had lost all patience with his lies. The painful memories of ten long years thirsted for justice. "Every soul in Crequy is a witness and victim to your crimes!" Then, before the entire hall, he continued briefly, but vehemently, to decry all of Sir Baudouin's offenses of the past decade.

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Wincing at this fresh humiliation, Sir Baudouin stood silent before his accuser. His anger turned to anxiety as he realized that each accusation against him was visibly exciting the sympathies of the crowd. He tried in vain to ignore the countless piercing stares, but soon his own nervous gaze hardened into a willful glare. His face flushed with anger and pride. How *dare* the Lord of Renty lecture him like this!

“I did not come, sir!” Sir Baudouin spoke suddenly, interrupting the diatribe, “to stand trial to your judgment! You have no authority here.”

“Neither do you!”

Sir Baudouin shot a glance out at the crowd, for the indignant cry had come from the throng. Sensing the Lord of Renty’s satisfaction, the usurper looked him boldly in the eye.

“So you’ve won, my lord. Is that not enough? What else do you seek?”

“Justice; which, thank God, has returned your brother as the rightful lord of this castle and its lands.”

“Yes,” Sir Baudouin’s anger made him blind to all danger around him. His grasp tightened on the hilt of his sword. “Crequy has thankfully been spared your lordship.”

“And has been freed of yours.”

“Are you not then satisfied?” There was a fearless indignation in his voice, “... or does Justice demand my blood as well.”

The Lord of Renty caught the look in his eye and noticed the grip on his sword. “I will not rest, Sir Baudouin,” he answered, raising his blade, “until I know Crequy is safe from you.... Forever.”

“You’re prepared to ensure that yourself?” was the challenging reply.

For a suspenseful moment, the two knights focused in a silent stare, oblivious of everything around them. Then both weapons seemed to quickly rise at once...

But they never touched.

Instead, Sir Baudouin found himself suddenly jolted back and away. Straining to steady himself, the knight caught hold of the arm that was pulling him. Stumbling away from the Lord of Renty, Sir Baudouin quickly turned to face the intruder. His jaw dropped when he saw it was none other than his older brother.

The crusader did not retract his grasp on the breathless knight’s shoulder.

“Sheathe your weapons,” Sir Raoul commanded. Fumbling, Sir Baudouin obeyed at once. Sir Raoul looked towards the Lord of Renty, who was staring in surprise. “Both of you.”

The humbled knight meekly lowered his head, and returned the weapon to his side. Sir Raoul was quick to clarify his rebuke.

“You spoke rightly, my friend,” the crusader’s firm tone was gentle. “I am lord of this castle. And you have defended my house well.” His noble friend gratefully raised his face at these words. Sir Raoul returned the look with a gracious nod before assuming a more serious tone. “But this traitor’s fate is in my hands now.”

“As you wish, my lord,” was the sincere and humble reply. “I desire nothing less.”

Lord Raoul turned now towards the trembling man beside him. The Great Hall was churning with many angry whispers and threatening looks. The moment that Sir Baudouin’s eyes met Raoul’s, the miserable knight fell to his knees.

“I know my crimes are not hidden from you, Raoul” he said. “But if you will spare me, I will relinquish my authority.”

The Lord of Renty instinctively went to Raoul’s defense. “You have no claim to Crequy!” he cried. “Except to its dungeon.”

“All the easier for me to resign.” Sir Baudouin’s sarcastic reply was quick and aimed solely at his accuser. Then addressing himself to Raoul, he promised, “I will disappear, I give you my word.”

“And what is that?” Mahtilde’s father suddenly spoke up. “The word of traitor?”

Ignoring Sir Renaud, the kneeling knight again pleaded his cause. “My intent was not to challenge you, Raoul, but to leave in peace. I vow never to return.”

The Lord of Crequy did not answer right away. Instead, there was a thoughtful pause. Though not a quiet one. Distinct and threatening murmurs could be heard throughout the Hall, which felt more like that of an execution than a tribunal. A cold sweat broke out on Sir Baudouin’s thin forehead.

*“Whatever scraps of pity I hoped for are impossible now. This mob will surely avenge Crequy to the degree that they feel Raoul’s justice is lacking.”*

As if sensing his thoughts, Lord Raoul addressed him with an intimidating composure.

“Do you deny the evil you have done to my wife and son?” Even the crowd grew quiet as Sir Baudouin hesitated in his response.

“No.”

Sir Raoul’s tone grew firm. “Then what have you to say for it?”

Again a heavy stillness descended on the Hall as it awaited the knight’s stuttered and breathless reply.

“I... I fear the dishonor I have brought u-upon myself, my family and... and you.” Sir Baudouin thought a moment, and then added, his face still lowered, “I abhor especially... the displeasure I have caused you.”

“Or rather you fear Lord Raoul’s power and punishment!” Sir Renaud could not restrain himself any more. He found this display of supposed contrition abhorrent. “Your remorse is all very well and good now that my daughter and grandson are at last free of your clutches!”

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The comment raised Sir Baudouin's face, and he looked instinctively for Raoul's reaction. To his dismay, Raoul seemed affected by his father-in-law's words.

"There is no punishment severe enough," Raoul began, "that could repair what your crimes have cost, Baudouin. Much less, atone for the offense given to God, Whose Authority you violated."

There was a strain in the crusader's voice. To the guilty knight, the subtle tension only bespoke a seething anger that sent a chill down his spine. Overwhelmed with fear, Sir Baudouin boldly attempted a fervent appeal for mercy.

"All I ask, brother, is that –"

"– You have the heart to call me 'brother'!" Raoul's unexpected tone and words cut sharp and deep. "After what you did to my family... to your kin?"

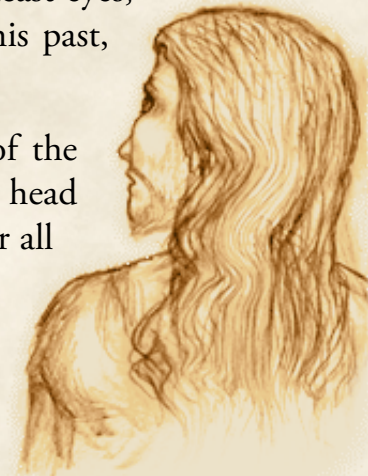
Sir Baudouin stared speechlessly at the crusader. Slowly, the meanness of his cowardice dawned on him. How could he shirk the punishment he so justly deserved after all of the suffering he had inflicted on others? The pain in his brother's voice rekindled the contrition Sir Baudouin had felt, and the understanding he had had for his betrayal. With downcast eyes, the knight silently repented, however imperfectly, of his past, and even current, failures.

Lord Raoul was carefully observing every feature of the traitor's thoughtful face. When, at last, Sir Baudouin's head silently hung in shame, the crusader raised his voice for all to hear.

"Too long has injustice prevailed in this castle. But today, no longer! God's just authority shall not again be abused in my home. He has given me lordship over Crequy, and has returned it to me for the Honor and Glory of His Blessed Mother. Let it be known then throughout Crequy," the lord turned now and faced the entire Hall, "that my judgment here is with God's Authority. It shall not be defied by any."

A respectful and awed silence filled the hall and was the people's unanimous sign of assent. Lord Raoul looked back towards his brother. Sir Baudouin, sensing his stare, risked a glance at the crusader's face. Their eyes unintentionally met and the kneeling knight gazed searchingly, yet briefly, at his elder brother. The look was returned, but none too gently, for the lord seemed to penetrate far deeper, as if reading the guilty man's soul.

Deeply disturbed, Sir Baudouin broke from their momentary stare. With a silent sigh, his heavy head lowered once more, this time with resignation. He had not found what he was searching for. He saw no mercy in Raoul's eyes.



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Never, in the history of Crequy, had the castle's Great Hall been the scene of such a unique suspense. A tense excitement hung in the air. All eagerly anticipated Lord Raoul's judgment upon his treacherous brother. Every guest seemed both pleased and proud to be present at this incredible moment. Their lord had returned. At long last, justice would have its day and the usurper would be dethroned.

But it was not enough to just *be* there. Many a seat was emptied as the more eager guests had discretely risen for a better view. They had so longed for this day... *everyone* wanted to see the wretched usurper in his defeat. Many of the remaining nobles tried with great difficulty to catch a glimpse of the humbled knight. Too many curious heads, though, were already staring and most of the guests had to be content with merely watching the tall, lordly figure of the solemn-faced crusader.

Sir Raoul, then, was the intent focus of the crowd, and they watched his expression closely. Sir Baudouin, on the other hand, dared not raise his face. Hope no longer had a place in his heart - his tormenting fears had distorted his mind. He was unable to find what he was so desperately searching for. The keen gaze of the crusader, on the other hand, had seen enough. And though he kept the crowd in brief suspense, the lord's judgment had already been passed. The guests instinctively stiffened as they watched Raoul stretch an authoritative hand towards the culprit. Raoul's grave face grew even more serious, and he turned his head to speak.

"Again, I say! Let it be known throughout these lands, that my judgment here is with God's Own authority and it shall not be defied." His strong voice rang out, as if summoning every soul there as a witness. "As the Lord of Crequy, then, and in full use of this power..." The crusader turned and laid his hand on the bowed head before him -

"... I forgive you, Baudouin."

The solemn words echoed through the dense hall... giving way to a deafening silence. Nothing could have better or more loudly expressed the total shock of the crowd.

One by one people slowly returned to their seats, and the guests began to stir. Only a few, at first, dared to whisper to one another, and many curious looks were exchanged among the noble guests. Some looked instinctively at the Lord of Renty. The stunned knight glanced guiltily at the weapon in his hand. His dark eyes returned to Lord Raoul. He knew the crusader too well to believe this to be an ill-humored joke. Yet a certain doubt lingered in his heart.

Sir Renaud, still standing at the head table, turned dumbfounded towards his daughter Mahtilde. But she did not see him. Naturally, the lady's eyes were fixed upon her lord. The elderly father continued to stare at her, though, for there was an interesting expression upon her sweet face. There was something mysteriously calm, and even edifying, about it. The look lingered but a moment, for the lady soon turned and discretely beckoned to one of her maids.



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While the entire hall was strongly, though silently, reacting to the unexpected pardon, the kneeling figure at Raoul's feet did not stir. Sir Baudouin did not doubt his brother's words. But he did not believe them either. His stunned mind was void of all thought... and his heart of any emotion. In this daze, he heard the Lord of Crequy speak again.

"God allows all for a purpose, Baudouin. Even your evil." Raoul's clear voice was low. "Some graces can only be won at such a price. Not until eternity will we truly understand the priceless treasure that Our Lady has wrought from this tragedy. Remember this, Baudouin - whatever God heals becomes an even greater thing than what it was before its fall."

Still kneeling, the knight instinctively raised his head to find that Sir Raoul was looking down at him. Sir Baudouin returned his gaze, staring thoughtfully into the crusader's face. For a moment, the years seemed to fade away, and Baudouin recognized the young lord he had remembered from so long ago... Yet, in some way, he did not know him. Raoul *had* changed. The nobility of character that had endeared the crusader to all who knew him had intensified. God's love had ennobled what His grace had sanctified through years of innocent suffering.

Without a word of response, Sir Baudouin lowered his ashamed face. The lord's chivalry was deeply humbling for the culprit, who now felt guilty at receiving this immense charity.



Sensing his fears, as well as the growing curiosity of the crowd, Lord Raoul stepped back and spoke loudly for all to hear.

"Rise now, Baudouin," Raoul beckoned as he spoke. His tone had softened, "The past is forgotten. Join us, dear brother, in God's good feast."

Sir Baudouin obediently, though hesitantly, rose to his feet. With downcast eyes, his voice was barely above a whisper as he echoed Raoul's own words: "You have the heart to call me 'brother'?"

The uneasy question was followed by an awkward silence. Nervous at the delay, Baudouin hoped that his comment had passed unnoticed. A single glance, however, and he *knew* that Raoul had heard him. Not only that, but his silence was purposefully intended to get Baudouin's attention. Yet even now, as they looked at one another, the lord made no effort to reply. The expression on his scarred face was serious, without being somber. There was a silent passion burning behind his deep eyes.

Then, in answer, the crusader simply held open a welcoming pair of arms. He had barely a moment before his younger brother rushed into them and was clasped in a fervent embrace.



The Lord of Renty, not too far off, stared in silence. By now the multitude of guests had seated themselves, and were engaged in many a hushed and excited conversation. Surprised, although not necessarily disappointed, the lord sheathed his sword. With furrowed eyebrows he gazed at the two brothers.

He could only clearly see Baudouin, who was blocking Raoul. Even at that, the younger knight's face was buried in the crusader's shoulder, and the lord could not see it. But he could tell that Baudouin was trembling though, and his keen eye noticed Raoul tighten his reassuring grasp.

The Lord of Renty frowned. He was weary of his friend's love and trust being betrayed. He could imagine the sacrifice it was to forgive Baudouin's treacheries. The lord only wished that, for once, Raoul would be the one to receive... *instead* of give.

These thoughts had rested only briefly in his mind, when his eye caught sight of the crusader. The two knights had moved slightly, and the Lord of Renty could now clearly see Raoul's face. That was all that he needed. Instinctively, and almost despite himself, the Lord of Renty's scowl broke into a grateful smile.

Lord Raoul *was* happy. There was no doubt of it. Everything about the crusader emitted such an incredible joy that the Lord of Renty could not even imagine it. But he did not need to. He knew enough now to be at peace. It was only in this act of charity and forgiveness that Raoul's love could find its fulfillment ... and its sweet 'revenge'. With a humble bow, the Lord of Renty returned content to his seat.

Sir Renaud, too, was moved by his son-in-law's behavior. He watched now with a certain pride as Lord Raoul led the forgiven brother up to the head table. It was only as the two knights approached that the old count realized *why* his daughter had summoned the maidservant. Anticipating her noble husband's charity, the Lady Mahtilde had discretely set an extra place at the family table... for Sir Baudouin.

Raoul noticed his wife's foresight, and saw in it her silent support. He said nothing, but the look on his grateful face was, to Mahtilde, more precious than the highest praise. She returned his smile, and happily watched as he took the plate and goblet for Sir Baudouin and set them down near his own. Gesturing for his brother, Lord Raoul motioned for him to sit. Sir Baudouin gently rubbed his damp eyes and grinned. His place was nothing less than at the lord's own side. No longer fearful, the knight humbly and gratefully obeyed.

The crowd looked on with proud and eager faces as the Lord of Crequy resumed his place at the head of the Banquet Hall. Turning to his lady beside him, Raoul took hold of her small hand and gently raised it aloft. At this sign, the hall resounded with a triumphant cheer. Words cannot express the immense joy that radiated from the noble couple. It flooded the room like a torrent of peace and of love. Everyone could feel it. And everyone knew... the greatest celebration in all of Crequy was only *just* beginning!

And it would not end there. In the classic style of the French, even the official festivities were carried on for days to follow. These *fêtes*, as they are called, opened the castle of Crequy to all. People who

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came from far and near to see the long-lost Count Raoul, and to hear the wondrous tale, knew that they would be welcome and well received.

It was during this time of excitement and celebration when, one day, a flushed and breathless woodsman came hurrying into the castle.

“I have to see the Lord Raoul!” he exclaimed eagerly, “I must speak with him!”

“Peace, my friend!” Sir Renaud approached the newcomer. “My lord is busy at the moment. He and his brother are currently entertaining the Lord of Renty and some other noble guests.”

“But, he must come with me to the forest!” the man insisted. “There is something that he has to see!”

“What is it?”

The peasant turned quickly at this sound of a woman’s voice. It was the Lady Mahtilde.

“Is something wrong?” she asked kindly. There was no anxiety in her eyes, and her gentle presence gave the anxious man confidence.

Bowing humbly, he answered “No, my lady. I simply bring news of the most interesting and extraordinary nature!”

“News! Is it good news?”

The exuberant question came from the little master of the castle, Raoul’s son Baudouin. But the self-proclaimed messenger was reluctant to share his tale with any other than the lord himself. And even then, he seemed eager that Sir Raoul should accompany him to the forest. Young Baudouin turned excitedly towards his mother.

“Shall I get father?” he grinned. With a smile, Mahtilde laid a calm and restraining hand on the boy’s shoulder. She looked over towards her father. The old man’s expression was thoughtful, but indecisive. With a single nod, Sir Renaud silently deferred to the lady’s decision. Turning back to the messenger, Mahtilde addressed her son’s request.

“Thank you, Baudouin. But that will not be necessary,” she said. Then, with a graceful gesture, she beckoned to the peasant. “Follow me, my good man. You may speak with Lord Raoul.”

Thus accompanied by her ladyship, the visitor was brought into the Great Hall. With a grateful bow to Sir Raoul, he apologized for his intrusion on the festivities. The long-lost Lord of Crequy nodded graciously.

“It is no intrusion. Please...continue...” a smile slowly emerged on Raoul’s face. He recognized the peasant. It was the woodsman - the very same who had found Lord Raoul when the crusader was first wandering the forests of Crequy after his miraculous rescue.

The woodcutter acknowledged Raoul’s smile with an even larger grin. Once more, the peasant thanked the nobles for their indulgent patience with his disruption. There was no cause for worry though, for the guests were in no way annoyed. On the contrary, many seemed pleased to be part of

this interesting interview and to hear the news this woodsman bore. Above all, they were intrigued by his mysterious request. All eyes were on the Lord of Crequy, who was listening with an intent focus. At length, Raoul arose from his chair.

“I will come,” he nodded at the peasant. “Lead me to the forest.”

With approving and excited whispers, the many nobles watched the lord and his family follow the messenger. Some of the more curious guests and closer friends also joined them.

As they made their way through the dense woods, Raoul slowly began to recognize his surroundings. He had been in this place not long ago. Each tree and shrub was now bringing back the memories of that fateful day: the day when he had been brought back to Crequy. He was near now to where he had awoken.

“My lord!” the woodsman’s voice cried out. “Over here!”

Sir Raoul looked up from his thoughts. His pace quickened towards his guide, who was waving at him in the near distance. Then a smile flashed across the lord’s face. This was not the first time the woodcutter had served as his guide. Only this time, Raoul was not the beggar he had once been.

The retinue of family and friends from the castle were not far behind him as the lord hastened past a cluster of trees. Coming around the bend, Raoul’s eyes instantly fell upon the object of the hunt.

“There, Lord Raoul,” the peasant excitedly pointed with an air of authority. “Do you see them?”

The crusader nodded. There was an interesting expression on his intent face.

“Indeed.” He answered. “I do.”

The woodsman was pleased. “You recognize them then, my lord? I had hoped so. You can imagine my surprise, I’m sure. But when I realized that this is so near where we first met... “ Raoul glanced up with a grin. The woodcutter too smiled at the memory. “Well, I felt you should see for yourself.”

The lord turned back with a nod. “You did well, my friend.”

“But what is it?” Sir Baudouin asked, coming up. The others had joined them now and were crowding around. All looked toward the objects in question. But the crusader made no answer. He only stared in silence. There, nearly hidden by the tall grass, was a large twisted clump of iron.

“Chains?” whispered the Lord of Renty. He peered down at the cold metal. “What are those doing here?”

Mahtilde was standing now by her husband’s side. Softly taking hold of his arm, she looked searchingly at his thoughtful face.

“Where did they come from?” the lady asked, half expecting the answer. The lord’s deep eyes remained still. His mind was over a thousand miles away.

“My prison.”

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At these words, a mix between fear and awe swept through the small group. Some excitedly stared now at the clump of metal as if at a miraculous sign. For lying there before them was yet further and physical proof of Our Lady's wondrous and powerful intercession. To others, the blood-stained iron brought the crusader's sad story to life. Seeing the actual chains that had imprisoned their tortured lord filled them with even greater compassion.

... Or, for some, contrition. Sir Baudouin almost winced at the frightful things, more out of remorse than anything else. He looked towards Raoul with even kinder eyes. Studying the quiet expression on the lord's scarred face, his pity turned to admiration. And, for perhaps the first time, Sir Baudouin thanked God for blessing him with the noble example and precious gift of his brother.

The somber stillness was broken by the surprising, though sweet, sound of Raoul's young son.

"Are *those* your chains then, father? The ones that held you captive in the tower for all of those years?"

There was a tone in the boy's sad voice that bespoke his tender feelings. The lad had been proud, in his own young way, to hear the tales of Lord Raoul's bravery and courage. The sight of these iron bonds though - used to afflict and torture his dear father - brought a stark reality of pain to the loving child.

Little Baudouin's question, however, got a strong reaction from his angered grandfather. The elderly count had been silently suppressing his justified indignation and disgust at the guilty chains. And at the sound of his poor grandchild's sorrow, Sir Renaud did not hesitate to share his thoughts.

"How terrible, Raoul!" Sir Renaud cried. "Oh, we shall remove those beastly things at once. We shall dispose of those horrors!"

The old knight's feelings were echoed by many approving nods and murmurs from his companions. One voice, however, rose in disagreement... Raoul's.

"No, my friends!" His firm correction was strangely touched with emotion. "You do not understand."

Everyone watched the tall lord step towards the heavy chains and lift them from the ground. Passing them through his scarred hands, the crusader carefully eyed the rusted and bloody metal. He knew it so well. Every link was filled with countless pains, hopes and memories. A smile came to the lord's scarred face, and he gently brought the instrument of torture to his lips.

*Dear God, I have so much to be grateful for.* This quiet prayer had barely left his heart, when Raoul turned to see Mahtilde approaching him. Her eyes met his, but their gaze went so much deeper. Searching her soul, the crusader sought to share his joy. He wanted her to understand what was so difficult to explain.

"You see, my Mahaut - my *strength*," the lord whispered her beautiful French name to intone its full and ancient meaning. "My love, I don't ever *want* to forget."

## THE LORD OF CREQUY

By now, the lady had placed her hand upon her husband's arm. At these words, Mahtilde laid her head upon his strong shoulder and breathed a heartfelt sigh. But it was not of grief or fear. It was a sigh that unburdens a heart overwhelmed with bliss. Closing her eyes, Mahtilde's sweet voice rang with the courage and confidence that filled her soul.

"And we never will, Raoul," she whispered back.

The Lord of Crequy looked down at the still figure of his wife. His serious face broke into a smile when he felt a tiny tug against the chains. He glanced over at his other side. There was his little Baudouin, standing firm with his little fist confidently clasping the hard metal. With a solemn, yet joyful, expression, the boy turned up towards his father and mother. Though separated by time and distance, they had suffered so much together - as a family.

Raoul looked again at the chains. The very pain they had once caused him was now replaced with an inexpressible joy! With boundless gratitude, the crusader raised his eyes to Heaven.



*Oh Mary, my Queen! My sweet Protectress! How can I ever thank You? Everything I thought I had lost forever- I now possess again - and even more! He gazed once more at all of his loved ones around him. You have given us all so much...*

It was becoming clearer to him now. All of it. Everything which they had endured for so long - it had all had a purpose... a goal for each of them and for all of them. And the good... all of the good that God had bestowed on the lord and his family had not been in spite of their sorrows, but *because* of them - and *through* them. Every trial had been the reward for a cross faithfully carried. Though painful at the time, Raoul could understand now why. Innocent suffering not only *purifies* love - it *proves* it. And every victory won merited for them even higher rewards and graces from the generous hands of Our Lady.

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Raoul looked again... to far beyond the forest's sky. He did not even try to form words of thanks. He knew that none would come. How could they? What could ever fittingly or accurately express the feelings of his heart? Raoul was confident, though, that his dear Queen understood his heart nonetheless. That She knew his gratitude. He only hoped, suddenly, that this joy he felt did not diminish his love for Her. Seeing now how his suffering had been crucial in God's loving plan, the humble crusader wished that this happiness too could somehow increase his love.

Then, in answer to his unspoken prayer, a sudden peace - such as he had never felt before - filled the knight's heart. In that precious moment, Raoul heard - or rather felt - Our Lady's loving response echo through his soul.

"God wills it."

## EPILOGUE

For the rest of their blessed lives, Sir Raoul, his Lady Mahtilde and their ever growing family enjoyed a deep and special love for our Blessed Mother, never forgetting the miraculous graces that had changed them forever. As for his prison chains, the Lord of Crequy immediately arranged for a monastery to be built in that same forest - in memory of the miracle. But with that, his gratitude could not be satisfied, and he was not at peace until he had ensured the prosperity of the monastic home by richly endowing it. His generosity still did not end there and in further thanks to his Heavenly Protectress, Lord Raoul went on to make many generous gifts and alms to the other neighboring chapels of our Blessed Lady.

Yet most importantly, the crusader kept the flame of Divine Love forever burning in his heart. It shone like a beacon to all around him - especially to his children. Young Baudouin and the rest of his new brothers and sisters, one of whom was named in memory of their martyred uncle Godfrey, were raised with the blessed example of this Faith. For Raoul and Mahtilde lived their lives as every Catholic should - in the knowledge that this earth is not our final abode. Our Eternal Home lies above us. And it was undoubtedly with great rejoicing that the family of the house of Crequy was forever reunited in the everlasting Kingdom of Heaven.

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It is of this author's opinion that this heroic crusader was nothing less than a Saint. And it is with the most earnest encouragement that all are invited to invoke and pray to this unknown noble. Raoul's incredible story has been retold for the express and single purpose for which he lived his life: to give honor and glory to Almighty God and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

## *THE LORD OF CREQUY*

Yet the tale of the Lord of Crequy is meant to achieve an even greater end - to increase our gratitude and love for God and His Mother. Let us honor this humble crusader by thanking Heaven for what They have given him - and for what They have given us. We too are called to cherish and defend the True Faith. We too must persevere with confidence and hope in our dark trials. We too were created to give God our all - that, in giving all, we may receive All!

Let us take this story to heart then - that, by his example and intercession, this noble knight may help raise up a host of selfless loving souls for Christ. Entrusting ourselves to Mary like Raoul did, we will be led and guided by Her Immaculate Heart - until we join his ranks at last with the blessed in Heaven.

**God wills it!**

**THE END**



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