

Rebels
and
Fools

David Michael Williams

ONEMILLIONWORDS

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First published by One Million Words, LLC, Wisconsin, USA

First printing, March 2016

ISBN 978-0-9910562-1-7

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Cover design by Jake Weiss (jacobweissdesign.com)

Author photograph by Jaime Lynn Hunt (jaimelynnhunt.com)

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Passage I

The Captain of the Guards' boots tapped a steady cadence on Port Town's weathered street. According to the messenger who had been sent to fetch him from his home, *Stalwart Mariner* had finally dropped anchor at the northern harbor.

"About bloody time," he muttered.

As he hurried to the wharves, Captain DeGrange thought that he ought to be thanking the gods that the ocean voyager had arrived at all. Reports from Fort Honor told of increased piratical activity off the island's western coast. Everyone had feared *Stalwart Mariner* had been intercepted somewhere between Continae to Capricon.

DeGrange squinted as the docks came into view. The setting sun cast an orange reflection on the harbor, where most of small fishing vessels were heading back to shore. The smell of frying fish drifted from the chimneys of the inns and houses he passed. It was enough to make DeGrange's stomach roar. He had had only a few bites of his own dinner before duty had whisked him away from the company of his wife and daughter.

Approaching *Stalwart Mariner*, he saw the ship's crew and the local dockhands unloading crate after crate from the ship into a nearby warehouse. The wooden boxes were filled with rare Huiyan spices, a cargo valuable enough to tempt any ne'er-do-well who scoured the Aden Ocean.

A moment later, he spotted the ship's captain, a wide but

squat man who looked like he would sink faster than an anchor if he fell overboard. Upon noticing DeGrange—and apparently recognizing his rank by the golden stripes on his uniform—*Stalwart Mariner*'s captain gave a final order to one of his crew before turning to DeGrange.

“Looks like you have everything well in hand here,” said DeGrange, coming to stand beside the captain. “Judging by the fact that your vessel is in one piece and you still have cargo to unload, I’d wager you didn’t encounter any pirates.”

“Not a one,” the captain assured him.

“Then tell me, why you are a week late?”

While he had gotten to know many of the captains who sailed back and forth between the island and Continae, DeGrange recognized neither this seaman nor his ship. But DeGrange’s brusque manner wasn’t due to unfriendliness. He knew that, after the long voyage from the continent—a trek that typically took two weeks but had taken *Stalwart Mariner* three—most sailors were eager to leave the confines of the ship and enjoy a few precious days ashore before returning to the sea.

Better to get business out of the way as quickly as possible.

Not that DeGrange himself didn’t have his own reasons for hastening matters. Today had been the first day in weeks he had arrived home before sunset, and he could not remember the last time he had shared an evening meal with his family. He did not blame the job itself for such inconveniences. Rather, he blamed the individual factors that made such long hours necessary.

Rebels who threatened the peace, Mayor Beryl’s impossible demands, slow ships—all of these things and more were his concern as Captain of the Three Guards in Port Town.

“Ya can’t see it now, ’cause her sails’re down, but there was a storm that tore her mainsail to ribbons and sent us far

off course to boot. Hell of a squall, it was,” the ship’s captain said.

As the man recounted the events of the voyage, DeGrange studied the ship with only a mild interest. Typically, it was the harbormaster’s responsibility to interview the captains of newly arrived vessels, but the mayor had ordered DeGrange to handle *Stalwart Mariner* personally.

Just what was so important about a spice-laden ship, DeGrange did not know. True, wares from lands beyond Continiae were precious and few in Capricon, but it was hardly the type of thing for the Captain of the Guards to worry about.

Well, thought DeGrange, Crofton Beryl will be pleased to hear that *Stalwart Mariner* has arrived safely and the people of Port Town will be able to purchase perfume and seasonings to their hearts’ content.

“But my crew don’t shirk in the face of danger,” *Stalwart Mariner*’s captain continued. “No, we fought every wave that tried to take us to the bottom. We—”

“None of the cargo got wet, did it? Were the spices damaged?” DeGrange knew Mayor Beryl would blame him for the ruined cargo. Never mind it would have happened many leagues away from Port Town.

Stalwart Mariner’s captain snorted and gave a sharp chuckle.

DeGrange frowned.

“Spices?” the captain asked, knotting his brow. “What’re ya talkin’ about, man? We’re carrying arms. Swords, spears, chain mail...you name it!”

“Wait...what?” he demanded.

Now DeGrange was once more studying the ship, thinking perhaps that he had been misinformed, that the lookouts had mistaken this ship for the true *Stalwart Mariner*, which, sadly, lay at the bottom of the ocean.

But, no, he could see the ship’s name, complete with a depiction of a sword-wielding sailor, painted on the ship’s

prow.

Before DeGrange could put any of his many questions into words, he spied something unusual near the ship's stern. A solitary figure, his face hidden by the hood of a long dun cloak, seemed to be staring back at him.

Absently scratching his graying beard, DeGrange realized he must have blinked, for suddenly the person was gone.

"Something isn't right," DeGrange muttered. "Captain, did you take on any passengers at Port Alexis?"

The captain opened his mouth to reply, but then both men's attention was drawn away from the ship to someone running down the dock. The young man's blue-and-white uniform denoted him as a pier guard, but DeGrange did not know him.

That was not much of a surprise, however, for Port Town was growing rapidly. Although DeGrange had been Captain of the Three Guards for almost a decade, he could hardly keep all of his men straight. New recruits were hired daily.

Leaning forward, his hands on his knees, the young pier guard spoke the dreaded words between deep breaths:

"Pirates...nearby...sir..."

DeGrange looked out into the open waters, expecting to find nothing less than an armada of the buccaneers charging toward the city, but seeing nothing other than small skiffs and fishing boats, he asked, "Where? Are they attacking?"

"No," the guard replied, his face regaining a little color, all of it red. "We spotted...two ships...a caravel and...the other has two masts—"

"Where?" DeGrange repeated, trying not to shout at the lad.

"They're anchored a couple miles south of the city...just off the coast. They're hidden by the dense trees...no one can see them from the road, but—"

"Take me there."

On his way from the wharves, DeGrange told the harbor-

master to have a chat with the captain of *Stalwart Mariner*. He quickly told him of the discrepancy in the cargo and mentioned the figure he had seen on deck. Confident the harbormaster would get to the bottom of it all, DeGrange focused on the next problem.

Running through the streets of Port Town with the younger guard beside him, DeGrange marveled at how much energy the boy possessed. He had surely sprinted all the way to the wharves. Now he was running at full speed once more.

DeGrange, meanwhile, was already breathing hard and had a stitch in his side. And the harbor wasn't even out of sight yet! He suddenly felt much older than his forty-six years, as though the weight of his responsibilities were aging him quicker than the seasons could. At that moment, DeGrange would have gladly traded places with the pier guard, rank and all.

So much for dinner with the family, he thought. Then he banished all thoughts except those concerning Port Town's safety from his mind.

After his brief exchange with DeGrange, followed by an almost identical encounter with the harbormaster, Captain Toeburry decided that he would never drop anchor in Port Town again.

First, there was the confusion over his cargo. Why, the mayor of this gods-forsaken city himself had requested the arms shipment and had provided quite a sum of silver to pay for the voyage!

And then there were the pirates the young guard had mentioned. Toeburry had fought off buccaneers before, but the casualties were always high. Toeburry planned on shoving off as early as tomorrow if he could manage it. He'd have to promise his men a full week of shore leave back on the continent, but if that's what it took to avoid pirates, then by the gods above and below, so be it.

He only regretted that he couldn't weigh anchor immediately after unloading the ship.

"Faster, boys. Faster!" he called to his men. "The quicker we're done with this mess, the quicker we can be gettin' drunk in the city!"

Captain Toeburry, however, was scheduled to share a drink with the harbormaster in his office. Apparently, there were more questions that needed answering. He spat in the direction of the whitewashed building and made a colorful comment about Port Town's forefathers.

He boarded *Stalwart Mariner* to retrieve one of his fancier coats when he caught sight of the monks. The five of them were making their way to the upper deck. Toeburry wondered if they would have bothered finding him before disappearing into the city.

The captain spat again but swallowed the curse that would have followed had the monks not been near enough to hear him.

"Brother Klye," Toeburry greeted, nodding vaguely to the others, whose names he had never bothered to learn. "I hope the storm didn't toss you 'round too badly."

The leader of the monks didn't reply at first. He untied a pouch from his belt and held it out to the captain. "Fifteen crowns at both ports, as we agreed."

"Aye." Toeburry snatched the purse from the monk's upraised palm and quickly stashed it in the pocket of his dark blue vest.

Brother Klye glanced around before adding, "We will be on our way now. Thank you, again, for accommodating us."

Without another word, Brother Klye and the four other monks started walking away. Biting down hard on his lower lip, Captain Toeburry trotted to catch up with their retreating forms.

"Yer provin' to be a bit of an inconvenience, ya know."

Brother Klye stopped and turned to regard him with a look that almost made Toeburry regret confronting him.

"I'm to be thoroughly interviewed by the harbormaster,"

he explained. "The Captain of the Three Guards saw one of ya up on deck. They're wantin' to know if I brought any passengers to Capricon."

"What did you tell him?" Brother Klye's asked evenly.

"I didn't tell them nothin', but when DeGrange is through chasin' pirates, he'll want some answers, don't ya doubt."

"And what would you have us do, Captain? Buy your silence?"

Toeburry shook his head so quickly he got a little dizzy. "No, no, no, nothin' like that. I'm as honest a man as yerself, Brother Klye. I'm not trying to fatten my purse at yer expense, but maybe it'd be better if we all forgot that ya came to Port Town on my ship."

"So...this never happened," Brother Klye summarized.

"Aye," said Captain Toeburry. "And if any of the guards see the five of ya leavin' the *Mariner*, me and my men don't know nothin' about it. Stowaways are gettin' cleverer and cleverer all the time, ya know."

Brother Klye nodded.

As the last of the monks disappeared up a ladder, one of them called back, "May Gnuren the Wise bless you and guide your path."

Captain Toeburry just stood there for a while, leaning against the wall of the narrow passageway. If Brother Klye is a monk, then I'm a monkey, he thought. Shaking his head, he spat and resumed the walk to his cabin.

Toeburry and his mates had ignored the passengers during the voyage, and the five men had kept to themselves, remaining in their cabins most of the time. Toeburry hadn't wanted to get caught up in whatever they were involved in, but the risk of smuggling them to Capricon had been worth the price.

Once he reached his private cabin, Toeburry counted the silver coins and smiled.

"May the gods watch over you, too, *Brother Klye*," he said with a great laugh. "But if yer needin' a ship to take ya

back to Continae, you'll not find *Stalwart Mariner* in this port again!"

As the five men left the ship, crossed the docks, and made their way toward the city proper, Klye looked around, making sure that no one was going to intercept them from ahead or follow them from behind.

He tried to remain inconspicuous, not turning his head too often. Then again, he wasn't sure if it was possible for them to be anything but suspicious. It wasn't as though any other groups of priests were walking the docks.

But the sailors and workers paid them not the slightest attention. Perhaps Captain Toeburry had told his men to ignore the monks. More likely, the tired, sweaty men were concerned only with finishing their work.

Rum and women were on their minds, not priests.

"Where to now, Brother Klye?" one of his men asked.

Klye didn't answer. Before leaving *Stalwart Mariner*, he had told them to let him do all of the talking. If anyone posed a question to one of them, Klye would explain that his fellow monks had taken vows of silence.

"When Othello told us that someone had seen him, I thought we'd have to fight our way out for sure," Plake continued. When neither Klye nor any of the others replied, Plake muttered something under his breath and kicked a stone.

Klye surreptitiously studied the faces of the guards they passed, but none of them gave him or his men a second glance. Bored and underpaid, the pier guards would act only if the harbor were in obvious danger, Klye supposed.

As they walked, the wharves and warehouses were gradually replaced by a dozen or more pubs crammed one right after the other. Judging by the pictures on their signs and names like Gambler's Grotto, these establishments were nothing more than places to drink cheap ale and gamble away one's pay.

But Klye could see larger buildings farther down the road, establishments where a traveler could get a bite to eat as well as find a room for the night. Deciding one inn was as good as another, he stopped in front of an inn called Oars and Omens.

“We’ll stay here,” Klye told his men, “but I want to meet with our contact yet tonight. Ragellan, you and Horcalus get us two rooms. Use the aliases we agreed upon.”

Chester Ragellan nodded and took the small leather purse Klye handed to him. Although Ragellan, at age forty-four, was the oldest of the group, he did not bristle at being told what to do by someone almost two decades his junior.

“Othello and Plake, you will come with me,” Klye continued. “It would probably be easier if I went alone, but Othello’s eyes may come in handy.” That he personally wanted to keep an eye on Plake, he did not say aloud.

“I’d rather see the city than just sit around some inn,” Plake said, flashing a triumphant smile at Ragellan and Horcalus, who did not respond one way or another.

Glancing around once more to be sure no one was watching them, Klye told Ragellan, “I’ll try to be back before the moon is fully risen. If we’re not back before midmorning tomorrow, you’d best get the hell out of Port Town.”

Klye turned to leave, but then Ragellan seized him by the shoulder.

Extending his arm, the knight said, “Good luck, Klye.”

Klye imitated the friendly gesture, smiled, and said, “I don’t believe in luck.”

Passage II

The grubby, old innkeeper glared at them. One scrutinizing eye lingered on their brown robes while the other, which moved independently of the first, roamed first to the left and then to the right. Finally, he asked, “You ain’t spell-casters, are ya?”

“No, good sir,” Ragellan replied. “We are humble servants of Gnuren the Wise. Ours is the power of knowledge, nothing more.”

Scratching his balding head, the innkeeper regarded the two monks a while longer. The errant eye ceased its wayward journey and settled on a point far above the two monks’ heads. Ragellan imagined the master of Oars and Omens was recalling everything he had ever heard about wizards.

True, he and Horcalus wore long robes, but they had neither the pointy hats nor such notorious oddities as eye of newt or pickled ogre toes on their persons, which the stories demanded from a proper spell-caster.

Apparently deciding that the two men lacked the necessary prerequisites of wizardkind, the innkeeper chuckled—or coughed—and scooped up their coins. He then got up to fetch the keys to their rooms. When the man returned to the counter a few seconds later, he dabbed an old, frayed quill into a jar of ink and squinted his good eye myopically at the page. That other unseeing eye came to rest on the two monks, which Ragellan found more than a little

unnerving.

“What’re yer names?”

“I am Brother Wade. This is Brother Armand.” Once the innkeeper had finished with his meticulous task of scribbling the aliases in his book, Ragellan added, “Three other monks will be joining us later. Please tell them where we can be found when they arrive. We will need three extra cots.”

“Two rooms for five men,” replied the innkeeper, frowning more than ever. “That’ll cost extra, ya know.”

Ragellan set another coin on the counter.

The innkeeper swiped it up with a vein-riddled hand. “I’ll tell yer friends where to find ya.”

The man then turned his full attention to the flagon of beer he had been nursing when they first walked in the door. Interpreting this as a sign their business was through, Ragellan took the keys from the countertop and wandered into the common room, which was heavy with the stench of sweat and spilled ale.

The noise of a poorly trained piper and the shouts of rowdy drinkers accosted their ears as they squirmed their way through the throng of merrymakers, ignoring the many stares they got from people who had likely never seen a priest in Oars and Omens. Or maybe, thought Ragellan, they had never seen a priest at all.

Finally, he and Horcalus emerged at the far end of the room where a wide stairway provided the only path up to the next level. While the second floor was far less boisterous than the one below, they nevertheless had to edge past a particularly amorous couple and an incoherent drunkard as they navigated the narrow hallway.

When they finally made it to their rooms, Ragellan locked the door behind them and exhaled a breath he had not realized he was holding.

“Brother Wade and Brother Armand,” Horcalus mumbled.

Still leaning against the door, Ragellan opened his eyes

to find his friend seated on one of the two beds in the small room.

“That bed looks older than the one my grandfather made for my father,” Ragellan said, “but after sleeping in a bunk aboard a rocking ship for the better part of a month, it looks like a small piece of Paradise.”

“You are welcome to it,” Horcalus said with a sigh. “I likely won’t sleep more than a few hours tonight anyway.”

“I don’t think we will need to post a guard. We are as safe here as we can expect to be anywhere,” Ragellan said, though he knew his friend had meant something else.

Horcalus rose suddenly and removed his brown robe in a single motion. He looked down at himself and barked a mirthless laugh. “We pose as monks, telling our lies anew every day, and under these scratchy robes are garments stolen from some honest family.”

Shaking his head, Dominic Horcalus cast the shapeless mass of brown cloth to the floor and sat down once more, his gray eyes fixed on the worn floorboards at his feet.

Ragellan removed his own disguise and regarded it for a moment before draping it over the edge of the bed.

“It is true we have seen better days,” Ragellan began. “I don’t enjoy this deception any more than you do, my friend. I pray for forgiveness every night. I also pray for direction and guidance.”

“As do I.” Horcalus sighed. “I pray even though I feel abandoned by the Good Gods above. Have we failed them somehow?”

The question was rhetorical, or so Ragellan presumed. He certainly could not speak for the gods. But he knew had had to say something to his young friend and former subordinate. Horcalus had not spoken much during their flight from Continae—except when he was voicing a complaint—and he had said even less during their time aboard *Stalwart Mariner*.

After a short silence, Horcalus said, “I do not say this lightly, Ragellan, and I would not question your judgment,

but are we doing the right thing?"

Ragellan rested a hand on Horcalus's shoulder. "The Knights of Superius, our former friends and comrades, thought beheading us was the right thing to do, but my outlook differs. We had no choice but to escape, Horcalus. Our only other option would have been to stay and be executed."

Just then, Horcalus looked as though he thought dying might have been the better alternative. "Someone has made a very big mistake, but maybe we could have reasoned with our captors or appealed to the King Edward himself. Instead we fled the continent with the very criminals with whom we were accused of consorting!"

"Had we remained in Superius, we would now be dead," Ragellan said matter-of-factly. "I am quite certain of that. This was no simple misunderstanding. Someone wanted us to die."

Horcalus glanced up at him. "But we did not have to come to Capricon with Klye and the others. I realize that we are in his debt, but would we not be safer far away from him? We could have hidden ourselves in Glenning or Shadrach or even Korek.

"Instead, we are serving as accomplices on a misguided mission, traveling with a thief, a murderer, and a...a...halfwit!"

Ragellan studied his friend carefully. When he finally spoke, his voice was quiet and calm. "I never asked you to come with me, my dear friend, though I have ever been grateful for your companionship. You remained loyal to me when everyone else was thrown into doubt. My oldest friends...the men under my command...they all turned their backs on me, but you tried to defend me, which doomed you to share my fate.

"We are alive only because Klye Tristan was bold and generous enough to come to our aid. And while Klye doesn't follow the Knights of Superius's code of virtue, I believe he is doing what he thinks is right. He has turned his

back on his old profession and is trying to redeem himself the only way he knows how.

“You and I may not agree with all he stands for, but I, for one, think that Klye is essentially a good man.”

Horcalus clenched his fists. “So we redeem ourselves by becoming the very traitors we were accused of being in the first place? We were once Superius’s...nay, Continae’s finest! We were Knights of Superius, Ragellan, and like my father before me, that is all I ever wanted to be. Now we’re no better than...than...”

“I never asked you to follow this path,” Ragellan repeated with a sad smile. “We are in Klye’s debt, but that is not the entire reason why I stay with him. Neither of us wishes to cross our former allies in battle, but if we stay with Klye, perhaps we will gain a better understanding of the circumstances. We may even find a way to solve our dilemma along the way.”

Horcalus’s expression told Ragellan how likely he thought that was, but the younger man’s countenance improved a bit as he said, “I have always trusted your judgment, Ragellan, and I shall continue to follow you and, consequently, Klye Tristan until my conscience can bear it no longer. However, you should know that if it comes down to it, I shall stab all three of them in the back before I stand by and watch them kill an innocent man.”

Ragellan nodded. As much as he valued Horcalus’s company, he would have done just about anything to undo the past few months—or at least arrange it so that his loyal friend had not been caught up in the conspiracy that had landed them both in the Citadel Dungeon.

At twenty-five, Horcalus was still so young a man and still so fresh a Knight. But throughout his twenty-some years in the Knighthood, Ragellan had learned many harsh lessons, but Horcalus was not yet prepared to even consider that the Knights of Superius—or the Alliance of Nations, for that matter—could be anything less than altruistic in its practices.

All too soon, Ragellan knew, the idealistic knight would either have to learn to bend with life's hard lessons, or the discrepancies between his blind faith and cold reality would tear him apart.

The three would-be monks made their way through Port Town's marketplace. Portable carts and crudely built booths lined the widening street. The place stank of fish, but after a while they began passing better-dressed merchants, who hawked less odorous wares. Those men and women advertised such utilitarian items as hemp ropes, empty barrels, and plain earthen jars.

Klye's fingers began to itch as they approached a smithy's stall. He eyed the blades on display but forced himself to keep walking.

In order to make their disguises as authentic as possible, he and his men had abandoned their larger weapons before boarding *Stalwart Mariner*. He felt vulnerable with only a single dagger concealed beneath his robe. Despite his lack of recent practice, he knew he could lift at least several more knives and possibly a sword without getting caught.

Tearing his gaze from the source of temptation, Klye trained his eyes forward, focusing on the white stone monolith that towered above the rest of the city. At the same time, he was taking in everything that was going on around them out the corner of his eye.

Though he wanted to get to the Cathedral as quickly as possible, he nevertheless stopped occasionally to admire this merchant's straw goods and that one's jewelry. Instinctively, Klye kept his ears open, too, picking up fragments of conversations as he, Plake, and Othello meandered through the market.

It was all reflexive: seeing more than you appeared to see, hearing more than you were meant to hear.

When he noticed a pair of true clerics in robes of silvery white, bargaining at a booth that sold ink, Klye was quick to

cross to the other side of the street. He supposed that the priests had come from Aladon's Cathedral but had no way of knowing for sure. Anyway, he would not risk talking to them, even though it might make their task easier. Better to keep encounters at a minimum.

And, in Klye's mind, avoiding the clergy of any faith was usually a good idea, especially when you were impersonating a man of the cloth yourself.

Klye quickened his pace. He had no fear of losing Othello. Back in Continae, the archer had proven that his eyesight was as sharp as any arrow. With his long legs, Othello was far more likely to outpace Klye than the other way around.

Plake, on the other hand...

Klye glanced over his shoulder. The younger man remained a few paces behind, wearing an annoyed look on his face. Now, Plake Nelway was not a child—he was in his early twenties, Klye's junior by only a few years—but Plake was undeniably the least mature of the group. If Plake had wandered off, for whatever reason, Klye wondered if he would have bothered looking for him. In all likelihood, Klye would be better off if Plake quit the group as capriciously as he had joined it.

With the marketplace at their backs, they were surrounded on either side by rows of single-story houses, the upkeep of which improved the farther inland they walked. The Cathedral remained directly in front of them, though it was not so far in the distance now.

By Klye's estimations, they would reach the church in a few minutes. He took that time to mull over some of the things he had heard in the marketplace. Most of the chatter had been useless conversations about personal matters, but Klye had overheard some things of interest.

Many of Port Town's citizens were whispering about the local band of Renegades, including Leslie Beryl, their leader and the mayor's own daughter. Some speculated that Leslie was a double agent while others claimed that Mayor

Beryl himself was the true traitor in Port Town. He had heard one middle-aged woman confiding to a friend that there were pirates in the area.

Pirates...hadn't Captain Toeburly said something about pirates? he thought.

Not that it mattered much to Klye. He didn't plan to stay long in Port Town.

Most of the talk about the Renegades had been pure speculation, but at least Klye had been able to confirm a few of the things he had heard back in Continae.

To his relief, he had not heard a word about Chester Ragellan's and Dominic Horcalus's recent escape from the Citadel Dungeon. Klye could only hope that the news hadn't reached the island yet.

The road came to an abrupt end at an intersection with no less than six other avenues from which to choose. Klye had no need for any of them. Now that he was standing before the Cathedral, Klye saw that it for the architectural marvel it truly was.

From what he had learned in Port Alexis, this church was the largest temple dedicated to the god Aladon in all of Continae and its territories. Come to think of it, Klye didn't know of any other Aladon churches, and he had practically traveled from one end of Continae to the other following the jailbreak at the Citadel Dungeon.

Those in Port Alexis had also told him that the Cathedral was a place of pilgrimage for Aladon's followers. Most humans regarded Aladon as the elves' god, preferring to worship the other Gods of Good, Pintor in particular. Although Klye had no use for any religion, he knew he was far more likely to run across a shrine dedicated to Tristana or Feol—lesser deities to be sure—than to find an Aladon church in Superius.

But he had been told that the people of western Capricon had taken to Aladon long before Superius had purchased the island from Glenning, which had happened long before the Confederacy of Continae came into being.

History wasn't one of his favorite topics, but one never knew when some random bit of knowledge would come in handy.

From its archaic appearance, Klye did not doubt that Aladon's Cathedral had been there for some time. It looked out of place among the simple homes that had sprouted up around it. The smaller structures were ordinary and dull in comparison to the Cathedral, which was covered in woodcarvings and stone statues of men and elves alike. Stained-glass windows stretched from the ground floor up to the tall spires.

Klye knew he was not an easy man to impress, but he did feel a little awed by the place, if for no other reason than the amount of work and time that the builders had put into constructing it. Unlike the Citadel Dungeon, which had also been of mammoth size, Aladon's Cathedral was a pleasure to behold.

He glanced over at his men to find Plake staring wide-eyed at the church. Likely, this was the largest building the young hayseed had ever seen. Othello did not appear to be giving the church much thought, as he was watching Klye with a blank expression. Klye wondered if the archer ever got excited. Othello seemed always to be calm, unaffected by the world around him. Even when Othello had first joined Klye's band—covered in the blood of the men he had just killed—he had walked away from his home without showing any regret.

"You two wait here," Klye told his companions. "I'll take a look inside."

"Wait a minute." Plake grabbed him by the elbow. "We're supposed to just stand here and scratch our asses until you get back? No way. I want see what it looks like on the inside."

Klye narrowed his eyes and wrenched his arm away. Plake was precisely the reason why Klye had wanted to enter the church alone. He did not want to have to worry about Plake, who had been a simple rancher before

throwing in with the band, blaspheming inside the Cathedral or saying something too revealing to the priests.

“You can see the inside of the Cathedral after I check it out,” Klye told him, trying to keep his voice civil.

“Don’t you think Othello and I are going to look kind of suspicious just standing out here in front of the Cathedral?” Plake argued.

“I’ll only be a minute.” He bit back the other words that threatened to spill out.

“And what if something happens to you? You’ll need our help.”

“It’s a church for gods’ sakes!”

Plake turned to Othello. “Don’t *you* think we ought to stay together?”

Othello didn’t respond.

“Plake,” Klye started to say, but the tolling of bells interrupted him.

The brassy sound reverberated from the Cathedral’s highest tower, echoing off the surrounding homes and shops. At the top of the wide stairway that stretched up from the street to the church’s main entrance, two tall doors closed seemingly of their volition. It was only then that Klye realized the sun had completely dipped beneath the western horizon.

He swore as ran up the steps, careful not to trip over the hem of his robe. He reached the doors in but a few strides.

“Damn!” he said again, though he caught himself before he said worse. When he turned back around, he saw that Plake had followed him. He didn’t bother berating the rancher, however, for it no longer mattered.

The doors were locked.