

# Plague man



A Novel By

K. D. KRAGEN

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**ArcheBooks Publishing**

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# Dedication

*to Mom and Dad*

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# Cast of Characters

**SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA** (c. 1347-1380)

**Pope CLEMENT VI** (c. 1291-1352, Pontificate, 1342-1352)

**King CHARLES IV** (c. 1316-1378, German King 1346,  
Holy Roman Emperor 1355)

**THERESA**, Dominican postulant, spiritual guide and confidant to Catherine

**KIERKIVE of Sarai**, 1st Lieutenant, Kipchak Tartar Army,  
Western Mongol Horde

**GORGONOVITCH KHAN**, Commander, Kipchak Army

**RAGNAUG**, 2nd Lieutenant, Kipchak Army

**MONGO**, Sergeant, fire-control officer for siege engines,  
Kipchak Army

**Father ARPI**, Priest, Theresa's guardian in the Crimea

**FIRENZI**, Captain, Genoese merchant guard, the Crimea

**GIOVANNI PICCOLOMINI**, Theresa's father, merchant  
and wealthy weaver of Siena

**PALIA DELLA QUERCIA**, Genoese city consul

**BARTOLINO ROZZI**, Sienese strong man, mad man, bandit

**Bishop GUIDO**, Bishop of Siena

**PETRUCHIO**, bishop's servant

**MARY**, Theresa's maidservant

**MARTA LUZZIANO**, Theresa's girlfriend

**FUCCINI**, Sienese stonecutter and Il Palio champion

**PETRACELLI**, man with no teeth, peasant

**Mother HARMONIUM**, abbess of Belcaro

**PINA, ANNETTE, BEATRICE, FELICITY, CHARITY**, novices, Siena Dominican Convent

**MARIANNA, CELANDRA**, murdered nuns of the Siena Convent

**le Marque di LOTHAR**, man with no lips, secretary to Cardinal Français, Curia di Cardinales, Palais-Vieux, Comtat Venaissin, Avignon

**ALBANES ROGER**, Commander, 4th district, Papal Guard, Avignon

**GIORGIO**, Sergeant, 4th district, Papal Guard, Avignon

**EPHRAIM MELECH JOICHIM**, Jew from Villeneuve, across Rhône from Avignon

The following people are historical figures: the criminal



Niccolò di Tuldo, Saint Rocco, Saint Catherine of Siena, Angelo di Tura, Pope Clement VI, King Charles IV.

The following events are in the historical record: the progress of the Black Death from Asia to Europe; the dissolution and outlawing of the Knights Templar throughout Europe; the Popes in Avignon from 1307-1379; the inquisition against the Albigensian or Cathari (*Patarini*) of Languedoc, Albi, Southern France; the persecution of the Jews under pretense of the usual libels or false accusations—i.e., poisoning wells, spreading plague, drinking the blood of kidnapped Christian babies; and Pope Clement's Papal Bull of 4 July 1348, in defense of the Jews.

The rest is fiction and historical speculation.

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The soul, who is lifted by a very great and yearning desire for the honour of God and the salvation of souls, begins by exercising herself, for a certain space of time, in the ordinary virtues, remaining in the cell of self-knowledge, in order to know better the goodness of God towards her. This she does because knowledge must precede love, and only when she has attained love, can she strive to follow and to clothe herself with the truth. But, in no way does the creature receive such a taste of truth, or so brilliant a light therefrom, as by means of humble and continuous prayer, founded on knowledge of herself and of God; because prayer, exercising her in the above way, unites with God the soul that follows the footprints of Christ crucified.

From: *The Dialogue*, St. Catherine of Siena,  
dictated between 1377-78



# Prologue Catherine



Like the world in which she lived, Catherine was old before her time. And as she gazed out across the world imagining the visions of those who had come before her, that mystic cloud of witnesses, Catherine longed for even a single word from the saints. One little word. But there were only the silent autumn mists playing in and out of myriad deep hollows secreted across a restless Tuscany landscape.

The year was 1379.

High upon a ragged knoll amidst this wild terrain there reposed a dark and lonely edifice, its stone walls massive, its balustrades well defended. Once a medieval castle, this struc-

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ture had become the Abbey of Belcaro, a poor convent of the Dominican order. In a small cell high up on the north wall, Catherine sat at her writing desk. Whenever Catherine visited the abbey, travel-sore and soul-weary, the abbess prepared for her this simple abode, quiet, sober, waiting for her always.

The early dawn hours were cold, even for Siena, and Catherine's arthritis was as biting as the frost. At thirty-two, Catherine felt old and tired, like the peasant women who worked long hours in the fields and bore eleven children. She longed for the simpler, less politically volatile life of her early years when she first joined the Sisters of Penitence of St. Dominic. That was back in 1363. She recalled the holy ecstasy and severe ascetic joy of those youthful, hope-filled days as a tertiary Dominican supplicant. Then she had only to struggle against resurgent attacks of the plague and the charms of the devil, to care for the ceaselessly suffering poor and the lepers outside the city walls, to conquer youthful weaknesses. Those simpler times were not like the present. Now her struggles were with men and cities and political estates, principalities and powers, popes and anti-popes, Florentine, French, and Roman.

"Lord, I have only sought to bring peace to your church on earth," she intoned in a melancholy voice, though tinged with that settled happiness which comes from a life-long habit of spiritual self-understanding.

The pale sun stretched its autumn rays weakly over the peaks of the Appennino Range. Catherine prepared to go to say her office, but she was distracted by the ill-omened arti-

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fact which lay upon her desk. She closed her eyes scrunched-up tight against its hard reality. The young women at the abbey looked to her example for steadfastness and constancy, she told herself. Even as she recognized this greatness in her character, she sought to beat down the lurking spiritual pride which likewise swelled up within her.

If I be steadfast and constant, she thought, if these be *my* virtues, it is only because they are so well balanced by the sin of pride which stalks my life like a dragon seeking whom it may devour—in this case, me! She laughed and glanced over at the rough-hewn door of her cell, as if fearing the beast were at that very moment right outside, sniffing out her soul, scavenging for a crack within her disciplined spiritual armor.

“Oh, Thou Love incarnate,” she whispered, covering her face with shivering hands. “Oh, Thou mystic Lamb of grace and light—”

Suddenly she stopped. Something *was* outside her cell.

But it was only the gentle footsteps of the abbess padding off to chapel and morning song. Catherine listened as the footsteps echoed past and away down the hall.

Then, silence. Cold, damp, silence. Deep shadows circled about the corners of the chamber like a black, unholy swarm.

Catherine turned from the low door toward the high, barred window, and the pink dawn illumined there. She watched a huge, black spider build a web on the sill. Along the strands of the web danced row upon row of starry dewdrops, line after line dipping and genuflecting down the balance-beam threads. Within the heart of each dewdrop

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glowed a single pink dawn, thousands of tiny aesthetic reenactments of the true sun's rising. Catherine sighed as a beam of sunlight played across the heavy dagger lying on her desk.

"Art Thou not all Love, oh, mystic Lamb, all Love, every Love, eternal, timeless, steadfast Love...?" But the dagger on the desk drew Catherine away from her prayers. She had scarcely slept for want and worry over the hard, tangible thing lying there.

It was heavy, oriental and bejeweled, and upon its golden hilt was etched a coiled dragon, symbol of the ancient Khanate of the Mongol emperor, Genghis Khan. After all these years, its long, curved blade still glistened sharp, reflecting the faint rays of morning with eerie malevolence. Catherine reached out to it, touched its cold silver edge, then drew her hand away with a gasp. Visions emanated from the dagger, coursed up through her fingertips, piercing into her soul, and attracting her remembrances with a mysterious magnetism; images of the past sparkled outward from its golden hilt, things at once unspeakable and yet filled with a strange and earthly passion, a human goodness not wholly reconcilable with the world as she saw it, as she understood it.

"Dear Theresa," Catherine whispered, recalling fondly her spiritual mentor and childhood friend. "Theresa. In all your purity of heart toward the God, in all your simple passion for the world to come, you shunned not what you saw as the goodness of *this* world. You had passion *for this life!* Few knew these things in you, Theresa, few but I from whom you hid nothing."



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Catherine remembered Theresa's own words: "Whereas those in the world see *God* as the greatest mystery of the universe, for us, dear Catherine, for us, devoted and wedded to Christ, it is the God's *creation* which is the greater mystery—this world, good, and fallen, and filled with inexplicable wonders. The God, you see, is a mystery in his hiddenness, whereas the world, Catherine, the world is a mystery in what it reveals."

"Dear Theresa," Catherine addressed her friend as if Theresa had not died so many years ago. "Dear Theresa, well do you say such things. Indeed, it *is* this life which is the greater mystery. Like your," a sob choked her, "like...your Lieutenant Kierkive—oh, Theresa!"

The tears flowed freely as she recalled the secret tale confided to her by her beloved confidant, told to her so many years before, when the visions of her youth were still fresh from heaven, and her dear old Theresa was the abbess of Belcaro. It was a story lost in the chaos of the plague years and the Papal captivity in French Avignon.

But do not all things come to light in the end?

Some weeks before, a novice was cleaning out a dusty storeroom. The girl came upon a small chest belonging to the previous abbess, Catherine's very own friend, dear Theresa. With great excitement, the chest was brought forth from the chamber and opened by the present abbess, Mother Veronica. It was then that the infamous dragon dagger was discovered, lying at the bottom of a stack of letters tied together with a scarlet thread.

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Surely, all at the abbey well knew Catherine's right to the executorship of the memory of the much beloved Mother Superior, Theresa of Siena, from the venerable family Piccolomini. Thus, Catherine was immediately sent for, having only just returned to Tuscany from an exhausting audience with Pope Urban VI in Rome.

"What can this mean?" the abbess had bewailed to Catherine helplessly. "Our dear Theresa should have such a foul and *pagan* device amongst her simple belongings? And these correspondences? From a man about whom we have never before heard tell!"

Trembling visibly, the tall willowy abbess turned away from the open chest to look hard at Catherine. "Please, I must have a report on what you know of this...*seeming indiscretion.*" The abbess' eyes were filled with anxiety. "Catherine, you have wrought wonders and miracles in our time! You have helped to bring the pope back to Rome. You have brought peace to the church on Earth, to warring Florence, even to that criminal, Niccolò di Tuldo, leading him to Christ at the very moment the city fathers led him to the headsman's block. Now, oh, please, dear sister, please bring peace to this humble abbey. The Curial Congregation of Beatification will need your word and knowledge if they deem it prudent to continue the Informative Process and investigations into the merits of our beloved Theresa. If there is anything..." she faltered, leaned against the wall, pointed a trembling finger. "Her memory depends upon you, Catherine, as does the reputation—the very future of this abbey!"

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With that, the abbess had sighed and departed Catherine's cell.

Catherine reached out in the quiet morning light, snatched up the heavy dagger and grasped its hilt tightly in both hands. Raising it to the window over her desk, she cried, "Why, Theresa? Why of all things did you keep *this*? The letters, though their Latin is barely translatable, these letters were dangerous enough. But this! You told me you had destroyed all record of him! How will I ever explain it without confessing to the Holy See the details of your involvement with the Mongol, Lieutenant Kierkive, your *Plagueman*? The God knows you would have butchered a pope for him."

Catherine wept, "The God knows...oh, Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world, have mercy on us!"

Down in the yard the abbess stopped in her tracks, turned round and looked up toward the small cell window she knew was Catherine's. From the tiny barred opening so high in the great wall, the abbess heard the mournful cry: "*My Jesus, mercy!*"



That afternoon, the two women sat before the fire in the first floor sitting room called *Le Chambre di Folle Marquis*. Catherine frowned at her dear friend, her hands trembled, her words came slowly. "Listen to me, sister. There is something you must know." She held up a hand, blocking all protest from the abbess. Then she turned and glanced about the

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chamber distractedly. “It was here, in this very room; right here Theresa divulged to me things you would not believe. You see,” her gaze became distant, her eyes glowed with a strange light. “You see, dear, sweet Veronica...sit, sit back. I must tell you a story.”

# Part One The Crimea

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My Bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enameling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

From "Sailing to Byzantium," pt. IV  
by W. B. Yeats, 1927 (New York:  
Macmillan Publishing Co., 1983, p 193)



### I



avaging Asia, China and Mongolia for decades, the plague had, as yet, spared Europe its fury.

In the century previous to 1300, relentless Kipchak armies of the Mongol Golden Horde conquered most of Western Asia, from the Crimea, north to Russian Kiev, west to the Hungarian border and south to the Caspian Sea. These Tartar tribes were the western-most of the vast Mongol reach.

Eastward the Kipchaks butted up against the Empire of the Great Khan, ruled successively by Genghis, Ogedei, Mongke, and finally Kublai. With the death of Kublai Khan in 1294, power and control began to crumble all across the Mongol world, signaling the onset of a slow and torturous

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decline. In western and Russian regions turmoil plagued the Kipchak Empire of Batu's Golden Horde.



The year was 1347.

It was hot.

An angry purple dawn bled ominously across the sky. The sun's fire streaked through a firmament hanging breathless above a parched Crimean landscape. Already, heat-waves wafted up through the dry air. Perched upon the rocky north shore of the Black Sea about a three day's journey northeast of the Italian-controlled seaport citadel of Kaffa, sat a Genoese merchant outpost. It was the last stopover for caravans journeying on to Kaffa, from which merchant ships would then set sail for Europe laden with the treasures of the Orient.

Outside the outpost's walls, holding the merchants under siege, brooded a weary army of Kipchak Mongols. Though the walls were not as high nor as thick as those of the citadel of Kaffa, upon its ramparts patrolled a contingent of well-armed Italian soldiers bearing the latest in crossbow technology. For over a century the Italians had been diverting from Russia the wealth of Islam, Byzantium and the East by channeling trade to Europe. Thus, retaliatory sieges and brutal pillage by Mongols were not uncommon threats to the merchants.

This particular siege had been going on for some weeks now, yet the Kipchaks had made no real progress toward taking the wealthy merchant outpost. The rank and file of the



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rag-tag Mongol army were growing dissatisfied with the project. They began to grumble. They feared that soon a much larger Genoese military force would come from Kaffa in search of the overdue caravan.

Beyond that, a sickness, a terrible plague, depleted their number.



Gorgonovitch Khan, commander of the Kipchak army, was about to announce a new tactic. He had thought long and hard on it. He believed it ingenious, an unexpected maneuver that would utterly demoralize the Genoese, afford a breach in their moral defenses, and likewise accomplish a breach in their physical ones.

His plan: catapult plague-dead corpses over the walls and into the enemy camp.

Clothed in metal and silk, and shifting impatiently in his camp-throne, Gorgonovitch was a huge man, tall and broad. His face was shaven but for a pitch-black moustache which hung down past his chin. He had a great nose, long and straight and wide at the bottom. His eyes were far apart and as black as the long hair which fell down his back. On his head was an iron helmet shaped like a round bowl, encased in fine leather wrappings and bejeweled about the crown. A massive six-inch spike stuck out from its top. A black leather cape was draped over his shoulders and clasped at the neck with a heavy, gold chain. Under his cloak he wore a bronze breast-

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plate, and upon the front of it was fashioned an ornately curving dragon, Tiamtu, a favorite symbol of the once unconquerable Golden Horde. The commander's silk trousers were long and baggy, cinched at the ankles above heavy, iron-shod sandals. Against his throne leaned a massive two-headed battle-axe of gleaming metal, its hilt nearly as tall as some of the soldiers serving under him.

The tent of Gorgonovitch was dark green. Its carpeted floor was strewn with pillows and animal-skins: oxen, bear, leopard. Facing the commander near the tent-flaps stood Ragnaug, second lieutenant of this surviving remnant of the once mighty Batu-Kipchak Legion.

Gorgonovitch looked at his second lieutenant and roared, "Where's Kierkive? The man tries my patience, today! By our ancestors—may they rot in eternal darkness—he tries my pa—"

"Commander," Kierkive ducked his head, stepped into the tent. He bowed curtly.

Gorgonovitch rumbled out ancient oaths from deep in his throat. He leaned forward and stared hard, first at Ragnaug then at Kierkive.

In contrast to Ragnaug's heavy-set, large-muscled body, Kierkive was tall, lean and sinewy, though he was every bit as strong as Ragnaug. Kierkive was dressed in a manner that was at once serious, yet scruffy. His breast-plate was plain and somewhat tarnished. His ragged cape was slung carelessly over one shoulder. At his side was a heavy, two-edged broadsword, its long double-handed heft crowned by a worn

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Turk's-head knot wrought in copper. He held his battered helmet loosely in his left hand. His face was dark and hard. His eyes too were dark, dark as bat-wings. And like his commander, his long mane of hair was pitch black. But his face was clean-shaven, or roughly so. He wore neither beard nor mustache. He stood there, his right hand resting lightly upon the hilt of his ancestral sword. Overall, his appearance was tarnished and weary, a lean, quixotic weariness—but for the highly polished, magnificent dagger secured conspicuously to his belt. This dagger was reputed to have belonged to one of the Seven Generals of the greatest emperor of all, Genghis Khan.

Despite the wasted appearance of Lieutenant Kierkive, his large, dark eyes were quick and full of fire. Their gaze was steady, deep and intelligent. He was the only one who could look Gorgonovitch right in the eye and not waver or turn away. He was the only one who could read the commander's expression as if reading his mind. This both irritated the commander and elicited his respect, even his admiration. For this reason, besides the fact that he was one fierce warrior, Kierkive was the commander's *first* lieutenant and Ragnaug his second.

Only Gorgonovitch was stronger than these two officers. In this barbarian's army, brute strength was still the overriding mark of superiority. Intelligence, whether tactical or philosophical, was useful, but not a practical necessity, neither for advancement nor for leadership. Wrestle a cave-bear to the death or slaughter twenty enemy Turks single-handedly and

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your soldiers would follow you anywhere, into the most insane and foolhardy of adventures, into the most hopeless of battles—even into one as dismal as the present.

Kierkive looked steadily at the commander. “My khan, I hear you have a plan. Good. My troops grow weary—we are dying in this cursed plain. The men cannot continue this siege another week, of this I am convinced.”

Gorgonovitch growled again. He scowled at Ragnaug as if it was the second lieutenant who had just spoken, not Kierkive.

Ragnaug looked down at his feet.

Kierkive again spoke. “We await your pleasure, sir. But, I must admit, not with the greatest pleasure do *I* wait. My pleasure I left back at the caravans of the eastern steppes, where the women are far more giving than these dammed walls. The god of the earth is against us, I fear. Tiamtu is against us. My men mutter similarly, my khan. We ought not ignore their grumblings.”

The commander growled and moved his gaze purposefully and slowly from Ragnaug to Kierkive. He seemed to measure the first lieutenant, his height as well as his maddening wisdom.

“Lieutenant.” He paused. “Lieutenant, you are wise, thus you are my first. Ragnaug is mighty...but you, Kierkive, you are a thinker. The commander’s speech filled the tent with foreboding, “Things do not go well. This desert plain and the sea at our backs are accursed, accursed with our blood and with our demons, the demons of Batu’s fallen empire, the de-

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mons of the once invincible Golden Horde, of the Great Khan, himself. The men grumble and whisper, indeed! Foolish women, they resurrect old hexes and charms, ghosts long forgotten since before the time of Temujin.

Gorgonovitch bellowed in frustration and suddenly rose from his throne. "Damn the eyes of Genghis and damn this plague which haunts his wretched progeny!" The commander's gaze was like fire, blazing first at Ragnaug, then at Kierkive, then up to the smoky spirits and dark ancestral goblins wafting about the tent's low ceiling. He pulled at his mustache. An oil lamp sputtered, casting hazy light around the scene of the three officers at council.

"Sit down, you fools! Don't stand there. *Sit!*" Gorgonovitch settled back upon his throne.

The two lieutenants sat down cross-legged on pillows, in front of their leader. Kierkive unhooked his sword and placed it across his lap. Ragnaug's sword lay by his side on the rug.

Gorgonovitch grinned at the two officers, a mixture of condescension and conspiratorial design. "Desperate times call for desperate measures—may the gods stand by this proverb. Do you not agree, Kierkive?"

"It is as you say, my khan." Kierkive paused for a moment, then added, "If the measure of desperation does not outweigh the demands of *our own honor*, nor the honor due our ancestors," he smiled wryly. "Sir."

A slight glint of puzzlement escaped Gorgonovitch's eyes, to be quickly replaced by his narrow gazing scowl. He growled again under his breath as he thoughtfully stroked his

mustache.

Once again, Kierkive seemed to read the commander's intentions, at least the dark undercurrent beneath them. Kierkive bowed slightly, "You have a plan, my khan. The day awaits your judgment."

"The day be damned!" cried Gorgonovitch. "The desert, too, and the gulls that lust after our rotting, stinking dead." The commander leaned forward and lowered his voice, "Speaking of the dead, the plan, you see, it was given me in a dream. Now I give it to you, my fine lieutenants." Gorgonovitch's scowl hardened. Black flames smoldered within his dark eyes, reflected in the ghostly smoke of the tent's oil lamps. "Go, my faithful lieutenants. Go and take up the dead of our weary ranks. Give the dead their honor due. Then catapult them over those cursed walls. In the worst heat of the day, cast them. Then we shall have our spoil and our due and our female flesh, and the burning flesh of our enemies, and the pillage of our wealthy foes! By week's end we will!"

The two lieutenants said nothing.

"Those are my orders. Make them so!" Gorgonovitch leaned back upon his throne. Sweat dripped down his brow. A thin smile creased his lips. "Go, I say!"

Kierkive rose to his feet, sword in hand. Ragnaug rose also, confused, aghast, but obedient to his khan. He turned to leave the tent, buckling his sword. But Kierkive did not turn, rather he stood there, looking at his commander in utter disbelief.

When Ragnaug noticed that Kierkive did not follow, he

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looked back over his shoulder, one hand at the open tent-flap. He saw the startled expression upon his commander's face, and let the tent-flap fall back in momentary indecision.

"What?" Kierkive hissed at the commander. "*Desecrate our dead! Against The Code?*" Kierkive lowered his voice, "Are you, too, succumbing to this plague, my khan? Has a demon bent your mind, my khan? Did I not understand your words, my khan? Tell me I *have not* understood your words!"

Gorgonovitch rose from his throne. "Do my will, Lieutenant Kierkive!" he bellowed. "Do my will, or you will know my wrath, Lieutenant Kierkive!"

The giant warrior-chief tightened his grip upon the battle-axe at his side. At this outburst two of the commander's personal bodyguard rushed into the tent, nearly knocking Ragnaug off his feet. They took up positions at either side of the opening and looked at their leader inquisitively, swords ready. Gorgonovitch raised a hand in response to their queries, then focused his stare back upon Kierkive, as if awaiting his lieutenant's, "Yes, my khan."

But Kierkive was silent. The two barbarians faced off. Tension in the low tent grew by the second. Standing between the two bodyguards, Ragnaug was but a few feet behind Kierkive. His hand dropped quietly to his sword hilt, sensing a battle.

Kierkive realized the precariousness of his situation. His mind raced over the options. He felt the two bodyguards behind him, Ragnaug with them. He saw the commander's battle-axe. He knew that he was caught between this new

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madness of his khan's and the inevitable outrage and possible mutiny of his own soldiers out on the field. He decided to stall.

"Yes, my khan," he spat it out with just the right mixture of bitterness and resignation to make his backing down seem as convincing as possible. Then he turned and stalked out of the tent, not even pausing to give the proper bow. He brushed roughly by Ragnaug and the two guards.

A few yards from the tent, Kierkive collected himself. He reined in his anger and a nearly uncontrollable urge to go back there, sword drawn, after Gorgonovitch, his brainless bodyguards and second lieutenant, all of them, right then and there. How could Gorgonovitch expect the men to countenance this outrage, this desecration of their dead, their spirits?

"Damn, damn, damn!" he spat out venomously, and headed off quickly through the camp. First, he would speak to those with whom he was sure he could build a viable coalition against the commander. There would be a fight. But that was their way. Then, he would lead the survivors away from this cursed plain, back to the northern steppes he wished he'd never left.

Kierkive strode past the line of great catapults, six of them, standing there like ferocious monsters ready to breathe their fire against any enemy. He hardly noticed them now, their painted works carefully finished to resemble dragons, to instill fear as they rolled up toward the camp of an enemy.

Kierkive used to love those great machines. In his younger years, he was fire-officer, the one who calculated trajectories,



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weights and tensions according to the composition of projectiles employed, the one who dropped the torch, who gave the command for all batteries to lay fire. He had watched the terrible machines release their deadly loads, sometimes casting weights four times that of a man and set alight like fire-balls spewn from the earth god's exploding mountains.

These six machines set apart the army of Gorgonovitch Khan from all rivals. These machines were its glory. Hundreds of years old, they had seen the conquest of Western Asia by the mighty Kipchak forces, by Batu's Golden Horde, even to Wallachia, Hungary, and Poland. These six engines of war—at one time hundreds of them rumbled across Asian deserts and western mountain ranges—these six were all that were left of that empire's dark, conquering storm. Here, and in the years to come, they would crumble into the sands upon which they stood, wooden sphinxes telling their story of conquest to the empty, barren hills and the quiet sea.

Kierkive rushed on across camp. He barged into a raggedy tent to find his friend Mongo putting on sandals. The old warrior was scarred and battered, his face sunburned and bearded, but he still had all his limbs intact. In one corner of the tent sat Mongo's slave-wife, taken years ago from a caravan out of Azerbaijan. The woman smiled at Kierkive, and nodded. She had settled with Mongo, and Mongo with her. The two had become friends.

“Mongo! We must talk.”

“Kierkive, friend. You know, I can judge and tie off a catapult stopper hitch within a quarter finger's width, do it in

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the wink of an eye. But I cannot for the life of me tie my own thongs without getting the knot tangled." At this great joke of life, Mongo let out a roar of laughter. He stood up and slapped Kierkive on the shoulder, and turned to go outside.

"No, wait. Stay, Mongo," Kierkive put a finger to his lips.

"Very well. But don't speak of deep things so early in the morning, not before I've had my breakfast. Actually, I must tell you this, my friend—*somebody must*—you lose a fellow whenever you start talking about deep things, the shape of the cosmos, ages of the Elder Beings. I am just an old dog, my friend. Eat, lie around, kill rich merchants. Just an old dog from the steppes, eh, old friend?"

"Mongo. Silence a moment and listen to me. The commander has decided—no, by Krom, the commander has *ordered* us to cast our dead comrades over those damned walls over there. *Our dead comrades!*"

At this announcement, the huge sergeant lost his silly grin, lowered his shaggy head, and looked Kierkive in the eye. "What is this you say?"

"Mongo, we cannot do such a thing. Surely you know it! We will be cursed among the tribes, the steppes people, even the desert clans will despise us. The spirits of the dead and our ancestors will haunt us until we rot in deepest hell! Gorgonovitch goes too far. He has become mad with this scheme, Mongo. With this plague he's become mad. We must—"

At that moment the commander's guards stormed into Mongo's tent.

Before Kierkive or his friend could turn and draw their

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swords, they were overwhelmed by sheer numbers and dragged outside to where Gorgonovitch stood, legs spread, like an oriental Colossus of Rhodes.

“For once I am quicker than you, Kierkive! Ha! For once I have read *your* mind, Lieutenant Kierkive.” Turning to his guards, Gorgonovitch yelled, “Bind him!” Then laying his evil gaze upon Mongo, “You are the best fire-officer I have now, Sergeant Mongo. Go to the catapults. Immediately! To-day we win the battle!”

Mongo looked from his commander to his friend. Mongo was a simple soldier, without the wisdom or individual character to oppose his lord. “Yes, my khan,” Mongo muttered and shuffled off in frustration and angry despair. He cursed the day he was born. A vague foreboding clouded his mind. But Mongo’s mind did not run his body, his habits did. And his habits pushed him off to his station at the catapults.

Gorgonovitch turned, calling to his guards, “Bring the lieutenant!”

But, even as one guard pulled Kierkive’s hands behind his back to bind them, Kierkive moved like lightning. He dropped low to the ground and spun around violently to face the bodyguard. In the next instant, Kierkive swung his free hand upward, drawing his long, golden-jeweled knife from his belt, and plunged it through the other man’s heart.

In the next moment, Kierkive dove for the one who had taken his sword. Now that guard too lay slain. Kierkive swung out with his great broadsword taking off the head of a third, whose blood fountained high into the hot morning air,

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giving off a hissing sound and sickly smell.

In the next breath, Gorgonovitch came around. His huge battle-axe flew outward, just missing Kierkive's chest. With a thundering roar, Gorgonovitch arched back on his swing and grazed Kierkive's helmet, sending the lieutenant sprawling. It all ended as swiftly as it had begun.

Others in the camp gathered around, but had not the time to ascertain the situation, to take sides or not, before a dozen more guards jumped the lieutenant while he was down. They bound him like a lamb for the slaughter.

"Bring him," Gorgonovitch bellowed. His long black mane swirled about him as he turned back to his tent, as if nothing had happened, as if three of his beloved guards did not lay dead, as if the one mutiny he'd always feared hadn't almost come to pass.

2



Inside the walls, a young girl, a novice-candidate, rushed across an open square. She was slim, with a small turned-up nose and striking dark eyes. Her lashes were also dark, almost black, but her long hair was the color of sunlit gold. Parted in the middle, it hung straight down on either side of her face—for not until she returned home to Italy, to Siena, would she become a full Dominican supplicant, her hair cut short and forever hidden under the habit of her order, the outward sign of an inward commitment.

The young girl wove deftly in and out among ragged craters pitting the courtyard. She circled around a burned out battery of small cross-bow catapults, still smoldering from the

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previous day's fiery assault.

Lifting her skirts she leapt the three steps leading into the infirmary.

"Sister!" someone called to her. "Hurry!"

"Coming, signore," she replied in a still somewhat childish voice. She was not even a novice let alone a sister, a nun, but she was the closest thing to an official representative of the church left in the outpost, for the priest accompanying her and the merchant caravan had been killed.

The girl rushed over to a cot. On it lay the body of a soldier near death. She knelt down, took the soldier's only hand in hers. His other hand—*his whole arm*—had been torn away by a missile from one of the barbarian's siege machines.

The dying man tried to say something. He moaned, a gurgling sound, a breathless, hopeless rattling deep in his throat.

"Please, do not try to speak aloud, Antone," the girl said. "Speak to the God in your heart. Make peace with the King of the universe. Seek Him who seeks your soul." She smiled and wiped a damp cloth across his brow.

*If only*, the girl sighed to herself, *if only Father Arpi were here*. But Father had left this world some weeks ago. His body still smoldered beneath a ton of stone and burning tar from the early days of the siege. *God in heaven, I'm not even second order, just the daughter of a merchant. Dear Mother of God, I have not the words.*

She looked into the dying soldier's eyes. Suddenly, she bent over and kissed him long on the lips. She tasted blood

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and salt—glorious elemental aspects of material human existence. The soldier focused through his pain upon the young girl. He recognized her, *the angel of the wastelands*. That was what everyone called her now. He smiled, his pain for one brief moment forgotten, lost in her angel eyes.

“Soon, I shall be Christ’s bride, dear Antone; and he says, ‘Even as you do unto the least of these, so do you unto me’.” And with that she kissed him again on the lips. Then, with an strange, ecstatic joy, she whispered in his ear, “Christ in you, the hope of Glory.” Having made this pronouncement, she laid her head upon Antone’s breast and wept silent tears and unctial prayers of intercession even as the soldier breathed his last.

3



he soldier blurted out, “But Mongo, it’s Lieutenant Kierkive!” as he slopped animal grease on a hinge of one of the catapults. Mutiny brewed within the camp. It ran along the catapult lines, wove in and out among the pikers and the archers and the front ranks like the sun-baked stench of the corpses being exhumed and readied for the coming necrophilic assault.

“Our descendants,” Mongo replied morosely, “remember us for how well we serve our khan, *not some damned lieutenant!*” He despised himself more every minute. “Even”—he spoke with little conviction—“even as we remember our ancestors for how well they served their khan. This is our way, soldier. I



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know of no other. And neither do you!” he spat at the man. Turning away, the old sergeant mumbled over and over again, “This is our way, this is our way.”

“But, Mongo...it’s...*the lieutenant*,” the soldier persisted. He added in a choked voice, “Some of us think Lieutenant Kierkive is right, that we will become cursed among our people and our ancestors, that our ghosts will haunt this empty plain forever without rest. Some of us think maybe we—”

“Damn you, soldier! And damn this stench and dragon’s shit whore’s breath and grease that demon hell-blasted machine, you jackal!”

All this talk was more than Mongo could handle. The whole thing unnerved him—superstition and elder gods, avenging ancestral ghosts and spawn of hell creeping up through the dark earth and swarming flies, born of the great and awful Tiamtu herself, and fear, blind, plague-sucking fear. It all made his vision swim and his head pound, like some white and putrid worm inside him was eating his brain. It made his heart catapult fire and pain out across his old chest, against his ribs, in a dizzying, inner battle.

The soldier didn’t say any more. He had never seen the sergeant in such a foul mood. “The whole world’s gone pus-rotten crazy,” he swore under his breath.



Mid-morning. Gorgonovitch stood beside Mongo. The sky was an open furnace, blinding white and hot as hell.

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“The gods are stoking the fires today, sergeant,” mused Gorgonovitch. “You do not look well, Mongo. After this battle, you rest.” He smiled a fatherly smile. Gorgonovitch Khan loved his soldiers, his children. He loved them—or, by Krom, he fed ‘em to the jackals. That’s exactly how he put it. Love ‘em, or feed ‘em to the jackals.

The commander’s bodyguards were nervous and alert for signs of a revolt among the troops. Kierkive was securely bound between two of the guards.

Corpses had been piled up behind each of the six huge catapults. Many of the bodies were badly decomposed, having been buried since the siege began. Flies, undulating black clouds of them, covered the piles like swarms of tiny buzzards.

“Load your weapons, sergeant,” said Gorgonovitch to Mongo.

“Lock ‘em and load ‘em!” cried Mongo, not even looking at his khan. Deep inside the old sergeant’s mind desperation stirred; it simmered and bubbled and ate away at Mongo’s tangled thoughts. But Mongo was too old, suddenly, too tired. He picked up his signal torch and set it alight.

At the catapults, the soldiers cursed and grumbled mutinously. They went about their tasks as if any moment ready to explode themselves. With a bizarre, confused reverence for the dead, a conviction going back thousands of years, they lifted bodies and laid them carefully into the large buckets of the catapults. Soon all six siege engines were locked down and ready for the first assault.

Each catapult held two corpses, the feet of each loosely

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bound, a heavy stone weight strapped to the chest to give their flight a gruesome, head-first trajectory. The stench was unbearable and the catapult handlers wore rags over their mouths and noses.

Mongo stumbled past each catapult crew, from machine to machine, inspecting tensions and stopper hitches. He spat out the usual bluster to fire up his men, but he couldn't disguise his bitterness. "This is it, men, we've got those rich camel's asses right where we want them," and "Trust in our khan, you worthless dogs," and "Dump it on 'em good, boys." He paused, looking from one pile of bodies to another. "Damn, we'll give our comrades one hell of a last battle, right, my friends?" But he did not believe a word of it.

Finally, Mongo went back to his position at the end of the siege line. He took up the signal torch. His hands trembled. Regiments on either side of the big batteries prepared for the attack, archers, shield-bearers, swordsmen, ladder handlers to scale the walls, all geared up and anxious to finish their lives as they had lived them, in an ecstasy of slaughter and plunder, blood and fire and glorious destruction. There was a feeling as if this was the big one, the one that would end a hell of a wretched life—that would finish the damn enemy—that would finish all; for many, it didn't matter which, only that they did not die of the sickness, wasting away on their mats, helpless, coughing pus and blood, ending up a rotted corpse in the bucket of a catapult.

Mongo turned to his khan. He could not bring himself to look over at Kierkive.

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Gorgonovitch gazed across the barren stretch of ground between his own front lines and the coveted walls of the Genoese outpost. He cast his vision across the field as if it was a grand mystical moment in the history of the world.



Atop the outpost's ramparts and two short end-towers, the archers were stationed with deadly accurate crossbows. In the courtyard beyond the walls, Italian soldiers rushed about making ready reserve-magazines of arrows to be fed up to the archers. Infantry took up positions at the main gates, preparing for any breach in the walls. The small batteries of fixed crossbow catapults stood loaded with their first rounds. On scaffolds just below the tops of the walls the last of the oil was brought to a boil in large caldrons.

All was silent. For a quiet moment, creation caught its breath and held it. For one frozen instant, that Crimean shore became a place of eternal waiting, a moment in time when everything *could* become different, changed from what it always seemed to be, when everything could *become*...



"Do it!" roared Gorgonovitch, raising his battle-axe high into the scorched air.

*No!* Mongo cried within himself, even as he called out, "Fire!" He dropped the signal torch like it was an evil thing

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in his hands. He clutched his chest. *No*, he thought. *No*.

“To hell!” cried the Mongol horde as they laid into the attack. “To hell with the demon host of Marduk. To hell with us all!”



An archer atop the walls looked out across the plain. He saw a hundred barbarian foot-soldiers rush down the clearing toward the wall, screaming war-cries terrible enough to raise the dead, and at the same instant he saw an airborne contingent—not of heavy artillery, stone and flaming refuse, but of *soldiers*—death-masked soldiers in full armor, some grasping spears, some carrying heavy stones held tightly to their chests. The flying soldiers arced gracefully upwards in gentle, magic curves, then, for a fleeting moment, stayed suspended there, high up in the furnace of the sky, before bowing their heads to begin their ghastly dive toward the Genoese camp.

The archer crossed himself, for he knew it was the end of the world.

Soon all the archers and infantry along the walls and up on the towers forgot about the onrushing horde below, now, nearly halfway across the clearing. They all looked up at the incoming barrage, the inexplicable magic army descending upon them from the heavens like a host of apocalyptic, winged demons.

In a crazy kind of reflex, the archers raised their crossbows and began to fire upon the incoming hail of bodies. The ser-

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geant-at-arms on the middle of the wall yelled orders to fire on the ground attack, but even as he yelled the orders he continued to look and point up at the vision of flying soldiers, his actions only adding to the confusion of his bewildered troops. Defenses along the entire length of the wall fell into disarray. Down below in the courtyard the fire-control officer in charge of the remaining two batteries of crossbow catapults stood there, signal-torch held high, waiting for the go-ahead from the sergeant on the wall.

The first bodies hit inside the walls. Amongst the Italian troops horror led to chaos and chaos to greater horror. Meanwhile, out on the plain old Mongo, weak and broken and running on some remaining deep instinct, had his catapult crews loading the next round of grisly missiles.

When the first bodies hit, the older corpses exploded. The more recent dead came apart in larger portions and the force of their impact was horribly lethal to those within range. The psychological effect was instantaneous: panic, abandon and terror. The world inside the walls had become a slaughter house. Everything was drenched in blood and gore. Evil fumes and plague-stench spread along the ground.

Four of the worst bodies impacted directly upon a platoon of pike-soldiers. Those who were not battered into unconsciousness simply dropped their weapons and ran across the compound in a frenzy.

On the porch of a weapons shed stood a young girl, *the angel of the wastelands*. She watched in amazement the crazed flight of those about her. Yet, some deep, mysterious self-

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possession kept her mind clear. Suddenly, with the inexplicable logic of a child, she dashed over to one of the battered corpses from the barbarian barrage, picked up the spear that had been bound to it with cords, and screamed as loud as she could, "They're dead! Dead people! Just dead bodies! Already dead! Look, look! Dead! Dead!"

Everywhere, soldiers fled in wild animal panic.

"They are not devils!" she screamed again. "Look! They are human! The barbarians are running out of ammunition for their catapults! It must be their last assault! It's a trick! A trick!" She jumped up, searched the hellish scene before her. Grabbing a soldier she knew well, she cried, "Bruno! Listen to me, Bruno! Look at me! I have its spear."

She stared up into Bruno's eyes. The soldier slowly took the ornate spear from the girl's hands, stared at it as if she had performed a miracle. More bodies came over the walls even as they stood there.

The soldier nodded to the girl. He shook his head. Moments passed. Then he held up the spear and bellowed, "By the horns of Satan, she's right! Stop running! Stop, I say!"

He turned and grabbed one of his fellows and shook the man. "Look! Leonardo, look! Our little sister took this off of one of those things! Listen to me, damn you!"

Within minutes, word spread around the camp. A messenger was sent up on the walls to calm the panic. Soldiers began to regroup. The remaining cross-bow catapults were once again returning volley for volley while the young girl ran off to tend the wounded.



In the barbarian camp, Kierkive still stood bound between the two guards, his hands tied behind his back. A few feet away, Gorgonovitch watched the quickening progress of the attack. The barbarians could distinctly see the confusion up on the walls, while their troops at the base of the walls were meeting little resistance.

A crooked smile spread across the commander's face. "We have them! By Krom, it worked! Ah ha! The war gods *are* with us, Lieutenant Kierkive," he cried in wild laughing abandon which slowly devolved into a manic slavering, sending a chill into the hearts of his own bodyguards.

Gorgonovitch turned to Kierkive, cast an evil smile upon him like the shadow of a vulture. "You! You would betray your khan!" He roared. "Take him!"

The guards looked blankly at their feet, at those around them, at the sky.

"Do you hear me?" the commander bellowed.

"My lord?" the captain of the guard ventured.

"To the catapults, the gods damn you all! Take the traitor to the catapults. A sacrifice, my bloodthirsty children! This jackal shall be our sacrifice to the gods for the victory they give into our hands this day!" Gorgonovitch raged into a storm of oratory. In his eyes he had truly become the khan in line with the great emperors of Mongol history. In his eyes he, too, was a great emperor. This was the beginning. This day he



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would make the noble lists. *Oh, the songs that would tell the story of Gorgonovitch Khan!*

He raised his battle-axe high over the heads of all who stood there in the camp. "This day will be chronicled throughout our land till *the end of the world!*" he howled. "Till time ends and all that is left is the dark, spinning void!"

The guards looked at each other. Hesitantly, the captain of the guard collected what small wits he possessed, and ordered his men, "You heard your lord. Take Lieutenant Kierkive to the catapults."

Without further word, the four guards standing by Kierkive began to force the bound captive toward number one catapult.

"Gorgonovitch!" screamed Kierkive. "This goes against our honor, the code of the Great Khan! You cannot do this! You are bound by the code."

"Shut him up!" the commander screamed furiously.

"Gorgonovitch! You are bound by honor to let me die in battle! It is against tradition, against our ancestors. Think what you are doing!"

The guards holding Kierkive before the terrible machine faltered, listened to the words of their khan, then to Kierkive, then again to their khan.

"Do you hear me?" Gorgonovitch roared once more. And as he did he rushed at the hesitating guards.

"No! Don't let him do it!" Kierkive pleaded. "He's mad!"

But the guards saw Gorgonovitch, they saw the huge silver axe of Gorgonovitch Khan. They gagged Kierkive and

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threw him to the ground, slipped a rope behind his knees, bound his legs tightly together and then passed the rope around his neck. They pulled the line tight, doubling him up into a ball, drawing his knees painfully up against his chest. He could not speak, he could barely breathe.

Gorgonovitch looked down at the lieutenant. "Here," he said softly, kneeling beside him, scowling down at him. Gorgonovitch jammed the dragon-hilted dagger into Kierkive's belt. "Take this to hell with you, lieutenant. You may find it useful there!"

As mad Gorgonovitch rose up over his guards, they quickly pushed the catapult handlers aside and hefted Kierkive up into the bucket.

There was already a dead body in it, and Kierkive rolled over into its decomposing flesh. The muck of the thing seeped into his bedraggled hair and torn clothes. Kierkive fought the nausea, fearful of drowning in his own vomit. But even as he thought this he wondered why it mattered. He was dead, anyway, as dead as the steaming thing lying there next to him.

From the other end of the siege line Mongo looked upon the scene in frozen disbelief.

Gorgonovitch took up a torch. "On my mark, captain, you may have the honor."

The captain of the guard once more shook his head in fearful wonder. He had seen a lot of rape and pillage and torture, a lot of cruelty in his day. But the captain had never seen things such as these—things which deep down he was certain

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were not the ways of his people, were not the ways of his noble Asian race. Had he misjudged life? His khan? The gods?

“Captain?” Gorgonovitch tilted his head, bird-like, and queried in a voice now changed, a sweet, mysterious voice.

“As you command—my—khan,” the captain stuttered.

Even as the battle raged on in the field, those who had not yet gone out, those who manned the rear armaments, those who were not in the forward ranks, these gathered in a wide circle around the great siege engine. They gathered around the catapult now controlled by the khan’s personal guard, with the commander himself holding the torch, and the captain of the guard handling the release mechanism, and the still respected, even loved Lieutenant Kierkive bound and gagged in the muck-encrusted bucket of machine number one.

“Make it so, my friend,” Gorgonovitch’s voice had become deeper again. It was as if he spoke out of the dark cell of his soul. “Join us, captain.”

The captain grasped the release mechanism.

“Join us...”

The captain looked at Gorgonovitch. As if hypnotized, he pulled the release and the great engine boomed and cracked and fired its massive arm, projecting those tragic pawns of a dark millennium into the furnace of the morning sky, a double warhead, a missile symbolic of all human history, possessed of both the living and the dead, a tiny, tragic icon of transient, time-bound, suffering *sapiens*.

As the captain turned to Gorgonovitch Khan, he saw the

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giant Mongol warlord open his ragged mouth wide in a crazed howl. He saw Gorgonovitch raise his arms, the shining battle-axe high above his head. He heard his khan scream, a wail of conquest and death.

Then, from the armor-plated chest of Gorgonovitch burst forth the long, silver blade of a broadsword. The huge Tartar chief spun around in the frenzied rage of a wounded mountain bear. He brought down his axe upon the one whom he knew instinctively to have cut him. And as Gorgonovitch turned to his attacker, he opened up his own body from gut to spine. His battle-axe fell as the soul of Gorgonovitch flew off into the dark spinning void.

Mongo staggered back, withdrawing his sword. Gorgonovitch's terrible weapon came down blindly and ineffectually at Mongo's feet, and the slaughtered chief dropped into the dust before the old sergeant.

Everyone just stood there.

Mongo grinned at the captain of the guard. He smiled at the large circle of his comrades. He smiled and then he clutched his chest. His smile twitched and he, too, fell to the ground. Mongo died, but with his sword in hand, and his Mongol honor intact within his broken heart.

Part Two  
Val di Fuora

Midway upon the journey of our life  
I found myself within a forest dark,  
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

Dante Alighieri.

*The Divine Comedy, Inferno, Canto I*

H. W. Longfellow, trans.



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1



he horrendous jolt of the catapult's bucket against the forward stop, the jolt that hurtled the bodies of Lieutenant Kierkive and his rotting dead companion into the sun-drenched sky, that shock alone was enough to break the neck of any normal man.

Pain like an overwhelming flood assailed the lieutenant's brain. As he tumbled higher and higher into the burning heavens, rolling dizzily, hot air rushing like a storm from hell in his ears and his eyes, Kierkive both pleaded with the demon of unconsciousness to take him away and yet contended mightily *against* that very same demon. The ancient martial arts and barbarian discipline emblazoned deep within the sol-

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dier's psyche vied with the fatalistic turn which can possess the barbaric soul at the moment of death. But intrinsic to the primal spirit within the human is the will to deny annihilation to the very last. Encrusted not with the fears and timidity of more complex civilizations, it was this primal instinct which tipped the balance for Kierkive and turned him against death no matter how seemingly inevitable, no matter how overwhelming.

In the slowing moments, his trajectory carried him upwards. Even as he felt the zenith of his flight to be nigh, Kierkive fought furiously against his bonds. At this point he had become separated from his macabre companion, and as he struggled he thought across to it, "We are alike in all ways, my comrade, but this: *I still possess the illusion of life!*"

Blood flowed freely from his mouth where he savagely tore at the gag and ropes, lacerating his lips. The gag fell loose and fluttered away gracefully like a freed sparrow. Kierkive gnawed and ripped at the rope that bound his knees up to his chest. He knotted the sinews in his arms, straining beyond human capacity to rend the bonds that fettered his wrists. As he crested his ascent, he wondered feverishly if this was not a spiritual ascent, the rise of the mad ascetic attaining at last to that mystical, divine release spoken of by the Buddhist monks. But the maddening rush back towards earth shattered the momentary delusion.

Thundering wind once more threatened to take away his consciousness even as he felt the bones of his left arm and wrist twist and crack. Suddenly his arms were free, though



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shrieks of pain tore into his brain like ravenous timber wolves. Kierkive's left arm dangled useless—he kept thinking it was on fire, a fleshly torch. He used the pain skillfully, as a weapon against the demon of unconsciousness. The best soldier learned such wisdom or died for the lack of it.

With his right arm free, Kierkive grasped the legendary dagger. As the walled outpost hurtled upwards toward him, he sliced through his remaining bonds, stretched out his body to its full length, his good arm curved over his head, the dagger grasped as if ready to take on the dragon Tiemtu herself, as if he would live on after the destruction of his body, live on to slaughter the whole Italian regiment, then crawl back to Gorgonovitch Khan to cut the devil's heart out and stuff it down his treacherous throat before the evil jackal's dark soul was even aware of its accursed fate. In the last seconds of that long and terrible journey between two brutal worlds, Kierkive was ready. Unlike Gorgonovitch Khan, Kierkive was ready to meet his fate.



In the Genoese camp, the tide of battle turned. The archers upon the walls were at the last moment beginning to beat back the onrushing horde, though they were not sure why, or how.

Seeing the last Mongol catapult let go its gruesome load, the archery sergeant cried out to his men, "Look! They falter, they lose heart!"

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Something in the barbarian camp had changed. Even from the outpost's walls, the sergeant could make out some sort of confusion behind the Mongol lines. Up in the sky two more bodies came hurtling down upon them. Yet, it was clear, the attacking forces were breaking up; an electric current of retreat flashed through the forward ranks. With unintelligible curses, the barbarians turned—not defeated, just quitting the siege, leaving the field back to their encampment. Strangely, inexplicably, the battle had ended.

The Italian soldiers watched, arrows still nocked, bows still raised, watched in disbelief, and wonder, and relief. Below, within the walls and throughout the outpost the battle's end was quickly intuited.

The young girl, Theresa, also looked up at the walls and felt the sudden change, saw the stooped shoulders of the archers, saw the archery sergeant slumped against one of the huge, empty oil kettles, his helmet askew upon his head.

Then, not ten paces from the girl, a body crashed through the roof of one of the feed sheds, while farther on, yet another corpse smashed harmlessly into the dry earth, splattering outward in a putrid circle of decay and stench.

The sergeant on the wall looked down into the courtyard where the bodies hit. "That be the last!" he cried in a voice both triumphant and filled with exhaustion. "Look men!" And he pointed toward the camp of the besieging Kipchak army. "Look brothers! They had us, yet they pack up and leave! The Holy Virgin has saved us!"

Others climbed up onto the walls to see for themselves.

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Cheering broke out. Indeed, like some wild, shaggy herd moving on to more northern feeding grounds, the Mongols had turned away from the siege.

Theresa, too, wanted to go up onto the wall and look out at this wondrous thing. She trotted by the feed shed with its roof caved in from the last barrage. As she passed by, the shed door suddenly crashed open, hitting her on the shoulder and throwing her to the ground. Out of the shed stumbled, crawled, slithered—a *horrible* thing—one of the corpses.

Theresa tried to scream, but a momentary madness choked her. She threw her hand up to shield her eyes from the sun which shone down directly upon the bloody apparition. The thing lunged toward her, but only crumpled to the ground at her feet, spitting blood and hissing. It held a fantastic dagger in its hand, striking out blindly, feebly, as if the life it had somehow regained were only a memory of life.

She looked at the blood flowing from a deep wound where a ragged stake from the shed roof had pierced deeply through the creature's thigh. She thought how brightly crimson the blood was, not the dusty red-grey of a corpse. The creature's blood flowed freely, freshly, as the blood of the living, even as the blood of Christ ran in holy rivulets down the ragged stake of the blessed cross: *the blood of Christ, the cup of salvation*. Once again Theresa began to see with the mystic's vision, with the eyes of her beloved Lord.

Defly grasping the shattered creature's wrist which held the dagger, Theresa spoke softly, "You have no need of the weapon, my lost brother. Only healing. Healing in your body,

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and healing in your soul.”

Through a searing curtain of pain and madness, Kierkive, although he did not understand the strange girl’s words, could nonetheless feel their deep sense. With one eye, he squinted at her and saw in her eyes a wild serenity, a tranquility at once innocent and ageless.

Theresa gazed upon the human wreck before her. Then, seeing his expression shift suddenly back to wounded animal, she looked up.

A pike-soldier jabbed his spear at the Mongol, “Hey! This dog’s alive!”

Another soldier grabbed Theresa, “Careful, little sister, the beast can bite even so near to death.”

An officer came over and looked down at Kierkive. “Slay it, piker!” he commanded indifferently and turned to go.

“No!” Theresa pulled away from the soldier who held her and fell to the ground. She threw her body between the piker’s spear and the fallen enemy. “No. He is sorely wounded—”

The officer turned back and stared. “He is armed, or had you not noticed, foolish girl?” Looking to the other soldier, “Get her away from here. But be gentle with our little sister!”

Theresa would not be moved. She grabbed the great dagger from Kierkive’s weak hand and held it up toward the piker. “Wrong! He is not armed. I am!”

Kierkive watched the strange girl, babbling in her foreign tongue and brandishing his dagger up at one of her own people—he *felt* her pleading for his life.

## Plagueman

Theresa pointed the dagger at the officer, while with her free hand she grabbed the hilt of the piker's weapon just above the spear head, pulling it toward her so that its sharp tip touched her breast. "You must go through me first, soldier."

Her voice was suddenly deep with confidence and calm. "I, as the sole representative of Holy Mother Church, do hereby grant this wounded creature of the God *sanctuary*! Such a declaration may not be rescinded except by official court, presided over by the Bishop of Siena, to whom alone, aside from the Pope, I am answerable."

The officer looked down at the young girl and sighed. He knew the piker would sooner run himself through than harm one hair upon the girl's golden head. "Take the dog to the infirmary. I want two guards on him twenty-four hours a day." He noticed Kierkive's body armor. "Ho, the barbarian is an officer, a lieutenant, I believe. Three-quarters dead he could still take plenty of us to hell with him if we gave him a chance. Do not underestimate this man." With that, the officer turned again and went back to his work.

"Thank you, Captain Firenzi!" Theresa called after him. "Christ sees even the little things that someday shall prove one a *tree of righteousness*."

"He will be dead before we reach Kaffa," the piker muttered. Looking down at the girl, he added, "I am sorry, little sister. Maybe you can convert him." He leaned his spear up against the feed shed and called to a couple of his fellows, "Hey! Give me a hand, here."

## K. D. Kragen

Theresa, still kneeling, gazed down at Kierkive and smiled. Her head tilted to one side and a few strands of golden hair dipped in the Mongol's blood.

Three soldiers lifted the lieutenant. He winced, than gave in to the demon-god of unconsciousness.

His last thought was: *this demon is an angel.*

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