

OF PRINCES AND KINGS

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CHAPTER TWO

Though no Byzantine forces took part in the siege of Nicaea, Stephan was instructed to help secretly negotiate the surrender of the city to Byzantium without the crusader's knowledge. He would be assisted in this endeavor by a force of 2000 Byzantine foot soldiers who would shortly arrive to make a direct assault on the walled city. This was purely for show since the Turks would immediately surrender to the Byzantines after witnessing the disastrous battle and the loss of the Turkish army after Sultan Kiliç Arslan fled the field.

The crusaders were to be denied plunder and supplies from this rich city. The great treasury of Kiliç Arslan would revert to the emperor, and a Byzantine general would be named Duke of the City. The crusaders would be forbidden to enter the city except in groups of six. The European Princes who led the crusaders would each be ordered to renew an oath of vassalage to the emperor, meaning any city they captured would be the property of the Byzantine empire.

Stephan re-read the order in disbelief. He had no idea how the crusaders would react to this. And he really didn't want to be around to find out.

Then he read the second page. It was far worse. He was ordered to enter the city, find and secure an ancient set of religious relics called the Four Tablets of the Apocalypse, and bring them to Constantinople.

He found what was left of his tent and was soon joined by his scribe Paul. Stephan was momentarily relieved to see him still alive, then the relief was clouded with anger.

"I didn't become a royal ambassador of Byzantium to be a relic collector!" He flung his sword to the ground while Paul tied his horse to a hitching post.

"And how in Hades am I supposed to sneak into a city with a double wall and two hundred towers?"

"Find a postern?" Paul replied, unfastening the leather straps holding Stephan's chain mail.

Stephan thought about it for a moment. Every castle, every walled city, had secret doorways called posterns skillfully hidden to allow men carrying messages to slip in and out of the city unseen. Finding one would mean examining every inch of the walls, nearly three thousand meters long. And then there was the inner wall.

"I'm going back to Polis," Stephan announced. He used the irreverent name provincial Byzantines and commoners used to refer to Constantinople.

The sarcasm wasn't lost on Paul. "Then you will defy the will of the emperor?"

Stephan shook his head in disbelief at what he was ordered to accomplish.

"Finding holy relics in a city guarded by Turkish warriors in a city of that size, somehow getting them back to Polis unseen. If I could even get in..."

He had trained from very young to be a page, then a squire, but was eventually appointed royal ambassador in the service of the emperor. All he ever wanted was to become a knight. His oath as ambassador made it impossible to break a direct order. He was the youngest envoy in the service of Alexios, and heard the usual accusations of nepotism, being the nephew of the

emperor, but a certain amount of favoritism was expected in the court. He endured harsh and extensive training, and even though he wasn't the best swordsman on foot, his skill at handling a horse made up for much of it. For a fighter, the ability to handle his mount well in any situation was as important as his skill with weapons. After thousands of hours of training, he could control his mount with skill and deftness that easily outmatched any opponent. In battle, he would abandon the reins and use only his weight and his legs to maneuver the horse, freeing his arms for precise and deadly swordplay. On foot, it was another matter. His attempt to master right-handed swordplay was interrupted when he received the appointment as Imperial Byzantine Ambassador. He felt it was his biggest impediment to full knighthood.

"I suspect it's getting out that would be a problem," Paul said. "I mean, after the surrender, you could ride right in with the Byzantine delegates, but nobody is going to let you leave with a rich treasure like holy relics."

"It would be an unusual adventure," Stephan said, considering the idea. He knew the emperor was trusting him with a mission of the gravest importance to the empire. Roman emperors from the time of Constantius played an active role in the acquisition of holy relics and the transportation of them to Constantinople. Having the most sacred relics from Christ's passion kept the city eternally safe from all enemies, within and without.

"The four tablets," Stephan mused. "Other than the Holy Grail, which is still lost, these are among the most sacred of all relics."

"I thought the four tablets were a myth," Paul said.

"In Polis, the Patriarch teaches that it's one way to interpret the Apocalypse, which is not only the last book of the New Testament, but the most terrifying. Each of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse was given a sealed tablet. And when the seal was broken, the horsemen went forth destroying by the sword, by plague, famine and death."

"When I was last in the great church," Paul said, "I saw two pieces of the true cross, the iron lance that pierced the side of Our Lord, and two of the nails driven through his hands and feet."

"We have the most impressive collection of relics in all of Christendom," Stephan said. "and I think the emperor wants to keep it that way. For the good of the church and to help boost his authority."

"But I thought the four tablets were only a legend," Paul said again.

"The Patriarch has convinced the emperor they do in fact exist. It's my job to determine if they're real or just another biblical legend. But there's more here," Stephan said, showing Paul the message from the emperor. "He has on the word of reliable spies the tablets are hidden separately from the Sultan's treasure, and the key to finding them rests with the Sultan's daughter."

"You'll never get near the Sultan's daughter," Stephan said, shaking his head. "She alone is worth a ransom as rich as the Sultan's treasure."

"Even if I do get in, getting out will be my biggest problem." Stephan said. A half dozen strategies to decline this mission clouded his thinking. None of them made any sense or allowed him to escape with honor. His reputation and the honor of his family would be forever tallied by what he did today.

"If the Franks don't have you drawn and quartered, the Turks will skin you alive." Paul said.

"Thanks for reminding me. Let's get in the city, locate the Sultan's daughter and figure out the rest later. Who knows, we may even get out of this alive."

So frightened was the Turkish city at the defeat of Kiliç Arslan and his army that surrender was inevitable. Their only hope now was to avoid being butchered in an uncontrolled sack. Over the last five weeks the crusaders mounted a variety of strategies to take the city, including siege engines, tunneling, heavy bombardment, and sailing a flotilla of boats across the lake adjoining the city. The shock of the loss of the Sultan's army finally broke their will. Screams and laments could be heard from within the city walls. The cries pierced the night like the sound of dead warriors wailing.

By arrangement, it was Emperor Alexios's Byzantine army of two thousand men who took official surrender of the city, leaving the crusaders waiting outside the walls.

Stephan rode in with the emperor's men. The tension between the forces was close to bringing them to battle. If the Latin army wanted to, they could have easily slaughtered the outnumbered Byzantines and taken the riches of the city for themselves. The only thing stopping them at this point was the oath of vassalage they swore to the emperor back in Constantinople. The oath was required before he would grant them passage in boats across the Bosphorus to the eastern shore. Some of the princes were still disputing that oath, and there was at least one prince, the leader of the Provence, who refused to take it. This made the situation more volatile than ever before. The four crusader armies were on the verge of revolt, ready to explode. Inside the walls, the Greeks were vastly outnumbered by the Turkish garrison who could also have annihilated them had the surrender been a trick.

Stephan joined the Byzantine generals Boutoumites and Taticius to ride through the main gate, followed by their small army. Taticius recognized Stephan by the colors of the imperial court emblazoned on his shield and sewn into the saddle blanket that hung nearly to the ground.

"Stephanos Komnenos, Knight of Byzantium!" Taticius said in greeting.

"Not a knight yet. By the grace of God, well met sire," Stephan replied.

Taticius did not raise his visor in greeting, which would normally be considered rude, but Stephan understood why. Years ago, Taticius lost his nose in the siege of Bari, when the Byzantines lost that city in Italy to the Norman Robert Guiscard. He once wore a metal nose but now more often than not he chose to simply ignore it, or conceal it with a visor. Stephan knew his disfigured face, but never thought it looked all that grotesque. He even thought of it as a badge of honor.

"Today we raise the imperial standard above the city. Will you do the honor? I believe the donjon on the south side of the city is the highest tower. My men will guide and protect you. There are still many angry and deceitful Turks within."

"It isn't the Turks you will have to protect me against," Stephan replied. He glanced at the crusaders and the Latin princes, including Bohemond, Robert of Flanders, and the southern Italian Normans who stood to one side, denied entrance to the city. They were keenly aware their standards would never be raised over the city. Expressions of hatred and distrust blazed from their eyes.

"I have a contingent of men distributing coppers to the foot soldiers, silver coin to the lieutenants, and gold to the princes. It should be enough to mollify them for a time."

Stephan knew the crusaders would have gained ten times that wealth if they were allowed to sack the city. On the other hand, he agreed with the logic of the generals' thinking since

maintaining the city as an important commercial center would be of much greater benefit to the empire.

Stephan was impressed by the fortifications of the city. Surrounded by a double line of walls built of huge stones, decorated with Roman tiles and architectural fragments from ancient ruins, the city was always considered impregnable. The walls were of extraordinary height, punctuated by two hundred towers, and wide enough to march a line of soldiers on top, ten abreast.

“This is an ancient and extraordinarily well-designed city,” Taticius said. “Look at the inner wall. The towers in the inner wall stand opposite but in between the towers of the outer wall. And the whole thing surrounded by a moat, fed by the lake.”

Taticius knew the city of Nicaea well, having besieged it several times in the past. The emperor was greatly troubled by the closeness of Nicaea to Constantinople. Nicaea was the capital of the Seljuk Turkish empire and the emperor long wanted to recapture it. But every early attempt resulted in failure. Now Taticius beamed in pride. His face radiated the intense pleasure he enjoyed in finally capturing the city, even though his army had little to do with the long siege, except to finalize the victory.

Inside the walls, the prosperity of the city was evident. Stephan remembered stories of a Jewish community and an Armenian Christian community who lived alongside the Turks who valued the merchant skills and the contributions of people who didn't share their religion. Most of the structures were splendidly built of stone, marble, and fragments of Roman ruins. The streets were wide and paved with smooth stones providing easy traffic for both foot and cart. Tall, stately colonnades, tastefully decorated with colored tiles and marble, and covered walkways spread out in all directions. The city survived several earthquakes over the years and was always rebuilt carefully and cleanly. It looked to Stephan like a miniature version of Constantinople, only cleaner. The Greek Orthodox church of the Dominion rose proudly in the center. It had obviously been converted to a mosque and bore large round signs in Arabic on the outside, with gold Arabic symbols ornately gracing a dark green background. But those would now be removed and replaced with Christian symbols.

“I'm sending a dozen knights to guard the Sultan's legendary treasure,” Taticius said. “Take my standard and raise it with pride.”

Stephan guessed he was guarding the treasure against the Latins and not the Turks. He accepted the Byzantine colors from a page. “Where is this tower?”

“It's the residence of the Sultan's family,” Taticius replied. “My men will guide you. Don't let those women seduce you,” he added. “Anyway, my men will be there to protect them.”

This couldn't be any better, Stephan thought. I'm being led straight to the Sultan's wife and daughter. Now the only problem will be slipping past the guard, interviewing the daughter, convincing her to tell me the location of the tablets, and getting out alive. And he had no idea how he would do any of that.