

# THE COLORS OF FIRE

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## CHAPTER THREE

After the formal surrender where the commanders of the Turkish garrison and the city fathers accepted the surrender terms of the Byzantine generals, Stephan was escorted to the highest tower, the donjon on the southern wall of the city. His two escorts were Knights Templar, the most feared warriors in all of Christendom. Taticius wasn't taking any chances with the Sultan's family.

Along the way he saw four mosques, a Roman bath, and an amphitheater, all beautifully maintained with marble facades and colorful tiles. He couldn't believe the opulence and understood why the crusaders were so angry about being denied entry to plunder the city.

As they climbed the winding staircase up the outside of the tower to the foredeck, Stephan couldn't help thinking it was the perfect place for an ambush, if some of the citizens decided to prevent the Byzantine standard from being raised over the city, as it flew for hundreds of years before the Seljuk Turks captured it and made it the capital of their domains in Anatolia just fifteen years ago.

Two Turkish guards greeted them at the top, icy contempt flashing in their eyes.

"These men still have their weapons," Stephan said. His escorts immediately placed their hands on their swords. It wasn't really necessary. When the Turks saw the simple, unembellished sandy tunics of the of the Knights Templar, they paled and quickly withdrew. The reputation and garb of the Templars had already spread across the Seljuk empire. The Templars ordered the Turkish guards to vacate, saying they were taking over the guard duties.

"It will take more than just a surrender to persuade the Turks to relinquish their arms," one of the knights remarked. "We're seriously outnumbered here, so it will be more about diplomacy and the creation of a treaty that honors their traditions and doesn't destroy the trade routes they've established. Stability and prosperity are the keys to holding a city, not force of arms."

Stephan was impressed but not surprised at the knight's response. The Knights Templar were not just the most skilled fighting men the world had ever seen, they were highly educated and extremely resourceful, with more than enough political sway to achieve their goals, and it frightened most of the rulers of the Latin cities. The order still

lacked official recognition from Pope Urban, but it was almost certain to be granted.

He also knew that interviewing the wife and daughter of the Sultan without these men present would be a challenge. The women would take some serious convincing, not with overt threats of violence but with all the diplomacy and tact he could bring to the situation. His mind reeled as he struggled to find a solution. If he could only remove them to a secure location, away from their familiar lodgings, the task might be easier. In spite of the confidence the emperor and the Patriarch placed in him, he just didn't feel fully qualified to handle such a delicate and dangerous situation. Once again, self-doubt began to pollute his thinking. The more he thought about it, the more he was ready to just give up on the mission. He considered explaining to Taticius that the emperor wanted the family removed to Constantinople, but it would make it

even more difficult to take them if he refused. He was about to consider doing it anyway, when he unfurled the banner that was to be raised above the city. It changed everything.

It wasn't the emperor's banner or even the city colors of Constantinople. It was Taticius' personal banner, a blue shield on a yellow background with crossed swords and lions rampant on the shield. The emperor's banner was a red field dominated by a gold double-headed eagle. Had he known what the banner was, he would have protested in his authority as the legate of the emperor in Asia Minor. Now he knew the knights were there to make sure this banner went up.

This changed everything. Taticius was clearly paving the way to ignore the authority of the emperor and acquire at least some of the riches of Nicaea for himself. Stephan cursed himself for not seeing it. This was so typical of Byzantine commanders. Taticius could control the city and profit from the trade routes, while officially liberating it from Turkish interests and uniting it with the Byzantine empire. The emperor fought against similar transgressions during his entire reign. Taxes, tariffs, and other assessments would still be sent to Constantinople, but the bulk of the wealth would be under the control and effectively in the possession of Taticius.

Worse, when the army of crusaders who swore an oath to the emperor saw the banner, they would almost certainly revolt, knowing that Taticius was planning on seizing the city and its wealth for himself. Taticius and his army could barricade the city against them but with the Turks on the inside and the princes and their armies on the outside, the outcome would almost certainly be a prolonged and disastrous battle.

Stephan reflected on his role as a deputy of the emperor. From the beginning, the crusade was a rough and disorganized mass of Latin armies with no central command. The infighting between the princes was one of the biggest hindrances to success. Stephan was supposed to find some element of cohesiveness, to enforce the will of the emperor and remind the princes of their oaths, but their respect for him dwindled so far it was unlikely they would listen to his entreaties.

"Have you seen this banner?" Stephan asked one of the knights.

"Our orders are to make sure it is raised above the city."

Stephan held the banner up to display the heraldry. "Do you have any idea what will happen when this banner goes up?" he asked.

The knights looked at the banner, then looked at each other.

"You talk about managing structure and financial stability. What's going to happen when the crusaders, who have sworn an oath to the emperor, see this banner?"

"He's got a point," one of the knights answered.

Stephan was relying on the knight's being more loyal to their Templar order than to Taticius.

The knight seized the banner and rolled it up. "Remove your tunic," he commanded.

"What do you mean?"

"Your tunic bears the double-headed eagle, the symbol of Constantinople. We will raise that above the city."

Stephan's face split into a wide grin as he pulled his tunic over his head and watched while they fastened it vertically to the rope so the eagle would be clearly displayed. Taticius would be furious! Stephan's heart began to flutter as they raised his tunic above the city. The wind immediately caught it and revealed the eagle. Cheers went up from the armies massed below.

Stephan hadn't expected it. The cheers went on and on and he gloried briefly in the moment as he watched his dirty, blood-stained tunic wave proudly above the city. What was

done here today could not be undone. He turned his attention the Sultan's family within the donjon.

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"I need to speak to the wife and daughter of the Sultan. I assume this is their quarters?"

"It is, but there is no way you can enter. And even if you did, there is no way the harem guards will allow you to speak to them. They may be eunuchs, but they are highly trained warriors whose sole job is to protect the harem. They were allowed to keep their weapons because the harem is at least as valuable as the Sultan's treasure of gold."

"But you're going to let me try, right?"

Again, the knights exchanged glances. "It's your life. We can always throw your body over the wall if it turns out wrong."

The keeps and donjons of most castellated structures were typically dark, dreary, and often wet, since this type of tower was typically a battlement. Inside, it was anything but a structure designed solely for defense. He passed through an anteroom hung with tapestries and into the main chamber. Turkish artisans finished the walls with colored tiles in arabesque patterns. Silk festoons billowed down from a high ceiling and made the entire scene dreamlike and fantastical. Rich, thick carpets covered the floor. Furnishings embroidered in gold, silver, and covered with fine silks ornamented the room. It was altogether another world from the cold stone exterior.

He was greeted by a female Nubian slave who bowed low, shot a distrusting glance at his garb, now no longer identified with the insignia of the Byzantine emperor, and asked what he wanted.

Stephan's Arabic wasn't the most fluent, but he practiced it with his teachers at court and received high praise from the Turkish counselors. He spoke in what he imagined would be the most respectful address. "I am here on the authority of the Byzantine emperor to see the wife and daughter of Kiliç Arslan, Sword Lion and Sultan of Rum, may Allah bring him patience and strength in this difficult time."

Her brows raised in an expression Stephan interpreted as either amusement or surprise. He wasn't sure whether he said 'patience and strength' or 'strong bowels.' He hoped it was the former.

She raised her brows in a questioning look and said, "which wife?"

"What do you mean?"

She turned and gestured toward an inner doorway. An elegant, graceful woman emerged, followed by another, and another, each more enchanting than the last. Finally, seven of the loveliest creatures on earth stood before him. Stephan was speechless.

"And which daughter?" she asked. She gestured again and seven more younger women, of different ages and statures, emerged from the inner room. The entire entourage was flanked by four of the tallest, blackest guards he had ever seen. They stood with staid calmness, arms crossed, as beautiful as sculpture, staring out into empty space. Stephan sensed they could use their curved scimitars to remove his head in an instant if he so much as sneezed the wrong way.

"But which one is, I mean, which is the actual wife and daughter?"

The slave grinned. Stephan's reaction seemed to amuse her. "Why, all of them!"