

# Constantine's Crown



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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# Author's Note

The world in this tale is like our own, its history mirrors ours. Yet, readers beware, this is but a work of fiction. The characters in this story, the world they inhabit, and the events they experience, are as fictional as this author's Lamborghini Aventador, parked outside his imagined Sicilian villa. Likewise the author must stress that even though several religions are described in this novel, the author is not biased against any of them, or any cultures. The author simply hopes you will be entertained, and perhaps inspired to learn more about the history of the real world.

# Prologue

In the year 325, the Roman emperor Constantine the Great had turned the empire to Christianity. The council of Nicaea laid the groundwork for what was later to become the Roman Catholic Church and its Eastern offshoot the Orthodox Church. Constantine himself would rule this empire from his new city Constantinople for another twelve years, and Constantinople would remain the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire after the Western Empire had fallen in 476 A.D. The East was spared, it was said, because of Constantine's Holy Crown, which was given to him by the bishop Eusebius of Caesarea. Eusebius had supposedly been granted the Crown by God whilst in prayer. It was to be worn by God's representative on Earth, the leader of his Christian people. For almost a thousand years, the Eastern Roman Emperors would bear it and safeguard Christendom, but the Crown was lost in 1202. Just two years later Constantinople was sacked...

Now it is the year 1439. France has been at war with England for almost a century now. After a long and bitter conflict, that almost saw the collapse of the kingdom, the French king is finally pushing the islanders back. A peace treaty had been signed with the cousin of the king, the duke of Burgundy in 1435. Burgundy that had been English staunchest ally during the war, even if the duchy actually belonged to the king of France. In this war-torn France an old knight rides home on a cold wintery evening...

# Chapter one

It was a cold January in the year 1439 when a bearded man rode his horse back into his citadel. Guarded by five of his best riders. Temperatures were deep below zero and night had fallen. The villagers of Dixmont had fortunately been spared the snow, but even the winter had taken a high toll on the people. Frozen corpses were a common sight. The bearded man on the horse paid those he saw little heed, for he was accustomed to the view. His name was Gérard de Courtenay, and he was the noble that ruled this little village and its outskirts. His citadel provided shelter in times of war, or against pillagers. He had been out riding with a small force in response to these same pillagers who had preyed on his peasants. The war against the English has been brought to a halt during the winter times, but as usual, the mercenaries now turned elsewhere for food and comfort. *Not on my watch*, Gérard thought.

He was a middle-aged man who had served his king many a times over the past thirty years, but had been given a quiet piece of land to settle down. Now all he needed to do was tend to his family, and the commoners he protected. Tonight had been a routine matter. English brigands had torched the house of a peasant family in reprisal for not getting any food, which the peasants lacked. Furthermore, the bandits had raped the farmer's daughter out of spite. Gérard had ridden out in fast response, and caught the men near an old river crossing. An ancient Roman bridge. On foot, the men were no match for the riders as they charged in. The horses trampled two, and the old knight and his men had mercilessly cut down the others. Gérard felt a hard



patch of his beard, which still held some of their blood. As a warning to others, the looters had been strung up against the trees near the bridge.

Now he re-entered his castle, which he had also dubbed Dixmont, since his last name had already been given to a castle a few miles west. Richard, the son of his oldest brother, used to live there. Used to because he had recently been sentenced to death for murder. Not an action Gérard had expected from him, but he had been in no position to inquire any further on Richard's motivation. The old man pulled up his black hood to shield him from the strong wind. He was almost home, where a roaring fire would guard him from the cold dark night.

"Open the gate. Our lord has returned." A captain of the night guard bellowed down, and just as the metal chains were lifting the large oak spikes and steel cross fittings, Gérard noticed a hooded man sitting leaned back against the gate. He was shivering all over, his face was white, and his gaze was distant. The man was dying from the cold! Without hesitation, Gérard lowered his hood, exposing himself to the winter, and jumped off his horse. "Laurent, Emille, help me! This man is dying." Together they picked him up, and carried the man inside the city walls. He was cold as ice, but still conscious as they laid him down inside the nearest building with a fireplace. "Laurent", Gérard said. "Make sure this man is given food, and taken care of until he restores."

"My lord?" Emille, who was still leaning over the poor frozen man's body, said.

"Yes?" Gérard inquired as he turned around and his chainmail rattled.

"Is this not your nephew, my lord?" Gérard rushed over to the table and removed the cloak that shielded the man's face.

"Richard?" Gérard looked bewildered at his nephew's face. An

elegant man with short trimmed, reddish-brown hair. People always said he looked almost English since he was so clean shaven. Not now though, his facial hair was long and rugged. Yet, it was definitely him. *But how?*... Gérard thought. "Get him upstairs to the keep! I want him nursed back to health and two guards posted at his room at all times."

Emille and another soldier struggled to carry Richard up the spiralling stairs, but Gérard was too distracted to notice. "Laurent...", he said to a dark soldier with a moustache and brown eyes, as he pulled him closer and whispered in his ear: "...bring me the gate's captain, and let him report to me at once." The soldier hurried out, while Gérard finally sat down from a long and tiresome evening. *I cannot risk anyone spreading the word that Richard is here. I cannot be caught harbouring an outlaw.* "Samuel bring some ale to my chambers." He said to his only Jewish guardsman. The old lord then commenced with taking off his armour near the warm fire.

\*

The first snowflakes were beginning to fall as Laurent rushed outside. The metal of his armour clang with every step he made. He had been looking forward to a nice warm bath, but now he was outside again in the skin tearing cold. Along the buildings he rushed, towards the gate. The citadel was quiet tonight, and all that was to be heard were his own metal steps. He pressed on, past the stables, when suddenly he tripped over a protruding tile in the path. "Blast it!" He could just shout out, before he came down. The French stone was harsh and painful, but after a few seconds also soothing. For the first time that evening Laurent felt how tired he was, and for perhaps maybe a minute he laid there on the ground. No one came. No one had heard him. The citadel was as desolate as it seemed. *I can't keep lying here. I will freeze.* He

picked himself up and rushed on. His hands and knees burned from the fall. Both of them were grazed, and bleeding. Laurent let out some curse words, but soon enough he saw the gate. However as he was approaching it, he made a sharp turn right.

The guardsman dove into a backdoor of the church that dominated most of the citadel. Here, in a small backroom, the local priest sat at an oak table reading his Bible. A gentle fire roared and kept the priest warm. He shook up when Laurent almost fell through his door, gasping for air. "This late at night it would be proper for you to knock on the door, guardsman." The clergyman said.

"Father it is me, Laurent. I bring news... valuable news." The priest knocked back his hood, and laid his book to rest on the table. Laurent could just spot him reading the Bible: *Genesis 12:3*.

"Tell me what news you bring then... Laurent?" The guardsman swallowed before he replied, as if he was contemplating his actions one last time.

"Father, lord de Courtenay's nephew Richard. He's here. We've just found him outside the gate. He must have escaped."

"Ahhh he must have come here to seek refuge." The priest reached for a pocket in his robe and tossed the guardsman a piece of silver. "Continue with your duties. I will take care of the rest. You know the procedure."

"Yes, we never spoke." Laurent bowed and left the priest's private chambers. The clergyman then gathered some paper, pen, and ink, and started to write a troublesome letter.

\*

Darkness, cold... then light. The sun shone fiercely, for it was June 18<sup>th</sup> again, 1429. Richard was twenty years old once more when he passed a crooked sign that said Patay. Its pole was broken about halfway. When Richard lifted the visor of his helmet, the colours that entered were extreme. The green of the grass was almost the colour of poison, while the blue sky hurt his eyes looking at it. Yet, his suit of armour felt weightless, and the horse he rode on seemed to float over the gravel road. He was among the noble knights chosen to be the vanguard, but he recognised none of them, especially since they all had their visors down. The only thing he did recognise was the white banner of the girl, that was saving France. Jhezus Maria it read, and Joan of Arc was her name. *Some said she was crazy, or worse a witch, but I was there at Orleans*, Richard thought. *I was there when she turned the tide.*

The horses trod through the long grass, when Joan and the other two commanders, de Xaintrailles, and La Hire called the vanguard to stop in its place. Some names were called out, but Richard could not identify any of them until he heard his own: de Courtenay. “That’s us Richard!” A man patted on his steel shoulder pads, and when Richard looked beside him, he could see it was his uncle Gérard. “Come on”, he said. The two dismounted and joined the forward commanders in their battle discussions. One of them, de Xaintrailles, a man with long dark hair and a broad dark moustache, had produced a crude map. It was torn on all sides and sand slid up and down the parchment when he moved it around to catch more of the bright summer sun. “The village of Patay, we must be somewhere around here.” De Xaintrailles tapped his finger on a spot on the map between two rivers and a small town.

“There...” the small finger of the fair Maiden Joan pointed. “The

English are near the river La Conie. In the visions Saint Michael showed me they were positioned on the right bank.” When she looked up at the other commanders and nobles, she stared for an instance at Richard, but no one saw it. As her golden hair flowed past her bright shining armour she smiled. She smiled at *him*.

“We must hurry then”, said La Hire. The commoner from the South who had it made to commander. “We must hurry before the English ready their archers.”

“We won’t make that mistake again.” Richard’s uncle Gérard chimed in. “Let’s give them something back for Agincourt.” Richard instantly thought of his father Martin who had died all those years ago. Shot down by the common English peasants at that infamous battle.

“We’ll ride through the woods, stay off the large roads and open fields. Take them by surprise.” Richard now spoke for the first time.

“Bon”, the other men said in agreement, and Joan smiled at him again. After that glorious summer long ago, Richard believed he might never love again, but the godsend Maiden probably incurred such feelings in all men who gazed upon her.

“Saddle your horses”, she said, and after they all did, she shouted out: “You have spurs. Use them!” And all the men cheered her on as they rode by, and right before she put her helmet over her golden hair again, she stared into Richard’s eyes once more.

Then the image was gone, and again there was darkness, then a bright flickering light returned. The sound of horses racing, and breathing heavily. The banging of metal. He was in a forest and among the finest knights of France again. They galloped through the bushes, avoiding trees as shining metal strafed from left to right, when they suddenly came into the open.

Blinded by the sun it took a full second for Richard to re-orientate himself. He saw the green grass again, and the glistening of the river in the background. “Form around me!” Joan cried out, as they all swept into a line formation around her white banner. Then Richard heard the English cry out, but it was not a war cry, rather it was a cry of terror!

Richard saw groups of English soldiers hastily break line, and their red and blue banners fall down unto the ground. Some still managed to fire their longbows, and Richard, like his compatriots, lifted up his shield with his left arm. With a loud thud, a few arrows still managed to hit his shield, and some knights cried out in pain, while several horses were heard falling down. When he lowered his shield again, and the light came back through his visor, the English were only a few yards away.

“For France!” The Maiden shouted.

“For France!” All the knights in the vanguard answered her, as they lowered their lances and charged in on the helpless English. For once, their archers were not prepared, and had not found the time to place their horse-breaking wooden stakes in the ground. The French horses bashed through the already half broken line of the English, and Richard skewered at least two of them with his lance, before he had to drop it. Afterwards he hacked from side to side with the sword his father had used all those years before. Much English blood was spilled that day, and left and right severed limbs were to be found. This was not a battle, merely an exercise in slaughter.

Even the holy banner of the Maiden was sprayed with English blood. Even though Richard could not remember seeing her fight, her banner was always in the thick of it. The English on horseback had already fled the battle, as the rest were left to be massacred. *Today England did not prevail*, Richard thought. Then the world turned black again.

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As dawn was coming and the sun was rising lord Gérard stood at his window looking outside at God's white Earth. Snow had finally come. The old man had been up all night questioning the gate's guard, but apparently no one had heard or seen anything yesterday. Now he was waiting for Richard to come by. *If word of this gets out, it could lead to serious complications.* He thought. Except for his best men, Gérard had kept the presence of Richard a secret for everyone.

Gérard took another sip from his ale, while the sun was desperately, but unsuccessfully trying to melt the snow. His blood red garment picked up the rays of the sun, and the pearls of his necklace glistened. It had been a week since he had heard the news of Richard's conviction. Joseph, the village priest, had brought him the sad tidings.

"Un... uncle?" A familiar voice strained to call out, and Gérard looked around. His servants had shaven Richard, and even in his weakened state Gérard's nephew had a very noble look with his strong straight nose and square jawline. Richard looked nothing like Gérard did. With his short reddish-brown hair he looked far more like Gérard's brother, Martin.

"Richard..." Gérard replied and sat down on a small wooden stool.

"Thank God, I made it then." Richard said. Gérard nodded and consoled him, by grabbing his hand.

"How do you feel?"

"Still a bit cold, but a lot better than before." Richard slowly rose up to a seated position and took the cup of hot water Gérard handed him.

"Care to shed some light on the current affairs?" Gérard smiled comfortingly, and Richard felt relaxed for the first time this week.

"Yes, you probably want the whole story."

“Please.”

“Well, the story starts on a dark December evening. I was summoned before the king. Matters of war. Adelaide came with me. She was just in her early pregnancy so it was alright.” Richard took a sip while collecting his thoughts. He was still shivering. “King Charles hadn’t yet arrived, however. He was stuck in the south. War had come to a halt, but apparently some matter had arisen.”

“Yes, what I’ve heard a delicate matter between his wife and mistress.” Gérard interrupted.” It was a joke, but Richard felt the current situation was too serious to laugh. So instead, he gave his uncle a slightly irritated smile.

“In any case we stayed at Louvre palace, where we had our own room in the southern spire. The bishop of Paris, Alexandre, was in charge of all the proceedings inside the palace. During daytime, I spend a lot of time in the city while Adelaide mostly remained in our room reading. She had gotten quite interested in theology these past few years, and since she was pregnant. In any case,” he continued. “We weren’t together that often.” Richard said and thought: *We were never together anyway. A hollow marriage.*

Gérard stood up, and opened the door to ask for more hot water and some bread. “Go on, Richard.”

“Well, about three days later I was at the royal chapel praying when at least a dozen soldiers armed with pikes, burst in. They demanded I come with them. The priests were herded out, and then he entered, bishop Alexandre...” Someone knocked at the door, and the voice of a servant girl outside said:

“My lord, your hot water and bread.”

“Enter, girl.” Gérard responded. He knew there was no way a servant girl would recognise his nephew. Richard had hardly ever visited. The dark



haired girl entered, dropped the food on a table adjacent to the window, and without daring to look Richard in the eye, she quickly left again. After she closed the door, Richard continued his story:

“Have you ever met him?”

“The bishop?”

“Yes, Alexandre.”

“Is he the blond one? Slightly balding?”

“Yes, that’s him. The king’s bastard brother. He came in accusing me of murdering my wife. Her body had been found at the bottom of tower we resided in. The bishop declared I had been seen throwing her down from the spire.

“By whom?”

“Townfolk, soldiers, people that have never seen me before.”

“That’s all?” Gérard asked surprised, as he took a loaf of bread in his hand, but shortly thereafter deposited it again. “Did you get to see her body?” Richard looked down before he answered, and then looked back up. It clearly pained him to answer:

“There wasn’t much left to make out..., but... but she still wore the amethyst necklace I had given to her for our wedding.” Richard pulled his hand up to stop his tears. “...the loss of your child...uncle.”

“Richard I’m sorry...” Gérard said, he felt uncomfortable with the subject so he quickly changed it: “Would anyone gain anything by her death? Perhaps to get to you? The king has forgiven your past transgressions with the Maiden, right? You bend the knee. Perhaps someone else?” Richard stared blankly outside, and then took a sip of his water.

“I don’t believe she had any. For myself. Like you said, I have forsaken my honour long ago.

“A difficult choice, your family or your conscience...” Gérard answered. “One you must contemplate every day I reckon.” Richard merely nodded in agreement. “So there wasn’t any reason? What about this bishop... Alexandre? Did he know her?” This time Gérard did take a bite when he picked up another loaf of bread. It tasted quite good. For a moment, he was distracted from the conversation, until Richard answered.

“Not that I know of.” He swallowed. “Uncle, I fear... she might have killed herself. She spoke of it before. After the miscarriages, perhaps... I don’t know. I can’t think of anyone who would want her dead.”

“I’m sorry Richard. Still... They sent you to prison without proof. And the trial?...”

“Would be today, if I hadn’t escaped.”

“Yes... tell me how?” Gérard inquired, and then Richard told the entire story of his escape. He told how one day his cell door was left open, and no guards were to be found during his way out. A friend must have had arranged his escape. Someone in the army. Richard did not know whom, only that he was grateful for it. Gérard supported his chin as he heard Richard finish his story, and then rose up when he did: “It seems you still have friends then, Richard. And I am pleased that you do. There are so few of our family left.”

“So am I”, Richard replied.

Gérard then turned around to leave the room. He sighed and thought to himself: *I can’t keep him here. It won’t be long until the bishop finds out, and what if the bishop turns to the king. Richard can’t stay.*

# Chapter two

**B**ishop Alexandre usually was a quickly irritable man, but today he felt particularly pleased. His façade gave him the looks of a lord or count, yet all paths to earthly glory were barred from him. He was after all a bastard. His glowing blond hair, boyish exterior and perfect nose could not make up for that. He was the product of his father's desires for a peasant girl, who his stepmother had promptly ordered to be killed. His father, the king, hardly had a say in the matter. He had gone insane a year before. Believing he was made of glass. It was in fact the mercy of his brother Charles, that saved Alexandre. Although he had to live out his life as a clergyman. Alexandre started off as a priest, but after the liberation of Paris in 1435 the king had been in need of a new bishop. Alexandre's hunger was greater however, and at long last things were proceeding according to plan.

Adelaide, second daughter of the duke of Bavaria, was finally dead, and Alexandre's servants were preparing his clothes and belongings for his long journey. The only minor inconvenience was the escape of lord de Courtenay. Alexandre's most loyal captain, Christoph de Orsay, a petty noble whose family had lost their holdings during the on-going war with England, now stood before him to discuss the matter. "Quite the escape for a lone man, would you not say, Christoph?" The bishop said amused to his captain, who did not share his sense of joy.

"We don't believe he was alone, excellency." The man with the long dark hair said. He had a rash voice, *probably from all his drinking*, Alexandre thought. "I've fought with de Courtenay, and he is was one of the best

knights I've ever seen. But he was unarmed and we believe gunpowder has been used to force the door to his cell." Alexandre turned around, and looked outside his window to better help him concentrate. Paris had turned white with snow, which deeply contrasted with his scarlet red bishop's attire. He was quite fond of the fact.

"Gunpowder?" Alexandre said a tad surprised.

"Yes, excellency. Word is, he's hiding with his uncle. Lord Gérard de Courtenay in Dixmont. I could have your army assembled by midday if you wish, excellency."

"My army?" Alexandre said "You weren't much of a soldier were you? I bet that is why you were cut in your face." The bishop referred to the scar that still ran over the entire left cheek of Christoph's face, and the man immediately showed his weakness by feeling it up. "It is midwinter and snow has fallen. How long do you think a siege will last?"

"Excellency, lord Gérard commands but few men. Surely he would surrender Rich..."

"Richard de Courtenay is of minor importance to my plan. He is condemned, an outlaw, he can't harm us anymore."

"But excel..."

"And if..." the bishop interrupted his captain by holding up his right index finger. He then picked a poker from the wall to adjust the fire in his hearth. "...if the Courtenay's go into full rebellion my brother the king will squash them." The fire swelled up, and brought more heat into the room. Even making Alexandre sweat a little.

"Excellency, it would mean a great deal to me if Richard were to be eliminated. I still have a small score to settle." And Christoph rubbed against the scar on his left cheek with his left hand.

“What you do in your own time is your decision, just remember to be in Florence. The council starts in 25 days. If you’re not there, I’ll find someone else.”

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The following day the sun was shining, and Richard was out in the citadel’s garden. Its plants and grass had all been covered by a thick layer of snow, and only sparsely some green leaves, or dots of brown dirt showed. It was winter alright, and it sure was cold. The sun’s minimal heat was barely enough for Richard to stay outside. His uncle forbade him to leave the keep, but he felt too confined inside. Besides he hardly feared anyone would recognize him. The world in the middle ages was simply too big. Even the king would not have been recognised by the common man without his crown and entourage.

The knight hid behind the thick fur coat he was given, while he walked slowly through the garden. His current situation gave him ample time to contemplate his life. He pondered the fate of his unborn child. A strange feeling of loss, which he could not describe, and he wondered what happened to his wife, Adelaide. Richard could not phantom anyone wanting her dead. Even not himself. Although he never loved her, that was reserved for another. He couldn’t really say he missed her, for he wondered if he ever really had her. Adelaide was beautiful, but not in a friendly way. A girl you lusted after, but wouldn’t fall in love with. Bright blonde hairs, and screaming blue eyes. Still it didn’t matter much if you were hardly in the same room together.

His marriage to Adelaide was a conception of their parents. De Courtenay and Wittelsbach, you couldn’t miss. As the second daughter of the duke of Bavaria, their marriage would strengthen their families bonds, and

the position of the house de Courtenay.

Richard looked up at the heavens and wondered what he would do now. He was a prisoner inside his uncle's castle. He considered leaving France, and live as a mercenary. The English had taught him all he needed to know about war. Perhaps he could go to Castille, or Italy... but then what was the point to it all? He had fought his entire life. A door creaked, and opened. Someone stepped out:

"Oh sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you." It was his uncle's oldest daughter Plaisance. Dark haired and slender. She still had those cute freckles on her face, which she had when she was younger. Her feet gently stepped onto the stones of the garden. "I was told by Alice you would be here."

"The servant girl? Well, don't worry. I was just contemplating my next move." Plaisance then stepped outside. Like Richard she wore a fur coat over her thick brown winter dress, and she joined him near the central square at the fountain. The water was now frozen completely dry, but during summer it gave a joyful impression. The garden wasn't large by any measure, so Richard decided to sit down again and invited his twelve year-old cousin to join him on the wooden bench.

"Yes, father told me what happened, and of course we all heard the rumours." She said with great variations in tone as only children do. "So I came down here to see how you were doing. Are you alright then?" Plaisance smiled an innocent smile at him. She hardly knew anything about the harsh world they lived in. It lifted Richard's spirits somewhat.

"Well", he said, and smiled back at the freckled girl. "Considering the circumstances I'm doing quite good." He responded with a touch of cynicism that was lost completely on the girl. Richard coughed. "I mean I've lost a lot, almost everything, but I'm still alive. Perhaps God saw it fit to spare me so I

could serve him further.”

“You must miss her? Plaisance inquired further, as she pulled up her legs on the bench and curled her arms around them. She shivered with the cold, but tried not to let Richard notice. He didn’t:

“Do I miss Adelaide.” Richard sighed and gazed at the garden with its small columns, that held up the ceilings to the covered passages inside. Dabs of snow were falling from its roof. “She was my father’s choice...and we grew apart even further the past few years, as I was fighting the war. But still... I don’t know perhaps a bit.” Richard turned his gaze towards Plaisance as he spoke the final words.

“Didn’t you love her?” She asked full of innocence, and Richard chuckled in response. “God did not grant me to love her. I did love someone once, But I lost her.”

“Who was she? What happened?” Plaisance was now getting excited. She looked at Richard, who had turned his face out to the horizon.

“Her name was Gisèle, and we met during one summer fifteen years ago. There was nothing quite like her. But... she was taken from me.”

“Why?” Plaisance studied Richard, as he was still gazing at the frozen grass. *Did it still hurt?* She wondered.

“She was already promised to another man. A Greek lord. She never told me.”

“Have you ever heard from her? Do you know where she is?” Richard sighed and smiled when he thought back:

“She’s at the same place she’s been the past fifteen years, Constantinople. After that summer I never heard from her again.” For a short moment there was a silence, but then Plaisance enthusiastically restarted the conversation:

“So what will you do now then? I mean without titles, or place to live. I mean you can’t stay here.” Plaisance was startled by what she said. “I mean... you might be hunted down. They will find you sooner, or later... You could go look for her!” She said, as if struck by a wondrous idea.

“To Constantinople, and chase a married woman?” Richard laughed.

“Where else would you go?” The young girl asked him, and Richard had to admit he didn’t have a proper answer for her.

\*

In the evening Gérard de Courtenay was holding a council meeting, with his most trusted men, Samuel, Laurent, Emile, Alain, and Sebastian. All common soldiers, lacking a surname, but elevated to the position of captain by their old lord. These were the men he always counted on, and he counted on them tonight to help solve the problem concerning Richard, who had joined them. The fire was roaring, and the thick stone walls of this windowless room inside the heart of the castle were warm and inviting. The stones turned brown in the glow of the orange fire. It flickered on the faces of the assembled men. Including Gérard, who sat on his elevated brown throne. The old knight drank wine from his silver chalice and then said: “Men, you are my most loyal soldiers, and counsellors. You know why I’ve summoned you here. With God’s help I know we can find a solution.”

“My lord...”, Alain son of Jean said, and with great difficulty the old man rose from his chair. “My lord de Courtenay, your cousin’s plight is highly unfortunate...”, and he nodded to Richard, who sat on the other side of the room, before he continued: “...but sheltering him here puts all of Dixmont in danger. What if the king sides against us?” He said and tweaked his grey beard before he sat down again.



“Nonsense!” Laurent the man with dark complexion and black moustache said. “Nonsense!” He stood up, and while he spoke he turned around so everyone could hear him speak in a loud manner. “The king will never side with the bishop, our master has served him, and his father, well for all these years fighting the English. Let us not forget Patay, or Orleans!”

“That was ten years ago.” The Jew Samuel said. “And the king was only 22. Do you think he will really side against his brother, the bishop? Besides, from what I’ve heard Richard’s reputation with the king hasn’t been as good since his captivity at Rouen.” Richard listened to it all intently, and flashes of his dream returned when the names Patay and Rouen sounded.

“Are you calling the lord’s nephew a traitor?!” Sebastian a strong man with long blond hair stood up. “He fought the English for more than a decade.” Sebastian looked like a Norseman when he made his big gestures and spoke with a deep voice. His brown fur clothes clearly found it difficult to keep all his muscles sheltered. “What you speak off are only rumours!”

“No, Samuel speaks the truth...” Richard said, for he suddenly felt the need to intervene, and stood up as well. He looked at his uncle who gave him an approving nod. “I did challenge the king, and refused to declare Joan a witch. Until he threatened to forfeit my titles. I had to choose between the Maiden or my family. So I relented, but I doubt the king would ever forget.” Richard let his right hand slide through his hair before he said: “I don’t believe for an instant the king would favour me over his brother.”

“I’m not sure you’re doing yourself any good, Richard.” Gérard smilingly said, “but I believe God will approve of your honesty.” He took another sip from his silver chalice, and then rose to his feet as well. “However... the decision seems simple enough for me to make.” In fact Gérard had already decided beforehand. “Even if it is one I do not choose

easily.“ He continued, walked to Richard, and put his left hand on his shoulder. “I believe it’s best if you leave. There is no place in France for you to hide. You’re an outlaw. Pretty soon there’ll be a price on your head.” Gérard’s captains were all silent as their lord explained his decision, who then took another sip of his wine and awaited Richard’s reply.

“Then it is settled. Tomorrow I will depart.”

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The tallest tower in castle Dixmont was situated at the east side or rear end of its citadel. Forming a pentagon, the tower was the middlemost spire of the five, and attached directly to the lord’s personal residency. Serving not only a military purpose, the tower was also Gérard’s favourite vantage point at night to look out at the surrounding land and the heavens, for he was a deeply devout man. When he brought Richard with him this time, the whole land was covered in white snow, creating a remarkable view. Gérard had sent Richard up first, who was now looking outward to where the river Yonne was still streaming. A cold wind blew against Richard’s face. So he wrapped his shawl around his throat and ears for protection, then he looked up at the sky, and all the stars that floated in the Lord’s ether.

“It’s quite a sight, isn’t it Richard?” Gérard had finally scaled the wooden ladder to the top, and now they both stood at the battlements. The wind howled frightfully against the stone. “I often come up here, when I want to think, and I believe you have much to think about at the moment.”

“Is that Venus?” Richard pointed at a pinkish dot in the sky.

“No, unfortunately Venus can only be seen during twilight.” Gérard was silent for a moment. “Sometimes the most beautiful things are only shown for a short time in life.

“What do you mean?” Richard said, and his uncle looked as if he knew more than he let on. “Plaisance told me about Gisèle.” Gérard walked out to the battlements and stared at the great forest that surrounded his lands, which now had turned white as well. “Have you ever thought about going after her?”

“Gisèle?” Richard asked, and joined his uncle at the wall. It felt cold to his touch. The French limestone proved sturdy building material, but unfortunately wasn’t quite pleasing to touch. Especially in the midst of a cold winter at 25 meters above the ground.

“Yes, there is nothing left here for you. Perhaps there is happiness to be found in the east. At the very least a purpose. You could take up the cross.” They both looked out at the horizon now, and in the distance small fires could be seen burning.

“Take the cross? To defend the Greeks? They are heretics.”

“Do you really believe that? Even the mad king of France, Charles VI was wise enough to send his daughter to form an alliance with the East. The Greeks and their city, Constantinople, form a gateway to Europe. If it falls who knows how far the Turks will come.” Gérard felt his beard, before he continued. Unbeknownst to the two men a silent killer had been quietly scaling the tower’s ladder upwards, and was nearing the very battlements Richard and Gérard stood on. “The Greeks are Christians like us, they’ve simply fallen from the true path. I would think a man with your experience would know better.” Richard remained silent, for he knew his uncle was right. “But I won’t have you go to Constantinople. It is surrounded by the Turks. As it happens, the Greek Emperor is in Florence for a council of reconciliation. Who knows maybe you’ll see her again.”

*Gisèle*, Richard thought and in a short glimpse saw her flowing hair,

and beautiful smile. Only to be awoken by the sound of a sword unsheathing. Richard could barely turn around, and make a quick sidestep to evade the blade of his assailant, who in the same move gave Gérard a hit with the backside of his left arm. Richard dove to the left, to escape another attack. In a brief glimpse he got a look at his attacker, who was dressed in black leather armour. His face was almost completely covered with an equally black scarf. Again the assailant struck, and this time Richard could only roll as far as the edge of the tower would allow him, which caused the sword to strike the back of his fur coat and get stuck. Immediately recognising his chance he rolled over back to the other side, and with his left leg kicked hard at the feet of his attacker. With a shout the man fell down upon him, allowing Richard for the first time to look him in the eye. *The scar!*

Another sword unsheathed. Gérard had crept back up, and was now wielding his two-hander with a determined grip. The attacker and Richard had fallen into a wrestling struggle, during which Richard ripped off the scarf from the man's face. "Christoph!" But Christoph immediately seized the opportunity to give Richard a head-butt, and stood again. He grabbed his sword just in time to counter a slash by Gérard. It turned into a sword fight and Christoph was no stranger to the contest. He lunged in, slashing and thrusting and Gérard could barely hold him off. Christoph slashed another time and took with him a part of the lord's grey beard. Unfortunately for Christoph he had failed to render Richard unconscious. As Richard leapt towards the silent attacker, and threw him down. Richard landed on the floor of the battlements, but Christoph did not share in his luck. He fell down the hatch, he himself had left open, and broke his neck when he landed three meters down. His sword still reflected the starlight as it lay beside him.

"A friend of yours?" Gérard asked, and Richard crept up to look down

the hole.

“He once was when we fought on the side of the Maiden. Then he betrayed us.” Richard breathed heavily. “I gave him the scar.” Then Richard felt his face again. “I think I broke my nose.”

“Let me take a look.” Upon which Gérard grabbed his chin. “You’re fine, just keep your head back as you walk. It’ll stop the bleeding.” And as Richard recovered, Gérard looked outwards again. “This proves I can’t keep you safe here, Richard. I still have many powerful friends among the army. One of them arranged your escape three weeks ago.” Gérard turned around. “But even they can’t control everything.” Richard looked up at Gérard who simply nodded to reply his unspoken question, that it was indeed him who had arranged his escape. Gérard turned his head away again when he said: “Richard, you’ve sacrificed your body and youth for France, and then your soul for your family. Perhaps it is finally time to serve yourself now.”

“So Florence it is.” Richard replied.

“The Italians call it Firenze. When you get there ask for Cosimo, and tell him I sent you.”

“Just Cosimo?”

“Just Cosimo.”

## Chapter three

**I**t took Richard twelve weeks to get to Florence. Since traveling in the Middle Ages was hard and rarely safe, the knight had offered his services as a soldier to a traveling band of merchants. The band was a motley crew of people: there were wine salesmen from the Provence, fishermen and