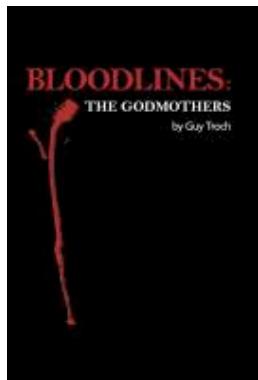


# BLOODLINES: THE GODMOTHERS

by Guy Troch





*In this first book of the **BLOODLINES** series, the five godmothers are introduced. The thirteenth century is the stage. Love and lust, bloodletting, and adventure are the players. A Scottish noblewoman takes off to rescue her brother in Saracen-country, a Nubian Princess is sold to the Khan's Mongols, A Chinese and Indian noble woman suffer the same fate. A Samojed shaman-girl follows suit. The "bad" godmother's line starts in the Roman era in Germania.*

# **BLOODLINES**

## The Godmothers

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# **BLOODLINES:**

## **THE GODMOTHERS**

**Guy Troch**

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ISBN: 978-1-63490-137-6

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.  
2015

Second Edition

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## Chapter One

September 3rd, 1227, near Karakorum, Mongolia

Isabelle de Ste. Clair was putting one foot in front of the other and kept repeating that action in a physical and mental state of total exhaustion. They had left the Khan's camp two days ago, relentlessly advancing at a grueling 30 miles a day tempo, stopping only to have some food, rest and water twice a day. Dsjinghis Khan was dead. He had fallen off his horse in the Xining province of Western China giving chase to a band of enemies and had died a couple of days later due to a strange fever—or so it was said. There even was this strange story going around about a Chinese princess he had raped who had inserted a piece of poisoned glass in her vagina. Isabelle knew better though. How in heaven's name had she ended up in the funeral procession of the Khan?

Only a couple of years ago, she was riding her horse, hunting and doing needlework, living a happy life at home in the Ste. Clair castle in Scotland, near Edinburgh. She still remembered the message that had been delivered one evening to her father Henry, the Earl of Rosslyn.

The news was bad—very bad. Her twin brother John, whom she adored, and who had left home to fight infidels in the Holy Land, joining the Fifth Crusade with Scottish, Flemish and Dutch knights, had been reported missing in action. After a bloody skirmish in the deserts near Cairo, he had been forced away from his fellow fighters and had not been seen since then.

Her father and mother had tried to dissuade Isabelle from leaving with reasoning, tears and almost by force, ultimately locking her up in her room, putting a guard at the door. It had not been enough to hold her back though. The love for her twin brother was too strong. She had been hiding weapons, clothes and provisions in her room and it had

been easy for her to slip out of the castle just before dusk. After leading her horse for a couple of miles, she mounted it and made for the port of Montrose, about 60 miles due northeast, knowing her father would send search parties towards Edinburgh or even York. She had a dear friend in Montrose, Malcolm Erskine, the son of Matthew Erskine, of Flemish-Norman nobility, whom she met at a feast in honor of King Alexander, son of William ‘The Lion’ at the Red Castle. They took a romantic walk during the festivities. There was quite a lot of holding hands and some feverish and very unsuccessful kissing and petting. Later, messages and letters were interchanged by way of merchants and travelers, but they hadn’t seen each other since the feast.

Riding through the forest, she hoped that Malcolm would be able to help her get on a boat across the Channel. By the time she couldn’t discern trees from free space she halted, bridled her mare Bryn and started a fire. While having a late meal of cold veal with some barley bread, she started thinking about the way to go about things. Her very much loved, but very much less intelligent brother had followed a whim and his friends into a crusade bestowed with bad omens from the beginning. Quarrels and disputes between the pope and some military leaders created chaos and thus loss of life.

At first they received regular messages from John, sending word from every port where his ship moored for provisions. As time went on, the messages grew ever scarcer and the news went from bad to worse and even worse. Bad temper among the leadership, disease and storms made for a grueling passage to the port of Acre, recently taken from the Saracens, teeming with pestilence and death. The next message was about John joining the Templar order with some of his Flemish, Dutch and Scottish friends, forming a military detail, small and fast, to lend swift help in case of need and danger to the pilgrims. Their leader was the Templar Grand Master Pedro de Montaigue who believed in leading from the front and who was a fierce warrior. He was totally disrespectful of his own health and instilled in his pupils a sense of duty and care for the defenseless faithful making their way to the birthplace of their spiritual lord. The last months though, there had been no message at all but a very short letter sent by Armand, lord of

Blanchefort, about John being a very brave fighter in the service of the lord, taking care of the poor souls making their way east.

And then the dark message had been delivered at their doorstep about John being cut off from the main fighting body of knights in a desperate attempt to save one of the young knights about to be killed by a large force of Muslim warriors. Her mother and father crumbled down and wept. It was then she made the pledge to go and get her brother back. That's what she had sworn to her parents and they told her she couldn't, shouldn't go. It was not ladylike, too dangerous and not pious, etcetera, etcetera. She hadn't even listened to anything they had said after that and started making plans. She had sent word to Malcolm, had gathered weapons, food and clothes in her room and groomed Bryn, her horse, her soul mate.

Her grandmother had told her she descended from the *Iceni*, probably from Queen Boadicea herself, producing a golden broche in the shape of the island of Mona, or Ynys Mon, as she insisted on calling it.

Isabelle had always been a horse person. As a two-year-old, she had been found in the stables after a long panicky day of searching, fast asleep next to Tara, Bryn's mother. Ever since that time she had an instinctive relationship with the animals. She knew how to approach them, what was wrong with them and she was totally devoid of fear for the big animals. She had spent long hours with Cran, the blacksmith-horse physician, living a short distance from her parent's burgh in a smithy in the woods. People came a long way with their favorite horses to see Cran, who claimed to be descending from the druids and who had a strange melodious way of conversing with the wind creatures, as he used to call the horses. They used to treat, exercise and of course shoe the horses, she and Cran, regularly losing track of time. Usually, one of the maids from the burgh would come running and shouting to haul her back home to the rebukes of her mother and the headshaking of her father.

The fire started to get going in earnest now and her camp was in order, so she cleaned the plates, rinsed them in the brook and wrapped herself in her old soldier's mantle, a gift from her uncle, her father's

brother. He said it dated back to the Roman era, her great-great-great grandmother Boadicea taking it off a Roman centurion after killing him with her bare hands. She considered this a typical example of Celtic enthusiasm, and thus, exaggeration. It was like Cran, her Celtic horse friend in the woods who sometimes went a little overboard talking about her ancestry and the Iceni and the way they had fought the Romans back into the sea.

With her mantle tucked around her, the fire roaring away, the presence of Bryn and her physical and mental fatigue she went into a deep and dream-riddled sleep...smoky surroundings, big rooms with wooden walls and several fires burning inside...painted people chanting...singing.

A strange looking old woman with a painted face stood close by, bare breasted, fire in her eyes, speaking in a strange tongue...that she understood strangely enough. She was speaking about the need to drive the enemy back into the sea...about their way of life, one with nature, one with the seasons and the land, and the threat to it because of the Roman empire invading their domains with military might but also attacking their culture with more deceptive, secretive means...circular versus rectangular, metal versus wood, rock versus sea and static versus flowing.

And then this big woman rose and instantly dominated the room by sheer charisma, redhead and powerful, scars and bruises visible all over her body. She turned to Isabelle and said in a husky voice, spanning the era, “Granddaughter, your dream has brought you to the isle of Ynys Mon, just before we leave for our last stand against the Roman barbarians. The druids are giving us their blessing and we are going to sing all through the night. We will succeed or be vanquished, but we will have tried.”

Isabelle awoke to a hazy dank morning with Bryn nibbling at her shoulder, demanding some food. The fire had almost died down so she fed it some more wood and set about performing the tasks of a day in the wild, all the time thinking of her strange dream and the woman calling her granddaughter. She didn’t have much time to muse though. The sun was up, her brother was missing in the Holy lands and she

needed to throw her father's dogs off her scent. She loved her father dearly, but he was so easy to read she knew in advance the measures he was going to take trying to track her down. He would be thinking Edinburgh, a crossing to Bruges and then a passage to the Orient on horseback. So she was planning a diversion, showing up in the inn at Lasswade, near Bonnyrig, on the road east to Edinburgh. She would make sure everybody in the building knew her name and that everybody was certain she was heading for Bruges via Edinburgh. It took her about six hours to get to the inn where there was a jolly bunch of travelers and merchants about. It didn't take her long to join a handful of masons on their way to perform repair work on Edinburgh Castle. She introduced herself properly, extensively babbling about her plans to go to Edinburgh, embark on a boat to Bruges and join the caravan traveling to the Holy land by France, Italy and then, on to Cyprus by boat.

By the time she left the premises, spirits were high, cups were filled and emptied at ever growing speed and the singing of scabrous songs started in earnest, growing more deafening by the minute. Isabelle went out, mounted Bryn and headed west making the most of the few remaining hours of daylight. Loanhead was the next stop on her list.

That is, the vicinity of Loanhead, since she had decided to avoid any contact with local people. So she made her way west, passing by Kingsknowe and Linlithgow, eventually arriving near Stirling, where she crossed the river Forth, heading north into the highlands.

Fall was giving way to winter and one morning, as she was getting close to the town of Kinross on the shores of Loch Leven, she awoke covered by a thin blanket of powdery snow. She knew she needed to make haste to reach Montrose and Malcolm, before weather conditions turned really harsh.

After making a wide circle around Perth, a bustling town where the chance of being spotted was real, she made good headway towards Forfar, a small hamlet about twenty miles from Montrose where she hoped to find Malcolm waiting—sweet Malcolm with his unruly boyish bustle of blond hair, grey eyes that looked at her as in a trance

and his strong muscular frame she couldn't help dreaming about at night.

King Winter was making a grand entrance now. Evenings, nights and mornings grew distinctively chillier and from time to time dark grey skies shed a white blanket of fluffy snow. Before leaving home she had only confided in one person, her soul mate Con, who didn't even try to dissuade her from her plan but spent hours briefing her about the trip north.

"Listen, Bel, Scotland is the most beautiful country on the face of this earth, but it doesn't allow for even one mistake this time of year. Weather, wildlife and stupidity are the main killers, the latter being the principal one. You should be able to get to Montrose before the weather gets really ugly, but if I believe my wind creatures, we should be in for some very cold times. I can tell by their manes, their droppings, they keep flapping their tails in this weird wintery fashion, and..." She interrupted him there, knowing his speeches about his whinnying darlings could drag on for ages.

"Alright, princess," he said. "You know what you need to take with you—a fresh set of clothes in a watertight skin, food for Bryn, dried food for yourself, weapons, your emergency pack for the wild and some silver and gold coins. Stay away from the smaller villages. If possible stay away from anything human, because your father's network is better extended than you think. During the day, there should not be a problem wildlife-wise, but as soon as it gets dark, light a big fire and build a shelter next to it because wolves and bears will be around. It's not cold enough yet for them to really take chances, though, so that leaves weather and stupidity to consider. I know you're clever, so the only thing that's worrying me is the weather, and my whinnying weather specialists are giving me bad forecasts. Build a camp early, start a big fire and above all else, stay dry! If you should get into the water and no shelter is near, you won't have a chance in hell! If it happens anyway, get out of your clothes first, put on the dry ones from the skin and try to light a fire or start riding Bryn for warmth!"

She had about twenty to thirty miles to go to the saltwater basin near Montrose where she was supposed to meet young earl Erskine on the North side of the river feeding the basin. She made her way towards Barnhead, a very small hamlet south of the Esk River coming out of the big saltwater basin. At dawn she had already noticed a strange leaden color in the sky, temperatures made strange swings up and down and the winds were gushing in all directions and blowing blustery. Terrain was not helping either, snowdrifts hiding the roads and treacherous potholes making the path even more dangerous. She made a stop a couple of hours before nightfall and was in doubt about either going into the hamlet of Barnhead for the night or moving further towards the river and perhaps even crossing it. The thought of Malcolm tipped the scale. She hungered for him not only mentally but physically as well, as this was her first emotional bond...man...did it work havoc on her young woman's body! She patted Bryn on the neck, gave a little spur and the horse went into a steady trot. They started making their way into the wintery woodland leading towards Montrose.

In his last message, Malcolm had told her to cross the South Esk River west from the basin and wait for him on the north side. There was a rocky outcrop about two miles inland from the basin, ten miles to the north. There, Malcolm and his friends had built a wooden cabin they used for hunting and fishing. There used to be a royal burgh there, called Dun's Dish, and that's where he would be waiting for her.

At first the going was pretty good and she even thought about crossing the river that same evening. After a while though, the weather got really gruesome and she remembered the words of Con, '*I think there is bad weather coming*' and so it turned out! She couldn't see ten feet down the road at one time, so she started looking for a place to shelter and make camp for the night. It was a difficult search because of the visibility getting close to nil and the ruggedness of the woods. In the end it started getting dark in earnest and by a stroke of luck there was this heap of rocks surrounded by large beach trees providing shelter from the howling blizzard. She took care of Bryn first, unsaddling her, giving her some food and rubbing her down. She had some trouble getting a fire going because the wood was not exactly dry

and the howling wind killed any embryonic flames she tried to produce. At last, a fire was blazing away and she fashioned some sort of shelter with a maze of branches and her mantle, trying to get some sleep in these stormy conditions. At one time, somehow, she had actually dozed off and when she awoke a couple of hours later, the weather had changed dramatically. The wind had completely died down by now and snowing had stopped, but temperatures had taken a tumble, it was freezing cold! She had no more feeling in toes and fingers so she started feeding the fire some logs, jumped up and down and started hitting her sides with her arms to restart circulation. Bryn didn't like the weather either, whinnying, kicking and being a total nuisance while Isabelle tried to get her saddled and ready for traveling. In the end though, they got back on the beaten track and headed north towards the basin. The panorama was breathtaking. Snow-covered highlands with basalt rock overgrown with birch and beech trees painted beautiful sketches. The contrast with the clear blue skies convinced her this was indeed the most beautiful country on earth. In places, Bryn waded knee-deep through the snow and seemed to like it on top! She was snorting and whinnying, doing short bursts of energetic galloping and making Isabelle bounce up and down in the saddle forcing her to use her short bullwhip and spurs to calm the horse down. After a while they turned into the well-oiled, mile-eating machine they usually were, functioning as a unit. Deep snowdrifts, white woodlands and rocky heathers were havens of quiet, only a howling wolf or a screeching eagle interrupted the utter silence sometimes.

Her mind started to wander, thinking about her foolish-heroic-childish twin brother wandering off with some of his equally foolish friends to free Palestine, and while he was at it, save the Christian world and singlehandedly destroying the Saracen hordes. She couldn't help but admire his total self-abnegation and irrational yearning for fame and heroism. She was very aware of the feeling among Scottish noblemen, a generation born in an era where national pride and need for independence was instilled in the young by their fathers and uncles, a result of years and years of war against the English oppressor.

When the party was held at the Red Castle, she had been positively surprised by the young nobility present, no superficial squabble about fashion, fabrics or furniture. They were talking about revolution and resistance against the English and...independence... establishing a Nation of Scots that would take the lead in freeing the Holy land... about the fleet they would build to explore the world and establish a Scottish Empire and Commonwealth.

Her thoughts automatically went to Malcolm Erskine, the wild and explosive young man she met at the party, full of pride and emotion and wild as the Highlands where he was born. They bounced into each other quite literally. She ruined his waistcoat spilling her mead all over him and all he could do was burst out in his lion-like roaring laughter, he swept her off her feet instantly. After they experimented in the garden with a very small amount of success to kiss properly, he stated that she had stolen his heart. She was his Queen, the woman he would go to and through hell for. He would conquer strange countries and heap treasures upon her beyond compare... She calmed him down and they started talking about horses, and houses, yards and even children.

She got to the river next to the basin, only the weather went mad again. Con's words whirled through her thoughts and the whole world went white, the fog and drizzle freezing over. She hesitated at first but the water didn't seem too deep and the current was not a problem either, so she tapped Bryn on the neck and drove her gently into the water. Her mare descended from a long line of tough horses bred by the *Iceni*, a crossbreed between North-European wild horses and Barb horses from the North of Africa, so she was not afraid of the cold or the water, not even wolves scared her. The South Esk River was thirty yards wide at this crossing point and they were about halfway when it happened. Bryn's front left foot slipped and slid in a hole between two rocks. Isabelle's instincts took over, realizing her horse's leg could break, so she made her prance. Bryn got up on her rear feet and lost her footing, throwing off Isabelle and falling down herself. They were splattering and splashing about, both of them. That was when she realized the current was a little stronger than she had thought at first

and the water carried them off. It was only after a mile or so that Bryn managed to get a foothold and got up, Isabelle still holding on to her manes for dear life. The water was so cold it had cut off her breathing, she was wet to the bone and her clothes weighed a ton. Bryn dragged Isabelle out of the river and she clung to the side of the horse like a bunch of rags. Standing by the stream, she immediately grabbed the watertight bag with the second set of clothes. Her heart stopped for a second! The bag was torn...probably a sharp stone in the river...and her clothes were wet. She stripped bare anyway, because the clothes she was wearing now were completely drenched. The pain the cold inflicted on her naked, wet body was excruciating so she quickly got into the second set of clothes that was only a little less drenched. Remembering Con's words, she got on Bryn's back and kicked her into a trot, hoping to get warmed by the animal's body heat. They started north in the general direction Malcolm had told her. After a while though, she realized they were not going to make it. The cold was too intense and she drifted in and out of consciousness, the feeling in her hands and feet diminishing fast. She twined her gloved hands into the manes of her horse and they trotted on. Her mind started to wander as if her being was retreating inside, fighting a losing battle of trenches. The white world around her was creating a hallucinogenic environment and she went into a kind of trance.

The big woman was there again, red hair flowing around her head, cascading down her back. She was wearing a tartan held by a magnificent golden brooch, a heavy golden torque around her neck. She slowly walked between tens or even hundreds of log fires on a plain bestrewn with people, all singing, eating and drinking, painting their bodies blue. On the other side of the narrow valley, Isabelle could make out another mass of campfires with shadows moving in front of them. The woman moved to a small hillock in the middle of the camp, got on top of it and addressed the crowd that turned silent as if the sound had been cut off suddenly.

“Look at me, my people, my warriors! I am the Boudicca. The Roman barbarians betrayed the promises made to my dead husband Prasutagus. They are looting, killing women and children and pillaging

our land. They destroyed our holy island of Ynys Mon and butchered the holy men and women, our druids. They raped my two child-daughters and whipped the flesh of my back.” She threw off her tartan and stood there with naked torso and turned round to show the horrible scars on her back, forming a gruesome patchwork. “These dogs will not stop before our whole way of living has disappeared, so we have no option but to fight them...fight them and destroy them...push them back into the ocean and reclaim what is ours...I tell you—follow me into battle or submit to the roman yoke!”

A mighty roar came rolling up the hillside, a thousand voices repeated one name in chant, over and over again, “Boudicca, Boudicca, Boudicca...” Then this formidable woman turned once more towards Isabelle and said, “I go to meet my destiny, my granddaughter...the outcome is known only to the gods. Whether I survive or not is unimportant in the wheels of the eternal universe turning. Having met you in the spirit-world is proof that my bloodline will go on and I can tell you now that you will meet with kin souls and that great feats are in store for your offspring...farewell, blood of my blood.”

Malcolm Erskine was brooding while unsaddling his horse at the hunting lodge he and his rogue Highlander friends had built near Dun’s dish, a small loch to the northwest of the Montrose basin. They used it for hunting and fishing and sometimes for getting really drunk on fine ale...in a word, for behaving like the irresponsible adolescents they were. In Malcolm’s case, his irresponsibility had come to a grinding halt recently for a couple of reasons. His mother died some years ago due to a long, crippling illness, to which his two-year-old little sister had succumbed too. The gloom and depression in the house had been suffocating. His father had started drinking, effectively getting drunk to the point of unconsciousness and repeating this exercise day in, day out. His three younger brothers, James, Ronald and Tom, aged 13, 15 and 15, the latter two being twins, had done what can be expected of fine upstanding Scottish youngsters without any guidance. They had gone berserk, even running into trouble with the law while organizing a race in the little hamlet of Dubton, the three

of them riding a bull into town at market day. It was a miracle no one got killed, but injuries and damages to houses and goods were substantial. When Malcolm went to retrieve the three scoundrels from the sheriff's office, he took them to the stables of the family home and gave them a severe beating so that they were not able to eat sitting down for three days. When he tried to explain the matter to his father though, the man was already drunk beyond stupor early in the morning, so Malcolm decided there and then that he would have to grow up without any delay and take family matters into his own hands. He talked to his uncle James, his father's brother, one of the king's counselors who gave him his blessing and promise of support.

He had taken his father to the monks at Monmuir, a small community that took care of the mentally sick. He wept like a child after leaving his father with the monks. His role model, a drooling, babbling wreck, he was feeling like a traitor to the man who fed him and took him through the first phases of life. But he had to think about his criminal, irresponsible, idiotic brothers now...whom he loved more dearly than life itself. He was just about to attack the paperwork of the estate, having cleaned out the place in thirty days of splashing, throwing away and burning trash, tidying up stables, selling animals he considered too sick or too old, firing people not able or willing to do their job and hiring new, eager young men and women, sometimes from hamlets a long way from Montrose, on the advice of his friends.

The initial chaos and mess created by the flushing out of years of bad management and waste and the import of new material: cattle, horses and supplies, slowly resolved itself and some embryonic order grew out of the mess. All this didn't go without a hassle. Arguments, accidents, fights and bloodshed were abundant in these first days. It proved his point that the new people were doing their job though, and that they were willing to exchange blows to prove their point. During the last ten years, he couldn't remember any discussion at all; he couldn't remember the house looking so tidy and bustling with activity either. The new animals were looking healthy and groomed, the house was clean and the grounds were ploughed and enriched with manure. The orchards were pruned and clean with the pruning material strewn around the hundreds of fruit trees: apples, pears, cherries and in

between raspberries. If he could hold out financially for a short while, being as broke as an empty broken glass cup, in a couple of months he could get his domain on the rails again. One more positive note was the effect of the backbreaking work on his three scoundrel brothers. They looked hollow-eyed and skin over bones, but they showed him they were aware of him taking over from their father and the emotional toll it had taken from him. The three of them were up and about in the small hours, milking, and getting wood for the fires and of course grooming the horses they were mad about, they actually adored the four-footers. Just then came the message from Isabelle, the girl he met at the Red Castle who immediately swept him off his feet. He could still see her face whenever he closed his eyes—her coppery blond hair, intense green eyes and her body. He could still feel her when they embraced, cursing himself for being so clumsy and inexperienced, just barely not hurting her when they kissed. It was a blessing that he went to bed so totally worn out, because when he didn't fall asleep immediately, his middle leg got so hard it hurt and falling asleep was very, very tough. Anyway, he could understand her point and he would probably react just like her if one of his brothers got lost the way her brother John had. He would have carried her to Saracen country on his back if it had not been for the situation he and his home were in. He could not leave his brothers alone now and he had his father to think about. But still he suffered some bouts of rage when thinking about this girl he had come to worship in this short while and the way he had to let her go, perhaps never to see her again. He got in touch with his best friends, his blood brothers, who he knew were going to join the Fifth crusade. He found out they were leaving by boat towards New Port, where they were planning to board a large galley sailing for the Holy Land. He wrote a message to Isabelle telling her about the transport possibility and the deadline she needed to meet. He still had a couple of days left, so he dug deep into work again.

The day before the meeting with Isabelle he took provisions, saddled up and set off towards ‘The Lodge’, that’s what he and his mates called their cabin. He got there early in the afternoon, started a fire, cleaned the place up and for the first time in a very long time sat down and thought about his life and the strange shenanigans he had

been subjected to these last weeks and months. He knew he had taken the right decision not joining Isabelle and his friends, instead straightening out his brethren and taking command of the mansion. His plan was to follow them after things had calmed down. He was a little less worried because she was going to be in the company of seven of his best friends; loudmouthed, unruly and brutish young men he trusted with his life. They would join her on the boat heading for New Port and would be her companions on the trip to Limassol, Cyprus.

She was the love of his life as he was thinking about her any time he was not working himself into a coma. The thought of her made the blood vessels in his groin working overtime. So he wandered about the lodge, tidied things up and started preparing the hides he and his friends had hunted for tanning. They had a large stone vessel mounted on top of a furnace they used to heat the tanning fluid they put the hides in. He filled it up with water and got the fire going underneath so it would be warm the next day to prepare the hides.

He had a late supper and fell asleep while still sitting at the table. When he woke up next morning, he was a little disoriented and about to start giving marching orders to his brothers and staff when he saw the peaceful surroundings of the cabin and realized where he was. The water in the big vessel was only lukewarm so he rekindled the fire. It was still very early in the morning and he didn't expect Isabelle to show up for a couple of hours. He got out of the cabin, saddled up and went for a ride in the wintery surroundings, trying to get some order into his troubled mind. He kept up a quick tempo riding south towards the river, his mind and body yearning for the presence of this girl...this special being that shook him to his foundations. The further he got on the way, the more he wanted to see her sweet face and hold her in his arms. It got so bad he even imagined he heard hoof beats in the distance. Maybe he needed to get himself admitted to Monmuir Abbey too; perhaps he was going mad just like his poor father. Shaking his head, he rode on and passed a bend in the road to see a specter, a horse and rider totally white and moving along slowly and evidently in pain. He really thought at first that he had gone mad, even thinking about turning his horse and fleeing. But then, feeling ashamed about his attitude, he spurred on the horse and headed straight for the

phantom duo. Getting closer, he suddenly recognized the rider and hurried to catch up. My god, Isabelle, her hands stuck frozen in the horse's manes, both horse and rider near death by freezing. She was unconscious and did not react to any yelling, prodding or shaking. He had to do some very quick thinking because she didn't have very much time left. He needed to get her warmed up fast. So he hoisted her onto his horse in front of him, held on to the reins of Bryn and kicked his horse into a brisk gallop. It took about half an hour to get back to the cabin, but it seemed to take much longer to him as he did not feel any proof of life coming from the hobbling mass of human being in front of him and he feared the worst. When they finally reached the cabin, he got off his horse quickly and carried his precious load inside, taking Bryn inside along with them. She was not responding at all and when he started taking off her clothes, they cracked and crackled, so he knew the clothes had been wet when she put them on. He was so worried for her life that he didn't even take notice of the breathtaking beauty of her naked body. He couldn't feel any pulse and did not discern any breathing, so he thought he had lost her. His heart cramped with grief because he had lost so much already in such a short span of time...he couldn't take anymore. Then he saw the vessel on the furnace, the water getting warmer but not hot just yet and took a swift decision. He took off his own clothes, took Isabelle in his arms and got into the hot tub. Then he waited...and waited....

Isabelle was charging along with the Boudicca, acting as her spear carrier standing next to her in the war cart drawn by four magnificent copies of Bryn, shouting her challenge at the hordes of Roman soldiers waiting for them further down the field. The big woman next to her was singing a war song while handling the span of horses masterfully. Next to them were ten more carts charging at top speed, each one with a driver and a spear-bearer, all of them female. She felt the rush of her blood while she held on for dear life and prepared her spears for throwing. Then they reached the Roman lines and she drove her first spear deep into the throat of a big legionnaire, the Boudicca driving their cart straight through the pack of Roman dogs. Only that was what the bastards had planned for all along. They

were caught in a fyke, surrounded on all sides by fire and legionnaires, heaps of rock and tree trunks thrown about to restrain horse and cart's free movement. And then, when they were forced to halt their war wagon and got out to kill as much of the enemy as possible, they were overrun by an avalanche of Roman foot soldiers, clad in leather and metal and suffocating both of them with their sweating bodies. Her last memory was of her great-grandmother warding off a sword blow and coming to stand back to back with her in a last stand against the Roman mob. Then a blow to the head made the world go hazy....

She was suddenly trotting through a white world, riding Bryn, and holding on to her manes, not feeling her own body...Everything was white...the trees...the ground...even Bryn and she herself. White...white...her breath came out of her mouth as white vapor...she saw a rider galloping towards her in a blurry motion...her brain translating his fierce speed into a slow-motion movement....

And then she was with the Boudicca again, both of them being tied to stakes on top of pyres with hordes and hordes of Romans around them. A fat Roman officer walked towards them and addressed the Boudicca.

“I am Gaius Suetonius Paulinus and I will hereby put an end to your legend of immortality, Boadicea. I will also poison the tales of your courage and bravery by spreading the rumor you poisoned yourself, which in your world is a coward’s way of dying!”

The Boudicca didn’t even look at the Roman, but instead turned her head and spoke directly to Isabelle. “My sweet daughter from the future, I can see your destiny. You will live great adventures, you will have special children with a very special man, a gift not given to every woman. I thank you to have come and fought my last battle with me and to have embraced death alongside me. I welcome death as a friend, having lost so many friends and loved ones already. The Roman dogs even killed my druids, the wise men and women on Ynys Mon, the sacred island. Always follow your heart, my beautiful child, even if doing so spits in the face of reason and logic, and follow love, the greatest gift on earth. Now let’s not give these monstrous men the

pleasure of hearing us scream. Be brave and sing with me...sing, Isabelle!" So they started singing a song, an age-old war song Isabelle had never heard, but she sang along with her great-grandmother while the Roman soldiers lighted the fire underneath the pyre....

Malcolm was thinking how he was ever going to explain this to Isabelle's parents; he was at a loss about what to do next. Here he was with the woman he wanted to have his children, to grow old with. Both of them were naked in a hot tub, he himself being alive and she very dead. Still not showing any sign of life, she felt like a bundle of wet rags bungling in his arms. Then, suddenly, just as he started thinking about taking her out of the water, she suddenly inhaled like a drowning person breaking through the water's surface shouting, "I will follow you even into death, Boudicca." Then she seemed to regain consciousness for a moment, looked at him and said, "Malcolm," fainted and fell back into the water. He grabbed her, dragged her from the water and started rubbing her fiercely with the rough cloths he and his friends used for drying skins. He quickly put on some clothes and noticed her circulation starting again, rosy patterns ever more apparent on her pale skin. He eased her down on the heap of skins waiting to be transported to the harbor, kept rubbing her skin briskly and covered her with some woolen cloths. She looked deathly pale, breathing like a fish on land, shaking, trembling and speaking in a tongue he did not recognize. Her shaking intensified, he could feel her pulse being erratic and sometimes stopping completely. Then, once again, she sucked in a great gasp of air and regained consciousness for a short while, looking up at him with a blurry glance and burbling some words and sounds. The next time she got out of her shadow world, she looked at him a little longer, seemed to recognize him and, a sweet loving smile on her lips, said, "Malcolm, dear Malcolm," only to go into a fit shaking and jerking about, her eyes turning in their sockets, bloody foam forming around her mouth, moaning, "Cold, cold, so cold!" He got out of his clothes again, slipped under the cloths with her, piled some skins on top of both of them, only then he felt the intense cold emanating from her body. He grabbed her tightly, entwining her with his limbs, feeling the trembling increase initially and, only after some

time, dying down. He felt intensely happy, knowing the love of his life would survive. Then he fell asleep, exhaustion, warmth and relief being a potent hypnotic. He woke up some time later, feeling her warm and very alive body pressed against his, and, oh god, his penis was also very alive, it was so swollen it hurt! She had gone into a coma-like state, sleeping with very slow and profound intakes of breath. He got her to drink some water and tucked her in under the hides again. After that, he took care of Bryn, relieving her of packs and saddle, rubbing her down, feeding her some oats and providing her with plenty of water. He put some more logs on the fire and, only now feeling his exhaustion. He made a second crib on the other side of the cabin to fall into a deep and dreamless slumber.

Hours passed by and Isabelle was first to wake up. She was totally unaware of where she was, images of white freezing surroundings, pyres with the Boudicca, her brother lost in the Holy Land, Malcolm and near-death experiences fluttering around in her tortured mind. She lifted her upper body off the bed, suddenly feeling very weak again and looked around the room. It was comfortably warm, a bit smoky but very cozy. A heap of skins was next to the wall, a large stone vessel filled with near to boiling water stood in the middle of the room and on the other side somebody was snoring like a dying ox. She put on some very unflattering men's clothes, got up and headed for the dying ox. It was Malcolm and it suddenly came back to her, all of it. He had saved her...he had taken her back to safety and gotten her back to life—the vessel, the crib, his warm body against her, he even got Bryn tended to. Her horse was very particular about who could groom her. The only one deemed worthy had been Con...until now. The mare snorted softly, nibbling the oats and greeting Isabelle happily. She moved closer to his bed, not wanting to wake him up. He was sleeping and making the grunting sounds she had heard all the way to the other bed. Then she noticed he was shivering slightly because his crib was on the other side of the cabin, where the warmth of the fire had to compete with the severe cold outside. It suddenly dawned on her. She was certain he had held her in his arms to warm her; she had been awake for a while, ever so slightly. He had been naked and she had distinctively felt his rock-hard erection

against her belly just before dropping back into the abyss of unconsciousness. Her heart melted for this gentle giant who was now shivering with cold because he was not at ease with his feelings for her. Perhaps she would never see him again, this man, perhaps she would perish trying to find her brother. Yet here he was, the one she knew who would, in other circumstances, be the man of her life and the father of her children. He was a bear-like man...his reddish crop of hair...his massive chin and the beard and mustache growing grubbily and free. She knew she loved him, he saved her life and now...she was leaving.

“Malcolm, wake up, Malcolm....” He growled and whirled his body around, throwing her off her feet and displaying his manhood to the world...then suddenly waking up trying to hold her, asking her how she was, hiding his penis, accidentally hitting her on the chin, cursing himself and feeling like an idiot all in one move!

“Isabelle...you...I...how... I love you.”

Isabelle took him by the hand, dropped the clothes she was wearing and led him to her bed closer to the fire. She gently took off his clothes, got the both of them under the covers and said, “Malcolm, perhaps we will never meet again. I know you saved my life and I am eternally grateful to you. I want you to be the first man I make love to, in other circumstances we would be speaking about marriage and children and such things. But you know I need to get my brother back...get him back or bury him if need be.”

“Isabelle,” he said, “I don’t want any reward for saving you...I love you more than my life ...I curse myself for letting you go out to the Holy Land by yourself, but the situation does not allow for any other....”

She silenced him with a kiss. Not an ordinary kiss, a hard kiss on the mouth, her tongue forcing his lips apart and invading his mouth. He took in a deep breath, totally surprised, but then his hormones took over and he kissed her back ferociously. She could feel his hands all over her body, cupping her breasts, touching her hard nipples and pushing his erect penis up against her belly. He kissed and licked her lips, then moved to the soft spot underneath her chin and down to her breasts, sucking and nibbling her nipples, feeling her shiver and moan.

She was going with the motion, feeling his hands, mouth and tongue excite her more and more. He let his lips and fingers wander down south, licking her bellybutton, moving with the movements of her muscles, his face being thrown up and down like a ship in a storm. He could now feel her stubbly pubic hair on his chin. When he touched the little button just above her vagina with his tongue, she reacted by groaning loudly, grabbing his hair and pushing his face into her sex. He could smell and taste the wetness of her excitement on his mouth and felt the hardness of his penis throbbing away, the feeling of lust increasing. He had now gone into a state of pure male madness, trying to get into her as soon as possible.

“Malcolm, Malcolm, MALCOLM!” she yelled, and he stopped his attempts to enter her.

“I...I...am sorry, Isabelle, I couldn’t help myself, I love you so and when you touched me I couldn’t resist the urge...I am sorry!”

“My love,” she said. “I don’t want our first lovemaking to be just a coupling...like animals, like bouncing bodies. I want to take the time to explore your body, and I want you to do the same with mine.”

He looked at her naked body illuminated by the roaring fire and took her in his arms, kissing her and feeling her body react to his. He previously only had acquired experience kissing some young local ladies, his most ardent kiss being the one he just got from Isabelle. He tried to contain the emotions bubbling up from deep inside, driving him howling mad. He felt her hands scratching at his back, heard her guttural moaning sounds and her hips pushing and pushing against him. He answered her tongue movements, feeling his way inside her mouth and let his hands go on another tour around her body. He felt her muscles tighten, her back tense and her nipples harden, she clawed at him now and turned over on her back, pulling him on top of her. He could feel her wetness on his hard member and pushed forward in a red haze. She inhaled fitfully, feeling her hymen tear with his first thrust. But when she held her breath and moaned and he tried to stop moving, she grabbed his buttocks and started pulling him in and out rhythmically, pushing her hips into his, moaning and hissing in his ear.

“Yes, Malcolm, take me, mate with me, and make me your woman!”

Malcolm felt his loins heat up. He felt the predictive convulsive feelings in his testicles, and let go with a huge shout. They fell asleep in each other's arms, tired and satisfied.

The day after, he was up early and pleased to see her up and about too before long. She came to him and gave him a long kiss on the lips.

“We have to talk, my love,” she said.

“I know, my love,” he answered.

“You first,” she said and so he started the speech he had been rehearsing for a long time.

“You are the one for me, Isabelle, I would die for you, let myself be hung and quartered and afterwards burned at the stake for you. I know why you want to do what you want to do, because I would do the same thing for the three criminal idiots who are my brothers.”

“Let’s take a walk and enjoy what little time we have together, my love,” Isabelle said. “I would rather stay, marry you and have a bunch of your children but you know I have to get my moronic brother back.”

“Don’t talk of your brother that way, Isabelle. He may not be as smart as you, and perhaps his quest with the Templars is not the wisest thing to do if you only think of things in material and monetary standards. I for one respect a man ready to put his life at risk to pursue his ideals!” And then he looked at her, her face was contorted with laughter, wide-eyed, looking at Malcolm and hitting her sides. “I do apologize, my love,” he added. “But this is not a matter to be taken lightly, your brother is a hero in the service of...” and then he had to stop and burst out laughing along with Isabelle, grasping the extent of his quite ridiculous attitude and the seriousness of his propos. They roared with laughter, actually falling to the ground and hitting their sides, turning red and blue in the face, and having new fits every time they looked at each other. They got up and started walking together in the magical scenery of the Scottish highlands under a carpet of pure white snow.

“You know, Isabelle, the younger generation of Scottish noblemen, and I am one of them, are sick and tired of the way the English have been treating us for years on end. We have decided to

react and stand shoulder to shoulder with King Alexander when he gives the word and stands up in rebellion! You will meet four of my best friends in the morning. We call each other by animal names, a residue of our younger years together. The first one is Bear, full name Haakon Eriksson of Orkney, the Jarl's son and Harald Eriksson's grandson. You will see why we call him Bear—he is huge! My second friend is Iain the Fox, fully named Iain Stewart of Angus, son of the Earl, and one of my blood brothers. The third one is the Cat, named Maël Choluim of Fife; Malcolm is his short name, just like mine. The fourth is our leader, the lion, Mael Isu or Mallus of Strethearn. All of them descend from high nobility, and all of them want to go where your brother is now and join the righteous fight. The ones that come back will stand with the king when the time comes. I have already told them I can't go with you, because of my situation, I also told them you are the apple of my eyes, the woman of my dreams and that they have to guard you with their lives because I, because I..."

She took him in her arms, kissed him gently on the lips and said, "Sweet Malcolm, life doesn't always go the way we would like it to go, it has bends and storms and ravines and who knows how the wheels of fortune will turn. I can only tell you that I love you, body and soul, I respect you and admire you for the way you handled the difficult situation at home. But you know I have to go and find my brother, I could not live with myself if I didn't."

"I know, my love," he said. "Let's walk back to the cabin, I expect to see my friends late in the afternoon or early evening, because they will be aiming to sail out with the high tide very early tomorrow." They strolled together through the wintery Highlands and didn't say another word, just enjoying each other's company. They got back to the cabin just before dusk, got the fire going again and roasted some grouse Malcolm shot the day before. He produced a bottle of claret and they drank a cup together. She had another difficult matter to clear up, then—Bryn.

"Malcolm, I want you to take Bryn home with you, I know she will be happy there and that you will take good care of her. If I come back, I will come and reclaim her."

“Not if, Isabelle,” he said. “When you get back, I will be waiting for you, no matter how long it takes, I will be waiting!”

She recognized the truthfulness in his words and embraced this mountain of a man, pulling his head down and kissing him purposefully on the lips. She hugged him with her whole body, grinding her hips against him, immediately feeling his reaction. They didn’t even make it to the bed this time; he hoisted her skirts over her hips, lifted her against the wall, pushed down his pants and eased her down gently. She could feel the tip of his big penis throbbing against her wet mound and wriggled her hips to absorb his organ inside. He entered her very slowly, pushing up inch by delicious inch until he was completely buried inside her.

“O Malcolm, yes, you big bear, do it...do it, push it harder inside, oh!” Malcolm saw red, he was so excited he just banged Isabelle against the wall and kept banging until he released with a big howl and felt his legs give way underneath him. They sagged to the floor; he picked her up and got the both of them into the stone vessel, filled with lukewarm water, a blessing to both of their bodies. They were still in there, holding each other, kissing, murmuring sweet words and enjoying the moment, when a thundering voice barked.

“Bull, you son of a gun! I never would have thought you were up to it!”

Isabelle hid underwater, behind the broad back of Malcolm, who jumped out of the vessel totally naked and attacked this gigantic blond man, who was even bigger than him. They smashed into each other with a fleshy sound, fell to the floor and while Isabelle looked for some kind of weapon to come to Malcolm’s rescue, she heard both men laughing and swearing at each other and saw them hugging and hitting each other’s back with thunderous blows. They turned towards her and burst out in laughter again, tears rolling down their cheeks. When Isabelle looked down, she realized why...she was only clad in a horse’s blanket and held a hammer high to hit the blond giant over the head.

“Malcolm, do you think this is a joke? I thought this brute was going to kill you and I wanted to save your life and all you can do is burst out laughing and here I stand nearly nude!” This only brought on

an even bigger avalanche of roaring laughter so contagious she couldn't help but join the fun and laugh along with the two big men. Malcolm put on some clothes and both men got out of the cabin to give Isabelle a chance to get decent too. When he came back in with his very big friend, he properly introduced them.

"Isabelle, this is Haakon Eriksson of Orkney, the Jarl's son, we call him Bear for obvious reasons, and he is a true friend of mine."

Isabelle made a 'reverence', trying to be as dignified as possible, keeping in mind the man had seen her stark-naked in a bath with Malcolm.

"Bear, this is Isabelle de Ste.Clair, daughter to the duke of Rosslyn, the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with!" The human blond mountain made a surprisingly elegant bow, kissed Isabelle's hand gently and said, "My lady, my life and my axe are yours. My friend Bull is the luckiest man in the world to have found a woman like you." With a wink towards Isabelle and a mischievous tone in his voice he added, "How somebody as beautiful as you can fall for an ugly bugger like him is beyond me!" Then all hell broke loose once more as both giants started chasing each other through the small cabin, hitting each other over the head and calling each other rude names, roaring with laughter. At one time they bumped in to Isabelle, propelling her into the wall where she fell on a smelly heap of skins. The clumsy duo exhaustively apologized and stumbled upon each other to help Isabelle on her feet.

"You scoundrels!" came a voice from the doorway. "Taking advantage of a poor innocent lady. Shall I chop off their heads for you, my lady?" There was a strikingly handsome man standing by the door with a very lethal-looking sword in his hands he was brandishing with clear virtuosity. He made a thrust towards both men, touching both of them lightly and producing a tiny red spot on both their necks.

Isabelle thought for a while to repeat the hammer-trick she pulled on Haakon, but decided against it, remembering the fool she made of herself. And indeed, none of the big guys tried to defend themselves but instead made a huddle with the handsome guy in the middle, making him disappear completely. After they had finished hitting each

other on shoulders and back, handsome turned about and asked, “Is anybody going to formally introduce me to this goddess, please?”

Malcolm said, “Iain, this is Isabelle, the love of my life. Isabelle, meet Iain Stewart of Angus, we call him the Fox, also one of my best friends.”

Iain took a bow and said to Isabelle, “Dear lady, I am grateful to you for taking my friend under your wings, since I have always doubted he would ever find a woman able to see through his clumsiness and rough bark to discover his heart of gold.”

“I thank you for your kind words, my lord,” she said. “He is indeed a bit of a clumsy oaf, but so am I, since we only got acquainted because I threw my cup of mead all over him. I do love him with my whole being, though, and hope that, eventually, our children will not kill themselves in their cots, being twice gifted with our awkwardness.” The three friends applauded and cheered.

“Well said, well said, my lady,” said the Fox. “It’s just a strange way to go about things when you want to get married and have children to send your sweetheart overseas with your friends and stay home yourself!” Haakon had to intervene because Malcolm was charging Iain frontally, grasping at him with both hands.

“Easy, friend, easy, I am sure and certain our sly Fox was only joking,” said Haakon. “A very bad joke, might I add!” he said, sending a poisonous look at the man from Angus.

“I am sorry, Malcolm,” said Iain. “My Scottish wit is sometimes indelicate, I know. I am aware of the difficult situation you are in at home and I can see this is indeed that once in a lifetime match you have found. I confess to a little jealousy on my part. I do apologize to the both of you. I will defend your lady with my life on our journey and will gladly teach your children manners, dexterity and swordsmanship. I also brought the Cat and the Lion along who are mooring the boat. Let’s go give them a hand before they both drown. Why I have been blessed with such a host of gawky friends, I am sure I do not know!”

While the three men went to help the others with the boat, Isabelle prepared a very late supper with the rest of the grouse, some salted pork she found in Malcolm’s saddlebags and seven duck’s eggs

she fried on a hot fire. When everything was on the table, she straightened her back and looked at the meal. The grouse and pork in the middle, eggs on the side and delicious dark bread to go, spring onions, garlic and roots finished it off and three more bottles of claret would serve as flushing fluid.

A bit later, a jolly band of five came bursting in looking at the delights on and next to the table. The two latest arrivals were duly presented by Iain as Maël Choluim of Fife, known as the Cat and Maël Isu of Stretearn, the Lion. Unmistakably the leader of the group, he oozed charisma. They both greeted Isabelle courteously and attacked the food on the table like a pack of famished animals.

It was like wizardry. At one time, there was a heap of food on the table, and the next...it was gone. The wolf pack settled down contented and travel planning started in earnest. Mallus, short for Maël Isu, took command. Leadership came naturally to him.

"We will sail with the high tide tomorrow at first light. We should be out of the basin before noon and will cross the channel due south-southeast heading for Novus Portus in Flanders. Tides and winds willing, we should get there tomorrow in the evening or even at night. There is a lighthouse just north of the harbor, so even if daylight has gone, we will be able to enter port. The Bear is our captain, so he's got command on board, we will be his slaves during the crossing. In Novus Portus, a galley is waiting, a Templar galley. Our good King William and his son Alexander have been speaking with the 'Poor fellow soldiers of Christ and the temple of Solomon', as the Templar Knights call themselves. When we come back from this quest to the Holy Land, we will stand up, we, the Scottish people and we will throw off the shackles the English suppressors have put on our freedom. The Templar organization will stand by us. To toast to a successful crusade, to a swift reunification of Malcolm and Isabelle and to the freedom of our beloved Scotland I have brought a new produce of our country."

Mallus produced a bottle filled with a yellow liquid, pulled the stop and said, "It is called *Usquebaugh*, life-water, it has been discovered by accident when a barrel of barley got filled with water and after three months produced a strong hydromel-like substance. The

shepherd who found it spread open the mass of wet barley, washed it with boiling water, wanting to feed it to his sheep, then forgot about it and when the barrel was opened again after three years this god given drink saw daylight for the first time. I drink to the crusade, to the swift reunion of Isabelle and Malcolm, and the freedom of Scotland, *Slainthe Mhath!*"

Isabelle added, "And the safe return of my brother John!"

They all took a small stone cup filled with the strong smelling drink and with a joint *Slainthe Mhath!* emptied the cup in one gulp. Isabelle thought she drank liquid fire, the strength of the stuff made her inhale intensely, which in turn made her cough and sneeze at the same time. The *Usquebaugh* passing through her nose seemed to burn her nostrils, tears streaming from her eyes. Though the men experienced a similar attack on mouth and nose, they pretended it didn't bother them and laughed at Isabelle's predicament. Boudicca's great-granddaughter was not a woman to be made fun of, though. She held out her empty cup to Mallus and said, "I'll have some more of your life-water, Mallus. This time I will drink it, though!" With a look of admiration, Mallus filled Isabelle's cup and did the same with all the others. As they gathered in a circle, a heartfelt silence filled the room as Isabelle said in a serious, solemn voice, "Once more, for Scotland, for Freedom, *Slainthe Mhath!*" They roared, "Scotland! freedom! *Slainthe Mhath!*" and they all finished their cup, this time Isabelle succeeding in downing the life-water without accidents. She felt it flushing down to her stomach, providing warmth in her chest and lightness in her head almost instantly. After the toast, they turned in for a few short hours of sleep since the high tide was early next day. Isabelle and Malcolm shared the same bed but didn't sleep, they talked all night, saying goodbye, making plans, mixing a couple of tears with some giggles and a lot of kisses. Two hours before dawn, Mallus rose, woke the others and they prepared to leave.

It was a brisk walk of about one hour to the saltwater basin. Isabelle and Malcolm walked in the rear, both horses were left by the cabin where Malcolm would pick them up to take them home later. Isabelle had said a difficult goodbye to her soul mate Bryn. She knew her horse would be in excellent hands, though, and Bryn had taken to

Malcolm instantly, which made the goodbye a little less hard. When they reached the basin, she saw the vessel that would take them across the channel. It was quite a sturdy boat, a flat-bottomed cog with a single mainsail, more than large enough to accommodate the five of them with their equipment, and, according to Haakon, the expert, more than seaworthy enough to cross the channel.

The time to leave was there...a last, long kiss...and Isabelle stood in the boat's stern, next to Haakon holding the rudder, gazing at the ever smaller figure standing on the basin's bank waving goodbye. When the morning fog erased the image of Malcolm, Isabelle's shoulders slumped and tears welled up. She felt a bearlike arm on her shoulders and the giant Viking said, "Don't worry, little Isabelle, he will be all right. You just worry about getting your brother back now. And don't forget you have us. We will stand by you through thick and thin!" Isabelle hugged the man-mountain and kissed him on the cheek, which produced a very un-masculine blush on his cheeks.

"I thank you for your kind words, Haakon Eriksson of Orkney. With the help of you and your friends, I am certain I will find my brother John and bring him back safely."

When they had crossed the Montrose basin and headed for the high seas, Haakon set a South-Southeasterly course and Isabelle felt, for the first time in her life, the raw primal power of the sea. She worried about the movements the boat made, but when she looked at her newfound friend, she immediately understood things were perfectly normal. Haakon was holding the rudder, a big smile on his face, the wind and the droplets of seawater making him look like a true Norseman. He even started singing a song in his Norwegian mother tongue. Mallus came to sit with her for a while and they talked about the trip ahead, the boat making considerable headway, nine to ten knots.

"When I spoke with the Templar people, I have already made inquiries about John, Isabelle. As you know, he went missing in the desert near Cairo, news travels very slowly in that part of the world, so up until now, no recent information is available. When we moor this evening in Novus Portus, I will meet with the Templar emissary as soon as possible to make arrangements for us to board the ship heading

for Limassol in Cyprus, I have also asked for any news on your brother, so, this evening, we will hopefully know more.”

They sailed on and, if anything, even went faster now. The cog lifted and plunged with a mighty smack with every wave they passed, sea scum flying over the side and from time to time, even a load of salt water came crushing over the deck. Haakon seemed totally in his element, laughing at the wind and the waves, singing scabrous songs of heavy drinking, light women and hard fighting; water, salt and foam clinging to his beard and hair. Even Iain seemed completely at ease walking about the deck checking his pack and grinding his sword with a whetstone. Mallus didn’t even seem aware he was at sea, lost in thoughts and gazing in the distance. Malcolm the Cat, though, just like his animal name suggested, was not in his element and in a terrible state. He had been hanging overboard, heaving his breakfast, his supper and from the look of it the dinners, breakfasts and suppers he had the last few weeks. She had tried to talk to him to give him some moral support and to try to make him feel a little more comfortable, but he only made some cellar-like burping sounds, had a greenish complexion and gazed into the sea morosely. The other three had convinced her to stop trying. Iain had tied a rope to Malcolm’s foot to keep him on board and so they continued their trip, plowing through the waves at ever increasing speed.

It was pitch dark when they arrived near Novus Portus, but as Mallus had mentioned, a great fire was burning on the shore north of the harbor. They entered port illuminated by some big fires on an equally big ship, the same type they had made the crossing on, only five times as large. It was a *Hanseatic* freight ship able to transport up to 300 tons of cargo. With a nonchalant air of mastery, Haakon maneuvered their small ship into port and moored it. Miraculously, Malcolm recovered as soon as he set foot on solid ground and assisted Haakon and Iain to unload their luggage. Meanwhile, Mallus went into town to find the emissary of the Templar order.

Once their luggage was ashore, the young rogues told Isabelle to stay put and keep an eye on the bags while they went on a scouting tour, their eyes happily blinking in anticipation of rum and rumble. She sat down on their bags and started observing the goings-on in the

harbor. As was to be expected, a lot of drunk to very drunk sailors staggered by, there were a couple of passages by the bailiff and his men and women with more or less clothes and more or less paint exhibited their goods. After a while, she got bored and decided to take a stroll, after all, what could happen? There was an inn about a hundred yards from where their luggage was. She gave a coin to one of the harbor workers with the promise of double if everything was still there and in good condition at her return and took off towards the inn. Candlelight, joyous music and singing and laughter worked on her like a magnet. The moment she entered the place, she realized this had been a mistake. The single room was full of rude, drunk and foul-smelling men. The ladies present weren't really up to standard either, in variable states of nudity, clinging to the men, grasping for purses and testicles and, in a corner, she even saw a couple in full intercourse, loudly cheered on by everybody present. She wanted to take advantage of the spectacle to slither out again before she got into trouble, when a double shot of bad luck stifled her strategy. Primo: A small group of very loud and very drunk men entered through the doorway she had chosen to escape and secondo: the performing artist chose this time to wrap up his exhibition by loudly and demonstratively ejaculating. Everybody applauded, the man and woman took a bow and the general negative spiral of deteriorating morality proceeded. Speaking of which, a very ugly, reeking specimen who had entered with the last group sighted Isabelle and made a romantic gesture consisting of groping her breasts with both hands and trying to kiss her on the mouth. She reacted by efficiently crushing his family jewels with her right knee and cracking his skull with a particularly heavy earthenware jug. The man fell down, blood oozing from nose and ears, shaking spastically and then lying still. After an eerie moment of silence, one of the other newcomers yelled, "She killed him! The whore killed Bart! Get her!" The whole mob descended on her. She tried to get away, but there were too many of them and there was no room to move. Two of them held her from behind; the rest was groping at her feverishly. She looked the worst of humanity in the eyes now, they were growling, licking their lips, even drooling while they tore her clothes, put her on a table and spread her legs apart. She almost lost

consciousness when her head hit the table hard and then...three of her attackers took flight, two more dropped to the ground and the rest of them dispersed. She looked up dazzled and saw Mallus standing there quite relaxed, swishing his sword about nonchalantly who said, "I do apologize to interrupt your little party, my noble friends, but the lady's presence is required elsewhere!" His communication had not been optimal, or so it seemed. Three of the gentlemen attacked screaming, one pointing a finger at Mallus, and two others charging full tilt. He did something with his blade, too quick to register, and said to the first man, whose index missed two phalanges, "You should never point a naked finger at a dressed man. Didn't your mother ever tell you?" To the other two ruffians, who lay on the floor squirming in pain, he said, "You will find there is a slight incision in your superficial abdominal muscles, give it a couple of weeks and you should be able to walk straight again!" He walked over to Isabelle, quite courtly rearranged her clothing and picked her up like a feather.

"Shall we say this party is over, my dear?" he said and walked to the door. Isabelle's blurry vision focused just in time to see a very large, very ugly brute approach Mallus from the back. She wanted to call out a warning, but the ugly brute suddenly disappeared chased by a midsized table, taking three to four other bystanders along. She looked over and saw Haakon, ready to throw a second table. Still they hadn't quite grasped the situation and one of them tried to creep up on Mallus holding a nasty looking knife. An arrow quivering underneath his nose stopped him. Malcolm the Cat was squatting on a bench near a window, his second arrow on the bowstring and three more in his left hand.

The front door was smashed open, hinges busted, and Iain entered. "I always like to make an entrance, you see, if any of you gentlemen would like to have a friendly scrimmage, I'm game!"

None of the present was game, though, so the four friends made an organized retreat and Isabelle thought by herself that she had seldom felt this safe. When they arrived back at the harbor, their luggage had already been stowed in a launch, Isabelle's guard being comfortably put aside, tied and gagged. She explained to Mallus he had only done his job, so the man was released and given five times

the amount he had been promised. Ten men, dressed in grey-white tunics with a small red patted cross on their left shoulder, had transported their goods. Four of them were in a large sloop, waiting to launch it, four were standing guard and two were waiting for Mallus and his friends.

*“Messire Maël, on est prêt pour embarquer, la marée nous est favorable, mais plus pour longtemps,”* said one of them and Mallus said, “*C'est bien, sergeant, allons-y!*”

“My friends,” he continued. “This is Alexandre de Montaigue, sergeant to the Templar Preceptory of La Rochelle, one of the main strongholds of the organization in France. His brother is Pedro, the acting Grandmaster of the order. He just told me we need to move quickly if we want to catch the tide!”

They boarded the sloop and they made for the large *huissier* anchored in the harbor. It was the biggest boat Isabelle ever saw, carrying one big mainsail with the *Croix Pattée* and a fore and after castle. This kind of ship was produced in large numbers for the Templar organization in Aigues Mortes, near Marseille. In fact they had been designed around 1170 in Byzantium, large, sea-going vessels with a door opening in one of the sides to accommodate horses. With its length of about two hundred feet and thirty feet of width, it was a very big boat indeed.

One hour later, they set sail due south-southwest for Dunkerque, where they would pick up the last three travel companions. The sun just peeked over the horizon when they made a slight course correction and got the full thrust of the Atlantic Ocean thrown at them. With the fresh ocean wind in her face, Isabelle felt invigorated and full of life and energy. She went below deck to have a couple of hours of sleep, but after a little while, woke up feeling nauseous. She hurried back topside and just made it to the side to feed the fish. Looking to the right, she stared Maël in the eyes who shared with her a look of connectedness. A worrying thought entered her mind. She vomited, it was early morning, her nipples felt pretty swollen and painful. “My god, I am pregnant...Oh my god...this is really not the time.” A terrifying scenario of traveling to the barren sands of Egypt with an ever-extending belly, vomiting and unable to find and rescue her

brother unraveled before her mind's eye. She felt a new spasm coming up and looked down into the foaming waves...the situation was desperate...she was doomed.

Two days later, Isabelle still felt atrociously ill forming a constant duo with the Cat, both of them in love with the balustrade. They eventually arrived at the port of Dunkerque, the boat riding at anchor a mile out, the sloop heading for the harbor. Isabelle decided not to go because of her constant nausea and vertigo. She cursed herself for her irresponsibility when having sex with Malcolm, however wonderful it had been. Her nipples were still very tender, her bowels were making a horrible burbling noise and she threw up everything she managed to eat, in short, she was up shit creek in a leaky boat without a paddle in her Sunday dress! She had been miserably hanging overboard for quite a while, faithfully joined by Malcolm the Cat, woefully musing and mourning, counting the disasters heaped upon her when the sloop returned to the boat and a booming voice said, "You poor thing! Let's get you below deck and give you the once-over!"

She looked up and saw a huge man, almost as wide as he was tall, with a red, smiling face picking her up as if she was a kitten. She saw Mallus looking over the shoulder of the fleshy man who said, "It's okay, Isabelle. This is Daniel of Aalst, among his other qualities, mainly of gastronomical nature, he is also a gifted physician. He will help you."

The man called Daniël took her down the stairs into the hull, settled her down and started asking questions in a quiet, soothing voice. Isabelle felt at ease with this large man, whose eyes shone with friendliness and compassion.

"Tell me what's wrong, my lady, I understand you are to be the companion of my soul mate Malcolm, I will help you to the best of my abilities."

Isabelle said, "Oh, Daniel, I have been such a fool, such a love-struck idiot, I love him so much, though, and he saved my life, I almost died freezing to death and he brought me to his cabin and he put me in his own bed and shivered with cold because he didn't want to...and then we...I...and we had the most amazing...and I love him

so...and now I am pregnant and I need to save my brother who has been hurt in the desert.” Isabelle broke down and wept.

The big man settled her down, hugged her grandfatherly and said, “I have the distinct impression too much calamities have been heaped upon your plate lately, milady. Let’s do some fact gathering first. Will you disrobe, please; you can keep your undergarments on.” Isabelle took off her smeared upper clothes, lay down on the straw mattress and let Daniel examine her. He asked her when she had intercourse with Malcolm, what had happened since, when she got ill and the precise symptoms. He examined her breasts, looked carefully at her nipples and inserted two fingers inside her vagina, prodding gently, she noticed she didn’t feel embarrassed at all. He checked the color of her tongue and registered her pulse frequency. After that, he took away her clothes, gave her a clean outfit belonging to a young deckhand, settled her comfortably with some straw-filled cushions propped up behind her and said, “Isabelle, I can now confirm you are not pregnant. Your cervix is not tender enough, and as for your breasts and nipples, they have been treated savagely in the recent past. If young Malcolm is the offender, I will speak sternly to him at the first occasion. You are also suffering from exhaustion and malnutrition, respectively treatable by rest and food. I have my medicine chest with me, so I will prepare a tea based on ginger, mint and chamomile. I will arrange for a small tent to be placed just in front of the mast, amidships, where you will suffer least from the sea motions. The final diagnosis, my dear, is seasickness. I will put my friend Maël with you in the same tent and give him the same treatment.”

And so it was to be, Isabelle and Malcolm were settled in the small tent next to the mast, given some tea to drink and fell asleep on the spot. After that, the ship set sail again towards the Gulf of Biscay; Daniel joined Mallus and the others at the forecastle, two other newcomers joining them, Hugues of Breda and Hendrik of Egmond, both Frisian noblemen.

“How did you manage to get them comfortable so swiftly, my friend?” Mallus asked Daniel. The Hog said, “Next to the mint, chamomile and ginger, I also added a large amount of valerian. They should be sleeping for a couple of hours. What’s the plan, Lion?”

“We sail from Dunkerque, via La Coruna and Aigues Mortes to Limassol on the island of Cyprus, where we will meet Pedro de Montaigue, the Templar order’s Grand Master, in the Kolossi castle, their Grand Commandery. Isabelle’s brother was with him the last time he was spotted, so I hope to get some news there. At the same time, our good King Alexander has sent me on a fact-finding mission. I have full authority to negotiate with the Templar order to unite both of our causes once the crusade comes to an end. You know we are planning to create a free Scotland and tear ourselves away from the English suppressor. The order wants to create a nation. They are looking at the Languedoc region in France and Spain. In addition, in 1192, they bought Cyprus from King Richard the Lionheart. Ships are being built in Aigues Mortes by the Templars, and we will start building our own in Glasgow and Newcastle as soon as we have thrown off the British shackles. Together we will create an empire!”

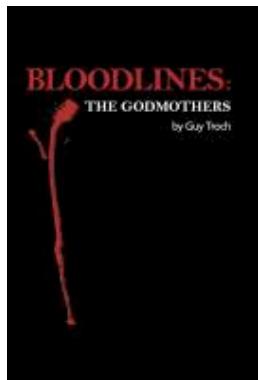
The seven friends stood gazing over the Atlantic Ocean and they all mused over the exciting times ahead, knowing it was not going to be a free ride. Blood, sweat and tears would be faithful travel companions.

The next morning, Isabelle woke up feeling much better. She had slept for a solid twelve hours and was aroused by Malcolm the Cat who snored atrociously. To add to her feeling better, she felt very hungry and...she had never felt so relieved to be menstruating before! She hurried to the forecastle to tell Daniel the good news.

“I told you, my young friend. Now I am going to fix you a breakfast that will make you feel like new again.” The big man had a good fire going in the iron cooking pit and he cut off a couple of slides of sowbelly, let them fry until they were crisp, added some spring onions and, in the same pan, added some duck’s eggs scrambled to a foam. He put the delight on a wooden plate and added two crude cuts of dark bread. Isabelle was quickly joined by Malcolm, who had woken up to the mouthwatering smells too and was cured to the point that he attacked the delicious omelet without even putting the food on a plate, he scooped it up from the frying pan and sopped it clean with the rest of the bread. He sat back, belched deafeningly and looked very satisfied.

*BLOODLINES*

So they sailed on towards the Mediterranean, towards John and towards adventures that would change Isabelle's life forever.



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# **BLOODLINES**

## The Godmothers

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