

The Iron Lance
Book I of The Celtic Crusades
By Stephen R. Lawhead

Chapter One

January 6, 1899: Edinburgh, Scotland

My name is of no importance.

It is enough to know that three nights ago I obtained to the Seventh Degree Initiation. Perforce, and I am now a member of the Inner Temple, and therefore privy to the secrets I am about to reveal.

Do not think for a moment that I intend to betray the trust which has been placed in me. I would gladly die before endangering the Brotherhood or its work. As it happens, much of what I shall set forth is already known; at least, any reasonably intelligent reader with an ounce of curiosity and a half-decent library can obtain it with patience and perseverance. The rest, however, is beyond all recovery, save by the methods which have been employed on my behalf. Those methods, like the knowledge so derived, is arcane beyond belief.

Indeed, were I not now among the chosen few, I would not believe it myself, nor would I be writing this at all. As to that, I have put it off long enough. The time has come to order the confusion of my thoughts and the extraordinary, nay fantastic, experiences of the last days. Perhaps in the writing I will begin to reassure myself that I am not insane. The events which I shall tell did happen, believe me.

I begin.

The summons came as it usually does—a single rap on the door of my study, and a note bearing neither seal nor signature, nor any message save the solitary word: Tonight.

Needless to say, I spent the rest of the day disengaging myself from my various commitments and, at the appropriate time, made my way to the appointed place of rendezvous. Forgive me if I do not divulge the location of our meeting place. Suffice to say that it is a simple church no great distance from the city, easily reached by hansom cab. As always, I paid the driver for his trouble, delivered instructions for his return, and proceeded the last two or so miles on foot. Like my fellows, I vary the route each time, as well as the driver, so as not to arouse undue interest or suspicion.

Although the church appears nondescript—all somber grey stone and suitably traditional appointments—I assure you it is quite ancient, and anything but traditional. Upon

entering, I paused to pray in one of the chapel pews before retrieving my grey robe from the rack in the vestry, and making my way down the hidden steps behind the altar to the crypt where our more intimate convocations take place.

The lower room smells faintly of dust and dry decay. It is dark. We rely on candlelight alone, and that sparingly. I am not afraid; I have participated in many such gatherings of the Brotherhood for several years now, and am well acquainted with the various forms and functions of our group. Ordinarily, I am one of the first to arrive. Tonight, however, I can sense the others waiting for me as I stoop nearly double to enter the inner room. I make some small excuse for being late, but am reassured by Genotti (I should state here that all names encountered in this narrative have been altered to protect the anonymity of the members of the Brotherhood)—who tells me that I am not late, but that tonight's meeting is a special affair.

'We began our colloquy last night,' Genotti tells me. 'You were not required until this moment.'

'I see.'

Another voice speaks. 'You have been a faithful member of the Council of Brothers for six years, I believe.' It is Evans, our number two, or Second Principal. 'In that time, we have watched you ceaselessly for any hint or sign of impropriety, however small.'

'I hope I have not disappointed you.'

'On the contrary. You have impressed us greatly. Our admiration has only increased.'

A third voice speaks from the darkness. 'Many have been called to the Brotherhood before you.' It is Kutch; his Austrian accent is all his own. 'However, no one has proven worthy of higher honour...until now'

At his use of the word 'honour', my senses prick. That word was used only once before on such an occasion—the night I was asked to join the Brotherhood.

'I was not aware any higher honour existed,' I reply.

'Martyrdom was an honour,' Zaccaria informs me calmly, 'to those who embraced it.'

'Am I to be a martyr?'

It is De Cardou who answers. 'We are all martyrs, my friend. It is only the cause which distinguishes one from another.'

I do not know what to say to this, so the silence stretches long. I have the sense that they are watching me, that they can see me in the dark even though I cannot see them.

It is Pemberton who speaks at last. This surprises me, for I expected one of the others—Evans, perhaps, or De Cardou. But, no, I know now that the unassuming Pemberton is our superior, our First Principal. 'If you would suffer martyrdom, as we have suffered it before you,' he says gently, 'you have but to step forward.'

I do so, and without a moment's hesitation. I have seen enough of the Brotherhood and its works to trust these men implicitly. I need no second invitation, and in any event I would not have received one. Thus, I accept, stepping forward the prescribed single step; and thus, the initiation begins.

At once I am seized by two members of the Inner Temple, one on either side; they stretch out my arms horizontally, while a third fastens a thick, padded band around my waist. I am led forward to a small table which has been set up in the centre of the crypt.

A solitary candle is lit, and in its glow I see that the table is covered with a spotless white cloth upon which a selection of objects has been assembled: a silver bowl of liquid, a white clay pipe of the kind used to smoke tobacco, a communion chalice, a golden plate containing something which looks like dried figs, a folded black cloth of a material which I assume to be silk, or satin, and lastly, a crude wooden cross set on a pedestal of gold.

I am brought to stand before the table, and my six initiators take their places on the other side, opposite me; they have covered their heads with their cowls so I may not see their faces. It does not matter, I know their voices like I know my own. Even so, the effect is unsettling.

'Seeker, stretch forth your hands.' The command is delivered by Pemberton, and I do as I am told. He picks up the silver bowl and places it on my palms. 'Take and drink.'

I raise the bowl to my lips and sip the liquid. It is sweet, tasting vaguely herbal, like a mixture of roses and anise; yet, there is strength in it, too. I feel the burn in my throat as I swallow. I lower the bowl and it is removed from me, only to be offered once more. 'Seeker, take and drink.'

I drink again, and feel an uncanny warmth spreading through my gullet and stomach. I lower the bowl once more, and once more I am instructed to drink. The strange warmth is filling me from the inside out, spreading from the pit of my stomach to my limbs.

After the third drink of the heady potion, I am allowed to replace the bowl, whereupon the cross is raised and offered to me. 'Seeker,' it is De Cardou, 'venerate the cross.'

At this, the cross is elevated and placed before my face for me to kiss. This I do, and the cross is replaced. De Cardou takes up the clay pipe and turns away. when he turns back, the pipe is lit and smoking—although this happens so quickly I do not see how he could have struck a match, let alone lit the pipe. 'Seeker, imbibe the Incense of Heaven.'

I take the end of the pipe into my mouth and draw upon it. The smoke is fragrant and fills my mouth. I blow it out, and draw again on the wonderful fragrance. After the third such puff, the pipe is, like the bowl, withdrawn and replaced on the table.

Genotti speaks next. 'Seeker,' he says in his soft Italian tones, raising the golden plate, 'take and eat.'

I choose one of the shrivelled brown objects from the offered plate. I put it into my mouth and chew. The flesh is soft and somewhat leathery—like that of dried fruit but the taste is acrid, bitter. Tears start to my eyes, and I am overwhelmed by a desire to spit out this strange substance. The bitterness is so intense it seems to burn, and then to numb my mouth. My tongue loses all sensation, becoming an unfeeling lump of useless tissue which, unaccountably, seems to swell in my mouth. I fear I will choke. I cannot breathe.

Gasping, gagging, somehow I keep chewing the awful stuff, and am at last able to swallow it down. A new fear overtakes me: I will be made to eat from the plate again...but no, Genotti replaces the plate, and takes up the chalice. This is offered without a word, and I accept. I drink; it seems to be a cordial of some kind. I can detect no particular aroma or taste, but instantly feel my tongue and teeth and lips and the soft tissues of my throat begin to throb with a tingling sensation. I know not whether this comes from the dried fruit I have ingested, or from the cordial, but the tingling does not abate.

I am suddenly taken with a curious desire to laugh. I feel as if a bubble is rising inside me, growing larger as it ascends, and that I must give birth to this bubble with a gale of laughter, otherwise I will burst. It is all I can do to keep from laughing out loud.

'Seeker,' says Genotti once more, 'imbibe the Incense of Heaven.'

The smoke calms me, and though my mouth still tingles I am no longer afflicted by the mad desire to laugh. Evans speaks next. 'Seeker, answer me: how sees a child of God?' he asks, his Welsh lilt falling easily on the ear.

'With the eyes of faith,' I reply. The question is a standard query posed to initiates at every degree.

'Then open your eyes, Seeker, and you shall see,' Evans commands. He takes up the folded cloth of black silk and, stepping around the table, raises the cloth to my face. He quickly binds my eyes, and, blindfolded, I am led by my right hand to another part of the room and made to lie down on my back on the floor.

I compose myself for whatever will happen next, and I hear a low scraping sound, like chalk dragging slowly across a blackboard. This goes on for a time, and then I feel cold air on the left side of my face—as if a door has opened to the draught. At the same time, ropes are attached to either side of the padded band around my waist, and then I am securely tied. The others are standing around me now, towering over me.

Suddenly, my feet are grasped and I am spun like a terrapin on my back. When my feet are released once more, I feel that there is nothing beneath them—my feet dangle over open space. I am allowed no time to reflect on this, for at almost the same instant I am gently pulled forward, allowing my feet, ankles, and legs to slide down into emptiness. My arms are taken up, the ropes pulled taut, and I feel myself slipping into the hole which has been opened in the floor.

Slowly, I descend into the void, dangling at the end of my ropes like a puppet.

The chamber into which I am lowered is immense. I cannot say how I know this—perhaps the size is suggested by the chill of the air and the sound of my breathing echoing back from unseen walls. My eyes are bound; I see nothing. Down and down I go.

At last, my feet touch solid ground once more; I gather my legs under me and stand. I cannot tell how far I have descended. The voice falling down to me from directly overhead reaches me as an echo merely: 'Seeker ...' it is Pemberton, 'with the eyes of faith, I bid you seek...and may you truly find.'

At this, the ropes go slack as they are thrown in after me. This puppet's strings have been cut, as it were, and it is for me to find my own way, to seek. But what...what am I seeking? What am I meant to find? None of my previous experiences with the Brotherhood have prepared me for this test. I will stand or fall by my own efforts.

As I am a seeker, I decide, I will do as I am told. Although the object of my search remains a mystery, I will have faith enough to believe that I shall recognize the prize when I find it.

Thus resolved, I take my first faltering steps into the cave—for that is how I think of it, an immense subterranean cavern, a vast hollow chamber of stone deep under the earth. I take three steps into the clinging darkness, and I stop. I am no longer steady on my feet. I feel light-headed, as if I am floating.

Nevertheless, I take a deep breath and proceed.

I turn slowly, first left, then right. I seem to feel the faintest breath of air on my cheek when I face the right, and so I decide to pursue the search in this direction. It is a whim, nothing more, but it is rewarded by the fact that after a dozen or so measured paces, I reach a step.

I stoop and feel the edge of the step with my hands; it rises to others behind it. I mount the first three, then three more, then another, and I am arrived upon a platform, which I take to be cut into the cavern wall.

I speak a word and judge by the reverberation of the sound that I have entered a smaller chamber, open to the larger a vestibule of sons. Stretching my hands before me like a

blind man—truly, I am a blind man—I shuffle forward to explore the chamber to which I have ascended.

My head is spinning now. I have passed giddy and am actually growing dizzy. My senses remain acute. I feel as if I am glowing in the dark, giving off sparks. My hearing is sharp, but there is nothing to hear, save my own breathing. Since I have not been instructed otherwise, I decide to remove the blindfold.

As expected, there is no light. The subterranean darkness is complete. It covers me like a second skin, so close as to be part of me. Though I am blind still, my senses are alive and tingling with anticipation—or, more probably, the strange substances I have imbibed are beginning to work in me somehow. I feel as if I am flying.

I continue with my inspection. The walls of the vestibule, I discover, are rounded and smooth, cut, as I have surmised, into the walls of the cave. There is no impediment to my movement as I work my way around what I perceive to be the back wall of the vestibule, feeling with my hands. And then....

I brush the edge of the opening with my fingers. I feel the curved lip of a ledge, and quickly trace the opening in the wall with my hands. It is a niche, wider than it is high, and with a slightly projecting shelf. I reach in. It is not deep. I feel the back of the niche, and then begin running my fingers along the shelf.

My fingertips brush something cold and hard.

The object has been placed in the niche precisely. Indeed, I presume the niche and shelf have been constructed especial to hold the object it contains. Could this be what I was meant to find?

I continue my investigation of the object. It is long and thin, with a hardness and coldness that can only be metal. I take it into my hand and carefully remove it from its resting place, holding it lengthwise across my palms to judge its heft. From the weight, I suspect bronze, or iron; and from the length and shape, I imagine a rake handle. But no, it is too thin—the circumference is too small for any common tool or implement of that sort—and it is too heavy. The surface is rough, pitted, and without marking or ornamentation that I can discern.

Running my hand along the length of the metal rod, I perceive that it is not entirely straight—the metal bows and turns slightly as it gradually thickens towards its blunt, rounded end. I turn my attention to the opposite end, and find that the cylindrical shaft thins as it nears what I imagine to be the top, its roundness squared beneath a short, triangular-shaped head. There are three—what shall I call them? protrusions?—on the head: small vanes, if you will. These vanes are thin, and...

As I stand puzzling over the nature of the object I have found, I hear the whoosh of air, great volumes of air moving, yet I feel not the slightest movement on my skin. Sweat breaks out on my forehead.

All at once, it seems as if the floor beneath me is tilting. I reel forwards, clutching the metal rod. With my free hand, I grab for the edge of the niche, miss, and lurch awkwardly into the wall. The cavern is booming now, and I realize the sound is in my head—it is the rush of blood through my ears. Bracing myself against the wall, I try to turn, but find I can no longer stand.

I am panting like a dog. My breath comes in quick bursts and gasps, as if I have run ten miles. Sweat is pouring from my face. I hold to the wall, leaning against it, afraid to move lest I fall from the raised vestibule to the floor. Instead, keeping my back to the wall, I slide down slowly into a sitting position, clutching the metal rod, and gulping air like a fish caught on dry land.

The floor beneath me trembles; I feel the vibration seeping up through the stone floor and into my bones. My mouth is dry and tastes of sour milk. The sweat is pouring from me now. I press my head back against the solid rock and feel my poor heart thumping away wildly in my chest.

This is how I will die, I think.

There are dancing spots before my eyes—like fireflies, these errant beams glint and fade, appearing and reappearing in the vast emptiness of the cavern. Unlike fireflies, however, they are swarming, growing larger, gathering more substance. I see colours: bold, vibrant, shocking in their intensity. The light is growing stronger, coalescing into spheres.

It must be the last eruption of a dying brain, but no...I can see some of the cavern chamber illuminated in the light of the ever-shifting spheres. One of them drifts close to me, shedding a gentle glow of light over me. What is more, I can see something moving inside the sphere: the dim shapes of human figures.

The images inside the sphere are shifting, changing, filling my vision. It is all I can see now, and the light is growing stronger. Without warning the vision breaks over me. A sudden burst of light, and all at once, the cavern is ablaze with sparkling images. They fly past my dazzled eyes in a flurry of beams, a veritable blizzard of brilliance, each image a burning spark striking deep into the soft tissue of my brain. Each blazing particle is part of a greater whole, merging and coalescing as they accumulate in my mind.

Individual fragments are swallowed in the gradually emerging whole, and I begin to see—not broken images now, but a portrait entire. With the crystalline clarity of a dream, I see it all. More, I behold. I have become part of the dream, living it even as it is played out in my mind.

Still, the dazzling fragments, these scintillating shards of dream, fly at me, piercing my senses, embedding themselves deep in my perception. I am defenceless before the onslaught. I can but gape and surrender to the dizzying torrent. But there is so much! The scenes cascade into my consciousness, and I am a man drowning in the onrushing flood.

I can derive no sense or understanding of what I see; the dream is too vast, too chaotic, too wild. It is all I can do to take it in. Yet, there is meaning here. I feel it. This dream is no hollow hallucination, the shadow-play of a drugged and fevered brain. Indeed, irresistibly, I am impressed with a grave and terrible certainty that the things I am seeing, however bizarre and chaotic they may seem, actually happened. The dream is authentic. It happened.

Oddly, it is this awful certainty which overwhelms me in the end. I cannot endure the frenzied onslaught, and I fall back. A man drunk on an impossibly rich and heady elixir, I slump against the wall, blind and insensate. Resting the metal rod across my lap, I press the heels of my hands to my poor eyes. Instantly, the images cease. Upon releasing the rod, I have broken contact with the source of the dream, and am myself released to the blessed, soothing darkness of the cavern.

Oh, but it is a darkness lit by the flickering light of a strange and glorious magic. The dream is alive in me. Slowly, slowly, with ignorant, faltering steps I begin the first feeble attempt to impose some small order on the irreducible chaos of the thoughts and images whirling inside my mind.

Great God, I am lost!

The cry is scarcely uttered when the answer is revealed. There is a thread...a thread. Seize it, hold it, follow it, and it will lead through the twisted labyrinth of madness to sweet reason.

Carefully, carefully, I take up the thread.

Chapter One

Murdo raced down the long slope, his bare feet striking the soft turf so that the only sound to be heard was the hiss and swash of his legs through the coarse green bracken. Far behind him, a rider appeared on the crest of the hill and was quickly joined by two more. Murdo knew they were there; he had anticipated this moment of discovery, and the instant the hunters appeared he dived headlong to the ground to vanish among the quivering fronds where he continued his flight, scrambling forward on knees and elbows, first one way and then another.

The riders spurred their mounts and flew down the hillside, the blades of their spears gleaming in the early light. All three shouted as they came, voicing the ancient battle cry of the clan: 'Dubh a dearg!'

Murdo heard the shouts and froze fast, pressing himself to the damp earth. He felt the dew seeping through his siarc and breechs, and smelled the sharp tang of the bracken. The sky showed bright blue through leafy gaps above him and, heart pounding, he watched the empty air for the first glimpse of discovery.

The horses raced swiftly nearer, their hooves drumming fast and loud, and flinging the soft turf high over their broad backs. Murdo, flat beneath the bracken, every sense alert and twitching, listened to the swift-running horses and judged their distance. He also heard the liquid gurgle of a hidden burn a short distance ahead, lower down the slope.

Upon reaching the place where the youth had disappeared, the riders halted and began hacking into the dense brake with the butts of their spears. 'Out! Out!' they shouted. 'We have you! Declare and surrender!'

Murdo, ignoring the calls, lay still as death and tried to calm the rapid beating of his heart so the hunters would not hear him. They were very near. He held his breath and watched the patch of sky for sight or shadow of his pursuers.

The riders wheeled their mounts this way and that, spear shafts slashing at the fronds, their cries growing more irritated with each futile pass. 'Come out!' shouted the largest of the riders, a raw-boned, fair-haired young man named Torf. 'You cannot escape! Come out, damn you!'

'Give up!' shouted one of the others. Murdo recognized the voice; it belonged to a thick-shouldered bull of a youth named Skull. 'Give up and face your punishment!'

'Surrender, you sneaking little weasel,' cried the last of the three.

It was the dark-haired one called Paul. 'Surrender now and save yourself a hiding!'

Murdo knew his pursuers and knew them well. Two of them were his brothers, and the third was a cousin he had met for the first time only ten days ago. Even so, he had no intention of giving up; he knew, despite Paul's vague assurance, they would beat him anyway.

Instead, amidst the shouts and the brushy whack of the spears, Murdo calmly put two fingers beneath his belt and withdrew a tightly-wound skein of wool and deftly tied one end of the thread to the long bracken stem beside his head. Then, with the most subtle of movements, he began to crawl again, paying out the thread as he went.

Slowly, slowly, and with the icy cunning of a serpent, he moved, pausing to unwind more string and then slithering forward again, head low under the pungent green fronds, forcing himself to remain calm. To hurry now would mean certain disaster.

'We know you are here!' shouted Torf. 'We saw you. Stand and declare, coward! Hear me? You are a very coward, Murdo!'

'Surrender,' cried Paul, dangerously near. 'We will let you go free.'

'Give up, Stick!' added Skull. 'You are caught!'

Murdo kept silent—and even when Paul's spear swept only a hair's breadth from his head, he did not break and run, but hunkered down and waited for the horse to move on. Reaching to the end of his thread ball, he lay still, trying to determine where and how far away were each of his pursuers. Satisfied that they were all at least ten or more paces away, he took a deep breath, pulled the woolen thread taut...and then gave a quick, sharp tug.

He waited, and jerked the string once more.

'There!' shouted Skuli. The other two whooped in triumph, wheeling their mounts and making for the place.

But Murdo had already released the thread and was slithering down the hill as fast as he could go. He reached the bank of the burn and risked a furtive look back at the riders: all three stood poised in the saddle with spears at the ready, shouting into the bracken for him to surrender.

Smiling, Murdo eased over the edge of the bank and lowered himself into the burn. The water was shallow, and cold on his bare feet, but he gritted his teeth and hastened on. While the riders demanded his surrender, Murdo made his escape along the low stream bed.

It was Niamh who finally caught him; he was sliding quietly around the corner of the barn, hoping to slip into the yard unobserved. 'Murdo! There you are,' she scolded, 'I have been looking for you.'

'My lady,' Murdo said, snapping himself straight. He turned to see her flying towards him, green skirts bunched in her fists, dark eyes flashing.

'A fine my lady! Look at you!' she said, exasperation making her sharp. 'Wet to the bone and muddy with it.' She seized him by the arm and pulled him roughly towards her. A head or more taller than the slender woman, he nevertheless delivered himself to her reproof. 'You have been at that cursed game again!'

'I am sorry, mam,' he replied, his man-voice breaking through the boyish apology. 'It's the last time, and—'Hare and hunter—at your age, Murdo!' she snapped, then looked at him and softened. 'Ah, my heart,' she sighed and released his arm. 'You should never let them treat you like that. It is neither meet nor fitting for any lord's son.'

'But they could not catch me,' Murdo protested. 'They never do.'

'The abbot is here,' Niamh said, tugging his damp, dirty siarc and brushing at it with her hands.

'I know. I saw the horses.'

'He will think you one of the servingmen, and who is to blame but yourself?'

'What of that?' Murdo replied sourly. 'It's never me that's going.'

'How should you be going? For all it is only ten and four you are.'

'Ten and five—in five months,' Murdo protested. 'Besides, I am taller than Paul, and stronger.' But his mother was already moving away. He stepped quickly beside her. 'Why is the abbot here?'

'Can you not guess?'

'It's the gathering,' Murdo answered.

'It is that.'

'When?'

'Ask the abbot,' replied Niamh. 'It's him you are greeting soon enough.'

They proceeded across the yard—a flat expanse of hard-packed earth enclosed on three sides by the barn and storehouses, and on the fourth by the great grey stone manor house itself. In all, Hrafnbu was as fine a manor farm as any in Orkney; the estate, or bu, had been in Murdo's family for five generations, and it was the best place Murdo knew.

Seven horses waited in the yard—the four clerics' and those of Torf, Skuli, and Paul, who had reached the bu well before Murdo, but just after the abbot. Lord Ranulf, flanked by his sons and nephew, stood in the centre of the yard, deep in conversation with the abbot and his monks.

Ignoring the clerics, Murdo's eyes went first to his father. The Lord of Hrafnbu towered above those around him. He was a big man, with large, strong hands—one of which gripped his elbow while the other stroked his heavy brown beard. Open-faced and

naturally amiable, he was frowning now, his friendly dark eyes narrowed in a look which Murdo knew to betoken trouble.

His expression changed instantly when the lord glanced up at the approach of Murdo and his mother. 'Abbot Gerardus, my wife and last-born son.' Ranulf held out his hand, which his wife accepted with a minute bow.

'Lady Niamh,' the abbot said, inclining his head respectfully. 'God save you, my lady. I greet you in the name of Our Redeemer. I trust you are well.'

A gurry-mouthed Saecsen, thought Murdo darkly, stiffening at the abbot's accent. They hold themselves so superior and cannot even speak a proper word.

The young abbot's eyes swung easily to Murdo and, finding little enough to interest him, flicked away again. Murdo vowed vengeance for the slight.

'Good abbot,' said Lady Niamh, 'my husband would keep you talking the whole day long, but I will not. I am certain that whatever you have to say will be better spoken over the welcome cup. Come, you have ridden a fair distance already and the day is yet new.'

Murdo squirmed uncomfortably as his mother slipped easily into the speech and manner of the hated foreigner. Why did she always have to do that?

'You are most kind, my lady,' replied the abbot imperiously. 'I assure you my fellow priests and I would be delighted to attend you.'

'This way, friends,' said the lord, indicating the house with an expansive gesture. 'We will discuss our business over our cups.'

Lord Ranulf and the abbot started off, and Torf, Skuli, and Paul made to follow. 'See to the horses, you three,' Ranulf called over his shoulder, halting them in midstep. 'And give our friends' animals a good measure as well.'

The young men stared after the lord, suddenly chagrined at being left out of the discussion. Murdo allowed himself a smile of wicked glee at their dismay. Torf saw the smile and started for him, fists clenched, but Paul seized the older youth's arm and pulled him back, saying, 'If we hurry, we can still join them before the cup is dry.'

Torf growled and, turning on his heel, darted after the others. As the horses were led away, Murdo fell into place behind the trailing monks and the procession crossed the yard and entered the house. The monks were brought into the hall and given places at the lord's board.

Unlike Jarl Erlend's palace in Orphir, Ranulf's manor was very much the house of a working farmer, whose estate, though extensive, required constant vigilance and exacting care in order to produce even the modest wealth the lord and his vassals enjoyed. There

were no golden bowls, no silver ornaments for visiting clerics, no gifts of coin for the church; the hall was not full of warriors with gleaming torcs and armbands awaiting the next raid, the next battle. Indeed, the master of Hrafnbu kept no fighting men, and at Yuletide and other holy days, his own family and friends more than filled the low-beamed hall; if any more visitors came, extra boards and trestles were set up in the yard. Still and all, Ranulf's ale was good and dark and sweet, and the fire at his wide hearth was as warm as any king's.

Murdo liked the hall and the solid stone house, and bristled at the way in which the abbot dismissed his surroundings with an indifferent glance. Ranulf failed to notice the snub, however, as he poured the monks' cups with his own hand. When the bowls were filled, he raised his, saying, 'Health and long life. Take your ease and be welcome in my house.' The holy men nodded in silence, and they all drank.

'Lord Ranulf,' remarked the abbot, lowering the cup at last, 'this is a rare pleasure for me, I assure you. I have long had it in mind to visit you, and I rejoice that the jarl's decision has provided this felicitous opportunity.'

'You honour me with your company, Abbot Gerardus,' replied Ranulf, reaching forward to refill the cups. He emptied the jar and made to replace it on the board but, seeing Murdo, gestured to his son. 'Here now, Murdo, fill the jar.'

Murdo leapt to the task so that he would not miss a single word. He dashed from the hall and into the kitchen to the vat in the corner, lifted the wooden cover and plunged the jar into the cool brown ale, pulled it up, and was away again before the cover slammed down. He brought the jar still dripping to the board and placed it beside his father.

'It is as I expected,' Ranulf was saying. Murdo noticed the frown was back on his father's face. 'Yet, I had hoped he would change his mind.'

'No doubt Jarl Erlend has many pressing concerns,' the abbot remarked judiciously.

'Nay,' replied Ranulf scornfully, 'the concerns of the Holy Church are the concerns of all good Christian men. What temporal duty can claim greater obligation?'

'Both the bishop and I agree, of course,' Abbot Gerardus said. 'And that is why we have interceded with the jarl—sadly, to no avail.' He allowed this sorrow to be duly felt, before brightening once more. 'Still, I am pleased to tell you that he has at least seen the wisdom of our appeal and allowed his decision to be moderated somewhat.' The abbot paused to indulge a smugly satisfied smile. 'When the interests of the church are at issue, I think you will find us most formidable adversaries.'

'I am certain of it,' answered Ranulf quickly, impatient to learn the answer he had been waiting for over two months to hear.

But the abbot was enjoying his diplomatic mission and would not be hurried. 'Of course, the jarl is a difficult man at best, and never easy to persuade. Truly, if it were not for the bishop's friendship with King Magnus, I do not believe-' he paused again. 'Ah, well, all that is done now, and I am pleased to tell you we have secured that which we sought—at least in part, as I say.'

'Yes?' coaxed Ranulf, leaning forward slightly.

Abbot Gerardus lifted his head as if he were delivering a benediction. 'Although Jarl Erlend remains firm in his decision, he has given his vow that he will neither hinder nor reprove any nobleman who chooses to follow the crusade.'

'Good!' cried Ranulf, slapping the board with his hand.

'God be praised,' the monks murmured, nodding contentedly.

'Indeed,' continued the abbot, 'each of the jarl's vassals is free to obey his own conviction in the matter.'

There was a movement beside the lord as his wife stepped beside him. Alone of those present, her expression was dour. Ranulf, oblivious to her disapproval and giddy with the prospect before him, took her hand into his. The abbot looked away primly.

'Naturally,' intoned the abbot after a moment, 'the jarl wishes it to be known that, inasmuch as he is not taking the cross himself, he will not be extending any material assistance to those who choose to go.'

'Nothing?' asked Ranulf, the smile fading from his face.

The abbot gave a slight shake of his head. Murdo could see how much the grey-robed cleric relished his position as emissary, and hated him the more. Self-important meddler, thought Murdo, and entertained himself with the vision of the abbot's backside covered in ripe, red boils.

'You see how it is,' Abbot Gerardus replied. 'The jarl has many claims on his properties and substance. It is enough that he will be deprived of the rightful tribute of his noblemen. Certainly, he cannot be expected to provide supplies and provisions for all.'

'But-' began Ranulf. His protest was stifled by the imperious abbot's upraised palm.

'It is the view of the church that those who follow the crusade are pilgrims and as such must meet the cost of the pilgrimage out of their own resources.' He looked around the room, as if assessing the value of its appointments. 'If one finds oneself unable to meet the cost, then perhaps one is unwise in pursuing the journey.'

'The tribute will be forgiven?' wondered Ranulf.

'Of course.'

'For the duration of the crusade?'

The abbot nodded. 'All tithes and taxes, too, yes—that is, until the pilgrim returns.'

Ranulf rubbed his chin, reckoning his savings.

'I would not like to think the love of mammon stood between any man and his sacred duty,' Abbot Gerardus continued. 'The spiritual rewards are not inconsiderable. As you know, all pilgrims will enjoy complete absolution for all sins committed while on crusade, and should death befall anyone who takes the cross, his soul is assured swift admission into paradise.'

'That much I have heard,' Ranulf replied.

Lady Niamh, grim and silent, stood with her arms crossed and her mouth pressed into a thin, hard line. Murdo knew the look, and rightly feared it.

The three young men entered the hall just then, eager to hear the abbot's news. They approached the board and Ranulf beckoned them close. 'We have our answer,' the lord informed his sons and nephew. 'Jarl Erlend will allow the crusade, but we cannot look to him for aid.'

'We can go?' asked Torf, glancing from his father to the abbot and back again.

'Aye, that we can,' Lord Ranulf answered.

'Then I take the cross!' declared Torf, thrusting forward.

'Torf-Einar!' exclaimed Lady Niamh. 'It is not for you to say.'

'I take the cross!' Skuli echoed, ignoring his mother.

Not to be outdone, Paul pushed forward. 'In the name of Christ, I take the cross!'

Ranulf stood, gazing resolutely at his wife. 'Tell Bishop Adalbert that Lord Ranulf of Dyrness and his sons will come before him to take the cross on the Saint John's Sabbath.'

Murdo heard this and his heart beat faster. Did his father mean to include him, too? Perhaps the lord had changed his mind, and he would be included after all. He held his breath.

The young abbot nodded. 'Trust that I will tell him. Of course, you will wish to place your lands under the protection of the church during your pilgrimage.'

'That will not be necessary,' Ranulf replied easily. 'Lady Niamh will remain in authority here. My son, Murdo, will be here to help her, of course, and as the jarl is to stay in Orkneyjar, we have nothing to fear.'

Murdo's face fell as the hope, so quickly kindled, died to ashes in his heart.

'That is your privilege, of course, Lord Ranulf,' remarked the abbot. 'But I advise you to pray and seek God's guidance in this matter. You can deliver your decision to the bishop on the Sabbath.'

'There is no need,' Ranulf assured him. 'I have made my decision, and I will not be changing it now.'

'Very well.' With that, the abbot rose, and Murdo received the distinct impression that, having made a dreadful blunder, they were all being abruptly dismissed.

Heads erect, hands folded before them, Abbot Gerardus and his brother monks left the hall, retracing their steps to the yard. The lord bade his sons to fetch the clerics' horses, and Murdo used the opportunity to loosen the cinch strap on the abbot's saddle—not enough so that the churchman should fall, but enough to make the saddle sway uneasily from side to side.

Back in the yard once more, the abbot accepted the reins from Murdo's hand and, without so much as a word of thanks, swung himself onto his mount. 'Pax vobiscum,' he intoned sourly.

'Pax vobiscum,' answered Ranulf, whereupon the abbot wheeled his horse and rode from the yard, followed by his three silent companions.

After supper the Lord of Dyrness and his lady wife exchanged sharp words. Late into the night their voices could be heard beyond the thick walls of their chamber. The servingmen had vanished just after clearing the supper board, lest they come foul of their lord's displeasure, and none were to be found anywhere. Murdo, sitting alone at the hearth, could not hear what they said, but the meaning was clear enough. Even the lord's grey wolfhound remained curled in a corner of the hearth, jowls resting on his great paws.

'What ails you, Jotun?' muttered Murdo, flicking a peat clod at the dog. 'It's me that has been forsaken.'

Murdo did not go to his bed that night; he was discouraged enough already without listening to the smug chatter of his brothers and cousin. Instead, he stalked the hill behind the house cursing his luck and railing against his untimely birth. He demanded of the heavens to know why he had been born last, but neither the stars, nor the pale half moon deigned to answer. They never did.