

## CHAPTER 9

# A Paladin, Well and True

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WORMS, WINTER 788

THE KING'S COURT AT INGELHEIM, SPRING 788

Midwinter snow lined the practice yard at the king's palace at Worms, and Sebastian stood in the middle of it, sweating like a horse after a long gallop. Warner, the king's constable and horse master, had just put him through yet another grueling session with the heavy wooden practice swords, pitting one young warrior after another against Sebastian, each of them hoping to best one of the king's finest swordsmen. Sebastian had stood his ground, patiently studying each challenger's style and approach to the match and then finessing each one until a blow or counterblow clearly represented his defeat.

Sebastian drove himself each day until he was exhausted. Ever since the king left for Bavaria, he had faced three sessions a day under Warner's relentless regimen, and he was sick to death of the endless routine of violence. He stood head down and eyes closed in the empty courtyard, leaning heavily on the clumsy practice sword.

"Well, you are stronger, are you not?" announced a deep voice out of the gathering gloom of the early evening. "Everyone says so. They say there's no one around who can beat you."

"Hullo, Heimdal," he replied wearily.

"What's this? Do I detect some resentment from the king's champion? I would have thought you could not get enough of this rough play. Can it be you've finally tired of playing at war?"

"Get away, old man. I'm not in the mood for your philosophies."

"Oh, come along, my fine lad. It's been a while since we've had a good chat, and it seems you could use one now. Come, wash up a bit, and let's retire to the tavern down the road. I hear they have some very good late wine, a bit sweet, but delicious nonetheless."

Sebastian did not often step outside the grounds of the king's palace. He had not even had a cup of ale since the king departed for Italy. But in the mind-numbing sameness of rebuilding his strength and skills each day, and in the absence of most of his friends, his spirits had fallen to a new low. So in spite of his surly response to Heimdal, he jumped at the chance for a little conversation with the old sage.

The tavern was stuffy and filled with the smell of stale bread and burnt fish, but it was warm and mercifully empty of other guests. They settled at a low table by the fire and were served a thick porridge of oats and vegetables with a few chunks of tough goat meat and a cup of sweet white wine.

"Well, out with it, Sebastian. You sound worse than before. I thought you were on the road to recovery."

"Where is this God we're supposed to believe in, Heimdal?" Sebastian began, all at once pouring out his discontent. "Why is my life so difficult and full of such strife and loss? Surely, I've paid my debts enough to deserve a little happiness and peace."

"No one guarantees you a life of happiness, Sebastian. The best thing you can do is find a way to conduct your life so that you find tranquility and a sense of moral worth."

"How in blazes does one find that, Heimdal?"

"You know from your experience, my friend, that human conditions do not naturally reflect order and calm. And without order, there can be no peace, no calm, no sense of virtue in the world. It becomes a place of animals, where 'eat or be eaten' is the only rule. I believe that reason alone offers some kind of order and value in life. It is what one must pursue above all else."

"Not God, Heimdal? What of our Christian beliefs?"

"I do believe there is some kind of God, Sebastian. Reason tells me there must be something or someone who began everything. But the

concepts of divinity and creation are so far above our puny minds that we cannot possibly know them. How can we know the mind of God, let alone what or who that God really is?

"Therefore, we must cling to reason—because we can at least understand *it*, and we know that only reason can provide some kind of order in this chaotic world in which we live. If we follow reason, we will see that justice and duty are the loftiest virtues—because they will lead to order. And if we pursue these virtues, we can at least have peace of mind."

"But what of those Christian virtues we are taught? What of mercy, forgiveness, faith, and love?"

"We cannot know, my boy, but personally I tend to believe that such virtues can lead one away from reason. Is it reasonable, for example, to forgive an implacable enemy? Should one have mercy on the Saxons after they have betrayed our trust so many times? And, my good man, I hesitate to say it since you have obviously encountered love in all its intensity, but I have found, over my long lifetime, that love is fickle. It does not last, sometimes not even for very long, certainly not for a whole lifetime. Reason, on the other hand, tells us to raise duty above love, for duty creates necessary order while love distracts, confuses, and disappoints—and often creates absolute chaos, not order. Look at your own great love for Adela. Has it created order or chaos?"

"Never mind that, Heimdal, damn you. Talk of something else."

This was not the first of such conversations with Heimdal, but in his present disillusioned state, this one stuck profoundly in Sebastian's brain. He could see how love had been the cause of his great joy and how much the loss of it had made him bitter and his life empty and meaningless. He knew too well the chaos of the world, and eventually he resolved that, henceforth, if he were to feel any worth at all, he must concentrate on duty alone. He would become the king's paladin, well and truly.



While Sebastian was recovering, the king, never one to rest when there was unfinished business, was in Bavaria disciplining the unfortunate Count Tassilo to the point of actually annexing Bavaria to the Frankish crown.



His successes there put him in almost giddy spirits upon his return to Francia. He spent the winter in Ingelheim, near Mayence, calling a general assembly there in the spring to put Duke Tassilo on trial and discuss the acquisition of Bavaria with his magnates. He sent for Sebastian almost as soon as he returned.

"Come in, Sebastian. Good man!" the king exuded, hurriedly dressing himself for a ride. "Sit while I ready myself. I've a new stallion, and I want to have a go at him before supper. Well, I do say," he said, looking Sebastian over with interest, "it's true what they told me; you're in fine fettle—and more than that, you look a proper pushing lad once again. I can see why Arno told me you can't be beaten in the practice yard lately. Good show!"

"Thank you, my lord king," Sebastian responded indifferently to the mayor of the palace's praise.

"Tonight I'm celebrating! Not only did we have a rattling good campaign in Bavaria—couldn't have gone off better—but Fastrada has given me another child, a girl. I'm delighted with her—with both of them. We're having a banquet, and I want you there."

"If you wish it, my liege."

"I do indeed. The only thing better would be if you had been along in Bavaria to share our good fortune. But let me tell you quickly what's next for you—there won't be time tonight. I want you to go back up north—not to Denmark, mind! You're to stay completely away from that bloody Konrad. You understand?"

"Yes, my lord king."

"I want you to go to Frisia. I've been getting more unsettling reports about those bloody Vikings again. They're not just a nuisance now, they're beginning to be a real thorn in my side. They've been raiding all over Frisia, right up into the towns. We've got to stop 'em. You once told me the best way to do it would be to build our own boats so we could find them quicker and fight them on their own level. Well, I want you to go up there and find a way to build me some ships such as the Vikings have. We could never catch them in the old buckets we've been using for trade.

"You're one of my paladins now, you know. You're supposed to be capable of anything," he added almost offhandedly. "Do you think you could do that?"

"I do, my king," Sebastian replied, feeling a spark of enthusiasm for

the first time. "I know something about that region. Attalus and I were often in those parts when the Saxons were trying to stir up the Frisians against us. I might be able to find someone there who knows the secrets of the Viking boats."

"Good on you, then. That's what you'll do. Unfortunately, I must go back down to Bavaria with another army in a few weeks. That villain Tassilo has gone back on his word already and refuses to be my vassal. He's acting a proper fool. I'm afraid I shall have to remove him from the duchy completely and put him in a monastery. I should have his bloody head lopped off, but he's my cousin. Wouldn't do."

As Sebastian and the king were leaving, Charlemagne saw Fastrada in the garden and pushed Sebastian toward her. "Go pay your respects to my lady queen. She's been asking about you. And she'll need a young and handsome lad like you to talk to tonight. She won't say a word to most of my 'old boy' retinue here." With that, he bounded away toward the stables, leaving Sebastian with a disconcerting prospect.

He paused to put himself on guard as he approached the queen. He already knew how bold and unpredictable she was. Their last meeting, just before the king sent him to Brittany, had almost shocked him senseless. He could still feel her fingers tracing the muscles of his arms and back, her dark eyes probing into his brain. He had felt virtually seduced.

For a minute or so, he watched her from a distance out of the corner of his eye, taking in her luxurious dress—purple silk, clinging to her body like a glove, definitely not a conventional choice for morning. With purple and silver ribbons in her hair, a riot of silver jewelry, and a boldly open bodice, she looked as if she were going to a celebratory festival instead of a morning stroll. *She's fancy, no mistake*, he thought. *Too rich for my blood*. But the king was over the moon about her. He vowed to pay no mind to the allure and just keep his distance. But he kept on walking toward her.

She was talking animatedly to two obviously captivated young warriors. They bowed and moved off quickly when they saw Sebastian approaching. Fastrada turned in surprise. "Ah, Lord Sebastian," she cooed softly, embracing him briefly but very warmly. "I am so happy to have found you at last."

Sebastian was rapidly routed from his resolve by this unexpected display of familiarity. Most Frankish women would never do such

a thing, especially with a man they hardly knew. But Fastrada was decidedly an exception. She was the queen, and she exulted in her beauty and the feel of her power. Sebastian felt all that in her ardent, magnetic embrace. He could not help but be more than a little stirred by it.

At this point in their marriage, Charlemagne was besotted with Fastrada, with her elegant beauty, exceptional intelligence, and palpable carnality. It occurred to Sebastian that she was like original sin, impossible to ignore or avoid. The queen did as she pleased, more or less. And it took Sebastian only a few moments to see she was not content just to be Charlemagne's queen, his woman of the moment. She wanted much more. She didn't want to replace the king, she just wanted to control him and anyone else who had power and influence.

"Congratulations, my queen," Sebastian began, bowing low before Fastrada. "The king told me of your new child. He's very pleased."

"Ah," she murmured, reaching across to take his hand in hers. "Is that all you can say? The baby is old news. I had her months ago. The king is just now getting around to celebrating her birth. I would have thought you might say you were glad to see *me*."

"Of course I am, Your Grace." He cleared his throat and ventured lamely, "You are looking very well and healthy."

"Heavens! You certainly know how to charm a lady. Never mind. Take my arm. Let us get to know one another better." She walked him into the part of the garden where there were thicker shrubs. "You seem to be avoiding me, my handsome hero," she said, holding his arm tightly up against her bosom. "Why is that? I so want to be your friend."

"What?" Sebastian croaked, stunned at her familiarity. "Your friend, Your Grace? That is impossible; you are the queen. It would not be seemly."

Fastrada laughed derisively. "My good Lord Sebastian! Seemly? What kind of word is that? Don't be so stuffy and formal. Do you not think that queens are like all other women? They have feelings and emotions—needs, just like men or any other woman."

Despite his smug confidence that he was aware of Fastrada's game, Sebastian flushed red with embarrassment. The queen was speaking to him with highly inappropriate familiarity and holding him far too closely to her side as she led him rapidly into a nest of high flowering bushes, her hip firmly thrust against his own. Whenever she spoke,



she leaned into him, pressing her bosom into his arm. "Look here, Sebastian," she insisted, stopping and fixing him with the unwavering eyes of a cat on the hunt. "I want you to be my good friend. I admire you ever so much, and I always listen eagerly for news of you. You are the most interesting man in my husband's court. I follow your doings everywhere. I even know some of your secrets." She paused a moment to let this pregnant phrase sink in.

"I know, for example, that you are a man of great passion and determination, that you love unreservedly and you would do anything for the one you love, even to the point of heedlessly intruding into the den of a notorious bandit to fight him in the midst of his bloodthirsty friends. What passion! What consuming desire drove you to do such a reckless thing? They almost killed you. And yet you live. Perhaps it's true what the people say about you—that you cannot be killed. And you appear now even stronger, more vital than before. I marvel at you, my intrepid Achilles! Can you blame anyone for wanting to be closer to you?"

"You do me far too much honor, Your Grace, and I am truly sorry you know about that unfortunate business in Denmark. I was a fool, not a hero there."

"Of course you weren't a fool—only passionate and dogged in your devotion. Would that the king would love *me* with such ardor."

"He does, I assure you, Your Grace. He dotes upon you."

"Yes, at the present moment he does. But would he go to such extremes as you have done for love of me?" She let the question hang in the air as Sebastian struggled in stunned confusion.

Finally, she continued, "My dear Sebastian, I want you to be my confidant. I want you to be close to me—very close. Did you know that it was I who recommended to the king that he choose you to be his paladin? Yes, it's true. I told him he could find no greater devotion or loyalty in a man and that he could have no greater champion." She drew in a breath, pulling him closer. "So you see, you are *my* paladin as well as the king's. You will be the new Roland, and I will be the muse for all your future adventures."

By this time, Sebastian's head was pounding, and he looked desperately around for a way out of the sensuous bonds Fastrada was coiling around him. He had never met such a seductively attractive woman, one who wielded her charms with such terrifying confidence,

as if she wanted to devour him in order to own him. He was at once horrified and charmed, like a rabbit before a snake, and he could think of nothing to say.

She continued, snuggling boldly up to his chest. "I have dreamed of you, my paladin. I see you one day as a great general, a leader of all King's Karl's armies, and myself as the source of your power and the inspiration for your deeds." She tugged him off the path and behind a spreading bush. "Here, kiss me, my champion, and seal the pact between us."

"No!" Sebastian blurted, tripping and almost falling over his own feet in his haste to escape Fastrada's grasp. He retreated two more steps, took a deep breath, and bowed low. Recovering some control over his emotions, he said evenly, not daring to meet her eyes, "My dear lady queen, you think far too much of me, but you are mistaken. I am nothing like what you assume. I am in many ways the least of the servants of the king, your husband. But one thing you said about me is true: I am perhaps his most loyal subject, and I cannot imagine remaining so and assuming at the same time the intimacy which you offer. I revere you as the king's wife and his most beautiful queen. And I will serve you as I serve him—if it be his will. Please forgive me if I disappoint you. But I seek no fame, no special place among the Frankish host. I only live to serve the king, and that is enough for me."

With that, he bowed low one more time, turned, and hurried from the garden. Later that afternoon, he sent a message to the court excusing himself from the banquet that evening due to 'pressing family concerns.'