

Lord Conrad's Crusade

*Book Seven
in the
Adventures of Conrad Stargard*

A Science Fiction Novel

by

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And
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Chapter 6 Hunger, Thirst, and Death

I awoke laying on top of a cargo container, in the middle of the ocean. My head hurt, and I was thirsty. The storm was mostly over, but the waves were still choppy. Nothing else was in sight.

Cynthia was with me.

"I see that you are alive, Conrad. I was beginning to worry about you."

"I gather that you have saved my life. Thank you. How long was I unconscious?"

"Almost two days."

"Do we have any supplies of any sort?"

"No, nothing."

"And do you know what happened to the ship?"

"It was still sailing, the last time I saw it. I don't think that the Captain knew that we were gone."

"You could be right. Most of our guests were pretty drunk. It was probably a while before somebody thought to report our abrupt exit. Not that the Captain could have done much for us in that storm, anyway.

"What's in this container?" I asked, hoping for an assortment of foodstuffs.

"The bill of lading on the container says it's full of fiberglass insulation, refrigeration grade, to be delivered to the Captain of Construction, Amazon Mouth North. I suppose that's why it floated when so many of them sank."

"We'll have to check that out. Sometimes, mistakes are made. You look different. Your breasts are much larger."

"Yes. One of the uses that my kind was made for is taking care of small children. My breasts are fully functional."

"So?"

"So, we have no food or fresh water. You can not drink sea water, but I can. You can drink the milk that I can produce. Therefore, I have caused my breasts to enlarge, to keep you alive."

"So you can do this voluntarily? That's an ability that a lot of human girls would love to have! And, that's quite an offer you just made! Again, I thank you."

"Nursing isn't painful. Actually, it's very pleasant."

"Do you know where we are?"

"Yes. We are a bit north of the equator, and a few hundred miles from the coast of Africa. The wind is blowing us in the right direction, but I have no idea how long this will continue. Are you thirsty?"

"Very."

She bent over me, presenting her breasts.

"Then please enjoy."

We didn't have anything like a cup, but one wasn't needed.

There was obviously a limit to how long her small body could continue to feed my big one. This was in addition to the fact that she had an extremely high metabolism, and normally ate three times as much as I did.

A Big Person could have eaten the wooden lid of the container, but Cynthia

wasn't up to such a thing.

Cynthia had gone swimming a few times, hoping to catch a fish, but no luck so far.

My pistol was gone, but I still had my sword and a useless sack of gold and silver, and Cynthia had her knife. I started to cut a small hole in the container's lid, to make very sure that there was nothing useful inside. Cynthia soon took over the job, being much stronger than I was.

The container was full of fiberglass. Feeling around inside it with my sword, I found something hard! We had to cut another hole to get at whatever it was, and eventually discovered that we owned a bottle of whiskey! Stolen whiskey. I knew that because it was from my own private stock!

"Someone was probably sending a postage free gift to a friend," I said.

"At least you have something to drink."

"No, but you do. Humans don't metabolize alcohol all that well, but my impression is that your sort of body treats it just like any ordinary food."

"Yes, that's true."

"Then you should drink this, and I'll continue to drink you!"

"That does make sense, Conrad."

A further search didn't turn up any more presents in the container.

I put the gold down the hole into the container, rather than have it bouncing around on my belt.

Drinking sea water required her to urinate much more often, to dump the extra salt, I suppose. Cynthia considered nudity to be completely normal, but she was embarrassed to pee while I was watching. I obliged her and always looked in another direction. A lady has her privileges.

A few days later, Cynthia sighted a large jellyfish. She swam out to it and ate most of it on the spot, since she couldn't grab on to it to bring it back. It just ripped apart.

Just as well, since she was starting to look thin, and I was getting plenty of nourishment just getting enough to drink. The sun was fierce, and we didn't have any sort of cover. It's a pity that Cynthia's breasts couldn't make water instead of milk.

The breasts of a human woman will sacrifice her own body in order to get enough of the nutrients needed to feed her baby. I didn't know if Cynthia's people worked the same way, but I was afraid that they might.

I told her to eat the rest of the jellyfish herself, and she did.

The heat was oppressive, but I tried hard to limit my intake of milk, because it was costing Cynthia so much. The thirst was unbearable, and I only used her when I couldn't stand it any more. And while I suffered from thirst, she suffered even more from hunger.

I started to spend as much time as I could in the water, hanging on to a rope I'd made out of some of my clothes. It was cooler in the water, so I sweated less, and perhaps I absorbed a bit of the sea water through my skin. Also, this let me look down every minute or so, hoping to see a fish, or anything she could eat. But there wasn't anything.

A week later, it was becoming obvious that she couldn't go on feeding my big body with her small one. We had been able to find nothing more for her to

eat. She was getting very thin and weak. She even gave up looking for fish, and most of the time she just laid there in a sort of comma.

The winds were sometimes favorable, and sometimes not. I was beginning to lose hope.

I went swimming a few more times, thinking that I might be able to kill something with my sword, but there was nothing down there for me to cut up. In all of the stories that I had read, the seas were filled with sharks, but somehow, we were now someplace where they weren't.

A few times, I cut myself on my hand, and dangled it in the water, hoping to attract some attention. Blood was supposed to attract sharks. Losing a hand to a shark would be preferable to losing Cynthia, but nothing came of it.

I finally resolved that I was going to have to stop using her. If I had to die, so be it, but I wasn't going to kill Cynthia in the process. I prayed a lot that night, trying to get my soul in order.

I slept late, and when I awoke, the container was bumping gently against the shore!

It was a deserted beach, with nothing much but sand.

Weak with thirst, and stumbling, I carried Cynthia up onto the shore. She was alive, but she wasn't capable of much movement.

I searched for something for her to eat, but it was the cleanest beach I'd ever seen. No dead fish, no seaweed. I could find no sign of crabs or clams. It was as dead as the sea before it. There weren't even any insects!

Thinking back, once I'd read of a place like this. They called it the Skeleton Coast.

A few hundred yards from the shore, there was some sparse vegetation. When I staggered up there, I found it to be a rough sort of grass. A Big Person could have eaten it, but I didn't know about Cynthia. Hacking it down with my sword, I gathered up an armful of it and headed back.

When I got there, she was so weak that I had to put some of it in her mouth, but then she started chewing it, and said, "Thank you."

I continued feeding her throughout the day, which was mostly cloudy, for a blessing. I brought her sea water with the empty whiskey bottle, and tied my money pouch back to my belt, when I was down there. The container might drift back to sea, and the gold might prove useful, now that we were on land.

Either that grass was more nutritious than it looked, or Cynthia's digestive system was more efficient than I had imagined, but she actually started to recover. When evening came, she got up, walked slowly to the ocean and took another long drink for herself.

The thirst was killing me, but I made no mention of it. But as darkness set in, she put her left breast into my mouth and said, "Your turn."

Later, working by moonlight, I gathered her yet another armful of grass, so that she could eat at night, if she wanted to.

That night, I said, "I think that we should stay here for a few days, until we are strong enough to move on. Then, we should head north along the beach. Eventually, we must find people, some sort of civilization, and then my bag of gold should be able to buy us some transportation home."

"That sounds like a good plan, Conrad."

"Another thing. I . . . I have come to admire you greatly, Cynthia. When we

get home, what would you think of joining my family? What would you think of being my wife, or at least, my third wife?"

"Oh, yes! I would love that, Conrad! I would love that very much!"

We kissed, and held each other, but neither of us had the strength for real love making.

I awoke to hear men on camels approaching!

I shook Cynthia awake.

"Company's coming! Let's try to be friendly with them. Maybe, they are our ticket out of here!"

We were both still very weak, and Cynthia didn't have a tenth of her old strength, speed, and agility.

I stood and smiled with my cracked lips. I had my right hand raised in a gesture of peace. In my left, I held my bag of gold and silver.

The men, wearing voluminous blue robes, surrounded us, scowling, with their swords drawn. One of them was saying something, in a harsh language that I'd never heard before.

"They don't look very friendly, Conrad."

"Just be as calm as you can!"

Keeping my movements slow and unthreatening, I poured some of the gold into my right hand, still smiling. I gestured to the man who was doing the talking, offering it to him.

Then, one of the men behind me swung his long camel sword and cut my right hand completely off at the wrist!

Blood squirted from the end of my arm! I was aghast! How could this happen to me? Why would they do this to me? I was trying to be friendly! Yet, my hand was laying there on the sand, with gold and blood all around it.

Cynthia just had to join in to the fight, but she was still too close to total exhaustion to be able to fight well. Still, the man who had struck off my hand suddenly found her on his camel's back, behind him. Cutting his throat, with her left hand gripping his hair through his turban and her right hand jerking her knife, took less than a second!

Then she leaped to the next camel, attacking the guy on her right. Again going for the throat, she sliced every artery in it!

While she was doing that, a third Arab, or whatever these bastards were, swung a sword from behind her and cut her head completely off!

Her beautiful head went flying from her tiny body! Her people could recover from some serious wounds, but not decapitation!

I drew my sword with my left hand and tried to attack them, but I weak and clumsy. I was contemptuously kicked in the face, and landed in the dirt. I was dazed, my nose was broken, my front teeth were missing, and my face was smashed. A dozen swords were pointed at me.

It was over.

They disarmed me, keeping my sword, scabbard, and belt. They picked up all of my gold and silver, marveling at the quality and quantity of the coins, and kept it all. Their thought must have been, Why work for some of his gold when we can easily take it all for free? It must have been obvious how weak I was.

One of them tied a tourniquet to my forearm, even though it wasn't bleeding

much any more. Two weeks of dehydration had thickened my blood, or perhaps my Uncle Tom had something to do with it.

Apparently, they were going to let me live. They gave me a long drink of water, too.

They took Cynthia's knife, and they stripped their own dead as well. When they stripped the bodies, I saw that their skin looked blue, too. They must have used a very cheap dye on their robes. All three bodies were just left where they laid, to eventually rot away on the surface.

Maybe, if I hadn't fed Cynthia at all, she would still be in a coma, and she couldn't have attacked these bastards. She might still be alive.

If only I had done things differently, better.

Then the gang got interested in the container, They pulled some of the fiberglass out of the holes we'd cut and examined it, arguing. They had obviously never seen anything like it.

They hauled me over, shouting and pointing at it. With gestures, I explained that they should rub it on their genitals, and that this would make them grow very long.

Most of them actually did it. This got me another beating the next morning, since the glass fibers are amazingly irritating to the skin, but it was worth it. Anything that can hurt the enemy is good.

They tied me, belly down, over one of the camels that Cynthia had emptied, and we rode on. I prayed for her, and hoped that the little girl that I loved so much had a soul, but there was nothing else that I could do. She was gone.

A mile up the coast, we found a beached, newly dead whale.

Had I just explored a bit, Cynthia would have had plenty to eat, and might have been up to strength for combat. She might still be alive. With her old strength, she could easily have killed them all, and we could have ridden north with plenty of gear and supplies.

Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.

Life no longer seemed worth living.

Chapter 12 Slavery

Riding on my stomach on the back of a camel was uncomfortable, but I got enough water to drink, and all of the raw whale meat I could stomach.

Compared to my previous situation, I suppose that it was an improvement. Not that I much cared.

I survived, even though I didn't want to.

I eventually discovered that the party that had murdered Cynthia and captured me was the advanced guard of a sizeable caravan. In a few days, they were replaced by another group of blue covered men, and we waited for the caravan to catch up.

When they arrived, my stump was re-banded by a medic who seemed to know what he was doing, I was chained by the neck at the end of a long line of Black African slaves, and I had to walk from then on. Actually, it was preferable to riding that damned camel.

The caravan guards wore the blue outfits, too, but most of the people in the caravan itself dressed differently, and seemed to be of a slightly different racial type. They were not as absolutely brutal as the blue robed ones.

We slaves got nothing but whale meat for two weeks, but at least now it was cooked. They watered us after they watered the camels, but at least they watered us. We were valuable property, and they didn't want us needlessly damaged. Whip marks on some of the Black slaves suggested that some damage was acceptable, though.

The other slaves, mostly men, were all healthy. I suspect that this was because any who weren't had been killed before the trip began. We were not in kindly hands.

For myself, I just followed orders. I was too depressed to do anything else.

By the time the trip was over, my stump had healed over, to the amazement of the medic. Uncle Tom had done that much for me, anyway, even though he hadn't done a very good job of explaining just what he had done. I wished that he would show up and do some more nice things for me, like sending me home, but he didn't.

After two weeks of walking, we came to a fair sized city on the banks of a river. The land about it was a very dry grassland, almost a desert, but the fields around the city were irrigated and looked productive.

We spent the night in a prison, of sorts. First thing in the morning they brought us to a public bath, stripped us down, and cleaned us up. Then we were taken to a market square, where we slaves were auctioned off, naked.

Since I was at the end of the line, I was sold last. I suppose that it was because of my injuries, but I fetched less than any of the black slaves. A few trifling bits of silver. I'd paid a hundred times that much for one of Cynthia's silk dresses. It was annoying and embarrassing. It also told me that I wasn't a very valuable slave, and that if I wanted to live, I'd better be careful. They might decide that I wasn't worth the food that I was eating.

Then, they would kill me, eliminating an inefficient economic asset.

My new owner took me under guard to a pumping station that provided irrigation water for the fields. They used four big Archimedes screws for this,

each with one end in the river, and the other end dumping into a tank that fed into a canal. Two men walked around inside of a big barrel to power each pump.

They took me to a pump that was barely turning, since there was but a single man inside. A door was unlocked, I was forced inside, and the door was locked behind me. A guard threatened me with a whip, and I joined my fellow slave, walking, always uphill.

I felt like a reincarnation of Sisyphus, the Greek who had offended the Gods, and was forced to push a rock uphill, always to have it roll down before his task was completed.

My fellow inmate was also missing a right hand, but you didn't need hands for our job. He was a little man, small even among these short people.

The water from the pump poured into a tank with a hole in the bottom that led to the canal. When our keeper happened by, if the water was at the proper level, he knew that we'd been working, and we were fed. Mostly, it was stale coarse bread, sometimes with some wilted, raw vegetables as well.

If the water level in the tank was low, we went hungry.

Drinking water was straight from the river. Sanitary arrangements were non-existent. You peed through the grating in the door way, you shat on the floor, and then scraped it up with your hand. If you didn't, you had to sleep in your own mess, and then walk in it the next day.

The days were very hot, but the nights were often cold, and we had nothing like blankets. Our owners simply didn't care. We huddled together for warmth, to stay alive.

Weeks went by, I don't know how long. We had to work whenever it was light out, from early dawn to darkness, and seven days a week. Yet, my depression was such that I couldn't even feel angry about it.

Chapter 14 To Escape From A Barrel

My life as a slave in Timbuktu wasn't a pleasant one.

My cell mate wasn't a talkative man, but slowly I managed to pick up enough of the local language to communicate with him a bit.

His name was Omar, and he had once been a student at one of the many universities in the city. He was soon to graduate with what I think was the local equivalent of a law degree, but then he fell into bad company. Being hard pressed to meet his expenses, he got involved in some shady deals. When the university found out about it, he was dismissed, and his name was forever blackened.

Falling ever lower, he had been caught stealing, and lost his right hand as a judicial punishment for theft. The second time they caught him stealing, they might have killed him, but the judge was merciful. He was enslaved, and given to the city, to spend his life in unending drudgery.

I eventually found that the city that I was serving was called Timbuktu, and that the blue men who had mutilated and captured me weren't Arabs at all, but were from a people called Twaregs. Omar claimed that they were the most brutal people in the world, and I had to agree with that. They were at least on a par with the Mongols.

Not that the information did me any good.

On top of the endless drudgery, part of the annoyance was that our job was completely unnecessary. A simple undershot water wheel, turned by the river itself, could have done the work cheaply, and around the clock. Or even a wind mill. I had built many of each in Poland.

But, even if my owners, the city government, bought the idea, it could put me into much greater trouble than I was in now. Maybe they would be grateful, but maybe they would decide that if they didn't need pumping slaves any more, why feed them? They might kill us all out of hand.

A slave has very little incentive to be creative.

After a few weeks, I realized that I had not said my army oath since the I had been washed into the Atlantic Ocean. This was normally said every morning by every warrior in the Christian Army, with his right hand raised to the raising sun. I couldn't see the morning sun from my barrel, and I no longer had a right hand to raise to it, but I started to say my oath again, anyway.

"On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God, and to the army. I will obey the Warrior's Code, and I will keep myself physically fit, mentally awake, and morally straight.

"The Warrior's Code:

"A warrior is: Trustworthy, Loyal, and Reverent. Courteous, Kind, and Fatherly. Obedient, Cheerful, and Efficient. Brave, Clean, and Deadly."

It helped me, somehow, and I've said it every morning since.

I'd always say it in Polish, of course. I think that Omar thought that I was praying, and maybe I was.

After a month went by, I noticed something very strange. A bulge was forming at the end of my stump! It was tender and sensitive.

I thought that it might be an infection of some kind, but Omar cautioned me not to let our keepers know about it. Medical help was unavailable, and if they thought that one of the slaves was sickly, they simply killed him, threw his body into the river to feed the crocodiles, and bought another slave. Our type of slave was cheap here.

A few days later, I noticed that my front teeth were starting to grow back!

Months went by, and slowly my mind began to recover from the shocks that I had been put through. My depression and apathy eventually turned into anger, but it was an anger for which there was no release.

The door lock was strong and inaccessible. We were both completely naked, with nothing resembling a tool of any kind.

The barrel and the door were made out of the hardest wood that I'd ever seen. Something imported from the tropics, I supposed. Even chewing on it didn't accomplish much. Oh, a year's chewing might have made it through, but we were in the open, with people walking by all of the time. Any damage would soon be noticed, and punished.

The old woman who brought our food didn't have the keys, so simply grabbing her wouldn't accomplish anything, either.

Crippled as I was, I couldn't come up with a plan.

The bulge on the end of my right arm kept growing. After four months, it was as big as my other fist. There wasn't anything that I could do about it, either.

So we continued to walk, pumping water, and they continued to feed us, after a fashion. I knew that someday, something would break in my favor, and when that day happened, I'd better be ready for it. My legs were getting plenty of exercise, but my upper body wasn't. I started building my upper body strength back up, mostly using dynamic tension, since push ups and pull ups were out of the question. It's not as though I had anything better to do.

After I'd been inside that damned pump for at least six months, maybe seven, another amazing thing happened. The skin on the lump at the end of my right arm dried up, broke open, and peeled off! And inside, I had grown a whole new hand!

Omar was shocked, scared.

"Never have I ever heard of such a thing! This must be witchcraft!"

"No! I don't think so, Omar! If I could do witchcraft, I would have gotten out of this barrel long ago! I think that it is a miracle!" I said, even though I knew that this must be the result of the complete medical going over that my Uncle Tom had once given me.

One man's miracle can be just another man's technology. And how could there be anything that forbids God from using technology to attain His ends? God can do anything that He wants to do!

Frogs were able to do this same trick, growing a new limb. But frogs manage to turn out twenty to fifty new generations for every one that human beings do. This, plus their far larger number of offspring gave them a considerable evolutionary advantage. Every new baby can be looked on as being an evolutionary experiment, after all. Frogs are actually a far more advanced life form than we Homo Sapiens are.

Oh, they hadn't hit on making huge brains, and spending a third of their basal metabolism on maintaining them, but intelligence has not yet been proven

to be a long term survival mechanism. In seven hundred years, we brilliant humans will be very close to destroying our entire planet!

But trying to explain that would just convince Omar that it was witchcraft, and that might cause problems.

“You think that this could be a sign from Allah?”

“Can you think of anyone else who could have done it?”

Omar said, “Indeed, no! Why would the devil help a man? It must have been Allah!”

“Then perhaps, Allah has something in mind for me to do.”

“Yes, yes! Something great and important!”

“I must think on this,” I said.

“Indeed! And we must pray!”

I’d never seen Omar pray before, or indeed have anything to do with any religion of any kind, but seeing a supposed miracle had quite an effect on him.

I did do some praying, but I spent more time thinking. Now that I was whole again, I didn’t have to come up with a plan to sneak back home. I could damn well fight my way back!

Hours later, I said, “Omar, what is the procedure around here when someone dies?”

“Procedure? They throw his body into the river and get another slave!”

“How many men do they send to do that?”

“Two. At least the three times that my cell mate has died, they always sent two guards.”

“I’ve told you that once, I was a famous fighting man in my own country. I think that I could take out two of them, even if they were armed and I was naked.”

“You plan on some ruse, to make them think that you are dead?”

“No, actually. I was planning on making them think that you were dead. Then, when they came in here to get your body, I would jump them,” I said.

“Humm... My first thought is that jumping them, merely beating them up, this would be a very dangerous thing to do. If we act violently, my large friend, we must be very violent indeed, and kill them both without mercy! Our punishment would be death whether we were kind to them or not, and if they escaped, they would sound the alarm against us! We must kill them as quickly and as silently as possible!”

“There is much wisdom in what you are saying, yes. And I certainly have no love for these slave masters. Death it is. And your second thought?”

“It is that your plan might not work, Conrad. I am a very small man, but you are a giant. The guards might just tell you to put my body outside the door. They would be afraid of you, and have their swords drawn. They would be watchful!”

I asked, “Then what do you suggest?”

“I suggest that you be the one to feign death. I have been here for many years, and they do not fear me. If you are dead, they will not fear you, either. And one so small as myself could not be expected to move one so large as you are. They will have to enter the barrel to get you. Then, we can give them a surprise!”

“That sounds like a good plan. You know, though, that if this fails, they will kill us both, don’t you?”

“Of course, I have already said that!” He said, “But what do we have to

lose? This is not an earthly paradise that we are in, is it? There is nothing for us here but drudgery and death! Also, I think that in helping you, I will be doing the work of Allah, and thus atoning for some of my misspent life.”

“Well, if we both survive this, you will be well rewarded in this life, as well as the next one. I’m a very wealthy man, you know.”

“So you have told me. But we must not act too hastily! We must plan everything very carefully! Just to get out of this barrel is one thing. To get out of Timbuktu, and into your land of Europe is quite another! Let us both think, and plan further, for we will only have a single chance!”

And plan we did. We were fairly certain about our ability to trick and kill our guards, especially if we pulled it off very early on a Saturday morning, when there wouldn’t be anyone working in the fields, and the streets would be nearly empty.

The big problem was in quickly getting away from Timbuktu itself. The city was surrounded by what amounted to a desert, this time of the year. A man on foot couldn’t carry enough water to get across it. We had to have camels, food, clothes, and a lot of equipment.

We had no money to buy anything with, and after spending so many years in the barrel, Omar wasn’t even sure of his ability to know where to go to steal any of it. I, of course, had no idea of where to get anything.

And we had to get out of town fast, because they would doubtless be after us soon with all of their forces.

And once we were out of the city, mounted on camels and with the right equipment and supplies, where would we go? The desert was trackless. You needed a guide to find the next oasis.

We talked it over for three weeks, without solving anything.

Linking up with an outgoing caravan would be nice, but that cost money which we didn’t have, and cash is always a closely guarded commodity! Anyway, this wasn’t the season for caravans, and one wouldn’t be leaving on a Saturday morning in any event. It was the Islamic version of Sunday, and a holy day.

There had to be a way out of here, but we didn’t know how to do it.

After another week, I said, “Omar, there is no way for us to sneak out of this city with any serious hope of survival, let alone of success.”

“I fear that this is true, Conrad.”

I paused, and then I said:

“We’re just going to have to conquer it!”

(Authors Note: You have decided to read this book because it is a genuine, rousing, and exciting Leo Frankowski Product. However I did contribute a little to it. This takes place in the same general area where Conrad landed on the coast. Captain Walznik has been landed with a column of wolves and is looking for Conrad.

Rodger Olsen)

It had taken two days to find the first village on the coast. Getting anyone to talk to them was very tricky because everyone they met immediately ran into the jungle. When they finally caught one man by running him down and sitting on him, he just gabbled, growled, and barked until he was hoarse. The newly and temporarily promoted Captain Walznik sat on a nearby stump and waited with his head leaning on his hand until the man's struggles diminished.

Finally he called out, "Sir Toby, bring me a bottle of that good bourbon from the trade goods – and a couple of cups."

When the bottle was delivered, the Captain approached the man who had finally stopped struggling. He poured a liberal dose of the Bourbon in a cup and tried to hand it to man sitting on the ground. The result was a frightened gabble and four limbs trying desperately to move away from the cup.

Sir Toby, holding onto two of the four writhing limbs said, "I think he thinks you're trying to poison him."

Without taking his eyes from the frightened man's face, the Captain raised the cup to his own lips and took a drink. The man stopped struggling. When the Captain tried a second time to give him the cup, he still tried to pull away. The Captain took a second drink, leaned over, and breathed in the mans face. The captives eyes lit up and he reached for the cup. He drank the entire half cup twelve year old bourbon in two long swigs. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and said "gabble, gabble, gabble!"

When it was obvious no one understood him, he said "gooble, gooble, gooble!"

Again seeing no recognition in the eyes around him he said in passable Aramaic, "That's a pretty good drink you got there!"

Captain Walznik answered, through the Spanish scholar they'd brought with them to translate, "Glad you enjoyed it. Care for another?"

"Not right now. I have to walk back to my hut. But you are welcome to leave the bottle."

"Sorry, we can't do that. Maybe you can help us, though and we could leave you a little. We are looking for a friend of ours. He would have drifted up on shore around here a few months ago. He's a very tall white man, taller than me, with light colored hair. He had a beautiful white girl who hated to wear clothes with him. He carried a big sword longer than a mans arm with a golden handle."

The man shook his head. "Haven't heard of any strangers around these parts on sea or on foot for quite a while. I sure would have remembered a couple like that. Did get some nice new boots for the wife from the shore recently. No one stops here much anyway. If anyone does come, they stop at Armoon. Its got the only market in the area. Sells slaves, cloth, stuff from the North. They might

be able to help you there. Perhaps I would have another little drink, if you don't mind."

While the nameless man sipped his second drink, the captain fished a small gold coin from his purse and handed it over. "Here's a little token of our appreciation for your help. As we get closer to our friend, our appreciation gets bigger." Before they left, they found out that Armoon was about two days walk south and that there was only one good sized village on the way.

They got to the bigger village the next day. Captain Walznik had the column stop out of site of the town while he approached the log palisade around it. He and their Spanish scholar tried several languages, calling out "Hello in there" in Polish, German, Aramaic, and Greek before they got a response to the Greek.

A voice inside called back in heavily accented Greek. "Hello out there. Go away."

The scholar called back "We have some good trade goods and a little gold. Some of our horses have died and we need replacements. We will pay you well!"

The muffled voice came back "You seem to have more weapons than horses. Go away."

The Captain said to the translator. "Well, this is going well. Tell them that we would like to buy a slave. That we will pay well for him."

The answer came back. "I am certain that you would like to have us all as slaves. We are very poor. We have no slaves, no gold, no women, no food, no horses. We cannot even get enough water to drink. Go away!"

Captain Walznik gave up. Before he left, he shouted back at the wall. "Alright, we are going away. Tell everyone that we are looking for a friend of ours. He is very tall and light colored. He may have come to the beach a few months ago. We will pay well for his safe return."

The voice came back. "We have heard of such a man. I am certain that you can find him at Armoon. It is about two days walk south of here. Better hurry before you miss him."

As they walked back to the column, the translator looked excited. "Do you really think they have seen Lord Conrad?"

The Captain Walznik snorted. "Of course not. If fifty armed men came to your village and said they were looking for something what would you tell them? You'd say of course you know where it is. Anywhere but here! This is going to be tricky."

They did see a good sized town the next day, but decided to bypass it until they met up with the column that was working its way north. They met the second column two days later. At that point, they had each found several empty cargo containers, but no Conrad. Some of the natives were sporting Polish cloth clothing or leather boots from Germany or wiping their butts with the remains of Polish novels, but no one had seen, or admitted to seeing Lord Conrad or Cynthia. Many people said that they had seen such a man – over that way, far away – but when pressed for details, they were always wrong.

Captain Walznik met with Hendricks and four of the knights. "Lord Conrad has been missing for several months. I think, therefore, that we can take enough time to do an organized hunt for him. Obviously, no one is going to talk straight to a column of eight dozen heavily armed men so we are going to need another approach. I'm going to take a small group into that town we passed, 'Armoon'.

We've all heard that there is a market there. We are going to try to pose as representatives of a merchant caravan. I'll take enough men to bring back supplies. We'll try to buy enough horses for the rest of the men and clothes more suitable to merchants. These uniforms must be causing a lot of talk up and down the coast."

Banner Hendricks spoke up. "I assume that I will be staying here with the column. I suggest that you take Garrett and anyone else with a flair for languages with you. We'll need to learn the local lingo if we are going to travel. While you are gone, I'll try to round up a local willing to give language lessons to the Warriors. Of course, since we don't know the language, the first problem will be communicating that we don't know the language and want to learn it. We'll work that out later."

Conrad had once said that a famous linguist had claimed that any idea could be communicated if you knew the right two hundred words of a language and were willing to use a lot of words and a lot of back and forth to get your idea across. He was optimistic, but not too far off. The difference between no words and two or three hundred words was the difference between frustration and communication. Most people in the Christian Army could learn that much of anything in a few weeks.

Armoon was certainly a town rather than a village. It was surrounded by a six yard high mud brick wall. Around the top, you could see the ends of tree trunks sticking through the wall. They would hold the fighting platforms on the inside of the wall. The gate was a wide log contraption guarded by eight men in identical robes. One of them stepped in front of the column as it approached. He spoke Aramaic. Apparently they saw at least an occasional Arab trader here.

Once the language was established, he asked their business. Walznik answered, "We are merchants. We need to buy horses and supplies for the trip inland. We also have some trade goods to sell."

The guard said, "There is a ten talent fee for entering the city. That is two small Byzantine gold coins per man or the equivalent. You will also have to leave your weapons here."

Walznik could see that many men in the town were wearing swords or daggers. He judged that the guard had never heard of a gun and was trying to steal their bayonets and swords. "I tell you what, I will give you eight of these gold coins for our passage and you will forget about our swords. We mean no offense, but my men would feel naked if they were unarmed in a strange place." All of the Warriors had their hands on their sword hilts and were staring hard at the gate guard.

The guard judged his chances of continuing to breath after a confrontation and answered, "Fair enough. While you are in our city, you may want to look for the inn of the blue pig. My cousin runs a clean place with good whores. There are stables to your left where you can leave your horses."

It was one thing to accept a fool's sword but quite another to actually fight for it.

The stable owner did not speak any common language, but gesturing and grunting got them a corral and feed for the horses. Two Warriors pitched a tent near the horses. They didn't know the moral climate around here, and they didn't

want to find out by looking for stolen horses.

The Captain and the rest of the troop took rooms at an inn. It might have been clean by local standards, but by those of the Christian Army, it was filthy. The men glanced at the local whores, and passed.

The owner spoke Greek, Aramaic, Latin, and several other languages. He had a set of scales on the counter and quoted prices in ounces of gold, bronze, or silver, convertible right here. This was certainly a caravan town.

Even though this was definitely a town and not a city, there were a few other merchants in town. Merchants and tradesman in this era profited from their secrets and rarely shared information. However, a lot of drinks and gossip would often elicit the information that the other fellow thought that you already had.

The sand nomads to the north had been converted to Islam over a hundred years before. Caravans came across the desert from the Mediterranean carrying Byzantine glass, Polish manufactures, Egyptian cotton, and slaves. As a result, you could also purchase a potato or an ear of corn in most places. There was a second route overland and upriver from Egypt but it was longer and more dangerous.

Walznik desperately wished that he could disguise his men as Moslems or Jews. It would make the search much easier. The area they were in wasn't really Moslem, but they were used to Moslem traders. However, his men would fear for their immortal souls if they denied God even once. They would have to pass as Christian merchants.

Because of the trade with the Moslem areas, Aramaic was the common trade tongue although a few people would remember Greek and Latin from the older days. There was also a trade language that the Africans used among themselves. The men spent much of their time learning it. It was easier to get information in a man's native language.

By the end of the first week, they had arranged with a nearby farmer to rent a field for the column. Banner Hendricks then moved the camp closer and gave some liberty to each of the men to explore the city. It took repeated buys to purchase enough horses to mount the men without driving the prices sky high. They needed almost eight dozen additional mounts. Camels would have been cheaper, but no one knew how to ride one.

Once they had enough language to be comfortable, they started looking for information of Conrad. They went to the local slave market and asked if anyone had sold a big, blonde male slave from the north. They went to inns and taverns to ask if anyone had seen anyone of Lord Conrad's description drinking heavily and bothering the servant girls.

It them took three weeks to get a lead. One evening, Captain Walznik and Garrett were approached while at dinner. The man was wearing a Moorish headdress and was obviously not a local.

"I understand that you are looking for a friend of yours. A man who may have come in from the sea. I have also heard that you may be willing to reward the man who helps you. Is this true?"

Captain Walznik gestured to a chair. "Yes. Many men have come to us claiming to have seen our friend, but it has always turned out that it was only someone similar. We have yet to hear reliable news."

The mans voice became conspiratorial. "Would your friend have come to shore on one of those cargo boxes that we have been seeing in the market place? Perhaps with a nasty female warrior? Perhaps he was carrying a great two handed sword with the sharpest blade in Africa?"

Walznik tried hard to suppress his look of excitement. Tried, and failed. Conrad actually swung his sword with one hand, but for most men it would be a two handed blade.

"That could be our friend. Did you see the sword yourself?"

"Yes, it was a scimitar longer than my arm, and slightly curved. The pommel was in the shape of a golden eagle and had an inscription in some language that I could not read. The current owner was quite proud of it."

Current owner? That did not sound good. "May I inquire as to where you saw this man?"

The informant shuffled his feet. "Of course, you may inquire. I do want to help out a fellow traveler. However, the matter of money needs to be resolved first. I am an honest man, but this trip was not as profitable as I had hoped and I need money for the trip home. Perhaps we can help each other?"

The Captain dropped his purse on the table.

"What is your price?"

The man looked apologetic. "It will take close to 100 of those small gold coins that you have been passing around for me to get back to my home. I would not ask so much, but I am stranded here."

Walznik gestured to the purse.

"There is a little more than that in this purse. Tell us what we need to know, and you can take it with you!"

The man looked apologetic again.

"You seem to be an honest man, but I have been cheated many times on this trip. Do you swear by Allah that you will pay me that purse when I have told my story?"

"I swear by the one true God. You may call him any name you want."

The man started to reach for the purse and then decided to tell his story first.

"Several months ago, I was coming in this direction from a City called Timbuktu. I am a drover. I travel with the caravans of others. About noon we met a caravan of people who called themselves something like 'Twaregs'. They were a filthy people. They smelled as bad as a Mongol. They were an illiterate and cruel people. I think they scavenged or stole everything they could from wherever they were and took it on caravan to find a place to sell it. We stopped for a noon meal and tea with them. I think that our merchant wanted to see if he could purchase stolen goods cheaply from them or maybe he was just afraid to offend such nasty looking characters. Anyway, they had a lot of merchandise from a shipwreck here on the coast. They wanted too much money for it, so we didn't buy any.

He continued, "They also had many slaves along. Most of them were in bad shape. They tried to sell us several, but we weren't interested. We keep slaves in my country, but there are rules about how you must treat them. It was unpleasant to see how these men and women were treated. I asked the leader about one of the slaves. He was a very large man and looked very powerful. He

was, however, obviously sick and he had one arm, I think his left one, bandaged. I wondered why they were hauling a one armed slave around and suggested that it might be easier to simply dump him beside the road and let him walk home.

“The leader said that they thought that they could get a few silver coins for him from someone along the road, if he lived long enough. They had found him, they said, alongside one of the merchandise boxes that they were scavenging on the shore. He was with a beautiful girl. The girl would have been worth a lot more than the man, but she had fought so hard, killing two of their men, that they had to kill her and then hurt the man. They felt bad about killing the more valuable slave and were determined to get a little money for their trouble.

“That’s when I noticed him fingering the sword at his side. He told me that it had belonged to the slave. He said it was too bad the slave was too ignorant to talk like a human. He must have had money to own such a weapon and if he could talk, they might have sold him for ransom. As it was, he was almost worthless.”

The story stopped while the man looked around the table. “I or anyone else here can give you directions for the road to Timbuktu. If he lives, your friend will be along there.”

He looked at the purse hopefully.

Captain Walznik paused only for a moment before he reached across the table and nudged the purse closer to the man.

“Thank you, friend. You have certainly earned the purse. We must tell our men of the good news, but if you get a thirst or hunger in the future, you are welcome at our table. Perhaps we can share other tales.”

Chapter 19 (Sir Walsnik's Rescue) Captain Walsnik's Search

It was unbelievable! Lord Conrad was alive! He was a slave, but alive. The feeling of relief among the men had been audible when they were told. The two officers were discussing the next move.

Banner Hendricks was saying, "We can be ready to move out within a week. However, we need to get word back that our Lord is, happily, alive. I don't know how we are going to do that since both of our radios are broken beyond repair! The Henryk won't be back for at least two months. We could also use some reinforcements if we are going trekking through the jungle."

Captain Walznik replied, "We can't wait for any more help. It probably wouldn't do much good anyway. We can't conquer this whole continent. Besides, now that we know Lord Conrad is a slave, we have to move as fast as possible. He is an injured slave. That means that he has to be used for brute force carrying or as a light duty house slave. He is either working as a horse or a decoration. The average life span of an injured worker is less than a year. If he is in a household, his verbal disability will kill him even sooner. The first order he gets will be answered with 'Screw You', and he will be in trouble."

Sir Hendricks thought for a moment. "We're less than four miles from the sea. I have two men in one of my lances who are good sailors. If we get them a small dhow, or other sailing ship, they should be able to sail up to Lisbon in less than a month or so. From there they can radio home. At least people will know what we are doing."

Sir Walznik thought for a minute. "The idea is a good one. If we fail, our information will not be lost and someone else can try. I hate to lose two men from our small force, but you are right, we need to send word home. Make certain that the men inform the Liner Henryk FIRST. We don't know what King Henryk will do with the information. In fact, why don't we make a short list of officers that we know can be trusted. Your men can send messages to them first. Tell them to use the radio, it is harder to stop than the mail. You and I had better finish our shopping. It may be awhile before we run into another bazaar."

In fact, it took almost a week to finish purchasing what they needed and prepare for the trek. By that time they had crude maps purchased from other travelers, horses or mules for all of the cargo, and mounts for all of the men. They had to purchase spare mounts as they became available. Speed was necessary if they were to find Lord Conrad alive.

They also bought enough Arab clothing and cloaks to look like Moslem merchants whenever needed. They packed enough grain and rice for well over a month and hoped that they would not need more. They had taken enough trade goods from the Henryk to actually function as merchants if needed.

They had finally learned the name of their informant and had invited him to a farewell dinner at the inn. Besides his company, they needed to know as exactly as possible where on the trail he had seen Lord Conrad. It would save them the time needed to search the area between Armoon and the last place Lord Conrad had been seen.

Amhad Al-Misri's name meant "Ahmad from Egypt". Captain Walznik wondered if his guest really had seen the Nile. The meal was being served in their rooms at the inn. There had been six courses of food, wine and conversation. People in this area started with desert. Rolls sweetened with honey and nuts began the meal. Vegetables, fruits, steak, and fowl were then served. This was obviously a celebration rather than the usual bowl of stew and bread. Walznik, Hendricks, and Sir Garrett sat around the table with Ahmad. Ahmad, as a Moslem, was, of course, forbidden to use alcohol but when away from home he was as faithful as most men are. He was certain that Allah would be understanding when he returned home. Besides, the bourbon was an excellent and rare treat.

Captain Walznik asked, "Are you certain that you do not want to hire on as a guide? The pay would be very good."

Ahmad belched politely and replied, "I would like to help, but I have been away from home much too long. We came down the Nile and then started across country over two years ago. It has been too long since I have slept with my wife and held my children. For a small fee and in appreciation of this marvelous meal I would, however, be happy to tell you as much as I can about the route ahead of you. For myself, I have been traveling with Ali Ben-Joseph much too long."

Sir Garrett asked, "You have a companion?"

Ahmed smiled and leaned back wearily. "Every caravaner travels with Ali Ben-Joseph. Every second man you meet claims to be Ali Ben-Joseph or his brother. Ali comes from a small caliphate east of Constantinople. It is near the area that I come from, and I am fortunate to be one the few people to have actually met the man. He was a very successful merchant in his home town. He was a personal friend of the Caliph and very respected. He had the finest family of handsome sons and one beautiful daughter who's countenance brought suitors from all of kingdoms of Allah. When she was to be married, Ali gave the finest banquet that the city had ever seen. Seven days of entertainment and feasting were provided! Wild beasts were paraded though the perfumed streets! Musicians played all over the city while people danced in the streets and houses. In his palace, Ali had hired the best dancers and entertainers and served the finest food anyone had ever seen. On the last night, Ali had eaten far too much and may even, May Allah Forgive Him, have had a little wine, such was his sorrow at seeing his daughter leave his house.

"Anyway, when he leaned over the banquet table to kiss his daughters hand one last time, he farted. It was not just an ordinary fart. It was a fart that was louder than the music and longer than a sermon. A fart that leaves color on the clothes and drops like rain in the air.

"He was mortally wounded in his soul. In his embarrassment he fled the house, mounted his horse and rode alone into the night. He took not a coin or a morsel of bread with him. For twenty years he wandered the caravan trails as a common drover. The toil aged him and bent his back. Every night he thought of his beloved family and home and suffered anew. Finally he decided that it was safe to return home. After all, in twenty years, even his transgression would be forgotten. Anxious to see his family, he came once again to the gate of our city. In those peaceful times our older soldiers stood guard at that post. As he entered the gate, Ali stopped to chat with the old timer. 'How is the caliph? Is

Muhammad Al-Rashid still in good health?’

“Oh, you must have been away for a long time. His son Ibn Muhammad Al-Rashid has ruled for fifteen years now. He is a good man, but his father is still missed.’

“Ali looked sad. ‘Are you certain that is has been fifteen years? Al-Rashid looked like such a strong and healthy man when I last saw him.’

“The guard thought for a moment and then said, ‘Yes, I am certain that it has been fifteen years. I remember because that it was five years, almost to the day, after Ali Ben-Joseph farted at his daughters wedding.’

“Ali wanders the caravan trails to this day and I often see him.”

When the chuckling stopped, Sir Garrett offered a toast, “To Ali Ben-Joseph. May we all meet him and never be him. To home.”

When they had drunk, Ahmed leaned across the table and looked earnest. “I have noticed that all of your men carry firesticks. They may be more a problem than a help. Everyone on the caravan trail knows about them. The locals here have never seen one, but many like myself have seen firesticks that were stolen from Europe. On my last caravan, the caravan master had two in his money wagon. They are highly prized but shoot very slow. They are not good against these people if the battle goes on too long or gets too close.

“I, myself, have seen such things in battle. It is no travelers tale. I fought with the Seljuk Sultanate as a young man. I think that we would have lost the battle if it had not been for the Christians devastating half the Mongol army. You did us a great favor there.”

Banner Hendricks asked “Did the Mongols actually have, uh, firesticks? I thought we had invented them.”

Ahmed gestured, “Not like yours. They had things like a bamboo tube. They would set one end on fire and it would fly through the sky and then explode with loud noise. They also had iron balls the size of your head that they would set afire and throw from horseback. They would burn for awhile and then explode. The noise was scary at first, but you got used to it pretty fast. In fact, it was easier to get used to the noise than to the smell. People claim that the horse was the Mongols greatest weapon. Anyone who believes that hasn’t smelled their breath.”

He shuddered from the memory. “My people fight for Allah. I think that the Mongols are out looking for women. Their own probably prefer to sleep with the horses rather than the men. They are the filthiest people that I have ever met. They are even worse than the Twaregs.

“Anyway, the people that you will be traveling through allow the caravans because they are profitable, but take care, for they are also envious.”

The night wore down from there. Soon, the Christians left the Inn for the last time and joined the column in the early morning light.