

THE
BOY WHO
WANTED WINGS



JAMES CONROYD MARTIN

HUSSAR
QUILL PRESS



The Boy Who Wanted Wings

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While some characters are based on historical personages, this is a work of fiction.

ALSO BY JAMES
CONROYD MARTIN

The Poland Trilogy:

Push Not the River
Against a Crimson Sky
The Warsaw Conspiracy
and
Hologram: A Haunting

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~For my loyal readers,
with sincere thanks~

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HISTORICAL NOTE:

On the eve of September 11, 1683, a massive Ottoman horde was besieging the gates of Vienna and had been doing so since the previous July. Now, however, they were just hours from capturing this capital of the Holy Roman Empire. The Turks' intent was to bring Islam to all of Europe, and this city was seen by East and West alike as the gateway. They had already achieved success in Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Serbia. With the window of time closing for Vienna, the walls were about to be breached on September 12 when the vastly outnumbered Christian coalition, led by Polish King Jan III Sobieski and his famous winged hussars, descended Kahlenberg Mountain to engage the Turks in an attempt to lift the siege.

Is it merely coincidental that Al-Qaeda terrorists chose September 11, 2001, for their horrific attack on New York and Washington, DC? Or had the Battle of Vienna—as seminal in human history as the 1066 Battle of Hastings—inspired a symbolic message that the time had come to resume the struggle of 1683?



GLOSSARY

Dog's blood!: Damn, Damn it!

Dniestr—Dnyehstr: a river in Southeastern Poland, now in the Ukraine, that empties into the Black Sea

Dwór—dvoor: manor house of the Polish nobility

Halicz—Hah-leatch: a historic city in Southeastern Poland, now in the Western Ukraine

Hussar—hu'-zar: (Polish hussar or Winged Warrior) a heavily armored shock cavalryman, often a lancer

Husaria—hu'-zar-ia: plural of hussar, the elite of the Polish cavalry

Janissary—an Ottoman infantry soldier

Kołacz—kaw-watch: a special decorative wedding bread or cake

Kontusz—kaw-ntoosh: a long, robe-like, decorative garment worn (over a *żupan*) by noblemen of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth

Kraków—Krah-koof: a city in Southern Poland on the River Vistula; from the twelfth century to 1595 the national capital

Kwarciani—kfah-rchia-nee: elite hussars assigned to the “Wild Fields” on alert for unrest and raids from Tatars and Cossacks

Pacholik—pa-ho-leak: military retainer; plural: Pacholicy—pa-ho-lea-tsi

Rotmistrz—rot-measts: military company commander, usually a nobleman

sipâhi—sipâ-hi: an Ottoman cavalryman

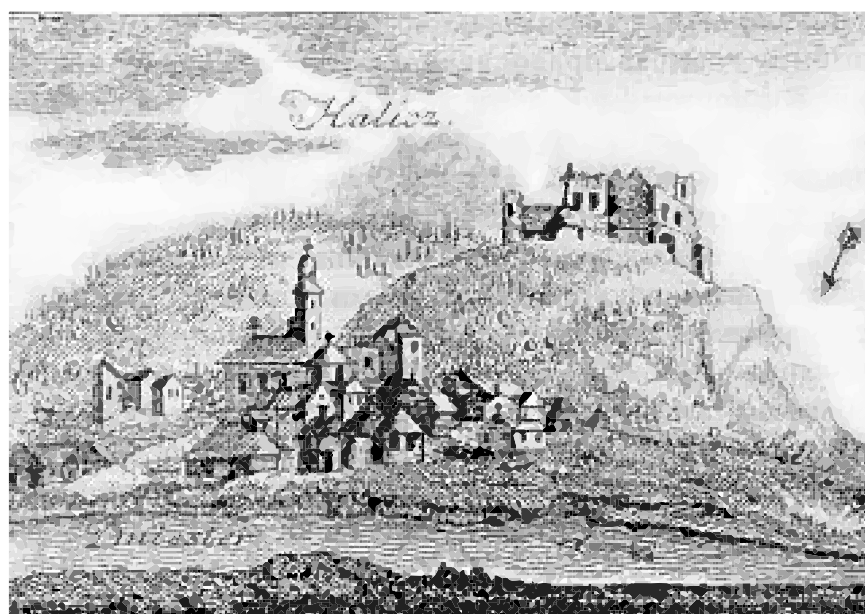
Sukiennice—su-kie-nnea-tse: the Cloth Hall, centerpiece of the Market Square in Kraków

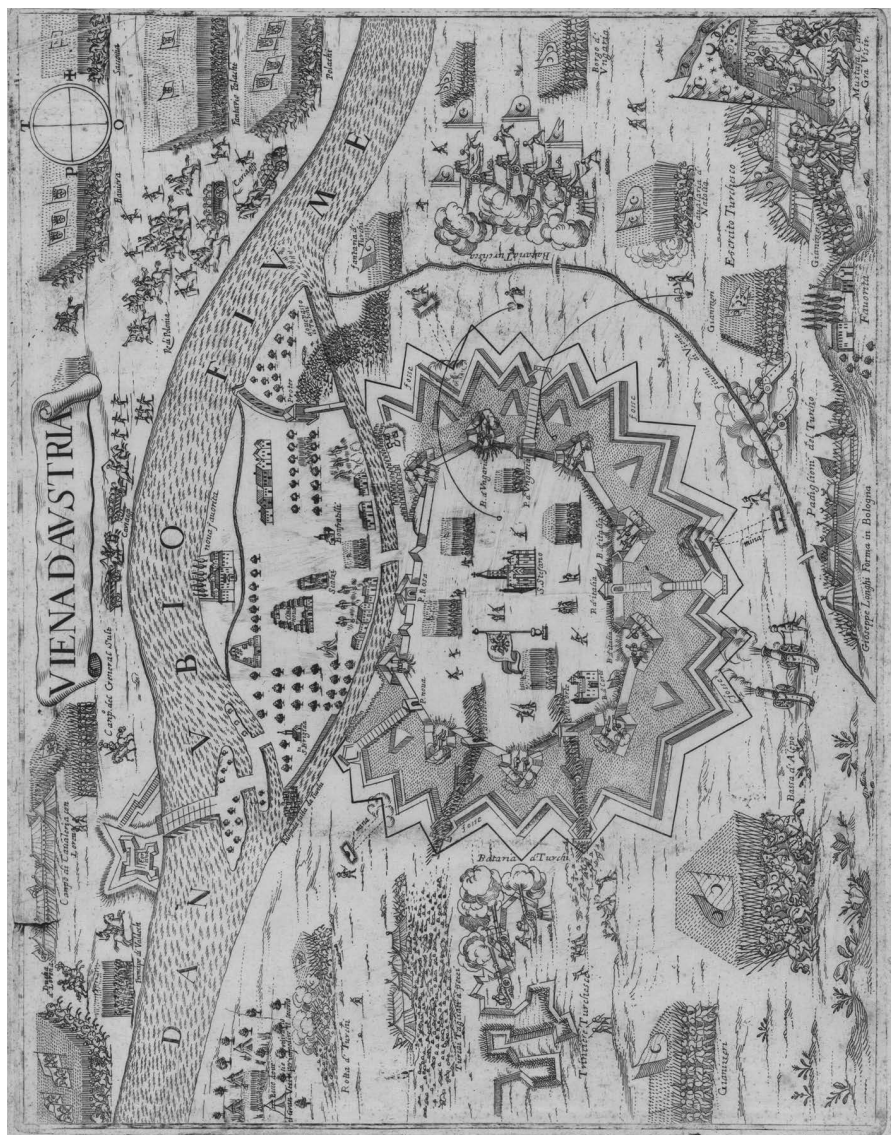
Szlachta—shlach'-ta: the Polish gentry; minor nobility (six to eight per cent of the population)

Towarzysz—tova-jish: military companions, or knight-officers, accompanying a company commander (rotmistrz)

Wycinanki—Vih-cee-nahn-kee: Polish folk papercuts

Żupan—zhu'-pahn: a long, lined garment worn first by noblemen of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, then by males of all classes





Viena d'Austria By Giuseppe Longhi



The Relief of Vienna, 12 September 1683 By Frans Geffels
Wien Museum/Courtesy of Wien Museum

ONE

Southeastern Poland

May 1683

AS THE COACH TRUNDLED ALONG, days out from Warsaw, Krystyna took little notice of the passing countryside, wondering instead how Mother Abbess Teodora reacted when she opened her underskirt drawer only to find a dead rat.

“What the devil are you smiling at?” her brother asked.

“Nothing... Oh, I do wish Papa had you bring the open carriage.”

“The open carriage?” Roman’s mouth gaped. “Between Warsaw and Halicz? Are you daft? Did you learn nothing at convent school?”

“I did,” Krystyna snapped, eyes flashing at her brother, who sat rigid on the padded bench across from her as the coach rattled on. “I learned that after five years there, I should be very glad to come home.”

“Why, on the way to Warsaw the rain fell in torrents for two days running,” Roman said, persisting in his own line of thought. “Did you wish me to arrive drenched to the skin? The open carriage would have been a bucket on wheels.”

She gave out with a little laugh. “But it’s sunny enough now. Oh, Romek,” she said, employing his sobriquet, “it was a wish, nothing more.”

He looked at her as if puzzled, shrugged, and settled back against the cushion.

She smothered another laugh. He had taken her literally, as had so many of the Carmelite nuns. At sixteen, she was—at last and for good—coming home to Halicz. It had taken some doing. She sat back now, tilting her head toward the window, watching the landscape glide past as she had imagined so many times in her cell: the strong, evergreen sentinels on the

slopes of the Carpathian Mountains, the verdant green fields, the herds of oxen, and the gentle turns of the sparkling, elegant River Dniester. They were nearing Halicz. It was all too wonderful. The week's grueling travel and dreary lodging places were forgotten. She glanced back at Roman, whose eyes were closing despite the relentless racket and jarring grind of the carriage wheels. He couldn't understand that she would have liked to be in the open carriage, sans bonnet, the wind slapping at her face, the scents of spring lifting her, and the sights of Southeastern Poland flying past her. The freedom was at once her nectar and ambrosia. She had been recalled to life.

As the coach came around a turn, her gaze fell upon Castle Hill and followed the winding, weedy path up to the ruins that sat atop it. Her heart caught. She had climbed the heights years before, a lifetime ago, wandering through its broken walls and dilapidated interior, stumbling among stones and splintered glass, richly imagining herself as sovereign of the land, the rabbits and red squirrels her subjects. Those days came back to her like found gold coins. Her holiday visits home in recent years had been short, affording no time for the castle, and the previous winter had been the harshest and snowiest in decades, precluding any visit for nearly a year.

Castle Hill faded into the distance. The perfume of May lilac enveloped the coach, a scent redolent of springs past and childhood. Summer was on the horizon. Shivering, she pushed from her mind the memory of how cold and damp her cell was throughout the long, dark winter behind convent stone walls and allowed herself to slip into a reverie as scenery sped by in a dazzling blur.

The carriage had only just passed through one of the villages owned by her family when her eyes lighted on something and she shouted out for the driver to stop at once. Jumping up from her seat, she called again, louder, as her brother roused himself from a sleepy trance.

"What are you doing, for God's sake?" Roman growled.

"It's the flowers—the white and the blue wildflowers—here, near the road. I want some for my room." The carriage ground to a halt and Krystyna flung open the door, ready to tumble out without benefit of the drop-down steps when her brother grasped her upper arm, holding her in place.

"Let me go, Roman!" she cried, holding to a post, disallowing herself to be directed back to safety; neither did she strain to leave the coach. Her gaze became fixed on two men—boys, really—in the field, not far from the

road, farmers who had been readying the soil for planting, but who were now staring back at her. They stood, these young men, still as scarecrows, their straw hats in their hands. Had they doffed them for her? Her gaze was drawn to the dark-complexioned one, so striking was his smile and look of surprise.

The moment hung fire. She stared, as did they.

At last, Roman loosened her grip and forced her safely back into the coach, dropping her unceremoniously onto the bench, her yellow gown billowing about her like a flower in full bloom. She noticed that as he reached out to pull closed the door, he paused for a moment, his eyes narrowing, forehead crinkling in disapproval. He was taking note of the two young men.

Suddenly he slammed shut the door, gruffly urged the driver on, and slid closed the leather window shades. He sat now across from her, his mouth a flat line of seriousness, his eyes—a midnight blue—honing in on hers, the emerald green eyes over which a few of the nuns had marveled. Not Mother Abbess Teodora, however. “Reckless,” she would have hissed, had she borne witness to this little episode. “You are a reckless girl, Krystyna Halicka.” Well, she would not have to hear that husky, grating voice again. Not for talking during morning prayers. Not for stealing down into the cold room after bedtime for something sweet. Not for peering out the window at a group of passing cadets. She sighed in relief.

As for her brother, she could read his smug expression. He was relieved, but he was also congratulating himself on having avoided a scene that would have marred her homecoming and no doubt brought blame down on his curly blond head.

“Wildflowers, indeed,” Roman intoned with the sarcasm of a school master.

Krystyna knew she should thank her brother, her elder by three years. She drew in her breath now—and extended her tongue as daintily as if she were to receive Holy Communion.

TWO

Southeastern Poland

Halicz

ALEKSY GAZDECKI SAT AT TABLE, absently watching his mother, Jadwiga, remove dark bread from the bread-oven, a built-in necessity in every cottage, no matter how poor. Hungry as he was, even the tantalizing aroma of bread direct from the white oven—coupled with the sharp whiff of bigos that had simmered all day in a pot above the kitchen grate—could not stir him. He was lost in thought about the unusual scene that had unfolded that afternoon.

“Aleksy!”

His mother’s raised voice propelled him to the present. He hadn’t heard the high-pitched whine outside the door, but his mother had. Her large frame was turning toward him. “That dog of yours is not welcome here. It should be with the sheep. No beggars here—we have little enough.”

“The sheep are tucked in, Mother.”

“And who’s to protect the hen house from that fox that took our fattest hen the other night? Tell her to be off, Aleksy.” His mother turned back to the business of ladling out the bigos, the hunters’ stew containing scraps of pork from their Sunday meal four days earlier. Sauerkraut, mushrooms, onions, apples, and peppercorns produced its heady scent.

Aleksy rose from the table and started toward the door, but at that moment it opened and his father and brother entered, allowing Luba to make a mad scramble for safe harbor under the table near Aleksy’s chair, well hidden from his mother’s eyes and swift broom.

Damian’s hungry gaze was glued to the steaming bowls so that he was oblivious to the dog’s movement, but Aleksy’s father seldom missed the

flight of a fly and didn't miss Luba's covert entry. He nodded for Aleksy to abort his mission and return to his seat. Above his broad nose and grizzled moustache and beard, his eyes glittered with blue mutiny. Aleksy retreated to his place, allowing Luba, a Polish lowland sheepdog of medium size with a long shaggy coat of white with gray patches, to place her muzzle on his boot.

No sooner had the meal commenced than Damian spoke: "We saw a strange sight today—didn't we, Aleksy?" He did not wait for a reply. "Seems Lord Halicki's daughter has come home from the convent school in Warsaw."

"Really?" Jadwiga asked.

Without further prompting—and with as much relish as for his plate of bigos—Damian launched into the telling of the incident of the girl in yellow who had nearly fallen into the ravine.

"It's been five or six years since I've seen her," his father estimated. "I imagine she's grown to be a young lady."

"It happens in a heartbeat, Borys Gazdecki," Jadwiga told her husband. "I was a mere fifteen when you set your cap for me." Her gaze shifted to Damian. "So you were taken by the sight? Remember, she's of the *szlachta* and not meant for the likes of you."

Nor for me, either, Aleksy thought. He had been taught early on to watch his step with members of the *szlachta*—the lower nobility. He sent up a fervent prayer not to be brought into the conversation.

Pulling on a piece of bread, Damian chewed, the light blue eyes considering his mother's words. The short span of time expanded for Aleksy, who knew what was to come—Damian always talked too much—and grew uncomfortable by the moment. A heat came into his face. He held his fork but had yet to use it.

"I'm spoken for, as you know, Mother," Damian said.

"Indeed—but boys are boys and your Lilka is way over in Horodenka," Jadwiga said, "so there's nothing to keep you from ogling a yellow dress hereabouts, is there?"

"But I'm not the ogler—am I, Alek?" Damian pronounced Aleksy's diminutive in an exaggerated and accusatory tone that served to heighten the drama—and Aleksy's embarrassment. Huskier in build and two years older, he enjoyed a bit of fun at his brother's expense.

His parents' eyes moving to him now like search lanterns, Aleksy

became tongue-tied. His ears burned. He wished he could give Luba a tug and make for the door with her. He looked down into his bowl. "Hold your tongue, Damian," he murmured.

"*You* were taken by her?" his mother asked.

Aleksy looked up, attempting to decipher the smile on his mother's face. Did she understand? Or was she amused? Might she be implying that he was even more of an unlikely admirer? The thought hardened like a stone inside him.

"It was his *wish*," Damian interjected, "to be taken by her." His laugh allowed for a bit of stew to fly out of his mouth.

"Enough!" Jadwiga snapped.

"Swa!" Somehow their father could make a growling sound out of a shushing word.

Damian hushed.

Borys' attention turned on Aleksy, eyes as sharp as his words. "You didn't say anything to the girl, Aleksy?"

Aleksy could only stare at his father. The mood at the table had turned, quick as lightning.

"Nothing forward? Nothing improper? Tell us, Aleksy!"

"I did not."

"I had better not hear otherwise. She is the lord's daughter, his only daughter, and if he were to hear that one of his tenants' sons had dared—"

Jadwiga interrupted, attempting to steer the conversation. "There, there, Borys. He said he did nothing improper, didn't you, Aleksy?" Directed at him, her amber-flecked blue eyes radiated warmth.

"We both removed our hats."

"You see, Borys. Tenant farmers but gentleman-like in the presence of the lord's daughter."

"Had she fallen," Aleksy blurted, "I would have caught her."

Damian laughed. "You aren't so fleet of foot, Aleksy, and we weren't standing that close to the road."

Before Aleksy could contradict Damian, their father's fist came down upon the oak table, causing a clatter of pewter plates and rattle of utensils. "You would do no such thing, Aleksy! Do you hear? If such an event occurs again, you are to keep your hat on and your eyes on the task at hand. Both of you! Is that understood?"

Damian spoke: "Father, it was just that—"

Aleksy saw his father's powerful arm move up and then come down in a wide arc, his huge hand clouting Damian across the face, nearly forcing him from his chair.

"You are to learn, Damian," his father said through clenched teeth, "and you too, Aleksy, that there are rules to live by!"

The meal was finished in icy silence. The plate of saffron wafers went untouched.



"You won't tell?" Aleksy asked again.

"I said so, didn't I?" Damian called back as he struck out for home and the mid-morning meal.

Aleksy had to trust that his brother would get the story right: that he was staying in the fields to take a nap instead of returning home for breakfast and that he had with him some cheese and leftover bread to tide him over until supper, the only other meal of the day. The bread and cheese part of the tale was true. The rest was fiction. He smiled to himself, thinking that Damian would not gamble taking another clout in his brother's stead.

Gathering up his bow and linen quiver filled with lovingly fashioned arrows made of ash, Aleksy mounted Kastor, the family horse, and directed him toward the road to Mount Halicz, his thoughts not on what he was about to see, but on what he had seen the day before—the girl in yellow. She was a sight to behold. Her blond, braided hair coruscated in the sun like a halo. He had gone to sleep thinking of her, had awakened thinking of her. It was foolish, he knew. Why, they hadn't even spoken. He knew nothing of her except that she was exceedingly beautiful, like the personification of a springtime daffodil. And she had looked at him, too—well, at *them*, him and his brother. Maybe it was Damian who drew her attention. Wasn't that more likely? His heart faltered. *Why should she be interested in me?*

Kastor meandered on, sure of footing but slow as sap from a tree in winter, for he was but a plow horse that had aided in many a spring planting. His gray hide was freckled with brown, like age spots. Aleksy's father had often commented that if the world were a fair place, Kastor would have been put to pasture by now. When they came at last to the foot of Mount Halicz, Aleksy's thoughts were still on the girl. He looked down at his hands, his arms. How dark they were, severely so in contrast to the porcelain white of

her face and hands, dark, too, in contrast to the whiteness of Damian's skin, especially in winter, when the browning from the summer sun had faded. While his own skin darkened somewhat in the summer, any fading in the cold months was almost imperceptible. He thought of her eyes. What color were they? He had not been close enough to determine. They were light, no doubt, blue like Damian's—or green or gray. They were not nearly black like his; nor were they almond-shaped, like his.

The differences stung like a serpent's bite. Of course, he had always known—or so it seemed—that his parents were not his parents, that his brother was not his brother. And there had been myriad times when the differences mattered, as they did now. Still, the poison had never seemed as toxic.

Borys—Aleksy called him Borys rather than Father—had told him years ago that they had adopted him and that his parents were of a Tatar tribe of nomadic herdsman south of Halicz, on the Budzhak steppe that stretched to the Black Sea on either side of the River Dniester. Borys had been an infantryman under Lord Halicki in a military company assigned to protect the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from the incursion of Cossacks and Tatars on the southern and eastern steppes. While supplying no real details, Borys had told him that both of his parents had been killed, adding that his father had been a leader of some distinction, a detail that Aleksy clung to like the air that he breathed. One day he would insist on more facts.

When he was seven years of age, his mother had suggested to Borys that he be allowed to visit a nearby village of Tatars loyal to the Commonwealth so that he might study and learn their language and ways. The local parish priest protested, however, fearing Aleksy would take up the Muslim faith and Borys sided with him.

Despite sometimes being labeled “the Tatar” by his peers, as well as by some adults who snarled at him, Aleksy had been content to stay within the cocoon of Polishness he had come to know. Even though as the years went by and he became less fearful of venturing away from the family that had taken him in, he was afraid that doing so would hurt them. And so he had embraced Christianity and the Polish way of living.

But then there were times like these when he felt removed from every thing and everyone around him. Oh, he knew that the boundaries of class set a rich lord's daughter upon a pedestal and well out of a tenant's son's

reach, but he realized now that the fortune of his birth—his coloring, visage, and Eastern ancestry—made the chasm between him and the girl in the coach impossibly wide and deep. It escaped his logic, and yet somehow he deemed it a fault of his own.

He was caught between cultures. Still, he thought, his acceptance of things Polish could be providential—should he ever have the opportunity, slim as chances were—of meeting the girl who had so entranced him.

About halfway up the mountain, he came to a clearing that jutted out over a bare field. He dismounted. His eyes fastened on the activity below. This is what he had come for, and so he put the lord's daughter from his mind. Brooding on what cannot be, he determined, would come to nothing.

The company of hussars on the field far below seemed larger today, at least fifty, Aleksy guessed. They were being mustered into formation now, their lances glinting in the sun, black and gold pennants—each with a white eagle—flying. There would be none of the usual games, it seemed, no jousting, no running at a ring whereby the lancers would attempt to wield their lances so precisely as to catch a small circlet that hung from a portable wooden framework. Today they were forming up for sober and orderly maneuvers. He wondered at their formality.

Aleksy took note of the multitude of colors below and the little mystery resolved itself. Whereas on other occasions the men, some very young and generally of modest noble birth and means, wore outer garments of a blue, often inexpensive material, today they had been joined by wealthier nobles who could afford wardrobes rich in their assortment of color and fabric. These men—in their silks and brocades and in their wolf and leopard skins or striped capes—gathered to the side of the formation to watch and deliver commentary. Aleksy caught his breath when he suddenly realized that some of these must be the Old Guard of the *Kwarciani*. They were the most elite of hussars permanently stationed at borderlands east and south of Halicz—in what was called the Wild Fields—to counter raids by Cossacks and Tatars unfriendly to the Commonwealth. Their reviews would be taken, no doubt, with great solemnity and likely nervousness by the young lancers. Every soldier would make the greatest effort to impress the legendary men. According to Szymon, Lord Halicki's stable master, in recent years the numbers of the *Kwarciani* had been reduced by massacres,

and talk had it that they were eager to replenish their manpower. No doubt a few of the local novices below would be chosen to join the heroic elect.

Some place at his core went cold with jealousy. If only he were allowed to train as a hussar. He could be as good as any of them. *Better*. No one he knew was more skillful at a bow than he. He could show those hussars a thing or two about the makings of an archer—even though he had come to realize fewer and fewer of the lancers bothered to carry a bow and quiver. The majority now disparaged the art of archery in favor of pistols, relying on a pair of them, in addition to the traditional sabre and lance.

Naturally enough, there was no disdain for the lance, the very lifeblood and signature weapon of the hussar army. Aleksy smiled to himself when he thought of his own handcrafted lance.

His thoughts conjured an elation that was only momentary, for he thought now how he had had to hide away his secret project under a pile of hay in the barn—and unless he should happen to be practicing with it one day in the forest when a wayward boar might meander his way, he would never be able to use it. His spirits plummeted. And the thought of mounting a plow horse like Kastor with it instead of riding atop one of the Polish-Arabians strutting below made him burn with—what? Indignation? Embarrassment? Humiliation—yes, he decided, humiliation was the most accurate.

Inexplicably, the thought of the girl in yellow once again seized him, lifting him. Would he bargain one dream for the other? Life as a hussar in exchange for life with her? His breaths became shallow. He thought he just might risk anything to succumb to her charms. Almost at once his own bitter laugh stifled all thoughts as he grappled with the fact that he had no opportunity to become a hussar and no opportunity to even address such a young lady.

“Silence!”

The order travelled up the mountain like a clarion call. Below, the young lancers were being ordered to muster and were readying themselves for a practice drill.

At the far end of the field two columns of the sleek *Turks*—Polish-Arabian horses—began moving down the narrowly marked twin tracks, the formation so tight as to make it seem the riders’ stirrups must be touching. The butts of lances held steady in their toks, boots that were strapped to

the right side of the saddles. The hussars lowered the lances parallel to the horses' heads, the pointed ends aimed at the imagined navels of the enemy. Two by two, the hussars put spur to their Turks and the beasts fairly flew down the track at full gallop—as if shot out of twin cannons. Aleksy had witnessed the usual maneuvers a dozen times and they had never failed to excite him, but today the sight was many more times thrilling because, attached to the steel backplate of each hussar was the apparatus that held dual wings rising vertically, each with dozens of eagles' feathers whipping against the wind like palm branches. Szymon had told him about these soldiers' wings, but this was his first sighting of them. "They're meant to scare the life out of the enemy and the enemy's horses, my boy," he had told Aleksy. "And they do a fine job of it!" Until today—at this very formal exercise—Aleksy could only imagine the splendor of the sight. The sun was warm on his arms, but nonetheless his skin turned to gooseflesh as he watched the hussars cover some four hundred paces and come to the end of the field, each line forming an arch as they turned outward—their horses' hooves expertly kept from stepping out—then flying back to the point of departure. From above, the outline of colorful uniforms and wings formed a most perfect and beautiful figure—appearing as one magnificent, moving pair of wings. The vision took his breath away.

Szymon, a riveting storyteller despite his gravelly voice, had enflamed Aleksy with tales of the hussars and the King of Poland, detailing the military exploits of Jan Sobieski that led to his being named Grand Hetman of the Crown, the equivalent of the Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Army. Szymon had been a *pacholik*, or retainer, for Lord Halicki during the most recent wars with the Ottomans a decade before and had witnessed Sobieski's initiative to increase hussar units, a move that accounted for a string of victories that led to his being elected King Jan III Sobieski. In a speech to the Sejm, Szymon recalled, the king designated his hussars "the hardwood of the army."



Still in a trance inspired by what he had just witnessed, Aleksy goaded a nervous Kastor down the uneven mountain path. Not far from the foot of the mountain, the horse stopped suddenly and a slight shiver alerted Aleksy to possible danger and brought him up short. A movement in the

brush caught his ear. The beat of his heart accelerated as reaction trumped thought. He drew reins, his eyes raking the thicket. It was then that he spied the cause. His hand seamlessly reached back for an arrow, knocked it to the bow cord and loosed the shot. The goose feather-fledged shaft flew true. He let out a little whoop as he jumped down and went to take up his prize. The arrow had pierced the plump rabbit at the neck, allowing for the body to fully serve the family's table. His mother would light up at the sight, for meat was a rarity at table. They usually had to trade or sell his fowl or game in order to afford various staples such as pots, utensils, sugar, mustard, black pepper, nutmeg, and salt ; often, too, larger game—deer, elk, or wild boar—became part of their tithes owed to Lord Halicki.

Aleksy withdrew the arrow, wrapped a strip of cloth about the wound, and tied the animal to his saddle. He remounted Kastor, thankful for the little body tremor that had alerted him to the presence of the rabbit. Before continuing down the mountain, he carefully unstrung the bow and placed it in the soft linen bow case he had fashioned. To preserve the strength and tension of the weapon, he never left it strung for more than three or four hours at a time.

He was not long on the road home when he heard horses' hooves behind coming toward him at full gallop. Turning, he sighted two riders. He directed Kastor off to the right, allowing room for them to pass.

In but moments one rider was there at his left while the other pulled up on his right, brushing up against Kastor and forcing him more to the road's center. Both had slowed to his pace. The two were young hussars that had just come from their maneuvers. The horses were breathtakingly beautiful stallions, to be outdone only by the magnificent wings of eagles' feathers fastened to the backplates of the soldiers. Even before they spoke, Aleksy was seized with a presentiment of danger. He was certain he knew the identity of these young soldiers. He did not pull up Kastor, allowing the horse to plod slowly on. He loved old Kastor and yet he burned with embarrassment to find himself hemmed in by the pair of elegant high-stepping Turks.

"Well, what have we here, lord brother?" asked the hussar on his left. Then, to Aleksy: "Who are you, boy?"

Aleksy turned to him. The soldier was no more than a year or two older than he, taller in the saddle too, and handsome. The blond curls, dusted by the afternoon's activities on the track reached the low collar of

his red *župan*. Beneath this long, sashed garment, white linen trousers were tucked into yellow leather boots. He had seen this one recently—but not in uniform.

“I said—”

“I was on the mountain watching.”

“Watching? Watching us?”

“Yes, milord.”

“Spying, were you?”

“No, milord.”

“And what were your impressions?” This question—friendlier—came from the soldier on the right. Even though the term “lord brother” was commonly used among military comrades, Aleksy realized these two were indeed brothers. The family resemblance to the first speaker was evident, but he was younger, less confident, and not as striking in looks. His long, straight hair was more of a brown, rather than blond and, like the other, he wore neither helmet nor cap. He wore a blue *župan* with leg wear and boots similar to his brother’s.

Aleksy halted Kastor and the soldiers on either side followed suit. “I did miss the jousting and running at the ring, but—”

“But what?” the older one demanded, his gaze seeming to alight on Aleksy’s bow, which protruded from the bow case.

“The wings made up for the missing games. Are the devices heavy on your back?”

“So this *watching* is a pastime of yours, is it?”

“Yes, milord.” Aleksy hated using the epithet for this peacock but hoped the courtesy might take the edge off his belligerent attitude.

“Would you like to be a soldier, boy?” He smiled meanly. “A hussar?”

Aleksy’s mouth tightened. *Of course*, he wanted to shout, but the impossibility held him silent. He managed a slow nod of the head.

Laughter came from both sides. “Where’s your lance, then?” the elder brother asked. “Maybe it’s at home being polished by your squire?”

“I do...” Aleksy thought better of his intended retort.

“You do what?”

“Nothing.”

“That’s a fine stallion, too,” mocked the one in blue.

Aleksy turned, focusing for a moment on him. Matching his light brown locks was a wishful wisp of a moustache that he was twisting. His nose had been broken.

“Damned if it isn’t,” said the other. More laughter.

“He’s a plow horse,” Aleksy said, turning to face forward.

“And you are a plow boy, I would guess. Where is your plow, boy?— And what is this?” The soldier in red prodded the rabbit with his boot, still in its stirrup.

“A rabbit.”

“Why, if we hadn’t left our lances in camp we could have had some good fun playing running at the rabbit instead of running at the ring.” He winked at his brother and they shared a guffaw. He then continued the interrogation. “And where did you shoot the little beast? Why, it looks quite fresh!”

“There.” Aleksy motioned behind him. “On Mount Halicz.”

“Indeed? And do you have hunting rights for those grounds?”

The unexpected challenge stung. “No, milord.”

“Then you are in violation of the owner’s rights.”

Aleksy was nearly certain that, like him, the brothers hadn’t a clue whether Mount Halicz even had an owner. And so he dared to question, “Who is the owner that I may plead my case?”

The soldier’s face pinkened. He stammered for a moment, then asked, “How did you kill it? It looks cleanly done.”

Aleksy’s left hand lifted to touch the tip of the horned tip bow that protruded from the bow case slung on his right shoulder.

“Let me see it!”

At the order, an alarm went off inside him. Aleksy thought of spurring Kastor into movement but knew that was useless. They could run him down in twenty seconds flat. Heart pacing, he drew in a silent breath, removed the bow from the case, and gave it over to the soldier in red, who examined it closely.

“I’m surprised at the workmanship,” he said, turning it over in his hands. “It’s good. It’s a bit longer than what I’ve used.”

“Five feet, eight inches. The perfect length, I’m told.” Aleksy waited for the next question.

“Who made it?”

“I did.”

“You?” He harrumphed. “A plow boy?”

Aleksy’s expression and the slightest nod was his response. He was nearly certain that the soldier meant to take it. Would he allow him to do so—without a fight? Where would that lead—challenging members of the *szlachta*? Especially these two. His spine tightened. Come what may, he would not stand by and see the bow he had labored over for months taken. Yew was the best wood, Szymon had told him, and for the length of yew needed, the stable master had troubled himself to send all the way to Henryków, in Southwestern Poland where the oldest yew trees grew.

“Let’s have a string,” the soldier ordered.

With misgivings, Aleksy withdrew the hemp cord from a little pocket in the bow case and surrendered it.

The soldier fastened the noose to the nocked horn at the lower part of the bow. He placed that end of the weapon on the toe of his boot and attempted to bend it now so that he could stretch the eye of the cord up to the nocked horn of the slightly longer top part. He surprised himself when he couldn’t do it. He tried again.

Bows made of yew could be a challenge to the strongest of men and trying it while mounted made for a serious challenge. Aleksy had seen strong and sturdy men struggle with such bows.

With each new try, the soldier’s once pink face reddened until it nearly matched his crimson *żupan*.

Aleksy held out his hand to retrieve his property.

The soldier shot him an angry look and tried again—to no avail. “I can’t manage it atop this horse,” he admitted.

“It’s difficult,” Aleksy said.

“You can string it?”

Taken aback by the foolish question, Aleksy nodded, resisting the boast that he could string it right there and then—atop his horse. Over the past ten years he had created ever stronger, more resilient bows, all the while strengthening his arms and adding muscle and volume to his back and shoulders.

“Give him the bow,” the brother said. “We don’t have time for this.”

The soldier hesitated, the knuckles on the hand that held it going white. Clearly, he coveted it. Frustrated, he took either end of the bow and

attempted to bend it in the opposite direction. It was evident now that he wanted to break it.

Aleksy's heart pounded. In his mind he could hear the snap that would come with the breaking of the beloved bow. "Give it back," Aleksy shouted. "Now!"

The soldier's face was contorted with exertion.

The yew held.

At last he slapped it into Aleksy's hand. "What are you? A Turk?"

So this is what it all came to, Aleksy thought as he placed the bow and cord in the bow case. "Tatar." He felt his spine stiffen.

"Ah, Tatar. You're dark like a Turk. And you have the eyes of a Mongol. What are you doing around here—spying on our maneuvers?"

"Not spying, milord. I live close by."

"In whose household?" The question was voiced as a challenge.

"That of Borys Gazdecki."

"So!—You're the one he took home from the battlefield a few years ago?"

"Seventeen—seventeen years ago."

"People said he did it because his second son died."

"We should go now," the brother cautioned. "I remember him. He was underfoot in the stable often enough before we left for our training."

The soldier in red nodded but kept his eyes on Aleksy. "Then, you're the changeling all grown up, are you? If you know what's good for you, you'll stay out of our way." He spat in the direction of Kastor.

"Come on, Roman," the other urged.

The two gave spur now and were soon in full gallop, stones and clumps of mud flying back like buckshot. Aleksy glanced at the spittle that had struck his boot but the insult did not register.

Roman, he was thinking. *Roman*, he was called. He had seen the face of that one before. And he had heard his name the other day at the roadside, spoken by the girl in the coach, the girl in yellow. These were her brothers. Worse, they were the sons of the lord who owned their tiny village, the nobleman who owned the *dwór*—manor house—called Poplar House, and who all but owned the Gazdecki family themselves.

THREE

“DAMN!” ROMAN SPAT. “THERE’S NOT one longbow here that rivals that dark devil’s bow. The nocked horn at the ends doesn’t compare in workmanship. And none of the bows have the same spring to them. A cholera on him!”

They stood in a small room off the manor house kitchen called the weapons room. Marek was returning to its place on the wall one of the bows he and his brother had been inspecting. “What does it matter? We’ve got fine pistols. The finest! And you know that to aim with a bow from atop a horse is impossible.”

“Evidently not so for our new friend with the rabbit.” Roman was examining a bow his father had once carried.

“Forget it. Concentrate on our chances of being called up to join the *Kwarciani*.”

“Did you see the wound on that rabbit? A perfect shot through the throat! I should have just taken it.”

“The rabbit?”

“Don’t be an ass, Marek—the bow! What could he do to stop me? His family is one of ours.”

Marek was chuckling at his little joke. “Let him have his damn bow. To hell with him—think about your lance. It’s perfection! What chance does he have of ever lifting or owning a seventeen-foot lance?”

“For once you have a point. Still—”

“Yes, one with seventeen feet behind it.” Marek laughed. “Come on, we’ll be late to supper and the old man will bark at us. You know that we’ve got to get back to camp afterwards. More maneuvers tomorrow, remember?”



"We're no more than two minutes late," Marek said.

It was their mother who chastised her boys for holding up the supper.

"Oh, Zena," Konrad said, playfully intoning the diminutive for Zenobia, "you should have seen our boys out there today. They were magnificent!"

Two maids commenced with the first of the courses, mushroom soup.

Roman had no appetite. He gave only the appearance of following his father's proud detailing of the day's maneuvers at Mount Halicz, omitting the less than splendid errors made by his elder son. And to make him more disconsolate, the incident with the bow still rankled. Sitting at his side, Marek joined in on occasion. Across from the brothers, gowned in cornflower blue, sat Krystyna sipping at her soup, her eyes going from Marek to her father and back again as the descriptions unfolded.

"Have you nothing to add, Roman?" his mother asked.

"No."

His mother rested her spoon. "Nothing?"

"It went well, Mother. Perhaps we'll be selected for the *Kwarciani*, perhaps not."

"That's a devil-may-care attitude," his mother said.

"I expect there isn't much drama to maneuvers," Krystyna said, drawing all eyes to her. "No risk and therefore no excitement. Isn't that so, Romek? I should like to see a joust. I should like to see a real battle!"

"Krystyna, that's enough!" His mother pursed her lips as if tasting something sour. "I told you I have no patience with you. A battle, indeed! War is not a mazurka in a music room. You'd faint dead away."

"Not I," Krystyna said, spoon raised and green eyes riveted on her mother as she made what seemed a deliberate slurping noise.

"Well, I have a good feeling about our chances, Roman," Marek said.

"Good feelings don't fetch water, lord brother," Roman said, his annoyance with his sibling overshadowing for the moment his nagging disdain for the Tatar. "Now, if Papa had said but a word or two—" He silenced himself, wishing he could retract the half-statement.

His mother's gray-eyed gaze locked on to his father's across the length of the table. She had caught the meaning. "Why Konrad, do you mean to say you didn't identify your own sons to the Old Guard. Why, you know them all!" Using her fingers, the bone-thin woman plucked from her teeth

an inedible bit from her mushroom soup, grimaced, and pushed the bowl to the side.

Lord Konrad Halicki's round, fleshy face darkened and his eyes, all blue fire, went from his wife to his son. "You dare bring this up at table, Roman. We've been through this time and again. It's your *skill* that is to get you a place with the *Kwarciani*. And Marek's. If it's meant to be." He leaned against the back of his chair, his hands interlocking against the orange brocade *żupan* that restrained his large belly. "Without proving yourselves, you don't deserve a place on the border. It's too dangerous!"

Conversation ceased for several minutes as the maids came into the dining hall with the main course, a shoulder of venison spit-roasted in the Hungarian style and dill-speckled boiled potatoes.

His mother resumed the conversation once the maids had passed through the swinging door to the kitchen. "Ah, well, I'd just as soon have you both close to home, not out wandering the Wild Fields."

Roman was about to protest and Marek, seeing his intent, dutifully chose to change the subject. "We saw that Tatar today—the one from the Gazdecki family."

His father seemed irritated. "He's not from the Gazdecki family, Marek. His name is Aleksy Gazdecki. He is one of their family."

"Still, it's odd that he should have a Polish name," Marek said. "He's Tatar, Papa."

Roman's father spoke with a stern formality. "His adoptive parents are Polish and his adoptive country is Poland. This is what matters."

"What was it that made Borys Gazdecki adopt him, Papa?" Marek asked. "After all, he's from the savage Wild Fields, isn't he?"

The count's gaze went with lightning speed down the table to his wife. Roman turned, too, and realized that she had stopped eating and had paled. Her hands were in her lap. She seemed to be deliberately avoiding her husband's glance. He had the impression that at any moment she might jump up and run from the room. An odd current of electricity ran the length of the table. Was it his imagination, or was there some secret his parents shared about the Tatar boy?

"He hardly seems a savage," Krystyna said.

The table went quiet. Krystyna drew a piece of venison into her mouth

and slowly set down her fork, aware she had turned the conversation upon herself and relishing having done so.

“What?” The countess had come to attention as if from a trance.

“When did *you* see Aleksy?” the count demanded of his daughter.

Roman bit down on his lower lip, an old habit. It dawned on him now that the Tatar was one of the two boys in the field that he and Krystyna had seen from the coach. She had made the connection at once. His stomach tightened out of fear that the near mishap in the carriage was about to come to light. He was certain that the fact that he had saved his sister from falling into the ditch would be eclipsed by the precarious danger he had somehow allowed to occur.

Krystyna took several beats to finish chewing before she spoke. “Oh, I do think I remember him as a boy hereabouts before I went away to convent school. He shadowed Szymon in and around the stable and barn.” The green eyes suddenly went to Roman.

Roman gave her an almost imperceptible shake of the head, imploring her to be silent on the subject. Only *he* stood to lose. Her lips formed an enigmatic smile. Her eyes fluttered. Had the silly fool failed to read his cautionary signal? What more would she say?

Her reply mollified his father, but his mother spoke now. “Ah, you have a good memory,” she said, a tremble in her voice. “That was years ago.” She reached for her wine goblet.

“And he’s grown to be an interesting young man,” Krystyna said, eyes on Roman.

She was going to tell after all, Roman realized, steeling himself to deal with his father’s anger. He silently cursed. She was taking delight in this little game.

The eyelids flickered again. “Of course, I’m merely assuming.”

Damn her teasing!

“He’s become a good farmer and helpmate to Borys,” the count said.

“But not,” her mother advised, her eyes colorless stones above the rim of her goblet, “someone you’re at all likely to have any sort of exchange with. He is a peasant, after all. Stay clear of him, do you hear?” She drank, leaving unsaid the fact that he is a Tatar.

“But if he is a good farmer, Mother, as Papa says, isn’t he in part

responsible for the rye that made this good bread? Isn't that a sort of *exchange*?" She held up a piece of black bread and bit into it.

Krystyna's questions shut down the conversation completely. Roman could only marvel at Krystyna's nerve. How had the Carmelite sisters put up with her?



Roman and Marek left for camp well after dark, leaving their wings behind in the weapons room, for maneuvers the next day were to be informal. Marek wanted to gallop and issued a challenge. Although Roman agreed to race, urging his Turk into a canter, he lost interest before achieving a gallop and found himself lagging behind, lost in thought about his chances of being chosen for the *Kwarciani*. He had made light of it at supper, but in truth he was serious as the gallows about his chances of being inducted. Unlike his brother, he had little optimism. The maneuvers had not gone so perfectly for him. He knew that at the turn-around at the end of the track his horse had stepped outside the path markings. It was just for the briefest moment and only a few steps—chances are the judges wouldn't have seen the error—but the misstep had so unnerved him that he attempted to direct the stallion with his left hand on the reins, and in so doing he lost his concentration, allowing for the lance in his right hand to shake and falter. He steadied it almost immediately, but he had violated the first rule of carrying a lance: never direct a horse with anything other than your knees at its flanks. He knew that was a blunder that could not have gone unseen.

Chances were better his younger brother would be selected. His performance had been perfection. *Damn him for his good luck if he is chosen.*

His thoughts lighted upon the Tatar and his incredible bow. How he would like that bow for himself. It would assuage a part of the humiliation he would feel if he is not chosen. He cursed himself again for not taking it. Would the boy sell it to him? Perhaps, if the devil were offered enough. Even as he called him a devil in his thoughts, there was no denying that he was indeed a handsome rogue, what with his swarthy complexion and almond-shaped black eyes. He wondered if his looks had had an effect on Krystyna. He scuttled that thought almost immediately. If her eyes had gone to anyone, surely it was to the Polish brother, the truly Polish one—and yet he could not recall the brother's face.

Roman reached the forest now and drew up. He listened for Marek's horse. Nothing. Little expecting they would be separated, they had not discussed whether they would take the shorter route through the birch forest or the longer but more clearly delineated path around it. Without giving it much thought, he goaded his horse forward with the pressure of his knees. It took just fifteen minutes to regret his decision, for the forest became black as pitch and while his horse could sense the path if they moved slowly, there was no glimmer of the moon or even a star shimmering through the high tree-top openings. Like ghostly fingers, low-hanging branches brushed against his plumed cap.

Roman was thinking of turning around at the very moment he heard the noise. His horse heard the baying of a wolf pack, too, and halted at once. The animal let out a fearful snort, and a shiver ran through horse and rider. Even at some distance, the howling of wolves curdled his blood; it always had. Being torn apart by wolves made for an unspeakably gruesome death and one not uncommon, no matter the season. He had seen the grisly remains of a three-person hunting party once and the sight remained seared in his memory.

Roman's decision came quickly. He attempted to turn and retrace their steps, but the horse stubbornly stayed in place. He abandoned the use of his knees, instead employing both reins and spurs, none too gently. The horse turned, turned again in confusion or fright or pain, and turned yet again. Roman lost his bearings.

The shrieks of the wolves heightened to a deafeningly clamorous pitch. They had found their prey. An elk? A deer? And then the incomprehensible occurred to Roman—Marek? *Had* he gone on ahead? Roman's stomach roiled. He thought he would be sick. *Chrystus Jezus, let it be that Marek took the route around the forest.* Why had his brother allowed such a distance to come between them? But he knew at once that it was *he* who had allowed it. What to do?

He listened to the sickening, echoing sounds that came from—where? Behind him? The horse whinnied, its worry borne out by its ears that were flattened back and little convulsive tremors in the hard muscle beneath its mane. "Steady, Flash," Roman murmured. The stallion snorted, slowly pumping its front legs, as if in readiness for his command.

Getting his bearings, Roman was about to spur the horse away from

the sounds of the wolf pack when he heard noises—the breaking of twigs and the rush of something or someone through brush and low-hanging tree limbs. More wolves? *Holy Chrystus!*

He felt as if his heart would come through his chest. What seemed an eternity passed. The sounds grew louder, the terror more intense.

Finally, moments after he recognized the padding of horses' hooves on the soft forest floor, he heard his own name called out. "Roman!"

And then Marek was there, drawing close, their mounts snout to snout, his brother's face barely visible in the dark. "It's you, Mareczek—thank God!"

"Were you so frightened?" Marek asked. "Ha! You must have been! You never use my diminutive anymore."

Before Roman could reply, the wolves' cries rose to a shrill crescendo, drawing Marek up short. "God's bones!" he hissed.

"Better His than ours—let's get the devil out of here!"

Marek paused for a moment, mesmerized and listening. "They're feasting."

"And no doubt battling each other for the best pieces. Let's go!" Roman said, certain that his younger brother was gripped by the same fear—that it was no animal being torn to pieces.

"God's bones!" Marek repeated, shivering at the sounds. "I couldn't wish that on the worst Turk in Constantinople. Well, perhaps on the Sultan."

"Oh, I could think of a Tatar I would wish it upon. If I believed in wishes."

FOUR

“**W**HAT DO YOU THINK OF it, Idzi?”

Aleksy bent to retrieve from the straw-strewn surface of the barn the lance he had created. He turned the unwieldy weapon over in his hands, admiring it anew. Years before, he had made friends with Lord Halicki’s old stable master, Szymon, under whose tutelage he had become an expert in woodcraft, fashioning his own yew bows and ash arrows. Szymon had pronounced him an excellent bowyer and one magical day the year previous had allowed him to examine an old lance once used by the count. Aleksy took the measurements of the lance and carefully replicated it from a seventeen-foot length of fir-wood cut in halves and hollowed out as far as the rounded handguard at the lower end, thus reducing its weight. The shorter section managed by the lancer was left solid wood for leverage. The town blacksmith that provided Aleksy’s steel arrow points forged the lance point.

“It’s a beauty, Aleksy. How did you manage to fasten the two pieces together after you hollowed out the wood?”

“Just by chance. One day Borys made an off-hand comment about a Mongolian formula using a tar made from birch bark. I tried it and it worked just fine, as you can see.”

“Why is it you call your father by his Christian name?”

“He’s always had me call him *Borys*. I guess it’s odd to most folks.”

“You don’t call your mother *Jadwiga*, do you?”

“God help me if I did.”

“So what now?” Idzi asked. “About the lance.”

Aleksy interpreted the question as, *You’ve created this thing—now, what’s the likelihood of its doing you any good?* He ignored it, posing one of his own.

“Can you lift it?”

“Who the hell do you think moved it to this side of the barn so that the

cow or Kastor wouldn't trample it? Just because it's four times longer than I am tall doesn't mean I'm a weakling, my friend."

"Indeed," Aleksy said as he gently returned the lance to its place of safety. "Why then, you could be of value to the army." He stood up, unable to contain a mischievous smile, and turned to Idzi. "You could run at the horsed enemy with the lance and he wouldn't see you coming until you jabbed him in the toe from below."

"Or—if he's on foot—his codpiece," Idzi said, his smile wide. "You're a bastard, you are."

The two fell to laughing now as they sat cross-legged in the straw, the lantern between them, the muted thrum of rain on the thatched roof. Aleksy felt as if he could make a bit of fun out of Idzi's dwarfism, such was their friendship. And Idzi took it in stride and could return in kind with Tatar jibes. The barn was his home, along with the family horse, cow, and a variety of farm animals. He had come to the family seven years before, at the age of ten. He showed up one day, an orphan looking for work and he stayed on to take care of the barn, hen house, pigsty and the like, worming his way into the hearts of everyone, especially Aleksy's, with the exclusion of Aleksy's mother, who insisted on calling him by his full Christian name, *Egidiusz*. She said she held nothing against the lad who refused to grow, but she never invited him into the house unless it was to deliver eggs, a slaughtered chicken, or on some other errand. Idzi had been nearly as tall as Aleksy when he had come to the farm, but now he was no taller than the height of Aleksy's waist. He had a large head offset by a mass of sandy hair, a keen mind, and unapologetic sky-blue eyes. Aleksy thought him a handsome little man, one who minded his manners in front of Borys and Jadwiga, and yet when Aleksy asked his parents if his friend could partake of a Sunday supper the previous winter, Borys went silent in deference to Jadwiga's glowering expression and adamant refusal. Aleksy wondered sometimes why *he* had been adopted and accepted into their home as son and brother to Damian while Idzi—of Polish blood—was relegated to servant status with lodging in the barn.

For food, Idzi fended for himself, but Aleksy often brought him leftovers in the night—a bit of meatless stew and bread this night—when they would converse while whittling out of linden wood the figures of

animals or people. Although Aleksy loved his brother Damian, he found a deeper connection to Idzi.

"Aleksy..." Idzi said tentatively, his eyes on his own sculpture of a dog meant to be Luba, who lay sprawled on her side close by, a fluffy mound of white and gray.

Aleksy grunted.

"You've carved enough soldiers to make your own army should you somehow bring them to life."

"And to life-size."

"Which means taller than me, I'll wager. You're working on an animal now, yes? Is it a goat?"

"Hah! It's not a goat, fool. Soldiers have to ride, yes?"

"A horse, then. And when do *you* plan to ride?"

Aleksy looked up and even in the lantern light could see the sharpness of Idzi's gaze. He shrugged and felt his face heating.

"You know what I mean, Aleksy. You now have your lance. When do you make your move? Ever since I've known you, you've had soldiering on your mind. So, when?"

"I don't know. It was easy to think about, easy to talk about, but not so easy to do."

"Why?"

"You know very well. Who will take me? Yes, I have a lance and I'm a damn good archer, too! But I have no horse, for God's sake. And I've never even ridden a good horse, a really good one. A Polish-Arabian, a "Turk," like the mounts I saw the Halicki brothers with, damn them."

"Still, someone should give you a try."

"Why should they? I hear that a Turk costs over one hundred and twenty zlotys." Aleksy fell silent for several minutes. "I should get back to the cottage. Can't afford to be tired in the field."

"Unless you find a nice shady spot."

"Shady spots don't get the weeds pulled or baby plants set upright after tonight's rain."

"Aleksy, is there something else?" Idzi's eyes were on him again. "To keep you here?"

"Like what?"

"Damian says you were taken by that girl—the one in the carriage."

Aleksy's mouth fell open. "Damian said what?"

Idzi just stared, searching, a dormant smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Curse my brother! His mouth runs like a springtime mountain brook." Why should Damian meddle so? First with his parents and now with Idzi. He sighed. "Damn! She's a noble's daughter, Idzi! Do you take me for an idiot? I'm not to even talk to her. And yet—*why* should it make such a difference?"

"I don't know, but it does and it's something you can't change, like my size. The girl's high-born and you're not. They say, 'Those born for the cap should not crave the crown'."

The answer was not to Aleksy's liking. He said nothing.

"So if nothing's holding you here," Idzi said, "why don't you go—take a stab at soldiering?"

"Maybe I will. Are you so anxious to see me off and away?"

"It's just that you've spoken of nothing else. I thought it was in your blood. And now the lance is finished and it is a beauty. Why, I'd go with you myself if I thought—well, I'm not an idiot, either. Just a dwarf."

Aleksy found no suitable reply. *And maybe I am just a dreamer*, he thought. Standing, he tossed his sculpture into the corner and gave the facsimile of a sleepy stretch. "I'll see you tomorrow. You should sleep, too. That rooster will have you up before you know it."

Idzi laughed. "The cock is the village clock, no?"



"Heard you had a little clash with the Masters Halicki," Szymon said within moments of opening the tall doors of the huge Halicki stable so that Aleksy could enter with his horse and dog. His milky blue eyes twinkled above a wildly full and grizzled beard.

After Sunday Mass at the little village church, Aleksy often visited Count Halicki's stable master at Poplar House. Their initial relationship had been struck years before when Borys had business at the manor house and Aleksy had trailed along and been amused by Szymon in the stable. Their friendship was truly sealed when he learned that Szymon had been held captive for five years by Tatars not friendly to the Commonwealth. Here was a man—Polish to the bone—who could tell him something about the

Tatar people to the east, Aleksy's people, something more that the cryptic Borys had told him. Aleksy learned that his ancestors originated in the extreme climate of Mongolia's Gobi Desert. After centuries of migrations and subjugations, the Tatars came to form a piece of what was called the Golden Horde, one that controlled the Eurasian Steppe. From that tapestry came the Budzhak Tatars and a particular tribe Borys had told him about—that of his parents—who tended cattle and roamed the land south of Halicz, on the plain that followed the River Dniester toward the Black Sea.

Szymon's statement about the Halicki brothers brought Aleksy up short. "The one had a mind to steal my bow.—Who told you?"

"That sounds more like Roman, I can tell you. Puffs like a toad. The trick is to treat him like a tadpole. He was a regular little miscreant as a child."

"He hasn't changed."

Szymon laughed. "Ah, Alek," he said, using the diminutive, "they seldom do. Once a slyboots, always a slyboots. His brother Marek told me about seeing you. I guess they were surprised to see you almost all grown."

"Almost?" Aleksy feigned an affront. "Evidently not surprised in a good way."

"What would you have done had he taken it?"

"I would have taken it back and probably broken it over his head." Later, in bed that night, Aleksy would wonder whether his own statement wasn't a bit of bluster.

"Ah, then it's best ended as it did. Don't be so impulsive, my boy. Had he absconded with it, we could have pleaded your case to the count."

"And what would his father do?"

"Hopefully the right thing, Alek."

Aleksy made a grunting sound. "Maybe."

"I've thought of a few new expressions for you today. Put Kastor over in the stall and come sit."

Aleksy did as he was told, then passed the count's horses, lingering for several moments at the stalls of the Halicki brothers' Polish-Arabians, stroking their fine manes.

"Some beauties, huh?" Szymon said.

"I've never seen the like."

"The boys were well rewarded for their successful military training.

Their father spent some money on that horseflesh, I can tell you. They had better appreciate them. Now, hurry, boy!" Something in his throaty tone made Aleksy think Szymon harbored a bit of jealousy for the advantages of the brothers' births, as well as for their youth.

The two sat at a small rough-hewn table. Luba settled into a mound of hay. "How did you get away—when you were a captive?" Aleksy asked.

"Lord Halicki missed my expertise as a retainer in our fighting years, I guess," Szymon said, laughing. "He paid the ransom."

"Ransom?"

"Yes, my boy. It goes that way often enough. If an enemy thinks you might have value, they'll seek a reward for your return. The bartering took years, but here I am. Now, do you wish to learn or not?"

Aleksy's interest in his own personal history had led to Szymon's teaching him Tatar customs and phrases. The phrases, in turn, had led to Aleksy's learning how to write the phrases. Szymon, having studied to become a priest years before, had an education more advanced than the average stable master. He had not blinked two years earlier when Aleksy told him he could neither read nor write. What peasant could? "Well, I shall teach you what I know," he said, "not that it's so much, mind you, but it will do. And I will teach you the Tataric *and* the Polish."

And in that way the tutorials had begun. Aleksy dared not tell his family he was learning to read and write. He could imagine no positive reaction and suspected Damian would be jealous. He had, however, trusted Idzi with the secret.

Two hours passed with Szymon's quizzing Aleksy on phrases he had already learned. After acquitting himself well in speaking the phrases in Polish and then Tataric, Aleksy used a stick to spell out the phrases in the dirt floor of the stable. Szymon could teach only the written Polish. He had not mastered the written Tataric.

Today Szymon taught several new sayings. The one he saved for last played tricks with Aleksy's mind: "At home with their friends, all men are soldiers."

Aleksy thought about its meaning as he repeated it back in Polish, then in Tataric. Then came the Polish writing in the dirt, all the while his mind working. Was that phrase alluding to bravado? *Is my dream nothing more than bravado?*

Evidently Szymon's mind was working in the same direction. "Have you thought more about your joining the colors, my boy?"

Aleksy cursed his own tongue. Why had he told people about his foolishness? Why? Now they had expectations of him. First Idzi—and now Szymon. He was filled with shame. "Soldiering? I have no horse."

"Not all soldiers have horses."

"A foot soldier? Never!"

"The infantry is nothing to be ashamed of. And, who knows, maybe the King's Army will supply you with a mount once you show them your fine bow and fine lance. I had some doing in that, you know, making of you a fine bowyer and allowing you to copy Count Halicki's lance."

Luba's head came up from the straw at that moment and she began to growl. Aleksy and Szymon turned toward the door that led to the path up to the house. There stood Szymon's apprentice, Gusztáf, eyeing them peculiarly. Szymon stood and took two steps forward so as to make the soldier saying in the dirt illegible. To keep the lessons secret, they were conducted only on Sundays because Gusztáf went home to the village of Horodenka for the day.

"You're back early," Szymon said.

Gusztáf nodded, his eyes shifting from Szymon to Aleksy and back again.

For a few awkward moments nothing more than the shuffling of a horse in its stall could be heard.

"Gusztáf," Szymon said, managing a false smile, "will you be a good boy and take the bucket there and fetch some water?"

Blond, with hazel eyes above a sharp nose, Gusztáf was a year younger than Aleksy and not one to hide his emotion of the moment. Today it was suspicion. He resentfully picked up the bucket and made his exit.

"What did he hear?" Aleksy asked, scrambling to his feet.

"I don't know."

"About the soldiering?" Aleksy's heart was racing. "About Lord Halicki's lance?"

"Not to worry, my boy. You know, I did try to teach him to read a bit. He wasn't interested. Too bad for him."

"But if he heard—if the count should find out—or my father!"

"I can handle the likes of Gusztáf. He's a homely lad and not so very bright, but I'll make a decent groom out of him in the long run."

"He doesn't like me. He never has."

"Don't take it personal. Now, let me teach you a new phrase, yes? *Scratch a Tatar and you'll find a Russian.*"

Aleksy grasped his meaning. "So Gusztáf hates Russians? Most Poles do!"

"No doubt." Szymon spoke quickly. "And many connect Tatars with Eastern people and with Russia. Enough of that—now listen to me closely if you wish to avoid the infantry. Even without a horse, you can leave Halicz with riding skills."

"On what—Kastor? You're joking!"

Szymon took Aleksy by the shoulders, the pale yet keen eyes on him. "I said, listen to me, boy, so that you might one day be a man! Milord and the countess are on their way to Warsaw to celebrate the wedding of someone or other related to his lordship's friend, General Lubomirski. Roman and Marek were not about to sit in a carriage for days, so they went by horseback. I suspect they want to get to the capital early and have a bit of fun. Those family things go on for days, not that you or I would know, but they do! And then there's the travel time. They will be gone for at least the next several Sundays. You are to come earlier than usual on those days. Gusztáf sets off for Horodenka before dawn, so come right after."

"I have Mass—"

"God will forgive you for a few Sundays. Make up some excuse for your parents. The Almighty will forgive you that, too."

"But—why?"

"Listen, Alek, and I'll tell you why! You come at dawn and I'll let you ride one of the boys' Turks."

Aleksy had to shake his head. Was he understanding this clearly? His heart beat fast. He peered into the dark—toward the horses' stalls. "Why didn't they take them?"

"And waste prize horseflesh on a wild ride, not to mention trusting someone to care for them in Warsaw? No, they took a couple of hearty but ordinary stallions. They're impatient, too, especially Roman, so they'll trade them off a couple of times at outposts along the way." Szymon gave a conspiratorial wink. "Now, on those Sundays I can teach you plenty about horsemanship."

Aleksy had more questions, more protestations, but at that moment

the door behind him creaked open. Luba started to growl again. Gusztáf entered with the water.



Sunday came at last. The night before, Aleksy told his parents he was to help out old Szymon and that he would attend early morning Mass at a church in Halicz rather than the village chapel. Regret for lying and missing Mass was eclipsed by the sheer excitement of riding a Polish-Arabian. He scarcely slept. This was the immediate and reachable goal. The other—soldiering—remained so elusive a thing for a peasant and non-Pole that its achievement seemed unfathomable.

Aleksy had always approached the Halicki *dwór* from the rear because that gave closest access from his village and because his business had always been with Szymon, but today—well before dawn—he took the road leading up to the house, walking Kastor down the long, poplar-lined drive so that he would not call attention to his arrival. The columnar shape of the poplars offered little concealment for a man and horse, so as he neared the house he took up a position behind a belt of tall bushes. From here he could see the comings and goings of the household. He would be able to witness the leave-taking of the groom for his family cottage.

Aleksy knew Poplar House and its outbuildings from its back end, but now he studied the building, taking in the size and the grandeur of the façade. He had seen little of the Commonwealth and so to his mind this could have been the residence of one of its mighty magnates, those wealthy-beyond-measure nobles who numbered no more than perhaps forty in the nation. Rather, this was the home of the Halickis, a *szlachta* family. There were estimated to be many hundreds of these lower nobility families. And then, of course, there were the multitudes of the peasantry, folks like his family who were all but tied to the land.

Day was breaking gray but the starkly beautiful white of the three-storied *dwór* fairly glowed in the gloom. Huge windows fronted the center of the building on the ground and first floors, slightly smaller ones gracing the two wings running to the left and to the right. Aleksy's gaze was drawn at once to the huge columned portico at the center—Polish symbol of hospitality—then taken up to the balcony on the roof above it and the tall mullioned French doors that provided access. Above the second level,

he took in the attic level, the whiteness giving way to the dark evergreen shingles of the deeply sloping roof. Here the windows were like half-coins beautifully incised into the roof. Almost like Eastern eyes peering out, he thought. *Like my eyes.*

Amber candlelight glowed from one of the eye-windows at the far right. A servant getting dressed to start the day?

Aleksy was jarred from his conjecture when he heard a horse clip-clopping along the path from the rear of the manor house. He drew back and stroked Kastor's forehead to keep him quiet. The rider urged his horse into a canter as soon as he came to the drive fronting the estate. They flew past and by the time they came to the main road they were at a gallop—and gone. Gusztáf was on his way home, to Horodenka.

Aleksy glanced up. The window had gone dark. "Come on, Kastor," he said, remounting and proceeding to the stable.

"You may choose between the two," Szymon said, ushering him to the stalls of the two Polish-Arabians. "On second thought, I would recommend Miracle, Marek's Turk."

"Why?"

"Roman's mount is more spirited, like him. Perhaps next Sunday for that one, yes?"

"Who am I to quibble?" Aleksy held his breath as Szymon led Miracle from the stable. He had had little opportunity to observe the Turk when the Halicki brothers accosted him so that only now was a good appraisal possible. The chestnut coat shimmered in the early morning light. The animal's dark, observant eyes regarded Aleksy beneath a forelock that was fully black, as was his mane and tail. Aleksy went to his side, noticing now that the legs beneath the knee were dark, too, but the fetlocks were white as milk. In no time he was fully mounted, aware of the strength of horseflesh under him and experiencing a thrill each time Miracle responded to his cue.

For several hours they worked in a corral far from the house and away from the eyes of house servants. Szymon had cut markings into the dirt similar to the ones Aleksy had observed at Mount Halicz. The horse had been schooled well and knew the drill, so it was just Aleksy doing the learning, all the while imagining a lance in his hand.

"I have things to tend to," Szymon said at noon.

"I see," Aleksy said from atop Miracle. Assuming they were done for the day, he started to dismount.

"Stay right where you are, young Alek!"

"But, why—"

"I don't expect either you or Miracle is tired out. You've got to get to know him—and him you. Go out on the road and give yourselves a workout."

Aleksy inhaled deeply. "Truly?"

"I said so, no? Take the afternoon."

"But—but what if someone sees us? Polish-Arabians are not common around here. They'll recognize him and you'll be in trouble with his lordship."

"Ah, well, take back roads then. In fact," he said, pulling at his salt and pepper beard, "take that road up to the castle ruins. There are some long stretches along the way. No one's likely to be there. Folks think the place is haunted."

Aleksy didn't have to be convinced.

"And next Sunday—oh, you see that contraption on the right side of the saddle?" Szymon was pointing to a rounded leather holder attached to the saddle. "It's called a tok. It's a Hungarian word. Do you know what it's for?"

Aleksy nodded. He had seen it used often enough. "The butt of the lance."

"Damn right. Now, next Sunday I want you to bring your lance. Can you manage that?" Without waiting for an answer, Szymon swatted the hind of Miracle and he took off at once, as if he were anxious for the outing.

Aleksy had no opportunity to respond. He would have been speechless anyway. What could Szymon mean—other than it was his intention to teach him the use of the lance atop one of the Polish-Arabians? The horse moved easily, transitioning quickly into a full gallop, and a kind of joy Aleksy had never known pumped through him.

The horse was aptly named.



"No water, my friend." Aleksy stood next to Miracle, his hand stroking the high forehead. He had given the stallion a good workout and deeply regretted not having taken a waterskin for himself and, more especially, for the horse.

But this outing had been anything but planned. They stood in the bailey of the castle, having carefully crossed the broken-down drawbridge, its chains long in disuse from time and rust. “We’ll go back soon,” he promised his charge. But for now he wanted to explore the ruins; he had not been here for several years. While some people thought it haunted, Aleksy thought it the stuff of dreams. He looked about him at the stone and timber ruins of gatehouses, kitchens, stables. He searched for a post to tie up the horse, and finding nothing suitable, placed the reins under a large stone.

He then made his way to the castle keep which rose up from a raised shelf of land near the rear wall. Standing just inside the four-level structure, he found the stairs in fairly good condition. With a glance out at the patiently waiting horse, he took the stairs, floor by floor, carefully stepping over boards, bricks, and shards of glass that lay strewn about. The remnants of the timbered roof had given way years before so that on the fourth level the sun streamed in upon him. He walked to what had been a crenelle, a narrow window slit meant for archers—like himself, he dared to think—but time had rendered it a huge gaping hole with no lintel.

He looked down at the bailey, not seeing the lone horse nibbling on some sweet grass but imagining instead what this castle had been like in its days of use when men patrolled the gatehouses, blacksmiths worked in their smithy, grooms in the wide stables, servants came and went on errands, some toiling in the kitchens, the huge fireplaces lighted and the scent of roasted meat in the air. And in the rooms of the keep below him the members of the noble family entertaining and being entertained. Time yielded to his imagination.

Absently, he noticed that Miracle’s head had come up, his ears on alert. The imaginings fell away. Even at this distance Aleksy could see the horse grow tense. His head was moving from side to side, one ear flattened back. What was it? A snake there in the overgrown brown grasses of the keep? It very well could be. Sweet Jesus—and here he was four floors up in a tumbling down structure.

He had only just turned to make for the stairs when he heard the neighing of a horse. He pivoted back to the window. Miracle was growing restless, his right front leg pawing at the dry ground.

The neighing came again and Aleksy’s worst fear was realized: it was the neighing of another horse, somewhere outside the front of the castle.

There was no time to theorize who it might be. Aleksy dumbly stared as Miracle pulled at his reins in an effort to escape. The stone was not so heavy it would restrain a horse that had the will to pull free. Miracle—this magnificent treasure of one of the young Halicki lords that Szymon had placed in his custody—would be gone before Aleksy could pick his way down four rubble-filled floors.

Heart pounding, he went for the stairs. His descent to the third level was unimpaired, but on the second level the edge of a stair gave way and he fell. He picked himself up and ran faster, fearful first for the horse and then somehow certain that his life was about to change.

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