

Growing up a bastard isn't easy. Especially when you have three half-siblings all convinced you're after *their* land. As if I could care less. Who wants to own some backwater like Wiltshire anyways? If it weren't for my lord father's constant pleas for attention, the English throne probably wouldn't even know we exist. No, instead I was to be given to the church, educated by some of the best monks catholicism had to offer, at least so I was told. I, though a devout catholic, was less than pleased with this arrangement. I craved glory, a chance to prove myself. I highly doubted I would do so wearing the cloth. Yet less than a year after I turned 20 a call went out across the Christian world. Our great king Harold the Third was setting out on a sacred crusade against the horrid infidel. I saw my chance to finally escape from the confines my lord father had placed upon me at the monastery, and so I answered the call, expecting to be but a common foot soldier. I eagerly rode towards London ready to serve God and King in holy melee. Yet I slowed when I lay eyes on the site before me just off the road. I had not even left the county. Great stone slabs formed a circle before me, a silence permeated the place giving me chills. I had heard tales from the monks of Stonehenge before, but never felt the urge to see it in person. I didn't even intend to visit it in the first place, rather it just happened to be on the way. My eyes narrowed at its sight as I fought back the urge to spit. Pagan superstitious nonsense. I made the sign of the cross as I walked away, as any true christian would. Why my lord father never removed the eyesore was a question for another time. For now it was time to think of the future, glorious battle to retake the holy land! Despite my father's plan to give me to the church, I still had grown up learning to use a sword. Yet never had my blade tasted blood. It was time to rectify that. The infidel would be crushed, and should I manage to impress not even my bastard blood would get in the way of my reward, for all know God rewards those who champion his divine mandate.

The king's army landed just to the north of the Island of Cyprus. We marched south singing songs of exultation. We were the true faithful, and we would bring righteous fury upon the blasphemous Saracen hordes. My unit was small, scarcely a few hundred men all from the county of Wiltshire. I had command of these brave soldiers, for all men are equal under the cross - bastards included. We told each other stories of our homes, and joked about how the beautiful downtrodden young christian women living under the unforgiving Saracen's rule would undoubtedly reward us for our...efforts once they were liberated. Morale could not have been higher, for surely God favored us. And should we fall in this worthy cause, our place in heaven was guaranteed. Either way, once it was all over we would be in paradise, either here on this world or the next.

We first engaged the infidel at the city of Acre. Whatever I thought war was like, it was not what I found. The men I had prayed alongside with mere hours ago now lay dead by the thousands. Their blood intermingled with that of our heathen foes. King Richard called it a major victory for all of christendom. I could not. Our forces continued on, fighting at Beirut, Hebron, Tyrus, Beirut again, Tyrus again, Beirut again, Tyrus again, I stopped paying attention after that. I was numb. At each battle I watched more and more of my comrades fall. I was promoted and promoted again, viewed a hero for what they called my heroic actions to save as many of my countrymen as possible. It did not stop me from being sick after each mere skirmish. Perhaps it was cowardice that held firm now within my heart, perhaps not. It was when we reached the city of Ascalon however that I finally broke down. I had become a commander of the forces at large, leading the king's right flank. Thousands of men were now mine to care for. King

Richard ordered us to assault the walls directly rather than siege them down. I watched our army fall like wheat to scythe. Though the walls fell, the fields were forever stained by the blood of the faithful and heathen alike. When the city finally capitulated I watched as my comrades, the devout and faithful, God's chosen holy warriors to enact his divine will, began looting the city of all its valuables. Atrocities that I cannot bring myself to put to words happened on every street. The city reeked of blood and ash. My sword hung limp in my gore soaked hand. I could no longer lift it, as if it suddenly had the weight of the world behind it. The normally cold steel blade was now warm with blood. Was this what I desired but a few years ago? There was little time for reflection. The horns sounded as the Saracens moved to retake the city. As the crusaders moved to defend their spoils, I fell to the ground retching violently. I stared at a muslim woman weeping over her dead family. Truly a demoness indeed. Surely this heartbroken woman was the great example of the unholy Muslim world. Surely she who wept for her lost children embodied all that was wrong with the Muslim creed. Surely it was infidel incapable of human feelings like her that we came to this place and sacrificed mind and body to destroy. Surely her tears were God's will. I dropped my sword and too wept.

When the Muslim forces overran us, I made no move to stop them. They retook the city, and took me prisoner. I had given up on life. A mere 27 years of age and I had already had my fill. I had seen the monster man truly was, I had seen the lie that was a loving god. My lord father made no move to pay my ransom. Why would he? A bastard son was all I would ever be to him. When my captors realized that there would be no point in keeping me captive, I was told that I could either on my honor return home never to fight for the cross again, or die in the dungeons. I needed no such motivation. My honor was long since discarded, and my faith along with it. I don't remember the ship home. I don't remember the ride back to Wiltshire, and I surely don't remember purposefully riding to the strange circle of stones that I had written off a lifetime ago. Yet there I was. I walked between the stones, not understanding why they had called out to me. I had not thought of them a single time while in the holy land, yet here I stood. I felt no need to go back to my monastery, no desire to go back to my childhood home. But why would I instead desire these meaningless pagan stones?

"You feel her presence, you heard her call, and so you have answered." a wizened voice croaked behind me. I spun around to find a hunchbacked old man wearing furs. His snowy beard reached far down his chest, and his complexion had a strange darkness to it that I was far more akin to seeing in the holy land than I was here in England. I asked him what he meant, for I had felt no presence, heard no call, and answered to no-one. He explained what my teachers at the monastery had omitted. For this was a pagan shrine indeed, and though the goddess' faithful had long been put down, she herself remained. I told him he was crazy, for I no longer believed in the gods. I was a decorated crusader, and yet I had long since cast my rosary away. I served none, no king and surely no god. The old man beckoned me to sit in the center of the circle. I almost refused, but even as I opened my mouth to do so I found myself walking towards the spot. I sat down, and at his insistence began to meditate upon the way of the world, the way of man.

I know not how long I remained there. It may have been hours, it may have been days. Hunger seemed to no longer affect me, nor thirst nor sleep. I did not know why I did these things, only that they felt right somehow. It was in the dark of night that she appeared. Long black hair flowed to her waist, a blue

dress once worn by ancient peoples adorned her snow white skin. I could not speak for her beauty overwhelmed me. She approached me and gently put her hand upon mine. She said nothing, but stared into my eyes, my very tarnished soul. A soul wracked with guilt, shame, and despair. Yet upon her smile all of this vanished. Tears flowed into my eyes for the first time since the battle of Ascalon, yet these were not tears of despair, but of healing.

When I awoke I was alone. Yet I did not feel it. For the first time in my life I felt at peace. In wonder I set off towards my father's keep, my thoughts pure and my heart glad. When I passed the monastery I looked upon the hard stone walls, the walls as unwelcoming as the god to which they were dedicated. I shook my head as I walked away. I would never return.

Upon reaching the place of my accursed birth I was met by my step mother. Despite not being of my blood, she surely cared for me more than anyone else at the manor. She told me, with a hint of bitterness, that my lord father preferred I not return. Though hearing it stung, it did not surprise me. After all he would not even pay the 10 gold ransom to save me from the Saracen's dungeons. Instead she gave me a large pouch of gold. She said that she had convinced the family to each donate money, that though I must leave, at least I would not be without means. It was upon accepting this pouch that the last strand of my past was cut from me. I was free.

I did not know where to turn to next. I found myself once again at the stone circle. I sat in meditation, hoping only to just glimpse her face again. A mere glance upon her perfection was all I desired. I felt her before I saw her, lithe arms wrapped around from behind. I did not turn to face her, but instead held her hands in mine. An embrace, even better than a stolen glance. I wished to stay there forever, at peace. Yet all things end. As she faded away however she spoke but two words: "Isla Canarias".

I wasted no time. She had given me direction, and I would sooner die in agony than disappoint. I reached the Duchy of Cornwall and hired a ship to take me to the Canary Islands. I knew not what awaited me there, but for the first time in a long while I was eager to find out.

The island was even more a backwater than Wiltshire. The people, though friendly, were alarmingly backwards. I was no scholar, yet even I could tell thus. I spent over a year meeting the locals, learning of their ways. I found that I was not the only one the Goddess had revealed herself to. Many of the inhabitants of the isle worshipped her, though oft by a different name. I joined them without hesitation.

I had no idea as to why the Goddess had sent me there. I was exhilarated to find others like me, others who understood the peace I now felt. Yet surely there was more to it? I used the money given to me by my "family" to gain enough power to establish myself as head of the tribe. Though I was an outsider, my faith in their Goddess was enough to satisfy the majority. I set to work bringing the Canaries into the

modern world. I devoted all my resources to improving the lives of my people. I erected buildings left and right in order to better this land. Though I was born a bastard, I found myself ruler after all. Unfortunately it was likely these improvements that put the island into the sights of the newly independent ruler of Infa. It was said that he participated in a revolt against his decadent liege, and took the opportunity to break free. However he was weak and would not stay independent if he did not manage to grab more power, and my island was one of the few options available to him. I sent multiple diplomatic envoys to try and convince him to turn away from the path after he established a fictional claim upon the island. He was a well known lunatic, sure, but the same was often said of me, and so I held out hope that reason would prevail. It would not. Despite the valiant efforts of my chancellor, it did not seem to make any difference. War was coming.

I knew what would happen should the man land troops upon our shores. I had seen war in all its horror. I had seen what men will do when claiming it's god's will, and these Sunni were unlikely to be any different than their eastern brothers. So I focused my efforts in building up the island's military. Yet it was obvious to all that it would not matter how much I tried, there were only so many people able to wield a sword here. As time passed and it became more and more obvious that should it come down to it there would be no victory, I fell back in desperation on the use of assassins. My spymaster assured me that the bastard would be poisoned by his wine at a feast, and no one would ever suspect we were behind it. He was right, but he was also wrong. The ruler of Infa perished by poisoned wine, but word got out that it was I who ordered it. The declaration of war came not a week later from his son, the new ruler of Ifna. I desperately raised my levies, preparing for the inevitable. Yet as I watched in dread from a tower as the troops approached shore, I felt a familiar presence. A wave of peace washed over me, as lithe arms once again wrapped around my waist from behind. "Fear not. For I hath not sent thee here to die, but to spread my love." I closed my eyes and put my hand on hers, just as I had so many years ago. She vanished upon a knock at my door. My Court Chaplain walked into the room with a contented smile upon his face as well. "My chief," he began, "those ships are not the only ones to grace our fair island. Just one hour ago ships appeared from the south of the island and began unloading troops. They are religious zealots my lord, men who I thought I had failed to incite, and they have come to save us from the flame."

I looked out upon the seas as the ships bearing enemy troops approached. I did not ask how many zealots had arrived, for I knew it mattered not. The Goddess had spoken. Victory was assured. It was a few months after the war with Infa ended in our favor that I came to the conclusion that if we were to remain safe as a people, we would need to build a realm capable of defending ourselves. This is surely what the Goddess had in mind when she sent me here: to ensure that those dedicated to her love had a place they could pray safely, away from the abrahamic barbarians.

I had dedicated my son's education to the art of war, and his sister's to that of the gods. Both born bastards such as I, yet both were legitimized. I had never married, for my heart had already belonged to another, though I admit I did not see her as often as I would wish. Perhaps it is unseemly to love your deity. I suppose it mattered not. Regardless, I had high hopes for the two children Malcolm and Aleita. It was readily apparent to me that they were far more innately gifted than I. I only hoped that when I passed, they would be able to keep the people safe. This tiny rock in the middle of nowhere was the

only place I knew of to offer such peace. Should it fall there would be nowhere safe to worship the Goddess unmolested. And so I began to chart the future of the Canary Empire, for that is what it would become. I would not leave such unpleasantness as war to my children. This was my chosen burden.

Iberia was embroiled in the reconquista, and the people both christian and muslim suffered for it. I would show them a new way. As the two behemoths fought one another, I would be there to care for the people. I would establish a new realm and prove the folly of dying for an uncaring god, one whose only blessing is death. We would start with the western coast, which had splintered into multiple muslim factions in the south, and the small dukedom of galicia to the north. If we moved quickly enough we would be able to establish ourselves there before the kingdom of Castille nor the Caliphate could respond. I would then jump over Castille to attack the county of Navarra before pushing my way to the southeast. Before any of this though, I would invade the islands of Mallorca and Menorca, who had somehow managed to remain semi-independent this whole time, instead just regularly paying tribute to the Caliphate.

I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples. I knew I did not have long left. Though I was not too old yet, a mere 45 years, a sickness unlike any other was sapping my strength. The wise elders did not have an answer. And so I knew I needed to accomplish my plan as quickly as possible. Though I had faith in my children, I would not leave such a bloody mess to them. If it meant keeping my people safe from harm, I would pull out my sword one last time.

The war against Mallorca and then Menorca were unremarkable. Mallorca was at the time helping a family member in a separate war, so we landed troops and took the island virtually without a fight. Menorca was scarcely much worse, with a single small battle being fought on the island of Mallorca before my men besieged and took Menorca. Massing our troops we began the wars in Iberia. It may have been bloody, but I refused to let my men commit the atrocities I had seen in the holy land, the atrocities that still haunted my dreams. The men willingly followed me, a retinue of the faithful, they would not cause undue harm. The enemy of course brooked no such quarter. When I awoke this morning I found her sitting on the side of my bed. Black hair streamed down to her waist, her clad in her blue dress that she had worn at our meeting. She made no sound, but only stared at me in sorrow. I knew what was to come. I put my hand on hers and told her it was fine, that my children would take up the mantle of the safety of her people. OUR people. She reached out and pulled me close in embrace. She told me that she would be waiting. I made the necessary arrangements, then marched to my fate. I personally led our armies on the field of battle near Lisbon and put the enemy to rout. It was a stray arrow that caught me in the chest. Had I not been suffering the illness, perhaps it would have been different. Yet I was not afraid. I knew what awaited me, and for this I was glad. My life had been one of many changes. I who had pledged myself to a god that deserved only scorn, now belonged to another: one who found love in all things. The last sensation I feel is lithe arms wrapping around my waist and a voice in my ear as beautiful as the moon.