

The Hostility of Hanno

Robin Hood

by Angus Donald, 1965–

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July 1191, Acre

A fat fly looped through the baked afternoon air of the small infirmary, buzzing contentedly and crossing and recrossing the sun-filled space with an

aimlessness that seemed almost insolent. The low room, although spotlessly clean, smelled faintly of wine and blood, with a background hum of bodily corruption that had drawn the fly in through the high stone window despite the swelter of noon and the iron bars that guarded that small square opening. Catching the delightful stench of overripe green grapes, the fly hung almost motionless in the air for a moment and then swooped, dropping to a wooden table that had been placed between two cots, each of which contained a slumbering man, and which were part of a row of eight simple wooden-framed beds that stood against the outside wall.

On that late July day these two were the only injured men occupying the ward belonging to the Knight Hospitallers of St John, one of several in their recently reclaimed commanderie in Acre. The city had been captured from the Saracens a couple of weeks before by a huge Christian army—mostly under the command of Richard the Lionheart, King of England. It had been lightly looted and was now packed to its high white walls with victorious, wine-filled Christian soldiery of many regions, most of whom had never before set foot in a city of its quality; and its narrow, shady, tight-twisting alleyways, gold-clad mosques, magnificent palaces and cool courtyards with tinkling fountains seemed somehow somnolent, bruised and resentful in the summer heat, like a drunk after a three-day debauch.

The fellow in the left-hand cot was long-limbed and yellow-haired, slim and very young, perhaps no older than sixteen years. His face was browned by the Mediterranean sun, regular in shape and roughly handsome with prominent cheekbones and a square, determined chin. He was deeply asleep, his unlined forehead filmed with sweat, his closed eyelids twitching minutely as he dreamed. Contrasting with his tanned face, his upper body, which was bared to the hips, was pale as buttermilk below the collar bone, and despite his youth the slabs of musculature indicating a highly trained swordsman created sculpted planes and shadows on his smooth chest and arms. His right wrist, which lay on the sweat-damp sheet that covered his modesty, was strapped tightly with crisp white bandages. And his lower belly, too, just above the hip bone, was swathed in a thick snowy linen band.

The man in the second cot also appeared to be asleep. Almost in opposition to the young warrior, he was squat and thick-bodied; an ill-made creature with heavy pads of hair on his chest, back and the curve of his shoulders, and yet with all the hair on his head shaven away to expose a large knuckle-like skull. His hairy sweat-gleaming upper body was a mass of lumped muscle and a truly spectacular collection of scars. His lower left leg had clearly been broken; it had been set, bound and secured between two pieces of split pine, and tightly bandaged from knee to ankle.

The fly alighted on the wrinkled green skin of a lone grape, unhooked its mouth parts and began to feed on the sweet juice of the fruit...

CRACK!

A hairy hand smashed flat on to the surface of the table, crushing grape and fly into a green mush, and creating a sharp noise like a breaking tree limb. The blond warrior sat up with a jerk, and immediately wheezed with pain and clutched at his belly bandages. He looked angrily over at the man in the other bed who was wiping the mess from his hand on to his linen sheet. The shaven-headed man looked

back at him with dark, iron-hard eyes. The two men stared at each other for some moments, neither speaking, neither willing to break their gaze, the heat in the already baking infirmary seeming to intensify around them, as if their locked eyes were generating a blaze all of their own. Finally, the younger man looked away, and flopped back down on to his cot. The shaven-headed man spoke then, a harsh unintelligible cackle, neither French nor English, nor any kind of local Latin—languages the young man might have comprehended. But it sounded very much like a deadly insult, or some vile curse.

‘What did you just say?’ the young man said, sitting up once again though this time with a little more care for his wounded middle. He had received a crossbow bolt to the lower side of his belly at a fierce battle in Cyprus more than two months before, and while the wound was healing under the skilled care of the Order of Hospitallers, it was still tender when forced into sudden movement.

He was answered by a tall old man in a grey robe, one of the brother infirmarians of the Order, not a knight, but a learned physician and a skilled healer of men, who had appeared unobserved at the end of the shaven-headed man’s bed carrying a bowl filled with bloody water. ‘Hanno asks if you maybe have some problem with him,’ the tall man said. ‘If I were you, young Alan Dale, I would say no. And smile politely at the fellow as you do so.’

‘Why does he not speak a proper language?’ asked Alan, frowning at the hairy oaf, who was looking at him once again with a hostile challenge in his eyes. ‘What is that foul barbarian tongue that he yaps away in, anyway?’

‘I doubt he thinks his native tongue is improper. He is from the German-speaking lands, as indeed am I, and while he does not speak a pure form of the language—he is only a simple man from the deep forests of Bavaria, after all—I do not think you should call him a barbarian to his face. He is a dangerous fellow, or so I’ve gathered from the accounts of his compatriots, and not someone you should insult lightly.’

‘Well, tell him to stop glaring at me like a demon with a grudge, then.’

The physician sighed, said something long and authoritative to Hanno, and the Bavarian backwoodsman gave a short bark of laughter and lay back in his cot.

‘You must make some allowances for him,’ said the physician. ‘Hanno is not a happy fellow; he is all alone in the world.’

‘With his demeanour, I can understand why his fellows shun him,’ said Alan.

‘No, you do not understand. His countrymen have left the Holy Land, they departed when Duke Leopold of Austria took ship for his homeland, but Hanno was abandoned in our care for he was too sick with fever. There were half a dozen others of his kind left in Acre, but they have been gathered unto the arms of our merciful Lord. Only he remains.’

Hanno felt the thrum of pain in his leg and tried to ignore it. But the sensation had swelled like some cruel music since the early morning, rising into his body, up through his spine, and was now pulsing in the back of his head and across his shoulders. The break was mending cleanly, the physicians had told him the day before, and he had been offered milk of the poppy. But Hanno refused: he did not want his wits fuddled while the Chiavari brothers were on the loose in Acre. He would rather be in pain than be in his grave. He reached a hand up

above his head, sliding it under the limp canvas pillow, and felt the wooden handle of the dagger that lay there. Given a heartbeat's warning, he believed that he could make the Chiavaris, or any of their hirelings, regret it if they came for him in the infirmary. And after what had passed, they'd come for him one day, that was certain.

He had always slept lightly, even during the worst of the fever, and yet still he did his best to resist the pull of oblivion as long as he could. But no man can go without sleep for ever, not even oak-tough Bavarians, and he had plunged into a vulnerable dreamless state the day before for more than an hour—only to be harshly awakened by a huge blond fellow quacking away far too loudly in the English tongue to the beardless stripling in the bed next to him. The man, a giant red-faced warrior in a long green woollen cloak, bawled and guffawed, and banged on a large shield that he had brought for the wounded boy. He seemed to be explaining what it was for: God in Heaven, were the soldiers of the Lionheart all imbeciles? Did they willingly go into battle without knowing how to hold a shield?

The English boy had several visitors in green cloaks: a tall good-looking fellow with an easy air and strange silver-grey eyes who seemed to be his lord, an excitable red-head not much older than the patient accompanied by an odd-looking woman who seemed to be his mother, and a child-servant who brought food and drink and hovered around twisting his fingers in anxiety for his master's health. There was no peace to be had in the infirmary, Hanno grumbled to himself, no peace at all. He cursed the bone of his leg that had been shattered by that woman's blow, long before the fever took him. A shameful wound: laid low by an ale slut. He had not expected that—he had thought he was fighting two men in that noisome drinking den in Tyre, and he had dispatched them smartly enough, but the woman over whom he had taken up arms in the first place sided with the Chiavaris and snapped his tibia with an iron cooking pot when his back was to her. Which only proved what he had always said: a man could always improve; a man should strive for perfection in his art, but he must also be as ready to learn as he was to teach. She was a fine woman, after all, well worth fighting for—fat as butter and with breasts like the full udders of a prize milch cow, and she brewed a decent ale as well. Shame she was dead now, really. Shame he had to kill her. But what could you do... Just bad luck. Bad luck, too, to be pinned here helplessly by that God-damned leg with the remaining Chiavari brothers calling for bloody vengeance. And all alone, without a single comrade to stand beside him, to watch over him... For a moment, he felt a childish self-pity ballooning in his chest, but he squelched it ruthlessly, laughing at his own weakness, and focused his thoughts on his future—and the loom of the Chiavaris. When would they come? At night? Maybe. During the day in the guise of concerned friends? Perhaps. Or would they wait until his guard was down, perhaps for weeks or even months. Whichever, it would be foolish to remain lying here in this bed for too long...

Alan was awoken by a clattering of wood on stone and a harsh cry of pain. It was dim in the infirmary, deep night-time, but a lone candle on a table at the far end gave some relief from the darkness. He sat up and looked left. The cot that had contained his surly companion was empty but he could see a humped shape moving feebly at the foot of the bed, trying to drag itself forward. He slowly

levered himself out of bed and stepped over to the fallen man. Two fierce eyes gleamed up at him from the tangle of limbs and bedding. Alan reached down and hauled the man upright. Hanno let out a bitten-down yelp as his broken limb banged against the bed, and followed it with a foul-sounding stream of unintelligible yet clearly furious words. It was no easy task, for his wounds had seriously weakened him, but Alan had soon wrestled the shaven-headed man back on his cot. They glared at each other, both panting with the exertion of the manoeuvre. And then Hanno said loudly, 'Wasser!'

'What?'

'*Wasser! Wasser!*' Hanno mimed drinking with a curled hand.

Alan nodded and walked over to the table at the end of the room. His wounded belly had been strained in the act of lifting the heavy-set Bavarian on to the bed, and he checked it and was pleased to find no fresh blood; for all his discomfort, he was nearly mended. From a tall earthenware jug, he poured out a pint beaker of cool water and brought it over to his neighbour. The man took it and sank the contents in a single draft. He put the beaker on the round table between them and gave Alan the smallest of grunts by way of thanks.

August 1191, Acre

The sun reflected off the Mediterranean as if it were a mirror, almost blinding in its intensity. Alan Dale sat under a huge red-and-white-striped awning, at a table on the western promenade just outside the walls of the citadel of Acre, drinking twice-watered wine and eating slices of cool melon. His eyes ached from the glare but he had chosen this spot because he relished the cooling breeze that came straight in from the sea. Behind his back the city was quiet; most of the local folk, Christian, Jew and Muslim alike, had taken to their beds to escape the battering heat of mid-afternoon, and the holy soldiers of the Great Pilgrimage—now only Englishmen, Normans, men of Maine, Anjou and Aquitaine, and a few Italians, as King Philip of France and Duke Leopold of Austria had returned home—usually followed their example. It was almost too hot to think. But Alan had spent too long abed over the past few weeks to desire his cot, so he sat in the shade, with his back to the high white ramparts, looking out over the low wall that separated the promenade from the shining blue sea and enjoying the breeze. Indeed, he was not the only mad soul in Acre who had refused to retire for the afternoon. A few of the hardier Arab stallholders on the other side of the promenade were still at their posts, determined to be on hand to sell their trinkets, fruit, cool drinks and gaudy clothing to any passer-by. Alan's eye was drawn to a short sturdy figure in a black leather jerkin who walked the promenade with the trace of a limp in his left leg. He was bathed in sweat, half-blinded by the glare and his shaven head was the colour of a well-cooked lobster. Alan recognized him as the man who had occupied the cot beside him some weeks before in the infirmary. He had disappeared—one day Alan had woken and found the man gone, with no warning, no goodbye—but here he was walking stiffly along the promenade past the line of stalls, his head lowered, his shoulders hunched against the heat, his gait determined. For a moment, Alan thought about hailing

him, but it was too hot for even the slightest exertion, and he remembered the man had been unfriendly to the point of rudeness, and so he held his tongue and watched him slowly approach, draw level and move onwards without apparently noticing his former neighbour.

Hanno paused at a stall selling headscarfs in a rainbow of bright hues. He saw the English boy across the promenade slumped on a stool with his back to the battlements and his long legs extended but had no particular desire to speak to him. He knew that his head was being burnt raw by this God-damned merciless heathen sun, and that he ought to purchase some form of covering, but he could not let himself be got up like some foreign nancy-boy just to avoid a touch of sunburn. Why were there no decent woollen hoods for sale in this damned country? Even a floppy leather countryman's hat would have done the trick—but there seemed to be nothing for sale but these absurd-looking turbans. He fingered the silky material of a turquoise scarf—he would look like some painted harlot if he were to wrap this frippery around his head. But, on the other hand, it might make it harder for the Chiavari men to spot him...

Alan watched idly as the surly Bavarian pawed a trailing strand of fine silk. That man badly needs a hat, he thought. Or some hair. He smiled at his own thoughts, and then straightened in his seat, jolted out of his torpor by the sight of a young Arab, not much older than him, watching the German out of the corner of his eye from the next stall along. The Arab was examining a brass cooking pot, tapping the bottom and holding it up to the sunlight. But Alan could see by his covert glances that the true object of his interest was the shaven-headed thug three yards away. Alan was entranced. He knew exactly what was happening—his former ward-fellow was being stalked. Not so long ago, Alan himself had been a predator of the same ilk as the Arab boy, and he had stalked his prey in a very similar manner. His only dilemma was whether or not he should warn the ill-mannered brute. It was none of his business, and he was professionally interested in seeing how the Arab would accomplish his task, yet the Hospitaller physician had said that the man Hanno was alone in Acre, that he had no comrades, no friends at all; perhaps he owed it to him as a fellow Christian, as a fellow pilgrim in the struggle to recapture Jerusalem, to warn him.

The Arab casually strolled to the stall selling brightly coloured scarves and positioned himself beside and a little behind Hanno who was by now leaning forward speaking loudly and angrily to the stall keeper, doubtless trying to make himself understood. As Alan watched, he saw a stealthy brown hand reach out, low down, level with Hanno's hip, and a knife flashed in the sunlight.

'Hey, Hanno! Behind you!' shouted Alan.

And the Bavarian moved, faster than a striking viper. He turned in a tight circle, right elbow leading, a blade already in his hand, his arm uncoiling—and he slammed a dagger with astounding accuracy into the throat of the Arab standing behind him, then ripped it sideways and free of the flesh in a shower of red droplets. The young man screamed, a horrible wet, choking noise, and dropped to his knees, both hands flew automatically to his half-severed neck, one dropping a short knife, the other a brown leather purse containing no more than a few pennies that just moments before he had freed from Hanno's belt.

Hanno ignored the dying man at his feet and the gush of blood over his boots; his head snapped left and right, his feet had assumed a fighting stance, the bloody dagger was cocked and ready in his right fist—but there were no enemies to be seen. Indeed, the walkway was almost deserted. Hanno looked over at Alan, and he lowered his shoulders and smiled, showing a ragged set of yellow-grey teeth. He lifted the gory dagger to his brow in salute; bent and retrieved his purse from the Arab's slack lap, and sauntered down the promenade as carefree as a child.

The stallholder's face was the colour of ash; he knelt beside the stricken thief on the stone flags of the promenade flapping his hands in shocked panic but unable to make any noise at all. Alan realized that his own mouth was hanging wide open. He shut it abruptly, fumbled a coin on to the table for his food and walked jerkily away.

The wine was sour, barely drinkable, but Alan was determined to finish this jug and another. The anger he felt in his belly at the ruthless, money-grubbing behaviour of his lord demanded the fruit of the grape. He drank alone, in a tavern in a strange quarter of Acre that he knew none of his company of green-cloaked English men-at-arms and Welsh bowmen were likely to visit. They always drank in one of the dives near the airy sea-palace that his lord had commandeered, so as not to have too far to stagger home with a bellyful. Alan was grateful to be alone—he'd dismissed his servant with an angry word and stormed into the night looking for wine, lots of it, nursing his anger like a baby at his breast.

He finished his cup and refilled it. He could feel the liquor coursing through his veins and igniting a glow behind his eyes and he began to relax a little. He looked around the room. It was a dismal place: a low, square room with a counter at one end filled with bottles and casks where a dwarfish man in a greasy robe grinned and bowed at him. There were a dozen other drinkers huddled on benches around the edge of the room, and some at the other tables; many were clearly European but a good proportion were local; none, it seemed, wished to engage with any of the other souls there. Alan was glad of that; he was also glad of the poniard he had in a sheath at his waist, a foot-long blade of fine Spanish steel. Since it had fallen to the Christians, Acre had become a wild and dangerous place after dark, with pilgrim throats cut daily for the silver in their purses, sometimes just for their clothing or boots. Every morning at least one or two bodies were discovered slumped, stripped and blood-streaked in the winding alleyways of the old city. Certain parts of the city were declared off-limits; the Christian soldiers were warned not to drink alone, or with strangers, and always to keep a hand on their purses. Good advice—which Alan utterly ignored. He fiddled in his own purse and produced a coin. He tapped it on the table and pointed at his jug. The little proprietor nodded and bustled over to sweep the jug from the table and hurry away to refill it.

'I buy this!' said a hard voice, and Alan noticed a muscular weight beside his elbow, and the dull shine of candlelight off a heat-blistered bald head. Hanno pulled up a stool and took a seat by the Englishman. 'I say thank you. For warning.'

Alan nodded. 'You have learnt some English?' he asked.

‘A little. I not perfect. It too difficult...’ Hanno finished his sentence with an unintelligible stream of Bavarian that seemed to be packed with the vilest profanities. Then he sat down on Alan’s left and filled a beaker for himself from the jug. The two sat in silence for a while, sipping the execrable wine, unable or unwilling to find an area in common suitable for conversation. Finally, Alan spoke. ‘You know, Hanno, there was no need to kill that boy on the promenade,’ he said mildly. ‘He was a cut-purse: he presented no danger to you, only to your silver.’

Hanno looked utterly perplexed. Alan tried again, speaking a little more loudly and slowly as was his habit with foreigners who did not have the wit to understand him, and miming a little on some of the longer words. ‘The boy. He was a thief; he not want harm you. Thief. Take purse. Steal. You do not need to kill him.’

Hanno looked at Alan as if he were mad; then filled his beaker to the brim with wine. And while Alan drew breath to try once again to make his point anew, a fresh voice broke in: ‘But Hanno likes to kill, don’t you, Hanno?’ The stranger, who was standing on the far side of the table, followed this with a stream of German, which Hanno evidently understood but did not care for. He was glaring at the stranger, a man with a long face, long black hair and yellowish skin. Alan could see that the man had a fighting axe tucked discreetly into his belt at the back, the curved head just visible in the gloom.

Without the slightest invitation, the stranger hooked out a stool with his foot and sat down. Alan was suddenly aware of two other men, big, indistinct figures who had shifted from their positions against the wall and were now paying a little too much attention to the three of them at the table. His spine itched.

‘You go now,’ said Hanno, pushing hard against Alan’s left arm. ‘Go away. This man is no good man. You go now.’

‘Yes, off you go now, sonny,’ said the stranger. ‘Old Johannes and I have some pressing business to transact.’

Alan did not move. ‘I haven’t finished my drink,’ he said, wrapping the fingers of his left hand around the beaker. His right hand lay casually in his lap beneath the table.

‘You finish up your drink and run along, there’s a good lad,’ said the man.

‘Who are you to be giving orders?’ Alan’s mouth had tightened to a grim, determined line. He remembered his earlier anger at the barbarities of his lord, and found that he was perfectly happy to redirect his rage at this yellow-faced stranger.

‘I am Rudolfo Chiavari—and these are my brothers, Sergio and Roberto.’ The man jerked a chin at the two shadowy men who by now were standing behind Alan and Hanno. The young Englishman stared hard at Chiavari, trying to keep any trace of shock or fear from his face.

‘I see that you have heard of us—that is good. It will make things more simple. So now, finish your drink and go. There need be no trouble between us.’

Alan did know of the Chiavari brothers, a vicious gang of five siblings and their followers, all cut-throats and thieves who served in the Italian contingent under Ubaldo Lanfranchi, the Archbishop of Pisa. They had been in the Holy Land longer than most of the other Christian forces and had built themselves a reputation for ruthless dishonesty, outrageous thievery, extortion, murder and mayhem that was

a disgrace to their noble cause. For a moment, Alan considered getting meekly to his feet and leaving that tavern, which now stank of menace. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see drinkers hurriedly finishing their drinks and making for the doorway. He owed nothing to Hanno—he had already gone out of his way to be kindly to him on two occasions with scant thanks. There was no bond between them, nothing to stop him walking away. It was the right, the wise, the sensible thing to do.

‘What business have you with my friend Hanno here?’ asked Alan. All his senses were extended: he was listening for any sound of movement from the men behind him, while keeping his eyes fixed on the fellow sitting across the table. The bar had nearly emptied. Even the obsequious dwarfish owner had found some hole to burrow into. Alan felt the chilly fire of battle ignite in his belly. His mouth was dry, the thrill of mortal peril puckering the skin on his arms and neck.

The dark-haired Rudolfo smiled like a satisfied wolf. ‘Since you ask, your friend killed my brother Petrus, in a common brawl, in a place like this up in Tyre, over some fat slattern who brewed ale there.’ The man looked around at the dingy surroundings. ‘Yes, he died in a place very much like this one. Petrus was a drunken sodomite, a lazy, useless, foul-mouthed slug-abled much of the time, but he was my brother, and you know how these things are. So, will you go now, and leave us to our business, sonny? Absolutely your last chance.’

But the man was lying. With a slow, dream-like clarity, Alan could see Rudolfo already reaching for the axe behind his belt. And the dead, fear-stinking air was moving behind Alan’s back; he felt the whisper of it on his bare neck, although he had not seen Rudolfo give the slightest signal. It was beginning.

Alan felt a heavy hand thud on to his shoulder—and he raised his left hand and flipped the full beaker of wine up behind him into the face of the Chiavari standing at his back. A splash, a vile oath, and a clatter as the empty beaker hit the floor. Alan’s poniard was already unsheathed in his right hand and without turning he jabbed the long blade backwards blindly, under his left elbow between his arm and his ribs, and felt it sink home into the man’s groin. A squeal of rage and a wash of blood over his fist, and Alan was on his feet and turning, tugging the blade free, moving to finish the wounded man with a second plunging poniard strike to the belly.

If Alan Dale thought that he had moved swiftly to combat the Chiavari looming behind his stool, his brisk actions were as nothing beside those of Hanno. The moment Rudolfo began to reach for the axe, the Bavarian put his right boot up on the edge of the table and shoved it hard towards the man seated opposite, skidding the heavy wood across, smashing the table’s side into his enemy’s chest and knocking him to the floor. Hanno was already twisting and rising, his dagger in his fist. He surged up at the man standing behind his chair, the blade driving up, the soft pop of a knife-filled fist meeting slack jaw flesh, and the dagger had buried itself under the chin of the Chiavari, ploughing through tongue and soft palette into his brain. The man died instantly, on his feet, and Hanno turned like a cat, leapt two-footed on to the table, and used it as springboard to dive at Rudolfo, who was only now struggling to his feet. As Alan jammed his poniard into the large belly of his already stricken, wine-soaked victim, Hanno’s sunburnt shaven head smashed into Rudolfo’s mouth, knocking him immediately back down on to the

greasy rushes of the tavern floor. The two men lay prone for half an instant. Then Hanno's body reared up above his stunned opponent. A lateral swing of Hanno's powerful right arm and his dagger punched into Rudolfo's temple, cracking through the thin plate of bone and deep into his skull. Hanno stirred the handle of the dagger once, extinguishing the divine spark in his enemy's appalled eyes in three long, slow, heavy heartbeats.

Panting, Hanno rose to his feet. He growled something in his backwoods German dialect to the very few remaining wide-eyed spectators of the fight. Alan did not understand the words, he doubted that many in that dim, blood-stinking room recognised them, but the message was crystal clear: 'Anyone else have a problem with me?'

Outside the tavern, battle-joy boiling in their veins, Alan and Hanno trotted away down the narrow alley. Alan looked back once but not a man had dared to follow them. They took two turnings, three, and then paused, their backs pressed flat against the cool stone wall of a palatial house. And listened. Nothing.

Alan was grinning at his companion, his spirits soaring, his heart bounding. He tapped the other man's broad chest with a shaking forefinger. 'You fight well, my friend,' he said, his blood fizzing with post-combat euphoria. Hanno nodded distractedly, still listening for sounds of pursuit. 'And I didn't do too badly either,' Alan continued happily. 'We make a damned good fighting team, you and I.'

'You are lucky!' said the Bavarian. 'The man you fight is too stupid.'

'Hmm?' Alan was taken completely aback.

Hanno looked at him, his face shrouded in shadow. 'He puts hand on your shoulder. He gives warning. He is stupid.'

'I finished him off pretty smartly.'

'Yes, he is stupid.'

Alan's glorious battle-stoked happiness drained swiftly away.

Hanno seemed to sense the change in Alan's mood. 'I show you,' he said. He held up the index finger of his right hand before Alan's face. 'This is my knife, yes?' By a gleam of light from a nearby half-open doorway, Alan could see that the stubby digit still had Rudolfo's black blood on it. Hanno gripped Alan by the shoulders and turned him so that the young man's back was towards the Bavarian fighter.

'Like this,' he said. And he laid the finger lightly on Alan's throat, on the left side, a fraction of an instant before he put his left hand on Alan's right shoulder, then he swiftly drew the finger across Alan's neck as if cutting his throat, his left arm across his back and shoulder bracing Alan's body against the sweep of the cut.

'This is how you do. See? This is perfect. He is stupid. You are lucky.'

For a terrifying moment the youngster felt as if he might burst into tears. Or lash out blindly at Hanno with his fists. But, mercifully, he managed to control himself, and with a clogged, angry voice, he said, 'Well, *you* were lucky—you were lucky to have me there at all!' And he pulled his shoulder roughly out of Hanno's grasp and, without another word, marched down the alley, leaving the bewildered Bavarian behind him.

September 1191, Jaffa

Alan Dale rode slowly through the heap of dusty rubble that used to be the old town of Jaffa. It had been utterly destroyed by the retreating enemy—with almost no stone standing upon another—at Saladin's express order after the Battle of Arsuf, two weeks previously. The battle, a bloody, day-long affair, had seen the light Saracen cavalry of the great Muslim warlord overmatched, mauled and driven from the field by the repeated charges of the heavy Christian knights, and the Englishman had played his part in that gory day most valiantly. But despite the victory, his spirits were low: he had come face to face with some of the harsher realities of the world in recent weeks, and been forced to shed more blood than ever before in his life, and his young, handsome face had been marked with its first lines of care.

He kicked his grey horse around the charred ruins of a grand house and pointed its nose down a steeply sloping road towards the old harbour. The fishermen of Jaffa had enjoyed something of a boom with the arrival of the Christian army; if their shacks and hovels had all been destroyed, no matter, for the hungry soldiery from half a dozen European nations made up for it by buying almost anything they could catch, at almost any price they asked. Indeed, Alan had been dispatched to the harbour that morning to buy a fresh tuna, if he could get it, for his lord's table but he had been given strict instructions to pay no more than three precious shillings—an outrageous amount already—for the noble fish. As the young man walked his horse down the rubble road towards the waterfront, he felt the weight of battle fatigue press on his shoulders. His head was bowed in imitation of his horse's down-stretched neck and his chin almost rested on his mailed chest. He was still garbed for war, although the great battle was many days behind him, for the shattered forces of Saladin had spawned a host of bandits—runaway men who no longer saw the need for the Sultan's discipline, and who now made their living ambushing unwary Christians—as well as the more organized groups of Muslim warriors under one petty emir or another who harassed the Christian camp for loot and glory. These groups of men lurked in groves of olive trees around the ruined town or in half-destroyed houses inside it and rode out to surprise and attack small parties of knights, engage them, kill a few and then ride for safety before help could be summoned. So, even though he had been dispatched on no more than a simple shopping errand by his master, Alan wore a good iron-link hauberk despite the September heat, and as well as his poniard, he had a long sword hanging from his waist.

As Ghost, his faithful grey gelding, picked his way nimbly down the rubble-strewn road, Alan's eye was plucked by a scene to his left on a small promontory above the bay, a flattish piece of land that oversaw the curve of blue sea and the dirty mass of crowded fishing boats below. A simple gibbet had been set up there some days before at Richard the Lionheart's command, a cross bar between two upright posts, and two dark corpses were twisting in the brisk wind from the Mediterranean. Evidently another hanging was due, for a scrum of men in red surcoats was jostling around a small, squat figure, writhing hard, who was evidently very far from resigned to his fate. Alan halted his horse and looked over at the scene, some thirty yards away. He had a peculiar horror of hangings, for his

father had been killed in such a manner half a dozen or so years previously, when he was a boy, and in his heart of hearts it had always seemed a barbaric method of punishment: the slow strangling of a man as he kicked and danced out his final moments at the end of a rough rope.

Alan was about to ride on down to the harbour when, with a sinking in his stomach, he recognized the brutal brown planes of the knuckle-shaped bald head of the man about to hang.

Hanno.

There was no doubt about it. For several heartbeats, Alan hesitated. He could close his eyes, ride on and he would never have to see the ugly little Bavarian again. He was not his comrade, his compatriot nor his friend; in all honesty, Hanno was an unfortunate friendless fellow, a rude and graceless killer of men—and doubtless he had murdered someone of importance and was about to pay the price. *I should ride on*, Alan told himself. *It is not my concern*, he said to his conscience. 'A bad end is fitting for a bad man such as he,' he mumbled under his breath. And then he sighed, turned Ghost's head around towards the top of the slope and put his spurs into the beast's sides.

As Alan approached the gibbet, he could see that Hanno had finally been subdued. He was bound at the wrists and around his upper arms and was being pinned to the ladder propped against the gibbet by half a dozen men-at-arms, all in red surcoats with a silver cross on the front—the Archbishop of Pisa's men, Alan registered dimly. One of the red-coated Italians sat a-horse, a vintemar by his look, or some other kind of petty officer. He nodded at Alan as he rode up on Ghost, and called out a greeting.

'God save you,' sang out Alan in French. 'And what have we here?'

'A miscreant facing just punishment,' said the vintemar, in that same language.

'And what has the poor fellow done to deserve death?'

The man laughed bitterly and said, 'His crimes are far too numerous to list but he will see the face of God today at the Archbishop of Pisa's orders because he has slain several of His Grace's followers.'

Alan watched the noose being pushed over Hanno's hairless head and the Bavarian, standing halfway up the ladder, looked at him intently, a sly grin on his ugly face. Alan hated that look. It was too expectant; it placed obligation like a lead cope around his young shoulders.

'Friend, will you do me a great boon?' he said to the vintemar. 'Will you sell me this man? I have a purse of silver here—three English shillings—which I will gladly exchange for his living body. I will take him away and you and the Archbishop need never see his face again. I swear it. I am bound for England any day now and I will take this fellow with me. He will be gone and you need not trouble your conscience with his death at your hands.'

'His death will not trouble my conscience one jot—this man deserves to die. He is a killer, a murderer many times over. He was born to hang. Did I mention that the men he killed were my brothers? I will watch him hang for their sakes, and for my pleasure.'

'What is your name, friend?' said Alan softly.

'I am Ignatio Chiavari, at your service,' said the man, bowing in the saddle.

'I am Alan Dale, a trouvère in the service of the Earl of Locksley,' replied the Englishman. He thought for a moment about the reputation of the Chiavaris, and of the yellow-faced one he had already met in the tavern at Acre. 'Tell me, friend,' he said, 'are we not all killers, murderers, to one degree or another? Who among us can say that he is without mortal sin, so blameless that he is fit to judge his fellow man? I know that I am not. My sins weigh heavily on me. In the name of mercy, I ask you one more time, give me this man; allow me to purchase his life, to pay with my silver for his sins.'

'What is this murderous villain to you? Why do you pester me on his behalf?'

'So many of my friends have already died—in the struggle against the Saracen, and out of it—on this God-forsaken pilgrimage. The Holy Land has been awash with blood since we came here—perhaps I do not want another corpse on my conscience.'

'That man is already a corpse,' said Chiavari, and he lifted his voice to the mass of men-at-arms holding Hanno on the ladder. 'Carry on, Sergeant!'

'Sir, I beg you,' Alan protested.

'Stand aside, sir,' said the man, and drew his sword.

And as Alan watched, appalled, the men-at-arms bundled Hanno off the ladder and into space without the slightest ceremony. The rope went taut as iron as it took the Bavarian's weight; Hanno's face began to swell, blood red and then darker; his tongue was forced between his teeth, fat, ugly and purple; and his short legs began to kick futilely at the air.

Alan said, 'No!'

His sword in his hand, he urged Ghost forward. Chiavari moved forward to block his path, cutting out at him with his long blade. Alan blocked the sword blow, purely by instinct, pushing it away, and riposted equally without a moment's thought, scything his own heavy blade into the man's unprotected face, crushing his nose and cutting deeply into his head across both his eyes. Chiavari gave a great shout of pain and fell back in the saddle, his face a mass of blood and jelly. He would never see again, but Alan was already past him, Ghost's muscular body forcing his horse out of the way. The men at-arms scattered before the gelding and its snarling, sword-wielding rider. Alan turned his horse by the gibbet, his right arm licked out, his blade sliced through the rope, and Hanno's body tumbled to the earth like a sack of dirt.

Alan circled Ghost around the fallen man, the menace of his long sword keeping the leaderless men-at-arms at a respectful distance. From a dozen yards away, Chiavari, shouting with pain and fear through a bloody mask, urged the men to attack the brutal madman who had just blinded him. But, sensibly, if perhaps ignobly, the men-at-arms kept their distance. Hanno was on his feet by now, tugging at the cut rope around his neck, and Alan extended his left hand. Hanno grasped it with both his bound ones, gripped and leapt up on to the back of Ghost. Alan cursed and cut hard at a man-at-arms who had come too close. The man dodged the blade, staggered back and sprawled on to his backside. They were clear of the crowd. Alan put spurs to Ghost's sides and they galloped away.

The Archbishop's men came for them the next day. Alan and Hanno were in the Englishman's tent, a green woollen affair that he had pitched in an olive

grove half a mile outside the ruined city of Acre. Alan was drinking wine and tending to the bruises that marked the Bavarian's already battered face. The first he heard of their coming was the soft murmur of voices, the click of hoof on stone and the jingle of metal accoutrements. He pushed open the cloth flaps, stepped out of his abode and into bright sunshine; Hanno, his face still black and red from the bruising earned in the struggle before his hanging, was hard on his heels. Both men had steel in their hands, violence in their hearts. They were confronted outside the tent by four Italian knights on big gleaming horses, with pennant-streaming lances and red-and-silver shields, and four elegant squires also mounted in a rank behind their lords. Alan Dale looked up at them all, squinting his eyes against the harsh Mediterranean light, the handle of his sword slick against his palm.

'You are Alan Dale, a man-at-arms in the service of the Earl of Locksley?' said the foremost knight, scowling down beneath the brim of his heavy helmet.

'I am. What is it to you?'

'You are charged with obstructing the Archbishop's men in carrying out his justice, namely in seizing that villain, that foul murderer'—he jerked his chin at Hanno—'and unlawfully bearing him away, thereby preventing the...'

A huge man stepped out of the green flaps of the tent next to the one that had held Alan and Hanno. He had a vast, ugly, battered red face framed with two braided yellow pigtails, a short-sleeved coat of iron mail that was too tight around his massive chest, and a double-headed axe in one meaty fist. Around his brawny shoulders was draped a long green cloak. He looked fearsome and irritated.

'Save your stinking breath,' the big blond man said to the knight.

He put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. Men began to appear from all around the camping ground, emerging from other similar tents, from behind trees, from under crude shelters made of turf and olive branches, many wearing the same distinctive green cloak as the big man, some bearing war bows and nocked arrows, others armed with axe or spear or sword. None of them looked soft; each man looked exactly like what he was—a proven warrior, a seasoned fighting man with the scars to demonstrate that claim and the pride to match. Scores of men appeared, and more, perhaps as many as a hundred, and they flowed towards Alan Dale's tent and the Italian knights before it, surrounding the aliens almost silently, with a quiet discipline but also with an unmistakable sense of deadly menace.

The foremost knight stared at the blond giant before him. 'Who are you?' he asked.

'I am John Nailor, but they all call me Little John.' He spoke clearly and slowly in English, watching to see that the knights comprehended his words. 'I serve the Earl of Locksley, as do all these good men here.' He waved generally at the villanous-looking cloaked army that surrounded the Italians. 'We are all Robin Hood's men.'

Then John pointed a sausage-like finger at Hanno. 'This ugly fellow is a friend of Alan Dale's. That means he is a friend of mine, of all of ours. Do you understand?'

The foremost Italian knight licked his lips, and nodded.

Little John continued in slow, measured English. ‘So, if you have a problem with this man, you have a problem with all of us. If you offer him the threat of violence, you are threatening all of us. Am I being clear?’

The knight nodded again.

The big man said, ‘Now—if you like, if you are feeling particularly rash, you can fight us for him, all of us, right now. But, alternatively, you could quietly turn your horses and ride away, and tell your master that you weren’t able to find the fellow after all, and you fear he may have slipped away from the army and left the Holy Land altogether. Indeed, in truth, we will all be taking ship in a couple of days and we’ll be gone from the Holy Land for good. So, you must choose: do you pull your swords and die, right here, right now? Or do you ride away with honour?’

The knight said nothing. He looked around slowly at the sea of green-cloaked warriors, at the nocked bows and bright-whetted spears, then merely gave a small, delicate shrug and began to turn his horse. The army of Locksley men opened a path before them, a green corridor, and the four knights and their squires rode quietly through it out into the olive grove.

‘Well,’ said Little John, his face creasing with satisfaction. ‘That seems to be that.’ He looked hard at Hanno. ‘I hope you prove to be worth all the trouble, baldy,’ he said. ‘Your mangy carcass is only walking around today because young Alan here’s got a tender heart. So you might see if you can think of some way to repay his kindness. You are going to England, my fine German felon, and if you want to keep that carcass intact until we get there, you’d better behave yourself. I hope you’re well pleased with our company because, for better or worse, you’re one of us now. What say you to that?’

‘It is perfect,’ said Hanno.

