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"Not yet," she says. "I want to say something. I do have something to help us in our journey besides a possible place to go to in the mountains. I've shown this to Agna, Meshek, but I want to show it to you as well."

He sits near her, and she begins her tale.

"When Mother Superior and I left Ravenna to escape the plague two years ago, we took some of our personal artwork as bargaining material for food or shelter or whatever we might need as we made our way overland to northern Germany. Our order in Ravenna had a very good reputation among the arts community there, and artists who had received favors from us would often repay us with their works. Some of those gifts went to the church, but some went to Mother Superior and I, because of our work in the fields for our order.

"Signor Alighieri writing his *Divine Commedia* in spoken Italian inspired many of the artists writing and painting more than a hundred years ago. Since the beginning of this century, the beautiful paintings of Dante's contemporary and friend, Giotto, have greatly influenced the artworks not only of visual artists around Florence, but even the writings of our good friend in Ravenna, Giovanni Boccaccio.

"As we were getting ready to depart Ravenna, rumors of plague were everywhere. Though we were making haste to leave, Boccaccio seemed to relish all the rumors of the plague's grisly effects, and the feeble efforts of the wealthy to not succumb to an illness of the poor. He began to write some stories, and he gave me a draft of one of those on paper. Even the paper itself was expensive, but nothing compared to the value of anything written by Boccaccio.

"I have this draft in my pouch, along with pieces of work from all of the beloved artists I have mentioned. I even have a small sketch done in ink on parchment by Giotto and given to his patron in those early days. His patron later came on hard times. Our order gave him food and a place to stay, and he repaid us with Giotto's beautiful sketch. My mother superior insisted that I take the sketch with me for safekeeping as we traveled north from Ravenna.

"When it was time for me to leave Hamburg, Mother Superior would not hear of me giving the sketch back to her. Tears of pain and longing came to her eyes, but she would not accept the sketch from me. She turned her back on me, and it was then that she threatened to have me thrown out of the order, something I could not bear.

"I still have the sketch with me today. I have been able to keep it with me for these two years, but I fear the loss of it now that the plague stalks us, as it stalks the desperate people who walk beside us along this terrible road.

"Everything in this bag is a treasure worth, altogether, an unimaginable value in the right time and place, but for now, I would almost trade all of it for safe passage to the door of Walkenried Abbey."

Sophia's head droops, now that she has exhausted herself of all she wanted to say.

I put my hand on her shoulder, then pull her toward my body in a warm hug. I think of how different I once saw us from the upper classes fleeing the plague in their horse-drawn carriages. Now I see that helping a stranger on the roadside has given all of us wealth and safe passage in the towns to come.

Meshek reaches out to touch each of us on the shoulder. "Thank you for trusting us enough to tell us this," he says. "Now we must go."

"There is one more thing," Sophia says. She pulls a blue/violet stone out of the depths of her bag. It is no more than the size of my thumb, and the stone shines with an almost translucent beauty. The color changes as she turns the stone in the light. Neither Meshek nor I have ever seen anything like it.

“My mother superior gave me this stone and asked that I try to return it to the abbey in Ravenna,” she says. “Neither she nor I have any idea of its value but were told that it had been carried across the world and across time. Mother Superior told me the stone is meant to reside in God’s house. If anything happens to me, the stone is yours to do with as you please.”

With this solemn oath, we rise and rejoin the road south, away from the Black Death creeping along behind us.

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On the third day of our journey, I once again rise first as the sun begins to turn the horizon slightly gray. This morning, though, the gray seems to have a reddish tinge, a sign of almost certain rain.

I shake the other two awake. “Get up. We need to make as much progress as we can before the rain gets too close to us. We will need to find a shelter from it, or we will need to make a shelter from whatever we can find in the woods.”

Fortunately, our increasing elevation as we reach the foothills has produced a few more trees along our route. The trees provide shelter and warmth, even the possibility of having some rabbit meat cooked over a fire. The idea makes my mouth water. The other two are still too groggy from waking up to care.

The rain comes down heavily for an hour or two in the morning. Then, the clouds clear, and the sun comes out to once again dry the roads. By afternoon, the winds kick up the dust from the roads, and it seems that each particle is destined to get into the eyes and nose of each traveler.

Soon we resolve to find a dry place out of the wind, so we can spend a day finding some meat and some firewood to cook it with. If we could find a stream coming down the mountains, we can even consider cleaning our grimy bodies. Once we find just such a place, we cannot help but feel overwhelmed with our good fortune in having survived this far and having each met and made friends with two good and supportive people.

Our good fortune continues after our day of rest, when Meshek hails a fellow driving a wagon pulled by two oxen. In the back of the wagon are two barrels of salted herring for delivery to the very abbey we are heading to.

On seeing the teamster’s wagon and barrels of herring I cannot help but think of Kurt and the help he gave me on the muddy road from Lübeck to Hamburg. I still remember the two knights on their fine horses and how much fear they carried with them like a shield. I turn away from my friends to wipe away a tear that I might never see Kurt, or any of my family, again.

Meshek recognized the harness on the oxen as it was sold by the company he worked for. When he points this out to the teamster, the teamster invites the three of us to ride along with him for the remainder of our journey.

Some days later, we arrive at the door of the beautiful abbey. Sophia’s letter is gladly accepted, as are the two barrels of salted herring. We are all invited to join the Cistercians at their evening meal.

Before entering the building, I look around the surrounding woods in the hopes I would see some kind of vision that would help me decide what to do next. Sophia is walking next to a monk of the abbey. She turns and looks back at me and smiles.

Meshek also looks at the surrounding woods, the sky, and the abbey grounds. As his eye catches mine, he, too, smiles.

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