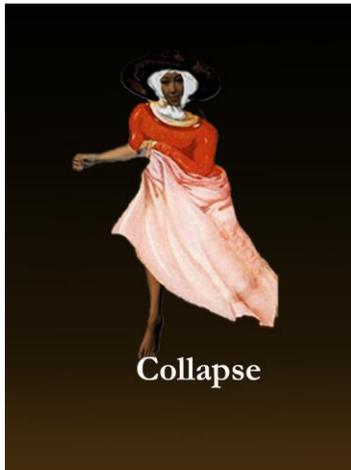


Collapse

Summer, 1350 CE. Agna, a young woman, works as a helper in a small bakery near the docks of Hamburg, Germany. Suddenly, a cry of plague rings through the streets. She grabs her small bag of belongings, and her few precious bits of parchment, her pen, and a small bottle of ink for her attempts at writing. She tries to escape the Black Death, which is spreading from the docks thanks to a cargo ship carrying the bubonic plague.

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In Agna's escape from her job as a baker's assistant, she has joined up with two other escaping travelers: Sophia, a Catholic nun, and Meshek, a Jewish leatherworker. These three strangers decide they must learn how to work and live together during their escape to the Harz Mountains one hundred fifty miles south of Hamburg.

Part 1.

My family lives on the Baltic seacoast three days' walk north and east from the village of Lübeck. I remember my mother's frequent call as I grew up: "Over here, Agna, now please. Help your father load those fish."

Lübeck has become the administrative center for the entire region along the coasts of the Baltic and North Seas. For over two hundred years, the commercial interests along the thousand miles of coastline between Bruges in Belgium and Gdansk, three hundred miles east and north of Lübeck, have been building up trading relationships. These relationships – called, informally, The Hansa – link commercial interests in London as well.

I am short and well-muscled from my family's hard work. We earn our way by fishing and by helping other local fishermen and farmers with the shipping and selling of their wares. Fishing has not always been in my blood, though. There are rumors among some members of my family, who do not usually talk about such things, that a castaway had washed ashore during a storm in the Baltic Sea. This was several generations ago. The castaway was said to be Asian.

According to family rumor, the castaway found a way to keep himself alive. He built a small settlement that eventually became known as Raban Haven – home of the raven, in other words. The survivor spoke an academic but clumsy form of High German. He was good with tools and learned how to work as an itinerant laborer. He could earn money helping local fishermen and the warehousemen and teamsters who carried the produce of the area, mostly herring, to market.

Those who might have been curious about the survivor's foreign features and his command of high German kept to themselves about it after seeing how hard he worked for them when they needed help. He eventually married a local German girl. They had many children and grandchildren, and some of these offspring married and had their own children in time.

I am one of these fifth-generation grandchildren. My parents took note shortly after my birth that I am slightly different from other German children. For those who look closely, my eyes are a bit almond-shaped, as are those of others in my family, but none are quite as pronounced as mine. My mother and father continue to hope that my eyes will not condemn me to becoming an outsider in whatever community I choose to live in.

My parents also hope that one other part of our family history will never become generally known: the survivor who founded our small community was a Mongol officer in the Army of Subodei Kahn. He was wounded and left for dead in the Battle of Leignitz over one hundred years ago.

Though born and raised by a loving family, I soon yearned to see the world and add to our trove of stories. I knew that I must leave them to see something of the world beyond Raban Haven.

Some distant part of my extended family lives in Lübeck, the administrative capital of the Hansa, so I endeavored to reach them. Lübeck is about three days' walking southwest of Raban Haven.

My distant cousins run a small rooming house for fishermen who spend the fishing seasons working the waters off the Baltic coast. Soon after I arrived, I was able to work with them to earn room and board. Eventually, though, I tired of the need to empty the bedpans and to accomplish other low and menial tasks in my cousins' hotel. I thought of other ways to earn a living but finding decent work in Lübeck is difficult for girls without connections.

Opportunities for work are also limited for girls without the kinds of special skills important to the Hansa, things like reading and writing contracts, agreements and bookkeeping. My only other option would be to earn money by selling sex to men with enough money to make pregnancy, or the degradation of the act itself when done with strangers, worth the costs, but I am unwilling to make those sacrifices.

Upon hearing my plan, and my resolve to leave Lübeck, my relatives sympathized with me, though they still needed somebody to empty the pans so they would not have to pay somebody else to do it. They tried to discourage me in my plan, but eventually, I decided that I would leave without their permission, if necessary and walk the forty miles to Hamburg. I then resolved to work out some kind of peaceful resolution of concerns among my relatives. They finally relented to some extent and even gave me some money and a basket of food for my journey.

I leave Lübeck early on a sunny day. I begin walking the forty miles along the crowded commercial road connecting Lübeck with the city of Lüneburg near the Elbe, upriver from Hamburg. Many people are walking or pulling carts along the ancient, muddy road in both directions. Most are carrying goods for trading in their destination city: Lübeck for those traveling north, and Lüneburg or Hamburg for those traveling south.

Their way is complicated by the number of horse-drawn wagons carrying barrels of salted herring from the Baltic fisheries to the docks in Hamburg.

The Baltic herring fishery is very productive. My parents would say that the herring form the commercial basis for the creation of The Hansa itself. The herring is preserved in salt, which comes from mines in Lüneburg. Whenever a herring wagon from Lübeck must compete for roadway with a salt wagon from Lüneburg, traffic on the narrow path gets tangled as one tries to get past the other.

I know many of the teamsters on these wagons because my family helps them gut and salt the herring or pound iron into the shapes necessary to make reinforcing joints and steel wheel straps for their wagons. I do not want to show my face to some of them because they have not treated my family or me well in the past, and their actions toward me now that I am on my own might be even less desirable. I believe my most important possession is the dark hood and cloak that warms my body, hides my face, and hides my femininity from those who might mean me harm.

"Is that you, Agna?" a man on a wagon passing in my direction calls my name. I think I recognize the voice, but I am afraid to turn to see who it might be.

He persists. "Aгна, it's Kurt. What are you doing on this road?"

I look up to see Kurt, a friend from my village. I smile but am still unsure how to answer his inquiry.

Kurt calls out to his teamster to pull the oxen and wagon to the side and stop. He jumps down from the wagon and comes over to greet me.

Both of us are too shy to hug or touch in public, but we do exchange smiles and warm glances with our greetings. Finally, Kurt asks again what I am doing traveling by myself along this road with its many thieves and dangerous men.

"I am walking to Hamburg. I have decided that I want to see if I can find better work, since there is not much work in Lübeck for young girls from the villages. I left the hotel where my relatives generously allowed me to work dumping shit for these past several months. I am very happy to see you, Kurt."

"I am happy to see you as well," Kurt responds. "But the road is dangerous, and you should not travel alone. Please come with me on the wagon. I can watch out for you, and I know some people in Hamburg who may be able to help you find work and housing."

This is the best prospect I've had in a while, so I climb upon the back of the wagon and sit next to Kurt on top of a barrel of fish. We talk about things that have happened to us since we last saw each other in Raban Haven many months ago.

The teamster lightly cracks his whip, and the ox team leans into the wooden shoulder harness and moves the wagon back onto the road.

Talking is hard. The road is bumpy and rutted by deep tracks in some places, and it is deep with mud in others. After a while any conversation seems like too much trouble. There is some woolen cloth in the front of the wagon. I retrieve the cloth, pull it around myself, and then lie down on a plank that Kurt has laid on the tops of two barrels for me. In spite of the rough ride, my exhaustion gets the best of me. I fall immediately asleep.

Later, I wake up to find Kurt shaking me. He is whispering hoarsely in my ear. "Aгна. Get up. Please get up!"

"What is it, Kurt?" I mumble.

"Knights. They are up ahead searching the wagons for illegal goods."

I jolt upright. The knights are of the Teutonic Order. My parents told me they are sometimes contracted by the business interests of the Hansa, not to mention the Holy Roman Empire, to make sure the commerce moving along this particular road is approved for transport.

"I need to know if you have papers that authorize you to be on the road," Kurt says. "If not, I can tell them you are a family friend from Raban Haven, and you work in Lübeck helping me organize these shipments of herring."

My head spins at this news. "I didn't know I needed papers to walk along the road. Will I be in trouble if I don't have papers?"

I've learned that the teamster's name is Aldrick. He turns to the back of the wagon, then pulls his hood aside to look at me. He is a much older man than I had thought. His face is wrinkled, and the eyelids and the bags under his reddened eyes actually droop. I recognize Aldrick as a steel smith in Raban Haven who has worked his trade there for most of my life. He has done work with my family several times. He has seemed to always be ancient over all the years that I have known him.

His voice is raspy as he speaks to me.

“It will go better for you if you don’t say anything, miss, and you should try and keep your face hidden. These knights all had early family members killed or wounded by the Mongols in their last battle with them in Poland a hundred years ago. They have long memories, and they might start getting excited if they look too closely at your eyes.”

I turn to Kurt. “Give me some dirt and grease from the bottom of the wagon around the axle. I’ll smear it on my face and try to hide my eyes. I don’t think a Teutonic knight will find a dirty little girl attractive enough to ask questions. If they do ask, I’ll start to cry and wipe the tears away with my cloak. I’ll look at you with a very sorrowful look. You can tell them I am a little thick and a little afraid of them. That should further discourage them from wanting to talk to me.”

When Kurt returns my stare, I see that he is impressed with how much I’ve grown, how street smart I’ve become, since we last saw each other.

The two knights are on horseback, and they are inching closer all the time. They are wearing their white capes over white singlets with a black cross emblazoned on the front. Both are armed with long swords. Two squires carry out their orders by crawling into the wagons, asking for papers, and, sometimes, demanding that a case or carton be opened for inspection.

When they stop at Kurt’s wagon, a squire asks him a few questions. He seems satisfied with Kurt’s answers, but then asks about my relationship to him. I am looking down and away from the eyes of the knights and the squires. Kurt tells them why I am with him. The story is a good one because it is mostly true.

I glance up briefly when I hear the squire talking to Kurt about me, but I quickly look away. The squire asks no further questions. He jumps down from the wagon and walks alongside the knights to the next wagon in the line alongside the road.

I cannot help but be impressed with the knights’ dress, their carriage, and their demeanor. They look too young to be much concerned with losing a distant relative to the Mongols so many years ago.

It is at this point that Aldrick turns again to speak to me in his gravelly voice.

“These knights are trained from birth to believe that they won a decisive victory at Leignitz in Poland, but the truth is that the knights’ armies were destroyed by the Mongols. These knights claim that their victory is the reason the Mongols retreated from Europe a few months later and never returned. The way I hear it, the Mongols left Europe because they got word that their Great Kahn, Obeday, had died in their capital at Karakorum. They all had to return to their capital in order to protect their political interests.

“If you take no other advice from me ever again, take this: Never discuss what I have just told you with anyone. If you ever do, and the word gets back to any of the knights, that knight and his family will search the earth for you. They will never stop, and when they find you, they will kill you in a very slow and painful way.” Aldrick paused a moment. “...but probably not before they have tortured my name, as your source of the information, out of you.”

I feel my body start to tense with fear and nervous energy. My eyes grow teary with these revelations from Aldrick. “If this is so, sir, why do you burden me with these horrible tales?”

My voice shakes with fear. My whole body will not stop shaking.

Aldrick answers. “You travel alone. I want you to know these things so you will be better able to survive any encounter with whatever may lay in your path. Your mother and father have always known of your desire to leave your village. They have always treated me fairly. They once asked me to look out for you.”

“All the knights and their families are now part of the commercial interests of the Hansa,” Kurt adds. “They are much more interested in making a few florins off people like me who haul their salt and their fish, and empty their chamber pots, than they are in seeking revenge over old grievances—that is, except for those grievances that arise over any threats to the honor of their families, or their family names. Those grievances never go away, and their desire to redress those grievances never fades.”

Kurt motions the old teamster to move out. As we ride, I think about all the events of this day. After a period of time the rocking motion of the wagon over muddy, rutted ground puts me back to sleep.

Part 2.

On first arriving in Hamburg, I spend several days wandering the streets, trying to talk to people who know Kurt and who might help me find food and shelter as my small store of money and food is nearly gone. First, I must find a job so I can repay Kurt the few florins he loaned me to live on. After a few days, I find a temporary place to sleep where I can spend time looking for a good job, and begin, then, to think further about what I really want to do with my newfound freedom.

I know I have my imagination and, just as with the knights along the road, I know how to use it when there are obstacles to overcome. I also have some skills and a tolerance for hard work over long hours. I long ago lost any personal pride I might have about dirty jobs during my time growing up with my fishing family, and at the hotel in Lübeck.

I know how to decide which of a batch of freshly caught herring are worth saving and which should be thrown away. I know how to gut the fish that are worth saving, and I know how to separate and salt all the premium parts and the leftover parts of the fish that have value.

I have my own gutting knife and sharpening stone. My father gave them to me on my sixth birthday. They are precious to me, and I’m resolved to not lose them. I have other skills of the kind needed around boats and the people who work on boats. I have skills with woodworking, and with the repair of fishing nets and sails. I know how to raise a sail, and I know how to take it down to gain advantage with each shift in the wind, particularly in the shallow waters near the rough coasts of the Baltic.

Kurt helps me find work as a baker’s helper. The shop is owned by a man named Cadell. His shop sells flour and bread to pursers on ships traveling the Elbe River between Hamburg and ports along the coast of the North Sea. When ships need to load or unload cargo and restock for their next trip, they tie up at the Hamburg docks near Cadell’s shop. Cadell values my skills as a baker’s helper, as well as my ability to speak more languages than the clumsy German of most of the young itinerants looking for work every day on the docks.

One day a sailor, Matius, comes into the bakery to buy a loaf of bread. Matius tells me he comes into the Port of Hamburg every few weeks. Cadell is away, arranging a shipment of grain for baking, so I am left in charge of the shop. Matius is a very handsome man, and I am pleased to sell him a loaf for a few pfennigs.

Over a period of months, we grow close. When Matius is in port and Cadell gives me leave, Matius and I walk around the city. We enjoy the sights, sounds, and smells together.

One day Matius tells me that he and some of his shipmates have heard stories of plague from sailors working on the Mediterranean Sea. Matius becomes upset as he describes those who catch the plague and then die a horrible death.

“First they get sick. Then these horrible growths called buboes spring up under their arms and in

their groins. If those grow in their lungs, they will surely die within hours. Sometimes death does not occur for a few days. Some will survive the ordeal, and a few will never get sick, even when exposed to those who have the disease.

"If our captain even hears a rumor of plague in a port, he will immediately untie from the dock and head to sea; whatever the weather; whether or not all the sailors are aboard; and whether or not the loading and unloading have been completed.

"Whenever you hear the word plague, you must immediately gather some food and water, and leave the city," he says. "Don't approach the man or woman who says the word seeking more information. They may kill you by breathing on you or touching you, or he or she may kill you out of fear that you might have plague. You must promise me that you will leave immediately." Matius looks deeply into my eyes.

"Yes, Matius, I will."

One day there are several boats tied up at the docks, and our ovens work constantly. Even so Cadell sends me to the boats to ask pursers about the bread and flour they might need for coming journeys.

When not actually in the shop selling or baking, I often accompany our shipment of baked goods to the boat to make sure the purser is satisfied with the order and that Cadell gets properly paid. The occasional purser is unsatisfied with the order, and uncompromising with my attempts to settle the debt. I have learned when to demand that the purser take me either to the captain or to the boat's owners, if the owners live in Hamburg. At this point, there is a combination of charm, sexual innuendo, assertive talking, yelling, and foot stomping needed to resolve these kinds of commercial problems. My attempts to write are not pleasing to me, but I try to record at least the day and the name of the ship when these problems occur.

Once, when I grew too frustrated dealing with a ship's purser named Friedrich, I went to the rooming house where I knew Matius was staying. We did not yet know each other well, but I trusted Matius to do right by me, and he had the size and demeanor of a man who could be ready for a fight when necessary. Even better, though normally calm, Matius knew how to look the part of a very angry man.

Today Cadell is away dealing with a shipment of grain needed by our shop. He is not available for counsel about how to deal with the problem purser. It is all up to me.

Matius readily agrees to come with me to the docks. We arrive to find the purser back at his desk hunched over his paperwork. Matius motions for me to go back down the gangway to wait for him on the dock. Matius then barges back into the room without knocking. Rather than go down to the dock as Matius had asked, I stand just outside the door to the purser's spaces. When I look in, Matius has his back to me, but I can see the purser.

The purser looks up, his face suddenly pale. "What do you want?" he asks.

"I want the money you owe my friend for the bread and flour she delivered this morning," Matius replies.

"The bread was stale, and the flour riven with weevils." "Show me the flour,"

Matius says. "Now."

"No" is the reply.

Matius picks the purser up by the collar of his shirt, carries him to the door, and through it to the rail

outside. Before the purser can grasp what is going on, Matius tips him over the rail and dumps him into the water twenty feet below. Matius takes a moment to make sure the purser can swim, then turns to go find the ship's cook.

The cook had been watching as the purser went into the water. He moves to intercept Matius, then takes him to the captain who is passed out in his room from drinking too much beer. I wait just outside the door to the captain's quarters. The cook shakes the captain, hard, then kicks him. "Captain! Wake up! This man wants to get paid, and the purser is acting like a scheisskopf again."

The captain mutters something about the keys being in the desk drawer.

Matius later tells me that he hears the captain mumble something to the effect of "Pay the bastard, and then get him the fuck off my boat."

The cook looks at Matius and winks. "How much?" "Four florins," Matius replies.

The cook uses the captain's key to open a drawer. He pulls out a small leather bag and shakes out the four florins. "No hard feelings, I hope.

There was nothing wrong with the bread or the flour. Our purser likes to think he is a tough guy who can bully people, especially pretty women like your girlfriend, so he can cheat them out of their money. Then he takes the money that should have gone to the supplier and stuffs it into his own pocket."

Matius, not knowing how to deal with this strange crew, nods, but does not change his expression.

"This garbage scow may want to return to these docks again. If I am still aboard, I hope we can do some more business. Once I talk about this incident with the ship's owners, I doubt if you will see either the captain or the purser again. Can we shake on it?" The cook extends his hand.

"Yes. There are no hard feelings. I'll let my friend know what you have told me, and that you have assured me that she and her baking company will be welcome to supply your ship in the future."

I look to Matius as he comes out the door. I had grown concerned when he threw the purser overboard, then disappeared inside the ship with the cook. I hug him and hold him tightly for some moments.

"Here's your four florins," he says as we walk away from the dock.

Since the formation of the Hansa in the early part of the century, Hamburg has become an important shipping port. It has been built to handle shipping between the farms, factories, and other producers of goods and produce from northwest Germany; goods that are held in Hamburg's many warehouses to exchange with goods and produce received from European markets scattered around the North Sea, the Baltic Sea, the channel between England and France, and the distant ports on the far seas beyond.

I know that plague is certainly no stranger to the city of Hamburg. As the rumors of plague in other cities grow numerous, I grow more concerned. Matius' admonishment rings in my ears.

Some of the shopkeepers have begun whispering in the nearby market. I know I will have to get away from the docks, soon even get away from Hamburg itself, if I am to survive the plague that many suspect is on the way and, now, very close to the city.

A few days after Matius' altercation with the purser, I wake to hear a man running down the street, screaming: "Plague! Plague! The plague is here! It comes on a boat drifting on the Elbe full of dead

sailors! Flee! Flee!”

On hearing this I jerk up in my bed. The plague has come to the Hamburg docks. I gather some clothes, and what money and food I have on hand, and stuff them in a sack. I begin to walk to a place where I can take a water taxi across the Elbe. I hope that word has not yet got to the taxi stand, or the prices will rise above my ability to pay.

I am lucky. I find a water taximan whose deafness means he cannot hear the growing number of shouts on the street. He takes me across the river and does not charge me extra.

Like Lot, I begin to walk south toward the Harz mountains, over one hundred miles away, without looking back. In the mountains the cooler air might stop, or at least slow the spread of the plague before it can catch up to me. I have heard rumors that this is true from travelers who escaped plague in England, Ireland, and Scotland the year before.

I am not alone on the road. Others are walking, though some from the upper classes ride in horse-drawn carriages. I am still dressed in my flour stained work clothes. Several others on the road are similarly dressed, as though they felt they had to escape the city as quickly as possible, grabbing only the few handfuls of personal items they could carry as they ran out of their homes and into the streets.

As the day unfolds, more people join us walking south. Many are already dragging their feet. I am now grateful for my upbringing and its constant demand that I do hard physical labor. I am also glad for the months in the bakery lifting and carrying heavy bags of flour. I resolve to walk as far as I can on this first day. When the time comes, I think I will go into the woods and try to sleep a little. I know, though, that the road will only grow more crowded with refugees from the plague, and I have no idea what might await me in the mountains. I know I can only sleep for a little while.

Some of the wealthier residents of Hamburg shout from their carriages for us to get out of the way, as though their passage is more important than the struggles of those of us carrying all of our belongings on our backs. I resent this and allow myself to grow angry about it, but I have no will to shout back or express my resentment in any other way. I find that if I give into emotion, or into panicked thoughts, like whether Matius escaped the plague, I grow weary enough to have to stop. Ahead of me, a figure in a hooded cloak sits huddled alongside the road, hugging their upper body as though in pain. It appears to me that he or she might have caught the plague. I resolve to stay clear of whoever it is.

When the huddled figure sees me pass, though, she calls out to me. A subdued voice quavers, “I have been struck by a rock or piece of wood thrown up by one of these fast-moving wagons. Please help me.”

As I turn to approach the huddled person, she looks up at me, crying in pain. I note that she is young, perhaps very young, and that she wears a white hood inside her outer cloak. She rubs her side below her left breast and asks for help in a foreign-accented German. I see a piece of wood as large as her leg laying in the road nearby.

I cannot demand that this stranger show me her underarms or her groin before I help her, but I see no visible buboes or other evidence of plague. I lift the hooded girl to her feet and struggle to help her move farther off the road and behind some bushes, so I can look at the wound. I pull the cloak and her inner garments, both ripped where the wood had struck the girl, aside. There is a grisly black and blue patch of skin, but no blood. I have nothing to help the pain, but the wounded girl seems to calm down as I run my fingers over the bruise, and then lay my palm on the black and blue mark.

The girl seems to take comfort from my touch.

In careful German, I ask how the girl should be called.

"My name is Sophia," she says. "I am a nun with the Catholic Church in Lübeck."

Sophia looks carefully at me. She searches my face for any reaction to her words, but I suppose she sees none, as she continues.

"Four days ago, my mother superior told me to take a few of my most precious belongings and some food, and walk as fast as I could to the Harz mountains. She said that a plague ship would arrive in Hamburg in five days. I became very frightened by her prophecy and left right away."

"I think that ship will arrive in Hamburg sometime today," I say, "unless the city leaders can persuade whoever is sailing the ship to stay away. I don't think that will stop the plague, but each day they are stopped from docking is another day the plague can't begin to move through the city. Can you walk?"

"Yes. But not as fast as I would like. Also, this parchment is heavy and unwieldy." Sophia opens her cloak to show me a pouch she has tied to the left side of her body. The pouch had probably stopped the wood from puncturing the skin over her ribs. In the pouch are some pages with writing on them.

"What is written on these pages?" I ask.

"These are words written by a church scribe in my monastery in Italy, in Florence. His name is Teodoro. He was a scribe to Boccaccio in Ravenna. He copied some of the stories Boccaccio started to write about the plague. Do you know Boccaccio?"

I shake my head no.

"Well, two years ago, when the plague first came into the ports of Naples and Messina, there was a lot of panic all over Italy, among all the classes. Boccaccio wanted to capture the thoughts of some noblemen and women of that area as they tried to think how to escape."

I look at one of the scripts, but I cannot make any sense of it. It was written in Italian, first of all. "Can you read this to me?" I say.

"I will try to translate this," Sophia says, "but you may have to help me find the correct German word."

I get Sophia back on her feet and follow closely behind her as she hobbles forward. We go on in this way for another couple of miles, when the sun gets close to the horizon. "How do your ribs feel?" I ask.

"They hurt terribly, but I can walk with it," Sophia replies.

I can see the grimace on her face as the nun speaks. We are both tired, and we need to rest. We will need to stop before it gets too dark. We need to find a safe place to sleep. I also know that two young women on the road without any visible escorts are an invitation to trouble. I know myself to be strong enough and smart enough to discourage most fainthearted attackers, but I am not sure what I would do if I had to defend both of us against an attacker who is dedicated, smart, and hungry for whatever two women might have to offer.

I slow down to allow Sophia to take a slower, less painful pace. As we trudge along, I look around the shallow hills on either side of the road in the hopes of finding some shelter. Two mature ravens fly over them toward some trees to the right. One of the ravens seems to turn its head to look at me but then turns back to continue on its way with its mate.

At the sight of the ravens, I feel a twinge of longing for Raban Haven, on the shores of the Baltic.

I notice that the birds were flying toward a small copse of trees to the west that could provide not only small animals but also two traveling women shelter from the wind. We have been moving

fairly fast on the road, and the crowd has thinned considerably as night closes in.

I keep walking to let a little more light fade from the sky. On an impulse I grab Sophia's arm and push her off the road, across a ditch, and up a small hill on the other side. We then crouch to walk furtively toward the group of trees where I hope we can find some shelter for the night. I hope that no one has seen us leave the road, but the crunching of nearby branches underfoot make it sound like someone has.

I whisper to Sophia to stop for a moment and sit quietly. As she does, I turn to observe the other figure so I could decide whether they might be a threat to us.

Before I can make such an assessment, the other gives away his position. He calls out to us in an accented German from about twenty paces away: "Hello. I don't mean you any harm. I only hope to find someone to travel with. I think we will do better sharing what we know, and whatever else we have as we try to get to the mountains. I have some food and a goatskin of water."

I whisper hoarsely, "Who are you?"

"I am Meshek. I take care of the accounts for one of the members of the Hansa who sells saddles and harness leathers in Hamburg. I hope the plague passes by without too much harm so I can go back to work there."

"What will you do if the plague lingers?" I ask.

"Then I think we are all in trouble," Meshek says. "But even that terrible eventuality might still be a good reason to share our resources. May I ask your names?"

I decide that Meshek seems trustworthy enough to get this bit of information, so I bob my head. "Yes. I am Agna, and my friend is Sophia. We are both strong and well-armed with knives and clubs. How do we make sure you are no threat to us?"

"What kind of assurance do you need?" asks Meshek. "The only real threat any of us has is the threat that one or all of us will catch the plague. I'd say that, if we have made it this far from Hamburg today, and we are each still in good health, then we are probably not a threat to each other from plague sickness. Now you say you are well armed and strong. I am only armed with food and water. So you have me at a disadvantage. Are you hungry?"

I walk cautiously toward him. "Yes. We have some food, but not much. Do you have enough to share?"

"All of our food will need to be carefully rationed," he says, "but I am willing to put my whole stock together with yours so we can share equally. You say you have knives and clubs and the strength to use them. You should put yourselves at ease, then. Though I am a rather tall man, I have no weapons at all and have never been in a fight in my life. I keep books after all."

Sophia speaks from her spot on the ground. "You sound like a good and careful man, Meshek. I think, Agna, that we can trust him."

"Yes. All right," I say. "But please walk ahead of us and a little distance away so we can get used to traveling with you. We are headed toward that small copse of trees up there. I want to get there before it is totally dark so we can see if it will work as shelter for the three of us."

With our tall new traveling companion, Sophia and I make our way to the trees, arriving there in time to look around. The place seems suitable, so we move some branches around to give ourselves some comfort. I share some of my bread with the others, and Meshek passed his goatskin of water around.

Two ravens, one with a single white feather atop its right wing, come around to see if there might be a handout for them as well. I am certain that they're the same two ravens that guided me toward

these trees, and I gratefully toss a small chunk of bread to each of them. Ravens are powerful symbols in the north. It would never do to fail to offer them sustenance.

"Your accent is strange to my ear, Meshek. Where are you from?" Sophia asks.

"I am Jewish," Meshek says, "which means that I am from many places. And you are Catholic. I can tell from your white coif, and what is left of the black in that part of your robe not covered in mud. What is your order?"

"I am Benedictine. My mother superior and I left our church in Ravenna, Italy, to escape the plague there, but now it has caught up to us again. By an arrangement with the bishop in Hamburg, we had been working at the Cathedral of Saint Mary. On hearing of the plague ships, my mother superior felt she must stay in Hamburg to help the sick there, but she told me that if I did not leave immediately for the Harz mountains she would make sure that I would be thrown out of the Benedictine order, and never allowed to return.

"There is a cathedral at the foothills to the mountains called the Walkenried Abbey. Mother Superior has given me a note to the Cistercian monastery there, to ask them to take me in."

"Do you think they might take in a Jewish man?" asks Meshek.

"The Cistercian Order, and my order, the Benectines, are not allowed to turn travelers away. We must give them shelter and food, and we must bind their wounds until they are well enough to be on their way. You should have no fear of them."

"I am grateful to hear this," Meshek says, and I can hear the calm that enters his voice.

We soon turn in for the night, and weary from our travels, all fall into a deep sleep.

I wake hearing noises along the road. The sky along the eastern horizon is turning gray with approaching sunlight. I rouse my travel mates.

At Sophia's half-waking protests, I insist: "We should be on our way while the road is still mostly uncrowded. Here is a bit of bread to chew on."

Meshek passes the goatskin of water around and contributes a bite of rabbit meat to the common table. "We will need to find some food soon," he says. "I have a sling and a knife, and I am a pretty good shot with the sling. If you see any rabbits, or any abandoned animals of any kind that doesn't look sick, let me know. If they are nearby, I may be able to cripple or kill it with my sling."

"I think we need to look for a way toward the mountains that will be less crowded and less dangerous than this road," I say. "I fear that recent escapees from Hamburg may have been exposed to plague, and they may pass it to one of us. How are you feeling, Sophia?"

Sophia has her body turned away from us. Her head is bowed as she makes her morning prayers. She remains silent for a few moments, then turns toward us. "My side is still painful, but I think I can keep up with you through the day. Do you want to go now?"

"I think we need to start soon, especially if we are to find an alternative to walking on the road."

"I think we will make much better time on this road," Meshek says. "For one thing, we know where this road goes and we might find others, like ourselves, who have food and water and would prefer to travel in a group. If we go across the fields that I see here, we will spend a lot of time in mud and thick brush."

"I don't know if I could handle that," Sophia says. Her eyes are wide in fear and honesty.

Meshek hums in his throat. "Also, if we find a road, we won't know where it goes unless there are already refugees upon it. If there are refugees on any new road that we find, then we will have wasted the time we could have spent walking on the road we already know, and the progress we could have made toward higher elevations."

"You make compelling arguments," I say, "but I am still concerned that this road is the main road to the mountains, and it will become very crowded as the day goes on. I would have no doubt about looking for another route if it were just me and Sophia, but Meshek, your presence gives me some hope that threats against us will be less while you are here. But you have told us that you are unarmed. You have suggested that you are a coward when presented with the possibility of physical conflict, and yet, this morning you have told me that you are armed with a sling and a knife. So, please help me understand. Will you shrink from a fight and run away at the threat of violence, or will you stand to protect us?"

Meshek thinks for a moment, then rises. "I will answer your question, Agna, but we should get moving, and I propose that we stay on this road for now. As I said last night, the most important thing to me is traveling in a group. I am prepared to give whatever I have to any group that I believe I am compatible with, as I believe you both are.

"I do have more to contribute to such a group than what I let on last night. I am skilled with personal combat using knives and pugil sticks, or whatever heavy, blunt instrument is at hand."

Sophia is listening intently to this conversation with tears in her eyes. This morning, her native Italian dialect more deeply colors everything she wants to say. "I can't help in any of this. I left Hamburg with almost no food or water; only whatever scraps Mother Superior was able to give me as she brought me to the road before us now. I am completely dependent on you both to help me, especially now that I am in pain. Please stay with me; please help me."

Meshek looks toward Sophia for a moment, then back to me. He says nothing more, but we both rise to walk with him back to the road.

Meshek stays to the side and a little ahead of us. Though he says nothing of the sort, he seems to believe that his presence will be more valuable to us if he is not seen in public as part of our party.

As we regain the road, the sun rises fully above the horizon. I expect the day to be hot. Meshek seems to have water, still, in his goatskin. I have a little as well, but we will certainly need to find water tomorrow. I believe that we will need another three days after this one to get to the edge of the woods that mark the foothills of the Harz mountains.

As we walk, Sophia tells us stories to keep our minds off of our aching feet. She tells me of Walkenried Abbey and its Cistercian monks and nuns. The Cistercians are associated with the Benedictines and share the values of hard work, particularly in agriculture, and particularly in their home communities. They run mines in the mountains, and they use the proceeds of their labors to help finance some of their commercial activities with the Hansa in Lübeck and Hamburg. It is rumored that they even used some of their funds to aid Pope Clement VI, who conducted his papacy in Avignon in southern France. Because of this, the church leaves them alone to work out their necessary arrangements with the Hansa.

The Cistercians have helped to finance some of the Crusades, and some of the Crusader knights financed by them had fought in the Battle of Leignitz. I flinch and avoid the impulse to tell this seemingly trustworthy sister of my own family's involvement in that long-ago fight. I do not know how she would take it or if she would turn on me.

"I am offering these insights to you," Sophia says, "so that you will see some value in my presence with you."

I grip her hand. "Please don't worry about that, Sophia. I am happy to help you on this journey that is so important for all of us. I know you would do the same for me, and probably even for Meshek. You must not think that either of us will try to find you someday after this is all over to lay claim against you for services rendered during this terrible plague. I can't even imagine such a thing in the ruins of society that will follow the end of this plague."

Meshek has been walking behind us, but now catches up. "I think we should stop for a bit to rest and eat something. Let's move off the road so we can have some privacy. I think I saw another rabbit. If I can catch it, I won't want to share with anyone but the two of you."

We three move to a small mound of earth in a cluster of small trees about fifty paces off the road. Meshek whispers that he will return shortly. Sophie expresses her relief as she thumps onto the ground by smiling slightly in my direction through her pain and fatigue.

As I suspected, the road has grown more crowded as the day progresses. There are more walkers carrying their bundles. They look tired and downtrodden, especially when the wagons of the wealthier commercial classes pass by, kicking up rocks and the layers of dust covering the road, a dry, powdery dust drained of moisture by the hot sun.

Shortly, Meshek returns with a dead rabbit. "I brought this little fellow down with my sling. He didn't go willingly, but I'm sure he will be grateful to have given us needed sustenance on our journey."

"How good are you with that sling?" Sophia asks. "Are you like David taking on Goliath in the Valley of Elah?"

"Well, we Jewish people don't like to take on airs, so I will defer any comparisons with that David. However, I am pretty good with the sling, and I have had to take down the occasional hostile threat with it."

"I think you need to tell us more about who you are," I say as Meshek stows the rabbit in his pack, to skin and roast later tonight. "I believe you are a good man, but I also believe you have a troubled, or perhaps a troubling, past. Do you? Have such a past, I mean?"

His jaw tightens as he fastens his pack. "I have a past, as we all do. As a Jewish man who believes in his religion, though perhaps not in the rigorous practice of it, I have been many places and done many things to survive in a Christian world that is largely hostile to me. I have learned what I know of the sling from the story of King David, and I have learned what I need to know of combat without weapons from the Asians, who, unlike Christians, neither fear us nor seek to destroy us as a people.

"I could have made myself very much at home with the Mongols, if I had lived in those times, and if I had not found a good position with some businessmen in Hamburg who valued my skills and talent more than they feared my Jewishness. Actually, my final skill, with knives and other piercing instruments, I learned from these businessmen. Their specialty in Hamburg's commercial world is the cutting and stitching of heavy leathers used in saddles and harnesses. Having these leatherworking tools, and knowing how to keep them sharp, clean, and ready for use, is a matter of strong pride for me."

He frowns and pauses for a long moment. "You have many reasons to fear my skills in the violent arts," he says finally, "but, I think, many more reasons to view me as your protector, as that is my intent with you and with Sophia. I know Sophia is a member of a Christian order, though not one with violent intent toward the Jews."

"That is true," Sophia says. "We, the Benedictines and the Cistercians, are more interested in helping things grow into healthy maturity than we are in seeking revenge against ancient enemies as many Christian sects are."

Meshek nods in Sophia's direction. "Perhaps we should be moving along."

"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.

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.

END