

The Seventh Templar
By Juha-Pekka Koskinen

Prologue

With a heavy mind and a heart filled with grief, I once again take hold of my tattered quill. The city surrounding me is full of shouting and cries of anguish. In every street corner holy men pray to God and His saints to come to their aid. Merchants are stocking their gold coins into bags and fleeing the city by the cover of night. The water in the jug on my table ripples from the approaching enemy army's warhorses' earth quaking trot. The time for Christendom is coming to an end.

I have no time to wail about our wretched destiny for I must complete the history of my family and that of the Jerusalem kingdom; soon either one of them exists. God only knows I'm not doing this with a light heart but a heavy one. I am also doing it knowing that nobody could do it with such an honest heart than I can. I am also doing it so that my writings are left behind as a lesson and a warning to all those men who would rather split a knot open with their swords than devote time into solving it. Let my record also be a bitter reminder to all those women who cradle the foolish thought that there is sincere love in this world. For I have seen sixty-two springs and can confidently argue that they are wrong.

Bohemond

(chapter one)

Elvira

I

I, Elvira Canmore, was born in the year of our Lord 1125, twenty-six years after the capture of Jerusalem. My father, Johannes, had as an infant accompanied his father while he was vanquishing the Saracens. He had already as a suckling seen the great stones tossed by the throwing machines whirling over city walls, heard the evil clatter of swords and smelled the nauseating stench of blood. Or so he told me.

Our castle was located at the west side of the Dead Sea, on a Godforsaken cliff, on the outskirts of the Judean desert. My father Johannes had gotten the area as his vassalage a few years after my big brother Raimond was born. On a clear day you could see Jerusalem as a foggy silhouette from the highest tower in the castle. At least my brothers insisted so, for I never had that keen of an eyesight that I could see nothing else than an emptiness lying over the horizon.

Our castle was known as Canmer. It was originally built by the Knights Templar to watch over the trading route traveling on the eastside of Jerusalem. Protected by its upward rising walls were the bed chambers and stables, the gloomy chapel and an enormous vat of water. The Knights Templar had left the castle in the care of my father and sworn him to keep an eye on the emptiness stretching out in the surroundings. The shepherders in the nearby areas paid taxes to my father but the amount was next to nothing, like my mother Agnes always remembered to point out.

Canmer was a somber castle but it was also a safe one. It enclosed us behind its walls and shut the rest of the world outside, so we didn't have to worry about the Saracens nor them about us. When the third king of Jerusalem, Balduin II, died in 1131, my father didn't receive the news of his death until the following year.

I had learned to read before my hardheaded big brother Raimond had learned his sixth letter. I remember how we were all sitting in the eastern tower listening to our tutor Miles, who despite his name had no chivalry in him whatsoever. We were all focused on our drawing boards, Raimond, I, Joscelin, Maria and

Johannes. Little Mikael hadn't been born yet. All of a sudden I realized that I could read the markings scribbled on the clay tablet.

- Jesus Christ, our Saviour, I cried out unable to control myself.

Raimond looked at me frowning. His eyes got crossed in an unpleasant way when he got mad even as a child.

- Miles is teaching us boys, not you Elvira!

- He has got his work cut out for himself with you. Your head is like a dull knife being sharpened except it never gets finished.

- Be quiet!!

I closed my mouth and set my fingers on the table. My smooth, thin and pale fingers, what ever became of them during the passing years? Miles hit me with a stick so hard that my nails were black the following day. I can still feel that blow in my fingertips.

- May God preserve you from pride, woman! Miles grunted.

The blow from the stick sealed my fate. During the following years when my brothers concentrated on tying the buckles of their hauberks and chest armors, on oiling chain mail and repairing reins neglecting reading as well as writing, I sat with graying Miles in the deserted tower. He hated me and I him, but we needed each other. Without me, mother would have sent Miles away, for Maria had no interest in studying. If it weren't for Miles' lessons I would have had to help my brothers constantly when they banged each other up on the dusty inner yard of the castle. I could ride with greater skill than Joscelin and almost matched the skill of Raimond, but moving and fastening heavy equipment was always left to me.

- Elvira is as strong as an ox, Raimond taunted me like he usually did when I was taking the saddle back into the stable.

- Just like mother, Maria snickered.

- Don't you mock mother, Joscelin said very solemnly.

- But yet I can read and write, which doesn't hold true to all of you!

- I can touch my nose with the tip of my tongue, Johannes shrieked and started contorting his face like a halfwit.

Little-Mikael followed his example and soon the courtyard was filled with the boys' laughter and shrieking. It was no wonder that our father had entrusted me with the rest of our family's documents.

On one November morning on the year of our Lord 1136, I was sitting in the gate tower straightening Raimond's helmet for his twelfth birthday. The day was gloomy and dark like every winter day seemed to be on the outskirts of the Judean desert. From somewhere amidst the emptiness a whinny of a horse sounded out. The sound fluttered across the plains like a butterfly fleeing the night.

I rushed to the window, full of excitement. The summer long drought had dried wells in the desert and burnt the plant life so, that not one knight had visited us in a long time. I stared at the low thorn decorated hill relentlessly, from behind of which the road burnt to a yellow ribbon slithered towards the castle.

At first, I thought I saw just the shadow of the steed until I realized that both the horse and man were clad fully in black, although the horse's long and black caparison was gray from dust and there were holes in it like it had been trampled upon by a herd of frightened sheep. The red emblem of the crown of thorns had faded so that it was almost completely invisible. The knight had wrapped himself inside a black cape. Only his grayed head revealed itself from amidst the darkness. Riding a fluffy eared jackass beside the knight there was an arms bearer so thin that he could have hid behind the lance he was holding.

I remembered how my father had ten years earlier arrived at the castle in the exact same fashion. He had appeared in the middle of the desert out of nowhere. Although I was just a small child then, I remembered that seeing him didn't raise such a feeling of curiosity mixed with fear as these two approaching riders did.

The riders approached the drawbridge agonizingly slowly. It felt as if they were deliberately keeping me in suspense. I threw Raimond's helmet from my lap and, supporting my head up, rushed to the stairway.

Father had already hurried into the castle's yard. He readjusted his black hunting gloves so that they would fit just perfectly and straightened his cape looking discontent. He would have obviously wanted to wear the cape of the Knights Templar although he hadn't been one of them in years.

- Lower the drawbridge! he yelled at the guards, who instantly started working the rusty chained mechanism.

Raimond, Joscelin, Johannes and Mikael scurried on to the courtyard red and sweaty as they usually did. Maria was content staying in the shadows so that the sun peeking behind the clouds wouldn't ruin her pale complexion.

The drawbridge rumbled ominously under the hooves of the black knight's steed. There was no audible sound coming from the arms bearer's jackass' movement since it was drowned in the thunderous hoof clap of the war horse. The gray headed rider moved with such an imperturbable manner that it seemed he was going to ride straight past the walls and carry on into the inner chambers of the castle. Only after his horse almost stepped on father's toes did he pull on the reins and bring him to a halt.

- Welcome to the castle of Canmer, sir Canmore.

The knight stared at father with his only seeing eye, for I just noticed that his other eye had been blinded, and dismounted without saying a word. He brushed his gray hair and stared father intensely as if he were thinking what would be the best way to split him in half. He was missing the middle finger of his left hand and I was starting to think what other body parts he might be missing in addition to the eye and the finger.

- So you have finally understood that despite of God's good effort I am still among the living?
- Yes. I was in Antioch when knowledge of Bohemond II's death reached me

The knight let out a dry laugh and settled his hand on the handle of his sword. The back of his hand was one jagged edged shining scar. When he turned to look at us, I was so afraid that I almost soiled myself.

- He got what he deserved. Are these your children?
- Yes. This here is Raimond. He turned 12 today. Here is Elvira, this is Joscelin. That maiden enjoying the shade is Maria and this little sir is Johannes junior. And that boy, whose nose seems to be always running, is Mikael.

Sir Canmore's expression had grown darker after every new introduction. He was acting like a man who finds one rat after another in the granary. When he heard Mikael's name his face started to darken from annoyance.

- God has given husband and wife the command of going forth and multiplying and inhabiting the Earth, but I hardly think he meant for you to do it on your own!

- And here comes my lovely wife Agnes, father continued ignoring sir Canmore's sarcastic comment. As mother appeared from the shadows of the castle on to the courtyard, sir Canmore flinched. First time his cool exterior seemed to crack and his seeing eye twirled around as if he were looking for an escape route.

- In this land a wife must surely be strong in order to give birth to six children, he muttered.

- So this is your infamous father, who killed your mother with grief and left you to survive on your own as best you could? mother asked.

Father laughed and put his hands on mother's shoulders.

- Yes. This is my father Mikael Canmore, Highlands' gift to the Holy land.

And may God have mercy on me, to the horror of us all he was just that.

II

Sometimes just before a storm, the air inside the castle became musty and stifled. The air blowing through the desert seemed to lodge itself in the towers and halls in a way that made avoiding getting a headache impossible. Sir Canmore was like a storm, falling upon us black and darkened.

We had all heard how our grandfather had been among the first to climb over the walls of Jerusalem on the year of our Lord 1099 and taken the city from the Saracens. Sir Canmore had lost his loved one during his pilgrimage, Johannes' mother and our grandmother Michelle, and fallen in love with a Greek woman and conceived a son with her. Once he found his beloved again he asked Bohemond, the ruler of Antioch to slay his mistress and his bastard son to conceal his straying.

Mother Agnes could tell tales one more horrible than the other about sir Canmore, who lurked behind the Greek and Latin rulers like the devil during the whole pilgrimage. She also knew that grandfather had waded knee deep in blood and the intestines of the ungodly in Jerusalem. When the fact that he had also forlorn his wife was added to this horror, we could not imagine a man more unholy than our grandfather. That's why we stared at him with a sense of respect muddled with fear. I wondered how any woman could ever have loved him.

Sir Canmore's servant, the tall gangly boy, was feeble minded. Saracens believed that feeble minded and crazy people had been touched by God. If this was the case then God must have touched sir Canmore's servant too heavily. He looked like a bar of soap which had been left in the water basin for too long. He was unnaturally thin and his laughter sounded like a jackass' bray.

- His name is Judas, sir Canmore told me when I was staring at the freak who had settled at his feet.
- No God fearing man would give a name like that to his son, I said.

Sir Canmore let out a dry laugh and rubbed his sun scorched, wrinkled cheeks.

- His father surely did not fear God, but it was not he who gave this creature that accursed name. I renamed him so that he would not forget the evil deeds of his father but would remember them until the time of his death.

To me such cruelty seemed uncalled for but I didn't dare to argue. I thought he might rename me too if I angered him.

- Then who was his father? I asked.

Sir Canmore laughed again and kicked Judas in his ribs.

- Go and get my chest!

Judas leaped up and slipped out of the hall like he was escaping a fire. Before I could even take a breath he returned carrying a smallish chest. Sir Canmore took the chest and slid his four-fingered hand over it. He

looked at father with a slanted grin on his lips. At the same time his eye socket, the empty one, was staring at me.

- I am not going to utter a single word about Judas' father, he said opening the chest, - but here is his brother.

He took something out of the chest, which at first looked to me like a bunch of dried up hay. When he turned the bunch around I could see cracked and dried lips drawn to reveal a deadly grin and eyes which were sowed shut.

- For God's sake! How did Bohemond II's head get to be in your possession? father yelled.

I don't know how grandfather responded because I had to run out of the room so I wouldn't throw up. When I snuck back in, the head rested on the table and Raimond was poking it with the handle of his knife.

- I can't understand you and in no way condone your decisions. You have brought an abundance of children into this world and they will get nothing more from life than sin and misery, sir Canmore said.

Father laughed and ruffled Raimond's hair.

- Doesn't the kingdom require knights to aid it? Haven't you yourself traveled through Palestine protecting pilgrims from the Saracens so meritoriously that you are know from Cairo to Damascus?
- What I do is none of your concern! It would be in the best interest of us all if the kingdom would collapse and drown in its own blood. And on the subject of knights, aren't there enough men who thrive on battle in the Knights templar so that you don't have to bring them into the world by the dozens?
- So do you think that I should have remained in the service of the brotherhood?

Sir Canmore puffed with contempt and slapped Judas' cheek with the back of his hand in anger.

- I have never heard of nothing more ridiculous than a brotherhood, which travels around the world picking fights instead of praying. Even the fact that you were one of those to found that brotherhood of the devil is such a great sin that you will never be able to amend it!
- Belonging to the Knights Templar was a sin and leaving them was one as well. When you add me having a wife and children to the list of my sins, I'm having difficulties in understanding how I should have lived my life in order to have pleased you?
- You fool! I am not the one you have to please, but God! You have let the temptation of flesh blind your eyes and greed stifle your soul.

Father laughed and ran his fingers through his curly hair. His leather gloves were shining in the light of the candle. I knew that he liked those gloves especially, because the only time he took them off was when he went to bed.

- I don't know how to defend myself. Apparently your own life has been so righteous that I can't achieve anything that will get your approval.

Sir Canmore grabbed father's hair so quickly that father didn't have time to utter a sound. He tugged his hair like a schoolboy's and let go only when Raimond rushed towards him with his knife in hand. I just heard a squelch of metal and saw a flash of lightning appearing in the darkness of the hall. At the exact same

moment Raimond's knife fell to my feet and I saw how sir Canmore stood before trembling Raimond with his sword wielded.

- Never charge the enemy like an enraged bull! If you would have taken a stool for protection you could have succeeded in sticking that small knife of yours in my thigh before I would have sliced you in half. .

Then for the first and last time, I saw him smiling, petting Raimond's cheek.

- You have more fire in you than your father ever had.

Father didn't have a chance to say anything before mother stormed into the hall with Ibrahim at her heels. Ibrahim was an infidel doctor whom father had bought from Jerusalem into Canmer so we wouldn't have to travel across the desert to find help for our ailments.

- Haven't I told you a thousand times that there will be no playing with weapons inside? mother ranted and stared alternately at Raimond and sir Canmore with burning eyes.
- Especially a gentleman who has already lost one of his eyes in battle should be more careful, Ibrahim added.

Sir Canmore grunted threateningly and took a step towards Ibrahim. He sheathed his sword and stared at Ibrahim's face, which was contorted into a gentle smile, with his remaining eye.

- I have blinded it myself, for it seduced me into committing sin.

Mother squelched like a dog getting hit with a stick and looked at sir Canmore, horrified.

- God forbid that my husband should become like his father!
- If you wanted to punish yourself by blinding your eye wouldn't it have been better to blind the left one? Your seeing eye will be left behind your shield during battle and you'll be blind as an owl in daylight, that is, if you want to use your sword with your better arm and hand.
- Heretic wisdom! Men like you I can just as easily split in half with my left hand even if there were only one finger remaining in it!
- Doesn't Ibrahim know that he is the four-fingered knight? The knight whom everyone from Gaza to Antioch are afraid of! Raimond yelled out and kicked Ibrahim in his shin.

Mother took a hold of Raimond by the back of his shirt and lifted him up as easily as a cloak left on the floor. She could straighten a horseshoe with her bare hands if she wanted to, as could I when I turned fifteen.

- Don't bruise Ibrahim! Do you think that we can afford to buy a new doctor every year?!

I can't imagine what kind of chaos would have become of the situation if Judas wouldn't have started braying like a jackass. The ear shattering noise he made forced everybody to quiet down and cover their ears. Ibrahim saw his opportunity and slipped out of the hall. Mother joined him after telling sir Canmore to pick Bohemond II's head of her best table. Now father started laughing to his hearts content. Only until the embalmed head was removed and put away in its container did Judas quiet down.

Sir Canmore didn't stay with us for more than a few days. He told us that fish and guests started to stink after three days. During his visit, Ibrahim's pet raven disappeared and was found later, nailed to the door of the

southern tower. Sir Canmore said that considering the hatred Judas had for Muslims, Ibrahim should feel lucky that the only thing nailed to the door was just a minor representative of the animal kingdom and nothing else. I wasn't deceived by his speech. I was sorry for Ibrahim. He had even taught the raven some Arabic words to sooth his homesickness. Sometimes, when he thought nobody saw him, he would listen to the raven with tears running down his cheeks.

- Your brothers in faith are killing defenseless Christians like lambs brought to slaughter and you're pining after a senseless bird, sir Canmore puffed mounting his horse.

Our whole family was standing in line to send him on his way. Even Miles had descended down from his tower and was gathering his cloak upwards so it wouldn't touch the dusty courtyard or Ibrahim for that matter.

- It is ungodly to teach a bird to speak, Miles mumbled.
- Birds have been created by God as well, Ibrahim said and shaking his head.

Sir Canmore yawned and took hold of the reins. Sunlight peeking between the clouds made his face seem even more wrinkled than it was.

- Birds as well? And only the birds you say? he huffed.
- Farewell sir Canmore. If you leave right away you can reach Jerusalem before nightfall, mother said.
- Don't concern yourself on my behalf lady Agnes. I do not fret the dark.

Sir Canmore gave us a bored look and was left staring at me and Raimond.

- As a matter of fact, I have too much weight on me, he said and started rummaging through his saddlebags. I felt a slight twinge in the pit of my stomach when he lifted out the chest and a book bound with leather straps.
- You can take this Raimond. You can have it as a decoration at the end of your bed if you like, he said throwing the small chest at Raimond.

Raimond's cries of joy were accompanied by my mother's anguished sigh.

- And for you, my fair maiden, I will leave this, he continued and held his tattered book out to me. – I have nothing more to write into it, for writing is pure vanity. But be sure not to lose it, for it is to be used to learn from by those who think they are something other than they truly are.

After having said what he wanted he raced his steed into full gallop and shot out of the gates of Canmer like he had the Devil on his trail. Judas tried to catch up to him trying to hurry his jackass, pounding him with his skinny feet.

- God bless you too, sir Canmore, father mumbled.
- At last, mother sighed.

And so I got to have grandfather's story as my burden. On a yard smelling of horse manure, I got a moldy book shoved in my lap while my brother Raimond got to keep the severed head of the ruler of Antioch. Although Raimond did lose his toy fairly soon when little-Mikael buried the head somewhere and it was never found again.

It wasn't until nightfall that I opened the leather straps tightened by lack of humidity. The covers of the book smelled like a drenched dog. The parchment was thick and some of the pages had been torn off and fell in my lap. On some pages the ink had been smirched as if someone had been crying reading them. On other pages there were dried up brownish blots which I suspected to have been dried blood. I swore on the Holy Virgin Mary that I wouldn't read the writings of my arrogant and evil grandfather but I would burn them instead. Having read a few pages I swore I would burn the book on the following morning. The following morning I swore I would burn it in the evening. When evening came, I swore again that I would burn it the following morning. Fifty-one years have past from that moment and I still swear that I will burn the book to ashes the next day. I can't comprehend why I want to preserve the story by copying it on fresh parchment. A story that begins: "Having spent three years in the desert, I decided to kill Bohemond with my own hands."