

BEHOLD
THE DAWN

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K.M. WEILAND

BEHOLD THE DAWN
SCOTTSBLUFF, NEBRASKA

Behold the Dawn
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K.M. Weiland

Map by Joanna Coleman.

Scripture quotations taken from the King James Version.

“I trained myself a falcon” by Der von Kurenberg (c.1150-1170).

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Dedicated to my beloved Savior, who has given us a fresh beginning in each new day. May we always have the strength to reach out and grasp that perfect gift.

And to Adrie, who lets Annan live in her closet.

Also by K.M. Weiland:

A Man Called Outlaw

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

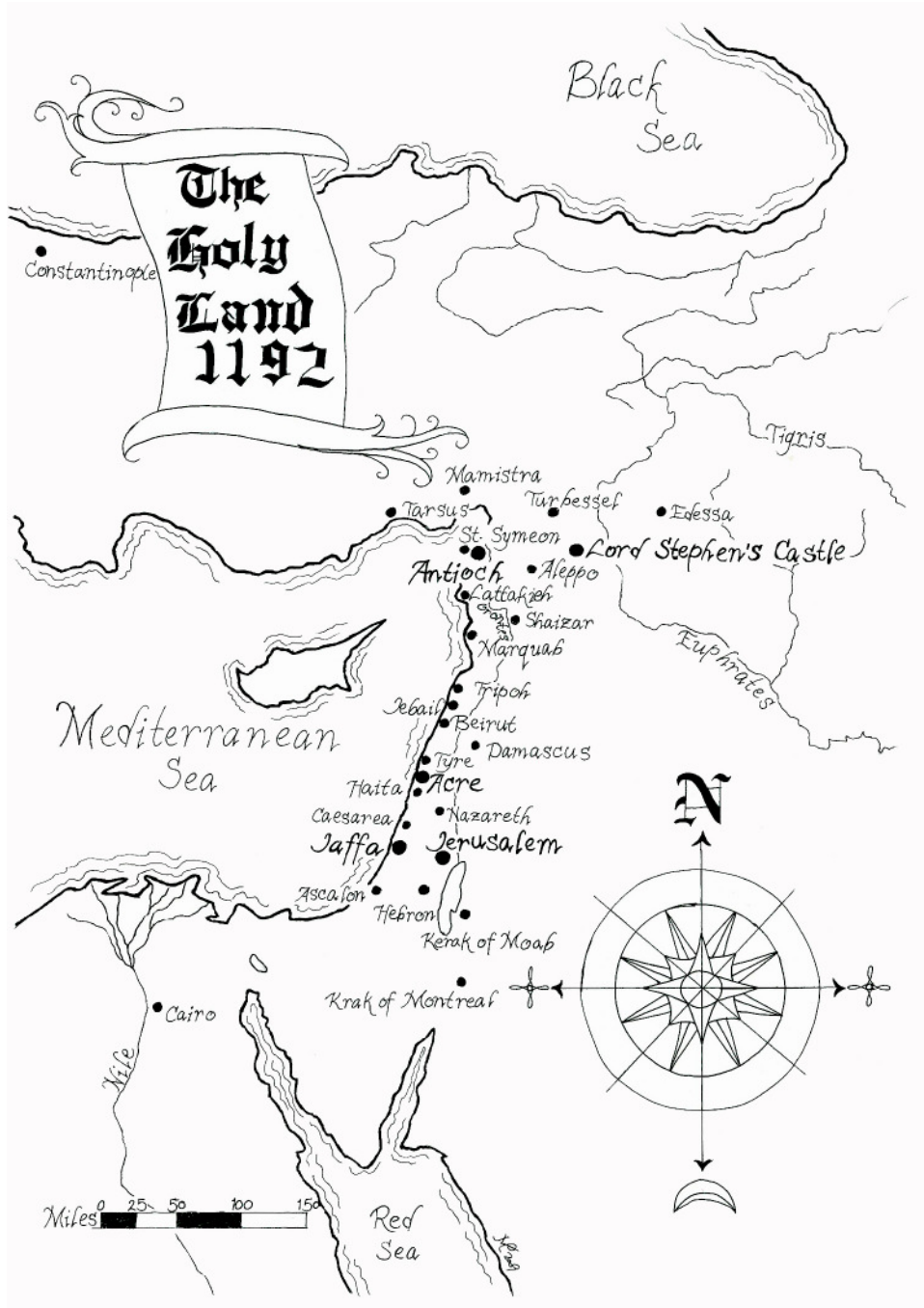
MANY PEOPLE HAVE been instrumental in helping this project to publication. I am deeply humbled by the time and encouragement they lavished upon me while I was writing and editing this story. Without them, this book might never have made its way into your hands, and it certainly wouldn't have been anywhere near as good a story. In no particular order, those people are:

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Thank you all. May you be blessed as you have blessed me.



*Heroes are forged on anvils hot with pain,
And splendid courage comes but with the test.
Some natures ripen and some natures bloom
Only on blood-wet soils; some souls prove great
Only in moments dark with death or doom.*

—Ella Wheeler Wilcox

CHAPTER I

1192—Bari, Italy

MARCUS ANNAN HAD killed before. He had killed so many times he could no longer remember them all... so many times he had become inured to the ache of sorrow as he stared into the faces of the dead.

Some had deserved to die; some hadn't. It mattered not. They were all dead, and he could not bring them back. Unlike himself, they would never have to wonder if the end would ever come, if life would go on and on forever, taunting in its gaiety, tormenting in its bleakness.

As he reined his horse back amidst the chaos of a southern tourney and watched his allies crash into the opposing line of horsemen, he wondered if perhaps he had traveled this dark path beyond his ability to return. He watched through the barred vision of his great helm, concentrating on the steady rhythm of his breathing, forcing down the fire of battle that coursed through his veins as he waited for his quarry to extricate himself from the clangor of battle.

Today, Marcus Annan—tourneyer, soldier, and wanderer—would bring the tally of deaths yet a little higher as he played one more round in this bloody, accursed game of mock battle that had become the only pursuit of his shattered life. The legend of his name would grow, and the burning flash of battle fire would once more blind the sorrows of his heart. He would end one more life, even as his own hurtled onward,

unable to escape the demons that wailed as loud on this day as they had upon their birth almost a score of years past.

Only two horses' lengths ahead, a knight in a purple surcoat freed himself from the roiling knot of iron and flesh, sword lofted in victory. Annan exhaled. This would be his last conquest of the day, chosen from among the dozens of other competitors because the knight in the purple surcoat was one of the few who could possibly challenge his strength.

Annan released his hold on his destrier's mouth, and the horse leapt forward. Long strides devoured the distance between him and the purple knight. Lifting his sword, he felt the familiar swell of his muscles beneath their covering of mail.

A knight from the opposing side swung his sword as Annan galloped past, his blow ringing against Annan's buckler. The arm behind the blow was strong, and Annan felt the ache all through his bones. He afforded his attacker a glance, swinging hard with his sword and catching the knight full across the chest, not even touching his shield.

From the corner of his left eye, he saw the descent of another knight's blade. His horse wheeled at the touch of his leg, and he smashed his opponent's sword from his hand. The man lifted his metal-sheathed gaze in panic.

But Annan left him. He had more pressing matters to deal with than an unarmed opponent: The purple knight had seen him.

The man reined his destrier around, sword leveled at Annan's chest, a wordless battle cry echoing inside his helm.

Joy of the fight—his only joy—swelled in Annan's heart, and he drove his spurs into his blood bay's flanks. The horse leapt forward, grunting through its nostrils.

The purple knight's sword struck Annan's with all the furor of a young body and determined mind. With a flick of his wrist, Annan separated the blades even as he thundered past. The knight turned back to confront him, and he brought his sword before his face in a salute, perhaps recognizing Annan as the famed Scottish tourneyer. Then he sheathed the sword and drew, from beneath the purple brocade of his horse's caparison, a new weapon. The setting sun, burning gold through the dust of the field, glinted against the iron tip of a war hammer.

Annan's blood pumped heat into his muscles. The rules of this tourney banned the war hammer from competition; its lethal heft would

crush armor and shatter flesh and bone alike. His fist tightened on his sword hilt, the leather finger of his gauntlet creaking against the steel of the crossguard. Marcus Annan wasted no mercy on duplicitous knaves.

The purple knight laid his spurs to his horse. The war hammer rose above his head, its point flashing once across the face of the dying sun. Annan charged to meet him.

The war hammer caught his blade, and his horse, wearied from the long day of fighting, stumbled in the mud and fell almost to its knees. The hammer skidded down Annan's blade, toward his crossguard, and the purple knight jerked hard, trying to wrench the hilt from Annan's hand. The sharkskin wrap on the hilt skidded against the leather palm of Annan's mail glove. He was losing his grip; another moment and he would be defenseless. The knight's mount smashed into Annan's knee, and the destrier staggered yet again.

Dropping the reins, Annan heaved all the strength of his sword arm against the unfair leverage of the war hammer and clamped his other hand on the hammer's back spike. With a roar, he ripped it free of his blade and spurred his horse.

The destrier scrambled, mud splattering in wet clods, and Annan twisted in his saddle to strike his opponent's vulnerable back. From the depths of his helmet, he could hear the knight's cry of pain, and he wheeled his destrier in time to see the recoil of his opponent's body against his saddlebow.

He waited, hilt resting against his thigh, as the man pushed himself aright and straightened his contorted body. Again, the knight lifted his luckless hammer and bloodied his mount's sides with his spurs.

Annan remained as he was, his only movement that of his sword swinging away from its resting place on his hip. He cast one glance at the waning tangle of battle to his right, and his fingers tightened on the reins. The purple knight lifted his weapon high above his head, a scream upon his lips.

Annan foresaw the moment of the blow, sensed it in every taut line beneath the purple surcoat. With the grace and strength of a man who had spent more than twenty years in the armor of a professional soldier, he hurled his weight into a stroke that deflected the war hammer and pierced the mail above the purple knight's heart.

The knight froze. His limbs yanked tight, his sword arm falling to his side. Annan waited as the body slumped forward onto the saddlebow and, at last, tumbled from the skittish destrier's back. The war hammer, its gleam still unmarred by the blood of a first kill, crashed to the trampled sward, inches from its owner's outstretched hand.

Annan raised his head. Shouts and the clatter of arms echoed in the heavy dusk. Against the horizon, framed by the dirty huts that bordered the field, men fought on to claim the last ransoms of the day. Annan's arm fell to his side, and he reached to take the purple knight's reins. The horse would be his only gain from his victory. No one ransomed the dead.

He touched his rein to his destrier's neck, ready to return to camp. The battle fire had fled, draining his veins to emptiness. Another battle won, another tourney at an end. Another day he would never have to live again.

Against the backdrop of the encroaching woods, a stranger in the dark robes of a monk stood, watching him. Annan's brows came together. Holy men did not frequent the fields of a tournament, save to spit in disgust or cross themselves in horror.

Faceless beneath the shadow of his cowl, the monk stood with his hands hidden in his broad sleeves. He was not a tall man, but his shoulders were broad, his chest deep. He said nothing, and he did not move. He only watched.

The monk's head shifted away from Annan, and he seemed to stare at the fallen knight. Then he turned and staggered into the forest, every step warping his body as he struggled to move his crippled feet.

As the shadows swallowed the monk's ragged limp, Annan's heart beat a strange rhythm. He did not believe in superstitions, the guidance of the saints, or the power of visions. Indeed, he believed in little at all, save the strength of his own arm. But something about the sight of this crippled monk whispered a chill across his skin and prodded him to flee.

He turned his horse's face and spurred hard. He didn't look back to see if his allies were bending to gather their spoils, or to see if his opponents had noticed and reacted to their dead confederate.

And he did not turn to see if the monk had resurfaced to watch him retreat.

After collecting the day's ransom money and selling the purple knight's horse and accoutrements, Annan returned to camp. As he entered the maze of tents spread beneath the city walls like the particolored cloak of a minstrel, he reined his destrier to a walk. The camp and, beyond it, the city of Bari bustled with all the color and noise of a foreign tourney. Even here, so near the earthly domain of the Popes, after almost two score years of threatened excommunication, the tournaments thrived.

In front of a wedge tent striped in green, he drew to a stop and dismounted, his bones creaking. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he had hoped the mild southern air would ease the pain of old wounds. But some things went too deep for healing.

He ducked to peer into the tent but could find no sign of Peregrine Marek, the Glasgow lad indentured to him after he had rescued the little thief from an irate shopkeeper three years before. He wasn't surprised. Marek had the bothersome habit of never being anywhere Annan wanted him when he wanted him. He growled, out of habit more than anger. Tossing his heavy purse into the tent, he turned to untack his horse.

He had already unbuckled the muddy caparison and stripped it from his mount by the time Marek finally trotted around the tent at the end of the row.

The lad's quick eye found Annan in a moment, and he slowed, pushing through the crowd with the stiff stride he invariably used when trying not to attract attention or appear in any haste. Even from across the camp, Annan could see the darting of Marek's eyes. He was fidgety about something.

Marek managed to dodge squires and knights alike and duck beneath the necks of a dozen skittish chargers without tripping himself or anyone else. At last, he stopped next to the tent pole and planted his hands on his belt. "Well. And how'd it go?"

Annan glared at him.

Marek huffed a breath. "And how'd it go, *sir*?"

Annan tried to ignore the inevitable sourness in his stomach as he tossed the caparison into the lad's chest. Crowing about the blood on his hands had never brought him much joy. "Mayhap you'd like to be

explaining why you weren't waiting here when I told you to be?"

Marek shook out the heavy green brocade, dragging the edge in the dust at his feet. "If you'd any idea the fuss that's about to befall that fair city, you wouldn't waste time wanting explanations."

Annan turned away and slung his horse's reins over a tree branch. Marek's theatrics were rarely worth the effort of playing along. "It's a tourney town today, laddie. When isn't there a fuss?"

"It's a wee bit more'n a fuss this time. More like an unholy uproar. Didn't you hear anything about it when you was picking up your prize money?"

Annan glanced at the city's walls. Beyond the workmanlike clamor of the camp, he could hear only the shouts of knights galloping into town to drink their own health. "No."

"That Count Heladio—or whate'er his name is—you know the bucko in charge of this here tourney thing. Well, appears his nephew got himself killed out there today. In the last hour or so, they say."

"They can't know that. The bodies won't be collected 'til morning light."

"Well, all I know is this count person seemed to know what he knew. And he's none too rejoiced over it, neither. He's got him about half a score o' men-at-arms, and he's riding out to find the man what did the deed."

"It's a tourney. Men die all the time." Annan looked down at the dirt and blood crusted in the mail links on the back of his gauntlet, and he flexed the stiffness in his sword hand. "Matters not to us, anyway. Unsaddle the horse and rub him down before he binds up."

Marek made a face. "How many'd you kill today?"

"A few." He tugged the glove from his hand. "One for certain."

Marek lifted both eyebrows, and Annan knew what the lad was thinking before he could give it voice. "Master—"

"Crusade. I know." As if a Crusade could be enough to ransom him. He yanked the glove from his left hand. The leather underside had ripped earlier that day, and a dark bruise filled his palm.

Marek tossed the caparison over the destrier's flanks and flopped the stirrup onto the seat of the saddle. "I've said it before, and I'll say it again. All the priests swear it's true. Take the vow, kill a few infidels, and

the name of a tourneyer becomes as good as that of a saint.”

Annan stared at his palm, at the deepening shadow of purple. “The priests delude themselves.”

“How would you know?”

“I know. Let us leave it at that.”

Marek loosened the girth with a grunt. “Well, I’ll tell you something else *I* know.”

“And what’s that?” Annan unfastened his belt with one hand and, with the weight of his sword in the other, joined both ends behind his back. He turned for the shade of the tent. Tomorrow, he and Marek would be traveling on to another tourney somewhere. But for tonight, all he wanted was meat and wine and the abyss of sleep.

“Count Heladio has other reasons to be unhappy.” Marek yanked the saddle from the horse’s back. “The Baptist is here.”

Annan stopped and flicked his eyes to where the sunset backlit the city walls. “The Baptist—” The habitual lines in his forehead etched themselves deeper, and the dark-robed figure who had watched him from the edge of the tourney field flashed across his memory.

In the last year, the mendicant friar known as the Baptist had seemed ubiquitous. Everywhere Annan’s travels had taken him, this fire-breathing monk, who preached against the excesses of the Church with the assurance of the Devil, never traveled far behind.

Marek dumped the saddle next to the tent pole. “Ever get the feeling he’s been following us?”

“Why should he?”

“I dunno, maybe he likes tourneys. They say he’s a heretic.”

The Baptist’s railings against the Church, against the Pope, against the Holy War that even now raged in the East, were enough to bring anathema down on him from every quarter. But what made Annan’s skin burn cold was that the Baptist also raged against Roderic, bishop of Devonshire, the one-time prior of St. Dunstan’s Abbey—the man and the place that had hurtled Annan down the sunless path he now trod. Despite the sins of his past, Roderic had risen in the circles of English royalty until he counseled the king himself, an honor he little deserved.

Marek pulled a water bucket from a tree limb and lugged it to the destrier. “Mayhap we should catch a glimpse of him before we head our

own way again. The count'll throw him out sooner or later, and I never was one to oppose a good show. Eh?"

Annan unclenched his teeth. "I've seen him already."

"What?" Marek stopped short and water sloshed against his chest. "Already?"

"He was on the field, watching."

"So he does like tourneys, then." Marek shoved the bucket beneath the destrier's outstretched muzzle. "Can't tell me this isn't a ruddy sad world, when even monks are chasin' after the tournaments."

"It isn't the tournaments." Realization razored across Annan's mind. "It's me." Without looking down, he buckled his sword back on. This monk knew him. When they had stared at one another across the tourney field only an hour before, the intensity beneath the man's cowl hadn't been mere curiosity. Somewhere in the shadows of the past, the Baptist had known him.

Annan caught his saddle up from the ground and lugged it to where Marek's palfrey stood stomping at flies.

"Hey. Where is it you're off to?" Marek craned a look over his shoulder.

"To find out what he's after."

"How about me? Don't you think I want to see the count throw him out on his ear?"

"You'll wait here." He tightened the girth and drilled Marek a look. "And when I say wait here, I mean wait."

"You always say that. But what if there's extenuatin' circumstances you're not foreseeing?"

"Your extenuating circumstances always end up sounding like excuses." He took the reins and swung aboard. "Just stay here. I'll be back before night falls."

Marek huffed. "Well, when Heladio does decide to throw Master Gethin the Baptist out of town, please don't go trying to rescue him and get us all into trouble."

Annan's heavy hand on the reins choked the palfrey back to a halt. In his veins, his blood grew thick. "Gethin?"

"Gethin the Baptist. That's what they're calling him back in the

town.” Marek shrugged. “You weren’t thinking his name was John, now were you?”

Annan let his breath out. “Stay here,” he said and spurred the palfrey.

The name rang in his ears. Wasn’t it one he had once known as well as his own? For sixteen years, it was a name he had believed belonged to a dead man. Had Marek told him John the Baptist had indeed walked across the centuries to resume preaching, the numbness in Annan’s soul could have left him no colder.

At the city gates, Annan found him. The tourney crowd swarmed around and beneath the gate arch, laughing and yelling. Filmy twilight was falling over the city, and the gay festival colors had reverted to everyday grays and browns. A few men, already deep in their cups, staggered and swore, looking for one more fight before the day ended.

Just outside the gate, his back against the sand-colored bricks of the wall, the dark-robed monk stood atop the overturned half of a barrel. The shadow of his cowl hid his face, and his hands buried themselves in his opposing sleeves. At his feet, a score of people had gathered, faces upturned to hear him speak. His voice, deep almost to the point of hoarseness, rumbled across the distance, audible in tone, if not in word. He stood as if cast in stone; he did not move, did not gesture. Only the rise and fall of his voice held in check the throng that surrounded him.

Annan reined the palfrey to a halt just beyond the crowd. As the monk had watched him at work on the tourney field, he now watched the monk. His heart thudded against his breastbone, swelling until his chest seemed to hold nothing but its beat.

This monk, this Gethin the Baptist, could not be the man he had known. The Gethin he had once loved as a brother had died. He had been killed, murdered, cast out to feed the ravens and the dogs. For sixteen years, Annan had known this as certainly as he had known the weight of his sword in his hand. It could not be him.

He dismounted and led the palfrey to the edge of the crowd. He towered over the townspeople, the line of vision between himself and

the Baptist unimpaired as the Baptist's growl floated through the crowd to reach him.

“Thus saith the Patriarch, ‘By thy sword shalt thou live, and shalt serve thy brother; and it shall come to pass when thou shalt have the dominion, that thou shalt break his yoke from off thy neck.’” A white scar slashed the Baptist's dark lips, twisting them into perpetual mockery. “And thus saith the Prophet—” The shadow of his hood tilted across his face, flashing a glimpse of shriveled, waxen horror. “‘Hear ye this, O house of Jacob, which swear by the name of the Lord and make mention of the God of Israel, but not in righteousness, not in *truth*.’”

The Baptist looked up, his eyes blazing with all the furor of a hunting falcon's, and Annan's blood stopped pumping. He knew these eyes. He knew this man.

The scar across the Baptist's lips twisted harder, carving a serpentine into the albescent flesh. He stretched out his hands, and two young men lifted him to the ground. The crowd parted before him, scrambling out of his way, opening a path down their midst.

At the end of the path Annan waited. He had come to this country with the hope that his old wounds might find relief. Now, the oldest of his wounds ripped open before his eyes.

The Baptist limped toward him, every step contorting his body, his left hip collapsing beneath him, his toes dragging, then lifting, then dragging again.

“Gethin,” Annan whispered.

He knew now why, back on the tourney field, he had felt the urge to flee. Standing before him was the greatest enemy he had ever faced.

His past.