

THE BRITON AND THE DANE
Concordia

MARY ANN BERNAL



Published in the United States of America in association with
The Literary Underground, Yucaipa, California 92399
www.litunderground.com

Copyright © 2013 by Mary Ann Bernal

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the author.

ISBN: 978-1481889940

Cover design by Steven Novak
www.novakillustration.com

For

Alex and Kerry
Alex, Ana and Addy

Dedicated to the memory of

KIA Kabul Afghanistan 27 April 2011

Lt Col Frank Bryant
Major David Brodeur
Major Jeffrey Ausborn
Major Raymond Estelle
Major Philip Ambard
Major Charles Ransom
Capt Nathan Nylander
MSgt Tara Brown
Mr. James McLaughlin
and all the fallen
military and civilian heroes
in the ongoing fight against terror

Acknowledgements

There are many people that have played a supportive role during my writing journey. The enthusiasm and belief in the project provided by my editor, WeiEn Chen, is truly gratifying.

My family and friends continual encouragement since I embarked on fulfilling my lifelong dream is also deeply appreciated.

Very special thanks to Mark Barry, my staunchest supporter and dearest friend. I am also indebted to Diane Boni, D. G. Turner, and Holliday Franger for their insightful feedback as they eagerly read the draft manuscript, and to Sonja Cox for her invaluable assistance with my marketing endeavors.

My illustrator, Steven Novak, designed covers that accurately depict the theme of the series, and I am most grateful for his exceptional creative talent.

Lastly, I wish to thank my wonderful reading public for their interest in my work. “The Briton and the Dane” novels will truly transcend time because of the remarkable support that I continue to receive from my fans.

Novels by Mary Ann Bernal

The Briton and the Dane: Concordia

The Briton and the Dane Trilogy:

The Briton and the Dane

The Briton and the Dane: Birthright

The Briton and the Dane: Legacy





Europe

Kingdom of Anglo-Saxon Wessex
Reign of Alfred the Great

Capital and Court at Winchester
Alfred the Great - King of Wessex
Aethelwitha - Alfred's Queen

Children

Edward the Elder; Aethelflaed
Aefthryth; Aethelgifu; Aethelweard

The Queen's Confessor

Father Damian

The King's Army

Brantson - Commander
Bryce - First Officer

Court School

Brother Frederic

Burh of Wareham

Lord Stephen - Commandant
Elizabeth - wife of Lord Stephen
Gabriel - son of Stephen & Elizabeth
Oriana - daughter of Stephen & Elizabeth
Concordia - daughter of Stephen & Arista
Emidus - son of Stephen & Arista
Winifred - Concordia's servant
Diera - love interest of Umar
Father Osmund - Abbey priest

European Continent

Rome - The Papal City

Pope John IX

Holy Roman Emperor

Arnulf of Carinthia

Frankish Coast

Lothar - Umar's Uncle

Hilary - wife of Lothar; Umar's Aunt

Celsa - daughter of Lothar & Hilary

Muslim Hispania - Emirate of Cordova

Valencia

Idris & Hadaya -governing family

Málaga

Thayer - son of Idris & Hadaya

Sharif - Thayer's henchman

Nadia- love interest of Thayer

Bashir - Nadia's henchman

Yara - slave & love interest of Jafri

Marbella

Umar - fisherman

Saracen Pirates

Chad - leader

Dean

Liban

Jafri - love interest of Yara

Concordia's World

King Alfred's court school was flourishing despite the badgering heathen raids that continued to plague the Saxon king's reign. Even though King Guthrum's successor, King Eohric, continued to honor the treaty agreed to by his predecessor, invading Norsemen continued to harass Britannia's shores, seeking to conquer the rich fertile lands of the Kingdom of Wessex.

Scholars and students from the continent paid no heed to the heathen threat since warfare was a way of life in an age dominated by invasion and conquest where all of Christendom was fighting not only the feared Norsemen but also the Saracen menace. Moorish pirates sailed the Mediterranean Sea and ventured across the Frankish kingdom pursuing plunder and slaves.

Protecting travelers was a lucrative business that mercenaries exploited, charging steep fees that were readily paid by people of privilege. Thieves usually avoided armed caravans since it was well known that seasoned warriors gave no quarter. The Holy Roman Emperor's army also hunted the brigands that harassed the countryside, but Moorish bandits struck quickly and returned to hidden camps lining Hispania's coastline.

Travelers failed to be dissuaded, drawing up wills and placing their affairs in order prior to embarking on a lengthy journey. Tradesmen, merchants, scholars and students were drawn to the thriving cities while pilgrims flocked to newly-built abbeys to atone for their many sins.

As powerful rulers increased the size of their standing armies and warriors were trained to keep the peace within the realm, the perils of traveling lessened. Visiting foreign lands enticed the adventurous spirit and excited the soul as conditions improved. While people prayed for safe deliverance, enslavement or death was a reality that could not be denied, yet they willingly risked life and limb, because whatever fate was suffered was the will of God.

Preface

Concordia hurried across the deserted courtyard and headed towards the massive Keep that dominated King Alfred's fortified city of Winchester. She kept within the shadows and was grateful for the cloud cover while running past the soldiers patrolling the wall-walk and avoiding the ever-present sentries that walked the familiar streets. She pulled her hood tighter around her face when a sudden gust of wind scattered the willowy clouds and moonbeams illuminated the darkened night. She looked atop the tower and quickened her pace when she noticed a solitary figure glancing in her direction.

Concordia waved excitedly as she approached the stairwell and was out of breath by the time she reached the top. Her eyes sparkled and her face was flushed as she removed her hood, her loose tresses caressing her face when touched by the whispering wind, her simple dress accentuating her curvaceous body while her cloak fluttered about her.

Thayer bowed ceremoniously, grasped her hand and kissed the tip of her fingers. He laughed inwardly since he was amused by her reticence as she quickly withdrew her hand, yet he looked questionably into her glowing eyes while brushing aside unruly strands of hair that billowed effortlessly in the wind.

Concordia glanced upon the exotic Moor whom she admired from the moment he had arrived at the court school. She had kept her distance because she feared the awakening emotions that consumed her thoughts whenever she came upon him, whether in the classroom or at the king's table. She remembered her embarrassment each time he caught her staring at him during one of Brother Frederic's lengthy discussions; however, she was genuinely pleased when he winked in acknowledgement, and how could she forget the sparkle in his eyes? His dark features added to his mystique, which fueled the budding fire within her soul. Concordia sensed his excitement when their hands touched briefly each time he handed her a book or helped her rise from a chair. She preferred sharing the evening meal at the king's table where Thayer would be found sitting next to the queen, and she still had the flower petals he had given her when they first met. She tried to suppress her feelings, knowing her father would

never permit such a match, even though Concordia and Thayer shared a passion for knowledge in a world shrouded in warfare.

“You are trembling,” Thayer whispered as he pulled her closer and held her tightly in a loving embrace.

Concordia did not shy away from his touch, but welcomed his protective arms as she tried to control her rising emotions while fearing the truth of his words. Her watery eyes glistened in the moonlight as she buried her head in his chest, taking deep breaths as her mind made sense of her chaotic thoughts while finding the courage to speak the words hidden within her heart.

“Do not be distressed,” Thayer said softly as he kissed the top of her head. “Our friendship is unrivaled and I shall cherish the memories.”

Concordia freed herself from his embrace and walked towards the wall while admonishing herself for her foolishness. He had spoken the truth, they were just friends, but because she was smitten, she believed he returned her love. She would have been humiliated by her confession and silently thanked the Lord that she had held her tongue.

“I beg forgiveness,” Concordia said as she glanced upon the darkened landscape. “I had grown accustomed to your presence in the classroom and will miss our debates. I meant no offense.”

“Ah, Concordia, never apologize for speaking your thoughts...that is why I find you so refreshing...I have enjoyed our differing opinions...you will be sorely missed.”

Concordia wrapped her cloak tightly around her as wind gusts chilled the night air. She smiled slightly when Thayer placed a velvet pouch in her hand, yet she was hesitant to accept the gift.

“Open it,” Thayer whispered in her ear.

Concordia gasped when she saw the gold bead necklace, but she could not curtail her excitement when she held the striking jewels against her chest. The gold beads were interspersed with turquoise and blue glass of various designs, and each bead was elegantly embellished by exquisitely engraved decorations.

“I have never seen such intricate work,” Concordia said excitedly as Thayer clasped the necklace around her neck. “There are no words...but I cannot accept such a costly gift.”

“You must, lest you offend my mother.”

“I do not understand...how am I known?”

“I had written my mother of our friendship...she sent this token so you may always remember the bond we share...it belonged to her mother...she insisted.”

“Tell her I am most pleased,” Concordia murmured as she held the beads gently between her fingers while averting his gaze. “Tell her I shall never forget her kindness.”

“Come, the hour grows late...you must be in your chambers before you are missed.”

Concordia followed Thayer down the stairs as the clouds once again covered the full moon. She walked silently beside the man who had captured her heart, etching his features into memory, to remember in the days ahead, when she grieved for a love that might have been.

Thayer stopped abruptly when they reached the king’s private quarters, grasped Concordia by the shoulders and kissed her gently upon her lips.

“Forgive my impertinence,” Thayer said softly. “I cannot leave without telling you...if only...you must go before words are spoken that cannot be taken back...go!”

“I do not understand,” Concordia tearfully replied. “Can you not see...”

“Hush,” Thayer interrupted as he placed his finger over her lips. “I know.”

“Will I ever see you again?” Concordia asked, her voice choked with emotion.

“If Allah wills it,” Thayer replied kindly before he disappeared into the night.

Chapter One

As the sun began its descent in a cloudless sky, the battle-weary Saxons cheered as the blazing dragonship sank in the windswept channel. The forceful gusts obscured the cries of drowning men as the remnants of Norse invaders embraced a watery grave. The stench of death intermingled with the sea mist as King Alfred's warriors walked amongst the carnage, seeking their fallen brothers in arms while a healer tended to the wounded.

Women from a nearby village hurried towards the sandy battlefield, carrying baskets filled with an assortment of healing herbs while children carried much needed linen to bind the wounds. The healer was grateful for their assistance, barking orders as he bound the severed leg of a gravely injured warrior.

"We are skilled with the needle," one of the women said as she pointed to a man whose arm had been slashed.

"Tend to him then!" The healer shouted while the rest of the women made themselves useful ministering to the mutilated men.

A stableboy drove a wagon down the sloping shoreline, reining his horse when he reached the blood-soaked beach. He jumped off his seat and calmed the frightened animal as he waited to load the wagon, thanking the Lord silently that the heathen assault had been thwarted.

Brantson walked amongst the wounded as his able-bodied men made the necessary preparations to bury the dead. He spoke with every man, assessing their wounds while providing comfort, but his demeanor was somber as he silently counted the number of warriors he had lost. Brantson gestured to the stableboy who hurried towards him, and he smiled slightly when the lad removed his hat and bowed.

"How are you called?"

"Alden, my lord."

"Alden, I would have you bring the wounded men to the holy brothers at the abbey, but return quickly for the dead."

"We will need more wagons," Alden replied while pointing at the heathen bodies.

"Nay, we will alight a funeral fire as is their custom...I would not deny them their beliefs."

"As you wish," Alden mumbled before taking his leave.

“The boy seemed surprised by your honorable treatment of the enemy,” the first officer said quietly as he approached his commander.

“It is only fitting,” Brantson murmured as he gazed upon the lifeless bodies. “But you already know my thoughts in this regard, so why are you troubled?”

“One of the children said there were two dragonships.”

Brantson did not answer immediately but rather walked towards the rippling waves breaking softly upon the muddy beach. He glanced at the quiet coastline as the red and orange hues of twilight brightened the evening sky.

“Set up camp in the forest, near the abbey. If what the boy said is true, I would expect a raid when the moon sits high in the sky.”

Brantson remained at the water’s edge while his first officer carried out his orders. His thoughts returned to a battle at sea so many years past, when the man he called father had died while serving King Alfred in a fight of his own choosing. If the king had not been victorious, Rollo’s fate might never have been known. His eyes became moist as he remembered the pain the woman he called mother suffered once she learned the truth, and because he remembered, he took pity on the heathen women who lived across the North Sea since they would never learn the fate of their men.

The Saxon warriors rested in the darkened camp, eating dried meat but drinking sparsely as they awaited the enemy while scouting parties patrolled the shoreline in the warm night air. The men spoke in whispers, their soft words hidden beneath the screeching sound of dying animals as nocturnal predators ensnared their prey. A gentle breeze rustled the trees, the cool night air a welcome respite from the sweltering heat that lingered across the countryside. Faint flashes of lightning were seen on the horizon, casting an eerie whitish glow in the star-studded sky.

Brantson sat against a white birch, sharpening his sword while his thoughts wandered to happier days when cousins spent the summer months in Exeter, visiting Concordia’s Uncle Sidonius, her mother’s brother who had restored the familial estate to its former glory. A smile formed on his solemn face when he recalled Concordia running through a flowery meadow, her laughter echoing across the countryside as she playfully teased the younger children. He was not

of their blood, but he was considered family, sharing a life once thought beyond his reach. The cousins sought his counsel because he was older and wise beyond his years, which formed a deepening bond that defied the passage of time.

Brantson did not remember when his feelings towards Concordia began to change. She was as a sister, a spirited little girl who never left his side whenever he visited Wareham. His hand sought the silver Cross he wore beneath his tunic, Concordia's parting gift when he left to serve in King Alfred's army. She had stayed atop the Keep until he was lost to her view, a mere child whom he would not see again for many years.

Brantson rose in the ranks of King Alfred's army and became a respected officer, a gifted tactician who thwarted the Norsemen on numerous campaigns, but the heathen continued to threaten Britannia's shores, keeping Brantson in the midst of battle and preventing him from returning to those he loved.

"My lord," Bryce said softly as he approached his commander.

Brantson smiled at his first officer, beckoning him to sit while sheathing his sword. He handed the younger man a wineskin filled with water and waited as Bryce greedily drank his fill.

"The breeze does little to dispel this insufferable heat!" Bryce grinned as he wiped his mouth with the back of his gloved hand. "Rain would be most welcome."

"Not until we win the battle!"

"That is what I meant," Bryce chuckled, "but all is quiet still. It is possible the children were mistaken."

"I pray that is so, but the night is young...and the abbey is known for its riches, but that is not why you seek me."

"You speak the truth, as always. We have received word from the king," Bryce replied as he handed Brantson a sealed parchment. "The messenger is being fed as we speak."

Brantson broke the king's seal and was surprised when he noticed that a second letter had been enclosed with the king's communication. He recognized Concordia's handwriting but controlled his desire to read her words before reading his king's orders.

"We are to return to court once we finish here," Brantson said, somewhat bemused. "I wonder what mischief is planned."

“Concordia must be behind this,” Bryce laughed while pointing to the second letter that Brantson shoved inside his boot, “and why have you not yet told her how you truly feel?”

“If there is no battle, we will set out at first light, otherwise we will leave once the men are rested. Have the messenger await us at the abbey, but have him inform the healer we would have our wounded return with us, if they are fit to travel,” Brantson barked at his first officer.

“I meant no disrespect and apologize for my impertinence,” Bryce told his commander and friend as he arose.

“I must beg forgiveness, my tone was overly harsh,” Brantson whispered as he stood up and grasped Bryce’s forearm.

“There is nothing to forgive, the day has been long and it is not yet finished...we are all in need of rest.”

Brantson nodded as Bryce returned to the camp, waiting until he was once again alone before retrieving Concordia’s letter. He leaned against the smooth bark of an oak tree and gently broke the wax seal. He read over the words quickly, holding his breath with each sentence, before he slowly read again Concordia’s innocent words...

“Brantson, I trust you are well. It is unfortunate that I have not had the pleasure of your company since I have been housed at the king’s court, but this will soon be remedied. I am in need of your wise counsel, and beg your support, as you have done so many times when I was but a child. I await you anxiously, my dearest friend. Concordia.”

“Concordia, what are you up to now?” Brantson mumbled beneath his breath while shaking his head.

Brantson folded Concordia’s letter, placed it inside King Alfred’s message, and thrust the communication into his pouch. He grasped his belted dagger, his fingers clenching and unclenching the hilt while he tried to interpret Concordia’s cryptic message. He was troubled because she called him her dearest friend. She held his heart, but he feared he had waited too long to confess his true feelings, and that she was already smitten with someone she had met at court. He vowed to seek her hand in marriage, but then could he chance losing her friendship if she feared his love?

Brantson was grateful to return to the task at hand when one of his men hurriedly ran towards him.

“There is movement amongst the trees,” the warrior whispered as he pointed towards the dense brushwood.

Brantson nodded while silently giving the order to pursue the enemy. His men crept stealthily through the forest, keeping their distance while trying to determine the size of the enemy forces.

“Have the archers await the enemy at the abbey. They will have to cross open ground before they reach the walls,” Brantson said quietly to the young warrior.

Brantson searched for Bryce as he walked silently through the woods with his sword drawn, but he had difficulty identifying any of his warriors in the darkened shadows.

“My lord,” a whispered voice said from behind. “There are ten men, maybe eleven.”

“They are outnumbered then, but I would rather fight in the clearing than amongst the trees...but if we silence them, one at a time, from the rear, we hold the advantage and will keep our losses to a minimum. Find Officer Bryce and tell him I will join our scouts watching the beach. I would capture their ship.”

“As you command,” the warrior replied as he disappeared within the trees.

While the archers stood at the ready, waiting for the order to release a deadly barrage of arrows, the Saxon foot soldiers quickly came upon the unsuspecting Norsemen with drawn daggers. Bryce nodded when one of the foot soldiers put his hand over the surprised heathen’s mouth, deftly slit his throat and quietly placed the dead body upon the ground. Another heathen was taken by surprise and yet another, which left six invaders to be felled by the archer’s arrow.

Brantson could smell victory as he joined his scouts who had already captured the anchored dragonship. He noticed two Norsemen bound together, sitting near the water’s edge, but he had not expected to find enslaved women and children crammed in the dark hull when he boarded the vessel. He shouted to his men as he started to pull the captives onto the deck. His warriors reassured the frightened children while the women kept praising God for their deliverance.

“Our village is near Chichester,” one of the women tearfully said. “We do not know the fate of our men.”

“We will rest in the abbey this night,” Brantson replied, “but do not worry, my warriors will see to your safe return.”

Brantson turned his attention to the Norsemen who glared at their captor as he approached. Both men spat at Brantson’s feet when he stood before them, and remained silent when questioned.

“My lord!” Bryce shouted as he ran down the sloping shoreline and headed towards the water’s edge, but he stopped abruptly when he came upon the women and children.

“They were taken near Chichester,” one of the scouts said. “We are bringing them to the abbey.”

“Praise God they were not harmed,” Bryce whispered as the women and children followed their saviors towards the forest path that led to the abbey while Brantson joined him.

“Select ten men who have seafarer training. We will sail this ship to Wareham, and from there we will escort these men to Winchester. Perhaps they might be persuaded to speak to the king,” Brantson began. “I leave you the command...see that the dead are properly buried...any wounded who are not fit to travel are to remain at the abbey until the healer releases them from his care...return the women and children to their village, but if the village is destroyed, bring them to the fortification and seek Lord David’s counsel. Once all is settled, meet me at the king’s court.”

“As you command,” Bryce saluted, but before he took his leave he whispered mischievously. “Good luck pursuing Concordia.”

Brantson’s face turned bright red as his first officer quickly left the beach, but he did not mind the words because Bryce was a trusted friend, a friend who had suspected the depth of his feelings for Concordia before he had admitted the truth to himself.

Chapter Two

Concordia was in her chambers writing a letter to her father. She stared at the blank parchment, composing her thoughts while dipping the quill into the inkpot, mumbling under her breath, her rambling words making no sense because she could not curtail her excitement. She sighed deeply, threw the quill down as she rose from the table. She paced the length of the room, mumbling to herself as she spoke the words she needed to write, and paid no heed to the gentle knocking on the door.

“May I enter?” Emidus asked through the wood.

Concordia quickly opened the door and embraced her twin. He noticed her agitated state and could only wonder what she was plotting as he entered the room.

“The queen would have us at her table for the evening meal,” her brother told her while helping himself to a cup of wine.

“Must we?”

“Of course we must,” Emidus grinned as he fingered the parchment.

Concordia grabbed the vellum, crumpled it into a ball and tossed it into the blazing fire. She felt the heat rising into her cheeks as her face turned bright red when she noticed Emidus’ knowledgeable eyes glaring at her, challenging her intent and daring her to speak the truth.

“Father will never agree,” Emidus told her knowingly.

“You do not know that!” Concordia huffed while knowing in her heart that her brother was probably right, yet again!

“Of course, if the queen championed your cause and convinced the king...”

“Then father would have to give his consent,” Concordia interrupted. “Father would never dare defy his king.”

Concordia was glowing when she suddenly grasped her brother’s hands and spun him around her chambers while humming a festive tune, her steps lively and precise as she followed Emidus’ lead. They circled the room too many times to count and were out of breath when the church bells chimed.

“*Vespers!*” Concordia whispered. “Would our presence be missed?”

“I dare say highly doubtful with Emperor Leo’s emissary at court...their presence is the reason you plot, am I right?”

“I do not plot!” Concordia laughed while feigning offense. “But how did you...”

“Know that you would travel to Constantinople...that you want to visit the remnants of Rome’s Eastern Empire...that you want to see for yourself the world outside these walls!”

“Oh Emidus, you know me so well. You are right; I wish to visit the Eastern Empire...there are so many cities to explore, not only Constantinople but Athens and Alexandria...and Rome, the seat of the Western Empire, and what of Aachen? Charlemagne’s palace still stands, does it not?”

“Your journey would take years, which is why I do not believe father would sanction such a request.”

“But we have been at court these past two summers and father has yet to visit!”

“That might be true, but you are still on Britannia’s soil, protected and safe!” Emidus reminded her. “And you have yet to reveal your true purpose and name the country that you would choose above all others, a country shrouded in mystery, a land that does not follow the teachings of Christ Jesus.”

Concordia turned away from her brother and walked towards the open window. She watched the beautiful dark blue hues of the evening sky turning day into night while glittering stars dominated the heavens. She took deep breaths, needing to master her emotions, and needing to forget the exotic Moor who had captured her heart while chiding herself for her foolishness since Thayer had never encouraged her love.

Concordia was silent when Emidus joined her, yet she did not shy away from his protective embrace. She rested her head against her beloved brother's shoulder as she found the courage to speak.

“Was I so transparent?”

“Oh dear sister, when Thayer was presented at court I knew you were smitten once your eyes found his, but I kept your secret. I did not meddle because I knew you would not listen. I also feared you might do something foolish if you were denied his company. I could not have you return with him to his lands, the danger is too great.”

“I am not very wise, and I tend to rule with my heart, but while I would welcome a chance to see him one last time, I would not place

myself in danger to do so,” Concordia whispered. “Might I persuade you to accompany me...father would find it difficult to deny us both!”

“And why would I be tempted to join you?”

“Do not tease me brother! I would welcome your company.”

“I believe the Athenian students are returning to their homeland in three months time...we could book passage on their ship.”

Concordia screeched with delight as she held her brother in a forceful embrace. Emidus grinned while freeing himself from her suffocating hold and kissing the top of her head.

“Come, we must join the queen for the evening meal,” Emidus reminded her as he walked towards the door, “but tomorrow we must come up with a plan...and I admit I am looking forward to the adventure!”

Queen Aethelwitha was conversing with her son, Prince Edward, when Concordia and Emidus entered the festive Great Hall. Minstrels walked amongst the honored guests, playing their harps while storytellers recited epic tales of heroic adventures from days lost past. The smell of freshly-baked bread tantalized the senses, the aroma carried through the air by a gentle breeze filtering through the open windows. Serving women placed platters filled with a variety of roasted meats and fish upon the many linen-covered tables while serving men kept goblets filled to the brim with imported French wine.

Concordia and Emidus chose to sit with the men who had accompanied Emperor Leo’s emissary to Britannia’s shores. Concordia was charming and quite a delight to the foreign visitors who quickly became enamored with such a lovely creature who was genuinely interested in learning about their homeland. The men vied for her attention, answering her innocent questions at the same time, much to Emidus’ amusement.

“We will be quite knowledgeable about the Eastern Empire before the evening ends,” Emidus thought as he quietly ate his fill.

While Concordia enthralled the queen’s invited guests, King Alfred entered the hall, but the unpretentious king insisted that his subjects remain seated as he joined his wife at the high table. The room became quiet when the king lifted his goblet in the air, toasting his esteemed guests while speaking.

“I am pleased that your emperor has such interest in my humble kingdom...I invite you to walk the streets of this fair city during your stay...our schools are renowned throughout all of Christendom as are our abbeys...you will be most welcome by all my subjects.”

King Alfred nodded before emptying his cup in one swallow to the cheers of his guests.

“You are beautiful my queen,” King Alfred whispered as he sat next to his wife and motioned for the feasting to begin.

Acrobats and tumblers appeared out of nowhere to everyone’s delight. The minstrels’ lively music accompanied the amazing feats of the talented performers, but it was the fire-eating jesters that mesmerized the crowd. Concordia jumped in her seat when one of the jesters breathed a fireball in her direction, which frightened her acquaintances while fire jugglers walked the length of the tables, impressing the people with their specialized skill. There were shouts and applause when the performers bowed in front of their king before taking their leave.

King Alfred rose from the table, but he did not speak until the trumpeter quieted the crowd.

“My wife and I would retire, but please enjoy the festivities...there is much food and drink yet...and dancing...the minstrels will entertain until first light should there be a need!”

Emidus nodded to his king and queen as they left the Great Hall, but he was surprised when Prince Edward sought his company.

“I would have words,” Prince Edward told him as he headed towards the door.

Emidus was intrigued by the unexpected command, but he needed to find someone he could trust to escort Concordia to her chambers and was relieved when he noticed that one of the king’s personal guards had yet to leave the hall. The soldier was more than willing to accommodate Emidus’ request and was quick to join Concordia at the table. Once Emidus was satisfied that his sister was protected, he stepped into the darkened courtyard where Prince Edward waited patiently.

“My lord,” Emidus bowed, “how may I serve you?”

“Do not be so formal, are we not friends?”

Emidus nodded.

“I have need of a personal advisor, someone who will not flower their words but will speak the truth, no matter how unpleasant,

someone whose loyalty is above reproach, that someone I seek is you. Would you be willing to accept this coveted position?"

"My lord, there are no words," Emidus stammered. "I am most honored to be considered."

"You accept?"

"How could I not? I am truly grateful for this privilege and will serve you well."

"It is settled then...be at my table for the morning meal...we have much to discuss."

Chapter Three

The court school was a bustle of activity as teachers prepared the day's lesson. The three-story building contained classrooms on the first two floors, but the prized library occupied the entire third level where learned scribes copied selected passages from literary works for use during class. Students who sought to master a difficult subject would be tutored privately before lessons began while the remaining aspiring scholars shared the morning meal in the nearby kitchens.

Concordia's mind was elsewhere as she helped herself to a bowl of porridge before sitting at the end of the long table. She smiled at the young men when they acknowledged her presence, but her thoughts were chaotic as she satisfied her hunger. She stared through the open window as translucent sunbeams caressed the dew-soaked grass, and she was genuinely startled when Brother Frederic joined her. She paid no heed to the curious stares of her fellow students while she quietly conversed with her favorite teacher.

"We need privacy," Brother Frederic whispered, annoyed by the men's probing glances. "Come with me."

Concordia felt the color rising as her face turned crimson when she and Brother Frederic suddenly arose from the table and left the room. She could hear the whispers when she stepped into the dusty courtyard, but she stifled her laughter, knowing that this unprecedented event only added to her mystique. Since she was the only young woman attending the court school at this time, she maintained a brotherly-type friendship with the young men, taking care not to encourage their unsolicited advances.

"I fear I have aroused their curiosity, but I had little choice," Brother Frederic apologized.

"Do not worry, they will soon forget our meeting...but I am pleased you sought me before setting out for Exeter...and if I may be so bold...I seek a favor...if you are willing."

"If it is within my power, you know well my answer."

"I have written my Uncle Sidonius whose villa is not far from the abbey," Concordia said softly as she retrieved a sealed parchment from her pouch. "If you would personally deliver this, then I need not trouble the king's messenger."

“Is that all?” Brother Frederic grinned conspiratorially. “Dare I venture a guess?”

“Do not tease me so! But I do confess you know me well.”

“Ah, you would have your uncle champion your cause. Am I right?”

Concordia nodded excitedly.

“Perhaps I might also be of assistance, if the Bishop grants my request.”

“I do not understand. Of what do you speak?”

“It has always been my desire to visit the Holy Land. If I am permitted this pilgrimage, then we might travel together...I would see you safely delivered to Athens before proceeding onto Jerusalem.”

“The Greek students will return to their homeland soon...we could travel on their ship!”

“We both must have permission, my child,” Brother Frederic reminded her. “I will await your uncle’s reply before returning...but without your father’s consent...”

“Leave my father to me,” Concordia interrupted as she embraced the Benedictine monk warmly. “Godspeed.”

Concordia waited in the early morning heat until Brother Frederic was lost to her view before returning to the court school. She did not want to be instructed this day, she wanted to get a message to her father and beg the queen’s help, she wanted to make preparations for her journey, and she needed to find Emidus who was noticeably absent when the study of mathematics began.

The morning seemed endless as Concordia sat through her assigned classes, her waning interest quite noticeable by the time the bells called the faithful to *Sext*. She grabbed her books, running out the door and into the busy street before the final rhythmic chime. She hurried towards Emidus’ quarters while praying silently that he had not taken to his bed.

“Emidus!” Concordia screamed as she pushed open the door to his chambers and ran into the empty room.

“My lady?” A serving woman asked.

“Have you seen my brother?”

“He was with Prince Edward at the morning meal, but he has yet to return to his quarters. Is something wrong?”

“It is nothing...I had forgotten about his meeting...I did not mean to disturb you.”

The serving woman smiled, returning to her chores while Concordia went back to her nearby chambers. She opened the door slowly so as not to startle any servants that might be cleaning her quarters, and breathed a sigh of relief when she found the rooms empty. She poured herself a cup of watered-down wine and sipped her drink slowly as she walked towards the window. She glanced at the Keep, searching for the familiar figure that would never return as she grasped the delicate beads of her treasured necklace between her fingers. She watched the soldiers patrolling the wall-walk and smiled silently when she noticed the embarrassed look of a young maiden when the boy she apparently fancied stole a kiss.

“I wonder if Thayer is promised,” Concordia mumbled to herself as the enamored couple disappeared from her view, yet sighing wistfully when she heard the knock on the door.

“Enter!”

Emidus opened the door slowly, glancing about the room before entering. He noticed his sister’s pensive look while helping himself to some wine. He drained the cup in one swallow, filled it again and emptied it quickly. He sat the goblet down and joined his sister at the window, remaining silent as he gazed upon her face, and waited patiently for her to speak.

“You were sorely missed this morning...I thought you had taken ill.”

“I did not mean to upset you...the hour was late when I spoke with Prince Edward...but you are right, I should have told you.”

“Why were you summoned?”

“You are speaking to Prince Edward’s personal advisor,” Emidus beamed.

“Father will be proud as I am proud!” Concordia said excitedly as she embraced her brother. “And Uncle Sidonius...we must send word!”

“So we shall, but I fear your travel plans have been thwarted.”

“How so?”

“I cannot accompany you on your journey.”

“Not to worry, dear brother...I have since learned that Brother Frederic is planning a pilgrimage to the Holy Land...he will travel

with me and see to my safe deliverance! And he will visit with Uncle Sidonius who must surely sanction my journey.”

“Have you sent word to father?”

“No, but the letter is written. If you write of your appointment, then the messages can be sent together, and I do believe father’s messenger has yet to return to Wareham.”

“I will see to it,” Emidus grinned. “Ah, I almost forgot...King Alfred has received word from Brantson...he is personally escorting two captured Norsemen to Winchester...he should arrive within a fortnight. Would you be pleased to see him?”

“How could you ask such a question? Brantson is my dearest friend...and I must confess that I have written him, seeking his counsel when he next meets with the king.”

“Intriguing as always, dear sister...would you speak of your lost love or convince him to champion your cause?”

“You are most wicked!” Concordia laughed. “I would seek his protection on the voyage, if the king agrees to my request.”

“Watch your words or all will be lost.”

“I do not understand.”

“Concordia, I have seen how Brantson looks at you...I do believe you hold his heart, but...”

“You are mistaken...we do have a special bond...that is true...but we are as brother and sister, that is all.”

“Nevertheless, tread carefully. Brantson is also like a brother and I would not have you encourage his advances if your heart lies elsewhere.”

“Emidus! You do me a grave injustice. I would take the veil rather than cause Brantson pain...I cannot bear the thought!”

“Would you consider becoming his wife? Brantson is a suitable match and father would be very pleased.”

“Now look what you have done! How can I face Brantson knowing that he pines for me...you have ruined everything!”

“You are behaving like a coddled child!” Emidus told her firmly. “Surely you know that you cannot remain a maid forever. Why not be wed to a man who truly loves you? You already love him as a friend...the marriage could work.”

“Leave me...I beg you,” Concordia said through misty eyes. “I have much to think about.”

“I am sorry you are troubled, but you must know the truth little sister...and you must know that I cannot protect you forever.”

Chapter Four

The days passed slowly for Concordia as she anxiously awaited word from her father and dear uncle. She wanted to take Queen Aethelswitha into her confidence, yet she was hesitant because her true intentions might be misconstrued. Did anyone other than her brother suspect that she had been enamored with a mysterious foreigner who had graced the court school one summer past? She believed she had kept her feelings to herself, yet if Emidus had suspected the truth, how many others were knowledgeable but remain silent? What if the queen believed she was seeking to rekindle a friendship because of her obsession over Thayer rather than wishing to expand her knowledge of the known world?

Concordia was deep in thought as she returned to her quarters, choosing to walk through the king's private gardens to save time. Butterflies fluttered above a variety of blossomed flowers while bees foraged for nectar amongst the pale yellow petals. Hummingbirds hovered above an ancient Roman fountain, the birds' soft melodious tunes mingling with the soothing sounds of flowing water that rippled gently over the edge of the multi-tiered structure. Squirrels scurried playfully between the bushes bordering the carefully-tended enclosure while golden fish swam amongst water plants in the freshwater pond. A refreshing breeze cooled the stagnant air as the sun descended slowly upon the horizon, the bluish hues appearing violet in the darkening sky.

King Alfred was deep in meditation and prayer, hidden within a cluster of apple trees that provided a shady retreat from the overbearing summer sun. He heard Concordia's footsteps upon the lush green grass before he caught sight of her walking across the lawn. He smiled slightly at the comely young woman he loved as a sister, waiting until she was closer before calling out her name and beckoning that she join him.

Concordia waved and hurriedly approached her king, her face glowing when she bowed and kissed his ring. She remained standing in the royal presence, but was pleased when he insisted that she sit beside him. She waited for permission to speak while the king closed his prayer book and placed it atop the stone bench, and was relieved when he told her she could speak freely.

“I did not mean to disturb you...I would have walked the courtyard had I but known,” Concordia stammered while rubbing her sweating palms.

King Alfred stifled the laughter that escaped his lips with the back of his hand, feigning a cough to ease her discomfiture. He winked mischievously, taking her hand in his when he spoke.

“Are you not a member of my household? And were you not presented to me when but a child? Why then are you so unsettled?”

Concordia’s breathing was erratic as she tried to organize the chaotic thoughts engulfing her mind. She did not know where to begin nor did she know what should be shared. If she said too little, the king might not understand her misgivings, but if she said too much, the king might not sanction her plans.

“Concordia, do not fear to take me into your confidence. Whatever is troubling you can be remedied, you have my word.”

“I want to see the country of my ancestors...I want to visit the great cities...and sit upon the stones where Socrates once spoke...and Emperor Constantine’s capital...and not be wed unless I am willing,” Concordia stammered between breaths while beads of sweat trickled down her face, her damp hair clinging to her neck. “Why cannot I determine my own fate as did my mother?”

“I have been told you are very much your mother’s daughter,” King Alfred said compassionately. “I have prayed before her crypt when at Exeter, and I have founded an abbey in her memory.”

“My lord, I meant no offense. I...”

King Alfred raised his hand to silence her, and gently embraced the embarrassed young woman before he spoke.

“I have had word from your father...he understands the fire that burns in your soul, but he is uneasy about granting your request. The journey you plan would take more than one summer, and pirates and bandits prey on the innocent.”

Concordia looked pleadingly upon her king through misty eyes, but she refrained from interrupting, hoping beyond hope that she might convince the king to approve her request while silently praying for a miracle.

“Your father is accompanying Brantson and should arrive within a fortnight. We will discuss your planned journey at length, but we will also decide on a suitable husband.”

“You have spoken to Emidus then?” Concordia interrupted.

“I have not, but if you have secrets, I would have you reveal whatever you keep from your father...you must be given proper counsel so you may choose wisely.”

“My mother chose my father, why cannot I do the same?”

“You are infatuated with appearances and charm and have not given much thought beyond the nuptial bed. Thayer does not believe in Christ Jesus, and for this very reason, what you seek cannot be.”

“We were just friends...he behaved appropriately, and we were never alone...and I have received no word since he returned to his homeland.”

“Yet you wear his necklace,” King Alfred told her as he fingered the beautiful beads that glittered in the fading sunlight.

Concordia was at a loss for words as she gazed upon her king. If Emidus had not shared his concerns about her Moorish friend, how did the king discover the truth? While it was true that she thought of Thayer occasionally, she was not that besotted! Or was she?

“My head aches...and what is that smell?” King Alfred asked unexpectedly, but Concordia was too focused on her own plight to notice the king’s blank stare.

Suddenly King Alfred’s muscles contracted, his limbs jerking uncontrollably as he fell onto the ground, soiling his clothing while his eyelids fluttered and his eyes rolled upward. Frightening sounds escaped through clenched teeth as saliva dripped down the side of his mouth.

“I need a healer!” Concordia screamed, watching in horror as the king’s limbs stiffened and his breathing became labored. “I need a healer!”

Two of King Alfred’s personal guards quickly made their presence known, while a third guard sought the healer. The men acted quickly, placing a cloth beneath the king’s head while turning him onto his side.

“Fetch the queen,” one of the guards shouted, but Concordia was too frightened to obey the command since she feared the king had been poisoned.

“Are you simple?” The other guard barked. “Fetch the queen.”

Concordia was trembling as she backed away, sobbing uncontrollably while attempting to do as she was bid, but her knees buckled and she fell to the ground whilst chastising herself for being weak, yet she could not move because her fear was too great. She

saw the queen approaching from the corner of her eye just as Emidus lifted her into his arms and carried her out of the gardens. Her brother spoke comforting words as he hurried to their quarters, but Concordia could not stop her tears.

“Is the king dead?” Concordia sobbed.

“No, but you must never repeat what you have just witnessed...the king’s enemies must never learn his weakness.”

“I do not understand.”

“Those who are privy to the king’s sickness are sworn to secrecy...I was with Prince Edward when his father suffered an episode two summers past, but I fear the scourge no longer sleeps.”

“Why did you not tell me?” Concordia whispered. “If I had known, I would not have behaved like such a dolt!”

“I gave my word...would you have me disgraced?”

Concordia shook her head as her tears subsided, but she took a deep breath before speaking.

“The king believes I pine for Thayer, and I fear father might also believe this truth. Since I have the king’s word that you did not reveal your suspicions, I must assume my behavior betrayed my thoughts...oh Emidus, I am truly foolish!”

“You are young still and do not know the world outside the classroom.”

“We are the same age, what makes you so knowledgeable?”

“Do you forget I have been trained for battle and know well the evils of this world while you were trained to discuss philosophy amongst other subjects?”

Concordia stomped her foot and placed her hands on her hips as she glared at her brother who guffawed at her fit of temper. She reached for a pillow that rested upon the nearby cushioned bench and hit her brother repeatedly on his shoulders. Emidus taunted her as he deflected the blows while dancing about the room, but he pulled the pillow from her when he stopped to catch his breath.

“Enough,” Emidus said as he sat upon the bench. “What would father think?”

“Father would join us,” Concordia whispered, “and speaking of father, he arrives within a fortnight...with Brantson! The king told me before he fell ill.”

“Father leaving Wareham and without Elizabeth! I fear your fate then,” Emidus said playfully.

“You are most wicked! Besides, the king said father is hesitant about sanctioning my journey...he did not say father has denied my request...they will speak at great length...so I am hopeful.”

“And Brantson?”

“Brantson is my dearest friend, that is all.”

“I fear that may not be all,” Emidus told her knowingly. “And you will not be given a choice.”