

OGIER'S PRAYER

THE CHILDREN OF ARTHUR: BOOK THREE

BY

TYLER R. TICHELAAR

Ogier's Prayer: The Children of Arthur, Book Three

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“If thou shouldst never see my face again,
Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.”
— Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “The Passing of Arthur”

“Work out your own salvation. Do not depend on others.”
— Buddha

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PROLOGUE

803 A.D.

YEAR 187 BY THE MUSLIM CALENDAR

HAROUN AL-RASHID—sovereign over half the known world as ruler of the Abbasid Caliphate, which stretched from Arabia’s southern deserts to the great Caspian Sea, and from the Mediterranean’s easternmost reaches to the borders of India, so that all the world knew his fame and feared him, yet marveled at his magnificence and admired his wisdom and prowess—was terribly bored.

The mighty caliph sat in his sumptuous palace in his glorious capital city of Baghdad and wondered whether there was anything at all left in the world that could possibly give him a few hours’ amusement. He had engaged in all manner of sport, warfare, and love during his youth. He was honored and esteemed above all in his domains and over all princes and heads of state outside the borders of his empire. Not even Charlemagne of the Franks himself could rival the caliph in any way. And now as the great caliph approached his fortieth year, he felt that everything there was to see and do, had been seen and done,

and so being a great ruler was a sorry position to hold in life, for all manner of amusement had always been readily available to him, all his desires quickly and easily fulfilled, and only great boredom had resulted from all his prosperity and success.

Today, this mighty potentate was in a miserable, listless mood that not even wine nor song nor women nor games could dispel. Such was his mood when Giafar, the grand vizier and Haroun al-Rashid's old and tried friend, entered his chamber. Bowing low, Giafar waited, as was his duty, till his master spoke, but Haroun al-Rashid merely turned his head and looked at his friend, and then he sank back into his former weary posture of being slumped in his chair. After a moment, he sighed in a manner that asked Giafar, without the actual use of words, "What is it this time?"

Now, Giafar had something of importance to say to the caliph, and he had no intention of being put off by mere silence, so taking Haroun al-Rashid's sigh for permission, he made another low bow in front of the throne and began to speak.

"Commander of the Faithful," said Giafar, "I have come to remind your eminence of how you have undertaken to observe, secretly and for yourself, the manner in which justice is done and order is kept throughout your great capital city. For that very reason, you came to Baghdad from your palace in Ar-Raqqah. And today is the day you have set apart to devote to this purpose, and perhaps in fulfilling this duty, you may find some distraction from the melancholy that I perceive is so strongly overpowering you."

"Giafar, you are right!" exclaimed the caliph, suddenly stirred with a renewed interest in life. "Thank goodness you reminded me. I always find my people amusing, and at times, I have been able to right a wrong, punish an evildoer, and even gain some wisdom from the

common folk. But what are you waiting for? Go, find our disguises, and we will walk among the common people as if we were one—or rather two—of them.”

Giafar bowed and quickly obeyed. Five minutes later, he returned with two disguises, and after assisting his master, within a few moments, they were both dressed as foreign merchants.

And in another minute, the caliph and grand vizier had passed through a secret door in Haroun al-Rashid’s private chamber that took them through a long and twisting tunnel beneath the palace. Soon they emerged outside through a hidden door in a city wall covered by a great shrubbery. Quickly, they merged with the crowds, as if it were an everyday ordinary activity for them to walk the streets of Baghdad, bartering in the bazaar, giving alms to beggars, and stopping to kneel when the call to prayer was sounded.

So disguised, Haroun al-Rashid was able to find some pleasure in this great joke that freed him from the burdens of statecraft. Often, he considered that he might so remain in such a disguise, with the intent to slip away from the palace and Baghdad and his own high position so that he might forget all his cares, for the ruling of an empire was no light matter. But he also knew that his wife, Zubaida, and his children, as well as the many millions of his subjects, depended on him. Should he disappear, his absence would cause all manner of problems for the empire and lead to rumors of his death, suspicions of foul play, and even civil war. No, he had a duty to his people and could not forsake it, but it did not hurt to fulfill that duty now and then by pretending to be one of the people so he could better understand those whom he ruled.

Despite the diversion of pretending to be a foreign merchant, today the great caliph found no amusement in the streets capable of diverting him from his melancholy and boredom. He was pleased to see the

peace and good order of the city; his people appeared content, and he could observe that the city was prosperous. Even the blind beggar he passed had a smile on his face.

“Blind one,” he stopped to inquire, “what reason gives you cause to be smiling?”

The beggar’s smile only widened at the question, and looking over the caliph’s shoulder, he pointed up into the sky.

“He is not blind!” exclaimed Giafar. “Blind men do not point at the sky!”

But the blind man continued to point, and his dishonesty was quickly forgotten when Giafar and Haroun al-Rashid both turned to discover what so commanded the beggar’s attention.

Soon everyone in the street was also staring—and pointing, and gasping, and exclaiming, “Is it a genie? An evil sorcerer? It can’t be real! Am I seeing things?”

Haroun al-Rashid had never in his life doubted his own vision, but at that moment, he came very close to it.

“A genuine magical flying carpet!” exclaimed Giafar.

“It is indeed!” Haroun al-Rashid agreed. “The stuff of genie tales.”

The carpet was floating over the city, just perhaps fifty feet above it, slowly growing closer and gently descending. For a good five minutes, everyone in the streets of Baghdad stared up at it, murmuring in astonishment, and children crawled up onto their parents’ shoulders so they might see it better.

In a little while, the carpet descended so that it landed on the flat roof of a house. And when the man, who had previously sat cross-legged upon it and whose appearance had been difficult until now to see clearly, stood up, even more gasps filled the street.

This man was no native of the city, nor even of any city or property

in all the great Abbasid Caliphate. This man had a light complexion like no one in Baghdad had ever seen. His hair looked to have been spun from gold, and he was clad in shining silver armor that sparkled in the sun.

“Is it a god?” cried one woman.

“Blasphemy!” a man replied.

“It must be a Christian,” said another man. “For look at his pale skin—and a Christian is the farthest thing from a god that anyone could be!”

The golden-haired man was beautiful, however, and tall and finely formed, and dazzling even without a smile, for he looked uncertain, looking down first upon the crowd, and then at the magic carpet beneath his feet, as if willing it to fly back up into the air.

And then the magic moment was broken as three soldiers stormed into the house, upon the roof of which the golden-haired man stood.

In another minute, the soldiers had arrived on the roof, and the Christian knight, if that is what he was, had drawn his sword, ready to do battle.

“Drop your sword!” cried one soldier. “You are under arrest by order of his great majesty, Caliph Haroun al-Rashid!”

The caliph heard his name invoked, but he made no move, not wishing to reveal his true identity, but even more so, wishing to see how this fight would turn out.

The golden-haired stranger, instead of dropping his sword, charged toward his assailants, and within a minute, the three soldiers found their own weapons struck from their hands and sent flying into the street, the crowd quickly dodging them. One man, in the fight that ensued, stumbled over the roof’s edge and went crashing into the crowd, causing a bystander a broken arm. Another, in fear, jumped

onto a neighboring roof, while the third soldier fell to his knees, begging mercy from the golden-haired, godlike warrior who had so mysteriously appeared in their city.

“Now!” exclaimed the stranger, “you may take me to your king, but I go as his guest, and not as a prisoner to any man.”

After recovering from his astonishment, the kneeling soldier regained his feet and did as he was bid, leading the way back down through the house. The stranger stopped a moment to put his sword back into its sheath; then he bent down to gather up the magic carpet, roll it, and tuck it under his arm, before descending through the house.

As the crowd waited in astonishment to see this amazing warrior enter the street, Haroun al-Rashid said to Giafar, “Quickly. We must return.” And elbowing their way through the clamoring crowd of men, women, and children, all seeking to get a glimpse of, or even better, to touch the mysterious stranger, the caliph and his grand vizier made their way back to the secret tunnel that would allow them to return to the palace.

Within half an hour, they were once again in the caliph’s private chamber, and immediately, they heard a rapid, insistent pounding on the door from the servants who repeatedly cried, “My caliph, are you there? Please, a great marvel has happened. Come quickly!”

“I will be there in a moment!” the caliph shouted, perturbed by his servants’ impatience; they should know better than to harangue him.

Then there was silence, for once confirmation was heard of their master’s presence, his servants dared not anger him.

Giafar quickly helped his master change out of the merchant’s clothing and back into robes suitable for a great ruler to receive an esteemed visitor.

Then Haroun al-Rashid stepped toward the door and placed his

fingers around the handle to open it, but first he turned back and said to Giafar, "Have that deceitful blind beggar found and thrown into prison for his falsehood." When the caliph did open the door, dozens of servants, his wife, children, and ministers all bowed before him and created a path so he could pass through. Haroun al-Rashid ignored them all and strode through the palace to his throne room where he intended to receive his illustrious guest.

Once seated, with a wave of his hand, the caliph ordered the guards to open the door. Then in strode the golden-haired man, taller than everyone else in the room, and escorted by six more soldiers, whom no doubt he could have easily divested of their swords if he had so wished, but instead, he had willingly given up his own sword, his air of confidence and bearing declaring he felt no need for it.

The mysterious stranger came to a stop a few feet before Haroun al-Rashid's throne, and after bowing, he awaited permission to speak.

"Stranger," said the caliph, "we have seen with our own eyes your amazing entry into our great city. We would know your name and your purpose here."

"Great Caliph," said the golden-haired giant of a man, "I am Ogier the Dane, one of the paladins to the great Charles, King of the Franks, and in my own right, Prince of Denmark. I am a stranger here in your domain, it is true, but I come in peace on a mission I can share with your ears alone. I beg a private audience with your majesty."

By then, the multitude of the royal household had crowded into the throne room. They now all gasped at such a bold demand from a stranger.

Haroun al-Rashid waited a moment as everyone reacted to this unusual request, and then, clapping his hands together, he ordered, "Silence!"

The room became still as Haroun al-Rashid looked deep into Ogier the Dane's eyes, searching as if to read his very soul. After a moment, he rose from his throne and stepped forward.

The silence was broken when he placed his hand on Ogier's shoulder, a familiarity he had never shown in public to any man, not even to Giafar.

"Come," said Haroun al-Rashid. "I have been sorely bored, and you have brought me pleasure in the unexpectedness of your visit. Your words speak truth, for you look to be one of noble breeding, and your eyes bespeak suffering but also wisdom. I will hear your tale, but first, we will have you properly bathed and fed."

And then leading the way, Haroun al-Rashid personally escorted the stranger to his own private bathing pool where he left him under the care of his servants, saying to Ogier, "Please refresh yourself, and then my servants will bring you to me to dine. Over our meal, I will hear with great pleasure all you have to say."

And so it was, in an hour's time, that Ogier the Dane, Prince of Denmark, thousands of miles from the cold northern climes where he had been raised, found himself dining with Haroun al-Rashid, the Caliph of the Abbasid Empire, the most powerful man in the world.

Seated at a table, the caliph ordered wine for his guest and also all manner of sweetmeats and fruits and vegetables, every delicacy known within his great empire, and as they began to eat, the caliph said, "Now, I wish to hear your tale for I have no doubt it is a marvelous one."

Ogier the Dane nodded in agreement and said, "My lord, I will be most pleased to tell you my story, and perhaps when I have finished, you will be good enough to aid me, though I am but a humble knight of Charles the Great, King of the Franks."

"We are good friends with King Charles," replied the caliph,

“although he now calls himself an emperor, so I am surprised you do not show him the respect he deserves with that title.”

“Emperor?” muttered Ogier. “Emperor of what?”

“He was crowned as Holy Roman Emperor by the Pope. Did you not know this? It has been two or three years now since it happened.”

“No, I...I—”

“It seems you have been journeying far from home for a long time then, Prince Ogier.”

“I believe so, your majesty,” replied the Dane.

“Come. Tell me all about it. When did you leave King Charles’ court, and how did you come to be in my domains?”

“That is a long, long tale, Great Caliph, and I find it not easy to know where to start. I do not wish to weary you, but I fear we must begin just a few days after my birth.”

“I am prepared for a tale as long as you have to tell,” Haroun al-Rashid replied, “and we have all night for the telling.”

“I suspect it will take at least that long, if not longer,” Ogier began, “but I am happy to obey your command to hear it, and I hope that in my words you will find the entertainment you seek.”