

The “Lost Gems” – Number One

(August 2009)

Chapter 15 – The Expedition

(The Lion of St. Mark – Actual Book)

Seething to take revenge on Venice for her abortive plot to kill him and sensing the West had no desire to come to her aid, if attacked, the Sultan now sought to provoke the Republic. He decided to attack Argos, just south of the Isthmus of Corinth.

As the unsuspecting residents of Argos celebrated Lent – the holiest season of the year and also the enduring peace they had enjoyed under seventy-five years of Venetian rule since their Byzantine despot had sought the Republic’s protection, the Turks struck. The Venetian fortress and its formidable garrison that had provided a comforting sense of power and security, as it towered over Argos like their own private Olympus, fell in a *coup de main*. By morning, the entire garrison had been mercilessly put to the sword and the leading citizens carried off as hostages.

The Storm (Expanded Chapter Deleted In Editing Process)

The setting sun gently draped the rocky hills to the west in deep purple grandeur. The two scheming sisters stifled their giggles as they completed their clever deception. They had obediently departed from the marathon Lenten dinner and songfest in the town square, pretending to return home to complete the chores their mother had assigned them to be finished before bedtime. After rushing through their work, doing just enough to avoid a stern reprimand,

they had taken the bottle of red wine they had hidden in their straw bed and sneaked off to their favorite spot on the rocky hill that rose above Argos like a giant sentinel emplaced by the gods.

“They say that Hercules once sat here on this very spot,” whispered the older girl. “Look! See how dark the Gulf is in the absence of moonlight tonight.”

“At night, the town looks so small from up here,” replied the younger one as she unconsciously fondled her delicate silver necklace with its tiny Greek cross. A gift from her mother on her twelfth birthday, she never went anywhere without it.

High up on the hill the local Greeks called “Larissa”, under the walls of the imposing Venetian fortress of Argo, originally built by the Franks on the old ruins of the ancient acropolis, the sisters chattered quietly as they sipped the nectar of the gods.

“Stop talking and hand the bottle to me. You are drinking more than your share!”

“Hush! You are too young to drink any more. You will get drunk and then we will not be able to sneak through the window into our beds, without father hearing us.”

They both shivered at the thought of how angry he would be; his dark eyes flashing as he beat them with his hand – he never used a stick like their friends’ fathers did. But tonight, they had agreed, their adventure was worth the risk. After all, Ariadne was almost fourteen and Thera had just turned twelve. Both were already of childbearing age. The “curse” had finally visited upon Thera but more convincing was the way the boys of the town had begun to eye them – leering like dogs in heat and acting like fools. Ariadne’s body had begun to sprout in all the right places when she had turned twelve. She looked older than her age, almost like a grown woman. Her little sister Thera’s beauty was a source of pride for the entire village. Everyone said that when she was grown she could have any man she wanted.

As they looked far down the undulating hill to the brightly lit village below, they could see hundreds of tiny flickering lights around the town square. Whenever the soft sea breeze curled up to them from the Gulf of Argolia, they could hear the melodic strains of harmonized voices and *bouzouki* strings celebrating the religious holiday in song. They knew that the singing and celebrating would last far into the early morning hours.

The people of Argos celebrated not only the coming of Easter – the holiest day of the year but also the enduring peace they had enjoyed under Venice’s rule in the seventy-five years since their Byzantine despot had sought the Republic’s protection. The Venetian fortress and its formidable garrison provided a comforting sense of power and security as it towered over Argos like their own private Olympus.

As Ariadne tilted the bottle high above her curly black head, Thera grabbed her wrist to prevent her from taking the last sip. It slipped from her grasp and exploded with a crash on the rocky ground. The girls froze. Surely the Venetians up on the walls would have heard such a loud noise. Barely breathing, the only sound they could hear was the rustling wind punctuated occasionally by the music far below.

With nothing left to drink and feeling a bit queasy, uncertain if it was the wine or the sudden change of circumstances, the sisters stood and began to stumble along the dark path back down the hill, trying to keep their balance despite the many stones underfoot.

When Ariadne turned to see if Thera was keeping up she found she had lost her in the darkness. She uttered a mild oath and, with difficulty, tried to retrace her footsteps, loudly hissing her little sister’s name. She did not see the shadowy form behind her. As he cupped his hand over her mouth, she screamed but his meaty fingers smothered her sounds. Her eyes wide with terror,

she slammed her fist straight back and caught her assailant squarely in the groin. Over the years, she had perfected over the years on her three older brothers – the oldest claimed that if the Turks ever came, the Sultan would surely have selected him to replace his favorite eunuch, after the poundings she had given him.

Sickening images began to invade her thoughts when suddenly, the man released her and staggered backwards, laughing uncontrollably despite his pain. Three more soldiers mocked his defeat at the hands of a mere child as they joined him in a chorus of laughter.

“Ariadne!” screamed Thera as she stumbled awkwardly toward her older sister.

“Thera! Did they hurt you?”

“No,” whimpered her younger sister, her face wet with tears. The girls flew together, and embraced like long lost sisters. Then Ariadne turned and lashed out at the Venetian soldiers.

“Pigs! How dare you touch us. She is only twelve,” she spit, pointing to her sister. “We are not prostitutes. We did not come up here to give you pleasure like the older girls do.”

“I assure you, Signorina, we meant no harm or offense,” protested the young officer. But you know the rules. You must not sneak around the fortress walls after dark. You could easily have been mistaken for a Turk and shot through with an arrow.”

“Like you shoot through the girls who sneak up here on Saturday nights?” Ariadne hissed.

“Oh, we run them through alright, but they seem to like it,” laughed a big soldier. His comrades roared with laughter at his crude joke.

Ariadne scowled at the soldier but she was thankful no harm had come to them.

“Very well, run along now. It is late and you should be down there,” the officer pointed to Argos far below.

“Come, Thera,” said Ariadne, reaching out her hand.

As they turned to walk away, suddenly a bright flash of light, followed instantly by the boom of a loud explosion split the quiet of the night. The four soldiers, brightly illuminated for a moment, all spun around in the direction of the main gate. They began to run and shout as the light flickered and dimmed, forgetting the pretty young girls. The massive gate had been partly demolished by the explosion. White-garbed phantoms were streaming through it. As the four Venetians disappeared into the night, the girls turned and ran down the hill in the opposite direction as fast as their feet could carry them.

As they descended, they could see commotion in the town below – only surpassed by the fierce melee raging above them around the fortress. For the first time in their lives, Ariadne and Thera could hear the sound of desperate men screaming with the rattle of death in their throats. They covered their ears as they made their way down the path to the town, terrified.

Suddenly, Thera began to cry. She had fallen, shredding her knee. She begged for Ariadne to help her, but her older sister stood transfixed, watching files of men in white rushing up the path below them, while hundreds of others stormed into the town.

Ariadne instantly spun around, ran the short distance to where Thera, now visible in the light from the castle on fire, sat holding her knee and grabbed her by the wrist. Half dragging and half carrying her little sister, Ariadne spied a large rock to hide behind just in time. No sooner had they ducked behind it than they could see strange looking men run past in ranks of three up

the twisting path toward the fortress, swords and maces clanking against their long coats of chain mail.

Thera tried to speak – Ariadne clapped her hand hard over her mouth. Thera glared at her but neither said a word. For twenty minutes the girls hid there as the battle over the fortress raged above them and the white ghosts inundated the town below.

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By dawn, the Turks were mopping up after their sudden and victorious *coup de main* on the Venetian fortress and subsequent capture of Argos. All of the Venetians, not killed in the fight, were put to the sword soon after surrendering. More than two hundred soldiers were massacred in addition to the hundred men killed in the battle. The townsfolk were more fortunate. The Turks intended to stay. Only a few prominent citizens were killed to ensure the rest would see the wisdom of cooperating with their new masters.

Ariadne and Thera were never seen again. Exposed by the dawning light on the rocky hillside, they were soon spotted, apprehended and taken into the fortress. Their beauty, such an asset in peace, was their undoing in war.