



**SONG OF THE EIGHT WINDS**  
*RECONQUISTA*

- An Epic Tale of Medieval Spain -

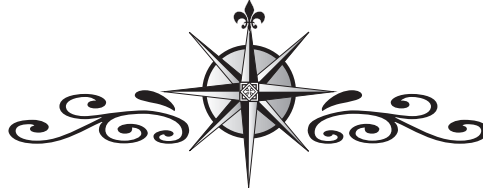
by

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1

## FAIR STANDS THE WIND FOR MALLORCA



*OFF THE PORT OF SALOU, NORTH-EAST SPAIN, ON THE  
MORNING OF WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 5<sup>TH</sup>, 1229 – ABOARD  
THE GALLEY OF KING JAUME I OF ARAGON-CATALONIA...*

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‘A-A-A-YOS ... A-A-A-YOS ... A-A-A-YOS!’

The slow, rhythmical chant of the sailors resounded across the wide waters of the bay as anchor after anchor was hauled up and the great armada bearing an army of 15,000 foot soldiers and 1,500 cavalry prepared to put to sea. There were some 150 vessels in all: twenty-five large sailing ships, eighteen undecked horse transports called *taridas*, a flotilla of flat-bottomed *brices* loaded with supplies and engines of war, plus squadrons of oar-and-sail-driven galleys carrying the nobles and the elite of their men-at-arms, in addition to the mandatory members of the clergy, including Berenguer de Palou, the Bishop of Barcelona himself.

The royal galley was lying at anchor some distance landward of the main body of the fleet, which had been assembling off the Cape of Salou. Clad in a long, scarlet surcoat trimmed with gold, the young king stood tall, broad-shouldered and proud on the raised poop deck, his blue eyes ablaze with anticipation, his flowing flaxen hair swept back from his face by an off-shore breeze which augured well for the forthcoming voyage. He raised his eyes to the

## SONG OF THE EIGHT WINDS

top of the galley's mast, where the royal pennant was fluttering now against a cloudless sky. A look of satisfaction lit his face.

'At last, the day that will change my life,' he murmured. Then, sensing someone behind him, he half turned to see a young sailor checking the coupling of one of the galley's two side-mounted tiller shafts. In a tone of regal self-assurance, though diluted by the merest hint of embarrassment, the king said, 'Did you ... that is, I take it you heard what I said just then, *marinèr*?'

There was a wry smile on the young helmsman's lips as he lowered his head in deference. '*Sí, Majestat*, and I daresay there's no man among all the thousands who sail with you today who wouldn't agree.'

King Jaume surveyed the helmsman's features for a few seconds, trying to decide if that lopsided smile of his indicated derision or was merely an attempt to convey some sort of empathy. If it was the former, then the lad had little respect for his own neck, and if it was the latter ... well, that was a reaction from a subordinate the monarch had seldom experienced before, and was one, therefore, that he would regard with due suspicion.

'Wouldn't agree with what?' he enquired warily. 'That this is the day that will change *my* life, or theirs?'

The helmsman arched his eyebrows. 'Well, both, *senyor* ... both!'

The King said nothing, but his stare remained fixed on the sailor's face.

The helmsman's smile broadened and, turning his head seaward, he said, 'For you, another land to add to your existing kingdoms of Aragon and Catalonia lies just forty leagues over that horizon. Also, when you've claimed Mallorca, your reputation as a great champion of Christian Spain will be written on the pages of history for ever. So, as a king, this could well be the day that will change your life.'

With a slightly exaggerated nonchalance, the king nodded his head. '*Sí*, if it pleases the Almighty, that may well be the case. But,' he added both swiftly and with an air of piety, 'it is for *His* glory, not for mine, that the battle for Mallorca will be fought. I act merely as God's vassal – a Christian soldier, chosen by Him to help retake

all of Spain from the infidel Moor.’

The helmsman was tempted to point out that the Moors would have believed that their occupation of Spain five centuries earlier had also been undertaken in the name of God, albeit that they called him Allah. But he knew all too well that such a statement would be regarded as blasphemy. Hides more valuable than his had been flogged for daring to utter such unthinkable thoughts.

Instead, he dipped his head again. ‘Therefore, *senyor*, God will surely grant victory to his chosen vassal, and your reward will be the tenure of the kingdom of Mallorca.’

The king shrugged. ‘Which is no more than my right. Equally, the churchmen and barons who accompany me and have provided the ships, men and wherewithall to make this holy mission possible will also be entitled to their division of the lands and wealth of Mallorca.’

‘Just as their men will be entitled to *their* share of the plunder?’

The king gave a little laugh. ‘The men who follow me today have come, not just from Aragon and Catalonia, but from all over Iberia, from France and from as far away as Italy, Hungary, Germany and even Britain. How else can such an army be mustered – and paid for – if not by the promise of a fair allotment of whatever bounty a God-given victory may provide?’ A look of suspicion came into his eyes. ‘But do I detect a note of disapproval in your attitude, sailor? I hope not, and I suspect not – for what else but the prospect of increasing your own wealth, meagre as it doubtless is, would be your reason for embarking on such a perilous quest as this?’

The helmsman shook his head, the smile now gone from his lips. ‘Strange as it may seem, my decision to follow you wasn’t motivated by any desire to benefit from the spoils of war. No, *Majestat*, even if God has decreed that such is the right of His chosen vassal and *his* vassals, I didn’t join the *Reconquista* for personal gain.’ Motioning towards the teeming main deck of the galley, where sailors and oarsmen were now busying themselves with their respective tasks in preparation for putting to sea, he continued: ‘Although I own little more in the world than the clothes I stand up in, I seek no material riches in Mallorca, unlike the

## SONG OF THE EIGHT WINDS

motives of this crew and every other in the fleet.’ He paused to assess the king’s reaction, which, as could be expected, was a mix of puzzlement and simmering displeasure. ‘With due respect to each and every man,’ the helmsman prudently appended, ‘and to their allegiance to God and your Majesty, of course.’

Still the king said nothing, although he was thinking plenty. There was something about this young sailor he couldn’t fathom. Although he spoke with the accent of a common man, the way he spoke and the smack of intellect in what he said belied his status as a humble seaman. And while he was clearly being careful to show an acceptable degree of reverence in the presence of his king, there remained a suggestion of independence in his manner – a further hint that there was indeed more to this fellow than his occupation would have one believe. There was also an air of honesty about him, a frankness that was the very antithesis of the fawning and backstabbing ways of so many of the ‘nobility’ that King Jaume had been associated with since childhood. He was intrigued. More than that, something told him that perhaps, just perhaps, here was someone he could trust, no matter how modest his position in life. Yes, he would have to find out more about this fellow.

‘So, tell me, *marinèr* – what do they call you?’

‘Call me? Why, Blànes, *senyor*. Pedro Blànes is my name. Although...’ He hesitated, rolling a shoulder uneasily.

Now it was the king’s turn to smile. ‘Don’t be shy, Master Blànes. If you have another name – a nickname, perhaps, by which you’re better known – then you must tell me.’ With a jerk of his head, he gestured towards the bustle of seamen going about their duties on the open deck immediately forward of where they were standing. ‘On a cramped vessel like this, nothing can remain a secret for long anyway.’

The helmsman lowered his eyes.

The king was delighting in the young sailor’s embarrassment. ‘Come on, *marinèr!*’ he taunted. ‘Tell me – what do your friends call you, eh?’

The helmsman sighed. ‘Well, *senyor*, if you must know, it’s ... well, it’s Pedrito.’

## FAIR STANDS THE WIND FOR MALLORCA

‘Pedrito?’ the king laughed. ‘But that means *little* Pedro – a child’s name!’ He strode over and stood beside the young seaman. ‘And look at you! You’re as tall as I am, and I stand a good palm’s width above most of my knights, and as much as two palms above many of them. Yet you’re called *little* Pedro?’

‘It’s what my parents called me when I was a baby,’ Pedrito indifferently explained, ‘and the name just sort of, well, stuck – even after I started to grow.’

The king took a pace back, grinning while he looked the helmsman up and down. He noted his shock of black, wavy hair, his suntanned skin, his fine-boned features framing dark, deep-set eyes that twinkled with good humour, yet revealed a suggestion of melancholy as well. His baggy linen shirt and trousers were ragged and stained, though long exposure to the elements had bleached them salty white, as was typical of the garb of seafaring men. However, for all that he was fated to climb no further up the ladder of life than the lowly rung he stood on now, the fellow exuded a definite freedom of spirit, with even his bare feet looking as though they might never welcome the restriction of shoes.

It was obvious from his lean, muscular frame that this sailor was no stranger to hard physical effort. Nothing unusual about that. More interesting, perhaps, was that his appearance had more than a hint of the Moor about it. But, as the king was then obliged to concede, there was actually nothing unusual about that either. After all, it was said that no women had accompanied the first Moorish armies that overran Spain all those centuries ago, so there had always been plenty of Arab blood flowing through the veins of the peasantry. By the same token, the king could hardly deny that his own physical appearance reflected the characteristics of the Visigoths, the Germanic peoples who had occupied Spain after the Romans had been driven out many centuries earlier than the arrival of the Moors. Therefore, being a fair and just man, he bore no grudge against people who looked a bit like the current occupiers – provided, naturally, that they worshipped the true Christian God and not the Muslim Allah.

‘How old are you?’ he asked the helmsman.

## SONG OF THE EIGHT WINDS

‘Twenty-one, *senyor* – as far as I know.’

The king stroked his chin. ‘Interesting. The same age as myself. But why do you say “as far as you know”?’

‘Because the people I call my parents never knew exactly when I was born. It may have been a week before they found me, maybe two weeks, maybe three.’ Pedrito Blànes hunched his shoulders. ‘Who knows?’

But the king was only half listening. ‘Hmm, but by the look of your arms, you could wield a two-handed sword with ease. *Sí*, and I’ll wager those legs of yours are more than capable of supporting a heavy coat of mail.’ He gave Pedrito a hearty slap on the shoulder. ‘So then, how would you like to fight at my side when we attack the Saracen armies on Mallorca? You could be one of my squires.’ There was an impish glint in the king’s eyes now. ‘That’s if you’re an able horseman, of course. And I presume you *can* handle a horse, can’t you, En Blànes?’

Pedrito resisted the inclination to frown. He was aware that he was being teased, but he had no intention of giving the king the satisfaction of thinking it bothered him. Accordingly, instead of answering the king’s questions, he promptly countered them with one of his own.

‘Why do you call me *En Blànes, Majestat*? I’ve told you my name’s Pedrito, so why call me something else?’

A smile played at a corner of the king’s mouth. ‘It seems, then, that your life at sea has taught you little of the ways of chivalry.’

Pedrito gave a dismissive snort. ‘The only chivalrous thing I learned during five years pulling an oar on a galley was not to fart in the face of the rowers sitting immediately behind me.’

The king threw his head back and bellowed with laughter. ‘And as a measure of their respect, they called you Pedrito, but never En, right?’

‘A man can be called many names when he’s at the bottom of the heap, *senyor*, and few of them are complimentary.’ Then, giving King Jaume a look that was as chastening as prudence allowed, young Blànes added, ‘It always helps to understand what the insults mean, though.’

## FAIR STANDS THE WIND FOR MALLORCA

‘Ah, but calling you En is no insult, *amic*.’ King Jaume shook his head vigorously. ‘On the contrary, you should feel flattered.’ He went on to explain that in much of Spain the Castilian term ‘Don’ was put before a gentleman’s name as a mark of respect. ‘In Castile, all noblemen, even kings, are addressed as Don,’ he continued, ‘as in “the King Don Alfonso”, for example. But in the language of my kingdoms of Aragon and Catalonia –

‘*Sí, sí,*’ Pedrito cut in, unable to quell his mounting irritation, ‘you say En instead of Don. I know all that!’ Noticing that the king was taken aback by this sudden show of testiness, and acutely aware that such apparent impertinence could result in severe punishment, he promptly adopted a more deferential manner. ‘I realise that no one is less entitled to be addressed as En than I am, *senyor*. But my position at the bottom of the heap doesn’t mean that I don’t have some pride, and I feel less than flattered by being mocked’ – he paused to look King Jaume in the eye – ‘even by someone as exalted as your royal self.’

There were a few tense moments as the two young men stood with their eyes locked, their expressions stony. It was Pedrito who eventually spoke, his desire for his head to remain attached to his shoulders rising above the overwhelming compulsion to stand up for himself that the harsh lessons of life had instilled in him.

‘However, let me assure you, *senyor*, that having respect for myself doesn’t mean that I have any less respect for you, or for anyone else ... *if* he deserves it.’

The king’s eyes burned into Pedrito’s. ‘But isn’t being your king reason enough to deserve your respect?’

The young helmsman swallowed hard, his brain sending urgent messages to his mouth that it should now remain firmly shut.

Slowly, the king lowered his right hand until it found the hilt of his sword. Pursing his lips, he stroked the sword’s pommel with his thumb.

Unblinking, Pedrito watched as the glistening blade was withdrawn from its scabbard, inch by buttock-clenching inch. And still the king’s gaze remained fixed on his face, from which he could feel the blood starting to drain.



## SONG OF THE EIGHT WINDS

In a flash, the king withdrew the last few inches of sword from its sheath, and in a single stroke thrust its point into the deck between Pedrito's naked feet.

Pedrito closed his eyes, tightly. He heard a faint splintering of wood as the sword was prised upwards, then waited for the regal grunt that would tell him his intestines were about to experience their first breath of sea air. But there was only silence, followed, after a few apprehensive moments, by the touch of a hand on his shoulder. Pedrito opened his eyes, gingerly.

Although the king's smile was warm, a shadow of uncertainty lurked in his eyes. 'I'm not accustomed to such candour from my subjects, Master Blànes,' he said in a matter-of-fact way.

The enquiring look that Pedrito cast him was tinged with foreboding. Was the king merely lulling him into a false sense of security before testing the sharpness of that sword on his worthless guts? Everyone knew that King Jaume was well-trained in the ways of a knight. And, despite never having mixed in their company, Pedrito knew that knights were trained to kill. What's more, he'd heard that some, like cats, took great pleasure in toying with their victims before putting them out of their misery.

The king pouted again. 'I'm still waiting for your answer, Master Blànes. I repeat – isn't being your king reason enough to deserve your respect?'

Pedrito nodded mechanically. 'As a mouse respects a cat,' his mouth blurted out without resorting to consultation with his brain.

The king scowled.

Pedrito silently resolved that, in the unlikely event of his internal organs being fortunate enough to survive this fraught encounter intact, he would sew a button on his lip.

His promise of self-retribution was, however, premature. The king's scowl gradually dissolved into a smile, which in turn graduated into a broad grin.

'But I suspect you're no mouse,' he beamed. '*Sí*, and I respect you all the more for that!'

Too surprised to venture a reply, Pedrito inclined his head briefly to one side as a tacit gesture of appreciation.

## FAIR STANDS THE WIND FOR MALLORCA

The king acknowledged in like manner, then, pointing to his sword, he added, ‘And lest you may have heard otherwise, I can promise you that *I* am no cat!’

Pedrito took the point, canting his head again as confirmation, while thanking his lucky stars that his head was still suitably situated for the undertaking of such a gesture.

His relieved expression didn’t go unnoticed by the king. With a knowing smile, he raised his sword and rested its blade on the palm of his left hand. ‘Toledo,’ he said. ‘The finest steel there is.’ He looked Pedrito in the eye. ‘So, we can say the Saracen invader brought at least *one* useful skill to Spain, no?’

‘I’ve heard it said, *senyor*, that they also brought skills for the *saving* of life.’ Pedrito immediately wished he hadn’t made such a potentially provocative reply, true though it was.

However, if the king was annoyed, he didn’t let it show. ‘I have several such swords, Master Blànes,’ he smiled. ‘So, will you accept my invitation to carry one of them at my side when we fight the Saracens on Mallorca?’

Pedrito took time to think carefully before replying this time. ‘You, uhm – you said you respected my frankness, *Majestat...*’

King Jaume indicated the affirmative.

Nervously, Pedrito tweaked the lobe of his ear.

‘Come on, *marinèr*,’ the king urged, still smiling, ‘if it’s the prospect of handling a horse that worries you, I can promise –’

‘It’s not that,’ Pedrito interrupted. ‘I’m well used to horses, *senyor*.’ He rolled a shoulder uneasily once more. ‘Well, when I say horses, I actually mean *a* horse – singular.’

The king knotted his brows. ‘But surely one horse is pretty much the same as another, when you get down to basics?’

Pedrito offered a weak smile. ‘Except when a horse is not a horse, maybe?’

‘A horseless horse?’ The king gave an impatient shake of his head. ‘I’ve no time for riddles, *amic*.’

Pedrito noticed that the king’s attention was now beginning to drift. Those penetrating blue eyes had started to wander, first towards the prow of the vessel, where a huddle of sailors were

## SONG OF THE EIGHT WINDS

awaiting the order to weigh anchor, then to admidships, where another group were preparing to unfurl the galley's sail. Suddenly, Pedrito could see that, king or no king, this man was human after all. His nerves, royal as they might be, were on edge. And Pedrito wasn't about to make any criticism of that. All *he* had to concern himself with, after all, was steering this ship towards Mallorca – a simple matter of using his physical strength to heave rudder paddles one way or the other according to the commands of the captain. King Jaume, on the other hand, had to bear the responsibility of being in charge of the greatest seaborne expedition ever undertaken in the name of Spain, a daring and complex military operation that would eclipse any purely land-based assault against the Moors that had taken place to date.

This, possibly, was what had been going through the king's mind when Pedrito had overheard him declaring that this was the day that would change his life. Yet, as Pedrito had sensed, no matter how much the king had been trying to convince himself, there had been an element of doubt in his general demeanour as well. And little wonder, since the risk of failure was real and its consequences dire. The Moors, with their vastly larger army, would defend their dominion of Mallorca fiercely, and in the associated battles many lives would be lost, including, perhaps, that of young King Jaume himself. So, his train of thought at this pivotal moment in his reign would have been manifold. A glorious victory would indeed immortalise him as a great champion of Christian Spain, whereas being forced into ignominious retreat would commit his name to history's register of also-rans. Alternatively, death in action would send him to meet his maker, who would either heap honours upon him for his success against the infidel, or would condemn him to purgatory for his lack of it. With such onerous matters weighing on his mind, it was very likely, Pedrito concluded, that the king's dalliance with him had been but a light diversion from the gravity of his present situation.

And indeed it had been, for the most part, but not entirely. The king's curiosity had been aroused by this enigmatic young sailor, and for all that he was preoccupied with thoughts of the

forthcoming campaign, he was still of a mind to find out more about Pedrito's background. He turned to him again...

'You were about to tell me about a horseless horse, I believe?'

Pedrito couldn't help chuckling. 'I said a horse that isn't a horse, *senyor*, not a horseless horse. There *is* a difference.'

The king raised an eyebrow. 'Really?'

'*Sí*. Surely a horseless horse would be nothing at all, no?'

The king's expression was blank.

'Whereas,' Pedrito went on, 'a horse that isn't a horse is *something* – even if it's something other than a horse.'

'Get to the point, Master Blànes,' the king bristled. 'I told you, I've no time for riddles.'

Pedrito got to the point. 'It's my father's horse – or rather the man I call my father.'

The king bared his teeth in a smile, though with scant evidence of humour. 'The horse that isn't a horse, belonging to a father who isn't a father?' He scowled again. 'You're beginning to test my patience, *amic*.'

Pedrito duly apologised, then explained that the man who was the only father he'd ever known had actually found him, abandoned as a tiny baby, behind a heap of fish baskets on the quay at Medïna Mayûrqa, the Moorish capital of Mallorca. The man, Gabriel Blànes, was a fisherman from the little port of Andratx, some eighteen miles distant from the capital on the south-western tip of the island. To supplement the meagre income from his fishing, he farmed a small *finca* a short way inland from the port, keeping some livestock as well as growing enough vegetables and fruit to feed a family of four – himself, his wife, their natural daughter and the foundling Pedrito – with any surplus produce being taken by boat to the capital for sale on market days.

'Ah, so you're from Mallorca?' said the king, his curiosity whetted. 'But the man you call your father – Gabriel – this is hardly an Arabic name, no?'

'Nor is Pedro, the name he gave me after the patron saint of fishermen, and there are no Muslim saints.'

'Meaning?'

## SONG OF THE EIGHT WINDS

‘Meaning my parents are Christians, or Mozarabs, as the Moors call those who live under the rule of Islam, but choose to practise their own religion.’

‘Mozarabs,’ the king muttered, ‘meaning would-be Arabs in the Moorish tongue, I believe. Hardly a complimentary term for a Spanish Christian, in my opinion. Typical of the patronising arrogance of the Saracen, however.’

Pedrito shook his head. ‘In fairness, *senyor*, the Moors of Mallorca, in my family’s experience at any rate, never showed any disrespect for our faith or objected to us worshiping Christ – provided we didn’t try to build a church in his name, that is. Nor did they object to us speaking in the same *Latina* tongue as yourself, as many fishing families still do in that little corner of the island, having kept the language alive by sea-trading with Catalonia over the centuries. Of course, we speak Arabic as well – just as everyone does in Muslim Spain.’

‘A humiliation which is going to cease the moment we’ve driven the Saracen hordes back to Africa,’ the king declared through clenched teeth. ‘Catalan, or *Latina* as you call it, will be spoken throughout my kingdoms, and the Arab language, like everything else that reeks of the Moors, will be stamped out for ever. This I have promised in the name of God.’ Then, as if to put such daunting obligations to the back of his mind for the moment, he adopted a less austere manner. ‘But what of this strange animal of yours – the horse that isn’t a horse?’

A wistful smile traversed Pedrito’s lips. ‘My father’s mule,’ he murmured. ‘But he always insists on calling it a horse – his *cavall*.’

The king’s eyes lit up. ‘Or *caballo*, as they say in Castile. And if, as you claim, you’re accustomed to handling your father’s *caballo*, then you’re entitled to be called a *caballero* – a horseman, a gentleman, a knight!’ He gave Pedrito a manly slap on the back. ‘There, I told you that you deserved the title of *En* before your name. So then,’ he grinned, ‘I take it you will fight at my side as one of my squires, *En* Pedrito Blànes?’

Pedrito lowered his eyes. ‘Ah, but I know your Majesty’s merely jesting, and –’

## FAIR STANDS THE WIND FOR MALLORCA

‘Oh, but I assure you I am not!’

‘Then you do me a great honour, *senyor*, and I’m truly grateful. But...’

‘But?’

Pedrito detected an ominous note in the king’s delivery of that single word. He could only guess what the consequences of rebuffing a royal invitation to arms would be, and the prospect didn’t appeal. He would have to tread extremely carefully here. He cleared his throat.

‘You, ahem, you said you respected my frankness, *senyor*...’

‘Yes, so if you have something to say, say it.’ King Jaume squinted at Pedrito through half-closed eyes, then asked tauntingly, ‘Or are you a mouse after all?’

Pedrito raised his eyes to meet the king’s. ‘That depends. I’m not a fighting man by nature, and I’ve no wish to inflict harm on anyone – not even the Moors. But that doesn’t mean I’m a –’

‘No wish to inflict harm on the Moors?’ the king interrupted, his voice rising, a frown of amazement furrowing his brow. ‘No wish to inflict harm on the disbelievers who stole our land from us?’ He shook his head. ‘You mystify me, Master Blànes. First you say you’ve no desire to benefit from the spoils of war, and now you tell me that you wish no harm to *my* enemies.’ King Jaume was making no attempt to conceal his displeasure. ‘I think it’s high time you explained precisely *why* you came on this crusade, don’t you?’

‘Well, firstly because I was hired as a sailor, not as a soldier, and secondly –’

‘Every sailor must take up arms if required,’ the king barked. ‘Surely you’re aware of that?’

Realising he had talked himself into a corner, Pedrito decided to throw a measure of caution to the wind. He had no option now. ‘You said you respected my frankness, *Majestat*...’

‘And?’

‘And I’m going to be honest with you. My main reason for coming on this expedition was because I hoped it might give me the chance to check on the wellbeing of my parents and little sister. I’ve been at sea for five years now, and I haven’t had any news of them

## SONG OF THE EIGHT WINDS

in all that time.’

‘Then perhaps you should never have gone to sea,’ the king retorted.

‘I didn’t really have any choice,’ Pedrito came back. ‘If it had been up to me, I’d still be working with my father’s mule on our *finca*.’

‘All of us, even kings, have to do things in life that we’d rather not!’ the king admonished. Then, after a moment, his look softened slightly. ‘Still, your concern for your family is commendable, Master Blànes. And I envy the fact that you have a family at all, for I’ve known no mother or father since I was three years old. However, we’re about to go to war, and *you* are a member of my army, whether you like it or not!’

At that, and to Pedrito’s great relief, the galley’s captain appeared, stepping briskly up to the poop deck from between the ranks of oarsmen now settling onto the benches straddling the vessel’s hull. Though obviously in a state of some agitation, the captain took a moment to bow before the king.

‘Permission to weigh anchor, my lord?’ He crooked a thumb over his shoulder. ‘As you can see, the rowers are on the thwarts with oars at the ready, and the deck hands are waiting for my order to hoist the sail, and –’

The king raised a silencing finger. ‘No one is more impatient than I am to start this voyage, Captain Guayron, but the orders I gave are clear – the fleet does not move off until the lead ship of Captain Bonet signals that the last of the vessels have come out from Tarragona and Cambrils on either side of the cape yonder. Then, and only then, does my galley join the fleet, bringing up the rear as planned.’ He followed that outburst with a mumbled: ‘As planned by our fine general, my cousin En Nunyo Sans, but not by me, I may say.’

The captain, though an older man than the king and doubtless much more experienced in the ways of the sea, clearly had no wish to invite his monarch’s displeasure. ‘I beg your forgiveness, *senyor*, and I don’t wish to distract your Majesty’s attention from other more important matters’ – he cast his helmsman a chilly glance,

## FAIR STANDS THE WIND FOR MALLORCA

then offered the king another stiff little bow – ‘but if you will pardon my intrusion, I –’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, get on with it, man!’ the king snapped. ‘This is no time to stand on ceremony! What is it you want to say?’

The captain was now pointing frantically towards the seaward flank of the fleet, and to the lead ship in particular. ‘B-but, my lord,’ he stammered, ‘– look there! The flag man on Captain Bonet’s ship is already signalling. You see, the remaining Tarragona and Cambrils vessels came out and took up position while you were –’ he shot Pedrito another icy look – ‘while you were otherwise engaged. Everyone’s now waiting for your signal to proceed.’ He pointed again. ‘As you can see, the canvas on the sailing ships is already being raised.’

The king glared at Pedrito. ‘If you had the makings of a half-decent squire,’ he hissed, ‘you would have told me about that flag!’

Pedrito was sorely tempted to tell the king that if he had the makings of a half-decent naval commander he would have noticed the flag himself, but he kept his own counsel. It was becoming increasingly obvious to him that King Jaume, though destined to become one of Spain’s greatest heroes (if the fates allowed), was also a ‘normal’ young man like himself, saddled with insecurities and self-doubt, which his regal status compelled him to conceal as best he could.

Just then, a cry rose up from amid the masses of onlookers thronging the shoreline:

‘Look there! See how all the sea seems white with sails!’

‘And why, Captain, aren’t we hoisting ours?’ the king demanded. ‘The royal galley having to bring up the rear in front of all those people is bad enough, but being left behind completely would be a disgrace too terrible to contemplate!’

‘To Mallorca! To Mallorca!’ came the concerted call from the crowds on the beach. ‘To Mallorca, and go with God, King Jaume!’

‘Well, Captain Guayron,’ the king urged, ‘you heard what they said! What in heaven’s name are you waiting for? Tell your conch horn blower to sound the advance, or whatever it’s called at sea!’

Without having to be asked a third time, the captain barked the



## SONG OF THE EIGHT WINDS

required command. Then, with a pained look, he turned round to address the king again.

‘The *Ponent* – I fear it may not favour the larger ships today, *senyor*.’

‘The *what?*’ the king frowned.

‘The *Ponent* – the west wind.’

The king’s frown deepened. ‘But surely the west wind is what we want. The *Ponent*, as you call it, will blow us eastward to Mallorca, no?’

‘*Sí, Majestat*, but look at our sail. It’s hanging like a wet shirt on a washing line. The wind’s just too slack. I mean, this and all the other galleys can make good headway by using our oars, but the large sailing ships – well, they have no oars.’ His expression changed from concern to one of resignation. ‘And any fleet is only as fast as its slowest vessel.’

The king’s face fell. ‘Surprise is worth a thousand men in battle, and this morning after mass the Bishop of Barcelona prayed for a fair wind to take us swiftly to Mallorca. But now your wretched *Ponent*...’ His voice trailed away.

‘Perhaps he didn’t pray hard enough,’ Pedrito Blànes suggested, aware that his wayward tongue might be putting his head on the chopping block again, but deciding nevertheless that an attempt at raising the young monarch’s flagging spirits was called for. King Jaume was already renowned as a leader of land armies, but it was becoming increasingly apparent that he was sadly lacking in knowledge of how things happen at sea.

‘You dare to criticise the Bishop of Barcelona’s power of prayer?’ he growled at Pedrito.

‘I’d never criticise anyone’s prayers,’ Pedrito assured him, ‘for I’ve no skill at praying myself.’ He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Never seems to work for me.’

‘You’re treading on dangerous ground, *marinèr*. Doubting the power of prayer, even your own, is tantamount to doubting the mercy of God, and that’s a sin punishable by –’

The king’s words of warning were interrupted by the galley master’s shouted command to his oarsmen that they should take the strain.

## FAIR STANDS THE WIND FOR MALLORCA

Then, as the regular beat of a drum dictated the rate of the rowers' strokes, Pedrito said to the king, 'All I was about to say, *senyor*, is that, when it comes to dealing with the fickle ways of the sea, even the most skilled sayer of prayers can have his powers boosted by the age-old traditions of the seafarer.'

He then began to sing in time with the slow, steady rhythm of the galley master's drum...

'Sailor, you say you will do anything,  
So make me a song of the winds  
And sing it to me when night falls...  
I see the winds –  
Morning wind and evening wind,  
North wind and desert wind.  
*Llevant, Xaloc, Migjorn,*  
*Llebeig, Ponent and Mestral,*  
*Tramuntana and Gregal.*  
Make me a song of the eight winds –  
The winds of the world.  
And bring me a wind,  
A wind that will take us safe to land.'

The king's mood had mellowed somewhat by the time Pedrito had come to the end of his song. 'A pleasant enough ditty, Master Blànes, but are you really suggesting it'll bring us the wind we need more readily than would the power of prayer?'

Pedrito raised his shoulders again. 'All I can say is that, when man's at the mercy of the sea, the eight winds are God's messengers, just as Christ was His messenger on earth. So, it does no harm to pay the winds homage, even if only through an old sailor's song like that one.'

Smiling, the king nodded his head as he considered what Pedrito had told him. 'You speak more like a philosopher than a helmsman,' he said at length, then patted Pedrito's shoulder again, though more gently than before. 'However, it's good to know that your years spent pulling an oar on a Catalonian galley taught you,

## SONG OF THE EIGHT WINDS

somehow, to nurture such worthy Christian thoughts – even though I don't entirely follow them.'

With a twinkle in his eye, Pedrito returned the young king's smile. 'Perhaps that's because the old song of the eight winds isn't a Christian one, *Majestat*.'

The king looked surprised.

'No, no,' Pedrito said, 'it's actually a Muslim sailors' chant I translated from the Arabic.'

The king stared at him, aghast. '*Muslim? Arabic?*'

'Oh, absolutely, *senyor*. You see, before I was hired as helmsman for this voyage, the years I spent pulling an oar were served, not on a Catalonian galley, but aboard a Moorish pirate ship.'

Stunned, the king glowered at him, then gave the captain an even darker look.

'You hired a Mozarab *pirate* to man the helm of my galley?'

The captain was quick to point out that he hadn't hired Pedrito, raising both hands to emphasise his innocence in the event of the king's wrath being provoked, which it was clearly about to be.

King Jaume lowered his voice to a menacing snarl. 'Then who, in the name of Saint Mary, *did* hire him?'

The captain dropped the corners of his mouth. 'My information is that the order came directly from one of your nobles, En Guillen de Muntcada, who sails in the lead ship of Captain Nicolas Bonet, and it was Captain Bonet who relayed the order to me.'

Mulling that over, the king rubbed his jaw. 'But En Guillen de Muntcada is one of my most battle-seasoned nobles, and one of my most trusted as well.' He looked askance at Pedrito. 'I'd have expected him to be a bit more careful when selecting members of my crew.'

Pedrito was now adjusting the angle of the tillers, setting course for the rear of the fleet, his head raised, his gaze directed beyond the king towards the prow of the galley. He was fully conscious of the king's confusion, however, and he couldn't help smiling.

'Don't look so smug, helmsman,' the king muttered. 'You may think it's too late to replace you now, but I swear that if you put a finger wrong during this voyage, I'll personally throw you

overboard and steer the ship myself!’

Pedrito suppressed the urge to laugh as he stole a brief glance at the captain, whose face was a picture of bewilderment. Then, with his eyes focused on the galley’s direction of passage, he gave the king a sideways nod of his head. ‘It’s fair enough to call me a Mozarab if you choose to, *senyor*, but I’m no pirate and never have been.’

‘You’re talking in riddles again,’ the king replied frostily, ‘and I told you I’ve no time for them. It seems you have a poor memory, no?’

‘No poorer than your own, if you’ll permit me to say, because you obviously forget what I told you only a few minutes ago.’

The captain, fearing a right royal eruption at what he regarded as Pedrito’s show of insolence, excused himself and made a swift exit from the poop deck. Nautical matters, he claimed, required his urgent attention.

But the king was too busy glaring daggers at Pedrito to bother about what the captain had said. ‘You’re pushing your luck again, helmsman,’ he growled through his teeth.

Pedrito smiled. ‘Only being candid, your Majesty, and you did tell me you appreciated my frankness.’

‘Except there’s a thin line between respectful frankness and disrespectful impertinence, and you’re coming dangerously close to crossing it!’

Staring dead ahead, Pedrito continued to concentrate on manipulating his tillers. ‘I merely wanted to remind you, *senyor*, that I said I’d no choice about going to sea those five or so years ago.’

‘I remember you said that,’ the king retorted, ‘but I don’t recall you saying anything at the same time about joining a pirate crew!’

‘And I don’t remember anything about joining the pirate crew either. And that’s the whole point. One minute I’m ploughing my father’s field with the old mule, a minute later I see a bunch of Arabs leaping out at me from behind a wall, and the next thing I know I’m lying on the deck of a Moorish pirate ship with a lump on my head and stars in my eyes.’

## SONG OF THE EIGHT WINDS

‘Ah, I see,’ said the king with a contrite dip of his head, ‘you, uh – you were kidnapped, then – taken into bondage. Is that what you’re saying?’

‘That’s where I did have a choice, *senyor* – either become an oarsman on that pirate galley or be sold to the highest bidder in a Moroccan slave market.’ Pedrito shuddered at the thought. ‘A fine strong boy, they said I was. Would fetch a handsome price as a plaything for some rich, wizzened crone in Tangier or Casablanca, they reckoned. *Vaja!* I couldn’t get them to shackle me to that rowing bench fast enough!’

King Jaume was more intrigued than ever now. ‘So tell me, how did all that time spent on a Moorish pirate ship lead to you being taken on as helmsman on a Christian king’s galley, especially by a high-ranking nobleman such as my trusty friend En Guillen de Muntcada?’

While maintaining his set heading in the wake of the hindmost vessels of the fleet, Pedrito proceeded to relate how he had managed to escape from his pirate captors during a slave-taking attack on the Catalonian fishing hamlet of Sitges. It was the first time in his five years as a galley slave that he’d been able to convince his masters that they could trust him to be included in such a raiding party. And he’d grasped the opportunity as though his life depended on it – which, in reality, it probably did. Men doomed to the drudgery of propelling Moorish pirate ships by the power of their muscles weren’t noted for their longevity.

From Sitges, he’d made his way southward along the coast to the city of Tarragona, where the topic on everyone’s lips was the impending reconquest of Mallorca by King Jaume himself. That had been some three months ago, when many vessels committed to the expedition were already beginning to assemble at Tarragona and the neighbouring ports of Salou and Cambrils. In a harbourside tavern one evening, Pedrito had chanced to fall into the company of a happy-go-lucky, red-haired young fellow from northern Britain by the name of Robert St Clair de Roslin, a novice Knight of the Temple who happened to be one of En Guillen de Muntcada’s train. The new royal galley, the cost of its construction having been

## FAIR STANDS THE WIND FOR MALLORCA

provided by the king's native city of Montpellier, had just been launched and a crew was being put together prior to the start of the vessel's sea trials. The hiring of the sailors had been entrusted to the master of En Guillen de Muntcada's galley, Captain Bonet, who, as chance would have it, was also in the same tavern as Pedrito and Robert St Clair that evening.

'So, *Majestat*,' Pedrito concluded, 'Robert St Clair introduced me to Captain Bonet as an experienced sailor, who'd not only known the waters around Mallorca since childhood, but could also speak Arabic and was well acquainted with the practices of the Moors at sea. Don't forget,' he cautioned, 'that they may well launch an attack on your fleet between here and the island.'

King Jaume stroked his chin in the now-familiar way, though his expression was more penitent than pensive this time. 'It seems, then, that I owe you an apology, Master Blànes.'

Pedrito gave him a reassuring smile. 'You owe me nothing, *senyor*. As I said before, all I seek from this mission is an opportunity to see my family again, and being a member of your crew is giving me that chance. So, by my way of thinking, the only person who's indebted to anyone is me.'

A moment or two passed as the king gathered his thoughts, all the while studying Pedrito's face, as he in turn concentrated on holding steady the galley's course against the swells and currents of the open sea into which they were now sailing. Yes indeed, King Jaume told himself, there was a lot more to this young sailor than his lowly status might suggest.

'And by *my* way of thinking,' he said at last, 'the old song of the eight winds wasn't the only thing you learned during your five years as an oarsman on a pirate ship.'

Pedrito gave a chuckle. 'That's right. I also learned the etiquette of farting in company.'

'No doubt, no doubt,' the king laughed, then resumed a more thoughtful mien. 'Yet something tells me you learned a lot more besides, no?'

Pedrito remained silent, his gaze still fixed on the way ahead.

'However,' the king said with a sigh, 'as long as your old song

## SONG OF THE EIGHT WINDS

brings us a fair wind to carry us in all haste to Mallorca...'

'Keep the faith, *senyor*, keep the faith. Sometimes God answers a prayer, sometimes the winds answer a song.' Pedrito turned his head to look the king in the eye. 'And this time, I've a feeling my old song will bring you the very wind you need.'