

# THE WOMAN POPE

THE LIFE AND LEGEND OF POPE JOAN

A NOVEL BY

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*The world is but a bridge.  
Pass over, but build no house upon it.  
He who hopes for an hour  
May hope for an eternity.  
The world is but an hour,  
Spend it in devotion.  
Life is a moment upon the bridge;  
The rest is unseen.*

Persian inscription on a gate in  
Fatehpur Sikri, India  
Attributed to Jesus



# PROLOGUE



IT WAS ROME'S last chance.

The pope was the only man on earth who had the power to dissolve the curse on the city in this most wicked time, eight-hundred fifty-eight long years after the Lord's death and resurrection.

No rain had fallen in months. Swarms of grasshoppers covered the city, wild fires burned unchecked in the countryside and sickness lurked on every corner looking for anyone not conscientious in their prayers.

It was crucial that Pope John Anglicus VIII, John The English, walk the time-honored processional route from the Lateran Basilica to St. Peter's to exorcise the demons strangling the life from Rome.

Only he could divert the evil taken hold of the holy city.

A woman stood in the same spot she had occupied for hours. Shoulder-to-shoulder with the others, she waited, squinting down the crowded narrow street until it bent out of sight. Finally, in the late afternoon, while giving a precious gulp to her four-year-old daughter from their waterskin, she felt a ripple of expectation swell through the people.

"The pope is coming," said a man next to her. He had a discolored, turkey-waddle like growth on the side of his neck.

Around the far corner came horses. The young mother stood on her tip toes trying to see over the heads in front of her. She

could feel the rumble of hooves through the ground and thought she could make out a purple banner at the end of the street.

A hand pulled at her. When she turned, she flinched at a filthy rag held in her face.

“Protect yourself from the plague, little mother.”

Beyond the rag leered a bloated face flaked with thick scales of psoriasis.

“From the robe of Saint Benedict. It'll protect the child from pox.”

She spat at the man's feet and walked away from the relic seller. She was young but no fool. Long ago she learned that rags, dried fingers, toes, and worse were plundered daily from corpses found on the streets, and foul men like that one sold the remains as the parts of saints and martyrs. Only new pilgrims were naive enough not to believe Rome was the home of deception as well as the resting place of St. Peter.

She edged both herself and her child toward the procession. Instantly, they were sucked into a moving tide of flailing arms. She looked over the heads in front of her. Papal guards cleared a path for the pontiff, some with long poles, some using whips. Squeezed on all sides by backs and shoulders and sweating faces, she tried to jostle her way out, but it was too late. They were both caught up and carried away in the jumble of bodies pushed toward the stamping hooves of the guards.

Through the waving elbows and fists around them she caught a glimpse of the red robes of cardinals and the purple miters of bishops on horseback. She watched their heads twist nervously this way and that. Their pointed headgear jutted above the tangled masses, and the precious stones sewn into their garments cast sparkling lights over the wretched sea around them.

As the procession approached, she sensed something was wrong. The holy men were red in the face from screaming for their acolytes, swinging their hook-shaped crosiers, hitting the people to keep them at bay. The acolytes, who fanned them earlier with palm fronds had drowned in the mob, and now the robed churchmen were afraid of their own flock.

Roman guards whipped at the crowd, lashing vicious strokes across outstretched hands, making a bloody pathway for the Holy One.

“I see him,” the mother said to her daughter. The child was speechless with fear, her little mouth and eyes wide open. “Wave, Maria. Call to him. If he sees you, you'll be blessed. They say his look has magic.”

She grunted and lifted Maria onto her shoulders. Beside them, the pope's envoy strained to pass through the frenzied crowd. The guards' horses reared, snorting against grabbing hands of the mob, the animals' ears twitching, and their dark eyes blinked with panic. The Holy Father, surrounded by soldiers, was not on horseback but rode instead on an old donkey.

The mother stopped her frantic waving. She stared, amazed. He was so different from the rest of his entourage. The pontiff of all Christendom could not be more than twenty-one.

He wore simple coarse robes in shades of white, and on his head was a broad-brimmed straw hat, free of jewelry, to keep the sun off. No whiskers graced his face and a soft and kind face it was, so thin and drawn, strikingly out of place above his distended paunch.

As she stared, the pope turned in her direction. Though tossed in the human cauldron around her, she could not take her eyes away. Close enough to see the pontiff's hazel eyes, the young man suddenly jerked with such a grimace that those who saw it grew alarmed. The pope panted and gulped for air as a seizure shook his body and for several seconds he twitched on the donkey, holding his belly until it passed with a final shiver. He sighed and a burst of perspiration rained off him. The pope, aware of the anxious crowd, made the sign of the cross.

“John Anglicus. Pope John the Eighth!” shouted the people, surging forward, pressing their bodies into the skittish soldiers.

“John the English. Save us. Save *me*,” said an old woman. Pushed from behind, she slammed into the back of a hairy sergeant at the pope's flank. Instinctively, he brought the flat side of his heavy broad sword around, and unable to stop the reflex, struck the woman. It broke her shoulder with a snap.

Her shriek cut through the clamor. The shaken sergeant yanked the sword back, but in his rush to pull it away from the old woman the blade dug into the thigh of the pope's donkey.

The donkey's bray and the old woman's scream were a piercing shriek in the air. Flattening its ears, the donkey bolted into the crowd kicking furiously at the air with its hind legs. The pope gripped its mane and looked barely able to hang on as the animal broke through the line of soldiers and ran into the crowd.

A dark implication spread out to everyone who watched. In that moment all faith in the pope's ability to destroy the devils plaguing Rome disintegrated. In the eyes of the multitude, this demi-god, who daily communed face-to-face with the God of the universe, had been turned into a mortal by a common beast. The most spiritually favored being on earth had been transformed before their eyes into a helpless man clinging to a donkey.

Maria and her mother were abruptly released from the clutch of frantic bodies parting before them, and the two stood wondering at the sudden open space of ground around them.

"Mama!" the child watched the injured donkey run by. It wheeled sharply and made for an alley. As it did, the mother opened her mouth to speak but was smothered in a cloud of robes.

The pope was flung from the donkey onto them.

All three tumbled to the ground and rolled in the dank earth.

Maria found herself cradled around a large, hard belly. She opened her eyes, no longer in her mother's arms. She looked up into the face of Pope John VIII. He looked down and Maria saw his surprise at seeing a little girl in his lap.

"Child," he said, drawing a soft hand across the girl's forehead. His gentleness calmed her. He touched the large double mole next to her left eye. "What's your name?"

"Maria," she said and kissed the back of his hand.

A spasm took hold and he fell back on the ground while swarms of frightened people crept close, closer than they had ever been to a living pope. They crossed themselves and mumbled prayers but no one moved to come to his aid.

A casual misfortune for an ordinary man, this fall was ominous and flooded all who witnessed it with a dark meaning.

“As he falls, so will Rome,” someone whispered.

The young mother got on one knee beside her daughter, and they watched the pope writhe in pain. The wide-brimmed hat had flown off, leaving his soft features exposed to the sun.

“The pope is dying.”

“Evil’s come for us today.”

“The devil’s gutted him. Look,” said a woman, pointing.

A red flow emerged from the lower quarters of the pope’s robes, and when the crowd saw it, their fears quickened.

A wail like a single shrill voice rose up from the people and reverberated along the walls of the street. As if they had sensed that a diabolic age was at that moment descending upon them. Men and women turned and, spontaneously, regardless of age or infirmity, began hitting each other. It was as if blaming the stranger next to them for the oncoming apocalypse was the only power they had left.

The fighting spread and within minutes the scuffles bloomed into a full-scale riot threatening to overwhelm mother, child, and pope. The young mother tried to shield the two, but seeing there was nothing to be done in the mob, she panicked with the thought all three were going to die.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw a crowd devour the terrified centurions, now unable to protect even themselves. The elite soldiers were cut down by farm tools turned into weapons by the mob.

The mother saw a man on a horse. The red of his cardinal’s robes flapped in the stale breeze as he tried to move through the horde. For a moment the determination on his face made the mother’s heart rise with hope. Until a hundred hands reached for his rearing horse. The animal desperately tried to turn away but stumbled. It fell with a pitiful cry and the cardinal sank with it into the crowd and disappeared.

“Help me,” said the pope to the mother, squeezing her hand. “Hurry, it is near.”

It took several moments before the mother registered that the pope of all Christendom, God’s chosen servant, was speaking to her. The woman put her arms around His Holiness, lifted him to

his feet, and with Maria clinging to her leg, all three began to walk.

After a few steps, the pope cried out and collapsed, taking the mother and girl with him to the ground. The mother draped herself over his body and waited for the rabble to dig in and crush them. She stiffened when a hand took hold of her arm.

“Let me help him, mother.”

She looked up into the face of the fallen cardinal. His red outer robe had been torn off in the skirmish and along his neck was a bleeding trail from many fingernails. She noted that when he bent down with his strong arms and broad chest, he looked more like an athlete than a clergyman. Woven into the dark curls of his beard were flecks of blood and sweat, a sharp contrast to his sky blue pupils. His gaze was searing and penetrated everything he looked upon.

“Adrian,” said the pontiff, relieved.

Cardinal Adrian stood up with the pope in his arms and moved through the crowd as the young mother watched, riven by an inexplicable sensation when the two exchanged looks.

She picked up her daughter. For a weapon, she chose a brick from a crumbled section of the wall and followed the cardinal.

“I’m here, I won’t leave you.”

“Don’t ever leave me again, Adrian. Promise me.”

“My word, Holy One, is sworn with my life.”

The young mother tried to catch what Pope John Anglicus VIII whispered to his protector, but it was all she could do to struggle through to keep up.

With Adrian’s red cardinal’s cloak gone and his clothes torn in the scuffle, the man changed once again and looked more like a shifty street magician than a powerful priest with the ailing pope clinging to his neck, an anonymous bundle carried through the eye of the melee.

Adrian pushed his way to the corner of the street toward the door of a fabric shop. If he could make it through they would be safe, they could escape the madness.

Adrian had only reached for the door when two screaming men in a strangle-hold on each other fell onto his back. Adrian was thrown to one side, tripping over the body of a trampled

Egyptian merchant and stumbled, hurling forward into the people in front of him.

Rolling off one man, he spun around and hit hard against a wall then fell to the ground. The fall was agony for the pope who cried out in pain, his arms around the cardinal's neck.

With Maria wrapped around her back, the young mother fought her way through the crowd until she reached them.

“Adrian,” said the pope, clutching the stained robes over his belly and imploring the cardinal with frightened eyes.

The young mother frowned and put her hands to her ears, afraid to hear what might come next, but was unable to look away.

“I'm with you, Holy One,” said the Cardinal. “I'll carry you to St. Peter's.”

“No. It's happening. Help me. It happens *now*.”

The Pope and the Cardinal clung to each other, and the young mother stood over them with her mouth open.

All sound stopped.

Movement froze.

The torrent of people faded from her consciousness.

The young mother's focus shifted from the cardinal to the pope and back. She drew in a sharp breath and saw a truth so evident it seemed incredible it was ever thought otherwise.

The Vicar of Christ, who for the last two years and four months had calmed the tormented city, was a woman.

Not only a woman masquerading as the pope, but a woman in labor. The birth contractions were literally squeezing the secret out of her. The young mother's hands passed over her own stomach, and she remembered her Maria's difficult delivery. She knelt and saw the boyish features were now completely feminine and womanly, charged with transformation.

The voices and the movement of the crowd slowly came back to her, a hissing sound growing to a roar in her ears.

“Adrian. I love you so much,” said the woman pope.

“I love you, Johanna,” said Cardinal Adrian, her rescuer, and he bent and kissed her full on the lips.

*Johanna.*

Maria's mother stood up with her daughter in her arms, unaware of the riot raging around them. She watched a cardinal embrace a pope as a lover and as a woman, and at the sight of it the truth of everything she had ever known fled from her world.

It could only mean one thing, and Maria's mother looked skyward and began to pray.

She begged for mercy on her daughter's soul and to be forgiven her own sins. She knew there was not much time. Searching the sky she looked for the place where the blue ceiling above would split open. Her eyes darted across the horizon looking for the tear, the black rip through the blue where the heavens would crack and release devils and angels by the millions. She watched where the forces of heaven and hell would fly through the broken sky and descend to earth for the last battle on this, the Judgment Day. She knew she was witnessing the astonishments the priests promised would come at the final hour.

*Hurry, it is near,* the pope had said to her.

Maria's mother knew, of course, that this was the end of the world.

PART 1  
CHAPTER I



JOHANNA OF MAINZ raced ahead of her father, who was laughing so hard he had to lean on his walking staff to keep from falling over. Jumping and turning, her little hands swatted the air in front of her as she ran along a forest path deep in the ancient hills along the southern border of old Germania. She looked as if she was performing an ecstatic pagan dance, leaping into the air with a squeal and when she came down her face glowed.

“I got him, father,” she said, waving a closed fist.

“Who do you have, little one?” he said.

Johanna suddenly felt herself scooped up in his arms. She turned and looked into the face of Halbert of Mainz and saw a large, heavysset man with shoulder-length, nut-brown hair blending into a bushy beard that matched his fur-lined robes.

“I have the favorite of the gods,” she beamed. “A bug that will follow us to the next world.”

“I don't think you do, Johanna.”

“I *do* think I do.”

“Thank the gods bugs will not pester us when we stand before Nerthus.”

He smoothed the blond, bowl cut hair from her eyes. With her short hair and scruffy appearance she was often mistaken as a boy, an error Halbert felt safe with on their travels. An oval face looked up at him and he playfully pinched a smoothly slop-

ing nose, across it a stripe of freckles and dirt, all typical of the eight-year old he so loved.

“Oh, this one will, little one,” she said, imitating his manner of correcting her. She held out her hand and opened it. A praying mantis rocked on her palm, rubbing its extremities with thorny legs. Halbert burst out laughing. He picked her up, set her on his big shoulders and continued walking.

“I can’t think of any god, from Donar to the Matrones, the triple goddesses, who would not let him pass if he’s held by you,” he said, lifting her up over his head, setting her on the yoke of his shoulders. He walked with a springy step as Johanna bounced happily above. The branches of tall ash trees fluttered along the path of the forest glade. Beyond, at the end of the forest, was a small village.

Halbert began to sing in a resonant baritone, and a few moments later its echo came back along the wooded corridor.

“Sing with me, Johanna. You have a lovely voice when it is not asking questions.”

Johanna knew her father was hungry. He was anticipating life’s daily gift of their supper, whatever that might turn out to be, according to the hearts of strangers. She joined him in a plainsong they usually sang at winter solstice, but one he loved when he hoped the world might be especially generous. He picked up the pace. She put her fist close to her ear and felt the prickly scrape of the insect’s legs against her skin as it struggled to free itself.

She sang with her father and the soothing vibration of their voices, plus the buzzing inside her palm, made Johanna quietly slip beneath the moment into a deeper place.

In that place she felt she was part of a great continuous line, familed to every living thing. *Look at you*, she thought, bringing the exotic green stick close and watching the mandibles work below the huge orbs of the mantis’ eyes. Johanna was struck by the notion that the creature she held in her hand was essentially the same as all things that live, the same as herself. *We both live, right now, at this exact moment.*

She felt a jolt; a spark caught fire inside her lit from the Engine of all things. The feeling at first thrilled her, but then made

her sad. It was part of a mystery, one easy to see, but to understand it fully required age and abilities she did not possess and had no idea where to find. She opened her hand and the mantis sprang into the air, buzzing in erratic loops to the safety of the high grass. She then squeezed the lobe of her father's right ear, a secret little signal they had used for as long as she could remember. He lifted her from his shoulders and set her on the ground. They held hands and walked.

That night in an abandoned barn, Halbert and his daughter stuffed themselves with two loaves of day old bread spread with a large hunk of goat cheese. He drank wine from a skin and Johanna stood in the moonlight wrapped in a blanket near the door. She read from grease-stained scrolls, a few sheets from Aristotle, from Cicero, torn strips of Horace and others. Halbert's bible. Smearred, crumpled, and weather-beaten, the yellowed edges of the lambskin parchments were torn at the edges from use.

He watched her and felt an uneasy foreboding at his daughter's continued fascination with the scrolls.

It had begun innocently enough, he remembered, a curious four-year-old demanding an explanation of the book's scratchy symbols. But her craving for knowledge launched them on a nightly excursion that had since lasted years. Theirs was a journey of ideas and concepts and was an immeasurable part of their relationship despite the dangers.

"Put the book away," he said. "You already know too many secrets forbidden to you and you'll be sad when you have to stop. And you *will* have to stop."

"I want to know it all, father."

"Perhaps one day when we get to Rome, little one, we'll see her glorious libraries and we'll--"

"No, Papa! Not there!" Her mood suddenly soured. "I miss Mama so much. Why did they kill her? She wasn't bad."

"She wasn't bad, no. The Christians made a mistake."

"They are evil and their faith is evil."

“Shhh. Sleep. It's men's hearts, not their beliefs, that are good or bad.”

“Who says that?”

“Wise men have always known this.”

“I hate the Christians and their bad god. Papa, you loved mama more than any god, didn't you?” she said, her body shaking with sobs.

“Yes, I did.”

Staring off, both minds fled back into the past. Despite having the knowledge of numbers, some would say sacred while many would call it evil knowledge, they could not count the number of times they had gone back to the same afternoon three years before.

*Halbert, with five-year-old Johanna on his shoulders as always, is smiling as he gazes down on his petite wife, Gilberta, walking beside them. Wandering nomads, carrying all they own, dancing as they walk and singing a joyful pagan praise to life.*

*They rest outside a village. Halbert sits with Johanna and cuts a slice of old bread for her lunch. Gilberta wanders off looking for privacy and finds it in the middle of a wheat field. She bends, holds up withered stalks of wheat. The entire field is blighted with worms. She wipes at the menstrual blood trickling down her inner thigh and quickly buries the bloody rag in the earth. Gilberta looks back in the distance.*

*Halbert sits on the ground, draws letters in the dirt for Johanna as she chews the bread, fascinated. Gilberta watches the loving, intimate sight of her little family and sighs. She hears a noise behind her. Gilberta turns and is struck hard across the temple.*

*Two village farmers armed with clubs drag her unconscious body out of the field.*

*Halbert moves Johanna's fingers over a letter and, sensing something not right, looks up. He whistles, lets out the perfect call of a forest owl, his secret signal to her. Johanna tries to mimic him and laughs. Trying not to seem worried he picks her*

*up and calls to Gilberta. He walks, then runs in the direction he last saw his wife.*

*Minutes later, in the middle of the village square, Gilberta jerks awake to noise and smoke. She tries to move but finds she's tied to a wood stake and a fire has been set at her feet. She looks out on the village and sees diseased villagers waving crosses, coughing and hacking at the smoke and cursing her. A priest, a hood pulled down so low his face cannot be seen, sprinkles holy water on the flames at Gilberta's feet.*

*"You wandering demon. Devil whose blood brings death to our fields and plague to our people, take your curses back to Satan. Tell him we live by Christ."*

*It is then that Halbert, holding Johanna, breaks through the crowd. Gilberta sees them and the little family screams for each other.*

*The crowd goes after Halbert, another foreign demon who has caused the righteous so much pain and trouble. They raise their clubs, then stop when they hear the creature bellow, enraged. Halbert raises his staff and charges, beating every person, man or woman, who tries to flee before him.*

*Johanna watches the flames consume her mother. Gilberta, her agony complete, slumps into the fire and succumbs. Johanna looks around for help from anyone, anything. She sees the hooded priest slip away, afraid for his life before the fury of the bellowing pagan.*

*Watching the priest escape, the cowardice of the anonymous man responsible for all of this horror transforms the little girl. Her terror and hysteria fade, her little face relaxes and only her eyes show emotion. Hate.*

*She watches the flames roar and listens to Halbert roar and swing, pounding his staff into flesh, breaking teeth, shattering bone with no mercy.*

*Johanna stares. Her eyes burn cold.*

A long while later her breathing returned to normal and she settled in the comfort of her father's arms. Halbert's rocking

calmed her, the memory passed and soon she drifted through the door of a dream.

On the other side of that door she was walking along a sandy beach. She stooped to pick up a shell when a tremendous, sparkling wave rose up on the water's edge. It filled the entire dream horizon and swelled higher than a mountain. The wave crested and then tumbled down in a perfect transparent blue curl.

Instead of destroying Johanna, the water drenched her with a gentle touch, a touch made of sound. The sound was an incomparable rush of voices. Smiling at the sensation, Johanna thought she was being carried away on a wonderful dream until, without thinking, she opened her eyes. Halbert still held her, his head bent forward, the rumble of a snore in his nose.

She blinked and looked around the room, wide awake and gulping air. The wave continued to wash over her and flooded the barn, engulfing everything. She knew something had come for her.

She closed her eyes and opened her mouth and tasted the song-that-was-more-than-sound. It was sweetly aromatic with a roasted nut-like flavor. She savored the taste and felt a tingling spread through her body. Johanna reached in front of her and felt the vibration of the wave, its softness, its texture like feeling the wind on her fingertips. The song told her to cast her burdens aside, the voices whispered to her to rest, as if she had come from a long journey. She relaxed and let the sensations rush in and lift her up into their arms.

## CHAPTER II

THEY WANDERED FOR years and walked hundreds of leagues through the wilderness of Europe long before it would be named so.

“Run with me, father!” said Johanna, and trotted down the road. They traveled along a well-used road toward a village Halbert knew.

“You go on ahead,” he said. “I’m too old.”

Halbert watched his daughter and saw the reflection of his own large boned features in the long swiftly pumping legs. But her size was mellowed by the delicate softness of her mother, Gilberta, with fine blond-streaked hair blowing back in her wake. Halbert also saw in his child his own sharp intelligence, magnified.

Halbert had always been big and as a boy was expected to excel only in matters of strength. But his was an intellectual appetite. Quick to learn Latin and Greek from the monks who took him in, the shy orphan read all their books and surprised the brothers and priests with vigorous debates in an agile, scholarly tongue. This verbal agility would be needed later -- after he met his soul mate, pagan Gilberta, and was thrown from the church and became a father -- to keep up with a little girl who gave him good chase from the time she could speak.

“Come, you turtle,” said Halbert running by, startling Johanna with a swat on her rear. “Can’t beat a fat old man to the village?”

“Not fair!” she laughed, and took off after him.

Always alert to every stage in her childhood, Halbert made her think and dig for the answers she relentlessly ran after. Johanna met his every challenge then surpassed each one. The only information he ever kept from his daughter, upon the death of her mother at the hands of Christians, was his education and once-close relationship to the church and religion she hated so much. The pain it would cause was not worth the hate he knew would fill her little heart.

“You win,” panted Halbert after she had caught and passed him. They approached a village near the southwestern border in the land of the Western Franks. Halbert rested on a boulder at the edge of the road. Johanna was about to tease him when he held his finger to his lips. She listened, strained to separate the sounds of the forest from a plaintive din beyond the trees. Wailing voices came across the far distance.

“What is that?” she asked, her eyes wide. He shook his head.

They walked warily through the forest and into the village.

She was eleven-years-old that day and her father had reluctantly promised to go over the Greek alphabet as part of her birthday present. A boy was the first to see them enter the village and pointed to the many-colored pouches hanging off Halbert's staff, the sign of a traveling herb seller. He ran off and shortly after, led a large shirt-less man to them. He asked Halbert to come to the funeral of his father and spread herbs to keep sickness at bay. In a rough dialect he promised two days worth of food and a pair of outgrown wooden shoes for Johanna. Halbert sealed the agreement with a handshake.

The man led the way.

Johanna frowned and crossed her arms, kicking the dirt as she walked. Not happy to have to wait until that night for her lesson, she needed to know everything *now*.

They followed the man through the village and Johanna noted the roofs of the cow dung houses were already girded with fresh layers of thatch to meet the autumn. A short way beyond the houses stood the village cemetery where the grieving family and entire village gathered at a funeral pyre. The body rested on

top of the stacked wood, laid out in the dead man's finest clothes.

"The pox?" Halbert asked.

"How did you know that?" asked the son, fearful. "Have you heard tales of our village?"

"No. But why would he want to be burned rather than buried?"

"Burned with all his possessions," said the son's wife, a dour, stick-thin woman at the pyre. She spat. "Damn him."

Halbert knew the outrageous request must have devastated both family and friends not only hoping to gain from the well-to-do man's passing, but the sacrilege of having the village watch a family member burn like a common witch. Never in memory had anyone heard of such a request as it went against all their Christian burial customs.

"I have no choice and you know it," said the son. He slapped his wife across the face and sent her away yowling. "You want to loose the house and land? Father said if I refuse his wishes it all goes to the village as charity."

"Heat some water," said Halbert to the son. "I'll make a drink to protect you and your relatives."

Johanna sat on the ground away from the proceedings and played with her old rag doll, but had no interest in either toy or ceremony. Her eyes were on the pyre. Her mouth dry from the day's warmth, forehead glistening with sweat, Johanna had seen plenty of corpses but only one, her mother, purposefully burned.

The dead man's possessions were stacked in tall piles around the pyre. Winter clothes, hardwood chairs, objects of finely carved woods, iron trinkets in the shapes of men and animals, plus oiled skins of snow rabbit, red fox and deer. Wood barrels were filled with odds and ends, but as Johanna looked over the goods, a peculiar shape caught her eye. The object stuck out of the last barrel at the very rear of the stacks. A cylinder of some kind or a roll of parchment inside a quiver or a tube, she could not be sure. All she could see were tiny black designs.

Johanna made her way toward the barrel.

"The learned man believed the pox clings to his possessions. Imagine that! Oh, he wants to spare his family and all of us from

it,” snorted a thick-necked woman, her stubby hands covetously fingering a rich tapestry depicting flying birds and wild boar.

“He read books and was wise, but this is superstition,” grumped a red-faced man, the sweat of a new fever on his forehead. “He just wants to take it with him.”

“What’s it to you?” snapped the woman. “You wouldn’t get nothing anyway.”

“Tell you what I get. I get to be first in line to curse his soul on its way to the fire in hell.”

“Blame his wife. She and the son are the ones making the family burn his goods. Dead man, son and widow are all fools.”

A scream startled Johanna and everyone turned. She caught sight of the dead man’s wife fainting as the pyre was torched. Family members began to toss articles into the blaze while Halbert mixed herbs for the broth.

Johanna’s eyes locked again onto the cylinder and concentrated. Soon the mystery of the flowery designs faded; she knew what they were. Not tiny paintings or decorations at all, but letters. Greek letters. The letters Halbert traced on the ground that morning came racing back. The bold shapes were symbols, symbols for sounds that rose up into walls of words. The walls were then joined as sentences and each sentence wall was roofed with thoughts until in the final construction a dwelling was painstakingly built out of words. It stood where only parts had been, a structure made of thoughts and ideas, filled with the treasure of knowledge. And that house was about to turn to ash.

Johanna edged closer until she was in front of the leather-bound tube, the pillars and arches of the symbols clearly visible. The letters commanded her; everything about them radiated power, secrets and called out with a mystical beckoning.

She knew she could not let them be destroyed.

Johanna trembled at the act she was about to undertake. Not only did she take her life in her hands if caught, but just as harrowing was the thought of her father’s wrath for stealing, not for food or need, that was the covenant of beggars. But to steal out of greed or lust was, next to murder, a most terrible crime.

“Forgive me, father,” she whispered to herself, and casually ran her fingers over the lines of the letters. She touched the

quiver as if merely tracing the black shapes for their pretty geometry. Yet when her fingers reached half way down the scroll they gripped the cylinder and lifted it out of the barrel.

“You,” said a voice behind her. She pulled her hand away. Profusely sweating and naked to the waist was the son of the dead man. He stood above her stripped of his shirt and his inheritance, his mouth sucked into a grimace and his skin striped with soot from a fire it was his hateful duty to feed.

“You little scavenging rat. What are you doing?”

“Nothing, sir...I...I...”

“Thief! You want forbidden property? Here. Since no one else can have it, feel free to share my father's wealth -- including his flames,” he said and reached down. Incredibly strong fingers dug into the soft flesh of her underarms. The man lifted Johanna high in the air a long moment, his eyes burning into hers with a hatred that chilled her little heart. He walked to the fire holding her out in front of him until a scream slapped him still. Other screams sprang up. He dropped Johanna and ran.

She hit the ground, flat in the dirt, and watched the man run for the bonfire and his mother, the dead man's wife. The widow had climbed onto the raging platform. She entered the fire and hugged the body, instantly engulfed in the orange curtains of flame.

The man and his family called out to her, reached into the blaze only to pull their arms back out, singed. The old woman waved her hand to ward off those who would follow while she embraced her husband with one arm. Halbert restrained two of the daughters from leaping after their mother into the flames. The entire village, hands to their heads, shuffled around the raging pyre in a dance of panic.

Johanna realized she was not the one cast into the flames and got to her feet. The son, arms blistered, tore at his hair, tilted his head back and shrieked at the calm evening sky. All eyes were on the victims and Johanna was forgotten. This time she did not hesitate.

She lifted the heavy leather tube out of the barrel, tucked it under her arm and fled from the roar of the pyre. She ran in terror for what seemed like miles.

Johanna cut through fields, tripped and fell again and again. She hid beneath a gnarled oak until late that night, crying, hugging the scroll, rocking it back and forth like a baby in her arms.

*Who would do such a thing?* she said to herself. Risk her life, for what? Risk everything for paper, for symbols? For something she did not even know its meaning?

“Wicked girl. Thief,” she said. This perverse behavior flew in the face of her father's teachings.

“I'm sorry,” she wept. “I could not let them burn you.”

Johanna shivered. She felt the world despised her for what she yearned for, fixed her with the same feral hatred as the son who would have surely tossed her into the fire as one more bauble destroyed because he could not go against his father's wishes.

“I won't let them hurt you,” she said, stroking the soft leather tube. She smelled the musky scent and fingered the leather strips tied around it. Her tears wet the hide, softened it, and her body heated the tube, heightening the thick animal aroma to such an extent that it seemed the thing was about to stir, wake, to actually come alive, a beast of ideas. And now it was her beast. She promised herself she would break its wild secrets and ride its kicking spirit until she tamed it as her own.

She clutched the heavy tube to her chest and walked out from under the oak feeling as though she carried the means of both her life and her death.

“Johanna,” said Halbert when she returned that night. He was so angry she thought he would strike her, something he had never done. She almost wished he would to exorcise her torment. The man loomed over her like a giant, hands on his hips. He raised his hands and she waited for the blow.

Instead, he took her in his arms and wept. So relieved and confused she did not say a word and clung to him the rest of the night. Halbert was so tired from the tragedy of the funeral and worry over Johanna that he fell asleep before she could confess her crime.

When they left the village in the morning and were on the road, Johanna ran to the tree and retrieved the quiver. Without explanation, Johanna set the heavy leather tube in his hands.

Turning it slowly in his hands, Halbert's eyebrows shot up quizzically as he undid the straps.

“What have you done now?” he sighed. He pulled out several sheets of parchment rolled around each other in a thick log. Halbert looked at the tangled halo of sun-bleached hair, the green eyes wide with fear, her mouth parted with a question.

“Do you have any idea...” He opened his mouth to yell, and stopped. He went back to the scrolls, unrolled sheet after sheet. His anger was overpowered by each length of tightly curled paper. Johanna saw the excitement bubble up behind his eyes. He wanted to be angry, to make her realize the depth of her sin and show her she had gone beyond a whole range of moral and social boundaries.

“Johanna,” he began, then sputtered into a dumbfound silence. She had set a treasure in his hands, a mother-lode they could excavate each time he took it from its leather cave. Every page a was jewel-laden mine that would not be exhausted for years.

Halbert promised himself he would scold his daughter later. He would threaten, he would plead, he would lecture her for hours on end about the seriousness of her crime.

But at that moment he hurriedly replaced the rolls in the quiver, tucked the quiver under his arm, grabbed Johanna by the collar of her dress and then ran as fast as he could. Halbert bolted down the road with Johanna held at arm's length, her little feet running alongside him, barely touching the ground.