

THE RED WOLF CONSPIRACY

Robert V.S. Redick

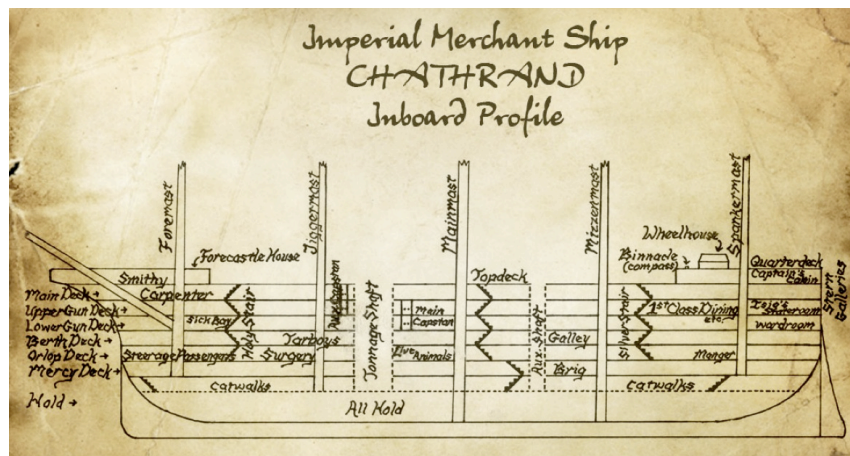
CHAPTER 3

The Master and His Lads

SETTING: port town of Sorrophran, four days by sea from Etherhorde, capital of the Arquali Empire. In Sorrophran, a backwater, the ancient, enormous ship Chathrand is being made ready for a deep sea voyage, her first in many years. Every aspect of the voyage—destination, purpose, passengers, crew—has been withheld from the public, for reasons as yet unknown.

Arqual has been at war with the world's other great power, the Mzithrin, for much of the last three hundred years.

Edited slightly for ease of reading as a stand-alone.



I.M.S. Chathrand Profile by Bruce Hemmer

On a skysail mast, three hundred feet over the deck of the *Chathrand*, the moon falcon watched and waited. He was an extraordinarily beautiful bird: black above, cream-yellow below. Smaller than a hawk but a better hunter, and quick enough to steal a fish from an eagle's claw if he had a mind to. But this falcon knew his duty, and did not move as a few last rats hurled themselves aboard by the gangplanks, and a toothless prisoner from the

THE RED WOLF CONSPIRACY

Robert V.S. Redick

Sorrophran jail dabbed hot tar on the mast just a few yards below him, chattering foolishly: *'Lo, Jimmy Bird! Sailin' with the Great Ship, are we?'*

There were prisoners all over the ship, sanding rough planks, tarring ropes against the months of salt spray ahead, driving brass pegs into transom and mast. The falcon noted them as he would cattle in a field: inedible, useless, no threat to him. In all Sorrophran, just one thing mattered: an ornate red carriage by the Mariners' Inn, six blocks uphill from the water. The falcon's eyes were so sharp he could count the flies on the horses' rumps, but they could not pierce the tavern door, nor see who had arrived by that carriage in the night.

'Ere's bread for a handsome Jim!'

The prisoner took a mouldy biscuit from his pocket, snapped it in two and tossed half at the falcon. The bird did not deign to move. On the wharf, a great crowd was gathering before the *Chathrand*: street boys, staggering drunks, noncommissioned sailors with their pale wives and barefoot children, fruit-sellers, grog-sellers, Rapopalni monks in their mustard-yellow robes. All were held back from the *Chathrand*'s main gangway by a wooden fence that cut the square in two. Imperial marines, their gold helmets winking in the sun, paced just inside the fence.

At last the door of the inn swung wide. The bird tensed. Onto the porch came a heavy, muscular man, slow of step, dressed in the uniform of a merchant officer: black coat, gold trim, high collar turned up at the back. Over his chest flowed a curly, rust-red beard. The man's eyes were bright and restless. He looked suspicious of the doorway, the horses, the very air. The carriage driver scampered down from his seat, opened the passenger door and lowered the footstool. The red-bearded man paid no attention.

After a moment a servant came from the inn bearing a tray. Upon the tray, a dish, and within the dish the falcon saw four of the tiny, sky-blue eggs of milop birds. The bearded man scooped them into his hand. The servant waited, the horses stamped, the carriage driver stood

THE RED WOLF CONSPIRACY

Robert V.S. Redick



IMS Chathrand By Edward Miller

in the rain, but the man had eyes only for his eggs. With great patience he lifted each one, rolled it in his palm, and then with a surprisingly delicate motion cracked it between his teeth and drank it raw. He did this four times. Then he passed the eggshells to the servant and lumbered towards the carriage.

Now the falcon saw it: the odd, toe-pointing twitch in the man's left foot. Not quite a limp, but unmistakable – his master had demonstrated. Beard, eggs, twitch. It was enough.

The carriage door closed. The driver took his seat and whipped the horses into a trot. Nearly a mile away, the falcon leaped from the mast with a warrior's cry, startling the prisoner so badly he scalded his leg with tar. The ship was already forgotten: the falcon shot like an arrow into the thunderheads, beating west and screaming defiance of the wind. Shedding rain, delighted to be under way, he climbed until land and sea vanished utterly beneath the clouds, and then higher still. At last he burst through to sunlight, and skimmed low over a wild, brooding cloudscape, a kingdom of his own.

THE RED WOLF CONSPIRACY

Robert V.S. Redick

All day the bird flew southwest, hardly changing the tempo of its wingbeats. Toward evening a cloud-murth on a horse like white smoke chased him, leering and waving an axe, but the falcon beat the demon to the edge of the cloudlands, and taunted it with a corkscrew dive at the setting sun. Before dark he saw a pod of whales surging east, and a ship in pursuit.

Under the moon, his name-father, the bird flew faster than ever, and at midnight with a thrill of joy he felt the wind shift behind him. *I shall be early, early!* He passed gulls, terns, cormorants as if they were standing still. Now and then a wander-star crossed the heavens: one of the metal eyes the ancients hung over Alifros to spy on their enemies.

By the second day the wind tasted of Etherhorde. Marsh gasses, city smoke, the sweet reek of farmland. At last it came: a bright coast, ships beyond counting, harbour bells and the barking of dogs, the rumbling, gabbling noise of the afternoon market, the children laughing in the slums, the fortresses, the black parade of the Emperor's Horse Guard. Etherhorde was the mightiest city in the world, and one day (so his master whispered) would be the only city where power dwelt, all others made its vassals.

.... Up the mountain he flew, beyond exhaustion, announcing his coming with ragged shrieks. Cliffs appeared, and a lone lake, and then on the broken summit rose the huge, wet bulk of Castle Maag. The oldest structure in Etherhorde, Maag was the ancestral home of the ruling family, a darker and more private place than the five-domed seat of Empire in the city below. There, the Emperor stunned his subjects with opulence: the crown of rubies, the throne cut from a single, pale-purple crystal. Here, a pair of bejewelled concubines swatted beetles on a terrace, and an ancient gardener raked lilac petals into drifts, and the Queen Mother walked a white boar on a chain about the soggy grounds.

Above them all, in the Weather Tower, shutters flew open. Sandor Ott, Spymaster of the Imperium, held a gloved hand from the window. He was an old man and rather short, but his body was lean and strong. Eagerly he watched the bird's approach. Below the glove the skin of his arm was a criss-crossed tangle of scars.

THE RED WOLF CONSPIRACY

Robert V.S. Redick

With a last flurry the bird alighted. The old man cooed to him and stroked his back.

‘Niriviel, my champion! You’ll rest, and eat from my own plate tonight. But what news, finest falcon? Tell me at once!’

Within the tower chamber, a group of younger men huddled, breathless. They were six in all: poised and muscular, with wary eyes and handsome faces. Some wore heavy silk, others the jaquina shirts of snow-white cotton made popular by a visit from the Prince of Talturi. None carried weapons (only Ott had that privilege within the castle walls) but most carried scars. One had been tending the fire when the bird arrived, and stood gaping, the poker forgotten in his hand. Indeed, no one moved a finger as Ott cocked his ear close to that savage beak. The men had spent the night shivering and sullen, not believing any bird would come; they would have laughed at the old warrior if they dared. But here it stood. Would the rest of his tale prove true? Would speech come from a wild thing, here in their very midst?

No, it would not: Niriviel’s voice was only a shrill whistle, the same as any bird of prey. But Sandor Ott listened motionless, so they did as well. The bird gave a longer trill, and then a curious hop on the spymaster’s arm, as if attempting a demonstration.

Ott took a deep breath. Then he walked the bird to its perch, whispering and petting him all the while. Once the falcon was settled he turned to look at them, his face wild with something, and slowly pulled off the glove. The hand that emerged flexed once, then tightened into a fist.

‘Rose is found,’ he said.

Abruptly the room fell so quiet they could hear the bubble of sap from a pine log in the hearth. Furtively, the men sought one another’s eyes. Ott noticed the glances and raised his voice nearly to a shout.

‘Do you hear? Nilus Rotheby Rose is found! In Sorrophran, fresh from the Narrow Sea, and he’ll be here at the helm of *Chathrand* in four days’ time. Open that wine, somebody, and let us drink to good fortune. At long last the game is begun!’

THE RED WOLF CONSPIRACY

Robert V.S. Redick

The men looked at the bottle of wine and did not move. One of them picked up the corkscrew from the table, unfolded it and glanced uncertainly at his fellows. Sandor Ott walked to the centre of the room.

‘It’s the best of news, eh, lads? The start of your golden time. Just think: a year from now His Supremacy will count you all Defenders of the Realm. And centuries hence your family names will still be praised in song. You work in secrecy today, but your grandchildren will know that they are descended from the men who saved the Empire. More than heroes, you shall— *Zirfet Salubrastin!*’

At the sound of his name a very big man, easily the strongest in the room, gave a startled jump.

‘Why are you looking at the door, you straw-gutted mule?’

‘I never did, sir!’ blurted Zirfet. He stood rooted to the spot, his enormous frame turned slightly in the direction of the tower door. Ott crossed the room to face him. The top of the old man’s head was little higher than Zirfet’s elbow.

‘You had a mind to slip away,’ said Ott, very low.

‘No, sir!’ exploded Zirfet.

Ott held Zirfet’s gaze without moving. Then, in a smooth gesture, he unsheathed a long white knife.

‘You were scheming, Zirfet.’ he said. ‘An illness, a broken leg, your dear Ma dying in Hubboxum. Any story, so long as it kept you off that ship.’

‘You’re wrong! I never – not for one minute—’

Ott slid the naked blade through Zirfet’s own belt, then withdrew his hand.

‘Master Ott!’ Now Zirfet’s great shoulders were quaking. ‘I don’t want your knife, sir! I don’t!’

‘You’ve got the only blade in the room, lad. And I’m calling you a coward. A reeking, swill-blooded coward. You’ll want to challenge me, Zirfet. It’s your right.’

THE RED WOLF CONSPIRACY

Robert V.S. Redick

With contemptuous slowness, the old man turned his back on the younger spy and cast a cold glance at the other eight.

‘Men of the Secret Fist. Which of you could stand before his father and not hang his head? By the Night Gods! I watched them leap onto burning ships. I watched them charge up ladders through the boiling pitch, into the very teeth of the Mzithrin horde. Murder in their eyes, blood to their elbows. And look at their progeny. A few years of peace and you turn into dolls. Straw dolls, scarecrows, cowards! Rin spare me, you’re like old Quimby, her Highness’s pet. White flabby sows, too fond of your slops to bother with the oath you swore at the Ametrine Throne, or even to defend your own rancid, maggot-mounded, offal-heap honour! *Pelech!*’

The last word was in Old Arquali, a ritual battle-cry to be flung at an enemy, and with it the old man twisted sideways, out of the path of Zirfet’s lunge. The knife missed his back by an inch, but Ott did not escape unharmed: Zirfet’s huge left fist caught him squarely in the eye. The old man flung himself with the blow, rolled over the little table with the candles and the sea chart. The other men retreated to the walls. No stopping a fight the spymaster himself had provoked.

Zirfet leaped for Ott again, snarling, all hesitation gone. But Ott was quicker. His fall from the table carried back into a roll, and as he gained his feet, still spinning, he caught the table by one leg and whirled it with terrific speed. His first pass checked Zirfet’s advance, his second caught the knife in mid-stab and tore it from the other’s hand.

To the watching spies, the rest of the fight seemed pitifully one-sided. Zirfet rushed Ott like an elephant, Ott leaped back and let him slip on the wine. Zirfet had learned enough from his old teacher to use the fall rather than struggle against it, and sprang to his feet again with something approaching grace. But then he took another hopeless swing at Ott. The spymaster parried it easily with his knee, and at the same time broke the second wine bottle over Zirfet’s head. Even as he fell, Zirfet managed to lash out with his fist. Ott merely danced

THE RED WOLF CONSPIRACY

Robert V.S. Redick

backward, absorbing the blow, and seizing the big man's wrist in one hand. The blow had stretched Zirfet out, and almost at his ease the spymaster kicked him in the stomach, leaped on his back, and pressed the jagged stem of the bottle to his throat.

All was still. Sandor Ott grinned hideously, one eye blind with blood from Zirfet's first blow. He pulled the other's head up by the hair.

'You're a coward, are you not?'

'No, sir.'

'A coward, I say. A leech from a pigsty pool, like all the men of your line.'

'I'll kill you, sir.'

'What?'

'I swear I'll see you dead if you insult me more. I'm no coward, sir!'

A quiet sound reached the ears of the spies, and it was a moment before they recognized it as laughter. Ott's shoulders shook. He threw the bottle aside and leaped off Zirfet, who bucked himself unsteadily to his feet. Watching him, Ott laughed louder.

'If you'd answered "yes" I'd have believed it, lad. You'd be dead on this floor with your throat slit.'

'Well I know it, Master,' said Zirfet, wheezing.

'This knife,' said Sandor Ott, tugging it from the table, 'was placed in my hand by my first general, after I slew the Mzithrin Lord Tiamek on the Ega Bridge. Will you take it, Zirfet Salubrastin, as token of your honour defended?'

For the second time, Zirfet froze. Then he staggered forward, eyes wide with astonishment, and took the knife from his master's hand. Eyes met around the room; there were nods of grim approval.

The spymaster plucked the chart from the floor. Wine had ruined it: the western lands seemed to vanish in a sea of blood.

THE RED WOLF CONSPIRACY

Robert V.S. Redick

‘Now hear me once and for ever,’ said Ott. ‘There’ll be no glancing at doors, for *there are no doors to escape by*. Not for you six, nor for me, nor even for His Supremacy. Rose will captain that ship, and we shall sail with her. The game’s begun, lads. We’ll play it to the last round.’