

## PART ONE

### CHAPTER I

[1]

The late afternoon London fog, thick and slow, crept down the Strand and came over the wall in back of the garden enveloping trees, shrubs, and flowers. Through a windowpane in his second-floor solarium, Lord Otto de Grandson watched as his roses became diffused in the white mist. He loved the heavy fog; it reminded him of his childhood and how it used to slither down the craggy Alpine valleys and make everything soft and dream-like.

Then he heard a beggar's bell asking for alms out on the Strand. The rhythmic ringing yanked Otto out of his reverie. He listened again, this time with full attention. That was no ordinary beggar. It was urgent news. He counted the rings: one-six, meant Vespers; one-two-three, meant Grey Friars; one-one, meant today. Otto listened two more times for confirmation, and there was no doubt: he was to meet a courier that evening at Vespers by the Grey Friar's abbey in the city.

He walked over to a side table, picked up a codex he had just bought by the Franciscan Roger Bacon and sat down to read. For a while he just stared at the words. What could be the urgent message? It had to be from France. Maybe Cantor de Milly had run across a letter from King Philip with a concrete timeline when the French would declare war? Or maybe...Otto stopped himself. He would just wait and see; there was no sense speculating. He read the Aristotelian text until he came to a word the copier had omitted from an otherwise powerful sentence. That was annoying. He resolved to make the correction the following day. Then he noticed that the servants had started lighting the oil lamps and candles throughout the house. He put the book down and called for his hauberk of fine German chain mail and sword belt. After a groom helped him put them on, he draped a heincelin over his shoulders against the evening chill. At the bottom of the stairs he announced to anyone listening, "I'm going for Vespers at the Grey Friars."

When he stood under the appointed elm in the abbey's garden shrouded in foggy twilight, he turned his gaze to the monks and worshippers rushing to church, and sure enough, eventually one among the many hooded parishioners cut away from the crowd; then slowly, as though going for a stroll, circled the sundial, touched the nearby statue's right foot, and casually made his way to the tree.

When the man came close and uncovered his head, Otto recognized the immaculate goatee, hooked nose, and thick, knitted eyebrows. "Cantor! What are you doing here?"

Blood-shot eyes stared at Otto. "I couldn't trust a courier with what I have to tell you, my Lord," Cantor whispered tensely in his Languedoc French. "The time has come for you to fulfill your promise."

"What happened?"

"Three days ago, at the royal palace in Paris, I overheard King Philip order his ministers, Flote, Nogaret, and Marigny, to set the French Scheme in motion." Cantor paused, apparently trying to control the emotion in his voice. "I saw all four of them go into the sitting chamber without their clerks and attendants and knew it was important. So I hid in the next room pretending to write a letter should anyone walk in, but no one did and I listened by pressing my ear to the connecting door. Marigny is going to finish off the Scottish royal family; Flote is to send men to Acre to create an incident that will break the truce in the Holy Land with the Turks. Nogaret's job is to get rid of the pope. I heard it all, clear as day."

Cantor's face settled into a grimace. "The French will have everything in place, my Lord. They plan for Acre to fall to the Turks in the spring of 1291. By then the Scots will be both without a king, or an heir to the throne, and there'll be a new pope, a puppet of the French."

For Otto it was all like a bad dream, one he had reviewed in his mind many times. Now that it was happening, he discovered he was actually relieved. The wait was over; it was time for action. "I can understand why you decided to come in person to tell me, but we have known..."

"The French are no longer just making plans," Cantor interrupted. "You must understand that now they are going ahead with their scheme! They have to be stopped!"

"I know, Cantor. I know. But I promise your efforts will be rewarded. Don't worry, King Philip will never conquer Europe."

"How will you stop that monster? He's just as ruthless and ambitious as his father and grandfather, but far more capable. I know him much better than you, my Lord. Believe me, this French king can become emperor."

Otto looked at the man's exhausted and anxious face. In all likelihood he had not stopped to rest or eat for the past three days. "From the day you alerted me to the French Scheme twelve years ago, I have been hard at work...Cantor, we made a bargain. You fulfilled your part, and on my honor, I will fulfill mine."

Cantor shook his head. "Please tell me how you are going to stop Philip's killers from starting a war with the Turks or doing away with the pope and Scottish royals."

"No one can. I could try and stop a French army, but not a determined killer. But I have a plan of my own once the inevitable happens."

"But I rushed over..."

"I'm sorry, Cantor, but I have to focus on what's possible. My plan will work."

"If you think that your King Edward can stop Philip, you are wrong. The French can raise an army several times the size of the English."

"Yes, I'm painfully aware of that."

Otto decided to tell Cantor everything, to give him hope; after all, the man had risked his life for the past twelve years, not to mention his present journey. "I'm going to arrange for the Knights Templar to fight the French."

Cantor's eyes flickered with either surprise or delight. "How will you do that? Part of Philip's strategy includes destroying the Templars. Are you going to save them? But how? The way Philip has it set up, there's no way."

Two weeks later Otto looked up from a parchment he had been studying as one of his clerks escorted Lord Ralph Hengham and the shire reeve, Sir Ian, into his work chamber at Westminster Palace. In the morning light coming through the narrow windows behind him, Otto tried to read their faces for the good news he had been hoping for. They both seemed pleased with themselves, and Otto's spirits rose. He dismissed his clerk with a nod, stood from his worktable and extended an open hand for the two men to approach.

Sir Ian seemed particularly excited. "William is going to Abissey Castle this summer for a week," he blurted out, forgoing social amenities.

At the words, Otto's attention shifted from studying the shire reeve's drab attire to his face. The sheriff—as they were now called—stared back at him with a glint of pride in his eyes. "You didn't think I had the means to arrange it, eh, brother?" he said.

Otto laughed as he stood and came around his worktable. What the man lacked in manners he made up with results. "I have never doubted your ability to influence people, Brother Ian. Maybe one day you can come and work for me."

"Leave the good shire reeve where he is, Otto," interjected Lord Hengham,

stroking his elegant beard, “you’ve got enough spies working for you.”

“So I’m finally going to meet William!” Otto said, pointing to the chairs in one corner of the room. “After all these years of waiting!” Otto signaled for his friend Ralph to sit next to him, and Sheriff Ian in one of the two chairs facing them.

After exchanging pleasantries with the two men, Otto decided to get to the point. “Somehow we have to convince William to leave the Cistercians and join the Templars. Any ideas?”

“We know what’s at stake,” Ralph Hengham said in a ponderous tone, and Otto knew that the king’s chief Justice was about to go into one of his lawyerly tirades. “Without William we can’t find his uncle John, Without John, there is no Jesus Gospel, and without the Gospel the Templars won’t have any reason to fight the French king...”

“We know that, Ralph,” interrupted Otto, “so let’s hope that William is like his uncle, in which case the Brotherhood’s troubles might soon be over.”

Ralph nodded ever so slightly at Otto, and then turned to face Sheriff Ian. “You’ve kept an eye on William all these years Brother Ian, and you know him best. How can we convince him to become a Templar in the Holy Land?”

“He’ll be at Abissey for about a week, that’s all,” Ian said, nervously switching his body in the chair and making his cheap chain mail rustle. “Each year, at summer’s end, around the Feast of St. James, William’s abbot sends a friar named Jules to raise money from local barons. I interceded through Bishop Gregor so that William accompanies the friar this year. That’s the best I could come up with.”

“And we appreciate it, Brother Ian,” Ralph said soothingly. “But we’ll need more than a week with William. Perhaps all we can do is meet with him and gain his trust. Then, next year...”

“Next year?” Otto exclaimed. “Ralph, William just turned twenty, and can now join the Templars. For God’s sake, man, let’s not waste any more time! Caesarius’ prophecy says that the Templars will be driven out of the Holy Land by the end of the century. That can be anytime now!”

“What do you suggest, Otto? Force William into becoming a Templar?”

“No, of course not. I’ll travel to Abissey this summer using the upcoming meeting of Parliament as my reason. I’ll tell King Edward that I need to make sure the earl of Abissey is on our side. Then Brother Ian can use some excuse to introduce me to William. Of course, Ian, I don’t want William to know who I am.”

“Don’t worry brother. I’ll figure it out.”

“Well, then,” said Ralph, “should we succeed in convincing the lad, we

should then be willing to offer him the funds necessary to travel to Outremer and join the Templars.”

“Yes, of course,” said Otto.

Ian shook his head vehemently. “No, no, no. Please. I thought you understood.”

“Understood what, Brother Ian,” asked Ralph. “Certainly you would want to make it easier...”

“Don’t you see? The Caesarius Prophecy surfaced right when we needed it. That’s what John taught me long ago, that those who have the inner power would manifest whatever is needed.” Ian’s eyes shone, and he appeared to be gaining in self-assurance, as though the words were giving him substance. “The Prophecy,” continued Ian, “came because of John, he needed it. Without it he couldn’t have gone searching for the Gospel. And now the Prophecy is pointing the course for his nephew. William must manifest what he needs to be in harmony with the forces behind the Prophecy, and to learn that he’s like his uncle.”

Otto realized that it would be useless to argue with Ian. *So be it*, he thought. If the lad couldn’t raise the funds, he and Ralph could always intervene without Ian’s knowledge. “Very well, Brother Ian. You seem to know what you are talking about. We’ll let William fend for himself.”

Ian seemed to relax. “You’ll see, brother; you’ll see how it works.”

Otto smiled at Ian and nodded. “I look forward to our joint effort.”

Ian took the hint and rose to his feet. “I’ll see you at Abissey in four months, Brother Otto.” He then wished them *Beauseant* and left the room.

When he heard the sheriff’s steps fading down the hall, Otto turned to Ralph. “He is totally sold on the Caesarius Prophecy, eh?”

“Well, you heard him. ‘The power of the Prophecy,’ indeed! Selecting him twelve years ago to tell the brethren about the Prophecy was sheer genius. By now no one dares dispute its legitimacy. The French count who gave us so much trouble is now a believer, as is Bishop Gregor who has become an expert on Caesarius of Heisterbach and his prophecies. All thanks to Brother Ian’s efforts. I’m just amazed that John was convinced as well, otherwise he wouldn’t have taken off after the Gospel.”

Otto took a long, deliberate breath. “Well, God bless them all.

“Let’s just hope that William can find his uncle...I wonder, though, if William is truly up to the challenge. When we received that letter from John telling us that William could find him, we decided that it was because William was much like him. So...what should I look for in William? You told me you met John once. What was he like?”

“Yes, I met him once while in Acre,” Ralph said. “I don’t know how to de-

scribe him. I can't tell you exactly what it is he has, but I think you'll know if William has it as well. John's mere presence is awe inspiring, he's very serene in demeanor, but you realize that it must come from deep inside, and you feel as though you've known and loved him all your life. I've never met anyone else like him before or since. I think you'll just have to go with your instincts. If there is a Jesus Gospel, I'm sure John found it, and if William is anything like him, he's sure to follow in his footsteps."

"Very well, very well," Otto said absentmindedly. So much depended on William, so much, and the notion had always made him uneasy, from the beginning. But of course, he could always stop the process and implement his alternate plan. *There is time, there is enough time.*

"So much depends on William, Otto," Ralph said as though reading his thoughts. "What if he turns us down, or fails, what then?"

"We'll cross that river when we have to. William will come through for us, I'm sure of that."

[2]

Looking after a depraved friar was not the life William had envisioned for himself as a novice monk. Those innocent notions had ended in one painful moment, and now here he was approaching the familiar meadow, wearing the Cistercian white habit he had once coveted so much, and leading the friar's horse by the reins as his sandaled feet kicked up the road's summer dust.

*But for now all is well,* he told himself. *There's no temptation for Brother Jules.*

The place was just as he remembered, William noted as he tugged on the reins. He ran his gaze over the grassy expanse ringed by trees and took in the old giant oak with the huge trunk and two main branches reaching up toward the sky. The stream gurgled some fifty feet away, hidden behind a line of pine trees and a few boulders. Over the years he had stopped here at least four times with his father and brother, along with a handful of servants, on the way to London. At that moment he heard Jules cough, and William longed for the past, for any past rather than the here and now.

He recalled the last time he saw the meadow on his way to enter the abbey a little over two years before. Then he couldn't wait to don the habit and start what he thought would be a quiet life of prayer and contemplation among devoted monks. William shook his head. He had been so naive!

He wiped the perspiration from his forehead with his free hand, looked up at the sun and figured they had another three hours before dark. They could make it over the next hill, but the meadow looked cool and inviting. William was hot and sweaty under his heavy habit, and remembered that the brook ran clean. Perhaps if nothing else they could replenish their water bags and water the horse.

“Brother Guillaume, we’ll stop for Nones here,” Brother Jules said in French.

William led the way to the old oak wishing the friar would speak English and call him by his English name, now that they were no longer in Normandy. He found French irritating; it grated on his ears. Maybe it was the sight of the old oak, or just the sound of his superior’s voice, or maybe that he just yearned for a simpler time.

William searched for a place to graze the horse and spotted a healthy patch of clover and wild oats by a large rock. He stopped the horse and took a rope from the saddlebag, tied the hackney to a tree, loosened the bridle then pulled the bit from its mouth.

“I don’t remember this meadow. Are we getting close to Abissey Castle?” Brother Jules asked struggling to slide off the saddle, his face glistening with perspiration, heavy lines showing the fatigue from the day’s journey.

“At our pace it will take us two more days,” William waited for Brother Jules to come down from the horse then loosened the saddle’s cinch. If it were up to him he could make it in a day but he knew Brother Jules could hardly move, even though he had ridden the entire way. William looked down at his dusty feet and bent down to rub a blister forming on his left heel. He made an effort to sound cordial. “There’s a monastery on the way. We can spend tomorrow’s night there if you wish.” He knew he should pray for him, rather than wishing him gone, never born.

Brother Jules slumped down on some dry grass, with his back resting against a tree trunk. “Oh no, we’ll find an inn. Brother, fetch me water for cleansing.”

William reached for the two almost empty water bags looped together by the horse’s neck and headed for the creek.

When he skirted a boulder he saw the two peasant boys chatting under a tree and his heart sank. Of course! That’s why Brother Jules wanted to make camp. William had not seen them since noon and had hoped they had made headway or turned off somewhere.

As he came near, William desperately tried to figure out what to do about the two. He now realized Jules had kept the horse’s pace to within sight of the boys, ever since spotting them that morning. William pretended to inspect the water bags as he stood a good distance away from the boys, who glanced furtively at him a couple of times, whispered to each other and continued to eat, ill at ease. He thought of ordering them to leave but was within earshot of Brother Jules. The two were barefoot, dressed in homemade trousers and tunics, rags really, of rough linen. The younger one was fair, eight or so, and without doubt the one who had caught the friar’s fancy. There was little question in William’s mind of

Jules' intent, not after what happened the previous night at the inn when he had stared at the serving boy, in fact had appeared mesmerized by that very blond child with pale blue eyes. Jules had seemed unable to take his gaze off of him, eating his food absent-mindedly, and seemed to become agitated whenever the server approached them, gawking up and down the young body.

Perhaps that had been the reason their abbot had ordered William to accompany Brother Jules on this year's trip. "Look after him," he had been told, thinking he was to watch for his safety. Now it made sense.

William decided there was nothing he could do at the moment except keep Jules away from the children. He grabbed the bags' straps in either hand and headed toward the uneasy boys on his way to the stream behind them. When he approached they quickly rose to their feet and bowed.

He reached the slow moving creek, shed his sandals, uncorked the leather bags, and walked into the shallow waters. He picked up the bottom of his habit and jacked it up to his waist to avoid getting the coarse wool wet. For a moment he relished the feel of the water on his legs and the soothing sounds around him: the flowing creek, the breeze, rustling leaves, bugs skimming the surface, and the birds singing up high on the branches. He bent over, sunk the water bags and started muttering a prayer asking for guidance. Why couldn't the world just let him be? All he ever wanted was to pray in peace, away from all the sins and ugliness.

But for now, how was he to protect the children? He was but a novice, and Jules a senior friar whose orders he was sworn to obey without question.

"What's taking you so long?" he heard Jules yell, and William decided to pray for humility and acceptance, and for God to protect the two boys.

William made his way back to their camp. When he went by the two boys, they again stood up and bowed.

He filled Brother Jules' bowl from a water bag, and brought it to him, avoiding eye contact.

"Very good, Guillaume. Now fetch me the drying cloth."

William watched as Brother Jules dried his hands and then used the now moist cloth to wipe his pale neck, arms and feet.

"The abbey couldn't survive without me," Jules said as he dabbed his forehead with the cloth, "these trips of mine are what keeps the place afloat and people like you fed." He tossed the cloth by a tree with a flick of his wrist. "Fortunately for the abbey, my family is rich and powerful...we have ruled Brabant for over two hundred years..." and the friar continued with his oft-repeated litany of how closely his people were associated with the French royal family and how, had he been out in the world, he would be in line to become the duke of that province.

Now it was just a matter of time before he became a bishop.

The sad part, William realized, was that it was all true. He looked down at the rotund figure with dough-like flesh and wished with all his heart that he would die, let out a groan, clutch his chest and die. That would be just. Why would God let it be otherwise?

“Oh, my, by all that’s holy!” Jules exclaimed, looking at his right hand. “My ring, where’s my ring?” At this the friar rose, walked over to the horse and anxiously reached for the backpack.

“You have to help me look! This is very important!” yelled Jules.

William loosened the straps behind the saddle and brought the heavy pack down to the ground, opened it and turned it over, emptying the contents. The friar’s belongings, “the direst necessities,” came tumbling out. William foraged through underwear of various thickness, bags of powders and bottles of potions, even a box of jewelry, and his own items: an extra habit and his only luxury, a *braie* he wore from his days as a squire and the object of ridicule from the other novices who considered underpants an affectation.

They spent some time looking, but there was no ring. Jules appeared anxious, nervously throwing things around, looking under the same items several times.

Heaviness in his heart told William what would come next.

“I must have left it at the inn last night. Brother, you have to go back and get it right now before some thief finds it!” Jules said, out of breath, as he looked at William wide-eyed, his almost-non-existent eyebrows frozen in an arch. “Anybody can use the ring to sign important family and Church documents on my behalf, you can’t imagine the consequences! But what would someone like you, raised to be a mere knight know about these things?”

All William ever remembered writing on behalf of Brother Jules were requests for money to his family. Granted, some of it was handed over to the abbot but most destined for the purchase of “dire necessities” and apparently lavish meals, probably at the inn near the abbey.

“Brother Guillaume, I order you to go this very instant,” Jules said extending a sausage arm in the direction they had just come, “and don’t stop until you reach the inn and find my ring!”

William studied Jules, his jowls flapping in his excitement, and was certain that if he tore off the friar’s habit and undid the pouch where he kept his money, he would find the ring inside. He had noticed that through all the wild gesticulations, Jules’ attention kept going back to the spot behind the boulder where the two peasant boys sat eating.

Taking his time, hoping for someone else to stop by the meadow, or for a storm, anything, William picked up the horse’s rope, a water bag, and started for

the creek.

“Ride the horse as hard as you can!” Jules yelled.

William took some time to water the docile beast and momentarily thought of ordering the two boys to come with him, but under what pretext? And how? He had but the one horse. He could take one boy with him but two stood a better chance against Jules. William ran his hand along the animal’s neck to determine how tired it was but the horse was young and that day’s slow pace had hardly produced a sweat. He had no excuse; he had to obey Jules. The boys were in God’s hands.

He fixed the saddle, refastened the bit and halter, mounted the hackney and on the way gave Brother Jules one last look. The friar stood by their pack of belongings, his feet wide apart, hands on his hips. Reluctantly, William dug his heels into the horse’s sides and sent it into an easy canter, toward the inn of the night before.

William wasn’t sure how long he rode, but after a while he recognized the bend on the road and the beginning of the fir forest. A few feet further down was the turnoff to the Jewish village.

At that moment the abbot’s words came back to him: “Look after him!”

He brought the horse to a halt, his gaze fixed on the path leading to the village.

What was he supposed to do? The abbot’s instructions could have meant many things and after all he had received specific orders from a superior—Brother Jules. And he had taken an oath of obedience, a sacred oath.

But what would happen to the boys? Hadn’t he also taken an oath as a knight to care for those who couldn’t defend themselves? He could keep riding on to the inn, where he would not find the ring, and then return to the meadow, apologize for returning empty handed, and pretend that nothing out if the ordinary had happened. But if he turned around and defended the boys, Brother Jules’ ugly secret would be exposed.

Then he would have to bring the case to their abbot... and Brother Jules’ word would be against his. The abbot would have to pay heed to Brother Jules; after all he was a highborn, a man of great rank.

William realized he had been staring without seeing, his eyes riveted on the ruts on the pathway to the Jewish village, ruts made by so many carts over the years. He felt a jolt to his heart and at that moment the old grief was back: Jacob!

That had been another time in his life when he stood by and allowed evil to take its course.

At the thought, William felt a surge of rage, turned his horse around, dug his

heels hard and released the reins, prompting the hackney into a gallop. He would have hell to pay in this life, but not in the next.

But the meadow was empty. The backpack and belongings were still strewn by the oak and a few paces away the meager possessions of the two peasant boys—bread and some dried meat—lay on two old kerchiefs along with a water jug.

A sick feeling in his gut told William he better hurry.

He rode around the meadow at a brisk pace, scanning the surroundings. Of course Brother Jules would want to hide from view with the boys, but where? William's attention was drawn to a large boulder on the other side of the creek. He dismounted, ran toward the rock and as he got closer heard muffled cries.

Without breaking stride he came around the boulder and found the undressed fat man standing, a naked boy on the ground beneath him and the other boy tied to a tree.

William reached for the friar's back, his hands dug into flesh, then he pulled the heavy body back and made Jules tumble down.

Lying on his back, Jules appeared stunned and stared up at William. "Brother Guillaume!" Jules said with fear in his voice. "By God, how dare you attack me! These are mere *villeins*, can't you tell?"

William glared at Jules. "You...evil, horrid man!" He then turned his attention to the cowering little boy on the ground. William bent over and gently picked him up, brushing away the twigs and dirt that clung to his thin back. The boy clutched his hands to his chest, shaking with sobs, tears and snot running down his face. Yes, he was but a mere *vilain*, a peasant, and would likely die an old man barely in his thirties, underfed and overworked, his life indentured to some farmer, weaver, or tanner.

William embraced him, trying desperately to undo the harm done to the young soul who perhaps did not fully understand what had happened. He then looked him over for signs of sexual violation but realized he didn't quite know what to look for.

"How are you, young lad? What did this man do to you?" he asked in English.

"Oh, for goodness sake, nothing happened!" Brother Jules exclaimed in French.

"Is it true that nothing happened?" William asked the child, who continued sobbing, averting his eyes. William inspected him and could see no signs of rough treatment anywhere. He felt relieved that he had arrived in time and no physical violation had taken place. He let loose of the youngster and went and untied the other sobbing boy.

He then turned to face the friar.

Brother Jules had knelt on the ground, his face looking up at the sky and began intoning a heartfelt prayer. "I thank you oh, Lord, for my Brother Guillaume, without whom I would have gravely sinned against you..." he continued, his prayer becoming more impassioned, calling himself a "worthless sinner." He then picked up a branch and proceeded to beat himself with it, first on his naked back but then all over, with greater force as he went on, until he drew blood and great welts formed all over his face and body.

William watched him, his anger subsiding, feeling respectful of Jules' act of contrition.

He turned to look at the children. The younger one was now dressed and the sobbing had stopped. The two ran to where they had left their belongings and William watched them leave the meadow as fast as they could.

Brother Jules lay prostrate, face down on the ground, arms and legs spread out in his final act of surrender to the Almighty. William knelt beside him and proceeded to pray, reciting the Paternosters of the office of Nones. He prayed with gratitude that he had arrived in time to save the boys and that obviously he had been an instrument of the Lord in changing Brother Jules' sinful ways. All is well, William told himself as the tension in his chest lifted. Now he felt guilty for thinking of Jules as evil; the friar was greatly flawed but obviously very devout.

That day and the following, the penitent Brother Jules kept on praying and whenever they stopped punished his flesh again to the point where William felt sorry and wanted to stop him. Jules' face, arms and legs showed nothing but welts, bruises and bloody wounds. But the friar kept up the self-flagellation, punctuated by prayer and mournful declarations of his horrid nature. "I'm but a monster," he said repeatedly between sobs, and then beat himself even harder.

In late afternoon of the second day after leaving the meadow, they came within sight of Castle Abissey perched on a hill in the middle of a small valley that was dotted with half a dozen white huts, each surrounded by a field defined with a low stone fence. They were going past one of the huts and a heavy smell of burning dung wafted through the air. Cooking smoke poured from the only opening, the door. It appeared as though itchy pigs had rubbed away the white wash on one spot of the squat, thatched-roof structure, exposing the hardened mud and some of the wooden lattice.

William could hear the yells of shepherds gathering their flocks in the distance, and the sharp barks of their dogs reverberating through the still air.

Brother Jules came down from the horse and insisted on furthering his penance by walking the rest of the way barefoot, humbly staying behind the hackney.

William continued on foot, leading the horse by the reins, for it wouldn't be seemly for him to ride with his superior on foot. They slowly covered the half league or so to the fortress and in the twilight watched as the heavy doors opened before them into the outer bailey, where the commander of the guard met them accompanied by two armed men.

William was about to speak when Brother Jules ran out panting from behind the horse. "Oh, my man, grace fall upon you, please protect me!" he said in heavily accented English.

A bewildered William could only look on as Jules continued: "Please let me see your lord, tell him I implore his protection from this crazed man who attacked me most savagely!" Jules said as he pointed wildly at William, then turned to face the commander. "I am Jules of Saint Simeon, count of Laverne, brother of the duke of Brabant, and presently a humble Cistercian friar serving at the Abbey of Sobern. Your lord knows me well."

The officer, who had been studying the friar's wounds, ordered his guards to arrest William, who stood in silent surprise, and as his hands were shackled, looked at Jules and noticed a quick flash of satisfaction in his eyes.

The soldier holding William by the shackles seemed unsure. "This isn't right," he said hesitantly.

The commander came to stand but a foot from the guard then brought his face to within inches of his subordinate's. "Sergeant," he said in a rough whisper, "one of the earl's friends, the brother of a duke, has been attacked, and he's told us who did it. That's all we need to know."

The guard took William to the dungeon, while the officer escorted the limping and moaning Brother Jules in the direction of the castle keep.

[3]

Otto stared at Sheriff Ian, going over what he had just heard. "William is in the dungeon because he attacked the friar to protect two *vilain* boys, but the friar claims William attacked him out of envy of his nobler rank?"

"Yes, brother," replied Ian. The two spoke in hushed tones as they walked along the main hallway on the ground floor on their way to the dungeon, for all around them were signs of Castle Abissey bedding down for the night, as knights, servants, and minor guests gathered in the great hall to find a place to sleep. The early ones had located the best spots with reeds or hay free of dirt, grease or food droppings, which they piled up to make mattresses. Others were busy shaking their blankets to rid them of as many lice and fleas as they could. "That's not like William at all," continued Ian. "Besides, I can tell the friar hurt himself using a stick. I've seen injuries in my life, and that's plain to me." Ian stopped and held Otto by the arm, then looked him in the eyes. "I'm sure the friar would have

killed the two *vilain* boys had it not been for William.”

“This entire affair is quite astonishing,” Otto said. “I don’t know what to make of it all. I’m glad to hear that William finally arrived, but now he’s a prisoner? That’s bizarre. But you say we can visit him in his cell and talk to him in private?”

“Yes, of course, brother; that’s where we’re going right now. I have access to the earl’s dungeon, and with your authority we should be able to do anything we want. But we best hurry, the friar will try to do away with William any way he can.”

Ian led the way down the narrow stairs leading to the prison cells under the castle. “The earl of Abissey is not a powerful baron, so he must stay in King Edward’s good graces,” Ian said as he made his way carefully. “Brother, you could demand just about anything and the earl would trip over himself trying to comply.” At the bottom of the stairs they found a guard who handed Ian his torch, and he guided Otto through a maze of corridors to a guard’s post, a small room with spy holes to the four adjoining cells. Ian pointed to one of the holes. “I thought you may want to observe William first, before meeting with him.”

Otto bent over and looked through the slot in the stonework. The sole source of light in William’s cell came through a metal grill on his door, a torch casting a grid pattern on the opposing wall. To the left was a cot of rough timbers and next to it Otto saw a young monk kneeling on the damp stone floor, a likely knight judging by his big, strong body and noble bearing; of black hair and dark complexion. In the young man’s pleasing features he discerned strength but also that peace that only the very devout have.

Otto noted that William was praying. Not pacing, not hitting the walls in anger, not any of the myriad of things people did when unjustly imprisoned, but in an apparent state of grace. It was obvious that circumstances had brought out William’s true spirit. He was a sincere monk, and without question, Brotherhood material. The fact that he was willing to sacrifice everything to protect two *vilain* boys was proof.

After some time Otto heard footsteps outside, then the sound of a key opening the door of William’s cell. In walked a guard and a rotund monk. Otto asked Ian in a whisper whether that was Brother Jules.

Ian peered through the slot. “That’s him.”

Otto followed the proceedings with keen interest. Jules ordered the guard to wait outside the door.

“I’ve come to offer you my services as confessor and to extend my forgiveness,” Jules said, loud enough for the guard to hear.

William continued praying.

Jules sat down on the cot and switched to a whisper, inaudible to the guard but one Otto could make out by pressing his ear against the opening. "They will execute you in the morning. The earl has no patience for those who assault men of noble rank."

Jules fumbled in his habit and produced a knife, which he placed on the cot beside him. "I've taken pity on you and decided to let you end your life by your own hands. After all, you were a knight, and your station deserves a more dignified end than to be flailed alive and quartered by horses in public view."

Jules rose, and louder now, intoned the rites of absolution ending with a prayer. He then left in haste, perhaps unsettled by William who had not moved the entire time.

Otto couldn't keep from chuckling. Jules was indeed a horrid man, but you had to admire his cunning. The average twenty-year old might have believed Jules' threat, that the earl would execute him for such an offense. In reality, local barons would not dare touch a member of the Church and could only refer him to his abbot. Jules had used the confession excuse to gain access to William, but only priests heard confessions; obviously the guard wouldn't know that. Then the whole thing with the knife. That was brilliant. Chances were that William would attack a guard with it to try to escape and most likely be overwhelmed by the guards who might kill him in the process. Desperate men did such things. How Jules would explain the presence of a knife in the cell after his visit was something else. Perhaps he was desperate himself and was taking inordinate steps to ensure William died that very night, before he could tell people what happened on the road. It was clear Jules didn't know that Ian had already talked to William.

Otto pulled away from the spy hole and approached Ian who stood a few feet away. "You say Jules was planning on killing those two boys? How do you know?"

"Every year, around this time, we've found at least one crucified child."

"Oh my! But of course, now I remember. You brought the matter to the Brotherhood a while back...it has been going on for several years. It makes perfect sense. After having his way with a boy, what better way to silence him than to crucify him? That way the Jews are to blame." That was one of the infamous crimes the Jews were blamed for through the centuries, crucifying Christian children. In addition the Jews were suspect of poisoning wells and causing mass famine. "That friar is very clever...and evil." The Brotherhood would have to deal with him; they couldn't allow a man that wicked to go on. But first things first. "William is indeed an admirable young man, and thanks to Brother Jules, he's probably ready to leave the Cistercians and could be talked into joining the Templars. But you have to do it."

“Me? But...”

“Ian, this incident is a godsend. William knows what the friar was planning to do with those boys and he’s in turmoil; disappointed in his order, and questioning whether he made the right choice. If you escort him back to his abbot, you’ll have about eight days to convince him to join the Templars.”

“I suppose...”

“Yes, Ian. First, go into his cell and let William know that you are involved. And please remove the knife Jules left behind on the cot. I will speak with the earl. This is the king’s affair because the friar is a foreign highborn and the earl will assume that I’m trying to avoid an incident with the French court. I’ll notify the earl that you will escort William as your prisoner and the friar as his accuser back to their abbey in Normandy. However, as soon as you can arrange it, let’s make Jules disappear.”

“Yes, Brother Otto,” Ian said as he turned around and headed out the door.

Otto watched as Ian entered the young man’s cell.

“William, It’s me, Sheriff Ian.”

At this William rose.

“You will be sent back to your abbot to be dealt with, along with the friar.” Ian said as he bent over to pick up the knife from the cot. “I will be escorting you both.”

[4]

Once the sheriff left his cell, William took a moment to compose himself. He was still reeling from Jules’ visit; the friar’s sickness had been so obvious, his intentions transparent. William let out a sigh. The prison cell was quiet, and now he could pray for as long as he wanted without interruption.

He prayed, and once again felt a sense of grace, and he focused on the joy growing in his heart. He knew that all would be well as long as he could feel that; nothing else really mattered.

The following morning, William was brought before the earl who stood surrounded by a number of guards in the inner bailey on top of the stairs leading to the castle keep. Two steps below him stood Brother Jules, his scant hair slick with oil, looking rested and at ease. He turned to look at William and seemed upset, but then shrugged his shoulders and stared at the earl with a faint smile on his face. Sheriff Ian was to one side of the stairs, waiting with arms folded.

“William Montfort,” said the short and thin earl still wearing his night robe, “you have heinously assaulted a man of high birth.” William noted the pleasure on the friar’s face at the words. “But it’s not for me to mete out punishment, that is your abbot’s responsibility. I am ordering the sheriff to escort you back to your abbey.”

“No!” Exclaimed Jules.

The earl turned to the friar. “Jules, this is an inconvenience, but you must go as well to bear witness against your subordinate, this William.”

Jules approached the earl and whispered anxiously in his ear, but the earl kept shaking his head. Jules resumed his place and stared at the ground until the earl dismissed everyone and William was escorted back to his cell.

That afternoon William heard from the guards that no one could account for Jules. By evening, the earl ordered an extensive search and during that night his soldiers looked throughout the castle, in farms, in the two neighboring villages, but found no trace of the friar.

Before sunrise a guard escorted William out of his cell to the outer bailey and handed him over to the sheriff.

“It’ll be just the two of us, William,” Sheriff Ian said as he led him to the friar’s horse. “It appears Brother Jules decided not to go back to the abbey but make his way in the world.”

They started out of the castle with the sun peeking over a hill, William riding his horse, his shackled hands in front of him holding the reins. He was relieved that he would not have to bear the friar’s presence but was concerned about other potential victims. Well, he had done all that he could. Obviously no one had believed his story, and William doubted the abbot would, but that was fine, he was at peace. He would suffer whatever punishment with gladness; it was as though the Lord had given him this one chance to make up for Jacob by protecting the two boys. William imagined that his abbot would sentence him to solitary confinement with only bread and water for a few months. No duties except prayer. That would be grand. And after that? Well, that was in God’s hands.

At noon they stopped at a crossroads. “We’ll rest here,” the sheriff said as he dismounted. “I’m waiting to meet someone, then we can go.”

Eventually a party of about twelve men on horseback approached them. The man heading the group wore a houpellande, a robe much like William had seen on his own earl, but fancier yet, for this one was made entirely of scarlet cloth, which he had seen before in thin strips in ladies’ dresses. The man rode a beautiful white palfrey of smooth gait, the type of riding horse William had only heard about. Two clerks and several men-at-arms followed the obviously important lord, who stopped and dismounted.

The sheriff and the lord ambled far from the road, as though going for a stroll, the sheriff respectfully falling behind.

[5]

Otto turned around. They were safely out of sight and earshot from his clerks and guards. “How did it go with Jules?”

“He resisted, but is unhurt,” replied Ian. “He’ll be safe in a prison cell in the island by nightfall.”

“Good, my friend. We’ve done well in the sight of God. I’m just glad we caught him. What about William? Have you talked to him?”

Ian shook his head. “Not yet, brother. I was waiting until we gained some distance from the castle and any prying ears and eyes.”

“Ian, you realize the events of these past days were a miracle? Make the best of this journey. Please.

“Mention John to William and convince him to become a Templar. Don’t mention Hafiz Mountain or the Jesus Gospel, it’s too early for that. You may tell him of the Caesarius Prophecy if the need arises.

“I already sent an urgent letter to Bishop Gregor requesting that he contact William’s abbot so William can transfer to the Templars. The abbot will be made to think that William is being forced to join the Templars as punishment.”

“I’ll make sure that William is ready.”

“We also need someone to guide his steps once he becomes a Templar.”

“I would choose Brother Hughes,” Ian said without hesitation. “Both of us served with William’s uncle at Tortosa.”

“I take it Hughes is a member of the Brotherhood and not just a Templar?”

“Of course. And he’s a tough and capable man. He’ll protect and guide William like no one else. I recently heard that he’s now a commander.”

Otto nodded. “I’ll make the arrangements so that Commander Hughes meets William in Outremer. That’s a relief. I was concerned about William getting killed in combat...”

“If you knew John, you wouldn’t say that.” Interrupted Ian.

“Why? William will be fighting. You are telling me that John can protect him?”

“He might, but that’s not what I meant. If William is anything like John, nothing can happen to him, unless he allows it.”

“Really? How does that work?”

“I don’t know, brother. I just know it does. I was with John in many battles and the only time he was wounded was to teach me a lesson. The man is beyond our understanding.”

Otto sighed. “Sounds like quite an amazing man. *Beauseant*, Brother Ian.”

“*Beauseant*, Brother Otto. Until we meet again.”

[6]

William, sitting cross-legged on the ground with his back against a tree, watched the sheriff and the lord approach the group. The lord’s men, some of whom were supposed to be guarding him but had ambled about, quickly scrambled to stand

by their horses.

William noticed the lord scrutinizing him as he came near. When their eyes met the lord seemed to smile ever so subtly.

“I beg your leave, my Lord,” the sheriff said as he bowed.

The lord did not respond but waved his hand in dismissal. He then climbed on his horse and rode with his entourage on the way to London.

After they were gone, the sheriff walked to where William sat. He undid William’s shackles and smiled. “William, I am a friend of your uncle John. We served together as Knights Templar in Outremer.”

“My uncle? You knew my uncle John?”

“Yes, son. Let me introduce myself.” He extended his ungloved hand. “I’m Sir Ian Duval, in the king’s service as shire reeve of Devonshire.

“And by the way, William, you are not a prisoner. I believe your story.”

As William took the sheriff’s hand he studied the man. He noted that Sir Ian was perhaps in his forties, had gray hair, a well-lined face with a number of scars. His eyes caught William’s attention, for they were kind, and he seemed a frank and honest man, of lean body and medium height. He wore an old but serviceable hauberk of mended chain mail under a green tunic. A heavy, well-maintained sword hung inconspicuously by his side, as though a part of his body. His head was covered with only a mail hood. There was no helmet, nor shield. Either he had become careless, or was particularly skillful and sure of himself. There was no sign of his family’s heraldic coat of arms. His warhorse was an aging Percheron he treated with familiarity. Obviously man and beast knew each other well.

“At what point did you believe me?” William asked.

“From the moment I laid eyes on you. Not only did I remember you, but I also heard the friar’s tale and sensed it was false.”

“Have we met before?”

“When you were a child. I visited your father once and helped place you and your brother at the earl of Sheffield’s household.”

William and Sir Ian walked their horses in silence for some time. They were in no hurry now, William thought.

For the following three days, in casual conversation, Sir Ian told William about his uncle—how they had met as young men in the Holy Land, how they fought together for seven years, and forged a close friendship. In his eyes John was a saint, an extraordinary man of mysterious ways, whose purpose in life seemed to be on a higher plane. Ian described how John healed people with his hands. “A friend of ours was dying after being poisoned. John touched his stomach and within a day our friend was well. And he healed many others. But he performed other amazing feats. One time he walked unarmed and alone into a Saracens’

camp, and they were so impressed by him that their emir became his friend.”

“You talk about him as though he’s dead. Did he die?”

Sir Ian stared at the ground lost in thought. “He went on a mission eleven years ago and never made it back, but we received word from him and know that he’s alive.”

“Where? What happened?”

Sir Ian shrugged his shoulders. “He’s an amazing man. You’ll meet him one day.” Then he told more stories about him, and that led to talk about the Templars and their strict code of honor, as well as their discipline and devotion. “Death in battle,” Sir Ian told William, “becomes unimportant, just another thing that happens, and honor and duty is all you care about; you realize that the dedication and devotion reflected in your actions is enriching you beyond measure.”

“A life of discipline and devotion is why I became a monk,” William said. “But I can’t stay in an order that allows people like Brother Jules to be a part of it.” In saying this William knew he was uttering words he had not yet told himself. “And I know there are at least two other friars just like him.”

“Yes, I know the story,” Sir Ian said. “The other two friars are also rich, noble, and waiting for a chance to go somewhere more comfortable, but meantime living a life with as much luxury as possible while they ‘put in time’ for appearances’ sake. The abbot and the Cistercians have to make accommodations to survive and that includes making room for the rich and powerful who want the Church for their own ends.

“You won’t find that in the Templars.”

It occurred to William that Sir Ian was trying to recruit him, and he thought about what becoming a Templar would mean. They were monks, and that was grand, they had a reputation for honor and discipline, but also as fierce warriors, and that meant killing. And that was a dark thought. Maybe he could join them as a scholar.

He noticed a man and a woman coming on foot in their direction, carrying bundles on their backs. “I have a notion that Brother Jules didn’t just leave on his own accord, did he?”

Ian shot William an appreciative glance. “You are right. He’s in a place where he can’t harm anyone. The Templars have a prison on an island not far from here where they keep criminals like the friar; those that the world put up with because of their power and influence. They’ll try to change Jules’ ways through prayer.”

“I’ve never heard of anything like it.” William noted that the couple carrying firewood hugged the side of the road in deference to Sir Ian, although still a good distance away. “Is that what Templars do? Does that mean that you are still a Templar?”

"I no longer wear the habit—the surcoat with the red cross—but once you take the oath you always remain a Templar. Now I serve in secret. There are many of us in key places. What happened with you and Jules involved four of us. We took care so both you and Jules ended up where you belong."

The couple never lifted their eyes from the ground as they went past, apparently concerned about making eye contact with a knight.

Things started to make sense to William...the lord's smile, Ian's flowery descriptions of the Templars for the past three days and the constant talk about his uncle. It wasn't merely the talk from an elder to someone trying to decide what to do with his life. "Where I belong? Does that mean you and the other Templars have plans for me?"

"Yes."

"So you being at Abissey with that lord, that was planned?"

"Yes. We wanted to find a way to talk to you. But when we learned that you had been made prisoner, the opportunity was clear. I would escort you to your abbot and on the way talk you into joining the Templars so you can search for your uncle."

In utter surprise, William laughed. The proposition was too direct and blunt, the premise bizarre. "You are hoping I will become a Templar and go to the Holy Land so I can find my uncle John?" The words when spoken did sound peculiar, but he felt excited like never before. William stared at Sir Ian in wonder. It was all so odd. "Why would I be able to find him? Why can't others look for him? Where is he?"

"I don't know William. He sent us a letter after he disappeared saying that he couldn't make it back, but that you could find him. That was over ten years ago. We've been waiting for you to come of age ever since."

"His ways are beyond the rest of us...if he believed you alone could find him, that must be the case."

Sir Ian mounted and William followed suit. It was close to noon but the day was overcast and cool. The road ahead meandered down into a valley. Two boys trotted past them also carrying firewood, apparently trying to catch up with the couple and William knew they would soon tire and have to stop. He blessed them in his thoughts and hoped they would be forever safe.

Sir Ian pulled out some bread and dried meat from his saddlebag and gave half to William.

William ate the chunks of heavily salted dried beef and the bread that was by now stale and hard. He often wondered how smoothly things had gone in his life and had marveled at his good fortune: first as squire when he sorely needed a horse, and his earl had suddenly offered one; then as a knight when the earl

gifted him armor; and then when he wanted to become a monk and the earl agreed so readily. Now it was clear: Sir Ian had gone to a lot of trouble for him, and it was touching that he cared; most surprising though, was the reason why. Sir Ian was part of a society of powerful men who tried to do good in the world, and they needed him.

At the realization, William's heart felt even lighter than on the day he decided to become a monk. It was as though destiny had mapped out a course. He couldn't be a Cistercian anymore; that was behind him, and becoming a Templar was certainly worth considering. "I assume," William said, "that back when I asked the earl of Sheffield for his leave to become a monk and he agreed, you had something to do with it?"

"No, lad, for that I chose a former Templar who is the earl's superior and someone he greatly admires."

William smiled broadly. "It's so unbelievable that all of these people whom I've never met want to help me!"

"That's because I told them you would become a Templar and find John."

"What made you so sure I would accept?"

Sir Ian smiled. "You will. In fact, you just did."

And William realized Sir Ian was right. Somehow he would have to reconcile his soul with killing. Knights don't become scholars, they remain knights; and something inside told him he had to find his uncle John. But just as important, he knew that Ian was the kind of monk he would want to be near. If there were more Templars like him, then that's where he belonged. Besides, his uncle had chosen the Templars, and he was a saint.

"Sir Ian, why do you and the others want to find my uncle? Obviously you have gone to a lot of trouble to make sure I do. But why me?"

"I know you have many questions, William. I'll tell you what I know, but we have time, lad. Things will become clear in due time. I promise."

They rode for some time, chatting about a cloistered life, and the friends they had left behind. Sir Ian held the reins loose, allowing his horse to set its own pace. "I saw you here and there over the years, William. You seemed like a happy child, were you not?" he asked suddenly.

William shook his head and instinctively looked up to find a magnificent hawk with wings outstretched. "I felt different from those around me: my parents, my brother Richard, the other squires. I wanted nothing to do with war and violence, but in their eyes those things were as natural as that hawk flying overhead carrying a rat. When people go to fairs they are used to games where cats, dogs, and pigs are clobbered, strangled, stoned, shot with arrows...and they think it's all very amusing. I cried for days after my parents took me to my first

fair, and my father wanted to beat me because he thought I was so strange. In my eyes the world is sick. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Sir Ian had been staring at the bird with its prey, now disappearing into a clump of trees. "Did you have any friends, someone who thought like you?"

"Only one person, a Jew named Jacob."

The road was now empty of travelers. In the distance they could hear a farmer calling his cows.

"You befriended a Jew?"

"Yes. Of course I had to keep it secret, but he was the one who taught me to read and write."

"You know how to read and write?"

"Yes. The other squires used to tease me by saying that I had all the makings of a merchant."

"You are a most unusual man. Please do tell me about Jacob."

William stared at the ground "He was a cobbler who lived in the Jewish village off this very road. My father's lands were within his rounds and he would stop first in the village and then come by our house. Jacob would drive his cart by the river on the other side of an apple orchard from my father's manor, so as not to disturb us. He traveled with his family, a wife and two children, a daughter about my age and a son about a year older. He would spend whatever time he needed to make or fix our shoes, gloves, and saddles, always using the best leathers. For my mother he made shoes so soft, they felt like butter in your hands and light as feathers.

"One day—I must have been around seven—I approached his cart to watch him work. I noticed his daughter sitting by his side reading aloud from a book. I got curious and looked over her shoulder and was mystified by the words on the page which she could decipher with such ease. The story she was reading was very interesting. It was about a warrior who after many adventures comes home disguised as a beggar, so his wife doesn't recognize him. She has many suitors, because her husband is presumed dead. She still loves her husband and decrees that he who can draw his bow will marry her. Everyone tries, but it is a big bow and requires great strength. Everyone fails except for her husband.

"I was enthralled by the story and asked if I could come back to hear some more stories.

"Instead, Jacob started to teach me how to read—I mean at that very moment. And I came back every day. Two weeks later, as he was about to leave, he handed me the one book his daughter was reading and told me I could keep it until he came by again."

"A cobbler who was also a scholar. Don't you think it odd?"

William patted his horse's neck. "I eventually learned that's not uncommon for Jews or Muslims. Only Christians seem to be terribly ignorant. However, Jacob was unique. He had been sent to Spain as a child by his father to live with his uncle, and was trained as a physician. Jacob returned to England to live with his family but could only work as a cobbler, his father's occupation, because Jews are forbidden from engaging in the higher trades."

"Go on."

"The next time he came he had books for me; not scrolls, but codices; fine vellum sheets bound in covers. Oh, how I loved to read! I had to hide the books in the barn, way up high in the loft where no one but the bats and barn cats would go. And so it was I learned to read in French, English, Greek and Latin. To this day I can read Greek and Latin but I have never spoken them.

"Jacob also showed me how to use an abacus. After that I was learning mathematics, but not just the counting of merchants, but geometry, and what the Arabs call '*al-jabr*.'

"He taught me for five years. My family was unaware, at least not until much later when all of us squires were told to attend talks in the wintertime by visiting scholars who talked about math, natural science, the arts, music; that's when everyone found out just how much I knew. While my brother Richard and the others were struggling with the basics, I was trying to engage the scholars to find out if there was anything they could teach me that I didn't already know. There wasn't.

"Mine were the secrets of the ancients, their knowledge, their stories, their poems, the beauty of so many minds and I wondered how and why there had been such people, so great, and why there was no one like them anymore.

"Jacob said such was the fate of Christianity, to live in the shadow of greatness, for the Christians had abandoned learning in the fanaticism of the fourth century, but not so for Jews and Muslims who inherited the rich trove of knowledge from the Romans."

"What happened in the fourth century?" Sir Ian asked.

"It was all because of the then Roman Emperor, Constantine," William said. "He was an astute politician who wanted to strengthen his grip on power. He decided to first have the Church declare that Jesus was the Son of God, the only son of God. We now take that for granted, but actually that was a major step that changed the world...at the time many considered Jesus a rabbi, a spiritual teacher, but Constantine wanted Jesus to be much more, as great or greater than any pagan god. He aligned himself with a Christian sect that held his views, and declared the others heretical. That accomplished, he proceeded to make Christianity the official religion of the Empire. Oh, there was the usual tale of how he

had won a battle through divine intervention; but at any rate, he consolidated his power because by then Christians were numerous. Constantine also defined the New Testament of the Bible—the four gospels—and ordered that all other gospels, well over a hundred, be burned, because those said that Jesus was human. Christian hordes started ransacking the great Roman libraries, going after everything that was not the official Bible, destroying the knowledge accumulated by the Greeks and the Romans over all those centuries. However, Christian monks in charge of the Library of Alexandria took what they could to the desert and handed it over to the Arabs.”

Ian stared at William and appeared thoughtful, not shocked or amazed as William thought he would be.

“It seems Jacob taught you a lot.”

They came over a hill and found a shepherd with his flock blocking the road. The man tried anxiously to get his animals out of the way. William dismounted, gave his reins to Ian and helped the shepherd usher his animals through a narrow gate in the stone fence. When they were done, and while the man kept bowing awkwardly at him, William noticed Sir Ian’s approving gaze as he mounted his horse.

“Yes, Jacob taught me a lot,” continued William. “But it wasn’t until I was twelve that he had me read the most important books. I recall two in particular, one by the Muslim Averroes and the other by the Jew Maimonides—both lived in Spain about a hundred years ago. I was impressed and saddened by reading them: impressed by their wide knowledge and wisdom and saddened because those were the kind of people we didn’t have and I wondered what our lives would be like if we did.

“Since then I have read books by some noted Christian scholars—Saint Augustine, Peter Abelard, and the Dominican Tomasso di Aquino—all truly brilliant, but their writings seemed trite compared to the likes of Averroes and Maimonides. Even the stories literate monks read at the abbey were silly adventures and romances, nothing like the intricate and wonderful stories I read as a child.

“I asked Jacob where he got his books and he said from the Arabs in Spain who had all the books from the ancients, all the knowledge on earth.”

“But books are very expensive, how did he get to own them?”

“Oh, he didn’t. He told me that books were passed around within the Jewish community. He thought I deserved to read them as well.”

“Sounds like a wonderful man whom you loved deeply. What happened to him?”

William felt a lump in his throat and knew he would break down if he tried to talk. He got down from his horse, took the reins in his left hand and walked

down the empty road that stretched in between two wooded hills. Sir Ian followed on his horse. After some time William felt composed, stopped and turned around to look at Sir Ian. "I was fifteen at the time and had come home with my brother for Michaelmas. At the breakfast table I heard from my father that the Jews had kidnapped and sacrificed another Christian boy. My father said the Jews did this for their secret rites, catch a Christian child and crucify him or her, and they did this often, for children were found thus from time to time and people knew what had happened."

William took a deep breath. "That afternoon town folk came to our house with pitchforks, axes, and sickles, ready to raid the Jewish village in retribution. My father armed himself and joined the other knights, merchants, farmers, and peasants, and marched on to the Jewish village.

"I could only watch them from my chamber window, knowing full well that Jews did not commit such crimes, because I knew one such Jew and he would never, ever, possibly do such a thing. But all I could do was pray, other than that I did nothing. I did nothing."

"William, I understand, and I'm sorry. Was Jacob slain?"

"Yes, along with his family. I ran across his cart the following day on my way back to the castle. My brother, who was riding with me, pointed to the cart and the bodies strewn around it and laughed, saying how we now needed to find another cobbler."

"I don't know that you could have done anything to prevent the killings, William. You were but a boy."

"I already knew how to wield sword and lance."

"Would you have wielded them against your own kin?"

William resumed his brisk walk. "I think not. But at least I could have stood before them, stopped them, and perhaps I could have reasoned with them."

Sir Ian spurred his horse, passed William, blocked his path and turned to face him. "William, you went through a lot at a young age. I can understand what you were seeking in the abbey. You are right; the Jews are innocent of such crimes, and I know because I have dealt with many as a Templar and some I can call 'brother.' There are also Muslims I can call thus."

William stared at Sir Ian. "But the Templars fight the Muslims in the Holy Land and the Dominican inquisitors go after Jews. They are considered enemies of Christ, enemies of the Church."

"Do you believe that?"

"No, not even as a child before I met Jacob. It's never been a truth for me."

Ian smiled at him. "That's part of the reason why we want you to join us."

William walked in silence for some time, and then spoke, almost as if to

himself. "If the Jews are not to blame for the crucifixion killings of Christian children, then who is committing those horrible crimes? And why?"

"Oh, son, I'm afraid you already know the answer."

William looked Sir Ian in the eyes, his gaze searching, pondering.

"Oh, my Lord, have mercy!" he exclaimed. "Of course. That's what Brother Jules was planning to do with the two boys to keep them quiet; otherwise he would have a whole village coming after him.

"I wonder how many times that's happened?"

"Much too often, my friend, by many others like Jules. I am willing to wager that when the young boy was found crucified, which prompted the citizens in your father's fief to kill Jews, someone like Brother Jules was somewhere in the vicinity.

"William, you just avenged your Jacob."

William entered the eatery a short distance from the abbey where he had agreed to meet Sir Ian after seeing his abbot. The public house was better than average, still wattle and daub, but with a wooden floor covered with clean reeds, glass windows instead of shutters or waxed cloth, and tables and benches made of hardy oak rather than fir. It was past dinnertime and just a handful of patrons sat drinking ale, beer, cider, and hot, spiced wine. Ian had picked the one table by the window and William noticed that he had ordered meat pie, roasted apples and ale for both.

Sir Ian looked up. "Are you now Sir William?"

"I am," William said as he took a seat facing Sir Ian and looked self-consciously at his new attire: a tunic, hose and shoes the draper brother had given him. "I have some friends I wish I could have said farewell to, but the abbot made me swear that I wouldn't."

"And you are not to mention anything about Jules to anyone."

"Yes, I swore to that as well."

"But he released you from the Cistercians. Was that difficult?"

"I had to promise that I would join the Templars, that way I remain a monk."

Ian pulled out a pouch and handed William six gold coins. "This is enough for a hackney, a cheap sword, and some provisions for the road," he told him. "You will return home a poor knight but a knight nevertheless."

Sir Ian took a long, thoughtful sip of ale from his mug. "You have until April to board a Templar galley bound for Outremer. This is August, so you have seven months at home to outfit yourself and raise the money you need. I figured three hundred English pounds would do to buy a quality hauberk, a sword, a destrier

with saddle and mail protection, your space in the galley, plus the hundred and fifty pounds of gifting every knight is expected to provide when joining the Order.”

William stared at the coins in his hand. “I need to join some tournaments, then. My father doesn’t have that kind of money.”

Sir Ian appeared to be thinking and kept shaking his head. Then he smiled broadly. “Many have tried to make their fortunes that way, but few have succeeded. No matter, I’m certain you’ll find a way.”

He sipped his ale in silence for some time. “You did a great service by helping us catch Jules,” he said. “Unfortunately the world is full of people like him. And that’s one of the main reasons the likes of us join the Templars, to seek refuge from such people... but also to fight them. And fight them you will. Great things await you in the Holy Land. I believe you will find your uncle and do many things you can’t yet imagine, but that will be just the beginning. Your real challenge will be to help the Templars survive.”

William took a bite of pie then washed the greasy taste with the dark and bitter ale. “Help the Templars survive? Me? Why do you say that?”

“Because of a prophecy by a famous seer, Caesarius of Heisterbach.”

William pinched pieces of pie absentmindedly. “He was a Cistercian monk, a scholar who wrote about miracles...but yes, he made some predictions...mostly about the end of the world, I think.”

“This is a secret prophecy he gave only to us. It’s very important, William.”

“Will there be war?”

“There’s always war. No, that’s the least of our worries. There are forces gathering for the destruction of our Knights Templar.”

“By whom? And why?”

Sir Ian cleared his throat. “According to Caesarius, by the end of this century all Christian armies will be driven out of the Holy Land by the Turks, and shortly after, the Templars will be attacked by the French king. And that is why we are asking you to search for your uncle, before any of that happens. He has the means to save the Order.”

“What does my uncle have that can save the Templars?”

“I don’t know, William, but he does. Very important people believe this.”

“Why would the French king want to destroy the Templars?”

“It’s nothing new. It has happened throughout history. The world at large lives in darkness, but there is always a group endowed with great understanding and they are persecuted for it. That’s what happened with the Cathars. They were a peaceful people who lived in the Languedoc region of southern France a hundred years ago. They believed that God resides within all of us, and that we can be one with Him without Church or priests, by simply going inside. They too had

embraced Jews and Muslims. For this, the pope and the king of France saw to it that most of the Cathars were killed three decades ago, in 1254. The Templars were able to save some by hiding them. There are still a few in small villages in the Pyrenees, but the Dominican inquisitors are determined to kill them all.

“The Sultanate of Granada is the only place left where Jews, Muslims and Christians live in harmony, where people can believe and practice what they wish, but it’s just a matter of time before they too are conquered by the fanatics...either Christian or Muslim.”

William nodded. “Jacob told me about the Cathars and Moorish Spain. You say that I will find that type of tolerance in the Templars?”

Sir Ian started on a roasted apple with obvious relish. “Not all Templars,” he said in between bites. “I’m talking about a group within the Order. They, like the Cathars, believe we all have God inside and that we are all brothers.”

Sir Ian stopped eating and looked at William with concern. “You must keep this a secret, William.”

“I promise, Sir Ian. I’ll keep what you told me to myself.”

“Wait until one of your uncle’s friends approaches you, and talks as we have, openly about all matters. Then you can speak freely.”

“You mean a member of the group within the Templars you told me about?”

“A friend of your uncle’s. Until then don’t say anything to anyone.”

Ian stood and extended his hand. “*Beauseant*, William.”

William shook Sir Ian’s hand. “Be whole?”

“It’s the Templars’ salutation and battle cry, as well as the name we’ve given our flag, the black and white. In time it’ll all make sense to you.”

[7]

Otto walked into the chief justice’s chambers at Westminster Palace, as usual, unannounced, dismissing Lord Hengham’s clerks attempt to follow protocol by showing him in.

He found Ralph at his table amid a mountain of documents. Two big oil lamps burned bright, throwing shadows on his patrician features.

“You look very pleased with yourself, Otto. Success?”

“Beyond my dreams, Brother Ralph,” Otto said as he sat on a chair across the table from his friend. “Two days ago I received word from Brother Ian. William is on his way home to gather funds for his journey to Outremer.”

Ralph chuckled. “Let’s hope that Ian is right, and he can manifest what he needs. But otherwise, we’ll step in, right?”

“Of course.”

“Well, then, let us pray that William survives being a Templar. Have you

thought what to do should he die in combat?”

Otto smiled. “You should hear Ian’s answer to that question, Ralph. Apparently if he’s anything like his uncle John, that can’t happen.”

“Oh, my. The power of the Prophecy, eh? But seriously, between you and me, suppose William gets killed in combat. According to Ian that will prove that he’s not like his uncle after all...and leaves your plan in shambles. What would you do if he dies?”

“Ralph, that’s always a possibility for any of us. We do the best we can and leave the rest to God.” Otto felt a twinge of remorse, which he disguised with a knowing smile. There was no way he could divulge his alternate plan.

Ralph leaned back in his chair and bit his lower lip, a sure sign of concern, thought Otto.

“Just curious, Otto. Do you ever feel guilty for concocting this whole affair?”

Otto shook his head. “Only briefly, at the beginning, eleven years ago, when we learned that John had gone looking for the Jesus Gospel and then disappeared. The thought that such a good man might die because of a plan of my making bothered me beyond imagining. But then again, the French must be stopped and we need the Jesus Gospel to do it, you know that, Ralph. Otherwise what would become of the Templars? The moment they get thrown out of the Holy Land they would lose their reason for being; no longer fighting for a holy cause, they would become just another contemplative order. Then the French king could round them up like sheep.”

“You are right on that regard, Otto. But we lied to the Brotherhood, and used that poor shire reeve, Sir Ian, to do our dirty work. I feel terrible!”

“Ralph, how else could we have alerted the Brotherhood about the French king’s ambitions? Had I walked into a Brotherhood meeting and simply told them, they would not have believed me, and because I’m one of King Edward’s close friends and counselors, they would have had reason to suspect my motives. The Prophecy was the only way.”

Ralph played with his signet ring, apparently still ill at ease. “I still think we should try and stop Philip at this early stage. Surely we can send Templars to protect the remaining Scottish royals...and, Otto, the moment you learn that the French have sent their agents to Acre, why, we can be on the lookout...”

“Lookout for whom, Ralph? We know that Flote won’t be stupid enough to send readily recognizable Frenchmen to Acre. And do we know their targets? I assume they’ll go after prominent Muslims in the city, but whom do we protect?”

Ralph raised his hands in frustration. “I think you want war, man! I think you want to face King Philip once and for all and get it over with.”

Otto got up from his chair and went to the window behind Ralph to stare into space. "Ralph, my friend, please believe that I have nothing personal invested in this."

"I'm not contemplating such a horrid thought, Otto. But I think you are not telling me the whole story."

Otto turned to face Ralph, feeling resigned. "So be it, my brother," he said and inhaled deeply. "I want to fight the French because I believe in my heart that I can defeat them, and that I'm the only one who can. But I must do it while I still have vitality and my wits about me, because this will be a long and hard battle."

"The French have reason to fear our King Edward. If they declared war at this moment, Edward would have the barons of Aquitaine to add to his English army, and he could also bring the Scots to his side. That would make him a formidable foe. They also fear the Templars; they could rally the other military orders and they are rich. So it makes sense that the French want our king fighting the Scots, while they take Aquitaine away from him, and maneuver the Templars out of the Holy Land and within their grasp. Then, when they set up a puppet pope, he can order the destruction of the Templars, and at the same time, bestow the Holy Roman Empire's crown on Philip."

"If at this stage we prevent the killings of the Scottish royals and the breaking of the truce with the Turks in the Holy Land, the French will just wait for another opportune moment. I want them fully engaged in their scheme; I want to bog them down until they cry for mercy. Then I want them so utterly defeated, they'll never try anything like it again!"

"And for that I need the Brotherhood, and through them, the Templars; and to enlist them I need the Jesus Gospel. You know that."

"And you are certain that the Gospel, if it really exists, will say..."

"Ralph, my friend. It's a Gnostic text, written by Jesus, stating that we don't need priests for our salvation."

Ralph thought for a moment, contemplating the window behind Otto's shoulder. "Well, yes, a classic Gnostic text would say that." Ralph sighed. "But let us suppose the worst, that William can't find his uncle nor the Gospel..."

"In that case I will go myself and search desperately, and if I die trying, so be it."

"But surely you are not serious. Those brave souls the Brotherhood sent before John were never heard from again. Be reasonable, Otto. Even if Philip does become the Holy Roman emperor and conquers Europe and the Holy Land as you told me, that's not the end of the world."

Otto shook his head. "According to my spy in the French court, Philip will

then launch the ultimate crusade.”

“What does that mean? A crusade to end all crusades?”

“Yes, my friend. He will give the Christian fanatics their dream of a Christian only world, by massacring all Jews and Muslims everywhere.”

“Good Heavens! Are you sure? No, but of course you are. But then, won’t that be enough to motivate the Brotherhood? What do you need the Jesus Gospel for?”

“Ah, Ralph. How can I possibly prove it? No one will believe me until it’s too late. The French Scheme is so outlandish...I even had a hard time convincing you. But a French king and a pope persecuting the Templars, after what happened to the Cathars? That’s another story. However, given the Templars’ disregard for pain and death they would just as likely decide to become martyrs. Most of our brethren are like Ian, Templars. You’ve heard them at Brotherhood meetings...all that talk about honor, duty, and dying a good death, remember? But imagine what would happen should the Brotherhood have the Jesus Gospel in their possession! They have been looking for it for two hundred years, and if they are convinced that the French king would want to destroy it, they’ll go after Philip with every Templar under their command!”

“So why don’t you just fabricate a Jesus Gospel, as you did the Caesarius Prophecy?”

“You mean...”

“I mean come up with a credible text. Jot down some likely things in Greek or Aramaic that Jesus might have said, and make sure it specifically states that there is no need for a Church, priests, nor dogma. Just a classic Gnostic message of finding God inside oneself.”

Otto couldn’t believe what he was hearing, and he studied Ralph’s expression for any hidden meaning, but found only concern.

“Ralph...that’s impossible. Only a Christ-like being could write something that would pass muster by William and others like him. And Christ-like beings don’t get involved in subterfuge. They don’t lie.”

“But if we have a fake Gospel we wouldn’t need the likes of William, would we?”

“You forget that we need someone to lead the Templars on a holy cause. The gospel has to be real so William believes in it and is empowered by it, and if the quest to find it becomes the stuff of legend, so much the better.”

Ralph gave Otto a sad smile. “Yes, of course you are right.” Then he sighed. “We need someone like John. Too bad he never made it back. And we need the actual gospel. I pray it all works out. I pray William is indeed like his uncle.”

“Amen to that.”