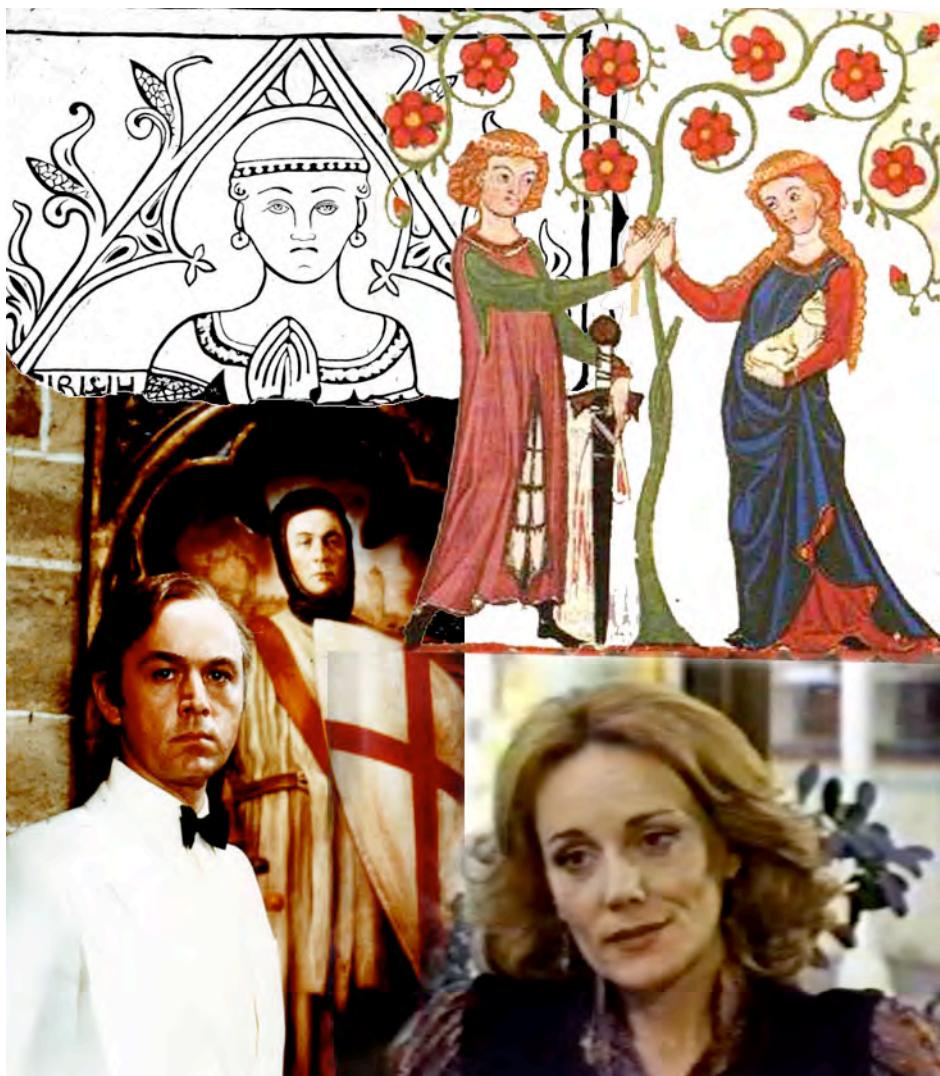


SURVIVORS

by M M Gilchrist

(being a sequel to M J Bird's *The Dark Side of the Sun*)



Author's Note:

First of all, a disclaimer: this is a work of fanfiction. All I own are the original characters: Dr Woods; Nurse Scott (whom I envisage being played by Katy Murphy); Dr Hepburn (inspired by one of my tutors and by my two high school Classics teachers); the unseen, but long-suffering Professor Aimery; Uncle Anciau, and some minor supporting characters. Everyone else was created by the late Michael J Bird: I am simply playing with them for fun, not profit, because I love them (two of them in particular). The quotations from real works of literature, history and songs are credited to their original writers in the course of the story, where possible. Again, this is for fun only.

This is about as close to ‘romance’ that I get: bittersweet Gothic rom-com with a background of murder, torture, conspiracy and psychic manipulation. I have located the Scottish castle in the Angus Glens because a) I wanted to use Dundee Art Gallery for a key scene, and b) I have first-hand memories of Dundee and Fife in this time-period.

The basic scenario has been lurking in my mind since 1983, when I was a First Year Mediæval History student at St Andrews, watching *Dark Side* in the TV room of my hall of residence. For my friends and I, the romantic pairing we wanted to see was obvious – but did we get it? *No*. Instead, there was GBH.

There were a few gaping logical holes in the plot. How is a curse supposed to work when the intended victim *knows* (from official medical records) that it is impossible, and when the curser *also* knows that the victim knows? Also, would someone who had killed a lover in *cold blood* (*not* in a *crime passionnel* or by some mishap) still be carrying a torch after several centuries to the extent that he keeps her picture on desk, treasures her jewellery, and takes uncharacteristic risks to possess her look-alike? We never learned Raoul’s version of events.

I was disturbed by the presumption of Templar guilt. The charges were dubious in the extreme, and the methods used to extract confessions brutal. A Templar who confessed, but then recanted on the grounds that his confession had been extracted under torture or threat of it, faced the stake as a relapsed heretic. The Grand Master himself died this way, declaring his innocence. In Cyprus (at first), torture was not used, and the Templars were found innocent; the Pope was dissatisfied, and ordered a retrial in order to get the desired result. The uncertainty over the fate of all the Templars in Cyprus (which had the highest concentration of knights, as opposed to sergeants and serving-brothers) is a gift for this fandom. But it seems to me that anyone who had passed through that terrible universe of show trials and torture-chambers (foreshadowing the horrors of the 20C) would be likely to be deeply damaged by it, mentally and physically.

I apologise to the shade of Hospitaller Grand Master Foulques de Villaret (Folco del Vilaret), for further besmirching his reputation (not that he did not manage this perfectly well by himself). Anthony Luttrell’s observation about the lack of *specific examples* of acts of oppression attributed to him at the time of his deposition leaves scope to insert a crucial incident from the canonical back-story. It

fits perfectly in date, and makes sense of the otherwise inexplicably *un*-secret ‘secret confession’ of Brother Philibert. So I have tried to draw the fictional back-story closer to plausibility, in the context of Hospitaller politics in 1317.

Rating: On fanfiction.net, this story carries an ‘M’ rating (‘Mature Readers’). Strong language occurs only once or twice, and there is no explicit sex, but there *is* brutal violence (in flashback), and explicit references to torture. Sadly, this is inevitable, given the historical back-story.

Don’t try this at home: In real life, I do not recommend using a knife to open a relationship. People get hurt, and carpets get ruined.

SURVIVORS

by Μ Μ Gilchrist

(being a sequel to M J Bird's *The Dark Side of the Sun*)

*This is emotion
Emotionless war
A torn shirt and a long dead cause
I can't sleep
This kind of thing gets me down
Don't say walk
I may lose my fear*

*I could lose myself
In this honesty*

China Crisis, *Christian*
(the slow dance from the masked ball, Episode 4)

1: Crossed Destinies

Ismini Christoyannis returned to her London hotel, and spent the evening turning over the day's events: Dr Phillimore's account of Anne's condition; Anne herself, uncommunicative, resigned to her delusions, gazing vacantly out of her window. If her phantom pregnancy was her psychic weapon to kill Raoul Lavallière, what would be the price? What remained of her sanity? Her *life*?

But how could he have survived, Ismini asked herself. The knife had gone through the muscles, into the thorax between the left shoulder-blade and the spine. It did not need to go deep to kill: few centimetres into the chest cavity would be enough there. Yes, the light had been poor, but she would have felt it if the blade had struck only the bone...

It was true that nothing had been made public these past few months: she had heard only vague rumours of sudden illness or death. Several distinguished visitors had left Rhodes hurriedly – private jets flying at odd hours from the airport. The Kastello Hagios Theodoros seemed almost empty, and she no longer sensed his presence on the island. And yet...

Anne knew. But she was not sharing that knowledge, not letting her into her mind lest she undermine her delusion.

That night still haunted her: the séance, the stabbing... Blood on her hands. Yes, she had blood on her hands, literally and metaphorically. She had touched the parapet of the balcony, and felt it, warm and wet, on her fingers. She was a doctor: it went against all her instincts to kill, and yet, when she saw his hands on Anne's throat, she had done so without remorse.

Almost.

There had been a moment – only a moment – when they had stared into each other's eyes and seen themselves reflected. Only a moment, but it had seared her very soul: pain, anger, centuries of loneliness, above all, an intensity of *life*. Had it held for another second, she might have –

No.

Better not to think of that.

Then, with the knife still buried in his back, he had stumbled past her, out on to the balcony, and fallen into – *nothing*. She stood there, in her thin white dressing-gown, with his blood dark and sticky on her hands, gazing down into the dark where a body should have been, but was not... The night breeze had rustled in the trees.

She would reach out to him herself: there was no other way.

She raised her own defences, so that, if she made contact, he could not read her mind. She pictured him as she had seen him waiting for Anne in the café, that last day: *soigné* and aloof, with those ice-pale eyes trying to pierce her mind.

De Montrefort, Lavallière, whatever you are calling yourself these days – if you're still alive, where *are you...?*

Hundreds of kilometres flashed past her: darkness, the lights of towns. Pictures and emotions jumbled together. She saw a building – grey, towered, close to water and hills: a castle, but not a real fortress like Hagios Theodoros, more of a decorative fancy. She sensed panic; physical pain, in the left side of his chest...

If Anne were trying to kill him by his own method, she would expect that: a heart attack.

She kept probing, expecting to feel his psychic barriers resisting her. Nothing. His defences were down. Something was wrong, she thought. *Was* he dead, after all? Unconscious?

Another building: modern, big. Windows. More water: the sea, or a large river, perhaps. Brightly-lit rooms.

Pain like a needle, now...

She heard a man's voice, unfamiliar: "Less than four months ago? I hope you're not making a habit of this!"

A young woman, with an accent: "A wee rest and you'll be fine! My, you've been in the wars... What happened to you, for Christ's sake?"

He was disoriented. All his thoughts seemed to be of Anne, but she could not make sense of everything. It was as if she were hearing him speaking, in a language she did not quite recognise – neither French nor Spanish nor Italian, but slipping between them.

The elegant vision from the café slipped from her mind. Again, she saw him as at the last, in the bedroom: the knife, the blood, his gaze locked on hers... Predator and prey, bound together: but which was which?

She slept badly, dreaming of a nightingale flying into an upstairs window of the house on Rhodes. She was a child – it must have been after the war, just after the Italians had left – when her father had shown her the broken, brown-feathered body lying, twitching, on the balcony; that same balcony from which...

“Poor little thing, it must have seen its reflection in the glass, just like a mirror!”

“You’re a doctor, Papa – can’t you fix it?”

“It’s kinder to wring its neck.”

And now she saw a bird lying on the drawing-room floor (furnished as it had been in those days), below a shattered mirror. A line from an English poem: “*The mirror crack’d from side to side;/ The curse is come upon me,’ cried...*”¹ But now it was a falcon, with its wings outspread and studded with shards of glass like glittering knives...

She heard her father’s voice again: “It’s kinder to wring its neck.”

Her adult self answered: “I’m a doctor now, Papa.”

“But look at its claws, girl. It could tear your heart out.”

And the stricken bird stared up at her as a man had done, expecting the *coup-de-grâce*.

After breakfast, in the hotel’s coffee-bar she leafed through the morning papers – a range from across the UK, and some international ones – but she could not concentrate. Her own dreams and memories mingled with her vision of his fate. Her father had killed the injured nightingale to put it out of its misery. Was that was she must do – deliver the *coup-de-grâce*? Her hand trembled involuntarily.

“– Are you all right, madam?”

The waitress’s voice jolted her back to her surroundings.

“Why, yes.” Then she realised that she had knocked over her coffee, spilling the lees on to the papers. “Oh, I’m so sorry!”

She dabbed up the coffee with her paper napkin. “I think it most of it should still be readable!”

Then she noticed the article on which the stain had fallen: a short paragraph on an inner page of *The Scotsman*:

Man Collapses at Castle

A man is in a stable condition in Ninewells Hospital, Dundee, after collapsing at Glen[____]stle, in the Angus Glens, yesterday afternoon. The man, whose name has not yet bee[____]leased, is believed to have been viewing the castle, which has been on the market for the [____]two years. The estate agent raised the alarm...

¹ Alfred Tennyson, *The Lady of Shallott*.

"What is it?" asked the waitress, reading upside down. "Is it someone you know?"

"I fear it may be."

But she *knew*.

She called Dr Phillimore, to let him know that she was going up to Scotland for a few days.

"A good idea! I'm afraid there's unlikely to be much change in Mrs Tierney's condition in the meantime. Do you play golf at all?"

"No, I'm afraid not! But I may as well make the most of my time while I'm here: I'm afraid I never took the opportunity to go there while I lived in London," she said. "But I will be back to see her."

"Shall I let her know?"

"Just say an old friend – Oh, no, it doesn't matter. It would just confuse her."

The less Anne knew, the better. However, she decided to be honest with David, and telephoned him back at home on Rhodes. Just in case the worst should happen, *someone* ought to be informed of her whereabouts...

Poor David. They had been lovers briefly, early in their acquaintance. It had been more or less an accident: a particularly trying phone-call from her ex-husband; too much wine with dinner one evening; moving on to the bedroom. (The smell of cheap aftershave still triggered bad memories of the whole episode.) But it did not last: he was too young, too immature. They had, at least, remained good friends, but he reminded her of a clumsy puppy, eager to please, amusing enough, but hopelessly unsophisticated. He was out of his depth in this recent business, and had almost got himself killed.

She pushed coin after coin into the phone-box. The line crackled.

"David?"

"Hello, Ismini! What's the news on Anne?"

"Not good, I'm afraid. Physically, she's recovered – overdose of sleeping pills – but... she believes she's pregnant. She's even showing symptoms, purely psychosomatically."

A pause. "But that's impossible. Isn't it? Oh, please *don't* tell me..."

"Physically, yes, it's completely impossible. But she *has* convinced herself of it – I think, in order to convince *someone else*."

"What?"

"'Pointing the bone', David. Remember what I told you about how curses work? If he knows –"

"But *he's* dead, isn't he? After what you did to him?"

"No, he's not. He's in Scotland."

"Oh, bloody hell..."

"But I know where he is, and I'm going to find him."

Another pause. "But that's dangerous!"

"For *him*. He's ill. I think he's dying."

“– But we thought that before!”

“That was different. Anne is making him believe the prophecy is coming to fruition: *his own mind* is killing him. He’s already collapsed. He’s in hospital, in Dundee.”

“But even so... You *will* take care? And let me know that you’re all right?”

“Yes, of course! Don’t worry. I just want to make sure.” After all, of the three of them, she was by far the most capable. She had already resisted Lavallière’s efforts to read her mind at least once. “What about you? What’s happening with you?”

“A bit of news – good, I hope,” David went on, hurriedly, as he always did when nervous. “I told you Prof Aimery² said he’d passed my de Montrefort article on to Edith Hepburn, for peer-review? One of *the experts* on the military orders! Well, she wants to have a chat with me about it! She’s at a Crusades conference in Israel just now, and says she’ll stop off here in the next few days, on her way home!”

“Congratulations! That *does* sound promising!”

“– But Ismini – for God’s sake, do be careful! He nearly killed me!”

All he did was give me a headache, she thought. Show me a man who doesn’t – even *you*.

She phoned ahead to book a room in the Queens Hotel, not far from the university, and caught the first available train north. The journey took the rest of the day. She began a letter to David: “Instructions – just in case”, and a fuller account of Anne’s condition. It was evening by the time she arrived, and she was tired. She slept well, without nightmares.

Next day, following instructions from the hotel receptionist, she took a bus to the hospital, a large, modern building, with long rows of windows overlooking the Tay. She played the innocent foreign visitor, working her way from Main Reception to Accident & Emergency with leading questions and halting English:

“The gentleman who was taken ill at the castle... I am looking for a friend of mine... I was afraid...”

And being a charming, not to say attractive, woman with large brown eyes and a fascinating accent, she managed to learn from various members of staff that he was an *Italian* with diplomatic and military connections, Alessandro Taviani.

By the time she reached the doctor, whose voice she knew at once from her vision, her English had improved *remarkably*. He was a dark, neatly bearded man of about thirty-five: the badge on his white coat named him as ‘Brian Woods’.³

² Walter Scott Crusade novel joke: see *The Talisman* and the 1954 film *King Richard and the Crusaders*. The names of most of the original characters contain references to Scott’s Crusade-era novels.

³ Translate into French: see *Ivanhoe*.

"Ah, yes. Are you the next-of-kin?"

"No, I know him professionally and socially." She gave him one of her business cards, printed in Greek on one side, and English on the other: it gave both her Athens and Rhodes addresses.

"Interesting... He gave us an address in *Venice*."

"He has a summer place on Rhodes," she said.

"Well, that doesn't surprise me. Works for the UN, I understand. How did you know he was here?"

"I saw the report in the press, and I guessed, from what he had told me of his plans about viewing property... What exactly happened?"

"The estate agent thought he was having a heart-attack, but the X-rays showed the pneumothorax. History of trauma... A lung injury just a couple of months ago, yes?"

Ismini nodded, giving nothing away.

"If you ask me, it was a bit soon to risk flying: the change in air-pressure..."

"I was surprised he'd recovered so quickly," she answered innocently.

"Well, we did a tube thoracostomy. The problem should resolve itself in a few days."

She gave a thin smile. "I'm sure it *will*."

The doctor caught the attention of a passing nurse. "Becky – Nurse Scott – this is Dr Christoyannis. She's here to see Signor Taviani. Can you take her over to him?"

The nurse smiled. She was very young, not long out of training: bright, round eyes in a round, freckled face and a slight overbite gave her the look of an eager hamster. "Hello! You're his first visitor! Have you come a long way?"

"From London." She recognised her voice, too. It was better not to say too much: he might be reading the nurse's mind.

"He's doing fine, though he'll no' take anything for the pain." She guided her towards a curtained bay. "He's in here, on his own: he was anxious about other people... Wasnae worth going private for a few days, though. We got his things sent fae his hotel. *Lovely* manners: a *real* gentleman... Are you family?"

"A friend," she lied.

Nurse Scott smiled knowingly.

"More of an *acquaintance*," she added, lest the younger woman's imagination ran away with her.

"A visitor to see you, sir!"

For a moment, as the nurse's hand drew aside the curtain, Ismini wondered whether behind it there might indeed be a Signor Alessandro Taviani, an Italian diplomat and complete stranger. If so, she might have been relieved (although he, undoubtedly, would have been quite alarmed).

But no.

It was, indeed, Raoul Lavallière. He was sitting up in bed, reading a Calvino novel, *Il Castello dei Destini Incrociati*, which had an illustration of Renaissance tarot cards on the cover. His hair was

browner than she recalled: dyed for his new identity, she suspected. He was half-wearing his pyjama jacket (silk, as she might have guessed, a subtle slate colour), the left side merely draped about the shoulder, because of the chest-drain. His eyes (which also appeared darker) darted up as the women entered. Briefly, Ismini detected mingled alarm and anger in them. Then, just as swiftly, his expression reverted to its usual mask-like serenity. "Thank you so much," he said, with a slight bow of his head.

The nurse beamed at him. Ismini read her mind in an instant. Unused to courtesy from injured city drunks and Hilltown junkies, and given to spending tea-breaks reading Mills & Boon romances, she was quite infatuated.

"If you need anything, just buzz, okay? – And don't let him tire himself, doctor."

And then she left them alone. Together.

2: A Man of Wealth & Taste

Ismini forced a smile. “Signor Taviani. Or Lavallière. Or is it de Montrefort? Or shall I just stick to *Maitre*?”

His eyes seemed to change colour, from hazel to their usual clear, chill grey. He glared, trying to find a route into her mind, but she blocked him. After a few moments, he seemed to accept this, and gestured graciously for her to sit down in the chair by the bed.

“I’m honoured to see you again, doctor.” His Greek was fluent, but something about his pronunciation suggested to her that he had learned the language long ago. “It is such a long way to travel, merely to *gloat*.”

“Not to gloat. No.”

“What, then? To *make sure*? ”

“I came to Britain to see *Anne*. I was concerned for her health.”

“My own reasons are not dissimilar.”

“I thought as much.” She kept on her guard, studying him: his face was drawn, as if he had slept badly. But she said, “You’re looking better than I expected.”

“*Alive*, I think you mean.”

“For the moment.”

“Is that a threat?”

“A *prophecy*, perhaps.”

He closed the book. “I’m not sure that I understand.”

“You *will*.”

Lavallière reached over, wincing slightly, to place the novel on the bedside cabinet, on top of Gérard de Nerval’s *Les Filles de Feu – Les Chimères* (paperback, well-thumbed), Rodenbach’s *Bruges-la-Morte* (ditto), and a hinged picture-frame (folded flat). Beside these, she noticed a string of worn olive-wood beads, with a tarnished silver cross: a rosary, she thought, the Catholic equivalent of the knotted *komboskinia* familiar to her from Orthodoxy. That he – with his demons and devil-worship – still possessed such a thing struck her as blasphemous.

“It may be rather old-fashioned of me,” he said, “but if someone runs a knife into my lung, I like to know why. From you, I expected something more *subtle*.”

“There wasn’t time: I had to save *Anne*.”

“She *was* trying to stab me.”

“Since you murdered her husband, seduced her in his guise, *and* tried to murder David, that’s not *entirely* unreasonable, is it?” Ismini replied acidly.

He inclined his head in modest acknowledgement of his endeavours.

“How many people *have* you killed?” she asked.

"Not as many as you think, in this lifetime, at least. And none without good reason."

"Reason doesn't give you the right."

"Nor *you*. The Hippocratic Oath, yes? Or should that be *hypocritic*?"

"Not to harm *human life*. But then, I'm not sure that *you* count as entirely human *or alive*."

"Dr Woods and Nurse Scott can assure you of both, medically speaking. So – you are here to conclude what you began?"

A dressing was taped over the place in his side where the tube entered. She remembered her father and the nightingale. It would not be difficult to *will* his death, given his present condition. Sometimes people suffer fatal complications, even from such routine procedures, she thought... But she was clearly not the first to have tried, judging by the scarring – old, but still heavy – on his left breast, close to the heart (if he had one). The damage was framed by the grey-blue silk of his pyjamas: a juxtaposition of violence and refinement that seemed to define him.

She said: "It would be no more than justice."

"With no defence? Thank you, but I'm already familiar with *that* kind of justice." Under the civility, his tone was bitter.

"Indeed: what defence did you allow Don Tierney? Or David Bascombe?"

"Had they been stronger-willed, they would have withstood it, as *you* did. But – they were weak, suggestible. Unlike *us*."

He was trying to flatter, she thought, but the values implied repelled her. "You think the weak deserve to die?"

"That's *not* what I said. But it's unwise to meddle in affairs beyond one's abilities or comprehension, wouldn't you say?"

"Such as your secret Brotherhood? 'Survivors of the Thirteenth', or whatever you call them."

"Ah, yes: you know about *them*."

"Your neo-Nazi neo-Templars."

"Who calls them that? *Bascombe*?" he said with disdain.

"He's a historian."

"Hardly his specialism, is it? And you know as well as I that he's not all he claims to be."

This put her on the defensive. "He does that to get access to sources, but—"

"You still believe him?"

"In this. Don's spirit spoke through him."

"And his own jealousy."

Ah. She knew how painfully jealous David had been of him, over Anne: his aristocratic sophistication had only highlighted the young Englishman's callowness, his gaucheness. "I would have sensed it, had that been the case," she said. "He only described what Don saw. I saw it, too, through him."

“Or *thought* you saw it. *Neo-Nazi...?*” Lavallière raised an eyebrow. “I doubt *Sir Joseph Marcus* would find that amusing. But I suppose it’s a change from being accused of being part of an international *Jewish* conspiracy. And Colonel von Reitz would be *appalled*.”

“Really!” (David had told her von Reitz was “born to wear jackboots” and, having seen him in their shared vision during the séance, she knew exactly what he meant.)

“He’s not quite *that* old! Ex-*Bundeswehr*, military attaché. A stuffy old Prussian, that I’ll grant – but his father was in the *Johanniterorden*.” He drew a finger across his throat. “Piano-wire.” He paused, while she absorbed his meaning.⁴ “I seek to advance people for their abilities, *not* their political labels, but there *are* limits – at least, in *civilised* circles.”

“In *civilised* circles, it’s customary *not to kill* people.”

“It’s *my* duty to defend *my* Brethren while they are under *my* protection. Elsewhere, some of them have bodyguards, ready to shoot on sight. Where’s the difference? Myself, I think firearms lack... *finesse*.”

“You killed an unarmed man –”

“Breaking and entering.”

“He was only a *photographer!* What threat –?”

“To politicians, international businessmen, scientists? Considerable. Under my roof, they mix and talk freely, in complete security. Deals are done; discussions can be sensitive. Media attention would be at best distracting, at worst extremely dangerous: the ruin of careers, lives, even of nations.”

“So you *murdered* him?”

He went on, ignoring her accusation: “I know these ‘campaigning photojournalists’; what the headlines would have been: ‘Fascist cabal aims at world domination’, every conspiracy theorist’s fantasy. He judged and condemned us at first sight.”

“Well, if you *will* dress up for these rituals...!”

“To erase worldly differences. And, to be so vulgar as to mention *money*, justify their fees. Castles *are* expensive to restore and run.” He sounded quite nonchalant.

“But this was *murder!*”

“*Was* it? His own fear killed him. To brave battlefields, and yet fear... *rats*? Pitiable!”

“Then why did you not *show pity*?”

“For cowardice? I should have failed in my duty. My Brethren’s safety –”

“The ends always justify the means?”

⁴ The *Johanniterorden* is a German Protestant Hospitaller Order, closely tied to the Hohenzollerns. As Desmond Seward writes in *The Monks of War: The Military Religious Orders* (revised ed., 1995), Nazi Party members were forbidden to belong to it, and around a dozen of its Knights were, in his word, “martyred” by hanging in 1944. See also Prince Wilhelm-Karl von Preussen and Baron Freytag von Loringhoven’s *Johanniter und der 20 Juli 1944* (1985/89).

“— I take the long view, longer than most. The most trivial act can have unforeseen consequences. Conspiracy theories can kill. But *sometimes*, small sacrifices may prevent greater harm.”

“A man’s life is hardly a *small* sacrifice.”

“For *him*, that I grant. But at my age, it differs little in span from a dog’s. A shepherd will shoot a stray dog that worries his flock: I defend those who are in my care.”

“Like David? *He* was your *guest*!”

“He abused my hospitality to insult me; *that* was *not* courteous.”

“And *Anne*? What’s ‘courteous’ about destroying the sanity of the woman you pretended to love?”

That seemed to sting him. “I did not *pretend*.”

“Then that makes it all the worse. It was contemptible, cruel!”

“We both got what we wanted,” he said bitterly. “The cruelty lay in disillusioning her, which was not *my* doing.”

“Now who’s the coward? She was vulnerable, innocent —”

“A terrible thing, innocence.”

“You can’t mean that,” she said.

“I do: it’s unforgivable.” He sighed. “Doctor, I *hope* she will recover; I *want* her to recover. A phantom pregnancy from a phantom lover? Poetic, perhaps, but an impossibility: it always has been.”

“Can you be so certain?” Ismini hoped he was bluffing.

“I’ve read her medical records,” he said. “You *know* I have. I tried to reach her, two days ago, when I was in the country. It was peaceful there, few distractions. I wanted her to know that I meant her no harm. But from her, I sensed everything: the overdose, the delusions... It was — *difficult*. And with the effects of the flight on my wound — well, here I am.”

“But the prophecy?”

“Prophecy? Why do you speak of prophecies? In all my life, I’ve heard of only *one* prophecy that was said to have come true, and I’m not sure if it was ever made in the first place.”⁵

“Agnès de Beauvoir.” He flinched at his mistress’s name. She had struck him deep this time, she thought. “The reason you strangled her.”

He was silent, frowning. “How much *do* you know?” he asked, after a pause.

“Enough. There’s written evidence. David found it in the museum archives, as he told you — which was why you tried to kill him. He read me the translations. Deny it if you can.”

“Documents exist, I do not deny,” he said. “But...”

“But what?”

⁵ He is thinking of the prophecy allegedly made at the stake in 1314 by Grand Master Jacques de Molay, calling Philippe IV and the Pope to account before God within the next year. It was probably invented after their deaths.

"Can you *trust* them? And can you trust *him*?"

"Of course I trust him. We're friends."

"*More* than friends, *surely*?"

She caught the glint in his eyes. Damn him, he *knew*. He must have swept through David's every thought, every memory, and goodness knows what he still felt about that first night. Arguing with Stefanos on the telephone; the loneliness; the wine; the embarrassment the morning after... Oh God.

"The sex-instinct makes fools of *all* of us, at some time or other," she answered, pointedly.

"True; although you deserve better." He half-smiled, then continued: "But do you trust him as a *scholar*? His *interpretation*? You know it's not his subject; that he's still a postgraduate; that he's *jeal*—"

"What alternative do I have?" she interrupted.

"You *could* trust me."

"Do you think I'm a fool?"

"If I did, you'd already be dead, believe me."

"But why should I?"

"With your abilities, you really should know whether or not I'm lying."

And risk letting him into her mind? She folded her hands under her chin, and eyed him sceptically.

"If we were to agree — swear, even — not to kill each other, would you be willing to trust me *a little*?" he asked.

"And not to harm the *others*? But on what could *you* swear that would make me trust you?"

"Now, there you have me." He sounded almost good-humoured. "But I'll think of something."

"You must let me know if you do," she said. "Sleep on it."

"That's not so easy."

"Pain or guilt?"

"I see too much at night," he said. He coughed, and shifted on the pillows, as if the drain were becoming more uncomfortable.

"Too much talking. You ought to rest: I don't want to cross Nurse Scott!"

"A funny little thing, isn't she?" he said. "Full of childish fancies."

"Harm her, and *you're* dead. *Again*."

He shook his head. "She has nothing to fear; nor has Anne."

"Prove it," she said.

"Tomorrow, then?" Again, his eyes fixed on hers, with an intensity that reminded her of that night.

Ismini turned her head away, breaking the link. "Perhaps."

She threw her black and russet paisley shawl about her shoulders, and left him, without another word. She passed Nurse Scott, scurrying along to attend to another patient; how safe *was* she, she wondered.

Alone in her hotel room, she wondered if he would try again to kill her. But she knew that she was strong enough to resist, and at least, if he focused his mind on her, Anne would be safe. Perhaps he was lying about the curse, hiding his fear. If so, he was convincing enough, but then he had as great a talent for self-deception as for deceiving others, she thought. How could he expect her to trust him, after all that had happened?

She began making notes: her direct impressions of him, and what she had learned from Anne, David, and the séance. She could see why Anne had allowed herself to be beguiled; why that hamster-cheeked little nurse had a crush on him. He was certainly handsome; clever, and knew it – all sophistry and self-justification. And he had charm: a dangerous sign in a man (Stefanos had taught her that). But, being neither a vulnerable young widow nor an impressionable girl, but a healthily cynical forty-something divorcée, she considered herself proof against it.

He intrigued her more professionally. Her studies and her career had been devoted to the workings of the human brain, of the mind: *psychology* – the study of the soul itself; *psychiatry* – the healing of the soul. Telepathy and hypnosis she understood: she had these skills herself. He was a rapid and thorough mind-reader. Through some form of telepathic suggestion, he had convinced Don and David that their greatest fears were pursuing them, killing one and almost killing the other. His assumption of Don's form, in his night-visits to Anne, may have been achieved by the same means: she had seen through it quickly when she caught him with Anne in the bedroom (*the night she had stabbed him*). Changing his eye-colour was a lesser effort on similar lines. She suspected also that he was controlling his pain by auto-suggestion (Nurse Scott had said he was refusing medication). That was wise: he probably feared that, if drugged, he might say things that he could not explain, reveal too much.

But to appear and disappear at will, to *travel* by power of the mind alone? To live for centuries without ageing, and survive lethal wounds? She had never encountered this before, outside science-fiction and ancient legends. How? Why? She was sceptical of 'magic', of the existence of demons: but if demons were a manifestation of will, of the will to evil... What *was* he? Not a *vrykolakas*, for sure. The undead of Greek tradition were crude creatures that tormented their friends and relatives. Nor was he a vampire of the Western type. The hospital evidently regarded him as physiologically normal, or at any rate, as 'normal' as a seven-hundred-year-old man who still appeared to be in his physical prime *could* be. What a case-study he would make! Even in terms of brain-activity... She had friends in neuroscience who would love to EEG him (if so much psychic energy did not blow their circuits, of course).

Too rare a bird to be destroyed, she thought. But the phrase evoked the image from her nightmare. *Look at its claws, girl. It could tear your heart out.* She would be careful, very careful...

3: Sand & Ruin & Gold

*There lived a singer in France of old
By the tideless, dolorous, midland sea.
In a land of sand and ruin and gold
There shone one woman, and none but she.*

A C Swinburne, *The Triumph of Time*

The following day, the rain had cleared, and Ismini decided to spend the morning as a tourist, explore the centre of Dundee. It struck her as a rather ugly city: at this time (1983), an air of depression hung over it, an industrial city in the death-throes of industry. Much of the historic heart had been ripped out and replaced by a concrete fortress of a shopping centre, which all but enveloped the City Churches, a rare survival of the Middle Ages.⁶ She threw a few coins into the hat of a guitarist, who was singing Leonard Cohen songs in the shadow of the tower:

*You're faithful to the better man:
I'm afraid that he left.
So let me judge your love-affair
In this very room
Where I have sentenced mine to death...⁷*

On the other side of the road, there was a branch of Liberty, where she bought another shawl for her collection.⁸ The pattern was *Hera*: the peacock-eyes of Argos, the watchman of the Queen of the Gods; an emblem, too, of immortality.

She asked directions to the city art gallery and museum. It was a nineteenth-century, pseudo-Venetian palazzo, marooned on a traffic island. The collection within was of variable quality. There was a fine Ramsay portrait of an amiable-looking army officer, Edward Harvey, but she was not impressed by John Everett Millais's *Puss in Boots*: a twee depiction of a small girl and a kitten which she had dressed in her doll's knitted bootees. She could imagine the next scene: the kitten turning into a squalling bundle of fur and claws, the child crying. It would have served her right.

But one painting filled her vision, dazzled her. It was extraordinary: vividly coloured, in a gilt frame, with two smaller, duller-hued scenes in the *predella*. In the main scene, a dead woman, with sensual but livid face, and brilliant red hair, lay on a bed; an angel – the Angel of Death – leaned over her, as if to kiss her; a man, sombrely clad in a long mediæval gown, watched intently; two more beautiful women were about to cover the corpse with a petal-strewn cloth. It disturbed her in many

⁶ The Overgate Centre has been rebuilt and is now somewhat less æsthetically offensive: in the 1980s, it was hideous, but had some good music shops.

⁷ *Take This Longing*.

⁸ The Liberty shop closed some years ago.

respects: she prided herself on her self-possession, her control; this painting was hallucinatory, overcharged with emotion. It was *Dante's Dream on the Death of Beatrice*, by Dante Gabriel Rossetti.⁹

During a few of the years of army rule, when she had lived in London, Ismini had often gone to the Tate. Symbolist and Pre-Raphaelite art, then just returning to fashion, had fascinated her, with its myth-making and literary allusions. She had become interested in Rossetti, initially because of his encouragement of the Greek artist and model, Maria Spartali (whom she *thought* she recognised as one of the attendants in this picture). But she had then become intrigued, professionally, by his construction of a personal mythology, a symbolic vocabulary, from the poetry of his namesake and of Boccaccio and Cavalcanti. Elizabeth Siddall and Jane Burden became Beatrice, Francesca, La Pia, Fiametta; Lizzie's overdose; the poems buried in her coffin, then exhumed (and fumigated). Sexual obsession, laudanum, death.

And yet as she gazed at the painting, the canvas seemed to become translucent, like a stained glass window; then transparent. She was drawn through it, into another – different, yet similar – scene behind. She was standing in a painted, candle-lit room. Another corpse lay on a bed, her hands crossed on her bosom: not Rossetti's flame-haired Beatrice, but a dark, delicate-looking girl – Anne's physical type, but younger, probably still in her teens. A young man, his profile obscured by a fall of fair-ish, heavy curls,¹⁰ was leaning over her; for a moment Ismini wondered if she was merely sleeping, and he was about to strangle her, but no: with shaking hands he removed a pendant from her neck. He kissed the jewel, and then sank down on his knees beside the bed – whether in prayer or tears she could not tell, for he had his back to her.

Then an older woman, wearing a floor-length black veil,¹¹ stepped into the picture, to help the boy to his feet. As he turned, Ismini caught a glimpse of his face. He was much younger, in his early twenties, but she knew him by his regular features and grave grey eyes...

Why are you showing me this? Is it the truth? she thought, reaching out to him. Or is it another of your games? How can I trust you after so much deceit?

But the telepathic link faded. Once more she was gazing at Rossetti's paint and canvas. The gallery attendant smiled at her, accustomed to people spending a long time with the work.

On her way back to the hotel, she passed the busker again. He had now moved on to Cat Stevens:

... *Why does it grieve me so
That your heart seems so silent?
Why do you breathe so low,
Why do you breathe so low...?*¹²

⁹ See <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s81.r-2.rap.html>

¹⁰ Fashionable young men c. 1300 seem to have used curling tongs or curlers.

¹¹ Women widowed in the fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1291 wore this distinctive garment.

¹² *Lady d'Arbanville.*

At the hospital that afternoon, Lavallière appeared stronger: rested, and not so pale. He was reading Calvino again. She noticed that the rosary was entwined around his wrist and fingers.

She smiled uneasily, and sat down in the chair beside the bed.

“No mortal vengeance today, then, doctor?” he asked.

“No.”

“Mercy’s an indulgence. A sign of weakness. You may live to regret it,” he said.

“So may you. But after this morning –”

He met her gaze directly. “I wasn’t sure if I could reach you.”

She nodded. “*If* that was the truth you showed me.”

“It’s not something about which I would lie.”

“I have only your word for that.”

“And you do not trust my word?”

“I saw nothing to indicate whether or not her death was natural.”

“But what did you feel?”

“Grief, overwhelming grief. And *guilt* – but that could point either way.”

“A shrewd observation.”

“So tell me what happened.”

He sighed. “There’s little enough to tell: a commonplace tale. We were very young. We were lovers for barely a year. She miscarried. Fever set in.” He sounded quite matter-of-fact, but she knew from the vision what it had done to him at the time.

“I am sorry,” she said: it was trite, but there was nothing else to say. “I knew only what I was told, what David had read in his researches.”

“You never *asked*.”

That was true enough – but why should she, or the others, have believed him even then?

He continued sarcastically: “But of course, it’s more *scientific* to assume the worst rather than ask directly, is it not?”

“But why *were* you accused?”

“Family honour. Politics. She was an heiress – in theory. By the time her father fell at Acre, the Turks had already taken their castle, together with the rest of the kingdom. Her uncles overestimated their worth, and sought a fine marriage for her – one of the Lusignan princes. My lineage was good, my wealth and influence *less* so: a minor count from the *Lemozi*, with his head stuffed with old songs and ancestral glory, and French as a second language. I was *not* such a good catch in those days.”

“So where did this happen?”

“Cyprus. I was a foolish boy who wanted to be another Rudel, another Cabestanh, writing clichés about nightingales and hawthorn flowers. I cast outmoded verses at her feet until she yielded. It was not *murder* – but still I killed her.”

“You can’t think that.”

"I led her into sin. If she had not been carrying my child, she would not have died. The thought that it might happen again... It was *one* of the reasons I took vows."

"So it was *after* this that you became a Templar?" She had been unsure of the order of events from David's brief outline of the story.

"Yes:

*Aissi guerpisc joi e deport,
E vair e gris e sembeli...*¹³

To lay the world aside – long hair, fine clothes, love, even laughter. Ruad had fallen by this time: I wanted martyrdom. That, too, was a sin, and I paid for it. One of her uncles was a Hospitaller, high in both the de Villarets' favour, and... That's another story."

"All very interesting," she said coolly. "I'm glad I didn't kill you before you'd told me."

"You *did*."

"Yes, but – *not permanently*. And only *once*."

A half-smile. "So far. I appreciate the reprieve."

"Thank Rossetti. His work's always intrigued me – such rich personal symbolism!"

He nodded. "A strange man. I knew his father – by correspondence, at least. I tried in vain to disabuse him of some of his notions. He was writing about my Order: peculiar works, Cathar-Gnostic-Masonic-proto-Protestantism, linked to Dante. All historically worthless – just the sort of books that would be *fashionable* these days! And his uncle – another tragic case... An interesting novel, mind: not as good as Maturin's, but I certainly thought there *was* something 'vampiric' about Byron's set."¹⁴

"That's a dreadful thing to say! You know, for us Greeks –"

"– A tiresome man. *Épater les bourgeois* is too easy; almost childish."

"So is *name-dropping*."

"You wish me to be honest: I *cannot* pretend to a mundane past."

"No, but *don't* try to distract me with anecdotes about all your *fascinating* friends!"

"Friends? – Acquaintances, yes; friends, no. A price of longevity. Others' lives are so short, there's little point in deep attachments."

"And women?"

"*Especially* women, after Agnès... I kept my vow for a long time. I prided myself on growing beyond such things; on becoming entirely superior to *base* urges," he said, with some self-mockery.

¹³ *So I lay aside joy and delight,
And squirrel and grey and sable fur...*" Guilhem IX of Poitou and Aquitaine (early 12C).

¹⁴ Gabriele Rossetti (Dante Gabriel's father)'s work is discussed by Peter Partner in *The Knights Templar and their Myth*. DG's "tragic" uncle is John (Giovanni) Polidori, medical graduate of Edinburgh and author of *The Vampyre* (said to be based on Byron). Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* is the tale of a man who sells his soul for an additional 150 years of life.

"Then, when I saw *her*, even as a memory in her fool of a husband's mind... You see there, the picture-frame? Would you open it, please?"

She picked up the small triptych from the bedside cabinet, and folded back the hinged wings. She half-expected to find a religious icon, but the central panel depicted the dead girl of her vision. She was dressed in green, with a light veil on her hair, and Anne's pearl pendant about her throat. The style was too naturalistic to be mediæval: early nineteenth-century, at a guess. She recognised that it must be the portrait David had said that he had seen at the *kastello*.

"I had it painted in the 1840s: *le style troubadour*. Blondel¹⁵ was working on the large portrait of myself in mail at the time. I gave him a sketch, drawn from memory, to work from. The image of Anne, is she not?"

Ismini nodded. "There is a strong resemblance."

"I fancied it was more than that."

"Appearances deceive. You, of all people, should know."

"And if we *want* to be deceived? I cannot deny that, at first, I intended merely to distract her, but... We *both* wanted to believe that someone lost had returned. The strange part is, they were entirely different *in character*: Anne is introverted, introspective; Agnès was the reverse – *quicksilver...* But *physically*, I wanted to believe..." He did not finish.

Ismini knew that he realised he had said far too much. *Want want want*. Unresolved grief, she thought. Had he taken his vows too soon after his lover's death? She wondered, too, if – at least in some cases – monastic life locked people in emotional adolescence, like overgrown boarding-school children. And so she struck, as quick and sharp as a knife.

"You know, in a man of your *apparent* age, this would be tragic. At seven hundred, it's *utterly ridiculous*."

For a moment, he looked stunned, uncertain how to react – as if she had slapped him across the face. She was taking a risk, she knew...

Then she smiled good-humouredly. "It's called 'being human'. You're not so high above it, or so out-of-practice, as you liked to think. As I said: desire makes fools of us *all*."

He seemed to relax. "I won't attempt to deny it."

"It may be wise to leave this picture closed for a while," she suggested. Indeed, she was about to fold it up when she noticed dark fingerprints staining its edges. They were the colour of dried blood. "Whose?" she asked, although she had already guessed.

"Mine. I was holding it when they found me on the study floor. You may be right about 'fools'."

¹⁵ Merry-Joseph Blondel (1781-1853): French artist, who painted some of the imaginary historical portraits and history paintings for the *Salles des Croisades*, Versailles.

She was cast back again to the memory of that night: watching him twisting in agony, vainly trying to pull out her knife; his eyes burning into hers with unbearable intensity; her hands sticky with his blood... “How badly –?”

“A pulmonary haemorrhage. Severe. For some hours, I was... *elsewhere*. They laid me out in state in the hall. When I *returned* – it caused some alarm.”

“So you *were* dead?”

“Only for a short time: I dislike idleness,” he said wryly. “But the Colonel was not *entirely* pleased to lose his promotion – or his chance to play detective. He thought we had a murderer among us.”

“How *did* you explain it?”

“The study door was not locked, and there are, as one might expect, hidden passages in the castle. A *burglar* must have discovered one of them, and entered. I disturbed him.”

“A *burglar*?” She was unsure whether to be amused or insulted.

“And of course, I was unable to describe him properly, because he stabbed me in the back.”

“What about your wound?”

“One of the Brethren’s a former medical man – a Nobel laureate – and we were hardly short of private jets. I was being treated in Athens until a few weeks ago.”

“I was working over there again, but I didn’t sense –”

“You were not looking for me, and I had no wish to be found. I *was* in poor health. I’d have fared better if they’d simply bandaged me and let me rest in my own bed. I mend well enough, left to myself; but surgeons complicate matters. Everyone has such ‘good intentions’ these days; hence *this*.” He indicated the drain.

“But for serious trauma –?”

“Even so,” he said. “I’ve known worse.”

She wondered about the rough scar on his chest. David had mentioned the Inquisition, a massacre at the *kastello*... She noticed that he was twisting the worn wooden beads and the silver crucifix between his fingers.

“That surprises me. I thought you’d sold your soul to the Devil,” she said, half-teasing, half-serious.

“An old habit,” he replied, slipping briefly into English. “Pun intended.”

“So you don’t worship demons?”

“No. Nor a disembodied talking head. Nor a black cat – with or without a cigar and a pistol.”¹⁶

“David said –”

¹⁶ The Templars were falsely accused of cat-worship, but the cat with the cigar and the pistol is the most delightful and loveable of demons, Begemot or Behemoth, in Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Master i Margarita*.

"No more 'David said', I beg you! – I *was* a devout son of the Holy Mother Church; unfortunately, she devours her own children."

"That's a harsh verdict."

"Not at all: quite generous, under the circumstances. I doubt, from reason and experience; I believe, from upbringing and emotion. I'm still getting accustomed to the Enlightenment. When so much else is in flux, there's order in ritual; security and beauty, too. But virtue? *Truth*? Pilate was right: 'What *is* truth?'"

"I understand," she said. "In Orthodoxy, I love the icons, the music, the incense – the symbolic 'theatre'. And for us – Greeks, that is – it's so much entwined with who we *are – nationally*. Yet, at the same time, I know that rationally and scientifically..."

"Rationally and scientifically, I *should* be dead. And I have to accept the fact that I am clearly *not*."

"Do you think it's a miracle?"

"No. And if I believed it *were* some god's doing, then such a God would, indeed, be the Devil."

"That's an interesting theory."

"Not mine, however; although if it were true, it would make life simpler."

"So how do you explain...?"

He held up the Calvino novel. "In this book, no-one speaks, but they tell their stories through Tarot cards. Were I to tell mine that way, would it make more sense to you?"

"Well, it's another symbolic vocabulary. Jung has used it, I know."

"And you?

"On occasion."

"Good. *Epées: huit*?"

"Sadness, grievous loss."

"*Le Pendu*?"

"Sacrifice, or achieving a state of transcendence through sacrifice."

"*La Tour*?"

"The tower is struck by lightning, people are falling. Violent overthrow, revolution, reversal of fortune, an overturning the old order."

*Je suis le ténébreux, – le veuf, – l'inconsolé,
Le prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie:
Ma seule étoile est morte, – et mon luth constellé
Porte le Soleil noir de la Mélancolie.*¹⁷

"That's... interesting," she said.

¹⁷ Gérard de Nerval, *El Desdichado* (the title alludes to both *Ivanhoe* and Lesage's *Le Diable Boiteaux*):

*I am the one in shadow, the widowed, the unconsoled.
The Prince of Aquitaine in the broken tower.
My only star is dead, and my starred lute
Bears the black Sun of Melancholia.*

“Gérard de Nerval: a madman, with more odd ideas about my Order – but a fine poet. I was never mad enough.”

That was debatable, she thought. *The Prince of Aquitaine in the broken tower.* This is how you *want* to see yourself, isn’t it? – Half revelling in your superiority and isolation, looking down on the world of lesser mortals; half immured emotionally in the ruins of your life.

“But is the tower your stronghold or your prison?” she asked.

He did not – could not – answer.

That evening, she telephoned David, to let him know that she was still alive and (thus far) safe.

“I’m making progress,” she said.

“What do you mean? Is he dead yet?”

“No, he’s on the mend: a complication from the wound I gave him. Nothing too serious.”

“You sound almost *relieved*.” (And *he* sounded anxious.)

“Well, I don’t *like* to see myself as a *murderer*, you know!” she answered lightly.

“But the curse –?”

“Forget that for now. I think he’s starting to trust me.”

“Are you sure he’s not just stringing you along?”

“I had some sort of epiphany this morning. We seemed to be... on the same frequency. Interesting conversations, too. I think I can make use of this.”

“You’re on *speaking terms*? ”

“Yes.”

“Surely that’s dangerous?”

“I need to know the *how* and the *why* of what happened. Do you have anything on Cyprus – the crusader nobility and the military orders?”

“*Cyprus*? – No. Why?”

“He claims he was in Cyprus first, before Rhodes.”

“But the books at the museum didn’t mention...”

“Then can you find some that *do*? ”

“I’m not sure... But I’ll ask Dr Hepburn when she arrives! The day after tomorrow, she said.”

“Thanks! That would be helpful.”

She sighed as she put the phone down. It might be a good idea to return to London, then, to see what could be done for Anne.

That night, she sent out her thoughts to the younger woman: *Please listen to me, Anne. Please trust me. What you are doing isn’t working; it isn’t killing him. There is no curse. You’re only harming yourself by this. There has to be another way...*

She could not be certain that Anne was listening.

4: A Season in Hell

The *Maître* had to admit to himself that he was enjoying Dr Christoyannis's visits. He had spent too long, especially in recent years, surrounded by servants and acolytes who obeyed orders, and questioned him only timidly. Their deference was flattering, but increasingly tedious – especially when it came from Dietrich von Reitz badgering him to sign approval for orders of office supplies. (Paperclips, *light-bulbs*... Dear God, at seven-hundred-and-four, he had more important things to think about... Whatever the merits of the late Major, his son was an irritating old woman at times.)

With Anne, he had *hoped* – but he had been deluding himself. Even without the complication of her husband (and he still had no regrets there – a threat, whom he had had to remove), the affair had been doomed. Sweet and pretty as she was, in personality, she was *not* his Agnès. During those wretched few weeks in Athens, coughing blood, with another of these damnable tubes in his side and stitches in his back, he had realised how far he had sunk – and for what?

Luxuria. Lust. He had not had many women over the years. It had taken him until the Enlightenment to discard most of his monastic scruples, and start to enjoy fine clothes and good food again; but still he remained aloof, emotionally reserved. There had never been a prophecy or curse upon him, but Agnès's death had impressed upon him the sinfulness of fornication, and death as the wages of sin. His intuition (as he then thought it) had told him that she was doomed from the moment he had learned of her pregnancy. He had hidden his fears from her, even as her warm body had lain close to his. There could be no joy, no delight of the flesh that was not paid for in suffering.

And now he had jeopardised all he had built – his new Brotherhood, his home, his life (self-contained, but content enough within its high defences) – to bed a woman for the sake of mere *physical resemblance*... Even then – and could he have abased himself more? – to do so, he had to take the form of the husband he had killed. (Although that at least served his vanity: he did not have to explain his numerous scars.) They had both been fucking ghosts, not each other (he would not – could not – grace the squalid intrigue with the name of love-making, of love-service). It was double necrophilia, a *ménage à quatre* with the dead. He must have been insane even to think it might have worked.

– Insane?

Well, now here he was with a *psychiatrist* – an extremely attractive psychiatrist: *une femme d'un certain âge*, with a lithe figure, rose-gold hair (the colour not natural, but never mind, it suited her), lively brown eyes behind fashionably oversized glasses, and a Liberty shawl that she cast about her shoulders with a graceful movement of patchouli-scented hands. She was an intellectual challenge: one of the few people he had met down the centuries whose psychic powers were strong enough to block his. She refused to be cowed or awed. On the other hand, she *had* also rammed a kitchen-knife into his back. And in that moment, when shock had briefly shattered defences on both sides, he had gazed into her eyes and recognised a kindred soul – and knew, too, that she did the same...

He was not given to laughing aloud (the Rule had forbidden such unseemliness), but he was *quietly* amused at the irony, the delicious absurdity of it.

She was always asking him questions. “How did you travel between my house and the *kastello*? ”

“You need to ask? You could do it yourself, if you tried.”

“Really?” Was he merely flattering her? Still, she was intrigued.

“Your powers are considerable – they *must* be, to have resisted – but... they need a sharper focus. Have you practised telekinesis at all?”

“Not for years. I had to learn to repress many of my abilities; you know what it’s like.”

“Only too well! I think we must have been very similar when we were young.”

“*Do* you, now?”

“What did you tell Anne – ‘It takes one to know one’? I learned much about you from her, too. It always begins in childhood, does it not?” he asked rhetorically.

She nodded. “Children are more open, more receptive. There’s so much that we don’t yet know about the brain’s development. In childhood and adolescence, it’s constantly expanding its capabilities, but too many people shut down certain areas from fear or from external social pressure.”

“I had prophetic dreams, sudden insights into others’ minds. I was afraid, unable to speak of it. In those days, it was dangerous to admit to such things: they could be the work of God, or of the Devil. One of my great-grandmothers had seen visions, I was told: she turned heretic, and died of it.”

“Burnt?”

“No. Self-starvation, one of their rites.¹⁸ It was a matter of great shame for my grandfather: he took the cross with Saint Louis, partly in expiation of his mother’s sins.”

“My father was a doctor,” she said. “He thought me *over-sensitive*, as it was – highly-strung: he blamed it on the war, the bombings, when I was small. As if the stress of it had thrown a switch inside my head. I remember once, getting distressed when I saw him kill an injured bird... He feared I was going to grow up unstable; my mother, that I’d be unmarriageable!”

“So because you *felt* everything intensely, you put on a mask?”

“And you?”

“Likewise. I believed I had to, to save my soul. When I was still a boy, we heard that Acre had fallen, and what remained of the kingdom with it. I realised that *that* must be my cause when I grew up.”

“Otherwise, you feared...?”

“My powers might turn out to be the worst: of the Devil. That preyed on me. After my father’s death, I sold up to my younger brother, to raise the money to take passage to Cyprus. You know something of what followed. After Agnès died, these *insights* recurred, and intensified. I believed it was because of my sins; that I was being called to the religious life, as both a penance and a vocation.”

¹⁸ The Cathar practice of the *endura*.

“Sincerely?”

“Of course.”

“And you *never* sold your soul to the Devil? Or worshipped demons?”

“Do you honestly believe that demons exist, outside works of fiction?”

“It’s never that simple,” she said, folding her hands elegantly beneath her chin, and leaning forward in the chair by the bed. “If the human imagination believes in them, it can *make* them exist – subjectively – in the same way that curses can be made to work.”

“That is true. But *objectively*? ”

“I’m sceptical. For example: the face of Asmodeus. David saw it, and so did Don, but *you* must have planted it in their minds.”

“*Asmodeus*? ”

“The inciter of lust. The bronze demon-mask on your gates. Surely you –? ”

“It has a *name*? ” He sounded half-perplexed, half-amused. “That’s the first I’ve heard of it! It’s merely... *door-furniture*. ”

“What? ”

“To ward off evil: nothing more than that. The *inciter of lust*? That sounds like the Hospitallers’ smith making a joke at our expense – I wouldn’t put it past them! ”

“But you conjured it as a weapon? ”

“Because of its appearance! I was never good at Latin prose,¹⁹ and there’s far too much of it in demonology. And to be honest... I find the subject *absurd*. ”

“But David *told* me your Order was found guilty of worshipping demonic heads. And *don’t* pretend he invented *that* from jealousy! It was in the books he found in the museum library: he’s shown me them himself. ”

“Rather *old* books, I fancy. Discredited ones. We venerated heads, yes. Do you know whose they were? Those well-known *demons*, Saint Euphemia and Virgin Number 58 of Saint Ursula’s handmaidens.²⁰ Holy relics, doctor, in silver-gilt reliquaries. Saints and martyrs. ”

¹⁹ Templars were literate in the vernacular, but were notoriously bad at Latin. When the Inquisitors had to check their prayers for orthodoxy of content, they found them to be entirely conventional, but misspelled and ungrammatical.

²⁰ See Helen Nicholson, *The Knights Templar: A New History*. The head of Saint Euphemia probably was not authentic (unless she was a very odd-looking girl), as her skeleton in Constantinople is complete. The other head was one of Saint Ursula’s 11,000 Virgins (probably an early mistranscription of 11, with the ‘M’ being either for ‘Martyr’ or the symbol for ‘Virgo’). The rest of the set can be seen in Köln Cathedral: in reality, remains from an old cemetery. As a late 13-early 14C religious, however, Raoul would have taken them very seriously.

“And that’s the truth?”

“On this cross.” He held up the rosary: he had been clasping it so tightly that the silver crucifix had left its imprint in the palm of his hand.

“You were *innocent*? ”

“We were *all* innocent.” He wound and unwound the beads about his fingers in suppressed anger. “And that’s the greatest crime. Murder can be pardoned: but *innocence*? Innocence is unforgivable. They demand repentance of sins you have not committed; but to repent is to admit guilt. So what can you do? There was an excellent book I read a few years ago...” And he quoted from memory: “*The accused, who will proclaim himself a contemptible traitor, will enter into the Pantheon of mankind; those who maintain their innocence will be condemned to the hell of history.*”

She recognised the reference: “Camus, *L’Homme Révolté*.”

“Well done.”

“It’s one of my favourites. Did you pick that up from David’s mind?”

“No. He may know you *carnally* – but *intellectually*? He’s quite ignorant of philosophy.”

“And *you’re* not?” Are *you* as jealous of *David* as *he* is of *you*, she wondered. If so, is it because of Anne, or...? (She dared not articulate the alternative, even in thought.) “That must make *murder* rather more interesting for you.”

“It does: after all, I’ve experienced it more than once – from *both* sides.”

“I’m not going to apologise.”

“I don’t expect you to.”

“That’s gallant of you!” she said acidly.

“Others have done worse, with worse cause. And for an amateur, your aim was *quite* good.”

“Well, so long as there’s no lasting harm...”

“Why don’t you take a look?”

She hesitated.

“I trust you: you’re a doctor.”

“I usually treat souls, not bodies,” she said.

“Then I should be safe, since I’ve lost mine.”

He shrugged his pyjama jacket off his left shoulder, and turned carefully, steadying the drain in his side, so that she could inspect her handiwork.

The wound had been enlarged surgically, for *débridement* and internal repairs, and then sutured. It had healed quite cleanly, but its position left her in no doubt that it *should* have been fatal.

“It’s not as noticeable as I’d thought,” was all that she said.

For more on the allegations against the Templars, see Malcolm Barber’s *The Trial of the Templars* and *The New Knighthood*, and Peter Partner’s *The Knights Templar and their Myth*. Some 19C Occultists even went so far as to invent ‘ancient’ sculptures of the so-called ‘Baphomet’.

This was true chiefly because there were so many others: paler seams and ridges across his pale shoulders and back. Beatings? Burns? It was hard to tell now; they were old and faded. A thicker knot of scar-tissue low on the shoulder-blade (just below it when he raised his arm) matched the one that disfigured his breast. Exit and entry wounds, she surmised. She tried not to envisage how they had been inflicted.

“I told you I’ve had worse,” he said.

“So I see.”

As she replaced the jacket, she avoided direct contact with his skin. The scars made him only too human, too vulnerable; and his body was otherwise *not* unattractive. She had no wish for him to sense that, as he surely would if she were to touch him.

“Shrapnel. An explosion in Lebanon, five years ago.”

“That’s what you told Dr Woods?”

“He’d hardly believe the truth.”

“Which is –?”

“*Condemned to the hell of history,*” he said. “I spent a whole year in Hell.” His expression remained superficially serene, inscrutable. His features were very much of his time, such as the artist of the *Codex Manesse*²¹ had drawn: the grave eyes; the sharp, straight nose; the mouth small and delicately shaped. It seemed almost another mask.

“Hell?”

“Yes. You said you wished to know how I developed my powers? It was there, through prayer – I daresay ‘meditation’ or ‘auto-suggestion’ would be your terms for it, but it amounts to the same thing.”

“What do you mean by ‘Hell’? You don’t believe in demons, you said, so –”

He threw the question back to her: “What do *you* mean by it?”

“As a theological or mythological concept? A place of torment. It takes various forms in different traditions: in some, a burning fire, in others, ice. For Dante, it was an inverted mountain, with frozen circles.”

He inclined his head in agreement. “And more abstractly, as ‘the absence of God’, yes?”

“That, too.”

“And more: a place from which God has *deliberately* turned away.”

She watched him carefully. His voice was emotionless, but he was twisting the beads with restless fingers.

“There is nothing of the spirit there, only the flesh. There is power and pain: no other reality. You can endure it, or be broken by it. Or – in either case – you may die. Innocence is no defence.”

²¹ Also known as the *Große Heidelberger Liederhandschrift*, an early 14C German songbook. See <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/cpg848/> for the full series of plates.

She recognised the expression in his eyes. She had not worked much with survivors of torture, but over the years there had been a few among her patients, from the Occupation and the Civil War, and from the more recent military dictatorship. She had seen the same look, too, at home on the island, in the eyes of the few Rhodesli Jews who had returned from the camps. People who had seen too much; had been brutalised.

“And for you?”

“In the castle of Kyrenia.²² I wondered at first if my great-grandmother had been right, after all: that the God of this world is indeed the Devil. But... I overcame it. I even convinced myself that Christ was with me; that this was indeed what it meant to ‘take the cross’, to accept its burden in full. I began to detach my mind, my soul, from my body. I ceased to feel pain, and travelled beyond it. I could look down on it, and know that it was *not* me, just flesh and bone and blood and rags: a stranger’s body. Then I found myself able to take it with me: to pass through doors and stone walls by will alone.”

“So you escaped?”

“While my Brethren did not,” he said bitterly. “I can bear much myself, but to be forced to watch... And not for the last time.”

“And that is still difficult for you?”

“It’s done with, long ago.”

“Are you sure?”

“Certainly in daylight.”

“If I can help –”

“Compassion’s a sign of weakness,” he said.

“You only say that because you’ve known far too little of it,” she countered, in a tone more tender than she would have anticipated using towards him a few days ago.

“Speaking as a psychiatrist or as a psychic?”

“The former. It’s not uncommon. If we can’t find what we *need*, we tell ourselves we don’t *want* it, even that we scorn it. At least it makes life bearable, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose it does.” He smiled slightly.

“And because you fear it in yourself; fear that others will judge you weak because of it.”

“Why do you believe I’m still capable of fear?”

²² Kyrenia Castle in Northern Cyprus. After the first trial of the Templars in Cyprus, some (including the Marshal, Ayme d’Osiliers) were re-arrested and sent there. It is not clear whether this was because of a second Templar trial (which was ordered by the Pope, but there is no surviving evidence as to whether it actually took place), or a separate investigation connected to allegations of a plot against King Henri, which included some secular nobles. There was certainly use of torture, starvation, &c. Some of the secular nobles were allegedly taken out in a boat and drowned. The Marshal of the Temple died there in 1316, after 4 or 5 years imprisonment.

"All these walls you've built around yourself. You haven't sold your soul, or lost it," she said.
"You just keep it locked away in that 'broken tower'. '*Half-sick of shadows*'."

"What else should I do with it?"

"Unlock it. You can walk through stone walls – real ones; you've defeated physical pain and time and death. Surely that was more difficult?"

"No, comparatively simple. The life-instinct's a stubborn one: the body fights to the last breath. When I'd mastered my body psychically, this will *against* extinction became... automatic. A continuation, an extension, of what I had taught myself in prison. To keep praying and praying, and then to wake... I sought martyrdom, yet my mind and body refused to die. Another of my failures. But" – and he gave another of those wry yet supercilious little smiles – "it has had *some* compensations."

"I'm sure it has – for *you*," she said. "Of course, Anne Tierney might disagree."

He ignored the jibe. "But it *is* something I could teach – to someone whose powers were already advanced, perhaps even greater than mine were when I was first imprisoned."

"Is that an offer?"

"We have much in common, as I've said. 'It takes one to know one'."

"You *do* flatter yourself, *Maitre*."

"But you've known it all along; you simply refuse to admit it. At least *I* am *trying* to be honest now."

She remembered that night in the bedroom again: if he had not broken away from her then, what *would* she have done...?

"You, too, know what it's like," he continued. "To be in the midst of a gathering, and yet know oneself to be utterly alone, set apart; to look into their minds, and find that only confirms one's isolation and exile from mundanity. It's a lonely existence, is it not?"

She laughed. "Hardly! I have a very busy life, especially in Athens: my work, my friends—"

"But how many of them know *what* you are, or of your powers? Your former husband? Your former lovers? – Except for the Bascombe boy, of course."

"They wouldn't understand. It's too frightening for most people: they like their categories, their pigeonholes..."

"Such as 'alive' and 'dead'?"

"– 'Sane' and 'insane'. In my profession, how seriously would they take me if I started talking about telepathy and conversing with the dead? A few Jungians might, but on the whole... So, I have to pretend – but most people do. Not lying, more... *evasion*. Avoiding difficulties. It's the basis of so much social interaction! And it *doesn't* mean I'm lonely."

"In other words, everyone wears masks of one kind or another."

"Not *all* with intent to deceive others," she said pointedly.

"No: some merely to deceive themselves. When you divorced –"

"I threw a party." It sounded flippant, but it was true.

“It hurt more than you admit.”

“I *know* you’re not reading my mind, so don’t pretend –”

“I’m not. And I didn’t steal it from Anne or David. But I, too, have been an observer of what passes for ‘human nature’ for a long time,” he said. “A *very* long time. I can only conclude that your husband was a fool.”

She shrugged. “We met at university. He’s well-educated, charming company – just not as *modern* as he likes to think, especially when it comes to women.”

“He felt threatened by your career?”

“Yes.”

“– And by your gifts?”

“Not something I could share with him. Over the years, he expected me more and more to play the model lawyer’s wife, the model bourgeois wife...”

“Not a set of masks that suits you, I imagine.”

She nodded. “What he thought ‘delightfully bohemian’ when we were students didn’t fit his ‘professional image’ later. If he’d known about my *other* abilities... We still keep in touch, usually when elderly relatives die off, but he’s not part of my life. He’s remarried, anyway.”

“And you?”

“A few lovers. No-one serious, though. I mean, you couldn’t call *David* serious, could you? I suspect most men feel intimidated by me.”

“That’s quite understandable – when you have a knife,” he said, teasing.

“*You’re* not intimidated otherwise?”

“On the contrary.” He was gazing at her intently.

“Now, should I be pleased or worried by that, I wonder?”

“Both, perhaps – as I am.”

She raised her hand, half-tempted to reach out to his, but she could not. Instead, she drew her shawl more closely about her shoulders, and changed the subject. “What are they going to do with you here?” she asked.

“Stitches tomorrow, release the day after. Dr Woods thinks I need observation because of my history – what little he knows of it.”

“When will you be going home?”

“Not for a few weeks. I’ve learned that it’s better not to fly too soon after this sort of damage. Besides, there are business matters I must tidy up – to put the estate agent out of his misery.”

Her dark eyes narrowed.

“Not *literally*, doctor!” he added.

“With you, how can I be sure? And you can stop calling me ‘doctor’: Ismini will do.”

“The daughter of Oedipus? The cautious one, who kept her head down? Another survivor.”

She nodded. “But what should *I* call *you*? How often *do* you change your name?”

"Tibalt was my baptismal name – Thibaut in *Langue d'Oïl*. But he died long ago. My current identity I think I shall leave here: I'm not very good at being Italian."

"I still think of you as Monsieur Lavallière."

"Then that will do. But *Raoul*, please. The Lavallières are one line of my older sister's descendants: I've been borrowing their name intermittently for years. And it will make things easier on Rhodes – *if* we should meet there again."

"You think that's likely?"

"It's not so large an island. Neither of us lives there all the time, admittedly, but... *just in case*."

"Yes. Just in case." After all, he had been living there for five years, and she had seen very little of him until a few months ago. There was no reason for them to see each other again.

Unless they *wanted* to, of course...

Ismini booked her train ticket, and made a reservation at the same hotel in London where she had been staying earlier. She would be glad to return there: to see how Anne was; to talk to Dr Phillimore about her condition; to hear from David, and be able to talk to him freely, without – not exactly lying, but withholding her thoughts, her emotions. Evasion, again. Another mask. She had told him as little as possible about her dealings with Lavallière, because he would never understand.

She scribbled down her thoughts, trying to clarify her emotions. She knew only too well what she felt for Raoul Lavallière. She was growing too close to him, too quickly. It had excited her to find – at last – a man confident enough in his own abilities, intellectual and psychic, to respect *hers*, as an equal. Even from behind their respective psychic defences, they understood each other instinctively, like old adversaries – or lifelong friends. His contradictions intrigued her: callousness and sensitivity; cynicism and spirituality; the torment he had endured – and caused. When she was with him, she felt an electricity between them, a desire of the mind as well of the body: the extraordinary communion she had sensed in that moment in the bedroom. If she *had* acknowledged it then; if she had caught him in her arms...

No. No. She could not have done that. It had already been too late, her knife already in his back.

And now?

Pity? She could see that he had been savagely ill-used, but when all was said and done, pity was a variety of condescension, good for neither of them.

Love? Physical desire, *eros*, that most amoral of instincts, justified nothing (she thought of his deception and seduction of Anne).

But what about the higher love – *agapi* in the old sense, as distinct from *eros*?

– He's a killer.

– So am I, by intent at least.

– But that was to save Anne.

- And he, too, thought he was defending his friends...
- But how can *you* betray *yours*? Is love, even unconditional, compassionate love, ever enough? Can it tiptoe past corpses and ruined lives, blinkering itself to them?

She could acknowledge her sympathy for his past, for his present emotional isolation; but she could not forget that there was at least one man dead, broken and charred in the wreckage of his car. There was a gentle girl in a psychiatric clinic, carrying a non-existent child, and a naïve, well-meaning boy almost (literally) frightened to death.

And yet – if he *could* teach her? If she could develop her own psychic powers to match his? Knowledge was always the greatest temptation in the archetypal myths, more than power or money or sex. Prometheus stealing fire; Pandora opening the box; Eve and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil... But at what price? *At what price?*

There was no merit in that prelapsarian ‘innocence’ that is merely ignorance: but with knowledge came choice – and responsibility. The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake always threatened religious orthodoxies and hierarchs. The risks were inevitable, necessary. Decide what you will – just be ready to face the consequences with courage.

She sketched the tree in her notebook: half in leaf, half bare.

When she closed her eyes, she saw her father killing the injured nightingale.

She saw herself standing on the same balcony, in the moonlight, with *his* blood warm on her hands, and on the smooth white stone: the blood of the man she had known even then that she wanted.

Face the consequences... And he would have to do the same.

5: Book of Revelation

Ismini went back to the art gallery in the morning. She stood for several minutes in front of the Rossetti painting again, as if hoping in vain for some new moment of epiphany. All she saw was the romantic-necrophiliac fantasy of an artist high on laudanum and mediæval literature.

The guitarist, clad in shabby denim, was busking again between the Overgate and the City Churches, playing more Leonard Cohen songs:

*Why do you stand by the window,
Abandoned to beauty and pride,
The thorn of the night in your bosom,
The spear of the age in your side;
Lost in the rages of fragrance,
Lost in the rags of remorse.
Lost in the waves of a sickness,
That loosens the high silver nerves?*

*Oh chosen love, Oh frozen love,
Oh tangle of matter and ghost,
Oh darling of angels, demons and saints,
And the whole broken-hearted host...²³*

She could have done without the demons.

She visited the university bookshop for something useful to read on the train, and browsed in the history section. She needed a deeper understanding of Raoul's formative experiences. His first lifetime was the key to him, she realised: the equivalent of childhood in a normal lifespan. She knew her Greek history, but had never read much on the Western European Middle Ages. She retained a general cultural prejudice that the crusaders were all basically *Barbaroi, Keltoi*: they had sacked the City, and had imposed themselves forcibly upon her island, before the Turks had done the same, before the Italians... Nothing David – himself a would-be Byzantinist – had told her so far had shaken it.

Then, the title of one paperback caught her eye: *The Trial of the Templars*, by Malcolm Barber. It was exactly what she needed...

“I bet you’re more comfy now without that drain, aren’t you, sir?” Nurse Scott chirped. She did not usually address patients as ‘sir’; but then, her patients were not usually handsome gentlemen with refined manners, charming accents, silk pyjamas, and dressing-gowns of what one of her favourite novelists would have called “midnight velvet”. (It would have suited someone with blue or grey eyes more, though, she thought.)

“Yes, thank you; much better,” said Raoul.

²³ *The Window*.

Wearing the said dressing-gown (which anyone else would have described simply as ‘dark navy’), he was sitting on the bed, tidying together his books on the bedside cabinet. The sooner he was away from here, the better. He did not feel safe in modern hospitals. If any doctor ever saw through his explanations, asked too many questions about his old wounds...

It was another reason the accusation of Nazism had revolted him: he knew too well what they would have sought to do with such a medical curiosity as himself. As if Kyrenia had not been bad enough... He had passed the war in the city he still thought of as Constantinople, as a translator. In a coffee-house near the university, he used to argue about the Crusades with a British lecturer with an intelligence background. He had found the Englishman’s romantic Byzantinism entertaining, if at times infuriating, but politely declined his romantic interest in *himself*.²⁴

“You asked me for these the other day,” the nurse said, and put a couple of tourist brochures on the bed beside him.

“Thank you again.”

The nod and slight smile were somewhat condescending (as usual), but she melted inside.

“I *do* hope you find a nice place to stay.”

“I’m sure that I shall.”

She plucked up her courage: “And your friend... I mean, the doctor lady that visits...? I cannae say her name right, but is she...?”

“*She* is going back to London.”

“Oh. Right...” A note of hope crept into her voice: “So you’re *not* – together? You and her, I mean?”

He gave her a sardonic look. “You have a *very* active imagination, Miss Scott. You read *romantic novels*, I think?”

“Only on my tea-break! Never on duty, sir!” Indeed, she was a hard-working (frankly, over-worked) girl. If fantasy was her escape, it was one that she earned.

“Have you read *Ivanhoe*? ”

“No – but I saw it on the telly last year!”²⁵

“Then you must know that your day-dream would be... *most unwise* in reality,” he said. “For either of us. Besides, I’m much older than you think. Much *too* old.”

²⁴ Possibly he is thinking of Steven Runciman, who lectured at Istanbul 1943-48.

²⁵ The 1982 TV movie *Ivanhoe*, starring Anthony Andrews and Sam Neill. The Crusades historian Charles Mills criticised Scott at the time for using the Templars in *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman* much as the Gothic novelists used the Jesuits as all-purpose, sinister monastic villains (although Brian de Bois-Guilbert is really a more interesting tragic hero than Wilfred of Ivanhoe!). *Dark Side* followed in the same tradition.

How could he know what she was dreaming? She wasn't blushing, was she? He was being all mysterious and enigmatic, she thought. "Foreign diplomat", Woodsy had said. That meant *spy*, surely? She bet he was a spy. And she still didn't think he could be more than twice her age: late thirties, forty-ish. It said thirty-eight on his notes. Forty-five at *most*, if he wasn't telling the truth... Mind, forty-five *was* pretty ancient...

"Sorry, sir," she said. "I didnae mean..."

That strange little smile again. "You *have* been kind to me. That's a rare thing. I shall remember it, *Rebecca*."

No-one ever call her by her full name – well, except Gran, when she was angry. Unless... Was it some kind of joke, because of *Ivanhoe*? She had loved that film: *so* romantic. And she hadn't half fancied Sam Neill as the Templar... Now, if *she'd* been *that* Rebecca...

When Ismini arrived, Raoul was leafing idly through the brochures. This *should* be 'goodbye', she thought, but... She set aside any thoughts of what might happen when they returned to Rhodes.

"Planning your next move?" she asked, with deliberate ambiguity.

He glanced up, his eyes reverting to their natural pale grey. "Yes. Thanks to Nurse Scott, I've found a suitable hotel. I mean to convalesce properly this time. Do you approve?"

He showed her the advertisement in the brochure: a country-house hotel on the other side of the Tay, just outside St Andrews.²⁶

"Five stars?"

"But of course," he said, as if there were no possible alternative. She realised that what some – well, David – had perceived as arrogance or affectation was neither. He was simply a born patrician and perfectionist: it was not in his nature to settle for anything that was less than ideal. "They say the gardens are beautiful at this time of year: '*la doussor del temps novel*.'"

"I hope you'll enjoy them."

"Have you considered my offer?"

"I have."

"And?"

"I must go back to London. I *ought to* go back. My train leaves in two hours."

"Ah."

"I need more time to... consider the implications. And I need to see Anne."

He frowned. "What will you tell her?"

²⁶ This is Rufflets Hotel. The gardens are, indeed, lovely, and I have fond memories, c. 1983-84, of taking long walks there, even through the snow, with my friends, for tea and cream scones on a Sunday afternoon. That was all the luxury we could afford. It is now about £11.00 a head for afternoon tea.

"That depends on how she is. I've been trying to communicate with her, but I'm not sure that she wants to listen."

"Perhaps not to *you*?"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"*Noblesse oblige*. If I can assist in any way –"

"After all you did to her –?"

"Reason enough to make amends. My intentions were not *entirely* dishonourable, you know: I *had* proposed marriage."

"And how psychologically healthy would *that* have been, for *either* of you? Honestly, you *do* have some foolish notions!" she scolded, more in teasing than earnest.

"I wasn't thinking clearly at the time, I confess. But I hope you'll trust me. And I *would* appreciate it if you didn't kill me *again*."

She nodded. "Well, it would be rather pointless."

"Indeed. We'd both find it tiresome after a while."

"And it's not that I don't *want* to hope. How far do you think I would get with any of my patients, if I didn't believe in hope?" – flying last of all from the opened box, she thought – "Or in perseverance? The longer problems have been neglected, the more difficult they are to deal with, but... very *few* people are *entirely* beyond help."

"*Or* beyond redemption?"

"That's not a concept in my professional vocabulary."

"But it *was* in mine."

She glanced at the tidy collection of belongings on top of the cabinet: a few books, the folded triptych, the prayer-beads worn small and smooth from centuries of use. "You mustn't forget your rosary, then."

"*Paternoster*."

"What?"

"For the Lord's Prayer. The rosary's for the *Ave*: the beads are grouped differently."

"I didn't know."

"Olive-wood," he continued. "They said it came from Gethsemane; I suspect, more probably from outside Limassol. There used to be carving on them, but that's all worn down, now."

"Too many prayers?"

"Too many *worries*," he replied. "But at least it convinced Nurse Scott that I'm virtuous, albeit far too un-Presbyterian!"

"I suppose she'll miss you – or have you dashed her fantasies to pieces?"

"I told her the truth: that I'm much too old for her."

"You're much too old for *anyone*!"

"Not quite. There *was* an older woman once," he said.

"Oh really?" She wondered if he were teasing her, now: she was, after all, slightly his senior in outward age.

"My one real love after Agnès. She was high above me in station; I pledged myself in humility to her service."

"*Humility? You?*" Ismini's eyes widened in disbelief.

"It's not *so* incredible, surely?"

"Who was she?"

"*Na Maria.*" He paused, then added: "We sang for her every day: *Ave, maris stella*. She was the beginning of our Order, and in her and in her honour were meant to be the end of our lives and that of the Order itself."²⁷

Briefly she glimpsed a time when his piety had been unselfconscious, free of irony: an earnest young soldier-monk, sublimating guilt and longing for his lost love in devotion to the *Theotokos*. It touched her.

"She betrayed us," he added quietly.

She sensed his old bewilderment and pain. *Where was the Mother of God when he and his Brethren were tortured? When they were slain?* The mask had slipped again.

"You *were* right, yesterday," she said. "We *do* have an affinity. I can't pretend otherwise, just because it's *uncomfortable*."

"Uncomfortable?"

"Morally."

"Having been on the wrong end of your cutlery, don't you think that I, too, have had *some* moral reservations?" he observed.

"I just don't want any more harm to come to Anne."

"My word on it, as a knight – if you think there's still any worth in that. Or my word as a friend."

"We don't have to be *friends*," she warned.

"*Not* enemies, then, at least?" He held out his hand to her.

She clasped it: warm, strong, *alive*. "*Not* enemies."

"And we will *communicate*, yes?" he asked.

"I think so," she said. "I *hope* so."

²⁷ Raoul is referring to *The Rule of the Templars*, 306 (see modern edition by Judith Upton-Ward). The *Ave, maris stella* (*Hail, Star of the Sea*) was among the hymns and prayers that the Order had to submit for vetting by the Inquisition. It is, of course, a standard Marian hymn. The Templars were especially devoted to the cult of the Virgin, which Bernard of Clairvaux, their early propagandist, had done so much to promote in 12C. They made their vows to "God and Our Lady St Mary".

He raised her hand to his lips, and kissed it lightly. She let him. Not friends, not enemies, she thought. That did not rule out being *lovers*...

Pointedly, neither said goodbye.

Once settled on the train, heading south to King's Cross, she pulled the Templar book out of her bag, and began to read.²⁸ In the preface, the author gave as one of his reasons for writing:

...I believe that the event has some relevance to the world of the late twentieth century so many of whose people have been, and continue to be, oppressed by regimes which use terror and torture to enforce conformity of thought and action.

With childhood memories of war and occupation, and more recent, bitter memories of military dictatorship, Ismini knew well what he meant. She thought, too, of home: the memorial fountain, with its dolphins, in the square of the *Judería*: the Ladino voices and songs, dimly recalled from early childhood, that had once been so much a part of the old city's life...

All through the late afternoon and evening, down the East Coast Line, she read. Edinburgh, Dunbar, Berwick, Newcastle, Durham (passing David's university), York, Doncaster... She was not there, but travelling through fourteenth-century Europe. What had David sneered about the Templars? "A bloody arrogant lot by anyone's standards"; "not much to write home about, morally", or words to that effect. Anne had told him he had spoilt her illusions about "knights in shining armour".

But their mail was not "shining": it was muddy and dented and bloody, and the knights within it vulnerable human flesh, blood and bone. Here was Grand Master de Beaujeu, dying a hero's death in the last battle at Acre: a javelin in his armpit, he was borne away on a shield as a stretcher. (She remembered the Spartan mothers' words to their sons: "*With it or on it.*")

Nor had David's flippant summary of the Order's suppression done justice to its grotesque horror. A ruthless king; a weak Pope; a naïve, stubborn old Grand Master, unable to believe that his Church would sacrifice its most faithful defenders. The *1984* logic of the Inquisition, according to which – as Raoul had said – innocence itself became the worst of crimes.

To be sure, all the scandal that David had outlined was there: the accusations and confessions of heresy, of secret rites involving the worship of mysterious heads or cats, black magic, and sodomy. But so, too, were descriptions of how the confessions were obtained: the rack; the strappado, which wrenched the arms from their sockets (sometimes weights were hung on the feet or, as in the case of Brother Gerard du Passage, on the genitals, to increase the shock of the drop); the application of fire to flesh. Peter Brocart said his torturers were "completely drunk". Some men died. The feet of Father Bernard Vado, Templar priest, of Albi, were roasted so severely that some of the bones fell out.

²⁸ I first read the first edition of Malcolm Barber's *The Trial of the Templars* around the time I saw *Dark Side* on TV. The quotations and paraphrases here are accurate. I am not much given to crying myself, but it reduced me to tears. An expanded second edition has now been published.

Ismini was not a woman for tears, especially not in public. Her hand against her mouth, she bit into her knuckle until a trace of blood welled up. Inside her head, she heard a familiar voice whispering lines from a Latin psalm:

*“Non nobis, Domine, non nobis,
sed nomini tuo da gloriam...”*

‘The Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon’: poor knights, indeed... “*Led like sheep to the slaughter*”, said Peter of Bologna.

“Agnus Dei, Qui tollis peccata mundi...”

Then there was the testimony of Brother Ponsard of Gisy, the Preceptor of Payns:

because it only took a short time, he was prepared to suffer either decapitation, or fire, or boiling, for the honour of the Order, but he could not thus sustain long tortures, which he had already endured for two or more years in prison.

Fifty-four Brethren burned at Saint-Antoine near Paris, all protesting their innocence. The efforts at a defence were broken: the defenders, the valiant Peter of Bologna and Reginald of Provins, were conveniently ‘disappeared’. In 1312, a Papal Bull declared the Order abolished – because, guilty or not, it had been too sullied in reputation to continue (a pretty piece of moral cowardice). The French crown and the Hospitallers reaped the spoils. And in the end, the old Master and the Preceptor of Normandy recanted their forced confessions, and paid for their innocence in the flames on the Île des Javiaux.

“Non nobis, Domine...”

This book said relatively little about what had happened in Cyprus. But now she had reason to trust Raoul’s words, and the physical evidence inscribed on his flesh... He said he had passed a year in Hell. Now she could fully believe it.

It was miraculous enough that he had survived in body. It would have been too much to expect him to come through it *mentally* unscathed, especially after his earlier grief and guilt over Agnès. She understood more clearly, too, his attitude towards religion, the “devouring Mother Church”. At a rational/intellectual level, he had separated himself from it, but emotionally, the relationship was that of a child with a once-beloved but sadistically abusive parent: a razor-wire tangle of love, hate, and betrayed trust. Given the fate of his Order, she did not see how it could have been otherwise. And it was a truism that the abused sometimes themselves become abusers...

She wished she had known sooner. And as for his earlier career, she was hoping that David would discover more about that.

It was quite late when she arrived back at her London hotel, later still on Rhodes, but she telephoned David.

“Ismini! Oh, I’m glad you called!” He sounded tired; more than tired, distressed. And possibly a little drunk.

“I haven’t got you out of bed, have I?”

“No, I’ve been reading! – God, it’s not *that* time already, is it?”

“Is something wrong?”

“No, not exactly. Where are you? London, right?”

“Yes.”

“Can you get faxes?”

“I should think so. Why? What is it?”

“I’ve been having my ears bent by Dr Hepburn all day – Miss Marple with a mauve rinse! She’s given me books, papers... Exhaustive. Exhausting. Are things okay with you?”

“Fine,” she said. (There would be another time for explanations.) “What about your article?”

“*Not* good. That’s why she... I need *your* opinion.”

“But I’m not a historian: I’ve only read one book on the train coming down!”

“Which book?”

“Barber. On the Templar trials. It was... *harrowing*.”

“*That?* Good God! That’s one of the ones Hepburn’s given me! I’ve been looking at it... Don’t have nightmares!”

“Too late. I have them anyway. Did you get some information about Cyprus?”

“Lots! *And* the Saint-Théodore business – But *you* – you’ve been *talking to him*. You said he was starting to trust you: do *you* trust *him*? ”

“In some respects.”

“I’ll send you Hepburn’s article. It... may change things – *some* things.”

“Some things have changed *already*, David,” she said.

There was silence for a moment. “Ismini...?”

“There was *no curse*. He says he didn’t kill Agnès. I believe him.”

He muttered something that sounded like, “Oh, *shit*...! Then it’s true...”

“What is?”

“I’m feeling bad enough as it is! Edith Hepburn said – You know, she looks like a sweet spinster auntie, but by God, she doesn’t pull her punches...! I can’t explain everything now, but... I’ll speak to you once you’ve read it. If Lavallière’s said anything else to you that confirms... What’s your fax number?”

She read it off the hotel card. He repeated the numbers twice as he wrote them down.

“Okay. In the morning, then. There are quite a lot of pages, so you’d better warn reception!”

“Thanks. I’m going to check up on Anne at the clinic, too. If there’s no curse, then she doesn’t need to –”

“Will you give her my love?”

“Of course.”

He was right about the nightmares.

6: The Blood-Red Cross

David had smartened himself up as well as he could, given his limited wardrobe, before going to meet Edith Hepburn in an old Ottoman coffee-house in Sokratous Street. He even added a few splashes of *Hai Karate* (Ismini had never told him how much she hated it).

He recognised Dr Hepburn from one or two conferences: a wiry little woman in her mid-fifties, with a mauve rinse on grey-white hair, dressed in a matching linen suit, with pearls. She was already waiting, with a glass of mint tea and a plateful of baklava, and watching the old men playing backgammon in the corner. A plastic carrier lay on the table beside her; from its shape and bulk, he guessed that it contained books and papers.

“David Bascombe? Edith Hepburn. I’m delighted to meet you!” she said in a Morningside accent. “I thought that since I was going to be at this end of the Mediterranean, I really *ought* to speak to you in person. When Giles – Professor Aimery – forwarded your article to me, with all those photographs of Chastel Saint-Théodore, *of course* I had to come!”

“You liked my article?” His face glowed with expectation.

She pursed her lips. “The illustrations are *very* exciting,” she said. “Your friend Mrs Tierney is a talented photographer, and I’d no idea that the restoration work at the castle was so fine! And the Blondel portrait – more of that anon, but I’m highly pleased to know it survives!”

“And... *my writing*? ”

“Ah. Now. *There* you have me. There’s a *great* deal I’d like to discuss with you about it. I’ve brought a few things that I thought might be useful to you, to read.”

He nodded. “I see. It just needs more work, right?”

Dr Hepburn stirred her mint tea. “More research, and more thought. Complete rewriting.”

He opened his mouth, but was at a loss to reply. “*Rewriting*? ”

“I appreciate that this is *not* your period, and *not* your specialism. But if your article were to be published as it stands, it would be very bad for your reputation. You’d be a laughing-stock.”

He gulped. “*That* bad?”

“I’m afraid so. You list your sources. I’m familiar with all of them – mainly nineteenth-century, probably quite good in their time, but hopelessly outdated these days. And as for primary sources... No Templar of Tyre? No *Gestes des Chypriots*, *Chronique d’Amadi*, or *Lignages d’Outremer*? None of the trial records from Cyprus? The Vatican Library has those on microfilm, dear boy: you can write and order them.”

“Oh. I see.” He was beginning to regret having asked. He forced a smile, nervous. “I used what was available in the museum library here.”

“And it *shows*, I’m afraid. You may like to take a look at this,” she said, drawing a photocopied article from the carrier. It was an essay from a volume of conference papers on the military orders,

published thirteen years previously: “*L’Affaire Saint-Théodore*: Thibaut de Montrefort, Philibert de Belabre and the Fall of Foulques de Villaret”. The author was *Edith Hepburn*.

And he thought *he* had discovered Brother Philibert’s account! David squirmed. “Look, I’m sorry. I—I didn’t know.”

She smiled gently. “You’re a Byzantinist: why should you, dear boy? *But*, if you are going to write on the Orders, it’s a good idea to read around first, isn’t it?”

“You’re not... *angry*?”

“Bless you, no!” Edith Hepburn was a kindly woman, famed for serving her students at St Andrews date-and-cucumber sandwiches on china plates in tutorials. She did not *intend* to humiliate him. “You and I are probably the only people who’ve looked at those *Miscellaneous Inventories* for years, so: I congratulate you on finding them!”

“The archivist didn’t think anyone else had examined them before!”

“How old is he? I very much doubt the old fellow I saw in ‘69 is still alive: I think he’d been there since the Turks left!”

“Mr Kaloudis is in his thirties, I think.”

“That explains it! – But it’s the *context* that matters: the wider issues of the suppression of the Order, and the Hospitaller *coup* against de Villaret.²⁹ What you’ve done, as far as I can see – and do correct me if I’m mistaken – is rely too heavily on de Belabre’s confession in *isolation*. It’s a useful account, but it needs to be read in a wider context. But I’m curious as to why you’ve taken so against Thibaut de Montrefort: it’s almost as if you’d fallen out with the poor fellow personally!”

He could hardly explain that Thibaut de Montrefort, still alive under the name of Raoul Lavallière, had, after murdering her husband, deceived and seduced the girl with whom he was falling in love, and had then tried to frighten him to death. On balance, he would prefer her to regard him as a bad historian than as a raving lunatic.

He frowned. “Well, the evidence I read certainly *suggests* that he was a bad lot: murdering his mistress, and all the stories of selling his soul to the Devil, worshipping demonic heads, and so on.”

“Ah. The Templars’ famous demonic heads. What do you know of those?”

²⁹ Brother Folco del Vilaret, or Foulques de Villaret, was Grand Master of the Hospitallers from 1305, succeeding his uncle Guilhem (William). He was deposed by his own Order around June 1317 for alleged tyrannical behaviour. They attempted to assassinate him at Rhodini, and he fled to Lindos, where he was besieged. The Pope reappointed him only to receive his formal resignation in 1319. Evidently a difficult man to work with, he had trouble in his subsequent posts in Italy. He spent his last years as a plain Brother of the Order, and died at his sister’s home near Montpellier in 1326. He was buried in the former Templar church there. The fictional massacre in *Dark Side* canon fits perfectly, date-wise, to be an example of his misbehaviour.

"The name 'Baphomet' turns up in some accounts, and there's a bronze face of the demon Asmodeus on the gate at Hagios Theodoros."

"I'm sure there *are* grotesques at the castle, dear boy." (Yes, he thought – you should meet the staff!) "The photograph you have of the door-ornament is really quite conventional. But 'Baphomet's just an Old French misspelling of Muhammad: a slander that they had 'gone over to the enemy'. Of course, *real* Muslims don't venerate images of any kind, but mediæval Christian propaganda imagined them as idolaters. The only heads that the Templars had were the usual sort of saints' relics."

"So you don't *believe* all the charges?"

She looked at him incredulously. "I don't think *anyone* with an ounce of sense does these days! Just occultists and assorted cranks – or Papal apologists who can't accept that their Church could crucify its own servants! And now there's all this silliness with grails and 'holy bloodlines'... As for being an 'élite secret society' – they're *Cistercians with swords*, that's all! Saint Bernard's 'new knighthood'? Have you read Barber's book on the trial? It came out about five years ago."

"No, I haven't."

"Well, I *do* have the paperback with me. You can keep it; I have a hardback at home. But... try not to read it at bedtime!" She drew it, too, from her bag, and pressed it into his hands.

"But surely there's no smoke without fire?" he asked.

"There's certainly plenty of *fire*: men burned alive at the stake, or with their feet roasted, or red-hot irons applied to their bodies. It doesn't mean they told the truth."

He grimaced. "I think I see what you mean about it not being bedtime reading!" Fire utterly terrified him, after seeing a classmate accidentally set himself alight with a Bunsen burner. That was one reason he had dropped the sciences at school, and also why de Montrefort/Lavallière had used fire as a psychic weapon against him, pursuing him with visions of flames all the way to Ismini's house.

The waiter set down a pot of Greek coffee beside him. David suspected that he was going to need all the caffeine he could get to survive this meeting...

"While I'm here, I should like to visit Saint-Théodore," Edith asked. "Is it open to the public?"

David looked wary. "No, I'm afraid it's in private hands. The owner's a Frenchman: he claims to be a relative of de Montrefort."

Her eyes lit up. "How thrilling! Perhaps I could telephone him and make arrangements?"

"Erm, *no*: he's abroad just now. He had... a serious *accident* a few months ago. Funnily enough, I think he's in Scotland."

"So you *know* him?"

"I wouldn't put it *that* strongly. We met a couple of times, but... didn't really get on. He may have been *a bit* upset about my research." *That* was an understatement, he thought.

"You mean, you *showed* him what you'd written?"

"I *told* him about it, while I was researching it. Bad idea, eh?" He forced a grin.

"A trifle *insensitive*, I'd have thought. What a *pity*... I should have liked to meet him, to pay my respects."

"Respects?"

She smiled, eyes twinkling. "On account of Brother Thibaut. He was a *remarkable* man."

"That's *one* word for it!"

"You haven't known him for as long as I have. Remarkably courageous."

That might be true on paper, David thought, but she hadn't had the murderous, stuck-up bastard playing mind-games with her, trying to kill her, or sneaking around in disguise having sex with someone she fancied. What was courageous about *that*?

"Can you take me through what you *do* know, then? Where I went wrong?" he asked.

She nodded. "Of course!" She fished a large brown envelope from the bag, and from it a heavily annotated typescript. His article. He had not seen so much red ink since he was an undergraduate. "Shall we start at the beginning?"

"Where else?" He suspected he was going to regret this...

She scraped her chair over the pebbled floor, so that she was sitting at a right angle to him, rather than directly opposite, and he was able to see the papers the right way up. "Well, first of all, he didn't flee to the East from France in 1307, because he was already *there*."

"Really?"

"Yes. Many of the Templars back in Europe were older men, or untried lads, or sergeant-brothers and serving-brothers. The best knights of fighting age were in Cyprus, the front-line. And he had joined the order there."

"But... didn't he arrive on Rhodes as a *fugitive*?"

"Yes, but from *Cyprus*, not from France. And not until 1313-ish."

"So what was he up to before then?"

"He first appears in the Cypriot records around 1300 – a minor count from the Limousin. His mother's family was from further south. There's a little bit of charter evidence on them in France. In Cyprus, he became involved with Agnès de Belvoir or Beauvoir, as either his mistress or wife. She was from Outremer: her father was killed at Acre, and her uncle, Brother Anciau de Belvoir, was influential in the Hospitallers, close to both the de Villaret Grand Masters. If I remember rightly, her mother was a Bonvoisin – originally Bonvicino: Genoese, from Tyre. But Agnès died very young."

"Do we know how?"

"The *Lignages d'Outremer*, which claims – incorrectly, I think – that they were married, says that she died '*en couches*' – childbirth or puerperal fever. Quite common."

"But de Belabre says there was a story that he strangled her...?"

"I'll come to that later. The point is, after her death he took vows as a Templar."

"So... he wasn't *already* a Templar at this time?"

"Gracious, no! The Templars had a *very* strict monastic discipline, and mostly kept it: unchastity was a serious offence. We know from his trial testimony that Brother Thibaut took vows in 1303, inspired by the fall of the garrison at Ruad. He said he was in his twenty-fifth year then, so he would have been born about 1278-79."

David did a quick piece of mental arithmetic. "So that makes him pushing forty when he was killed in 1317?"

"More or less."

That fitted with his present-day appearance, he thought.

Edith continued: "He doesn't seem to have held any high office himself, although his name turns up regularly in association with the Marshal, Brother Ayme d'Osiliers, witnessing charters, so he was probably one of his subordinates. His career was quite unexceptional, quite undistinguished."

David was secretly pleased to hear this: the arrogant 'Maître Lavallière' a nonentity. An underling.

"— Or, I should say, it *was* until the arrests began. Adversity can make or break a man, the way fire tempers steel."

"When was this? 13 October 1307?"

"No. That's when the arrests began *in France*. Certainly, that marked the beginning of the end for the whole Order. The Grand Master had gone there the previous year, to plan a new crusade, and never returned. The papal warrant arrived in Cyprus only in May 1308, and the knights tried to resist. The Marshal took command, and de Montrefort was there beside him. He was one of the knights captured in the siege of Limassol, and kept under house arrest at Khirokitia for two or three years. He testified at the first trial – in 1310 or '11."

"Did he confess?"

"No. He said that he knew the Order to be innocent of all the serious charges, and that if the Grand Master and others had confessed in France, he knew it to be false, 'on account of the barbarous cruelties they had endured'. Nor did any other of the Cyprus Templars confess. External witnesses also attested to their innocence. There was even said to be a small miracle at Khirokitia: a guard, who had doubted their innocence, saw the Host expand beyond its actual size at one of their Masses."

David had a strong suspicion as to *who* might have been responsible for *that* little conjuring trick, but said nothing.

"Despite the secular political antagonisms – the Templars had mostly supported the Regent Amaury against his brother King Henri – the only people who cast aspersions on them were a couple of Hospitallers. The Prior made vague references to heresy and idols, and de Belvoir made a rather snide *ad hominem* attack on de Montrefort for seducing his niece, leading to her death. Since this was a personal matter, concerning his life before joining the Order, it was ruled irrelevant."

"So why did they confess in France and not in Cyprus?"

“Torture. There was no torture used in Cyprus at this point, but a copious amount in France. I jalouse *you*’d confess to devil-worship and buggery if someone were to light fires under your feet or hang weights on your testicles,” she observed sweetly.

He winced and crossed his legs. It was not the sort of thing he expected a mauve-rinsed, cut-glass-voiced Scottish spinster to express quite so... frankly. He realised he would have been putty in the hands of the Inquisition. Not a ‘comfy chair’ in sight...

“But Pope Clement was dissatisfied with the results of the first Cyprus trial, and ordered a second – *with* torture. We don’t know what became of most of the Templars there then. Certainly some, including the Marshal, were re-arrested and imprisoned in the dungeons of Kyrenia; but whether because of this order, or because of an alleged plot against the king is uncertain. Some secular nobles were also arrested.”³⁰

“What about de Montfort?”

“As an associate of the Marshal, he was one of the unlucky ones. When he presented himself to de Villaret in Rhodes, around 1313, he said he had been delivered ‘by the grace of the Holy Spirit’ out of prison in Kyrenia, where he had maintained his innocence, despite being beaten and burnt with hot irons.”

“Is that likely?”

“More than likely!” she said almost chirpily. “The prisoners in Kyrenia certainly *were* cruelly treated... It’s even claimed that some were taken out in boats and drowned.”

“I mean, the escape – *divine intervention*? ”

She chuckled. “I should think *bribery* is far more likely! Or an accomplice on the outside. But the means are less important than what he did afterwards.”

I beg to differ, thought David. He had seen what the man could do, in terms of shapeshifting and transporting himself. ‘By the grace of the Holy Spirit’? Some psychic method was more likely. No wonder he’s good at it: centuries of practice...

“It seems that a few of the other Templars, who had proven their innocence, were living with the Hospitallers on the island. They were not permitted to join the Hospitallers fully, but continued to live their monastic life with them. De Montfort asked that they be placed under his command, in a

³⁰ The account of the trial(s) of the Templars in Cyprus is derived from the works of Anne Gilmour-Bryson, Malcolm Barber and Helen Nicholson. Only one Hospitaller testified against them. The ‘miracle of the Host’ at Khirokitia was described by Raymond de Bentho, a non-Templar witness, in his evidence at the trial. Clement V ordered a second trial with torture, to get the result he wanted. We do not know if it took place, but certainly Marshal Ayme d’Osiliers and a number of other knights were imprisoned in Kyrenia. The Marshal died there in 1316. In reality, as far as we know, there were no Templars on Rhodes.

house of their own. This *was* rather dubious legally, since they were no longer a functioning order after 1312, and were meant to be kept scattered between other houses, *not* concentrated together.”

“So did he blackmail de Villaret into this?”

“No. That’s just de Belabre embellishing later. I get the sense that, at this time, de Villaret was quite glad to abdicate the responsibility of looking after the Templars. And for four years, Thibaut de Montrefort held Chastel Saint-Théodore under the Hospital – but manned by former Templars.”

“And there were no problems?”

“None. They kept to themselves, and their background was obscured in the Hospitaller records. There were allegations that de Montrefort was a martinet, and tight-fisted with money, but that’s hardly surprising: after the trial, he didn’t want any scandal about his house, or for it to be harmed by de Villaret’s financial problems. But he seems to have been a decent enough landlord as far as the locals were concerned. He must have felt safer and happier there than he had done for years.”

“So if they were just getting along with their lives quietly, what went wrong? What did he do?”

“This is where the broader context becomes important again. In 1314, the old Grand Master was burned alive in Paris, after retracting his forced confession. In 1316, the Marshal died in the dungeons of Kyrenia, either from starvation or by torture. So the old Templar hierarchy de Montrefort had known – and which was tainted, however unjustly, by the trials – was gone. Then, a new Pope, John XXII, was elected, after a two-year interregnum. De Montrefort saw a chance for a fresh start – for his Order, and himself. We don’t know whether this had been his aim from the beginning, when he first came to Rhodes, or whether he was simply opportunistic.”

He still *is* opportunistic, thought David bitterly, at least where women are concerned. Between mouthfuls of baklava, he asked, “You mean, he wanted to *refound* the Templars? But hadn’t the *Hospitallers* been granted all their property and income?”

“Yes. And this was where the trouble started. He shared the fatal flaw of most of the last leading Templars: he was quite hopelessly, irredeemably *naïve*.”

He tried not to choke on a piece of pistachio. ‘*Naïve*’ was not a word he would ever have associated with the man he knew.

She went on: “The Papacy had long wanted to merge the two largest military Orders, to concentrate crusading resources. That had been achieved – albeit by the cruellest means – so a Templar revival wasn’t in Church interests. And since de Villaret had run the *Hospitallers* into debt, and was *still* struggling to get control of the Templars’ international assets, the last thing *he* wanted was for them to start reclaiming them. One man couldn’t be allowed to stand in the way.”

“You’re making it sound as if Thibaut de Montrefort was some sort of *victim* in all this.”

She looked at him quizzically, her head tilted to one side. “What *other* word for him *is* there? – As soon as de Villaret intercepted a letter from him to the Pope, he revived the old accusations – heresy, devil-worship, unnatural acts – against the Brethren at Saint-Théodore. He accused Brother Thibaut of selling his soul to the devil, and of using sorcery to escape from Kyrenia. Anciau de Belvoir also joined

in, not merely accusing him of *ruining* his niece this time, but of *murdering* her outright because of some absurd prophecy.”

“And you don’t believe this?”

“It’s all a little *too* Dennis Wheatley for words, don’t you think?”

Easy for her to say, he thought: *she* had never been pursued along the road by shooting flames and red, grimacing demons.

“It was also rather too politically convenient. The only plausible charges are that he had taken to wearing full Templar habit again – the black tunic and the white mantle with the red cross on the breast, which symbolised their expectation of martyrdom – and that he signed himself as ‘Grand Preceptor’, effectively acting Grand Master, when he wrote to the Pope.”

“And this led to the massacre?”

“Yes. He refused a command from de Villaret to face his accusers in a chapter meeting. There must have been quite a battle of wills going on: they were both formidable men. At last, de Montrefort invited de Belvoir and some of his entourage to dine with him and open negotiations. Grand Master de Villaret thought this was the perfect opportunity to strike. De Belabre’s confession’s quite accurate as to the order of events: the advance guard arrived as ‘guests’, with more troops in support. What’s uncertain is whether they intended simply to *arrest* de Montrefort, and someone panicked, or whether the slaughter was planned in cold blood from the first. All the Templars were butchered, and the village was burned, in broad daylight. One of the Orthodox monasteries mentions it in a brief chronicle – the smoke was visible for some miles – so there is some corroboration.”

“And there were no survivors? No wounded? De Montrefort – could he have escaped again?”

“There’s no *written* evidence of survivors, although it’s possible some of the villagers simply fled into the countryside: they were quite used to this sort of thing happening, with various invaders. But no-one in the castle stood a chance. They were trapped, and mostly unarmed – in the refectory, or en route to the chapel for the usual after-dinner service. As for Thibaut de Montrefort himself – as you know, he was the first to be cut down. De Belabre says a sword was thrust right through his body, through the cross on his habit. He couldn’t possibly have lived.”

That’s what *you* think, thought David, although her version of events was beginning to make him extremely uncomfortable. He had been considering having souvlaki for dinner, but suddenly he felt faintly queasy at the idea of anything on a *skewer*.

“But it wasn’t in vain,” she added.

“Why?”

She stirred her tea, crushing the mint-leaves brutally with her spoon. When she spoke, she sounded like Miss Marple crossed with Miss Jean Brodie: “Did it *never* occur to you *why* Philibert de Belabre wrote a *secret confession* of the atrocity in the margins of an *account-book*? ”³¹

“No, not really,” he admitted. “I—I suppose it was guilt, conscience. He *had* taken part in the massacre, and seems to have been shaken up by what he saw!”

“But *anyone else* who needed the accounts and inventories could have read it. Especially as it’s in the vernacular. It isn’t *very* secret, is it?”

The blinding obviousness of this had simply not occurred to him before. The volume of *Miscellaneous Inventories of the Hospitallers* had been difficult for *him* to find in the archives, but in their time, such inventories and account-books would have been used regularly, to record orders of provisions, tithes received, contents of the stores...

“You’re right. I didn’t think...”

She nodded sagely. “No. And you didn’t think about the *date*: 1317. What happened to the Hospitallers in 1317?”

“I – erm – didn’t really focus on them...”

She answered for him. “In early summer that year, about two months after the massacre, they rebelled against their Grand Master – our old friend Foulques de Villaret. They sent men to assassinate him at Rhodini, but his chamberlain warned him, and he fled to Lindos. There his own Order besieged him, after electing a replacement. He was accused generally of tyrannical behaviour, acts of oppression, and immoral living, but no evidence of any *specific* abuses survives. Apart from the *affaire Saint-Théodore*, that is.”

“I’d heard about de Villaret’s downfall, but I didn’t think...”

“That there was a connection?”

“No, no... But I can see... So you think de Belabre wrote his account as part of the attack on de Villaret, then?”

She nodded. “Of the forty-two Hospitallers who took part in the massacre – what you read as ‘three hundred’ knights is actually ‘thirty’ – those are ‘X’s, not ‘C’s – bad pen-strokes – he was the youngest and least experienced. He seems to have been overwhelmed with remorse at being forced to participate, appalled by the carnage – although he doesn’t seem to have questioned the validity of the

³¹ In *Dark Side* canon, David discovered Brother Philibert de Belabre’s account of the massacre at Saint-Théodore in a volume of Hospitaller inventories. Although allegedly ‘secret’, it is written in legible French in the margins of a document that would be very far from ‘secret’. It is dated 1317, and Brother Philibert declares that he is writing in defiance of the Grand Master. Date-wise, this fits perfectly with the events leading to de Villaret’s deposition; it could not be afterwards, as under the brief reign of the elderly Maurice de Pagnac, who had not been approved by the Pope, the Order’s priority was getting rid of de Villaret.

accusations. I suspect he circulated his confession among those who were planning the revolt, to stir things up.”

“So what happened in the end?”

“The Pope was forced to adjudicate between the rival Masters. He reappointed Foulques de Villaret – but solely to receive his resignation in the proper manner in 1319. After a chequered career in Italy, de Villaret died several years later, as a mere Brother of the order, in his native Montpellier. De Belabre seems to have died in Rhodes, after becoming insane.”

“What about Uncle Anciau?”

“Killed at Lindos, fighting on de Villaret’s side. He’d have been about sixty at the time.”

“But de Villaret wasn’t *publicly* charged with the Saint-Théodore massacre?”

“No. Neither the Hospital nor the Pope wanted to re-open any of the cases involving the Templars. The Hospitallers insisted that the castle had been ‘a nest of vipers, blasphemers and sodomites’, and called de Montrefort a murderer. They succeeded to the extent that when a collateral descendant – de Laval, de Lavallière, something like that – had that imaginary portrait done for the *Salles des Croisades* at Versailles in the 1840s, Louis-Philippe refused to hang it, although there’s one of de Villaret there, bold as brass. Engravings of it appeared occasionally in some nineteenth century works – your Bishop Greystoke and others – but the original vanished back into family hands. It’s not accurate, of course – very much of its time – look at the treatment of the heraldry, and the lack of beard – but it has a certain period charm. That’s why I was intrigued to see that you had a photograph of it.”

“Yes, it’s up at the *kastello* now. And the present owner *is* called Lavallière. No ‘de’, as far as I know.”

“Splendid! But such a pity, though, that younger people these days *are* rather reticent about using a ‘de’, even when they’re entitled to it! – And are you *sure* we *can’t* get ourselves in there? I’m sure that if I telephoned his staff –”

“Believe me, it’s *not* a good idea!” He could say no more to her, but he would not cross the threshold of that place again, even if there were a million quid and a tenured lectureship in it. Even with Lavallière out of the country, he would not feel safe there, with those unnerving henchmen (especially the stony-faced German with the cigarette-holder) and far too many disturbing memories.

She sighed. “Never mind! Perhaps some other time! It’s just that it was still partly ruined when I was last here, and it looks *so* lovely in your photographs... Time doesn’t stand still, does it?”

Only for *some* people, he thought, looking at Anne’s photograph of de Montrefort’s portrait. He was worried about Anne; worried, too, about Ismini, worldly-wise as she was. What was she doing, *talking* to him, trying to *reason* with him?

“Erm... We could always go to *Lindos* tomorrow,” he suggested.

“Splendid idea!” she said. “And look for wicked uncles! – But you really *shouldn’t* neglect your thesis! Your *own* field, young man! You’re far more at home there, and Giles would *so* like you to finish it!”

He forced a smile.

Back in his apartment that evening, David poured himself a large whisky, and settled down on the couch with Edith's plastic bagful of books and photocopied articles. He had underestimated how much material there was on the case.

It confirmed everything she had told him in the café: chapter and verse, footnoted, with quotations in Latin, French, Italian and even some Greek. Hideous images flitted across his mind. How does it feel to discover that 'things you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy' have indeed happened *to* your worst enemy? Imprisonment, semi-starvation, beatings, red-hot irons; then to be murdered by treachery, skewered like an insect on a pin, so that it seemed as if the red cross on his habit was itself bleeding...

He skimmed through Barber's book: still more horrors.

And slowly, through the terrible scenes that his reading and his imagination conjured, he recognised how crass his behaviour at the party must have seemed. He felt a pang of – well, not quite *shame*, but *unease*, at least.

And so, he had waited for the telephone to ring...

'T: Ashes of Memories

When Ismini came downstairs the next morning, her mind still haunted by dreams of tortured Templars, the receptionist handed her a large brown envelope packed with papers. "A fax for you from Rhodes, doctor – from a Mr Bascombe."

"Thank you. I was expecting it."

The receptionist's eyes widened: "*All of it?* That's sixty-seven pages. At seven pence each." She scribbled on a notepad. "That'll be £4.69, please."

Ismini paid her, and thanked her again.

She glanced over the papers quickly. The marginal notes (Hepburn's on David's article, and his on hers) had not reproduced well, and would take some time to decipher. She decided to leave them until later. Seven centuries ago there might have been greater urgency in the matter, but Anne's case was now far more pressing. Indeed, she felt a degree of guilt for having left her to go to Scotland in the first place. She had tried to communicate with her, but had sensed no response.

She telephoned Dr Phillimore in some anxiety.

"I'm delighted to hear from you again, Dr Christoyannis!" he said – and she was relieved that he sounded so cheerful. "About Mrs Tierney, isn't it? Well, you'll be glad to hear that there's been some improvement these past few days."

"In what respect?"

"We're finally getting to the root of her... problem. Psychologically, she is beginning to accept that she was *mistaken* about the pregnancy. The physical symptoms seem to be easing."

"Is there any particular reason for the change?"

"I think we'd better have a chat. Can you visit?"

She rented a car to drive to the psychiatric clinic again. It was several miles out of town: one of those large Victorian institutions that had been modernised into something more comfortable and domestic, a genuine place of asylum and respite.

Dr Phillimore – a thin man, nearing retirement age, with wavy grey hair – was pleasantly avuncular. "Definite progress, Dr Christoyannis! She's beginning to reveal something of what happened on Rhodes. I don't know how much she had confided in you, but... I think it is significant, and since she told me, she's started to let go of the delusion."

"Can you tell me – one doctor to another?"

"Yes: indeed, perhaps you can confirm it. She claims she had a brief affair while she was on the island – something she regretted."

Ismini nodded. "I had wondered if it might be something of that sort," she said, guardedly.

"Hence she's been punishing herself, for betraying her husband's memory, as she sees it; punishing her lover, too – not that he can know anything of her situation, of course! But she seems to feel that he took advantage of her grief, exploited her sexually."

"That makes sense," she said. Of course, Anne had said nothing of the more *unusual* aspects of the case; nor of the fact that Raoul had killed her husband. Had she done so, Phillimore would certainly have been convinced that she was completely unhinged.

"So she hadn't told you more about this at the time?"

"A little, but not *directly*." Which was true: Anne had concealed it from her for as long as she could – much as she, in turn, would now have to hide her own thoughts and emotions.

"She clearly wasn't ready for a new relationship. And holiday romances *do* have a habit of turning sour once you take away the sunshine and the sand!" he said wryly.

She smiled to herself. And some of them can simply be utterly perverse and twisted from the beginning, she thought; and she was not thinking only of Anne's situation...

"A *Frenchman*, she said. Quite the smooth seducer, by the sound of it: castles and cocktail parties. Probably made all kinds of promises. Usually it's teenaged girls who get upset and overdose because of this kind of thing, but... Our Mrs Tierney has had a rather sheltered youth, and was in an extremely vulnerable state. What a cad! – How was Scotland, anyway?" Dr Phillimore asked.

"I think the English phrase is a 'bus-driver's holiday', isn't it?"

"A *busman's* holiday. But I thought you'd just gone to see a friend?"

"Yes: *another* one with problems: a post-traumatic case, chronically neglected."

"Oh! I'm sorry to hear it!"

"No, it was quite fascinating. An intelligent person, exceptional in many ways, but... with a great deal of damage, physical *and* mental. Socially, most people probably wouldn't notice, but as in triage, it's the ones who *aren't* screaming one has to worry about the most."

"That's only too true, I'm afraid!" he said. " Still, it's a good idea to take a *proper* break, you know! You don't want to end up here yourself! Such a pity you *weren't* playing golf!"

She laughed, then asked: "So is Mrs Tierney well enough to receive visitors?"

"Indeed, I think so. And I think you'll be impressed by the change since last week."

Anne was sitting by the window of her room, gazing out over the gardens. May: the cool damp of an English spring was giving way to the green of summer, of leaf and bud and blossom. New life was *burgeoning*: that was the word, wasn't it? – But not for her. Not now. Not ever. And at last, she was glad of that. She felt as if a shadow were receding from her life.

She did not turn immediately when Ismini entered. When she did, the older woman saw how pale she was – like a little wax doll – and the skin below her eyes was swollen, as if she had been crying recently. But her gaze seemed less vacant than when she had last seen her. She was, however, still wearing Agnès's pearl-and-gold pendant.

“Dr Phillimore told me you were feeling better.”

She nodded. “I think so.”

“What has been happening?”

“I—I decided to tell him... not *everything* – I couldn’t, because it sounds impossible, but... More than I had. It’s *guilt*, he thinks. *Guilt*.”

“I understand.”

“Yes, I... wanted to hurt myself... hurt both of us – *him* most of all.”

“That’s understandable, too.”

“But I *can’t* any more. Sometimes letting go is all that’s left, isn’t it?”

She took Anne’s hands in hers. “What made you realise this?”

“I *know* you were trying to help me. I didn’t want to listen, at first. But then... I’ve had these dreams, these past few days. At least, I *think* they were dreams...”

Ismini looked suspicious. “What kind of dreams?”

Anne hesitated, then said quietly, “I saw Don again.”

Oh God, *not again*, she thought. I really *will* kill you *this* time, somehow... “How? What happened?”

“*Nothing*. That’s just it. It wasn’t like... like *before*. Not when it was *him*. More as it was before, when I saw him here, in England, after the funeral.”

“What did you sense, when you saw him?”

“Peace. Peace, and a kind of release... Reassurance. I didn’t feel afraid.”

“And you’re *sure* it wasn’t...?”

She nodded again. “I’d have *known* this time. He didn’t say anything – but he didn’t *touch* me. That’s how I knew. He was just *there*.”

There *was* an outside chance that it was Don Tierney’s spirit. On the other hand, it seemed far more likely that... Raoul, if it was you, you have a *nerve*, Ismini thought. But then – he had said that he wished to make amends. Perhaps he *was* still capable of a generous gesture, however outweighed it was by the harm he had wrought. If so – *thank you*; it’s a start.

“And I know... I know I’m *not*...” Anne glanced down at her abdomen. “I only thought – it was the prophecy... That we *both* had to be punished.”

“And, at some subconscious or unconscious level, you willed it to be, so that you could destroy him, yes?”

“Yes. It was stupid of me, really. I mean, David had *told* me he’d stolen my medical records, so why should he have believed...? But he *was* taken ill, wasn’t he? Did you sense it, too?”

Ismini nodded. “Yes, I did.”

“But then *you* told me there was no prophecy, no curse...”

“So you *did* receive my messages?”

“I did... but I didn’t understand. I didn’t *want* to. How could there *not* be...?”

“Because there was no murder. The accusation was false.”

She raised a slender hand to the pearl, which lay like a frozen teardrop on her chest. “How do you know?”

“David and I have been doing some more research,” she said. (She could not admit that *her* research had consisted chiefly of conversing with Raoul while he lay, exquisitely *déshabillé*, in a hospital bed. She hid some memories with care.)

“Then why –? I mean, to go so far as to steal my records, just to make sure that I couldn’t...”

“Agnès died after a miscarriage. I think he was simply terrified of losing her the same way again, in you.”

Anne sighed. “That’s dreadful, but... He still killed my husband. Still *used* me.”

“I know. And nothing can undo or excuse that.”

“– And I *let* myself be used, which is the worst part. I was *willing. More than willing!*”

“You didn’t know, and you *couldn’t* have known. Your powers were not so strong as to see through his. And who could blame you for *wanting* to believe it?”

“And yet... How can I let him...?”

“Let him get away with it, is that what you’re trying to say?”

She nodded.

“I’m not sure that he *has*, are *you*? ”

“He’s still alive: I can sense it!”

“But it’s not a life to envy. You’re making the right choice, Anne – to let go of anger, hate, fear; not to let them imprison you. Even fine, brave people can let themselves be trapped by them, and become warped: too wrapped up in their own pain to care how much they hurt others. But *you* have friends who love you, and want to help you. You’ll get through this.”

“You think so?”

“Of course. David sends you all his love, and I’m sure that when he comes back to England...”

Anne’s eyes – huge and dark in her delicate face – seemed to brighten at the mention of him. “He’ll still want me? After all this?”

“You *know* how much he cares for you. He’s been so worried for you.”

“But I didn’t think of him when I...”

“– When you took those pills? You were ill. *But* it isn’t going to happen again. You have so much to live for: *everything*, in fact. You’ll see!”

Anne managed a shy smile.

Later that afternoon, after returning to the hotel, Ismini settled down with a coffee, a cigarette, and the faxed articles: David’s own, which she had read previously, now heavily corrected, and Edith Hepburn’s, to which David had added comments of his own. Piecing together these with the book she had read on the train, she recognised that Raoul had been as truthful with her as he could be. There had

been some omissions – she could understand why he had not talked in great detail about his imprisonment, or about the massacre at Hagios Theodoros – but he had not intended to deceive her.

But the massacre was a key factor in Raoul's present-day behaviour. She realised that in his four years at Chastel Saint-Théodore, he must have begun to recuperate, physically and mentally, from the dungeons of Kyrenia. (She had a fleeting mental image of him as he must have been in those days: austereley habited, bearded, still stooping and slightly lame from his injuries.) As Preceptor of the house, he was no longer helpless, powerless, but held a position of authority, amid the security of being part of an organised monastic community. He would not have felt completely isolated by his experiences, since his fellow Templars had also endured trial and imprisonment, with varying degrees of hardship. She saw his hope of reviving his Order not so much as the foolhardy ambition of a political naïf (as Hepburn interpreted it), but as part of his effort to rebuild his life; to undo all that happened since 1308. But the attack in 1317, his first 'death', had left him with *nothing*.

It had been a savage business. Hepburn mentioned an Italian archaeological excavation in the castle in the late 1920s, in which several adult male skeletons were found dumped in a refuse-pit. Pottery fragments and a small coin of Henri II de Lusignan of Cyprus found in the same deposit suggested that they were some of the victims: at least three had split skulls, and one had an arm severed at the shoulder. Ismini remembered Raoul's hint about Kyrenia not being the last time he had been "forced to watch"... Had they made him watch his Brethren slain around him, knowing that all hope for his beloved Order died with him, before they removed the sword? Judging by the scarring, the blade must have been wrenched out very roughly, even twisted. Not an easy death, albeit only temporary. She could almost hear the ribs cracking...

But they had broken more than his body. All the psychological progress he had made since Kyrenia had been undone. He was robbed, in the most brutal manner imaginable, of the community that gave him purpose and security. His paranoia intensified: a second betrayal by his own Church; a betrayal within the walls of his own home, by guests with whom he had broken bread. Small wonder that he reacted so violently to intruders and to perceived abuses of hospitality; that he was obsessed with protecting his present-day 'Brethren' – to the point of murder.

Would he have felt so threatened, had he been living anywhere but Saint-Théodore, she wondered. Why had he decided to buy and restore the *kastello*, given that it was the site of his greatest trauma? Why make it his chief residence, the headquarters for his neo-Templar society? Had he simply hoped that his positive memories of it, as the place where he had begun to repair his life, would outweigh its association with treachery and death? Or had he gone there deliberately to 'reclaim' it, to face and overcome his history – only to fail when put to the test? She would have to talk him through this, she thought, but at a time of his choosing. She was curious, professionally and personally, but she must be patient. He would need to feel much safer before he could talk about it, and it would be wrong to use her psychic abilities to rush the matter.

She added to her notes:

1. As already noted, patient perceives his own acts of aggression – however extreme – as purely defensive, in response to threats against self and Brethren. (Sees them as extension of self – result of long-term institutionalisation/self-identification with Order.).
2. Self-image is focused primarily on victimhood: self-justification (add to this residual religiosity, concept of martyrdom, &c.) blinds him to suffering he causes others.
3. Paranoia is entirely comprehensible, given personal history. Cannot be considered ‘persecution complex’ in usual sense – has known REAL persecution, betrayal: extensive (and extreme) psychological and physical trauma.
4. Survivor guilt. Forced to see Brethren tortured/killed; was powerless to intervene.
5. Does not expect a sympathetic response; superficially hostile to expressions of compassion.
6. None of this remarkable in itself. However: length of time patient has been living with this IS.
7. Need to encourage cognitive shifts. TRUST. Moral boundaries, NOT emotional barriers.

Later, she phoned David. (God, this was going to be an expensive trip...)

“What’s the news on Anne?” he asked. He sounded in good spirits: less harassed (and more sober) than last night.

“She’s improving. I think it’s likely to take some time for her to recover fully, but... All the signs are positive.”

“You passed on my love?”

“Of course!”

“Did she say –?”

“She didn’t need to say it; I could see it in her face. But she knows you love her, and she wants to see you again.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking... especially after talking to Dr Hepburn. Maybe I should come home soon: get the thesis submitted at last, and everything. And take care of Anne.”

“That would be wonderful – just what she needs!”

“After everything she’s been through... it’s the least I can do. – And what about the fax? Did you get it?”

“Yes, thank you. I’ve read it all.”

“And what do you make of it?”

“It verifies what Lavallière told me, certainly about Agnès, and his imprisonment.”

“It *was* as bad as that?”

“The word he used was ‘Hell’. The one part of the story he couldn’t bring himself to describe was what happened at Hagios Theodoros, but that’s not surprising. I don’t think he’s got over it, even after all these centuries. And I can well understand why, having seen the scarring on his chest –”

There was a clatter that suggested David had lost his grip on the telephone receiver. “*You’ve seen –?*”

"He was being treated for a pneumothorax. I'd have had to be blind not to notice."

"You almost had me worried for a minute!"

"Why?" she asked. "It's hardly a pleasant sight." But all the more moving for it, she thought, recalling him baring his shoulder... The strength and grace of his body only lent greater poignancy to its disfigurement. "And he must have been half-flayed in Kyrenia."

"Well, no wonder he wears other people's bodies when he needs a shag, then!"

Ah, David, you *do* express yourself so *sensitively*, so *eloquently*, she thought, rolling her eyes. She shuddered to think what impression of their brief liaison Raoul had formed from reading *his* mind... He was a good-hearted young man, but just so... *unsophisticated*. "How are you getting on with Dr Hepburn?" she asked.

"We 'did' Lindos today: I now know more about that bloody Hospitaller siege than anyone living *needs* to know. But I had to think of *something* to keep her busy, to stop her dragooning me into taking her to Hagios Theodoros!"

"You don't think it would be reasonably safe while...?"

"*No!* I expect he's left 'Uncle Adolf' and the sidekicks in charge: I don't much fancy running into them again!"

"Has she told you any more historical anecdotes – anything useful?"

"Well, she does wonder if de Belabre skewered him *in person*, you know."

"Really?"

"She couldn't put it in the article, as there's no written evidence. She's quite strict about indulging in speculation – one of the things she ticked *me* off for. But she has a hunch that it might be why, of all those involved, he wrote about the massacre; and why he cracked up eventually. Mind, that *could* have been You-Know-Who up to a spot of psychic revenge: I wouldn't put it past him: he's obviously been perfecting his technique over centuries."

"He'd certainly have good reason, if de Belabre *did* murder him."

A pause. "I *suppose* so. He may be a complete bastard *now*, but he didn't exactly have much fun in those days, did he?" (That's putting it mildly, Ismini thought.) "Just one disaster after another."

"Yes. Very tragic."

"Mind, I'm still not 100% sure he wasn't up to something funny even then... How did you leave things with him?"

"We came to an understanding. A promise of good behaviour."

"*Good behaviour?*" he snorted. "You trust him in *that*?"

"For the sake of what he *was* – yes." Had anyone else ever spared a thought for the man he had been, she thought. "Besides, I don't think he much likes the idea of being killed *again*: it must get tedious. Anne should be safe, which is what matters."

"Yes, that's true. That *is* what matters. There's not a lot we can do about all that political scheming – it's too high above our heads – and we can't *prove* murder... But that whole obsession he had with her: the portrait, the necklace... Mind, I thought he was pretty creepy from the first!"

Ismini laughed. "I know *exactly* what you thought from the first! You were so green with envy I thought you were going to start *photosynthesising!*"

"Well, yes! *And* I was right, wasn't I? – Anyway, when are you coming home? Rhodes is deathly dull without you!"

She sighed. "I haven't quite decided. I'd like to see Anne more settled, out of hospital."

And there was Raoul... What *was* she going to do about him, she wondered. A difficult case, time-consuming, but not, she suspected, impossible. And if she took up his offer... well, they would have plenty of time.

8: Four Grey Walls & Four Grey Towers

That evening, Ismini reached out in thought to Raoul. She recalled the photograph of the hotel in the brochure he had shown her; she remembered the touch of his lips on her hand.

There was no rush of confused images, disjointed snatches of sound and vision, as had happened when he was ill. The mental connection between them was stronger than she had experienced with anyone else. She saw him clearly, sitting in the window-seat of an elegantly furnished room, reading by lamplight his volume of Nerval (the sonnet sequence, *Le Christ aux Oliviers*). Much as on Rhodes – from what little she had seen of him there – he was wearing an expensive, pale-coloured suit and a thoroughly deceptive air of serenity. He had evidently washed the dye from his hair, returning it to its natural (slightly greying) fairness. Through the glass behind him, she saw that dusk was falling over a large formal garden that receded into woodland.

– I’m sure you know that Anne’s making progress. If it *was* you, thank you.

He glanced up, as if he had heard her speaking, and gave one of his small, condescending nods of acknowledgement. *I merely sent her an image; the distance is too great for me to visit bodily in any form.*

– Probably that’s just as well, for her sake. All the same, it was a generous gesture.

– *What else could I do? Leave her to irrevocable insanity? To suicide?*

– It’s the fact her fate matters to you.

– Of course *it matters*. *For a time I believed she was my Agnès returned. And I lay with her, though that was... vilhura, baseness. For that at least...* He widened his eyes. – *Do you still think me so inhuman?*

– No, far from it. But since the last time you met, you did try to strangle –

– *In hot blood. I’m not fond of being duped in order to be stabbed: once was enough. And since I’ve already paid in my own blood, what greater penance would you exact?*

– You needn’t be so defensive with me. That’s *not* what I meant.

– *Just as well.* He half-smiled in his usual fashion, midway between annoyingly smug and provocative. *I suspect full-length prostrations on stone chapel floors are not a good idea at my age.*

– I suspect they’re not a good idea at *any* age! No: what I meant was, I’m glad that you’re at least trying to do something for her. When I doubted you before...

– *You did have reason, I admit.* (Or did he mean, in French idiom, *You were right*, she wondered.) *I cannot undo all I have done; I would be lying if I said I wished I could; and I rather think that even she wouldn’t wish her boor of a husband back, now that Bascombe...* A sweet girl, but such poor taste in men.

– Yes; she found *you* attractive enough until she found out what you’d done!

– *I will allow her that. And at least she was completely sober at the time.*

– That’s not something you’ll ever let me live down, is it?

– *Probably not. But then, you have more than enough stones to cast back at me. All I ask is that you don’t use a trebuchet – especially indoors.*

She laughed. – At least David knows how to make salad!

– *I have a chef.*

– Ah, now that's even better!

– *I did not say that he was a good one.*

– But would *you* employ one who *wasn't*? Anyway, when I doubted you before, I had cause; but now? I accept your word, as a knight *and* a friend.

– *Thank you.* And he gave one of his gracious little smiles that, at last, seemed entirely sincere.

She was touched by that. And so she left him to his book, and the twilight over the garden:

“...Frères, je vous trompais: Abîme! abîme! abîme!
Le dieu manque à l'autel, où je suis la victime...
Dieu n'est pas! Dieu n'est plus!” Mais ils dormaient toujours!³²

In the days that followed, she returned to the Tate, to spend some time among the Pre-Raphaelite collection. Looking at the Rossettis, she could not help recalling Raoul's comments about the artist's father, and his bizarre writings about the Templars. Although he was hundreds of miles away, she felt close to him, almost as if he were looking over her shoulder. She would not have minded if he was. Strange: when she had last visited the gallery ten years ago, her husband had been beside her physically, but not spiritually or emotionally. She had never felt more alone then.

It had been here in England, in the early '70s, that she and Stefanos had begun to drift apart, as their expectations diverged. Doubtless it would have happened anyway, but she wondered if being abroad – more or less a self-imposed exile from the military – had hurried the process along. The feminist ideas she found in London had reinforced her natural instinct to resist the future that he had planned, with her role increasingly sidelined as helpmeet. He had never understood her desire to continue to grow intellectually, or her career ambitions. She had told Anne that she had regretted not having children, but she knew that if she had had any, the chances were she would still be locked into his well-ordered life: 'The Lawyer's Wife', without an opinion or profession of her own, smiling and nodding at dinner-parties for his colleagues (just like Kati, his present wife). The marriage had limped to its end a couple of years after they returned to Athens. She had been divorced for eight years now – and did not regret *that* at all.

Raoul might be a creature of the feudal age, she thought, but at least he seemed to have been adapting culturally over the centuries. (She had been amused by his comment about still adjusting to the Enlightenment.) Her ex-husband just became stuffier and more backward-looking the older he got, and did *not* appreciate being teased about it.

32

“Brothers, I have deceived you: the abyss! the abyss!
God is absent from the altar where I am the victim...
God does not exist! God is no more!” But they still slept!

Gérard de Nerval, *Le Christ aux Oliviers* (*Christ Among the Olive-trees*)

On her visits to Anne, she brought selections of postcards from the main London galleries as a reminder of the colour of life outside the hospital. She had picked up hints, here and there, in their conversations, and from Anne's personality, that she had come to photography from an art background, unlike Don, with his journalistic training. It would do her good, she thought, once she was discharged, to go to the museums and galleries, and become involved again in creativity.

Anne certainly laughed, delighted as a child, as Ismini tipped the cards from a paper bag on to the table in her room: Rossetti, Millais, Arthur Hughes and Burne-Jones from the Tate; also some of Julia Margaret Cameron's Tennyson-inspired photographs. "Oh, I used to love these myself, when I was a student!"

"Old favourites of mine, too! I spent a lot of time in the Tate when I lived here. Anyway, I got a couple of each, to send to friends. Keep any that appeal to you!"

"I'm not sure David would approve of some of them, though! I'm not sure *I* do, now..." she said, looking wistfully at Rossetti's *Wedding of Saint George*: golden armour and a severed dragon's head. "I've certainly no romantic illusions left about knights."

"I never had any to start with!" Ismini smiled. (But earned respect is another matter, she told herself, thinking of one knight in particular.)

"I'm afraid that, as a girl, I *did*. We always had lots of books of Victorian poetry and fairy tales around the house, and for me they were... a *dream*, into which I could escape." The younger woman picked up the card of Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shallott*. "But I didn't expect it to become a nightmare. I feared I would end up like her."

"In what way, exactly?"

She twisted the pearl pendant on its chain. "Do you know the poem? There's a curse on her: she can only look at the world through a mirror, weaving a tapestry of all that she sees. But when a knight – Sir Lancelot – rides past, she looks at him directly, and the mirror breaks. She goes mad, and dies in a boat drifting down to Camelot."

"Yes, I have read it."

"I was talking to Dr Phillimore about it the other day. I always felt as if my sterility – horrible word! – were a curse on *me*. And I spent too long looking at life through a camera lens to make up for it – when I wasn't putting Don's career first, and living – I suppose, vicariously – through him and his work – but then... His murder, and this whole mess... I thought it would destroy me."

"You're stronger than that. You've proved it already."

"I've never *thought* of myself as strong."

"After all that's happened to you this year? Of course you are! The Lady's not that much like you. She believes herself accursed, and so walls herself off from life, only gazing on its reflection. Then reality shatters her defences. Another of these self-imprisoning types."

"You said something about that before; about what anger and fear can do."

"Well, I've seen enough of it in various patients. I know the damage it causes. But then, so do you."

"You mean *Lavallière*? Is that what you and David found out about him?"

Ismini nodded. "*The mirror crack'd from side to side.*" (And now she understood the shattered mirror in her earlier nightmare about the injured bird...)

"Even without the alleged curse?"

"There are different kinds of curse. People can curse themselves. In trying to protect themselves, they create self-fulfilling prophecies, traps. I'm glad that you're resisting that path."

"So how *do* I protect myself, without becoming like that?"

"Protect yourself from *him*? I think there's little danger there for you." She had to be careful how much she revealed. "I *have* been in contact with him, in Scotland."

"Scotland? Yes, I thought he was there, but why did you -? The risk -"

"I considered finishing what I'd begun, but... it proved unnecessary. I don't think he'll trouble you again. I'd almost stake my soul on it."

Anne's eyes widened, concerned. "Please don't say that, Ismini!"

She smiled. "I *did* say 'almost'! When you've recovered more fully, there are things you may want to read about the case – although I'm sure David can explain it far better than I can. The historical background is such that –" She broke off: Anne was in no fit state to hear the full horror of it. "Well, to understand all isn't *necessarily* to forgive all, but it puts events and actions in perspective. And offers some hope."

"How do you mean?"

"To know why some people act as they do; that cruelty and fear breed only more of the same. It's *learned* behaviour, which means it may be *un-learned*."

"You think that's possible?"

"We must hope so."

Back at the coffee-bar in her hotel, with a strong black coffee and a cigarette, Ismini pondered the fact that she had created a new burden for herself. She would *never* be able to tell the truth to Anne or David about her involvement with Raoul, even if it went no further. Neither of them would cope: they would feel betrayed, threatened, at the very least; and Anne, especially... She did not want to imagine what it could do to *her*. She would have to keep it closed off from them for ever; would have to lie; have to keep her own psychic defences up in Anne's presence...

– Is this all that lies ahead? Deception on top of deception? she asked him in thought.

– *Everything has its price. Besides, you've done it before, when you told her that young Bascombe was dead.*

– And that was because of *you*. You'd have read her mind otherwise, and tried to kill him again.

– *That I concede.*

- So you accept responsibility for that? Good.
- *Does he accept responsibility for his atrocious manners?*
- I think he's embarrassed, at least. And I understand *why* you reacted as you did – as I think he now does – but it was still an *overreaction*. But we can talk through this together, if you wish.
- *Together?*
- Of course. I want to help you.
- *As I told you, I don't want pity.*
- This isn't pity. It's friendship, and – *more*, if you will. I've been reading: I know what you've endured.

- *No more nor less than any of my Brethren, on either occasion. I am notable only in having survived.*
- But it was still *too much*; it still *is*. I admire your courage, but...
- *But?*
- You shouldn't have to bear it alone. I've thought about your offer, and...

But then the telepathic contact between them faded: too much background noise interference. One of the waitresses was muttering expletives at the music-system, thumping it to make it start. The tape, a Duran Duran album,³³ was already stretched in places by over-playing:

... *You built your refuge, turns you captive all the same.
Because you're lonely in your nightmare, let me in;
And it's barren in your garden, let me in;
Because there's heat beneath your winter, let me in...*

Ismini turned over one of the postcards of *The Lady of Shallott*, and wrote: “*I am half-sick of shadows* – aren't you?” She posted it to him c/o his hotel.

As Anne continued to improve, Dr Phillimore made plans to release her as an outpatient. Harry Brennan, her boss from the photographic agency, and his wife Liz, who had been visiting her, invited her to stay with them to convalesce. Ismini was pleased: they were warm, down-to-earth people (Harry reminded her of an amiable and protective bear), exactly what Anne needed to take care of her. It also relieved her conscience a little, in view of her plans...

She drove out to say goodbye to Anne, who was delighted to see her. “I can't thank you enough for everything, Ismini! It was kind of you to come all this way, when you knew I'd... And as for your helping with *that other business* in Scotland...”

“It was the least I could do! Besides, Dr Phillimore was very persuasive. You'll be comfortable with the Brennans, I know.”

She nodded. “Everyone's rallied round wonderfully! It was the same when Don... And when David comes back –”

“That will make everything just right, won't it?”

³³ *Rio* (1982).

“You’re *happy* about that, aren’t you? I mean... I *do* realise – you and he –”

“That was over long ago! We’re *friends*. I may use his salad-making skills from time to time, but you’re the only woman he *loves*, I assure you! I’m delighted for you!”

“You’re *sure*? ”

“Of course! I’m not the jealous sort! I don’t have any claim on him: you can’t *own* someone’s body, let alone their soul!”

“Spoken like an old hippie!”

Ismini chuckled. “I *was*, a little, you know! But my husband wasn’t – one of the reasons he’s an *ex-husband!*”

“I suspected as much: your shawls and patchouli!”

“– *And* I’ve always loved *rembetika*: all the disreputable songs about thieves and whores, drinking raki, smoking *tsika*!”

“*Tsika*? ”

“Hashish. My dear, you’ve had a *very* sheltered upbringing!”

Anne smiled. “I suppose I have! Don was the one who took risks and had adventures: war zones, refugee camps, Asia, Africa... When we met, through the agency, I wasn’t long out of college: he was older, and had all these wild exploits behind him... I always felt such an innocent in comparison.”

“But now you’ve proven yourself!

“I didn’t *want* to – not *this* way!”

“But you have. – And no, you *don’t* need to ask my permission! If I were in your shoes, I wouldn’t!” (As I *am*, but cannot admit it, she thought.)

“And you – What are you going to do when you go home?” Anne asked.

“Back to routine: my practice in Athens, and weekends back in Rhodes now and then. But... I’m considering a few new opportunities that may be exciting.”

“Professionally?”

“In part. Ideas for research, perhaps some more publishable papers.”

“And the other part?”

Ismini smiled. “Let’s just say that’s more personal.”

“*Oh*. That sounds intriguing! I take it there’s a man involved?”

“Yes.” Please don’t ask any more, she thought. Don’t make me lie to you more than I have to...

“Anyone I know?” Not that this was likely: Ismini had introduced her in passing to a few acquaintances on some of their photographic excursions, but none had made a lasting impression. On balance, it was probably someone in Athens.

“No, I don’t think so.” Which was the truth: although Anne had been courted by Raoul, she did not *know* him. He had been wearing one of his masks – the haughty but chivalrous *seigneur* – hiding his role in Don’s death, hiding his own past, his own suffering. Even when she had made love with him, it had not been *his* body she had seen, touched, joined with... “I wasn’t sure at first what to do about it.”

“Why?”

She shrugged expressively. “It’s been quite a while since I had a serious relationship. And there’s a lot of history between us.” Some seven centuries of it, she thought wryly.

“He’s an ex?”

She shook her head. “A friend. A professional acquaintance.”

“But you’re in love with him?”

“I *love* him; that’s different. We already know the best and worst of each other. No illusions.”

“That’s good, surely?”

“Yes, it is. But I was wondering if I were too old to take a chance. If I do, I may regret it; if I don’t – I may regret it, too.”

“Then you shouldn’t let it pass you by,” Anne said earnestly. “When David comes home, I... After all, none of us knows how much time – Oh, you know what I mean!”

“I do. And you’re right. I’d be a fool to let this one slip through my fingers.” Like blood, she thought, remembering its stickiness on her hands, that night on the balcony.

“There’s just one thing,” Anne said. “When you go back...” She took off the mediæval pearl and gold pendant, and laid it in her friend’s hand. “I don’t know what to do with this. It’s not rightfully mine, but I can’t just get rid of it... Given its age, it must be priceless, after all.”

Ismini turned it over, remembering the parable of the merchant who sold all he had to buy one “pearl beyond price”. Knowing Raoul, was that how he had seen both Agnès and Anne? “No-one gives such a gift lightly. Are you sure?”

She nodded. “It’s too horrible to think of... I’ve only been wearing it because – well, one can never be too sure about theft in a place like this. But it makes me feel like a whore. *Payment for services rendered.*”

“I can take it back with me, and make sure it’s delivered to the *kastello* – if that’s what you want. No message, no questions asked.”

She thought about it. “That would be kind. Whatever I think about *him*, given what you say happened to *her* – Agnès... perhaps it’s what *she* would want. And he had kept it for so many years. So it doesn’t feel right for me to...”

Ismini closed her fingers around it. “I’ll see that he gets it,” she said. After all, it would give her an excellent excuse to visit.

A postcard was waiting for her at the hotel: another Waterhouse, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, a Keats-inspired scene in which a barefoot nymph, the ‘Beautiful, Merciless Lady’ of the title, ensnares an armoured knight in the long tresses of her hair. Raoul must have bought it from an art shop. On the reverse, he had made a stylised, slightly awkward line-drawing, reminiscent of mediæval marginal illustrations, of a bucket-helmeted knight, in mail and surcoat. “*Alone and palely loitering*” was written

beneath, and he signed it with a monogram formed from the T of his baptismal name and the R of the name he used.

She laughed, shaking her head to herself. No, he would *not* have to wait until they returned to Rhodes to receive the necklace.

9: Tea & Trebuchets

Again, Ismini found herself on the train heading north up the East Coast line. When it stopped in Durham, she gazed out at the university where David's supervisor, Professor Aimery, taught – and, no doubt, despaired of one of his longest-serving research students. (She hoped that he did not know that David had been passing himself off as a junior lecturer to get access to archives and to impress the English-as-a-foreign-language students who were his chief source of income on Rhodes.) She had telephoned David to tell him that she was leaving London, and had decided to look up some other old friends in Britain before returning home. It was true – just not the *whole* truth.

She glanced admiringly at the massive Romanesque and Gothic cathedral, which still dominated the city. It must be nearly a thousand years old: even older than the man she was going to see, she thought. The man she loved.

She could admit to herself now what *would* have happened, had they held each other's gaze a moment longer that night when their minds were torn open to each other, and her knife was in his back.

Eros and Thanatos. Achilles and Penthesileia. Love and death bound in a single moment.

Struck by such a *coup-de-foudre*, she could no more have delivered the *coup-de-grâce* than she could have put the injured bird out of its misery when she was a child. As he stumbled, half-fainting in his agony, she would have caught him in her arms. In a rush of fear and desire, pity and guilt – and, above all, *recognition* – they would have kissed, even as that fine-drawn mouth of his filled with blood. She would have laid him on the bed, and cut the clothing from his hurt body. She would have done all she could, with every tenderness, to tend his wound and ease his breathing. So she would have let him rest, as he wished, while death passed briefly as a shadow over him and turned to healing sleep.

– But what of Anne and David?

It would have been a betrayal far graver than that she believed herself to be committing now.

And so she was glad that they had not succumbed then. She and Raoul had both travelled some distance – metaphorically and literally – since that night, and they had needed to do so. But, in the tangle of passion, compassion and intellectual fascination she felt for him, she should never have doubted that they were kindred spirits.

Leuchars railway station was small, isolated, vaguely unsettling. RAF jets screeched and roared overhead in the wide, clear skies above the estuary of the Eden. From there, she took a taxi to the hotel, an early twentieth-century country house, long and low, in its own grounds.

Raoul was there to meet her at the entrance. She had not told him in advance which train she was catching, only sent a thought to him as the train crossed the Forth Bridge. She had forgotten how tall he was, the dignity of his bearing. But then, she could count on one hand the times she had seen him in health, fully dressed; all comparatively fleeting. What she could *not* forget was that, much as the

elegant Italian suit (more classic than *le dernier cri*) concealed his physical scars, so his gracious manner masked the scars on his mind and soul.

They kissed in greeting, rather formally, but for slightly longer than politeness ordinarily required. (The receptionist, who pretended not to be watching, put it down them being ‘continentals’.) She caught a hint of cologne – good quality, she thought, unlike David’s cheap, studenty aftershave. (It was *Mouchoir de Monsieur*, which he had favoured for more than seventy years.)³⁴

“You have had a good journey, I hope?” he asked.

“Comfortable enough, although it’s been a long day. And you – you’re not ‘palely loitering’ at all! You look very well! Fully recovered?”

“Thank you, yes,” he said. “It was my own fault: I should have taken more time to convalesce, that is all. But – then we should not have had the chance to get to know one another better. And I am glad of that.”

“So am I – *very* glad. But if you’ll excuse me, I must make sure there’s somewhere I can leave my case until... I’m going to have to go into the town later, to find a guest-house, and –”

“But you already have a room here.”

She looked at him askance. She did not like to feel indebted to him (or to any potential lover), to feel dependent, to feel *bought*... She remembered what Anne had said about the gift of the pearl.

He smiled as if he had read the question she had asked herself (as he probably had). “A *single* room. I know now how dangerous it is to presume too much. Nothing is taken for granted, I assure you.”

“That’s very generous, but I’d prefer not owe you anything.”

“You already owe me a *suit*; but I fear my tailor’s bill would alarm you even more than the hotel’s.”

“I *could* have done far *worse!*” she teased.

“You *saved* me from far worse, and that is a debt I can never repay. So please allow me some small gesture of gratitude.”

“Thank you, then. I suppose I ought to check in properly – and tidy myself up!”

“I shall await you in the drawing-room.” And he bowed slightly.

She scarcely noticed how pleasant and well-furnished her room was, she was in such haste to shower, change her blouse, repair her make-up. She had not felt such anticipation, such excitement since she was a girl; it felt vaguely ridiculous at her age. Don’t overdo the eyeliner, she told herself: these days it tends to settle in the lines beneath your eyes. She unpinned her short plait from the back of her

³⁴ *Mouchoir de Monsieur*: Guerlain (1904). The official Guerlain booklet says it is suitable for “the most sophisticated of men”.

head – too severe a look for the occasion, she thought – and combed down her hair. She threw the peacock-print shawl she had bought in Dundee about her shoulders.

She took a file of papers – the faxes from David and Edith Hepburn, and her own historical notes – from her case, and made sure that the sealed envelope containing Agnès's necklace was in her handbag. She took a deep breath to compose herself before coming downstairs.

The drawing-room was bright, welcoming, with an Adam-style fireplace, although (at this time of year) no fire was lit. The framed pictures on the walls – watercolours or, more probably, prints from watercolours – had a Mediterranean atmosphere: lightly clad young women, some bare-breasted, languid in sun-baked courtyards or beside old stone wells.³⁵

Raoul had made himself comfortable in an armchair, but rose to his feet to greet her again, kissing her hand. "Quite beautiful," he said.

"Don't overdo the flattery!" she laughed. "You're fifteen or twenty years too late for all that!"

"But your years are as days or minutes to me, remember?"

"Even so! I'm still not impressed."

"Then what *does* impress you?" he asked, as she sat down in the chair beside his.

"A witty choice of postcard. Eccentric mediæval drawings."

He shrugged. "I used to get bored during chapter meetings, and make caricatures. What is that they say about the Devil and idle hands?"

"At least it's safer than conjuring demonic visions!"

"But not always as amusing."

"It doesn't kill people."

"True, although that is not something I do *often*. And *only* under provocation."

"And I understand why, *but...*! Anne is recovering, at least. I suppose that's the best outcome we could have hoped for from any of this."

"What about *Monsieur Bascombe*? He *is* going to take care of her, is he not?"

"Yes, when he comes back to England to finish his thesis, which I think will be sooner rather than later. He's rather demoralised."

"I gleaned a little of this from you, but what happened, exactly? You must tell me everything!"

"David wrote an article about your previous tenure of Hagios Theodoros, which he wanted to get published. He sent it to his supervisor at Durham for review, but he's a Byzantinist; so he passed it on to a Crusades historian, Edith Hepburn. Since she was on her way back from a conference in Israel, she went to see David about it in person. She took it apart completely: poor research methods, blatant bias – everything."

³⁵ The pictures are by the Scottish artist William Russell Flint.

Raoul was pleased that he had not managed to kill the young man, after all: an academic humiliation was far more fitting. He tried to suppress his most infuriatingly arrogant smirk. In this, he failed.

“You don’t need to look *quite* so smug about it,” Ismini warned.

“It is difficult *not* to.”

“Anyway, it seems that you have a long-term admirer in this Dr Hepburn.”

“Really? I don’t believe I’ve ever met her.”

“I think you’d remember if you had: David says she has *mauve* hair.”

His eyes widened. “What is it that they call them these days? The *punks*, or something of the kind?”

“No, no – not at all! She’s a very genteel lady. He faxed me her article about you and de Villaret. I read it, and –”

“And?”

“If what she has written is true, then – you *have* been wronged indeed.”

“I see... We need afternoon tea to discuss this, I think: Lapsang, yes?”

“Yes, please: that would be delicious!”

“I believe *many* of life’s problems may be solved with Lapsang; for the rest, a counterweight trebuchet generally serves.” This he said quite straight-faced, but with a mischievous glint. He gave their order to the waitress.

Ismini took her cigarette case from her handbag. “Do you mind if I –?”

“I should prefer it if you did *not*, given recent events.”

“Oh, forgive me – that was thoughtless!” (Within the past three months he had suffered a major hæmopneumothorax *and* a pneumothorax: *of course* smoking in close proximity was out of the question.)

“For yourself, also, it is better not to.”

She nodded. “You’re right: I ought to give up. I’ve tried, before now. But I’ll tell you something: we doctors are the worst at taking our own advice! It’s a matter of will, isn’t it?”

“Not something you lack otherwise, as I know, to my cost.”

“True!”

“Perhaps you merely need a little encouragement?” he suggested.

The waitress brought a tray bearing tea, sandwiches, and scones with butter and preserves, which she placed on the coffee-table. Their conversation lapsed while they ate, but picked up again over tea.

Ismini was relieved to notice that he seemed to have quite a healthy appetite. “Please don’t think me entirely mad, but at one stage it *did* cross my mind that you might be a vampire.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Have you heard of *many* vampires who drink *tea*?”

“Now, be fair – I didn’t *know* that then!”

"I appreciate good wine, also... as I hope you will find out at dinner. Although I draw the line at *Châteauneuf-du-Pape* – for obvious reasons."

"Ah yes, the Avignon Popes: not among your favourite people!"

"Indeed. So you have learned a good deal, then?"

"Yes! Most of it was completely new to me, and... to be honest, disturbing. I hadn't realised how great an injustice was done. And you – Well, I've brought Hepburn's article down with me, if you'd like to see it."

"Yes, I would," he said.

"Some of it may be *uncomfortable* for you."

"But rather *less* uncomfortable than the events in question, I fancy."

She thought of the sword blade that had impaled him through the chest. "A bad choice of word. You know what I mean."

"Thank you for the warning, anyway."

She took the article from her folder and gave it to Raoul. She studied his expression while he read. There was no outward trace of emotion in his face, but she noticed that he skimmed over several pages – those describing the massacre of 1317. His hands seemed to tense: she knew that he would have been reaching for his prayer beads, had he had them nearby.

"Fascinating," he said, at last. "Mostly true – although I am a little hurt that she deems my early career 'undistinguished'. I had some hope of succeeding the Marshal; that was why I was imprisoned with him in Kyrenia."

"But does any written evidence of that remain?"

"Ah. Perhaps not."

"Then it's no slight! From what David told me, I don't think she likes to speculate in print too far beyond the evidence."

"Very wise. But it is scarcely as heroic a tale as she has made of it. I tried to do my duty, no more than that; and I failed to protect my Brethren."

"But look at the odds that were against you! Popes, kings, the Hospitaller Grand Master! There's no disgrace in that, believe me." She looked deep into his eyes. "And there's *none* in having survived, either – not after all you went through!"

"I wish I could convince myself of that."

"Well, we could always talk to her. She teaches here, in the town. She must have returned home by now."

He smiled wryly. "A 'second opinion'?"

"It might help. And I have something else for you," she said, and drew a sealed brown envelope from her handbag. "Anne wanted me to return this to you. I know it means a great deal to you."

He did not need to open it; he could tell from the shape and feel that it contained the pearl pendant which, lifetimes ago, he had taken from the neck of his dead mistress. He frowned. “Of course.”

“I’m sorry. But you surely know why.”

“I do. You were right: I *was* a fool. I was caught up in the thrill of the intrigue; pretending I was young again, when the world, too, was younger; leaving secretly in silence before the dawn; imagining again the watchman on the tower: ‘*Oy Dieus, oy Dieus, de l’alba! tan tost ve...*’”³⁶ He sighed sadly, bitterly. “But it was *not* love-service, it was – something *base*. I’ve *thought* the word – although it’s not one that I will say. But I *chose* not to see that, just as she, too, chose not to see through a thin mask of suggestion. A little reason, and she would have seen me as I am.”

“You can hardly blame her, under the circumstances.”

“I do not *blame* her. What surprised me *a little* was that all she seemed to want from her husband was... *physical*. Yet she seemed to me too *fine* for him – too sensitive. But it was a delusion, on both sides; a shameful one, on mine.”

Ismini nodded. “Desire’s a strange thing: a mixture of psychology, chemistry, social cues... It *can* be foolish, and dangerously destructive. But *not always*.”

Raoul slipped the envelope into the inside pocket of his jacket. “At least there is no more war between *us*.³⁷”

³⁶ ‘Ah God, ah God, the dawn! How soon it comes!’ The *alba*, or dawn song, is a staple of the Occitan tradition. Generally, it involves adulterous lovers and a watchman, and the lovers having to part at dawn, the man sneaking off before *lo gelos* (the jealous husband) returns. The earliest example is in Latin, from the 10C, *Phæbi claro nondum orto iubare*, with the refrain in Occitan or North Italian vernacular; the most famous is 12C, Guiraut de Bornelh’s *Reis glorios, verais lums e clartatz* (*Glorious King, Thou True Light and Clarity*), but Raoul is quoting an anonymous 12-13C one, *En un vergier sotz fuelha d’albespi* (*In an orchard, beneath the hawthorn’s leaves*). This is the sort of romantic culture with which he has grown up: you can take the boy out of the Middle Ages, but...

³⁷ There is an echo here of Guilhem IX of Aquitaine’s *Ab la doussor del temps novel*:

*Enquer me membra d’un mati
que nos fezem de guerra fi
e que.m donet un don tan gran
sa drudaria e son anel.
Enquer me lais Deus viure tan
qu’afia mas mans sotz son mante!*

*Still I recall the morning
When we made an end of our war
And she gave to me so great a gift:
Her love-service and her ring.
God grant that I live long enough
To place my hands beneath her cloak!*

“No, my dear.”

Being unused to endearments, and, indeed, rather surprised by it, he smiled hesitantly.

That evening, they dined together in the hotel restaurant. Good food, good wine, good conversation of the sort that runs on and on and covers every subject under the sun. Raoul seemed far more at ease, on the surface, at least. Ismini guessed he must be like this at his elegant dinner-parties at the *kastello*, but she also sensed that all the wit and charm were, in part, *willed*. She asked him (carefully avoiding more troubling topics) about the times in his life when he had been most happy. He talked, unaffectedly, of his youth in the Limousin – hunting and hawking with his family (he was the third child, and eldest boy, among nine), learning songs; of his early years in Cyprus, when his sweet, delicate Agnès was alive; of Prague, too, in Rudolf's time, four centuries ago; of eighteenth-century Paris and Edinburgh and Naples, *salons* and *philosophes*. She was a great listener by profession, but this was a pleasure.

They embraced afterwards (less reservedly than before), but he retired to his suite, and she to her room. She was weary from the long train-journey, and he –? All this talk of past joys had, quite simply, left him feeling somewhat *afraid*. He knew how fragile, how transient a state it was.

10: The Branch of the Whitethorn

*Lanquan li jorn son lonc en may
M'es belhs dous chans d'auzelhs de lonh,
E quan mi tuy partitz de lay,
Remembra'm d'un' amor de lonh.
Vau de talan embroncx e clis
Si que chans ni flors d'albespis
No.m platz plus que l'yverns gelatz.*

*When the days are long in May,
Fair to me are birds' sweet distant songs,
And when I go away from there,
I call to mind a distant love.
From longing I go oppressed, bowed down,
So that neither songs nor whitethorn blooms
Please me more than winter's ice.*

Jaufre Rudel de Blaia (died c. 1148), *Lanquan li jorn son lonc en may*

Raoul took a walk in the hotel gardens after breakfast. Ismini had gone back to her room to finish getting ready: women generally took a long time over such things.

Beyond the formal lawns and flowerbeds was a wild garden, a small woodland, through which flowed a stream with a small bridge. The hawthorns were blooming in a creamy and pink froth of blossom.

Flors d'albespin.

It called to mind the courtly songs he had learned as a youth – songs by men over a century dead, even then. Guilhem of Aquitaine (though he had his coarse moods); the Castellan of Blaia who went *outra mar* for love of the Countess of Tripoli, whom he had never seen, and died; Cabestanh, whose heart, they said, was cut out and roasted and served up to his lady by her husband (and she threw herself from the window when she knew what she had eaten); Arnaut, “the better maker”, as Dante had called him, “who swims against the stream”; *En* Bertran of Autafort, from his own country, with his songs of bright war-banners and din of axe on shield, and women with lithe bodies white as whitethorn flowers...

Always whitethorn flowers and the song of the nightingale. But there were no nightingales here. And the *trobadors* never mentioned that whitethorn has the scent of mortality, the sweetness of decaying flesh.

Every living creature dies once, and decays; any exception is, by definition, unnatural, a *monster*. Was it not the worst selfishness to tempt another – especially one whom he loved – to share such monstrousness, so as not to be alone?

He thought of Agnès, her fragile beauty rotted into bone and dust all those years ago: six-hundred-and-eighty years, seven months, three weeks, and... He could reckon it to the very hour. The last he had seen of her was on a brief visit to Cyprus three years ago: a fragment of incised tomb-slab in

the Archæological Museum in Limassol, labelled *Unidentified Lady of the Lusignan Era, c. 1300*.³⁸ A generic outline of a head, which had never resembled her; he had said so even at the time.

The envelope containing her necklace was still in his inside pocket. It had been a generous gesture of Anne's to return it, he thought. Poor girl. Had she wished truly to hurt him, she could have taken it to an auction-house and profited considerably from the proceeds. God knew how old it was. Agnès had been given it by her mother, whose family had had it for over a century. They said it had been brought from Constantinople by Ansaldo Bonvicino, when he came with that Marquis, of whom Bertran had sung...³⁹

He heard a woman's footsteps, and turned, for a moment uncertain whom he would see.

It was Ismini, in her russet outdoor wrap. "You seem troubled; I think I know why."

"Do you?" he asked, a little sharply, but then continued more gently: "Ah, I'm sure that you do. I have had less cause to hide my thoughts from you of late."

"Nor would I wish you to hide them. – It's still about Agnès, isn't it? And Anne?"

He did not reply, but she knew the answer.

"The *past*, in other words?"

"You must admit, I have rather *more* past, and a more complicated one, than most men."

"– And more *future*, if you'll look towards it." She held out her hand to him; he took it, and so they began to walk slowly back towards the hotel. "You know what happened to Orpheos, through looking back?" she warned. "He lost what he desired most. I won't let you do that."

"So what have you been conspiring?" he asked; not that he did not already have a very good idea...

"I telephoned the university, to speak to Edith Hepburn. I said I was a friend of David's; that I knew she was interested in Hagios Theodoros; and that there was someone she really ought to meet – namely, *you*. She sounded quite thrilled."

"So you have arranged it all, *without* asking me first?"

"I knew you'd agree! Besides, today's Wednesday, so she isn't teaching this afternoon, which makes everything easier. She suggests we meet at three, at a tea-room called McArthur's:⁴⁰ it's near her department. South Street, I think. If that suits you, of course."

"Of course." He smiled. "You have *initiative*, that I grant you. If you insist on organising my life so efficiently, I may have to replace the Colonel!"

"What have you been doing about transport?"

³⁸ Compare this 14C incised slab from Nicosia: http://mbs-brasses.co.uk/pic_lib/Nicosia_Brass.htm

³⁹ The Bonvicini arrived in Tyre in 1187 with the Marquis Conrad of Montferrat (c. 1145-92), who saved the Kingdom of Jerusalem, and was briefly its king.

⁴⁰ A St Andrews institution, which, alas, closed in 1984 or '85 (if I recall correctly). The building is now split between a pub and an Indian restaurant.

"When I arrived in this country, I hired a car with a driver, but that arrangement lapsed while I was in hospital. So at present, no..."

"You don't drive yourself?"

He shrugged. "I have never learned; I'm not entirely convinced it is a custom that will last."

"After a hundred years?" She was surprised at this. At home, he had a stylish, pale-coloured metallic Mercedes, but then, as she recalled, she had only ever seen him in one of the rear passenger seats.

"And we've had millennia with the *horse!* Besides, here, the town is within walking distance."

"It doesn't over-tire you?"

"I was advised to take 'fresh air and gentle exercise'; I've already made the journey once or twice. Hence your card from *Madame Firth's* shop."⁴¹

However, they decided to take a taxi, to be sure of arriving on time. South Street was one of the great processional streets that led from the site of the walls (in this case, the one surviving gate) to the now-ruined cathedral. It was lined with trees, and punctuated with architectural relics: a seventeenth-century courtyard, glimpsed through an archway; a small Gothic ruin, a fragment of the Church of the Blackfriars. Raoul felt a warm glow of what Colonel von Reitz would have called *schadenfreude* at the Dominicans – the order which ran the Inquisition – being thus brought low.

Outside McArthur's (more or less opposite the Post Office), a small, neatly dressed woman was waiting. She was clutching a tapestry handbag, and kept glancing at her watch. At first sight, they were uncertain whether it *was* Dr Hepburn, as her hair was now rinsed a very delicate shade of *eau-de-Nil*,⁴² but Raoul read her superficially, to confirm her identity. Since Ismini had spoken to her on the telephone, she carried out the introductions, describing Raoul as her "good friend".

"I should have known you at once, *monsieur!*" the historian exclaimed cheerily.

"How so?"

"From the Blondel painting; the resemblance is striking! Was it your great-grandfather or great-great-grandfather who modelled for that?"

"The latter, I believe, *madame,*" he lied.

"Well, it's an honour to meet you! And you too, doctor! What is it you're a doctor *of?*"

"I'm a psychiatrist. But don't worry, I'm not here in a professional capacity!" (At least, not for *you*, she thought; Raoul was a different matter.)

"Well, let's go in! I booked a table, but I wasn't sure how well you knew your way around town..."

⁴¹ The shop is still there, but is no longer Helen Firth's.

⁴² Edith's changing hair colour is taken from one of her real-life inspirations, whose hair varied between pale blue, pale green, pink and mauve. Nowadays, it is plain white.

She led the way inside. Past a well-stocked *patisserie* counter, it opened out into spacious tea-room. It was a quaint, old-fashioned place, more 1950s than 1980s, in which waitresses in black dresses and white aprons bustled about, and cakes appeared on trolleys and tiered stands.

“What a coincidence that you should be in Scotland! A very happy one, I must say!”

“I know David Bascombe *quite* well,” said Ismini, ignoring a wicked look from Raoul. “I was speaking to him on the telephone, after he’d met you, and he told me how disappointed you were about not being able to visit Hagios Theodoros. So I thought I should mention it to Raoul when next I saw him.”

“How *very* thoughtful of you!”

“I am sorry, indeed, that I was absent,” he said. “I have read your work concerning my ancestor, and it would please me much to be your guide on some future occasion. Perhaps, if you return to Rhodes, you would let me know?”

“That’s most kind of you, and I’d be delighted to take you up on it! Mr Bascombe told me you’d been in a serious accident: I do hope you’re better!”

“Thank you, yes. But it was not so *very* serious: not life-threatening. A shoulder injury, that is all.”

“Well, so long as you’re all right now!”

A waitress came to their table to take their order: coffees and shortbread.

“You see, I did *so* want to visit Saint-Théodore properly,” Edith Hepburn went on. “It was uninhabited – partly ruined – when I was last there, in the late ‘60s, and not entirely safe to explore. Some of the wartime gun-platforms were still in place, as I recall. I asked Mr Bascombe if we might arrange a visit with your staff, but he seemed to me... well, almost *alarmed* at the idea of going anywhere near it!”

“Ah. That *is* my doing, I am afraid,” said Raoul.

“He did say you’d had some sort of *contretemps* over his research; that his findings had offended you, am I right?”

“It was somewhat more serious than that. I was obliged to remove him from my property by force.”

“Oh?”

“If he had addressed his enquiries to me courteously, I should have been happy to answer any historical questions. Instead, he chose to confront me during a party, at which he was my guest, with some fatuous accusations against Thibaut de Montrefort. Since Ismini tells me that you have read his article, I need not repeat them. I did my best to ignore them: they were nothing I had not heard before. But then I found him trespassing in my private apartments – in my office, examining papers on my desk. And so I had no choice but to *throw him out*.” Apart from omitting the factor of jealousy over Anne, and his use of telepathic suggestion to make David see demons and believe himself to be on fire, this *approximated* to the truth. “I *did* lose my temper, I confess,” he added. “But I believe I had cause.”

"Dear me! How frightful! Well, that explains a *great* deal!"

"I saw David afterwards, and he *was* extremely distressed," added Ismini, with a pointed glance at Raoul. (David had been so hysterical that she had had to cut his hand with broken glass to bring him to his senses.) "A little more tact on *both* sides would not have gone amiss."

"Yes, well... Sadly, these things happen! Unfortunately, I suspect it's influenced Mr Bascombe's work," Edith said. "It seems to me that he's taking out his animosity towards *you* on poor Brother Thibaut. It's as if he treats you as one and the same!"

"Almost certainly," Raoul replied coolly.

Ismini noticed a glint in his eyes, and shot a thought across at him: Please behave yourself...

"And while I know it's not primarily his field, his gullibility *did* surprise me. You know, when I last saw Giles Aimery, he told me one of his research students had him tearing his hair out, despite being in Greece. Now I've *met* him – well, I'm not surprised Giles is almost *bald* these days! All the usual sensational Templar myths – conspiracies, devil-worship and so on – he seemed to *want* to believe, and was really rather disappointed with the truth, as far as we have it!"

"I hope you are more fortunate with your own students," he said.

"On the whole, but... I'm not sure how long *that* will continue, since that peculiar book came out last year!⁴³ I've already received a couple of essays that cited it as a source, and I shudder to think what may happen in the exams! Grails, Cathars, secret societies, holy bloodlines: whatever all that has to do with the Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon...! 'Poor Knights', indeed, poor old things... I don't think many people these days truly comprehend their *religious* commitments and duties."

"I'm sure David must have been difficult to convince on that," observed Ismini.

"Yes! When we were at Lindos, he asked me about the duties of Preceptors and Masters; what Brother Thibaut would have done at Saint-Théodore... I began to explain, but he started laughing and asked me if I were *joking*. Of course not, I told him: it's all far too tragic."

"But why did he *think* you were joking?"

"I told him that, every Maundy Thursday in the years he ran the house, he would have washed the feet of thirteen paupers from the village, and had them fed and clothed. Mr Bascombe found that hard to believe, for some reason."

Ismini could see David almost exploding at the very idea; indeed, she was not entirely sure whether she believed it herself. Thibaut de Montrefort – *Raoul Lavallière* – sleeves rolled up, on his knees with a bucket, washing peasants' leathery feet? She gazed at him: since he was looking particularly

⁴³ Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln's *The Holy Blood & the Holy Grail*, which revitalised the whole 'Templar/Cathar conspiracy theory' scene in 1982. We are still living with the consequences, Dan Brown & al.

serene and aloof at this moment, the juxtaposition of his past and present lives could not have been more bizarre...

"It is alien to *Monsieur* Bascombe's culture, I think," Raoul said calmly. "My ancestors believed strongly that *noblesse oblige*; also, it was the duty of the master of a religious house to follow his higher Master, as both shepherd *and* servant."

"So it's true? He did this *in person*?" Ismini asked.

"Of course. That is so, is it not, Dr Hepburn?"

She nodded. "One didn't get intellectuals or mystics in the Templars – and only one or two second- or third-rate *trobadors* that I recall" – Ismini noticed Raoul wince at this, but Edith carried on – "but they did carry out practical piety, acts of charity. Of course, the other part of their practical piety was smiting the Saracen, but Brother Thibaut never got the chance to do any of that. Limassol, when the Order was resisting arrest, must have been the only real fighting he saw."

But for Ismini, yet another mask had fallen, uncovering another facet of his personality. It fitted with his olive-wood prayer beads, with his devotion to the Virgin – besides some of his more disturbing earlier remarks. "A shepherd will shoot a stray dog that worries his flock: I defend those who are in my care," he had said, justifying Don Tierney's killing. But then, he had already tried dying for his previous Templar flock, as a 'Good Shepherd' ought – only to survive when they did not.

"You clearly know much about this subject, *Monsieur* Lavallière: have you studied it formally, or is it just an interest because of your family connection?" Edith asked.

"The latter. I have not had a great deal of *formal* education, it shames me to say. However, I spent some years in holy orders myself, when younger," he said. "Unfortunately, my health suffered, and I returned to the world – somewhat reluctantly at first."

"And what is your line of work these days?"

He shrugged. "Oh, consultancies, networking... From God to Mammon, yes?"

"Well, we all have to make a living! And at least you've been putting the proceeds to good use, judging by the photographs of the castle. Quite an ambitious project! And to have accomplished so much in so short a time!"

"Ruins are one of my pastimes. Before this, I had begun to restore a Templar keep in Lebanon – outside Sidon – but then, conditions there became far too dangerous. It is a pity: it's not so many years since Beirut was the Paris of the Levant."

"Yes, it was – a lovely city! I did some research there in the '60s... Heartbreaking, what's happened!" Edith sighed. "But – *Saint-Théodore*? As I said, quite an undertaking! And as a family member, it must have been quite an *emotional* one for you, too, even after so many centuries."

He was silent for a moment, pensive, stirring his coffee alternately clockwise and anti-clockwise. Ismini knew that he was composing himself, and composing his response without revealing too much. "I regard it as a moral duty; a debt of honour. As you say, there is so much nonsense written these days, I should not wish it to become... another *Rennes-le-Château*. The bones of innocent men still lie within

those walls; the blood of the martyrs, if I may call them that. Since Brother Thibaut was unable to protect them in life, I can, at least, protect them in death. For the sake of the villagers, also: they, too, were under his protection, and paid dearly.”

Sensing that they were on the verge of difficult territory, Ismini sent him reassuring thoughts, and steered the conversation back towards Edith. “So what first drew *you* to the case, Dr Hepburn?” she asked. “It’s a fairly obscure story, and hardly the most edifying.”

“I’m not sure that *anyone* studies history for *edification*! It’s been many years, now. I was researching the deposition of Foulques de Villaret as Grand Master of the Hospitallers. It’s an extraordinary event in the history of any of the military orders – an armed rebellion against an incumbent Grand Master. I kept finding oblique references to ‘acts of oppression’, ‘tyranny’, ‘abuses of power’, but little concrete evidence against him. Then I noticed a passing mention of de Montferrat. I thought this was rather odd at first, as the only man of that name I had encountered was a *Templar* who had been tried in Cyprus, and – I had assumed – died in Kyrenia. Gradually, I pieced together all the chronicle and charter references to him, de Belabre’s confession, a few letter copies in the Papal archives... And there we are.”

“We’re both quite familiar with the details,” Ismini said. “Raoul especially.” (She was anxious to protect him from an in-depth discussion of the massacre: she knew that he would need a great deal of her *professional* support if he were to face that.)

“Yes,” he said, “and I am grateful to you for bringing the incident to wider attention.”

“Not *so* wide! Mediæval history journals don’t have a large circulation, I’m sorry to say!”

“But it seems to me that you have a real sympathy – a *compassion* – for your subject. I... had not *expected* compassion, after so long.” He looked at Ismini. “It always surprises me – pleasantly.”

Edith nodded. “I daresay you’ll think me frightfully old-fashioned for saying this, but I believe historiography carries certain *responsibilities*. Ethically.⁴⁴ We – as a society, that is – generally condemn those who would deny or justify *this* century’s atrocities – death-camps, gulags, killing-fields – yet are indulgent towards the publication of wild theories about the Templars’ alleged ‘crimes’. But why? Does innocence become guilt merely because there are no survivors left to defend themselves? If so, we must fear for the future.”

He gave his enigmatic, Gothic smile, like that of the carved angels at Reims or Chartres. *No survivors?* If she only knew...

She went on: “I mean to say, in the Middle Ages, some believed that Jews ritually sacrificed Christian children, and that lepers went around poisoning wells. Patent nonsense, but innocent people were killed as a result. Nowadays, no-one sane would believe *those* claims – yet otherwise rational people

⁴⁴ Edith’s dialogue is inspired by Simon Schama’s words in *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (1989): “Confronted with evidence of an apocalypse, it does historians no credit to look aside in the name of scholarly objectivity”.

seem happy to convince themselves that the Templars worshipped idols, or were some sort of heretical conspiracy. They *want* to believe the official accusations and the confessions. But to me, that is to make oneself complicit, morally.”

“Complicit in the abuse by which the confessions were obtained?” Ismini asked.

“Yes. And I think that is... *abhorrent*. When one is faced with the torture of innocents, does one stand with the torturer or with the victim? The answer is obvious, or, at any rate, it *should* be.”

“That seems to me a very Christian position,” Raoul observed.

She shook her head. “I consider it merely *human*. After all, the Inquisition was a *Christian* institution, was it not?”

“Point taken.”

But Ismini was, first and foremost, a scientist: “What about objectivity?”

“Of course one should present evidence objectively – without deliberate falsification, without twisting it by selection or omission. And I’m not suggesting that history become *advocacy*. That would be futile: it’s seven centuries too late to start campaigning, ‘Free the Templars’! But it seems to me that privileging myth over evidence is the real danger. ‘No smoke without fire’, Mr Bascombe said. I told him the only fire was in the dungeons and at the stakes. We can’t afford to forget. We *owe* it to the dead to be as honest as we can.”

“Certainly, it is easier to be honest with *them* than with the living,” said Raoul. “And I am sure they would appreciate your efforts. If he could know of it, I believe that Brother Thibaut would be highly flattered by your concern.”

“He must have been a courageous man: not a *wise* one, and perhaps, in the end, too stubborn, but – *decent*, I think. In an earlier time, or in another order, his career would have been brighter. But you ought to be proud of him.”

He lowered his gaze modestly. “I believe it proper only to take pride or shame in one’s own actions, not the borrowed fame of one’s forebears. Besides, *Non nobis, Domine, non nobis, sed nomini tuo...*”

“*Not unto us, Lord, not unto us, but to Thy name give the glory?* Yes, indeed. That’s one reason why there are no Templar saints: all Brethren were spiritually equal. As for martyrs, well, the Church doesn’t tend to count those whom it martyrs *itself*.”

“That is true, also!” he said, smiling.

While Raoul attended to the bill – he would not hear of Edith paying – she whispered to Ismini: “You’re very lucky, my dear: such an *interesting* young man!”

“He’s older than he looks – but yes, he is quite *unusual*.”

They walked with Edith as far as her department, across the street. “You may want to take a look at next door,” she said. “The departmental library and study-rooms. They call it St John’s House: the plot was Templar property before 1312, of course, but then the Hospitallers got it. Not that they lived here, but they took the rents from it. There’s a carved stone head down the lane at the side, too.

Again, some foolish things have been said about *that* and the Templars, but it's probably just a fragment from the cathedral or the Blackfriars."

"Thank you: we will!" Ismini said.

"It really has been delightful to meet you both!"

"We shall meet again on Rhodes, I am sure of it," Raoul said. "But I think it may be diplomatic not to mention our meeting to *Monsieur Bascombe*, should you..."

Edith Hepburn cleared her throat. "I strongly suspect I *won't* be having further communications with *him!* Frightful manners! You have my full sympathy!"

And so they parted, in good cheer.

Raoul remarked that he wished he could "correct" the modern plaque of the Hospitaller arms in the stairwell of St John's with white and red paint. He and Ismini then inspected the weathered little head wearing an imperial crown, who grimaced down upon a garden in Baker Lane, just around the corner. Perhaps once a Biblical king or Roman emperor, or even 'King Death', he was certainly no demonic Asmodeus or mythical 'Baphomet': merely one of many 'orphaned' mediæval sculptures scattered about the town.⁴⁵

After they returned to his hotel suite, Raoul was very quiet for a while, retreating behind his psychic barriers once more. Ismini watched him from the couch, as he rested in the window-seat, gazing out over the gardens. He ran the olive-wood prayer beads through his fingers, perhaps less tensely than before. She intuited that, as he turned them over, so he turned Edith's words in his mind, her evaluation of the man he had been. It was surely good for him, she thought, to find that a stranger, who had learned of him only through the written record, cared for him; that he and his Brethren *were* viewed sympathetically.

⁴⁵ The sculpted head in Baker Lane (or Baxter's Wynd): sadly, an overgrown shrub has now more or less destroyed this little fellow, apart from his crown.

11: The Bread & the Knife

*La nostr' amor va enaissi
Com la brancha de l'albespi
Qu'estai sobre l'arbre tremblan,
La noig, ab la ploi' e al gel,
Tro l'endeman, qe.l sols s'espan
Per la fueilla vert e.l ramel.*

*Our love goes thus
Like the branch of the whitethorn
That's trembling on the tree
At night, in the rain and frost,
Until next day, when the sun spreads out
Through green leaf and bough.*

Guilhem IX of Aquitaine (1071-1126), *Ab la doussor del temps novel*

“Thank you so much for arranging today with Dr Hepburn,” Raoul said, at dinner. In the public rooms of the hotel, he and Ismini continued conversing in Greek, as a protection against the other guests, most of whom seemed to be Americans. “She will certainly be made welcome on her next visit.”

Ismini nodded. “I thought she’d be helpful. Mind, I half-expected to be asked to write an *essay* by the time she’d finished!”

“I know what you mean! I’m only relieved that none of my verses to Agnès survive, or she would have numbered me among the third-rate poets – fourth-rate, probably! I was painfully unoriginal in two languages.”

“Surely that’s an achievement in itself? – But she thinks well of you in other respects.”

“But, I wonder,” he mused, “is it better to be remembered as a brave and pious *fool*, or as a demonic *genius*? ”

“She didn’t call you a fool!”

“Not in so many words; but I read her mind a little.”

“You *do* realise that’s the psychic equivalent of David trespassing in your office?”

“I know,” he said disarmingly. “But you do it, too! – She’s fond of my former self – of that I have no doubt; but I also have no doubt that she thinks him... a *child*, in many respects. Utterly naïve.”

“You’re lucky, then, that she doesn’t know you as I do!” Ismini teased. “It *still* strains my brain to picture you with the paupers!”

“I was not then as I am now: I had renounced the world’s vanities. It took me a few centuries to realise that asceticism itself can be a vanity, spiritually. Self-denial and humility become other means of claiming superiority.”

“At least no-one could accuse you of either, now!”

“And that does not displease you?”

“Monastic virtues don’t appeal to me! A little obedience *perhaps*, but not poverty or chastity!”

He smiled, and took a sip of the Saint-Emilion. It was impossible to be in Scotland and *not* drink *claret*, he thought, remembering his last visit just over two hundred years ago. And it went well with this evening’s venison. “Have you given much thought to what happens when we return home? Are you returning to your practice in Athens?”

“Yes. I said I had been called abroad by a family crisis – illness – and arranged cover. I’ll have to sort out all of that, catch up on cases. What about you?”

“Paperwork, I expect. There must be a mountain of it on my desk: the Colonel can only deal with so much of it in my absence. And I should probably organise another meeting of the Brethren, given that the last one was... *disrupted* by my health.”

“Why do you do it? What do you hope to gain?”

“Gain? In what sense? Not materially, if that’s what you mean. The on-going work on the castle devours most of the fees.”

“In a broader sense, then. Surely you have, at least, *some* power?”

“*Influence*, not power – not for myself. There *is* a difference. I saw what was left in Europe after these last great wars. Taking the long view, I believed that I could foster the careers of people who had the ability to avert such destruction in the future; encourage them to share ideas. I keep an eye on potentially disruptive factors – the financial markets, the arms trade, *et cetera* – and occasionally *adjust* them where necessary. After all, if non-existent companies sell non-existent weapons to morally questionable authorities, the latter can hardly complain publicly of their *non-arrival*,” he said mischievously. “But it took me some years to devise the Brotherhood; the ritual aspects are a personal memorial to my Order. And after buying Saint-Théodore, I had a suitable location, with the necessary privacy.”

“Not to mention your personal *security system*!” There was a barb in her teasing: she could not forget that there had been at least one death. “So you *are* the latter-day Templar conspiracy?”

“An *éminence grise*, perhaps: one Templar hardly makes a conspiracy! But I need always to occupy myself with some project or other.”

“Like rebuilding your ruins?” she asked. She thought: it prevents you turning inwards, because you know where too much time, too much introspection could lead. With less intellectual discipline, less displacement activity, your mental state would be far worse than it is; but even now... It’s easier for you to rebuild physical stones and mortar, easier to erect walls around yourself inwardly, than to restore yourself psychologically and emotionally ...

“Yes. And I meet a great many interesting people from various *metiers*: politics, finance, arts, sciences. You would find them fascinating, I’m sure.”

“And?” Ismini tried to draw him out further.

"Sometimes one feels the lack of... an intelligent and articulate hostess at such gatherings: a *salonnière*. If it does not inconvenience you, I should like to hope that I may call upon you when you are on Rhodes..."

"Of course. I'm curious about what you get up to there. And I'd be honoured to meet your guests."

"Which reminds me: I ought to telephone Sir Joseph and Lady Marcus before I return to Rhodes; perhaps even visit them. Since I was semi-conscious when last he saw me, they may be concerned; I can, at least, assure them that I am well."

"I understand: it must have been a... great shock." She knew she had had no choice but to stab him, but still it discomfited her to think of it. "Incidentally, how *did* he manage to get out of that appointment with the Prime Minister?"

"He had a family crisis: a recurring one. You see, it's curious how, whenever he is invited to Chequers, his invalid cousin in Tel Aviv relapses," Raoul said, with a particularly innocent expression.

Ismini laughed. "You're incorrigible!"

He shrugged. "It was not my idea, but *his* – well, Wilde's originally, I think.⁴⁶ He would much rather spend a weekend at Saint-Théodore than in England with... They studied chemistry together at Cambridge, and he disliked her even then! And our weather is generally better, too, is it not? – Lady Marcus is a charming woman, very Viennese; we have an understanding."

"You haven't told –?"

"No, but... we have been in the *same place*: one always senses that, even subconsciously. Another survivor. She rarely speaks of it. Usually she wears a broad bracelet; it hides the number."

Ismini thought of the dolphin fountain in the Old City. "Dr Hepburn was right: there *is* a continuum, isn't there?"

"Hell always remains open for business: the staff merely change their uniforms from time to time," he answered.

Afterwards, they walked together slowly down through the gardens. Dusk was falling as they followed the path into the wilderness. There was no nightingale, but a blackbird sang as melodic substitute for its brown, southerly cousin.

"I rather like the idea of being a *salonnière*, you know," she said. "But you have *more* than that in mind, I hope?"

"Yes, " he replied, "and yet... I wonder what it would do to you."

"*No*: what it would do to *you*. Because you've seen everything and everyone you've loved destroyed or lost to you."

⁴⁶ *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

“*Les neiges d’antan.*⁴⁷ In the end, I have always been alone.”

“Until *now*.” And, she thought, you are wary of imagining the alternative, because half of you likes playing Nerval’s melancholy ‘Prince of Aquitaine in the broken tower’, while the other half is desperate to be free...

“Until now. But it *is* to ask a great deal of you.”

“You asked me to trust you: I do. You offered to teach me to live as you do: I agree.”

“Does that not frighten you?”

“No.”

“Perhaps it *should*.” He stopped beneath the hawthorn tree where she had found him that morning, and took both her hands in his. “I remember when I understood the cost of what I had gained. It was about thirty years after Saint-Théodore. I had survived mortal wounds; I was nearing my allotted ‘three-score-and-ten’; I should have been an old man, and yet I was – as I am now. There was a visitation of disease, the Great Pestilence. Wherever I travelled, all that I saw in every country, every village and town was death. Men, women, children, of all estates... Not enough gravediggers left to bury them. It seemed we had entered the Last Days – and I passed through them, untouched. I was horrified, but only as if it were a painted scene before my sight: the *Danse Macabre* that arose in those times. I *felt* nothing.”

She gazed into his eyes, wanting to reassure him. “*Anyone* would be numbed by the scale of that. And I’d hazard that you were still in shock: you’d put all your powers, all your psychic energy into healing your body, while your mind... It’s *not* because of immortality.”

“So you are not afraid of it?”

“For that, I’d have to fear *life itself*; and I don’t: I’ve never *learned* to fear it. And you... you have fought in battle; you have, as you said yourself, passed through Hell – damaged, yes, but not broken – never broken *completely*. Why should *you* fear *anything* now?”

“Because you may regret it. Because you may grow to resent it – and me.”

“I don’t believe that for a moment!”

“You may become *bored*, then.”

“I can’t imagine us ever getting bored with each other – even after centuries. Infuriated, exasperated, possibly slightly murderous – but not bored! The fact is, we *need* each other. I know it; you know it.”

“For you, it is so simple?”

“*You* tried to kill my friends; *I* gave you a punctured lung. And if the others hadn’t been there that night – which is impossible, because if *they* hadn’t, *you* wouldn’t... Oh God, whatever it is, I wouldn’t call it *simple!*”

He nodded in agreement. “How is it that the old song ends?

⁴⁷ From François Villon’s *Ballade de Dames du Temps Jadis*, 15C: “But where are last year’s snows?”

*...Some go bragging about love;
We have the bread and the knife of it.*

– But I think Count Guilhem did not mean literally for the knife to..." He gave her a wry look. "That is hardly how love is *supposed* to go!"

"And how much do *you* know about that? In theory, you're rather out-of-date, and in practice, you were borrowing another body!"

He shrugged. "It seemed a good idea at the time; foolish in retrospect, but... I have learned."

"Good. Because you're not like anyone else, and I love you for it. No masks. No mind-games."

He smiled gently, and reached into the inside pocket of his jacket. For a moment he feared he had left the envelope in his day-suit, before changing for dinner (he hated having to manage without a valet), but no. He drew it out, and opened it carefully. Agnès's pearl fell, glimmering, into his hand.

"You returned this to me, from someone to whom I should never have given it to begin with. You should not have –" He hesitated, rephrasing what he wanted to say. "I mean, I should have liked you to keep it. They say it's Byzantine, so it's only fitting that it should find its way back to..."

"Raoul, I've told you already – Your generosity... This is *priceless*!"

"No. Its price was *my life*. If I *had* killed Anne, do you think I could have retained *any* sanity, *any* desire to live? When you killed me, you *saved* me – saved all of us – from that. I saw it plainly, in that moment..."

The darkened bedroom, the knife, the blood; raw pain, anger, fear, and longing. Grey eyes and brown eyes burning into each other, with all emotional and psychic barriers torn down. And so now they gazed at each other again, without pretence or defensiveness.

He fastened the chain around her neck, his fingers softly brushing against her skin. "This once belonged to the woman I loved, and now... it does so again."

There was nothing she could say that would not sound stupid or schoolgirl-sentimental, so she simply put her arms around him.

When, at last, she decided to speak, she could not resist teasing again: "You'd make a fascinating case-study, my love – but I really mustn't take you on *officially* as a patient."

"No?"

"Ethical complications."

"You killed me *once* – but you are not planning to do it *again*, I hope?"

She grinned. "There are *other* ways of breaching doctor-patient ethics..." And with that, she drew him even closer, so that in a moment, his mouth was on hers.

He held her close, as if his soul depended on it. Perhaps it did. A light breeze shook the hawthorn branches, and a flurry of small, pale petals, fragrant with decay, fell on and around them.

*Que tal se van d'amor gaban;
Nos n'avem la pess'e.l coutel⁴⁸*

⁴⁸ Guilhem IX of Aquitaine, *Ab la doussor del temps novel*.

Epilogue: Happy Endings? – Some Snapshots

“I am just from bed. The sleep is still in my eyes.
“Come. I have had a long dream.”
And I: “That wood?
And two springs have passed us.”
“Not so far, no, not so far now,
There is a place – but no one else knows it –
A field in a valley . . .
Qu’ieu sui avinen,
Ieu lo sai.”⁴⁹
*She must speak of the time
Of Arnaut de Mareuil, I thought, “qu’ieu sui avinen.”*
Ezra Pound, *Fish and the Shadow*

Rhodes, Summer 1984:

The Kastello Hagios Theodoros – or, as Edith Hepburn still thought of it, Chastel Saint-Théodore – looked its best in the late afternoon sunshine, its masonry glowing warm and golden. It was hard to believe that anything as grotesque as the 1317 massacre had taken place in such tranquil surroundings, but that had not been its last fight. The Turks had seized it in the sixteenth century. They had refortified it; then the Italians did so again in the Second World War, as part of the island’s defences. And now? Now it was the hobby – no, the *passion* – of the gentleman who was guiding her around its arcaded courtyard/cloister.

Raoul Lavallière seemed far more at ease than he had done last year in Scotland – almost boyishly enthusiastic. She could tell that, despite being accustomed to entertaining, he rarely had the chance to talk in detail or at great length on the history and architecture of his home, of the restoration work. For an aristocratic amateur who had claimed to have little formal scholarship, he was unusually knowledgeable, even on quite obscure details. She strongly suspected him of false modesty and a Mediæval History degree from the Sorbonne. A doctoral thesis on the military orders, perhaps ten or twelve years ago? Possible – although even if it were unpublished, she would surely have heard of it on the conference circuit...

She took a few photographs: a carved capital here, a mason’s mark there. He leaned in one of the bays, humming snatches of old tunes under his breath: the ‘Golden Sequence’ attributed to Archbishop Langton;⁵⁰ Riquier’s *Be.m degra de chantar tener*. The latter seemed to fit the undercurrent of melancholy she always sensed about him. Recalling his friend Dr Christoyannis’s profession, and his

⁴⁹ “That I am comely, I know” a quotation from Arnaut de Maruelh.

⁵⁰ *Veni, Sancte Spiritus*, attributed to Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury.

claim that he had left a religious order on health grounds, she wondered whether he had once suffered a nervous breakdown, perhaps depression. It would not surprise her in the slightest.

“That’s Guiraut Riquier, isn’t it?” she said.

He gave a nod of acknowledgement:

“...Remembran mon greu temps passat,
Esgardan lo prezent forsat,
E cossiran l’avenidor,
Que per totz ai razon que plor.”⁵¹

“Oh, I hope that isn’t the case for *you*!”

“So you know something of *trobar*?”

“Yes; and I know only *two* other people who go around habitually humming it – among the more eccentric students in my department.”

“And you think *me* ‘eccentric’, too, yes?”

“A trifle.”

“I have no voice for them these days, but I have known the old songs all my life.”

“*And* in the original language?”

“But of course. ‘To translate is to betray’, as they say. *Mas trop suy vengutz als derriers.*”⁵²

“You really *are* much more than a ‘keen amateur’, *aren’t you?*”

He shrugged. “Perhaps the word you seek is ‘obsessive?’”

“Perhaps. In the best sense.”

He never laughed properly, she had noticed, but his eyes would brighten when he smiled, as now. “I do expect you to stay for dinner: my fiancée will be joining us.”

“Thank you: you are so kind! Your *fiancée*? Now let me guess: it’s that charming lady who was with you in St Andrews – Dr Christoyannis – am I right?”

“Yes. She’s writing a seminar paper at present; she has to attend a conference in three weeks’ time, or she would have been here to greet you.”

“Congratulations! But I can’t pretend to be surprised: I could see then how fond you were of each other!”

“We *have* had one or two *minor* disagreements in the past, but – yes. Ismini’s an exceptional woman, in so many ways. And she has been good for me.”

“Oh?”

⁵¹ Guiraut Riquier’s *Be.m degra de chantar tener* (*I ought to hold off from singing*):

“...Remembering my heavy past,
Oppressed looking at the present,
And pondering on the future,
For all this I am right to weep.”

⁵² Another line from Guiraut Riquier’s *Be.m degra de chantar tener* : “But I am come too late, toward the last”.

"I have never been inclined to suffer fools, and my temper has verged on the *diabolical*, as our friend *Monsieur* Bascombe discovered. But she is very wise, very compassionate, and I am learning to be a little more... *patient*. One *can* be *too* harsh."

"That's very true."

He led her into the cool stone interior. "Now, would you like to see the famous Blondel portrait?"

The painting hung against an unplastered ashlar wall. It was, Edith thought, quite typical of Blondel's *Salles des Croisades* work, including its Gothic Revival frame. The full-length format reminded her of his depiction of Jean de Joinville.

"I find it intriguing that your line of the family has done so much to keep Brother Thibaut's memory alive: after all, it's a collateral relationship, through a female line, and you don't have the name..."

"Ah, but I *do*: in full, I have a long string of names and entirely useless titles, and it *is* among them. Besides, since the Montrefort male line – his younger brothers and their heirs – became extinct during the Great Pestilence – *la Grande Peste* – what is the English term?"

"The Black Death."

"Yes – during the Black Death – the Lavallières were the most senior line surviving; and then the guillotine and Bonaparte's wars winnowed us still more. I am the *last*, certainly legitimately."

She glanced from the painting to him, and back again: "The resemblance is remarkable."

"And is often remarked *upon*," he said, with some amusement. "My great-great-grandfather was also an enthusiast for all things mediæval. His was the time of the Gothic Revival, after all."

"I wonder whether poor Brother Thibaut looked anything like either of you? A Templar beard would have made it hard to tell, but you *do* both have a rather *Gothic* physiognomy, you know. Pure *Codex Manesse*."

"Is that a compliment or the reverse?"

She laughed. "Your fiancée is better placed to tell you *that!* Anyway, it's a most elegant portrait. It's such a pity the heraldry's not quite right."

"I must contradict you there, dear doctor: there is *nothing* amiss with the heraldry."

"The Templar cross was the *cross pattée*, not a red Latin cross; and they more commonly used a simple black-and-white shield."

"That is true. But *this* is the cross more usually associated with Christian *warrior-martyrs*, I think."

Behind her spectacles, her eyes narrowed. "Ah. Now that *is* interesting!"

He smiled slyly. "Is it *not*?"

"You're a very clever man, *Monsieur* Lavallière. And I suspect your great-great-grandfather was a very *provocative* one. Small wonder it made the king uncomfortable! After all, with the various conspiracy

theories about the first Revolution – Cadet de Gassicourt, the *Abbé* de Barruel, *et cetera* – and then some of the odd activities of the time – Who was that, now, with the Neo-Templars?”

“Fabré-Palaprat.⁵³ Yes, indeed – although my family has never had time for such nonsense! My great-great-grandfather’s interest in the tale was quite straightforward, I think: he believed that Brother Thibaut had been wronged, and wished, in some small way, to salvage some honour for him. Hence he suggested the symbolism to the artist. I have their correspondence about the work, which you are most welcome to read. I also have a smaller piece which Blondel painted for him – in triptych form, of Agnès de Belvoir.”

“How sweet!”

“We will take a look at that later: it is in my study. There is a tapestry of the 1480 Siege of Rhodes, but I suspect that may be outside your chief period of interest.”

“A little late for me, but I’d love to see it, too! – Incidentally, do you think he is still here?”

“Who?”

“Brother Thibaut. I know the Italians excavated some remains in the 1920s, but... Oh, forgive me; it’s not a pleasant topic –”

“Little in this castle’s past *is* pleasant, I am afraid. But yes, when I am here, I *do* sense his presence very strongly,” he said innocently.

England, Autumn 1990:

Neither David nor Anne had seen Ismini for seven years. David had last met up with her briefly in Athens, just before he returned home to complete his thesis. She had been unable to attend their wedding (in the late summer of 1984) because the date clashed with a conference at which she was giving a paper, but she had sent them her warmest wishes *and* an expensive antique Ottoman coffee-set.

They corresponded intermittently (she occasionally telephoned them), keeping her up to date with their progress. David submitted his thesis, but was forced to re-write and re-submit, or else come away with only an M Phil to his credit. This, combined with his bruising experiences with Edith Hepburn, deterred him from trying to seek a university post afterwards. Instead, he took a job teaching History and Classics at a prep school in Surrey. Anne, who had made a good recovery, returned to her photography, and had begun a series of coffee-table books on English villages, county by county. In self-protection, she closed herself down psychically: if *a certain person* were indeed still alive, she had no wish to make herself vulnerable to him again. Nor was there any question of either of them ever considering returning to Rhodes: too many bad memories.

Of Ismini, they knew that she was now based chiefly on the island (“I’m getting too old for so much commuting!”); that she had taken a couple of years out for “further study – professional

⁵³ See Peter Partner’s *The Knights Templar and their Myth*.

development”; that she was now specialising in research on post-traumatic conditions, and had published several well-regarded papers on the subject. She said nothing in detail about her personal life, although an occasional use of the pronoun “we” suggested to them that she was in a steady relationship.

They were therefore delighted to receive an unexpected call from her during half-term: “Hello! I’m going to be in London on Thursday! Is it possible for you to come up? We could meet for lunch! Somewhere Greek, yes?”

She walked into the restaurant gracefully, looking even more elegant than they remembered: her hair (still rose-gold – never natural, in any case) in a French pleat, a Liberty ‘Hera’ shawl draped over a plain green velvet dress, and a Voysey enamelled necklace in the shape of a peacock. Despite her protestations about the toll of commuting, she seemed scarcely to have aged at all in seven years. If anything, she looked even slightly younger, although she must now have turned fifty. Anne, who felt somewhat dowdy in comparison, in blouse and pullover, wondered if she were on HRT.

“I gave up smoking a few years ago,” she said, when Anne complimented her on her appearance. “It’s bad for the skin, as well as everything else! You’re both looking extremely well, anyway.” (Anne was as slight and bird-like as ever; David was now growing distinctly chubby.) “Teaching must suit you!”

“Well, I’m certainly enjoying it,” he said.

“What age-group are they? The English school-system... I am not so familiar with it!”

“Under elevens. They’re great fun, aren’t they, Anne?”

His wife smiled. “With David becoming a house-master this year, we see the boys out of class, too. It... it means a great deal to me. It’s like having a family!” (They had tried to adopt, but her psychiatric history had proved an obstacle.) “– Not that we don’t have our hands full with the dogs! Golden retrievers: you wouldn’t believe how much energy they have!”

“That’s marvellous!” (She remembered Raoul remarking with satisfaction, after reading one of their Christmas letters: “You see how perfectly compatible they are? That would *never* have happened if I had not removed her *first* husband...”)

“So, what brings you over here, after all this time?”

“Time to kill. My husband has business meetings all day. I’m collecting him again later, for dinner: we’ve been invited by some of his friends.”

“*Husband?* What’s this?” David exclaimed.

“Yes, when did this happen?”

“It’s been five years now. Didn’t I say –?”

“We guessed there was someone, but you never mentioned marriage!” said Anne. “If only we’d known!”

Ismini shrugged. “It was very spur-of-the-moment: we were on holiday abroad. We’d been engaged for a while, and... the time just seemed right. It was quiet: no guests, no fuss, just a civil ceremony.”

They had been in France, touring his native Limousin (with a chauffeur). Raoul seemed a different man there, as if a burden had been lifted from his mind. They visited the Abbey of Saint-Martial de Limoges, the ruins of Hautefort (“Now that man was a great ‘finder’ of songs, a century before my time!”),⁵⁴ of Ventadour, Ussel, and even Châlus, “where Lord Yes-and-No⁵⁵ got his death from the crossbow-bolt”. And they stayed in a pension in the small country town below the crumbling fragments of the castle where he had been born, and married in the mairie there... It would help him, she thought, if they could find themselves another home in the region.

“But you’ve never even hinted there was anything that serious!” said David.

“Well, she did, *sort of*, to me, a good while ago...” Anne said. “An old friend.”

“Yes, I didn’t want to say too much at the time because of ethical considerations. You see, I’ve known him professionally for a few years.”

“A *patient*? You naughty girl!” David teased.

“Not quite, but we’ve done a lot of experimental work and research together.”

“You mean, you stuck electrodes on his head, and threatened him with electric shocks until he succumbed?”

Ismini laughed. “Well, he *does* say that I only married him for his *brain* – although his *body*’s not bad, either!” Nor should it be, after four centuries of fencing-practice, she thought. A lean, strong body, the flaws of which only moved her to greater tenderness: stroking and kissing his scarred flesh, the slight irregularities of healed bone, in the curtained dark of their bed...

“But,” she went on, “I daresay there might have been questions asked about objectivity and independence: he’s a few years older than I am, and quite influential in his own career. So I still work under my own name.”

“So what is it you’re doing now, then?” Anne asked.

“I’ve learnt a great deal over the last few years in research: reading and hands-on. I’d worked with a few post-traumatic cases in the past, but now... I think it’s a very important field – and, sadly, a growing one.”

“But it must be quite harrowing for you, especially given your... *other* abilities.”

“It can be, yes: if I enter someone’s mind, I feel what he or she has experienced. But the difference one can make to patients’ lives...”

She thought of her work with Raoul: gradually, gently unpacking the baggage of his past. It was often painful for them both, but it was deepening the bond between them on every level, even as he trained her in his own powers.

But she broke off. “No, I’m talking about *work*, and I’d much rather *not*, when among old friends!”

⁵⁴ Bertran de Born of Autafort.

⁵⁵ *Oc-e-Non*, Bertran de Born’s nickname for Richard I (1157-99).

"Talking of old friends, then," David said mischievously, "any news from the *kastello*? Is the 'Frog Prince' still holding court?"

Anne threw him a disapproving look.

"Well, I'm just *curious!*"

Ismini nodded. "I see him in town occasionally." (*More* than occasionally at home, of course.) "But he seems to be behaving himself these days." And if he *isn't*, she thought with amusement, I know *all* about it... "No unusual 'accidents' these past few years."

"You did return the pendant?" asked Anne.

"Yes," Ismini said. "It's back with its rightful owner." (She was wearing it beneath her dress, between her breasts, where he had placed it this morning.)

"You know," said David, "I've a mind to dig out that article I did, and broaden it out in scope. There's quite a market these days for speculative work about the Templars: probably some money in it – more than in my thesis, that's for sure!"

"Even after what Dr Hepburn said about it?" Ismini asked. It was her turn to feel uncomfortable, although she hid it well.

He nodded. "But that's typical of conventional academics, isn't it? They don't consider other possibilities – *alternative* explanations. And she didn't *experience* the things *we* did."

"You don't think that might risk attracting unwelcome attention...?"

"Not if I keep it more general: no more *ad hominem*s. Probably won't even mention *him*."

Anne nodded. Ismini could sense that she was less keen on the idea, but would probably go along with it for David's sake. "There *are* some pretty sites here in England we could photograph. I've seen a few already, in my village studies: beautiful old tithe barns."

"Yes... well, I doubt you can go far wrong with *tithe barns*," she agreed.

And so they chatted on for an hour or two, more inconsequentially. It never crossed the Bascombes' minds until they had returned home – and Anne was checking her address book – that they had forgotten to ask Ismini her husband's *name*.

France, Spring 2002:

The estate-agent was ready to turn on all his charm as he welcomed the latest pair of potential buyers to the shabby, much used-and-abused building known as *La Commanderie*. It had a fascinating history, having been built as a Templar preceptory in the twelfth century, and then being transferred to the Hospitallers in 1312. However, in its present state, it was something of a picturesque wreck. It had been a convent until the decline of vocations forced the Church to declare it no longer viable and sell it. It was then (briefly) a hotel, but in a quiet and otherwise undistinguished little Limousin town in which few tourists tended to stop, this had left the most recent owner bankrupt. It had been empty now for more than two years.

However, one look at the couple told him at once that they were no fools. Good-looking, in their late thirties to mid-forties, expensively (but not ostentatiously) dressed, the Lavallières had the air of people who knew exactly what they wanted, and expected to get it.

“As you will see – *madame, monsieur* – the *Commanderie* is in need of *some* repair...”

“Yes,” said Raoul, glancing up at the ceiling. *I think he means half the roof needs replacing completely*, he thought to Ismini.

Not to mention complete rewiring, she added.

– *And we must have broadband*. Aloud, he asked: “What do you think, darling?”

“It is smaller than Hagios Theodoros, but given how much work we do online these days, video-conferencing... I don’t think *that’s* necessarily a problem.”

It was difficult to get him *offline* sometimes. So much of the work co-ordinating his Brotherhood, and other international communications, could now be carried out by e-mail (encrypted) or over the net, they both wondered how they had ever managed before. (It did strain the old Colonel’s eyesight, however, and he had retired back to Germany, to live with his nephew.)

“We often entertain professional associates,” Raoul explained, “so a meeting-room or small conference space is desirable.”

The estate agent nodded. “There is the former chapel, which makes an excellent function room.”

They smiled at each other approvingly.

“Where is it that you usually live?”

“On Rhodes; but we also have a small apartment in Venice,” Raoul said. (Well, it was *comparatively* small; just *one* floor, not the *whole* fifteenth-century palazzo.) “But in summer, neither is the most comfortable of places. Venice has too many tourists, and Rhodes these days...”

“In a word,” added Ismini, “the problem is *Faliraki*. We live on the west coast, some distance away, but we have concerns about privacy and security, now that some of the tourism on the island is... less than civilised. My husband’s nerves are *sensitive* at times.” (She did *not* add, *And that could be dangerous for drunken or drug-addled ‘clubbers’ who stray where they should not*. His temper was far less volatile nowadays, but some of the young tourists on the island would try the patience of a fully canonised saint, never mind that of an unofficial martyr predisposed to anxiety. ‘Raves’ on the beach below the village would be asking for trouble.)

“I quite understand,” said the estate agent. “But you won’t find such problems here. This is a quiet town, and what visitors we get tend to be middle-aged and well-behaved – even the English ones,” he added with a smile.

“That *is* reassuring!”

“What was it that attracted you to this house?”

Raoul answered: “Its history – the fact it was a Templar *commanderie*. One side of my family is originally from this area – a little to the north of here, in fact. I believe there were family members in the

Order. And I should hate to think of a building such as this falling into the hands of... cranks, occultists – those people who have *strange* ideas about Templars.”

“I see. Well, if you wish to explore further, by yourselves...”

Gothic archways; seventeenth-century panelling; fragments of stained glass: neglected as *La Commanderie* was, it had tremendous potential.

“It’s in far better condition than Saint-Théodore was in the 1970s,” Raoul enthused. “The masonry is sound.”

“Have you noticed the original murals in the chapel?” she asked.

He raised an eyebrow: “They’re not visible.”

“I can sense them.”

“Behind the panelling? You have quite a talent these days!” he teased.

“I have a *wonderful* teacher. You know, I think this house is going to give us quite a few pleasant surprises.”

“But we can’t simply tear out seventeenth-century panelling, without professional advice!”

“No, we take it out *carefully*, and re-use it in one of the rooms *without* murals,” she suggested.
“It’s fortunate we don’t have to worry about money...”

But even if it had been no more than a heap of sticks and rubble, he would have been determined to buy it, Ismini thought wryly. She watched him stand by a window, running a hand over the carved stone: reading its history through touch, as a blind man reads Braille. He seemed entirely happy, and that moved her.

He had not always been easy to live with, especially in their early years – but then, she had never expected otherwise, given his past. She remembered what Jean Améry had written in *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne*: “*Anyone who has been tortured remains tortured... anyone who has suffered torture never again will be able to be at ease in the world*”.⁵⁶ He had let her into his mind, to share his memories: she knew the worst now, as he had experienced it.

It was only a few years since he had felt able to show her the exact site where he had been cut down in 1317. The servants had retired for the night. By lamplight, they stood in the archway at the former chapel’s entrance,

“You have to see everything as it *was*, not as it *is*. Here” – he had indicated the wall to his left, which was now bare stone – “was Our Lady enthroned, with the warrior martyrs Theodore and George on one side, and the virgins Catherine and Margaret on the other. Here” – on his right – “was Our Lord’s Entry into Jerusalem. From here, we could see the altar. Our priest, Father Lodovico, used to say that our crucifix was the finest on the island: Christ Himself in silver, on a gilded cross...”

⁵⁶ Améry (Hans Meier) was an Auschwitz survivor. This book, *Beyond Guilt and Atonement*, is also known as *At the Mind’s Limits* in English.

And she, too, could see it, shining like a flame in the shafts of midday sunlight that entered the narrow windows, designed for defence. He was leading his men, with their Hospitaller guests, from the refectory to the chapel. Suddenly, Agnès's uncle – a grey-haired man, in the white-crossed black habit of the Hospital – seized him by the arm and pulled him back.

"You may not enter, Brother. This house is under excommunication."

"What courtesy is this?" he asked quietly.

"It is no courtesy. I merely bear the sentence of our Master."

"Your Master. And what, pray, is the crime? We have not been tried."

"Heresy. Sorcery. Perversion."

"Ah, all the old lies."

"Defiance of the edicts of His late Holiness regarding the suppression of the Knights of Christ and the Temple. And, in your case, murder."

The Templars looked at each other, muttering, while the Hospitallers remained silent. De Montrefort drew himself up to his full height: he was a head taller than the older man. Still he did not raise his voice. "So you come, as my guest, to arrest me? The shame is yours, not mine."

"No," de Belvoir whispered, and raised his black mantle to show the hilt of his sword. "Not to arrest."

He crossed himself. "Brother Anciau, I know that your quarrel is with me alone, and not with my Brethren here. If it is God's will, then I alone –"

"Brother Thibaut, that is not what our Master orders."

*No. That he could not accept. No. Not the destruction of the Order, after all they had suffered and survived. He stared deep into de Belvoir's eyes – reading his mind, attempting to take control. With his hands raised in the old gesture of prayer, he began quietly to recite the verse that, they said, could change the outcome of battles: *Media vita in morte sumus*.*

"...Sancte misericors Salvator, amare mortis ne tradas nos..."⁵⁷

"Sorcerer!" a voice screamed.

Jolted from trance, he saw only a gleam of metal as a young Hospitaller thrust his sword into his chest, through the cross on his mantle, out through his back. He sank to his knees. The lad – Philibert de Belabre – still clutched the sword-hilt, terrified: it was his first kill, and the blade was stuck.

Father Lodovico ran forward to help the wounded man, but de Belvoir, freed from the hypnotic spell, hacked his head in half.

"Leave none alive!"

Then the reinforcements were let in. Cries echoed about the stone vaulting. The floor became slippery; the painted walls bespattered. Knights, sergeant-brothers, serving-brothers – all the little community. Thibaut de

⁵⁷ The antiphon *Media vita in morte sumus* (*In the midst of life we are in death*) was believed to have magical powers. The line quoted means: "*Holy merciful Saviour, do not surrender us to bitter death*".

Montrefort had known each of them since Cyprus, as friends, colleagues or servants. They had become his family.

And he – transfixed, utterly helpless – was conscious throughout. With all his powers he fought to suppress the pain, to force his body to stay alive. He called on his Lady, the Queen of Mercy, to whom he had vowed himself, since his earthly love had died:

...Ora pro nobis peccatoribus,
Nunc et in hora mortis nostræ...⁵⁸

No sound came: only a bloody froth as he mouthed the words. He looked up at her painted figure on the wall, and saw that she, too, was all bloodied. He rose out of his body and looked down, as if from a height, on a panicking youth still struggling to free his sword from muscle and bone and torn clothing...

It did not take long for the screams to stop.

"It's finished," said Brother Anciau, wiping his red hands on his black mantle.

He roughly pushed aside Brother Philibert, who was by now hysterical, and made the sign of the cross over his stricken enemy: "Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison."⁵⁹

Then, for leverage, he put his foot on Brother Thibaut's breastbone (breaking it and several ribs), and wrenched out the sword...

Raoul had shuddered for a moment, then felt Ismini's arms around him, warm, protective, loving. Neither of them could speak for a while; touch alone expressed all that was needed.

Later, he had told her that he had regained consciousness in a small Orthodox monastery, on the mountain just a few kilometres inland. The monks had found him lifeless at their gate, in his blood-drenched habit, with prayer-beads at his belt, and – in a bag on a cord around his neck – some small relic or trinket. They assumed he had been left for them to bury, despite being a Frank – until he revived while they were washing him.

"Didn't they think it was... unusual?"

"They believed in miracles, and particularly in the meditative use of the Jesus Prayer. When I was able to speak, I explained – in quite clumsy Greek in those days – that I'd used a similar means to survive and to reach safety."

"So they nursed you?"

"Yes. I stayed with them for several months. When they thought me strong enough to bear the news, they told me that the village had been burned. But by then, there was nothing I could do. The rebellion against de Villaret had already begun; Brother Anciau was dead." He sighed wearily. "I fear, sometimes, that there is little I can do in the wider scheme of things..."

She understood. When post-Cold War optimism had given way to the bloodbath of the Balkans, she had worked in training younger staff to support traumatised refugees. But he had become

⁵⁸ He was silently reciting the *Ave Maria*: "...Pray for us sinners,/Now and in the hour of our death..."

⁵⁹ "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy": one of the few pieces of Greek used in the old Roman Catholic liturgy.

somewhat dispirited, lost faith in his abilities, and those of his Brotherhood, in influencing events. The barbarities unfolding around the world he had seen time and again over the centuries: no-one ever learned. And he? He might be seven centuries old, wealthy, well-connected – but he was, ultimately, as powerless as any mortal.

But he could no longer retreat behind his defences in self-pity. He was loved by a woman whom he loved beyond measure. Ismini, with all her vitality and optimism, encouraged him to direct his efforts elsewhere, more positively.

“Why not do more for *cultural* co-operation internationally?” she suggested. “It needs long-term commitment!”

“And long-term commitment is a speciality of ours, is it not?”

As he admitted, he had no great talent himself, but he appreciated art, music, literature; he was good at bringing people together, at patronage. They began to change the mixture of guests, to invite new members, including women.

They still kept in touch with Edith Hepburn, although Ismini allowed her friendship with the Bascombes to dwindle over the years. They had grown far apart in interests and lifestyle, and it was a strain to have to avoid mentioning her husband’s identity. To make matters worse, David’s dabbling in ‘speculative history’ was leading him down some strange paths indeed. He had looked at the *Agnus Dei*, the Paschal Lamb, on the seals of the English Masters, and decided that it was a *Satanic goat*, the ‘Baphomet of Mendes’, as drawn by Constant in the nineteenth century... Ismini was undecided as to what extent he genuinely believed this, or whether he was simply giving his readers what they wanted; but it was upsetting. Edith wrote that she had never thought him much of a scholar, and that *she* at least “could tell sheep from goats”.

Raoul was more philosophical about it, having lived through the worst excesses of myth-making: eighteenth-century Masonic and anti-Masonic lore; Nerval, Rossetti, Hammer; Reuss, Saint-Yves d’Alveydre, Victor-Émile Michelet, Charpentier...⁶⁰ He had always despised David, but regarded him as a minor irritant, in comparison with some other authors. There were far more bizarre notions at large: the idea that his Order had secretly worshipped Isis, and constructed major Gothic cathedrals, lacing them with sexual symbolism; that there were Templars in Nova Scotia; Templars guarding secret treasure (his own wealth was simply due to sensible investments, Swiss bankers, and the amount of interest that can accrue in an abnormally extended lifespan); Templars guarding holy bloodlines and/or Grails and/or Arks and/or Stones of Destiny; Templars at Bannockburn; Templars at Rosslyn (since he was the only Templar living when it was built in the fifteenth century, and had never been there, that was quite amusing).⁶¹ As for the content of some of the fictional treatments, which were decidedly un-

⁶⁰ See Peter Partner’s *The Knights Templar and their Myth*.

⁶¹ Your local bookshop probably has shelves of such ‘alternative’ history... Mine does.

monastic...⁶² He took a mischievous delight in crashing offenders' websites in a manner that was completely untraceable; it was, at least, less dangerous than crashing their *cars*.

...He turned from the window, wearing his knowing half-smile. "Do you know what I sense most strongly, my love?"

"What?"

"No-one has been murdered in this house."

"Are you sure of it?"

"The last Templars who were here lived out their days peacefully. Under Hospitaller supervision, yes; but no-one killed them."

"It's perfect, then."

Scotland, Summer 2007:

Edith Hepburn, now almost seventy-nine, was sitting up in bed, recovering from hip-replacement surgery in Ninewells Hospital in Dundee. She was writing a letter to the friends whose bouquet of roses had arrived this morning.

Mes chers!

It is very sweet of you both to think of me, and send such beautiful flowers. They remind me so much of the garden at La Commanderie. I do hope that, life and limb permitting (at my age, one can never tell!), that I'll be able to take up your invitation again next summer!

I am so glad that you are continuing to make discoveries in the fabric of the building: the restored murals look most impressive. I'm glad, too, that all is well at Saint-Théodore. Do you hear much at all from the Colonel these days? I do hope he has settled in with his nephew. Is that the one you called the 'Lübeck marzipan baron'? I can't always tell when you're teasing, you know!

Raoul – thank you for the advice in your last letter re: managing chronic pain. I had no idea it had ever been a problem for you: you always have so much energy for your activities – your travels and conferences and websites! And quite honestly, neither of you looks a day older than that afternoon at McArthur's, all those years ago! (I do so miss McArthur's: we now have Starbucks and Costa, which are not the same at all!) – I suppose it's all the fresh air at Saint-Théodore and at La Commanderie.

M visited me just a few weeks ago, at the cottage. I hadn't realised she knew you. It really is a small world! Remember I told you once how few people there are who go around whistling or humming trobar? She was one of those I meant. She was very surprised that we'd met just before her First Year: she was sure you were both about her own age! She sends her love, and is so sorry not to be

⁶² There is now such a thing as the Templar bodice-ripper (habit-ripper?!)/erotic novel, in gay and straight varieties. The mind boggles...

*able to meet up in Strasbourg any more: her contract ended last year, as you probably know. She says she'll write.*⁶³

*I hope you are making progress with the Council of Europe heritage people with your own ideas: some sort of international network of sites associated with the Orders would be splendid, provided you can keep the lunatic fringe at bay. Good luck, too, in countering all these ghastly websites. I'm afraid our old friend Mr Bascombe published a little book on Rosslyn last year: his wife took the architectural photographs, which are lovely, but the text... Thank goodness for Eco: I plan to re-read Pendulum while I'm on the mend.*⁶⁴

One of the nurses, a dumpy, cheerful little woman in her early forties, with the bright eyes and round cheeks of a hamster, was arranging the roses for her in a vase.

“What bonnie flowers! International delivery, too!”

“Yes; they’re from a very sweet couple I know in France. I was hoping to visit them this summer. Still, perhaps next year! I’ll have to keep myself occupied until I’m fully mobile again.”

“If you’re wanting anything to read, I’ve a few books in my desk,” she suggested brightly.

“Oh? And what are they?”

“*The French Count’s Virgin Mistress*, *The Greek Tycoon’s Blackmailed Bride*, and *The Italian Prince’s Secret Seduction*.⁶⁵

“No, thank you: not *quite* my sort of thing. But it’s *very* kind of you to offer!”

“It’s history you like, isn’t it? I think there’s still a *Da Vinci Code* knocking about the staff room!” She noticed Edith purse her lips at this. “— Mind, you cannae beat a wee bit of romance. Not that there’s anything wrong wi’ Ken — that’s my husband, see — but... There was me thinking he’d be this big rock-star, but he’s still just playing round the pubs after all these years... *The Leopards*.⁶⁶ Metal, if you like metal. They’ve been in *The Courier*!”

“Well, that’s *something*!” Edith said diplomatically.

“France, eh? Where do they live?”

“A mediæval house — a sort of old monastery — south-east of Limoges.”

“Now that *is* romantic!”

“Not really, given all the work it needed: it had been quite neglected! I have some recent pictures.”

Edith reached into her writing-case, and drew out a couple of snapshots that had been enclosed with the last letter she had received: one of the building, and one of Raoul and Ismini in close-up, in front of one of the murals.

⁶³ M J Bird gave himself cameo-rôles. This is mine.

⁶⁴ Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* satirises the whole Templar conspiracy theory industry.

⁶⁵ I have invented these, but they are based on real romance novelette titles.

⁶⁶ Another Walter Scott Crusade novel joke: see *The Talisman*.

"These are my friends. Now, he *is* a French count, although he doesn't use his title. He's quite involved with cultural matters; she's a psychiatrist, quite an eminent one. Delightful people, and so devoted!"

The nurse blinked at the snapshot.

"Is there something wrong?"

"I've seen them *before!* Here... years ago!"

"Are you *sure?*"

"Aye. You see hundreds and thousands of patients, but there's always some that stick in your mind... It must be twenty-odd years! He'd collapsed: pneumothorax, so he wasnae in long. But he was just *so* classy... deid glamorous. I was just a wee lassie then, fresh out of college, and I had a big crush on him! And *she* visited... So she's his *wife* now!"

"Yes. The Lavallières."

"I thought he had an *Italian* name..."

"No, he's French, and she's Greek."

"Ah, right. 'It's all Greek to me', as the saying goes! – When was this?"

"A few months ago. They've been having some mediæval murals restored: all terribly exciting!"

The nurse looked distinctly unexcited, but continued to peer at the picture. "I'm sure his hair was darker then, but they've no' really changed at all. Mind, if they've money to live like that, they've money to get things done: a wee nip here, a wee tuck there, a bit of Botox, eh?"

Edith smiled over her spectacles. "I would *never* dream of asking!"

"It makes me wonder why he'd not had anything done about all those old scars, though..."

"Scars?"

"Aye. He'd a lot on his back, and he must've had something stuck right through his chest and out the other side. It's a wonder he was alive at all! The last time I saw anything like that was a lad who'd come off his motorbike on to railings! And a lot of old frac—" Becky realised that Edith was looking at her oddly, almost as if she had seen a ghost. "Sorry. That's too much. I shouldnae..."

But for Edith Hepburn, suddenly, everything had fallen into place: all the little questions, all the nagging suspicions she had had over the years about Raoul Lavallière. Improbable, impossible, perhaps, in normal terms: but for once, the impossible made sense.

"Did he ever explain it to you?" she asked.

"Not much. I said, 'What happened to you, for Christ's sake?', and he said, 'Yes', but I cannae mind all of it... What it boiled down to was that some bad things had happened to him in the East."

She thought for a moment, then answered calmly and carefully: "Yes, they *did* – terrible things. But it was a *very* long time ago." And she smiled to herself, wondering what she ought to ask him...