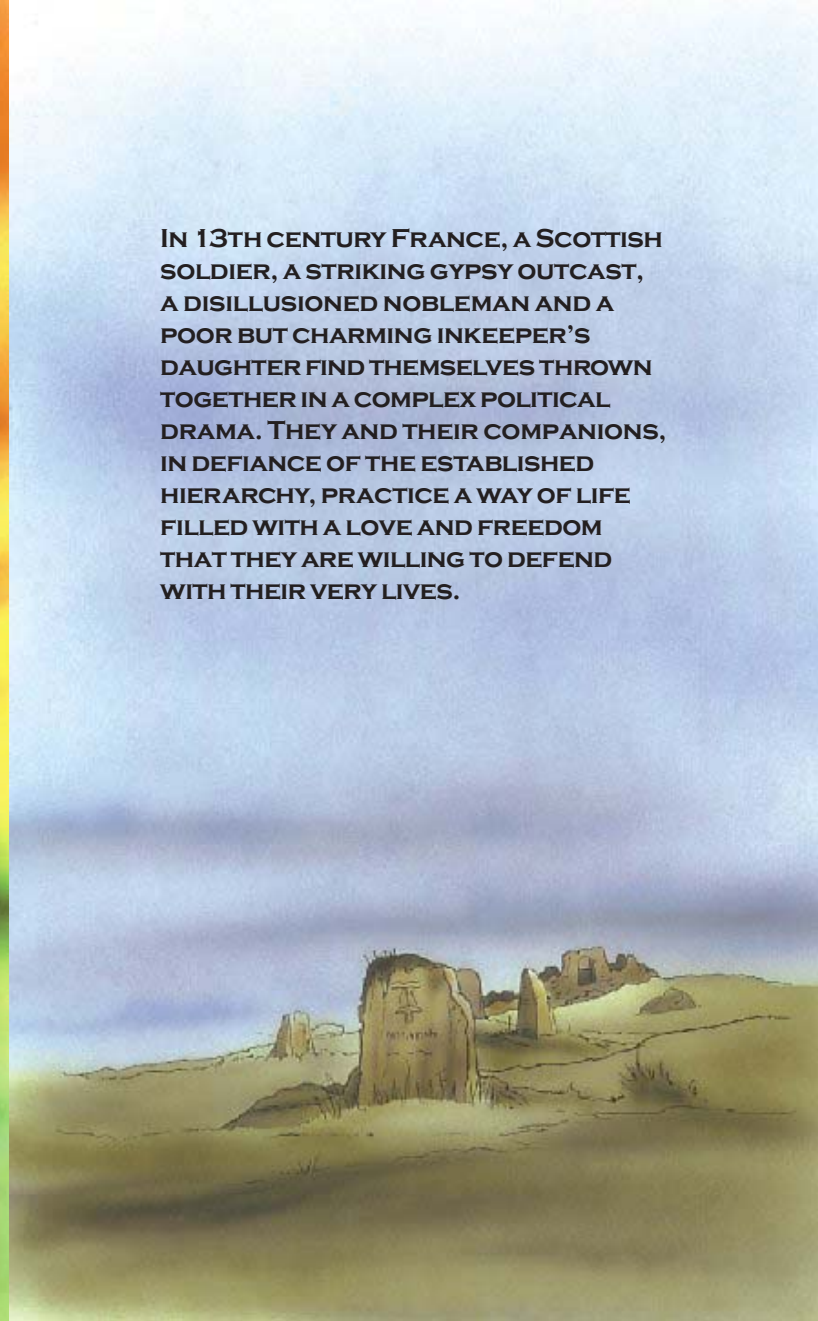


The Perfect Ones



IN 13TH CENTURY FRANCE, A SCOTTISH SOLDIER, A STRIKING GYPSY OUTCAST, A DISILLUSIONED NOBLEMAN AND A POOR BUT CHARMING INKEEPER'S DAUGHTER FIND THEMSELVES THROWN TOGETHER IN A COMPLEX POLITICAL DRAMA. THEY AND THEIR COMPANIONS, IN DEFIANCE OF THE ESTABLISHED HIERARCHY, PRACTICE A WAY OF LIFE FILLED WITH A LOVE AND FREEDOM THAT THEY ARE WILLING TO DEFEND WITH THEIR VERY LIVES.



The
Perfect Ones

SCOTT MCGREGOR

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*"Above all these things, put on love,
which is the bond of perfectness"
(Colossians. 3:14).*

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INTRODUCTION

The story is set in southern France, in the Languedoc area. The time is the early 13th century, and the place is the great city of Toulouse, from where Count Raymond rules a prosperous region. The country is rife with religious dispute, for here is the stronghold of the new religion of the Cathars—otherwise known as Albigenses¹.

There is not just one great movement of Cathars, but many and various small groups, holding diverse doctrines—yet all united in their love for God, for His Son, Jesus Christ, and their disdain for the rich and pompous church that masquerades as mediator between man and his Creator.

The Catholic church rules in the temporal, but the love and truth and spirit of the Cathars has captured the hearts and minds of the common people.



Now let us look at the protagonists of this story. First is Guillaume, nephew of the Count of Toulouse, a young man raised in riches, trained in the way of a medieval warrior, tall, good-looking, fair-haired but used to an idle life and regarded by some as dissolute of character. Having tasted of the pleasures of life, he

¹ See endnote i - The Cathars

is now seeking for something deeper.

Then there is Esme, a stranger in a strange land, the daughter of gypsies, an outcast. Esme's most striking feature are her eyes—dark and beautiful. Swarthy-complexioned and so different from those whose land she roams, yet she is an object of desire for many who look upon her. Her parents belong to a band of wanderers, and the roving life is all Esme has known. At the moment her family is alone, and at the beginning of this story they are camped a little south of the city of Toulouse, on the banks of the Garonne River.

In Toulouse, at a small inn, we find Guy, the son and oldest child of a widower, his mother having died when he was six or seven.—He is not sure when. Guy is 22 years old, a tall, good-looking man, strong from countless long days of manual labor. He has a ready smile and eyes that sparkle.

His younger sister, Heloise, is a pretty and rather delicate girl. What Guy has in physique and stature, Heloise has in petiteness and daintiness. She is three years younger, Guy's only sibling. Having married late in life, their father is now old and not as strong in body or mind as he once was. His children run the inn. On the side, Guy works as a laborer to supplement their meager earnings.

Now, we move to a road north of Toulouse, and here, on horseback, is Malcolm—a Scottish wanderer, formerly with the Royal Guard of Philip Augustus, king of France.

Now the king, as a token to his rich noblemen, has dismissed the foreigners in his guard and is under the protection of an entirely French force. And so, the young Scotsman, who had not been long in the service of the king, is now traveling south from the great city of Paris, in search of adventure and gainful employment.

Once well provided for in the king's service, he

now has little money to his name. Disdainful of the label "mercenary" and not willing to become a hired thug or another sword for some local chieftain, Malcolm has come to see if he could not find a respectable position with Count Raymond, ruler of Toulouse.

He is also curious to see for himself what he has heard sung around campfires and whispered in the halls of the great castles—the many tales of the Cathars. He has heard many stories, and he knows not what to believe. Are these a Devil-worshipping people who practice the dark arts of sorcery and engage in those despicable acts attributed to the pagans beyond Christendom? Or are they indeed the kind and love-filled "pure ones," as their name declares?



Soon these five people would have their lives thrown together in a way none of them could have dreamed.

I — MALCOLM

Malcolm MacAlpin is a veteran of war, who, at the age of 28, has seen more of it than he would have wished. He was raised in Scotland, the son of Kenneth MacAlpin, chief of a small clan who lived on the rugged western coast of Scotland. Malcolm had loved it there, but misfortune forced his esteemed father to place his clan under the protection of more powerful neighbours, and so had lost the right to his clan's independence. The old man, a direct descendant of the first Kenneth MacAlpin¹ who united the Scots and Picts of Alba (for that was the ancient name of the first kingdom now known as Scotland) had died brokenhearted and was buried on a lonely crag overlooking his beloved Irish Sea. To the east, the desolate, rocky hills that marked the border between the lowlands and the highlands stood in silent watch.

The MacAlpin brothers—for Malcolm was the youngest of five brothers—were a close-knit lot. But needing to make ends meet, they had gone their separate ways, vowing to reunite when each had made his fortune. His older brothers had headed for the cities and towns of Scotland—Edinburgh, Dundee and Glasgow. But young Malcolm, intrigued by the

¹ See endnote ii - Kenneth MacAlpin I

prospect of finding fame and fortune on the Continent, had set sail for France.

Malcolm reminisced on these things as his horse trotted south on the dirt road that wound alongside the Garrone River that flowed past him on its way to empty into the Bay of Biscay to the west. (Malcolm would not come across the gypsy camp before he reached the city, for that camp lay further to the south.) As he traveled, he saw rich farmlands and forests full of game. It was pretty country; idyllic.

He had been traveling all day by the time he rounded a bend, and saw in the distance the faint shapes of the buildings of the great city. As he came nearer, the dim objects took form. He could see the castle where Count Raymond, renowned throughout France as an enlightened and noble man, lived and ruled. Then, the giant cathedral, its spires thrusting upward like daggers into the indigo sky. There the bishop—mistrusted and disliked by many, hated by others—held sway over the soul and body of nobleman and peasant alike.

The bishop's name was Odo¹—and he hailed from the Norman aristocracy that ruled many of France's northern dukedoms. The people of this region considered him an intruder from the north, one sent to serve the interests of the great northern barons at the expense of the local people.

The relationship between Bishop Odo and Count Raymond was a prickly one of mutual dislike.

Malcolm's horse kept up its steady gait. Soon he was amongst the cottages and hovels of the poor that spread out from Toulouse.

As he entered the city gate, Malcolm warily eyed the raised portcullis. For an instant he imagined the menacing contraption falling as he trotted underneath, impaling him on its sharp iron points.

The city was wellfortified. The high walls of the city were gray and forbidding. Huge towers were interspersed along the walls at regular intervals, so that the archers manning the walls could trap any attackers in a withering crossfire.

A city had stood on this point since well before the Romans had made it a stronghold. Malcolm thought for a moment of how Roman legions had displaced the early Celtic Gauls who had inhabited this area for hundreds of years previously, of how Visigoth hordes from the north had sent the legions scurrying back to Rome, and of how the Visigoths, in turn, had been destroyed by the Franks. Now, this cosmopolitan city was called home to descendants of them all.

"You there! Fellow!" cried Malcolm at a rather sorry-looking man, stooped under a load of hay. "Where can I find an inn?" he demanded.

Without a word, the fellow pointed a crooked finger in the direction of some small, winding streets that led out from the main marketplace.

Malcolm trotted on. He knew that being a stranger in a strange city was a risky undertaking. He imagined rogues and vagabonds peering from the shadows to see if he was worth robbing. The sword hanging from his waist, and his other accouterments of war which hung on either side of his saddle—a shield, a double-bladed battle ax, and a mace—would probably cause most to have second thoughts.

But Malcolm knew that desperate men would try desperate things, for he had been set upon before in years past as he had wandered into another city, unprepared for the rough reception that he was to receive. He had been robbed, beaten, and left for dead. If it had not been for the kindness of some gentle folks, he would not be riding in Toulouse today.

Now, wiser for that experience, Malcolm was circumspect, eyeing every secret place and hidden shadow from where a man—or men—could leap suddenly.

¹ See endnote iii - Odo

The street narrowed till the tall buildings on either side allowed no direct sunlight to reach the cobblestones. The horse's breath was now visible in the cool evening air. The hairs on the back of Malcolm's neck raised. His sixth sense alerted him to lurking danger.

In practiced nonchalance, Malcolm's hand slipped over the hilt of his broad sword. The sword could be unsheathed in an instant—a skill honed by years of fighting.

The road was too narrow to turn around easily and go back; he had no choice but to press forward. He moved on, steadily but slowly. Being unfamiliar with the street, he did not want to spur his horse on and risk the animal slipping or stumbling.

As the road twisted to the left, the sound of metal scraping against rock caught Malcolm's ears. Those who stalked him in the shadows were getting closer. He moved steadily on.

Now the sounds of the market had all but disappeared. Inside the houses he could hear the clamor and clatter of cooking, and of dishes being placed on tables. He could also hear indistinguishable voices, speaking in *Langue d'Oc*, the dialect of southern France.

The shadows grew deeper still, as the sun was now setting. What little diffused sunlight that had managed to illuminate the street moments before had left.

Suddenly, with another twist in the road, he came upon a courtyard. Light streamed forth through an open window. A fire was burning in the giant hearth in the middle of an inn.

"Who goes there?" shouted a voice.

"A stranger," Malcolm shouted back.

"And what can I do for a stranger?" the voice called out.

"I seek lodging," said Malcolm, still not able to make out exactly where the voice was coming from.

"Welcome then, stranger," the voice shouted back, the apprehension evident in the first two exchanges now absent.

A tall young man stepped out from behind the door of the inn. "Welcome to our humble lodge," shouted Guy in a voice that to Malcolm seemed a little too loud.

"Thank you," Malcolm replied in his thickly-accented *Langue d'Oïl*—the spoken language of northern France. (The two dialects, *Langue d'Oïl*, and *Langue d'Oc* were similar enough for the speaker of one to understand—though sometimes imperfectly—the speech of the other.)

Malcolm's keen ears picked up the sounds of several sets of feet scurrying back down the narrow alley from which he had just emerged.

Guy strode up to Malcolm, his hand reaching up to grab the bridle of the horse. "You may wonder, sir, why I spoke in such a loud voice, but I tell you, it is dangerous here. There are those who will prey upon strangers, even ones as well-armed as yourself. For I daresay that it was looking at that sword partly unsheathed in your hand, and the other fine armaments hanging from your horse's saddle, that held them off this long from attacking."

"I did sense their presence," said Malcolm, "but I had thought that this area was known for the true and honest people that inhabit it."

"It is," replied Guy, "but there are those who have come from the north, who have attached themselves to Bishop Odo, and are his servants by day, while at night ply their trade as robbers and cutthroats. A stranger is a tempting target. But come, they have gone now. Make yourself welcome. I will take your horse and tether him in the stable."

"Thank you," said Malcolm, as he dismounted, his joints aching slightly from having spent the last eight hours in the saddle. "A good meal and a good rest is

what I need. Just see you be careful with the weapons. They are my livelihood, for I am a soldier. Once the beast is fed and watered, could you please bring the weapons to my room?"

"Certainly, sir," Guy answered. The beast, relieved of most of his burden, walked more lightly as Guy led it to the stables behind the inn.

Malcolm strode into the room, brightly lit by a fire in full blaze. Its flames leapt and licked the air, casting shadows all around. There were several tables near the door, but the place was deserted. For several minutes Malcolm stood and warmed himself by the fire. He then made his way over to a corner table, stretched once more, and sat down wearily.

By now, Heloise had emerged from the kitchen in the back, bearing a pitcher and a goblet. Malcolm did not notice her until she was there by his table. Looking up with a start, he was even more surprised to see what a beauty stood before him.

Heloise's golden hair cascaded over her shoulders and down her back. Her pretty face and delicate features were enhanced by the noticeable blush that resulted from the Scotsman's stare. Her simple brown dress, obviously well-worn, seemed stark in contrast to the beautiful figure that it enveloped.

"Wine, *monsieur*?" she said, her eyes cast down.

"Yes," replied Malcolm. He tried to think of something more to say, but was unable to find the words.

"I will bring you some soup and bread."

"Yes," Malcolm replied, once more reduced to the same monosyllabic answer.

Heloise whirled around, and quickly headed back towards the kitchen.

Suddenly, Malcolm became aware that another figure was in the room, and turned to see the young man who had met him outside, surveying the scene with a subtle, bemused smile.

"I put your saddle and your weapons in your room," Guy said.

Malcolm, embarrassed at having been caught staring at the girl, and not knowing if she was the man's wife or sister or merely a scullery maid, grunted out an appreciation and stared down into his wine goblet. Guy strode past the fireplace and into the kitchen.

Shortly, Heloise returned, this time carrying a tray with a bowl and some bread.

Malcolm, never fully at ease around women, continued to look down at his goblet.

Heloise set the food before him and turned to leave. Malcolm got up. "Stop!"

Heloise froze, then turned slowly to face him, fearful as to what this man's intentions could be.

"I-I-I ... thank you!" Malcolm stammered. "Thank you. I just wanted to say ... thank you!"

A glimmer of a smile flashed across Heloise's face, as she turned and hurried back out to the kitchen. Her brother Guy, peering through the window that looked from the kitchen into the main dining area, had observed the awkward encounter and let out a laugh as she came back in.

"Well, that was embarrassing."

"Stop it!" chided Heloise.

"It looks like you've caught a fine-looking soldier—as far as soldiers go. Most of them are nothing but ruffians who come down from the north to exploit the people here."

Heloise knew well what Guy meant. These northerners were not as the gentler and more chivalrous people of the south, but were rougher, more warlike and given to temper. But this young man with the strange accent seemed different. Heloise sank into a chair in the corner of the kitchen.

"I wonder what he wants here?" she said. "I wonder if he has come to work for the mad bishop."

“Shhh,” said Guy. “Don’t talk about him like that. You never know where his spies are.”

“Oh, why do we have to always be in fear of that man?”

“Because,” answered Guy, “he is powerful. And he is the voice of the church that tries to rule our lives. But come, let us try to finish up early tonight. The meeting is at nine.”

Heloise got back to her feet and hurried about the rest of her chores.

Meanwhile, Guy strode into the dining area.

“Will there be anything else you’re wanting tonight, sir?” said Guy.

“No, thank you,” Malcolm sighed. “I just need a good night’s sleep.”

“Very well,” said Guy. “Your room is up the stairs. Turn to the right and go down to the end of the hallway. It is our best room. I think you will find all that you need. My sister and I are soon to go out, but if you need anything, my father will be here.”

Sister! thought Malcolm, not hearing anything after that word was uttered. *So she is his sister!*

“Thank you,” Malcolm blurted out. “I will be fine.”

“Very well,” said Guy. “Sleep well, and we’ll see you in the morning.”

“Thank you,” Malcolm muttered again.

The two nodded to each other, and Guy disappeared once more into the kitchen.

Malcolm drank the last of the tasty mutton and vegetable soup, and sopped up the dregs with his bread. Finished with his meal, he grabbed the wine pitcher and the goblet and headed towards the stairs.

Finding his room, he looked around. A single candle illuminated what was a bare but pleasant room with a straw bed in the corner.

Malcolm unbuckled the belt that held his scabbard, and then placed the sword on the floor, next to the bed. It would be at his right hand, should

he need it in the night. This was an old habit, for a man in his profession must be prepared to grab his sword and to use it at a moment’s notice—even when awakened from a sound sleep. The ability to react quickly often meant the difference between life and death.

Malcolm took off the rest of the bulky clothing that he had learned to live with—the chain mail shirt that was worn under his surcoat, and the loose-fitting breeches. Down to his simple undertunic, he collapsed on the bed and soon fell into a blissful sleep. His dreams that night were populated by beautiful young ladies—all of whom bore a striking resemblance to Heloise.

II — THE MEETING

Two figures, barely distinguishable in the shadows, crept along the side of the alley and paused at the entrance to the main road which ran north to south through the city. The sound of marching soldiers coming down the cobbled road prompted the two to slip back a few yards into the darkened alley.

The rhythmic tromping grew louder as the troops approached. For a few moments they were visible from the alley, but soon they had passed and disappeared down the road.

“Almost nine o’clock,” said Guy. “The changing of the guards.”

These guards had come from the barracks adjacent to the castle of Count Raymond, and were marching to relieve their comrades who had stood watch on the city walls by day.

The two turned into the main road, and headed north. Soon they were outside the door of a small bakery. Guy knocked on the door three times, paused, then knocked twice more. A peephole opened, and Guy could make out two eyes peering at him. The peephole closed, followed by the sound of locks and bolts being unlatched, and the door swung open.

“Welcome, Brother Guy! Welcome, Sister Heloise,”

said the kindly voice.

“Good evening, Brother Francis!” the two replied in near unison.

“Come! The rest are here,” said Francis, as they moved to the back of the shop, past the huge baking ovens and into a room where fifteen other people sat and talked.

“We are all here now,” Francis proclaimed.

A man from a corner of the room moved and took his position at the head of the table where the others were seated.

“Welcome, brothers and sisters! May the peace of God be with you, and may He bless our congregating together and fill our hearts with His love. In the name of His beloved Son, who came and died and rose again. Amen.”

“Amen,” they all echoed.

“Well, my brethren,” the man continued, “He is blessing us and keeping us.”

“Yes!” chorused the people again.

Guy stared at the kindly, worn face of the speaker. The light from the candles in the middle of the table sparkled in his eyes. Guy knew the man’s life history well. Giles—for that was his name—had been a tailor for many years. He had become one of the most prosperous tradesmen in all of Toulouse. His clothes had been sought by the city’s aristocracy; he had even tailored clothes for the count!

Through hard work he had amassed a small fortune, but in his later years he grew dissatisfied and so had decided to devote the remainder of his life to seeking truth. He was a learned man, knowing how to both read and write, and so he had begun his search by studying the works of Augustine and others of the church doctors. However, he found that much of their writings left him confused. And so, he continued his quest for knowledge and truth in other areas.

He had even read translations of some of the Moorish writings that had made their way into France from Cordoba and Granada and the other Iberian kingdoms still controlled by descendants of Muslim invaders of centuries past. The Muslims had become familiar with the writings of the ancient Greeks through their contact with the Byzantine Empire, which still existed in Greece and in Asia Minor, and had translated many of those writings into Arabic. In turn, these Moorish works had been translated into Latin by people thirsting for more knowledge than was afforded them by the Catholic church.

Though he had found them interesting, these writings had left Giles more confused. The Bible was not readily available to be read by common men such as Giles. Some of the potentates of the church were even campaigning for the reading of the Scriptures to be the exclusive domain of those who had taken Holy Orders. Giles had read small portions of the Bible but had concentrated his search for truth in other directions.

However, in Lyon he met Peter Waldo¹, a former merchant like himself, who had given up all he had to become an itinerant lay preacher. Peter had taught him about the simplicity of Christ, and how Jesus had not lived the life of the rich and powerful, as those who claimed His heritage now did, but was a simple carpenter who lived with the common folk and preached freedom and truth.

One day, as Giles sat listening, particular words struck deep into his heart. These were words the man had quoted from the Bible, *“But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God.”*—Words which were to become the center of his life. Giles devoted himself to preaching. Yet after a while Giles grew homesick for Toulouse, and finding himself not in total agreement with all Peter Waldo

¹ See endnote iv - Peter Waldo and the Waldenses

did and preached, Giles returned to his hometown.

It was then that he began to associate with several of the Perfect Ones, the Pures, those who led the Cathar sects. These had abjured the ways of the world and had set themselves to living an ascetic life. From them, Giles had learned much. For they indeed were true and honest men, and their lifestyles contrasted sharply with the champions of Catholic orthodoxy, who lived in luxury and misused their religious offices for political purposes.

In his discussions with the Perfect Ones, Giles had difficulty accepting some of the doctrines they propounded. He also found that they often disagreed amongst themselves, but their disagreements did not give rise to fiery altercations. Instead, they were accepted as mere differences of interpretation.

Giles had rejected some of the ways of the Perfects, for he did not think that renouncing meat was necessary, nor that he would need to give up the marital companionship of his wife. But many of their other teachings—living simply, rejecting earthly possessions, and devoting oneself to a religious life—these he had embraced.

And so, his group regarded him as a Perfect One, although he had not gone through the *consolamentum*¹, the rite of initiation to the Perfect life through which those Cathars who wished to enter the ranks of the Perfects had passed.

A great anathema had been proclaimed on all the Cathars by the previous pope, and their movement had been suppressed. And so these met in secret, drawing comfort from each other's faith, companionship and fellowship.

While Guy was reviewing all this in his mind, he missed much of Giles' homily. His thoughts came crashing down to earth when he heard all the others saying, "Amen, and so be it."

¹ See endnote v - The Consolamentum

Now everyone was up, embracing one another.

"Go in peace, Guy," Giles said.

"Thank you, Brother Giles," Guy answered. "It is a comfort having one as you to lead us."

"Find your comfort in God, young man—not in me," said Giles. "He it is that truly leads us. We are but His servants, groping to do His will."

"Amen," Guy replied, knowing that Giles hated any sort of flattery. He didn't want to pursue the subject further, but Guy greatly admired Giles.

Giles turned to Heloise. "And bless you, too, my child. How have you been?"

"Well," said Heloise, "God has been good to us, and kept us."

"Amen," said Giles, "but I must warn you, this will not last forever. For I have heard rumor that he who sits on Peter's throne wishes to do us harm in some greater way than has already happened. We must prepare now, that we may be able to stand in the evil day."

A look of fear flashed across Heloise's face.

"Oh, don't worry, my dear!" Giles said. "I am sure that God will take care of us, just as He has done so many other times."

"Amen," replied Heloise, a little hesitantly.

Giles realized that his little reassurance hadn't been as effective as he had hoped, but not wishing to take the matter further now, he kissed Heloise on both cheeks, and bade her *godspeed* and *goodnight*.

Francis the baker was leading the other people out the front door. "Quiet now!" he said. "And stick to the shadows until you are well away from here. We don't want the bishop's 'eyes and ears' seeing us tonight."

"Amen, brother," said Guy, as he slipped out the door. Heloise followed close beside him as the two made their way silently down the street. They were soon at the alleyway that they had come out of earlier.

They turned and disappeared into the night.



The smell of incense was almost overpowering in the small back den that Bishop Odo used as his sanctum sanctorum. Quill in hand, he sat huddled over papers. The light from the oil lamps on the wall reflected off his bald cranium. The few white hairs that were left around his ears had been closely cropped. He continued to write as the two men in front of him stood in silence. One of them was a huge brutish-looking fellow. A broad scar, long as his crooked nose, traversed his cheek and disappeared into a scraggly black beard. The surcoat he wore bore the arms of Bishop Odo, signifying that he was sergeant at arms, in charge of the bishop's own small retinue of private troops.

The other man wore the garb of a priest.

"We must make preparations," Bishop Odo was saying, "for the papal legate will be here in a week to present Count Raymond with the pope's command that we once and for all suppress the heretics."

The other two remained silent.

"We have a glorious opportunity here to redeem this country from the curse of this heresy, and to turn it back to the truth and the arms of Mother Church. The papal legate is on his way, and I want you to take him this document. It is my personal pledge to assist him all I can, and to commit all my resources to helping him convince Count Raymond of his error in tolerating this heresy. And then, if his argument is successful, I will further commit all that is in my power to actively suppress and root out these infidels. For they are in grave error in challenging the authority of the church in matters both spiritual and temporal."

Bishop Odo's eyes flashed upward. The tall man with the scar flinched. Even though he had been in the service of the bishop for many years, he had never

gotten entirely used to the coldness that emanated from the prelate's eyes.

Bishop Odo rose with some difficulty, revealing that he was a rather corpulent fellow. He was the youngest son of a northern nobleman and, as was the way in those days, in order to ensure the inheritance of his elder brother, he had been sent into the priesthood. At the age of 15 he had entered the monastery at Reims, where he had received the tonsure—a small circular shaven patch on the back of the head—signifying that he was destined to a cleric's life.

However, being the son of a nobleman afforded some benefits. Soon after taking his vows, Odo was given a position in the royal courts. And so, he had come to the notice of the king, within whose power it was to appoint bishops within the realm of France.

Seven years earlier, after several appointments in the northern lands, Odo had been appointed Bishop of Toulouse. He soon found out with what scorn northerners were regarded. Now he saw his chance to exact revenge on these who had not treated him with the awe and respect that he thought he should have been afforded.



Count Raymond sat in the midst of a small group of counselors. Among them, his brother-in-law, Godfrey; his nephew, Guillaume; another nephew, Raymond-Roger Trencavel; and the count's chancellor, a man of merit and ability but not of noble birth, known as Robert of Avignon.

Count Raymond's grandfather, also known as Raymond, had been one of the leaders of the first crusade. He had earned the respect of the other crusaders—and the hatred of a few—because he had gone with a true and honest heart, and had not allowed the political ambitions of some others to materialize. He had tried to keep the crusade to its stated noble mission of liberating the Holy Land, and

to return its administration to the Byzantine Empire which had previously ruled it. He had only been partially successful at this and several crusader kingdoms were set up in the supposedly liberated territories, but he stuck to his principles and refused the crown of the newly-founded kingdom of Jerusalem.

That was many years ago, but enmity still lay between the counts of Toulouse and some of the houses of the northern barons, whose ambitions Count Raymond's grandfather had thwarted.

Now Innocent III¹, who had become pope a few years earlier, wanted to raise another crusade to once again reclaim the Holy Land for Christendom. When the resultant crusader army, manipulated by the trading interests of Venice and the palace intrigues of Byzantium, attacked and sacked Constantinople instead of fulfilling its commission of conquering the Holy Land, he turned to matters closer at hand. Now he seemed intent on restoring southern France and northern Italy to the church, wiping out the "heresy" of the Cathars.

Count Raymond had a few hours earlier learned of the dispatch from Rome of Peter of Castelnau, the papal legate.

The five men spoke in hushed voices, for they wished not what they were saying to go further than the room that they were in.

"We are soon going to be in a very difficult situation," said Count Raymond. "Castelnau is going to ask that I suppress the sects of the Cathars in my realm. But these sects have earned the admiration and respect of the majority of my people. Why, they even call them the *bons hommes*, the good men! If I suppress them, I earn the enmity of my own people. The prosperity of our lands would also diminish, because the adherents of this faith are some of the

most industrious people amongst the inhabitants. But if I refuse to suppress them, I earn papal displeasure and risk censure."

"It is indeed a most complex problem, brother," said Godfrey.

"Indeed it is, sire," said Robert. "But there must be a way that we can turn this thing around. This is a thorny problem."

The two younger men remained silent, not having much that they could contribute to such a conversation and realizing that the problem would not be resolved simply.

Guillaume stifled a yawn behind his gloved hand.

"I see these things bore you," said Count Raymond to Guillaume.

"Not at all, Uncle," said Guillaume. "It is just that it is late, and I have had a long day. I see the intricacy of this problem and I fear I have not much advice to offer."

Count Raymond smiled affectionately at Guillaume, for even though he was a brash young man and given to the wild wantonness of youth, he was also kind and generous, almost to a fault. He was like a second son to the count, and was the boon friend and avuncular mentor of the count's son, also called Raymond, who was still a child and too young to partake of discussions of state such as this.

"Well, young man, that is how you learn to be wise, by listening to the wisdom of others. For one day, you will have to sit here as your father does with me, and act as my counselor and counselor to my son. The hour is late, but the problem is pressing and we have only a few days to come up with a solution. But then again, perhaps it would do us all well to sleep on it and see if our minds are not clearer in the morning. We must meet again and try and sort out this mess.

"Oh, if people would just leave us alone, we would

¹ See endnote vi - Pope Innocent III

be a happy and prosperous area! Someone is always stirring up trouble for us, not the least of them being the mad bishop, as the common people call him. I wonder what he is going to do about this? You can be sure that he is going to try to stir up antagonism towards me.”

“That crazy man!” said Guillaume. “I wish we could be done with him once and for all!”

“Yes,” said Raymond, “but it is a wise saying that the devil you know is better than the devil you don’t. And at least we have been around him for seven years. We know how he thinks and how he acts. That is our protection. But see to it, Robert, that our ‘eyes and ears’ tell us everything there is to know about what Bishop Odo does, just as I’m sure his ‘eyes and ears’ tell him about us. Well, goodnight, gentlemen. And may God grant you all a good sleep. Until the morrow.”

“Until the morrow, Sire!”

III — THE MESSAGE

The sun had barely risen before Malcolm was up and ready to start the day. He was a country lad at heart, and had learned that one way to satisfy his longing and help him stay satisfied with city life was to take regular rides into the countryside, away from the hustle and bustle, the dirt and grime.

Leaving most of his armor and weapons in the room—except the sword, which was his constant companion—Malcolm made his way downstairs and over to the great hearth, where a fire was already burning. As he stopped to warm his hands, Guy walked in the front door.

“It will be a while before there is food for breakfast, sir,” said Guy.

“Then I’ll come back later,” said Malcolm. “I want to go for an early morning ride and blow some of this city air out of my head.”

Guy gave a friendly and knowing laugh, for he too found city life stifling.

“So, will you be staying with us when you come back?”

“I would like to, but I must see what this city holds for me.”

“Hmmm,” said Guy. It seemed to Malcolm that Guy

was thinking about his last comment. “Your horse was already fed and watered this morning,” Guy added.

“Good, thank you,” said Malcolm. “Then I will make my way to the stable, and I will be seeing you later.” Malcolm toyed with the idea of asking Guy to pass on greetings to his sister, but decided that it would appear too presumptuous.

“Very well, sir,” replied Guy.

Malcolm found his horse in the stable, mounted it and was soon trotting down the main thoroughfare and out the city gate, heading south.

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Malcolm had not been the first horseman to leave that morning; three others had left at dawn, as soon as the city gates were open.

The leader of the three was the sergeant at arms who had stood before Bishop Odo the night before. In the pouch around his waist was a sealed letter, intended for Peter of Castelnau, the papal legate. These three had gone several miles south of the city when they paused to let their horses drink from the river, before turning east on the road to Marseilles, the route they anticipated the legate and his party would be traveling.

The spot they had chosen to water their horses was only a few hundred yards from the gypsy camp.

Bernard—for that was the sergeant’s name—was gazing nonchalantly in the direction of that camp when he saw what he thought was a woman’s head poking out of the water. Squinting his eyes, he strained to get a better view. Apparently the person hadn’t seen him.

Dismounting his horse, he motioned to his two companions to do the same. Quietly they moved along the bank. Coming to a point a little further on, beneath a weeping willow which overhung the riverbank, he spotted a pile of clothes. From the garments he

deduced that it was indeed a woman and, what is more, she was swimming naked.

He and the other two exchanged looks that immediately betrayed their ignoble intentions, and slipped down behind the foliage, their eyes glued on the distant figure. The woman was now swimming in their direction, not suspecting that three men were watching her with mounting anticipation. It seemed as if it took an eternity to the three men, but slowly she made her way to the shore.

Esme felt her feet touch the soft mud of the river bottom as she neared the bank. She stopped swimming and started to walk through the water toward the spot where she had left her clothes. The three men ogled her from their hidden vantage point. As she casually came out of the water, the sunlight reflected off her swarthy skin. At an agonizingly slow pace, more and more of her body was revealed as she came out of the water. Eventually her entire naked body was visible. She slowly strolled over to her pile of clothes and as she bent down to pick up her dress, one of Bernard’s companions could control himself no longer and let out a long-suppressed gasp.

Startled, Esme spun around, but before she knew it, the three men had surrounded her. Modestly, she tried to hide her nakedness by holding her dress in front of her.

“Come now, my beauty,” said Bernard. “You don’t have to be so shy with us. Let us see what we want to see.”

“Pig!” she hissed. “You beast! You brutes!”

“Oh, she has some fight in her, this one!” exclaimed Bernard. His two companions giggled.

“Come on, let us have our way with you, for you are nothing but a heathen gypsy wench!”

“I would rather die than let myself be had by you!” Esme hurled back in their faces.

“Ah, come on! Don’t talk like that!”

"I said I would rather die!"

"Well, you just might, then!"

"Come near me and I'll scream my head off!"

"And what will that do?" said Bernard. "Will your papa or perhaps your brother come running? And then what? Will we have to kill them too?"

"Go away! Leave me alone!" Esme cried, as she tried to back towards the water.

Having anticipated that move, one of Bernard's men had slipped between her and the river, cutting off her way of retreat.

Bernard moved in towards the young woman, and reached out and grabbed the dress. A tug of war ensued, with Bernard trying to pull the dress away and Esme clinging to it furiously. Soon the poor dress split in two with a loud rip, and Esme was left with a small fragment in her hands.

"Aha," said Bernard triumphantly. "Grab her and let us all have our way with her."

"Leave the damsel alone!" came a stern voice from the top of a small hill about twenty yards from where this was happening.

Bernard whirled around to find himself staring at the lone Scotsman, his sword still sheathed and his arms folded in a cocky sort of way.

"Get away from here," said Bernard to Malcolm. "This is no business of yours. She is just a heathen gypsy whore."

"I care not what she is," said Malcolm. "But I do care that she is obviously displeased with your intentions."

"Look, this is not your quarrel," said Bernard. "Get out of here before you're sorry that you interfered."

"I daresay that it is you who are sorry that I interfered," said Malcolm back to the man, to whom he had now taken a particular dislike. "You know, that scar on your face shines red even from here."

Bernard loathed people who made fun of the way

his scar flushed red when he was angry. "Look here, if you want to champion this slut, then you'll have three swords to contend with."

"You leave me no other choice," said Malcolm. "I am a man of honor, and if the dear lady would have me as her champion, then I should surely have to be."

Esme's mouth gaped open. To be the brunt of brutes like Bernard was nothing new, but to have a stranger not of her own people willing to champion her against three was completely unknown!

"So will you have me as your champion, ma'am?" asked Malcolm.

"Sir, I do not know who you are," Esme replied, "but I am highly honored that you would deign to defend one like me."

"Well then," said Malcolm, "so be it. I challenge you, knave, you sorry excuse for a man! In the name of this fair lady, who you have so rudely mishandled. To your arms, sir, for I have a lesson to teach you in manners!"

"You presumptuous nincompoop!" scoffed Bernard. "You are a fool! This morning you are a dead man! Hold the woman!" he ordered one of his men. "I think two of us are all that are needed to teach this foreign fellow a lesson. It's a pity he won't live to use it."

One of his companions grabbed Esme by the arms, as the other two men drew their swords and made their way towards the top of the hill where Malcolm stood.

Malcolm slowly drew his sword and spoke softly to it. "Today we will teach these two brutish ruffians a lesson that *they* shall never forget!"

"So the two of you will fight me! Well, I guess that's fair odds for hired thugs as yourselves," Malcolm taunted.

Bernard and his companion circled 'round, so that

they were directly opposite each other, catching Malcolm in the middle. Bernard's companion charged first, swinging his sword wildly towards Malcolm. Malcolm immediately parried the first swing, and then deftly stepped out of the way as the fellow, carried on by his own impetus, charged past Malcolm and crashed into his own sergeant.

"You fool!" muttered Bernard at the hapless fellow, who sought to disentangle himself from Bernard.

Bernard attacked next. Malcolm and Bernard parried and thrust and crashed and swung at each other. Although Bernard had many years experience as a soldier, it was soon evident that he lacked the skill of his better-trained opponent.

The other guardsman again joined in, and soon Malcolm found himself being forced down the hill under the onslaught of the two men's blows. Malcolm quickly realized that he needed to get at least one of them out of the fight. Deftly moving to one side as the second soldier swung, Malcolm delivered a debilitating blow to the man's leg. The fellow let out a scream as he crumpled to the ground, blood gushing from the wound.

"Leave the woman, and join me!" Bernard ordered the other soldier. Throwing Esme to the ground, the third man drew his sword and charged up the hill to meet Malcolm. Soon, Malcolm again found himself faltering under the blows of two opponents. Mustering all the skill that he had learned in battle, Malcolm sidestepped and tripped the newcomer, who went rolling down the hill.

At that moment, Bernard seized the opportunity to swing hard at Malcolm. Malcolm parried the blow with his sword, but could not help himself from being knocked over, his sword clattering to the ground a few feet away from him. Unarmed and helpless, Malcolm looked up to see Bernard raising his sword for what the ruffian was anticipating as the *coup de*

grâce of the encounter. Just at that moment, as Bernard's sword was about to begin its downward swing, he was struck heavily on his helmet and fell in an unconscious heap beside Malcolm. Bernard didn't know what hit him!

Malcolm looked up to see a young man with a broad smile and a small yet weighty mace in his hand. "Well, we couldn't have the bishop's soldiers killing you, now could we?" said Guillaume.

"I'm much obliged," said Malcolm to his unknown deliverer.

"This is a fine mess! One, two, three ... Well that's about the odds the bishop likes to play with," said Guillaume.

"So these are the bishop's soldiers?" said Malcolm.

"Yes. You can tell by what they wear, this coat of arms on their tunics."

Malcolm looked around to find the girl. His eyes found her hiding behind the willow tree, having clothed herself in the remnants of her dress and the other garments.

"Are you all right?" Malcolm called out.

"Yes, sir ... " said Esme, as she slowly ventured forth.

Guillaume turned to see, and was at once thunder-struck at the dark beauty of the woman. Normally an ebullient young man, he found himself short on words.

Malcolm turned to him. "I found these three fellows trying to have their way with this young girl."

"I'm not a girl, sir," said Esme. "I'm eighteen years old."

"I beg your pardon, Madam," said Malcolm, a little mockingly. "Being the noble fellow that I am," he joked, "I couldn't let these three brutes carry out their intent."

Malcolm surveyed the scene. The soldier who had been wounded in the leg had passed out from the pain and loss of blood. The second one, who appeared

to have knocked his head on a rock in his fall, lay in a crumpled heap at the bottom of the hill. Bernard was sprawled spread-eagled a few feet from the two men.

"I am much obliged for your intervention," said Malcolm, as he turned to see Guillaume still staring, transfixed, at Esme.

Guillaume snapped out of his trance. "It was the least I could do," he stammered. "I am not one to see a man set upon by people like these, and not intervene. Woman, what is your name?"

"I am Esme, daughter of Ricardo, the gypsy whose camp is over yonder."

"Ah, the gypsies! They say you are a vagabond lot, thieves and cutthroats, diviners and sorcerers."

"We are a simple people who make our livelihoods from being tinkers," said Esme, defending her family. "We are not cutthroats, nor liars, nor cheats, as your people suppose."

"Hmmm, I know not what to believe about these things," said Guillaume, "but one as beautiful as you needs to be careful around fellows like these. Quick, I advise you to go tell your father what has happened. You must be gone from here, for when these fellows wake up, they will no doubt seek to do you harm."

"But the one man is wounded. I must help him!" said Esme. "I cannot let him bleed to death here."

"Why? This man was trying to rape you!" retorted Guillaume. "Why should you help him?"

"Because he is hurt," said Esme, "and I cannot leave him here to die."

"The logic of this woman!" exclaimed Guillaume in wonderment. "But I wish if I were ever hurt, I would fall into the hands of one as tender and merciful as yourself, Madam."

"You mock me, sire," said Esme.

"A little," said Guillaume, "but many a true word is spoken in jest. Come, let us see if we can dress his

wound, and when his companions wake up, they can take care of him from then on."

The cut was fairly deep, and the blood flow had been profuse.

"I will need some herbs," said Esme. "I will run and get them."

Esme headed off toward the caravan. Meanwhile, Guillaume looked at the three men and scratched his head. "I wonder what brings Bishop Odo's men this far from town," he said.

Spying the pouch around Bernard's waist, Guillaume uttered, "Aha! The secret might lie in that pouch there!" He bent over, loosed the thong that held the pouch flap, and pulled out the sealed letter.

"Aha! A message to the papal legate!" said Guillaume. "I wonder what Odo was asking him, and I wonder what is so important that he had to send his men ahead to pass this to him, rather than waiting to have this letter delivered once the man reached Toulouse."

Looking around to make sure none of the three men had regained consciousness, Guillaume broke the wax seal and opened the letter.

"*To his excellency Peter of Castelnaud from Odo, Bishop of Toulouse.*" Guillaume ran his eyes over the Latin writing, for that was the official language for all communications, both religious and secular, at this time.

"It is from Odo, saying he is offering his full services in cooperation to the legate in persuading Raymond, the Count of Toulouse, into pressing a major persecution against the Cathars of the Languedoc region. Well, this we knew, that Odo would cooperate and even push for this, for this is what he has wanted for so long. But what is this? It says that he has someone, a close confidant of the count, who is informing Odo of all the count's intentions, and therefore could provide good intelligence by which

they may be more persuasive in their arguments.

“By all the saints! There’s a traitor! There’s a traitor close to my uncle! A treacherous betrayer!” said Guillaume, the color rising in his face. “It goes on to say that this informant will be able to continue to give them valuable information, and has already drawn up a list of the leading Cathars and their secret adherents within the castle and the count’s retinue, and that he will soon be able to turn this list over to himself—that is, Odo—and that Odo will in turn pass this list on to the legate, as the representative of the Holy Father.

“My God, what treachery!” exclaimed Guillaume.

Malcolm had remained quiet through all this, realizing there was far more afoot here than he was at present able to comprehend.

At that moment, Esme arrived back with her father, and was preparing a poultice of herbs to place on the wound. The wounded soldier moaned as they pushed the poultice against the cut and began to bandage it.

Though the seal was broken, Guillaume slipped the letter back into Bernard’s pouch.

Esme and her father finished dressing and bandaging the soldier’s wound, and rose to leave.

“Thank you again, fair gentlemen,” said Esme, “for coming to my rescue.”

“It was my pleasure,” said Malcolm.

Guillaume gazed upon the beautiful gypsy girl once more. “Ma’am,” said Guillaume, “I only regret that I was not here first, that I might have fought for your honor.”

Esme blushed. Her father, grabbing her by the hand, pulled her away. “Come!” he urged. “We must leave now and find a new camp. Surely these soldiers will have their revenge on us if we tarry.”

Guillaume thought quickly and then said, “My father has an estate about ten miles to the north of Toulouse. Go there and you shall find a safe haven.

Tell my father’s steward that Guillaume has asked that you be given a place to camp. Take this small crucifix as a token. They will know it is mine. The steward of the place will not like this, but he will acquiesce, for he will know that I have ordered it. Now go!”

“Come,” said Esme’s father, “we must go.”

“Till we meet again,” said Guillaume.

“Till we meet again, sir!” said Esme.

Malcolm nodded and gave a short stiff bow, as Esme and her father headed off to the campsite.

“Well,” said Guillaume to Malcolm, “we have uncovered a fine mess today! I could use a one such as you, for I saw your skill with the sword. If it had not been that there were three of them, I think you would easily have mastered the situation without my help. I would have intervened sooner, but I could not let these men know who it was who helped you, for then the word would have gotten back to the bishop and there would have been hell to pay. So I’m afraid, dear Scotsman—for I perceive by your accent that is what you are—that you shall bear the blame for all of this alone!”

“It is a blame I have no regrets to bear,” said Malcolm.

“You say that now, but I think you might come to regret this day,” said Guillaume with a seriousness not normal to him. “Come. Let us ride back to the city, for I have news to tell my uncle. And on the way back you can tell me about yourself and what brings a stranger such as you to our fair land.”

“I will do that gladly,” said Malcolm. “But pray tell me, whom do I address?”

“I am Guillaume, son of Godfrey, brother-in-law of Count Raymond of Toulouse,” replied Guillaume.

The two mounted their horses and headed back to Toulouse. What had started as a leisurely morning ride for both of them had been transformed. Now these

two young men were heading back with news that would change the lives of not only the nobility of Toulouse, but all the good citizens of the Languedoc.

IV — A TRAITOR

The two horsemen talked as they rode back to the city together. Malcolm explained to Guillaume how he had come to France and been recruited into the king of France's corps of bodyguards, and how he had remained in the royal service for about three years before being discharged. Now he had come south to find out for himself if the things he had heard of this region were true.

Guillaume explained to Malcolm the political intrigue that had been going on for several years now between Bishop Odo and Count Raymond. And how, after having been thwarted in his attempts to mount a successful crusade to the Holy Land, the new pope had settled on a mission of gathering southern France and Northern Italy back into the fold of the Holy Mother Church.

It was midmorning by the time the two riders entered the city. Guillaume was intent on seeing his uncle immediately to explain the latest encounter with Odo's henchman, Bernard. But Malcolm, being mindful of his belongings that he had left at the inn, insisted that they first charge the innkeeper to keep his things safe until he returned for them.

Guy was gone when they arrived, but pretty Heloise

was just coming out the main door as Malcolm rushed in. Heloise was taken aback by the apparent urgency in Malcolm's words, but promised to keep his things in good order.

Then, by some strange inspiration, Malcolm felt compelled to take off his sword and give it to Heloise to keep with his other weapons. Malcolm felt quite odd, for in the many years that he had been a soldier, his sword had never left his side. He could not understand this strange compulsion. It was as if something had taken control of him for that instant.

Now armed only with his small dagger, Malcolm mounted his horse and joined Guillaume. Then the two headed up the main road to the castle. After leaving their horses with the attendants who rushed out to greet them, Malcolm and Guillaume marched up the main stairs and entered the great hall of the castle.

There, Guillaume spotted Robert of Avignon and went directly to him to inquire about his uncle. Robert explained that they had been meeting that morning, as the count had felt pressed to continue the meeting from the night before, and that Guillaume had been missed. The count had been called away to attend to other business, but would be back straightway.

Guillaume paced up and down anxiously. How he wished to share the news with his uncle that one of his confidants was betraying him to the bishop! Robert eyed Guillaume inquisitively, wondering what had made the young man so agitated, but he asked him not.

Meanwhile, Malcolm stood a few feet away, in due deference to those in the room who held higher stations in life. This was expected of him, a stranger who was more or less a commoner in this country, even though he was indeed of noble blood in his own land.

Presently, the count returned through a small door

at the far end of the hall. This door, Guillaume knew, led to the stairs going up to the count's own apartments on an upper level of the castle.

"Guillaume, my nephew," said the count, "you were missed this morning!"

"Yes, Uncle," said Guillaume. "My apologies. But I have some rather urgent news to share with you."

"Very well, what is it?"

Guillaume paused for a moment, and then continued. "Uncle, I think it is best that I relate this news to you in private."

Count Raymond looked bewildered. What could Guillaume possibly have to tell him that could not be said in front of Robert, his trusted counselor and chancellor?

"Leave us for a little while, Robert," said Count Raymond with a kind look. "It is apparent that my nephew has something rather difficult to say to me."

Robert bowed deferentially and left the hall by the main door, to wait in the courtyard. "What about this young man?" asked the count.

Guillaume glanced over to where Malcolm stood, then turned to his uncle. "This man is my witness, for he too saw what I saw."

"And what is it that you two saw?" inquired the count.

Guillaume then related how he had come upon Malcolm fighting with Odo's guardsmen, and had intervened on Malcolm's behalf, before finding the letter from Bishop Odo to Peter of Castelnau, the papal legate.

"My God!" exclaimed the count as he turned slowly away from Guillaume, his hand over his mouth, pondering all that he had just heard. "This is a *very* disturbing turn of events!"

"This is treachery, Uncle!" said Guillaume.

"Indeed it is," said Raymond. "Indeed it is. We now have two challenges before us. First, to find out who

this informer is; second, to turn the knowledge of this to our advantage.”

“Who do you think it is?” Guillaume inquired.

“It could be many people,” mused the count. “This will make our lives even more complex. We know not who to trust, for it could be anyone of those around me—from my servants, all the way to my chancellor. This is a fine pickle!” said Raymond, slumping into his chair. “This is a fine pickle, but by all that is holy, I will find out who this man is—or woman! I must devise a plan to expose this person. I must think hard. Guillaume, you are the one person that I can trust, for though I dearly love your father, this news brings everyone’s loyalty into question.”

“Surely, sir,” said Guillaume, aghast, “you cannot suspect my father!”

“Guillaume, you now learn a sad lesson in statecraft. All are suspect—even those you hold closest and love dearest. This is the weight of being in a position of authority. There are always those who will seek that position and covet the power that comes with it. Leadership is a lonely place. I do trust your father, Guillaume, believe me! I love him and I trust him, but now I know not whether my trust is well-founded.”



While these events are unfolding in the great hall, we go back to Esme and her family, who are busy breaking camp, making ready to move to their new destination.

As Ricardo was hitching the horses to their wagon, Esme, sorely troubled, turned to her father, “Father, that one soldier ... he might die!”

“Yes, he might, my daughter!”

“I cannot have him die, Father! For when Giles sat with us and shared the holy Word, he taught us that we must love our enemies, and care for those who use us spitefully.”

Ricardo looked gently into his daughter’s eyes. “And what would you have me do, my daughter?”

“We must care for that man!”

“But to take him with us would be dangerous.”

“I know, Father, but the poultice will need changing soon, and his wound is deep. Father, if we can take him with us in the back of the wagon, then I can nurse his wounds.”

“But daughter,” said Ricardo, “you know that you could be endangering all of our lives once again.” Ricardo looked into Esme’s eyes and then heaved a sigh. “I know—I know what you say is right. All right, I will tell your mother.”

Her father finished hitching the horses to the wagon, and, climbing on board, whistled at the horses and snapped the reins. The horses strained to get the heavy wagon rolling, and the pots and pans and other bits and pieces hanging from the sides of the wagon erupted into a jangling cacophony. Heading along the bank of the river, Ricardo drove the wagon to where the three soldiers lay. Then Esme and her father and mother scurried down to the water’s edge. Between the three of them, they managed to pick up the rather bulky soldier, haul him up to the wagon, and lay him in the back.

“Come, we must be going,” said Ricardo, as Esme took one last look at the other two men, who still did not seem to be stirring. The wagon pulled off, and headed towards Toulouse.

About a mile from the city, Ricardo turned off the main road. He knew that he and his family would not be welcome by the townspeople, so he gave them a wide berth. He found the main road on the north side of the town, and headed in the direction that Guillaume had instructed him.



It was late in the afternoon when Bernard finally regained consciousness. Rolling over, he groaned at

the pain he felt in his head. Gingerly pulling off his helmet, he looked at the large dent that his unknown assailant's weapon had inflicted upon it. He felt the lump on his head and winced. Looking over, he saw the second soldier still lying where he had fallen. With a kick and some other prompting in the form of shouts and curses, Bernard finally managed to get his companion to awaken.

He, too, had been lucky that his helmet had protected him from worse than merely being knocked unconscious. Bernard searched for the third guardsman, but found him not. Climbing to the top of the embankment, he discovered the gypsies had broken camp. The sun was getting low, and he realized that the better part of the day had passed since the encounter that had led to his current sorry state.

He sat down and scratched his head as he tried to think what to do next. It was then that he noticed that the thong on his pouch was loosed. Quickly he opened the flap. Looking in, he was relieved to see the letter still there, but as he pulled it out, he gasped in horror. The seal had been broken.

Bernard knew what he had to do. He could not deliver a letter with a broken seal to the papal legate. He would have to go back and face Bishop Odo. But he knew that he dare not tell the truth as it had happened. His story would need to paint himself as the victim.

"Come!" he yelled to his companion. "We must go back to town. Help me find the horses."

It took about half an hour to find the horses, for they had wandered off into a far pasture. It was only by chance that Bernard caught a glance of one of them as it appeared momentarily at the top of a small rise in the distance. Wearily, the two guardsmen tromped off in that direction.

After capturing the three horses, they made their

way to town, discussing as they went what they would tell the bishop.

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Bishop Odo was livid.

"You fool!" he yelled furiously at Bernard. "You let yourself get ambushed by a highwayman? I cannot believe it. And why on earth would a highwayman open the letter? If he were after money, why would he open the letter? There is more afoot here than highwaymen! This is the count's doing, I'll wager. Now, my years of cultivating that informant are down the drain. I must think. Get out of the room!" he bellowed at Bernard.

As Bernard turned to leave, Odo questioned him one more time. "And you would recognize this fellow which first accosted you?"

"Yes, your Grace," said Bernard, "for he egregiously taunted me. Yes, I would remember him."

"And you thought he was alone?" said Odo. "But then his confederates attacked you from behind?"

"Yes, your Grace."

"And you believe those assailants who assisted him were the gypsies that were camped out there?"

"Yes, your Grace," said Bernard, looking down at the ground.

"And you believe that they have killed the third soldier and have absconded with his body? No doubt to use in one of their black rites!" the bishop sighed. In deep despair he buried his face in his hands.

Then, as if gripped by a sudden seizure of evil inspiration, the bishop's face contorted into a gleeful sneer.

"Yes! Yes!" he shouted, "We can and shall turn this to our advantage! For does it not seem obvious that this attack must have been made by those rebel Cathars who hate the church and all she stands for, that it is they—in an unholy pact with the infidel gypsies—who have attacked and murdered Mother

Church's most pious servants? We shall use this as an excuse to press for their eradication. We shall demand a trial!

"We shall demand that Count Raymond apprehend these felons. And then—if indeed this is his doing—Count Raymond shall be caught in his own machinations. For I shall lay a trap, and it shall be shown that he is privy to what I have written in that letter. I shall then most righteously proclaim his guilt in front of all, as a co-conspirator. Ha, ha!

"By God, perhaps this is the best thing that's happened to me! And right when the legate is coming! Oh, we shall destroy Count Raymond or turn him into our groveling stooge! And then we shall have our way with purifying this land!"

V — ACCUSED

The next morning, Bishop Odo and his entourage made their way from the bishop's palace adjacent the cathedral, to the castle of Count Raymond. Up the stairs he climbed, dressed in all the finery of his office. His gold embroidered cape with its intricate designs trailed behind him; his finely carved and inlaid bishop's crook thudded rhythmically on the steps; and his miter made him appear taller than his attendants. Despite his portliness, Odo was an impressive sight.

Flanked by two priests, he was followed by several deacons and members of his bodyguard, including Bernard and the other soldier who had survived the fight with Malcolm the day before.

A herald announced their coming as they entered the great hall. "Announcing Bishop Odo of Toulouse, who seeks audience with His Excellency, Count Raymond of Toulouse."

This formality over, the bishop strode to the far end of the hall where Raymond sat on his throne, flanked by his brother-in-law, Sir Godfrey, and Robert of Avignon.

"Welcome, your Grace," Raymond said, as the bishop drew closer.

Odo made a short, stiff bow, and then, looking pompously at the count, began, "I have come on a matter of great urgency! Yesterday, thieves and vagabonds set upon three of my servants whom I had sent on a mission. Monies that they held were taken from them. What is more, one of my men fell mortally wounded, and now his body is not to be found. I therefore come to you for justice, and to demand that you apprehend those men, that they may face the full weight of the law. Count Raymond, my men were traveling through your territory, so I hold you responsible."

Count Raymond replied in restrained tones. "These are serious matters, your Grace. And where are the accusers, the witnesses to this matter, that I might question them and thereby be able to obtain justice for you and for Holy Mother Church?"

Odo snapped his fingers, and Bernard and the other soldier moved forward, their heads low.

"These are the two survivors. Their companion has disappeared after the attack. We fear that he has been killed and his body abducted."

"Please, your Grace," said the count. "I would like to hear the account from your two men."

Bernard, shaking slightly, spoke. "Your Excellency, we were on an errand, and there by the river, a short ways outside the city, where the road turns toward the west, we were ambushed by a highwayman. And while he drew our attention, we were set upon from behind."

"And who do you think these fellows were?" said Raymond, looking at the man sternly.

"The one who first accosted us had the bearing of a soldier, and he spoke the language of the north, with a heavy accent. He was a young man, less than thirty, with an appearance that I suppose some would find pleasing. He taunted me, and called me vile names. I believe he was confederate with some gypsies

who were camped nearby."

"We believe," said Odo, interrupting, "that these all were conspiring together with certain from the Cathar sects who are rampant in your county, and who always malign Mother Church, and teach things heretical. I have warned you before, these people should be eradicated."

"Yes, your Grace," said the count, "I know your concerns on these matters. But tell me, soldier, did you do anything to provoke this encounter?"

"Why no, your Excellency. We were peaceably on the bishop's business."

"I see," said the count. "And your Grace mentioned monies?"

"Oh ... oh yes," said Bernard. "We had with us a portion of the tithes that we were taking to the papal legate. They robbed us of these, some three hundred gold coin."

"Three hundred gold coin!" exclaimed the count.

"Yes," said Bernard. "We had three hundred gold coin on us."

The bishop and Bernard exchanged furtive glances, for they had concocted this lie about the gold the night before, in order to lend more gravity to this accusation.

Count Raymond turned again to Bernard. "And the accent of this assailant, would you say that it was a Scot's accent?"

Bernard looked at the count in wonderment. "Yes, your Excellency, it could well have been a Scot's accent, because I've heard the accents before from the fellows who come from the barbarous lands in the north of Britain. It could well have been a Scot's accent."

"Then," said the count, turning to the bishop, "I think we have your man already!"

Bishop Odo's eyes widened, caught unawares.

"Yesterday, we apprehended a Scotsman, as we believed him suspicious. But he had no monies on

him—at least in the amount that you have stated. As of now, I have confined him to my dungeon.”

“What?” queried the bishop.

“Yes, and I’m sure that upon interrogation all truth will come forth, and that you will recover your gold.”

The bishop looked askance at the count, and then again at Bernard, who was now visibly shaken, realizing that the falsity of his story could soon be found out if the Scotsman were allowed to tell his full story. In that case he would not only be in peril from the count, but also from the bishop. Bearing false witness in the tribunal before the count was a serious offense, and liable to be punished with the same severity as the crime that the accuser was imputing to the accused.

Bernard stood in frozen stupor.

“Come,” said the count. “Let us repair to the dungeon, and there you shall make a positive identification of the man. Once he has been identified, then the matter will be one of public trial.”

Bishop Odo, now recovering somewhat from the surprising news that the assailant had already been apprehended, returned to his prepared dialogue. “Yes, your Excellency Count Raymond. I demand a public trial, and I demand that this man be put to the interrogators, to find out the depth and the breadth of this Cathar conspiracy, and the extent that they are in league with the heathen gypsies.”

“We shall see,” said the count. “Come, let us go.”



The combined entourages of the count and the bishop made their way from the great hall out into the courtyard and across to an adjacent tower. Entering a door at the base, they filed down a circular staircase. Some thirty feet below, a number of cells lined the perimeter of the tower.

At the last cell, Count Raymond motioned for the jailer to open the door. Holding high a torch, the jailer

unlocked the heavy iron door, swung it open, and walked into the dank, dark, putrid dungeon. There, against the wall, his hands in manacles that were chained to a ring above him, sat Malcolm. His face was covered in dirt, and he had the appearance of having been beaten.

“Is this the man?” asked the count of Bernard.

“Well, go in!” demanded Odo. “Look at him!”

Bernard edged cautiously forward. His eyes locked with Malcolm’s. “Yes, this is the scum who attacked me!”

Malcolm sat in silence.

Bernard darted forward, as if to kick him, but Count Raymond swung his arm out and caught Bernard heavily in the chest.

“This man is my prisoner,” said the count, “and hence he is under my protection until he comes before me in trial.”

Bernard blurted out a weak apology and stumbled backwards. Then, catching Odo’s glare, Bernard slunk back out the door.

“Keep this man well, jailer,” said Raymond. “For the day after tomorrow, he shall stand trial.”

“So soon?” said Odo. “That will not do us well in preparing our case!”

“What case is there to prepare?” said Raymond. “Why, he attacked your man and stole your valuables; your man has identified him. Surely all these things will hold up in trial, and then he will suffer for his crimes.”

Things were moving too fast. Raymond had caught him off balance, but Odo quickly recovered and was careful not to reveal his shock.

“Yes, your Excellency, that is a wise decision,” said Odo, more composed this time. “Yes, the day after tomorrow—a trial!”

“Very well,” said Raymond. “Let us be gone.”

The entourage disappeared one by one through

the door. Lastly, the jailer carrying the flaming torch exited. The door clanged shut, and Malcolm was left in the pitch black of the dungeon room.

The sounds of the steps of the entourage making their way back up the spiral staircase grew fainter and eventually disappeared. A few minutes passed, and then a welcome sound came to Malcolm's ears—the grinding sound of heavy stone being moved. A secret door swung open, and Guillaume, torch in hand, entered the dungeon.

"You performed well, Scotsman," said Guillaume. "I observed all through the peephole. I thought that brute Bernard was going to deal you an ugly kick. Thank God my uncle held him off!"

"It's a good thing for that hulk that he did," said Malcolm. "For even with my hands manacled like this, I could have left that sorry fellow in a pitiful state."

"Ha!" said Guillaume. "You most certainly have spirit! You Scotsmen are a scrappy breed. Come, let us get you out of these manacles and back up into the fresh air."

Unbeknownst to Bishop Odo, he had been subjected to an elaborate ruse. Count Raymond had come up with the plan to try and trap the bishop in his own devices, and to do that he had enlisted the help of the young Scotsman, whom he had sworn to an oath of great secrecy: Anything that he would see and hear over the next few days, he would not divulge to anyone.

Malcolm had readily agreed, looking forward to being able to help the count and his new friend Guillaume, and to bring to justice Bernard and the other soldiers. They had anticipated the bishop coming and filing a formal complaint before the count. It now seemed that the scheme was in motion.

Guillaume released Malcolm from his manacles, and, holding the torch high above him, led the Scotsman up a secret stairway into an intricate

labyrinth of hidden passageways within the castle walls. Eventually they emerged into the private quarters of the count and his family.

"I think it would serve us well," said Guillaume, "to get you out of the castle for a while. Since you have tasted of the inhospitableness of the bishop and his hirelings, let us now treat you to some true Occitanian hospitality! My cousin Raymond—the count's son—and myself would like to enjoy your company tonight at a gathering of troubadours¹ from all over southern France. Many a nobleman, and many a nobleman's son, will be present, for this is a highly prized pursuit by us nobles in the south. It is a competition, a tournament of song. I myself shall be competing and have written an *alba*—a love song of the morning—especially for this.

"You will have to come in disguise, for the bishop will undoubtedly have his spies there. But as for now, friend Malcolm, I would suggest that perhaps you and I might like to take a ride to see how our gypsy friends do. For I must say, I was rather taken by that pretty young thing."

Malcolm looked at Guillaume, wondering what the young man's motives might be. "Excuse me, sire," said Malcolm, "I already fought once for that young maid's honor. I will not have to fight again, will I?"

Guillaume looked at Malcolm and let out a hearty laugh. "My, you are a noble fellow, aren't you? No, fear not. I have no ill intentions towards the young lady. It is just that she is a beauty, and I am afraid that I have been somewhat smitten by her. Still, it is not something that I can contemplate, for I am a nobleman, and it would be unacceptable for me to take a gypsy maid as wife. But doesn't she have the most amazing eyes?" asked Guillaume, as his speech drifted off.

Malcolm remembered the dark beauty of the girl,

¹ See endnote vii - The Troubadours

with her deep brown eyes that seemed to sparkle in the sun, and he understood completely what Guillaume was saying. “Sire, I have one request. I left my armor with the keepers of the inn where I was staying, and I feel at a severe disadvantage without my sword, knowing that I now have avowed enemies in these parts. I pray thee, let me go there to retrieve the sword.”

“No,” said Guillaume. “It is too dangerous. I cannot have you wandering around town. I propose that I send a messenger to the inn and ask that those there bring the sword to you at our destination.”

“Very well,” said Malcolm, agreeing with the young man’s wise decision.

“Come, let us ride out of here. Wear this great cloak and hood,” Guillaume said as he pulled it from a hook on the wall. “Hide yourself until we are far from the city, for the bishop has eyes and ears everywhere.”

“But will not someone come and check that I am still in the dungeon?”

“No,” said Guillaume. “My uncle the count has given strict orders that you are not to be fed during the next two days, so not even a meal will be brought to you. The jailer will not even bother to open the door. Trust my uncle; he knows what he is doing.”

Guillaume and Malcolm left the castle by a small side door. There, waiting for them, were their two horses. Malcolm mounted his trusty steed, and Guillaume the other, and the two men made their way to the northern gate of the city, which was practically deserted at this hour.

They slipped out of the town—hopefully unnoticed—and headed north towards Guillaume’s father’s estate.



It was late morning, nearly noon, by the time they arrived at the cottage where the gamekeeper and steward of Sir Godfrey’s estate resided. Guillaume

dismounted and walked to the door. Malcolm watched from a distance as Guillaume was met by a robust elderly man with long white hair, dressed in brown. The two conversed for a moment, then the older man pointed a finger up the road in the direction of a heavily wooded area.

Guillaume remounted and, turning to Malcolm, said, “My father’s steward says the gypsies are up here a few leagues, in the woods, well-hidden from view. But he has told me some disturbing news. He said they have with them a wounded soldier. I am worried. Come, let us go find them.”

They soon came upon the gypsy camp. Although it was well camouflaged, they knew what they were looking for, and spotted it quite readily. As they rode up to the huge wagon, Ricardo came out to greet them.

“Welcome, noble gentlemen,” said Ricardo.

“Welcome to you,” said Guillaume. Then looking over Ricardo’s shoulder, he saw Esme and her mother. “And welcome to you too, ladies,” said Guillaume.

“Welcome, sirs,” said the two women.

“I am indebted to you, young man,” said Ricardo, turning to Malcolm. “For I fear that my daughter would have been killed by those men had you not intervened.” Then turning to Guillaume, Ricardo added, “I am grateful to you too, sire, for coming to the aid of your companion when all seemed lost. My daughter has told me the whole story. We gypsies are not used to such kindness from outsiders. My wife is preparing the noontime meal. Would you join us?”

“I would be happy to,” said Guillaume, “and I am sure that my good companion here, Malcolm, would also enjoy a meal, for he had to forego his breakfast this morning.” Guillaume flashed a smile at Malcolm.

Malcolm smiled back at the good-natured jest, for he had indeed missed his breakfast that morning in order to prepare for his performance in the dungeon.

And so they ate heartily of the venison meal that

was put before them.

“I see you have caught a good deer,” said Guillaume to Ricardo. “One of my father’s, I presume.”

Ricardo looked down. “No, sire. I had this deer from before. I believed him to belong to no one.”

“Fear not,” said Guillaume. “You are welcome to catch whatever game you can here. For you may have to stay here a while, until this matter with the bishop and his henchmen gets resolved.”

“The bishop and his henchmen?” questioned Ricardo, his eyes widening.

“Yes,” said Guillaume. “For those soldiers who fell upon you—or, rather, tried to fall upon your beautiful daughter—are in the employ of Odo, Bishop of Toulouse, our much-beloved local prelate,” said Guillaume, mockingly.

“Good Lord, the Mad Bishop!” muttered Ricardo.

“I see his reputation has reached you,” said Guillaume.

“Yes, we all know of him.”

Guillaume now looked sternly at Ricardo. “I have heard disturbing news that you brought the wounded soldier with you.” Ricardo glanced over at Esme. “Yes, we have, young sir. For the man was sorely—we feared mortally—wounded, and we believed that he would bleed to death unless we cared for him.”

“And why would you have such compassion on this assailant?” asked Guillaume in astonishment.

“Because that is what our Lord would have us to do,” said Ricardo.

“Your Lord?”

“Yes, the God of the Christians. For a man named Giles has spent many days at our campfire, teaching us His holy Word. He told us that we were to love our enemies, and do good to them that hate us and use us spitefully. When we saw this man, we knew that God expected us to care for him and nurse him—if possible—back to health.”

“I suspect that the Giles you speak of is Giles the tailor, the preacher, for he is well known in Toulouse and in the surrounding areas as one of the Cathars. But where is the wounded soldier?” asked Guillaume.

“He is in the tent over there. He has a fever and is delirious. He has lost much blood, but we have dressed and nursed his wounds, and we believe that they could now heal. All depends on whether or not he fights to live.”

Guillaume and Malcolm followed Ricardo and Esme over to the tent and peered in. There they saw the man, laying on a cot, beads of sweat upon his head. His lips moved in silent mutters.

“You people astound me,” Guillaume spoke softly. “Let us hope that your man here lives, for if he dies, there will be hell to pay!”

Malcolm now turned to Ricardo. “I have heard of the Cathars. In the north they say much about them. Are you Cathars?”

“If you mean that we follow the teachings of Master Giles, then yes, we are Cathars. All the other people did treat us as outcasts and called us vagabonds, ruffians, villains and whores; but Giles came to us and asked nothing. He treated us with dignity and honor. He won our hearts with his kindness and his purity. Yes, if following the teachings of Master Giles makes us Cathars, then we are proud to be called by that name. But we know no others, for Giles visits us alone. I think he is afraid that even the other Cathars will not accept us.”

Just then they heard in the distance the sound of a dog barking. Soon the barking grew louder. Guillaume stepped behind a tree near the road and peered around cautiously to see what was happening.

Two figures—no, three—were marching up the road, following a great dog. The first figure, he recognized as his father’s steward. The other two, a man and a woman, he knew not. Guillaume motioned

to Malcolm to hide himself, and Malcolm slipped into some underbrush. Soon, the huge mastiff had reached the clearing and bounded directly towards Guillaume, who was still trying to conceal himself behind the tree.

“Halt, you beast,” said Guillaume good-naturedly.

The huge dog abruptly stopped and sat as his feet, his huge tail wagging, and his tongue hanging out. With chestnut eyes he adored his master.

“Good dog!” said Guillaume. The old mastiff had been his childhood friend, and now, ten or more years later, still resided on his father’s estate.

“These two people have come, sir,” said the steward to Guillaume. “They say that they were summoned by your servant to bring a sword.”

Guy and Heloise approached Guillaume.

“A messenger came to our inn this morning, sire, asking us to bring the sword of our lodger to the house of the steward of Sir Godfrey’s estate. I wanted to come alone, but my sister insisted that she come also. Where is the Scotsman, that we may deliver his sword to him?”

“Malcolm, you can come out!” said Guillaume.

Malcolm made his way out of the underbrush and walked over to the two newcomers. “I am very grateful that you have come and brought this,” said Malcolm. “I really felt quite naked without it.”

“You’re welcome, sir,” said Guy. “But pray, why did you leave it with my sister?”

“I know not,” said Malcolm, “but I was taken by some strange premonition that I should leave it with you yesterday afternoon. I regret your inconvenience at having to come this far to deliver it.”

“We were able to get a ride most of the way, and did not have far to walk,” said Guy.

“You didn’t attract the suspicion of anyone, did you?” asked Guillaume.

“I think not, sir,” said Guy. “And why should we

attract the suspicion of anyone?”

“Hmmm,” said Guillaume. “This will take a lot of explaining. Come over to the campfire.”

“Have you eaten?” asked Ricardo.

“Why no,” said Guy.

“Then let me prepare you some venison and bread,” Ricardo offered.

“Thank you.”

“These gypsies are Cathars,” said Guillaume.

Guy and Heloise cast a quick glance at each other.

“They are followers of one Giles the tailor, who is well known in our parts.”

Guy and Heloise looked at each other in amazement. They thought that their small group that met in the baker’s shop was Giles’ only congregation.

“And this Giles,” inquired Guy of Ricardo, “what does he teach you?”

“He has taught us,” said Ricardo, “that love is the greatest thing—that the command to love God and our fellows, what he called the Celestial Law, is higher than any law of the land. This Great Law was always Giles’ central teaching.”

Guy and Heloise immediately recognized the truth in the gypsy’s words, for that was the hallmark of Giles’ teaching: the Great Law, the Celestial Law, the Law of Love.

“It is good to know you, brother,” said Guy, embracing Ricardo. “For we, too, are followers of Giles. But it is a shock to know that he has followers other than our small fellowship.”

VI — THE TOURNAMENT OF SONG

A lively conversation soon ensued around the fire at the gypsy encampment. Ricardo left, and Esme came and sat in his place. After relating the details to Guy and Heloise of what had happened the day before, Malcolm then wanted to satisfy his own inquisitiveness as to what exactly these three Cathars believed. Guy and Heloise were fascinated to have found out that Giles had been teaching others secretly. Esme was thrilled to know that there were others who held the same beliefs and had the same teacher—others who now embraced her as a fellow believer. Guillaume was very familiar with most Cathar practices and beliefs, and assumed the role of a detached observer.

“Is it true,” asked Malcolm, “that you do not eat meat and eggs nor drink milk, and that you refrain from marriage?”

“No, it is not,” said Guy. “Others may, but not us. For we believe in the freedom of God’s love, and that means freedom to enjoy the things which God has provided. Our God is a good God, and we are free to enjoy all the good things that He provides.”

“But I have heard that some of you preach that you may take your own life, when trouble surrounds you.”

“That is also rubbish,” said Guy. “We love our lives.”

But these are the things that they say about us to discredit us, to try to show that we are dangerous—not only to others, but even to ourselves! For the only ones of our belief who have died violently or unnaturally are those who have been tortured, imprisoned and killed by our enemies—which, as you may know, are many.

“We are a peaceful, loving people, and want others to enjoy the peace and love that we have. We are active as preachers and teachers, and we spread our beliefs enthusiastically, but we harm no one. Others seek to harm us because we are freeing people from the spiritual tyranny under which they live and the fears and rules of man and the Church that oppress them.”

“Ah, but some of you do have strange beliefs,” said Guillaume. “For truly, sometimes I wonder what God you believe in! For there are some of you that believe in two gods—the one bad, the other good—and that you must transcend the bad to get to the good.”

“There are many different beliefs,” said Heloise, “for not all who do not conform to the Church of Rome are of one mind, neither are we all united. I know there are many preachers and many diverse beliefs among those preachers, but what we have been taught by Giles is that Jesus Christ is the Son of the God of love, sent by God to show us the way of love. Giles also taught us that He was a simple man who lived a simple life, and that He, like some of our fellows, was killed by those envious of Him. His preaching of love undermined their domination. He showed people how to be free, and not under bondage. That is what we tell others: that they can be free—free to enjoy life, free to love.”

“But some of you shun physical affection and say that you must refrain from the things of this world in order to perfect yourselves, in order to pass on to that perfect state beyond,” replied Guillaume.

“It is true—again,” said Guy, “that some teach this,

but this is not our belief. We believe that perfection will only come on the other side, when we have passed from this world into the next. Love and showing love is the way to perfection. It is not in the things that you deny yourself, but it is in the things that you do for others. It is in the care and consideration that you show to others—as this gypsy family has done in taking in this one who hated them and sought to do them harm; yet they have taken him in to try and heal him of his wounds. We believe such deeds of kindness are what help one reach perfection.”

“Well,” said Malcolm. “If this is what you believe, then I am happy to know you, for these are truly honorable beliefs. But why do I hear that the bishop and other members of Holy Mother Church hate you so?”

“It is as we said before,” said Guy. “We expose them for what they do not do. We expose them for their hypocrisy. That is why they hate us.”

“This Giles,” asked Malcolm, “how can I meet him? Truly I would like to hear the things he says.”

“I would have to ask him if I can bring you to our next meeting,” replied Guy.

“Please do,” said Malcolm, “for I would like to know more.”

“Well, my friend,” said Guillaume, “it looks like you’re enjoying this conversation and I hate to pull you away from it, but I must say that the day is getting late now. Tonight you shall be my guest at the Tournament of Song, so we must be thinking of getting away from here. Oh, I must think of a disguise for you!

“Master Guy and Mistress Heloise, I thank you for coming here, and for bringing my companion’s sword. I apologize to you for the inconvenience, and I apologize that we cannot stay and enjoy your pleasant company, but Malcolm and I must be off.”

Then Guillaume turned to Esme and was once

again struck by the deep beauty in her eyes. “Mistress Esme,” said Guillaume politely, “tell your noble father that he is most welcome to stay here. Thank you for your hospitality, and for the meal. I am concerned about that soldier, yonder, and I do join my prayers with yours that he will recover. Come, Malcolm, we must be going.”

Reluctantly, Malcolm nodded and arose. He turned to Guy and Heloise and said, “Thank you for telling me the things that you have today. I came in search of a mystery, and I have found something profound. You are truly a unique and noble people. I thank you, too, for coming this far to bring me my sword, and I pray that I will be able to return the favor someday.”

“You are welcome, noble Scotsman,” said Guy. “You are a true and honest man.” The two shook hands and then Malcolm turned to Heloise. Once again his awkwardness with women showed itself as he stammered out a disjointed repetition of all that he had just said to Guy. Heloise blushed slightly. As they looked into each other’s eyes, there was a long pause—a pause that grew almost awkward for the others standing around.

“Oh,” Guillaume teased as he slapped Malcolm on the back, “I think our dear Scotsman is smitten by your beauty, Ma’am!”

Heloise flushed a deep red. Malcolm turned angrily to Guillaume, but seeing the good-natured smile on the young man’s face, quickly found himself forgiving Guillaume for embarrassing him.

“Yes, we must be going,” said Malcolm somewhat brusquely as he headed towards his horse.

Guillaume turned back toward Esme, and again their eyes met. For a moment he seemed transported to some silent, timeless realm. Then a sweet smile broke on Esme’s face, and it was Guillaume’s turn to blush! He recovered with a smile and bowed chivalrously to the young woman. Without a word, he turned

and headed off to join Malcolm.

“You make light of me for being love-smitten,” said Malcolm to Guillaume, “but methinks your heart too has been lost at this campfire.”

Guillaume smiled, but didn’t answer. He swung himself into the horse’s saddle. “Come on, Scotsman! We must be off. First stop is my father’s house, which is about fifteen minutes’ ride from here. For there I think I can outfit you in a most deceiving disguise.”

Malcolm looked at Guillaume, somewhat puzzled, but decided not to test the matter further. He, too, swung into his saddle, and the two headed up the road that led out of the woods, then turned in the direction of Guillaume’s father’s country home.



We will skip the rest of the events of the afternoon, for they are rather inconsequential to this story. We switch once again to the great hall of the castle in Toulouse, which bustled with activity, for it would be the venue of the Tournament of Song. Servants rushed about, busily preparing the banquet tables that ringed the hall. Many knights, great lords, and sons of great lords had gathered in Toulouse that night.

The judge of the tournament was to be none other than the lovely wife of Count Raymond. She was the sister of Peter, the king of Aragon, the state that bordered the County of Toulouse to the south and west. Raymond’s late first wife, Joan, had been the sister of Richard the Lion-Hearted. Richard, himself a renowned troubadour, had died several years earlier, not far from Toulouse, from wounds received while besieging the castle of a rebellious underlord within his lands in France.

Count Raymond had been a troubadour himself in earlier times, but in these days he found himself so taken up with affairs of state that he no longer had time to pen songs. But tonight he, too, came to watch and to listen, for he found that a good song

could almost magically make him feel less burdened with the cares that constantly bedeviled him.

Shortly before the entertainment was to begin, Guillaume and young Raymond arrived. With them was a stranger, dressed in Saracen robes. His dark complexion, offset by the white headgear common to the Moors of southern Spain, made this stranger seem peculiarly out of place.

“This is Sharif Abu Ben-Ramen,” explained Guillaume to his startled uncle. “He is a Moorish doctor from Grenada, who has come to the Languedoc to ply his trade and teach his craft. The physicians of Cordoba and Grenada are famed throughout the world for their healing prowess. I have invited him to come tonight, to see and listen to the songs and beauty and culture of our fair Christian town. It may be that we can influence him to look kindly upon our religion.”

Count Raymond turned pale as he stared at the familiar features of the Saracen¹. The brown dye that tanned Malcolm’s face did little to hide his identity from the count. Raymond shook his head in dismay, then nodded to the man and sat down again, heavily, in his chair.

Reaching forward to grab his goblet of wine, Guillaume whispered in the younger Raymond’s ear. “We have obviously displeased your father with what we have done.”

Young Raymond turned to Guillaume with a twinkle in his eyes. He always enjoyed his cousin’s pranks; that Guillaume had disguised a friend was clear, but the younger Raymond was in the dark as to who exactly Malcolm was.

“That we have, cousin! That we have!” he said. “And let us see how well the ruse can be played off against the others!”

“Come, noble doctor,” said Guillaume to Sharif Abu Ben-Ramen, “let us be seated up here, on the right

hand of my illustrious uncle. I am so sorry that those of your religion do not drink alcohol, for though you will be able to listen to the good music, you will not be able to partake with us of this rather good wine that is produced in great quantity within our fair county.”

The Saracen nodded, but remained quiet as he sat down. Malcolm felt quite uncomfortable in the unfamiliar clothes, but he had gone along with the scheme and there was no turning back. To be invited to the Tournament of Song and to sit in a place of some honor was something that he would not have wanted to miss. The songs of the troubadours were famous throughout Christendom, and here he was going to hear some of the very best of them.

The songs were divided into several categories. The first singer sang a variation of *Le Chanson de Roland*, the story of the noble Roland, a Frankish knight who, several centuries earlier, had crossed the Pyrenees with Charlemagne with the intention of liberating those lands from the conquering Saracens. After a rather inconclusive campaign, Roland was given the command of the rearguard as the army of the Franks headed home. His was a noble mission doomed to failure, for his company was small in number and the enemy strong. Soon, the small, heroic band was defeated and all were killed in battle. However, their deeds became the essence of a legend and a popular subject for song.

Several people in the audience stared at Malcolm during the song. It took him a while before he realized that he should be somewhat offended by the words, for it did not speak of Saracens in pleasant terms. Turning to Guillaume, he bent over and whispered into his ear, somewhat jokingly, “I should be picking up my scimitar and running you through right about now, for the insults in this song.”

“Noble Saracen,” Guillaume whispered back, “do

¹ See endnote viii - Saracens

not take your disguise too literally. You can pretend to be offended, but the song will not last long. Fear not.”

To Malcolm’s relief, the song soon ended, to the cheers of the onlookers.

The next song told of heroic deeds, this time based on the struggles between various kingdoms that France had been divided into hundreds of years before.

The third troubadour sang of unrequited love. His was the story of a young knight who loved a princess who knew not that she was loved by the man. Tragically, the song ended in the young man leaving for the Crusades and dying in a far land, without the woman ever knowing of his love.

Then it was Guillaume’s turn. Accompanied by a musician on a lute, he sang a song of two lovers. It was a happy song, for the two were finally united and lived in endless bliss.

There were many other songs that night, and much wine was drunk. Malcolm thoroughly enjoyed the evening, even though he had to remain sober. After much roistering and singing, the tournament came to an end, and the countess was to award the prize, a richly decorated goblet, to the winner. After much debate with her husband, and acknowledging to those gathered that it was hard to be a judge when her own nephew had been among the contestants, she awarded the cup to the young chevalier who had sung the sad song of the unrequited love. A huge cheer went out from the crowd as the young man came forward and knelt before the countess. As he arose, she gave him the cup. Holding it high above his head, the young man turned to everyone, and they once again shouted and applauded.

“Come,” said Guillaume to Malcolm, “you and I must be departing soon. We must find a nice place for us to spend the night—out of harm’s way, and

away from the eyes of prying servants. I think that you and I might do better to stay at that inn of yours than to remain here in the castle, where already we know someone is telling the bishop my uncle’s every move.”

As they were leaving, a formidable knight in a drunken stupor turned to Malcolm. “You heathen Saracen!” he snarled. “Why do you come and show yourself among us Christians? You alchemist! You who do covenant with the Evil One! I should take my sword and run you through and be done with you now!” Malcolm eyed Guillaume nervously.

Guillaume turned to the man. “This Saracen is here by my invitation. He is a noble man, true and honest, and I will not have you insulting him in my uncle’s house. If you decide to run him through, you will have to run me through first. And then, I think, my uncle might have somewhat against thee.”

The color rose in the knight’s face as he muttered a halfhearted apology, turned, and headed out the door.

“Some of my countrymen are truly bigoted,” said Guillaume, “but I think it was more the wine talking than himself. It is well known in our parts that to achieve the best education, one must go to Cordoba, and there study in the university, but it seems that while some here are not averse to having the Moors educate them, Saracens in their own backyard make them nervous.

“But that man, Albert of Aurillac, is a truly dangerous man. He is not only rude and ill-tempered, but also one of the greatest warriors in these parts. I assume he did not take things further because he feared running afoul of my uncle. Come, let us go, before we encounter any of the others.”

Bidding goodnight to the younger Raymond, Guillaume and Malcolm slipped out of the great hall by a side door and made their way down a short flight

of steps into a side room, where Malcolm removed his disguise, washed the dye from his hands and face, and donned a cloak.

From there, they slipped out of the castle compound and into the town, and headed down the main street. Guillaume obviously knew where he was going, but to Malcolm, everything was new and unfamiliar. They passed the baker's shop, where, unbeknownst to them, Giles' group had met two days earlier. Then Guillaume turned to the right, into a small alleyway. Pressing on in the dark, they soon came to the inn. Guillaume knocked on the front door.

A voice that they both recognized shouted out from behind the door, "Who is it?"

"It is Malcolm and Guillaume," replied Guillaume.

The bolt clanged loudly as it was pulled, and the door swung open. The two made their way into the inn as Guy closed the door behind them.

"What are you doing here?" asked Guy.

"First I must swear you to an oath of loyalty and secrecy," said Guillaume.

"It is against my beliefs to swear any oath, but you have my word that what passes between you and I tonight will not be told to others," replied Guy.

Guillaume looked deep in Guy's eyes and hesitated for a moment. Then he continued, "Our friend, Malcolm, is supposed to be resident in my uncle's dungeon, but I was trying to find him some more hospitable accommodations tonight. He told me that you maintained a very nice inn here."

"Well, I hope it is better than your uncle's dungeon," said Guy with a smile, "though your uncle's dungeon probably has more occupancy than our inn tonight. Your room is still empty, sir," Guy said to Malcolm. "In truth, you may have the run of the place, for there are no other customers. But pray tell me, sir, why are you supposed to be resident in our count's dungeon?"

"Did Esme not tell you how we met?" asked Guillaume.

"Yes, she did," said Guy, "and that if it hadn't been for Malcolm here, the bishop's soldiers would have had their way with her, and possibly even killed her. And in turn, if you hadn't intervened, Malcolm himself could have been killed."

"Yes," said Malcolm. "I would have passed on to my reward—whatever that may be—if it had not been for the timely intervention of my friend, the noble Guillaume."

"As I said before," Guillaume interrupted, "it was the least that I could do, after having watched you fight those brutes single-handedly."

Turning to Guy, Guillaume continued, "That is why Malcolm is currently resident—or supposed to be resident—in my uncle's choicest lodgings. You see, the bishop has told a different story to my uncle, and his soldiers have accused Malcolm, along with some accomplices, of attacking them on the highway and robbing them of a goodly sum, and also of absconding with the body of one of them.

"And further, the bishop's soldiers contend that it was a conspiracy involving not only Malcolm, but also the gypsies and the Cathars."

"But surely your uncle does not believe this?" said Guy. "For you yourself were witness to the malintentions of the bishop's soldiers."

"Yes, this is true," said Guillaume. "My uncle does not believe it. But there is much politics in this. For even now, a delegation from the pope is in transit to our fair city to argue in front of my uncle that he should suppress you and others of the Cathars. Bishop Odo, our beloved local prelate, is encouraging him in this endeavor, and is also trying to use this attack on his men as another reason to persuade my uncle to oppress you. But my uncle has a plan whereby he hopes to expose the bishop as a liar, and

therefore place the papal legate in an embarrassing and compromised position whereby he will not be able to press my uncle into carrying out the pope's wishes. It is all very complicated, but much hinges on keeping our dear Scot here out of the public eye—that is, until the day of trial.”

“The day of trial?” queried Guy.

“Yes, the day after tomorrow, my uncle has set the trial.”

“Well, please make yourself at home. My sister has already retired for the night, and I was also about to sleep, but can I get you anything first?”

“We will be all right, my friend,” said Guillaume. “Just show us the way to our rooms. I fear we need a good night's rest as there may not be much chance for such a luxury in the days to come.”

VII — GILES

Before dawn, Guillaume slipped out of the inn and went back to the castle. He and Malcolm had arranged that Malcolm would stay in the inn for the day, so that he would not be seen by outsiders. Guillaume would return that night and they would make their way back to the castle. There Malcolm would resume his sojourn in the dungeon and be ready to face trial the following morning.

Malcolm slept long. About midmorning, Guy came to ask if he wanted to eat. Malcolm woke with a start as the young man knocked on the door and peered in. Out of reflex, his sword was already in his hand. Guy looked apprehensively at the menacing blade pointed in his direction. It was a plain sword, unlike the fancy gilded and jewel-encrusted ones that nobility often wore. But Guy had noted the day before, as he carried it to the meeting in the woods, that it bore the seal of the city of Toledo. He knew thereby that it came out of the foundries of the world's finest sword smiths, and was made of Spanish steel, the strongest known alloy. It was a formidable weapon in the hand of any skilled warrior.

Upon seeing it was only Guy entering the room, Malcolm relaxed and placed the sword once again on

the floor. After some pleasantries, Malcolm agreed to eat and Guy returned presently with the victuals and a pitcher of water. Malcolm opened the shutters of his window slightly, to let a little light in. His room faced the back alley, where another building blocked any sort of view there might have been.

After eating, Malcolm lay on his bed, contemplating all the things that had happened to him. He also reviewed the story that he had rehearsed with Count Raymond and Guillaume the previous morning.

Soon, however, Malcolm grew decidedly bored with his confines, and longed to get out of the place. Unfortunately, he knew that he had to stay where he was. Malcolm had inquired of Guy earlier whether his sister was there that day. Heloise was away on a family errand that Guy did not care to elaborate on, so Malcolm dropped the subject.

The day drew on. Malcolm got up and paced the room. For a while he practiced swordplay with an imaginary foe. He inspected his other weapons and armor, and polished some rust off his battle-axe. As he checked the honed edge of the instrument, he took note that it was slightly dull, but still sharp enough to accomplish the gruesome task for which it was designed. He also checked his mace, his shield, and the other assorted pieces of armor. After having busied himself with these things for as long as he could, he once again sank back down into bed to count the hours.

As evening approached, Malcolm could stay in the room no longer. He went down the hallway and looked over the balcony into the main room of the inn. The room was empty except for Guy and an older man with long silvery hair and a white beard. Malcolm saw they were engrossed in an intense conversation.

Suddenly, the other man looked up and saw Malcolm. Guy excused himself and went to Malcolm. "Sir," he whispered, "Lord Guillaume gave me strict

instructions that you were not to show yourself out of your room today."

"Aye," said Malcolm, "but I cannot stand looking at those four walls any longer. Indeed, your abode is pleasant, but I am not a man to stay in a room all day. It is like death to me."

"Come down, young man," the old man called out.

When Guy saw that Malcolm was pleased with the invitation, he acquiesced. But before returning to his table, he bolted the door and shuttered the windows which looked out onto the main street.

Malcolm came down and walked over to where the old man sat. "You're Giles, aren't you?" he queried.

"That is my name. Come, sit down here with me, and enjoy master Guy's hospitality."

"Thank you," said Malcolm, taking the seat opposite. "I have heard much about you from Guy and his sister, and from the gypsy girl named Esme."

"And I have heard much of you. I have heard that you saved Esme's life, and as her spiritual mentor, I thank you for your kindness."

"It was the honorable thing to do. The lady was in distress, and they were villains who had set upon her."

"Nevertheless, you did not need to intervene, but God moved you to do so, and I thank you for that."

"God or no, I would have intervened. As I said, she was in distress."

"Well, I will make the conjecture that God had you there to come to her defense."

"That sounds like a good compromise. But tell me, master Giles, how did you become a teacher of this way, and a leader of these people called the Cathars?"

"I am no leader. I am a follower—a follower of our Savior, the Lord Jesus. I but teach what I have learned from those more honorable than myself."

"But from what I have heard of you and your teachings, it does not seem that you are of the same

people. For I have heard of some of the Cathars' doctrines, and yet yours do not seem to be the same."

"When I began my quest," explained Giles, "I studied and read many books. But not finding any peace, I began a pilgrimage—not a pilgrimage to a shrine made of hands, but a pilgrimage in search of truth. I traveled to many cities. By and by, at Lyon, I met Peter Waldo, the leader of the people who are now called by his name. I saw that he preached a great truth—the truth of the Holy Gospels.

"For a while, I became one of his people. I traveled with a companion, and we preached God's Word. Peter Waldo sent us out to preach the good news in the vernacular, the language of the common people. He taught us that God's Word cannot be confined to one language; it is for all men, and all men should hear it in their own language. And so, many of the Gospels and other books of the New Testament were translated into the Provençal language of that region, similar to *Langue d'Oc*.

"But after a while, my spirit was moved within me and I longed to return here, to my home in Toulouse, to preach among my own kindred. It was here that I communed with those Perfects of the Cathars, and I found them to be true and good men and women. It was in talking with them that a new dimension was opened to me. You see, Waldo taught that the Word was to be obeyed to the most minute detail. We did everything as the Word instructed, and if the Word did not instruct, we did not do it.

"But when I met the Cathars, they taught me the great principle of love. Love, to them, overrode all law. I searched out this matter in the sacred Scriptures, and I saw that the greatest commandment was to love God with heart, soul, mind and body, and to love my neighbor as myself. I also learned that sometimes love stands contrary to the law. Although Peter Waldo taught me great things from the Scriptures, the

Scriptures themselves are not love; the letter of the law is only dead works.

"I came to see that love is the greatest thing; that love is the way to true perfection. I began showing people from the Scriptures how these things be so. People listened. Soon I had small groups of believers who looked to me as their guide. Now I count myself a teacher of about twenty-five such groups, scattered throughout our city and surrounding towns. It was while traveling from one meeting to another that I came across Ricardo and his family. I preached to them, and that is how they came to be believers.

"Young Guy here did not know I had all these other groups, and so this is still all rather mysterious to him and his sister. I thought it best not to join all these groups into one big fellowship, but rather to keep each one small, so that they may survive in the evil time that is to come. For evil shall come, and it shall not be long in arriving."

Giles paused for a minute, as a look of deep consternation came across his face. Then he continued somberly. "I have seen in a vision, destruction and war. I have seen a black fist rise out of the North, pounding down on my beloved Languedoc. A black prince, of much malice, shall lead an army against us and shall prevail. He himself shall be brought low, but not before great wickedness and destruction is done to my people. And so, I keep my groups small and clandestine, that they may survive in the evil day."

Malcolm sat captivated, his eyes transfixed by the clear stare of the old man whose blue eyes shone with an unfathomable intensity. The same beautiful light shone from all these people's eyes, but even brighter in those of Giles.

Tears welled up in Giles' eyes, and Malcolm placed his hand on his shoulder in an effort to comfort him. "Dear sir," he said, "I pray this dreadful vision does

not come to pass. But let it be known that if it does, I will come to the defense of your people and your beliefs. For when I heard your words, my heart did rejoice. Let me now dedicate myself to this cause. This is what I have been seeking.”

The old man reached for Malcolm’s hand and squeezed it in his. “You know not what you say, young man, nor what troubles you take upon yourself. But I am glad that you have heard the truth in my words, and I embrace you as a brother. May God strengthen you, and may the love of His Son dwell in your heart and lead you to all truth and all knowledge.”

“So be it,” said Malcolm quietly.

“So be it,” said Giles. “Young man, I’m sorry I cannot stay longer, but I must be away. People are counting on me tonight. Yet know that I will be praying for you, for tomorrow, I hear, you must stand trial on false and heinous charges. Fear not, for the God who is the Creator of all things shall send His angel to stand by your side.”

“Thank you,” said Malcolm, “but I am counting on Count Raymond to stand by my side. Well, at least that is his scheme.”

Giles sighed. “Count Raymond is a good man, but powers greater than him will soon be coming. He will have to compromise to keep that which he rules, and he will succumb in the end. Now I must be away.”

Guy, who had been standing aside, listening to the conversation, picked up the old man’s cloak that hung on a peg by the door, and carried it to Giles. “Brother Giles,” said Guy, “may I suggest you leave by the back door?”

“Yes,” said Giles, slipping the cloak over his shoulders. “Farewell, young Scotsman. See that you be careful.”

Guy saw Giles on his way, leaving Malcolm deep in thought at all he had heard.

After a few moments, Malcolm was shaken to his

senses by a loud banging on the front door. He rose silently from his chair, slipped up the stairs and disappeared into his room. From the cracked door he tried to make out what was going on.

Guy hurried back in from the kitchen area, and stood by the front door. “Who is there?” demanded Guy. “And why do you pound so heavily upon my door?”

“Open up, in the name of the bishop,” shouted a familiar voice from the other side. Malcolm immediately recognized Bernard’s voice. Guy opened the small peephole and looked out. “And what is my lord bishop wanting with me,” asked Guy, “and with my humble inn?”

“We have reports that one Giles, the tailor, was seen coming to this inn. The bishop wishes to question this heretic.”

“You are mistaken,” said Guy. “I am the only one here.”

“Open this door!” said Bernard. “How dare you defy the bishop by denying his soldiers entry!”

“I knew not that the bishop had authority to demand entry to my inn,” replied Guy.

“Do you want me to break down this door?” bellowed Bernard.

“I most certainly do not,” answered Guy.

“Then open the door!” shouted Bernard again.

“Under what authority am I to open the door?” said Guy.

“Listen, you impudent little pip-squeak,” said Bernard, clearly agitated at this challenge of his authority, “if you value your life, you’ll open the door and allow me to inspect your inn.”

Suddenly, a new voice could be heard from outside the door. “My goodness, and what would the bishop’s soldiers want with this little inn?” Guillaume’s voice was clearly recognizable to Guy, and even to Malcolm, who was quite a distance away.

“I am conducting a search on the order of my lord bishop,” answered Bernard.

“And what authority does the bishop have to conduct searches?” Guillaume inquired.

“By the authority vested in him from God,” said Bernard, hesitantly.

“Oh, come, come, sergeant!” said Guillaume. “The bishop has no authority to order searches inside the city. That is the prerogative of my uncle, the count.”

Bernard flushed. “Giles, a known heretic, was seen entering this inn, and, in matters of heresy, my lord bishop has authority.”

“Yes,” said Guillaume. “In matters of heresy your lord bishop does indeed have authority. But that authority does not extend to conducting searches within the houses of the city. That is the prerogative of the count. Once the heretic is apprehended, only then may he be brought for ecclesiastical trial before my lord bishop. Come, come, sergeant. You know that you can’t do this!”

Bernard, by now, was losing his temper. “My Lord Guillaume exerts himself in matters too high for him!”

“Oh, I scarcely think so,” said Guillaume. “I speak in the name of my uncle. Surely that is enough authority. Now, begone with you, sergeant, and leave this poor innkeeper to his pots, pans and night pots.”

“And what, may I ask, are you doing here?” said Bernard to Guillaume.

“Why, just passing by,” said Guillaume.

“Happenstance?” Bernard’s eyes narrowed.

“My goodness!” said Guillaume. “That’s a dreadful dent you have in your helmet. Did you get hit?”

Bernard’s demeanor could now be described as very wroth. “You know very well I was hit!” he said through his clenched teeth. “It was reported by my lord bishop to your uncle the count, and I am sure that you have been well informed.”

“Ah, that’s right! A highwayman, wasn’t it? Tsk,

tsk! Well, must watch your back now, mustn’t you? But go on, off with you now! Tell your bishop that you weren’t able to find the man. Or, you can tell him that I refused to let you enter into the house, because you were breaking the law and demanding entry. Go on! Off with you now!” said Guillaume, his voice suddenly becoming stern. “Before it’s more trouble for you!”

Bernard reluctantly moved away from the door. He angrily motioned at the two guards that accompanied him and they all stomped off down the narrow street towards the main marketplace.

Guillaume made a pretense of leisurely strolling the other way till he was convinced that the bishop’s soldiers could not see him in the darkened street, then doubled back. A figure draped in a cloak hurried past Guillaume and disappeared into the blackness of the street ahead.

Guillaume turned back towards the inn, and entered the alley that led around to the back, where the stables were. He made his way through the stables and slipped inside the back door. Turning a corner while looking the other way, he ran straight into Guy, who was poised to strike a blow, a huge cast-iron frying pan in his hand.

The two stood there for a second in startled fright, then both broke out in laughter. “That is quite a vicious weapon that you wield,” chortled Guillaume.

“Aye,” replied Guy. “I’m afraid I grabbed the best thing I could, thinking I was going to have to defend myself against that brute outside the door—though I scarcely think a frying pan would have done the subject justice!”

“Your little inn is certainly a hotbed of trouble today! But pray tell me, is it true that the bishop’s guard was looking for Giles the tailor?”

“Yes, it is true, and he was here. He left not more than a few moments before they began to knock.”

“And Malcolm?” queried Guillaume. “Is he still upstairs? He hasn’t flown the coop, has he?”

“No, Malcolm is upstairs,” said Guy.

Guillaume made his way upstairs, and back to the room, where Malcolm was.

“Malcolm, it is I,” he said, as he slowly opened the door. He was careful to make sure Malcolm knew who was coming; for he had seen Malcolm’s swordsmanship and did not care to risk being on the receiving end.

“Welcome, Lord Guillaume,” said Malcolm. “That was quite a commotion outside!”

“Yes, I’m afraid the dear bishop’s sergeant does not look too kindly upon me these days—and less now for interfering with his charge out there. I wonder why the bishop suddenly wants to arrest Giles?” Guillaume pondered aloud.

“Because Giles is a threat to his authority?” said Malcolm, trying to be helpful.

“Hmm, perhaps,” said Guillaume. “But he has known about Giles for a long time. I wonder why he chose today to try and catch him? Oh well, no use trying to figure that out now. Come, have you eaten?”

“I have eaten once today,” said Malcolm.

“Well, you need to eat again, for after your meal I must once again escort you to the castle, where you must await tomorrow—and your moment of truth.”

“I place myself in your hands, and,” Malcolm added in a voice that betrayed a decided loss of confidence after the talk with Giles, “into the hands of your good uncle.”

VIII — THE TRIAL

Malcolm was awakened by the heavy tramp of feet upon the stairs. Soon, Malcolm heard the sound of a key being placed in the heavy lock outside the door. The door swung open with a loud clang, and two figures walked into the dungeon cell. One held a flaming torch aloft, as the other—a lean and gangly fellow dressed in brown and obviously one of the jailers—roughly unlocked the manacles from the ring imbedded in the wall above Malcolm’s head.

Still manacled and shackled, Malcolm was roughly pulled to his feet. “Come on, Scotsman,” the man sneered. “Today you face the sweet justice of Toulouse.”

Malcolm remained silent.

Without further ado, the man grabbed the manacle chain and led Malcolm out the door and through the narrow hallway. The other attendant followed. The three men marched up the spiral staircase and emerged into the daylight’s glare.

Two soldiers took positions on either side of Malcolm, and the group marched across the courtyard and into the great hall of the castle.

There, at the far end, sat Count Raymond on his throne, flanked by Robert of Avignon and Sir Godfrey,

Guillaume's father. Count Raymond's son, young Raymond, was next to Godfrey. Guillaume and an array of other notables—some of whom Malcolm recognized from the Tournament of Song—were also in attendance.

To the left of the count, and at a distance, sat Bishop Odo, surrounded by several priests, deacons, and other functionaries of the church.

Malcolm was marched to the wooden dock in front of the count. The two soldiers remained, spears in hand, on either side of Malcolm.

A notable of the court then arose, with a scroll in his hand, and read out the following. "Hereby, in the court of Count Raymond of Toulouse, is brought forth the matter of the attack on Bishop Odo's guardsmen of four days hence, the theft of three hundred gold pieces, and the disappearance of one of their number, presumed dead. The prisoner, one Malcolm MacAlpin, a Scotsman, is hereby accused of being the perpetrator of these acts, several accomplices, at this point unidentified, being confederate with him in this crime. This matter is now brought for judgment before His Excellency Count Raymond."

Count Raymond turned to Malcolm. "How plead you to these charges?"

Malcolm looked first at the count, then across to the bishop, then back to the count. "Innocent!" he exclaimed in a loud clear voice.

A murmur rose from the gallery of spectators.

Count Raymond then turned to the bishop. "My lord bishop, where are the victims and the accusers of this man?"

The bishop nodded to one of his attendants, who hastened to a side door and opened it. In walked Bernard and the other guard who was with him on that day.

"These two men are the victims," bellowed Odo, "and they will hereby identify this felon as the one

who set upon and robbed them, and murdered their companion."

Count Raymond turned to Bernard and ordered him to come forward. "Tell me your story," said the count.

Bernard then launched into his well-rehearsed story of how he and his companions had been on their way to deliver a letter and some gold to the papal legate's party, when only a short distance from Toulouse, where the road took a sharp turn and headed west, they were set upon by Malcolm and the others, knocked unconscious and robbed.

"And what happened to the message?" inquired the count.

"What message, my lord?" asked Bernard.

"The message you just said that you were carrying. Did you lose that too?"

"Uh, why no, my lord."

"And why would you be carrying a message to the papal legate?"

"It was church business, my lord," explained Bernard.

"Hmmm," said the count, with a hint of suspicion in his voice.

All this time, Odo was intently scrutinizing the count, for he realized that with all this talk of the message, the count might well betray the fact that he knew what the content of the message was, if indeed he knew. But Odo bided his time, and the count continued his questioning of Bernard.

Finally, Bernard turned and pointed at Malcolm. "This is the man, and I hereby accuse him of these crimes; and not I only, but the man—my surviving companion, who is with me at this time—can also attest that this is the scoundrel."

"Bring forward the other guard," commanded Count Raymond.

The man nervously came forward and stood beside Bernard.

“Do you also say this is the man?”

“Yes, your Excellency,” the guard responded.

“And you both say, beyond doubt, that this was indeed the fellow?”

“Yes, your Excellency!”

“And could you identify any of the other assailants?”

“The others attacked us from behind, my lord,” said Bernard. “We did not see them.”

“Hmmm,” said the count. “We have the word of two men against one. Very well, you may both step back. I will now question the prisoner.” And with that, the count turned to Malcolm, still standing silently in the dock. “What were you doing on the road outside of Toulouse that morning?”

“I was going for an early morning ride, my lord,” Malcolm answered.

“So, you do not deny that you were at the scene of the crime?”

“No, my lord, I do not deny that I was at the scene of the real crime.”

“And what do you mean by that, Scotsman?”

“My lord, I came across these two fellows and their companion trying to have their way with a maid, down by the river.”

A murmur rose from the suddenly very attentive audience. Odo’s eyes narrowed and flashed at Bernard.

“Lies!” Bernard yelled out. “Those are heinous lies! He is lying to save his neck!”

“Silence!” ordered the count. “Go on, Scotsman, tell us your story.”

“Well, when I saw these three brutes with the girl, I shouted at them to stop.”

“What was their reaction?”

“The big fellow over there”—pointing to Bernard—“told me to be gone; that it was none of my business. But seeing that the woman was obviously distressed

and being forced, I said that I made it my business; that I was duty bound as a gentleman and as a knight to defend her honor if she would choose me as her champion.”

“And did you defend her honor?”

“Yes, my lord, I challenged the three of them.”

“So, you challenged and fought these three men; you, one against three?”

“Well, my lord, they didn’t seem too handy with their weapons.”

A ripple of laughter went through the court.

Bernard fumed. “He is lying, my lord!” he said again.

“Be quiet,” snapped the count. “So what happened?”

“Well, we fought, and I easily mastered the two of them, but then tripped, and that big fellow there was about to kill me, when to my surprise, someone hit him on the head and knocked him out.”

“And who was this someone?” asked the count.

“A certain benefactor, my lord,” said Malcolm.

“And who might this benefactor be?” asked the count.

“I cannot say, my lord,” said Malcolm, “for I gave my word.”

At this point, Bishop Odo interrupted. “This is a preposterous tale, Count Raymond! This man would have us believe that he fought three of my guards single-handedly in a noble effort to save the honor of some wench! He brings no witnesses, but just spins this fantastic tale. These two,” he said, pointing towards Bernard and the other, “are my trusted men. They claim that this man accosted them and diverted their attention while they were set upon from behind by his fellow brigands! *That* is what happened, not this preposterous, fanciful tale of supposed chivalry! That man,” Odo now was waving his finger at Malcolm in an ever-mounting

fit of fury, “is a highwayman and a liar!”

“Hmmm,” mused the count. “It is true, we have the word of two. And, as the proverb says, ‘In the mouth of two witnesses shall the truth be established.’ I’m afraid, Scotsman, that I cannot believe your word, for two people contradict it.”

A smile flashed across Odo’s face as he heard those words.

But at that moment, the doors at the far end of the hall swung open. “My lord,” cried a new voice, “I will contradict those men’s statements!”

Everyone in the hall turned to see who was speaking. There, with one arm around the neck of Guy and the other leaning heavily on a crutch, stood the missing member of Odo’s guard.

“And who are you?” asked the count.

“I was the third member of the trio that set upon the girl that morning,” said the soldier, in a quiet, steady voice.

Another gasp arose from the crowd at this coup de théâtre. The soldier, assisted by Guy, hobbled forward to where the other attendants of the court stood.

Odo slumped into his seat in shock. Bernard and his fellow accuser were struck dumb, and for a few moments looked like two tormented specters who had returned from the grave to witness the recompense of their foul deeds while living.

“My lord count,” said the third soldier, whose name was Roger, “I beg two boons from you. Firstly, what I am about to testify to will put me in mortal danger, so I beg that I be placed under your protection till the proceedings are over. Secondly, my fever has now passed and I am of a clear mind, but since my leg is still grievously wounded from the fight that ensued, may I request to sit, my lord?”

“I shall grant both your requests,” said the count. “Bring the man a seat.” An attendant rushed up with

a stool, and Roger sat heavily upon it and began his testimony.

“The Scotsman tells you the truth, for we saw the girl swimming naked in the river, and our lusts burned within us. We planned to have our way with her that morning, before continuing on our journey. But the Scotsman came upon us, and seeing our malicious intentions, challenged us. The three of us fought him, and he did grievously wound me on my leg, so that I collapsed and passed out from the pain.

“I have no recollection of what happened from that point on, except that I awoke to find the girl, the same one whom we had sought to most grievously dishonor, nursing my wound. She told me what was to transpire today, and that is why I am here. Even though this man is the cause of my present pain and crippled condition, I cannot let him suffer so ignobly at the hands of my former companions, when it was we who did the shameful deed—or at least, sought to.”

“And what of the monies that you were carrying?” queried the count.

“Monies? We were carrying no monies, my lord, just a letter to His Excellency Peter of Castelnau,” replied Roger.

Odo was up on his feet now, and stormed towards Roger. “And who were these people that took care of you?” he hissed, trying to divert attention from talk of the message and the monies.

“They were the gypsies, my lord bishop!”

“The gypsies? What gypsies?”

“They were camped near to the river where we had stopped to water our horses.”

“And the woman—the girl, she was a gypsy?”

Roger nodded. “And a truer Christian woman I have never met,” he added.

Odo now turned to face Count Raymond. “My lord count,” he said, “it is obvious that this man has been bewitched! His brain has been addled by these gypsies.

They are heathens, my lord count, and are accorded no protection in Christendom. They are devotees of darkness—worse than the Cathars, who they are no doubt in league with. They have cast a spell on him, so he knows not what he says. To accord a gypsy girl the honor of being called a true Christian woman is an insult to all the noble ladies of our realm. This tale has gone too far. The words that this fool mouths are things impossible to believe. He betrays his own enchanted state.”

A murmur of assent rippled through the superstitious crowd, who shared Odo’s prejudice.

Count Raymond looked down at the man. “He seems in his right mind to me, my lord bishop.”

“I am the judge of spiritual matters such as these,” challenged Odo.

“But, my lord bishop,” Raymond sternly replied, “I am the judge here. This is my court, not yours. In light of this man’s concurring testimony, I can only declare the innocence of this Scotsman. Furthermore, it would appear that you have fabricated this story of monies stolen. I can only assume, then, that something happened to the message that these men were carrying, something which—I have noticed, lord bishop—you seem to prefer not to discuss!”

Odo looked fiercely at Raymond. “You have no right to accuse me! This man has been bewitched! I hereby demand trial by combat, to prove the guilt of the Scotsman!”

A smile crossed Malcolm’s face, for the thought of doing combat with Bernard to prove his innocence was something he quite looked forward to.

The count turned to Malcolm. “Will you accept this trial by combat?”

“I will,” said Malcolm, “for I am innocent of these charges.”

“And who will be your champion?” the count inquired of Odo.

Odo turned to look at Bernard. It was obvious that Bernard was no match, for already he and his two soldiers had been beaten by this one man—or at least, almost beaten. Odo scanned the room until his eyes fell on a man in the back of the count’s retinue.

“I ask for Albert of Aurillac, a noble knight and a true son of Mother Church, to hereby be the champion of the church in this matter!”

A loud murmur swept through the court. Guillaume’s and Malcolm’s anxious eyes met and locked. The situation had taken a dangerous turn, for Albert of Aurillac was arguably the greatest swordsman of southern France.

The count, his face notably grave, turned to Albert. “What say ye, Albert of Aurillac? Will you accept this commission?”

With scarcely a moment of hesitation, he thundered out, “I will!”

“Then,” said the count, turning to Odo, “you have appealed to trial by combat, and, being a priest, it is your right to have someone fight in your stead. The two sides have agreed. Therefore, I decree that this afternoon in the royal lists, this combat commence. May truth and justice prevail, according to the laws of the Franks, which do govern our lands.

“And to the two combatants I say: Repair ye to that field at one hour past noon today, there to do deadly combat. And if either of you do not show, your guilt shall be declared, and you shall be branded an outlaw. Choose your seconds.”

Albert turned to the man next to him. “My cousin Theobald shall be my second.”

“And you, Scotsman, who will you choose to be your second?”

At this, Guillaume stepped forward. “My lord uncle, this man is a stranger in our lands. It would be dishonorable for him, and for us, if he did not have a second. I hereby volunteer to be this man’s second,

and to arrange the details of the fight.”

“So be it,” said Count Raymond. “This court is adjourned, and will reconvene at the jousting field at the appointed time. And may God have mercy on us all!”

IX — THE PAPAL LEGATE

As the court was about to disperse, a large commotion could be heard. It was coming from the direction of the city. A page ran into the great hall and approached Count Raymond.

“My lord,” he said, “the papal legate, Peter of Castelnau and his retinue, have entered the city gates. They are presently making their way towards the castle.”

“An auspicious moment for him to arrive,” mused Count Raymond. “Well, my lord bishop,” Raymond said, turning to Odo, “it looks like the papal legate has arrived just in time for the trial by combat.”

Odo looked somewhat discomfited, but quickly put on a brave face. “Yes, my lord count,” said Odo, “and he shall surely see the triumph of the truth and the vindication of the servants of our Holy Mother Church when the Scotsman falls under the blows of the mighty Albert of Aurillac.”

“Yes, my lord bishop,” said Count Raymond, “indeed he might. But, as you will recall, the Holy Father, Innocent III, has discouraged clergy from taking recourse to trial by combat. His excellency shall be in a most awkward position.”

Odo bowed in mock graciousness. “Excuse me, my

lord count, I must be away and make preparations to receive His Excellency Peter of Castelnau and his retinue, at my residence. I pray thee, grant me leave to retire.”

“Oh, most certainly,” replied the count. “I pray that all will go well in your entertaining the legate. I will, of course, expect to see you and the legate this afternoon, at the lists.”

“I shall be there,” said the bishop, “but I cannot speak for the honorable Peter of Castelnau in this matter.”

Odo hastily headed for the main door. His attendants scurried to keep up with him, and struggled to form some sort of orderly procession out of the great hall, down the steps, through the courtyard, and out the castle gate.

The normally languid Odo marched along with a zealotness that his entourage was not accustomed to. Odo arrived at his palace, only to see the legate and his party already drawn up at the main gate. There stood the tall, angular figure of Peter of Castelnau, dressed in the distinctive white robes of the Cistercian order¹. Although he was just a friar and therefore nominally lower on the church hierarchy than Odo, Peter of Castelnau was a favorite of the pope and had often acted as his legate in the realm of Languedoc, particularly in efforts to stem the Cathar “heresy.” Odo intended to show him due deference and thereby hopefully ingratiate himself with the powers that be in the papal court.

“Welcome!” proclaimed Odo, as he hurried forward to greet the legate.

“We have had an exhausting journey,” said the legate. “I hope we will not impose too greatly upon your hospitality, but could you please find lodgings for the members of my party, and then take me to the apartments prepared for me?”

¹ See endnote ix - The Cistercian Order

“At once,” said Odo. “We have been expecting you for some time. I do apologize that I was not here when you arrived, but I was in the attendance of the count on matters of some importance.”

“Yes, I have heard news of this trial. Did everything run satisfactorily for you?”

“It did not go as expected,” said Odo, somewhat downcast, “but the matter is not over yet. It is to be decided by trial of combat.”

“What?!” exclaimed the legate. “Do you not know that the Holy Father has expressly forbidden the clergy to be involved in trials by combat?”

Odo shuffled nervously before the legate but did his utmost to present a gracious front. “There was nothing else that could be done. It was forced upon us.”

“Humph,” said the legate. “Let us hope that our God in Heaven smiles upon this venture, and that He will give strength to your champion.”

“I have little fear that He will give strength to our champion,” said Odo more confidently, “for the mighty Albert of Aurillac, the most feared knight in all of southern France, is to champion the Church.”

“Well, we shall see, won’t we?”

“Yes. Come, let me lead you to your apartments.”

Servants scurried hither and thither as Odo waved his hands and glanced angrily at several who seemed not to be busy enough attending to His Excellency.

The two men walked up the main staircase to the second floor, and headed toward the guest apartments.

“What time shall be this trial?” inquired the legate as they paused at the door.

“One hour after noon this day, your excellency,” replied Odo.

“Very well, then. Tell your servants to prepare a place for me. I shall be in attendance.”

After the bishop's hasty exit from the castle's main hall, Guillaume ordered the jailer to remove the shackles and the manacles from Malcolm's ankles and wrists, telling the jailer that he would take charge of readying the Scot for the upcoming combat.

"Come, my dear man," said Guillaume softly to Malcolm. "We have much to prepare."

Just then Albert of Aurillac strode over to Guillaume and Malcolm.

"You look strangely familiar," he said, staring intently at Malcolm.

"Perhaps we have met before," remarked Malcolm.

"Perhaps we have, even though the time and circumstance escape me. But that is of no consequence." Albert had come to deliver a message, and would not be sidetracked. "I want you to know," said Albert, "that I enjoy fighting. I enjoy beating an opponent. I shall enjoy fighting you, and I shall stop at nothing, but to kill you."

"Sir Albert, you have such a way with words," said Guillaume, with a notable tinge of sarcasm in his voice.

"Popinjay!" Albert grunted at Guillaume before turning once more to Malcolm. "I am a true son of Mother Church, and I shall defend her honor with every ounce of strength in my body. Make no doubt about that."

Turning to Guillaume, Albert added, "My second will meet you to discuss conditions."

"I shall await your cousin Theobald," answered Guillaume, "half an hour before the combat is to begin."

"Very well," said Albert. "Say your prayers, Scotsman, and be sure that your heart is prepared to meet your God."

"I believe my heart is prepared," said Malcolm, "more prepared than it has ever been in the past. But do not be so sure that I shall be the one to knock on

the heavenly portals."

"Ha!" said Albert. "You are cocky, but it remains to be seen if you are as deft with your sword as you are with your tongue."

"And so we shall," said Malcolm.

✠

Guy, after assisting Roger into the main hall for his court appearance, had stood a ways apart. Guillaume now motioned to him to come over. "We shall need the Scotsman's weapons," said Guillaume. "Arrange to have them brought to my tent, which shall be set up on the field of combat."

"I shall," said Guy, before turning to Malcolm. "Brother Malcolm, please know that I and as many of the others as I can notify shall pray for your strength, and skill, and courage for the time of battle. And most of all, we shall pray for your triumph today. We know that your cause is just, that our God is just, and that He is ever able to do the impossible. Your opponent is mighty, that is plain to see, but you are armed with truth and righteousness."

"Thank you," replied Malcolm. "Those are touching words, and they are a comfort to my heart. Yes, please tell the others to pray, for truly I shall need all their prayers this day!"

✠

In all the commotion, everyone had forgotten about Roger, who had grown quiet, progressively feeling fainter while sitting on the stool. Guy finally noticed that the man was about to collapse, and rushed over to steady him. Guillaume motioned to two of his uncle's attendants. "Take this man to my quarters," said Guillaume, "and make sure that he is well cared for. Then ride to my father's estate and tell the steward that Roger, of the bishop's guard, is resting here in my apartment and could use the services of the person who has been nursing him. Then wait while he fetches the nurse and bring her back hither."

“Yes, my lord,” said the attendant. He and his companion braced Roger from either side. With one of his arms over each of their shoulders, they helped him to the stairway which led to the private quarters of the castle.

Malcolm turned to Guy. “I shall need my horse, too.”

“Yes, Malcolm, it will be there, along with all your armor.”

“Thank you. You are a good friend.”

“It is an honor to be called your friend,” said Guy, as he turned and headed off.

“Well,” said Guillaume, trying to act cheerful. “We are a somber lot now, aren’t we? Come, let us go. I think you need a hearty meal, Malcolm. You cannot fight on an empty stomach. While you are eating, I will tell you of Albert’s strengths and weaknesses, for I have seen him fight many times. Though formidable, he is not altogether unbeatable. You might well be the one to make the mighty Albert fall from his pedestal.”

“I surely hope so,” said Malcolm, “for if I am not, I shall not see another dawn.”

“Come, let us be gone.”

The two men walked off.

Unnoticed, it seemed, by the others, Robert of Avignon had observed the conversation from a discreet distance. He, too, turned and left the room.

✕

The sun was high in the sky when Guillaume and Malcolm arrived at the jousting field. There was an annual tournament held in Toulouse, and to accommodate this, the lists had been built some time previously. It was a long field, situated just outside the city walls. A fence divided the field. When jousting with a lance, the two combatants would charge toward each other and ride along opposite sides of the fence. This was to prevent the

horses from swerving and crashing into each other.

On one side of the field was a small grandstand where the count and other notables of the area would sit to observe the tourney. On the other side of the field was a fence, and behind it a knoll from which the commoners would watch. At either end, the tents of the combatants would be pitched. There were only two tents pitched this day—one for Albert and one for Malcolm.

True to his word, Guy arrived at the field with Malcolm’s horse and his armor. With him was the pretty Heloise. Before coming to the field, they had gotten word to Francis the baker, who promised to spread the word amongst the faithful—hopefully even to Giles—to pray for Malcolm.

Malcolm and Guillaume feasted well, though apprehensively, on pheasant, fruit and good wine. Malcolm had joked darkly that this “last meal” had been one of the better ones of his life. Guillaume, never much given to such melancholic thoughts, told Malcolm to cheer up. “As sure as there is a righteous God, He will give you strength for this battle!”

Guillaume thought for a minute, and noted with some amusement that he was now preaching the strength and grace of God—something that would have been quite out of character for him just a few days earlier. “Well, we need to get you suited up,” he quickly added.

“Yes,” said Malcolm, “we had better do that.”

✕

These were the days before heavily armored knights; heavy plate armor would only become common in the following centuries. At this time, knights wore a thigh-length shirt of mail called a hauberk. It consisted of small metal rings linked together. There were many thousands of these in one hauberk. Attached to the hauberk was a hood called a coif that covered and protected the head. The sleeves of the hauberk were

also made of mail and ended in mittens of the same. A thick padded garment was worn under the hauberk. Chain mail was an ample defense against the slashing blows of a sword, but it could easily be penetrated by a sudden forward thrust, whether from a sword, a spear, or bolts from a crossbow.

On their heads knights wore metal helmets with a nosepiece that partially protected their face. Their legs were covered by mail leggings. Over the hauberk they wore a sleeveless tunic which bore an identifying emblem, called a coat of arms. Malcolm's was blue and bore the image of a lion standing on its hind legs. The shields most common in these days were round on the top and curved down to a long point, something like an inverted tear drop. Malcolm's shield was plain, though it was common for knights to have their coat of arms painted on their shields.

At the appointed time, Theobald came to Guillaume's tent, and the two stepped outside to converse a short distance away.

"Normally," Theobald said, "your man would have the right to choose the weapons, but in this case Bishop Odo appealed to trial by combat to prove his innocence from the charges leveled by Roger. So now Albert stands in the place of the accused, and your man as the accuser. Therefore, Albert claims the right to choose the weapons."

"This is preposterous!" said Guillaume. "My man is the man in the dock, and your man stands in the stead of the accuser!"

"No," replied Theobald, "we must choose the weapons. Albert has instructed me to be very clear. He is to have the choice of weapons."

"Then I appeal to my uncle as the judge," said Guillaume. "Come, let us be off."

Heloise had stood a ways off during all the previous proceedings. Malcolm now turned to her. She blushed and looked down.

"Thank you for coming," Malcolm said quietly.

"I had to. Oh, Malcolm! I fear for your life!"

"Fear not, for was it not you who said your God was a strong God?"

"Yes, but at times like this, I am afraid my faith does waver."

"Mistress Heloise, I would ask you a boon."

"Pray, ask!"

"It is a custom that in the tournament, a knight will wear a token from his lady. I have no lady ... but I have found in you not only a lady, but a sister and a woman of rare beauty. I am not very good with words, and I am clumsy around women. Perhaps it is knowing that my death may be imminent that emboldens me to speak this way, but would you have a scarf or some other token that I could wear?"

Heloise blushed. "Oh, Malcolm, I would most gladly give you a token! For in truth, I care for you greatly. Do not die today! Fight with all that is in you. Here, let this be my token to you," she said as she pulled out a large linen handkerchief. "It is not the finery of silk that real ladies would have, but know that it symbolizes my love, truer and greater than any of them could have for thee."

Now it was Malcolm's turn to blush. "Heloise," he confessed, "from the first moment I cast eyes upon you, my heart was lost to you."

"Oh, Malcolm! I gladly give you mine also!"

"Now truly, I have something to live and fight for! Pray, bind that kerchief around my arm here, for it is my fighting arm. With each swing of my sword, I shall see that token and it shall give me strength."

Guy, who was standing by, felt increasingly awkward as he watched this encounter unfold. Finally he could take no more, and distanced himself to give the two more privacy. Presently, Guillaume came back.

"That was a close call, friend, but I have good

news,” he said. “Albert was trying to claim the right to choose the weapons, as he declared that in this instance our most ungracious bishop was the one offended. But my uncle affirmed that you are legitimately the accused, and therefore retain the right to choose weapons.”

“Then I choose the sword,” said Malcolm after a moment of thought.

“It is good,” said Guillaume. “For with axe or mace, Albert is without peer. Even with the sword he has few equals. The combat will begin on horse. Hmmm, I see you’ve made a lot of progress in getting ready while I was away.”

Malcolm smiled. “Yes, we have made a lot of progress,” he said, as he turned to look at Heloise. For a moment, their eyes locked.

“I love thee, noble Malcolm,” said Heloise.

“And I love thee, fair lady!” answered Malcolm.

“May God give you might and power!” prayed Heloise. “O Jesus, please bring this, my love, safely through the battle today.” She rushed forward and embraced Malcolm ardently.

After a long, tender moment, Malcolm gently pulled himself away from Heloise’s grasp.

“I must go now,” he whispered softly, and, turning to Guillaume, said, “Come, help me get the rest of this on. For I have a battle to fight.”

X — TO THE DEATH

Fully armed, Malcolm walked out of the tent and peered down the long jousting field. At the far end, he could clearly make out Albert of Aurillac pacing back and forth in front of his tent, obviously impatient to get on with the fight. The sun stood high in the sky, and Malcolm knew that the trumpet would soon sound to summon the two warriors to come before the count.

Malcolm took out his sword and checked it one more time. He knew he was physically ready now, and he also felt a reassurance that he was ready in spirit. A confidence was building in him, not an overconfidence in his abilities, but a confidence that the prayers of his newfound brothers and sisters would carry him through this ordeal.

He knew that doing battle was foreign to many of the Cathars, who shunned violence of any form, but he was thankful that Guy, Heloise, and those in their fellowship were praying that he would come through this encounter victoriously.

A trumpet blast jolted him out of his reverie. It was the call that the two combatants had been waiting for. Malcolm strode over to his horse and deftly swung into the saddle.

Guillaume walked beside him, as they slowly moved down the field towards the central grandstand where Raymond, Odo, Peter of Castelnau and the other dignitaries were seated.

A large crowd of common folks had gathered on the other side of the field. Apparently, word of the trial by combat had spread quickly amongst the townspeople. Albert's reputation had ensured that a good crowd would be there to witness this event.

Within a few minutes, Malcolm and Guillaume were standing in front of the grandstand. They hadn't spoken on the way down; all that needed to be said had already been said.

Guillaume mounted the stairs and took his seat to the right of the count. Albert and his second had arrived at about the same time. Theobald also left his cousin to take his place in the stands. Albert and Malcolm eyed each other momentarily, before a herald stood up to proclaim the purpose of the fight.

"Hear ye! Let all here gathered this day listen and understand. Today it has been decreed that these two combatants have brought their grievance, to be settled by trial of combat, before the court of Count Raymond of Toulouse. The fight shall be with swords, such as was chosen by the accused, Malcolm MacAlpin.

"You two shall mark off a distance of twenty paces, and you shall charge one another on your horses. If one of you shall fall, then he shall continue fighting dismounted. The fight shall be to the death, and may God grant strength to he whose cause is the righteous one. Go now, and take your positions. At the blast of the trumpet, the combat shall commence. So it is decreed by His Excellency, Raymond the Sixth, Count of Toulouse."

Malcolm and Albert now rode away from each other, to where a marker showed the required distance that they were to have between them at the initiation of the combat. Malcolm braced himself in the saddle,

his body tense and ready for the assault which was about to begin.

Albert was bigger and burlier, but Malcolm was obviously the more athletic of the two. This was going to come down to a contest of brawn versus agility. Malcolm peered over the top of his shield at Albert, took his sword out of his sheath, and held it at his side. His left arm bore his shield, leaving his hand free to grasp the reins of his horse.

The trumpet sounded, the two riders spurred their mounts, and the horses charged towards each other. The first clash of the men's swords rang out across the field of death. The two whirled around and came at each other again. Albert's sword struck Malcolm's shield with deadly force. Malcolm reeled in his saddle and struggled to regain his balance. Desperately, Malcolm swung his sword sideways, clipping Albert's shield and almost causing it to spin off his arm.

The two turned again and charged at close range. This time they stayed locked in battle, swinging their swords at each other with all the force that they could muster. Albert was the bigger man, and his blows came down with a deadly force.

The heavy blows from Albert's sword did their damage upon Malcolm's shield. Malcolm, however, was content to absorb the pounding for now, for he was conserving his strength. Albert was swinging wildly, and Malcolm knew that the bigger man would eventually start to tire—and that would be when he would seize his chance.

But Albert was a canny fighter himself. His eyes glared at Malcolm from underneath his helmet, as he let out a continuous stream of curses.

"You foreign dog," he snarled between blows. "I shall chop you up and feed you piece by piece to the ravens. You pig! You cur! You swine!"

Albert kept up his voluble stream of curses, while Malcolm deemed it wiser to concentrate on his fighting

than on cursing.

Albert spurred his horse away a few yards, then turned again to charge at Malcolm. Malcolm spun his steed around in time for his shield to meet another onslaught of blows from Albert's sword.

It was time for Malcolm to go on the offensive. He swung his blade and hit Albert's shield with a force that the Frenchman clearly had not expected. Unsteadied in his saddle, Albert leaned far to the other side. Malcolm pressed his advantage. Again and again and again he beat down upon his adversary. Suddenly, the big fellow toppled from his horse. A roar erupted from the crowd.

Jumping to his feet, Albert whirled around to meet the next charge.

Malcolm clearly had the advantage now, and was about to spur his horse on, when, as if by a sudden inspiration, he caught on to Albert's intentions. The French knight's sword was poised to strike a lethal blow to Malcolm's mount and bring the animal down, hopefully pinning Malcolm underneath. Malcolm reined his horse in.

"Come on, you coward! You scum!" Albert taunted. "Charge me!"

Malcolm quickly considered his options. A battle horse was an extremely valuable animal, and one that he could not afford to lose in such an encounter as this. Nimbly, Malcolm dismounted and gave his horse a whack on its flank to send it trotting away in the other direction. Albert's horse had already been grabbed by some attendants and led away from the battlefield.

Malcolm and Albert, now on equal terms, circled each other warily.

Albert lunged again. Malcolm, more nimble on his feet than the bigger man, deftly sidestepped. Albert charged past him.

Albert turned, his face glaring red and his eyes

burning with an intense hatred. He swung again at Malcolm with all his force. Malcolm took the blow on his shield. The blow was a heavy one, and Malcolm slipped slightly. Albert tried to press home his advantage, pushing and shoving Malcolm in an attempt to topple him.

Malcolm halted, almost fell backwards, and then, mustering all of his athletic ability, threw his weight to the side. Once again the big man went flying past him. Another roar rose from the crowd.

"You think you're so smart!" said Albert. "You think you are such a swordsman! All you know how to do is run! Stand and fight!"

Malcolm now thought it time for him to reply to some of Albert's curses. "I am standing and fighting," he said. "It is you that keeps running past me!"

"Why you scummy dog!" cursed Albert, as he lunged towards Malcolm again.

The two continued swinging at each other. Malcolm tried to conserve his strength. Surely the other man must be tiring. But Albert kept up the pressure.

Then, in a momentary lapse of concentration, Malcolm missed fully parrying a blow. Albert's sword swung down and hit Malcolm on the shoulder. His coat of mail absorbed much of the blow, but some of the links broke and the sword cut through to his flesh. Blood soaked through to the blue surcoat that Malcolm was wearing, and the crowd let out a gasp. Heloise, who was standing afar off, covered her eyes, and started to sob.

Albert, clearly invigorated by being the first to draw blood, continued to aggressively attack Malcolm. Malcolm was in pain and clearly at the disadvantage, but he valiantly held up against the renewed blows of his adversary. Albert kept the pressure on.

Another heavy blow from Albert's sword forced Malcolm onto one knee. Albert lifted high his sword to swing down for the final blow. In that moment of

overconfidence, he inadvertently pulled his shield away from fully guarding his front. Malcolm seized the opportunity and, with all the strength he could muster, thrust his sword into Albert. Through the mail it went, and through the heavily padded undergarment, striking flesh. Deeper the sword went, until it had come out the other side.

A look of horror and disbelief was fixed on Albert's face. He staggered backwards, reeled around once, and collapsed on the tournament field with a loud thud.

Theobald, Albert's second, and several attendants rushed over to the man. Guillaume also took to the field. Malcolm had risen to his feet, but was obviously quite wobbly. Guillaume caught the exhausted man and held him steady.

Albert lay sprawled on the field, belly up, and Malcolm's sword was still lodged deep in his chest, as it had been wrenched from Malcolm's hand when Albert had staggered backwards. His eyes, opened wide and transfixed skyward, were filled with unspeakable horror.

Theobald ran his hand over Albert's face and closed the dead man's eyes. "He's dead," he said solemnly. "You have killed him!" Without another word, Theobald walked away.

The attendants rolled Albert's body onto a litter, and with one mighty yank Guillaume pulled Malcolm's sword from the cadaver and handed it to Malcolm. The attendants carried Albert's body to his tent.

Heloise and Guy, at the far end of the grandstand, stood practically paralyzed in disbelief—and relief—at what they had just seen.

Guillaume steadied Malcolm by the shoulder again, and whispered in his ear. "Come, we must now stand before the count, so that you can receive your acquittal."

Malcolm nodded, but he was clearly exhausted

from the combat. Summoning all his reserves, he tried to look as dignified as he could, as he walked over and stood before the count.

The count looked over at Odo. The prelate was white as a sheet—shocked and incredulous at what had just transpired. The mightiest knight of southern France, the knight who had championed the church, lay dead! And Odo's scheme lay in shambles!

Castelnau glared at Odo. Without a word, the legate rose and walked off.

Raymond, summoning all his diplomatic skill, scarcely managed to hide his delight in seeing the bishop so discomfited. He arose and beckoned Malcolm to come forward.

"This day you have been vindicated, Malcolm MacAlpin. According to the laws of the Franks, which do govern this land, I hereby acquit you of all charges that have been laid before you in this court. You have proven your innocence. And to your accusers, I say: Take note. God has acquitted this man this day, and has seen fit to deliver him. Those who accused him shall now need to give account of their false testimony."

And having said that, he turned to where Bishop Odo now stood. "I will expect you to appear before me tomorrow morning. And bring those two brigands that were in your employ, so they may give a truthful account of what happened."

The bishop looked as though he would vomit, but somehow managed to maintain his composure. "You do not have authority over such matters," he said haughtily, "for these are most certainly ecclesiastical matters which cannot be judged in a secular court—only in my court! These men were on holy business, and they therefore do not fall under your jurisdiction."

"Those two men are not clerics," the count roared back. "They are soldiers, and as such, are subject to secular law. Have them there tomorrow morning, and

we will have an end of this mess!”

Turning once again to Malcolm, Count Raymond added, “God has smiled on you this day, for I did think you were a dead man!”

“Thank you, my lord,” said Malcolm. “But I will be the first to admit that it was not I who had the strength today, but I felt a supernatural strength within me. I, too, thought I was a dead man, but something came upon me that I knew not of, and gave me power to slay my tormentor and silence the lies of my accusers. I lay the glory and credit at the feet of God, for I believe it was only through the earnest prayers that were said for me that I have come from this field victorious.”

“Very well, then,” said the count. “Go and have your wounds dressed, and when you have recovered, come and see me again. I have need of a man such as you in my service.”

“Thank you, my lord,” replied Malcolm.

Having so said, Malcolm’s face turned a deathly pale, as if all the life had drained from him, and, to the horror of all those present, he collapsed on the ground.

XI — TROUBLE IN TOULOUSE

Heloise and Guy rushed over to Malcolm. Guillaume fell to his knees and put his fingers on Malcolm’s neck.

“He’s fainted,” said Guillaume, “probably from the loss of blood. Quickly, let us get him on a litter and carry him to my room. Come along, you two,” he added to Guy and Heloise. “Our Scotsman is going to need some nursing back to health.”

Heloise fell down beside him, put her face close to Malcolm’s, and kissed him. Tears streamed down her face. “Thank You, Lord! Thank You, Lord! Thank You, Lord!” she kept saying, over and over again. “Thank You for sparing my Malcolm! Thank You for giving him victory, Jesus! Thank You, thank You, thank You, Jesus!”

Attendants hurried forth with a litter, loaded Malcolm upon it, and carried him away. Guillaume, Guy and Heloise followed closely behind them.

“Don’t worry,” said Guillaume, “He is a strong man, our Scot. He will survive. ”

“I know he will,” said Heloise.

As they headed back into the city, curious onlookers stopped to look at Malcolm. Small groups paused to relate to each other what they had seen or

what they had heard of the events that had transpired on the tournament field; how the mighty Albert of Aurillac was now dead, and how the young Scotsman had collapsed at the end of the fight. That day there was much joy in the hearts of those who knew that God had given Malcolm MacAlpin the victory, for certainly the odds had been against him.

As they traveled down the main street of the city towards the castle, they passed the shop of Francis the baker. Guy and Heloise cast furtive glances in that direction.

Francis was standing in the window, and he gave them a quick smile and a wink as they passed by. They knew this meant that he had gotten the word out to the others; indeed, today's victory had been a victory wrought in prayer.

Further on, they passed a cloaked figure walking in the other direction. For a few seconds, the man's silver beard and hair were visible, and Guy and Heloise immediately recognized Giles. He surreptitiously raised a finger to his mouth, in a motion for them not to let on who he was.

He paused for a moment to look down at Malcolm as the litter went by, then he continued on his way.

Presently, the small group came to Raymond's castle, and Guillaume gave instructions for Malcolm to be taken to his quarters, which, as the reader will remember, were also occupied at that time by Roger, the wounded guardsman.

After conferring for a few minutes with Guy, he told him and Heloise to go there also. Guillaume had a few things that he needed to take care of before he could join them.

Guy and Heloise followed the attendants up the inner staircases to Guillaume's apartment, which was located in a turret of the castle. As they opened the door, a figure slipped into a small niche in a corner.

Esme heaved a sigh of relief as the familiar faces

of Guy and Heloise entered the door. But her relief quickly turned to concern as she recognized that it was Malcolm who lay unconscious on the litter. The attendants picked him up and placed him on a second bed that servants had just set up.

Roger, who had been sleeping, upon hearing the various voices and the small commotion that was made, now awoke. He looked over and saw Malcolm, and immediately wanted to know what had happened. Guy and Heloise took turns telling the story to both Esme and Roger.

After they had finished telling all that had transpired, Heloise turned to Esme and said, "It is a good thing that you are here. For now I am afraid that you have a second patient to nurse to health. The wound on his shoulder—I don't know how serious it is."

Esme walked over to take a closer look. "We must get his armor off," she said. "Come, you two. Please help me."

Between Guy, Heloise and Esme, they somehow managed to lift Malcolm and pull off the heavy chain mail armor. Still unconscious, Malcolm started and flinched several times during the process. The ordeal reopened the wound, and more blood began to flow.

"Quick, we must staunch this flow of blood!" said Esme. "Bring me towels, cloths—anything!"

Guy turned to the attendants, who were still standing in the corner of the room. "Fetch us what linens and cloths you can. Quickly now!"

"And bring hot water!" requested Esme. "We will need to bathe this wound."

Esme looked intently at the slash. "This could well have been a mortal wound," she said. "It seems that God has smiled on Malcolm. He is very weak, though, from the shock and loss of blood. It is a good thing that I have my herbs and potions, which I brought when I came to attend to Roger."

After what seemed like hours to the anxious occupants of the room, an attendant returned with a pile of cloth, and a pitcher of hot water.

"Pour some of the water into this basin," Esme instructed, "and leave the pitcher here."

The attendant, not used to receiving instructions from gypsy girls, hesitated for a moment.

"Do as she says!" said Guy. "This is a matter of urgency. This man's life is in her hands."

The attendant complied.

"Take these cloths," Esme said to Heloise, "and soak them in the hot water. Then, gently start cleaning the wound. Here, I will pour some of this in—it will act as a cleanser and a purifier." Esme poured some powder into the basin, which turned the water a light blue color.

Heloise busied herself with carrying out Esme's instructions, while Esme started soaking some other herbs and petals. "Let this steep for a little while," she said to Guy. "The water will draw the purifying agents. Then we shall mix the herbs and a little of the water they are steeped in with flour to prepare a poultice. Oh, I forgot to ask the attendants to get flour! Please, bring me back some flour from the kitchen," said Esme, turning to the servant.

The attendant disappeared again, and soon returned with a bowl of flour.

"That is good," said Esme. "Now, let us mix the petals and herbs with the flour and some water to make a thick paste."

Having done that, she walked over to Malcolm. Heloise was nearly finished cleaning the wound. "Look carefully that there are no shards from the mail left in the wound," she said, "for they will hinder the healing."

"It is such a gruesome task!" said Heloise, who was not used to the sight of so much blood. Bravely but gingerly she wiped the wound clean. "All this blood

makes my head swim!"

"Malcolm will appreciate your efforts when he recovers," smiled Esme, as she placed a hand on Heloise's shoulder. Esme returned to preparing the poultice. "We will have to apply this regularly, but it should help the healing," she explained as she placed the thick paste back in the bowl where the flour had been. "If we left him to the count's physicians, they would have taken a hot sword and cauterized the wound. But that would never allow it to heal as it should. See, look! You can see the scars on his body where this has been done before." Malcolm's bare torso bore several broad scars, where wounds received in previous encounters had been seared by hot irons.

Having applied the poultice, Esme ripped some of the linen that had been brought to her, to use as bandages. "Now," said Esme, "all we can do is pray and wait. I will prepare some teas and a hippocras for him to sip. They will help dull the pain once he has regained consciousness."

She took some willow bark from a bag and, turning to the attendant, instructed him to take it to the kitchen, boil it for half an hour, and then bring it back.

"Well," said Esme, as she looked down at Malcolm, "now we are even, noble Scot. You once saved my life—now I have repaid."

Heloise touched the gypsy girl on the shoulder. "Thank you, my dear," she said.

Esme looked at her. "Truly, I think there is not a more noble man in all the world than Malcolm—except perhaps ... " her voice trailed off, but Heloise and Guy finished the sentence in their minds; they both knew that she was thinking of the dashing Guillaume.

"Come," said Heloise to Esme, "let us sit and talk. I must admit, you are the first gypsy that I have ever met, and I have always had ... well, let me say, there were tales that colored my opinions of your people."

Esme and Heloise sat on a bench in the corner of the room, and settled into a long conversation—a pastime at which the fair sex seem peculiarly adept. Guy glanced over at Roger, who was propped up on one elbow, surveying all that was taking place.

“Well,” said Guy, “your life has certainly changed!”

“Indeed it has,” replied Roger. “Those who I had despised have become my benefactors. And yet, more than benefactors—they have become my saviors. For my life was lost; I knew it. But she to whom I had sought to do much wrong has nursed me back to health. Truly, I am in awe.”

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The scene now changes, and we are once again in the residence of Bishop Odo, who we find sitting, still ashen-faced, on a chair in the middle of his quarters. A furious Peter of Castelnau is pacing back and forth, shaking his finger at Odo.

“The timing of this couldn’t be worse!” bellowed Castelnau. “Here I come all this way, and you pull a stunt like this! Your men have been caught bearing false witness—for which they shall be punished! And you have been found aiding and abetting their cause! Do you not realize that you have seriously weakened my hand in persuading the count to purge these heretics from his land? For he will say, ‘Look, these people are peaceful, law-abiding, honest. It is the representatives of the church who resort to lies, and then bring evil accusations. First put your own house in order, before you come to tell me to put mine in order.’”

Odo sat silently.

“Why don’t you say something?” said Castelnau.

“I have nothing to say,” muttered Odo, but then added, “It is obvious that the heretics put a curse on Albert, and he succumbed to that curse. That ragtag Scot was a dead man. It was obvious! I cannot understand; I just cannot understand! That fool of

Aurillac!”

“He died championing the church,” said Castelnau, still glaring at Odo. “He died in trial by combat, championing the church. The pope has expressly forbidden clergy to resort to trial by combat, whether themselves or by proxy. You went against the Holy Father’s orders in this, and your fate is sealed. Make no doubt about this: I shall make a full recounting of this to the Holy Father when I see him. I shall make no secret of the fact that your office and bishopric are in jeopardy. It would have been one thing to win, but you lost! And as you know, His Holiness Innocent III plays to win! He has little patience with losers!”

“This evening, I shall make my appeal to Raymond. Your presence will not be necessary, for you have some matters to sort out with these incompetent idiots you hired as guards!” With that, Castelnau headed for the door, brushing past the priest who stood in attendance.

After the legate had left, Odo looked up. “Get out and close the door,” he snarled at the priest, who dutifully complied.

Odo sat there, considering his options. Although it was the king of France who retained the right to appoint bishops throughout the realm, Odo knew that if he incurred the displeasure of Pope Innocent III—the most powerful man ever to sit on Peter’s throne—the chances of him retaining his position, let alone advancing in the church, were nil.

Peter of Castelnau, Odo knew, was a renowned preacher and a confidant of the pope. It was obvious that the legate was not going to be dissuaded from the course of action that he had settled upon. Odo did not take long now to conclude what must happen. With a sigh, he stood up, walked out of the room through a door at the other end, and into his private chamber.

“Send for Bernard,” he told the priest who was

sitting in the corner, writing with a long quill pen.

The priest silently stood up, bowed dutifully to Odo, and left the room. Odo sat pensively in his chair. He was deep in thought when Bernard entered the room. Odo glared at the man. "You have lied to me!" he snarled. "All that the Scotsman said was true, wasn't it?"

Bernard shuddered. "Y ... yes, your eminence."

"Tomorrow I could turn you over to Raymond, and you know the penalty for perjury."

Bernard shuddered again.

"But I will give you one last chance to redeem yourself. However, know that from this point forward, you are no longer in my official service."

Bernard's eyes narrowed. "A chance?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Odo. "A chance! And be sure you do not botch it this time, for surely you shall die if you do! Close the door, for what I have to say is for your ears only."



At the end of the evening meal, a herald notified Count Raymond that Peter of Castelnau had arrived.

"Show him in," said Raymond.

The tall, dignified churchman strode confidently into the room, and bowed deeply before the count. Peter of Castelnau was a noted orator and papal diplomat. He had engaged some of the more eloquent of the Perfects in debates several times, and though neither side had convinced their opponents of the righteousness of their cause, still Peter of Castelnau had gained the reputation of being a persuasive, charming, and incisive speaker.

"My lord count," he began, "I bring you greetings from the Holy Father, Innocent III, who has asked me to convey to you his felicitations and his prayers, for you and for the people of the County of Toulouse."

"The Holy Father's prayers and felicitations are well received," said the count. "Please convey mine to him,

for we are grateful for his care and understanding."

"Indeed," said Castelnau, "for he does care for you deeply, and for the souls of those here within your realm. He has asked me to beseech you to help rid your county of this plague of heresy that does sorely threaten to damn the souls of your people."

"Say on," said the count, not wishing to take issue at this stage in the proceedings.

"Count Raymond, your county is rife with heresy. Many of God's flock are being led astray into the realms of darkness and eternal damnation, for these heretics do not preach the true Gospel. They do mock the Holy Church, which was instituted by Jesus Christ when He laid the keys of the kingdom upon the holy apostle and founder of the true church, Saint Peter—of whom the Holy Father is successor on Earth. You must make efforts to stamp out this heresy, for your own soul is in jeopardy. God has instituted your office, and you but hold it by the grace of God—and at the pleasure of the Holy Father!"

Raymond's blood began to boil at this last comment. Pope Innocent III—who claimed the title of *Vicar of Christ on Earth*, and therefore God's proxy—contended that all temporal leaders, be they kings, emperors or counts, and, in fact, all nobility, held their office at his pleasure. This was not a new doctrine, but Innocent had asserted this claim more than any of his predecessors.

Raymond deeply resented anyone who claimed to rule over him at their pleasure. Even his cousin, the king of France, dared not belabor the fact that Raymond was his vassal. It was all he could do to control his anger.

"I thank the Holy Father for his concern," Raymond replied, attempting to put on as pleasant and congenial a demeanor as possible, "but my family has held this county and lordship for many generations before the pope decided to assert this

authority, given him neither in God's Word, nor yet by tradition."

Castelnau smiled politely. "We know the Holy Father is God's representative on Earth, therefore what the Holy Father claims is what God institutes. If God now chooses to reveal to the pontiff that secular rulers should make themselves subservient to him, the Vicar of Christ on Earth, then who are we to question the Holy Father's wisdom?"

"Wisdom?" rebuffed Count Raymond. "I would call that a lust for power!"

The two men stared at each other intently, their fixed smiles failing to mask the growing anger and hostility evident in their eyes.

"Pardon me, Count Raymond," said Peter obligingly. "I am sure the Holy Father does not want me to assert his primacy at this time. He only asks that you honor your duty and join him in ridding your land of this heresy, this pestilence that does poison the people."

"I see no evidence of poisoning," answered Raymond indignantly. "My people are industrious. The county flourishes, our trade is prosperous, our agriculture is good. The land is at peace. Brigandage is virtually unknown—except as practiced by certain employees of the church." Count Raymond paused at this point to let what he had just said sink into the ears of Castelnau and the others present.

"I take it you are referring to Bishop Odo," said Castelnau, "and those men who were in his employ."

"Indeed it would appear so," said Raymond. "For have we not just had a demonstration of the probity and uprightness of the Holy Father's representatives in our realm?"

"The Holy Father is ill-served by these people," said Castelnau, "as it appears he is ill-served by *you* at this time! Could it be that he who tolerates heresy is guilty of it himself?"

At this, Raymond stood up. "You are accusing *me* of heresy now? You go beyond what is acceptable!"

"I surely think not!" said Peter. "I only state the obvious."

"You stand in front of me, and in front of my assembled courtiers, and dare to insult me?" said Raymond, glowering at the legate.

"You insult yourself, sir," said Castelnau, "by being party to the heresy that afflicts your realm."

"Listen, you miserable excuse for a servant of God!" Raymond was infuriated. "Get you from my domain! We are doing quite well without your interference!"

"Then it is with heavy heart that I must take my leave from you," said Castelnau, "for I will have to tell the Holy Father of your intransigence. I can only assume that the severest of penalties shall be forthcoming, and that a bull of excommunication will be issued."

"Don't threaten me with excommunication!" yelled Raymond.

"Would you prefer an interdict on your entire land?" asked Castelnau. At this, Raymond stood up and bellowed at the man. "Get out, before I think seriously of doing you harm!" Raymond ran his hand over the hilt of his dagger, which lay sheathed on the table in front of him.

The implication was not lost on Castelnau, who bowed low before the count and took a step backwards. "Fear not, Count Raymond, for I shall take my leave of you now, and I shall begin to remove myself from this accursed land by sunrise tomorrow."

"And that would be none too soon!" said Raymond. "Pray that the sun doesn't rise on the wrath that I feel for you tonight, for God help you if it does!"

The legate bowed deeply again, turned and marched quickly out of the great hall.

XII — TREACHERY

That night was a restless one for our main characters. Malcolm had remained unconscious the entire afternoon, occasionally stirring and, in his delirium, muttering unintelligible things about Scotland, his father and brothers, and some oath. Esme and Heloise, who had stayed at his side to nurse him through, exchanged puzzled looks. What ever could he be talking about?

Guy left early in the evening, to go back to the inn, as there was no one watching over it except his aged father who needed watching over himself.

It was late when Guillaume returned to the castle. He told Esme and Heloise of the confrontation between the count and the legate, but he never told them where he had been that afternoon. Something was afoot, and Guillaume was being tightlipped about it.

Count Raymond did not sleep well that night. After the legate left, he had retired with Robert of Avignon and Godfrey into a small room that they sometimes used for private meetings. The count was fretting, and his anger had gotten the better of him. He was a powerful magnate. Apart from the king, the Count of Toulouse was the greatest of all ruling nobles in France. He was cousin to the French king, but there

was no love lost between the two. The count ruled a greater area than the lands ruled directly by the king. The king, however, expected at least the nominal allegiance of most of the nobles in the French area, and claimed sovereignty over them—including Raymond¹.

The count held his lands as a fief of the king, yet, unlike the other nobles of France, he was not required to pay homage to the king annually. He also had allies in some of the Iberian kingdoms to the south. Yet the count knew that in Innocent III he had a formidable opponent, if the pope were to decide to move against him. He talked long into the evening with Robert and Godfrey, weighing their options.

Odo also sat long at his desk. Things had not gone well, and the course of action that he had now decided on was even more risky than any he had undertaken so far. He, too, weighed up the odds. Deep into the night, after much thought, he arose from his desk and fell upon his bed exhausted.

Peter of Castelnau was also very busy that night. Preparations needed to be made for an early departure in the morning. His post as papal legate provided him some protection, and surely only the most foolhardy of men would seek to hurt him, yet Castelnau was a cautious man, and he had seen the look of anger in Count Raymond's eyes. He knew that noblemen—especially those as powerful as Raymond—did not take kindly to having their authority challenged. He had clearly overstepped the mark with Raymond, and the result of their confrontation had not been as he had hoped. He counted it prudent to withdraw without further encounter.

After all the arrangements had been made for him and his retinue to depart at first light, Castelnau fell into a troubled sleep.

He was up again in a few hours, at dawn's first

light. Soon he and his retinue marched out of the city gates. A cloaked figure watched them depart, then mounted his horse. Keeping a discreet distance, the man followed the legate's party.

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Later that morning, a priest arrived in the great hall with a sealed message for Count Raymond. It was from Bishop Odo. Robert of Avignon received the communiqué from the cleric and took them both to the count. The contents of the note came as no surprise to Raymond, who nevertheless vented his wrath on the hapless friar. According to the message, the two guardsmen that were supposed to appear before the count that morning had stolen away during the night.

After a protracted tirade from the count, the cowed friar hurried away to convey the count's displeasure to his superior.

Malcolm awoke midmorning. At first, his eyes could barely focus, then slowly, the unfamiliar surroundings became clearer. Realizing that he was in a room he had never been in before, he instinctively reached for his sword, but could not find it. His hand searched more frantically, until the movement caught the attention of the others in the room.

Esme and Heloise had slept lightly, and they too had been up at first light. The two were becoming fast friends. Malcolm looked up at the two women—both different, but both beautiful—as they came over.

"I've died and gone to Heaven," muttered Malcolm weakly, "and the Almighty God has sent forth two angels to greet me!"

The two girls looked at each other and smiled.

"Well," said Heloise, "I don't think we have to worry about him! He looks to be in fine form."

"Yes," smiled Esme.

"Come, my noble Scot," said Heloise, "there is broth prepared for you and I think it is time for you to have

¹ See endnote x - Feudalism

some nourishment.”

“I’m ravenously hungry,” said Malcolm, “and all you’re going to feed me is soup?”

“It shall be sufficient for now,” said Esme, trying to sound a little sterner. “You suffered quite a blow on your shoulder and have lost much blood. It will be a while before you are up and about.”

Malcolm looked down at his right shoulder, which was bandaged. He tried to move himself with his left arm, but winced from the pain. “Ouch! I was rusty to have let that blow get through!” he chided himself. “What happened? Where am I?”

“You collapsed from a loss of blood and the pain, I fear—just as you were receiving your acquittal from the count. You are now in Guillaume’s room. He left this morning early, and said he might not be back for a day or two.”

“You and I are left alone with these two charming ladies!” Roger piped up. “I suppose this must be the best infirmary in all the world!”

Malcolm looked over at Roger. “Hmmm,” he muttered, “I guess I’ll just have to make the most of it.”

“That you will,” said Heloise. “My brother should be returning to visit us some time after noon. He’ll be pleased to see the progress of our champion.”



The first day’s journey from Toulouse went well for the legate. He and his party maintained a torrid pace and put considerable distance between themselves and the irate Count of Toulouse.

The next day, as they continued on their journey, Peter’s boldness returned and he felt more at ease. He began rehearsing in his mind the report that he would submit to Pope Innocent. It seemed the die had been cast, and there was nothing more to do than for the pope to take more decisive action. He would suggest that the count be excommunicated, and the

fief of Toulouse be declared forfeit due to Raymond’s siding with the proponents of heresy. His Holiness the pope would then invite the king of France to reclaim it and award it to another noble more compliant to the church.

By midafternoon the following day, the party reached the banks of the Rhône River and prepared to be ferried across. Peter rode his horse into the water a few yards from shore, and the animal bent down to drink. As he looked back along the road he had traveled, he was puzzled to see a horseman carrying a spear in an upright position and galloping towards him at great speed.

Presuming that the rider bore a message, the legate turned his horse to face the approaching horseman. Castelnau’s guards and the remainder of his party milling around on the riverbank stopped and watched, expecting him to rein up as he approached the retinue.

But to their horror, the horseman lowered his spear to a charging position. Spurring his horse forward, the black-garbed rider galloped past the attendants and headed straight towards the legate, who sat on his horse, defenseless and transfixed in terror. Before he could move, Castelnau was impaled.

The horseman raised his fist in a sign of victory and shouted, “Freedom for Toulouse!” Then he spurred his horse northward along the riverbank and disappeared into the distance.

The legate’s attendants watched in shock as Peter’s body tottered back and forth on his horse, and then tumbled into the water with a loud splash.

Although the horseman had been dressed in plain black clothing, several of the attendants had seen a coat of arms embroidered on the saddlecloth of the assassin’s horse. It belonged to the Count of Toulouse.

Once Peter’s body had been pulled from the river, one of the attendants was immediately dispatched to take the news to the pope.



Guillaume hadn't been seen at the castle for several days. Malcolm had made good progress in his recovery, and was feeling much stronger. Esme was still there, caring for the two injured men. Heloise had also wanted to stay, but she had duties to perform at the inn, so after the second day, she had reluctantly gone back.

Malcolm missed her a lot—her sweet smile and sunny disposition, and her frail form that seemed to cry out for a strong man to protect her. Malcolm had fallen in love.

Sometimes he felt happy; other times he felt uneasy and confused. Grappling with these new emotions was not easy. Esme observed all. Although she was not very wise in the ways of love herself, she watched Malcolm's moods with a certain amusement.

Mid-afternoon on the fourth day, Guillaume returned. Although he tried to be his normal, cheerful self, it was obvious that he was troubled.

"What's the matter?" Malcolm asked.

"We have just heard some very disturbing news," said Guillaume. "Peter of Castelnau has been murdered at the Rhône River while on his way back to Rome. The country is rife with speculation about who did it, and many people believe it is my uncle who perpetrated the crime. He and Castelnau had argued that last night he was here in front of many witnesses, myself included. There are reports that the saddlecloth on the horse that the assassin rode bore my uncle's coat of arms. The situation is even graver than before. We have a crisis!"

"What do you think will happen?" asked Malcolm.

"Many things could happen," said Guillaume. "I don't know what action the pope will take, nor do I know my uncle's plans as yet. The pope, though, will not take this lying down, and my uncle is the prime suspect. Robert of Avignon told me that when the

count heard the news, he turned pale and went off to his room. This could mean war, and if that is the case, it will be largely us against the rest of the world. My uncle and his lands are the envy of all Europe. There are many who would relish this chance to seize the County of Toulouse."

"If this is war," said Malcolm, "you can count on at least one soldier here. I will fight for your uncle with all that I have!"

"Brave words, Scotsman! Yes, I know you will fight, and you are worth ten men. Our allies will also fight with us. But to fight the rulers of other fiefdoms is one thing—to fight a pope who terrorizes the souls of men with threats of eternal damnation is quite another matter! Men are easily made afraid of losing their immortal souls. They fear hellfire, and they fear being placed under the ban."

"Then you will need to rely on people who do not fear the pope nor his bans. Surely the Cathars, who have flourished in your county, will fight for you!"

"The Cathars are a mixed lot," said Guillaume. "Some will surely fight. Others shun the idea of fighting—their principles will not even allow them to defend themselves! No, I am afraid we will have an uphill struggle from the start. But don't fear, my uncle is an astute man. I trust him. He is a noble warrior, a good general, and skilled in the tactics of war. Yes, if it must come to war, we can have no better leader than my uncle."

"There are many in the north who look with envy upon this land," said Malcolm, "but let us hope for the best. Surely your uncle will send messengers to the pope, maintaining his innocence."

"Surely he will," said Guillaume, "but why should the pope accept such a messenger? For even if my uncle is innocent of this crime, the pope will press forward. He has the advantage, and now he will be able to demand that my uncle accept his terms

regarding eradicating the Cathars from our midst.”

Esme, who had been listening quietly to the conversation, sank to her knees. “Oh Lord, save us!” she cried. “Save us from this tyranny! Deliver Your children from that which is to come!”

Guillaume walked over and put his arm around her. “Come, come, Esme,” he comforted her. “Nothing will happen quite yet. There is still time for things to work out. Don’t worry, I will protect you!”

Esme turned and hugged him tightly. Guillaume drew her close to him. His hand pressed her head against his chest, and he kissed her gently on her forehead.

Roger and Malcolm exchanged glances.

“Well, it looks as though there’s going to be a lot of work for men in our profession,” said Malcolm.

“It certainly does,” said Roger.

XIII — HAMISH AND DOUGAL

“Oh, by the way,” said Guillaume, as if suddenly having an afterthought, “I came across two strange fellows in town today, who claimed they were looking for their lost brother. When I stopped to talk to them ...” Guillaume’s voice trailed off, as Malcolm looked quizzically at him.

Guillaume raised his voice: “Let them in!”

An attendant who was standing outside swung open the door. There stood two big, brawny red-haired fellows, dressed in the rough attire of Scotsmen.

Malcolm let out a yell. “Hamish! Dougal!”

The two fellows hurried into the room and stood at the end of the bed where Malcolm lay. “Well, would ya’ look at this?” said the burlier one. “It’s our wee brother, lyin’ in bed!”

“Aye,” said the other. “He always was a sleepy-head—always the lazy one!”

“You big brutes!” shouted Malcolm. “Not a second after you walk in the door, you’re already picking on me!”

The three brothers stared at each other for a minute. Malcolm sat up and threw his arms wide as the two brothers charged at him, knocking him flat on his back. “Ouch!” cried Malcolm, wincing in pain

from the wound that was still far from healed.

“Oh, my God! The wee lad is hurt!” said Hamish.

“Always was a scrappy little bairn!” said Dougal to Hamish. “But he ne’er could look after himself. We had to pull him out o’ trouble so many times, don’t ya’ remember?”

“Aye, look at him, wincing and groaning like a girl!” chided Hamish.

Esme rushed over to Malcolm. “Get back, you big brutes!” she said. “Can’t you see he’s hurt? Who are these people, Malcolm?”

“These men,” explained Malcolm, managing to smile through his pain, “are Hamish and Dougal, two of my older brothers.” Malcolm then turned to the two redheaded giants, “And what in God’s name brings you here?”

“We’d be lookin’ for ya’,” said Hamish, the older of the two.

“Aye, older brother Kenneth sent us—we’re to come lookin’ for ya’ to bring ya’ home.”

“Bring me home?” said Malcolm. “We have no home!”

“We do now, laddie! Kenneth has reclaimed the MacAlpin land. He made a small fortune for himself—just how I dinna could ken—and he went back and laid claim to our heritage, and the neighboring clan chiefs, on exacting terms of alliance have agreed. The land is *ours* again! The MacAlpins are comin’ home!”

“We have our land again?” asked Malcolm, looking at them even more incredulously than he had so far.

“Aye, and we’re all to come home and once again be the merry clan o’ MacAlpin,” added Dougal. “Why, Kenneth is quite the chief, he is. And he’s got servants now, too, an’ cattle! He’s got some fang-dangled farmin’ business going.—Plow’n the land all in neat little rows, he is, and planting stuff. Never seen the likes of it before in that part of Scotland. Well, brother,

when will we be a goin’?”

“Going?” said Malcolm, looking around the room at the others.

Guillaume had stood there silently, looking on in amusement at the show that was being put on up till this point, but things had just taken a serious turn. He looked earnestly at Malcolm.

“Brothers,” said Malcolm, “I have a duty here. These here are my friends, and I am sworn to help and protect them.”

“Well,” mused Hamish, looking around. “These people look like they can protect themselves! Just look at this fine castle and that handsome fella over here with the sword by his side, who brung us here. And another able man over there, in bed as well! My goodness, these French are lazy, aren’t they? It’s rubbin’ off on ya, boy! An’ ya’re goin’ to protect them? It looks like they’re protectin’ *you*!”

“You don’t understand,” said Malcolm. “There’s enough afoot to send your head a spinnin’.”

“Well, you’d better tell us,” said Hamish. “We’ve come a long way for ya! We’ve been lookin’ for ya’ high and low—you wouldn’t believe the things we’ve been through. So you’d better have a damn good excuse for not comin’ home with us.”

“I’ve got a damn good reason, all right,” said Malcolm, a note of determination rising in his voice as he sat up to face his two brothers.

“Well, you’d better start a tellin’ us!”

Malcolm slumped back down in the bed. “It’s a long story, brothers. Are you ready to hear it?”

“Well, we didn’t come all this way to leave empty-handed! By golly, we’d better be a hearin’,” said Dougal, looking at Hamish as they sat on the bed.

“Aye, by all the blessed saints, we’d better hear yer story. Come on! Get it out!”

“Well!” began Malcolm, taking a deep breath. “You knew that I headed for France and I wandered the

country for a while, until I took up service with the king ...”

Malcolm told the rest of the story, including all that had happened over these last few days—the accusations and the trial by combat, the intrigue of the bishop and the legate and the count, of the Cathars, Giles—he even told them of his love for Heloise.

“An’ would this be the fair lass?” asked Hamish, pointing his finger at Esme.

“No,” said Malcolm, “this angel of mercy is Esme.”

“Ah, ya’ve got two girls, then!” said Dougal. “What are ya’ tryin’ to do? Are you planning to be a bigamist now? Ya’ve got this beautiful girl here, and then ya’ say ya’ve got another one of ’em? These Cathars ha’e some mighty strange ways about ’em!”

Esme blushed.

“No, brothers,” said Malcolm. “Esme has nursed me back to health from this nasty wound. I love her dearly, but as a sister.”

“Hmm,” grunted Hamish, a glint sparkling in his eye. “So, do ya’ think she might be handy for another Scotsman of considerably grander proportions than me baby brother?”

Esme blushed a deeper red, and Guillaume got his hackles up at that suggestion. Then he looked over at Hamish, and, catching the mischievous twinkle in his eye, realized that the Scotsman was in jest.

Malcolm smiled, but then returned to a serious mood. “Brothers, I have something to say. I have thrown my lot in with the Cathars. I came searching for answers and I found them. I found truth and love and simplicity with these people—things that I had never known before; true and honest love; true faith in God, without hypocrisy and without partiality. I saw these people loving their enemies and caring for those who spitefully used them. I know that I am called to fight for them—and not just *for* them, but

as *one* of them. And now, brothers, things have gotten serious. There will be war, most likely. The pope’s legate was murdered, and undoubtedly the blame will be placed here, on the count or on the Cathars. Either way, I am obligated to help these people. I will not leave them in their time of trouble. I am trained as a warrior; and aside from things I learnt as a boy, a warrior’s skills are all that I know.”

Dougal and Hamish exchanged glances, then Hamish turned to Malcolm. “Well, younger brother, I see a sincerity in you. A true MacAlpin ya’ are, swearin’ oaths to help people, even to ya’ own hurt. By golly, it seems we found ya’ just a few days too late! We could ha’e been away from here, but I know ya’re a man o’ yer word, and if a man’s word’s na’ good, he’s nuthin’. I won’t demand ya’ break yer word. But know, if ya’ ever need a place to go, ya’ ha’e a place back in bonny Scotland wi’ yer fam’ly. But if ya’ dinna mind, I’d like to stay here awhile with ya’, and see what kind o’ mess ya’ got ya’self into.”

Dougal nodded. “Aye, let’s stay here awhile. We can watch over ya’ a wee bit till ya’re recovered. We dinna want na harm to come to ya’; it sounds like ya’ve got a nest of vipers here with some of these rapscallions. Ya’re gonna need a couple of strong brothers to stand by ya’ side, to help ya’.”

Malcolm laughed. “You two! Always lookin’ out for me, even now!”

“Aye, we’re lookin’ out for ya’! Ya’re our wee brother—our wee *baby* brother. We always ha’e to look out for ya’!”

“Do ya’ think we can find lodging around here?” asked Hamish, turning to Guillaume.

Guillaume looked the two up and down again, still not quite getting over how big, brawny and rugged they looked with their long red hair and scraggly, unkempt beards. “Well, we’d better not take you around town too much, or you’ll scare the wits out of

our noble citizens,” he said jokingly.

“Oh, I like this fella!” said Hamish. “He’s got a fine sense o’ humor! Ya’ ha’n’t got any Scot in ya’, have ya’, lad?”

Guillaume laughed. “More’s the pity! I’m afraid I’m a true Frenchman! There’s nary a drop of foreign blood in me.”

“Oh well, we’ll just make do with ya’ as ye are,” said Hamish.

“I don’t know if we can put you up in the castle here,” said Guillaume “but I know a fine inn in the city where there are people most disposed to taking care of relatives of Malcolm MacAlpin.”

“Oooh, then we’d better be gettin’ off to it, then.”

“Oh, stay a whiles, brothers, and tell me all that’s happened back home,” said Malcolm.

“Aye,” said Hamish to Dougal. “We’d best stay for awhile, dinna ya’ think? We can always git to the inn later!”

“Very well,” said Guillaume. “By that time, perhaps Guy will be here, and he can take you there.”

“Who’s Guy?” said Hamish.

“He’s the brother of Heloise,” said Malcolm.

“Aaah, he’s just about family then, ain’t he?” All in the room broke into laughter, with the two older MacAlpins bellowing away with such unrestrained merriment that Guillaume was afraid they would be heard all the way to the great hall itself.

Malcolm felt good to be laughing like this. He hadn’t heard such hearty laughter for years.

“Ya’ still remember the oath, don’t ya’?” asked Dougal.

“Aye, I remember,” said Malcolm.

At the mention of the word “oath,” Esme’s ears perked up, remembering how Malcolm had been muttering about an oath.

“What oath, sirs?” said Esme.

“Tis a secret, lass, just between us brothers.”

“And how are Kenneth and David?” asked Malcolm.

“As we said, Kenneth is now Laird MacAlpin, and he rules our area like a little king. But the people love him and we love him too. He’s a bonnie man.”

“And David?”

Hamish and Dougal looked down, and the older one wiped a tear that was forming in his eyes.

“David died of the coughing sickness.”

Tears rose in Malcolm’s eyes at the news. David had always been the weaker one of the five, the more frail, more predisposed to books and learning. He had helped tutor Malcolm when he was younger, and it was thanks to David’s persistence that Malcolm learned Latin and the other subjects that had constituted his schooling.

“Aye, David died about two years ago. After hearing the news that Kenneth was reclaiming the lairdship, David was the first to hea’ home. He traveled many days in a terrible storm, and became deathly ill. He arrived sick; pale and burnin’ with fever. He dinna last but a couple a days. But he got to get home. He got to breathe the free air of our beloved home. His body was laid to rest with our honorable father, may he rest in peace. So there’s only four of us now, and that’s why Kenneth sent us to look for ya’. And by God, ya’ve been a hard man to find! We followed the leads to Paris and then we a’heard that ya’d headed off south, and that ya’ mighta come here.

“As we got near Toulouse we started to hear stories about a donnybrook between some champion of France and a Scotsman. An’ we ken’d that that Scotsman could be our scrappy young brother. And lo and behold, it was!—Getting into fights again! Goodness gracious! Do ya’ alway’ have ta get ya’self into such trouble?”

“I had no choice,” said Malcolm.

“Ah, that’s what ya’ alway’ say. Not changed a bit. Well, we’re here now, until ya’re recovered and on yer

feet. And if anyone's thinkin' to do ya' harm, they'll have to contend with us!"

"What a daunting thought," said Guillaume, a little mockingly.

Hamish looked at Guillaume and, with a notable hint of irritability in his voice exclaimed, "Aye, it is a daunting thought!"

"Easy, brother," said Malcolm. "This man is my good friend. He saved my life, and I owe him a lot."

"Okay. Well, if you saved my wee brother's life, I'll forgive ya' this time—but ya' sense o' humor's gonna get ya' killed one day."

"You are a most gracious man," said Guillaume, a twinkle in his eye.

"Does he always tease like this, brother?" asked Dougal.

"Only those he likes," answered Malcolm.

"Well, I guess we'll put up with him then."

"Please do, brother," said Malcolm. "His uncle happens to be the count."

"Ooooh, we ha'e nobility here! A thousand pardons! Well, the blood of nobility runs in our veins as well."

"Aye, brother," said Malcolm. "There's no disputin' that."

"Good!"

"And so, is he really a friend?" queried Hamish.

"Aye, brothers," Malcolm said. "He is my friend."

"Very well. Then he's our friend, too. Shall we give 'im one of those good ol' friendly Scottish 'ugs?"

"Friendly Scottish hugs?" Guillaume repeated nervously.

"Aye!" said Hamish, getting up from the bed where he had been sitting. And with that he threw his arms around Guillaume and gave the young Frenchman such a squeeze that the poor fellow began gasping for air. When the Scotsman finally put him down, Guillaume was panting.

"An' now it's my turn," said Dougal.

"That's all right," said Guillaume. "I-I-I believe that you're my friend." Then Guillaume turned again to Malcolm, aghast. "How did you ever survive growing up with these two?"

✕

Pope Innocent III looked gravely down at the piece of paper that he had just signed. The secretary poured molten wax from a small crucible onto the bottom of the letter. The pope stared at the little molten pool, and glanced at the ring upon his hand. He paused.

This was a momentous decision and he knew what devastation and slaughter it would unleash, but the die had been cast. The church and all that it stood for had been challenged. Innocent was convinced of the righteousness of his cause. He pushed his ring into the wax. The fate of southern France had been sealed, just as surely as his papal ring had left its imprint in the sealing wax.

The document was a formal declaration, and called on the king of France, the barons, and on the faithful of the church to unite in a crusade against the heretics of the region of Languedoc.

The secretary poured another pool of wax on a second document. Again the pope sealed it with his signet ring. This second document enjoined the Holy Roman Emperor, Otto¹, to also take up the cause of the cross and lift his sword against the heretics. Finally, a third document was signed and sealed. This was a formal bull excommunicating Raymond, Count of Toulouse, on charges of harboring and fostering heretics within his realm. This was the culmination of Innocent's many years of fruitlessly trying to combat the heresy of the Cathars.

The secretary picked up the three documents and delivered them to the official papal messengers—one heading to Paris, one to Harzburg Castle where the German Emperor, Otto IV, was currently resident,

¹ See endnote xi - The Holy Roman Empire

and one to Toulouse.

As the pope stood up, all the others in the room bowed low. He made a cursory sign of the cross over them, and left the room without saying a word.

The three messengers were dispatched immediately. It took many days of hard riding before each reached his destination.

The German Emperor, who was busy with other affairs in his own realm and at variance with the pope, received the message with due protocol, but then set it aside for a more convenient time.

The French king took more decisive action. He had often looked with envy upon his rich vassal and cousin. The whole thrust of Philip's policy had been to strengthen and enlarge his royal authority upon all of France. The county of Toulouse was the strongest and most independent county, so this turn of events played neatly into his hand.

After summoning the northern barons, the papal decree was read aloud to them. Many of the barons reacted with glee. Here was a chance for glory, loot and new land—all close to home, and all the while earning papal blessings and indulgences. An army was soon raised that consisted not only of Frenchmen, but also many foreign mercenaries. The leadership of the crusading army would eventually fall to Simon de Montfort.

Simon de Montfort was an austere man, pious and fanatically Catholic. He had previously joined the Fourth Crusade, which had been intended to liberate the Holy Land. Although the bulk of that crusade had been diverted to the sacking of Constantinople, Simon de Montfort and several like-minded knights had held steadfastly to their mission, and traveled directly to the Earldom of Tripolis, one of the Crusader Kingdoms in the Holy Land. After several years of futilely trying to change the status quo in that part of the world, Simon had come back to France. Frustrated with his

failure to vanquish the “infidel” Muslims, he now seized the opportunity to raise his sword against these heretics. He would crush them *all* in the name of the church and the cross, he vowed. Believing he was doing God service, he was about to become a cruel and heartless instrument of destruction and terror. Indeed, he was the dark lord that Giles had seen in his ominous vision, and he would descend upon the south like a fiend from hell.



Meanwhile, the messenger dispatched to Toulouse had arrived. The count had anticipated this course of events. While the court was assembled, the messenger marched into the great hall. At the far end, the count sat sullenly, surrounded by a small group of advisers and courtiers. The messenger diplomatically fell to one knee and passed the rolled document to the count, who in turn passed it to Robert of Avignon.

The messenger then arose, quickly turned, and marched out.

“Read it to me, Robert,” said Raymond quietly.

Robert unrolled the scroll and slowly repeated the Latin words. Raymond was hereby officially excommunicated. He was to be shunned by all good Catholics, refused the sacraments, and refused any Christian charity. He was pronounced an anathema, an heretic, and anyone who consorted with him was to also be so treated.

Raymond sighed. “Prepare to go to Rome, Robert. I want you to plead my case before the pope. Ask him what I must do to have this bull of excommunication revoked. Prepare letters from me, affirming my devoutness to the church and citing my attendance at masses, my devotion to the saints’ relics and pilgrimages, my piety and almsgiving, and all of the other things that I do. Whatever the cost, I must get this bull revoked!”

Guillaume, who had watched this scene from the

side, turned and left the room, disgusted at how quickly his uncle had caved in.

His exit did not go unnoticed. The count quickly dismissed those assembled, rose from his chair and marched off after Guillaume. After a few quick strides, Raymond caught up with him.

“Guillaume, stop!” he ordered.

The young man turned around and stared resentfully at his uncle.

“You are disappointed in me, aren’t you?” Raymond asked.

“How could you give in so easily?” said Guillaume. “I’ve always looked up to you as a fighter, a warrior willing to stand up for what you believe. But you gave up so quickly, so easily!”

“Guillaume, you do not yet understand politics and diplomacy! If you did, you would know that I have no other choice. But listen, all is not yet lost.”

Guillaume raised an eyebrow. “But you are sending Robert to the pope, asking him to revoke the bull. Yet you know that the only way this bull can be revoked is for you to turn on your own people!”

“Guillaume,” said Raymond, looking around, and lowering his voice to a whisper, “Robert is the traitor. This was all just a performance. Have faith, boy! Have faith!”

XIV — THE DECISION

Robert of Avignon found himself dispatched in great haste to Rome to bring the count’s petition before the pope. Several days after arriving he was granted a formal audience. There, before the papal court, he halfheartedly pled the count’s case and failed to persuade the pope to lift either the interdict or the excommunication.

News of his mission’s failure preceded his return to Toulouse. On his arrival, the count vented his displeasure on Robert and accused him of not giving the maximum effort expected of one on such an important assignment.

And so Robert was exiled from the county of Toulouse. It was an ignominious ending for Robert. He had been gifted with a keen intellect, which, since early on in life, he had learned to exploit. Thus he had risen from the lowly station in which he had been born to a position of power and influence. But he had overreached. He had thought that he could play off the great men in this affair against each other, and thereby gain greater prominence. His desire for power was stronger than his loyalty to his liege and, as is so often the case for those who betray the confidence and trust placed in them, he all too soon had to pay

the penalty.

Robert was lucky though. He could have suffered with his life, but the count did not have enough evidence to openly accuse him of treachery. Now this failed mission gave Raymond an excuse to rid himself of this one whom he could no longer trust.

He now turned to Guillaume's father, Lord Godfrey, to fill Robert's shoes.

News soon reached the region of Languedoc that a large crusading army had assembled and was headed south. The nobility and citizens of that region prepared to meet the coming onslaught. The resolute leadership expected from Count Raymond, however, was not forthcoming. For reasons known only to himself, he continued to vacillate as to what his intentions were to be—whether he would head the forces of the south to resist this invasion, or whether he, too, would join the crusade against the Cathar population.

And so it was left to the lesser nobility, who were more militant and vigorous in the defense of their citizens and territories, to rally the local population to resist. Foremost among them was Raymond-Roger Trencavel, the nephew of Count Raymond, and Viscount of Beziers. The Trencavels had held this viscounty for many generations, but they had often proved to be bothersome vassals to the Counts of Toulouse. Raymond-Roger proved no exception, even though he had at times been close to the count.

It was believed that Count Raymond was giving him surreptitious support, but this could not be confirmed. Many thought that the count was betting on both sides. If the crusaders won, then Raymond was rid of a difficult but powerful vassal, and he would be able to exercise his authority over the Trencavel domains. If Raymond-Roger won, then his worries about the crusade would be over. Either way, Count Raymond would come out on top.

Malcolm and his two brothers attached themselves to Guillaume, who had himself raised a small force of seasoned soldiers from among the local population—many of them Cathars—who pledged themselves to defend their homeland.

The southerners, whether Catholic or Cathar, knew that even though the ostensible reason for the crusade was to force the so-called heretics, the Cathari, to renounce their beliefs, the rapacious, land-hungry northern aristocracy were most interested in carving up the region of Languedoc into their own personal fiefdoms.

Alarming news had also reached them: a large portion of the army were mercenaries, those who were intent on pillaging and raping, and prepared to kill anyone, as long as they were paid. Anyone “taking up the cross” in joining this “holy crusade” had been granted a 40-day indulgence by the church. Beginning from the first day of the war, none of the crimes they might commit against the citizens of the south would be imputed to them in this life, or the next. With time already ticking, these cutthroats were anxious to get on with their sport.



Guillaume and his band of three hundred or so knights and soldiers had made their camp to the west of Toulouse. While appearing to operate independently, they were secretly taking their orders from Lord Godfrey. Their instructions were not to engage in pitched battles with the crusaders, but to attack and harass contingents not yet attached to the main body of the crusading army. This they had done quite successfully. The biggest engagement had been against a band of two or three hundred German mercenaries under the command of Simon de Montfort's son, Guy. Guillaume and his troops had surprised them as they came out of a narrow pass. The mercenary band was virtually wiped out. The few

survivors, which included Guy de Montfort, fled west.

The three Scotsmen had formed a small personal bodyguard for Guillaume. Their brash young commander would charge into the thick of the battle, and so they often found themselves in precarious and dangerous situations. Yet oftener than not, the sight of the two red-headed giants, Hamish and Dougal, swinging their great claymores, was enough to cause the valor of many of the enemy to melt away. This is not in any way to denigrate the martial skills of Malcolm and Guillaume, but the awesome spectacle of the other two brothers, yelling and cursing in their native Gaelic all the time and carving a deadly swath of mayhem through the enemy's ranks, was a fearsome sight. So far the four of them had managed to come out of these encounters without any serious wounds.

Still, they knew that these encounters were only minor skirmishes compared to the battles that surely still lay ahead. Raymond was still uncommitted.

Finally, a secret dispatch arrived at Guillaume's camp. This time it bore his uncle's seal, not his father's, so Guillaume knew that it would contain the long-awaited news of Raymond's decision. Inside his tent, the young knight stared pensively at the sealed letter. Malcolm and his two brothers sat silently across from him. Then, with uncharacteristic trepidation, Guillaume broke the seal and unfolded the document. As the others watched his eyes traverse the paper, his anxious countenance turned to one of disappointment, then despair. The news was not good!

Count Raymond had decided to join the crusaders. All of his attempts to defuse the situation had failed to produce a satisfactory result, and the size of the invading army was too great to be successfully challenged. And so the count had settled on this course of action. His only hope of retaining his territory, it seemed, was to be received back into the

church, and the only way he could achieve that was to do penance for his "sins" by submitting to a humiliating public flogging, and then join the Crusade. All of Guillaume's men were to take an oath of loyalty to the church. Any who refused were to be summarily dismissed and branded as outlaws. Guillaume was mortified at the news.

Passing the dispatch to Malcolm, Guillaume staggered out of the tent and sat down heavily on the ground before a campfire a few feet away. Malcolm read the document to his brothers, and then the three of them joined the despondent Guillaume.

"What am I to do, Malcolm? Do I join this murderous mob, descending like locusts upon our country, and fight our own good citizens? Or do I disregard my uncle's orders? If I were to do that, and my men knew that my uncle now fought on the other side, I don't know how many of them would stay with me. I cannot, in all good conscience, fight my own people, but I cannot fight without an army. I am much perplexed, my friend.

"Am I to obey orders and have a part in this evil, or am I to disobey my liege, to whom I have sworn fealty? Which is greater, my oath which I solemnly swore, or my conscience and my heart, which tell me that I must defend the weak and the oppressed, and those wrongly persecuted? These are grave matters, Malcolm, and I know not what to do!"

Malcolm shook his head and remained silent. He had no quick answer to give.

Hamish, noting his brother's silence, turned to Guillaume and tried to offer his advice. "If a man is not as good as his word, he is nuthin'! And ya' ha'e sworn the great oath to yer uncle and ya' be bound by that. Ya' canna go against yer word. Ya' swore it to yer own hurt, and by the saints, ya' have to keep it. That's why my brother's here, because he sware that he would help ya'. Now he too 'as got a dreadful

decision to make. For his heart is with these people, but ya're his commander, and he has taken an oath to serve ya'. So if ya' decide that ya're gonna follow yer uncle in this war, then he too has ta' decide. And his heart—his heart is lost to that lass, an' it be her kind that he'd ha'e to be a fightin'! Oh, war is a horrible thing!—Especially a one like this. When you ha'e to fight strangers, them 'ho mean nuthin' to ya', thata be one thing, but when those ya've been asked to fight are un's that ya've got regard fa' and ha'e grown up wi' some a them, then this is a dreadful thing! Ah, this is a melancholy night to be sure!"

"Aye, it is a melancholy night," said Malcolm. "I will not be sleepin' tonight, I reckon. But I know what Heloise would expect of me, and that I must be a doin'. I'm gonna go over theres away for a little while, under those yonder trees, and I'm gonna pray and ask God to get through this thick Scottish skull of mine, and show me what to do. My heart feels torn in a hundred ways. I think we all could do some praying tonight!"

Malcolm picked up a pebble and threw it into the fire. For a moment he gazed at it and thought himself very much like that little stone, with the flames of torment licking at him from every side.

"May God help us, and make our paths clear!" he said to the others as he rose. And with that, he turned and headed off to the copse a short distance away. He sat down, leaned hard against a tree, and looking up at the starry sky, began to pray. Things had been so clear-cut before: He was fighting on the side of the right, and against tyranny, defending the weak against the strong, siding with those who were sworn to the noble purpose of protecting people he loved—people such as Heloise. Now everything seemed hopelessly muddled.

His mind drifted back and forth between thoughts and prayers. He reminisced about the preceding

months, his engagement to Heloise, and their plans to marry at the end of the war; he thought of Esme, who had lovingly nursed him back to health; he thought of the love she had for Guillaume, and of Guillaume's love for her. Yet, it seemed that, under the current circumstances, the two would never be able to enjoy the bliss that he and Heloise enjoyed. Guillaume had put duty first. How clearly Malcolm remembered the tears he had seen in the young man's eyes the last time he parted from Esme.

Esme and her family knew that they would receive no mercy from the crusaders, who regarded them as heathens. She and her family, as well as many others, had left to cross the Pyrenees through some of the coastal passes, and planned to resettle in the kingdom of Count Raymond's brother-in-law, Peter of Aragon.

Malcolm thought of Guy, who had wrestled with his faith for many weeks. In the end, he had decided that he would rather die defending what he believed than to take the pacifistic approach that many of the Cathars had taken. Those who had renounced physical violence as a matter of principle were not even contemplating offering any resistance to the crusaders. They had resigned themselves to die as martyrs rather than renounce their faith. Guy had sought to join Guillaume's band, but needing to stay nearby his family's business, he had instead joined the militia that was being raised inside Toulouse. In due course, that militia would have become part of the defending army. But now that the count had changed sides, Guy and Heloise would be in great danger.

Malcolm struggled to clear his mind and to form some sort of a coherent prayer to God. After many hours of this anguish, a strange peace fell upon Malcolm—one that he had never known before. Suddenly, his troubled mind and heart were quiet. Within him was a renewed purpose, his objectives

were now clear. With a sigh of relief, and a thankful heart to his God, who had cut through all his confusion, he rolled over and fell into a deep sleep.

✕

Guillaume had watched as the young Scotsman had walked away, and then he, too, found a private place and searched his soul. But Guillaume was even more confused. His faith in God was not as deep as Malcolm's. In fact, he now found his mind clouded with uncertainty. Was there truly a God? If so, all this fighting over religion certainly didn't do Him any credit. And if so, why did He seem to take so little interest in what was going on?

As he mulled over these and a hundred other thoughts that crowded his mind, he determined that he would put God to the test to find out if He was truly there. Guillaume had always skirted the issue when it came to making any sort of commitment to God in his own life, but at this point he decided to strike a bargain. It was now or never. This crisis was too big for him to sort out—even with the help of those he trusted and loved the most: his uncle and his father. He knew that there was no simple answer, no unequivocal right and wrong.

And so that night Guillaume prayed with a sincerity and desperation that he had never felt before. He too found peace as the turmoil that had raged inside of him melted away. His purpose was now clear, and his direction fixed.

XV — CAPTURED

The small group huddled in the back room of Francis the baker's shop looked anxiously towards their leader. Giles' face was grim.

"This is indeed a bad turn of events, but it is not altogether unexpected. We knew the pressures on the count would be more than he could bear. Now it seems as though our enemies will triumph. All of our lives are in danger. As long as the count stood strong, those who sought to do us harm were restrained, but now you can be sure the bishop's men—and the mobs they will incite—will come looking for us. Even the count's personal army must now be counted among those who will seek to do us harm. Now is the time to pray, brethren. Our times and seasons are in the hands of God. Although all others fail us, He will never. His paths may lead us into perilous places, but we know that He walks with us and will keep us in every way. He shall not fail in all His pledges to us.

"We were vigilant before; now we must be doubly so. Our meetings will have to be less frequent, and held at irregular times in varied locations. Francis here will take care of notifying you where and when meetings are to be held. Up until now, we have been safe here in this little sanctuary that God has provided

us, but we cannot be sure if this location is known. We cannot trust handwritten messages, so all the locations of our future meetings must be passed on via word of mouth. If you do not hear the appointed time and location directly from one of the people in this room, then do not believe it.

“But fear not, dear friends! For He that is for us is greater than those that are against us. And if we suffer and die for our beliefs, know that all our persecutors do is propel us into Paradise, where nothing shall hurt nor harm, and nothing shall separate us one from another.”

At that moment, Giles’ admonition was interrupted by the sound of knocking on the front door. Everyone hushed and listened. The knocking came again. Anxious looks turned to ones of relief as everyone recognized the number and rhythm of the knocks. That sequence was known only to those numbered with them.

Still, the group remained silent as Francis opened the peephole and looked out. Agnes the vegetable seller peered back at him. Francis opened the door quickly and let her in.

“You weren’t followed, were you?” Francis asked anxiously.

“I did all that I was supposed to,” said Agnes. “I took a most circuitous route, and I saw nothing to make me suspect that I was being followed.”

“Very well,” said Francis. “Come. Giles has been here for a while.”

“I have news from the castle,” said Agnes, as she walked into the back room. “It is official. Count Raymond will do his public penance tomorrow at high noon. He is to go to the Abbey of Saint Gilles, where Odo, the other bishops, and the new legates will administer the punishments. Then he will receive absolution and be received back into the church.”

Looks ranging from bewilderment to disgust and

despair crossed the faces of those gathered. As Guy and Heloise looked at each other, tears rose in Heloise’s eyes. Guy reached out and embraced her.

Giles walked around the table and put his hand on the lovely girl’s head. “Fear not, child,” he said.

“Oh, I just feel so helpless!” said Heloise. “He that we looked to for protection has now joined forces with our enemies. What will Malcolm and Guillaume do? Must they too turn against us? Oh, I feel so weak in faith, Brother Giles! I wish I had the confidence and strength that you have!”

“Child,” said Giles, “you *have* the strength that I have. You just need to accept and believe that. Do not doubt the power of God, my girl. For He that is in you is greater than the world. As our Lord said, if you were of the world, the world would love you. But you and Guy, myself and all these others, are not of this world. Therefore the world hates us.

“Count Raymond, for all his grand intentions, is first and foremost a noble—a man of the world. He is interested in preserving his domain and the rights and privileges that come with it. He will flow with the tide and be carried with the wind. Furthermore, we, the poor and powerless in this world, are the expendable chattels of the mighty. We are the currency wherewith they buy and sell their positions, and even a relatively benevolent noble such as the count will not hesitate to sacrifice at least a few of us if that is what it takes to keep what he regards as his. But in God’s kingdom it shall not be so, for the greater shall serve the lesser in humility and love. In that world lies our hope—not in this one. We cannot place our confidence in man, my dear. Men always have feet of clay. We must trust in God, and fight in prayer.”

As the last words of his sentence trailed off, there came another knocking at the front door. This time it did not beat out the secret code, but it was loud, rapid and authoritative.

“Open this door!” a rough voice shouted.

A pall of terrified silence fell on the room.

“Open this door!” the voice shouted again. The banging became louder.

“Quickly! Out the back!” whispered Francis frantically.

There was a small stampede in the room as the people hurried towards the back entrance of the shop.

The knocking came again, this time even louder and more insistent. The voices of several men could be heard, shouting and cursing.

Guy, who had reached the back door first, cautiously opened it and looked both ways into the narrow alleyway behind. Motioning to the others to follow, he headed up the lane.

To his consternation, he hadn't gone but a few steps when two soldiers rounded a corner about twenty paces away. Guy turned around quickly and almost bowled over Heloise. He caught her and regained his balance, and started running the other way.

“Stop!” the soldiers shouted, as they ran after him. Guy grabbed Heloise by the arm and ran as fast as he could. The rest of the small congregation followed close behind him.

By now the soldiers had drawn their swords. One of the last women to get out of the baker's shop let out a shriek as a sword pierced her back.

Guy paused and looked back. Then, as he turned again, he ran right into two other soldiers who came out a side alley just in front of him. He knocked one of them down in the collision, and tried in vain to hurdle him, but the soldier reached out and grabbed him by the ankle. Guy hit the ground hard. Heloise collapsed on top of him. The second soldier viciously kicked Guy in the groin, and he doubled up in pain.

By this time, the soldiers had also broken down the front door of Francis' shop. Giles was there waiting for them.

“I believe you have come for me,” said Giles, looking serenely at the sergeant who headed the armed contingent.

“Are you Giles the tailor?” the sergeant inquired.

“I am,” replied Giles calmly.

“You and all your followers here are under arrest, by order of the count, on charges of heresy, blasphemy and sedition.”

“I am the one you are looking for,” said Giles. “Let these others go. They are simple folks. They have nothing to do with these charges.”

“They are your followers, are they not?”

Giles looked the man in the eyes. “They are humble people who mean no harm to anyone. Let them go.”

“I cannot,” said the sergeant gruffly. “I have my orders to arrest you and anyone associating with you. Men, take them away!”

By this time Guy, Heloise, Francis, Agnes and the rest of the small gathering had been herded back into the room by the back door. Guy was still bent over from the pain, but he was valiantly trying to help the woman who had been stabbed. Blood from her wound, which seemed quite severe, soaked much of her clothes and the front of Guy's rough spun tunic.

“Bring them all,” commanded the sergeant.

“This woman needs help,” said Guy. “She has been grievously wounded.”

“She'll die anyway,” answered the sergeant. “You!” he said, pointing to Guy, “You look like a strong man, heretic! You carry her!”

With that, the soldiers led the group out into the street, which was now crowded with curious on-lookers.

“What are you arresting them for?” cried a bystander as the group was herded down the street.

“These are heretics,” snarled the sergeant. “They're under arrest. Stand back! Out of our way, or I shall arrest you along with them!”

The crowd moved back to let them pass. Two soldiers stood on either side of Giles, their hands gripping him around the arms. The old man looked serenely forward, and smiled at the onlookers as he was marched down the street towards the castle.

Guy followed next, carrying the wounded woman who lay limp in his arms. Heloise, Agnes, Francis and the rest of them were pushed along by the remaining guards, some of whom seemed to find a sort of perverse pleasure in prodding them with their sharp spearheads.

Down the main road they walked, into the castle courtyard and across to the dungeon door in one of the towers. The jailer met them at the door and, grabbing a torch, led them down the inner stairwell. Unbeknownst to the prisoners, they were led to the same dungeon that Malcolm had been in before. They were all pushed inside, including the wounded woman, who had now fainted from the pain and loss of blood.

The jailer held high the torch and, looking around at his group of prisoners, let out a cackle. "Welcome!" he said mockingly. "Enjoy the hospitality of our gracious count!" Then, with another cackle, he marched out the door and slammed it shut.

Through the small latticed opening at the top of the door, a small flicker of light could still be seen by the terrified captives. They heard the key turn in the lock, then the shutter over the latticed opening slammed shut.

Then they were in pitch darkness. No one could see the person next to them. Heloise began to cry.

"Brother Giles!" wailed Agnes. "What is to become of us?"

"It's because of you that we're in this," Francis snapped back at her. "You were followed!"

"I don't see how I was followed," cried Agnes.

"Well, how else did they find us then?" said Francis.

"Hush," said Giles. "There's no need for these accusations! This is God's doing."

"God had us thrown in prison?" asked Francis.

"Truly you must believe, Francis," answered Giles, "that nothing happens by mistake, or without God knowing it. I don't yet know why He has allowed this to happen, but I know that it must be for a good reason. We just need to be patient."

"Well," said Francis, "we've got a lot of time to be patient. Oh, this place stinks terribly!"

For a few minutes they sat in silence, except for Heloise's soft crying. Guy found her in the dark and sat down beside her. With one strong arm around her, he stroked her face gently with his other hand.

Then Giles started singing, in his deep, sonorous voice, a song that they all knew well. The beautiful words of the beloved twenty-third Psalm now took on even greater meaning to them than ever before. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." A magical peace fell on that wretched prison cell as they all joined in the singing.

✱

The next day, at noon, Count Raymond, wearing the garb of a penitent, rode up to the abbey steps and dismounted. Loosing his cloak, he passed it to one of his attendants.

Bare-chested, he mounted the steps and knelt at the top. There stood the new legate, Milo, Bishop Odo, and all the bishops from the surrounding area. All wore the regalia of their offices. Odo looked down in smug triumph at the mighty potentate who was now on his knees before him.

Raymond looked the bishop square in the eye.

A sneer crossed Odo's face, who triumphantly confessed, "How I am savoring this sweet moment."

"Do not savor it too long or too loud," growled Raymond, "or my patience and my humility will be short-lived."

“Are you ready to do public penance?” cried Milo to Count Raymond, in a voice that carried across the square in front of the abbey church.

Raymond nodded.

“Are you ready to abjure your heretical beliefs?”

Count Raymond grimaced and nodded again.

Milo then wrapped his stole around Raymond’s neck, and pulled him into the church, flogging him as they went. To those who watched, it seemed that with every stroke of the whip, the smile on Odo’s face grew. He gloated as the count’s face contorted from the pain. Finally they reached the altar, where the flogging stopped, and the count fell to his knees.

Odo held before the count a huge crucifix. Count Raymond, shaking from the ordeal, leaned forward and kissed it. Odo piously made the sign of the cross over Raymond’s head and declared him absolved of his heresy. Raymond was once again declared a communicant.

Raymond staggered to his feet. Two of his attendants came to steady him, but he shooed them away. A third one gingerly placed the count’s cloak back around his shoulders. Count Raymond winced as it touched the open wounds that crisscrossed his back.

For the crowd who had watched, it had been an awesome sight. Here the mightiest man among them, the great Count of Toulouse, had been brought to his knees by the power of the church. Many shook their heads in disbelief, but few said a word as the crowd filed away from the square.

Raymond eventually made it back to his temporary quarters in the town that surrounded the abbey. Godfrey looked at his proud brother-in-law and liege, and wondered to himself how it had ever come to this. Raymond read his thoughts.

“Well, brother,” gasped Raymond, his teeth clenched together in an effort to alleviate the pain. “I

wonder if my countship was worth the whipping! We shall see! But I charge thee, brother. See to it that Odo does not live long to revel in his victory.”

✠

In 1209, the city of Beziers was attacked. After a short battle, the city was taken and all its citizens, over 15,000 in total, were massacred in an orgy of looting, rape and terror. This wanton barbarity was soon to become the norm for the crusading army. In the midst of the slaughter, when asked how to tell who was a Cathar and who was Catholic, the fanatical abbot and papal representative Arnald-Amaury, answered: “Kill them all. God will recognize His Own.”

Carcassonne was next to be attacked. Viscount Raymond-Roger, with a much smaller but well-disciplined and motivated force, managed to hold off the crusading army that besieged their walls. After a few weeks, the supplies of the city began to dry up and the young viscount took advantage of the crusaders’ offer of a truce to discuss terms.

Raymond-Roger and a small delegation rode out under a white flag to negotiate. There they were shocked to find that the terms the crusaders were offering were complete and unconditional capitulation, in exchange for which the lives of the inhabitants would be spared. Even after agreeing to the onerous terms, the young viscount, under the sanctuary of the white flag of truce, was treacherously set upon. Against all chivalry and diplomatic protocol, he was put in chains and thrown into a dungeon, where he languished for many months and finally died—some say by poisoning. He was only 24.

Carcassonne surrendered and was mercifully and uncharacteristically spared from the terror that befell Beziers—the terror that was, in later years, to befall many other towns and cities of the Languedoc.

Soon the forty-day period was up, and many of the crusaders returned home. Simon de Montfort was

granted the viscountship of Beziers and Carcassonne. He and the soldiers that remained with him settled in for a long war with the local nobility, who had allowed the Cathars to flourish on their lands. Although the southerners were not all Cathars, they were united by their hatred of these invaders from the north. And so the citizens fortified their towns and castles, and many took up arms to fight on the side of their nobles, and the Cathars.

XVI — THE PLAN

Dusk was falling as the four horsemen, wrapped in heavy cloaks to fend off the cool night air, rode into the troubled city of Toulouse. The watchmen at the gate were busily preparing to lower the portcullis for the night, so paid scant attention to the four as they rode in.

They cantered through the now-deserted marketplace, and headed up the narrow street that Malcolm had taken the first day he had arrived in Toulouse. So much had happened since that day, Malcolm thought. Soon they were at Guy and Heloise's inn.

Malcolm recalled how happy he was to have at last ridden into that open courtyard in front of the inn. This time as they arrived, there was no welcoming light cast from the open fireplace. Instead, the inn was dark and melancholy.

Malcolm and Guillaume exchanged worried glances. Malcolm dismounted and marched up to the door. It was then that he saw the parchment nailed to it—a proclamation stating that the operator of this inn, one Guy, and his sister, had been arrested for heresy along with others joined to that way of error known as the Cathars. They would stand trial before the ecclesiastical and secular authorities on the day

after the morrow.

Malcolm ripped the document from the door and crushed it in his hands.

It was then that a figure moved out from the shadows. Malcolm whirled around. Guillaume had seen it too, as had the others.

“Halt!” said Malcolm.

“Oh, Malcolm! It is you!” cried a familiar voice.

“Esme!” Guillaume and Malcolm chorused.

As the gypsy girl moved closer, the moonlight shone on her face.

“My dear Esme!” cried Guillaume. “What are you doing here?” He quickly dismounted and rushed over to her.

“Oh, Guillaume!” cried Esme as she rushed into his arms. “They’ve taken them! They’ve taken them! Your uncle’s soldiers have arrested Giles and the rest of them. They were all at Francis the baker’s shop, and they have been taken to the dungeons in your uncle’s castle.”

“We’ve got to get them out at once,” said Malcolm to Guillaume.

“Of course we do,” replied Guillaume. “But Esme, why are you still here? I thought you’d gone!”

A tear made its way down the girl’s face.

“I had. But every mile we rode away from here, my heart broke even more, until I could bear it no longer. My father saw my agony and finally entrusted me to the care of some merchants coming north. I traveled with them and arrived just yesterday—in time to see the spectacle at the baker’s shop, and to see my beloved teacher Giles being led away, together with Guy and Heloise and the others. But I knew you would come. God told me you would come. I heard His voice speaking to me, saying that you would be here soon, and to wait. And so I concealed myself in the stables at the back of the inn. The old man is still inside, but he did not notice me.

“When I heard the sound of horses on the cobblestones out front I came around. At first I thought you could be the bishop’s men or the count’s soldiers, for I did not recognize you under those cloaks. It wasn’t until I saw you tear the decree from the door that I took the chance that you were friends.”

“Come, my sweet darling,” said Guillaume. “You are trembling. We must get you inside.”

“But it is not safe here!” insisted Esme.

“We know the soldiers have arrested the two they were looking for here, so chances are that they will not come back. That probably makes this place safer than most right now. Malcolm, see if you can find Guy’s father.”

Malcolm and Hamish walked around to the back of the inn, where they entered and found the old man. After some time and effort, they managed to raise him from his sleep. He, being senile, did not at first understand the gravity of what had happened to his son and daughter. But after some patient reasoning, it seemed that he had sufficiently grasped the severity of the situation and agreed to let them all stay there. Then he retired to his room.

Hamish and Dougal had learned over the years to be creative cooks, preparing edible and even tasty meals from whatever ingredients were available. The two of them looked around the kitchen. Even though the place hadn’t been re-provisioned since Guy and Heloise had been taken two days earlier, they were able to prepare a passable meal for the hungry group. After eating, the five of them sat around the table trying to formulate a plan whereby they might rescue their loved ones.

“It’s simple!” Malcolm contended. “If they’re in the same dungeon I was, then there are the secret passageways.”

“There is only one dungeon connected to the passageways. If they’re not in that one, then we’re

sunk,” replied Guillaume.

“Well, we’ll just have to take the chance that that is indeed where they are,” said Malcolm.

“Aye, but that be only the first step!” said Hamish. “We’ve got a secret passageway into the dungeon. That part’s easy. But what are ya’ gonna do then? How are ya’ gonna get them out o’ the city?”

“There are many passageways, as you well know, Malcolm,” said Guillaume, “and one leads to a concealed entrance in the wall of the castle. Unfortunately, it doesn’t lead outside the city walls. We’re going to have to time it so that our escape coincides with the opening of the city gates. I think all we can do then is make a mad dash for it. We could head for the north gate through the district called the Bourg, where there are many Cathar sympathizers.”

“And then what will ya’ do when ya’re out o’ the city? Where will ya’ go from there?” asked Dougal.

“I don’t know,” said Guillaume. “I don’t know. All I know is, I want no more of war—certainly not *this* war and not *now*.”

“Well,” stated Hamish, seeing the young man’s apparent anguish of heart but wanting to get the planning back on track, “we shall need extra horses, for we canna’ just take everyone on ours. And what will we do with the others in the cell with them? We can’t take them all with us!”

“I dare say they won’t all want to go with us!” said Guillaume, looking at Hamish and Dougal. “Their families and relatives are here. They’ll probably just try to squirrel themselves away at some of their relatives’ houses and hope they don’t get found. As for horses, I think that I’d best leave that to you two rogues.”

“Well, we do need some planning here,” said Malcolm. “We need to calculate exactly how long it’s going to take to get these people out of the dungeon

and out of the city before people realize what’s going on.”

“We must do it just before dawn,” said Guillaume. “The guard will be changed at both the dungeon and at the city gates right about then. Just before the change, the last watch goes around to make sure all is well. There will be some time before the new jailers get around to check the dungeons again. At the city gates, the guards there will be opening them and preparing for all the farmers coming into the city with their market goods, so they will be concentrating on people coming in rather than going out.”

“Guillaume, are you sure you want to do this?” said Esme, bringing up a subject that the others had avoided until now. “This would be throwing away your birthright. You will be regarded as a traitor for going against your uncle’s wishes.”

“I have no uncle—not anymore,” retorted Guillaume. “I trusted him. Even when I thought I shouldn’t, I still did. Now I see that to him it was all a great game in order to preserve his position. He doesn’t have the rectitude or courage to stand up for the truth. He caved in to serve his own ends. I don’t want to end up like that. No, I’d rather be a wanderer—and a penniless one at that—than to stay here.”

“But it’s not just your uncle—it’s your father, your mother, and the prestige and power you have grown up with!” Esme added.

Guillaume shrugged. “Maybe I will be able to come back after awhile,” he said with his voice trailing off. Then he continued in a more forceful tone. “My heart is with you and Heloise and Guy and the rest of the Cathars. I cannot fight against them, which I will have to do if I stay. So I will go somewhere else—somewhere where I won’t have to wrestle with these questions.”

“Well, maybe we could use a little French influence back in MacAlpin Hall,” said Dougal. Malcolm and Hamish seconded the invitation.

“I thank you,” said Guillaume. “That would be an honor.”

“Well, wee brother,” said Hamish to Malcolm. “Do ya’ think ya might be comin’ home then, after this?”

Malcolm looked up. “Well, I don’t see much of a future for me here. Of course I’d have to get the consent of my lovely lady, and right now I am not in the position to ask her.”

“That’s where we come in,” said Dougal. “We’ll get ya’ in a position to ask.”

“If we get out of this in one piece, and we can figure out a way to get home, I’ll gladly go,” said Malcolm. “But getting out of the castle and even the city is one thing. As you and I know, the only city where we’re going to find a ship to Scotland is Ghent, and that is way to the north in Flanders. To get there we will have to travel through hostile territory the whole way!”

“One step at a time is all I can manage,” said Hamish. “It boggles m’ brain to try and figure the whole thing out. Well begun is half done, I say. We canna’ foresee every detail. If God be on our side, as I pray He be, then I think we ha’e nothin’ to fear.”

“Well, we should all turn in,” said Guillaume. “We’ll have to wake up early, and we’ll be getting no sleep tomorrow.”

The three other men nodded their assent, and went upstairs to settle down in various rooms of the vacant inn. Guillaume and Esme remained, sitting in silence for some time, looking at each other. Finally Guillaume spoke up.

“I love you more than all the world,” he whispered. “I would die for you this night, in a moment. I have been with the noblest of ladies, yet none compares to you. I know not why I confess that to you, but I feel I must bare my soul and my heart. Fair Esme, my love for you is beyond measure. My desire to be wed to you is the greatest desire in my being.”

“It is unthinkable!” said Esme. “You are a man of

noble birth, and I am an outcast. I could never be your bride, nor could I have your children.”

“But we can if we flee from this place, so that it is not known who we are!” insisted Guillaume. “I have struggled with this problem and this is what we must do. When I heard of my uncle’s decision to place his position and power ahead of that which is right and good, that night I knew that I had to make a stand one way or the other. As I sat in the gloomy darkness, I prayed to God with all my heart for a sign. I knew that a few yards away, Malcolm also was in agony of heart. When I looked in the direction of where he sat, I saw an unearthly glow. It radiated beautiful colors of blue and gold. I wanted to rise up and shout to the others, ‘Look, see what happens!’ But I could not. I sat there, immobile, transfixed, staring.

“Then, in the center of that glow, I made out the image of a man—tall, and strong, with arms outstretched. The blue and the gold undulated so that it looked like wings fluttering. I knew then that this was my sign, that God was with Malcolm and with those he loved. I knew then what I had to do. My loyalty was to be to the downtrodden, the weak, and the helpless, and not with my rich and fickle uncle. I told God that night that I would be His servant and that if I was to raise my sword again, it would be to defend those who cannot defend themselves.

“Then my thoughts turned to you, and the words came to my heart, ‘Fear not to take her for wife. She is a pearl of priceless value.’ I said, ‘Lord God, she is far away! I will never see her again!’ And the voice came back to my heart, saying, ‘I do impossible things.’

“Tonight, when I heard your voice and saw you walk out of the shadows, I almost fell off my horse! This was a sign to me also, and I knew then that God would bring all things to pass, as He had told me. So this day I beg thee: Be my wife, become the mother of

my children. And I will be to thee a true and honest husband and protector.”

Esme could not control the tears. She cried, then she laughed, and then she cried once again. Then, after regaining a modicum of composure, she looked the young nobleman in the eye and whispered, “Yes! Oh, yes! Oh, yes!”

With that, the two young lovers embraced. For what seemed like an eternity, the two kissed. At first, they were the shy and gentle kisses of first-time lovers, but gradually the passion mounted and the kisses became more fervent. Finally, Guillaume gathered her up in his arms and carried her up the stairs.

Meanwhile, Malcolm lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. He, too, was recalling that night when he left the campfire and wandered off to pray. He, too, knew that something mystical and wonderful had happened. He had not seen it, but he had felt an unearthly peace and a strengthening that he could not explain. He remembered how the confusion in his mind had suddenly fallen away.

This was a dying land. It was doomed. He knew that his mission here was over. There remained only one thing: To rescue Heloise, and for them to flee this country that would be rent by war and destruction—to flee with the light of truth that he had found, and with the love of his life. Home! Home to Scotland, and there to spread the wondrous truth of his new faith among his own.

“Dear God, bless this mission we undertake tomorrow,” he prayed. “Strengthen my hands! Strengthen my resolve! Help me to be Your instrument of deliverance this day to those that I love. They are in the hands of persecutors which are far stronger than I. Strengthen my arm, for I know that only by Your power and Your might will we succeed in our mission tomorrow. Give me sleep now, and peace of heart, for tomorrow we will either succeed and deliver

our loved ones, or else, dear Jesus, I will be gathered into Your arms. Let me succeed tomorrow, or I will die trying.”

XVII — FLIGHT

Guy woke from a fitful sleep at the sound of a loud clank. It was the shutter of the latticed window at the top of the cell door being opened. For a few moments the opening was lit by a flaming torch. A fleeting shaft of light illuminated the room, as the jailer peered in from the other side.

Satisfied that his charges were all still present, the jailer slammed the shutter closed. Once again, the dungeon was plunged into darkness.

Heloise woke with a start at the second noise. “Shhh! Hush, girl!” whispered Guy. “It was only the jailer checking on us again.”

Since they’d been in the dungeon, they had lost all track of time. There were no windows to give them any indication whether it was day or night. Guy, trying to estimate how long they’d been there by the number of times the guard had checked on them, figured that it was a little over two days, but that was just a guess.

They had not been fed at all since they had been thrown into the dungeon. The wounded woman had died quietly some time before. Giles had sat next to her the entire time, holding her hand, softly praying for her and speaking words of comfort. There was nothing to give her for surcease from the pain she

must have felt, but for some reason, shortly after they had been thrown into the cell, a peace had come over her. It had been as if some divine hand had dealt her a potion to ease her suffering.

Giles had not only been a source of strength for the woman, but for all those in the dungeon. After some gentle chiding, Francis the baker had stopped accusing Agnes of leading the count's men to their meeting, and the two were reconciled.

All told, there were fewer than a dozen of them in this cell. Since there was no light in the room, the only way they knew where the others were was through the sound of their voices and through touch. At first, it seemed to all of them like they had been confined to an abysmal blackness, but soon a peace and serenity that they all knew could have only come from God settled over them and helped them transcend the horror of their conditions. At times, some had started despairing, breaking down and crying. But they were able to encourage each other and, even in their miserable condition, they had managed to regularly say prayers and sing songs of thanksgiving.

Unexpectedly, a new sound reached Guy's ears—the sound of rock grinding on rock.

Francis let out a yell: "The wall's moving at my back!"

"Move back! Get out of the way!" a hushed voice could be heard through the wall.

"I shall not get out of the way," retorted Francis, "until I be sure what friend or foe thou art!"

"Please move, Francis," Giles' voice came out of the darkness. "I'm sure if they were foe, they would not be coming in this way."

Francis crawled forward on the floor, and soon the stone door that was the concealed entrance from the passageways into the dungeon swung open.

The bright and flickering light of a torch suddenly

filled the room, momentarily blinding all those who had been in the dungeon.

After a moment of stunned silence, the room suddenly became a beehive of commotion.

"*Shhh!* Everyone, please quiet down!" pleaded Malcolm.

Heloise immediately recognized Malcolm's voice. Her eyes had not adjusted to the light enough for her to make out the figure that had come into their midst, but she knew that voice! She would have screamed out his name, had her cry not been stifled by Guy, who quickly put his hand over her mouth. "*Shhh!* If we make too much noise, we'll alert the guards!"

"Malcolm!" said Heloise in an excited whisper. "I knew you'd come!"

"I couldn't leave you like this!" said Malcolm. "Quickly, now, all of you! We must make good our escape. They will soon be coming for you, to take you to trial. We must be well away from here before your absence is noticed."

By now, Guillaume was also in the room, and he quickly began ushering the startled occupants into the secret passageway.

Giles paused a moment, and looked down on the poor dead woman who still lay in the corner of the room, and then he, too, scurried out of the dungeon.

Guillaume led the way. Malcolm took up the rear, with Heloise and Guy. Once all were out of the room, he grabbed hold of the iron ring that was set in the concealed door and pulled it closed.

"That jailer is certainly going to be surprised when he comes looking for you," said Malcolm to Guy.

"I wish him such a fright that he will loose his bowels in the process," said Guy.

"Well, that would certainly add to the stench," said Malcolm.

The two smiled at each other.

"We don't have much time for pleasantries right

now,” said Malcolm, quickly embracing Guy. “We must not lose sight of the others. We’ve gotten you out of this dungeon, but we still have a long way to go to get us all to safety.”

The three scurried along and caught up with the others.

Heloise and Malcolm were only able to exchange a few words.

“We’ll have plenty of time for talking afterwards,” Malcolm told her. “But there are yet many perils ahead of us this day.”

After a great many twists and turns, Guillaume stopped.

“The exit is here,” he said. “Guy! Malcolm! Help me push.”

Guillaume and Malcolm had come in this way a short while earlier, and Hamish and Dougal had closed the entrance after them, lest someone stumble upon it by chance and raise the alarm.

The stone doorway gave way, and people in the passageway quickly filed out into the early morning air.

“Ah, there ya’ be, and right on time!” said Hamish.

“Hamish! Dougal!” cried Heloise, as she came out of the tunnel. “May God bless you!”

“Aye, and He ‘as! He’s blessed us with a bonnie sister-in-law!”

Heloise blushed and looked over at Malcolm.

“The horses are just around the corner here. There were several merchants and gentlemen staying at an inn not far from here, who’ve graciously allowed us the use of their fine horses.”

“You asked them?” said Malcolm quizzically.

“Well, we didn’t have time for that, brother!” said Dougal. “Besides, we would have had to wake ‘em up, and that wouldn’a been very nice, now would it?”

Giles was talking to several of the other escapees.

“Hurry, brother Giles! We must flee!” said Guy.

“All in God’s good time,” said Giles. He then turned to Guillaume. “You’ve risked your life, noble sire, to rescue us. And now, let us help you. To flee with all of us will only slow you down. The rest of us are townsfolk from here; we will manage to disappear into the city. There are many sympathizers here who will hide us, especially in the Bourg. Take Guy and Heloise. We will make sure that their father is looked after.”

“Giles, you must come with us!” said Guy. “They are seeking you above all!”

“If the shepherd flees, the sheep shall be scattered,” said Giles. “No, I will stay here amongst my flock. Fear not, for I shall make it very difficult for them to find me.”

“Come now! We must away!” said Hamish, who had just brought the horses.

A slight figure walked in his huge shadow.

“Esme!” said Heloise. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s a long story, and there’s not much time to tell it,” said Esme. “So let us wait until we have fled this place.”

“Malcolm, I have scarcely ridden a horse!” said Heloise with a note of concern rising in her voice.

“Then you will ride with me,” said Malcolm.

Malcolm had already mounted his horse, and he reached down and pulled Heloise up into his arms. “What about you, Guy?”

“Oh, I’ve had enough experience, I think!” he said, mounting a large roan gelding.

“You’ve got a lot of horse under you there,” Malcolm said jocularly.

Hamish and Dougal were already in their saddles. Esme had also mounted a horse, and the speed and skill with which she got the originally skittish mare under control showed that she was not without equestrian experience.

“Time to go!” said Guillaume, and the horses took

off at a canter through the quiet streets.

The rest of the rescued hurried themselves along. They were familiar with the town, and they quickly disappeared into the multitude of alleyways that interlaced the city. Giles paused at the entrance of one of them and turning, raised his hand in a farewell salute to his friends who were fast moving out of sight down the street. "May God go with you, and bring you to your desiring," he whispered. Then, with a flourish of his cloak, he was gone.

Guillaume knew that the alarm could be raised at any time now, but not wanting to raise too much suspicion, he prudently decided not to take off at a mad gallop through the town. Instead, he kept his horse at a steady trot. The others followed close behind.

The townsfolk were starting to emerge from their houses, and although the sight of people riding horses was not uncommon, some still seemed to look at them with more than a normal curiosity—or so it seemed.

After rounding a few more turns in the road, the north gate came into view. There was quite a lot of hustle and bustle, as farmers riding wagons carrying all sorts of vegetables and other foodstuffs were making their way into the city.

Several of the guards at the gate stood around in a small group, chatting with each other, while one or two others scrutinized the farmers as they came in.

Guillaume took a deep breath, and slowly cantered towards the gate. His every impulse was to spur his horse on, but he restrained himself. Pulling his felt hat over his face, he slowed his horse to a lazy walk as he went by the guards and through the gates.

"Good morrow!" he said gruffly, in an attempt to disguise his voice.

One of the guards grunted a reply.

Guillaume was through the gate now. Esme was right behind him. Guy was next, followed by Malcolm

and Heloise. Hamish and Dougal were bringing up the rear. Everything had gone almost too well up to this point.

Then, just as Hamish and Dougal rode under the raised portcullis, an alarm bell began to toll. The tolling was taken up by other bells throughout the city. The guards quickly snapped out of their reverie and started shouting and yelling at different ones. "Get out of the way! Get out of the way! We've got to close the gate! Bring down the portcullis."

Hamish swung his legs out and then in, his spurs digging into his horse's flesh. Immediately the horse took off with a start and broke into a mad gallop.

The other riders also took the cue and spurred their horses into a gallop.

For those who were used to riding horses, this was not a difficult thing, but for Guy, whose horse riding experience was minimal, keeping his powerful horse under control was almost more than he could manage. The horse reared up several times.

The guards, by this time realizing that the horsemen may have had something to do with the alarm bells, shouted at them to halt.

Guy valiantly tried to get his horse under control, but the horse, unfamiliar with its rider and riled by the bells and commotion, kept rearing up and turning in circles. One of the guards rushed out to grab the horse by its reins and pull its rider down. But then, just in the nick of time, the horse turned and bolted after the others. Guy held on for dear life.

Soon arrows were flying around him fired by the guards posted on the city walls above the gate. The others by now were well out of range, but Guy, for several perilous minutes, was in range of the bowmen.

Gamely he urged his horse on while at the same time praying that he would somehow manage to hold on.

Hamish and Dougal saw what was happening and

reined in. After one look at each other, they knew instinctively what they had to do. By now, Guy's horse had left the road and was galloping across open fields.

The two spurred on their horses, trying to catch up with him.

After a long chase that included jumping several hedgerows, they finally caught up with Guy. As they rode up, one on either side, they reached down and grabbed the horse's reins, and then pulled it in.

Guy was shaking. "Oh, gentlemen, I thank you!"

"Ya're welcome," said Hamish. "You sure led us on a bonnie chase, friend! Quick, we must take off after the others. Here, grab the reins more firmly and stick close by us. Soon they'll be after us! No time for riding lessons now, ya'll just have to learn as ya' go."

With the horse more under control now, the three set off at a gallop to catch up with the others. As they headed up to the road, Hamish looked back and could see a troop of horsemen exiting from the same gate.

"Oh, good God!" exclaimed Hamish. "Everything was going so well! Now the guard is after us already."

After dashing over some fields, they were back on the road. Ahead, they could see the dust being kicked up by the others' horses. The idea had been to flee northwest into the Angevin lands, which were nominally under the control of King John of England. They had planned to travel as far as they could on the first day, and even ride through the night if they could. Their initial destination was the Massif Central, and there they hoped to lose any pursuers in the many valleys of that mountain range.

"At least we have a small head start," said Malcolm to Heloise. "Hold on tight to the horse's mane."

"I am! I'm holding on for dear life!" cried Heloise. "But where is Guy?"

"Don't worry!" Malcolm shouted over the noise of the horse's pounding hoofs on the rugged path. "Hamish and Dougal are looking after him. We just

need to ride as far and as fast as we can. This horse is carrying double weight so he will tire sooner than the others. We must put as much distance between us and Toulouse as we can."

"Malcolm," said Heloise.

"Yes," said Malcolm.

"Thank you for rescuing me."

"It is the best thing I have done in my whole life," said Malcolm. "But hold on; we're in for a rough time of things!"

XVIII — MARTIN'S KEEP

The ride had been long and hard. There had been two river crossings to make; one over the River Tarn, at the town of Montauban, and a second across the Aveyron. They were now close to the town of Caussade, beyond which rose the foothills of the Massif Central. There they hoped to find temporary refuge while they planned the rest of their perilous journey.

For some reason, the troop of horses that had been pursuing them from Toulouse had pulled up after about an hour and had returned to the city. Perhaps they had been ill-prepared to mount a sustained chase at this time. But for whatever reason they had gone back, the fugitive band was relieved to be able to slow their escape and thereby conserve the strength of both themselves and their horses.

As they approached the town, they were greeted by the steward of a local nobleman named Martin—a man known for his charitable works and hospitality—and were invited to take rest in the guest chambers of his small but nonetheless well-fortified keep.

His pretty daughter Hilda, her long blonde hair done up in braids that were curled around on both sides of her head, busied herself with their care. Her father was a well-known Cathar, as were all the

members of his family. He had earned a reputation, second to none in the area, for his piety, charity and good works. Although of noble birth, he and his family dressed in plain, simple clothes. Many times it was hard to distinguish between them and their servants, as they all seemed to be one big family and treated each other with great kindness.

“Come and rest with us a while,” said Martin. “We can tell you’ve come a long way and have ridden hard. You must rest and regain your strength before you carry on in your journey. You are welcome to the hospitality of my table for as long as you desire.”

“You are most gracious in your hospitality, sire,” said Guillaume. “My companions and I are most grateful.”

“You look familiar,” said Martin to Guillaume, as he stared at the young man. “Are you by chance related to Raymond, count of our realm?”

“You are very astute,” said Guillaume. “Yes, I am his nephew. I believe I met you once at a great gathering of nobility in Toulouse many years ago. You are not a regular visitor to our court.”

“Indeed I am not, young man,” replied Martin. “I do not find great pleasure amongst other nobility, for my tastes are simple, as is my life and that of my household. Although I joy in this life, my hope is fixed on the next. And so, I seek to fulfill my God’s injunctions: to love my neighbor as myself, to show charity and hospitality, and, having food and clothing, to be content. I am not a martial man as I see you and your companions are, but I seek to follow the way of Christ in the perfect form.

“You must realize that my sympathies, and indeed, my part, lies with the Cathars and their purity and holiness, and not with the church that claims dominion over my soul. I hope only to be left in peace, but when strangers come, to offer them my hospitality.”

“Well spoken, sire,” said Guillaume. “I, too, am with the Cathars, although perhaps my particular beliefs differ some from yours. Still, I do graciously accept your hospitality, and my companions and I will indeed respect you and your beliefs. Allow me to introduce my companions: This is Malcolm MacAlpin, of Scotland, lately in my uncle’s service in the battle against the invaders. These are his two brothers, Hamish and Dougal, true and honest men, also pledged to my uncle’s cause before he turned his back on his people and sought to save his own neck. And this is Guy, and Heloise his sister—Cathars from Toulouse and followers of Giles the tailor, who has earned somewhat of a reputation and is most likely known to you. And this is Esme, my betrothed, and also one of Giles’ disciples.”

“Indeed, I have heard of this one called Giles,” said Martin. “He is well-respected here in my house. You and all your companions are most welcome. From time to time, you will also find other visitors here, and at the moment there is one who professes to be a traveler—on what business he did not disclose. But I fear he is not in sympathy with our cause. So I would warn you to keep your voices low when you talk to each other.

“I keep my doors open without discrimination, so even though I do not particularly like this man, still I am not able to refuse him my hospitality. But I warn you to be careful of him.”

“Thank you,” said Guillaume. “We will take precautions. And how will I recognize this man?”

“He has a broad scar across his cheek,” said Martin.

Esme gasped. Guillaume and Malcolm exchanged quick glances. Could it be?

“Where is this man now?” inquired Malcolm.

“Oh, he goes out by day—to do what, I know not,” said Martin. “But you will see him at dinner. He never

fails to return for the meal.”

“And could it be,” said Martin, turning to Malcolm, “that you are that Scotsman who slew Albert of Aurillac in combat?”

“I am indeed,” confirmed Malcolm.

“I see. News of that fight has reached far and wide, I can assure you,” said Martin. “And I feel I must tell you that the estates of his cousin, Theobald, who I understand was his second in that combat, lie only twelve miles east of here. I would recommend, therefore, that while you are welcome to my hospitality for as long as you want, you had best be prudent and make your stay here short, for your own good. Now, my servant will escort you to your rooms.”

✕

Unfortunately for our heroes, before Martin had passed on these warnings, their arrival had been spied by a horseman dressed in black. Perched on the edge of a cliff overlooking the small castle, Bernard had watched the arrival of the mounted band with curiosity, at first not recognizing any of the group because of the cloaks and hoods that they wore.

But as they dismounted, one of the party had pulled her hood off and had shaken free her dark, curly hair. Even from this distance Bernard had been sure that it was the girl who had started all his troubles—the one he had seen swimming in the river many months before.

He quickly counted the five men and two women on six horses—formidable odds indeed, for the lone Bernard. Yet the sneer on his face quickly erupted into laughter; his time of vengeance had come! He whirled his horse around and headed east, towards the castle of Theobald, where his erstwhile employer, Bishop Odo, would also soon be arriving to keep a prearranged rendezvous.

It was nightfall when Bernard arrived at Theobald’s estate. Already in the great hall, Odo and Theobald

were seated at a table. A roaring fire burned in the hearth behind them, and as Bernard walked in the door, the flames silhouetted the forms of the two men.

“Your Grace, your lordship,” said Bernard, acknowledging both the men as he walked in.

“Ah, Bernard, you have arrived,” said Odo. “I have been discussing our plans with Theobald here, of what we shall do to enhance our prestige in the new regime being established in our fair lands. We have sworn allegiance to Simon de Montfort, and he will undoubtedly reward us with the estates of these accursed followers and sympathizers of the Cathars.”

“Indeed, your Grace,” said Bernard. “But I bring you interesting news.”

“And what might that news be?” said Odo.

“Today I spied a small troop of men and women arriving at the castle of Martin of Caussade, on whose hospitality I am presently prevailing. I recognized one of them almost immediately. And it was then that I recognized two others.”

“Go on,” said Odo impatiently. “Stop being so mysterious. Tell us who they were.”

“It is none other than Lord Guillaume and that accursed Scotsman, Malcolm—the tormentor and slayer of your late cousin, Lord Theobald—and the gypsy wench who entranced me and caused me such great discomfiture and trouble.”

Odo and Theobald turned simultaneously and stared at Bernard.

“Are you sure these are they?” demanded Theobald.

“I am sure,” said Bernard. “And there were four others with them. Two big fellows, one young man, and another woman whom I did not recognize.”

“The two big men,” said Odo, “are the brothers of the Scot. They have gained the reputation of being formidable fighters, and have caused our Lord Simon de Montfort great trouble while they were in the employ of our fickle count. To capture these would

indeed be a feather in our cap, don't you suppose?"

"I have a blood feud with that Scot," growled Theobald. "We can capture these others, but his head is mine."

"As you desire," said Odo. "And that impudent puppy, Guillaume, has also caused me much discomfort. Today a messenger brought me news from Toulouse that some Cathars who had been thrown into the count's dungeon had mysteriously escaped. It is rumored that the count's own nephew had a hand in it, as he has not been anywhere seen since the incident.

"So, it seems we have opportunity here to further our cause and to bring the count and his household yet more embarrassment and pain. When I take this upstart back to Toulouse in irons and prove he was indeed involved in this conspiracy, Raymond will have to pronounce the sentence of death upon his own beloved nephew. Ah yes, that shall cause me great pleasure! And to see that henchman of his, Godfrey, lose his precious son to the headsman's axe will cause me great satisfaction, for I am determined to destroy this count and all his house.

"May I suggest, then," Bernard spoke, "that we head out several hours before daybreak, so that we arrive at Martin of Caussade's estate while our unsuspecting quarry lie sleeping. And there we shall capture them, hopefully without bloodshed."

"But if blood be spilt, then let it be theirs," Odo gleefully added.

"I will round up the troop," said Theobald. "There are all together seven of them, you say?"

Bernard nodded.

"Then twenty armed and mounted soldiers should suffice. But the Scotsman is mine. I do not intend for him to be delivered up to Toulouse. His death is mine to devise and to execute."

With this, Theobald marched out of the room,

shouting for his steward, whom he charged to gather his armored men and have them ready to leave before dawn.



Meanwhile, Malcolm, Guillaume and company were enjoying a good meal at Martin's table.

"The man with the scar is not here," remarked Guillaume casually to Martin.

"No, it is most unusual. Until now he has never failed to turn up for a meal. Perhaps he has left us. He rides out every morning, and then returns at supper. I don't know what he does, although I suspect he may be some sort of fugitive. Either that, or he is a henchman in the employ of some unknown master, and bides his time here while awaiting further orders."

Guillaume and the others exchanged glances, but rather than pursue the subject further in front of their hosts, Guillaume thought it wise to change the subject.

"So, you are also followers of the perfect way?" he inquired.

"Yes, my family and I love and respect those who are truly godly and follow the way of perfection," replied Martin.

"And you say you have heard of Giles of Toulouse?"

"Yes, I have," answered Martin. "He is known even among these parts, and respected also, although his ways are somewhat different than the Perfects of our adherence. But tonight we shall have two Perfects who have journeyed from Albi to meet with us, and if you so delight, you may join us."

"It would be our pleasure," said Guillaume.

"Very well, then. I expect them to be here within the hour. I will call you when the time is ready."

"I will look forward to that, as will my companions, I am sure."

As the servants came to collect what was left of the food, Guillaume, Malcolm and their whole party

wandered out into the cool, crisp evening air. It was a cloudless sky, and from their vantage point on the castle walls, countless stars could be seen, and the mountain peaks lay dimly silhouetted against the sky.

The two sets of lovers—Malcolm and Heloise, and Guillaume and Esme—walked off a little distance from the rest. The other three men sat on a stone bench just outside the turret through which they had ascended, and struck up conversation amongst themselves.

“So, wee Guy,” said Hamish. “Did they teach ya’ anythin’ in that militia training o’ yours?”

“Well, they gave me a pike and told me to stick it in the ground and aim it forward. That was about the end of it.”

“By the saints, boy, ya’re going to ha’e to learn more’n that if ya’re going to defend ya’self.”

“I would love to learn to defend myself, but I have neither sword nor pike here.”

“I always carry an extra sword with me,” explained Hamish. “I ha’e my huge brute of a thing, but I ha’e a smaller sword that I carry so I can pick me teeth aft’a good dinna, and as long as ya’ promise to ha’e it around at mealtimes for me, I’ll let ya’ borrow it for now. For I fear that we’re gonna ha’e some fightin’ to do before we come home.”

Guy smiled at the giant’s joke but then, in a more pensive mood, asked, “I take it you think I will be traveling all the way home with you?”

“Well, what are ya’ choices?” asked Hamish.

“I’m not sure,” replied Guy. “With our flight I haven’t had time to consider any alternatives. An innkeeper I don’t suppose I would have to be, but I don’t think a soldier’s life’s for me. I rather abhor killing and fighting. I only joined the militia because I thought I’d have to defend my sister and father and friends.”

“Those are noble intentions, my little friend, and

I’m sure that ya’ heart be in the right place. But ya’re gonna ha’e to learn to defend yerself, o’erwise ya’ just gonna go like a sheep to th’ slaughter.”

As they so conversed, an hour quickly passed. A servant came out to summon the visitors back to the meeting room, and they joined Martin’s family and servants. It seemed that some of the local townsfolk were also present. Once they all were assembled, Martin opened a side door and showed in two stately-looking people.

Both were robed in long black garments, but the man had around his waist a leather belt, from which hung a scroll. Hilda, who had taken the liberty of seating herself with her father’s guests, whispered to them that this scroll was a parchment copy of the New Testament.

The room was brightly lit, and the two Perfects looked serene and peaceful. Tonight was to be a general confession, and although it would not have been the practice for any who had not formally been admitted into their numbers to attend, Martin had reasoned with the Perfects beforehand and they had agreed to allow these curious guests to observe, but not participate.

The two, each in their turn, led the congregation in prayer, and then the woman (causing no small surprise to Malcolm and his brothers) preached a short sermon in which she outlined some of their doctrines: their renouncement of the Catholic church, their belief that this world is ruled by Satan, called the Evil One, and that it is the duty of believers to spend this life endeavoring to prepare themselves for a transition to the next. To accomplish this, one should endeavor to take the consolamentum before death, so that their spirit would be ready to pass on to a greater life in the world to come, and that flesh and all that is associated with it is to be shunned, but that only after taking the consolamentum would

the believer be required to do this consistently and for the rest of their lives. But it was sufficient, for now, simply to be a *believer*, and to wait on becoming a *Perfect* until near death, when failure to fulfill the requirements of a Perfect would mean damnation.

After the meeting, Martin and his household all knelt and then prostrated themselves before the Perfects. The Perfects bade them rise, gave each their blessing, and then retired from the room, accompanied by Martin.

The observers had been much impressed by the service and obvious sincerity and piety of the two Perfects. So had the rest of the congregation, the last of whom were now slowly filing out of the room.

It was Hamish who finally spoke up. “Well, I may respect their beliefs, but I tell ye all, this abstaining from the flesh is not my idea of an afterlife!”

Malcolm, Guillaume and the others laughed, and then they all retired to their respective rooms for the evening.

XIX — THE HOUR OF DARKNESS

Shortly after midnight, Heloise awoke with a scream. Within seconds, Malcolm rushed into her room that she shared with Esme, and Guillaume followed fast on his heels.

“What’s the matter, dear?” Malcolm asked Heloise anxiously.

“I had a horrible dream!” she replied, her face still registering her evident terror. “I dreamed that, as we lay here in our beds, we were surrounded by vile-looking men—men who looked more like devils than humans. They came upon us as we slept, with hatred and venom in their eyes. They slashed at us with their weapons and claws—killing us one by one. Oh, Malcolm, it was a horrible nightmare!”

“It’s all right, my dear,” said Malcolm. “It was just a bad dream. We’ve seen and heard a lot these last few days. Try to rest now.”

“I fear that it may be more than just a bad dream,” said Esme with a firmness and authority in her voice. “It is a warning! I, too, in a dreadful vision, have seen the camp of the saints surrounded by devils with hideous and grotesque features. In this vision, also, we were caught sleeping and unawares, and were led like lambs to the slaughter. No, I fear that those who

hate us are even now plotting our destruction.”

“What’s all the fuss?” announced Hamish, as he came marching into the room. “Who was it I heard a screamin’?”

“It was Heloise,” said Guillaume, who was kneeling by Esme’s bedside. “She had a bad dream, and Esme here thinks it’s an omen.”

“An omen, by God!” said Dougal, who had followed his brother in. Guy was up, too, and at this point was the last one to enter the room.

“Yes, an omen,” said Esme, a paleness coming across her face that made her dark features show yet more starkly in the dimly-lit room. “I sense danger in this place. My father often said that I had a sixth sense, to anticipate things before they happened, and now I feel a dying chill in the air. I fear that death and destruction lie before us; that we are to be caught as birds in the fowler’s net.”

“Ah! The words of a mad diviner who canna’ sleep. You women! I be a goin’ back to bed,” said Hamish with a loud yawn.

“No, brother! I think this is serious,” said Malcolm. “We already know that someone who could very well be Bernard, Odo’s henchman, has been staying at this very place, and I fear that if it indeed was him, then his failure to return to this keep augurs that our current lodging is discovered, and the sure chance that our enemies may soon be upon us.”

Guy, who had been leaning against the window, looked out into the darkness. The moon, though not full, cast a pale blue light on the landscape. Martin’s small castle overlooked the village, where all seemed quiet. To the east, and scarcely visible, a road headed off into the mountains.

Guy’s eyes continued traveling up the road, until, for a moment, he thought he saw a light in the distance. He strained his eyes but the light had disappeared. A few moments later it reappeared, and

then disappeared again.

“Malcolm! Guillaume! Look here!” said Guy.

The two men walked over to the window.

“There, in the distance. See that light? Look, there it is! Now it’s gone again. It seems to be moving. But why does it disappear and then appear again?”

“Indeed, the light is traveling,” said Guillaume. “It’s a torch; it’s disappearing behind rocks or trees or other obstructions, and then appearing again as it comes out from behind them. There are people on that road—and what is more, they seem to be heading our way.”

Now all seven people crowded around the window and peered out.

“I wonder who it is, traveling by night like this,” said Malcolm.

“Well, with the warnings we just heard, I would take it that we should assume the worst,” stated Guillaume. “To arms, men! If they *are* hostile, well, we shall teach them a lesson! Surprise will be on our side instead of theirs.”

“Then we must wake and inform Martin and his family!”

“I will take care of that,” said Guillaume, disappearing out of the door. “The rest of you, get ready. We are in a fortified position, so I would say it is best to prepare to make our stand here, rather than run. On open ground we will have a distinctive disadvantage.”

The men hastily went to put on their armor and weapons. Guy, who had no armor, armed himself with the sword that Hamish had given him earlier. “God help me use this thing,” he uttered hopefully.

“He’ll have to!” said Hamish, overhearing the prayer. “Cause I dinna’ ha’e time to teach ya’.”

Hamish and Dougal strung their bows, which they had carried along, and carefully checked their supply of arrows. Then they hurried off to take up their

positions at the top of the main tower that overlooked and guarded the gate.

Meanwhile, Guillaume had awoken Martin and told him the news.

“I will not resort to arms,” said Martin. “I have been a man of peace all my life. But I will not prevent you from defending yourselves either. My family and I, along with our servants, will repair to the cellars and there barricade ourselves in. I pray that the Lord smiles on you in your enterprise today, and I hope that you understand why I cannot allow any of my household to join you in this.”

“I appreciate your frankness,” said Guillaume, “and your steadfastness to your principles. Please do consider diligently the protection of your family, for I fear that you and they may also be in grave peril. If we have brought harm upon you this day, I apologize. Please fight for us with your prayers.”

Guillaume then went back and made sure the two women were barricaded into the room, along with Guy, who they had decided should stay back with them and defend them at the end, if need be.

Guillaume and Malcolm made their way to the castle walls, where they concealed themselves and awaited whoever was carrying that light in the distance and whatever they would bring them.

Soon, the sounds of horses could be clearly heard, and the accompanying rattle of men-at-arms who sat upon them. As they drew nearer, Malcolm and Guillaume’s eyes were drawn to a figure in the second row, immediately following the torchbearer. The unmistakable rotund figure of Odo was clear to both of them.

“By God, it’s Odo!” whispered Guillaume, “And he’s even carrying a sword!”

For those not familiar with this period in history, it was not uncommon for bishops to be both priests and warriors. Many of the contingents of crusading

armies were led by warrior bishops. A bishop not only ruled in the spiritual, but also in the temporal realm of his estate, and therefore had to be prepared to defend it and fight for it as any feudal lord.

Although Odo had not taken up arms for many years, he could not resist coming along with Theobald and his soldiers on this mission to exact his revenge upon his sworn enemies. It was an opportunity which he was not wont to miss.

Bernard and three other guards who had accompanied Odo from Toulouse were also among the party.

As they neared the walls, the horsemen drew up in a long column in front of the gates.

“I count twenty-one in all,” Malcolm whispered to his confrere.

Guillaume nodded. “Odds are more than five to one. Thank God we have surprise on our side.”

Two of the horsemen had dismounted and were making their silent, unsuspecting way to the doors of the castle.

Guillaume looked over and could see the figures of Hamish and Dougal in the high tower. He raised his hand and brought it down quickly. In the next instant, two arrows flew through the air, striking the two soldiers. One fell silently, but the other screamed as the arrow penetrated his body.

In the resulting confusion, and before Theobald and Odo could gain control of their men, six more arrows had flown, and six more men lay dead or wounded on the ground.

“Retreat!” shouted Odo, as he turned his horse around and galloped away from the castle walls.

Theobald and the other soldiers wheeled their horses around and headed for cover.

Guillaume and Malcolm peered into the darkness and waited.

A crossbow bolt came whizzing through the air

not far from where they were hidden, and struck the castle timber with a loud thud. It was followed by several more, all whizzing harmlessly overhead, or hitting the castle wall and falling to the ground.

“They must have someone moving ahead, and they’re trying to keep us down,” said Guillaume to Malcolm.

Malcolm nodded. Looking up at the high tower, they saw Hamish gesturing to the right. Peering out, they could see five armed figures moving in that direction. The two dropped to the ground and scurried over to that part of the wall, climbing up the ladder and onto the parapet on that side of the keep.

No sooner had they reached the wall when they heard the sound of a grappling hook flying through the air. With a clang, it secured itself between the battlements, not far from where Guillaume and Malcolm now lay in wait.

Quickly they scurried over and took up positions in the shadows on either side of the gap where the four-barbed hook lay. Soon they could hear the grunt of soldiers scaling the wall.

They waited until the first man had actually reached the top and was about to climb over. Then Malcolm rose and swung his sword, striking the man at the neck. Although it didn’t cut through the chain mail, the force knocked the man clear off the building. He went flying through the air and crashed headlong at the bottom of the wall. At that same instant, Guillaume swung down his sword on the rope, cutting it in two, and the other two men who had been scaling the wall behind the first fell with a loud crash.

Peering cautiously over, they saw two of the assailants lying motionless. The third was crawling away, dragging one leg behind him, which appeared to have been broken in the fall.

Two other figures could be seen scurrying to take refuge in the direction from which they had come.

Soon a voice broke the relative silence that followed this thwarted attack. Guillaume recognized it as Theobald’s.

“Martin of Caussade, why do you fight against us? Bring out your guests, for our quarrel is with them alone. Let us be done with this bloodshed!”

“It is not Martin of Caussade who fights against you, for he and his family have naught to do with you.”

“Then it is *you*, Lord Guillaume, son of Godfrey, by the unmistakable sound of your voice, who has committed this act of outlawry against these noble guardsmen!” shouted Odo.

“We are merely defending ourselves, Lord Bishop! It is you who are the aggressors.”

“Give yourselves up!” shouted Theobald.

“Never!” shouted Guillaume.

“Then prepare to die!” thundered Theobald.

Five or six more crossbow bolts whizzed through the air, once again harmlessly hitting the wood and masonry of the fortifications.

Guillaume and Malcolm ducked for cover, and whispered together.

“I’m afraid if this lasts till daybreak, they’re going to send for reinforcements! We have to find a way to end this fight quickly,” said Guillaume.

“How?” said Malcolm.

“We must devise a ruse,” said Guillaume, “a sort of Trojan horse in reverse. The next time an arrow comes through the air, scream as though you’d been struck. Meanwhile, I’ll slip up into the high tower, and explain to Hamish and Dougal what we’re doing. By my calculations, there are eleven men dead or wounded among them. That leaves only ten. I think we’re in a position to let them scale the walls and think that they have won.”

Guillaume disappeared, and a few minutes later, another volley of crossbow bolts sung through the air. As they passed overhead, Malcolm let out a

chilling scream. Shouts of satisfaction could be heard from the attackers' camp.

A few minutes later, Guillaume returned to Malcolm's side. "What we shall do," said Guillaume, "is let them get over the wall and open the gates. You can be sure that they will all rush inside. Once in, we have but to shut and guard the door, and they will be trapped."

"Great," said Malcolm a little sarcastically. "We let ten armed men into our castle, and four of us have them trapped!"

"Have I failed you so far in my military tactics?" grinned Guillaume.

"You've damn near killed us a hundred times," retorted Malcolm.

"Well, just pray this one's going to be damn near also, and not fatal. We don't have a choice. We've got to get them all in here before they send off for help, which, if they don't get a token of victory soon, you can be sure they will do."

Malcolm nodded his head.

The two of them once again jumped down from the parapet and concealed themselves in one of the stables. Soon, another grappling hook could be heard being thrown over another part of the wall. Minutes later, the cautious leader of the scaling party climbed over the wall and motioned to his fellows. Soon, four of them were on the parapet, swords drawn, cautiously looking this way and that. They headed down the stairs towards the gate. One soldier lifted the heavy beam that secured the door and threw it to one side, then pushed the door open.

Theobald was first through the gates, and motioned to his men to go this way and that, as though to search out whatever defenders remained.

"Watch out!" he warned his men. "They're going to be like cornered animals now. We know at least one of them is wounded."

A few minutes later, Odo came huffing and puffing through the door, surrounded by Bernard and the other guards. "Well?" he said, almost out of breath.

"They are hiding!" sneered Theobald. "But we'll sniff them out!"

Two volleys of arrows suddenly followed in quick succession. The four arrows found their mark; two of Odo's guards lay dead, and a third, with an arrow through his leg, fell screaming to the ground. The fourth arrow struck one of Theobald's guards in the back, and he also collapsed.

"There! Up in the tower!" shouted Theobald. Quickly, he took off up the steps, followed by the remainder of his men, who had come running back into the center of the courtyard.

Odo, his sword drawn, snapped at Bernard, "Don't leave me! I need you here to protect me. This lot," he sneered, motioning to the dead at his feet, "were a bunch of failures!"

Slowly, Bernard and Odo backed off towards one of the walls. Malcolm and Guillaume sprinted from their hiding place towards the gate.

"There they are!" shouted Odo. "Get them!"

Bernard, wondering if perhaps for the moment caution would be the better part of valor, hesitated. By then, Malcolm and Guillaume had reached the gate. Much to the surprise of Odo and Bernard, they didn't dash through it, but rather pushed the gate closed and bolted it. Then they turned, swords in hand, to meet their attackers.

Meanwhile, Theobald and his men had come to regret running up the tower steps, where at the top, they had met the two grinning Scottish giants with broad claymores in their hands.

"It's nice of ya' to pay us a visit!" said Hamish. "Dinna ya' think so, brother?"

"Aye, the manners these Frenchmen have," said Dougal.

Theobald stopped in his tracks, holding his sword out in front of him.

“Well, do ya’ think he wants to fight, brother?”

“I bet he does! But of course with that wee thing he has in his hand, he can’t do a lot better than pick our teeth!”

“I’ll show you how to pick your teeth!” said Theobald. “Get them!” he shouted to his men.

Two of his men ran headlong, swords swinging, at the two Scotsmen. Hamish and Dougal met them at the top of the stairs. Hamish swung his sword and shouted to Dougal, “Get back, will ya’? There’s only room for one of us to fight on these things!”

“Ah, stop being a hog, brother!” said Dougal. “Gimme a bit of the fun too!”

Hamish lifted his sword and swung with such force that it knocked the sword out of the hands of the first attacker, who then turned and bolted down the stairs. Theobald, seeing the situation was not quite as he had hoped, led the rest of his men in a hasty retreat down and back into the courtyard, closely pressed by Dougal and Hamish, who came charging down after them.

The odds were much better now, as there were only six attackers left, and four defenders, who had, as yet, remained unharmed.

Theobald was a skilled fighter, and nimble on his feet. Realizing that he couldn’t fight the two big Scotsmen blow for blow, he decided to go for quick thrusts and quicker withdrawals.

“Come here, ya’ little monkey!” said Hamish, as he swung his great sword through the air. “Come, fight like a man and die like a dog!”

“Nay, I will fight and do what I do best: Attack! Thrust! And retreat!” replied Theobald tauntingly.

Now Hamish and Dougal were in the middle of the courtyard, back to back, surrounded by Theobald and his three men.

Bernard, meanwhile, had rushed over to attack Guillaume, while Odo moved cautiously towards Malcolm.

“Go help the bishop!” Theobald ordered one of his men. “The three of us will take care of these two giants.”

One of the soldiers rushed over and started attacking Malcolm. Odo, meanwhile, encouraged by this sudden reinforcement, joined in the fight.

It was soon evident that Odo was no mean swordsman. Although a natural coward, he was gifted in the art of swordplay. Indeed, he had trained along with his brothers in the martial arts for many years before taking on the cloth. Even though there existed a prohibition on a cleric shedding blood, so that it was not acceptable for a bishop to carry a sword into battle, but rather a mace, Odo obviously flouted this rule.

And so Malcolm was now also one on two, as the guardsman and Odo deftly swung their swords at him.

It was at this moment that Guy appeared in the courtyard. Guy and the two girls had heard the clashing of swords. Malcolm’s terrible scream earlier had them all worried that he had been wounded, and Guy had insisted on going to his rescue. After some consultation with the women, it was agreed that he should go and that they should barricade themselves in again once he had left.

Guy, sword in hand, swung over behind Malcolm. “You look outnumbered there, friend!” he said. “Can I lend you a hand?”

“Get back, Guy!” shouted Malcolm. “We’ll take care of these!”

Meanwhile, Odo, seeing a chance for easier victory, broke off the fight with Malcolm and went after Guy. Guy, being a novice with the sword, soon found himself hard pressed by the rotund cleric.

Malcolm, seeing the danger, quickly endeavored

to finish off his final assailant, but the man was a better swordsman than most, and it took Malcolm quite some time to subdue, and finally slay him.

Meanwhile, Guillaume and Bernard were also locked in deadly combat, the clashing of their swords adding to the din around them.

Malcolm rushed to Guy's side, as he saw the fight going sorely against him, but just as he got there, Guy's sword went flying from his hand, and with a gleeful snarl, Odo plunged his sword into the defenseless man's stomach.

A look of horror and dismay crossed Guy's face as he collapsed and fell over. In that second, Malcolm caught up with the Bishop, and raising his sword high above his head, swung it down with all his might, cleaving Odo's skull in two, and the bulky figure collapsed in a heap on the ground.

Malcolm rushed over to Guy and cradled his head in his arms. "Dear Guy!" he cried. "Dear, foolish Guy! Oh, why did you do this? You are no swordsman! Oh, why?"

"Malcolm, don't cry and wail for me!" Guy whispered hoarsely. "I am alright. I am going Home, Malcolm. I am going Home to be with Jesus. Look after Heloise. She is just a girl, you know ..."

With those words, Guy's head slumped sideways and his body went limp.

Guillaume had seen what happened, and was for a moment distracted from his fight with Bernard. The big fellow swung and caught Guillaume on the shoulder—not a serious wound, but one to cause momentary loss of concentration.

Malcolm quickly lay Guy's head down, picked up his sword again, and rushed to Guillaume's assistance. Still, before he got within striking distance, Guillaume already had Bernard at a disadvantage and, before Bernard could call quarter, Guillaume thrust him through with his sword.

In the meantime, Dougal and Hamish had finished off three of their opponents, and only Theobald remained.

"Quarter!" he cried. "Quarter!"

Hamish and Dougal looked over at Guillaume.

"He would have given us no quarter," said Guillaume. "He deserves none from us."

"No!" Malcolm cried, tearfully carrying Guy's limp body in his arms. "We have seen enough killing. Tie him up."

"No," said Guillaume. "He has killed and caused to be killed. He deserves to die."

"No," repeated Malcolm firmly. "He has asked for quarter. We will give it to him. Tie him up, brothers. We will decide his fate later."

Guillaume rushed back up to the room where the girls were waiting, closely followed by Malcolm, still clutching his dead friend's silent form. As soon as he reached the barricaded door, Guillaume pounded on it, loudly proclaiming, "Let us in! It is us!"

With tears of relief, Heloise and Esme took down the barricade and opened the door.

"You've been hurt!" exclaimed Esme at once, at the sight of blood on Guillaume's arm.

"It's not much," said Guillaume. "It will heal."

"Come, let me treat it," said Esme, leading him away.

"Where are the others?" Heloise asked, a note of concern rising in her voice. "I heard Malcolm cry so terribly."

"It was only a ruse," Guillaume answered quietly.

At that instant, Malcolm appeared in the doorway, his face stained with a gruesome mixture of blood and tears, and the lifeless form of Guy hanging limp in his arms.

Heloise stood there in disbelief, her hands over her mouth. "Oh no!" she cried. "Not Guy! Not dear, gentle Guy! Oh, dear God! Not Guy!"

Malcolm didn't say a word, but put Guy down on one of the beds in the room, next to which Heloise instantly fell to her knees in uncontrollable sorrow. Malcolm knelt beside her, and held her tight. Suppressing his own sorrow for the moment, with breaking voice he tried to speak words of comfort to her.

"Take care of Heloise," was the last thing he had said to me. 'Don't cry and wail for me,' he said. 'I'm going Home to be with Jesus.' And then he was gone. He's gone Home to Jesus. He's gone Home, Heloise.—No more pain, no sorrow. He's Home."

Heloise, however, continued her sobbing, as she clung tightly to Malcolm. The two remained in this position for a long, long time.

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The sun had begun to rise in the early morning sky, and it was not long before the carnage of the night became evident. After some consultation, it was decided that they would tie Theobald to his horse, his feet fastened underneath so that he couldn't get off, and send the horse on its unguided way as they continued to make good their escape.

Before sending the sorry knight off, Guillaume told him that Martin and his family had in no way been involved in the incident of that night, and that no retribution should come to them. He made Theobald swear on his knightly honor that this would indeed be the case.

After Theobald left, Guillaume, his arm bandaged now, proceeded to the cellars to inform Martin and his family that the coast was now clear.

"It is a fearful sight," said Guillaume. "There are many dead bodies out there, including that of my dear friend, Guy, up in the room where we made our abode."

"We will take care of them," said Martin, "and we will make sure that your friend is buried well."

"Thank you," said Guillaume. "I am sure you must realize that these parts are no longer safe for us, and that it is expedient that we depart as early as possible."

"Yes, I understand," answered Martin. "But before you go, let me prepare you a meal and bid you Godspeed."

"Thank you," said Guillaume.

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Later that morning, when they had packed and eaten, the party, now of six, left sorrowfully from the small keep of Caussade. Martin had provided them with maps and details of how to travel through the mountains, avoiding larger towns where there was greater chance of both detection and danger.

The rest of the journey, though far from uneventful, is not the subject of this book, except to say that they made it to Ghent in the duchy of Flanders, and thence took ship to Scotland, landing in the port of Berwick.

After many more days of traveling, they finally arrived at the ancestral lands of the MacAlpin clan. There they were greeted by Kenneth, chief MacAlpin. A festive double-wedding was not long thereafter celebrated for Malcolm and Heloise, and Guillaume and Esme—the nobleman with the gypsy girl, and the Scotsman with the innkeeper's daughter.

The feasting went on for several days, and at the height of the celebration, all stood to pay honor to Guy—a dear friend and martyr to the cause, who became forever after a sort of patron saint to the MacAlpins.

EPILOGUE

This story still requires that some loose ends be tied up. Giles managed to survive for many more years. It was, finally, at the siege of Moissac, that he was trapped within the city as it was taken. Standing high upon one of the remaining tall buildings overlooking the city square, he shouted out a prophecy to the crusaders below:

“You are killing us now. You are slaughtering the innocents. But we will come back. Yea, at the time of the End we shall come back! For you kill our bodies, but you cannot kill our spirits, and we will still be here when you are rotting in Hell for your crimes. We will come back at the time of the End, and we shall lead God’s people to victory over all their oppressors.”

The crusader commander dispatched a troop of men to rush to the top of the building to silence this prophet, whose very words and voice did cause all who heard them to tremble. But by the time they had reached the roof, he was gone and nowhere to be found. Only his cloak lay in a pile. There had been no way of escape, except down the same flight of stairs by which the soldiers had come. Yet he was gone—disappeared! Some said he was a spirit. Some said he was a man, whom God caused to be lifted up into

Heaven that same day. Others say he is still there, to this day, waiting to return in the time of the End.

Simon de Montfort, that scourge of the Languedoc, died while besieging one of the towns that had held out against him. Standing at the battlefield he was mortally wounded by a piece of rubble fired by a trebuchet from within the town. Legend has it that that war machine had been manned by women.

Count Raymond, at the time of his death, had switched sides again and was fighting against the crusaders. He died an excommunicated man. Even though his son pled for many years that Raymond's body should be allowed to be buried on holy ground, all his requests were refused.

In turn his son, Raymond VII, inherited the county of Toulouse, but soon sued for peace. As part of the settlement, his daughter and only heir was married to the son of the king, and upon their deaths, without issue, the great independent county of Toulouse reverted to the royal demesne.

Robert of Avignon died in obscurity during the terrible siege of his native city by the armies of Louis VIII in 1226.

Martin of Caussade and his family were all killed in the months that followed Malcolm and his party's departure. Theobald, in spite of his promise not to seek vengeance on them, had arranged the massacre. But divine justice and judgment caught up with Theobald. A few years later when a careless attendant spilt scalding water on his hand, he was surprised to notice that he felt only a slight pain. Soon he noted that he was losing more feeling in his limbs. This was soon followed by the telltale lesions and skin discoloration peculiar to leprosy. Shunned, blinded by the disease, his face deformed and hideous to look at, Theobald spent the remainder of his short days confined to a tiny room at the top of a tower in his castle, despised by his family and retainers. He died

at the age of thirty-five, looking like a man of eighty.

The Cathars were exterminated in bloody battles and purges. Where armies failed to stamp out the light, the Holy Inquisition took up the torch. Soon all traces of Catharism and its adherents had been purged completely from southern France.

But in a little corner of Scotland, it is still told that in the home of the MacAlpins, they practiced a religion of love and truth, of hospitality and kindness. And on the moors, where once the great house stood, it is said that on quiet nights, if one stops to listen, the sound of laughter and merriment, of happy voices raised in song, can be heard.

The great oath that the brothers had sworn that somber day when they had all departed from MacAlpin Hall, their ancestral home, had been fulfilled. For they had sworn on the beloved memory of their father that they would strive with all that was in them to regain what was lost from them. And, having regained it, that they would never let their land be taken again, or even divided, but that they would gather together as one family, to sing and dance and fill the house with a continual joy where once it had been filled with mourning and desolation.

And if one wanders in the graveyard adjacent to the village kirk and takes time to browse the tombstones, instead of the engraved cross that one might expect, there is often found a heart or a dove in flight to the heavens. French names are intermingled with Gaelic. In the center of the field, a cylindrical pillar rises above the other stones. The elements have taken their toll over the centuries and the words that were carved on it are now difficult to decipher. They become clear only after careful study:

"I, Malcolm MacAlpin, do lay this monument in my eightieth year amongst the headstones that mark the earthly resting place of my wife, my brothers, my

friends, and, in times to come perhaps even my children and grandchildren. These are but tiny monuments to lives great and small, yet each one loved. Here I shall also be laid to rest, in my time, with these companions. My body shall await with theirs that wonderful day, when it shall be raised to perfection at the coming of our great Sovereign Jesus Christ, in whose grace these all have lived and died. Meanwhile my spirit will rejoice with theirs in eternal bliss, for these who lie here are now passed on to greater joys. Though none were perfect here, over there where all is perfect, they who have run the race and obtained the crown can rightly be called the Perfect Ones.”

❖ **THE END** ❖

ENDNOTES

i - The Cathars:

A Christian movement that flourished in western Europe during the 12th and 13th centuries. The name comes from the Greek word *katharos*, meaning “pure.” They were also known as the **Albigenses**, for the town of Albi in southern France where they were most numerous. They preached against the immoralities of the Catholic church, made great use of the written Scriptures, lived self-denying lives and had great zeal for moral purity.

ii - Kenneth MacAlpin I:

King of Dalriada, and founder and first king of Scotland. After conquering the Pictish kingdom, he united it with his own to form the united kingdom of Alban, which later became known as Scotland.

iii - Odo:

Odo is a fictional character. The actual bishop of Tolouse at this time was Folgnet de Marselille, a former merchant and troubador who was a far more complex and multi-faceted character than the singularly avaricious and scheming Odo. Odo epitomized all that was wrong in the Catholic church of his day.

iv - Peter Waldo and the Waldenses:

The Waldenses were members of a Christian movement that opposed the established church. The movement began with a wealthy French merchant, Peter Waldo, of Lyon, who gave up all his possessions and began a life of preaching in the second half of the 12th century. Waldo’s followers became known as the “poor men of Lyon.” Their preaching kindled a great desire among people to read the Bible. Their teachings sounded similar to those of the Cathars, but proved to be more popular than the complex Cathar teachings. Many of them later settled in the Cottian Alps, southwest of Turin. This area is still known as the Waldensian Valleys. The Waldenses are the only known medieval sect that has survived to this day.

v - The Consolamentum:

The consolamentum was the rite of initiation into the ranks of the Perfects. In a brightly lit room filled with believers and sympa-

thizers, the candidate stood before the senior Perfect and two assistants. A long homily outlined the obligations which the candidate was undertaking, and took him phrase by phrase through the *Pater Noster* (the Lord's Prayer), the only formal prayer which Christ Himself had taught and consequently the only one which the Cathars recognized. The candidate solemnly renounced the cross which had been marked upon his forehead at Catholic baptism, and instead accepted the baptism of the Holy Spirit. He undertook to deny himself all luxuries, to eat no meat, milk or eggs, to travel always in the company of friends in the faith, and to never allow fear of death to draw him from his chosen obligations. The candidate then prostrated himself in veneration before the officiating Perfect. Placing the Gospel of John on the candidate's head, the Perfect laid his hand upon the book and, in company with other Perfects present, called upon God to bring down upon the new Perfect the blessings of the Holy Spirit. (Taken from *the Albigensian Crusade* by Jonathan Sumption)

vi - Pope Innocent III:

One of the more outstanding of the medieval popes and arguably the most powerful, he was unanimously elected in 1198 and reigned until his death in 1216. He is probably most remembered for the many crusades he initiated, both against infidels in the Holy Land as well as heretics and nonconformists to the established church in Europe. He created many of the rules and doctrines of papal authority, defining the power of popes to this day.

vii - The Troubadours:

The troubadours were a class of 12th and 13th century lyric poets in Provence (southern France), northern Italy, and northern Spain, who composed songs in *Langue d'Oc*, often about courtly love. The lyrics of the troubadours were among the first to use native language rather than Latin, the literary language of the Middle Ages. Originally, the troubadours sang their own poems to assembled courts and often held competitions, or so-called tournaments of song; later, they engaged itinerant musicians, called jongleurs, to perform their works. The subjects included love, chivalry, religion, politics, war, funerals, and nature. The majority of these troubadours were nobles and some were kings. For them, composing and performing songs was a manifestation of the ideal of chivalry. Troubadour music gradually disappeared during the 13th century.

viii - Saracens:

The Saracens were originally a tribe in north Arabia. The name later came to be used generally for Arabs and Muslim peoples of the Middle East. The Muslims of northwest Africa and Spain were commonly referred to as **Moors**.

ix - The Cistercian Order:

A Roman Catholic monastic order founded in 1098 at Cîteaux ("Cistercium" in Latin) in France. By the end of the Middle Ages, more than 700 Cistercian abbeys existed. In the 12th century, considered their golden age, the Cistercians were the most influential order within the Roman Catholic church. They took over the bishoprics and legatine (directed by legates) offices, as well as the Roman Curia, the governmental body of the Roman Catholic church.

x - Feudalism:

Feudalism was the political and economic system of Western Europe during much of the Middle Ages. A king, or other men of influence, granted fiefs, usually consisting of land and labor, in return for military and political allegiance. The contract was sealed by oaths of homage and fealty (allegiance). The grantor of the fief became the lord of the grantee, or vassal, but both were free men, and social peers.

xi - The Holy Roman Empire:

During the time of this story, the Holy Roman Empire consisted mostly of the area now comprising Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Northern Italy. This area was broken up into many smaller duchies, kingdoms, and free cities. The leaders of these, including several archbishops, were known as electors. They elected the emperor from their numbers. **Otto IV**, of Brunswick, Germany, became Holy Roman Emperor after repeated battles with Philip, the duke of Swabia and king of Germany. Their factions warred continually for the title until Philip was murdered in 1208, and Otto was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 1209.