

THE TEMPLAR MAGICIAN

P. C. DOHERTY



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In loving memory of our wonderful Mum

Kathleen Elizabeth Kenny

Carmel, Brigid, Siobhan, Rosaleen, Michael and
Kathleen

We were blessed to have you as our Mum

May you rest in peace

God Bless

Historical Note

By 1152, the great Frankish lords had occupied Outremer (Palestine) for over fifty years, since the leaders of the First Crusade had stormed the walls of Jerusalem and captured the Holy City. In that time, it had become a Frankish outpost of the West. The great lords had elected a king, Baldwin II, and were busy dividing Outremer into spheres of influence, each baron jostling for power, occupying towns, cities and ports. The Templar order, founded by Hugh de Payens within a decade of taking Jerusalem, had also expanded its influence. The Templars were now an international movement patronised by the great and the good, hallowed by the papacy and made into the professional fighting arm of the West. They had their own headquarters in Jerusalem, and were already expanding their power, taking over or building castles and fortresses throughout Outremer. The order was also busy establishing and spreading its roots in Europe, be it France, England, Germany or Spain. The Templars represented the ideals of the Western knight, the paladin who offered his sword for the love of Christ and the defence of Holy Mother Church.

They also acquired great wealth, and the combination of riches, power and status made them intrigue and negotiate with the best as they strove to consolidate and expand even further. Hugh de Payens allegedly visited England and saw the prospects of further advancement of his order there. By 1150, the Temple had set up its headquarters in London and owned manor houses throughout the kingdom. Nevertheless, the expansion of the order meant that successive Grand Masters were eager for recruits, and the Temple attracted not only idealists and romantics but also those who had a great deal to hide.

Nowhere was this more true than England. The invasion of the Normans in 1066 had created a fighting elite intent on acquiring land and wealth. Norman influence stretched to the Welsh and Scottish marches, and the constant jostling of Norman warlords meant that there was a pressing need for the English king to be a strong military ruler. William the Conqueror and his two sons, William Rufus and Henry I, proved to be most adept at this. However, when Henry died without a male heir (his son William having drowned in the *White Ship* disaster), the English crown became the object of intense rivalry between Mathilda, Henry's daughter, and her cousin, Stephen of Blois. England descended into civil war so bitter and violent that men said it was the age when God and his saints slept. Both sides recruited the worst mercenaries from abroad as well as rogue knights from the English shires, eager for plunder, ruthless in its pursuit. The war, which lasted between 1135 and 1154, grew even more savage and brutal when Mathilda's son Henry Fitzempress took up the cause of his mother, determined to settle for nothing but the crown itself. The opponents manoeuvred for position even as they secretly recognised that an end to the war and the possibility of a lasting peace could only come about if one of the sides was totally destroyed ...

The quotations at the head of each chapter in Part One are from William of Tyre's chronicle *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Seas*. Those in Part Two are from the chronicle *Gesta Stephani – The Deeds of Stephen*. An author's note at the end provides an accurate context for many of the events described in this novel.

Main Historical Characters

OUTREMER

Baldwin III: King of Jerusalem

Raymond: Count of Tripoli

Melisande: Count Raymond's wife

THE CHURCH

Eugenius III: Pope, Bishop of Rome

Theodore: Archbishop of Canterbury

Henry Murdac: Archbishop of York; fervent supporter of King Stephen

Thomas à Becket: cleric and royal clerk; later Archbishop of Canterbury

Bernard of Clairvaux: one of the founders of the Cistercian order; an international figure, preacher and politician; an ardent supporter of the new Templar order

ENGLAND

William the Norman, or the Conqueror: King of England, 1087

William II, or Rufus: son of the Conqueror; King of England, 1087 – 1100; mysteriously killed whilst hunting in the New Forest

Henry I: Rufus's brother; King of England, 1100 – 35

Prince William: Henry I's son and heir; drowned when the *White Ship* capsized and sank

Mathilda: Henry's daughter, Empress; married Henry, the Holy Roman Emperor, then Geoffrey, Count of Anjou

Stephen of Blois: grandson of the Conqueror through the latter's daughter Adela; King of England, 1135–54

Eustace: Stephen's son and heir

William: Stephen's second son

Henry Fitzempress, or the Angevin: son of the Empress Mathilda, through whom he claimed the English crown; King of England, 1154 – 89, founder of the Plantagenet dynasty

Geoffrey de Mandeville: Earl of Essex; a leading protagonist in the civil war; killed in battle. Certain chronicles have given him a very sinister reputation

Simon de Senlis: Earl of Northampton; one of King Stephen's most loyal supporters

TEMPLARS

Hugh de Payens: founder of the Templar order, 1099 – 1100

Bertrand (de) Tremelai: Grand Master of the Templar order, 1152

Andrew (de) Montebard: Grand Master of the Templar order, 1153

Jacques de Molay: last Grand Master of the Templar order; executed by Philip IV of France, 1313

Boso (de) Baiocis: possible master of the English Temple, c. 1153

FRANCE

Philip IV, or 'Le Bel': Capetian King of France, d. 1314; the architect of the destruction of the Templar order, 1307 – 13

SCOTLAND

Robert

the King of Scotland; drove out the English armies of Edward I and Edward II; provided a
Bruce: sanctuary for Templars after the dissolution of their order

Prologue



Melrose Abbey, Scotland

Autumn 1314

The monk lifted his head and listened to the peal of bells roll through the abbey buildings. A funeral was being prepared. The dirige psalms were being sung, the plainchant drifting on the evening breeze. Soon the solemn peal of bells would begin again. If it was a woman being buried, two peals; for a man, three; for a cleric, as many as the minor orders he had received.

‘Have you even been shown the Gates of Death? Or met the Janitors of the Shadowlands?’

Brother Benedict turned swiftly. He stared at the old woman. She was dressed in the blackest widow’s weeds and sat on the high-backed chair close to his cot bed with its plaid-patterned drape.

‘Mistress.’ The young Benedictine monk smiled apologetically. ‘I was distracted. I really did not expect you until tomorrow, Lammas Eve ...’

‘But I came today.’ The old woman gripped her walking cane by its carved handle. ‘I have studied the manuscripts.’ She sighed, and rose to her feet, eyes no longer on the Benedictine but on the arrow loop window behind him. The day was darkening, the weak sunlight fading. Next to the window hung a Little Mary, a wooden carving of the Virgin Mother and her Divine Child.

‘The Gates of Death?’ Brother Benedict whispered. ‘The Janitors of the Shadowlands?’

‘Magic, Brother!’ the woman whispered.

‘Brother Guibert, our precentor, claims he met a warlock who talked of a monastery that sank into the ground then rose like Christ on Easter Day.’

‘No, no.’ The old woman shook her head. She tapped the chancery coffer beside her, then walked over to where the monk sat on his scribe chair. ‘Brother Benedict.’ She grasped an arm of the chair and stared hard at the young monk. ‘You write, at my request and that of His Grace Robert de Bruce, King of Scotland, the history of our order, the Templars. Yes?’ She gazed fiercely at him, her light blue eyes betraying the passion that burned like a firebrand within her. ‘Our order,’ she repeated, ‘the Templars, founded by our great and saintly ancestor Hugh de Payens, now destroyed by Philip, the Stone King of France. He burned Jacques de Molay on a small island in the Seine. Our Grand Master was lashed to a beam with cords and chains, beside him Geoffrey de Charnay. Both men, Brother Benedict, protested to the very end against the allegations of black magic, sorcery and witchcraft levelled by the Stone King’s lawyers. They testified to the piety, saintliness and innocence of the Templars. Ah well.’ She paused. ‘Later, secret adherents of our order, those who’d survived brutal black betrayal, torture and gruesome imprisonment, swam the Seine and collected in their teeth the

holy but charred remains of these valiant warriors. Yet,' the old woman, who rejoiced in the family name of de Payens, grasped the ivory handle of her walking stick, 'such innocence wasn't always so. Here, in these islands ...' Her voice faltered.

The young monk glanced up in expectation.

'Madam, such hellish accusations, levelled often against the Templars, have always been lies.'

'Is that so?' the old woman whispered. 'Listen now. Our order was founded by the great Hugh of Payens in Outremer. It was blessed by Bernard de Clairvaux, hallowed by popes, favoured by the princes of this world. Little wonder the Templars waxed fat and powerful, but in the end, monastic dreams die, visions fade. *Ab initio*, from the very beginning, there were those who immersed themselves in the hunt for sacred relics and the power these might bring. Worse,' she hissed, 'some even turned to dark imaginings, calling on the shadow host, conjuring up demons garbed in the liveries of hell's flames. They hired witches who collected the poison herbs of Thessaly. They set up a nursery of sorcery, tainted our order like the poisonous yew tree with its roots deep in the graveyard, digging down into dead men's tombs and draining from them malignant vapours to poison the air. Oh yes. The old woman tapped the manuscripts stacked on top of the flat lid of an iron-bound coffer. 'Brother, study these here. Do so carefully. Write as you did last time; base yourself on the manuscripts, weave your web and tell your tale.' She moved across to the lancet window, staring out at the evening mist moving like a gauze veil over the Melrose countryside. 'Conjure up the past.' Her voice became strident. 'Robins and nightingales do not live long in cages, nor does the truth when it's kept captive. Read all these manuscripts, Brother, and you'll meet the Lord Satan, as you would in a crystal or a burning sapphire, bright with the glow of hell's fire.'

PART ONE



TRIPOLI: OUTREMER AUTUMN 1152

Chapter 1



Count Raymond was struck down by the swords of the Assassins at the entrance to the gate.

‘A time of turbulence, of visions, portents and warnings! Heaven glowers at us because we have lost our way! Our souls, with their open ulcers, will go to hell on crutches. Around us, nothing but hollow graves, rotten and rotting corpses. Water may soak the earth. Blood soaks the heavens and calls on God’s justice to flash out like lightning. The sins committed in close and secret chambers will be paraded along the spacious pavements and squares of hell, where the rack, the gallows and the torture wheels stand black against the eternal flames of God’s wrath. I urge you to repent! We have taken Jerusalem, but we have lost our way.’

The preacher, garbed in filthy animal skins, lifted his staff and pointed up at the sheer blue sky which curved above the gleaming white city of Tripoli, overlooking the Middle Sea.

‘Repent!’ he yelled in one last attempt to provoke his listeners. ‘Repent, before the doom gates open and disgorge the power of hell.’

Edmund de Payens, knight of the Templar order, leaned across in a creak of leather and touched his English comrade Philip Mayele on the wrist.

‘Are you frightened, Philip? Fearful of what is to come?’

The Englishman’s long, swarthy, lined face broke into a grin. He clawed at the greying hair that straggled down to the white cloak around his shoulders. He scratched his beard and moustache, his brown eyes gleaming with cynicism.

‘Edmund, you are a soft soul, to be driven by many a black storm before you harden. Look around you. Life is as it was, as it will be and ever shall be.’ He laughed abruptly at Edmund’s frown over such mockery of the ‘Glory Be’.

De Payens quickly remembered his resolution, after he’d last been shriven, not to be so pompous and quick to take offence. He forced a grin and nodded, curling the reins of his horse around his mittened fingers. He and Mayele were moving slowly along the Street of Aleppo down to the city gates of Tripoli. They were escorting Count Raymond, the Frankish lord of the city, who was about to leave to be reconciled with his estranged wife, Melisande, in Jerusalem. De Payens closed his eyes against the bustle of the crowds. In truth, he wanted to be back with his brethren, his fellow warrior monks. Yet, he opened his eyes and glanced quickly at Mayele, not all the brothers were dreamers, followers or visionaries. Hadn’t Mayele been excommunicated with bell, book and candle for killing a priest in Coggeshale, a town in that mist-hung island of England on the edge of the world?

‘*Cruciferi, à bas, à bas!*’ The cry of derision was hurled in Provençal, a guttural shout by a Turk. It shook Edmund from his reverie, and he became aware of the crowd pressing around him. Ahead of

them, Raymond of Tripoli's lightly armed Turcopole mercenaries were pushing their way through the throng, their lamellar cuirasses gleaming in the strengthening sun. Edmund searched the faces on either side, but no one dared catch his eye. Anyone could have hurled such an insult. Most of the mercenaries had their heads hidden by white turbans, their faces half veiled by the end of the cloth pulled across nose and mouth against the dust-bearing wind and the swirling black horde of flies. De Payens remained uneasy. A dust haze billowed. The stench of camel and horse dung thickened the air. Around rose the cries of the various traders. Here in Tripoli, Jew and Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox, Frank and Turk rubbed shoulders uneasily in the tunnelled darkness of the alleyways, in the noisy bazaars and the sun-scorched squares. Tripoli was the meeting place of different faiths and cultures, kept calm by the mailed fist of the old count riding behind them with his escort of clerks and men-at-arms. Above their heads, Raymond's gorgeous blue and yellow banners, displaying the silver cedars of Lebanon, floated in the late-morning breeze.

'Stay calm, Templar!' The count's powerful voice forced de Payens to twist round in the saddle. The Templar nodded politely at Raymond even as he regretted not wearing his mail hauberk and chausses; nothing but lightweight boots, quilted jerkin and hose beneath the white Templar mantle sewn with its red cross. On his back was slung a concave shield, around his waist a simple leather sword belt with scabbards for sword and dagger. Was this enough protection if such hurled invective gave way to violence? De Payens twisted his neck against the bubbles of sweat beneath his long hair. He clutched the reins between his quilted mittens and murmured the Templar prayer: '*Non nobis Domine, non nobis, sed nomini tuo da gloriam*' – not to us, oh Lord, not unto us, but unto yourself giving glory.

He must remember he was a Poor Knight of the Temple, dedicated to poverty, obedience and chastity. He had sworn to follow the Templar cross in unblemished fealty to his Grand Master, which was why he and Mayele were here. For the last few months they'd been garrisoned at Chastel Blanc, a Templar fortress to the south of Tripoli. From there they'd been summoned to escort Count Raymond down into Jerusalem. Edmund was impatient. He was glad to be free of the grim routine of Chastel Blanc, eager to see Jerusalem again, but he quickly remembered how this mission was his prime duty. He was bound by oath. The Templars had been founded to patrol the highways of Outremer, Palestine, the land of Le Bon Seigneur. Jesus Christ, God incarnate, had walked, slept, eaten, talked to his friends, preached, died and risen again on this very soil. Nevertheless, de Payens felt a disquieting anxiety clawing at his heart and dulling his brain. Tripoli was noisy and frenetic, a sea of shifting colours, constant dust haze, strengthening heat and marauding flies. His body was soaked in sweat, his horse restless. The crowd on either side could house enemies as well as friends.

'Stay awake.' Mayele leaned over in a gust of sweat and ale. 'Stay awake, Edmund, for ye know not the day nor the hour; it will come like a thief in the night!'

De Payens blinked away the beads of perspiration and licked his sand- and salt-caked lips. The heat was closing in around him like a thick blanket. He must not, as he often did in such circumstances, dream about his grandparents' house, its whitewashed coolness among the cypress and olive groves of northern Lebanon. He stirred restlessly in his saddle, tapped the hilt of his sword, slid his dagger out and out. The procession was now swinging its way down the main thoroughfare towards the grey-walled gate, above which the banners of Tripoli flapped between the gibbets ranged along the turret walkway. Each scaffold bore a cadaver hanging by its neck, a proclamation pinned to its chest. They had become the gruesome feeding ground for kites, buzzards and vultures, their blood-splattered wings wafting away the black swarm of flies dancing against the light.

The noise grew deafening. Horses and donkeys brayed at the sweet smell of water. The clatter of pots and pans, the dull booming of kettle drums, the chatter in a myriad of tongues as traders called and beckoned was constant. The crowd broke like a shoal of multicoloured fish around the sea

stalls. A woman caught Edmund's eye. Her raven-black hair fringed a broad, smooth forehead, with arched brows over lustrous eyes. The bottom half of her face was hidden by a bead-laced gauze veil which only enhanced her mysterious beauty. She smiled at him. Edmund felt his interest quicken, then he glanced away as if distracted by a group of Jews in their long dark shubas, who slipped out of a side street to mingle with long-haired Maronites from Syria and dark-skinned Copts from the fabled lands south of the Nile. From a nearby church floated the faint hum of plainchant and the spicy fragrance of incense.

The singing grew louder as Greek priests made their way through the crowd, blessing the rabble of dirty children as they bore their precious icons and statues, all arrayed in costly garments and flashing precious stones, to some shrine or chapel. Behind these a line of camels, heavily burdened and swaying like carracks on the sea, battled against the throng, their drivers and guides screaming from the room.

De Payens did his best to ignore all these. They were now close to the gates, where Count Raymond's mercenaries were marshalled, soft Provençal voices mingling with the guttural tongue of Swabia. Nearby, carpenters and blacksmiths created a raucous clatter of axe, hammer and sword. Trumpets rang. Cymbals clashed. Kettle drums rolled in greeting. The mercenaries arranged themselves into ranks to greet their seigneur, as the sun reached its zenith on a day about to crack and crumble into a welter of killing and bloodshed.

De Payens startled as a flock of pigeons swooped low above him. Mayele swore loudly. Edmund turned in his saddle. A group of Maronite priests garbed in dark brown robes, braided black hair, hiding their faces, had appeared, holding petitions for Count Raymond. The Lord of Tripoli gestured for them to approach. The Maronites hastened on, like a pack of hounds, hot and keen on the scent. They closed in around the Frankish lord and his principal knight, screaming their blood lust. Assassins! The count and his henchman became slightly separated; their escort surged forward. De Payens and Mayele turned their horses in alarm – too late! The assassins had dropped all pretence, the white scraps of parchment fluttering away like butterflies. They drew long curved daggers decorated with red ribbon; these cut the air, gashing and slicing the count, all unprotected in his hose, cotehardie, cloak and soft boots. He and his henchman had no time even to mutter the Miserere, let alone draw sword or dagger. The assassins circled them, knives tearing and gouging, blood spurting out like wine from a skin. The daggers rose and fell like flailing rods. De Payens drew his own sword. Mayele yelled the Templar war cry, '*Beauséant! Beauséant!*' lashed out at the crowd milling about them. Their horses skittered, alarmed at the tang of fresh blood, this sudden violence. The count was now falling, drooping down over his horse's neck. Still the knives scythed the air in glittering arcs. Two of the assassins broke away and sped towards de Payens. The Templar urged his horse forward, crashing into the pair, his sword hacking and twisting as he shouted prayers, curses and battle cries. The blood-frenzy overwhelmed him, the song of his sword, the sheer exuberance of the clash, with more assassins now swarming around him. They had finished with the count and were intent on joining their comrades in killing this hated Templar. De Payens' battle fury became a red mist. He turned his horse, its sharpened hooves lashing out, and the assassins promptly broke and fled into the crowd.

Count Raymond's constables, now recovering from their shock, were eager for blood. They did not pursue the assassins but like Mayele struck at anyone within sword reach. They swept into the terrified crowd like reapers, cutting, gashing and smashing with mace, axe and sword. Some of the bystanders fought back; the massacre spread like some demonic black cloud. The garrison from the gatehouse, the walls, blood-hungry mercenaries, needed no second urging.

'Let the ravens and vultures feast!' Mayele screamed as he swept into a group of merchants and camel traders.

De Payens, now free of his battle lust, stared around in horror. Count Raymond's corpse and that of

his henchman, both swimming in blood, were being carried away wrapped in their cloaks. On either side of the thoroughfare the killing swirled swift and sudden like a breeze across the sands. Archers on the wall and the gateways darkened the sky, showering the fleeing crowd with a hail of bolts and arrows. Swords red to the hilt glittered and flashed. The dust-choked cobbles became drenched with blood pouring from severed limbs. Decapitated heads rolled like dirty bushweed across the ground. The white walls of buildings grew splattered with splashes of scarlet as if a gory rain was pelting down. Children screamed in terror. Plumes of black smoke curled up against the blue sky. The mayhem was spreading deep into the city. People fled into houses and churches.

Edmund heard a hideous cry carry across the bailey before the gateway. Two Syrian girls were struggling in the greedy grasp of Swabian mercenaries, their great two-headed axes lying on the ground beside them. The Swabians were stripping the sobbing girls and pushing them from one to another. The girls screamed; one of them pointed at the blood-encrusted corpse of a man lying beside them. Edmund roared in anger. He fought to settle his fretting horse, but it was too late. The mercenaries had either tired of their game or recognised the danger. They stood aside as one of the company swiftly plucked up his axe and cleanly severed the heads of both girls. The rest turned to face de Payens. He abruptly reined in and stared horror-struck as the two corpses, blood pouring from their severed necks, collapsed; their heads, shrouded by clouds of hair, bounced and rolled across the cobbles.

De Payens turned away in disgust. Sword drawn, he urged his horse towards the steps of the crumbling church, its doors flung open to allow in the flight of citizens, and rode up the steps, forcing aside the fugitives. The flickering darkness was heavy with the scent of myrrh, aloes and incense, the blackness broken by flaring torches and the glow of candles burning before icons and statues. At the far end stood the sanctuary altar, hidden by a heavy dark cloth with a silver pyx embroidered in the centre. The nave of the church was swiftly filling with refugees of every faith and none. Families clung to each other in terror, children whimpering. A Greek priest carrying a gold cross, accompanied by acolytes and a thurifer, processed out through the sacristy door. The priest bellowed that all who were not *cruciferi*, cross-bearers, should leave at once. Behind him shuffled mercenaries garbed in mailed hauberks, dirty boots scuffing the floor, kite-shaped shields slung on their backs, swords and daggers drawn in fierce expectation.

‘Leave!’ bellowed the priest as his escort clattered their arms. ‘Infidels, heretics, schismatic! There is no sanctuary for you here!’

His proclamations were greeted with fresh moans. De Payens urged his horse forward into a pool of light thrown by one of the clerestory windows high in the wall. The sun’s rays caught his white cloak emphasising the red cross stitched on its right shoulder.

‘No one need leave here, Domine,’ he declared in the lingua franca. The priest spluttered, fingering the cross around his neck. His escort, greedy for blood, plunder and rape, grumbled menacingly, but the Templar knight, sword drawn, his horse’s withers wet with blood, was objection enough. The priest bowed and, snapping at his dog soldiers, swept back into the sacristy.

De Payens took up guard at the open doors of the church. All were admitted, flooding into the nave fear-crazed and shocked. Any pursuers were turned away by the grim sentry, his cloak wrapped about him, the blade of his bloodied sword resting against his shoulder. He sat as if hewn out of granite, staring across the great bailey carpeted with corpses, blood gleaming and twinkling in the sunlight. Flies swarmed in black hordes. Vultures and buzzards, wings flapping, floated down to their banquet. Yellow pi dogs, ribs sticking out, moved from corpse to corpse, nosing at the clothes, eager to tear at the flesh. These scattered only at the appearance of looters and corpse-plunderers, sneaking across the bailey greedy-eyed, for any precious item. A merchant, grateful for his escape, offered the grim Templar some sesame seed cake and a pitcher of water. De Payens ate and drank as he stared out, his mind

pitching like a galley on a stormy sea. He felt cold, dead. Was it for this that he had entered the great order, vowed to serve God, Christ and St Mary and obey the master of the Temple?

To calm himself, de Payens remembered his dawn mass of ordination and investiture. How he had received the mantle of the order, the woollen waist cord that signified chastity, the soft cap symbolising obedience, all sealed by the master's kiss of peace. No more than two years ago, though now seemed like an age! He'd arrived in the Temple forecourt in Jerusalem dressed in his best clothes. There he'd been met by Templar serjeants and escorted across the Great Pavement, where the Knights Templar had their lodgings. They had gone along porticoes, colonnades and vaulted passageways lit by dim lamps, the stone slab floor echoing every footfall. After he'd been blessed and incensed in an antechamber, he had been led into the great chapter house, where the Templars waited; their white mantles displaying the red cross, soft silk caps on their heads, gauntleted hands resting on the hilts of drawn swords. Under terrible oaths in that cavernous chamber, cold and dark, the pricks of light from the juddering oil lamps shifting the shadows, de Payens had sworn that he was of knightly cast, legitimate birth and in good health. That he was a faithful adherent of the Catholic faith according to the Latin rite of Rome, that he was not married and was free of all such commitments. There, in the brooding gloom, close to the stables where Solomon once stabled his horses, a mere walk from where the Saviour had preached and driven out the money-sellers, the great oaths of the White Knights rolled out. Bertrand Tremelai, the Grand Master, proclaimed the challenge in a powerful voice:

'You must totally renounce your own will. You must admit to that of another. You must fast when you are hungry. Thirst when you wish to drink. Keep strict vigil even when tired.'

To all of these de Payens had replied:

'Yes, Domine, if God so pleases.'

It seemed like a whisper in contrast. After he had sworn the oath, the investiture had taken place. The massed ranks of the Templars chanted the psalm: 'Behold how good it is for brothers to live in union and harmony.'

Once invested, he'd been escorted into the refectory to receive the congratulations of his grandparents, Theodore the Greek, with his lazy smile and soft ways, and his redoubtable grandmother Eleanor, sister of the great Hugh de Payens, founder of the order. Then they had returned to Lebanon while he had remained in Jerusalem to undergo the grim discipline and training to be a Poor Knight of Christ.

De Payens had been relegated to the meanest lodgings within the courtyard of the Temple. Obedience was a harsh fact, not a choice, rigorous hardship the theme for every day and night. He slept in his clothes on a bed that was no more than a carpet strewn across the floor, on one side a lighted candle, on the other his weapons ready for use, his sleep constantly broken by calls to sing the Divine Office. Meagre meals taken in silence were his only sustenance. Harsh sword and lance practice in the glaring heat of the noonday devil was a daily requirement. Hunting, hawking and women were strictly denied, severe punishments imposed for any infringement of the rule: forty days of fasting for striking a comrade. Those in disgrace had to squat on the floor with the dogs to eat the food, and must not attempt to drive the dogs off.

Once training was finished, he had been sent on patrol along dusty roads that wound through eerie gorges or across sandy scorched wastes dotted with oases, their precious water bubbling up under the bending trunks of sycamore, terebinth and date palm. He had served as an escort for pilgrims who landed on the coast eager to journey inland to kneel in the shadow of the Holy Sepulchre. He had guarded merchants with their baggage of hemp sacks, leather cases, wicker baskets and chests, all heaped on the bare backs of sweaty porters; as well as important couriers, dignitaries and officials. During such missions he had clashed with the bearded, harsh-faced men of the desert who came swirling out of the dust with their green banners and ululating battle cries. Along with other Templars

he hunted for these same men out in the arid desert, where the sun beat down as merciless as a battle mace, searching for the encampments of the desert-crawlers, as they called them, with their orange pavilions, attacking and killing, seeking out their chieftains in their turbans, velvet robes and silver girdles. Women and children had fallen, tumbling beneath the hooves of his charging destrier. During one such attack he had captured a young woman who had escaped and fled deep into the wasteland. She had begged for her life, pressing her body up against his, breasts ripe and full pushed into his hands, slim waist soft against his mail shirt, eyes and lips promising everything. He had turned away, stumbling in fear from such temptation, and when he looked back, she was gone.

The encounter had changed de Payens. He'd been plagued by phantasms, succubi of the night, with soft perfumed flesh and alluring eyes, the prospect of a sinuous body twisting beneath him, of silken tendrils of hair wafting his face. In contrition he had prostrated himself in prayer, confessed his thoughts and been condemned to black bread and brackish water. He'd crept to the cross in the Templar chapel and done penance out on some sea of rock in the blinding heat of the desert. More importantly, he lost his appetite for blood: not the fury of battle, sword against sword, but for those who could offer no defence. He'd conjured up the fabulous stories about the paladins of old, whose deeds he had learned from the indomitable Eleanor. Hadn't she whispered how the great Hugh had established the order to defend the weak and the defenceless, be it Christian or Turk? She had lectured him on the futility of killing with all the cold finality of death brooding over the haunting landscape of the battlefield. She had taught him his horn book and his prayer wheel by quoting poetry about the aftermath of slaughter. How did those lines go?

'Many a spear, dawn cold to the touch, we wave them high but the poet's harp won't raise the fallen warriors, whilst the buzzards, winging sombrely over the plain, will bear tidings to the vulture, how he plucked and ate, how he and the jackal made short work of the dead ...'

'Domine, Domine!'

De Payens felt a hand on his thigh. He glanced down at the wide-eyed woman, her stricken face, her iron-grey hair charred and singed.

'Domine.' Her lips hardly moved. She pointed to the church door. 'We own a wine shop with a small vineyard behind it. The soldiers came. They took my husband and put him beneath the wine press and turned it until his head cracked like a nut, blood and brains seeping out to mingle with our wine. Domine, why did they do that?'

'Demons!' De Payens stroked her brow gently. 'Demons incarnate. The world is thronged with them.' He ushered the woman away, aware of how the noise in the church was settling, then returned to his guard and wondered what to do. A scorched, tattered figure came stumbling across the bailey, screaming:

'Christ and His Holy Sepulchre!'

De Payens waved him forward. The man staggered up the steps and crouched just within the doorway, gulping like a thirsty dog from a pannier of water a woman brought. When he had slaked his thirst, he peered up at de Payens.

'God curse you all,' he muttered. 'Parts of the city are burning. They claim that assassins sent by the Old Man of the Mountain are responsible.'

'Why?' de Payens asked.

'God knows!' The man rose and stumbled towards him. He grasped the horse's bridle, frenetic eyes glaring up at the Templar.

'The city is knee deep in dismembered corpses, the ground is sticky and jellied with blood. More like you—'

De Payens moved quickly, turning his horse even as his sword blocked the swift lunge by the knight hidden in the man's right hand. The weapon went clattering along the floor. Women screamed in

terror; men sprang to their feet, shouting warnings. De Payens hooked the tip of his sword under the man's chin, forcing him back into the light. His assailant didn't beg; the close-set eyes in that nut-brown face never wavered.

'How did you know?' he whispered.

'You are right-handed, but you used your left for the bridle.' De Payens searched the man's face, intelligent, purposeful, with a snub nose, full mouth and firm chin. 'Why?' he asked.

'Killers!' the man replied. 'Killers bound for hell for this day's work. You must all confront the Gates of Death and meet the Janitors of the Shadowlands.'

'A quotation from the Book of Job,' de Payens retorted. 'You are a scholar, a clerk?'

'A physician who has seen enough of killing to glut himself for many a lifetime.'

De Payens lowered his sword.

'Then pick up your dagger and get behind me. I am no demon, not yet at least.'

The man slid past him into the darkness of the church. De Payens tensed, straining his ear for any sound of a fresh attack. Instead the man came to stand beside him, sheathing his dagger as he whispered:

'A terror of the twilight, blinded and bloated with blood, stalks the city in his livery of lion skin. Behind him trail the shackles of death. Whole legions he takes ...'

De Payens stared down at him.

'You sound more like a priest than a physician.'

Screams carried across the great bailey. Three figures rounded the corner, running towards the church, hastening like shadows under the sun, tripping over corpses, glancing fearfully over their shoulders. They had almost reached the steps of the church when their pursuer appeared, garbed in white, head shrouded in a hood. *Mayele!* He trotted his horse across the bailey, then paused. He glimpsed Edmund, but made no sign of recognition. Instead, he coolly raised his Saracen horn bow, notched, loosed, then notched again. Each arrow sped like a curse, swift and fatal. Two of the men twisted as the shafts took them deep in the back; the third, a clutch of jewellery in his fist, was halfway up the steps, but *Mayele* was a deadly archer. The shaft sliced the fleeing man in the back of the neck, its barb breaking and shattering his soft sweaty throat. He collapsed in a gargle of blood. *Mayele* serenely guided his horse across the square, then reined in, grinning up at de Payens.

'They were infidels, corpse-plunderers.'

'What proof?'

Mayele pointed to the third man.

'He had stolen a pyx.'

'It's not a pyx.' De Payens gestured with his sword. 'It's jewellery. He was fleeing for sanctuary, innocent, Philip, as are so many who have died today.'

'Innocent, guilty?' *Mayele* hooked the bow over the horn of his saddle. 'Who can judge but God? Let him decide ...'

Chapter 2



It is rare that an enterprise, bad in inception and perverse in purpose, has a good ending.

Edmund de Payens, clad only in his loincloth, squatted near the door of the great refectory in the Templar house built on the corner of the Great Pavement at the heart of the old Temple enclosure in Jerusalem. He scratched the sweat coursing down his chest, wafting away the flies, trying to ignore the great wolfhounds eager to snatch his bread. He clutched his goblet, brimming with wine, and glared furiously at Mayele, who was similarly attired. Both were undergoing punishment for the chaos in Tripoli. The massacre there had ended when the standard-bearer of Baldwin III, King of Jerusalem, had processed solemnly through the city with trumpeters and heralds, demanding a cessation to the killing or immediate forfeiture of life and limb. The gallows were soon festooned with the corpses of those who had disobeyed. Decapitations, amputations and castrations had enforced the decree, and the royal standard had been placed outside the church. De Payens and Mayele had departed for the castle only to be immediately arrested on the specific command of the Grand Master, Bertrand Tremelai, who ordered both Templars to be stripped, chained and brought back in disgrace. They'd spent two weeks in the Temple dungeons, only to be released for further punishment and humiliation.

Edmund greedily drank the watered wine. He tried to catch Mayele's eye, but his comrade was too busy finishing his food before the wolfhounds did. Edmund glanced up the hall at the dais beneath the great Templar banner, a black cross on a sheet of sheer samite. Bertrand Tremelai sat there with his seneschals, clerks and other officers of the order. In truth, Edmund reflected, he did not like Tremelai a cockerel of a man, proud and arrogant, with the spirit of wrath in his nostrils; a soul who neither feared God nor revered man. Red-haired, hot-tempered and choleric, Tremelai had lashed de Payens and Mayele with his contemptuous words, accusing them of failing to protect Count Raymond, of not capturing or destroying the assassins. In the presence of the full chapter, the Grand Master had condemned them to this. Now he sat feasting on the dais, drinking from a pure glass goblet, the best protection against poison, whilst de Payens and Mayele squatted on the floor amongst the dogs. Edmund wondered if he should bark, then grinned quietly to himself. He squinted at Mayele, who sat with his back against the wall, chewing on a piece of gristle, a half-smile on his face. Mayele caught his glance and spat out the piece of meat for the waiting hound.

'Edmund de Payens,' he whispered, 'noble member of a noble family.' His voice was tinted with sarcasm, but de Payens did not object. Mayele was his brother-knight, a strange, bloodthirsty man with apparently no sense of fear. During the chapter meeting where they had been judged and punished, he had loudly protested his innocence, arguing hotly with Dominus Tremelai, shouting that the Grand Master would do better to find the reason for Count Raymond's murder and demand a full

investigation by the papal legate into the incident. Tremelai had shouted back before ordering the both to strip and lie prostrate before the chapter. De Payens had done so; Mayele had objected, so he had been seized, stripped and beaten with a sharp cane. The purple welts and bruises had now faded, the fresh skin neatly growing back, but Mayele had not forgiven or forgotten either the beating or the fresh humiliation.

‘*Pax et bonum*, brother.’ Mayele leaned over. He grasped de Payens’ goblet, sipped from it and handed it back. ‘This will not last long. Our brothers have intervened for us. No less a person than your great friend and patron William Trussell has pleaded on our behalf.’

De Payens nodded in agreement. Trussell was a legend, an Englishman who had joined Hugh de Payens after the *cruciferi* had stormed and taken Jerusalem some fifty-three years ago. A man well past his seventy-fifth year, a veteran treated as a hero, cared for and trusted by the order.

‘Ah, good day, Brother Baker, Brother Thurifer, Brother Smith, Brother Cook.’ Mayele’s sarcastic greeting rang through the hall as the lesser serjeants of the order trooped in for their main serving of the day.

His taunting refrain must have reached the Grand Master, for shortly afterwards burly serjeants appeared. The two men were dragged to their feet and pushed out along a vaulted passageway on to the Great Pavement, then across to the house of correction beneath the old mosque. De Payens winced as his naked feet touched the hot paving stones. The light blinded him, whilst the sun was as hot as a roaring fire. Mayele tried to make light of his discomfort by dancing a jig, much to his guards’ amusement. While they tried to restrain his companion, de Payens shielded his eyes and peered across at the view that rose above the Temple walls: the towers and belfries of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Here, de Payens reflected, in the heart of Jerusalem, whilst the army of the *cruciferi* had rampaged like hungry wolves through the streets of the Holy City, Hugh de Payens and his companions had reached the Great Pavement and raced across to the Dome of the Rock, down into the darkness beneath, where the great Solomon had built his stables. According to legend, Hugh and his brethren, the first group of Poor Knights of the White Mantle, had found treasure greater than any gold, silver or gorgeous rubies. Relics, artefacts from the time of Christ! The crown of thorns thrust on to the sacred head; the nails that had pierced his hands and feet; the shroud in which his corpse had been wrapped, and the cloth thrown over the Saviour’s face, which allegedly still bore a miraculous imprint.

‘Sir!’ The serjeants now held Mayele fast. The scribe in charge beckoned de Payens to follow.

They went down steep steps into the cold darkness and along a vaulted passageway: it reeked of oil and pitch, the walls on either side glistening as if drenched with water. A door to a dungeon was opened, and de Payens and Mayele were pushed inside to squat down on straw-filled palliasses.

‘When,’ de Payens asked, ‘will this end?’

‘Soon.’ Mayele crawled across, took the lamp and put it between them.

‘And why?’ de Payens asked. ‘Why was Count Raymond murdered?’

‘Rumour runs like mice in a hay barn,’ Mayele murmured. ‘What was the count but another greedy lord snatching territory, dividing Outremer like a loaf of bread? A squabble of barons.’ Mayele laughed at his own joke. ‘Fat lords supported by their even fatter priests.’

‘So who murdered him, and why?’

‘They say the hashish-devourers, the Assassins, a secret cult of Islam under their master, the Old Man of the Mountain. They are hated by the Franks and loathed by the Turks. Rumour holds them responsible. They and their leaders live high in mountain eyries, dealing out death. Come, Edmund!’ Mayele’s voice turned soft, ‘you must have heard the legends? How when the Old Man goes out he is preceded by a herald bearing a huge Danish axe, its long haft enclosed in silver, to which braided knots are fastened. As he goes, the herald proclaims: “Turn out of the way of he who has in his hand the fate of kings”.’

Mayele's voice thrilled through the shadows, unsettling de Payens even further.

'But why Count Raymond? Why should the Assassins kill him?'

'God knows.'

'And why were we brought from Chastel Blanc to act as his escort?'

'Only God and our Grand Master know that, Edmund. We've been away from Jerusalem for a year locked up in the fastness of Lebanon.'

'Not you,' de Payens retorted, moving on the uncomfortable palliase. 'You were the Chastel messenger to Jerusalem and elsewhere.' He paused at the sound of a braying horn, followed by the distant tolling of bells, marking a fresh hour in the horarium of the brethren.

'Time limps,' Mayele murmured, 'like a thief. In the light of day, Edmund, all will be revealed. Yes, I was a Templar messenger. I collected all the gossip and chatter from the brothers, winnowing the wheat from the chaff. Did you know Walkyn, one of our brethren, an Englishman?'

De Payens shook his head.

'Expelled from the order!'

'On what charge?'

'Some say witchcraft, dabbling in the black arts, conjuring up the demons of the dark angel. I don't know the full truth. Rumour has it that he was arrested, tried secretly and found guilty. He was supposed to be sent back to England in chains. Another Englishman, Richard Berrington, was delegated to escort him. You know Berrington?'

De Payens shook his head.

'Anyway,' Mayele sighed, 'Walkyn may have escaped. Berrington has certainly disappeared, so the gossips say.'

'Perhaps the Grand Master wishes that we would do the same.'

Mayele laughed and shook his head.

'No, brother, not that.'

'What happened?' De Payens returned to the question haunting him. 'What truly happened in Tripoli? Why were we there? Why did they kill Count Raymond?'

Mayele didn't answer. The sound of footsteps echoed in the passageway. The door was unlocked and swung open, and a serjeant beckoned to them to rise and follow.

Bertrand Tremelai was waiting for them in his octagonal chamber in the Temple manse, a ground-floor room decorated with brilliantly hued tapestries. The first described the fall of Jerusalem some fifty years earlier. The second related the story of the Templars from their founding to their patronage by St Bernard of Clairvaux. The third described the order's adoption by the papacy and the issuing of the decree *Milites Dei et Militia Dei – Soldiers of God, Army of God*. The Pope was shown flanked by St Peter and St Paul, with the title of the decree, which took the Templars fully under papal authority, inscribed on a silver tongue of parchment issuing out of the Pope's mouth.

Tremelai sat enthroned beneath these glories behind a broad desk of polished cassia. In the far corner two scribes copied documents, whilst a third poured hot wax on manuscripts before sealing them with the Temple seal displaying two poor knights sharing the same horse, suggesting brotherhood and humility. There was little of such virtue in the Grand Master's choleric red face. He thrust himself back in his chair and jabbed a finger at de Payens and Mayele.

'You will be readmitted to our ranks in chapter tomorrow. In preparation for which ...' He raised his hand, flapping his fingers. One of the clerks rose, collected two cloaks from a wall peg and hurried across. De Payens and Mayele donned these and sat on the stools provided. 'In preparation for which ...' Tremelai repeated, 'you will read the great Bernard's work, *De Laude Novae Militiae – In Praise of the New Knighthood*.'

‘I’ve read it,’ Mayele retorted.

‘Then read it again.’

‘Domine,’ de Payens chose his words carefully, ‘what happened in Tripoli?’

‘Count Raymond was murdered by the Assassins, the Naziris, Islamic heretics lurking with their so-called prince, the Old Man of the Mountain. As for why?’ Tremelai pulled a face. ‘The count raided caravanserais under their protection.’ He glared fiercely at de Payens, his watery blue eyes bulging, red beard bristling, chin jutting out aggressively, as if ready to refute any contradiction.

You are lying, de Payens swiftly concluded. You’re blustering, but why?

‘More importantly,’ Tremelai continued, shifting his gaze, ‘Count Raymond was under the protection of the Temple. The Old Man of the Mountain must be checked, brought to book, made pay reparation, accept the power of the Temple. You two will lead an embassy into the mountains.’ He stilled de Payens’ objection with his hand. ‘You’ll take six serjeants and a clerk. You’ll demand both an apology and compensation.’

‘And what happens,’ Mayele snarled, ‘if he sends our heads back to you pickled and dried in a basket?’

‘He will not do that,’ Tremelai soothed. ‘I have already received his written assurances. You will be received honourably.’

‘Does he deny the charge?’ de Payens asked.

‘He denies nothing, he offers nothing.’

‘The murderers,’ Mayele insisted. ‘Their corpses were found?’

‘No.’ Tremelai shook his head. ‘In the bloodbath, heads and limbs were severed, bodies mangled.’ The Grand Master shrugged.

‘So why were the Assassins blamed?’ de Payens insisted.

‘Naziris,’ Mayele interrupted. ‘That’s their true name, heretics!’

‘They are killers, murderers and marauders,’ de Payens countered. ‘Even so, what proof do we have that they were involved?’

‘True, their corpses weren’t found,’ Tremelai replied. ‘But one of their medallions was, a token they left on the corpses of their victims.’ He gestured at the clerk, who handed across a circle of copper about six inches across, the rim fretted with strong symbols, in its centre a striking viper. De Payens and Mayele studied this, then handed it back even as the clerk produced two long curved daggers, the handles of ivory decorated with blood-red ribbons. De Payens recalled similar ones in the hands of those brown-garbed assassins racing towards the count.

‘These too were found,’ Tremelai barked. ‘Proof enough – at least for the moment. Now ...’ He paused. ‘I said that you will travel with six serjeants and a clerk. The latter has chosen himself.’ He snapped his fingers and whispered to one of the scribes, who hurried out, then returned ushering a figure garbed in the dark robe of a serjeant of the order. The stranger kept to the shadows behind the Grand Master’s desk. De Payens had to strain his eyes to make out a figure and face he thought he recognised.

‘I believe you have met.’ Tremelai gestured the man forward into the full light. De Payens started in recognition. It was the physician who had tried to stab him in the church after the massacre. The man’s dark hair, moustache and beard were now neatly clipped, the swarthy skin oiled, the deep-set eyes calmer, the face more tranquil than the violent mask de Payens had glimpsed. The new arrival sketched a bow and spread his hands.

‘Thierry Parmenio, Domini,’ he murmured, ‘physician, wanderer, perpetual pilgrim.’

‘Whom I should have hanged out of hand,’ bellowed Tremelai, though his tone was surprisingly good-humoured, like that of a man who had drunk deep and well. De Payens glimpsed the poison proof glass goblet, brimming with wine, standing amongst the curled manuscripts littering the desk.

The Grand Master's guest came forward, hand extended. De Payens rose and clasped it.

'My apologies, Domine, my apologies.' Parmenio's grip was warm and strong. 'Let me explain.' He rested against the Grand Master's desk and turned to Mayele, who rose, staring narrow-eyed at the newcomer, then shrugged and clasped the extended hand. Parmenio gave a loud sigh and gestured to de Payens.

'I was in Tripoli because I had to be,' he began. 'Business with King Baldwin. I am, sirs, both physician and clerk, trained in the cathedral school of Genoa, later an avid scholar at Salerno. I have the deepest distaste for violence. I witnessed the horror, the rapacity of Count Raymond and his mercenaries. I thought that you, Edmund, were one of them.'

'Garbed in Templar dress?' Mayele sneered.

'In my shock, I did not recognise that,' Parmenio answered tactfully, eyes still smiling at de Payens. 'Just another killer, I thought. Only later did I realise who you were, what you had done and what great scarlet sin I had nearly committed. I hastened to be confessed, shrived and pardoned by the Grand Master. I offered to do penance, to rectify what I had done. So,' he spread his hands again, 'for a while I have donned the robes of a serjeant of your order, and will go with you into the mountains.'

'Why, sir?' de Payens asked.

Parmenio's grin widened. 'You look at me as if my neck was garlanded with dead men's fingers. I am not a cullion, no wandering beggar, but a bachelor of learning, eager to pour balm on a wound ...'

De Payens left the Grand Master's chamber bemused and startled. Mayele clapped him on the back and laughingly dismissed Parmenio as a glib, glossy-throated Genoese. De Payens shook his head, but Mayele just scoffed, adding that there was little they could do about it. The Grand Master had declared that they were to leave the day after tomorrow, so there was much to arrange. Together they went to the draper's office to draw fresh linen, cloaks, hauberks, cooking pans, drinking cups and all the impedimenta they would require for the journey. Clerks of the scriptorium, chancery and muniments room provided charts. Grooms and ostlers prepared the surefooted garrons and sumpter ponies they would need. The six serjeants had also been chosen: wiry, tough Provençals, surly but skilled, handsomely picked by the Grand Master. De Payens realised that their allegiance would be solely to Tremelai, not to the Templars they escorted. Parmenio joined them, all affable, a fount of amusing stories, anecdotes and tales, chattering about his previous travels, the marvels he had witnessed, the people he had met. Mayele remained wary of him, while de Payens, still intrigued about what had happened in Tripoli, eagerly seized the opportunity to escape from his companions and visit the old Englishman William Trussell.

The honoured veteran had been given a spacious chamber overlooking the Temple pavement, with its great open windows providing a breathtaking view of the city and the Mount of Olives beyond. The polished cedarwood used to lay the floor and provide the furnishings gleamed with its own polished fragrance. Tapestries decorated the walls; embroidered mats covered the floor. The ceiling was concave, and from its centre hung a Catherine wheel with numerous lamps embedded in its rim; this could be lowered and the wicks lit when darkness fell. Bowls of fruit – oranges, figs and apples – were laid out along the flat-topped chests. In the corners stood baskets of fresh flowers, rock rose, bellflowers and hollyhocks, their lovely smells mixing with the sweet aromas of balsam, cassia and myrrh placed in little sacks and pressed against any small hole in the walls. Trussell's furry tabby cat, Tortosa, sprawled like an emperor on a quilted stool. Trussell himself was sitting in a high-backed chair, peering down at a lectionary placed to catch the light pouring through the great open window behind him.

The old Englishman rose as de Payens entered. He was a tall, angular man with stooped shoulders and the long arms of a born swordsman. His undressed grey hair fell to his shoulders; his face reminded de Payens of the colour of weathered manuscript. He clasped de Payens' outstretched hand

and fussily waved him to a stool next to the chair. They exchanged pleasantries, whilst de Payens quietly studied his host. Trussell was a veteran much favoured by the order, a hero who had stormed the walls of Jerusalem and fought his way through the ranks of seasoned Egyptian soldiers who had been the bulwark of the city's defenders. He'd cut a path through these and decapitated the witches the Egyptian governor had placed behind them: evil harridans, their faces full of hate, their foul mouths spitting curses. In his time, Trussell had met all the heroes of the order: Hugh de Payens, Geoffrey of St Omer, Eleanor de Payens and her redoubtable husband Theodore the Greek. It was Theodore and Eleanor who had raised Edmund, and ever since he could remember, he had visited Trussell, who had filled his mind with all the daring, noble deeds of the Temple. Now, however, the old man was weakening, his mighty frame racked by fevers and ulcers that never healed. Sometimes his mind wandered; his eyes could assume a glassy look, his face hang slack, though he seemed alert and active enough now. He pointed down at the manuscript he'd been reading.

'Fulcher of Chartres, his description of the expedition to Jerusalem. Very good, Edmund.' He recollected himself, rolled up the manuscript, then glanced sheepishly at de Payens.

'I am sorry to hear about what happened in Tripoli. How you were blamed. Tremelai is a fool, arrogant and devious ...'

He was about to go on, then struck his breast.

'*Mea culpa*, I have sinned. I should not speak so about our Grand Master. Edmund, you will not denounce me in chapter?'

De Payens leaned forward and gently cupped the old man's face in his hands.

'Magister, Domine, I thank you for your kind intervention, but I am confused. Why was Raymond of Tripoli assassinated? What is happening here in the order? You must also have heard how Philip Mayele and I are bound for the Old Man of the Mountain.'

Trussell nodded, and his face assumed a sorrowful look. He touched the roll of manuscript with his vein-streaked hand and glanced across at one of the tapestries.

'I see visions, you know. In the dead of night, dreams come. Ships sail into the west,' his voice fell to a whisper, 'black sails billowing, masts bending as violent winds drive them swiftly over the deep. It will come, Edmund, the vengeance, Jerusalem besieged. The cross will go, and the visions of the *cruciferi* will become no more than the dreams of shadow-riders.' He lifted a hand to fend off de Payens' startled exclamation.

'I dream,' he continued, 'of how, along the roads to the west, the horses clatter, taking their sombre message across the sleepy, golden, autumn-tinged fields.' He looked up. 'They'll gather at crossroads before the great doors of cathedrals and the wooden planks of hamlet chapels. They will assemble at the meagre rush-light of taverns or the fire glow of castle hearths, the chilling darkness full of moans at our stupid sins of pride and avarice. Listen, Edmund: the standards of the Antichrist will be raised, the banners of Satan will fly above this city once hallowed by Christ's presence and sanctified by his blood. A storm is coming, and it's not to be checked by half-finished prayers or feverish chatter.' He smiled to himself. 'I write my own chronicle about life here in Outremer. We have won the land, taken the city, but look around. Our king, Baldwin III, is steeped in intrigue. The great lords divide the Holy Land into counties, cities and shires. They squabble and intrigue whilst fresh threats gather. The house of the Temple is no different. Tremelai is ambitious, ruthless, but not far-seeing. We have our roots here, but they stretch back to France, Burgundy and the Rhineland. Tremelai wants more. He has talked about sending envoys to England to intervene in the civil war between King Stephen and his cousin Henry Fitzempress, the Angevin. He wants to put down roots there, grasp a place close to the Crown.' Trussell paused, blinking, and dabbed at the silver froth between his lips. '*Omnia mutantur*, all things must change. Look at me, Edmund. I once ate rats' heads outside Antioch, before Bohemond stormed its gates. I ate rats and chewed foot leather and harness. Now every day I am allowed through

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