

MIS-DIRECTION

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MIS-DIRECTION

Book one

***From Templars
To Oak Island 2021
And Beyond,***

Eventually

The True Fictional History of Oak Island

by

Dave and Steve Cozens

SOMETHING STINKS

CHAPTER 1

The HOLY LAND, 1292

The air was full of candle smoke, thick and acrid, it hung to the ceiling like a menace waiting to devour the unsuspecting. The cavernous room had no windows just one set of heavy oak doors. Its walls were cold and many feet thick, large blocks half the size of a man made up the walls. Heavy armour would indeed save your life but it did make for an uncomfortable and hot existence.

Given the heat outside the room it was a welcome break. Its six bays of corbelled ceiling would rival many churches. Large candles attached to the walls were the only illumination. It gave the appearance of the most sacred of rooms.

Only fifteen people were ever allowed to enter this room, a Grand Master, twelve Knights, and Marcell, who was perhaps more important than eleven of the Knights and the lowly figure of Mister Vice, a rather junior knight completed the gathering. Twelve family banners hung around the edges, six on each side, sometimes the gold in these banners would glisten in the candle light.

At the head of the room the banner of the Grand Master hung straight, it's importance clear due to its size and grandeur. Seated underneath this Banner, Grand Master Étienne cast an imposing figure. Dressed in full armour he was just over 6 foot and built as strong as an Ox. His gilded helmet lay on the table.

Six Knights on each side of the enormous table stood behind heavy oak chairs, waiting for their permission to be seated. Grand Master waved his hand and the Knights began to be seated.

The order was carefully arranged, the knights closest to the Grand Master first and so it went down the line, the most junior knights being last. At the end of the table opposite the Grand Master sat the most junior of the knights, his banner was rolled up on the end wall not yet worthy of adorning the walls. His role was clear. He would offer the toasts, listen but not speak and have no opinions of his own, his title was Mister Vice.

At the very far wall Marcell occupied a small table. He was the Grand Master's valet and parts of his duties were to record these meetings. He was just short of 6 feet and with the right family behind him he would make a fine knight. Alas he was from a mere common background so valet was about as far as he could proceed.

The meeting went on for some time, wine and food from the table flowed like water. Many things were discussed. Routine running of the city, tax collections, those arriving and who was leaving the city, the impending war that was looming and eventually the final matter of the day. Marcell had made his notes, he would balance the income and expenditure later for a full report to the Grand Master.

They all knew it was coming but no one really wanted to discuss it, so the Grand master made the decision for all of them. "Marcell, the meeting is now closed."

Marcell placed his quill on the desk, leaned back and folded his arms.

“It’s settled, we move them now before anyone knows we have them.”

Grand Master Étienne had spoken. One by one the Knights around the table nodded in agreement and banged their fist on the table, none dissented and it wasn’t the way of the Order to question the Grand Master. On this matter even Mister Vice got to vote, the Order needed to be unanimous, not that there was any chance it wouldn’t be.

Grand Master Étienne cast his gaze around the Knights. He could see none were too keen on taking on the role, it would indeed be a very dangerous task. It would change the world if word got out, scoundrels in the Holy Land and the rest of Europe would hunt them down for such a treasure. Finally the Grand Master settled on his most trusted knight.

Jacques de Molay stared straight into the Grand Master’s eyes. “With my life.” was all he said. There was a silent but noticeable sigh of relief from the remaining Knights. “Take young Jeremy with you, he is ready and his skills may prove useful to you.” Mister Vice gulped probably more from the fact that the Grand Master knew his name than the impending task.

Jacques thought for a second of questioning the Grand Master’s judgement but thought better of it. “I can think of no other,” he said. Perhaps the hesitancy in his voice was noticed but the Grand Master simply moved on. “We must contact our network, warn them of the cargo and to arrange safe passage but it’s details must remain secret. No one outside this room must know, do I make myself clear.” Each Knight in turn banged the table with their ironclad fist.

“You leave after the midday meal, that way you can blend in with the crowds. I’ll leave the rest of the details to you. Five other carts will also leave each taking a different route to Tyr than you. Two random knights and two soldiers will accompany each cart. Each cart and soldiers will be assigned to the knights at random, that way no one will know what they have or do not have.”

All the knights nodded, the plan made perfect sense and keeps the enemy guessing. With that the meeting ended. Marcell rose from his chair and opened one of the heavy oak doors, he passed through and waited outside for each Knight to exit. Their swords were then returned, it was a rule of the Order that no swords were allowed in the meeting chamber. This rule became law following the attempted assassination of a Grand Master nearly one hundred years ago.

Each knight rose, juniors first, faced the Grand Master and raised their right arm to their chest and placed it over their heart. Each one bowed their head and left the room. Mister Vice stood and bowed, raised his right hand to his chest. As he turned to leave the Grand Master said, “You will make a fine knight Jeremy and much sooner than you think, protect Jacques with your life, he must not fail and neither must you.” Jacques and the Grand Master were both sure young Jeremy had grown six inches as he strode out of the room.

Jacques was the most senior and therefore the last to leave. “Before you go a word Jacques.” Jacques regained his seat and waited for the Master to speak but the Master simply sat in silence. To Jacques surprise Marcell re-entered the room and sat next to the Grand Master and directly opposite Jacques. Master Étienne tried hard to stifle a smile noting Jacques somewhat concerned face.

“Jacques I would like you to meet Henri De Rochelle.” Jacques thought about saying something but found his mouth no longer worked so simply nodded.

“Marcell is my most trusted spy, he knows everything, hears everything and knows every scoundrel in the city and the Holy Land.”

Finally Jacques found his voice, “I trust I am not on his list.” Master Étienne simply said “of course you’re on his list and no doubt so am I, what good would a spy be if he didn’t know everything about everyone.” Master Étienne continued before Jacques could reply.

“You leave before dawn and no one must know, it will give you a 7 hour start.” Jacques stared somewhat quizzically at the Grand Master. “Knights swear an oath to the Order but there were some in this room I do not fully trust and more importantly, neither does Marcell.” No further words were necessary on the subject. Jacques knew exactly whom the Grand Master had in mind.

“If you trust them so little why do you keep them in the inner circle?”

Grand Master Étienne smiled, “you have a lot to learn about running the Order but run it one day you will. If you remember nothing else from my leadership I ask you to heed these words. Trust everyone but trust no one.”

Marcell raised an eyebrow, no doubt digesting the words just spoken, he didn’t much care about the trust. It was his motto too but more the fact that De Molay would be Grand Master. He made a mental note to stay very close to De Molay and to take even more interest in him from now on.

“As for young Jeremy, he is perhaps the most loyal here, after yourselves of course. What he lacks in experience he makes up for in combat skills and I fear you may need those on your journey. There will be many who will seek you for the treasure, they are perhaps the most sacred I have ever known. Guard them well Jacques, the journey will be long and you will be tested many times but with God’s grace you will succeed.”

“When they are safely in the Paris Temple vault we can all breath again. However, plans must immediately be drawn up to move them even further away. Paris is not safe either so it must be to a place where no one will ever find them. They cannot be found, NEVER, do you understand me Jacques.”

Jacques gave it some thought, “I have just the man, a brilliant mind who can make even the simplest puzzle impossible to solve. Unfortunately he is English.”

Grand Master Étienne smiled, “well we can’t have everything we wish for, sometimes we must lower our standards. Oh, take young Charles with you too, his family connections will be very useful.”

“Marcell, I want to know which knights who were seated around this table leave the city tomorrow just after noon, there should be two maybe three. Once we know you will instruct your best riders to travel to Tyr and Acre. They must not take the normal routes, the message I send will be to important, is that clear?” Marcell nodded. “Any of those knights who leave must be executed at the first opportunity, an accident if you will.”

“Consider it done Master. May I leave now as I have many things to organise and so little time.” Master Étienne nodded and Marcell left the room.

“If he is a knight then why does he not follow the rules and show respect when he leaves?” asked Jacques.

“Another thing you must learn Jacques. Do not mistake insolence for a lack of loyalty in the right person. Marcell would lay down his life for the Order and me but more importantly than his loyalty, he makes me smile. He is a master at his job and a lot more loyal than most of our knights. If he were to be seen showing

the knights respect his cover would lie in tatters. The right amount of insolence is needed but his respect is total.”

The Grand Master looked troubled and Jacques could sense an air of sadness was about to descend on the conversation. “Marcell will join you in Masti and then journey with you to Atlit. He may be a day behind but you must not leave Masti without him. He has a knack of getting things done that most of us cannot. He mingles into the crowd and raises no suspicion where we knights certainly do. Look after him well, he is like a son to me. He will resist continuing with you saying his duty is to protect me but he must go with you. Use whatever means you have to but go with you he will.”

Jacques suddenly felt the whole world descend onto his shoulders and simply nodded.

“Marcell will arrange your transport and clothing for tomorrow, knowing Marcell you're not going to like it but it will ease your journey. Safe journey my friend and trust no one but those you travel with even more so in Paris. The King's men are everywhere and we are not as popular as we once were. The end is coming Jacques and we need to be prepared.”

Jacques turned to leave the room and only glanced back as he passed through the heavy oak doors. The Grand Master suddenly appeared paler, much older and certainly a lot sadder. Both men knew it was the last time they would see each other. The end for the Order in the Holy Land was near. Many battles lay ahead and it was very doubtful the Order would win any of them. Corruption was rife and disloyalty was plenty plus the enemy much stronger.

None of the knights slept well that night and were displeased when their valets woke them at some hour none had seen for quite some time. Even the birds were still asleep. Jacques dressed in his normal attire and fully expected his armour and sword to be at the stables where their cart would be waiting for them.

Just before dawn Jacques, Jeremy and Charles looked at the cart in total disgust. “You cannot be serious Marcell, this thing is disgusting and stinks more than the main sewers. As for our clothes, they haven't been washed for months.”

Marcell grinned, mainly at the thought of three knights smelling so bad. “If you don't want to go near this cart then no one else will want to either.” Trying not to smile even more Marcell continued, “this is a false floor, just like all the other carts and this is where the items are located. The barrels contained, something very smelly as I'm sure you have gathered. Keep these barrels until you reach Masti, there are many on that road who will attempt to steal any cargo but not this one.”

“Clean clothes and your swords will be waiting for you at Masti. I'm afraid it's only short swords until then but I expect your cargo may deter anyone from picking a fight.”

Jacques spoke up, “one day Marcell I will return the favour.” All three knights started to dress in the foul smelling clothes, it was sometimes difficult not to wretch. Marcell had one last trick or punishment up his sleeve.

“It may help if you apply some of this to your skin, to help with the illusion of you being shit collectors.”

Jacques felt a line may have been crossed but he knew Marcell was completely right so liberally applied the mixture. Strangely enough the smell seemed less potent, perhaps he was getting used to it or just so numb that he could no longer smell it.

Even the four proud Templar horses held their heads in shame, from the honour of battlefields to hauling shit, what had they done to deserve this. The knights pulled their hoods over their heads, not that anyone would be looking, they simply felt ashamed. Before dawn the roads inside the city bustled with merchants either buying or selling, some legal but most of it was illegal.

Everyone knew this happened, from the poor to the rich this system was the lifeblood of the city and it kept it running smoothly, as long as the taxes were paid. Templars kept an iron grip on all taxes whether it was legal or not, everyone paid their tax.

As the knights made their way through the city the crowds lining the streets separated like water running around a stone. The smell reached far and wide, everyone would press themselves against walls and doorways in a desperate attempt to get as far away from the stench as possible.

The three knights felt totally humiliated but had to admit their passage through the heavily populated streets was remarkably smooth. As they approached the southern gate even the guards were nowhere to be seen, a solitary arm waving them through was the only glimpse of any security.

Jacques broke the silence, "if only our enemies knew this trick the city would be lost while we slept."

Charles thought about smiling but that would only let in more of the stink so he clamped his jaw shut even more. As they exited the city the horses picked up the pace. Maybe it was simply being out in the open or an attempt to outrun the stench no one could say, but even the knights were thankful, the fresh air was a welcome feeling. All three knights took large gasps, forcing the fresh air into their lungs in a desperate attempt to flush out the stench. Marcell had made them suffer and they wouldn't let him forget.

Jacques had to admit Marcell's plan was brilliant. Whilst everyone noticed them no one wanted to look at them, they were invisible.

Most of the long journey to Masti passed without concern as people avoided them as if they had the plague. A solitary old lady was the only one who had time for the men, she didn't seem to mind the smell and offered wine and water to help with their journey. The knights thanked her generosity and wished they could repay her kindness. Charles gave the lady some fruit in exchange and she appeared pleased so all went on their merry way. Jacques noticed she was quite supple for her advanced age, perhaps the wine she offered contained some magic potion.

As they passed through a narrow gorge the knights were alerted to 5 men on horses ahead. The knights training immediately kicked in, a fight was looming and all three placed their hands on their short swords Marcell had provided.

As the distance reduced the five men separated, two to the left and three to the right. They went out further than Jacques had anticipated and this caused him some concern. It was at this point that he noticed the men were downwind of them. The knights had got so used to the stench they failed to notice it.

The attackers were not so fortunate they got the full force of the stench. As the cart drew level with the attackers they moved even further away, eventually all were pressed hard against the walls of the gorge. Their horses had refused to go any further.

Jacques realised the planned attack had been called off and halted their cart.

A large and very unfit attacker spoke first, “whatever they are paying you my friend it's nowhere near enough.” Jacques shrugged his shoulders.

“It's just a job and my family needs feeding, some wine growers seem to think it makes the wine taste better.”

The attacker laughed loudly, “I'll stick to beer in that case.” Jacques replied with a wry smile.

“They keep the really ripe stuff for the beer I'm told.” The attacker stopped laughing a look of horror written across his face.

“Is nothing safe these days, what about the water?” Jacques shrugged and shook his head.

“They piss in that too.” With that the conversation ended. Jacques encouraged the horses to move on, something everyone was happy about, knights, attackers and all nine horses. As they continued down the gorge Jeremy spoke up.

“I have to admit it, and it pains me to say this, Marcell is a genius but his turn will come, revenge will be sweet.” He clenched his fist as he said the words.

“Three times over,” muttered Charles.

All three laughed looking forward to that day. Even though Jacques laughed he had his doubts anyone would ever get one over on Marcell but it would be fun trying.

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As they crested the rise Masti came into view. It was a small village nestled in a large fertile valley. Perhaps 10 large houses at most, how it survived out here in the desert was a mystery until you noticed the vineyards that encircled the village. Whilst the terrain was ideal Jacques did wonder where the irrigation came from to grow such a magnificent crop. News of their arrival had reached the village long before they got to its outskirts. Two riders approached and a cart followed not far behind.

“Master Jacques I assume.” said a short powerful man. Jacques nodded and threw back his hood. “My name is Pedro, my friends on the cart will relieve you of your precious cargo.” Jacques was about to argue when he realised it was the barrels on the cart that he referred to.

“Ah yes, you're welcome to them, it's certainly,” for once Jacques was lost for words.

“To us Master Jacques it's the secret ingredient that keeps the crop growing, along with a plentiful supply of water.”

Jacques looked around, “I see the signs of water but from where does it come from.” A second man now spoke up.

“I hear they also piss in the water Pedro.”

Jacques felt his right hand grip his short sword as he turned his head to face one of the men on the cart. He stared straight into the eyes of the unfit man they had met in the gorge, only now he was a lot leaner and prepared for a fight.

“Relax Master Jacques, you have already met my brother Miguel. Your journey has been watched from the moment you left the city. The old lady you talked to was my sister Maria. We are all part of the Order, part of Marcell's network, which spreads all over the Holy Land I might add.”

“As for the water for our valuable crop. I will be honoured to give you all a guided tour tomorrow but the light is starting to fade and we really do need to

remove your barrels.”

Everyone, including the knights, helped to transfer the barrels and soon the other cart was heading off towards the fields. Jacques was sure the Templar horses felt liberated with a renewed spring in their step. Their cart was secured in a large barn and buried beneath large bails of fodder. Marcell had certainly thought of everything.

Pedro approached the trio, “if you’ll follow me we’ll get you some clean clothes and a well earned bath.”

None of the knights objected to that idea though the stench still lingered and they did wonder if it would ever be removed. As the evening wore on the knights relaxed a lot more. Pedro turned out to be Pedro Rodrigues, his family came from Portugal and were wine growers just like Jacques. Many tips and family secrets were soon shared.

Pedro's sister made an entrance and what an entrance it was, stunning would have been an understatement. All three knights looked back to the little old lady they had talked to and regretted just how easily they had been fooled. The Templar Order forbade any women to join but it became obvious Maria was a well accomplished member of the Order.

Charles had drawn the short straw for the night and guarded the cart. Pedro didn't question this and knew it was useless to offer one of his own men so let it be. None of the knights slept well that night, even though they knew they were in the safety of the Order they didn't let their guard down this time. They had been fooled once on their journey and it wasn't going to happen again.

Morning came round soon enough and a hearty breakfast awaited them all. “We must wait for Marcell and he will not be here until this evening so how about that tour of the vineyard.” suggested Pedro.

Jacques was the only one interested, or at least appeared to be, the other two would remain and guard the cart. Jacques needed not to have worried, Pedro and his families were loyal members of the Order.

The secret to the vineyard's water lay in a vast underground cavern that stretched as far as the eye could see, which wasn't that far in candlelight. Pedro did not know the source of the water, many a time he had set sail to find its location but all had failed. On one occasion he very nearly didn't find his way back, it was only the constant calls of a worker that helped him to find the cavern entrance. The entrance had a small dam across it to regulate the flow of water to the fields. Word eventually arrived that Marcell was nearing the village so any further tours of the fields were curtailed and they returned to the village.

Jacques was mightily impressed with the vineyards and congratulated Pedro, from one winegrower to another the respect was evident and most welcome. He also made a mental note for the time when he returned to his family estate, shit makes for a very good wine.

Marcell was greeted like he was one of the family. It was obvious he had been here on many occasions, everyone he passed knew him like a brother and offered greetings. Once inside Pedro's modest house things very quickly turned to business. All the men sat in old but comfortable chairs. Maria stood alert by the door. No one would be allowed in or out without her say so.

Marcell started to fill in the details of what had happened after Jacques left. As arranged the carts went about their business heading north to Tyr. Shortly after the

carts left three of the knights who had sat around the table left the city, accompanied by three or four followers. Each tried to hide their identity but Marcell's men were very experienced. Personal traits always give away a man's identity and knights were no exception.

Each knight was identified and his chosen route was passed on to the Grand Master. The Grand Master was right, he was seldom wrong, he wasn't angry he just appeared sad they would betray the Order. When their names were revealed Jacques was not surprised, disappointed but not surprised. The Grand Master had sent word that they were all to be executed along with their followers, treachery was a cardinal sin within the Order and punishable by death and so it would be.

Marcell informed Jacques that the master wanted him to ride with them to Atlit, many matters needed to be arranged and he knew all the right people in Atlit. Jacques thought to himself, 'you may be the master spy young Marcell but on this occasion even you don't know all the answers'.

How to get Marcell to complete the rest of the journey was a matter Jacques had not really thought about. On the journey so far all he could think about was how to get rid of the stench Marcell had forced on them. Whatever the plan it would need to be a good one, Marcell was no fool and he would spot a trap long before it could be sprung. As it turned out he need not have worried, as fate would play into his hands in a most unusual way.

Now that Marcell was here Jacques felt a lot more at ease so when Pedro suggested one of his men guard the cart he readily agreed. The four knights would need as much sleep as possible for the next leg of the journey. Pedro's men would keep a watchful eye over the group en route to Atlit. Atlit itself was another story altogether, it was known as a hotbed of thieves and that was just the local's. Interesting times lay ahead.

Charles was the first to notice the cart had been swapped. Whispering to Jacques he explained there were gouges missing from the side where he had sat. To help cure his boredom or take his mind of the stink, he had taken to removing small slithers of wood with his thumbnail. Jacques instantly responded, drawing his sword in a flash he turned and held it's point just under Pedro's chin.

Moments later Miguel and his men also had swords drawn. Maria held a knife by its point aiming it in the direction of Jacques. Marcell was the first to speak. "Jacques don't be an idiot, put your sword down." Jacques held firm.

"The cart has been changed." Jacques said through clenched teeth.

Pedro smiled as best he could with a blade resting against his throat. "Of course it has, the other one stank to high heaven." Jacques could see the funny side to both the comment and Pedro's plight.

"I'm listening." Jacques said showing no emotion, though inside he realised he was in as much shit as the barrel's they had carried.

Marcell continued, "lower your damn sword you idiot. Before your sword even got to the other side of poor Pedro's throat you and your men would all be dead." Jacques had to agree with this and reluctantly did as he was told.

Pedro checked his throat for any signs of blood, there was none but he realised just how close he had come to meeting his maker. Pedro thought about explaining but Jacques looked around at all the men and a lone woman who were still standing with weapons poised.

With a wave of his hand Pedro instructed everyone to stand down. Maria was

the last, she looked like someone who felt cheated out of a kill. Jacques stared at Maria as if to question her meaning, it was a longer than normal stare. He couldn't work out if it was out of fear or something else he had felt since the first time he had seen her.

Marcel broke the moment. "When you two have finished I'll explain and it will be a much better story than Pedro as he only knows parts of the story." Jacques and Maria felt like naughty children with their hands caught in the biscuit barrel.

"I'm listening and it better be good." barked Jacques.

Pedro also felt somewhat cheated, he thought he could trust Marcell but it would appear that trust didn't include everything. So he too waited to see just how far that trust had been lost.

"Yes the cart has been changed and it would have made little difference, apart from the stink. The items are already safely on board a ship in Atlit and have been for some weeks." Marcell was acutely aware that everyone was now staring at him. Pedro seemed quite upset and Jacques was a close second.

"Are you telling me I endured 3 days of that stink for nothing."

Marcell shuffled slightly from side to side. "Not exactly, we, the grand master and I, had to convince everyone that the mission was real and dangerous. We had to ensure all parties treated it seriously and acted normally, including Pedro's observation and security." Drawing breath and wishing he were somewhere else Marcell continued.

"The items were transported as part of a normal routine shipment. Two regular shit movers had the item hidden in their carts. They were not so lucky as to get a fresh cart for the journey with wine to Atlit. The items are safely aboard a ship which is bound for Cyprus."

Jacques noted the change in wording from item to items. Marcell had either been sloppy or he wanted Jacques to know, he couldn't quite work out which one. Marcell was always very meticulous with his planning so Jacques concluded the slip was for his ears.

Jacques had to admit it was a clever plan, perhaps brilliant but he was still very upset at having to endure three days of that stink. Pedro was equally upset at his men putting their lives in danger for nothing more than barrels of shit. Marcell still felt uncomfortable.

"Yes it was devious of us but we felt it was necessary. We had to ensure everyone behaved in their usual manner in case any of the traitors within the Order suspected anything was wrong."

The words "traitors within the Order," struck Jacques like a dagger through the heart. "Traitors," he said loudly.

Marcell really didn't want to be here now as the idea of traitors in the Order was so repulsive he thought Jacques was going to swing his sword in his direction.

"Philippe and Henri we knew for sure and we also suspected Gerarde, as it turns out, it was all three." Jacques moved a step closer.

"And, your only just telling me this now."

Marcell shrugged, "it was the Grand Master's idea to keep everyone in the dark, that way we could watch everyone more closely without having to worry about the loyal ones getting in the way." Jacques had to admit he would have done the same thing so started to soften his approach to Marcell.

Pedro on the other hand was still not pleased as he felt he had been betrayed by

someone that he considered a son. Marcell could sense the disappointment and his eyes pleaded for forgiveness. Pedro looked as if he would explode, his face filled with blood and his eyes looked like they were ready to pop out. Marcell thought he actually looked quite funny but kept that to himself.

“So you have made fools of me and all my family, plus three knights of the Order.” Marcell knew he was up to his neck in shit so thought he might as well go all out.

“That just about covers it,” he said.

Pedro laughed out loud and soon everyone in the barn followed suit except for Marcell. Pedro suddenly stopped and glared at Marcell. “No one outside of my family has made a fool out of me and lived to tell the tale.”

The laughing stopped and Jacques clenched his sword, Jeremy and Charles followed suit. Marcell was in some disgrace but he was one of their own and would be defended.

“It’s good for you that I consider you to be a son, a very cunning one at that.” Everyone relaxed and the tenseness of the situation seemed to fall away in an instant. Marcell bowed his head.

“It is an honour to be considered part of the family Pedro.”

“So master spy, any other plans we should know about.” Marcell thought for a second.

“Breakfast is about the best plan I can come up with.”

Charles agreed, “now that’s the best plan I have heard so far.”

With that everyone started to file out of the barn. Pedro slapped Marcell on the back as he passed. Maria smiled and nodded a welcome. Marcell knew he needed to stay where he was, he didn’t need to be told.

Jacques approached him and the two men stared at each other. Marcell was slightly shorter than Jacques but much younger. Jacques stared straight into the eyes of Marcell. “I want to know about every plan from now on, do we understand each other.”

Marcell held out his right hand, which Jacques grasped. Marcell placed his left hand on top of the now clenched fists. “You have my word Master.”

He very nearly said Grand Master but checked his thoughts. As soon as the words left Marcell’s mouth both men knew it was a lie. Jacques knew he would be told everything he needed to know and a lot would be kept from him. Marcell was thinking the very same thoughts.

A bond had been forged between the two men, as it turned out, a bond that would last a lifetime. Strange as it may seem, both men knew they could trust each other with their lives. For now at least.

“Don’t know about you but I’m starving.” Jacques said as he passed Marcell.

“You took the words right out of my mouth.” Marcell replied.

Breakfast soon rolled into lunch and the planned departure slipped until the following day. Everyone needed to relax, tensions drained away and the wine started to flow at an alarming rate.

Jacques knew he was being watched and who was doing the watching. He wanted to watch as well but it wasn’t accepted within the Order. She was clouding his mind and it was a feeling he both liked and feared.

ONE IN THE EYE

CHAPTER 2

In Holy Land the year 1292

Sore heads greeted everyone the following morning. All the men went about their actions in a slow and very deliberate manner. Minds were clouded, reactions slow and eyes that barely opened. Maria lost track of how many times she tutted as she passed the men, she was ashamed, they were weak and should anyone attack they would be useless.

Charles had suffered heavily, he was by far the youngest, easily led astray and was not very good at handling the wine or it's after effects. Breakfast had entered his body and not long after left his body much faster. He looked like death warmed up and moved just as fast. Jacques thought it would be good for him to ride in the cart until his mind and body caught up with each other.

The cart was much lighter as they pulled out from Pedro's barn, it seems wine is less heavier than shit. The two horses pulling the cart also seemed to notice this and if they could talk would have agreed. Jeremy was driving the cart and Charles was now leaning firmly on Jeremy, already fast asleep.

Jacques and Marcell rode the other two horses slightly in front of the cart. All were sad to be leaving Pedro as they were all treated like family. A feeling the knights had not felt for some time. Jacques had a particularly heavy heart, it was not a feeling he liked and remembered the last time he felt this way. It was when he left his family to join the Knights Templar. He knew who was causing this feeling and he noted she had avoided him this morning.

The road to Atlit was not a very good one, several times the cart had become lodged in ruts and Jacques thought on more than one occasion the cargo of wine would be lost. The bindings tied by Pedro's men held firm, he guessed they knew the road very well and made sure the cart was fit to survive the journey. Whilst the cart was expendable the wine was not.

Young Charles was looking much better and even managed to eat their midday meal. Marcell swapped places with Charles. Jacques decided that if there were to be any trouble further up the road then Charles would be more useful on a horse. The rest of the afternoon passed with the same boredom as the morning.

One bit of desert road looked like any other bit of desert road. The odd tree made a welcome sight but they were few and far between, even the horses appeared bored. The boredom didn't interfere with their military training. Each of the horse riding knights kept a good lookout to their side and to the rear. It was the job of the cart passenger to scout the road ahead.

As the light started to fade thoughts turned to making camp for the night. It was at this point that Marcell, who was now passenger, noticed nine riders approaching slowly in the distance. "Looks like trouble ahead master."

As the adrenaline flowed all four men instantly fell back on their military training. Jeremy was somewhat surprised at how quickly Marcell was ready for action. Swords were drawn. Jacques and Charles were ready to charge and simply waited for the right moment.

Jeremy was the first to hear the thundering of horse's hooves from their rear. Glancing rearwards he spotted five riders approaching fast. "More from the rear Master."

Jacques swivelled round on his horses and noticed three riders went to Charles's side of the cart and two to his side. To his surprise they stopped and faced the oncoming riders.

The nine riders stopped no more than twenty paces away from Jacques, they had arranged themselves into a loose "V" formation. As the situation became more tense it was obvious things were not going to work out well for one side.

One member of the attackers made a move to draw his sword. A small knife appeared in his left eye. The force threw his head back and he rolled off the horse's right side. As he hit the floor he twitched twice and then lay still, a small amount of blood flowing from his left eye.

Jacques didn't need to see who had thrown the knife, he knew. He was however more surprised when she rode out from the right side and approached the leader of the attackers. It had not escaped the attacker's notice that four of the riders were now pointing arrows in their direction. The fight had drained away from them so they made a point of showing their hands, without swords. Jacques sat back in his saddle, he was going to enjoy this and at the same time felt very sorry for the attackers.

The leader of the attackers seemed very confused to see a woman in front of him. Not wishing to appear weak he stared straight into Maria's eyes hoping the show of defiance would work in his favour. Maria ignored his gaze and moved on to the man to his right. "Who sent you?" she asked. The man was taken aback, how did she know he was the leader. He sat quietly and said nothing.

"I shall ask one more time, if you do not talk then I will cut off your left testicle." Sixteen men closed their legs slightly without even realising they had done so. Jacques even thought the dead man did the same.

"Then I will remove your right testicle."

Men on horseback clenched legs even further around their horses, Jeremy on the cart virtually crossed his. Jacques simply thought, 'I must remember never to cross this woman.'

The attackers leader was now sweating profusely. "If I tell you that he will kill me."

"If you don't tell me right now then I too will eventually kill you, maybe slower than who ever sent you but it will be equally as painful." Maria continued, "If you tell me now you will live, at least until you master catches up with you and for your sake and that of your men you better hope that's a long time."

The leader appeared to weigh up his options perhaps the prospect of having his testicles removed helped him to make his decision. "Faruk is his name, that's all I know about him. He hired us to take the cart and kill the men with it." Maria continued her teasing.

"This Faruk, would he happen to have a scar down his left cheek and a slight limp."

“That sounds like the same man, do you know him?” the confused leader was struggling to keep up.

“It was I who put the scar there and the reason he limps is down to the knife I embedded in his leg.” The attackers slumped on their horses, they knew their luck had run out, it would be useless to fight or even attempt to flee.

“It's your lucky day,” said Maria with an air of total mastery. “You will return to Faruk, with this cart and minus one man of course,” she looked down at the lifeless corpse. You will tell Faruk, all the men were slain and there were no survivors. Unfortunately two of your horses were also killed in the attack.”

The attackers all looked confused and glad to have the chance at being spared but still very confused. Even Jacques was struggling to work out the plan. Marcell smiled and simply thought, brilliant.

“I'll explain things a little more simply. Faruk wants the cart and you want to live, all good so far,” the attackers nodded. “We give you the cart and the wine. You take it back to Faruk. Hopefully he will let you all live and we all go on our merry way, our paths never to cross again. If you're feeling really brave or stupid, you could ditch the cart and put as much distance between you and Faruk as possible.” Stopping for a moment for the information to sink in she continued.

“I would suggest you take the cart and return to Faruk, you will have a better chance of living that way.”

With a choice of dying today, sometime later or perhaps living a longer life, the leader opted to take the cart and return.

“If any of your men break their silence and fail to follow the plan then that will be the death of you all, Faruk will see to it.” Looking at each of the attackers she added, “do you all understand?” Each attacker nodded knowing what she had said was true.

Pedro's men didn't lower their aim, their arrows were still pointed in the direction of the attackers. Jeremy and Charles jumped down from the cart. All the knights' belongings were left in the cart and two attackers were about to climb aboard the cart when Maria stopped them.

“I would suggest you all draw your swords and ensure there is blood on them. Faruk will most certainly check. Perhaps some blood on your clothing as well, you all look as if you're going out drinking for the night.” Looking down at their fallen comrade she said, “I don't think he will mind, so you best get started.”

Jacques watched the cart and eight men disappear into the fast fading light. Thankfully it was a full moon so they could keep a watch on them. Two of Pedro's men followed before returning some time later. They confirmed the attackers were indeed sticking to the plan.

Jacques plus his knights and four of Pedro's men proceeded towards Atlit. He was disappointed Maria didn't travel with them, she was intelligent and very dangerous and that excited Jacques. She was also very beautiful and had stolen his heart without even trying.

They took a route that was obviously well known to their guides but not to the average person. More than once Jacques wondered if the planned attack was just that, yet another plan he was not aware of. If it was, Marcell was just as much in the dark as he was.

They approached the town of Atlit from a southerly direction, hugging the coastline. Most probably a smugglers route out of sight from prying eyes.

Splitting into two groups they arranged to meet onboard the ship.

Charles and Jeremy's group was the first to depart, perhaps half an hour later Jacques and Marcell followed with their guides. It was still a full moon and great to see where one was going but terrible when trying to sneak into a large fishing town.

Many times the four men had to duck into door openings, hide behind walls or pretty much anything else that came to hand. Progress through the outskirts was slow and deliberate. Jacques guides knew all the shortcuts, all the small passageways and soon they were nearing the docks.

Jacques could see the ship outlined against the town's lights behind. "Phantom Storm" was a two-mast galley and heavily armoured. He knew Faruk's men would take heavy losses trying to take such a ship, so they would be safer once onboard but the risk was still there.

One of their guides grabbed Jacques arm and pointed to a lone figure leaning against the wall of a merchant's store. "One of Faruk's men," he whispered.

"We could easily take him," replied Jacques.

"Very true, but he will not be alone and the others would quickly return to Faruk, he would know you were aboard. He will surely mount an attack even if his losses would be high."

"I thought the plan was for Faruk to think we were slain."

"Maria knew they would be tortured on their return and the cart would have been searched. She simply bought us some more time, their torture would have been slow, Faruk likes it that way." Jacques agreed and once again smiled at the cunning of Maria.

"Do you have any wine?" Jacques asked.

"We are wine growers, we always have wine," his guide replied.

"Good, may I have some." His guide removed a flask of wine from his shirt.

"For courage master Jacques?"

"Not exactly and I do hope you'll forgive me for wasting your wine." Jacques took a mouthful of wine, swished it around his mouth and spat it out. Marcell looked very confused, as did the guides. "Marcell, do the same and spill some down your shirt, plenty of it." Marcell did as he was ordered, the wine tasted to good to spit out so he swallowed it. Jacques was not pleased. "One day not following orders will get you killed."

"It tasted too good to waste Jacques." Jacques had to agree but was still not pleased, he continued.

"As a master spy Marcell this should be child's play for you, pretend to be heavily drunk. Lean on me for support and sing, I assume you do know some sea songs." Marcell nodded but still didn't quite grasp the plan.

Jacques thanked his guides and told them to stay where they were. They were not to intervene if there was any trouble, they were simply to fade away and return home with news.

Before anyone could move one of the guides noticed two men approaching, it was Charles and Jeremy. "We could not get near the ship, Faruk's men are positioned everywhere."

Jacques thought for a second. "Okay, the plan should work with the four of us so he quickly outlined the plan." It was hastily put together but it was the best he could come up with. The guides departed and held position some 60 feet behind,

taking cover behind a low stone wall. As the knights were about to start their act, Jacques looked back and noted one of the guides fading into the darkness. He was thankful they hadn't decided to intervene, this wasn't their fight.

Marcell and Jacques were about to step forward when they heard a whisper from above. "Wait, wait." They both looked up to see Charles sitting on the top step of the stone staircase leading to the merchant's store.

"What are you doing up there?" was the whispered reply.

"My stomach could not take the fumes from the wine and I get a better view from up here. What do you see?" Jacques peered through the dim lighting towards the ship.

"I see a spy leaning in a door." Charles sighed.

"Look again master, now what do you see?"

Jacques didn't like this game, so he said in a more stern voice, "I still see a spy, either explain or let's get moving, we're wasting time." It was now that they found out why the Master had sent Charles with them.

"As you know master it is said that I can see a black cat in the cellar on a moonless night, so let me tell you what I see." Charles waited to let the tension build.

"The ship has only three lanterns lit, one is in the Captain's Cabin, one by the wheel and one by the forward hold. The Captain's cabin has only one person walking between the lantern and the windows to shore". Jacques stared at the ship checking out Charles's descriptions. Charles continued.

"There are two persons on deck trying to look like guards, but the only place they are concentrating on is the road from the town. In the shadows and lying next to the sails opposite the gangway are 2 more persons. They are given away by the moons reflection on their swords and belts whenever they change positions." Charles was enjoying his lesson.

"The deck by the gangway is in shadow because the brazier on the dock front has recently been doused, but it still shows a faint glow in the steel at the bottom. The tide has started to slacken and it will turn within the hour when we are supposed to leave. There are no sailors on deck making ready for the voyage, rather unusual I think you will agree." After a slight pause he added, "The ship's cat seems to be stalking a rat."

Marcell looked at Jeremy with astonishment and with a slightly slurred speech said, "We'll make a Knight out of you yet Charles."

With a sly smile came the reply, "I'm one already Marcell."

"Ok, time to go and be ready, things could go wrong at any moment."

None of the knights needed to be reminded as they fully expected everything to go wrong. Marcell seemed to be getting ready for his act. His glazed look impressed Jacques, if he didn't know better, he would have taken Marcell for being drunk. "Sing lads and hope."

Jeremy and Charles started singing, not the same song to start with but they quickly changed and agreed on a song. Marcell tried to join in but most of his words were either missing or well behind the other two.

'Marcell is really playing the part well,' thought Jacques. As they approached the spy Jacques noticed movement on the decks. Guards dropped down then reappeared. He wasn't sure if he had imagined things or if the guards were starting to get suspicious. It was too late to change the plan so they all carried on.

Jacques motioned to the spy. "Give me a hand with these mate, if the Captain catches us we'll all be getting ten lashes before breakfast." Jacques guessed the spy could remember a similar fate so grabbed Charles and helped to guide Jeremy. Marcell was becoming really heavy in Jacques grasp and then fell to the floor. Either Marcell was a very good actor or this wasn't part of the plan but it did seem to help convince the spy they were returning sailors, very drunken ones at that.

Jacques tried to lift Marcell who now felt as heavy as a sack of grain. With some effort he eventually threw the now unconscious Marcell over his shoulder. This wasn't part of the plan and Jacques realised there was something wrong with Marcell. With haste he bounded up the gangplank, Jeremy and Charles followed a little more slowly, thanking the spy as he left.

Jacques dumped Marcell on the deck and expecting trouble drew his sword but he was only met with the sight of Maria looking at him. Jacques was now confused but glad to see Maria. She looked at the lifeless Marcell and asked, "what's with him?"

Jacques shrugged, "no idea, we were pretending to be drunk and he just collapsed."

Maria immediately realised what had happened and shouted to one of her men, "get him below decks immediately."

The spy seemed to realise what was happening and in slow motion attempted to flee. A blow to the back of his head from someone hiding behind a large bale on the wharf brought him down Charles and Jeremy now sprinted up the remainder of the gangplank. Marcell was transferred to the captain's cabin where a man lay dead on the floor, the captain was issuing orders to a member of his crew.

Maria entered shortly after. Giving a small bottle to Jeremy she said, "make him drink this, all of it. He will not like it but he must drink it all." As she reached the door she turned and looked at the captain, "give me ten minutes and then set sail captain," and with that she was gone. Jacques was about to say something to her but he realised he would have been talking to the door so he turned to the captain and held up his hands.

"What the hell is happening?"

Quickly the captain explained. "We had been boarded by a small band of men. Out of nowhere Maria and an even smaller band of men turned up and, now you know as much as me. I have work to do, so out of my way."

Jacques and Charles followed the captain on deck, from their vantage point they could see bobbing lights approaching from their right. Faruk's men were en route as fast as their legs could carry them. The gangplank had long been raised and the bow ropes had been released. The ship's bow had started to drift away from the wharf. The stern was still tied but men were standing by to let go. The captain waited as long as he dared then gave the order to let go. The ship drifted out with the ebb tide, very slowly at first, eventually gathering a slow but steady speed. 'Not fast enough' thought Jacques.

A volley of arrows started out from the wharf, "GET DOWN" someone shouted from behind. The arrows crashed all around them. A second set soon followed but these were different, their tips were fiery. Thankfully most fell short but one or two found their mark. Small fires were soon extinguished but one remained and started to spread. Men started beating at the flames as if their lives depended on it. Eventually the flames died out.

The wharf was sliding into the darkness, sails were being raised and slowly they started to fill, still not fast enough for Jacques. It was then he remembered about Maria.

“Anyone seen Maria?” a deafening silence was the reply.

A young lad, no more than fourteen grabbed the captain's arm, “Captain there is someone on the long rope.” Captain Alonso peered over the stern into the darkness. A small figure was slowly hauling themselves up the rope, hand over hand but each time it was getting harder and harder.

“Pull them in, NOW,” barked the Captain.

The swimmer had all but given up trying to haul themselves so tied the rope around their waist. Feeling the tug on the rope they relaxed and let themselves be hauled aboard. The whole crew seemed delighted Maria had made it but all Jacques wanted to know was what she had been up to that was so important. Her explanation left Jacques in shock and he fully understood why she had to do it.

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As Jacques and his fellow knights started to make their way towards the ship, Sebastián wanted to wretch and swallow at the same time. He grabbed his neck where a warm sticky substance now flowed through his fingers.

Joaquín caught him as his body went limp, laying him behind the stone wall out of sight of everyone. As he exited from behind the stone wall he caught Jacques looking his way. Slowly Joaquín walked into the darkness and was gone. The plan was to meet up with Diego and Felipe then to head back to their horses and return to Masti. Joaquín had no intention of following the plan, as his plan was very different. He made good time getting to the horses, arriving before the other two who had waited for the specified time before setting off without the other two. Joaquín quickly explained they had run into some trouble and Sebastián didn't make it.

As they prepared their horses Diego was the first to fall to the ground, by the time Felipe realised what was happening he too fell to the ground. Joaquín retrieved his knives and then slit each of their throats to ensure the job was done correctly.

Mounting his horse he set out for Masti. The going was slow at first as it was still dark and his horse was unsure of its footing, as day broke the speed increased. He would be in Masti in about two days so had plenty of time to rehearse the speech Faruk had given him. Masti finally appeared as he crested a hill.

Pausing for a few minutes he watched the village, everything looked normal so he entered at full pace. Bringing his horse to a sliding stop he dismounted at speed and then realised everything was not normal.

Before he could move a knife found its way into his left leg, followed immediately by another to his right leg. He crumpled to the floor and Pedro slowly approached. A boot to the head and the world faded from view. Maria's voice had been heard long before Joaquín returned to the village.

Joaquín woke with a start, water dripping from his head. The pain from his legs was intense. Although he could open his eyes he couldn't see anything. Then he noticed the pain around both eyebrows. His arms were held above his head and he was dangling in mid air. He wet himself.

Pedro had ordered the village to be burned as they left and everyone to pack what they could but to travel as light as possible. The dam holding back the underground cavern had been breached, its water had flooded the vines and the sun was already at work returning the water back to the sky. It was a sad sight for Pedro, he and his family had worked hard for this and now it was all gone. One man had taken it all away and now he would pay.

Pedro entered the barn where a naked Joaquín hung like a side of meat. Joaquín couldn't see anything as his eyes were covered with two gold coins, they were stitched to his eyebrows.

Joaquín screamed in pain, a small object was placed on a small stool just in front of Joaquín. A small but steady trickle of blood started to flow down his left leg.

Pedro stepped up onto the stool being careful not to stand on the small object. He whispered into Joaquín's ear, "I hope they paid you well, no one makes a fool out of Pedro and lives to tell the tale."

Pedro jumped off the stool and Joaquín screamed again, another trickle started down his right leg. Pedro placed another small object next to the first. Joaquín simply whimpered as his life flowed down his legs. Pedro stabbed his knife into the stool, a silent message to Faruk.

Flames soon engulfed the village but the barn was left untouched. Family Pedro melted away into the desert, sadness filled their hearts.

Faruk could see the smoke in the distance, he was still a few hours away but he knew what it meant. Cursing his luck he ordered his men to slow their pace knowing it was already too late. Water in the desert would be scarce, more so for the horses, there was no need to force the pace any more so he relaxed. What now?

As they entered the village only one building remained untouched, a small barn. Dismounting from his horse Faruk approached the barn, he stopped at the door. Staring in he was met with the sight of a lifeless Joaquín hanging from a beam, a pool of blood covered a small stool and the floor below it. On the stool were two small objects which he recognised straight away. He felt sorry for Joaquín, he was a good agent. One of Faruk's men joined him by the door and asked if he should cut him down and retrieve the two gold coins.

Faruk said a silent prayer, "No, he has earned them, let him spend them in the afterlife." Faruk waved his man away and walked up to the lifeless body. He looked at the knife embedded in the stool. The message left by Pedro was clear and Faruk smiled. If only Pedro knew the truth, beware the viper Pedro. With a single but strong slice of his sword he cut Joaquín in half. The legs fell onto the stool and seemed to rejoin the two small objects perfectly.

The barn was the only thing left of Masti, it was left as a single tombstone in the desert.

SEA GODS

CHAPTER 3

Journey to Cyprus, Twelve ninety two

Marcell felt terrible, he tried to open his eyes but failed to do so, his world remained dark. His stomach felt like he had been retching all night. If he was dead, this was not what he imagined it would be. He tried again to open his eyes, with some success but the brightness forced them closed again. 'Maybe I am dead' he thought. What was that weird motion, side to side, up and down and pretty much all angles in between. Please make it stop.

His eyes flickered open again, this time staying open long enough for him to take in his surroundings. At least I'm not dead or if he was it looked very much like a cabin on a ship, a very nice comfortable cabin. A captain's cabin, I am the captain of a ship sailing through the afterlife, I do hope the ship's crew are gorgeous women with.

"Your awake then," said Charles.

Ok, maybe gorgeous women and one very annoying Charles. He quickly came to the only conclusion possible, he was not dead after all, and it just felt it. "So it would seem, though I feel like death warmed up."

"You very nearly were dead, if it wasn't for Maria we would have pushed you over the side yesterday."

"Yesterday! How long have I been out?"

Charles thought for a second "Including the first night it would be a day and a half. It's just past breakfast, I could get some for you if you like." Charles thought Marcell was about to throw up again so offered him the bucket.

"Think I'll skip breakfast if you don't mind." After a short time for his stomach to settle Marcell pushed on with the conversation, "So what happened, did I get injured in battle, am I a hero?"

"Not exactly, more like, err, how can I put this without injuring your pride, you collapsed before it all started. You were poisoned by one of Pedro's men, we're pretty sure he was actually working for Faruk. Maria sent word to Pedro so hopefully things went well for Pedro and his family,"

"Poisoned? How exactly?" His stupidity realised he cut Charles off before he could answer, "The wine, what an idiot I am."

"Glad you said that and not me."

Jacques entered the cabin looking rather angry, "Finally, your awake and about time too, you've been lying there too long. You're an idiot and I thought you were supposed to be the intelligent one."

Charles couldn't help himself, "that's exactly what he just said, the idiot bit." He thought about adding some more but Jacques look stopped him dead in his tracks, he sank back into his chair and waited.

A large wave hit the ship and Jacques grabbed the door to steady himself. "If

you ever disobey one of my orders in the future, you won't need to worry about someone poisoning you. as I will do it myself, understood.”

Marcell wasn't in the mood to argue so simply nodded.

“Ok, on your feet, you have some explaining to do and a really big thank you is owed to Maria for saving your life. You owe her big time and I have a feeling she will not let you forget in a hurry.”

So much for sympathy thought Marcell. Charles helped him up and he wished he hadn't bothered. His legs felt very unsteady and the motion of the ship only served to make things worse. ‘Perhaps being dead might have been a better option’ he thought. Owing a favour to Maria was of more concern to him, it would be a very big one no doubt and she would not forget.

Jacques led the way down to the ship's hold. The motion in the hold seemed slightly less so Marcell felt slightly better and a bit steadier on his feet. He never liked being onboard ship but he was never seasick. Today he just felt rough, very rough.

Maria was standing by a large crate that had been dragged to an open space on the deck. Thank you would have to wait, that was obvious, as Jacques temper didn't seem much better. Stopping by the crate he motioned towards it. Marcell wasn't sure if it was some way of letting his anger spill out or as a prompt to Marcell.

Jeremy was missing from the gathering, he had failed to find his sea legs spending most of the day and night lying down in his bunk. Although he ate regularly most of the time the birds following the ship seemed to eat more of it than he did, strangely enough, just after he had tried to eat it. He would rather face a hundred men in battle than travel on the high seas.

“So what's in this box that nearly got us all killed?”

“Grand Master Etienne said it must remain closed and safely hidden.” Marcell knew that wasn't going to calm Jacques so he continued. “I don't even know myself, I'm just following orders, like you are.”

Hoping the last three words would calm Jacques and make him see sense he waited.

“Charles, grab a crowbar and open this box”

Charles paused, he thought about reminding Jacques of the Grand Masters order's but thought better of it. Looking around he went in search of a crowbar.

Marcell was in a defiant mood now, he didn't like the Grand Masters orders being disobeyed. “Be it on your head Jacques, you were warned and there are two witness's.”

Maria thought things might spill over and Jacques was starting to go red in the face. Just in time Charles arrived back holding a crowbar.

“Open it, NOW.” Ordered Jacques.

It didn't take much opening and as Charles slid the top off all stared in wonder at the contents. Marcell and Jacques knew immediately what they were. Charles had an inkling and Maria simply thought they looked superb.

It seemed an age, each taking in the view, alone with their thoughts. It was Marcell who spoke first. “Seal it back up Charles and then we'll move it back to where it should be stored and that's where it stays.”

Jacques said nothing at first, he simply watched the men seal the crate and push it back to accompany the other crates.

“Marcell, please accept my apologies, like you I disobeyed orders and now I must pay the price, I hope our friendship hasn't suffered as a result.”

Marcell stared at Jacques, “accepted.” Marcell was an accomplished liar and knew how to hide it well. With that they shook hands. Marcell knew things would never be the same, something about Jacques had changed. He would still be by his side but would be more watchful from now on.

Something wasn't right, he could feel it in the pit of his stomach. Perhaps it was his aching stomach or something more, he couldn't tell but he would be more on his guard from now on. Maria also sensed it, she was trained to look for deceit and she had just witnessed it firsthand, from both men.

Jacques and Charles left the hold first and as Maria went past Marcell he gently grabbed her arm. Probably not the best thing to do with Maria but the gentleness of his touch was sufficient for Maria to know it was not an aggressive move. As she turned towards him he hugged her and sobbed. Instinctively she held him closer. He whispered in her ear.

“Thank you, I owe you my life and it is yours forever”

Maria gave him a tighter hug then kissed him on the cheek. “Next time I let you die, you were stupid.”

Marcell couldn't or even dare argue with that, so he climbed the stairs topside. Maria watched him go, then turned to the crate. Why were those items so important that two friends would become enemies? A bond that seemed unbreakable had been shattered.

She made it her mission to find out what they were and something else started to gnaw at her, a feeling she hadn't had before and it unsettled her. Perhaps it was just the waves.

Jacques was talking to the ship's Captain when she exited the hold. Charles and Marcell had gone below again, it seems Marcell had regained his appetite.

Charles relayed the boxes contents to Jeremy. “So, all this I'm suffering is just for that.” He managed to whisper out, his voice hoarse from the constant sickness.

“Jeremy, they were magnificent, they seemed to have a great power, one day you will see and I will say, 'I told you so'.”

He was very surprised at the news Jacques and Marcell had nearly come to blows. “ I thought those two were joined at the hip, I guess friendship's are a brittle thing at best.”

“Drink plenty of water, it will replenish what you give to the birds”

“Yes oh great one!” muttered Jeremy “your worse than Maria.”

“I heard that.” Charles said as he turned to go topside, on reaching the stairs he turned. “Jeremy who? I have only ever known you as Jeremy. Like you we are both junior members.”

“Jeremy Du Flitte”

With a look of amazement Charles spoke, “ You're not related to the Paris Du Flitte's are you”

“Yes I am. My uncle is Henrie Du Flitte”

“And you call me oh great one, I feel very lowly now,” and with that he turned to climb the stairs but paused.

“Charles Throxted, from err Throxted at your service. My father is Lord Throxted”

“Throxted, not somewhere I have heard of, which part of France would it be

in”

“England actually, it's sort of near London if you don't mind a very long carriage drive.” Knowing that the rest of any description would mean very little to Jeremy, Charles left it at that.

“Names and family mean nothing to me Charles, you are my equal but more importantly, you are my friend and I value that more than any title. I have known too many men who rely on their title and will stab you in the back without thinking about it. Your French is excellent Charles, I would not have known you were English.”

“My father sent me away to live with my aunt in La Rochelle when I was ten. I liked it so much I decided to stay, much to my father's disapproval. When he found out I had joined the Order he disowned me.”

Jeremy reached for the bucket and Charles thought it was time to go up top. A member of the French aristocracy needed privacy in such moments.

“Any signs we are being followed,” Jacques asked the Captain.

“Lookout's haven't reported anything so I think we out ran them. With a fair wind we will be in Cyprus within three or four days.”

“Keep a lookout ahead too, they might try to cut us off from Tyr or Acre.”

“We're too far out from the coast to be seen, I think we are safe but I will do as you ask, I will also change course and head off shore even more.”

Evening meal was a simple affair. It seems being on a ship meant most meals involved a fish of some sorts. The uneasy truce between Jacques and Marcell was holding, one might say, getting back to normal.

Maria had done a great job with the food, even the ship's chef was impressed and thankful for a night off. A special meal had been prepared for Jeremy, she hoped it would settle his stomach but didn't hold out much hope.

Charles still couldn't believe a member of the French aristocracy was on the same ship as him. He did wonder who else knew, his guess was no one and if Jeremy was ok with that, then so was Charles. A member of the aristocracy, my friend, he still couldn't believe it and neither would his father when he told him.

With the evening meal finished Maria made her excuse to leave and went topside. The transition from day to night was always her favourite time and tonight's sunset didn't let her down. Marcell leaned on the railing next to her. Waves broke around the bow and it sounded wonderful to her, a simple sound but she felt at peace.

Marcell broke the moment first. “Some say that a red sky at night is a good sign.”

Maria replied, “Some say it means your barn is on fire.”

Both smiled, Marcell even chuckled and just marvelled at the setting sun. As darkness took over the stars seemed very bright and much closer. A ribbon of colour splashed across the night's sky, more lights than one could count. Maria and Marcell didn't speak for an hour or so, they just stared at the night sky. Maria was the first to notice a small light on the horizon.

“Think we may have company.”

Marcell couldn't see anything but trusted Maria completely. “I'll warn the others.”

Soon every man and woman on board were poised for action. A whisper came down from the Captain, “ drop the sails.”

No one questioned the order but the knights couldn't work out what the game was, Maria knew of course. The ship came to a stop and all was quiet, even the rats and Jeremy's stomach seemed to go quiet, it just drifted with the flow. Marcell could now see the light, as it grew stronger.

The other ship made no attempt to alter its course, it carried on its merry way passing a few hundred feet in front of them and pretty soon started to fade again. It seems their crew was not keen with fish being on the menu every night as well.

"A transport ship is my guess," the Captain said to Jacques. "We'll give it a little longer and then hoist the sails again."

"Why come to a dead stop?" enquired Jacques.

"A ship makes a lot of noise when under sail, the sails themselves flap around in the wind and the hull makes more noise than you can imagine. Coming to a dead stop during the night is a trick I learned when avoiding those who wanted to collect their taxes or worse, steal your cargo and dispose of your crew."

The Captain was now turning his attention elsewhere, "We'll keep the crew on station for a little longer but if you all want to turn in for the night then now would be a good time. The sea's getting into a funny mood so maybe a storm is approaching, hopefully we can out run it."

"Wake me if you need us or spot any trouble."

With the motion of the ship and his acute tiredness Jacques was soon asleep. Marcell took a little longer, he had more than his fair share of sleep lately and eventually he drifted off. Charles was out like a light when his head hit the pillow.

Maria mused over the day's events before eventually turning over. Whispering she said, "night Marcell," but no reply was heard. She had thought him still awake but he had beaten her to it.

"He's already asleep," whispered Jeremy.

"How are you feeling?" she enquired.

"Like I've been trampled over by a few hundred horse's."

"Not too long now before dry land so just keep up with the water."

"Thanks for the special food, I really appreciate it."

"Will you two keep quiet, some of us are trying to sleep."

"If you don't mind your tongue Marcell you won't need to try."

Maria was greeted by silence so decided to join them, slowly drifting off to sleep. The ship seemed to be unsettled as if sensing bad times ahead.

Marcell had less trouble opening his eyes this time, the light coming in from the cracks in the deck was strong, he guessed it was well past dawn. Quietly he slipped past Jacques, Charles and Jeremy who were all snoring loudly. Maria had already gone topside.

As his head drew level with the decks the sunlight jabbed at his eyes. Once on deck he saw angry clouds off to the side of the ship. Out of nowhere Maria was standing by his side. "Don't like the look of those, they have been getting nearer for some time."

"Will you stop doing that."

"What?"

"Sneaking up on me, it's very unnerving."

"Relax, if I wanted you dead you wouldn't even know you were dead."

Marcell thought about it for a while, "Let's hope I always hear you then. I guess you couldn't sleep either."

“ I have heard a field full of angry bulls make less noise than those three. I did think about slitting their throats but I would only have had to clean up the mess.”

“Are you always so dangerous?”

“This is my good side.” she said with a dazzling smile.

“ Now I have to remember not to get you angry and to hear you sneaking up.”

“And never complain about my cooking.”

“No chance of that ever happening.”

Maria was happy people liked her cooking. The clouds drew nearer and the sun disappeared behind the clouds, an ominous darkness started to approach. Jacques bumped past Maria and ignored Marcell on his way to the Captain who was looking at the approaching clouds.

“Trouble?” he asked.

“Think we may just catch the edge of it, will still be rough but I hope we'll be fine. Our friends of last night might not have feared so well is my guess. Let's pray they made it.”

As the waves started to splash over the ship and with the wind picking up the Captain sought out Jacques.

“ I think it would be best if you and your men stayed below decks, anyone disappearing over the side will be gone forever. If you could check the cargo and tighten everything down, we don't want the cargo to shift and unbalance the ship.”

“You're the master on this ship so what you say is final.” With that Jacques rounded up any of his men on deck and told them to go below. He knew Maria could handle things so he left her to make her own mind up.

She chose to join the men as Jeremy might need her. Charles was not keen on being below decks in a storm, the thought of being trapped in a sinking ship didn't sit well with him.

“I think the Captain knows best and Pedro would have sought out his best Captain for us.” Jacques words seem to settle Charles so they all set about securing the cargo. Jacques checked on his box. A fight with Marcell was looming but he needed it to be the right time and on his terms.

As the hatches were secured Charles looked more agitated, Jacques thought he heard him praying as he sat next to Jeremy. To Jeremy the storm was different, perhaps his fear helped him to forget about his seasickness.

Charles had never heard a ship creak so much. Twice they had to go and re-secure the cargo. Water seemed to flood in at alarming rate but in reality the hatches held firm and the amount of water was very small. Even the rats looked calm.

Maria looked over at Jeremy who was smiling for the first time since they departed. ‘I think he has found his sea legs at last’ she thought. Just then a large wave caught the ship and it lurched over to one side before righting itself. All the knights looked visibly shocked, she just laughed. “A rogue wave she shouted, we'll be fine.” After many hours the hatches eventually slid open and the light streamed in.

“Captain says it's ok to come out if you want.”

Charles ascended faster than a whip being cracked. The fresh air washed over him, he looked up and said, “thank you.” The angry clouds could still be seen in the distance but were breaking up fast.

The Captain decided to explain to Jacques, though he was not even sure if Jacques

wanted to know, “always happens, the storm hits the land and simply vanishes. Everyone ok below?”

“Yes, we are fine, had to secure the cargo twice but no worries, apart from that wave.”

“Rogue waves,” said the Captain as he contorted his face. “Never see them coming and can sink a ship just like that, we were lucky, the sea gods left us alone. I fear that cargo ship may not have been so.”

The cargo ship was never seen again, the sea gods had claimed it for their own. The captain pointed towards the bow, “You may be more interested with that sight over there.”

Land was in sight. Journeys end thought Jacques, he just hoped it was the right end. It wasn't long before the ship changed course slightly.

“Storm must have blown us off course but I would recognise that island any day.” Everyone was on deck, all looking at the island which was getting bigger by the second. Jeremy however was wandering around the deck. As he passed the crowded bow Maria asked if he was ok.

“Never felt better.”

‘Definitely found his sea legs at last’ thought Maria.

The ship seemed to guide itself to the harbour as if it knew where it was going. Within minutes the crew had tied her up and a large plank had been placed between ship and shore. The ship could finally rest for a while her job done for another trip. Many would follow and to places she had not been for a very long time but she was going home.

“Charles, Jeremy, make sure our belongings and cargo stay aboard, Marcell you are with me.” Jacques started to march towards the gangplank. Maria had already departed as soon as the plank rested on the ship, she had business to attend and news she wanted to hear.

The harbour was bustling with seamen and land lovers alike. Both ensuring cargos were off loaded and loaded. Jacques and Marcell slipped through the crowd hoping no one would notice them. They were wrong.

Turning into a small narrow street they started the climb up the hill away from the harbour. Merchant traders and alehouses gave way to housing. Both men knew where they were going and neither said anything. Neither wanted to. Walking up a more affluent street they suddenly ducked to their left and entered the grounds of a substantial building through two iron gates which were already open. Jacques could never remember an occasion when they had ever been closed.

Well kept lawns with a gravel path that arched around them towards the grand white building. They didn't even get chance to knock before the heavy door opened.

“Welcome master Jacques,” said a familiar voice.

“You still here, I would have thought you would have retired from this years ago.”

“I have retired, it's my day off. You are expected.”

Knocking on an oak door Jacques and Marcell waited.

“No need to knock.” Boomed a voice from behind the door.

Pushing open the door Jacques bounded in, “Pierre it's been such a long time and you look, errr, heavier.”

“Too many official dinners can do that to a man as you are about to find out.”

Jacques visibly sighed, "Please tell me you haven't Pierre."

"Sorry, no choice in the matter, tonight at eight and no excuses. It's not for you, we have another guest of equal rank. He arrived two days ago and says he is looking forward to meeting up with you again."

"Who?"

Ignoring Jacques question the Master of Cyprus carried on, "So give me the details, how bad are things over there?" The meeting went on for some time and the Master of Cyprus grew gloomier by the minute.

"We should make plans to return, retake the holy lands," he said boldly.

Jacques thought for a second. "In my view it would be a waste of men and men are something we are short of, we should concentrate our efforts in our homelands."

"You mean we just give up?"

"They are too strong Pierre, there are too many of them and we are so few."

With a groan the Master reluctantly agreed. "Perhaps we can gather more men but I fear that will take some time. Talking of which it's getting on and don't be late." Jacques rolled his eyes and with that the meeting ended.

"I'll meet you back at the ship in the morning, if you make it. I have people to see."

"Very well Marcell but take great care, this town has changed, there are eyes and ears everywhere."

"I noticed that too, try not to get too drunk. If you do, stop in the residence. I don't fancy mounting a rescue mission, though Maria is a one woman rescue team."

"No arguments from me on that one."

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Marcell's next meeting place was far less opulent. Two burly men guarded the door and refused Marcel entrance. "Tell them Fernando is here to collect what I am owed."

One of the guards puffed himself up and tried to look intimidating, "Fernando who?"

Marcell looked up at the guard, "Just Fernando and if you don't want your balls serving up on a plate I would hurry."

The other guard smiled, his friend didn't fancy what was on offer so departed to find the owner.

"Fernando my friend where have you been, I have waited for your return."

"Like hell you have, I want paying and I want it now."

"This way, let's talk about it in the back room, I'm sure we can come to some arrangement."

As the door closed one of the guards said "Never seen the boss like that before, must owe Fernando a lot of money."

"If you fancy living I would keep your mouth shut too."

Nodding in acknowledgement he started his usual and annoying behaviour, looking up the street, looking down the street, looking up the street and looking down the street.

A large room greeted Marcell, much more opulent than anything in the

surrounding area. A large desk covered in parchment's occupied its middle, a very comfortable chair behind it. Marcell looked at the chair.

"You're getting soft in your old age."

"Perhaps but it helps with the pain in the rear."

"Still suffering?"

"Some days it hardly bothers me, other days it bleeds but I manage. So Marcell what news? Just the juicy bits if you would, leave out the boring stuff."

"The items are safely here. We all know what's in the box, Jacques made us open it. I advised against it but was over ruled." Pedro's brother mulled things over. He had not heard from his younger brother for some time and feared the worse.

"Maria did send word to Pedro so hopefully they were well prepared and will join us soon," Marcell added in an effort to help Raol. Raol's mood seemed to lighten on the news, sitting back in his chair he briefed Marcell.

"The Grand Master will not be pleased Jacques disobeyed his orders. From what I understand Acre is under siege and may well have been taken by now. The enemy forces outnumber us many times over and the city walls will be breached eventually. It was a difficult task for us to make our way to Tyr, several times we had to divert around the enemy scouts. It was thought best to divide our forces. We arrived before Pedro but it was decided not to wait, our mission is too important."

Marcell wasn't surprised, it was for that very reason the items were moved. The Grand Master knew the attack would be coming so started to make plans months before he expected it. Many Templar ships had departed Acre filled with whatever valuables they could squeeze in, the other Orders had done the same.

"Limassol is probably the wealthiest city in the Middle East at the moment and definitely the least secure. Pirates and thieves are having a good season. We need to move the items to a more secure location for a few weeks. I suggest the castle at Kolossi it's our strongest location."

Marcell agreed. "We just have to convince Jacques."

"Leave that to me, I'll be seeing him at the official dinner for a special guest who arrived two days ago."

"A special guest, who might that be?"

"Gerarde Von Kreuziger"

"You mean he's alive!" Marcell said in an agitated voice.

"Of course he is, the Grand Master made sure of it. You seemed shocked and confused my friend."

"That would be an understatement Raol, Jacques will kill him as soon as he sees him. Jacques thinks of him as a traitor and come to think of it, so do I." The last three words seemed to exit Marcell's mouth in slow motion. "You said, the Grand Master made sure of it, I'm not following."

Raol smiled, "Ah! The master spy has been deceived by his own master, now that has to be a first. Gerarde is one of us and I have bad news for you. Jacques is a member of the Obsidian Order"

If Marcell hadn't been seated he would have fallen over, "Now you're making fun of me Raol and it's not very funny."

"Deadly serious my friend, we've known for some time, we've been playing Jacques like a guitar, he dances to whatever tune we play."

Marcell was struggling to keep up so played for time whilst his head made sense of what he had just been told, “and the others”

“Charles and Jeremy are with us, as for Maria I doubt you need to ask.”

If there was one person he knew he could trust that was Maria. As for Charles and Jeremy, neither of them had given him any reason to doubt them. Jacques a traitor to the Order, now that would take some getting used to. Maybe that explained why Jacques was so intent on seeing the items, now it sort of made some sense.

“I would not underestimate Jacques, he's a very worthy warrior. So where do we go from here Raol?”

“I expect, god willing, Pedro to arrive shortly with some more ship's, four maybe five. Once they have resupplied they will carry on their journey back to the home world, stopping at a few places en route. As you have seen the items we must expect Jacques to send them to his preferred location, the Templar Keep in Paris.” Raol paused as he went through the plan in his head.

“All the items will be with him in France as he will be the next Grand Master. We however want them split up into our eight boxes. His fake boxes will be transferred to Paris and you will be with him all the way. The real boxes will be scattered around the known world, we have three locations already in mind and are searching for a safe forth.” Satisfied with the plan Raol stopped, Marcell took his chance.

“Gerarde is superior to Jacques, so, he should be Grand Master when the time comes and Jacques will no doubt check the content of his boxes.” Marcell was starting to see the plan.

“Very true but when the time comes Gerarde will defer to Jacques. If things go badly at Acre, as we expect it will, that time will come very soon, It's important we keep Jacques under control and that's why he will be Grand Master. That's where you come in my friend.”

“Thanks for that, something to look forward too.”

“Sorry my friend but it's necessary. Charles and Jeremy will accompany our boxes and whilst en route will be told the truth. Maria will accompany you and Jacques on your journey to France.”

“Why Maria? She should go with the others.”

“Someone has to watch your back and I'm sure you agree she is very capable. Should Jacques need removing she will do the job without question.”

“One woman I really don't want to upset.”

“It will be your job to ensure Jacques never looks in his boxes until they arrive in France as they are empty. The Grand Master had replicas made and these will eventually be the ones in his boxes, they are not perfect but will pass a casual glance. unfortunately they are in France already and will need to be put in place at the appropriate time. I'm sure you can manage that.”

“No problem I'll convince him they need to be moved in a less obvious way, he knows I can do that with ease so he shouldn't question that.”

Raol continued. “Should he become a problem Maria has her orders to remove him. Gerarde will take over but we need the Obsidian Order to think their man is firmly in charge so we need him guided and you are his guide.”

“This is getting better the more I hear. And, do I tell him when to shit?”

Before Raol could answer Maria entered from a side room, “I hope the plan

won't be a problem with you Marcell.” She had obviously been listening in the next room.

Marcell thought for while before answering. “It's a lot to take in but it does make sense and explains a lot of Jacques's behaviour. I also want to walk out of here in one piece so yes I'm in with the plan.”

“I'm glad you're with us Marcell, it would be a pity to cut that nice neck of yours.” Marcell could see the smile in her words, he liked her smile, unless it was the other smile, the one followed by death. Raol broke Marcell's thoughts.

“Well, we all have work to do so I suggest we get to it.”

“One question. If you suspect Jacques will not want to separate the items, he will want to be there when they are placed into their boxes. How are we going to get around that?”

“I'm sure you can think of something Marcell,” Maria said with one of her disarming smiles. Marcell concluded he didn't like those smiles, he was useless against them.

“Well at least I get the easy job, so will this be the last time we meet Raol?”

“I hope not, you have my sister going with you and I would like to see her regularly, in our sunny lands I might add, not in dreary Paris.”

As Marcell went through the door he yelled, “IF I DON'T GET PAID BY TOMORROW IT WILL BE THE LAST DAY YOU EVER SEE.”

The guards on the inside of the large door leading to the street couldn't move fast enough. If someone could shout like that at the boss, he wasn't someone you dared to cross.

The two guards outside also heard Marcell's comments and gave him a wide berth. Marcell strode through the open door as though he owned the world. Both sets of guards exchanged looks, not one of them said a word, they just shrugged.

Marcell's head was spinning all the way back to the ship. He had a lot to arrange and so little time, just the way he liked it.

“Do you think he will play by the rules?” asked Raol

“Marcell is one person I will never doubt”

“Ah! My little sister has a soft spot for Marcell I think.”

“If you want to keep thinking I would not say such things again,” running her hand across her neck as she did so.

“I like Marcell too, he's as devious as all of us, he would fit into our family very well.” The words were not lost on Maria.

A BOLT IN THE NIGHT

CHAPTER 4

Cyprus 1292

As Marcell returned to the ship his mind was racing from problem to problem. Sometimes his mind was clouded by a spectre he never imagined. He had heard of the Obsidian Order but now it was confirmed and Jacques was working for them. He had known Raol for many, many years and not once had he told him a lie and the presence of Maria only confirmed it.

How to exchange the boxes would be a more substantial challenge. Charles and Jeremy were true knights, loyal to their master and ready to die for their master. Not a good combination and somehow he had to break that obedience.

Charles and Jeremy needed to cross the seas and end up in Spain. They had to believe they were carrying out Jacques's orders and the boxes were the fake ones even though they were the real ones. In Marcell's favour was the fact that the boxes had not yet been seen by anyone. He needed two sets of identical boxes, eight in total and he needed them fast. He knew just the man but it wouldn't come cheap, these things never did.

Jacques also returned to the ship, much earlier than Marcell. He wasn't surprised at this, as he knew Marcell would be busy with his contacts. Marcell needed to keep this lifeline well and truly operational so he gave Marcell lots of leeway. Marcell of course took full advantage of this. As a knight he was good but as a spy and fixer, he was the best.

Jacques wasn't looking forward to the dinner at the Masters residence. It would be a boring and predictable affair, they always were. Some drinks to ease the pain, then a meal followed by more drinks. The Order was supposed to be forbidden from alcohol and lavish dinners but the rules were easily broken. Everyone knew it happened but turned a blind eye.

Young knights simply looked forward to their turn at the top table, assuming they lived long enough. The best time to join the order was after one crusade and before the next. Many years could pass and promotion could be swift but best of all, you didn't have to die.

To Jacques surprise a new set of clothes had been delivered to the ship not long after they had docked. His fate was sealed, he had to attend so reluctantly dressed in his new clothes. He made a point of throwing his old and stained cloak over the top. He still retained some power and he was keen to show it.

Before departing he called a meeting. Marcell was surprised, as he wasn't expecting anything until tomorrow. Charles and Jeremy just sat and waited, it's what junior knights did best.

"I don't have much time as I'm sure you're aware I have a dinner to attend." Nobody looked shocked so Jacques continued. "We have a change of plan." Now all ears pricked up.

“Apparently Grand Master Étienne has been busy long before we arrived. The items will now be split into four boxes, actually that should be eight boxes, real and decoy.” Marcell couldn't believe either his luck or misfortune.

This was all new to him, it seemed the Grand Master would only trust him so far. Had Jacques known all along or had the Grand Master used his power to ensure this plan would be divulged to Jacques when in Cyprus? Just how close was Raol to the Grand Master? He would find out in due course, he needed to know who told the truth. From this day forward he would be calling the shots or at least that was his plan.

“Charles and Jeremy, you are to take four boxes courtesy of Pedro's ship's to various locations which I shall brief you on tomorrow. Marcell, Maria and myself will initially sail with the combined fleet and then overland to Paris with the real items. A heavy guard will accompany both parties to ensure they get to where they belong.” Jacques was fidgeting with his new clothes, they were not his own and he didn't like it.

“We are hoping the sight of a large fleet departing will convince those that wish to steal the items to follow this fleet. Eventually we will go our separate ways, Pedro and the Templar fleet will depart west. Maria, Marcell and myself will depart north in a Templar vessel, we hope they will ignore us as a single ship must be a decoy. Jeremy, be prepared for attack at any opportunity. It may not come as they have little time to muster their forces but we must be prepared.”

Turning to Marcell he continued, “I assume you can arrange all that for me and it needs to be quick. I have been informed Pedro's small fleet has been sighted and will hold just outside of port tonight. Re-supply must be done via small boats and as quickly as possible.” Jacques looked agitated again but continued.

“Maria, I'm sure you would like to visit your family so please make your own arrangements and be back before midday. Try not to kill anyone.” He hoped the last bit would sink in.

“Ok, enough for tonight as time is short for me, we'll meet again midday tomorrow where I will give you a more detailed plan. I'm late and I'm guessing Maria and Marcell want to get going as soon as possible. Jeremy, no one comes on this ship unless the Captain says so, or it's one of us, is that clear?”

Jeremy nodded as did Charles, he knew it was his duty as well even though he wasn't mentioned, Jeremy being the more senior. Four men were waiting on the dockside to escort Jacques. Jacques was hesitant at first until Jeremy spoke up, “It's ok, I know them all from Acre, pretty good bodyguards, obviously not as good as Charles and me.”

“I never doubted that for a second, they would have to be the best to outshine you two.” With that Jacques departed, his tatty cloak fluttering behind him.

“Something's going on.” Charles said to no one in particular. Marcell agreed and Maria was already missing. Marcell sat on a nearby barrel, his head spinning with ideas, some good, a lot bad. He didn't like being left in the dark but this latest twist played to his advantage. The words Jacques had spoken could well have come from the mouth of Raol. The plan was nearly identical. Another visit to Raol was needed but he knew Raol wouldn't be there, tonight's dinner would see to that.

Before he could plan some more a small cart clattered down the cobbled dock. A grumpy old man hunched over the reins as the cart came to rest. “Looking for someone called Fernando.”

“Who wants him?”

“I do, are you deaf.” Marcell leaned over the ship's rail and looked at the old man.

“I thought you would be dead by now, you were just about hanging on last time I was here.”

“Any more of your cheek lad and you'll be dead. Now get down here and help with this lot so I can get back to my bed and that young wench waiting for me.”

“Now you are dreaming old man but I'm glad you are still alive and kicking my friend.”

The two men hugged. The old man whispered as they hugged.

“Been a long time and watch you backs, the whole world wants what you have.”

“Does anyone in this rat's nest not know what we have?”

“Just me.” he said with more than a fair share of sarcasm.

As the last of the eight boxes were being transferred below the old man and Marcell descended the plank leading to the port side. “I don't like ship's Fernando, never have so I'll stay on dry land if that's ok with you.” Once again they hugged as the old man departed, again he whispered. “They are as identical as I can make them, four have the mark and four don't, I'm sure you can work out which.”

“You're a genius and I shall miss you, keep safe and enjoy your wench.”

Marcell helped his friend onto the cart and as it clattered back down the port side he knew the wench would be safe tonight. His friend was only a matter of months from departing to the other world. His breathing was tight and his chest rattled. A true master carpenter would soon be no more.

Marcell descended into the hold. It was either luck or someone knew the plan long before he did. Examining the boxes he soon identified his four boxes. Opening all eight he was in for another change of plan that even he didn't expect. There was a true master at work and he knew who that was, the Grand Master himself. He could hear the words now.

“DON'T LET APPEARANCES AND ACTIONS FOOL YOU, NOT EVER, UNDERSTOOD.”

Marcell had already closely examined the contents. They were very good but the fine quality was missing. He could spot the difference if he closely examined them but most people wouldn't be able to tell them apart. Marcell was trained to look for forgery but even he had to admit, they were good. He wanted to know who was pulling the strings.

The two plans were similar, too similar for his liking. Boxes arrived without being ordered. Raol said nothing about them nor did Jacques so both were as much in the dark as he was. Moving the fake boxes to the Templar ship would be child's play and for that he was grateful. Silently he thanked his previous master, the planning was exquisite down to the finest detail. The Grand Master had out played everyone.

Poking his head out of the hatch Marcell looked for the other two knights.

“Charles, Jeremy make sure everyone is on full alert then get down here we have work to do.”

Shortly after Jeremy and Charles descended the stairs into the hold. “Everyone has got their eyes peeled, are you expecting trouble?”

“Always,” he pointed at the eight crates.

“Ah! I can see why.” murmured Charles “don't recall signing on to baby sit this lot, they look as good as the original ones. Someone has been busy.”

“Ok, unpack the originals into those crates and then seal them up. Stack them over there in two piles. Do remember which is which else Jacques will have all our balls roasting over a hot fire.”

“Oh! On your way up take the old box with you I have some use for that. Leave it where it can just about be seen but nothing obvious. It will be going to Castle Kolossi tomorrow under guard.” Neither man dared question Marcell nor question his plans. He was the master at being devious and there was obviously a very good reason an empty box would be going to Castle Kolossi. Though neither man could work it out.

Marcell made short work of switching the boxes, ensuring they were in the exactly the same places and in the same order. Charles had already proven his observational skills before, he will make a good spy but would need to learn on the job.

He would brief Raol tomorrow on the training of Charles. He would need to be fully trained by the time they reached Spain. If anyone could do it, it was Raol but it would need Charles to be at his best. Marcell prowled around the deck for a few minutes checking everyone looked alert, kicking those who showed signs of flagging. Passing his two knights he said, “Captain's cabin, now.”

As he entered the cabin Marcell seated himself around the Captain's chart table with the other three men. Soon they were deep in conversation, Charles looked the most worried and the thought of being trained by Raol didn't sit too easy with him. Jeremy came a close second. Not only would Raol train him, he would have to learn Portuguese.

Charles was already fluent in Spanish so he breathed a sigh of relieve. There was a lot to take in from the briefing and the danger was becoming obvious to all of them. Even the captain knew the dangers, he was just glad there were other ships sailing with him. Pedro was a canny tactician and it may well be needed on the voyage.

Finally Marcell added, “Jeremy, take the four real boxes over to the Mirage. Don't make it obvious, hide them inside a barrel, preferably an empty one, with a few others and then bring some back to make it look like a swap. Haggle a bit at the other end just in case anyone is watching. Take a couple of the crew to help you out.”

“What does Jacques think of all this?” asked Jeremy

“I'll let you know when I tell him.” Marcell stood up and thanked the Captain for the use of his cabin. “I have work to do so will not be back until the morning, keep guard and keep everyone on their toes.”

Before the two knights could say a word the Captain said proudly “my men are professionals fear not master Marcell.”

“Never doubted for a second, it's these two you have to keep an eye on.” Marcell departed the ship. Where would Stevano be this time of night? Only one place that could be, I do hope she wouldn't mind.

Jacques felt somewhat uncomfortable being escorted, he was used to being his own man. There was something afoot and he didn't like it very much. As they rounded the gravel path the front door opened. A familiar face greeted him.

“Another day off I see.”

“Can't have you lot getting drunk and doing silly things without someone to watch over you.”

“No drinking for me tonight, work to do in the morning.” Jacques handed his tattered cloak to a servant and proceeded to the meeting room.

“All swords to be left here as well sir.”

“Oh yes, sorry I forgot.” Jacques removed his sword as was normal for these events.

Passing the grand staircase to his left he could see the dim lights of the hall down the passage ahead. Jacques was surprised to see Raol just ahead of him and standing in a doorway waiting. Jacques held out his hand to greet Raol.

“Guess they let anyone attend these dinners now.”

“At least I live here now and again, what's your excuse? Great to see you again Jacques. It looks like we have a lot of work over the next few days.”

“So it would seem, I take it you are behind most of the planning. Grand Master Etienne always did have a soft spot for you.”

“He is truly a great man and I shall miss him.”

The look on Jacques's face said it all. “You mean!”

“Word came through that Acre has fallen but keep it to yourself for now.” Before Raol could say any more a voice boomed.

“Come on you two the rest are waiting and our special guest is about to make his entrance.”

‘Some boring old big wig no doubt’ thought Jacques. Raol kept his thoughts on the job at hand.

All the knights took their seats, one remained unfilled at the head of the table immediately to Jacques's left. The room was dimly lit as normal, banners were in place, Mr Vice seated at the foot of the table and his banner rolled up. Jacques was just about to question one of the banners when the special guest was announced.

“Gentlemen please stand for tonight's guest.”

All the knights plus guests stood and waited, Jacques stood but his gaze was still transfixed on the banner to his left. What the?

“I give you Gerarde Von Kreuziger.”

Jacques instinctively went for his missing sword, but as he did Raol grabbed his right arm so quickly no one noticed Jacques movement. All were peering at the open door as Gerarde walked in. Jacques couldn't move his right arm so strong was Raol's grip. As Raol released his grip Jacques instinctively knew now was not the time, so waited like all the rest. His resentment and bitterness climbed by the second.

“Thank you gentlemen, I am honoured, please be seated.”

Jacques was reluctant to sit and gazed straight into the eyes of Gerarde. “Managed to survive I see.” growled Jacques

“We shall talk later my friend.” Jacques was about to jump across the table when he felt Raol pull him down to his seat.

“Jacques let the man sit down he must be tired from his journey.”

As Jacques hit his seat very firmly a side door opened and a small man scurried in. Bowing to the seated knights he then made his way over to the Master of Cyprus and whispered into his ear. The Master looked visibly shocked. Jacques knew what had been whispered. The Master stood up.

“Gentlemen it is with great regret that tonight's dinner will be cancelled. Acre has fallen and the Grand Master has been killed. It is reported that all the knights fought with extreme bravery and none survived.” Sad and angry faces looked at him in equal numbers.

“Rather than be captured the Grand Master who was heavily wounded jumped from the city walls into the sea. As he was in full armour he went to the bottom like a stone thereby denying the horde their chance to recover and desecrate his body.”

If someone had dropped a pin it would have sounded like a church bell. It was Gerarde who broke the silence. “I would ask that all knights remain seated and if honoured guests would please retire to the reception room.”

Chairs scuffled backwards as the guests retired. Raol placed his hand on Jacques shoulder as he left as if trying to steady himself. Jacques knew what it meant, be patient. The large double doors closed as the last guest exited and the silence still remained. Everyone wanted to talk about the news but not a soul dared too.

Gerarde continued. “It is indeed very sad news and one that we will mourn in the correct manner but procedures need to be followed. As is the custom of the Order we must never be without a Grand Master. I nominate Jacques De Molay.”

This numbed even Jacques, as all the heads looked his way. Eventually he stood, somewhat unsteady but he hid it well. He hesitated before finding his voice. “I think you forget the order of things, you are next in line Gerarde.”

“Very true Jacques but you will be a better Grand Master than I. I can think of no other who will do a better job, the Order will be safe in your hands.”

“I second the nomination,” a familiar voice shouted.

Jacques looked across the table at his friend Geoffroi De Charny. Who grinned back. Each knight in turn stood and shouted “I also.” The last in turn was Mister Vice at the foot of the table. Not knowing if he should join in or not he stood up proudly and said, “I also, even if I shouldn't.”

The room burst into laughter and that was the end of the nominations. Jacques saw something whiz past him, it took a few seconds to realise what it was. By that time Gerarde was already staggering backwards holding his chest, blood oozing from where the crossbow bolt had struck him.

The rest of the room was slowly realising what was happening. Jacques reached out to Gerarde who by now was collapsing backwards. Some of the knights looked towards the large double doors, one was very slightly ajar. By the time the first knight reached the end of the corridor the attacker had already fled into the night through the open front door. A body lay slumped against the wall inside the open door.

A young knight came running into the dining room. He paused as he looked down at the now dead body of Gerarde. “Gone Grand Master, fled into the night before we could even give chase. Antonio is dead too.”

Jacques raced to the front door, his friend Antonio lay slumped against the wall in a pool of blood, his throat cut from ear to ear. Jacques was visibly shaken. “Antonio you fool, you should have been at home enjoying your retirement not here, not tonight.”

Eventually Jacques walked back down the corridor to the dining room. Sorrow filled his heart and vengeance filled his head. Two knights were staring at a note

pinned to the door. It was written in Arabic but Jacques understood its words.

'TONIGHT ANOTHER GRAND MASTER JOINS ETIENNE THE FOOLISH'

Geoffroi looked at Jacques "Seems they mistook Gerarde for the next Grand Master, you were lucky my friend." Raol thought it safe to join Jacques, most of the knights knew him well so no one questioned why he should be there. Jacques looked at Raol who shrugged.

"I will do my best to find out but I fear we have a professional on the loose. No one is safe and once they know they did not get their intended target they will try again. We need to fight fire with fire." Jacques knew what that meant but kept quiet.

"The main gates, close them now and no one gets in or out without a good reason. Two knights outside the front door, things will be changing now. We have become too soft in Cyprus. The Order will be avenged."

Jacques knew he was playing to the crowd. If there was a traitor in their midst he wanted them to pass the message back to his master. Jacques strolled into the dining room, a new swagger about him. He needed all around to see he was now in charge. Bending down next to Gerarde he took the knights lifeless hand. "Rest well my friend, you have fought many battles and shall be avenged." The words were difficult to say but everyone needed to hear them.

Turning to the Master of Cyprus, Jacques issued his orders. The body of Gerarde would be returned to his family, the Teutonic Knights would give him the correct and well deserved funeral a knight of his standing deserved.

Jacques headed for the Masters private meeting room, Geoffroi, Raol and the Master were invited to join him. Sitting in the Masters chair he motioned for the others to pull up chairs and join him.

"Raol, your territory, what's your gut feeling."

The Master of Cyprus was feeling a little miffed. Jacques was in his chair behind his desk and asking a non-knight first for his opinion. He was not in the mood to argue with Jacques and would most likely have ended up like poor Gerarde so he bit his tongue.

"Lone assassin, well trained, probably brought in by ship just for this task. If we are lucky he may well be on a ship leaving thinking he has done his job well. If not and he gets to know he has missed then he will certainly try again."

"Comforting to know, less than an hour into the job and I already have a target on my back."

Raol continued "We should bring forward the planned operation and leave as soon as possible."

"That would seem like we are running away and we never run from a battle." The Master of Cyprus had finally found his voice.

"Cyprus is already lost Jacques, I know it and so does this puppet to my left."

"Call me a puppet again and I'll kill you."

"Your too slow old man, Raol would finish you whilst you were still thinking about it." The Master of Cyprus thought about replying but held back. He was glaring at Raol as if he was issuing a threat without saying the words. Jacques could see his wounded pride.

"When you two girls have finished squabbling I have orders for you both." The two men exchanged a final look and turned towards Jacques. Geoffroi was

finding it very difficult not to laugh.

“Thank you. Master you are my second in command for this operation, we need to evacuate from the island as soon as possible, knights take with them the bare minimum,” looking around the room he continued “as do you Master.”

Thinking for a short time he continued. “It must be done in the strictest secrecy, no one must get wind of our departure until they see the empty port, is that understood? Any treasure and important business documents will be taken with us. We may be leaving but we will not betray our clients or friends.”

The Master's temper started to subside, second in command sounded good. Raol knew it was only to placate him, in reality most things would bypass his desk.”

“Raol, get your agents busy, ship's need to be readied for the earliest departure but without arousing any suspicion, make it look like normal trading.” Jacques knew he was already preaching to the converted, Raol knew exactly what to do he didn't need to be told, Jacques words were more for the Master to hear. The meeting went on for some time but eventually Jacques drew it to a close. Jacques, Geoffroi and Raol left the Master to his room.

“Geoffroi, that old fool would have trouble tying his own laces, I'm counting on you to make things happen and don't step on his toes.”

“Consider it done Grand Master.” Geoffroi turned and left the two of them in the corridor. Jacques didn't like the title but he would have to get used to it. Motioning to a small empty room Jacques and Raol entered for the rest of the briefing. Marcell was already seated in the empty room. Neither looked surprised and joined Marcell, a small table between them already had three glasses of wine poured.

“How did you know we would come into this room?” enquired Jacques.

“Easy, it's the only room you would be able to use, some of the others are locked, most are in use and I left the door open.”

Before Jacques could answer Marcell took the opportunity to jump in first.

“The eight boxes have arrived and I have packed the original four items into four of the boxes. I must say the quality of workmanship on the fakes was first class. Should I arrange for them to be shipped out to Pedro for transport.”

“Fakes! Boxes! Explain yourself.”

Raol was the first to reply. “Grand Master Etienne had the fakes made along with the boxes, the finest forger in Cyprus was tasked with it, unfortunately he is no longer with us, a very nasty accident.”

“I'm sure it was. So who else knows about all this, I seem to be the last.”

“Grand Master Etienne gave me a plan for the boxes. The fake items are to be scattered around the Mediterranean at locations already chosen by him. They are to be carried as part of Pedro's fleet, we think the others would more likely follow the fakes as they will be more heavily guarded. Of course the real ones would still be with you and your ship. Either way we can expect some sort of attack so we will need to be on our guard.”

Jacques liked the plan so far, the items needed to be with him at all times. It was however the same as he briefed his men on earlier, seems Grand Master Étienne had thought of everything. Marcell realised Raol had finished so he continued the conversation.

“I took the liberty of briefing Charles and Jeremy as they will be travelling

with Pedro, who has yet to be fully briefed. The original box will be transported to Castle Kolossi so naturally that party has been given their orders. We don't expect anything to happen to this movement as it would be so obvious but has to be done to play along." Marcell paused as if he wanted to change the plan then shook his head.

"We need the others to believe Pedro and Raol have the real items so they attempt to attack Pedro. Pedro of course has the faster ship's and he is used to outrunning pirates so that is in our favour. Your ship, although slower, will be more heavily armed so you should be ok. A single ship unguarded will hopefully be left alone."

Jacques corrected Marcell, "Shouldn't that be our ship, your coming with me don't forget."

"Sorry, just a slip of the tongue, I would suggest we make for Rimini and then to Bologna. I hear the Pope is staying there for some time and it would be wise to introduce yourself as Grand Master. All ship's will sail together and then anchor off Pilos. Our large force will be better protected so I don't expect anything to happen until we break. Their fleet would most likely be based in southern Italy, that is a guess on my part as information on its whereabouts has dried up recently." Marcell had that feeling again.

"Maria is off doing her thing at the moment but will be briefed when she returns."

Raol rolled his eyes, "No good asking me, she likes being a lone wolf. No doubt she will go to see Pedro, may already have happened, no one tells me anything." He held his hands out to his side to emphasise the point.

"I doubt that very much. The only time no one will tell you anything Raol is when you are in your box. You have more ears than a herd of sheep."

"Not sure if I should take that as a compliment or be offended."

Jacques thought for some time. Marcell hoped he wouldn't change anything as this was the plan Raol and he wanted. It seemed an age before he spoke.

"And after Bologna?"

Marcell gave a silent sigh, all good so far. "It would be better to finish the remainder of the journey by land, we can have a much stronger force. During the break in Bologna I will arrange for men to be recalled to us. Times are changing in Europe and we need our fighting men back in France. Eventually we should start thinking about returning our non-fighting men but that is for another time." One final thought crossed his mind.

"The Holy Land is lost. If others want to try and regain it then let them loose their men. It will only strengthen our position in the end."

Jacques looked at Marcell. "I can see why Grand Master Etienne kept you close, you seem to think of everything. So when do we set sail and abandon Cyprus?"

"We're not abandoning Cyprus just the fighting force is moving, the bankers will of course stay on. As for us, two days time and a very early start I'm afraid, the tide turns at four in the morning and we should be on it." Marcell sat back, a sign he had finished his briefing though in his head he was still planning.

Jacques nodded, "Agreed, secrecy is the word on this, we must leave the island like a ghost."

Jacques remained seated as Marcell and Raol left the room, he was suddenly

very tired. "Before you go Marcell could you seek out Geoffroi for me."

As the door closed he let his eyes close too. Just a short moment to take in what had happened, he was Grand Master now. He knew what was expected he just didn't expect it to be so soon. He woke to see Geoffroi standing in front of him.

"Sorry, didn't mean to wake you but Marcell said you wanted to speak with me."

"It's fine, I wasn't sleeping anyway, just thinking."

"You snore when you think."

"It would seem so. Sit down your making me nervous."

As Geoffroi was taking his seat he carried on, "Gerarde. A problem in the making I fear. The Teutonic Knights will think we Templars arranged everything to stop him becoming Grand Master."

Jacques nodded, he seemed to be doing a lot of that lately. "I had that thought too, so how do we avoid a war with them."

"We can't" replied Geoffroi, "they are a very proud order and will want revenge, we just need to be ready when they act. They will pick their time and place, maybe tomorrow or perhaps many years from now."

"As you say, we need to be ready but with that much uncertainty it will be hard to stay focused. Do you have anyone on the inside." Jacques said more in hope

"Not at the moment but we can try. It will take time of course and they are not the easiest of orders to join."

"It's the best we can hope for so let's make it a priority." Jacques rested his chin on his hands, which were now firmly supported by the table. He was tired but tried not to show it.

"You look like poor Gerarde just warmed up, so may I suggest you get some rest. Give me a few minutes and I'll arrange a room for you here." Jacques didn't have the strength or will to argue and nodded again.

Marcell arrived back at the ship near midnight, a member of the crew handed him a note sealed with lead wax. Marcell looked at the seal, he recognised the seal as that of Raol. Opening the note he read the short line, "Look in the box." Box, which box? We have eight.

Whilst mulling over the note he suddenly thought, we have nine boxes. The large box they had dragged all the way from Acre lay on the deck ready for the morning transport. Lifting the lid Marcell was more than a little shocked. Inside lay a body, it was wrapped in cloth from head to toe, it also showed signs of recent wounds as the blood was still fresh on the cloth.

The face area was covered with what looked like a blank parchment. Picking up the parchment Marcell turned it over. Written in French was the word "Traitor." Underneath this word were the names of ten families. Top of the list was De Molay. Quickly scanning the rest he stopped at the last name, De Rochelle.

Marcell replaced the parchment exactly as he found it and re-sealed the box. He then sought out the knight who would be escorting the box in the morning. Waking him took some doing but eventually the young knight became conscious. "I need a word about tomorrows orders, join me up top when you're ready." The young knight slowly made his way past sleeping knights and joined Marcell who was stood by the box.

"This is the box that must be taken to Castle Kolossi. Get everyone ready we

leave as soon as possible.”

The young knight was still groggy from being woken but nodded his agreement. It took a little time to arrange the horses and the cart but eventually they were ready to leave. Marcell was visibly irritated it was taking so long but he tried to hide it. The small but heavily armed group of men rode off into the night.

It didn't take long to reach the Castle as the road was in good order, thankfully they only passed a few locals who were walking to their morning work place and none of them gave the knights a second look. It was still dark when they reached Castle Kolossi though rapidly becoming daylight so Marcell acted quickly.

Marcell ordered the box to be moved to the little church next to the Castle. Three knights dug a shallow grave and the box was placed inside, a slab was placed over the grave and the soil dispersed to cover their tracks.

The slab was from a pile that was waiting to be used in burials so hopefully no one would notice its absence. Marcell didn't have time to arrange things in great detail so it would have to do. Before he departed, Marcell briefed the knights. They were to keep an eye on the grave with orders that no one must retrieve it. It was vital to the mission and they would soon be leaving Cyprus so he hoped all would go well before anyone did find it and its contents.

He need not have worried, the grave remained unopened for some eight hundred years.

The parchment and its contents played on his mind as he rode back to Limassol. It was obviously written by Raol, just what he knew Marcell would have to find out when the time was right.

Why was Marcell's family on the list? It could only have been due to his brother or perhaps his father but more likely his brother. The other eight names were committed to memory and just who was in the box? Questions he didn't have answers to and he didn't like that.

Although Jacques room was probably the best he had ever slept in he hardly noticed it. Twelve hours later he woke with sun streaming into the room. He guessed it was past noon he just didn't realise how far past it was.

Fresh water was on the table to freshen up, a new set of clothes were laid out on a chair. The staff had been busy and he had never heard them once. He just hoped he wasn't snoring too loudly.

Making his way down stairs he allowed himself time to look around the Masters House. There was a lot he had never noticed before. It seemed being Grand Master made you more aware of the finer things in life. He didn't really like it but he knew he would have to get used to it. It would be everywhere soon and he was expected to be part of it. His days of fighting with a sword would be a distant memory. Pedro was waiting near the base of the stairs. “About time and you snore like an old boar.”

The two men hugged for a short time, “great to see you too Pedro. I'm glad you all got out in time and why is everyone going on about me snoring, I don't snore”

“Of course you don't and neither do I. A close call but we have been in worse situations. I hear you had a close call too.”

“You could say that. Perhaps you can tell me sometime about your journey but I fear now would not be the best time, we have work to do.”

“There was this time when.” started Pedro in jest.

“You've already told me that one.” As the two men batted insults Marcell entered through the front door.

“Can we go back to the old times, it's like getting out of jail in reverse trying to get into here.”

Two old men said in unison “NO.”

“I only asked, keep your shirts on. Things are progressing nicely, it's going to be tight and we may have to leave some stuff we would rather not.” Jacques was looking around as Marcell said the words. “Pedro your ship's are fully supplied I take it.”

“Even the rats are going to be well fed. Rats are considered lucky so we take great care of them”

“Great, err now the bit you're not going to like Master. I have arranged a dinner in honour of the Grand Master for tomorrow night.” Marcell waited for Jacques to explode.

“We are leaving tomorrow night or have you forgot.”

“Certainly not, it's all part of the misdirection, we need it to appear to be business as usual.”

“So who's going to be at this grand event.” Jacques was not best pleased with Marcell's plan and his sarcasm showed it.

“You of course, the Master of Cyprus and err that's about it.” Marcell waited.

“Some grand dinner that will be, I take it the rest of you will be making your way to the ship's. Then the Master and I plus the guards will dash down to the docks and vanish.” Jacques said with a little more sarcasm.

“No dashing needed, just get a move on, we leave on the tide with or without you. Unless you want to swim.”

Jacques felt like a caged wolf, he didn't like being holed up in the Masters residence, he was a man who liked to roam. As he walked around the compound for the fifth time he noticed the compound walls were high, not something he had noticed before.

The only building he could see was a church tower, he didn't even know its name. Had times been different he might have walked over to find out.

Most of the day was taken up with meetings, it seemed to Jacques leaving was far more complicated than arriving. So much to do and in such a short time. Thankfully, Marcell and Geoffroi proved to be excellent organisers, so much so that Jacques was quite often surplus to requirements. He mostly nodded his approval, another requirement of the job.

Evening came and went. Jacques was quite relieved to be lying down in his bed. Tomorrow would be a day like no other for him. A banquet with only two people, then a mad dash down to the port side to be ready to leave on the morning tide. Shame it was at four in the morning. Despite his head being full of administration tasks he was soon asleep. Morning came round soon enough with a loud banging on the door.

“Hot water Grand Master.” Jacques washed and made ready for the long day ahead. More meetings and planning, Jacques didn't really like his first two days in the job. His respect for Grand Master Etienne grew throughout the day. Marcell arrived with news from the port, another Templar ship had arrived from Tyr. From what the ship's Captain had told Marcell his was the last ship to leave. Supplies were frantically being loaded aboard the ship, plus as many knights as it could

safely hold. With this last ship nearly all the garrison had found a berth. Those that couldn't be accommodated were being sent to Castle Kolossi along with whatever goods could be carried and would be evacuated over time.

As the light faded Jacques made his way back to his room, despite the events to come he felt sadness at leaving Cyprus. Cyprus had been a good and faithful home to the Templars. It didn't seem right to flee in the night but he knew it was necessary, there were factions in Limassol who didn't take kindly to the Templars. The items he had with him made it even more imperative they get out to the relative safety of the sea. Paris was very far away and was the only safe place for the items.

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Maria sat motionless in the darkness awaiting her target, she knew he would come it was simply when. Although her body cried out to move the only thing she moved were her eyes, even her breathing was slowed to a crawl. She waited.

Jacques and the Master felt strange eating in such grand settings. The room should have been filled with knights but just the two of them sat at the top table. The food was certainly not up to banquet standards, the cooks had all but disappeared and just one remained.

A small contingent of knights to escort them both to the port was keeping themselves busy. Jacques was sure the whole of Limassol would have known they were leaving. It felt very strange indeed.

Talk between the two men was difficult, neither knowing what to say. Even the candles attached to the walls seemed to be struggling. Banners had been removed and most things of value had long departed to the ship's.

Jacques suggested another walk around the compound to pass yet more time. Like any battle, the waiting seemed to be the hardest part, only this time there was to be no battle.

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A silent figure slowly passed Maria and made his way up the bell tower stairs. His footsteps were almost silent but Maria could still hear them. Slowly she followed him up the stairs, a mouse could have walked past her and it still wouldn't have heard her. She enjoyed the stealth it was her calling. She was good and she knew it and he was just about to find out how good.

Lying on the floor in front of her was the dark shape of a man. The crossbows butt was securely held against his right shoulder, his left hand holding it steady. The bolt was already held in place, his finger on the trigger. He was good at his job but his dedication to the shot meant he was deaf to the outside world around him. He waited, as did Maria.

Maria could see his line of sight. The Masters compound seemed to be very well lit tonight, she knew why as did the figure before her. He had one chance but it was her duty to stop him. Jacques appeared in view faster than she wanted.

The attacker sensed her behind him and tensed slightly as he let the bolt fly. It was the last thing he ever did as Maria had already pulled his head back and cut his throat. She glanced at the compound.

Jacques didn't see the bolt he just heard it thud into the right leg of the Master. The Master hit the ground like a sack of potatoes. A scream of pain shot from his lips. Jacques instinctively grabbed him by his collar and dragged him over to the safety of the wall. Maria watched the events from the bell tower. Seeing Jacques was unhurt she relaxed.

All of her weight was now on the motionless figure below her knees, she whispered, "two shots, one hit one miss, rest in peace fellow assassin."

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The remaining knights rushed to Jacques aid, pulling the Master back inside his residence. With difficulty and much cursing the bolt was removed from the Master's leg. Bandages were applied to stop the bleeding but the wound was deep and the blood still seeped into the bandage. Eventually the growing red patch overcame the bandage.

It was obvious to Jacques this was a battle the Master would not win. As the life slowly ebbed away from the Master he looked at Jacques. "You will be a great Grand Master, tread carefully and I'll see you on the other side."

Jacques turned to the knight who was close by "We leave now, get everyone ready, there could be more of them so let's get this done fast."

The dash to the docks was a little more than a dash, a sprint would be a better description. It was a very undignified way to leave but one that was forced on him. The first flames were already licking their way through the Master's residence as Jacques passed through the heavy gates.

Knights also saw the flames on the ship Jacques was expected on. Fearing the worst a troop of knights made their way towards the house. They didn't get far when a group of knights came running the other way. "Back to the ship."

As the night sky turned bright red over the Master's residence Jacques ship slipped its moorings followed by several more. The tide was not turning so it was slow progress but eventually they all made their way out to open sea. Pedro had seen the hasty departure and his small fleet joined the rear of the growing Templar fleet.

Not a single person saw Maria board the ship. As Jacques stood looking back at the dancing red sky over Limassol she enquired as to the health of the Master. "He didn't make it." pausing he added, "how did you know?"

Maria said nothing, she just stared at the fading flames. "I was too slow, not a mistake I will make again."

Jacques knew what she meant, the bolt had his name on it and she had stopped it. Both he and Marcell were heavily in her debt. Sails flapped in the wind, darkness was slowly giving way to daylight. Looking at the fleet around him Jacques felt safe. Pedro's small fleet was bringing up the rear. Pedro's ships were faster than his were but they maintained station although one appeared to be lagging behind. Jacques went below to join Marcell and the others.

"We leave you alone for a day and look at the mess you get yourself into. Grand Masters are not supposed to run away."

“This one did but if you tell anyone I'll send you to somewhere very cold and wet.”

“I like England.” replied Charles.

Pedro watched as Raol's ship slowly caught them up. Eventually it was skilfully manoeuvred along side.

Pedro shouted, “Good to see you brother, Are we being followed?”

“Just one ship, faster than ours, holding back so we are just in sight.”

“We should let Jacques know, I'll let you do the honours.”

Raol's ship gradually passed Pedro's and headed off to the Mirage, a much larger but slower vessel. Message passed, Raol resumed his position on the flanks of the fleet. Raol was glad to be going home at last. Pedro had mixed feelings, the new wine would be different and it would take time to produce. It would still be the best in Portugal but there were matters to attend to first.

Maria knew the journey and life would be exciting, she relished her new freedom.

Jacques saw many dangers ahead, the life of a diplomat wasn't going to be easy for him. The Order needed answers, the Templars needed a leader. He would need to be alert. Stability was needed more than anything else was and deceit.

Marcell contemplated his new task, he would be required to keep Jacques under constant watch but didn't know who to report too. His Grand Master worked for the Obsidian Order. Pedro knew it, Raol knew it and so did he. Maria knew everything, even how he felt about his path.

Captain Tusk's men watched the tops of the masts ahead. Jacques, Pedro and Raol knew Tusk was there but let him follow as one ship isn't going to do anything brave. Southern Greece was some distance away and the crews settled into their usual routines. Knights helped out where possible but most just relaxed in the sun. Everyone took a breather, time to recharge the body and mind, difficult times lay ahead.

Word was passed around the fleet they would soon make anchor off Pilos.

THE SHIPS BOY

CHAPTER 5

The Journey West 1292

The captain's cabin of the *Mirage* was crowded. Jacques had called a meeting. Pedro and Raol were chatting quietly by the large rear windows. Marcell and Maria were in deep conversation, some plan being hatched no doubt.

Charles and Jeremy sat waiting, unsure why they had been called to such a meeting, all the top brass and two lowly knights. Charles spotted three others he didn't recognise but from their appearance appeared to be Pedro's men, probably ship's captain's. A lone figure sat quietly in the corner, a religious man, later identified as Father Benedict.

Jacques called the meeting to order. "If I may have your attention we need to discuss what is happening next"

With that the conversations stopped, everyone sat down at the large table, it was cramped but all managed to find a seat. Father Benedict remained where he was. A good move on his part as he had the most room.

"Pedro, any news on our friend."

"Yes he docked a short time ago, started to unload his cargo and look set to replace it."

"Observer or just a trader," enquired Jacques.

"Observer, no doubt about that," replied Pedro.

"Ok, we need information on him, what he is up to, where he is going, who he works for."

"Already in hand." Jacques looked at Marcell and Maria, who sat next to him.

"Now why does that not surprise me."

"It's what we do." They said together.

Jacques thought about adding something but continued, "Once supplies have been replenished we proceed with the plan. Pedro your ship's will head west and be accompanied by the fleet. The *Mirage* alone will head north to Rimini."

Turning to each of Pedro's captain's he issued their orders and eventual destinations. Lastly he turned to Father Benedict.

"Father you will accompany Captain Alonso. We need to set up a small church on the island of Sardinia towards its northern shores. I'm afraid the congregation will be rather small if any at all." Father Benedict eyed up Captain Alonso. The two men seemed not to like each other.

"A small band of men from the crew will stay with you to build the church, the item we entrust with you must be safely hidden within the church. Hopefully this new church will encourage people to settle in the area but it's going to be pretty remote." Father Benedict shrugged.

"I love a challenge, I will convert Pedro's men and we shall become the place everyone will want to go too on Sardinia. A haven for silent prayer and