

Divine Verdict

A Tale from the Middle Ages

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THE YEAR IS 1162, THE HEART OF THE MIDDLE AGE. The second Crusade is over, the Countship of Edessa fallen, the Principality of Antioch hard-pressed by the Muslim armies. In Europe, however, few people seem to care what is going on in that end of the world. Here the petty wars of the barons and lords keep everyday life interesting.

The town of Villefort is at first glance no different than most others, with a small castle on a hill, houses clustered around its sides and a wall protecting them from the dangers of possible marauding knights. There is one exception to most towns here, in a fairly large building of uncut stone to the south of the city. The flag of the Order of the Poor Knights of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon — the Knight Templars — flies above its battlements.

TODAY IS A DAY OF CELEBRATION. Baron Bernard of Villefort is celebrating his birthday and so has called for a tournament on a field below the town. Many have come from afar, even all the way from the Alsace, to see this tournament. The baron himself is planning to joust, it is said, and there he is, sitting tall on a bay mare, clad in shimmering armor, his ruddy face gleaming in the opening of his helmet. The people cheer as their sovereign rides around the lists, his lance raised. His shield is decorated with a castle over which a lion lies, the arms of Villefort. He pauses to laugh at his subjects.

“People of Villefort and guests from afar,” he thundered good-naturedly. “Welcome to the tournament.” Cheers. “Today the best of knights will joust for the honor of choosing the Queen of the Tournament and many of you know who that will probably be.” There were shouts from the stands and after moments only two names remained, competing against each other.

“Tristan!” cheered the majority.

“Baron Bernard!” the others chanted back. A wave from the baron’s hand cut them off.

“Whoever it may be, let us fight honorably.” He bowed his head slightly and then slowly rode from the lists to where the other knights were waiting. He nodded to a knight on a black charger. He was also arrayed in armor, though his was a good deal less showy. The only emblem on his shield was a red cross. His visor was open to reveal an honest face. Somehow it didn’t belong in this land of fair people, the swartheness reminding one of the holy land, but the eyes were blue and gentle. The baron leaned over slightly and laughed to the knight.

“Well, Tristan, I believe that you are the favored here, even on my own birthday. Let’s see if for once fortune will help me unhorse you.”

“Perhaps, my lord,” the knight replied quietly. “I wouldn’t have joined in the jousting if it hadn’t been for your express wishes.”

“Always so honest, my dear friend,” Bernard chuckled. “But let’s get on with it.” He turned his steed and rode into the lists to the thunder of the trumpets, followed closely by nearly twenty knights. Only three bore the insignia of the red cross, marking them as Knight Templars. The jousting matches went quickly, with two of the Templars and the baron himself remaining in the saddle by the end of the day. Tristan sighed to himself as he watched the baron face off with his friend. It nearly always ended the same, with him and Bernard in the lists and the baron invariably finding himself on the ground after two or three passes. He’d warned Claude. His friend was the only one who could unseat Tristan and Claude had never fought the baron before. Still, the baron was clever and Claude’s foot slipped from his stirrup, taking him out of the lineup. *Perhaps I should let the baron win today*, the remaining Templar mused. But something inside him rebelled against that idea, just as much as it would against fighting. He sighed to himself as the baron rode to him.

“Well, my friend,” came the other man’s voice from the iron cage, “it is you and I again.” Tristan nodded solemnly.

“Then let’s fight.” They lined up on opposite sides and the trumpets thundered. The two horses flew at each other and moments later the baron was sitting in the dust. The Templar turned his black horse and came back, slowly opening his visor. The baron was smiling at him good-naturedly.

“You have won again, Tristan of Magdala,” Bernard laughed. “Even on my birthday.” The pages were already there to help their lord to his feet. He stood, weighed down by his heavy armor.

“Now, my friend, it is your honor to choose the Queen of the Tournament.”

“My lord, I give that honor to you, since it is your birthday,” Tristan returned with a smile. Bernard looked at him critically, before nodding in agreement. He remounted his bay mare and was given a new lance. The baroness then hung a crown of green silk and gold on the end of the lance. Baron Bernard slowly gazed around the many assembled women, before placing the circlet at the feet of a young woman, not his wife. The baroness’ face stayed straight, but still turned white with anger at her husband’s obvious shunning of her. Tristan shook his head quietly and guided his horse out of the lists. He rode to his tent, where his squire was waiting for him.

“Thank you, Philip,” he said quietly, before going into the tent and having his armor removed. *Dear God*, he thought to himself, listening to the clamor outside, *why do we always have to fight?*

“Tired of fighting, friend?” came a voice from the doorway. Tristan looked over.

“Oh, hello, Claude,” he said. “I’ve been tired of it since we were in that village in the holy land.” His friend slowly walked in, a knowing look in his bright blue eyes. He ran his free hand across his tousled blond hair and took a seat on a three-legged stool, after placing a flagon on the table.

“I know that only too well, Tristan,” he sighed. “Sometimes I’m quite certain that I agree with you.”

“At least the baron is happy,” the darker knight answered taking a seat on another stool, while Philip busied himself with checking out the armor. Both knights were simply clothed now, Tristan in the rough leather jerkin and breeches that he wore under his armor. He was of medium build, his hair black, skin darker than most, telling of his birth in foreign lands. Nothing would mark him as a Knight Templar at this moment, except for the scar that ran along his chin, a gift from a Saracen scimitar. He put one wide hand up to rub his broad shoulder and closed his eyes, thinking of home again. Claude on the other hand was tall and blond, his skin fair. His nose was quite flat, showing his loud and brawling nature that few thought he could control. He was dressed in a white tunic and trousers, a leather belt at his waist, a red cross on his shoulder, telling of his order. There was only one thing the same about these two and that was the clear blue of their eyes. Many believed that this marked them as brothers, but it was so in faith only.

“I wish I hadn’t agreed,” Tristan finally broke the silence.

“To the tournament?” Claude asked.

“No, to leaving Esther.”

“Tristan, that was years ago. The girl is dead, she died in your arms.” He leaned forward his voice getting a bit louder. “You’ve got to let go of this.”

“I don’t think I can,” the darker knight answered and took a sip of wine from his cup. “It just wells up sometimes, especially when I’m tired.” The blond man nodded quietly and they drank together.

“We’d better save it, shouldn’t we?” Tristan remarked. “Baron Bernard will be loading down the tables this evening.”

“And you’ll be the last one to leave again, my friend,” Claude laughed. He rose slowly, scratching his stomach.

“I’ll see you at the temple.” Tristan nodded. He just couldn’t get over it. Well, maybe he could. Mother always told him that Jesus Christ had won over all cares.

“Yes, Lord,” he whispered, “you have.”

THE BANQUET HAD BEEN LOUD AND BOISTEROUS, just like Claude on a good night. Tristan’s blond friend had entertained the people again with his ribald jokes, laughing the loudest and finally challenging one of the younger knights to a fist fight. The youngster had been rash enough to agree, but luckily the Templar was already a bit tipsy, so he found himself on the ground. That had caused him to go home, mumbling something about too much wine. Finally only Tristan was left sitting at the long table with the baron.

“Oh, yes,” the sovereign said with a drunken air, “this was the best birthday I’ve had yet.” He chuckled at his half-empty goblet and then leered over at the sober Tristan. The knight had only drunk sparingly the whole evening.

“If I may, my lord?” he asked.

“Bah, we’ve known each other long enough and we’re alone, friend. Anything you want to know.” The Templar was silent for a moment, his finger running along the scar on his chin.

“Don’t you think it was dangerous to make Sophie the Queen of the Tournament?” he finally queried. “You would have problems with the baroness.”

“You don’t understand, Tristan,” the baron slurred the words together and then paused to slurp from his cup. “You’ve never been in love and you’ve never lived with a woman who is your wife, but you can’t stand.” He stared at the end of the table, a tipsy smile on his lips. “But I love Sophie, my dear Templar, and she loves me. I can see her there in that white dress of hers, the brown hair and hazel eyes. Those lips.” He laughed to himself and drank deeply again. Tristan thought to let it go.

“Have you ever been in love?” Bernard cut into the knight’s resolve. The darker man smiled to himself, eyes sad.

“Yes, and I still am.”

“But I thought you Templars weren’t allowed women?” the other laughed.

“True, but it was before I became a knight. I don’t like to talk about it.” He made a wave with his right hand. The baron blinked at him and for an instant Tristan was afraid that his friend would make him talk.

“All right,” Bernard finally agreed, his eyes only half focusing on the knight sitting next to him, “you may know what being in love is like, but you don’t know what being married to a woman you’ve never loved is like.” He sighed, melancholy creeping up on him. “That baroness — I knew her as a child and we couldn’t stand each other. We only married because of political reasons — because our fathers wanted us to. It was the biggest mistake I’ve made, seeing that there are so many wonderful women in this world, eh?” His mood slowly swung back to mirth.

“That’s true,” the knight conceded, “but you are still called to be loyal to your wife, my lord. It’s what God commands.” The baron just grunted and looked into his now empty goblet.

“Well,” he finally mumbled, “it’s getting late. There is a tournament tomorrow and the day after. We need to be fit for it.” He grinned at Tristan. “Then perhaps we should be able to talk about *your* woman some time, hm?”

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THE TOURNAMENT CONTINUED WITHOUT TRISTAN IN THE SADDLE. He chose to sit quietly in the stands with the simple people, who were disappointed at his not participating any more. Sophie had taken her place that morning, resplendent in a green and red dress to compliment the crown on her head. She watched the polished armor of the baron with sparkling eyes, oblivious to the hatred in the looks of the baroness. The Knight Templar sighed sadly and shook his head at the poor baron’s marriage, but that was life. Sometimes one has to give up something for the good of the many. *If only it didn’t have to be a happy marriage*, the knight thought sadly, thinking of his own fate.

A commotion in the stands next to him made him turn his head. One of the many Jews of the town was making his way through the rows, looking for a place for himself and his daughter. Tristan knew of this man, called Hananel. Many people borrowed from him, having to pay back with a good deal of interest. It was said that he had more money than the baron, perhaps even more than the king of France himself. But his religion brought only scorn and anger upon his head, the people seeing him as one of the hated Jews who had crucified the Christ. He stood tall and thin, his shoulders stooped, his square, yellow hat bobbing among the crowd. Finally he came to the row where Tristan was sitting. He glared at the Knight Templar and was about to pass by him, when the warrior rose.

“You and you!” Tristan ordered two rough characters next to him, taking up enough room for six people. “Move over and give the man and his daughter some room.” The two men glared at the knight for a moment, before recognizing the red cross on his shoulder and realizing his standing as a Knight Templar of noble birth. They scooted over with surly faces. Hananel stared at Tristan in disbelief.

“Take your seat, friend,” the knight offered with a smile. The Jew gaped, before sinking down on the rough bench. His daughter took a seat between him and the knight. They huddled together, trying to push themselves away from the other people, who were obliged not to have any contact with them. Only Tristan stayed where he was. The old man leveled a withering gaze at him.

“Are you not afraid that touching us will take away your holiness?” he asked, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“No,” came the friendly reply, “I believe that all should be treated with equal respect, be they Jew or Gentile.” He then ignored the two, realizing that they would not be interested in conversation with him, and watched the battle. The trumpets were blown and the two groups of knights charged at each other, many falling to the ground. The two remaining Knight Templars were still in the saddle, as was the baron and one other knight of noble birth. A charge and the smaller of the Templars was on the ground, but up in an instant, his mace spinning over his head. The other knight fell from his horse as the iron balls pummeled his helmet. He rose slowly, dazedly, trying to draw his sword. The Knight Templar drew his and swung it in a deadly arc, only to come to a standstill against Claude of Rimneau’s blade.

“Not to the death, Pierre,” he thundered through his helmet.

“It is if I choose, Claude,” the other knight sneered, drawing his sword back again. The older and more experienced Templar swung one leg out and knocked him over, his sword tip resting at the crease between helmet and armor.

“I will not have you killing any of the other knights,” he snapped. “Now drop your sword and surrender to the marshal of the lists. I will have a word with the Commander about you.” The younger knight grumbled into his armor and then clumsily got to his feet and yanked off his helmet. Claude now had his visor open, his face burning with anger.

“This is not the last we’ve spoken, Claude of Rimneau,” Pierre sneered and marched off down the lists, right by Tristan, whom he paused to shoot an angry look at. The dark knight sighed to himself and shook his head. That boy would never learn, he knew that. He did not realize however that this one glance had supplied the younger knight with a view of the lovely face of Hananel’s daughter.

At that instant the trumpet called for the end of the battle and Claude was named victor. The baron smiled a bit sadly as he watched the Knight Templar kneel to receive the crown of victory from Sophie. The girl’s eyes rested on him for only a moment before straying to Bernard. He just cocked his head to one side and shrugged in his armor. Then the day’s action was over. Tristan rose and began to make his way off of the stands. Suddenly he heard a cry behind him, someone launched forward, slamming into the knight, who bumped into the girl in front of him, sending both to the ground. He picked himself up off her as fast as he could and extended his hand to help her up.

“I’m sorry, young lady,” he apologized, but Hananel’s daughter’s dark eyes only flashed with contempt. The yellow cloth had slipped off her rich, dark hair, which she promptly covered again, rising on her own. She simply turned on her heel and followed her father away. For an instant the knight looked after her, suddenly thinking of someone else with similar dark hair and brown eyes, only those filled with a sparkly joy and gentleness. The face receded slightly and he recalled the clothing of a novice in a monastery and sighed, knowing that he could never have what he wanted.

By now the people were shoving up against him and he marched on, his thoughts in the holy land, about twenty years earlier...

...THE SUN BEAT DOWN ON THE CHILDREN, playing in the dust of the small village of Magdala. Two boys of maybe twelve raced each other along the pathway, both with shining eyes and dark hair. The taller of the two was lagging behind, being also the one with more weight on his bones. Finally the smaller skidded to a stop, his eyes scanning the hilly horizon. He then turned around, grinning at his friend.

“There, Nurettin, I beat you again!” he laughed.

“Of course you did, Tristan,” the heavier boy snapped, setting his winded paunch down one of the rocks and panting. His dark eyes sparked with exertion and good natured defeat. “You Christians always seem to defeat us.”

“Oh, come on, you don’t want to start one of *those* discussions again, do you?” the Christian boy sighed.

“Maybe not,” his friend returned with a shrug. He glanced around the barren place. “I thought you said your brother and maybe your sisters would be here already.”

“We ran, they didn’t,” Tristan laughed, still breathing a bit harder than usual.

“Hey, Tristan!” came a call from a short way off. It was a girl, maybe two years younger than himself. She was dressed in tattered clothes, her charcoal hair blowing loosely in the wind, her shawl being off and in one hand. She came to a halt in front of the two boys. The only jewelry she wore was a gold cross, signifying her noble birth, though nothing else would have revealed the fact. She looked too poor, but something in the big, brown eyes made one know that she was incredibly rich — inside. Her face told of her European heritage, which

marked her as a hated conqueror, though most people of Magdala loved this girl more than any of the other children. Esther was the star of the village and a light to everyone there. Fathers and mothers were already saying how fortunate the man who married her would be. Young men were dreaming of having her for a bride. Few of them, however, noticed her special attachment to the Lord of Magdala's younger son. They didn't want it to be true. She fairly bounced as she stood in front of the two boys, slowly putting her shawl back in to place.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"We were waiting for my brother and sisters. We'll be having a picnic."

"Wow!" The dark eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

"You want to join us?" Tristan offered, oblivious to the grimace on his friend's face. As they were speaking a small train of other children arrived, under the careful protection of Tristan's older brother, Louis. There were still marauding groups of Saracens around and no one could be too careful. After the meal they played at different games such as tag and hide-and-seek, staying near the village and always careful to not go out of earshot of each other. Finally they sat down on the colorful blankets again as one of Tristan's older sisters pulled out a lute and began to pluck the strings, singing in her soft voice. The boy and the girl stared out at the sun that was slowly setting.

"Esther," he whispered in the musical air. She just nodded in answer.

"Will we be friends for ever?" She smiled.

"Yes, for ever..."

...TRISTAN SMILED WISTFULLY TO HIMSELF as he remembered the shiny eyes that afternoon, the girl's hair whipping around her shoulders and the laughter. They were only children, too innocent to know anything about the world that they were about to be thrust into, the world that didn't care for feelings... *No*, he thought, wiping the unhappiness from his eyes, face, and mind, *I must be content with everything God gives me*. He turned his mind back to the time at present. That was about twenty years ago. It was past. It was a nice memory, but unreachable in the present. *I am a Knight Templar, in the service of God Most High. I will be content with that*. Somehow, though, he was certain that this was the greatest mistake he'd made in life.

III

IT WAS EARLY EVENING BEFORE CLAUDE FINALLY GOT A CHANCE to speak with the Commander of the Villefort Temple. Lucien of Villefort was calmly sitting in his quarters, poring over his greatest possession — a portion of a Vulgate Bible. It was only the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of John, the Book of Romans, and John's Apocalypse, but the old man still loved to read it, understanding the immeasurable wealth that had been passed into his hands. These were pages he himself had copied, years before he had taken up the sword to liberate the holy land. The Dominican monastery two towns over had been sad to see him, one of their best novices, go, but all knew that it was God's will. Perhaps that was why the abbot had allowed him to take these few pages of the Word with him.

Now he reverently laid aside the parchment and turned to Claude of Rimneau, who was standing silently in the doorway. The old man nodded and the Knight Templar fell on one knee, bowing his head in a sign of respect.

"Sir."

"Rise up, Brother Claude," came the clear, soft voice. It was an impressive baritone with just a slight tremor in it.

"Sir, I have something to speak with you about," the knight said, his eyes still on the ground.

"Then speak." It was an invitation. "But first close the door and draw up a chair." The blond man did as he was ordered. Letting his charges sit in his presence was not a strange thing for this Commander to do. It made the event more personal and in that way the gentle Lucien had pried many a dark secret from the soul of the man he interviewed. He was so infinitely gentle about the way he did it, but did not let the pain of guilt be lessened at all. Claude knew this all too well and suddenly was afraid.

"Sir, you were not at the tournament today?"

"No, I was not," the other replied, shaking his silver head. The younger knight took a deep breath.

“Very well, sir, I have a complaint to make about Brother Pierre the younger.” A nod from his superior made him continue, “Today during the tournament he nearly slew one of the other contenders. I was just barely able to stop him. He said that it was his choice if a battle should be life or death.” The blue eyes went down for just a moment before looking into the green ones of the old man. “Sir, I believe that he is dangerous to the honor and to the goals of our order. He is brash and bloodthirsty. I have also heard that he has a taste for women and frequents some — uh — wenches...”

“Do you have proof of that?” The voice was still quiet and infinitely gentle, and yet it made the knight squirm in his seat.

“No, sir, not for the charges about the women, but for the rest... Tristan can vouch for me on the counts of brashness and bloodthirst.” The old man sighed, letting his bearded chin sink onto his white tunic in thought.

“Very well, Brother Claude,” he said after a long pause, “I will look into what you have told me. I will speak with Brother Tristan and with Brother Pierre and we will do as the Lord sees fit. Dismissed.” The blond man rose and bowed to his Commander and then left the room. Lucien closed his eyes. *I feel so old, so very old — and now this, a traitor in my own temple. Holy Mother of God, why do you let these things happen?*

THE SUN HAD NOT YET RISEN and already the Knight Templars were on their feet for the morning mass. Tristan received the wafer and the wine, drew the cross from forehead to chest and shoulder to shoulder, retreated to his seat, and knelt in silent communion with God. These were the times when he felt closest to his dear Savior. The outward ritual meant little to him, it was just knowing what the Lord Jesus Christ had done for him on that cross that gave him peace. He looked up at the crucifix and thought of the man of sorrows.

“This is my body, broken for you,” he remembered old Moshe recite in the tiny hovel that was the chapel for Tristan’s mother, Esther’s father, Claude and his parents, and so many others of Magdala. Then it was the blood, shed for you — for the remission of your sins, forever. Few believed that now, it seemed, and that made the knight sad. Perhaps some day the Christ would make it clear to all men. Now Tristan was certain he was part of a sort of elite, who knew the true secret of salvation — faith. He hardly spoke about it, but when he did it was clear that it was important to him. Few would listen and no one was sufficiently his enemy to call attention to the authorities. Sure, the Commander knew, but he did not want to lose his chief advisor and believing in the shed blood of Christ was no heresy, not after what he’d read in the books he’d copied.

Lucien of Villefort rose from in front of the altar and made the sign of the cross. He then bowed his head and clasped his hands. The knights slowly repeated the *Pater Noster* after him before breaking into a *Laudamus te, Christe*. Then they were dismissed to private meditation and recitation of their prayers, most to patron saints, Claude and Tristan to God alone.

As the dark knight turned to leave the chapel a gentle hand rested on his shoulder. He turned to see the Commander gazing at him quietly.

“May I have a word with you, Brother Tristan?” he asked. The knight nodded mutely and bowed, then following the old man back to his quarters in the tower. The door was closed, they were both seated and Lucien folded his hands in his lap, letting them rest on his long, white robe with the crimson cross on it that the Saracens so feared.

“I must speak with you about Brother Pierre the younger,” the Commander began after a few moments of quiet introspection. “Your friend, Brother Claude, said you could vouch for him.” The green eyes came up and gazed into the deep, Mediterranean blue of Tristan’s. “Tell me what happened yesterday on the field.”

“Brother Pierre tried to take the life of Klaus von Tann,” he said simply. “Brother Claude stopped him and forced him to leave the lists.”

“Did you hear any of the conversation?”

“No, sir, I was sitting in the stands.”

“And yet it was clear that Brother Pierre would have slain the knight?” Lucien’s voice suddenly became very fragile.

“Yes, sir. There is no doubt in my mind about that.” The old man stopped, sad and puzzled.

“And what of the charges that Brother Pierre visits the brothels?”

“I cannot say anything on that account, sir,” Tristan stated resolutely. “It is just hearsay, though I did once hear the young lady Sophie say that our brother proposed to her in a rather violent manner during his time as a squire.” The gray eyebrows across from him went up and the dark knight continued.

“She says she was only fifteen at the time — ‘Pretty as a picture,’ the baron would add — and Brother Pierre saw her and, well, proposed to her. She said no and he got violent, tried to force himself on her. She screamed and fortunately a servant was nearby. He scuffled with the squire and won, but the lady Sophie is still afraid and angry at our brother.” He fell silent and watched his Commander’s face grow pale.

“How trustworthy is this girl?”

“Not very, but the servant would back up her story.”

“And this was?”

“About five years ago, sir.” The green eyes were haunted.

“Tell me, Tristan, what should I do?” the old man finally asked in a broken voice.

“Sir, I would privately warn Brother Pierre that he is in grave danger and call him to repent.” A sad smile slid across Lucien’s face.

“You still believe in the goodness of man, do you, Brother Tristan?”

“No, sir,” he replied, shaking his head resolutely. “I believe that man is innately evil, but that God calls him to repentance and brings him to a point where he cannot resist the call without being damned for eternity. It is a choice: the Cross or hell.” Pause. “I believe that every man has a chance, even our Brother Pierre.”

“Very well,” the old man answered after a very long silence, “I will take your advice. Perhaps he will repent. Thank you very much, Tristan.” He thought for a moment. “Please pray for us, brother, because I have a feeling I will need more wisdom than my own.”

“I will, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

IT WAS A CONTRITE AND REPENTANT PIERRE that left the Commander’s room later that morning. He even went so far as to apologize to Claude, something unprecedented, due to the fact — and this was no secret — that the young knight despised the blond man especially. Tristan was present for the apology.

“I think he’s made a turn-around,” Claude remarked as he watched Pierre walk away humbly. His friend shook his head sadly.

“No, it’s all show. You could see it in his eyes. No matter how hard that boy tries, he’ll never be able to mask them.”

“Hm.” The blond knight cocked his head to one side and rubbed his flat nose. “Shall we go to watch the end of the tournament, my friend?” he finally asked.

“Yes, let’s. I want to speak with the baron when it is through.”

THE GALLERIES WERE FULL AGAIN, this time with Baron Bernard sitting in his plush throne, elevated above the others. The young lady Sophie sat at his right hand, the baroness being sick, or so said the people from the castle. The more base ones knew that it was jealousy that plagued the older woman.

Today was the archer’s tournament and excellent men from all different parts of France had come to try their hand at it. The shooting went quite quickly until two were left over. The one who took the prize from Sophie’s hand was a young man from the Bretagne. The other just happened to be the baron’s older son, Jean. He eyed the young woman in the stands next to his father, who was her senior by a bit less than twice her age, hating Bernard more each second. Even from the distance from which he watched, Tristan could see that. He leaned over to his friend next to him.

“It looks like the baron and Pierre are not the only ones enamored with the lady,” he remarked. Claude just grinned to himself.

“I remember something similar some fifteen years ago, my friend. Only that time it was *not* the baron of the town that was keeping two young lovers apart.” The dark knight smiled just a bit wistfully.

“Yes, it just happened to be the faith.” They rose slowly and walked towards the pavilion of the baron. He was dressed in blue and gold, a fur-lined cap on his head, waving one hand to his subjects, Sophie holding on to his other. He looked down after a few moments, his eyes resting on the two Knight Templars.

“Ah, Tristan, my friend,” he laughed cordially, “it is good to see you again.” The darker man bowed slightly.

“And Claude,” the baron acknowledged and nodded his head. The other knight also bowed.

“We were hoping that you would join us this evening. There is a banquet in honor of the end of the tournament and you are both welcome, as highly honored champions.”

“We would be delighted, my lord,” Tristan answered with another bow. Something in his face made Bernard lean forward, letting go of the girl’s hand.

“What is it?” he asked in a low voice.

“I must speak with you privately, sir,” was all the knight answered quietly.

“Very well, tonight after the banquet we’ll have time.” Tristan nodded and then watched as the baron took Sophie’s hand and they marched off the platform.

“I have a bad feeling that he won’t like what I have to tell him, my friend,” the shorter knight remarked.

He was right. The baron had been rather unhappy with the conversation about Sophie. He loved her, he’d explained, and she loved him. After all, the baroness was ten years older than him and quite ill. The doctors had said something about breathing problems. Tristan sadly knew that his friend would not shed one tear at the death of his wife. He would merely marry his mistress and life would go on — more happily for him. So the Knight Templar left the castle downheartedly, floating down the ethereal streets like a white specter.

RACHEL LEFT THE SMALL HOVEL where she’d been tending to a Christian boy. The mother had been thankful, but both of them knew that it wouldn’t do for a Jewish girl to stay at a Christian family’s home. After all, her healing skills being lavished on the poor — especially the *Christian* poor — were enough danger. Not a few Jewish women had been burned at the stake for their acts of charity, defamed as witches. So she slipped into the night, wearing a dark gray cloak to disguise her identity. She knew that many Christian men would gladly kidnap a Jewess or a Jew in order to press inordinate sums of money from them. And Hananel, her father, was one of the richest. *Hah, those Gentile fools would do anything to fill their pockets*, she thought with disgust, *even attack innocent girls*. Just like her mother. She paled at the thought and wiped it from her mind instantly. No, she wouldn’t let it bother her. It was not important.

She did not notice a cloaked figure slip out of the shadows behind her and follow her along. The girl left the dark alley and pattered along the main thoroughfare of Villefort, before disappearing into another dark street. Suddenly she stopped. Had she heard a shuffling behind her? She turned and looked over her shoulder. Nothing, just the moonlight slipping in from among the rooftops. And yet the alley was still pitch black. A quiet mewing made her jump and she looked down to see a calico cat brushing against her leg.

“Sht, go home!” she ordered quietly and took a step forward. Suddenly someone caught her from behind. She was able to cry out before a rough hand came up and pressed over her mouth, stifling any other attempt at calling for help. She struggled in the strong arms as she was pulled back into the shadows.

“Be quiet, Jewess,” a voice hissed in her ear. “No one has heard you.”

“Now there you are wrong,” came a second voice from the alley entrance. A figure clothed all in white was standing there, his face hidden in the black shadows cast by his cowl. The girl suddenly wondered if she’d heard his voice somewhere before. The man in white took a step forward. Suddenly she felt herself thrust aside, landing on the hard packed dirt of the street, only inches from a smelly sewer troth that ran down the center of the alley. A dagger flashed in her attacker’s hand, long and straight with a plain cross-bar, a Christian dagger. The white shadow also drew one, his with a gold hilt, curved — a Saracen’s weapon. Her attacker launched himself at the other, the blade flew forward, but the challenger was quicker. His white cloak came up in an instant, the dagger lodging uselessly in the folds. There was a loud tearing sound as it flew back out, cloth hanging on its edge. The curved dagger shot forward like a snake and her attacker cried out, dropping his weapon and fleeing into the night. The Christian blade lay on the ground. *That just goes to show how weak their religion is*, she found herself thinking. *The Saracen defeated him*. Her rescuer was now looming over her, his face still hidden in the dark.

“Come, I’ll take you home,” he said, offering one dark hand to her. She took it gratefully, rose and he followed closely behind her. She realized that he was a good deal taller than her.

“I believe you Muslims are stronger than the Christians after all,” she muttered.

“Don’t be deceived by the outward appearance,” the white shadow returned. “You hate the Christians?” Only a slight nod from the girl.

“I don’t blame you,” was all he answered. They reached her door. He kept his head down to hide his face from the light of the torches on the wall.

“Are you hurt?” she finally asked. He just shook his head, stepped past her and rapped on the door with his right hand. She saw that the knife of her attacker had caught his sleeve, tearing it away. The light of the torch revealed a deep scar in the skin of the massive fore-arm — it was shaped like a cross. She drew her breath sharply

as he suddenly dropped his hand and vanished into the darkness. Here was something she could not understand — a Christian who wore white and carried a Muslim dagger saved her, a Jewess. Was the whole world going upside-down?

HANANEL SAT QUIETLY IN HIS STUDY, brooding over the strange thing that had happened to his daughter the night before. He did not trust the Christians, but this was a very unusual thing indeed. The protector of his daughter — whoever he was — would probably never appear again. Strange. If only all Jews could have someone like that. Of course the baron said he protected the Jews, but who could be sure? The baron's father certainly hadn't. If it had been so, Ruth, Hananel's darling wife, would never have been killed by that angry mob.

"All Christians are cowards and demons," he muttered to himself as he rose and paced through the large house. He hated them. God, how he hated them! If it were up to him, they would all die quickly. Even this incident of kindness did not make him any more friendly to these people. Outside he had to play the humble servant, because otherwise they would kill him. He had to wear that ridiculous hat and always call everyone "sir." It was demeaning to say the least — below his dignity, after all he had more money than any other person in the town, including the baron.

A slight rap on the door brought him out of his brooding. He looked up and called, "Come." The door opened and Rachel walked in, dressed in gray, formless clothing, her hair covered by a yellow cloth, the only bit of color in her outfit.

"I hear you were at another Christian's house last night," he spat into the stillness.

"Yes, Father," she answered, head bowed.

"Well?"

"The child was sick. He needed help — and Mother would have done the same." She still kept her head down, but there was pride and disdain in her voice.

"Oh, she would have?" the old man snapped back, rising to his feet, gray eyes spitting fire. "That was what killed her!"

"No, Father." The girl's head came up, her brown eyes boring into his. "She was killed because they accused her of stealing something that she hadn't. *You* were the culprit." With that she turned on her heel and stalked out of the room. He let out a curse and slammed his fist onto the desk. Now even his daughter was talking back to him. Perhaps he deserved no more from this cruel God of Israel. Perhaps the Christians were right, the Jews were cursed.

"No, no, we are *not*!" he whispered to himself, sinking into his chair, anger and despair tugging at him.

IV

WORD OF THE STRANGE ENCOUNTER THE NIGHT BEFORE had somehow leaked onto the street and the poor folk were suddenly afraid. Sure, the thief who had attacked Rachel was not to be trusted, but to hear of someone as strong as the White Shadow, as he was now called, protecting the Jews made them afraid.

"We must drive them out of the city," someone screamed. A man jumped onto a table in the tavern and spread out his hands. In a few moments he had them quiet.

"Men of Villefort, listen to me!" he bellowed. "You have just heard what my friend said." There were nods and murmurs of assent. "The happening of last night clearly shows that the Jews are in league with the Devil himself. We must drive them out of the city before anything worse happens. Are you with me?"

"Yes!" screamed the crazed mob. Two people watched these happenings from opposite corners of the tavern, one with growing apprehension, the other with satisfaction. *This is better than I had planned it*, Pierre thought to himself. While the mob thrashed at the Jews he would be able to get away with the lovely Rachel. He would convert her — in his way, he decided with a wry grin.

The other man was Charles, a loyal friend of both Tristan and Claude and son of the baron's head steward. *This must be stopped. The baron must be warned*, he decided and slipped out of the stuffy room.

The mob moved swiftly to the Jewish quarter. None of the inhabitants were ready for them and they were quickly pushed to the side, taken captive, beaten. They reached Hananel's house just as he stepped out of the door to do some business.

"Stop, in the name of the baron!" he thundered. "What do you think you are doing?"

“Look,” someone roared, “it’s the sorcerer himself.”

“Crucify him!” someone else shouted. They pushed up to him and grabbed on to him, shoving him against the door. Several others, among them Pierre of Lyselle in disguise, pushed their way into the courtyard. In the same instant Rachel stepped from the doorway to see what the commotion was. She screamed and fled into the house. The Knight Templar raced after her and caught her just as she was about to start up the broad wooden stairs to the top floor. He grabbed her around the waist.

“I’ve got you now,” he laughed.

“Let me go!” she hissed, struggling in his iron grasp.

“I don’t think so,” he answered and hit her on the back of her head. She collapsed, unconscious. He moved her as if he was carrying a sleeping child and hurried out a back door. The girl’s yellow head scarf had come loose and lay on the floor by the stairs.

MEANWHILE, the people in front of Hananel’s house were holding him against the door. Someone produced some nails and a hammer. One rough man spread the old Jew’s hand apart and rested the sharp point of the spike against his palm. He drew back the hammer.

“STOP!” someone roared. The fellow jumped, the nail slipping out of his fingers.

“The baron!” came numerous screams. Many people tried slip out from the edge of the crowd, but they were quickly surrounded by armed men, some of them dressed in the white cloaks and red crosses of the Templars. Two of the white knights shoved their way through the crowd, swords bared. None of the people wanted to face the sharp blades and quickly made room. The man with the hammer and nails surrendered them to Claude, while Tristan supported Hananel.

“Are you all right, sir?” he asked. The Jew was dumbfounded to see such courtesy from his greatest enemies, the Templars, and merely nodded.

“I am desperately ashamed of you,” Bernard was thundering behind them. “You have forgotten that *I* am the protector of the Jews in this city and I mean to be that. I am also the protector of the Christians, besides being their judge.” He paused, green eyes flashing with anger. “What got into you, you fools?” he demanded. “I could almost swear that you were possessed by demons.”

“If there are any demons here they are sent by the Jews,” called the man who’d led the charge on the quarter. “You have heard about the White Shadow, have you not?”

“Yes, I have and I commend that man, whoever he may be. He is no demon, he is someone with more sense than any of you fools have.” The baron leaned forward on his horse. “And one more disrespectful outburst like that and you’ll find yourself hanged, is that clear?” The ringleader just sullenly glared at his lord.

“Because you acted foolishly, I won’t punish most of you. That insolent young man who started all of this will be put in the dungeon without food for two weeks. If he and you behave yourselves then he will go free. If not, he will be hanged, is that clear?” The crowd mumbled its assent. “Aside from that you are commanded to repair any damage you have made and this will *not* be figured as part of the labor that you owe me anyway. It is just punishment for fools like you.” He waved one hand. “Men, break up the crowd.” The mob splintered like a glass shattering on a marble floor and drifted off sullenly. Tristan gave Hananel an affectionate pat on the shoulder and left, Claude with him.

“I don’t know if we’ll ever get them to see that the Jews are people, too,” he sighed.

“They seem to forget that our Lord was one of them,” Tristan answered sadly. “Of course, they do not know our homeland, do they?”

“If it’s so bad here, why do you stay?” his friend remarked.

“Because it’s about as far away from Esther’s grave as I can get. It’s the only way I can somewhat forget her.” His friend nodded, understanding the dark knight’s plight.

“Dear God,” Tristan mumbled after they had mounted their horses and left the town, “why did I let her go that day? Why did we decide to go our separate ways? We would have been so much more effective together! Maybe then we’d have been able to come here and people would understand that Jews and Christians can live together in harmony.”

“No, Tristan, not even your wedding Esther would have made that possible,” Claude told him sadly. “Your father and mother’s marriage proved that. Even though your mother was converted, people still despised her and you know that. It’s the same, even out there.”

“But God calls us to love one another, even our enemies. Why can’t we just do that?”

“I don’t know.” And they were silent the rest of the way to the Temple.

“HE DID *WHAT?!?*” Lucien roared. It was one of the few times the Knight Templars had ever seen their sovereign lose his temper.

“He brought a woman to the Temple, sir,” Simon repeated, his face pale. “He said that she was wounded on the road. I gave her one of the rooms in the tower. There is a guard...”

“Why wasn’t I notified of this immediately?” the Commander demanded.

“I tried, sir, but he insisted that we lay her down first — and you were away at the riot.”

“Where is he now?”

“Back in town, sir. He said he would ask around as to who she was, so we can return her as soon as possible.”

“Liar,” someone else muttered. Lucien pretended not to have heard it.

“Very well, we’ll wait until he returns and then get her out of here...” A squire entered the room with a bow.

“What is it?” the Commander snapped.

“Sir, the Grand Visitor will arrive within the hour. He demands to be greeted with all respect.”

“Holy Mother of God, why now?” the old man groaned, sinking into the chair behind him. “What will we do now?” Brother Simon stepped forward.

“Sir, if I may?”

“Yes?”

“I would suggest that we lock the door to the chamber where the woman is, give her a guard of one squire and give her food. We can tell the Grand Visitor that there is a sick squire in there and that it is very contagious.”

“Yes, yes, that should do the trick,” Lucien mumbled. “Do it. And send me Brother Tristan as soon as he gets back.” The knights bowed and departed.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE VISITOR GENERAL was about as pompous as anything was allowed to get in the Templars’ “simple” abode. Unfortunately with the order’s increasing wealth most of the Knight Templars ended up dressing themselves to demonstrate this. The escort of the Grand Visitor was decked out in the finest linen, the crimson crosses of some even sparkled with small red gemstones and sequins. Sword hilts were adorned with various precious metals and stones, as were the helmets, but the horses had no adornments whatsoever on them, just as the order commanded. Amidst all of this the Visitor General seemed poor. His robes and white horse were simple. His gray hair and beard were cropped short and still had hints of their earlier color — fiery red — in them. In his right hand he carried his staff of office, topped with a small cross. This was Roger of St. Juven, one of the greatest Knight Templar to ever live. His body was covered with scars and his left hand was missing the small and ring finger. It was known that he was zealous for the cause of Christ. Tristan, having been under his command as a young knight, knew that he was almost a fanatic.

The Visitor General regally reigned his horse to a halt in front of the assembled knights of Villefort, all decked out in their best clothing, the white robes with the crimson crosses on the chest. Long capes of white were attached to the shoulders of the more prestigious ones, who also wore their silver chain mail shirts instead of the snowy tunics. Though belonging to this number, Tristan had chosen to come simply dressed. Only his wide cape showed his status. All had their hands at their sides, one resting on the hilt of the sword. The Commander stepped forward and bowed.

“Visitor General of the Order of the Poor Knights of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon,” he said solemnly in his gentle voice, “I bid you welcome to the Temple of Villefort.” The man on the horse fidgeted somewhat. Tristan knew that it was the power of that gentleness that effected him.

“I accept your invitation,” he returned, a very cold note in his voice. *He hasn’t changed one bit*, Tristan found himself thinking. Slowly Roger of St. Juven swung himself off his horse, stepped up to Lucien and kissed him on both cheeks. Then they walked forward, past the knights and squires. Only once did the Visitor General look to the side. It was when he noticed Tristan. The knight calmly returned the icy gaze with a humility that shamed his superior.

The black-clad squires leaped forward to hold the horses of the flashy party who marched their way into the castle. The knights of Villefort followed according to their rank. They gathered in the chapel for a special mass in honor of the Grand Visitor and then each one was allowed to do as he chose, while the Commander and

the Grand Visitor toured the Temple along with a few select knights. Among these was Tristan. They went through the building from the cellars to the highest towers — that is all, except for the western one.

“Why are we not going up there?” Roger demanded.

“There is a sick squire up there, sir,” Lucien explained almost too quickly. “Fever. We’re afraid it’s contagious.”

“Who looks after him?”

“The doctors. They are the only ones allowed to see him. Food is passed through the door and there is always someone on watch.”

“I hope the entire Temple won’t get it,” the Grand Visitor said with concern in his voice.

“Oh, no, sir,” the Commander returned. “We’re seeing to that.” Tristan smiled to himself as they continued on, remembering how deathly afraid of sickness Roger of St. Juven was. He paused for a moment longer than the others before turning and his eye caught a knight dashing up the stairs to the tower. Wasn’t it forbidden to go up there? The dark man stopped for a minute and thought. There had been no sick squires that morning at mass, nor had there been any in the earlier week. Pierre of Lyselle had also been strangely apprehensive that day when he’d returned from town. Why? And then the Commander’s overly-quick answer about the sick squire. *I had better go and see Hananel before the day is over*, he decided and trailed along behind the others.

THE OLD JEW was genuinely surprised to see two Knight Templars standing on his doorstep. They were careful not to wear their crimson crosses, so as not to offend the old man.

“What do you want?” he demanded, eyes narrowing.

“We wanted to see how you were doing after this morning,” Tristan replied.

“*And* to demand a reward, I suppose,” Hananel added disdainfully.

“No, sir, we just wanted to see if you *and* your daughter were well.”

“What does my daughter have to do with this?”

“Could you call her to make sure she is in?”

“She’s not,” the old man snapped. Claude and Tristan looked at each other.

“Do you have any idea where she is?” the blond man ventured.

“No and it’s none of your business, now be off with you!” The door slammed in their faces.

“Are you thinking what I am?” Claude asked. The darker knight nodded silently.

“That squire isn’t sick, she’s a prisoner.”

“What do we do now?”

“We go back to the Temple and pray that we can get her out before she gets hurt — and especially before Sir Roger finds out.”

“Is he really that bad?”

“He was pretty bad in Syria,” Tristan said in a resigned tone of voice. “He’s probably gotten worse. There’s something about his eyes...”

“You always say that,” his friend muttered and they swung themselves on their horses.

HANANEL HAD BEEN LISTENING from behind the door, leaving the peep hole cracked open just a bit. Now he could get Rachel back before anything bad happened to her. He *did* have enough money for the job and this old miser prized his only child more highly than his gold. It was all that reminded him of his precious Ruth. Slowly he walked back to the house, his mind in turmoil.

THE DANK TOWER CELL was the last place that Rachel expected to wake up in. It looked out over the lovely French landscape, the late summer sun painting a picture that most people would be delighted to look at, but she was too angry to notice. Slowly she walked the length and breadth of the room. It was round on three sides with a straight wall on the fourth. Six paces from the window to the opposite wall, six paces between where the wall intersected with the two ends of the curve. Not large at all and a bit dreary. There were two torch brackets beside the door and one of them was burning with a sickly flame.

She’d woken up some time ago, but had again simulated the unconscious maiden when someone came to see her. It was her kidnapper, she was certain and he’d paced back and forth in the room for nearly half an hour before the dinner call drew him from the place. She got up and now silently sat on the edge of the bed, her black

hair resting lightly on her shoulders, most of it spilling down her back. Most anyone would think her the picture of ultimate innocence. There was a knock and the door cracked open just slightly. Someone peered in before entering. It was a boy of perhaps seventeen, dressed in black and carrying a plate of food and a flagon of wine. He eyed her with suspicion as he put the food down on a table and replaced the burnt out torches with new ones. He also set a small candle on the table after lighting it from one of the torches.

“Where am I?” Rachel addressed him.

“I — I’m sorry, my lady,” the squire stammered, “I’m not to tell.” He made to leave.

“Who are you?” The question held him back.

“I — my name is Philip. I’m the squire of Tristan of Magdala.” She was about to ask something else, but he slipped through the door and she heard the key grate in the lock. Tristan of Magdala... Magdala, now where in Europe would that be? She remembered some stories she’d once heard from a friend about a woman named Mary who was called Magdalene. She had lived in Palestine — the Promised Land. Could it be that he was from *there*? Had she been taken all the way to the Promised Land in that instant of unconsciousness? The notion was absurd, but she wanted to find out badly where she was *and* she wanted to return home just as badly.

“God of our fathers, Lord, please take me back to where I belong,” she whispered. Finally the food on the table became so inviting that she could not resist and dug in.



HANANEL HAD NEVER BEEN TO THE TEMPLE OUTSIDE OF VILLEFORT. It was a place that the Jews and many Christians also stayed away from. True, it was one of the better ones of the land, where the knights really were noble and helped the people, but still the peasants were afraid of the white-clad warriors. They were something like monks, only stronger and that made an impression on the poor man.

Now the old Jew was standing by the gates. It had taken all his courage to take this step and he was now afraid that it was leaving him just as he was going to see the people there. Who would he ask for? The Commander? No, there had been talk about the knight Tristan of Magdala being a man with an open ear for anyone who came. Perhaps he would help. Little did he know that this was the same man that had knocked on his gate that morning. He took a deep breath, grasped at the Star of David under his tunic and walked across the lowered drawbridge to the sentry standing on the other side.

ROGER OF ST. JUVEN and his most trusted aid, Victor of Solcourt, were quietly walking in the garden of the Temple, talking about the condition of this small house of their order.

“They are in good condition,” the Grand Visitor remarked in a sour tone of voice.

“Does that bother you, sir?” Victor inquired.

“Of course it does! Not enough to find my old enemy Lucien of Villefort as Commander, he is doing a better job here than any of the other Commanders we have visited in France. I would give everything to see him taken from his position.”

“Why is that, sir?”

“Because, my friend, he was to be Grand Visitor, but I pushed some gold coins and favors around and got this position. If I were to die, he’d take my place immediately and the French division of our order would succumb.” The maimed left hand came up in a fist. “He does not have the zeal to do it. He does not love the Holy Father in Rome, nor God himself sufficiently for this. He is strange, I tell you, a monk at heart and not a warrior. He is not fit for this position.” He grumbled quietly into his beard, letting Victor assess what he had said. The younger knight knew that if someone was abhorred by his superior, then it was best to hate that person as well, but somehow he could not dislike Lucien of Villefort. There was something about him, an almost natural leadership that made Roger’s rule of terror seem worse than it was. Perhaps the old zealot was wrong for the first time in his life. At the same moment a squire came running up.

“Sir,” he said with a bow to the Visitor General, “there is an old Jew who wishes to see the Knight Tristan of Magdala. He said it is personal, but I thought that you should hear it first.”

“You did well,” Roger answered gravely. “Bring him here.” As soon as the squire left the old man’s brow furrowed.

“Tristan of Magdala, that name seems familiar, but I don’t know from where...” he muttered into his beard. A few moments later Hananel came in, following the squire. He instantly fell to his knees in front of the Grand Visitor.

“I wish to see Tristan of Magdala, sir,” he pleaded.

“Silence, Jew,” the old knight snapped. “You will speak when you are spoken to. I am Roger of St. Juven, Visitor General. If there is anything to be spoken of, it is to *me* that you will speak, is that clear?”

“Yes, sir,” the Jew stammered, meanwhile contemplating the canine origin of this man’s mother.

“Now what seems to be the problem?” The knight leaned back and crossed his arms, glaring down at this insolent wretch who thought that he could face up to the greatest representative of the greatest religion of all time; a wretch who had the audacity to cling to some worthless belief, more base than that of the Moslems. It took Hananel a moment to compose himself.

“Sir, it seems that one of your knights has kidnapped my daughter and is keeping her here in the castle.”

“Was it Tristan of Magdala?”

“No, sir,” the Jew answered with fake humility, “I don’t believe it was. He is merely known as a Templar whom everyman can approach.”

“Well, I tell you, Jew, that she is not to be found here. And if she were, she’d be sorry to ever set foot in the place, for she wouldn’t leave it alive.”

“But, sir, I’d offer...”

“Silence and begone with you, insolent dog!” Hananel rose, his face white with fear and anger, but he didn’t press the subject.

“And now, Victor,” the Visitor General began when the old man was out of earshot, “we will search this castle and find the girl. Surely she must have worked some devilish charm on the poor knight who took her and also bewitched the Commander to allow her to stay.” He rubbed his hands, his eyes filled with a perverse glee. “This will be the end, not only of the Jewish witch, but of Lucien of Villefort.”

LESS THAN A HALF-HOUR EARLIER Pierre of Lyselle rushed back up the stairs to the western tower, hoping to finally speak to this girl that he was so taken by. The squire opened the door for him without a question and he stormed in. Rachel was standing by the single, small window, her face filled with anger and pride.

“Who are you and what do you want?” she demanded, voice mirroring a frozen pond. Pierre made a low bow before her.

“I am Pierre of Lyselle, a Knight Templar and your humble admirer,” he answered, trying to soothe her with his words.

“Oh, you are?” The dark eyes glittered dangerously. “I believe you are the one who took me from my father’s house.”

“That was for your own good, my lady.” He took a step forward and she backed away against the wall.

“I would think you would be thankful for my saving you from being massacred by the townspeople,” he told her. Suddenly her heart was in her throat.

“You mean, they’re — dead?” The knight shrugged.

“Some.”

“My father?”

“I don’t know, fair maiden, but you are safe here,” he brought up one finger, “as long as you do as I ask.” Something in his hazel eyes made her shiver.

“I would never do *that*,” she whispered. “I may be no Christian but I have honor.” His features became stony for an instant and then he barked a laugh.

“Hah, *you* have honor?” He snickered and became serious again. “You can only have honor through a Christian, Jewess. *I* am that Christian. Lie with me and you will have your honor.”

“No!” It was just a bare whisper. She pressed herself against the stone wall, dark eyes wide with fear. She tried to edge away from him, but he was quicker, grabbing her and propelling her to the low bed. He threw her down on it and stood over her grinning.

“If you resist, it will only hurt you more,” he sneered. She pushed herself up, trying to get away. He lunged for her.

“Pierre!” The voice from the doorway was hard. His head snapped around to see who would be so insolent to intrude. Blue eyes burned out from an olive-skinned face with a thatch of dark hair. A scar pulled itself along the set jaw. Both hands were on his sword.

“Tristan, how dare you intrude!” the younger knight snapped.

“As I see it, it’s my *duty* to intrude here,” the dark man returned, “both to you and to the maiden.” Pierre straightened up and glared at his senior.

“You call her a *maiden*?” he scoffed. “She’s a Jewess.”

“And that makes her all the more a maiden,” Tristan shot back. “Now get out into the hall.” The younger knight hesitated just a moment too long and suddenly found himself staring at the sharp point of Tristan’s blade.

“Move!” he ordered. Pierre complied, sullenly stepping through the door where he was instantly pinned against the wall by the powerful fist of Claude. Tristan turned to the shaken girl.

“Are you all right, young lady?” he asked, perhaps a bit sternly. She sat up and nodded.

“Now to get you out of here,” the knight muttered, picked up a bundle of clothes and tossed it to her. “Put these on. I’ll close the door and wait outside. Come out when you’re finished.” With that he turned and left, closing the heavy portal. Rachel slowly pushed herself off the low cot and opened the bundle. There were blue and white clothes, made for a lady of high standing. There was also a white shawl and a gold cord to hold it in place. She knew that she actually shouldn’t wear them, but if it was her ticket out of here and away from that monster, Pierre, she’d do it. With a sigh, she set to changing her clothes.

TRISTAN AND CLAUDE stood at the top of the narrow stairs, side by side, swords unsheathed, points on the ground. They stared down the winding stairwell, hoping that no one would come. Pierre sat in one corner, where Claude had already tied his hands behind his back. Philip the squire stood guard over him. Suddenly the dark knight cocked his head.

“What’s that?” he asked quietly. Claude had heard it, too.

“Someone is coming up the stairs,” he whispered.

“True, but it’s not just a someone,” Tristan returned, “that sounds like the whole Temple is on its way up here!” Suddenly two squires in black swung into view, carrying candles. Right behind them was Roger of St. Juven, followed by Lucien and Victor, walking side-by-side. After that came most of the knights of the Temple.

“So you have already apprehended the witch,” the Visitor General said with a smirk.

“Witch?” Tristan asked. At the same moment the door behind him opened and Rachel stepped out in the regal gown and shawl. The jewelry she’d hidden under her plain dress now sparkled around her neck and wrists. She stood, stunned at the many men there.

“Step aside, in the name of the Cross,” the Visitor General commanded the two knights. They hesitated, glanced at each other and did as they were told. The old man stepped up onto the landing and glared down at the girl.

“So you gain entry to this holy precinct, do you, witch?” The gray eyes narrowed menacingly. “Yes, girl, I know who you are and we will put you on trial for your evil deeds.” Rachel backed away into the room, her eyes wide with fear. Her right hand fumbled for the door.

“Fear the cross, do you?” the old man laughed. “Well, now you will see the power of it!” In the same instant the Jewess’ hand closed around the heavy ring set in the door. She pulled on it with all her might and the door slammed shut in the men’s faces.

“Prepare the courtroom,” Roger ordered, turned and marched down the stairs through the crowd. Two squires hoisted Pierre of Lyselle to his feet, untied him and marched him to his quarters until the trial. The Commander took a step up to the landing on which the two knights still stood with their swords in hand.

“What do you think you were doing?” he asked quietly, just a slight edge in his voice. “You were playing right into his hands!”

“We’d hoped he hadn’t found out yet,” Tristan admitted, slowly sheathing his blade. “We wanted her out of here, for her protection and for ours. I know Roger of St. Juven. I’ve served under him. One time we even massacred an entire Christian village on his orders, merely because they had a converted Saracen in their midst, who would not bow to the commander of our troops.” He shook his head sadly and then gazed into the deep green eyes of his superior. “Sir, I didn’t want him to see her, because I knew that if he did, he’d kill her somehow.”

“Do you like her?” the old man interjected.

“Not more than any other person, sir. I just believe that all life is precious, even that of my enemy.” Lucien sighed and let his shoulders sag, making him look older and more care-worn than ever.

“I admire you, Tristan,” he finally admitted. “It is already past noon. We have a meal and then vespers planned for today. The trial cannot be held before tomorrow.” He lowered his old head. “I want both of you to go to your chambers after vespers for silent communion with God until the morning. You are not to touch supper, is that clear?” The two knights nodded and the Commander waved his hand.

“Dismissed.”

VI

USUALLY SILENT COMMUNION WITH GOD WAS SOMETHING TRISTAN ENJOYED, but now he strode back and forth in his small chamber with the window looking towards the coming night. It was four steps from the door to the bed and four steps back. At first he hurried back and forth, but now each step was preceded by a long pause. His head was bowed, chin resting on one hand, the other supporting the elbow. As he calmed down, he began a silent introspection. *Why am I so wound up about this?* he wondered. He knew about his excitable temper, something that his training as a knight helped him control. Could he be trying to get back at Roger for what he'd done in that village? No, he remembered the sand beneath his knees, staring towards the flames leaping through the small enclave, weeping, while the other Templars laughed and pointed. Not one had escaped those sharp blades and he himself had killed six of the men. It was those haunted eyes of the child that had stopped him ... haunted eyes ... He stopped in mid stride and pressed both fists into his eyes.

“My God, how could I forget,” he whispered. Those haunted eyes. That girl bound to the stake. *And I could have freed her*, he thought. *She was innocent!* The flames leaped up, touching off the already crimson hair. The hazel eyes were pleading. Slowly the head went back in an agonized scream. The flames leaped higher, scorching the fair skin. Another cry. *I could have freed her.* The fire was now crackling, the girl black and limp, just a smoldering carcass to be devoured by the heat of insane anger.

“No! Not again!” He was on his knees in his room, but the memory of that burning was still fresh. How often had it haunted his dreams as night after night he watched her die? He could have freed her. He *knew* she was innocent and could have proved it. *Why didn't I speak out?* Was it because he was afraid to do something that was painful for him? Was he afraid to make a decision that would jeopardize his life? The only way that silly bishop in that little hamlet on the Rhine river would have let her live was after the “Divine” verdict — two knights in battle, one to prove she was innocent, the other to prove she was guilty. The winner would determine her fate. Had he been afraid to fight?

“I've always been afraid to fight when it counted,” he moaned, rocking back and forth. Even when it came to Esther he'd been afraid to fight. He remembered that day too well. It was burned into his mind like the death of the innocent girl...

...IT WAS OUT ON THE KNOLL where they'd played so many times that he saw her again after nearly three years. Three years in which he'd been the squire of a Knight Templar, learning how to fight and be a man. He was a few days short of eighteen and had asked for leave to visit his family, hearing that his father was ill. The knight had granted it him and he'd gratefully accepted. Now here he was, just outside of his home-town, Magdala in Galilee, looking towards the large lake. Noon had just passed and he'd decided to go visit that spot and think a while. He had this distinct feeling that he was missing something — no, someone. It was not until he saw the young woman perched on the top of that hill staring at the shining lake that he realized who it was. She was dressed simply in dark clothes, making her black hair almost vanish in it. Only the breeze that lifted it every few minutes showed that it was distinct from the rest of her attire. A shawl lay on the ground beside her. He could not see her face and wondered what she was thinking of. He hesitantly took a step forward.

She must have heard it, because she turned her head. For an instant she didn't seem to recognize him, the dark eyes gazing at him dolefully. Then slowly a smile spread across her face.

“Tristan!” In a moment she was on her feet. It was all she could do to keep from hugging him.

“Hello, Esther,” he said with a smile of his own.

“I missed you,” she conceded, leading him back towards the edge of the hill where they sat down and gazed out at the water. They were silent for a few minutes.

“Did you come back to stay?” she finally asked.

“No, I have to return soon. I just came to visit Father. He’s sick now, as you know, and with Louis being away in Jerusalem for studies, I was the closest one who could come see him.”

“Too bad, but maybe it’s good, though.”

“What makes you say that?” he asked, looking at her sharply. She took a deep breath and expelled it in a soft, sad sigh.

“I have to go away, also, Tristan.”

“Where to?” The deep, dark eyes focused on him sadly.

“To the Countship of Edessa — to a monastery there. My mother — she ‘dedicated’ me as a child, as she put it.” She turned her face away to hide the tears. “I’m going to be a nun.”

“My ...” The words failed him and he fell silent. For a short time all that could be heard was the swish of the waves, the cries of the gulls, the wind and the soft sobbing of Esther.

“I don’t think we’ll ever see each other again,” she whispered. Tristan sat there, hands folded, knuckles showing white from the strain. His roaring feelings pulsed with his heart-beat. He had dreamed of seeing her again, had thought that then everything would be all right. But now he realized that this “seeing her” was only the beginning of something that would enhance the longing that he already had, that had kept him from sleeping most nights during his last three years. Finally he spoke up in a small voice.

“So there hasn’t been anybody ... *asking* about you?” She glanced up, surprised, the tears suddenly stopping.

“What?”

“No one has asked ... for your hand...?” A little smile drifted across her face.

“Of course, but I was always too young and now ... I’m going away.” She paused to search his face for a moment. “I don’t know if I should tell you this, but I wouldn’t have said ‘yes’ to anyone anyway. I’m waiting for someone.” A note of melancholy touched her forehead again. “Someone whom I’ll never get.” Disappointment mirrored in his face.

“Who is that?”

“You.” His eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Me? Why could you never have me?”

“Because you’ll be a Knight Templar and will have to take a vow of chastity, just like a nun...” He shook his head angrily.

“I never wanted it and I’m still only a squire. I can leave. I can come back.” He restrained a curse from crossing his lips and then looked at her, falling silent.

“You feel it, too?” she finally asked. He nodded.

“I — I guess I like you a lot more than I thought,” he admitted. “I ...” *Should I tell her this?* he wondered silently.

“Say it, Tristan,” she prompted.

“I — I love you, Esther.” A shine came to her eyes as a small smile slipped across her full lips. “I was hoping that I didn’t have to be a Knight Templar,” he continued. “I’d have come back and ask for your hand with honors, but now this...” Slowly she slipped to the side and rested her head on his shoulder. He put one arm around her and she slid up close. There was something heady about the moment. Finally she spoke.

“Let’s run away.” The thought had struck him at the same time.

“Yes, where to?”

“To Jaffa.” A slight lilting tone came to her voice. “We’ll get a priest to marry us there and then take the ship to Europe. Maybe Italy or Spain?”

“France,” he said resolutely. She raised her head just enough to look at him.

“France?”

“It’s where my father’s from. He’s told me about it so often and it sounded so beautiful. I want to see it.” She nodded in agreement.

“Then France it is.” He nodded also.

“I have some gold. It should get us there. I’ll try to find a job at the court of a baron and we can live in peace...” The dream hung in the air like the wispy tendrils of a spider’s web. It was clear enough to touch and seemed solid enough to hold on to. Then slowly he shook his head.

“No, it wouldn’t work.” She sat up and away from him.

“What? Why?” Her face was genuinely shocked. He looked at her helplessly.

“It’s a long way. We’re both under age. There are Saracens in the hills who would kill us. How do we know that the ship’s crew won’t sell us as slaves? What about the priest, will he cooperate? Can we get a job *if* we get to France? ...” He paused to catch his breath and she put up a hand, the light in her eyes slowly dying.

“I understand, but can’t we speak to our parents? Don’t you think they would let us get married, if we told them about this?”

“Maybe your mother would, but my father? Never! He is so set in his ways. It would be a miracle if he said yes. No, I think it’s better the way it is.” He stared at the water bitterly.

“I wish I’d never found out about the way you felt,” he moaned. “Things would be easier.”

“Please don’t say that,” she pleaded, resting on hand on his arm. “It may be more difficult now, but with God’s strength we’ll make it, right?” He stared at her for a long moment, his youthful face slowly becoming thoughtful. *In God’s strength...*

“Yes, we will,” he whispered, leaned forward and for the first and last time kissed her lips gently. Then they rose and returned to the village and to their different lives...

...PERHAPS HE SHOULD HAVE ASKED HIS FATHER, he now thought. Maybe the old man would have said yes. After all, he’d scorned what the others thought of his marriage to a Jewish convert. As he knelt on the rough, hard wood, he felt himself sinking back into the shadows and lights of that monastery in Edessa. Suddenly it was as if he was running along the halls again. The heat of the flames seared him. The Saracen leaped in front of him. He wasn’t quite quick enough with his blade and the scimitar slid along his chin, making a nasty cut. Then the bright Christian sword sang through the air and the Muslim was dead. He hurried on, feeling something nameless call him. Suddenly he stopped. There, in the mixture of the flickering light of the fire and the hazy, dust filled light from a hole in the ceiling, lay a small form in a nun’s habit. She was pinned under a heavy beam that must have fallen from the ceiling. Another nun was sitting by her, whispering, stroking the pale face. The comforter looked up.

“She needs help!” she called. Tristan dropped his sword and knelt beside the fallen woman.

“Are you all right?” he asked, his own blood dripping slowly onto the dirty floor. He knew that face that now whispered “Yes.” He knew that gentle voice, only away in a village to the south, where he’d grown up.

“Esther! My God, it’s Esther!” he cried and got up. His hands closed around the end of the beam and he lowered himself into a squatting position. Slowly he began to straighten up. The worry etched in his face gave him almost supernatural strength and he not only lifted the beam clear of the girl, but moved it around so that it lay on the ground some six feet away from her. He fell to his knees beside her and stroked the black hair. A smile was on her face.

“Tristan!” The dark eyes had a hazy quality to them, as if she was in much pain. “I was certain you’d come.” She let out a small gasp. The other nun leaned forward.

“We must turn her over, knight,” she ordered. So gently, inch by inch they laid the girl on her back. The quick hands of her sister rushed over her body.

“It’s no use, Sister Anna,” she finally said, addressing the fallen nun. Esther’s eyes closed momentarily.

“Thank you, Sister Elizabeth.” She opened her eyes again and gazed at the Knight Templar beside her. “I think I’ll die happy now.” Another pause. “Tristan, would you hold me?”

“Esther, the pain ... it would kill you.” She shook her head weakly.

“No, it’s going now. I have this wonderfully warm feeling.” After a moment’s hesitation he lifted her up and cradled her in his arms, her head resting on his left. She looked up at him and smiled, then suddenly became concerned.

“You’re bleeding!”

“Yes, but that’s nothing in contrast to what’s hurting inside.” The broken head nodded just slightly.

“I think I’ll sleep now,” she murmured. “I’ll see you in the morning, my dear one.” Slowly the dark eyes closed. Her breath expelled slowly, like a sigh, and she did not breath in again.

As he now knelt in his room in the same posture as when he’d held that lifeless body of the woman he’d loved so much, he realized that, *This was the one time that I did fight and it proved useless.* Would it prove the same with Rachel? Even if it did, the feeling of satisfaction that he’d done all he could would be enough.

Slowly he rose from the floor in his darkened room and lay down on his cot. Sleep was slow in coming, but when it did it was rewarding.

IT SEEMED TO HIM that he was walking the ethereal halls of a building he knew and yet didn't. At every turn he thought he would find someone he knew, but he was desperately alone. Step by step he moved towards his destination. Suddenly someone called his name. He turned to see a slight figure clothed in shimmering white coming towards him. It stopped only inches from him and smiled.

"Esther!" His voice had a hollow ring to it. She didn't seem quite solid, though she looked better than he'd ever imagined. Her edges were fuzzy, see-throughish, but her face was as radiant as ever. She beckoned him and he followed her down the hall to where the room was that he'd been looking for. In the center was a girl chained to a stake, wood piled around her. Across from him stood a knight in shining armor.

"Now you must fight," Esther said, "for *us*, for her and for your own freedom." She turned and looked at him lovingly. "You must let go of me and of what else you're holding on to," she told him. "You must fight and win." He nodded wordlessly and drew his sword, gazing at the person across from him. Slowly a hand lifted the visor and he found himself staring at a dark face with shining blue eyes and a scar on the chin — himself. And then he woke up.

THE LAST NIGHT had been terrible for Rachel as she paced her room, finding almost no sleep. The Visitor General had returned later in the day after he'd seen her and demanded all her jewelry, which she gave to him against her will.

"Might have a medallion from the Devil himself to protect her," he'd muttered and left her with the shimmering chains and bands of gold and silver. She was certain that he merely wanted these for himself. Her breakfast had come when the sun rose and now it illuminated the countryside, giving her an even greater sense of loss. Slowly she turned from the window and stared at the ground. A knock on her door startled her.

"Come!" she called. It opened slowly and a Knight Templar was in the door. She quickly recognized the dark face, black hair and blue eyes of Tristan of Magdala.

"You!" she growled, hunching forward slightly, like a cat ready to spring.

"Don't worry, Miss Rachel, I won't hurt you," he returned in a reassuring voice. "I would like to help you." The anger of her dark eyes did not disappear, though she straightened again.

"Why should I believe you? You are a Knight Templar and would be glad to see another cursed Jewess dead." The sarcasm in her voice could be cut with a knife.

"Not all of us are that way," the dark knight answered. "I for one believe that all people are equal before God, no matter what their religion. The only difference is that some have made peace with him and some haven't." He gazed at her calmly and she relaxed.

"Very reassuring, but what could you do?"

"I will defend you in the trial that will begin in a few minutes. I know that you are innocent of any charges brought against you."

"*How* do you know that?" Her eyes narrowed a bit.

"From your face and your eyes. Miss Rachel, I once met a real witch. She was no ugly old hag, as a matter of fact she was a woman much more beautiful than yourself — and such a woman is hard to find. She had something in the air around her that made her totally repulsive, though and you could see the evil power in her eyes." She leaned back and stared at him incredulously. He had not moved from his spot, hands clasped in front of him, eyes gently resting on her face.

"And you would trust only *that*?" she asked. He gave a little half-smile.

"No, I sent my squire into town to do some asking for me. He told me some very interesting things about you, but all of them point to your innocence. Besides that, I know that Roger of St. Juven is a fanatic. He once ordered a division of Templars to slaughter a whole village — a Christian village — for harboring a Saracen, converted though he was." The shock was drawn in the girl's face in clear lines.

"And you will help me against him?" she asked.

"Yes, but only if you trust me completely." She looked at him quite critically for a few minutes.

"Then give me something to make me trust you," she finally said. He thought for a moment and slowly rolled up his right sleeve. There in the massive forearm was a scar shaped like a cross, one that she had seen only once in the torch-light of her home.

"You — you're the White Shadow?" she gasped. He nodded silently.

“Then *you* were the one who has the Saracen’s weapon and saved me that evening!” She stared at him, her fists clenching and opening alternately. “Why?”

“Because I am sworn to help all in need. That is one of the things that we must swear when entering the Order. You needed help.”

“Why didn’t you reveal yourself?”

“For your protection and mine. If they’d have found out, we would both be in greater danger than we are now. At least here I can play according to my own rules. Out there the mobs are insane. Only a large number of armed men can do anything to stop them, like a few days ago at your home. But, come, we’ve got to go to the trial.”

“Then you’ll defend me?”

“That’s what I said.” She nodded and picked up the white shawl, threw it over her head and pulled part of it across her face, so only her dark eyes were visible. Then they turned and left the small room.

VII

THE FELLOWSHIP HALL OF THE KNIGHT TEMPLARS had been turned into a make-shift courtroom for the trial of the so-called witch. The hall fairly blazed with candles. The seat of the Visitor General was a large chair usually reserved for the Commander. It was raised on a low platform facing the hall. There were several seats behind and below it, places for the knights themselves. The first few benches of the hall were left empty for the chaplains and the squires of the order. In front of the raised seat of the Visitor General was a low table littered with plenty of parchment, ink and quills. This was the place for the two court recorders, selected from among the chaplains. The rest of the hall was filled to the bursting with common people. Lucien had tried to avoid this, but Roger had been all for the participation of the masses. Most had just come to watch a witch be condemned and executed. The Jews weren’t allowed to attend and only one or two Christians were brave enough to take a stand for the Jewess.

There was a shuffling at the far end of the hall and the residents of the Villefort Temple entered in a solemn procession to a hymn describing the judgmental God. The solemn, holy-sounding tune and the resounding male voices bestowed awe on the people sitting in the benches. Surely, people who could make such music were also men of God, capable of discerning his will to the fullest. Roger of St. Juven knew of this effect on the peasants and exploited it completely, trying to draw them to his side in a fanatical frenzy. By the time the song had ended all of the knights had taken their places. Only the seat of Tristan of Magdala was unoccupied, causing some muttering among the people. Why was their favorite Knight Templar absent?

The Visitor General then led the people in a *Pater Noster* and called them to sit down. He rested regally in his chair, his wide cape draped around it like a king would have it. His thinning, gray hair and beard were cropped short and his eyes burned with what the masses regarded as holy justice, but what Lucien and Claude thought to be insanity.

“Bring the accused,” he ordered. Now there was silence in the hall as Tristan of Magdala led the girl in. She was also surrounded by four sable-clad squires. The blue satin of her dress that peeked out from under the Jewess’ gray cloak was the only spot of color among them other than Tristan’s red cross. Her face was covered with part of her shawl and her head was down. An angry muttering rose from the crowd as she came to a halt in front of her place, a low, black stool against one wall. She sat down regally and the two of the four squires took their places beside her, halberds at attention. Tristan stood just a bit to her right, closer to the people.

“Brother Tristan,” the Grand Visitor addressed him, “take your seat among your people.”

“I cannot, sir,” he answered evenly. “I do not support the charges that our Order is bringing against this girl. I wish to defend her to the best of my abilities.” Roger nearly leaped out of his seat.

“What, has she cast a spell over *you*, too?” he cried. “You dare to defend a witch?”

“I dare to defend her, because she is no witch. People are innocent until proven guilty, but when some judges decide they are guilty before the trial even begins, my work gets harder. As for the spell, if she had tried to cast it, it would have no effect on me, for two reasons. The first my Commander and comrades will understand — the protection afforded me by the Lord Jesus Christ, and the second you will find more palpable.” He slowly raised his right arm and drew back the white sleeve to reveal the scar. “I carry the symbol of the cross on my body the way no one else here does. I know that you believe this is enough to annul any spell cast on me.” The Visitor

General's face had grown ashen during this short bout and he found himself at a loss for words. Finally he stared at this insolent knight and nodded.

"I will allow you to defend her in court," he said in a choked voice, took a deep breath and continued, "Let us begin. The witnesses." Several were called forward, all of them telling wild tales of how this girl had healed Christian men in strange ways. There were many lies woven with only one or two grains of truth in them, the truth that Rachel was a healer and that she helped the Christians free of charge. Tristan remained silent until all of the witnesses had been called. Then he requested permission to speak.

"Sir, I have undeniable proof that Temple money has been used to pay these men to lie." This time the Grand Visitor leaped from his seat.

"What?" Tristan nodded.

"Claude, would you give him the list?" The blond knight handed the old man a piece of fresh parchment. Roger's eyes narrowed at the sums.

"It's a list of the expenditures in the last few days," he snorted, waving the page. "So what?"

"There among the expenditures is a sum of several hundred guilders that were signed out by your lieutenant Victor of Solcourt for the express reason stated. Would you please read the reason, sir?" Again the old man squinted at the page and slowly made out the letters.

"For trustworthy witnesses in the trial of the morrow." He looked up, angry. "Are you telling me that these men were *bribed*?"

"Yes, sir, on your express orders." Now the Visitor General stood.

"How *dare* you accuse me!" he thundered.

"Sir, I would not do it, if two squires, who are completely trustworthy, had not on two separate occasions heard you order your lieutenant to find witnesses."

"And you say that he did this with a bribe?" Tristan nodded.

"Then let it be on the record that when I ordered him to 'find witnesses,' I was *not* speaking of bribes." The dark knight could tell that his superior was fuming beneath the stoic face.

"Do you have any other witnesses?" he asked in a polemic voice.

"I do, sir," Tristan answered. "I call Louise, the wife of Henri the Potter." There was some shuffling to allow the woman through. She was probably somewhere in her early thirties, but her hard life made her look like an old woman. She'd come dressed in her best clothes, which were rather shabby and now uncertainly stood beside the knight.

"Louise," Tristan began gently, bending down just a bit. "Would you kindly tell the Visitor General about Rachel's visits?" The woman nodded and didn't raise her head at all.

"Sir, Rachel came to my house to look after my young Marc. He was very sick with a red rash all over his skin."

"And did she heal him?" Roger cut in sharply.

"Yes, sir, she used salves and tea from herbs that she prepared in my house." She faltered for a moment. "There never were any incantations of any kind and she was always so helpful." She stopped and bit her lip, pulling out a small tin box. "And she gave me this salve. It cured my son, sir. Now he's alive and well like all other children."

"Show me the box," the man on the chair demanded. The poor woman shuffled forward and stretched out her hand timidly. He grabbed it from her and examined it.

"Ah, here we have proof!" he cried with a smile. There were a good number of Hebrew characters etched in the top of the box. He didn't even bother to read them as Tristan had, otherwise he would have known that these were the words of the Book of Books: "The scepter will not depart from Judah." Roger smirked at the defendant.

"I believe your witness has turned against you," he laughed. "Here we have undeniable proof!" He turned to the girl who silently sat on her sable stool, face hidden behind the shawl. "And you, witch, what do you have to say? We have proof that you have healed that boy by sorcery and that you have bewitched Pierre of Lyselle and Tristan of Magdala, two mighty knights of the Order of the Poor Knights of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon. What do you say in your defense?"

"I can only say, sir, that I am innocent of all charges," she answered in a shaking voice.

“Show me your face when you answer!” he demanded. She hesitated and slowly drew back the shawl, pulling it off her head completely. The raven hair fell to her shoulders and her pale, proud face bore a beauty that few of the people there had seen. The brown eyes seemed to the peasants to be full of innocence.

“I am innocent.” Slowly she drew a light, white glove off her right hand. “But since you will sentence me to death, I demand a Divine verdict, because I know that God can save me where men cannot.” The lines in her face were hard as she stood and flung the light piece of cloth at the feet of the Visitor General. He stared for a moment and then bent to retrieve it.

“So be it,” he muttered, thinking, *This girl is insolent enough to demand a Divine verdict, calling on the Christian God to save her worthless Jewish hide.* Out loud he continued, “Who will fight for you?”

“I will.” Tristan’s bright blue eyes stared at the old man. “And, sir, I call on *you* to stand to your decision and fight yourself.” An amused smile slipped on to the side of the old man’s face.

“So you will fight the best of the Knight Templars? I think not!”

“You, sir, have taken the glove. It is your duty to take the other side of the battle.” Roger stared hard at the knight in front of him. His arms were crossed, the right bared. The scar of the cross burned mockingly in the Visitor General’s eyes.

“Very well, tomorrow at midday we shall call for the Divine verdict. I myself will take God’s cause and defend the cross from this backslider!” He rose. “Court is adjourned.” With that he swept out of the hall in a fit of rage. Tristan merely nodded in satisfaction. Claude then rose and came over to him.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked.

“Yes, my friend, I am. It is time we test true faith in God against the fanaticism that this man has. Now I have something for you to do for me...” They talked quietly for a few moments before the dark knight walked over to the recorders’ table, bent over it and wrote something on a piece of parchment. He dried it, read it again and signed his name to the bottom, before rolling it up, sealing it, and putting it in his friend’s hand.

“This will be enough,” he said with a smile. “Make sure that the messenger does not leave until tomorrow after breakfast. We will win in any case.” Claude nodded soberly and stuck the note into his belt.

Tristan then accompanied Rachel back to her tower chamber. He let her step through the door and then turned to go.

“Sir knight!” she called. He turned back.

“Yes?”

“Where did you get that scar?” He smiled to himself sadly.

“A friend of mine gave it to me. He was a Muslim who didn’t even believe that God exists, but he told me that what was carved on my heart should be seen on my flesh. He then presented me with the dagger he’d used to do it with.”

“And you consented?” She shook her head incredulously.

“No, he did it while I was asleep. The pain woke me up, but the work was already done. As you see it helps at times. Now I bid you good night.” With that he turned and walked out of the room, leaving the Jewish girl impressed at how much a man who was so clearly a Christian would stand up to defend her from death.

THE SMALL FIELD in front of the Temple had been converted into the place of battle. Stands had been hurriedly set up and there were many banners waving in the wind. At the far end of the lists was the stake, surrounded already by piles of brushwood and tar-soaked hay. Chains were fastened to the pole, already blackened from earlier use. Beside the pyre was a low, black chair for the accused. The people had already arrived and there was much talk about how Tristan of Magdala had agreed to defend the Jewess. The Jews were there this time and populated a whole part of the galleries for themselves. Some of the “Christians” looked at them with disgust and made snide remarks, but no one dared attack them, after all this was a Divine verdict that was to be felled and no evil could have power over it.

A fanfare broke from the gate of the Temple and the Knight Templars rode forth, led by Lucien of Villefort on a dappled gelding. After him came two of the Visitor General’s henchmen, followed by Roger of St. Juven himself, clad in splendid armor, his gray eyes staring around with a steely gaze. After that came the knights in the order of their rank, the escort of the Visitor General sparkling in the sunlight. Then came the black horse of Tristan of Magdala, the dark knight’s armor glinting dully in the light. He held a shield that was covered with a white cloth and there seemed to be a sad quality in the blue eyes. There were now whispers among the people that he must be under a great weight.

Following him came Rachel, flanked by four squires. She was dressed in a simple, coarse white dress, barefoot, to make sure that nothing that she wore could hold any kind of protective power from the Devil. Her black hair framed her face and fell to her shoulders as she demurely strode towards the stake. Now the whispers had become a muttering as many of the people saw for the first time the exquisite beauty of this girl. Some were lamenting the fact that such a beautiful vessel could be filled with so much evil.

“If she were only one bit Christian,” one farmer told another, “I would be on that field to beat the living daylight out of any one who would try to harm her.”

After the girl came the Temple’s lower ranked inhabitants. These distributed themselves along the sides of the lists. A hymn was sung and then Lucien came forward with a large crucifix and stepped up to Tristan’s horse.

“Sir Tristan of Magdala,” he began, “do you swear upon the Cross of Christ, that you are fully clean of any enchantment or hatred for your adversary? Do you swear that you will do battle according to the code of honor of our order and do battle fairly?”

“Yes, I swear,” the knight answered, lightly resting his right hand on the crucifix. Then the Commander stepped over to the Visitor General.

“I have already taken the oath this morning in the presence of my knights,” he snapped at Lucien. The old man stared hard at his superior, gave a slight bow and retreated to his place as presiding judge.

“Then may you fight to the glory of God,” he cried, “and may his will be done. Amen.”

“Amen!” answered the people. The two knights trotted to the opposite ends of the field, Tristan on the end with the stake. He paused by the low chair where Rachel was now seated.

“Pray to the God of Israel that we will win,” he told her, “for your sake and for our sake.” The girl nodded. He reached up, snapped his visor shut and was handed his lance. Silence was laid over the field as the two men stood across from each other, the horses pawing the ground restlessly. It was white against black, good against evil, God against Satan, but who was representing whom? A squire then came up and loosened the strings of the white cloth covering Tristan’s shield. Instead of the crimson cross of the Templars was the face of a snarling lion and in Hebrew and Latin characters was inscribed: “The Lion of the Tribe of Judah has triumphed!” There was rapt attention on the stands.

BERNARD FELT RATHER SUBDUED THAT MORNING AFTER HIS BREAKFAST. The baroness was so sick that the doctors said she wouldn’t recover. Not that it bothered him any, it was just that she had a way of making people as miserable as she was. Sophie had hidden herself away at her father’s house and he felt so alone, now that Tristan had been detained at the Temple by the Visitor General. So, also hiding himself away from everyone, the baron had missed out on the excitement that filled the people of his town. A knock on the door startled him out of his bored reverie.

“What is it?” he snapped as a page poked his head in the door.

“Sir, one of the squires from the Temple wishes speak with you. He says he has a message for you.”

“Well, show him in!” Bernard roared and within seconds a shaken Philip was standing in front of the baron of Villefort.

“Who are you and what do you have to say?” the lord snapped.

“I — My name is Philip and I’m the squire of Tristan of Magdala. He sent a message for you.” He held out the roll of parchment with a stiff arm. Bernard grabbed it and broke the seal. His eyes passed over the message. Then he held it out to the squire.

“I can’t read.” Philip took the parchment, tilted it so the light struck it just right, and began to read.

“To Bernard, baron of Villefort. From Tristan of Magdala, Knight Templar. Greetings, my friend. It may be that you are unaware of the happenings of these last days, so I took a moment to write this message. The arrival of the Visitor General could not have had a worse timing, due to the fact that one of our knights had kidnapped one of the Jewish girls, who is under your sovereign protection. Upon finding her, the Visitor General assumed she was a witch and through a mock trial tried to condemn her to death. She was able to plead for a Divine verdict and I am going to stand at her side. However, my friend, I know the Visitor General well, for I served under him, and I will need your help. The Lion of the Tribe of Judah must and will triumph! I am awaiting you on the practice field by the Temple. To God be the Glory. Tristan of Magdala.” The baron was on his feet in an instant.

“What is this fool of a Visitor General trying to do?” he ranted. “Martinus!” His head steward came scuttling into the room.

“Get the men ready we must leave for the Temple immediately and get my armor at once!” The steward bowed and rushed from the room. His crisp orders could be heard from down the hall. Bernard stepped up close to the still shaking Philip.

“And you, boy, will get yourself back to the Temple at once and tell Tristan that the lion is out of the cage, is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.” With that the squire turned on his heel and hurried out of the castle.

THE SILENCE ON THE FIELD DID NOT LAST LONG. A chaplain who generally was marshal of the lists raised his hands. The trumpets blared and then the marshal cried.

“Fight, fight, fight!” The horses stood motionless for a moment and then leaped from their places. The two knights met at the center of the lists with a tremendous crash. The lances splintered, but both warriors stayed in their saddles. They circled around each other now, Roger pulling out a heavy mace. He swung it around his head twice to get it going and then held it out to strike the other knight, but Tristan was quicker. He had his battle ax free and thrust it up, haft first. The chain wrapped itself around the iron rod and the dark knight suddenly jerked it towards himself. Roger, not ready for the pull, flew from the saddle and into the dust. He was back up in moments, only to face an angry Tristan on foot. The swords were out and they clashed in the air. It seemed that the Visitor General’s sword could never even reach the other knight. Suddenly there was a different sounding clang and Roger’s helmet went spinning off his head. Still, he fought on against one of the mightiest warriors of Villefort. Moments later his sword spun out of his hand from an expert flick of Tristan’s blade. Then he drew his dagger. The long, straight blade glittered in the sun. He took a step back, tripped over an uneven hummock and lay flat on his back. The other knight dropped his shield and yanked off his helmet with his left hand. The dark face burned with anger and exertion. The sword was pointed at the old man’s throat. Suddenly Tristan heard a shout.

“The lion is out of the cage!” He glanced back at the fallen warrior.

“Then get on with it,” the old man snapped. “Kill me and show how God wanted the battle to end.” The sword wavered slightly. “Oh, so you’re too afraid to kill me?” the Visitor General mocked. “Perhaps it *is* me whom God wants to win.”

“I can assure you that God does *not* want you to win, Roger of St. Juven,” the other knight returned. “I just believe that all life is precious, even that of my enemy.”

“What makes me your enemy?”

“The things you have done and ordered me to do. Do you remember that village in Edessa? It was the one you ordered massacred. That was a *Christian* village.”

“It was apostate,” Roger roared back, trying to rise, but the sharp point at his throat kept him from doing so.

“Because there was a converted Saracen there? Because he did not acknowledge you as God’s appointed servant?” A sad smile crossed the younger knight’s face. “He was right not to do so, Visitor General, and we should never have obeyed your orders.”

“Wait a minute, you —” finally recognition came to the hard, gray eyes, “you were the one who tried to stop me from doing God’s work. You are that half-Jewish fool that infiltrated this holy order!” He reached up to push the blade away, but it just inched closer to his throat.

“Yes, my mother was Jewish, but she became a Christian and she was a better one than you could ever be, Roger of St. Juven. I have been raised as a Christian child. I received the baptism from the priests like all others — and yet you call me unfit to serve God, because my mother happens to have been converted from another religion — to the true faith!” The blue eyes glinted. “Do you know what it is costing me not to thrust this blade through your throat?”

“Then do it and get it over with!” the old man snapped.

“I will not,” Tristan returned and suddenly the air was filled with the sound of horses’ hooves. From around the bend came fifty armed riders, at their head the shining armor and device of the baron of Villefort. He thundered in, slid to a halt inches from the two Knight Templars on the field and dismounted. Neither flinched.

“So,” Bernard roared, bending over the old knight, “you are the man who think you are administering justice by sentencing an innocent Jewish girl to death, just on the fact that she is not a Christian?”

“We have proof that she *is* a witch,” the old man tried to defend himself.

“Let him get up, Tristan,” the baron ordered. The sword was withdrawn and the old man climbed to his feet, fists clenched, eyes burning in anger at the man in front of him.

“Who is this ‘witch’?”

“Rachel, the daughter of Hananel,” Tristan answered.

“So you are accusing a person who is known in my town as a healer — and a good one at that — of being a witch? Where is your proof?”

“There,” the Visitor General answered pointing at his four witnesses. The baron recognized them instantly.

“Oh, *them!* I’ve had them in court before and every single time they were bribed to say what their employers wanted to say. They have never told the truth in front of me. What other proof do you have?”

“The box!” the old man called. A squire came running up with the ornate tin box.

“See what is written in the top?” the Visitor General asked.

“I can’t read it.”

“But you can,” Tristan snapped at Roger accusingly. “Do so.” The Visitor General hesitated for a moment and then stared at the Hebrew characters.

“The scepter will not depart from Judah.”

“That is from the Bible!” the baron thundered. “How can you say that this is an incantation?”

“There must be some writing elsewhere,” the old man muttered turning the box over in his hands. There was none and Bernard snatched it from him.

“I hereby put you under arrest, Roger of St. Juven,” the baron roared. “The girl is innocent and she is free.” Anger flashed from the face of the old man and suddenly he had the baron’s sword in his hand.

“You will not get me without a fight.” Tristan’s blade was instantly crossed with his.

“The Lion of the Tribe of Judah will and *has* triumphed.” The younger knight’s blade whisked around in a complicated pattern and suddenly the old man fell with a deep gash in his throat, blood pouring from the wound.

“So the Divine verdict has been felled,” said Lucien, now standing behind the victor. The man on the ground’s face was contorted in hate and rage as he mouthed a few words silently before expiring.

“The question was if he ever knew what it was to be a Christian” Tristan said sadly. He looked down at the single drop of blood that dripped from his blade and then slowly raised it above his head. The crowd cheered and slowly began to disperse.

THE BODY OF ROGER OF ST. JUVEN was laid in the chapel of the Temple of Villefort. Tristan knelt by it in silent contemplation. *Dear God, was I wrong to kill him, or was this really your will?* No answer came, but he remembered his dream. He was called to fight and he had fought and won. The girl was free and at home again. He had done his duty, and yet he felt the pain of killing this bitter old man clinging to him. It was sad, but it had to be, otherwise the girl would have died, but either way one person would not be going to see the Lord.

“I wish you could have known God’s peace, Visitor General,” he whispered. “It would have made life so much easier for you.” A light hand rested on his shoulder and he looked up, surprised. Rachel was standing there, dressed in her traditional clothing, her hair covered by the golden cloth.

“I wanted to thank you,” she said, cutting off any questions he might have had. “The Commander said I could.” The knight rose slowly.

“It was what I had to do, Miss Rachel,” he returned quietly. She then looked at him quizzically.

“Tell me, what makes you different from the other Christians? Your ancestry?” He shook his head.

“It’s just the way that I understand the Gospel and the way I know God to be — loving and merciful and yet just and terrible. It seems that most other people don’t understand his first two attributes, they only see him as some monster waiting for them to sin. But God *is* love and he wants us to love one another as he loves us.”

“And where does your Jesus come into this?”

“He was the proof of God’s love, his death and resurrection were the proof — for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. Think it over and ask him to help you understand. He will.” With that he turned and slowly walked from the chapel, the white robe billowing around him and Rachel suddenly thought that she was watching a true man of God, someone who knew God intimately, leave the room.

The theme of this story is based on one from *Ivanhoe*, by Sir Walter Scott, as retold by Max Kruse in *Der Ritter*.

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