

THE BURDEN

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An excerpt of a completed novel.

PROLOGUE

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FATE

I had been told by my mother that I was born the son of a feudal vassal in the royal palace in Paris in the year 1214. For years I had believed her stories of my father without question, and I came to love him for the man he was. His death only ten days prior to my birth had shattered my mother, and it was through her tales that I came to know him. They were filled with the deepest of admiration for a man who in her eyes could not have been any more wonderful had he been the King himself, and I, listening to them, could not have possibly felt otherwise. But as my life progressed I came to know the truth behind the deception that was my parents. Gone was the image of a father so dear to my heart. In its place was the terror that I came to know as the truth.

My mother, as I later discovered, had spun fanciful yarns during my youth. And why should she have not? As a young woman under Philip Augustus' employ she had told many to his young son, Louis. Daily she would take him into the courtyard of his father's imperial palace, and amidst the spring birds, spin yarn after yarn, while his father carried on wars with King John of England. She had been the one familiar sight of his later childhood, developing his very character, preparing him to be the next king. And after he took the throne from his father, it would seem an irony that from Louis VIII's kingdom would come such bloody terror waged against my mother and myself.

As she had wound that young imp within those whimsical stories that filled the days of Louis' journey into adulthood, so too had my mother wound me up in her words. And perhaps there were no lies as whimsical as those of my father. It soon came to be that I knew of no other truth than what she had bound me with. But as I loved my mother, and still do, I shall not hold it against her. She was a teller of tales, and to her it was the only way she knew of to protect me from the reality of it all.

And so it began, the deception. My father, she said, had been a proud man, a vassal under King Philip II of France, bound by an oath of loyalty to serve and honor, and in return my father received a large fief, an estate of land to call his own. A king needed many soldiers to make up his army, and it was only through the exchange of land for

services that such an army could be built up. They were horsemen, these soldiers, *chevaliers*, or as the English used to call them, knights. But in reality they were so much more. They were members of Philip's garrison, and summoned by him when he sought counsel on questions concerning the fiefs. They also attended his court when it was deemed necessary. It was through these vassals that the King received the prestige that so marked him.

It was also from my father's frequent visits to the King's palace that he came to meet my mother. Only three years after young Louis' marriage to Blanche de Castile at the age of thirteen in 1200, there was no longer a need to care for him. Instead, my mother became the lady in waiting to his mother, Queen Isabella. Daily she would be seated alone in the courtyard, her words filling the air as she read from books, and when he passed, my father would stop to watch this beautiful maiden, her voice the softest sound he had yet heard. She knew he was watching, but never allowed herself to be so bold as to let him see her enjoyment. For months this simple charade continued, until one day my father was sent away on a battle in service to the King. For days my mother's heart ached with his absence, and she promised herself to show her desire for this man upon his immediate return. Then on November 12, 1213, my father returned to the palace, and he soon realized that he longed for my mother as she had longed for him. She told me how in the deep of night he had come into her chamber, their passion deeply ignited, and for months afterward they planned their wedding, keeping their love hidden within the closeness of the palace walls, away from the ears and the eyes of the King. My mother feared she would be sent away was he to know of her wretched ways.

But it was not the King's trust that she needed to maintain. It was his own unspoken love for her that ached within his heart. She had not been aware of his love during this time, and of course had not shared the same feelings. She found Philip to be a homely, rather unpleasant man out to destroy completely the English King. But Philip's anger soon turned a new course in May, 1214, when he discovered my mother's secret love affair and her impending pregnancy. After this revelation, Philip dedicated himself to severely harassing and brutalizing my father, working him for every service he was capable of giving. What had begun as a mutual and honest relationship turned bitter, no matter how my mother begged for Philip's mercy. As a lord, Philip had been obliged to protect and care for my father and his family in return for my father's sworn military and basic feudal service, and through most of this service the agreement was maintained. Until that fateful day...

On July 26, 1214, only ten days before my birth, my father was called into battle at Bouvines, another in a long line of wars waged by Philip against John of England. My father was at first reluctant to leave my mother, but against a threat of losing his fief, my father gave in to Philip. The battle was successful, and Philip managed to defeat both John and Otto IV, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, but my father never returned to the palace. Killed in the field, my mother suspected that Philip had him murdered. The King still yearned for my mother, and even promised to fulfill my right to lay claim to my father's fief when I came of age if she were to be his lover. She refused and fled the palace with me immediately after my birth.

For more than a decade my mother raised me, her life one of hardship and poverty, seeing that I had everything while she had nothing. It was through her own personal

sacrifices that I was able to attend some of the better schools in hopes that I might forgo the need to seek my feudal inheritance that so rightly belonged to me. I never resented her, though, for denying me that estate of land, for if I could not then, I can now see it all so clearly. I could never have served a lord who could so brutally destroy such innocent lives. And yet such brutality quickly became *my* way of life.

* * *

The first I ever heard of the Cathari, or the Albigensians, was when I was a young poet in Toulouse, but back then we tended to refer to them as “fallen Christians,” heretics if you will. They trudged into town from their headquarters at the castle of Montségur. They were searching out new members for their sect, or just anyone who would listen to their words. I remember picking up stones, as did others, and throwing them. We would be damned if we were going to listen to false prophets.

That was in 1229, three months before my fifteenth year, and to this day I shed tears over it. I had been educated in the schools, given an education in logic, philosophy, and rhetoric. I was not the son of nobility with a rich and grand scale of learning, but that of a peasant woman. I should have known better than to prejudge others.

After my father’s death, life on my mother had been very difficult. She had given up so much for me to be rid of Philip II, and the months that I spent away at school I worried greatly about her well-being and safety. She was my whole life, and only my poetry had the chance of filling the void.

An early education began with the learning of my *métier* from my mother. When I was a bit older, perhaps around seven (I really cannot remember exactly), I received my first lessons from Sébastian Gorod at Rheims. From him, I acquired the necessary manners and religious studies. He taught me how to read, to write, and to speak simple Latin.

My mother envisioned me a clerk, and the monastic school in Rheims was the most important and influential in its teaching. But by age twelve, I had other considerations. I no longer had the need for numbers or figures of any kind. What I wanted was to make some sense out of the world.

Sébastien Gorod, when learning of my desires, readily encouraged me. He quickly had me enrolled, against my mother’s pleas, at Chartes, a leading cathedral school. From there, and my further study of rhetoric, I acquired a great love of poetry. I would write for hours, letting my words speak for me. When I turned fifteen, I was reciting publicly, gathering with others, all of us sharing a love of philosophy-induced prose. My poems spoke out against the injustices erected upon the lower classes by the ruling monarchy, and against the tyranny of feudalism. I dreamt of the day when I might travel to the courts of Raymond V and his son, the centers for all poets and troubadours, but something occurred in June of my sixteenth year that would forever change my life. I can still recall that day so clearly...

* * *

A few weeks before Midsummer in the morning of that warm spring day, I awoke as my mother came to me before her visit to the market. My bed chamber was hot, a musty odor

riding on the air. The window had been sealed by shutters the night before to keep the flies and the mosquitoes away, but it often did little to stop them from coming in. There was a persistence in their nature, a desire to escape the cold night. My mother would hang bunches of ferns that had been shredded at the edges around the room. During the evening as I slept, the flies would gather on these bunches, ready to be discarded when the morning came. In the heat of the summer, a similar task would be done to rid the beds of fleas, only alder leaves would be used instead of ferns.

As my mother entered my room, she set a ceramic pot of washing water on the table near my bed before she began to collect the bunches of ferns. She started to speak to me of God, of purity, and the longing to be with those who knew the true way to Heaven. When she mentioned the Cathari, I was shocked. I had never been devoutly religious, although God was very important to me. Together my mother and I would celebrate the great feasts of the church--Christmas, Pentecost (particularly Mayday), and Easter--and I at times would enjoy them with great enthusiasm along with my friends, but the Cathari ways were extremely radical. They did not celebrate these religious days, and even the Pope had condemned them as heretics.

"My mother," I had said sternly to her, rising from the bed, "your words are most troubling. For what would my father say to hear you speak of such things? He should never allow you to act so foolishly."

She immediately blushed at the mention of my father, and yet I did not sense to take it as a warning. "Your father would preach love, an understanding of all people."

"If my father was as you have said," I answered, pulling on my breeches, "then he would not. He was a man of the King, as dreadful as events may have turned out near the end. Philip Augustus despised these groups, these Albigenians and Waldensians. He saw them for what they are. They speak out against the sacraments and against the church. Is this what you have come to believe in, my mother?"

She turned away from me, ashamed to confront my glare. I watched her hands fidget with the ferns as she grasped for something to say. Dead flies began to accumulate on the floor at her feet. "Do not lessen your trust in me," she begged desperately, turning back to face me, "for I love God with all my heart, and I praise all He has given to me and to the church. I do not disregard the sacrament, my son, nor should I find it right to do so. But should you listen to their words, you would find in them such a sincerity to God's true meaning. Do we not live in poverty? So do they! Have you not spoken out against the lavishness of the upper classes? So do they! I do not will for you to follow me along this path, my son, I simply ask it of you as your mother, and ask you to look into your heart. Know that I do not do this for the want of myself. Know that there is a need within us both, perhaps merely spiritual, that draws us away from here and into the safety of their fold. Know this, my son. Know this and trust in me."

I looked at the pot of washing water on the table. Flies had fallen into it from the ferns that my mother was grappling with. I scooped them out with my hand before splashing the cool liquid on my face. I knew that following my mother and joining the Cathari movement would mean giving up everything material that I had come to cherish, including my beloved poetry. "What you ask of is great," I said to her. "You are asking me to leave my home and my friends."

"For a better life," she replied. "For a chance to be one with God. Heresy is all around

us, my son, and it is only time before it comes looking for us. These are not holy times, Marduc. The Devil has taken over the world, created madness with his breath. The Cathari know this, and with them there will be only purity. We must escape while we can.”

I did trust her words, for I knew she was sincere in what she spoke. But were they just her words, her fears, or was she justified in believing the whole world had gone mad? Heresy was not something to be taken lightly. I have seen and known many who were accused of witchery, of lying with the Devil. Though I did not believe such was the case, I did little to prevent it. And yet I could not say one way or the other if the Devil had really bewitched the world with his breath. From what I have witnessed, it seemed at least that Toulouse had gone mad, officials torturing and burning those who went against the teachings of the church. It was all madness, that I was sure of. And that was all I could be sure of at this time.

“I shall think of it, mother,” I told her as I finished dressing. And as I followed her into the eating area out by the hearth, we sat quietly at the table, eating our breakfast of barley bread and cold potato soup. Though I hated the thought of leaving my home and my life, the thought of losing my mother to the Cathari was even more unbearable. For days I agonized over the decision I had to make, though I dared not speak of it to anyone. I so desperately wanted to discuss it with Master Gorod, but I feared he would not understand my mother as I did. But it was on the fourth day that I came to my decision. An incident occurred while we were in the market square that I will not soon forget.

“I think this will do,” my mother said to me, looking over the herbs at one of the stalls. She was collecting basil for soup, when we heard a commotion a few meters off. The market was crowded on this morning, and it was not easy to pinpoint the exact location of the sound. But a crowd began to gather quickly near the bread stalls, and soon my mother and I were joining them.

“Perhaps someone is hurt,” she said to me as we pushed forward among the many others who wanted to see what had happened. “A stall may have crippled some child.”

I held her hand to keep her close, and as we neared the sound, I heard the whinny of a horse and the snap of a whip. Suddenly a loud, boisterous voice yelled out to the crowd. “Stay back!” the man cautioned. “Stay back, or the hand of Satan shall come down upon you!”

The crowd was suddenly quiet. My mother looked at me, her eyes growing fearful. Soon murmurs began to fill the market, voices speaking of heresy and witchcraft. Accusations caught on like a wildfire and spread quickly from one person to the next; it did not matter what the evidence might be or who it may be that was accused. It was reasoned better to accuse another than to be the one accused.

My mother and I were able to squeeze close enough to catch a glimpse of the person who was suffering the fate of being in league with the Devil. Laying on the ground, her skirt covered in the dirt of the road, an elderly woman hid her face from the prying eyes around her. The official sat atop his horse, only a few feet from the crippled woman, his brown leather whip snapping at her back, urging her to rise to her feet. She let out a cry each time the bit touched her, tearing her clothing.

“Kill her!” yelled a male voice from the crowd. “Save our children from this wretched evil!”

“Yes, kill her!” called another, this time female. And then slowly the chant began to build

to a great momentum. Though I did not participate in the chanting, I saw my mother, her small form next to mine, begin to take up the words. At once I became ashamed of her, appalled by her reaction to what was happening. Did she believe as the others that this frail woman could have been a danger to anyone? I saw nothing but a broken woman, her clothes dirty, her hair knotted and coarse. I now see how my mother may have been right in assuming the whole world *had* gone mad!

“I have done nothing!” the old woman suddenly spoke, her face turned to the crowd. Tears welled up in her eyes, her skin scratched from the fall.

The mob continued their chant, reveling in the anguish of the woman. The more she protested her innocence, the louder the chanting grew. Soon she was drowned in a chorus of threats. It did not become quiet until the official gave word for the group to be silent.

“What you are witnessing,” he began in earnest, “is the result of a grave misfortune. A child has died from the hands of this wench. By performing the work of the Devil, she had bewitched the boy, giving him poison instead of a cure for what ailed him. She has brought shame upon this town, upon the country of France.”

“I have done nothing,” the woman protested, her voice now weak.

“Silence!” the official shouted. “The Devil rides upon your tongue. Confess your crime now, and the Lord shall be lenient upon you.”

The old woman said nothing, tears streaming down her face. I was angered by all this. I had seen enough of this spectacle, and urged my mother to follow me out of the market. She would not listen to my words, her eyes enthralled at the sight before her, at the words the official spoke.

“You shall pay for your crimes, old hag,” the man said. “You shall be tortured until you confess. It is the only way.”

I had to wonder what the Cathari would think of this demonstration? Surely all this must be an abomination in the eyes of God. Surely *he* would not approve of what was taking place. If this was what to expect from these people, from this town, then I had to take my mother away. I could not let her be influenced by it all, or God forbid, become accused herself. Could this old woman really be any more dangerous than she?

The harsh winter had made these people forget their senses, I told myself. Locked away too long in their homes during the blizzards, the snow, and the frigid temperatures. Too long to think of the mischief they could get up to. Thinking of the ways they could turn on one another, keep one another from enjoying the spoils of the spring planting. And when the rye went bad, there was seen a chance to take what was left, steal from the neighbor who was sent to prison, or burned for being a witch. It *was* all madness!

And then in an instant the crowd, the *mob*, began to descend upon the old woman, beating on her with their fists, kicking out at her with their shoes, and beating upon her with hard loaves of bread. I wanted to scream out myself, my cries mixed with hers, the sound of the horse and the madness of the people around us drowning out both of us. But I could not. I would not! I could not bear the same fate as the hag who lay upon the ground, her body becoming broken and bloodied.

But there was something I *could* do. I took hold of my mother, her sleeve tearing as I pulled her from the crowd. Her fists were clenched, having struck upon the woman, bruising her. She struggled in my grip, wanting to join the others, but I held to her tight. She was wild, wilder than I had ever seen her before, and it was distressing to see her in such a state. But I could not fully blame her. If blame were to be laid, it must rest upon the officials,

upon those in power. They did nothing but encourage this insanity.

Forcefully, I took my mother home. She was calmed as we reached the house, but I could still sense her anger for being pulled away. That night I informed her of my decision to leave Toulouse and join with the Cathari at her request. It was the only chance of an escape from the growing epidemic of absurdity that was taking over Europe.

And so at my mother's request, I gave up my poetry. I also gave up my schooling, and my want of choose to do as I wished, for Catharism was a strict religion. Never before had I been besieged by so many rules, and yet I blindly joined them in their quest for religious purity. I gave up my freedom and my independence to give my life completely to my God and to save my mother. I believed they would guide me and care for me.

As a Cathar, I was required to renounce any conditions of violence, no matter the need or cause; lying in any tongue; and the Pope and Church in Rome. We took no pleasure from marriage, from sexual intercourse, or from any kind of flesh. We did not drink milk or anything made from it, including cheese. We lived by a belief that the spirit self was good, but the material body was evil. Intercourse would eventually result in the birth of a child, trapping even more innocent souls within tangible bodies.

We did not adorn ourselves in fancy clothes or worship fine cloth as did the clergy. Instead, we preferred only to wear long, dark hooded gowns of serge, and sandals fitted on our feet. We believed that a simple life would draw us closer to Heaven.

But above all things, we stressed God as the supreme entity, and nothing, absolutely nothing, was placed before him. Catharism, unlike Catholicism, rejected all baptism by water, the sacrament, and the cross as a symbol of worship. Nor did we hold Jesus Christ as an equal to his father. To us, he was merely a spirit, somewhere between humanity and divinity. Since the human body was evil, God would never allow Himself to be trapped within one. Needless to say, this belief angered not only the Pope, but King Louis IX as well. Louis IX was the grandson of Philip Augustus.

Under their orders, the Grand Inquisitor at the time, Guillaume Arnaud, journeyed from town to town, holding a ceremony called "a week of grace." During this period, members of the sect were allowed to convert from Catharism or be burned alive for all to see. It was only when Arnaud reached Avignon, that we at Montségur became aware of what was happening. We knew immediately that this barbarism had to be stopped.

On our behalf, sixty knights that had been positioned at the castle rode down to the village. Once there, they awaited the arrival of the Grand Inquisitor and his tribunal. When he and his men were asleep, the armed knights burst into the living quarters of the Inquisitors, killing them and their nine assistants. To me, this very act of violence was only the start of the many contradictions the Cathari were soon to commit.

Word of Avignon spread quickly. Blanche de Castile, the King's mother, upon hearing of what happened, ordered her army of ten thousand to pitch their tents at the foot of our mountain hideaway. She had hoped that with her army lodged, all Cathari would gradually starve to death. But for the ten months that this army remained in watch, we did not starve. We found a way of bringing in the food we so desperately required. It was in the dark of night that our traveling was done, and with the undiscovered footpaths that ran up and down the mountain, supplies were steadily furnished to us.

Unfortunately, this soon came to an end. Pierre Bernart, a highly regarded member of the sect, turned against us and revealed the secret passages to the Basques. From this traitorous act, all Cathari in the east section of the castle were slaughtered as they fought to defend

their home.

We *all* fought bravely to defend our home. We fought until the early days of March, and then we could fight no more. Pierre-Rogier de Mirepoix, the son-in-law of the founder of Montségur, Raimon de Pereille, sought out the terms for our inevitable surrender. What at first seemed a fair and amicable treaty, soon became seen for what it really was: another deception. The surrender was to benefit only the Pope and King Louis IX, for in the end, they became rightful owners of the castle. Their immediate decision was to cast out all perfects, all believers, and all knights and men-at-arms who resided within. Perfects were those who followed the strictest of the Cathari lifestyle, while believers were merely that, only those who believed in the meaning of Catharism, yet lived their lives as always. While I lived as a perfect, in my heart I was only a believer, yet at times I was not even that.

And so the knights and men-at-arms were free to leave Montségur without any price upon their heads, but as for the Cathari, we were forced to make a choice. As in the “weeks of grace,” we could either withdraw from our beliefs, and our lives would be spared, or we would be burned in a great fire. Only this time, there would be no knights to come to our rescue.

Ultimately, no single Cathar renounced his faith.

* * *

Well, now that you know a bit about me, I think it's time that I formally introduce myself and let you in on the rest of the story. You see, I think there's something else you should be aware of before you decide to continue reading. My name is Marduc Rouen, and I am a heretic; a witch. Or maybe even a warlock, as some might have it, though I've rarely heard this term spoken, and I don't use it myself. But I am not the kind of witch you might immediately think of. I don't sit around a bubbling cauldron, stirring incessantly at a magic brew. Nor do I lay spells upon those whom I feel have wronged me. I don't do any of those banal things, though I could if I wanted to. No, I am a witch of fate, not of desire. I am a beast that wants for the flesh of those around me, but I do not kill for the pleasure. Once, I began to kill for revenge, but now I only kill to satisfy the need. I am an evil that lurks in the darkness, ready to pounce upon the unsuspecting. I bring my wretchedness to each place I creep, draping it over the earth like a plague.

Yet, it all happened so recklessly. It began with a want to avenge a great wrong, but in the end it turned into something far worse. It grew into a burning within my soul, an affliction that I could not shake, that I ultimately did not *want* to shake. It became all that I was, and I became all that it was.

“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”

- Exodus xxii. 18 -

BOOK ONE

PART ONE

FALLING FROM GRACE

CHAPTER ONE

**MONTSÉGUR, FRANCE
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 16, 1244**

I watched the morning sun rise from the east. A cold chill was in the air, and the bitter white of frost was on the ground. It was hard to imagine that in only a few short hours, that same earth would feel the heat of flames, leaving it scorched and blackened. During the night, the army had laid down the faggots, and on the Queen's word, they would be lit. All there was left to do was wait.

But I was not going to wait to burn in the flames. My love of Catharism was not strong enough to make me want to die. Unlike my mother, I was not controlled by the will of God; it had only been for her safety that I took on such beliefs. But now even *I* could no longer protect her from the fate that awaits.

Ah, my mother. She would rather feel the flames against her flesh, than surrender to France, or to the Devil, as she believed. And I felt strongly that she had been turned against me. I feared that my choice to live had spilled from certain lips, although I had spoken of it to no one.

While it is true that escape was on my mind, my desire to flee was not only from the army, but also from the Cathari, themselves. I longed for warmth, for the feel of soft cloth against my skin, and of the chance once again to write my poetry. The castle was cold and harsh, and the winter months were especially challenging.

Even now I knew my feet were frost-bitten. I looked about for my sandals and found them hidden beneath my straw mattress. I had placed them there the night before to ensure that they would not be stolen. Thieves were about, and they would take anything they were able to.

I grabbed my few possessions--a blanket, some bread and rice, a wooden drinking cup, and my costume of tunic and leggings that I had kept from my outside life--and threw all of them into a cloth sack. Although my belongings were meager, I was not about to lose them. Once I left the castle, they would be everything to me.

But I knew that I could not yet leave, not without one last attempt to change my mother's mind. I could not just stand idly by and watch the flames consume her as she followed the procession into the fire. She had to be convinced to live, if not for herself, then for me.

Taking hold of my pouch, I turned toward the door of my cell. I was startled to see Jacques Lebeaux standing before me, his large frame blocking my way. Of all the Cathari at Montségur, Jacques was my closest acquaintance. When my mother and I had first come to the castle, it was he who showed us kindness, while the others had kept their distance. Though we were now like a family, many had been slow to warm up. We had to gain their trust, their confidence. I think that because Jacques had grown up in the movement, he never really feared strangers. Never knowing of the outside world, there was never a reason to mistrust anyone.

He was born the son of one of the poorest families in Paris. Two months after his birth, his parents joined with the sect, hoping to make a better life for themselves and Jacques. What they really did was insure that their son never had a future. Thirty-two years after his birth, Jacques was no poorer, yet no richer, than his father had ever been. Now, with both of his parents dead of consumption, he too was destined to die a pauper. But was that not what the Cathari preached? And yet I wondered if they all desired to be so. I could see the desperation in the eyes of many as they longed for the goods they once held. But

they feared to speak of such a desire. Instead, they would rather face the flames than face what they yearned for most.

But what Jacques lacked in wealth and intelligence, he surely made up for in physique and strength. The largest of all Cathari, he was also one of the gentlest. His striking brown eyes captivated everyone, and his smile could cheer up even those who were angry or sad. Looking at him only made the immediate situation seem even more piteous than it already was.

“I see you have gathered your things together, Marduc,” he said to me, his own pouch in hand. “I feel relieved to be rid of these. I shall feel free when I meet God, not having these material things upon me.”

All the Cathari were giving away their life’s possessions to the knights and men-at-arms. All that they had ever laid claim to: clothing, wheat, salt, oil, and wax, was given to those who would live out the day.

Fool! I wanted to scream out. It angered me that Jacques’ simple thinking would not allow him to see through the Cathari charade. “I need to find my mother,” I answered plainly, “have you seen her?”

“In the large hall. She seemed so much at peace, Marduc. I knew that she was ready.”

His words dug into me. How dare he presume what my mother was thinking. He knew nothing of her, or her thoughts.

“I believe she is,” I answered, holding back any scalding words. “But I think I should begin looking for her now. There is very little time left, and I want to be with her until the end.” I made the motion to leave my cell, and waited until Jacques stepped out of the way.

“You shall be together in Heaven,” he said. “Oh, how glorious it shall be! To be together, Marduc, for an eternity!”

Without waiting for him to move, I brushed past him, and rushed down the length of the dark corridor. I couldn’t see it, but I could feel Jacques waving me away. His departing words were unintelligible and lost. For the first time in fourteen years, I was glad to be away from him.

The entire castle before me was in a state of panic. There were people crying, others screaming, and some that just sat stonefaced and silent. I suppose I grew bitter at them then. For weeks they had convinced my mother that death was good, spinning tales of how it would be wonderful finally to see God. Only now, these same fools were second-guessing their once enlightened fables.

I saw Bernard de Beaufort sitting pale against the stone wall, his fingertips numb with redness. Once animate and jovial, he was now just an empty shell. There was Pierre Miélot, comforting his crying wife. I wondered what words he was whispering into her ear to soothe her tears. Did he promise Heaven and all its glory, or was he preaching the face of God? Either way, I knew she was sure to be deceived. What possible salvation was there in allowing oneself to be murdered?

I pushed through the onslaught of Cathari on my way to the other end of the upper hall. Familiar faces passed by me, none looking directly at me, none acknowledging my existence. There was not a hint left of the once prosperous and thriving community. Only dead souls now roamed within the castle walls, stripped of every humility they once knew.

When I finally managed to locate my mother, she was sitting upon the hard stone floor, her back up against a corner wall. I think for the first time I noticed how old

she really was. At sixty-three her face had given way to every line and wrinkle of those years. She suddenly appeared so much older than when the army had first set up camp.

Her hair was a dull, black-gray, and it fell carelessly against her thin shoulders. It was obvious to me that she had not taken the time to brush it in days. Or maybe not since the fighting began back in December. The glimmer that had been held for so long in her raven eyes was now lost, owing immeasurably to the deeds at hand. Her cheeks had become slacken, and her once healthy face had become nothing more than a trace of death, so very pale. She had let herself waste away to complete abandonment, her fight for life only a last resort. In the bitter end, she had prepared herself for the final days, allowing for barely a fragment of happiness. Could she not have done it at least for me?

I moved to sit on the floor beside her. My mother's weak form fell against my own, and she trembled at my touch. But as she came to realize who I was, she let her fear subside. Her hands were rough and cold as I took them into mine, chapped from the winter weather. They seemed nothing more than mere brittle bones clinging desperately to the thin layer of flesh that covered them.

"Mother," I said to her, my hand touching upon her hair. "I have been searching for you. Why do you sit here? Do not fear the army, for until the fires are lit, they shall not harm you."

"My dear son, Marduc," she spoke, her shallow voice barely audible, "you should absolve me for what I have caused upon you. You know so little of it all."

Her words were confusing to me. "What are you saying, mother? You have caused naught for absolution, for all of what happens is not of your blame. It is Blanche de Castile who casts us into such torture with her heinous forces. It is she who should beseech absolution, not you."

Tears spilled from her bleak eyes as she shook her head. "Hearken to my words, dear Marduc, and heed what they say to you. Before we are taken to the fire and set to our deaths, I must tell you of it all. For many months I have permitted myself to be ill with fever for worry of our God turning from me for not confessing of my sins. Now he has shown me that it is time for all truths to be spoken. I do pray you will understand."

I could make no sense of her words. It pained me to hear her rambling on like some senile old woman. Getting up from the floor I took her hand, gently pulling her with me. "Follow with me, my mother, and we shall fetch water. You do appear most ill."

"We shall all be dead within a short while, my son."

I looked long into her face. "I pray thee, mother," I spoke, walking away from her, "but do not speak of the words I say to you, for I do tell you that we shall not all be dead."

She stopped behind me, the sound of her bare feet against the hard floor ending. Earlier in the week someone had taken her sandals when she left them lying about, and now she was forced to walk around the castle with no protection against her skin. I remembered the feeling against my own feet earlier and I shuddered for her. I turned to face her, and a small smile fell across her tight, dry lips.

"Pray God, Marduc! Is it true? Have the forces withdrawn and left us in peace?"

What could she be thinking? I asked myself. Did she believe it possible for a reprieve at such a late hour? The King and his mother had exhausted too much of their time enforcing rule for it all to end at the final blow. They would see us burn until the final cinder went out.

“No,” I answered, “it is not to be, mother.” I walked up to her and took hold of her cold hands. I held such pity for her. “They have not withdrawn, nor shall they. But there lies within me a hidden truth that I must tell. Follow with me as I fetch water, and I shall speak of it all.”

I gave her back her hands, and with my pouch in tow, my mother followed me into the lower hall off the donjon. I stopped near the great cistern of water, and waited for her to join me. The air was musty, almost too heavy to breathe without feeling an urgency to cough. There was a thin layer of ice atop the liquid in the wooden tank, a sign of the immense coldness in this part of the castle. Pulling the drinking cup from my sack, I dipped it into the cistern, breaking through the sheet. As I drank, I told my mother of my conception.

“I do not wish to perish within the flames,” I explained to her. “I do not wish to die for a god who would allow suffering on those who adore him. Such madness must not be permitted.”

Shock expressed on my mother’s face, and I thought she might slip to the floor, the worn stone swallowing her whole. She stumbled against the wooden tank of water, her right arm banging against it. Grabbing a hold of the bulk, she steadied herself.

“My ears deceive me so, Marduc, for I cannot believe what you have spoken to me.”

When she turned her face away, I added, “It is true, mother. Can you not behold of what happens here? We are being forced to relinquish our lives for what we believe. I did not come to Montségur to die. I came here to worship. How can that be if we are dead?”

“It is God you are deceiving, Marduc. Why do you turn your back on him, when all he gives and asks from you is love.”

“If love is what he wishes of me,” I responded, “then allow him to permit me continuance of my giving and sharing. When we came from Toulouse, I came with the knowledge I would end my days serving a lord that loved us as we have loved him. I did not come to be slaughtered as the lambs upon the farms. I came to live as I have never lived.”

“Marduc, my son,” she breathed, her pale face turning dark, “when I showed you the ways of this belief, you embraced them all. And embracing all is to not ever give it up. You are a Cathar, my son, a perfect. Does it mean nothing to you?”

“Does it mean nothing to *him*? It means as much to me as it has always. And it shall remain so for always. But, I shall not permit it to be the death of me.”

“Is it not better to be caused your death with his name upon your lips, than with the Devil in your soul? I shall never give up my faith in him or the people who have loved me. I ask that you effect the same.”

I took another drink of water, then offered some to my mother. She refused it immediately. “I do not wish of your water, my son. Water shall be of no good if you are with the Devil. Your throat shall forever be parched.”

Her words stung at me. How could she be so bitter as the end was so near? I remembered the days when she was kind and loving, and would never say such words to me. We were always so very close. I was everything to her since my father died, at least I tried to be, and now she was casting me aside in favor of her god. I could barely believe that I meant so little to her now. Why was she putting conditions on my love?

“Think as you wish, my mother, for it shall be I who lives as the blazing sun sets in the eve and as it rises in the morn. It shall be I who looks upon your ashes while the wind blows them.”

Her small hand reached up to slap my face, but I was able to take hold of it before she finished the act. "My dear mother, it is such a foolish thing you are about to do. Soon the army shall enter through the gates, and as they deliver you to the flaming faggots, it shall be too late to decree your wish to escape. They shall laugh at your effort and cast you to the hot fire."

"I shall never take it back!" her voice cursed. "I shall love it as the flames lick at my flesh, causing it to be black. I was made for burning, and so were you!"

She turned from me then to walk away, but I pulled on her arm to stop her. "My mother, hearken to me now, for after the sun is towering above this castle, the hour of demise shall have elapsed. I pray that you come with me and permit yourself to endure."

"For how can you be so dissimilar in your ways, as you are so much as I?" she asked. "I behold myself within you, yet your soul could not be of any more the contrary. Your black hair, as mine. Your black eyes, as mine. I do wonder what is wrong with you."

"Nothing is wrong, my mother, for I am wholly of what you have made me. You have awakened my belief. Do not push me away, but praise me. I shall not permit the French to cause me my death. They shall never have me."

"Hearken to my words, my son Marduc," she said to me, pulling free of my grip, "and heed my counsel. Those who stray shall never be saved. He shall never receive you if you cast him out."

"Death is all that I cast out," I threw at her. "Was it not he who cast me, *us*, out as he allowed the inquisitions to begin? And when I do escape..."

"For how shall you escape?" she asked, interrupting me, her voice binding. How cruel she was.

"I shall take the path," I answered. "I shall hide myself within the woodland until nightfall."

"Where shall you go? You cannot live within the woodland. A foolish plot it is that you have thought, my son."

"I shall not live within the woodland, my mother, for I shall seek comfort in the village. Or I shall seek comfort with the perfects who have fled."

"They shall not have you," she answered. "You are a traitor to your faith. They shall spit in your face."

"Then I shall spit back, for I am no more a traitor than they. They have gone to the Castle of Ussat, whereas we bear death upon us."

Her eyes shrank. I could tell that she was getting weaker, and I did not wish to make matters worse. Perhaps it was I who was the cruel one.

"They departed to keep safe the treasure," she answered. "It was their duty."

"Then I shall cause it to be part of my duty to seek them and aid them in keeping it safe. Shall they crucify me for that?"

"God shall crucify you for the truth."

She began to cough loudly, and as I endeavored to help her back to the upper hall, she pushed me aside with her hands, refusing any help. "Depart from me, Marduc. Depart and seek your peace at Ussat, for you shall discover no peace within yourself."

"Then so be it, mother," I responded quietly, yet firmly, "so be it."

She turned from me then and left me at the cistern. I knew as I watched her back move farther away, that I had lost her adoration. I did not allow myself to despair, though, for I knew I had done my best to convince her otherwise. She had taken her place

with God, and I with the life inside me.

* * *

I believe that it was after the hour of ten on that morning when I heard the large gates of the castle being pulled open. Their heavy iron swinging outward allowed the Devil to come in and take residence among us. As the sound echoed through the stone walls, I stole back to my small cell to gather any belongings I might have missed in my haste.

There were no others down the long, stone corridor that housed the many tiny, individual cells; no perfects were running into their empty dwellings, trying to find a place to hide. The still air hung heavy. I could hear my breathing as it came out, and it startled me. The sound was rhaspy.

Passing by my mother's cell, I noticed how little there was left of her effects. So much had been scavenged. Picking up the pieces of her worn clothing, I held the riches gently in my hands, smelling the aroma. It was fresh and so familiar. I should have forced her to come with me. She was much too stubborn. Why had I not bound and gagged her? But her words rang clear. I must have respect for the choice that she made, whether it was of her will or not. She would have died within my care, or at least she would have wanted to. Placing her things back down upon her straw mattress, I turned from them, leaving them by themselves. They too should never be within my company.

Quickly running to my own cell, a fast glance around told me nothing had been forgotten. My pouch in hand, I hugged it tight against my chest, a last memory of my mother coming to mind. Breathing deeply, I caused it to be gone, then I dashed from the tiny living quarters.

My sandaled feet pushed fast upon the cold stone floor as I made my way to the back of the enormous castle fortress. Out in the open air, out of the dank, dark sanctuary, I would watch to my mother, and I would watch to the others as they are put to their deaths. I must have the knowledge of what it was all worth.

I must have the knowledge of what I had given up.

No longer did screams or shouts reach my listening ears from the upper hall, only the sounds of orders being given by the massive men of the army. (Was this the same army my father had belonged to?) I feared the remainder of Montségur would be searched for those attempting to flee, and with that heavy on my thoughts, I quickened my pace. Upon reaching the exit leading toward the back footpath, I paused a moment, looking back into the dark castle. The only light to see by came from a few flambeaus that showed the way to each small room.

Have no guilt, I told myself. I must have no guilt for what has been done.

"I shall not," I whispered aloud. "Farewell, my mother."

I left the castle through the back chamber, venturing out into the bright morning sunlight, the warm rays refreshing me, a slight wind wrapping itself around. Out here I could hear the sweet sound of birds in the nearby trees, and the air was fresh with the scent of the coming spring, its scent spellbinding. How strange, I thought to myself, that such life should be thriving when such death was so near.

The footpath guided me into the surrounding bush and rocks, shielding me from any prying eyes. No longer did I fear being sought, for surely the army was greatly occupied with the others. They would not have the time to search out strays.

Into the dark of night I would run, allowing myself to become ever more distant from the place I had once called home, no longer familiar, but still very fresh in thought. No memory of what I shall come to see shall ever be gone from my mind.

I shall never let myself forget.

Driven to the wild commotion at the front of the mountain, I positioned myself at the farthest right corner of the castle wall to watch. A tight knot in my stomach may have tried to tell me that I should not watch, must not watch, but I refused to heed its call. I desired and needed to know what the French were capable of.

What *man* was capable of.

And as I held my eyes toward the members of the army, I kept sentinel and watched them as they ushered. Two hundred and sixteen perfects were marched down the mountainside. As the procession was led by the great Bertran Marti, conductor of Cathar rituals, the group sang their hymns to God, their voices reaching high and far into the heavens. It did not make sense to me to see them follow one another to their deaths. Surely they must all be mad!

As mad as the men who have come to kill. As mad as King Louis IX. And as mad as his mother, Blanche de Castile.

The sky should have begun to gray over, and I thought that if the air had been any warmer, the clouds might have given way to rain. The slick water would have been able to douse the flames as soon as they were set, but the sun continued to burn.

Soon a great fire was lit upon the faggots. Massive orange flames burst toward the sky, licking at it. A soft wind was blowing them in all directions, and the thick black smoke scattered over the countryside.

I knew the minds of my people were no longer their own if they were willing to enter this inferno. How could they be? How could their minds be anything but mad? And yet, wait. Some of the perfects had stopped and refused to step into the fire. I saw Jacques Coeur run from the flames, only to be clubbed upon the head. His unconscious body was dragged back to the faggots and thrown upon the blaze. And Barthélemy Leclerc screamed out in agony as the fire licked at his feet, and he threw himself away from the spectacle. He grabbed at his young son, Josse, trying to save them both, but a member of the army pushed the child into the burning sticks. And then Barthélemy, who did make a valiant attempt to flee, was beaten to death before his body was burned. One by one, the others fought, screamed, and ascended into the flames. Their bodies caught the sparks as they ate quickly at their robes, and then their remains. And all the while as each perfect after perfect mounted the burning bundles of sticks, the Crusaders bellowed their own sweet verses of song. They ignored the cries of pain that came from their fellow human beings, and chose instead to believe they were extinguishing the Devil, stamping him out.

Oh, how could they ignore the screams that came as the flesh burned! How could they ignore the stench that arose as the flesh burned!

The air around the faggots sweltered and warped as the flames rose high, the blue sky a mindless sea of waves, drowning the victims.

I watched to see, to bear witness, but was no longer able to. My eyes became dark, too dark to see. They became covered by the billowing black smoke that poured forth from the fire. The charred bodies of my fellow men and women fell against one another as they came to their deaths. The smoke was so much like the steam from a hot bath. Steam filling up the sky, covering the blue and leaving it black and gray,

the sun hid away, no longer able to warm me. Twisted minds were at work, I forced myself to remember. They tried to put me into a dazed state of thought, not letting me escape without being singed.

And it consumed me. The steam.

My head turned slightly. It was then that the smoke cleared. Once again the deadly inferno at the base of the mountain was revealed. It no longer ate away at the lives it yearned and hungered for. It was all over. It was complete. And it was erased from all minds that stood against it.

And my mother! Pray God, my mother! Her death had come, and I had missed it! Damn the smoke! Damn the steam! Now I shall never know for what it was worth!

The sun tried to comfort me, to caress me, but even though it burned brightly, I could feel no comfort from its yellow glow. Was *I* dead as well? Had *I* been taken to the flames and thrown upon the faggots?

Of course not! I was here, alive! I had survived this inquisition. But soon they shall come for me, their hands reaching and grasping.

No more shall I hear the gentle voice of my mother. I wiped away a tear, hating myself for weeping. Yet, should I not allow myself to cry? She was my mother! But I could not. I would not. She had shown me what she was when she turned away, when she turned from me to the God I now despised. What mother could do such a thing?

Picking up my pouch of possessions that lay upon the earth beside me, I ventured back to the footpath. Following it, I let it lead me into the mountains that abounded on either side, the mounds of trees swallowing me up, keeping cover over me.

CHAPTER TWO

I walked for hours, the endless line of brush and trees pushing and pulling against my costume, allowing me no refuge. I prayed for an end to the woodland, but there was no light amongst the thick, leafless branches that adorned the massive trunks. My feet ached, and I yearned for a place to rest. I wanted to sleep away the afflictions I faced.

The branches above me rustled in the wind, keeping me safe and alert. Could I be found in such dense growth? I had eluded the clawing hands of Blanche de Castile, forced her poison the other way. I could only hope that her death now comes quickly, and the horror soon ends.

Choosing a spot on the ground upon which to sit, I threw my pouch to the side; it fell carelessly in the dirt. The earth was cold and moist, and my costume quickly became soiled. Stripping out of my Cathari robe, I slipped into the clothing I had retained since my youth. It was snuggler than I had last remembered it to be, but it mattered little. It was relieving to discard my present life for my old. It would allow me to blend and disappear amongst others.

A condemnation extinguished.

The wet ground soaked through to my skin, and as I watched the moon begin to climb overhead, I was suddenly afraid. Not afraid of being discovered, but afraid of being alone. My entire life had been spent with others, dependent on them for food, companionship and shelter, and now, without any advance ability to entertain myself, I was put into the position of striving to survive.

Shivering, I pulled my old tunic close to my body, but it provided little comfort from the chill of the air. I desperately wished for a glow of ember at this time to warm myself, but I shall not bear the thought of fire on this evening. I shall honor my mother. I will not think of flames.

Suddenly, I made the decision to leave immediately the foreboding sanctuary of the forest. I was cold, alone, and terribly frightened of dying in the night's chill. I wasn't far from the castle, I knew, and it wouldn't take me long to return to its comforting walls. The army would be resting in their tents and would not spy me if I crept along the footpath. I

could sleep within the donjon and slip out in the morning just before dawn. I would travel better during the light of day.

The images of my mother and my fellow Cathari flashed in my mind, their burning bodies forever etched in my thoughts. And as I ran through the woodland toward Montségur, there seemed nothing left within me that could redeem my choice of life. Tears streamed down my face only to be whipped clear by the wind. It was harsh and punishing. Only my rage against the Pope, the King, and his mother justified my existence.

When I reached the foot of the mountain I let my eyes gaze the castle. Every window was dark. But if I looked hard enough, I was sure that I would have been able to see my mother peering out at me from her cell, her form illuminated by the flambeaus burning in the corridor.

Burning!

I shook the thought from my head and began to make my way up the footpath, my fingers grasping at rocks and twigs to keep myself from falling. I had a solid hold on the ground and found the climb to be very easy, even though I was out of breath from the run. I heard the voices of the army reach me from the other side of Montségur but I did not let them slow me. If anything, they gave me the strength to continue.

It wasn't until I reached the top of the steep hill that I stopped to rest. Looking down to where I had just come from, I could only see darkness. I must have been a fool to think I could remain in the woodland through the night. The dark held such terror for me, its blackness hiding such evil. My mother had been right in her foresight. She knew that I was ill-equipped to cope on my own.

As I made my way to the castle, I crept slowly along the night sky, my form only but a spot amongst the stars. And once inside the castle, I followed the long dark corridor past the empty cells, through the upper hall, then into the donjon. The air was damp, the darkness thick, but I could still find my way amongst the maze-like walls, the flambeaus long since extinguished. Screams echoed off the stone, tears spilled from the cracks, and my blood ran cold. Death touched me, shook me, and tore its way through my dying soul, and all the while I knew it could never reach me.

In the black of the donjon the frosted air bit through me as I slid to the ground beneath the great cistern of water. Suddenly I realized that I had left my pouch, and my life, back in the woodland. Why had I not realized earlier? Why had I not sensed its absence as I was grasping with both hands the rocks and twigs on the mountain side? Such a fool I was! Such a fool! Now how should I survive without food, and without my cup? Perhaps I should allow the army to find me in the morn, to end the misery so much quicker.

With bitterness biting through me, I laid my head to rest on the hard stone floor, tears filling my eyes for what I had lost that day. "Oh, mother," I whispered, my voice trembling, "how I do miss you. Pray God, how I miss your voice, your sweet words that were once there. Your soft face that looked upon me in the morn, and now I know I shall never see it again. All that once seemed so important is now so unimportant. But I shall make them suffer for what they have done to you! I shall force Blanche de Castile to her knees! I shall wait and attack her in the street! Oh, my mother. My mother!" I sobbed endlessly through the late night hours until sleep finally took me over. Soon I was lost among my dreams, the voices of the army still reaching me, still prodding at my consciousness, disrupting any prolonged slumber. Yet I yearned for this, for any indescribable sound would

surely bring me awake.

Dreaming.

I suddenly awoke with a start. A noise unfamiliar advanced to me, disturbing. It made me shudder with anticipation. What possibly could have produced it? Bringing my head up from the floor, I tried to peer about, but my eyes had not become adjusted to the immense darkness. The moon's light did not reach this far into the castle.

I had been dreaming, I told myself. The sound was not at all what I had thought.

The damp air whispered to me, calling out my name, but I was not so foolish as to believe it was a voice. I was confused, and my mind was taking the occasion to frolic with me; but I would not let it continue. Turning over on the ground, I placed my head back upon the stone, closing my eyes.

The voice, again. This time alert, I stood up and wiped the dirt of the floor from my tunic. I grasped to the cistern of water that provided me with support against the darkness. My breath was coming out in short gasps. I felt trapped where I stood. If there was someone lurking nearby in the castle, I was defenseless against them.

I tried to tell myself that it was all but a dream! Indeed, all *but* a dream!

A serpent had been sent to watch over me, to congratulate me for my turn against God. He wanted to praise me for thinking wicked thoughts when I should have been having themes of purity upon my mind. The serpent would be right, though, for I have thought little of my religion since the faggots went out.

Since the army positioned itself.

Since the fighting began, way, way back in December.

After giving up my life as a poet in Toulouse, was this the path set for me, to be brought to life after the great fire? And who was it that had written such a fate?

It is us, dear Marduc.

Whispers.

"Who is it that speaks?" I heard myself begging. "Come forth to me now, and permit me to touch your skin!"

There was no answer, but I did not expect to hear one. If I were to continue to think as this, I would surely go mad. My mother would have told me it was the Devil coming to take me away for my sins, but her words meant little to me now.

But if her words could ring true, then perhaps it was the Devil who tempted me within these walls. What should I do? Should I accept him, or should I turn my head away from his, pushing him out? Would he have let *his* servants die?

I am insane to think these thoughts, I told myself. Insane! I could never permit myself a place in the Devil's kingdom. I was a perfect! It must mean something to me!

"Commence your profane ritual upon me now!" I yelled out into the darkness. Silence was the only response given, the March chill hushing all. "I fear not of your presence, Satan. I know I shall be of no equal against you, but you cannot have me if I am not willing."

Nothing.

I laughed to myself, ashamed that I had even participated in such a foolish escapade. I was nothing more than a vagabond within these stone walls; a forgotten poet.

Whispers. Calling my name again. All whispers!

A sound coming from behind me caused me to turn my head in surprise, my ears pinpointing the exact location of the movement. A blow struck against the side of my skull, and I felt myself slip to the hard stone. The darkness overwhelmed me, and my eyes closed,

the lids too heavy to keep open. I was sure I was going to die, and all because I had escaped the flames. A fitting punishment from God.

My mother had been right.

* * *

When I awoke what seemed only moments later, a great throbbing pain filled my head and bright lights in the darkness appeared in front of my eyes. But they were only specks which quickly disappeared, leaving me dazed and withdrawn. It took only a short while to realize what had happened, and as it seems, I had somehow slipped upon the wet ground, hitting my head against the cistern. I moved my hand to the wound, and I could feel a moistness within my hair. I was alive, though, and that's what mattered most.

The dark played antics on my mind, and though I wanted to sleep peacefully until dawn, I was not in a state to defend myself against my thoughts.

Thoughts, taking me over, controlling me and warping my mind. I had a sensation of being lifted from my body, forced out. I was sinking farther and farther away, into a secret world far beyond my reach. I tried desperately to grab onto the edges of sanity, pulling myself upward. My fingers held to the sides, but my body was too heavy to be lifted through. It was all so senseless, escaping one fate only to be driven to another.

I felt my mind, confused and spellbound, begin to race with unfamiliar thoughts, sounds and images that I was not able to distinguish from fantasy or reality. Heat engulfed my body, and a feeling of genuine urgency invaded me, forcing me up that long, almost empty hill that suddenly appeared before me.

With my eyes now wide, I felt a need quickly to hide myself deep within the open countryside I found myself in. My head pounded, and I could hear a strange music being played. Weak, I pushed myself to it. With each beat of the drumming, I raced with the wind through the sparse trees.

I could hear the sounds, so many different ones, and yet they were all the same. I could feel the strength inside and understand why I was called into this. It was not that they wanted me, but that they *needed* me. The dead wanted to possess me. Inside, I was beginning to die. The fire that burned in my soul, the same that burned the faggots, ignited me.

I pushed my feet faster until I was upon them. The group of perfects before me, their flesh burned, and their bodies nothing more than wasted bone. My lungs were empty of any air, and the cool, brisk breeze of the night tried its best to fill them. My heart was racing, my head was pounding, but the fear inside me was gone.

I had arrived. I would now be with them. They wanted and needed me. They would do anything for me. Anything! And suddenly I was consumed with the passion to do anything for them.

But what do you want us to do? I heard them ask of me.

"I want you to bring to me my mother," came my response. "Return her living form to me as I deserve."

And I could see her, my mother. I could see her unburned form before me, and I knew that she...

Instantly everything changed. The cool light flickered from my eyes, and the perfects surrounding me were now gone. I was unsure if they had ever been there. The hill sloped

under me, tripping me as I fell to the cold stone floor, rolling forever towards the immense walls that surrounded me. It returned me to the bulk of the cistern that I had left behind.

And the whispers soon returned, the voices all around me.

“Marduc,” it softly blew, losing itself in the darkness.

I folded my arms close to my body. I was trembling, my hands were shaking, and I wasn’t sure whether it was from fright or from the cold air.

“Marduc,” the voice said, “we have come for you.”

It was now so clear that I could not be mistaken about it. The voice was real. I had heard it!

“If you are there,” I demanded, “display yourself to me.”

“Follow me,” it instructed, “follow me far into the castle. Let my voice lead you. Your salvation awaits.”

The voice was coming from deep within Montségur, far beyond the donjon. In my fifteen years of living here I had never ventured beyond this point. What waited for me in the darkness had found a place secure from the army, and it suddenly occurred to me that one or more perfects had escaped the burning as I had. But why had they not told others? Why had they not given others the opportunity to flee as they had? Yet the answer mattered little to me now. I had to find them and be with them, and together we would fight the monarchy.

Unaided by any light, I followed the voice as it echoed in the darkness. It led me out of the donjon and into a section of the castle far colder than any other. My flesh rose under its icy touch as the air locked itself onto me, tantalizing me as I crept through a narrow passage that led to a set of steps. Down below me I could hear the voice calling, its tone warm and comforting so that I no longer felt the cold. And as I followed the rough steps deeper into the castle I could hear the clanging of steel doors and the shuffling of feet. There must be at least ten people waiting for me in the darkness! How could so many have survived?

I stopped midway on the steps and looked back toward the donjon. I was unsure if I should continue. Perhaps it was a trick. Perhaps the army had known that I had escaped and was setting a trap? Should it go to such an elaborate scheme just for me? But then I heard a female voice, and any thoughts of turning back left me. There were no women in the army, and it seemed unlikely it would procure one for such a scheme. No, these were my people, my friends. I had to join them.

Bounding down the steps I took them, two, sometimes three at a time. When I was at the bottom I followed the sounds ahead of me. They were so close I could have touched them, and yet I walked for minutes, feeling my way against the hard stone of the walls. They were dirty and cold, and the air was quickly growing musty, but what did it matter when I would soon be with those who would not judge me. And yet had I not discarded my own Cathari robe? What should they say when their eyes look upon me? Would they turn me out to the army? Would they think I had betrayed them? Oh, but could they not understand?

The voices around me suddenly stopped and I stopped with them. I could hear nothing, the sounds from the castle left behind in the donjon. Even the army would not hear me were I to scream out. And yet what was there to fear? Should I fear the dark? Should I fear the unknown?

I called out to my friends, letting them know that I was there, but there were no words to greet me, nor any shuffling of feet. Had they gone farther ahead? Where was

this place they were hiding? How could they possibly exist down in this darkness? Would they ever lay eyes on the sun again? When Blanche de Castile takes over the castle what will they do then? I knew that I could not live out my life hid away like some scourge of society.

I called out again, demanding to be heard. If I could hear their voices from the donjon, then surely they could hear me from where I was now standing. My words were loud, sure to be heard, and in an instant a flambeau was lit. The sudden light was blinding and I had to shield my eyes from it. The crackling of the flames was loud, bouncing off the walls, and I was immediately transported back to the fire that stole my mother's life. There I was, outside in the sunlight, the smoke choking me, and all I could hear were the screams. So many screams!

"I cannot bear this!" I suddenly shouted out. "I cannot bear this!"

"Marduc!" the voice threw at me, "look about you! Uncover your eyes and see what is set before you."

I slowly lowered my hands and allowed myself to take in my surroundings. I was shocked by what I saw; I was shocked by what I did *not* see. There were no perfects standing about, no familiar faces that I once knew, only a steel door before me that had long ago banged shut, locking away some miserable tortured prisoner. Were my friends behind that door? With the passage way that I had just entered through so close, I almost ran back to the donjon, to safety, and yet I chose to stay where I was. The burning flambeau attached to the wall shed its light on the stones that surrounded me, a room no larger than my cell that I was sure was so close above. But the voices, I thought to myself. Many voices! And the feet shuffling along the stone floor! Who had they belonged to if not perfects? And yet I was not alone in that small enclosure.

In the glow of the flambeau, in its hideous flickering light, stood a woman no more than three feet away. She was neither a perfect nor a believer, but a woman of impeccable beauty, dressed in a robe of fine white silk that was tied around her waist with a girdle. Her long, straight hair was the whitest of white, and it fell freely past her shoulders to her breasts, while her eyes of the deepest blue pierced through me, not giving me the chance to look away. And her face, a milky, flawless complexion, was offset by lips the richest shade of blood red. She was evil, I knew that immediately, for what kind of woman would allow herself such a guise? I had stepped into the Devil's lair and there was no turning back.

"Who are you?" I asked, my voice quivering. "And where are the perfects that I heard down here?"

She moved closer to me. "I am Lia," she answered, her voice floating on the musty air. "Do not fear me. And the perfects? They are dead, Marduc. They are *all* dead. You heard nothing but that which you wanted to hear."

Disillusioned by her words, I remembered that the voice had earlier spoken of salvation. "Have you come to deliver me?" I asked her.

She outstretched her pale left arm and grazed my cheek. I felt the sting of her bite, but did not let it throw me. Was she to be the Eve to my Adam, tempting me into a life of sin?

"I have come to help you, Marduc," she answered. "I have come to fill you with the life you desire."

Her words were riddles to me. "How will you help me? Who has sent you? And how do you know of my name?"

"I come from a greater place, Marduc," she responded. "It is a place far greater than this world God has offered to you."

Pray God! It was true! On this night the Devil had entered my soul and taken residence within. My mother had spoken words of reality, for God had now turned against me.

“God has never been with you, Marduc,” she spoke, reading my thoughts. “God has left you to ruin. His deceit led your mother to her death. He deserves nothing of you.”

“You know nothing of what has been,” I threw at her. “I have breathed through pain and remorse, aware that I have sinned greatly. Many times I have told myself that I should not have faith in a god who would let his servants perish, but I carry no hatred for him. He is still within me.”

“Then you are nothing more than a fool, Marduc. Your mother lies dead for such a belief. Do you marvel at him for that?”

“Will she exist once more if I turn away? If it is possible for her soul to return to her body, giving her back her life, then I would be joyous to turn away from everything he is. But such joy does not come from misery or torment, nor the hope of what can never be.”

She smiled to me, her white teeth perfection against her deep red lips. “If you ache for it, you might have it,” she answered. “Beseech of what you desire, and it shall come to be.”

“I do not understand,” I told her. “How can something that can never be, exist if desired? If it is true, why has God not tried?”

“A fool is your god, and foolish ones will always follow behind. But you, Marduc, you have been given a chance. Seize the reigns and draw ahead. Allow yourself to seek what you most desire.”

“And what shall that be?” I asked her, though I had a sense I already knew.

“Vengeance,” she answered simply, my thought satisfied. “Vengeance is what you seek most, Marduc, and we possess the ability to give it to you.”

Ah, yes, vengeance. It was exactly what I wanted, to punish those who caused me such pain and grief. To punish those who caused my mother to lose her way and her life. How she would despise me for even thinking such thoughts, but I did not care. This woman, Lia, offered me a choice, one that God never had, nor ever would. Though I could practically smell the evil flowing from her, I owed it to myself to listen to all she spoke of.

“Tell me what it is I must do for this...this vengeance?” I pleaded with her.

She smiled slyly. “Do you agree to come with me?” she asked. “Do you agree to give yourself over to me?”

“Come with you?” I asked. “Come with you, where?”

“Deep, deep within this castle, my love. Beyond that door lies the life you so desire. Follow with me through it, Marduc, and the world shall beg of your mercy. Those whose lives go on as yours withers and as your mother’s is no longer, shall fear your very existence. Queen Blanche awaits her destiny at your hands.”

I feared what might lay ahead for me. If that door led to salvation, I wanted every part of it. But if it held damnation, then may God watch over me. All I knew is that it might give me what I was lacking, and I was suddenly unable to refuse it. There was such desire in me for revenge that I was almost sick with it. I had to have justice, at any price.

I nodded. “I agree,” I told her. “Take me with you.”

Lifting the flambeau from the wall with her right hand, Lia took hold of me with her other. Leading me through the steel door, we followed the dark passageway deeper into the body of Montségur. The light of the flambeau showed the remnants of dead rodents, thick cobwebs, and the occasional human remains. The stone walls were scarred, deep cuts

trailing down to the floor, days etched away, counted down, and lost in the darkness. There were more steel doors, more bones, and the air began to grow thinner, the dust thicker. The stones of the walls scratched me with their roughness, ripped me open and displayed my tainted soul for all to see. I was a harlequin for their foolish laughter. Screams of merriment tore through the silence of the hidden catacombs, a hundred men being burned alive for the enjoyment of others.

Faster and faster we moved through the corridors until we were running, time passing us by, growing old on the outside, but where we were it stood still. I was trapped in the hour of my death, forever feeling the despair of never being able to return to what once was. To Toulouse and my poetry, to lying in my mother's arms on the cold winter nights, the blowing wind and snow enveloping us. Only the warmth of our love keeping us safe.

I slipped into another space, another time, another world, one that was void of all feelings for humanity. Only selfishness reigned. Do for yourself what you want, and all others be damned! My mother was lost, gone forever. Her love, her warmth, her sensitivity, and her comforting touch, all removed, gone for eternity.

Finally, Lia and I slid down another set of worn stone steps, then I was pushed through a small wooden door only large enough for one of us at a time. My face hit the hard floor of the small room, and I coughed as the dirt rose up, clouding my head and my thoughts. Was I still in the castle? In France? Was I still myself, or did I no longer even have my mind?

Inside the room, silence surrounded me. But on the outside it was the sound of hopelessness that reached my ears. The atmosphere in the room had an evil, disastrous flavor, and I could feel, smell, and taste the thick air; it parched my throat. Only a burning fire in the middle of the floor gave the room any sense of being lived in.

If this was Hell, then it was nothing as I had imagined. No flames licked at my heels, and no bubbling cauldrons scorched my flesh. It was merely an unusual journey, given the deception of pain, torment and eternal fires.

Rising to my feet, I searched around. The walls, rough and close, were covered with a thick coating of moss. The entire area was probably no larger than ten feet square, but I could see no one through the light of the open fire. Lia, who I was sure had come in behind me, was nowhere to be seen.

Gaining my voice, I shouted out. "Lia! Lia, if you are there, permit me to hear your words!"

I waited impatiently for a response, for any sound, but there was none. "Lia, you must respond to me! It is I, Marduc! Appear before my eyes!"

From out of the corner of my sight, Lia came to me, appearing to fly, her silk robe flapping like wings. An almost perfect angel. Where had she come from? There was no place where she could possibly have hidden.

"Do not let your voice lead your mind, dear Marduc," she said to me. "Keep silent! It is fateful for one to appear better than the Devil."

The Devil! Pray God!

Fearful, I obeyed her command. I remained silent while she continued to speak.

"Allow yourself to be free of all guilt, Marduc," she said. "Allow yourself to be free of God, the perfects, and the deadly blaze that consumed them. Cleanse your mind and he shall embrace you fully."

Embrace me? Did I want Satan to embrace me? Certainly not. I did not even want to

look upon him. I knew I had made an unwise decision to accompany Lia to this place. I should have refused her from the start. I could not hope to find a life in France with the Devil on my back. Heresy was what I wanted to run from, not to.

“Release me of this place,” I said to her, “for I do not wish to be part of this. It is not what I want.”

“I know what you want, Marduc, and it is so very close. Whereas Blanche de Castile lies warmly within her bed-chamber, you are forced to flee with your life. Grant her what she deserves. Allow her to be the offering in your flames.”

If only! If only it could be! I would gladly sit next to the Devil if he could destroy the King’s mother. My former Queen. Was it any worse than what I was now, of what I would endure for the rest of my life?

“It is true I would be joyful of her death,” I answered back, sensibility taking over, “but part of me feels it should come at the hands of good, not evil.”

Lia took me in her arms, her soft skin caressing me. Her body was so tender that I did not resist. She was comforting to me in my time of need, no matter what she was. I allowed her to enfold me.

“Beloved boy,” she breathed, “do not worry of such affairs. Nothing is to be charged of you that you do not wish. Give us this occasion to be part of your vengeance. This is all we shall insist upon.”

No further complexity. And I did so much want to bring Blanche de Castile to her knees. Oh, so much!

“Present him to me,” I reluctantly said to her, unsure. “Permit the Devil to bring himself before me. It shall only be then that I decide.” I must have been truly insane.

Lia let out a chirp, her voice thrown out in spits. From out of the darkness, I watched a form suddenly appear. A man deformed, a beggar no doubt. He was aged beyond his years, grey hair swarming like snakes about his head. His left arm was shriveled, covered in a sickly yellow bandage, and his right, adorned with only four bent fingers, was covered in swelling blisters and warts. His face was wrinkled, deep lines etched everywhere, his teeth missing, and his eyes blood-shot red. His clothes were ragged, torn in almost every place, dirty and foul. And he walked with a limp, his left foot dragging loosely through the dirt. If this was the Devil, I was surprised and shocked, but I could not have been any less frightened. I had been expecting a

beast, an abhorrent creature, and instead was presented with a helpless old man. I had a strange feeling that I was being played for a fool.

But he came to me fast and slick. His face upon my face, his stench was overwhelming, part urine, part vomit. I wanted to run from there immediately, but there was something in his eyes, something deep and sinister in them that made me stay where I was. And when he put his withered hand on me, touching me, feeling me, I felt dirty and sickened.

My heart beat rapidly as he raised his right hand, the four fingers covered in sharp, pointed claws. And when he reached into me with his eyes, I came to see the evil that they held. Such contempt. He *was* the Devil, and he *was* a beast.

I could feel my soul being pulled out of me, and an inner pain rushed through my body as it was being torn from my flesh. The Devil made me want it to happen, and I think that if he hadn’t done it, I would have pulled it out myself.

Then something happened. A sort of realization of what was taking place swept through me, trying to purify me. I recoiled from the Devil’s touch and pulled away from his withered

hand. "Do not touch me!" I suddenly shouted out frantically like a frightened child. "Take your hands away! Leave me be! Leave me be! I cannot behold of this! I am not evil! I am not wicked!"

The Devil blew his breath in my face, causing me to relax my stance. I was weakening as I was quickly being taken. I had lost all will and want.

"For what," I managed to gasp forth, "have you brought me to this place?" The words slipped from my lips so calmly that it was as if I had never actually spoken them, but only imagined them. I needed to know the answer to satisfy my mind.

"To have you bleed for me," came his cracked, aged voice, soft, yet firm in its meaning. He was forcing me to love him. "To feel your soul in the shelter of my embracing hands. A craving to make it and mold it for my necessity. For you to be one with me; for you to show all your love. With me, you shall feel supreme above men and know that your life is worth more than naught."

I said nothing, but showed him I accepted what he offered. His eyes could see through me that my lips need not speak a word.

But how could I possibly be pleased at such a proposal? Should I believe that it all mattered? Yes, I told myself, it did all matter, all of it. There was an opportunity for the revival of my mother's soul, for her final and lasting revenge. And for that and her, I must take the chance. And live.

I opened my mouth to speak to the Devil, but I knew that he was already aware of my response. Coming close, he took my hand into his. It was the one with the four fingers. He rubbed my palm softly, preparing me. I implored him to begin, to get it over with.

Cut me! I heard my mind begin to beg, and at my request, the Devil did just that.

With his razor-sharp nails, he slashed across my index finger, my forefinger and the thumb of my left hand. The blood rushed out. The cut was deep, and it allowed the rich red liquid to flow steadily. A feeling of nausea swept over me and I almost passed out, but the Devil held me tight.

Taking hold of my wrist, he pushed my blood-stained fingers onto my face, spreading the wetness across my skin. I struggled suddenly against him, frightened of the blood as it ran in rivets down my chin, soaking my tunic, adding to the soiled areas. With words of softness he calmed me, and soon the blood was warm and relaxing. It gave me memories of home.

"Allow me to take your fingers into my mouth," the Devil spoke, his words startling. "Allow me to taste your tepid blood and suck upon you."

I didn't resist, but let him take hold of my pained fingers with such obvious tenderness. And as he took arrest of the bleeding extensions, a throbbing ache rose in my head. It brought to life the pain of the sore that I had acquired in the donjon, and it burned my eyes shut. As the Devil brought my fingers to his dry, cracked bluish lips, he put them against his flesh, and I could feel my legs go weak. Were it not for his piercing hold upon me, I feared I might have collapsed, save but the ground to keep me.

In desperation I forced my lids to open, but the pressure upon them only allowed me to squint. However, I was able to witness the Devil taking my blood-covered hand to his mouth. As he parted his lips, a dark blackened hole formed, and he pulled my fingers inside.

I gasped for a breath, holding it in as the sides of the Devil's mouth put pressure on my wounds. The harrowing sound of his tongue licking upon the blood echoed in my ears. His ageless mouth chewed eagerly at the tips of my nails as he tried to take in every last drop. The coarse texture of his gums added to the sickness I felt, and when

he finally released me, I crumpled to the dirt.

“Touch me,” the Devil said, placing my hand on his wet face.

I had no choice but to comply. He had such control over me.

Reaching upward, I placed my hands onto his chest, feeling his wheezing breath. He laughed aloud at me while in the background Lia screamed. I retracted my hands and threw them to my ears, warding off the shrill sound, but there was no ultimate escape. Deaf in one instant, fully restored in another. Unexplainable, and yet so fully understandable.

In an attempt to stand, I fell immediately back to the floor. My head spun from the thousands of worlds that began to collide in my thoughts. My body, now useless, could only lie broken on the ground.

I heard the drums beat as the newly perfumed air of the Devil reached my nostrils. He was bent over my crippled form, and as I looked up at him, into those bloody eyes, I knew I would forever long to be with him. There was a desirable curse and a burning need. But I could not say this, I could only be silent and still while he watched tenderly down at me.

And yet he was so cruel. But at the same time a wondrous being. Such a wondrous evil. I could not help but to love him.

“Do you aspire to this, Marduc?” the Devil asked me, a smile spreading across his face.

I gazed at him. “I do,” I answered back, my voice weak and drawn.

“Do you truly aspire to this?” he pressured into me. “Do you aspire to this so that you would perish for it?”

“I do!” I heard myself saying, my voice betraying. “I do! I do! I shall do all that you beseech of me!”

“All?”

“I shall! I shall!” Pray God, what did the Devil have over me?

He turned from me then. It seemed to last an eternity, but I was sure that it was no more than five or six seconds. I closed my eyes and sighed. Hearing me, the Devil turned my way.

I pushed myself up onto my elbows and stared directly at him, penetrating him with my dour thoughts. I wanted him to know everything that I was thinking and feeling. I wanted him to know what it was like to endure it, but he only laughed at me, making me shrink back.

I think if I were able to have moved then, to get up and run away, I doubt that I would have struggled to do so. The Devil had such a domination over my will. I wanted to shout out at him and curse him, but I didn't. He was going to spoil my soul and I was about to let him. He would seek out my sacred thoughts and see into my private lives. He would unlock the secrets of my heart and tell me of my future and everything that was to be, but even he could not see the horrors yet to come.

“Touch me,” I heard him whisper to me, and I turned my head away.

“No,” I gasped reluctantly, fearfully. “I...I cannot. Not again.”

Leaning over me, I heard the Devil's harsh breath from above. I heard Lia let out a scream, then turn that scream into a laugh. And I heard the drums cease. Silence.

“Then I shall tear your soul from your body!” he spat at me, his voice bitter, sinister.

I turned to him, relaxed, and no longer afraid. “Then so be it,” I said, “so be it.”

CHAPTER THREE

FRIDAY, MARCH 18, 1244

I opened my eyes, and in doing so, had the feeling that I was finally dead. For the first few moments of my return to consciousness, to what I thought was sanity, I could see nothing. I could, however, hear everything around me, all the strange and foreign sounds. They entombed me and smothered me.

I screamed in panic.

The hard blow that came to my head made me aware of where I was. "Return to us!" I heard the voice of the Devil bellow down towards me, and my vision began to clear.

I soon discovered that while I had been under their enchanting spell, the Devil and Lia had undressed me. My costume nowhere to be seen, I pushed myself to cover my

nakedness, but what could I hide that they had not already seen? What had they done to me when I had not been aware?

“Arise!” the Devil shouted to me, and I could feel my sore body lift from the floor so that I soon stood erect, my feet firmly planted. I was weak and famished with hunger. The last I had eaten was the day the faggots were laid, and not a morsel since. What day was it now?

Moving my eyes to meet those of the Devil, I knew he was aware of my plight. He took me to his body, his withered left arm holding me, soothing me.

“Lia!” I heard him say as his eyes never left my face. “Deliver yourself to me.”

A few moments, maybe even minutes fled past before Lia walked to where the Devil was holding me, and as he released me to the floor, she joined me, kneeling by my side. Her back was turned toward my body, but her mind was turned toward my mind. I raised my hand to touch her, but before I was able to, she spun to face me. I did not know what to do. What was it they were expecting of me? Would they not give me back my costume?

Taking my hands within hers, Lia burned me with the fire deep inside herself. I was growing excited, nervous. I opened my mouth to accept, to protest, but she slapped me, silencing me. A tear fell from my left eye, and I held back any words. I watched as she unhooked the girdle that held her robe close. Taking it off, she slipped from under her silk garment, her boldness not affecting.

I was frightened by this woman. She caused within me a feeling of needing, a feeling of wanting, and a feeling of just not caring. And I no longer knew myself; I was now a stranger to what I once was.

Total senselessness!

I turned my attention to Lia’s beautiful, doll-like body that bore no flaws. It burned in the light of the fire, smoldering. She motioned for me to touch her, and as I placed my hands onto her body, I did not want to take them away. When she allowed me to move them to her breasts, I did so without hesitation.

“Take me, my love,” she said next, her voice soft and her words simple. “Take me.”

A voice within me tried to tell me that I must abstain from such an act, that it was evil and immoral, but I let Lia throw her arms around me, pulling my form close to her own, and I was no longer able to pull myself from the excitement that I was beginning to display. Taking hold of my now erect penis, she guided me, inexperienced, untouched, into her, pushing herself against me. I could feel her long, bitter nails delve deep within my back, ripping my flesh and drawing blood.

It was pleasure beyond anything I could imagine; the ecstasy, the awakening! I damned the perfects, and I damned my mother for keeping me from it. This was what I had been desiring for so long, and even my poetry could not fill this void.

With Lia’s face below mine, I watched her eyes suddenly glaze over and her body begin to change. No longer was she the incredible creature that only moments ago aroused my desire like nothing else ever had, but now she was a beast, a wolf in sheep’s clothing, wild and cantankerous. She was outrageous, ghastly, and fierce, and the words that she spoke contained such wickedness.

I could feel the strength in my body building, giving way to a flash of blinding light. A metamorphosis was taking place as it was now I who was to become the beast. It was a deadly nightmare come to life, and the sex we were engaging in became deliriously rough and violent. I thrust against her with such force that I was sure I would rip her open. I was going mad, but the pleasure in the act would not let me stop!

Lia screamed loudly, her voice wailing, and had I been myself, I might have wished to help her. It was another presence that I felt inside my flesh, but for no reason would I attempt to overtake it. For even life I would not attempt it!

Then there was the blood, and it made it all seem so much worse that it really was. I wasn't certain if it had spread from Lia or myself. Had she so seriously cut me with her sharp nails, or was I the abominable villain? But as I had noticed the spilling of blood, she had not. She no longer cried with pain, but grabbed a tight hold of me, her fingers once again pushing deep into the skin on my back, entering it and going under it. Now it was I who felt the pain!

Her sudden words flew at me like a spirit overhead. "Slay me," I heard her say, "slay me."

Her voice was calm, and I was in the process of having her soul pull through me that we were in danger of colliding as one. In an instant her body fell limp within my touch. My head was pounding, but this time with a sense of fulfillment at what I had committed.

The Devil began to clap, and I quickly looked over to him. "I furnish to you, your praise," he spoke. "Is it what you had hoped?"

Such repugnance! Such evil!

Lia let out a sigh, rolling away from me, her torso covered in blood, *her* blood. When she was near the Devil, she stood up, pushing herself up against his crippled form. He seemed not to notice and walked over toward me. It was apparent that she was no more injured than I. Why did they wish to taunt me so?

They had used me, and I had let them. I had forsaken everything to believe their words, and now I would expend myself to them for always. My mother had been right when she spoke to me of things worse than they should be. I should have joined her in the flames, for I was sure that I was burning now.

It would have been what she wanted.

It was now what I wanted.

* * *

Days and days soon passed, and they quickly turned into weeks. Although the sun never rose or set, I could easily feel my life getting older and more numb. Each passing, it seemed, grew so much more worse than the other, my plight growing with each hour gone. All my hopes had been dashed.

I was beginning to crumble into a weaker shell of my former self. I craved food, but anything they were to offer me was no longer satisfying. I turned my head away from finch, chicken, grouse, and all the pies and cakes that I asked and desired for. I was dry inside, and none of those things could quench my nourishment. Even my favorite foods from my life in Toulouse no longer gave me pleasure. I feared knowing what they had done to me to cause me to be this way. What, if not food, would fill my wanting?

"What have you caused of me?" I yelled out, but there came no answer. "I defy you to face me. You have caused me to be something I do not wish."

"We have caused you to be *everything* you have wished!" Lia hissed at me as she appeared out of nowhere. Oh, for where could she have been! "Give to us your thankfulness, for we have offered you the world, Marduc. Why do you deny it?"

"What is it that I have asked of you?" I questioned.

“Do not be a fool. Vengeance is what you have wished, and now you shall have it. Take pity on the mortals, for they are yours. Drink from them, dear Marduc. Drink from them all.”

“You are insane!” I spat. “What vengeance should cause me to feel as I do? I am sick with hunger and nothing can rid me of it. I long to be back in the woodland. I must reclaim my pouch.”

She laughed at my words. “Your pouch?” she mimicked. “Beloved Marduc, you can possess so much more than your filthy pouch. Do not think of such pitiful things. Give yourself to us.”

“I believed your words,” I answered back. “I had believed all your words, as evil as they may have been. I do not wish to remain within this place.”

“You do not have a choice in the matter,” Lia said, erupting in laughter again. “There shall be no escape for you, Marduc, for it is greater than you can imagine. Your mother is the one who has lied to you.”

“For what reason is it that you speak of her?” I demanded. “She is dead, and deserves nothing of your cruel accusations.”

She tried to touch my face but I pulled away from her. The very thought of her flesh against mine now repelled me. I no longer considered her the object of beauty.

“You are what France has caused you to be, my love. You and your mother.”

“I do not understand what you are speaking of. You talk in such riddles.”

“Your mother tried to speak of it before her death. Do you recollect of this, Marduc?”

“I do,” I said to her, “I do recollect. But as you, she made no logic with her words.”

“Your mother was regarded as a heretic, a speaker of the Devil. With this upon her, she was put to her death. A fitting punishment in the eyes of the King and his mother, but she no more exercised the work of the Devil than did the Pope in Rome. Not after she hid within those castle walls.”

“My mother? What had she done that would cause her to hide?”

“Your mother was not of virtue...”

“Stop this madness!” I stormed, interrupting her. She flared at me, but I did not care. “I do not wish to hear any more. My mother was a perfect. She gave her life to God.”

“Your mother *fled* to God,” Lia began to explain. “Your mother tended house with the Devil. She fled from us.”

“Why must you continue with this nonsense,” I asked, my anger showing. “How is it that you speak of this.”

Lia grabbed a hold of my tunic, pushing me to the ground, her long nails at my throat. “You are nothing more than she!” she spat. “I shall tell you all that you are within your skin, Marduc. I shall tell you of all she made of herself and you. Would you fancy to be aware?”

“Would I fancy to be aware of what?” I asked. “What could you speak of that would cause me more anguish?”

“I shall tell you of so much more, Marduc, for it is history I shall speak of. A tragic web has been spun, my love, and it is now time for the spider to devour its prey. Be rid of your secrets, Marduc, and live your life as it was always meant to be.”

Though I did not, no, *could* not believe anything she was telling me, I was curious as to what kind of wicked tale she could possibly spin. For her to even think that I would accept her evil words as the truth, for her to even dare to *assume* that I would... I let her speak, to unfold her story. “Tell me of it then,” I answered. “Tell me of it and be quickly finished.”

I watched Lia as she displayed her pleasure. "I shall do better than that, Marduc. I shall show you the truth. I shall show you what has been."

I chuckled to myself. "Show me?" I asked. "You can show me nothing. I have been blinded. You have blinded me to any truth."

"You are blind only to yourself, Marduc. You refuse to gaze upon yourself and behold of what has been concealed for so long."

"I take no truth from what you speak," I said. "I do hope that you can hear that."

The light of the fire caught her eyes. "I can hear you. Now it is your turn to hear me. Allow me to show you what you are. Then you can decree if I spill lies or grant you the truth."

I knew she would never let me be if I did not let her proceed. I feared nothing from her coming words, for she could show me nothing that I was not already aware of.

"So it shall be," I told her, "you can do what you must. Allow this game to begin so it can soon be over."

Lia said nothing to me after this, but held me tight to the ground, her hands bound about my head. I refused her at first, struggling to get up, but she was stronger, and so I remained where I was. Forced by her strong hands, I knew I would be defenseless under her spell, and yet I did not fear. If she intended to do me any harm, she would already have done so.

My eyes grew heavy as Lia placed her hands over them, closing over my lids. My body was weak and I was unable to move my limbs about. I was her prisoner in sleep and she would do what was necessary. Given that, I let myself be carried away, lost deep and forever in dreams.

* * *

Midnight passing.

Years passing, pushing me back in time. Thirty-one years. So long ago.

I traveled extensively in my mind, in black and in white, searching for the place of destruction and desecration.

Murder!

A feeding. A need for the Devil to feed his insatiable hunger.

When the teeth struck their mark, I was upon it, travelling behind him. The town of Toulouse was coming to light, giving way to that small house made of rose-red clay within the fields along the River Garonne. It would be the Devil's home for the long night ahead.

My own lair so many years ago.

Surely, though, without first being asked, the Devil would not be welcomed within. He feared not, though, for he carried evil with him, and the power that it held would allow for no wrong.

My body pushed past the tops of the overflowing trees. The warm September air stirred the many insects that swarmed about the leaves and branches. My hands brushed the greenery as I swept by, the moisture of the eve catching to them. The sound of crickets filled the air, and mosquitoes bit into me, drawing blood.

Faster and faster I raced as I followed the form of the Devil on his run through the fields of rye, the evil creature's dark body only a spot amongst the dirt on the ground. His feet carried him as the wind carried me, and as he neared the house, his body sliding to the side

of it, I was to wait patiently above to be let in with him. I prayed his call might not be answered.

The Devil made his way to the tiny, encased window that led like a beaten path into the simple three-room home, and the firelight that encircled it gave the evil one a feeling of warmth and security, telling his mind that this was the place that he must enter. Yes, this was the chosen one, and the beautiful young maiden inside who stood erect by the stone hearth was the one he was to take and make his own.

Leaving his watching post beneath the sill, the Devil moved quickly to the door, his heart racing all the while. He could almost taste it! "Be still," he ordered, "or you shall destroy it all!"

It was at that point that the Devil began to change, his form becoming altered; a metamorphosis taking place. No longer the hideous old man he had been earlier, he now bore the form of a much younger and stronger being. His hair, once grey and sparse, was now long and thick to his shoulders and as pitch black as mine. His face was pale white, almost like snow, and smooth as porcelain. His lips ashen, his cheeks drawn, he looked a regular ghoul, frightening. He was dressed in clothes like mine, his rags no longer evident, but *his* garb was perfection. So straight, and not a wrinkle to be seen, not a thread out of place. And his limbs, full and muscular, held no evidence of when they were deformed and withered. He was distinguished, enviable almost, but I knew better.

He grabbed a hold of the tattered bag that kept possession of the wickedness he would be using, and as he held it tight to his body, he raised his left hand to the chafed and splintered wood of the door. Letting his knuckles beat against it, the sound played rhythmically to the tender ears of the fair maiden resting within. She *must* answer his beckoning!

But he was a stranger. Not only that, but a strange stranger! The worst kind of all!

As the voice from inside the house came to him like the sweet song of a bird carried on the wind, the Devil was already calculating his despicable plan. Had he the courage to go with it? Was he not the Devil!

"Who is there?" the soft sound fell to him, easing gently into his mind.

"It is a stranger," the Devil whispered back to her, letting his own voice seek out her thoughts and take them over. "I am a friend in dire need. There is but nowhere for me to take refuge on such a woeful night. I have traveled for such a length, and but for my soul being most weary, I am in need of much rest."

Ah, such a trite deception.

The woman's slender form appeared as but a mere shadow for the shortest time against the build of the window, and had he not known, the Devil would have assumed her a phantom. Come to steal him away!

The latch of the door clicking, and the sound of the handle turning, came to the evil creature as a bittersweet dream, for he could not know it this plain and uncomplicated. An unwilling pawn.

The bright light that forced itself onto him as the bulk of the door was pulled inward blinded the Devil for a short moment. The woman stepped back to let him enter. When he regained his sight, he was greeted with the barest of spaces. A table by the window with two lonely chairs was all that made up the eating area, and the bed-chambers, through whose doors the Devil could see, were fitted with isolated, sagging beds, only small bench-like tables to entertain them. A fold stool was near the hearth in which the woman might sit

upon while cooking. And yet, it was a safe haven.

The Devil threw his bag of tricks upon the ground beneath the slanted, wood table. Splinters stood up from all sides, making him take caution in not laying his hands upon it. The grain was grey, given years of use, and the chairs that accompanied it were in no better shape. Removing one of the seats from its resting place, the Devil took it over by the fire, warming himself as he sat. There was a faint smell of cooking meat lingering on the air, perhaps pig. Dragging the scent into his nostrils, he let it chill him. Or perhaps it was not the meat, but the woman's flesh that sought him out. Looking to the fire within the hearth, he saw a small black pot hanging above it, its lid bubbling up from the heat. It was not to be the woman after all.

"I am gracious for your service," the Devil spoke to her.

She was completely enthralled by his presence as she placed herself at the foot of the stone hearth. Her deep brown eyes were transfixed on his weather-beaten face. He knew his words had little affect upon her. He had stolen her mind.

The woman's rich black hair was like his own as it fell against her shoulders, and the light of the fire seemed to bring it vibrantly to life. She was dressed in a beige-colored super tunic that covered a gown beneath. It was pinned up at the bottom, and he could see her underskirt as it showed through. A simple nape was atop the tunic, and the shadows that danced upon it made it appear to be much more than it was.

As she had so readily opened the door only minutes earlier, the woman's stolen mind pushed her closer to the Devil. He let himself get up from the rotting chair and move to her, taking her soft hands into his. The woman's forceful grasp of his fingers was not expected as she pulled him through the tiny frame of the door to the largest bed-chamber, situated at the right rear of the house. Letting go of him, she sat on the small bed. The only light entering the room came from a small window, the moon in fullglow, the shutters open wide.

"Set beside me," she spoke to him, her meager voice trailing off. "Set beside me and hold me close. I have longed for the arms of a man around me. There is a light about you, something that tells me I will feel safe in those arms. Do not push me away."

Seize it, my love, I heard the voice of Lia speak to the Devil, her words blowing in my ears. *Seize this moment for all that it is worth. She desires it!*

"What has brought you here?" the woman asked the Devil, her hands desperately trying to take hold of him. "You have spoken to me of long travels, but it is plain by the shoes on your feet that you have not been out for long. Your eyes show me so much more than what you have spoken. They are such black wonders, and hold such secrets. Do not breathe such lies to me. Tell me with truth why you have come upon this house?"

"No more questions!" the Devil angrily threw at her. He snatched the frail beauty and pulled her up from the bed. "You seek too many!"

Astonished, she ripped free of his strong grip and stepped back. She moved quickly to the entrance of the room, her body leaning up against the cold clay wall. She didn't understand why he was being so harsh to her. Did she not offer him shelter from the night? And yet, there was something about this man that frightened her. All she wanted now was for him to leave.

"I have dreamed," she said softly, tears beginning to stream down her face. "I have dreamed of a man. No, not...not you. You are not that man, and yet...and yet...Each

morning as I wake, I used to see the world as it could, as it *should* be, but no longer can my eyes see what cannot come about. I only now see the world as it is. In the night I often envision a house...a house, somewhere outside France. And there is this man, so gentle. A man who bears upon himself such a burden, and for what? What is this burden, I find myself asking him. What is this burden? And then as the night creeps further in upon me, I open my eyes to see, but I can see nothing. I am only a woman...I am only a woman who cannot help him. And then I pray that such a burden may never be placed upon me, that I may never know the sorrow of such a weight. But I do. I do know such a burden, and that burden is before me now. Who are you? Who are you to come into my house and put upon me such a burden? I have found myself having thoughts that I have not thought before. I have found myself doing such things that I would never have done before. Your eyes spellbind me. They make me feel...strange, not myself. I beg of you to release me, to take yourself and your curse from this house.”

The Devil moved toward her. “Do not bring yourself to worry of things found only in dreams,” he said. “Each night I too have had visions, dreams etched in my mind. I dreamed of a house...a house, yes, *this* house. And I have dreamed of a woman. Yes, this woman before me. Do I regret such dreams? Do I regard such dreams as burdens? No, I do not. You speak of a man, this man in your dreams who carries such a burden. Forget of this man, for he is not real. Look only to me, for I am the reality. I am the reality of *that* man.”

“I may only be a woman, but I am not a fool. Your words do not bind me as they first did, so tender and kind. But I can now see that such words were not kind. You play tricks, this is *your* burden. You are not the man in my dreams. The man in my dreams is gentle. You...you are not gentle. I can see before me a beast, a wicked gentleman who steals into the houses of maidens to seduce them. But your seduction is not pure. Your seduction is not without its costs. Be gone from here, for you shall not seduce me. You are not welcome within these walls, and were it not for the love of God within me, I should wish you dead.”

“Ah, but my love,” the Devil said to her, unaffected by her words, “you had bid me welcome, did you not? Are you now taking back your invitation? I did not come into this house under force. I did not come into this house with my hands at your throat. No, I entered only at your invitation.” He pushed closer and touched her arm. She pulled away and struck him upon the cheek.

Grabbing a hold of her hair, the Devil pulled the woman’s head back. When she screamed, he madly threw her onto the bed. She crashed to it with a loud thud, knocking the frame into the wall.

“You are mad with illness!” she spat.

“I can make you live forever. I can give you the eternal life you desire, so that death will never visit upon you.”

She looked up at him, her brown eyes filled with tears. “You are mad! Leave this house at once!” she screeched.

“I am not mad,” he responded. “I am not mad. To be mad is not to know, but I know.”

The Devil moved over to the woman and knelt on the bed beside her. Placing his left hand upon her soft hair, he gently leaned toward her exposed right ear. “I want you to request my hands upon your body,” he whispered to her.

She turned her head to look directly in his eyes, and then he heard her ask, “What did you speak?”

The Devil spoke his words again. "I asked you to request my hands upon your body."

She was frightened. "Do not cause me any harm," she pleaded.

Angered, the Devil said, "Speak the words! Speak the words!"

"No," she breathed. "I...I cannot bear it."

"Obey me!" he shouted at her. "Speak these words or I shall tear your bloodied heart from your body! I shall skin you alive! "

She was hesitant. Forever the hesitation!

"Speak!" he roared, shouting the words at her.

A sound escaped her lips, and in a moment she repeated the words he so longed to hear her say.

The Devil's stomach began to ache, and with this growing ache, the wind outside the house began to grow to match its intensity. The wooden shutters on each side of the window flapped, slamming hard against the clay wall until they shattered, raining a shower of splintered wood into the room, the jagged pieces cutting upon the bodies of the two inhabitants, spilling their blood. The small, wooden bench by the side of the bed turned over as if it weighed nothing, while the woman in the Devil's hands screamed in terror. He could feel the powerful wind push its way through the room and through him. Bracing his hands on the woman's shoulders, he climbed atop her, feeling her fight beneath him.

Struggling under his strong grip, the young woman continued to scream. "Hold your tongue!" the Devil blew at her, his breath coming hot and furious. Grabbing her, he pulled her with him onto the hard floor. He could feel his blood boiling, his strength pushing him to kill and cripple.

"There is no one who can hear your cries," he said. "You are alone with me. No one shall come to your rescue. I have chosen you for myself on this night. So many years spent looking for you, searching for you. So much time spent to find you."

The woman stared blankly at him. "Ah, indeed, my love," he answered her gaze. "You have been chosen. Do you think you were an opportunity upon this night, that my stumble upon this house was a desperate choice? No, it was not. I have waited centuries to find you, waiting for this night, waiting for you to finally be ready."

Shaking her head, the woman beat upon the Devil with her fists, but it had little effect. "Leave! Leave!" she screamed, knowing the fight was becoming futile. The wind outside the small house began to grow stronger, each gust ripping away at her until she could fight no more. In a last attempt at defiance, she spat into his face, the spittle hanging loosely from his chin. Angered, he struck her on the cheek with the back of his hand, drawing a spot of blood at the corner of her mouth.

"No," he said simply, his face rushing up against hers, his lips pressed against her ear, "no. I will not leave. No, I will not." He could tell her struggle against him was weakening, and he knew that if he didn't take her soon it would be disastrous. With her cowering at his touch, the Devil raised his forceful and hungry hand above her head, bringing it down swift and easy, slicing through the skin upon her throat. His sharp talons caught hold of flesh, tearing it away.

Blood! Everywhere!

With the wound slit wide, the dark, black-colored liquid flowed freely, covering the Devil, the bed, the floor, and the woman. Bending to drink the warm wetness, the Devil let it slide down his throat, feeling it burn within the pit of his bare stomach.

Pushing his fingers through the blood, the Devil ripped at the woman's clothing, tearing it to shreds, each piece falling from her body. His mouth moved through the moistness on her neck, letting himself invade the slit, his tongue searching the opening. He sucked the blood from inside, draining her of any hope.

When he had finished his fill, the Devil let the woman's dead body drop from his arms to the floor, the whole of the area covered in her blood. She lay motionless, her lips silent of any breath that may escape them. Wiping his own mouth with the back of his hand, the Devil moved away from her to the small window, taking in a fresh breath of air. The room had filled with the sickly smell of blood, his clothing and his skin stained by the aroma, but all was soon washed away as the outside air entered. The wind blew in his face, chilling him. And as he turned away from that window, as he turned away from that wind, drops of blood dripping from his mouth to the floor, he turned to confront the woman he had just killed. She stood before him with her throat open wide, blood falling from the wound.

Whispering, her voice barely audible, her scent of death floating on the air, she said, "My soul is in your hands. Awaken it and permit it life!"

She was not a ghoul. No, her warm flesh, though dead, could not permit her to be as one. Her beauty, tainted only by the blood that covered her, remained intact. No, nothing had changed upon her. Nothing, that is, but her eyes. Gone was the soft brown, and in exchange was a deep, rich black.

"What do I desire?" the Devil asked her.

"I am what you desire," she replied. "I am all you have craved within yourself."

He moved to her, reaching out, his hands touching against the softness of her dead form. She was smooth, and had he not been aware, he would easily have thought her alive.

So alive!

He took her hands in his, and wiping away the drying blood from her face, pushed her thick hair back. "Speak of what you are," he said, soothing her, his mouth brushing up against hers.

Her tongue found its way out from behind her lips and made its way to his. He felt her pushing to the back of his throat, her forcefulness quickly coming forth.

"Speak of what you are," the Devil whispered into her ear, his mouth caressing her lobes. His hands cupped her exposed breasts, and he tore what was left of her costume from her body, casting it aside.

"I shall," she answered. "Allow me to show you."

Her hand, moving toward his legs, to the bottom of his tunic, lifted it upward. He could feel her fingers touch against the hardness of his penis. Taking her hand away, he brought his own to her face.

"Allow me to give you a child," he said to her. "Allow me to give you a child, so that you may show your love for me."

Her eyes looked into his as she said, "I shall. I shall do all you ask." Her hands once again moved to him, trailing to his hose, and he could hear the wind scream through the night.

Taking her back to the blood-stained bed, the Devil pushed her down upon the wetness, lying beside her. He moved his left hand along her thigh, being careful not to cut her with his deadly claws. She relaxed under his touch, willing herself to his every move, giving up all

resistance.

The Devil released himself of his clothing, shedding the weight that bore him down. Feeling her touch against him, he took hold of the woman's hands and held them to her sides, shaking his head in displeasure. She obeyed his command. When she was finally still, he moved atop her, slowly guiding his erection into her, the sound of her sighs reaching his ears. She clutched to his arms, moving carefully with his rhythm, her eyes closed all the while.

The decaying wood frame of the bed creaked under the weight of their bodies as the Devil pushed fast and hard against the woman. He allowed her to feel the full of him, her body raised to meet each thrust. Her fingers dug into his arms, her head back against the stained pillow. The pain within her was intense. Biting her lower lip, the woman said nothing but let him continue, wishing for it to soon be over, and for him to soon be gone; wishing for it to have never begun.

The Devil watched the woman turn her head away. She was beginning to have thoughts of regret, the whole of her mind open to him. Pushing harder, he took hold of her, the weight of his body heavy, sinking them both into the thin bed coverings. And as he ejaculated and pulled away, he was sure his seed would take. He would have no need to visit upon her again, and he would have embraced the end of her existence, were it not for the son she would carry within her womb.

The woman neither spoke nor moved upon the bed. The Devil left her where she was, naked and unclean, as he slipped from the house, no trace of him left in the dirt outside. The wind continued its force, carrying him upon its hefty breeze, sending him back from where he came.

CHAPTER FOUR

My eyes opened, bringing me back to the room deep within the castle. Lia's hand was still on my head, but when she saw me come awake she moved from me, standing up and walking away.

"Where do you go?" I asked. "You cannot leave. I have much to ask of you."

Turning to look at me with her blue eyes, she smiled. "I shall not leave you," she answered back. "Can you speak to me of the same? Do you give me your word?"

She was mad for wanting me to say that. "I cannot speak to you of such things. There is no desire within me to remain. I wish only to stay so you can give me the answers I long for."

"I shall give you all the answers you seek, my love," she said to me, coming back.

"I wish to know why you have given me such visions. Did you think I would see faith in them?"

"They are the truth. I have shown you nothing that is not real."

"My mother would never be with the Devil," I said to her. "My mother was of God. She was too wise. Why are you destroying time with such idle speech?"

Pushing her way to me upon the ground, Lia let herself lie beside my body. "I have no desire to create untruths of your mother. She knows what she has created. There shall be no more denial."

"What was she?" I asked, defying her answer. "Will you not speak of it?"

Laying her hand upon my face, Lia said, "Your mother was a heretic, Marduc."

So calm were her words as if she had actually come to believe in them. Getting up from the floor, I left her where she was. "Your words hold no truth," I threw at her. "What kind of fool do you cause me to be?"

"I cause you to be the fool that you are, Marduc. She was a heretic upon that night, one of the Devil's. You are the son of her, born of their love. He gave you to her to raise so you might one day rule the world. Think of it, my love!"

"Stop this madness!" I hissed. "My mother gave herself to God! She was a kind and gentle woman."

Lia did not speak.

Tears flowed from my eyes as I stood there defending the woman who died for her god. "My mother gave her life to be rid of these lies. Should I take belief that she allowed her life to be taken by Satan, given a child in trade?"

"Believe in all that I speak, Marduc. What you saw was not a dream, but a sight of what has been."

"Then speak of why she fled from you. Your yarn has no sense in it."

“Your mother was a peasant when captivated in the night by him,” she began, her words straight and simple. “It was time for the Devil to require a son, and it was then he searched out a young virgin to take his seed. Centuries had been spent seeking her. She had to be perfect in every way!”

Her voice took on a new excitement as she recalled the vision. “After he had taken her and left her fertilized, no words were spoken. Your mother lived as she had always, spending days and nights as she had always. Did you never ask of your father?”

I nodded. “And with truth she answered,” I said. “He died fighting for his lord, for Philip Augustus, at Bouvines. She would not allude to him unless I would ask, and only then in short tales. It broke her within to think such thoughts. I trust that she loved him so.”

Laughter erupted from her lips, her ivory teeth glaring. “Loved him? It is only but another of her untruths, Marduc. Your father did not die in battle. Your father is Satan.”

“No!” I stammered. “It is not true! And your vision showed my conception in September. I was born in August. It is impossible that I was conceived so early.”

“Another lie,” she said.

“If any lies are spoken, they are from you!”

“Quiet your voice, Marduc! Quiet your voice! Do not speak in such a manner! You will hearken to my words, and you will not break me of them until I have completed all.”

I was frightened and said nothing.

“Your mother raised you not to know of your true father. She was terrified that you would learn the truth and turn against her, your love forever gone. She tried to tell you of it, Marduc. On the last day of her life, she attempted to speak to you of the unspeakable, but you would not listen. If you had, Marduc, her soul might have been saved, but as it was, there was no hope. She wanted you to burn with her, Marduc, for she knew otherwise. She wanted you to burn in the flames so we could never reach you.”

I wanted deeply to disbelieve what she was saying. “Tell me why she would be with the Cathari if she was unholy. They would not have taken her in if it was true.”

“Your mother was a frightened creature,” Lia said. “All that she was on that night was blasphemous to her. Even in death she could not bear to have the Devil upon her. She believed she would be saved and forgiven if she took you to the fortress.

“On the twelfth day of June in the year 1230, she stole with you into the night on your sixteenth year to seek refuge within the castle. It was written that when you turned sixteen, you would be received by the Devil, brought into Hell and given your full rights as his son. From that day on, you would rule all darkness, sent out upon the earth to destroy all that is holy, bringing down the Pope and the Catholic Church in Rome. You were to progress to Italy, to the Vatican, and on the thirty-first day of October of that year, you would steal to the sleeping chamber of his holiness and slit upon his throat, spilling his blood over the land.”

None of this could possibly be true, I told myself, it was just too evil, too wicked!

“Your eyes, Marduc. Gaze into your eyes. For no others upon the earth have such black eyes. Only your mother and your father.”

My eyes! Pray God, why did I not think of them as strange? So normal, and yet so unnatural. They were nothing to me. “If my eyes are of the Devil, why did the Cathari not suspect? Why were we taken in with such obvious markings?”

“The Cathari were fools, my love. They saw your mother for the words of God she proclaimed and looked beyond the blackness. They knew nothing of the wickedness. They

were sheltered and unlearned.”

“What do you want of me?” I asked, tired of her words. “What is it that you wish of me?”

“Do you find truth in my words?”

I could not give her a positive answer, so I said, “Your words speak of a grave misjudgment taken place. I find much fault in the logic. I knew my mother as you did not, but I cannot help think of the mysteries. You have answered thoughts that I have possessed without my thinking them unusual, but brought to light, there can be no other fair explanation. For now, I shall bear your words upon my back should I discover the truth that lies beneath the surface.”

A smile etched across her face. “You have fashioned a wise choice, Marduc. You shall have no regrets.”

It was so simple for her to speak of these things. I hated her for forcing me to live through it, knowing of the pain it has all caused. She was despicable.

“Tell me of another truth, Lia, for I must know. Why do I hunger so? Why has food not satisfied me?”

“You are different, Marduc. You are no longer like the humans, but now require much greater pleasures. You are a heretic, a living witch, and as such, you shall want for flesh. The flesh of humans.”

I could feel myself begin to grow nauseous, my throat tightening at her answer. “No,” I started, “that is not true. No! It *cannot* be true! I...I will not. I...no, no! I will not do it! I will not eat the living, not them! Am I not living, myself? How can such a horrible thing even be thought of? My mother never ate the flesh of men!”

“Cease your protest, Marduc!” she shouted at me. “You are nothing as you once were. Do not even try to fool yourself. Humans are now your prey, no longer your equal. Your mother was alive before that night, before the ravishing, but after she was one of us. But you are right, she did not eat flesh. She had to remain as she once was. She had to fit in. And so, she retained her natural desires. But no longer did she bear her heart or soul, and neither do you. That is what marks us as *vis-a-vis* to the living, Marduc. We have no hearts, while we devour theirs. Only the Devil can create the living dead. Only he has the power.”

“I possess a heart,” I said to her. “I have felt it.”

“You have felt nothing that is a heart, my love, only the beating of living tissue. It is made to feel that way, but it is nothing of the same.”

“The Devil did not beget my mother,” I said to her, disregarding the answer that I did not want to hear. “He only ‘took’ her.”

“You are too much of a fool, Marduc. There is no difference, none but the guise under which it is done. But do not fret of it, my love, for now we must quench your hunger. It is time now to take ourselves out into the night and feed upon Toulouse. Come Marduc, for tonight you shall dine as you have never done before!”

* * *

Lia and I waited patiently in the north end of Toulouse near the far side of the Basilica of Saint-Sernin, an apostle who was killed in the third century. He was made a martyr by being tied to an angered bull of the wild which dragged him mercilessly through the streets before

he was gored to death with its horns.

Only fifteen years had passed since I had been to the village, locked away behind the gates of Montségur, but it could have been centuries, for nothing within the city seemed familiar to me. The streets were strange, and I was sure that I would have lost myself within the maze of cobblestones had I been left to myself.

We were careful now when we left the castle, Lia securing the way before we moved out. And yet we were able to glide soundlessly by the army without them sensing we were ever present. They had discarded their tents and moved into the abandoned cells once held by myself and my companions. They spoke, drank, fed, and caroused incessantly while we swept through their bodies and their violent games.

They would occupy Montségur until King Louis decided what would become of it. There had been talk one evening that Blanche de Castile feared another heretical group taking up residence. Oh, how they spoke of her, these men. So indecently did the army speak her name. And when they talked wretchedly about her nakedness, about her long-forgotten sexuality, I could only carry on with them. Through stone floors and steel doors, my laughter remained hidden while theirs carried endlessly about, fed to me through the corridors. And though I could hear their whispers through the silence of the night, I too shared the Queen's fear of another occupation, for I had been witness to the horror the army was capable of inflicting.

Lia nudged my arm suddenly, alerting me to a movement near the closed doors of the basilica, a figure moving out of the shadows. I recognized it immediately as that of a Dominican, a member of the religious order that turned their backs on the Cathari. A story told to me by my mother, spoke of how the founder, Saint Dominic, and sixteen disciples created the Dominican religion in 1214 as a safe haven from heresy. Saint Dominic believed that by teaching and preaching, he could force any Cathari to renounce what he thought of as their error-filled faith. He wanted them to join him in his crusade, and when he succeeded by converting his host in Toulouse, he felt it was his duty to crush all Catharism.

As a reward, Saint Dominic was given special privileges by Pope Innocent III to preach against all forms of heresy, and the Cathari religion was placed among those to be disposed of. Saint Dominic knew that the easiest way of attacking would be to embrace the great poverty of the Cathari. He did this, along with stealing their costume, but instead of wearing dark colors, he chose to adorn himself in white. It was to represent good as opposed to evil. He took everything that was sacred to them, to *us*, and made it seem depraved and wicked, and then he took our lives. Only now, I had the chance for revenge. The chance to do what Lia and the Devil had promised me.

"Do you feel it?" Lia asked me. "Do you feel the hunger?"

I did. I did! "Yes!" I answered back to her, clutching desperately to her thin arm. "I do! I do feel it!"

So desirable seemed the Dominican, and yet so very much repulsive.

"Move to him," she breathed, her voice not much above a whisper. "Move to him for the slaughter."

"But," I started to say, "how is it possible that I can take his life? My nature does not allow me to do such a thing."

She threw me a cold look. "Do it, or you shall starve! Cut his throat and spill his blood. Do it, Marduc, and you shall receive such ecstasy! Do it, and live your life! It is your calling!"

She pushed me away from her then, sending me out to the front of the rose-colored building. I moved quickly to the dark figure, but I did not rush him. It was not natural to me. I feared it, the very thought of it, and as I neared closer to the Dominican, I did not stalk him at his back, but instead went around to his front so he could see me. I had to give him a chance.

The delicate way that he turned to me when I came up to him; the almost hateful way that I looked at him, but I could not help it. My hunger pains were taking me over, desperately urging me on, and they would only end with that first kill. They were telling me that I must, that I had to do it!

But why? Why! It was not right, not murder! It just wasn't right! But my mind...my mind...

...the Dominican turned. That innocent way that he turned. That certain way, and he filled me with such...such ...and I knew I had to take him.

I just had to!

Like the lambs upon the farms, ready for the slaughter.

The very thought of it caused me to thirst for the blood within his body, and the hunger rose in my bowels. Such a false face he wore! So impure! So unmerciful! Oh, how I truly came to loathe him, and yet I loved him all the same. I loved the very idea of the unexpectedness in him, and I felt myself suddenly grabbing hold of the man and dragging him, kicking and shouting, to where Lia was standing in the darkness of the church's shadow, awaiting my return.

The Dominican continued to yell out, his voice broken and pained as he tried to fight back. Working upon my instincts, I took the man's arms and wound them around his back so that they snapped at the shoulder, the bones breaking away. I was immediately aghast at the strength with which I had used to still him. What was it in me that caused me to have such force, such power? My body was becoming inhuman. My grip was intensifying, and my nails were growing long and sharp. I was beginning to shape-shift.

"Save me God!" I heard the Dominican squeal, and I let the man go loose within my strong grip, his body slipping to the ground.

"Keep silent your tongue," I spat into his face, "or you shall come to your death!" Such words I was using! I was becoming evil, pure and simply evil. And the strangest thing was that I was loving it, caressing it.

I picked the Dominican back up, quickly tearing the vile costume from his body, throwing it into a mindless heap behind us. I stopped to catch my breath; his nakedness was exciting me!

I wanted to kill this man, to desecrate his body and snatch his life, but there was something far back in my mind that would not let me. It cursed me.

"Slay him! Slay him!" I heard Lia saying to me. She was pushing me to do what I did not want to do, and when I looked at the body in my arms, all I saw was a living human being, not the Dominican I had come to loathe.

I heard Lia scream at me, but her words did not register.

I could have, *should* have killed the man, but I was myself once again. I was conscious of all feelings. I had the passion to consider the act being committed. It was everything that I, as a Cathar, had fought against. It was everything that I and my mother had been branded, and it was everything we were not. I pulled the naked body to my chest. I soothed it, whispering. I tried to put forth comfort...the Dominican shouted in my

face...blasted at me...screamed...yelled...

...but I was told that I was no longer mortal; I was no longer human. I should not be made to think like one.

“Keep silent!” I stormed at the man. I could build such anger when I wanted.

“Slay him!” screeched Lia, and it was to her that I should pledge the kill...but my mind...my mind...

...and I would kill him. I would tear him to pieces. Anger burning within me, I pushed the Dominican roughly aside, causing the man to scream in terror. Lia came to life then, dancing around me and my hapless victim. Her glowing, radiant white form lit up the black night, and I wondered if anyone would see it and come to the man’s rescue. But the night air remained silent, broken only by the man’s screams.

Suddenly, the Dominican tried to run from me, his broken arms flying about him. He turned on his feet to flee, to get as far away as he could, but they betrayed him, and he slipped upon the cobblestones. In a daze of confusion, all he managed to accomplish was to fall on the ground near Lia, his chest crushed under the weight of his body. I heard the cracking of his bones.

Her dance fully completed, Lia bent down towards the injured man, turning him over and placing her warm, caressing hand under his head. I could feel the pain of his wounds, but the sensation within me soon disappeared when Lia ran her fingers through his hair. The feeling, though, as miraculous as it must have been, could not help to revive the bleeding man.

“Be strong with us,” Lia said, speaking to him as a mother to a child. “We are the new beginning.”

Moving to Lia and the Dominican, I lifted the broken body of the man into the cool, dark air. “This is all for you, my mother,” I said, as I punctured the flesh of the man’s back with my razor-sharp talons.

“Slay him! Slay him!” Lia squealed, the Dominican still alive. She started up her dance around me again, her hair blowing freely in the light spring breeze. “Tear out his soul!” she screamed.

I snorted, my hot, stinking breath steaming the air, but I was not expecting what I did next. Taking hold of the naked man’s arms, I twisted them from his shoulders, throwing them to the ground. I could feel the hot spray of blood as it shot out from the mangled sockets. The man was now barely alive, but by God, how he clung to the life within him. His breath, slow and shallow, mixed with the blood that fell from his lips.

“Taste them,” said Lia, glaring her piercing blue eyes at me, her pointed finger aimed at the blood-splattered arms that lay on the ground below me.

I could not! I would not! It was all too unacceptable! First murder, now this? How could I have even come *this* far?

But food! Nourishment! These things certainly had to be more important than any reservations I might have, any beliefs I might have had. They told me I was a heretic now, no longer what I once was, and without this...this *food*, I would surely die, and *living* was what I wanted to do.

Throwing the Dominican down, I reluctantly picked up one of his battered limbs, bringing it to my waiting lips. My *wanting* lips. The scent of the flesh as it reached my nostrils pushed me over the edge. I had no idea it could smell so wonderful! And the taste, oh, how it must taste!

With my stomach raging, I sank my sharp teeth deep into the raw skin that covered the meat beneath. And drawing the first rivets of blood, I pushed my fangs to the bone. I could feel the flesh tear away, the sweet sound so pleasing. Saliva mixed with blood spilled from my lips onto my tunic. Had I been conscious of what I was doing, I might have been disgusted at the vulgarity with which I consumed my food.

I finally began to chew hungrily on the soft, matted flesh that found its way into my mouth. The tissue hit my stomach like an explosion and it satisfied everything I desired. Finishing off one arm and licking the bone clean, I found myself picking up the other, consuming it as well. Lia looked on, smiling all the while.

“Slay him,” Lia said, “slay the Dominican. End his life now.”

I looked to her, nodding in agreement. “Yes, I will slay him.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Back in the castle I was furious, almost to the point of being violent. It all depended on how insane I was becoming. The bright flickering light of the fire was beginning to hurt my eyes, making me more irritated and angry. I wanted to kill Lia, an urge in me building. After the Dominican, after his death, and after what I had done to him, I had the ability to see it all so clearly. What I had committed upon him, upon his *flesh*, sickened me. I knew there was nothing she could say that would possibly make any part of it seem justified.

“How could you have set that upon me?” I shouted at her bitterly. “How could you have caused it to be?”

There was only silence. Not a single word was spoken, only the heavy breathing of the Devil filling the air.

“It caused me to feel something that I cannot describe. I am aghast at it. I am horrified at it. Can you not discern of this? Do you not discern of what it caused me to be, killing and ingesting human flesh? A filthy animal! I have seized the life of a human being, and took it as if it meant nothing. I cannot do it again.”

The Devil pointed an accusing finger at me, as he stood there in his well-dressed form. “You are nothing!” he spat. “You are nothing to use such a tongue! You do not employ words as though we are fools in your King’s court!”

His angry words only fueled mine as I retorted, “If I am your son, if I am born of your

seed, then how can I be *nothing*? If I carry your blood, then how can I be *nothing*? How can any of this be?"

His face stormed, darkness overshadowing. "I could beat upon you until you are dead!" he raged, clenching his fist. I dared not speak another word against him.

Lia left her spot and made her way over to me, standing between myself and the Devil. I was sure that she would peacefully intervene between our angry words, but instead she struck me, beating on me with her iron fists.

"Hide your tongue, fool!" she burst out at me, my face aching. I could feel the bruises begin to appear. "Do not question of what you are, Marduc."

Recovering from her blows, I said to her, a threatened feeling upon me, "There is nothing that I have effected to warrant such a beating. You have hit upon me as if I were a dog in the street, but I am much more. I am a man. I deserve more than I receive. I deserve as you deserve. Release yourself into me and feel the pain as I do, for there is no just in it. I do not beat upon you. Permit me to receive the same."

She stood silent, the rage gone from her eyes. I stared past her to the Devil, and I thought that at any moment he might also strike out at me, but he only responded verbally to my words. "You have asked for nothing, and that is what you shall receive. You have not been as I have wished, and for that we despise you. You do not take pleasure as we do, and for that we abhor you. You do not find yourself justified with what you are, and for that we should slay you. You have come with God on your mind and purity on your lips, and for that we beat you. You are my son. You are my blood. You are my seed. You are all of me. Accept it, and it shall be easier."

"I came to you with God upon my mind, for I did not come to you by my own choice. I came with purity on my lips, for I did not ask otherwise. I shall remain only for the vengeance that you have promised me."

"Your vengeance shall be what you cause it to be," he spoke. "Would you have preferred to wander aimlessly within the woodland, hoping for shelter, and knowing of none? You would not have lived the week."

"But, I..." I began to say, but the Devil quickly cut me off from any more words.

"You dreamt of a life most good, but no life is like that away from us. Your body would have rotted in the moss, animals feasting upon it. It would have been better to die in the flames with your mother, for she too was weak. She feared a life without God. But you, Marduc, you are immortal!"

"Yes," I answered, "immortal. But what is life if I cannot live it as I wish?"

"You are immortal to the end, my son, and the end is never. Your life is not yours, for you know nothing of it. You know nothing of yourself. There is power in you, but you will not accept it. Do not treat it as naught, or you shall be treated the same. Respect it. Nurture it, and love it."

I could hardly believe any of this was happening. Any moment I would awaken to find myself lying upon the floor of my stone cell, my pouch thrown carelessly to the ground, my belongings scattered about. The frigid air would nip at my arms, telling me that I am safe and secure. And as I looked to the foot of the mountain, I would not see the army with their tents and horses piled around, but the rocks and trees that abound, and all would be well.

Awaken!

"...why did you not choose to perish in the flames?"

I looked at the Devil. His face was so strange. Was he speaking to me?

“I did not hear you,” I said to him. “Repeat yourself.”

“Have you thought of why you did not choose to perish in the flames?”

“I chose to live because I did not want to burn,” was my answer, the truth spilling from my lips. “I did not want to die.”

The Devil smiled, his sharp white teeth showing. “You chose to live because you did not want to die for a god who would allow his people to perish. Is that not the truth?”

I knew that it was, that it was at least part of it. “I did not...I could not believe he would cause such grief. If he was as powerful as they all spoke, then why could he not stop the flames and save them? It maddens me to think of this. It causes me to be furious!”

“You gave up on him too easily. You brushed him from your life as though he were dirt upon your costume.”

“I despised him,” was the truth. “I despised him.”

“He betrayed you.”

“Yes.”

“And your mother.”

“Yes!”

I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply. I was weak from talk and I wanted to stop.

“He turned his back on her and threw her to the flames!”

I put my hand up. “No more, I beg of you,” I said, slipping to the ground. “Do not continue with this. It is over, now. I beg of you to cease it.”

I was sure they did not understand why I did not want to persist with it, for it was what they wanted most. “But the others,” I said, my own voice betraying me, “why were they allowed to die? Did he not love them? He must have known they were worthy of life. They were not heretics, but only victims of the Queen.”

I was taken aback when the Devil came to me, his soft, gentle hand pressing against my chest. I threw my eyes down to his fingers, his nails sharp, and was terrified that he would strike me, but he did not. He only smoothed my cheek, his supple flesh scraping my skin. He was trying to comfort me, but it was not working.

“God did not turn his back on them,” the Devil answered. “He loved them for all they were. He loved them for their prayers, their stance, and the love they gave to him. For without this, he would be nothing, left only with those who lie, cheat, and murder in his name. In his word. For this, he would die.

“His pride was your mother, for she did not relax to the evil. He loved her for her strength, her mind, and for you. He loved her for the mountain she fled to, and he loved her for burning upon the faggots. He did not turn against her. Her love was a love most pure, most genuine. No, Marduc, he did not permit her death. He gave her life!”

The Devil’s words seemed sincere, but they were too simple. They spoke of a love for a god that remained by without punishing those responsible, and for that, I turned away from him. For that I hated him.

“Why do you speak of him in this way?” I inquired. “Why do you not condemn him? You are the Devil; Satan. You are his nemesis.”

The Devil took his hand away from my face and left me. “If you wish vengeance, you are to take it against those responsible for the horrors. Do not fight God, for you will always lose. He is so much stronger.”

“Then why do you not fight him?”

“You are a fool to ask this,” he said. “Battles have been waged, and wars have been

fought. He is powerful, as am I, and unbeatable is a power so strong. I shall tell you of a tale of truth. Harken to my words and heed what they speak to you.

“We have clashed upon the earth for the length of four billion years. God is a spirit, as I am a spirit, and together we fight for the souls, for they give us strength. Life! God has existed for eternity, and I by his side, and we shall exist forever more. It was written that when the son of God and the son of Satan are dead, there shall be no more existence. God’s son has been put to death, murdered, and now the life of the earth lies within your hands, Marduc, for if you accept what you are, it shall be spared. If you choose ultimate defiance, then the world shall burn, the ground a blackened mass of ashes. The tide has begun to turn, my son, for the heretics have been sent into the flames, their flesh destroyed. Do not permit them to consume the earth.”

It was all so much to take in. I looked to Lia, but she turned away as though she were ashamed of me. “But what shall I do, my father?” I heard myself say, and I could hardly believe I had spoken such a line. “What shall I do?”

“Desist the burning,” he answered, pleased at my acceptance of him. “Desist the injustice to heretics and witches. Snatch them before they fall!”

“How?” I begged of him. “How?”

“Blanche de Castile lies quietly in her bed, my son. She sleeps a peaceful slumber while the flames go on, begun at her word. She has sentenced the earth to die, and only you can stop the process. Only you can stop her. End her life before yours. If the flames should continue, Marduc, there will be no evil left. It will all be wiped away. The world shall crumble. The child of Satan will be dead! The course of destruction will have begun, and there is no way to stop it! Creep into her lair on the first full moon of the first autumn chill, and snatch her life!”

“I shall,” I gasped, fooled. “I shall do it! I shall slay her!”

And so it shall be.

PART TWO

ON A COLD AUTUMN'S NIGHT

CHAPTER ONE

**MAUBUISSON, FRANCE
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 12, 1244**

A few months after the incident at Montségur, Blanche de Castile became very ill and

moved from her palace in Paris. Perhaps fearing that God may look her over, or disapprove of her actions, she took refuge within the Cistercian abbey in the village of Maubuisson near Pontoise. There, she could be nearer to her lord at the time of her death.

Since the night of my change, I have been able to smell the very blood within her body. I could take up her scent like a bloodhound, and I could follow it wherever she traversed. It was strange for me to be the one in control, holding all the power. I could easily kill her if I wanted to, or I could let her dangle by my web, teasing her, torturing her, giving her only the slightest bit of hope, then snatching it away.

My blood roared, screaming out at me with each step I took, knowing I was getting closer to her final resting place. I graced the land, my feet barely touching the soiled earth, as I whistled through the massive trees and over the rolling hills. I floated in the air, my body as light as the clouds, letting them carry me where they blew. And all the time I was confused at my newly acquired powers. My head was spinning out of control, my mind a blur at all I was now capable of. Such an evil being created from something that was once decent.

When Lia and the Devil sent me out, I knew nothing of where my former Queen lay, for they would not disclose of it. I was to use my passion, my desire for her death, to seek her body. If this did not bring me to her, then the desire was not great enough. But I could hear her, her raspy breath slow and pained, as it was carried on the wind. My former Queen, now withered and dying. She was no longer the woman she once was. No longer to reign over her child; over France.

I had so much wanted to take her while she remained a great presence upon the land. But now, as she lay behind those holy walls, her body weak, it just did not feel the same. She was no longer a match; no longer an equal warrior.

Should I turn away, run from the grounds, and let her die in peace, her body wracked with illness? Or should I scale those high walls, break through her window, and slaughter her in her bed?

Ah, but my mother. Was she not weak when taken? What did Blanche de Castile care for her? No, I must take my Queen. I must not worry of her state, for she worried of no others.

But those high walls. Those gargantuan walls blocked my way to her. I touched upon the cold, grey stone of the exterior of the abbey, placing my ear against the hardness. I could hear a multitude of voices coming from within, but they were not distinguishable. And yet they tried to tell me of a dream come true, of a story yet to be.

Numerous windows were alight with brightness, but the one in which Blanche de Castile kept her sleep was dark, its opening out of reach, her throat safe from my pawing hands. I walked along the stones that were cluttered at the base of the wall, long-dead weeds scratching against my skin. The bright moon lit my way, and the heavy moisture in the air was filled with frost. I desperately thirst for the blood in her veins to warm me.

I cursed her.

The cold, damp night surrounding the abbey was empty of any forms, but the wetness sent chills through me. The grounds had not been kept up over the past months, and the many trees that clustered about had long past died, their short lives stolen by the bitter chill of the autumn days. It gave me an unwelcome feeling, as though it had foreseen my eventual and inevitable coming. And after I leave on this

night, it will surely see the back of me forever.

Blanche de Castile was not known to be an affable person in the least, and even as she became ill, she continued to exert her authority. She ruled the palace with an iron fist, and even her son, Louis IX, feared her very wrath. She could destroy without a flinch, and as she banded together with the Pope, forcing the deaths of hundreds of Cathari, little did she know it would bring about her own.

Silenced forever!

I longed to grab hold of the ledge that led to her bed-chamber, letting my sleek body slide over the sill, pushing the glass windows slowly open. She would die of fright just to see me!

“Then let it be!” I shouted, my voice too loud. I quickly slouched to the ground, my eyes darting every way. I prayed that I was not heard. The cold was making me weak, and I was growing desperate for the spilling of blood. My long hair clung with the dampness to my forehead, its ends falling into my eyes. I brushed them away with the back of my hand.

Wasting no more time, I began my ascent. My hands touched to the solid stone walls, my palms sticking like glue. When my feet became elevated from the ground, I placed them against the stone wall as well, moving upon it as a spider would. Oh, but this was travel at its best! Stretching my arms high, I reached long and hard for each stone brick, climbing until I might reach the ones that made up the sill of her chamber. It neared so much closer; its sight was so immediate. My breath was coming fast, and I could feel my pulse race. My throat was dry as I could almost taste the flesh of her. So close!

I was too eager! Much too eager!

Soon, though, I was there. I crept through the window, my thin, lanky body sliding against the coldness of the ledge. Grasping to it, I carefully eased open the wet glass, my fingers leaving marks that ran in the moisture. My body was almost weightless, and as I jumped to the floor, the slight sound was oblivious to any sleeping ears.

The room smelled of flowers long dead, lilacs, I believe, and the scent hung heavy on the air. The coldness in the chamber, and the thick perfumed atmosphere made it almost unbearable to breathe. And though it was too dark in which to see, the sweet breathing of my slumbering Queen alerted me to the fact that she was very near. So close to me, but I was unfortunate in not being able to reach out and touch upon her soft skin, the black night protecting her.

I moved to the sound, the whispering of her breath leading the way. The moon did not shine its light into this room, for even it did not trust Her Majesty. But instead it hung high, its beams slanting downward, lighting the grounds below. In an instant, the breathing stopped.

Had she heard me? My footfalls were so soft, so quiet. It would have been impossible. But, she was awake, awake and sitting high within the covers of her bedstead. I could hear her fumbling with an instrument upon the table beside her bed, and within moments a flare came to light upon the wick of a half-burned candle. It threw shadows everywhere.

Staring blindly, the sudden light caused her to squint at the ghastly sight of a stranger within her bed-chamber. Staring at the clothes I wore, the sight of my black hair and my black eyes, and the appalling paleness of my deathly white face. She registered shock, and yet she spoke no words, asking for no immediate explanation.

Her eyes, wide, could not begin to believe what they were seeing. A witch come to claim

her life for so many. Her ears, perked, could not believe what they were hearing. The sound of my voice speaking her name, and the silence of it all. And her mouth, opened full, and yet unable to say anything, could not believe the words that it would soon set forth.

And I, my own eyes wide; my own ears perked; my own mouth opened full, could not believe the sight of her. I was angered at the thought of her, and the urge to kill came flooding over me, but I stifled it. I crushed it.

A miracle!

Speak. Speak! Somebody speak!

From out of Blanche de Castile's mouth came a voice both callous and unfeeling. A voice forceful and hard. "Take leave of this chamber," she spoke, her words cutting deep, and yet she did not shout them. She only implied them. "Take leave of here, now, or I shall cry for the bishop."

Such control she thought she had, but I was not one of her obliged servants. Here I was, standing at the foot of her large bed, with its brown cloth covers hanging low, the dark grain of wood smooth and fine, and she was appearing as though I were a simple thief who crept in to rob her of her precious jewels.

Glancing about myself, I took in the spacious surroundings, the room as barren and cold as its exterior. Simple portraits hung upon the walls, portraits of past and present saints, with a rather regal one of her dead husband, Louis VIII, placed rightly so near her. The rug that lay beneath the bed was of inadequate size, only extending inches out from the legs, the rest of the floor damp and hard. There was a tall cupboard that stood against the wall near the window, and it had a painting upon it of two saints

I could not immediately place. And other than the small table that sat next to the bed with a candle and looking-glass upon it, there were no other furnishings in the room.

With the night air bearing down upon us, I made little room for idle talk, hoping to escape as soon as possible. I looked back toward Blanche de Castile, her hateful eyes digging into me, awaiting my response. A stale layer of perspiration clung to her face, making it glare in the light of the candle's flame. I could not understand why she should be warm on such an evening.

A lump appeared in my throat as I was about to speak, making me unable to utter any sound. I cursed myself for feeling this way, knowing that she never would.

"Take leave of here, now," she said again, persistence in her words. "I shall cry for the bishop and have you put to your death."

"You shall achieve no such thing," I responded, sound finally appearing.

Her face flaxen, she pushed away the covers, attempting to get out of the overwhelming bed. I moved fast to her, pushing her back in. "You shall not be leaving here, Blanche de Castile," I said, my own words harsh and forceful. "I have come to steal your life."

No fear showed within her eyes or her face. "Why you have entered here," she said, "I do not know, but I shall have your life for it."

"My Queen," I responded, touching against her arm. She pulled away instantly, dragging the covers over herself. "My...my *fire* Queen. You do not have a voice in this matter. Why do you not fear me?"

She smirked at me, a crack forming between her lips, her yellowed teeth showing. Her brown hair hung down into her face in tangles, allowing her to appear nothing as the Queen she once was. Now, she only looked a hag.

"I fear not," she answered slowly and confidently. "I fear not of you, for you are nothing.

I have put to death more than you shall ever be. If you are a beggar, then you shall receive nothing. If you are a thief, then I shall have you put to your death. If you have come to steal my life, then be on with it. But with your own, you shall never leave.”

“You are evil and wicked, Blanche de Castile,” I said to her, my voice full of malice, “and you deserve death. I cannot bear any thought of you alive, while you have ordered hundreds to be slain. They did not deserve such a fate.”

A light of aspiration lit upon her wet face, turning it into a grimace of desperation. “Do you speak of the Cathari?” she asked me.

Her words came with no remorse or guilt for what she had caused. “I speak of innocent people,” I answered. “They were simple people. They had the same right as you to live.”

She threw the covers from herself. “They were heretics!” she slammed into me, her words coming out in anger. “They were with the Devil! They had no right to live!”

I struck her with my left fist, fury raging inside me. She screamed out, but it was nothing that anyone not in the room would have heard. Touching her face where I had hit, Blanche de Castile moved back farther onto the bed, seeking comfort in her large pillow. She clutched at her night clothes, pulling them tight.

“How dare you!” she screeched. “I am a Queen! I deserve nothing as this! You shall come to your death for what you have caused!”

“You are not a Queen!” I spat. “You never were a Queen! You have lived in comfort, but you do not deserve such treasures.”

“Slay me then, if you wish. If you desire of it, then slay me, but do not beat upon me. I am an old woman.”

I reached for her, pulling her to me, her face only inches from mine, my fingers digging into the thin flesh of her arms. The beauty that she had once had was gone forever, as stress and strain were now her mask. A fitting punishment perhaps.

“I loathe you, old woman, for you have taken from me my mother. You have taken my mother and put her to her death. Why? Why did you do it? Speak to me!”

I found myself shaking her, her weak body falling limply against my chest, her hair hitting my face, scratching it raw. “Stop this!” she gasped, her stern voice pleading. “Let loose of me!”

I let go of her arms, allowing her to fall back against the pillow. “I should cut your throat and cause you to bleed,” I said.

She breathed deeply, catching the breath that had eluded her. Wiping the long strands of brown and grey hair from her face, she responded, “Your mother,” she began, “was she a Cathar?”

I nodded.

“Then you are one?”

“Yes,” I said, “but I escaped the flames. Your wrath did not bear down upon me.” And then I had to test it, I had to find out the truth. “You were acquainted with my mother,” I said to her.

“Acquainted?”

I nodded. “She taught your husband in his father’s courtyard. And she remained there even after his marriage to you. She became Isabella’s lady in waiting.”

“Your mother?” she asked strangely.

“Yes,” I answered. “She told me of how she met my father at the palace. He was killed

at Bouvines before they could be married.”

She was silent for a while. “I know of no woman,” she finally said.

“You must,” I found myself pleading. “She read to Louis in his father’s courtyard. It continued after your marriage. H  l  ne,” I breathed, “her name was H  l  ne.”

“I know of no such woman. His mother cared for him, not a stranger. Take your lies elsewhere. They have no place here.”

I was appalled at her lack of empathy. “I shall remain here, my Queen. My mother died as a heretic, but on this eve I shall set her free from such a burden. I shall set her free of the chains you bound her with.”

“If she was a heretic, then you are a heretic,” she continued. “You are with the Devil. Return to his lair at once. Leave me be.” It was so matter-of-fact that she said it.

“Leave you be?” I mocked her. “Old woman, here am I to stay until your blood is spilled upon your covers. You shall never see the back of me.”

“I shall live to see the last of you burned.”

“Shall I beat upon you again?” I threw at her, my fist raised. She put her hands up in front of her face to block away any blows. She was a fool to think that she could ever fend me off.

“Do not lay your hands upon me, I beg of you,” her voice spoke. She had lost the harshness that she had first had.

“You have put the innocent to death,” I said to her. “Why do you think us evil? Do we wear upon ourselves marks of the Devil? We have lived to serve and preach the word of God, forsaking all that is not spiritual. Do you think that such purity is evil?”

“Your people did not embrace the Church or the sacraments,” she answered. “Your people embraced nothing holy. You were a threat to the Catholic religion. Why do you think *our* religion so evil? We praise God.”

“Just as we. But, we did not need your material possessions to satisfy our love for him. The Pope in Rome preached greed with his need for clothes of such grandeur while the apostles preached poverty. For what god requires his servants to live in such wealth? We lived as Jesus lived. Was he as evil as we?”

She was quickly regaining her strength, her words coming faster. “You did not embrace him. How dare you compare yourself to our saviour. You do not have the right!”

“I do not wish to liken myself to Christ,” I said to her, “for he is beyond compare. And though we did not look upon him as a divine object, it does not mean we held no love for him. We did. We simply put our love of God above all. He was the divine one.”

“Is that all you have come here for?” she asked. “I do not wish to learn of your religion.”

“My belief shall die from your hands. It shall go out as the flame upon a candle. So much as this one,” I spoke, and I placed my hand upon the burning wick of her own candle, ready to snuff it when it so pleased me. “Does it frighten you to think of me amongst the darkness, my fire Queen?”

Her eyes brushed me, her gaze steady. Clearing her throat, she said, “It does not. Do you wish to frighten me until the sun rises?”

“I wish of so much more.”

“Then do it. Do it! Do it! Do it!” Her voice screeched, the sound of the shrill words making me wince. “For I cannot bear this torture any longer!”

I put my hand over her mouth, shutting off the disturbing sound. Turning my left ear to the

door of the chamber, I listened for the sound of footfalls coming down the corridor, but there were none.

Safe, once again.

“Do not shout so,” I breathed, “or I shall beat upon you again. You are tormenting me, and I shall not stand for it.”

“It is I who is tormented,” she answered, her voice as hard as before. “You have invaded my chamber, forcing yourself in, and by the Lord above, I know not how you have come by such a feat. You have invaded upon my slumber, and I request only that you take leave. Permit me to lie in peace before I die.”

“Lend me your words, my gracious lady. Is it of truth you are on your deathbed? Do you tell to me of your death as we speak?”

She turned her head away from me, her sorry state now embarrassing. “I have spoken to you of nothing.”

“Then why have you fallen to this place to dwell within the Cistercian abbey? Do you wish closeness to your god before he commands your presence? I shall tell to you differently, Blanche de Castile, for he shall not have you. It shall be the Devil who requests you to his lair.”

She raised her hand to slap me, but I knocked it aside. The hatred in her eyes was forefront. “For how do you speak in such a manner? You do not rule the heavens. What voice do you use to judge me in the name of our Lord?”

“My birth voice,” I answered back. “I beg of you to speak of an answer for what I have requested. Is it true you are dying as we speak?”

“It is,” she answered reluctantly, “it is most true. I live within these walls, causing my days to be worthy, devoting myself to spiritual exercises. I cannot bear the thought of it. He shall never claim me. Not ever!”

“For who shall never claim you?”

“Do not ask it of me,” she replied, “for it is an answer I wish not to coat my tongue with. It shall never pass my lips.”

“For who shall never claim you?” I asked again, my voice as strong as hers. She would not flee my questioning.

“I cannot say,” she responded. “Do not ask it of me. I beg of you!”

“For who shall never claim you!”

“Satan! Satan shall never claim me!” Tears flowed from her eyes, but I did not feel for her. She was a wicked creature.

“Why have you spoken of this? Have you not faith in God, that you should take leave of your palace in Paris?”

“He shall not discover me in this place. He knows not.”

Her words had lost me. “Old woman,” I demanded of her, “make yourself clear.”

She wiped the streaming tears from her face, brushing out the hair that had fallen back into it. “I did not order your people slain for what they were,” came her shocking revelation, “for they were nothing to me. It pained me to cause the deaths of so many. I could not bear it.” Her voice faded away to a tiny whisper. So unnatural.

“I do not believe your words, old woman. You are causing false truths.”

“No,” she begged, shaking her head, truly wishing me to know that they were indeed not false. “The words I speak are the truth so long hidden. I only ask that God should now hear me and forgive me before you bring me to my death.”

“You are dying without my help. Why should it be me to cause the last?”

“It is a lie I have let loose,” she admitted, “for I do not carry death upon me. I have been cursed to die at your hands. I have awaited you, not feared you.”

“You are Blanche de Castile,” I began. “You are the wife of Louis VIII. You are the mother of Louis IX. You are cold, heartless and cruel. Why would you have awaited and feared my arrival?”

“It has been prophesied. He cursed me with it.”

“Who cursed you?”

“Satan.”

“You spill more lies.”

“No,” she begged again, “it is the truth. I have lived a life of lies, fear and the wrath of the Devil. He has stolen everything.”

“Tell of it to me,” I spoke, “then I shall cause my mind to decide upon what is truth and what is not.”

Blanche de Castile said a silent prayer to herself, her body leaning back against the soft pillow, her face turned slightly away. “It was in my twelfth year,” she began slowly, cautiously, “only a few months before Queen Eleanor was to come to Spain, receiving me to the palace. It was the last days of the summer of 1199 when I came to be visited upon in the eve; the torrid heat was most unbearable. It was uniquely warm that year, and it gave me a feeling of evil upon the air. I had resigned early to my bed, feeling ill with pain.

“It was about midnight, and the moon was high, hidden almost by the dark clouds. I came to spy a dark form along my window ledge, its scratching sound waking me from my slumber. Thinking it only an animal, I took leave of my bed to close over the windows, hoping it would not get in before. But I did not get to them fast, for whatever it was that stood in the air outside, it pounced through, settling upon the floor. I screamed loudly, running to my door, but something caused it to be stuck. It would not open, no matter the strength used.”

I listened intently as she spoke, my ears hanging to every sound, every pitch, every tone. I begged her to continue.

“I screamed for my father, but as quickly as my words came, they were gone. The evil creature had taken them from me, leaving me without a voice. I feared for my life then, and I crept carefully back to my bed, pulling the covers tight against my throat. I knew they would be of little refuge. He was there in the room, and he would do as he wanted, no matter how I begged him to be gone.

“I remember fumbling desperately for the candle upon my table and bringing light to the wick. His face was there within the bright flame, all horrid. I thought I might come to my death, but by God’s hand, he saw me through the night. The evil creature’s face was monstrous. His eyes were so red. I knew he was the Devil. There was no other reasoning. His voice, clear, spoke to me, his words everlasting. He asked me to slay for him, to take lives and murder. I told him that I would never, but he did not receive my words as they were.

“He forced the covers from my body, allowing himself to put his deformed hands upon me. His long nails scratched, leaving scars.” Lifting her bedclothes from her body, Blanche de Castile showed me the deep scars upon her legs. “I have tried to live with the shame,” she explained solemnly. “I begged him to stop, telling him that I was only twelve, but he

would not listen. He spoke tales of younger maidens than I, and that he cared nothing of my age. I should do what he asked just the same.

“Again he asked me to kill for him, and when I refused the second time, he threatened to cut upon my throat. Terrified, I asked him who he wished to have slain, and would I be strong enough to do it. Laughing at my words, he told me that what I was to do would not be done by my hands, but only by my voice. I should endow an order. When I questioned of this, he informed me that one day I would be the Queen of France. I would have all the power I needed to do as I wished. But, the Queen of *France*? I could not believe his words. It was just not possible, but he assured me that in the winter months, Queen Eleanor would come from Bordeaux, selecting not my sister Urraca, who was older and so much more beautiful. She would choose me, taking me back to France. Once there, I would be offered to my future husband, Prince Louis. Our marriage was destined, and there was nothing any person could do to change it.”

“Proceed,” I pleaded as she paused to wipe away more tears. Her pain did not cause me to be sympathetic. I could feel no sympathy for such a killer. “Tell me more of what he asked of you.”

Taking a deep breath, she continued, “He spoke to me of the early years within the following century, when there would be an uprising of heretics. They would preach the word of God, but only use such preaching to destroy the Catholic Church. I was told they should be destroyed, and I was to force my army to burn them to their deaths. This thought had caused me great illness even more so than I already felt on that eve, and I told him that I could not do it. Threatening me, he warned that if I did not cause these deaths, then he would cause mine. He would torture me until I was dead. I agreed immediately to do as he wished, for in the end I did not believe any of it would come true. It was not until I was Queen that the heretics came to light. I hesitated doing anything in the beginning, hoping that he would not recollect our meeting, but as the Albigensians and the Cathari became more evident in society, he returned to me in 1225, forcing me to comply.

“France was still under the reign of my husband, and the Devil promised me that if the slayings were not begun by the first of the winter’s chill, he would strike my husband dead. I pleaded with him to spare his life, but the Devil held me to his warning. During the summer of 1226, Louis embarked on a crusade against the Albigensians, and I was foolish to think that with him away from the palace, he would be safe. Grief came to me suddenly as he fell ill with fever and dysentery. I was at my last hope and begged for the Devil to return one last time. I asked him for the life of my husband, promising him I would at once put out the order for the slaughter to begin. And he came. Oh, pray God, he came! And he was so...so filthy. So...”

Her words ended there as she bore her face into her bed coverings, and sobbed heavily. I would not let her stop though. I had to know the full of the truth.

“Speak!” I commanded her. “Speak of your tale!”

“I cannot,” was all that she said.

I reached over to her and grabbed hold of her arms, pulling her out from under the covers. She attempted to break free of my grip, but she was much too weak. “You cannot fight me,” I said to her, “do not even attempt it.”

She let her body go limp in my touch, her weight pulling me onto the bed with her, my form atop hers. The first I smelled of her was lilacs, but the fragrant smell was soon

overwhelmed by the many layers of decay upon her. I could sense that she had not bathed in such a long time.

“Speak your words,” I breathed into her face, her lips so close to mine. “Tell me of all he has done to you. Make your confession.”

Her eyes were barely open, but I could see she was looking to me. “He came into my room the day before my husband’s death, his breath stinking and his body of such a foul odor. I regretted that I had called him forth. He saw my displeasure of him, but it made no difference.”

“Yes,” I begged, “proceed. Oh, do so.”

“He took me then,” she responded, her lips brushing mine. “Now, I must confess. I must confess, for he had stolen me, and taken me. Now, I must ask the Lord for his forgiveness, for it was not of my choosing. That is why I have come to this place. To wash away the filth. To wash it all away!”

I moved myself from her, letting her arms slip slowly from my grip. She was breathing heavily. Why had she spoken such words? Angered, I slapped her.

Suddenly, my former Queen became crazed, almost monstrosly savage. Her pupils flared up at me as she spat into my face. I wiped the spittle away and slapped her a second time. She squealed aloud, and I feared she might alert someone.

“Be silent!” I shouted. Again she spat in my face. I spoke to her; breathed to her, letting my words reach and imprison her. “Allow me to cut you,” I said, moving my hands along her waist. Her flesh trembled under my touch, but I knew she was not afraid. Her form was smooth, almost enticing, even with her age and appearance. I soon felt *myself* begin to tremble. “Allow me to cut you and take your life.”

Her stomach heaved.

“I waited for you to appear,” she answered, “for it was told.”

“What was told?” I asked her softly.

“The Devil spoke to me, telling me that a man would come to take my life. I knew it to be you. You are so much as him.”

I stood back from her, staring deeply. “How could he have spoken of it?”

Licking her lips, she said, “I was warned upon my return to God, that I would be visited upon. A young man would steal into my chamber and take my life for so many dead. I await my punishment. I am yours to slay.”

And the drums beat again.

“If what you speak is true, old woman, you have spoken your peace. I do not forgive you for what you have caused, for many lives have been lost.”

“What should I have done? Do you know of what would have become of me? I would have been murdered in my bed.”

“And tonight it shall be,” I responded. “To supply your life to save others would have been the noble thing to do, my love. It would have been the right thing, for now you beg of it.”

“I do beg of it, it is true,” she said, “but it was not easy then. It has never been easy. You speak of simple things, but you do not know what has been upon me. Pope Innocent asked me to rid France of the heretics, and I could not refuse. I had to protect my country. I had to protect it.”

“Heresy shall never be crushed,” I threw at her, “for it thrives on such deeds. We were not the heretics as you so named us, for true heretics hide themselves away. They do not

preach in the open air, old woman, for secrecy is their strongest weapon. Do not deny it, for it shall be they that rise above the slaying of the good.”

“And do you love it?” she asked of me.

“I do,” I answered.

“And will you slay for it?”

“I shall.”

“And do you hunger for the taste of blood?”

“Oh, I do, my Queen,” I whispered to her.

“And do you hunger for *my* blood?”

“Oh, I do, my Queen, I do.”

“Then take it. Sip upon it until it fills you. Let it be your nourishment.”

She moved her hands to her bedclothes, lifting the soft material upwards. Her flesh was as white as any pure snow, the paleness unflattering, and as she continued to raise the material, her breasts became exposed. “Cut upon me,” she breathed, her voice low, “simply...simply about here.” She motioned to her left breast, just below the nipple. “Cut upon me here...and take my blood.”

“I...I cannot,” I said to her. I could not put my mouth against her. Not...not her.

“Do it!” she ordered, her voice rising. “Do it, or I shall scream until dawn. I shall awaken every sleeping body within this abbey.” Her deep brown eyes pressed themselves upon me, demanding and controlling.

I dared not push her to use her threat. I gave in and moved my right hand to her breast, its nipple hard and wrinkled from the nursing of twelve children at her bosom.

The flesh was coarse against my touch.

“Cut upon me,” she said. “Permit me to bleed for you.”

“Why do you do this?” I asked her.

“I fear the Devil may take me, should you not end my life. The prophecy must be fulfilled. It must be acted upon as written. There is no other choice.”

I should have left there immediately. I should have left her chamber through the way I entered, but for the...the desire I felt inside. What was this hold she had over me? Oh, what was it!

With my nails bared and razor sharp, I placed my fingers below her left nipple, and they wavered all the while. Slowly slicing across the flesh of her breast, my claws hit upon every dark vein, the blood spraying into my face, my costume becoming stained. Blanche de Castile moaned through the pain, a smile washing across her face.

“You are so wicked,” I spoke through the blood, “and you shall die that way.”

“Allow me to,” she answered, “for I am the evil...the evil fire Queen.”

So evil.

With the fresh blood flowing freely, I moved my mouth to the fountain of liquid. I squeezed slightly upon the breast and allowed the wetness to hit my tongue. I let it slide down my throat, coating it, and warming me within. I immediately craved for more, and was compelled to move my lips to it, my tongue gliding through, taking in every drop until none remained. When I was finished and my former Queen lay pale and motionless, I backed away.

“Farewell, my fire Queen,” I said to her, a kiss blown from my blood-stained lips. I blew out the melted-down candle, its wick so close to the table, its flame so deadly.

I had the urge to throw it upon her, igniting the bed so she may feel the heat of the flames,

but I did not. I did not know why I had allowed this woman to die slowly, peacefully, and I never shall. All that I could understand was that she was nothing less than I.

Leaving her dying upon the bed, I made my way to the window. I turned back only to see that she had still not motioned to the life that still laid claim to her. You shall see me again in Hell, I thought to myself, and the musing of this brought a smile to my face. It even caused me to chortle. It would all again come full circle.

I crept back through the open glass of the window, the night air biting into my skin, chilling the blood upon me. I had committed such wicked acts on that evening that I would never be forgiven for, but I would ask for no forgiveness. I took flight from the abbey, my body slick and silent through the air, never looking back, only forward.

Justice had been laid.