

Star Seeker

Reason and Faith

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Book I. Aleppo

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One**A Wadi near Harim, the Frank Principality of Antioch January 1147**

The first arrow whistled past my face. It seared into the neck of the destrier that had been dragging itself along with drooping head a few feet beside me. The horse neighed and pranced, jumped aside in pain and bumped into other horses and men, so that we had instant pandemonium on our hands. It took a moment for my fellow-knights to realise what was happening. By then more arrows dropped from the sky, some obliquely, other almost vertically. Several groups of enemy had taken easy target on us. Most of the arrows did little harm. The narrow wooden shafts thudded in the sand of the ground and penetrated there, or pelted on the rocks and broke. Other arrows snapped on shields and chain mail, not very deep, but they hurt all the same.

We tried to spot the archers despite the cloud of dust thrown up by our advancing, now frantic horses, and despite the blazing light of the sun that shone straight in our eyes when we looked up. We forced our mounts rapidly forward among the stray rocks to avoid more arrows, but the long shafts with their lethal steel points kept falling on us. We could indeed see a few shadows of men high above us on the slopes of the ravine of the wadi, the dried-out riverbed we had been riding through, and prayed only a few Bedu bandits had harassed us.

But then, Saracen cavalry charged from behind the large boulders in front of us, crying the familiar ‘Allahu Akbar,’ and brandishing long, curved swords. The enemy horse riders would be fast on us, so the four chain-mailed knights of our company urged their mounts in front of the fifteen men-at-arms, to take the brunt of the first charge. A few arrows continued to plunge down into the ravine. The archers, we understood, were but part of an expertly prepared ambush. We realised too late we had been lured in the narrow corridor of the steep, sharp-edged slopes, but we hoped that with our few men we could yet breach the trap. We had been fools not to have sent a few lightly armoured men in front of us or up into the hills, but we had no time to repent for that now. I was sure the snare would have to be closed behind us too, so I didn’t advance with the other knights, but turned my horse, swearing at having been such a fool as to have trusted the knights of this patrol more than my instincts. Now I was convinced the trap had been arranged from both sides, and I acted accordingly. There would be another attack, soon, from the rear.

Sure enough, more Saracen horsemen rode in from behind. They were still some way off, for they had had to circumvent the ravine after we had marched in it. I could call about six of our men on foot to stand beside me in a line to halt the impact of this new, wild assault. While we heard swords clash at our backs, war-cries and curses being shouted frighteningly, we stood and braced for the shock.

My men locked shields, leaned against their spears thrust firmly in the sand - deadly point forward. We filled the lower part of the ravine with a shield wall. The warriors were all veterans of the skirmishes and battles in this sun-scorched, godforsaken part of the Frankish Principality of Antioch. Or was this already part of the Saracen and Zengid part of Syria? We certainly had passed the River Orontes; the wadi we were in must have been made by an ancient affluent of the Orontes. We had marched somewhere past the river, in the direction of Harim, roughly halfway between Antioch

and Aleppo. I certainly had no idea on which side of the frontier we had been patrolling. I was only aware that we were damn far from the protection of any Frank fortress. The warriors I had were good men. They knew their duty. They did not panic; they just stood with grim faces. But there was little doubt that we were vastly outnumbered.

The Saracen riders were almost upon us, and still spurring their horses to utmost speed, as fast as their little brown animals could gallop. The Saracen warriors wore white linen coats, chain mail armour, and light surcoats of thin leather over their mail. They held small round shields at the left arm. They also clutched the reins of their mounts lightly with that arm, while they swung a long curved sword in their other hand to slash at our throats. They looked like the worse black-haired devils of Syria that could have been let loose on us.

I prepared them a desperate surprise. The Saracens had expected me to remain standing with my horse to block the path, but I spurred it suddenly forward, right into the Saracen oncoming throng. If the enemy warriors were surprised, they were not much impressed by my charge. A mass of twenty or so Saracen riders simply continued riding on to overthrow our shield wall, and they would certainly succeed in that. About five riders, the ones that were right in front of me, closed in around me. I slung my sword at them and my horse pranced while turning sharply, creating further havoc among them. I already parried an enemy sword, and cut through an arm that had not been well protected by mail. Other swords lunged at me, but I slashed and thrust with such energy that no Saracen weapon could reach me. Such expense however I would not be able to hold up for long, so I pushed my horse straight into a large black-bearded man who wore a shining, red-plumed helmet, hoping he was one of the leaders of our assailants. I had the sun in my eyes and I saw only clearly the gleaming arches of the swords, dim patches of colours of the clothes of the Saracens and veils of dust thrown up in the narrow ravine. In that dust we fought.

I parried the sword of the Saracen rider, turned my horse rapidly and hit the man in the back, for he had been hindered by the other riders next to him. Then I slashed at his unprotected neck, beneath his helmet, to draw a long line of blood. The Saracen faltered in his saddle, stooped forward and I thrust my sword in his side, in a deep and lethal push. Then an arrow flung its barbed point of steel through my mail, into my side. I had no time to check on that arrow although I surmised it had only broken through flesh, for two more Saracen warriors hacked in on me. I could avert one sword blow with my shield, let my reins slide out of my hand for that. I could not evade the second slash. My shield flew away from me, almost drawing my arm out of its sockets. I turned my horse once more, using only the pressure of my legs, but a savage stab entered my thigh on the right. The sound of shouting men, neighing horses, clattering of swords, thuds on shields and clinging mail was deafening now, as the battle was filling the wadi.

I parried several more sword stabs and cuts. I severely wounded another Saracen by a long slice of my sword and I surely killed yet another man who had tried to grab my mail and drag me from my horse. A sword hurt me in the back. I would have a long, bloody wound there, at the place where a curved sword had pierced my mail in a long cut. The arrow that still stuck in my body pinched; my side hurt; my back gave me fire; blood oozed from under my mail. Suddenly, my helmet flew from my head,

flung up by slanting sword blow. All I remembered was the ironic satisfaction I felt to have held out against the Saracens for at least a few fleeting moments. Then a hard object, probably a small mace, hit my head, and I was oddly astonished to see myself dropping from my horse, unable to control anything any longer. All went black before I hit the ground.

Two**The bimaristan of Aleppo. January to March 1147**

I opened my eyes cautiously. I saw only very bright white. Only white. Then, shadows appeared in the white, the shadows as of the folds of a veil. I wanted to touch the whiteness for I felt very happy and relaxed. I was sure to be in heaven, for hell could not be in light, and I remembered clearly my last moments in the battle.

Something moved in front of me. Two little green circles appeared before my eyes, marvellous pure green colours, set in a pale background. I murmured, 'emeralds' and reached out.

I heard a giggling then, and a warm, husky, female voice whispered close to my face, 'yes, you may call me Zumurrud if you wish, though that is not my real name. You have to sleep a little more. Rest and get better.'

A small but firm hand pushed me down on the bed. I was lying on my back. The hurt in my sides, back and head forced itself upon me by the movement. I tensed and leaned back very slowly, looked up, but all was in a haze again. I closed my eyes.

I must have fallen asleep or drifted in unconsciousness on and on, but I did not know for how long and how many times. I opened my eyes again. I saw more distinctly where I was. No more white veil before me, but a wall of neatly laid large, white stones that were as smoothly evened on the surface as the best masons could stack. The room was not small, the vaulted ceiling high. My gaze wandered eagerly from the walls to the ceiling, and then to a dark opening in the wall on my right, which could only be a door. There was no wooden door however, just an opening. The light was still bright enough for me to see where I was, but it was dimming and would soon disappear. The colours of the walls shifted to orange and darkened rapidly. I was lying on a low, soft bed, white clean linen under and above me. I was naked under the linen. The room felt fresh. There was no other furniture in the room, no clothes, just my white bed and the walls. Then the light went out and I was in darkness. I felt too weak to react, to stand up or to cry. Anyhow, somebody had been caring well for me. I slept.

I woke up with a start. I was back in the white room. I looked around and the room was the same as before, as frugal and as appeasing. I smelled a slight scent of spices and of myrrh. A bowl with a greenish liquid stood now beside my bed on my right side. I tried a movement with my good arm to touch the bowl, but became aware of another presence in the room.

At my left side a man sat on the floor. He was dressed in a white burnous. His sleeves were lined with golden threads. He wore a keffiyeh on his head. The ends of the keffiyeh were nonchalantly but elegantly thrown over his broad shoulders. Golden rings curved on his wrists and a black band with white Arabic characters was knotted around his left upper arm. An unsheathed sword lay at his side. The heft of the sword was finely decorated with gemstones, with rubies and emeralds, and the sheath had

golden threads that ran the length of it. It was a long sword, not a ceremonial weapon, but a good killing blade. One hand of the man remained close to the sword; the other hand hid the face of the man with a bowl from which he was drinking, a bowl not unlike the one next to my bed. The man lowered the bowl and stayed silent; he scrutinised me, and I him. He had a long face with delicate features, powerful cheekbones, sensuous lips, small eyes in wrinkled sockets, heavy black eyebrows that were neatly cut, a very black beard and a thin moustache. His black beard was trimmed short. He seemed to me to be much older than me, even ten or twenty years older. The man's eyes moved over me but still he remained silent. He was not an impulsive man. He set down the bowl with slow movements, never keeping his eyes off me. He was a Saracen of course. The man was seated with crossed legs on a red brocaded cushion, quite near my bed. Was he my guard, and I a prisoner?

The man shifted his weight and said, 'Salaam Aleichem. My name is Usama. I wish you well. I am glad you woke up. Don't move yet. You were wounded.'

The Saracen had a warm, gentle voice. His words were precise, few, and brisk. This was a man used to command other men. He had spoken in Arabic. I wondered whether I could speak out loudly myself and when the first words came distinctly from my throat I was as surprised as he was. I asked simply the most obvious, 'where am I?'

The man answered hesitatingly, only after a while, 'you are in our bimaristan, the Muslim hospital of Aleppo. We are healing you. You were badly wounded.'

I pushed my body up against the pillows under my head, but daggers stuck in my sides and back so that I gushed out a cry of pain, then stayed leaning against the cushions. I dared not move.

'Don't move,' the Saracen grinned, and the grin somehow reassured me. 'We took care of you. Have no fear. I hear you do understand and speak Arabic. That is very rare for a Firinjah, for a Frank. Your wounds will heal. You had an arrow in your left side and we had to tear quite some flesh to pry the point out. You have received a sword stab in your right side. Your back is slashed in a long cut but your mail prevented the blade to reach your spine. I guess the worse was the hit on your head. You had quite a bump, blood all over you, blood also in your eyes. But all that is getting much better, I can tell. I have been hurt in the past, too, and survived – Allah be blessed. Our physicians were not sure how your mind would be after that blow, but I guess all is well. So, pray to Allah that you have been saved. You will soon again see the water flowing through the green woods of our land.'

'That will be green gardens under which streams flow. Am I in paradise?'

The man laughed heartily at that. 'No,' he said, 'but I will report the compliment. This is not paradise, though many, like you, believe it is. I told you, this is the bimaristan. People come here, or rather: they are brought here, to get better from sicknesses. The healers of Aleppo are very good, I assure you. Their medicine is often better than what your Frankish physicians have. I know. I have travelled among the Firinjah. But more of that for later. It is true that the Prophet said paradise is a green garden under which streams flow, but the water you hear flowing is only a fountain that drips in the courtyard.'

I asked, 'why am I not dead? Why was I not killed? Why was I brought here? If you keep me alive for a ransom, you can forget the gold. I am poor. The Franks will not

pay for me. It may take years before you see any gold for me. Kill me right now.’ A hundred questions circled in my mind. I realised that as long as I talked I was alive. Did I want to live?

Usama answered, ‘you are quite keen to die, Firinjah. Not so fast. You were wounded. The Qur’an says that no one shall die except by Allah’s permission.’

I was quick to reply, ‘the Qur’an also says that infidels should have their heads hacked off. I expect no pity.’

‘The Prophet wrote that verse about the infidels of Mecca who were attacking Medina, and he wrote it only then. Besides, are you really an infidel? The prophet also wrote that those who are of the Jewish religion, and the Christians, who believe in Allah and in the Last Day, and who do what is right, shall be rewarded by the Lord.’

‘In the Qur’an, the Prophet called the curse of Allah on the infidels.’

‘Yes. And Allah will judge. The Prophet also told that all those who believe, Jews and Christians, should not fear and not be put to grief.’

This conversation was beyond reality. I was in a hospital, which was no doubt also a Muslim prison, yet I was talking nonchalantly about books, about the Qur’an. Where would this lead me?

‘Was that then why I was not killed? Why are you at war then with the Franks? Does the Qur’an not say that one can pay evil with evil? Franks have done enough evil to your people for you to want to kill us all.’

Usama laughed at my words. He waited a while before continuing to speak, then resumed in slow sentences, each word well pronounced. ‘We have done enough evil too. You have indeed read the Qur’an. Our men saved you because they first thought you were already dead and did not bother to finish you off before searching through your clothes and horse-bags. You clutched the rein of your horse so firmly that the animal stayed close to you. A fine palfrey you had! When they searched your bags, our men found a Qur’an and other pages in Arabic characters, pages from a large book. The pages were hard to read for them. Our men were puzzled. They doubted you were a Christian then, despite your clothes. They thought you might be a Muslim in disguise, or a beginning Muslim. Only then did you stir and they saw you were not dead yet, after all. They sprinkled water on your face and in your mouth. The Arab tradition is that a prisoner who receives water shall not be killed.’

‘They could still have killed me.’

Usama sighed, then patiently replied, ‘since you know the Qur’an, let me remind you. The Qur’an says that if two armies of the faithful are at war, peace should be made in fairness. Allah forbids wickedness and oppression to believers. No one should die except by Allah’s permission, according to the notes in his Book in which everyone’s term of life is fixed. A believer should not be killed but by mischance. There was no mishap possible in killing a helpless man. Our warriors are believers. They supposed that Allah had saved you because of the Qur’an; it was not to them to thwart Allah’s design. So, they saved you and brought you here. How you survived the transport on a camel’s back, without ever gaining conscience, is still a mystery to me.’

He shifted his weight again on the cushion, and continued, ‘I am sure you must be a believer, even though you claim to be Christian. You read the Qur’an. You studied it while on patrol. You speak Arabic and you read Arabic. You proved all that to me by

talking to me and by citing the Qur'an's verses. You cannot but be a believer. You cannot be a Firinjah, a Frank knight. Who are you?'

I was quick to answer, 'I do am a Christian and a Frank. I am no Muslim. Yes, I studied the Qur'an. I found it a good and great book, filled with compassion and forgiveness. But there are a few verses I cannot agree with, only few though, and verses of which I think they had to do with the times the Prophet lived in. The Prophet could not but give a message that was not too much overturning all the habits of the people he lived with in their daily doings. I do not believe these lines are universally true.'

'Such as?'

'The Qur'an states for instance that women are pollution and should cleanse themselves before being with a man, that women can be divorced twice, that men are superior to women, one man being worth two women.'

Usama interrupted me by grinning and then laughing heartily and loudly, 'well, young man, I can see what you are interested in. You already charmed our main healer, a fine woman. She took care of you as if you had been her son. Well, most of the Franks would readily agree with the prophet's opinion of women! Few Franks honour women and I know they too repudiate their women when they are bored with them, and divorce them. Moreover, not only women are pollution; the Qur'an states that men should wash before every prayer, even using sand to cleanse in the desert where there is no water. Is being together with a woman not something like prayer? But let us stop discussing the Qur'an. You will find few true Muslims who do not have doubts about one or other verse of the Qur'an, and many interpret the Prophet's words.'

I kept on talking. Talking was good. Talking was life. I was eager to talk. I interrupted him. 'Is not the Qur'an the word of Allah, inspired by His Messenger Gabriel? Allah cannot be interpreted.'

'The Qur'an cannot be interpreted. That is true,' Usama replied. 'Yet, the Qur'an speaks of Allah as having eyes, hands, and feet. God cannot be similar to man and not be swayed by passions. So, there must be passages in the Qur'an that must be understood metaphorically.'

'That is Mu'tazilah philosophy!' I exclaimed. The Mu'tazilah had been formed by Arabian scholars of a philosophical school of men who saw reason an additional source of knowledge to the Qur'an. They interpreted the dogmas of religion in terms of reason. The Mu'tazilites were too close to heresy to the taste of the mainstream Islamic theologians, their very name suggesting the word for heresy. Had I come up to one of its adepts?

Usama was irritated. I had gone too far. I was suddenly afraid, indeed afraid to die as yet. He wanted to drop an argument and I had forced him further into it, onto dangerous paths. My damn weakness of flapping out inappropriate remarks had once again taken possession of me, whereas I should have been more careful.

Usama replied in sharp hissing tones, 'the words of Allah cannot be interpreted. Yet, the prophet was only a man. He wrote hundreds of years ago. Who knows exactly what Allah and the Prophet meant? Enough of this all. What is the Qur'an to you, Christian?' Usama leant forward to impress me, force his physical presence on me.

I repeated, ‘the Qur’an is a fine book, written by a Prophet who was as good a man as he could be for his times. He had a fine message, possibly or most probably inspired by Allah – who is also my God. The few verses I have problems with are exactly and only those that have to do with the rules given for the period the prophet lived in. I still am a Christian though, and a Frank. I am not a Muslim. So kill me now.’

‘Why are you so obsessed with death, Firinjah? Why? What is your name?’

I hesitated to give my real name, the one I was known by among the Franks, but decided my name could mean no harm. ‘My name is Daniel Pallet, and indeed, Death walks with me.’

‘From what part of Christendom have you come?’

‘I was conceived in the town of Paris in France, in the domains of the King, but raised in Brittany, a large Duchy southwest of Paris, near the western Sea. My father’s family originated from there.’

Usama thought a while, then spoke again, ‘I wondered about the strange parchments you had in your bags. I read them. It was heavy stuff, merely notes on a topic, I surmised. I would say they were of Greek origin, though written in Arabic, pages on philosophy. Are they notes of Aristotle maybe, or written by Plato? How did you come by them?’

I was surprised that a Saracen of these countries, and a warrior at that, knew Aristotle. I was as amazed as he might have been, finding Arabic documents on me. I answered, ‘the notes are from Aristotle indeed. They are pages from Aristotle’s book on Metaphysics.’

Usama said, ‘I have thousands of books, though you might find that hard to believe. But I do not have the Metaphysics of Aristotle. I have a copy of his Physics. How does it come that a Frankish knight newly arrived from Brittany knows Aristotle, speaks Arabic, reads the Qur’an, knows of Mu’tazilah theory, is apparently a scholar who studies philosophy, has the Hebrew name of prophet, and fights the Turks in Syria?’

‘Daniel is a name that is rather common in our lands. It was the name of my father’s father, the name the woman who raised me called me by. Yes, there was a prophet called Daniel. You read our Bible well!’

Usama laughed again, all aggression gone from his face. ‘Firinjah,’ he said, ‘you amuse me a lot and I am very much intrigued by you. I am sure I will have fine conversations with you about the Bible, the Christian Evangels and the Qur’an. The only thing my fellow-Muslims seem to be interested in is in cutting off the heads of all who are not of their faith and their tribe, or else they are mystic fools that call themselves Sufis – although I know also of serious Sufi’s -, and with these it is not possible to discuss a word of the Qur’an at all. So, let’s talk. I want to hear your story. You will be here for many more days and I need to hear what men the Franks are and how they think. Indulge in my curiosity. Yet, you are a strange man. You dodge some of my questions. There is something about you that puzzles me.’

Usama then told me who he was.

‘I am Usama ibn Murshid ibn Munqidh,’ he said. ‘My father’s name was Majd al-Din abu Salamah Murshid ibn ‘Izz ad-Dawla ibn Munqidh. He ruled the Kingdom of Shaizar on the River Orontes. We are Arabs, not Turks, no followers of Nur al-Din who rules Aleppo, though we live under his influence and by his will. The current

Malik, the ruler of Shaizar, is my uncle, 'Izz al-Din abu-l-'Asakir Sultan ibn 'Izz ad-Dawla ibn Munqidh. So, in your words I would be an Arabian Prince of Shaizar. Yet, I am an Amir of the Turks. I was a friend of the former Atabeg or governor of Aleppo and Mosul, Imad al-Din Zengi, the father of the current Atabeg Nur al-Din Abu al-Qasim Mahmud Ibn 'Imad al-Din Zengi. Although we live under the influence of the rulers of Aleppo and Mosul, I serve the ruler of Damascus, the most wise and valorous Vizir Mu'in al-Din Unur, who is also a Turk. With him I have visited the Franks. I have travelled and reside currently most of the time in Egypt. I serve the Fatimid Sultans there. My current master is the ageing Shi'ite Caliph al-Hafiz of Egypt. I am here on a mission to Nur al-Din. I am in Aleppo only for a while, so you were lucky indeed to have been wounded just while I was here, for a Turkish Amir would not have saved you. You were found by my own men, who happened to patrol with Nur al-Din's men. I teach my warriors to obey differently than Nur al-Din. I have been treated for sickness in this bimaristan before and have made friends here, so I could bring you to be cared for. Believe me: that was not easy! I had to tell the people here that you were a believer, so you had better also stick to that story.'

Then I started to tell Usama the story of my life. I spoke as if the gates of my mind had suddenly opened wide. The sadness and bitterness that had pushed against those gates for so long, rushed out.

Usama was a patient listener. He asked only spare questions. I talked at first in my white room, still lying on the bed, then sitting up, tugged against ample cushions. Later, I could sit by myself, and later still I tried to walk. Pain still wracked my body when I followed Usama to the courtyard of the bimaristan in which a fountain dripped its rivulets of cool water, but eventually I walked.

The bimaristan was a place of peace and rest. It was very white everywhere, built with the same large, soft-white hued stones in every wall, not built with mud-bricks. It was the cleanest place I had ever been in. I had washed only on rare occasions in my life. In the bimaristan, my female healer washed me daily. She used several large bowls of water for that, a strongly smelling green soap that was made especially in Aleppo out of olive oil, and she dried me with a lot of cloth. Though heavily veiled, she showed neither fear nor disgust at my nakedness and I learned not to be ashamed. She came to change my white robe every other day. After a while her veils became lighter, then transparent, flimsy pieces of cloth, and later still she dared to enter without a veil.

There was always fresh, cool air in the building. When I could walk alone I freely explored the narrow corridors in which scarcely two people could pass unhindered. The rooms had also only narrow openings, openings the size of one man, and no wooden doors, so the air could circulate with invigorating briskness. The air was always fresh and slightly humid, always moving lightly. I discovered larger halls with very high, domed ceilings, some of them opened to the skies at the top. I suspected these to be vents that attracted the fresh air from the fountains in and out, and which purified the atmosphere. There were stands with bowls of perfumes in certain halls, bowls of dried roses, and long pieces of cloth hung along the walls, which when one passed threw exotic scents at you, the cloths being probably imbued with essential

oils and spices. One discovered not only the complex architecture of the bimaristan, also its pungent perfumes.

The architects of the bimaristan had played with light. There were rather sombre rooms, rooms with subdued, diffused light and lightly lit rooms. Patients were transferred from darker to lighter rooms as they healed. The ample courtyard was open to the sky and situated in such a way that the blazing sun shone in it most of the day. The colonnaded gangway around the courtyard, not unlike in the cloisters of our monasteries, was shaded however, and always fresh. The air of Aleppo was a lot drier and healthier than the air of Antioch, the city in which I was based. Antioch had foul weather in the winter. It was a humid place with fogs and heavy rains. The wind blew always fiercely in Antioch, so that people hid from it in the stinking alleyways.

I found no tables, chairs or other furniture in the rooms of the Muslim hospital. The bimaristan had separate storerooms, where low chairs, beds, lamps and cushions were kept. When one such item was necessary for a patient, the object was fetched from the storeroom and brought back as soon as it was not useful anymore. The only colours in the place were of the multi-coloured mats and cushions, which were used amply. Tapestries lay in the courtyard, but these also were usually rolled up and stowed away when not in use.

I discovered where my armour was: my chain-mail and helmet, my greaves, my shield and sword, daggers and saddle-bags. My linen had been thrown away, probably with disgust for the stink and dirt. My healer showed me where my weapons were, once, after I had asked her. The healers of the bimaristan did their best to put their patients at ease, to ensure their comfort and calmness. I suppose my nurse hoped the feeling of being near to my armour and weapons would put me at ease. She was right.

Few people circulated in the bimaristan. All were dressed in white. When we would sit in the colonnaded courtyard, Usama sometimes invited musicians to play. I told my story then at the slow toggling of the strings of a zither or a harp, or at the languid rhythms of a sole drum.

In the beginning, in the first days of my confinement, Usama came to my room alone. Gradually, he brought with him a boy of about ten years, a boy he called Yusuf. When I was lying on the bed, which I still had to do for more than ten days, the boy sat quietly next to Usama on thick cushions. He only asked a question every odd day, addressing only Usama.

Then, also a woman joined Usama. She was a rather plump and small creature, but she had a very pretty face and the very bright, very green eyes that I had seen as the first thing when I woke up in the bimaristan. Usama told me she was my doctor. She usually sat without a burka, with a mere veil on her hair. Much later, when we had already left the bimaristan, Usama told me no male healer had wanted to touch me and only this woman had accepted to help. Yet, she was the finest doctor of Aleppo and Usama appreciated her wisdom and intelligence.

After a few days, when she came alone in my room, and after I knew who she was, I teased her. 'If you are not called Zumurrud, your name must be Amber, Jewel, or 'Abal, wild rose, maybe 'Azzah, gazelle?'

She smiled happily then. She was an austere and serious woman. She made me drink my daily sherbet, the cool drink in which spices and medicine were mixed, and I should not have dared to refuse. She used to push me down on the pillows with fervour, decidedly and firmly, when I tried to get up too soon. She was not a woman to be trifled with. Once, I heard her cry through the corridors, insulting a male healer. She did not speak to me except in terse commands, but with time she also softened. ‘Call me Batul,’ she said, which meant something like ‘great virgin’.

I chuckled at that. ‘No, no, you are no Batul,’ I said, ‘not a fine woman like you. You must be Baysan, she who walks with pride, or is it Basinah, little cat?’

Finally, she conceded her real name was Jadwa, gift, because her father had had no children before her until he was already quite old, and he was so glad at her birth that the thought she had been a special gift of Allah. Which she had been, for she was a remarkable woman. I told her she was Jadwa for me too. I thanked Allah for Jadwa. I saw the pride in her eyes, then and I was pleased with her.

She came to listen to me too, as often as she could. She would sit on the floor behind Usama and Yusuf. The man and the boy did not seem to mind her being there. Usama addressed her always with respect and deference. The boy more or less ignored her.

I healed. I got better. My wounds closed. I could walk in pain, but alone, then without pain. I wondered whether I would be thrown in the prison of Aleppo, but when I could leave the bimaristan, I walked and rode the roads of Aleppo with Usama as if I were a free man, though an accompanied man.

Aleppo was a much finer, but smaller town than Antioch. We visited the souks of the merchants: covered, bewildering alleys where everything one could dream of was bought and sold, from camels to spices, silk and damasks, weapons and copper utensils.

We strolled along the caravanserais, the large walled areas surrounded with walls in which the caravans from Damascus, from Mosul and Baghdad and from still farther away, from Egypt and Persia, gathered. Each region had its own, separate caravanserai. Aleppo was a rallying point for the caravans. From Aleppo caravans departed bound for the northern territories, for the Seljuk Sultanate of Qoniya, for Constantinople and for the now Frankish ports of Saint Simeon (the port of Antioch) and Tripoli.

In the centre of Aleppo stood an astonishing, high, almost perfectly conical hill. The hill was apparently man-made, huge, and on its top dominated an old but mighty citadel. Usama told me the citadel was too old and inadequate for Nur al-Din, so the Atabeg had projected to build a new, mighty fortress there. The souk ended almost in front of that citadel.

Thus, we explored at first Aleppo together. Then I left the bimaristan, not to be brought to a prison, but to stay in Usama’s house near the caravanserai of Shaizar. We rode out of Aleppo afterwards, passed the Quwaiq River south of the city and galloped in the deserts, the mountains and the fertile grounds. There were always guards with us, but I did not have the feeling I was a prisoner. I could have escaped easily. The question of imprisonment, freedom to come and go never came up

between us, but I stayed in the house when I was alone and I never rode out but with Usama.

In those months, when we rode, we stayed often outside Aleppo for several days. We often slept in the open, the Arabian way, and sometimes in tents. We rode in the formidable mountains of the Jebel Nosairi on the Frankish side of the River Orontes, and in the broad valleys and plains of Aleppo. It was as if Usama were discovering every wadi of the region, impregnating his mind with every possible mark of the terrain. We rode as far south as Shaizar and Hama, yet we avoided villages, towns and fortresses. We certainly avoided the eagle-nest castles of the Isma'ilis, the Muslim sect the Franks called Assassins. We saw their castles from the far, never went near.

Usama showed me the Shaizar, his home town, with its massive, crenellated walls. Shaizar was a beautiful city. It had domed mosques and a very high but elegant citadel with tall and slender towers. Shaizar was a town of colours. Many flags flew proudly in the warm wind on the towers and fortifications; it was a proud town also, with lush, green gardens around. The Amirs of Shaizar were Arabs, rulers that had survived the Turkish grab of power in Syria and retained a region with a town, a few villages and fortified places.

Usama told me of the terrible attack the Shaizar citadel had endured in the month of May of 1138, less than ten years ago, when the Byzantine Emperor Johannes Comnenus had laid siege to the city, aided by the Franks, with over a hundred thousand footmen and hundred thousand cavalry. The Emperor thought the town would surrender rapidly, but it didn't. More than twenty mangonels had hurled their massive boulders into the town and against the walls. The town was defended by Usama's uncle Abu'l 'Asaku Sultan. Usama was inside the citadel and town, so he had seen all. Usama had seen a stone destroy the home of one of his friends, Yusuf Abu'l-Ghraib. Another stone killed an old man in front of him. The old man had called the alarm of a Frank attack when the stone hit the man's head, decapitating him and forcing his head instantly in the wall behind him, splattering its brain matter all along the wall. The Atabeg Zengi of Aleppo dared not defy such a large force of Byzantines. The Shaizar had suffered terribly.

The Greek army captured the lower part of Shaizar but they abandoned the siege as suddenly as they had come. The Amir of Shaizar paid the Emperor a huge ransom of fine Arabian horses, gleaming silks lined with gold, a cross studded with rare rubies, precious furniture and much gold. The Emperor left and the Shaizar citadel was not captured! The siege had lasted twenty-four days.

We talked. Time passed slowly. I was in a world of peace, and at peace. Little did we bother about the brutal skirmishes that were surely waged around us. We could not know and did not want to know what happened in the world. Of course, our world disappeared in violence, bloodshed and disaster. But we talked of philosophy, of the Qur'an, the Bible and the Evangels. Usama read me sweet Persian poetry.

We could not foresee how but ten years later, Usama's town of Shaizar, his splendid kingdom, would be racked by a terrible earthquake that shook also our coastal towns and Antioch. Usama's citadel collapsed, burying in its rubble his entire family. The Shaizar was reduced to dust and the few survivors left the town forever.

Much later, I saw the site again. The city had returned to sand and the last Arabian family to own territories in Syria was annihilated.

Thirty years later, my own world would be destroyed. All the Frank Kingdoms of the Holy Land would be re-conquered by armies of tens of thousands of Turks led by the same boy Yusuf who had sat at my bed.

The County of Edessa had already been lost before I arrived in the Holy Land, its loss the very reason why I had come. The Kingdom of Jerusalem, the County of Tripoli and the Principality of Antioch would be captured in one swift sweep after the entire united army of the Frank knights had been destroyed in one battle. The Franks, would then be squeezed into a few coastal cities, defended by the Templar and the Hospitaller knights, in mere merchant ports infested with Venetian, Genoese and Pisan dealers.

Our dreams of a peaceful, learned Syria with prosperous Kingdoms never came to be realised. But that disaster was in the future. For the moment, we could talk about the far-away lands I had come from and of the lands and people of Outremer that Usama had visited. The boy Yusuf learned and laughed with us.

Three

Le Pallet, Brittany 1118-1132

I was conceived in Paris, the capital of the King of France, where my parents lived. I was born and raised however in the village and castle of Le Pallet, a lush village in the County of Nantes. Nantes was the largest town of the Duchy of Brittany and its county was part of the Duchy. I was raised by my father's sister. My aunt, Dionysia, called me after her grandfather, Daniel, Lord of Le Pallet. She was married to the Lord of Clisson, who owned a castle at a distance of about half a day's walking from Le Pallet, but when I was brought to her she lived alone like a recluse in our castle, though still in good terms with her husband. The Clissons were rude warriors, renowned throughout Brittany for their skills with weapons and for their courage, but I suppose in those times the Lord of Clisson was too rough and boisterous for my aunt's tastes. Her marriage to Clisson had been arranged by Dionysia's parents. The Clissons had an eye on the domain of Le Pallet, which was situated next to theirs.

My father should have been Lord of Le Pallet, but he had become a scholar and did not want to moulder away in a small village of Brittany. He preferred to teach in exciting Paris, in abbeys there and in other cathedral schools of France. My father had three brothers, but none of these wanted to stay at Le Pallet. They denigrated the countryside and fancied to live in cities. They preferred the liveliness of the town, the intensity of life that trade brought, and the intellectually thrilling world of crowded schools. Rodolphe and Dagobert were merchants in Nantes and lived near the harbour. Procaire was a canon in the cathedral of Nantes. I lodged a while with him to study Latin in the school of the cathedral. Also, none of the four brothers really wanted to become Lord of Le Pallet. The village was too peaceful, too quiet, too placid, too boring for the men of my family. Anyhow, only one of them could make a living out of our lands, so finally they had all forsaken the title. Yet, my father in Paris lived from what Le Pallet earned.

Le Pallet lay in the large valley of the River Loire, one of the most beautiful watercourses of France, and on the right bank of the River Sèvre, which throws itself in the Loire at Nantes. The castle had been built by the Dukes of Brittany a very long time before my birth, to control the valley and the access to Nantes, the capital city of Brittany and its main port. The fief had been given in feudal hold to our family. In my times the castle did not much serve as a guard fortress anymore. The garrison of men-at-arms was limited to a mere ten men. The sergeant of these men was a rough but bright veteran, called Gormond. Gormond had fought for the Kings of France in many battles. He was a professional warrior, but he could read Latin. He would handle the sword and the battle-axe and the mace, the crossbow and the lance like no other I knew. He commanded the garrison but listened respectfully to what Dionysia told him to do. He considered her truly as the Lady of the castle. He loyally obeyed her always. He knew she could outwit him even only with her little finger, and she knew more about Le Pallet than he would ever. He held his peace with her and she did not interfere with how he trained and ordered his men. I often wondered whether Gormond was not secretly in love with my aunt, but I doubt he ever dared approach her.

It was good living at Le Pallet. We never suffered from cold or hunger. My aunt was a woman who apparently had some cooling liquid in her arteries instead of blood. She

was always cold unless in the heat of summer. So, the fires blazed day and night in the wide hearths of the keep. Large logs of wood were ever thrown on the flames, so we enjoyed warmth always. My aunt realised she was burning down the woods of the estate, so she continually planted young trees, each year. She would not deforest her lands.

Dyonisia also knew more about the fields and meadows than any peasant that lived in the vicinity. She used to visit all the farms of Le Pallet and discuss with the peasants over which plants could be sown in spring, what land should be left alone, what land would receive which seed. She knew by heart how many cows, pigs and horses every farmer had. Each farmer would consult her about which crops to grow and when she had her mind set to something, none would have dared to dispute her decision. But when she proved wrong with a crop, she recognised her error and would pay the farmer's loss. The peasants of Le Pallet were no slaves. They were free men, but I never heard of a farmer or an elder son of a farmer to leave the region. The territory of Le Pallet was a patchwork of meadows and fields with crops. The grass was thick, the air soft, the skies usually blue and white and rarely grey, and the showers light and short. We had to endure only rarely heavy storms in the valley, and no earthquakes. Le Pallet was paradise.

My first memories as a child date from when I was a boy of about six years old. I see myself proudly striding behind my aunt in the low hills of our countryside, to pay visits to the farmers of Le Pallet. I too entered every farm and hovel. I saw the tilling and the harrowing of the brown, rich ground and often I was allowed sowing grain with the peasants. Once, a large and new, hilly spread of land proved to be useless for grain crops. My aunt stood with her hands in her hips, a farmer next to her, looking disappointedly at the meagre returns. She sniffed in the air, looked pensively at the sky, spotted the sun to the east of the field, moved her head with how the sun would move to the west, and then decided, 'Jean, this is no land for grain. Not for barley. Not for wheat. Not for nothing. Start planting vines!' The peasant of course had no money to buy vines, but Jean did not object for he did not dare to contradict my aunt. I imagine he had a few sleepless nights, but three weeks later carts loaded with vine trunks arrived at the farm without any payment being asked. It was late in the year, but Jean tilled the land anew and planted the vines. The first wine I drank was the sweet delicately tinted Muscadet wine of the Sèvre valley of Le Pallet. I still have its taste on my lips and when I recall that first tang I close my eyes and remember how lovely the lands of Le Pallet were, how sweet life was like that wine, and how gentle the times and the people were.

We housed in the keep of the castle and though my father and uncles might have been knights, we were not rich. With time and diligence, my aunt considerably improved our living. She sent gold to my father and she kept more gold to herself, but she scraped for every coin of it. We never grew hungry. The farms prospered. The peasants I spoke to told me how hard a life they had. They complained a lot, but all agreed that their livelihood had improved a lot compared to the times of their fathers and their father's fathers. The climate had become milder in the valleys of the Loire and the Sèvre, as it had almost everywhere in Christendom. Winters were not so freezing cold anymore, summers were less humid. The fields yielded more. The health of people improved as there was more food. My aunt also bought oxen and horses to help the farmers grow grain on more land.

My aunt Dionysia bred horses with the help of Gormond and of the garrison. Keeping the garrison alert was a duty she had to the Duke of Brittany, to Conan III the Fat, who was also Count of Nantes. Conan III resided in the town, in his castle. He took a keen interest in the fortified places around his capital. At least once a year a steward of the Duke would arrive at Le Pallet for an inspection. My aunt paid ever-increasing taxes. The Duke's stewards were welcomed every year, however. She was always ready. She would make a feast of such a visit, and received with a smile. The stewards liked to stay a few days at Le Pallet. They preferred a laughing, generous and even sometimes alluring hostess to a gruff, misery lord. She would stage sumptuous dinners and a little dancing in the evening. The stewards flirted with Dionysia but they dared not touch her, for they feared the wrath of Clisson. When they left, they got their hands propped full with the produce of the farms, their purses full of coins, their carts filled with too many barrels of wine, and they returned with the best of reports to the Duke. Yes, they said, Le Pallet was still a fine castle. Yes, the castle was being fortified anew. Yes, the garrison was well fed and kept in good fighting order, and in the right numbers. Yes, taxes had been paid as required. Dionysia and Gormond would of course show frequent training sessions of the men-at-arms, each day the stewards remained at our castle.

Training with weapons was normally held on and off at Le Pallet, when time and duties permitted. The men-at-arms were quite content to help at raising horses, to feed the cows and pigs, to help harvesting the hay, and to pinch the servant-maids in the stables. Yet, during the day there were always four men on guard, with one at the lookout on the top of the keep. Our sleeping rooms were on the second floor of that keep. The gates of the castle, open at day, were always closed at dusk, and at night two guards would patrol on the ramparts. But there was peace in the lands of Brittany while I lived at Le Pallet.

When I was very young we would visit my uncles in Nantes three or four times a year. Gormond was left in the castle then, but Dionysia took two armed guards with her. She never travelled unprotected. She would have readily done so, for the road to Nantes was a large one, well frequented by merchants of all kind, free of bandits, and within a day – even while walking only slowly – we could be in the harbour precinct of Nantes. We simply followed paths along the Sèvre River. But Gormond would not allow her to go alone and pressed his men on her. It was a matter of status, he said. The Lady of Le Pallet should not travel on the roads alone. The farmers and the Duke's men would see that she had authority. We all rode on horses, my aunt and me on a palfrey, the guards on destriers. Our guards were armoured and they wore spears and swords. Often, we rode with a cart, for my aunt brought some of her produce to her brothers and she bought and sold goods in Nantes. She often sent chariots laden with fruit, vegetables, grains, wine, hides and wood to Nantes. Her own steward, Master Renaud, usually did the selling for her. But Dionysia once in a while wanted to see for herself what the prices were, to check on the prices Renaud had obtained in the previous transactions. We spent several days in Nantes at such visits, usually lodging in the house of the canon Procaire. Dionysia did not think much of her brother, but he always welcomed her heartily and she responded with grace. She arrived with presents of course, and then most of the goods in her cart were for Procaire.

We liked to stroll in the markets and the harbour of Nantes. Nantes was a rich and lively town. The quays of the harbour were situated around an island in the estuary of the River Loire, which threw itself in the sea just past Nantes. I saw my first sea-going ships there, large transport vessels with huge sails. I noticed a warship occasionally, but not many. Nantes' harbour prided in several monstrous, wooden engines to draw barrels and large packed goods from the ships. Convicts trod in the drums on which strong ropes were coiled to draw the loads from or on the quays. Sailing ships from many coasts moored at Nantes. I heard my first German, Spanish, Dutch and Lingua Franca or Sabir at Nantes harbour. My aunt would walk briskly on the quays, followed by our guards. The guards were only lightly armed in Nantes, wearing merely a dagger and a short sword, but they wore chain armour nevertheless on their breast and back. She had our men carry so many items while she bought, that they would have been no good in any sudden brawl, but I never saw violence around me. I was thus exposed to ships at a very young age. Maybe because of that I never feared being aboard ships. The vessels were so large, so imposing that it seemed to me they could never falter on the water. I kept that faith in sea-going vessels ever after, though I know of course how dangerous the seas can be in gruesome storms and I have since been in a few very bad sea-tempests myself.

I also learnt to love colours in the harbour of Nantes. The pure sky of Brittany is a marvel to emphasise the brightness of a variety of colours. The hues in the harbour of Nantes fascinated me. I was submerged in colours there, white, black, green, red, and blue in all shades and intensities. I was not so much used to colours but for the most subdued ones at Le Pallet, where nature was green and brown mostly and foremost of the earth and sky. In the harbour of Nantes the colours were man-made, of every possible bright hue. The sails of the ships were often coloured, the ships themselves were painted, the goods were enveloped in cloth of all sorts of tints, and the sailors and merchants wore dresses in the most vivid tones. Flags hung from almost every house. These blew their colours in the sea-winds. I was happy then. My youth was joyful.

When I was twelve years old, something happened at Nantes that changed my life forever. It was in Nantes that I saw my first tourney of knights. The Lord of Clisson, Dionysia's husband, participated in the jousting and in the tournament, so she had been politely invited - or was it summoned – to attend. We were assigned a seating place on the tribune, which also held Duke Conan and his retinue of counts and knights and their ladies. The field of the tourney, to the side of Conan's castle, was huge. People watching were only allowed on one side and kept behind ropes. There were so many townsmen and women and children pressing next to the tribune that I guessed the entire city of Nantes had gathered. The jousting – one-to-one fights – had taken place the previous day. In jousting one knight on horse charged another with a lance and tried to strike the adversary to the ground. Each knight had up to three spiral-coloured lances, but the oak spears seldom broke. When the lances had nevertheless been broken or lost, the fight continued ardently with swords and maces. If the horses failed, were wounded, and if the two men fell on the ground but could stand up, the fight continued on foot. Olivier de Clisson had not won the jousting but only surrendered to the winner of the jousting at the last moment before being killed.

Dionysia hated jousting. She had wanted to show her husband she did not approve. Clisson would also take part in the tourney however, so we had come on that day, honour saved on both sides.

The rules of the contest of tourney were very simple. At the opposite ends of the green field fifteen knights waited nervously, all on neighing destriers, in full armour, and all holding a jousting lance. At a sign of the Duke the men rode in on each other and then there were no rules anymore. Each knight tried to pierce another knight's mail, to strike down, to wound or maim the opponents. That fine spring day in Nantes, after the first clash, most men were still on horse, as lances failed to hit or had glanced off shields. Among the men that had fallen at least one was dead. A few men, two or three, fell off their destriers with a dull thump, in the grass. The others could not get up from the weight of their armour, so they were rapidly taken away from the field by their squires, for the riders turned at the end of the field to charge anew. The fallen men would have to pay a ransom to the knights that had thrown them down, and their armour would have to be surrendered to the winners. The knights could use up to three lances in a tourney.

The knights charged once more. One powerful Baron was attacked by two adverse knights, but he fended off his opponents courageously. Holding a heavy oak lance horizontally took a lot of muscle. The weaker knights were already tired; the stronger ones made sure they struck home with more dexterity and precision and with more power. At least six men were grappling helplessly on the ground. Many lances were broken and replaced. Half of the men that had fallen could get up, though only with great effort, and started to fight on the ground. Two men had no weapons. The others had run to their horses and drawn off a mace or a sword. It took a while for the squires of the unarmed men to get to them and pitilessly the third charge rode in so that a knight on horse thrust his lance completely through a helpless man's chest. There was now a savage mêlée in which further charging with the lance was impossible for too many men were on the ground.

Individual fights ensued. The knights that were still on horse continued to fight seated, with swords. A man on horse attacked a man on foot. Men on foot locked with recuperated shields, stabbing at each other with swords. Two knights on horse clashed onto each other with maces. The fights were vicious and the more savage the duels, the more the crowd jeered. These deadly contests lasted a long time, until some of the knights could not even truly brandish a sword anymore. From that moment on, knights would not be killed anymore, although a knight could still die from his wounds, lose an arm or a leg. Desperate men who wore old and thin mails were prone to awful wounds. The worse I saw happening was a knight receiving a blow from a mace in the belly, collapsing immediately with terrible wounds from the sharpened edges of the dreadful weapon, blood pouring profusely from the gashes. Even with the best chain mails, such blows could mean terrible internal bleeding and horribly painful death.

The spectators cared very little for the knights, who were completely dehumanised, of course, and even less for the horses. They were caught in the frenzy and the excitement of the combats. They cried out their encouragements to their champions, or felt disgusted at the bad luck of the loser, when the man they supported fell or surrendered. Most fights at this final stage of the tourney ended by surrender, for several knights would attack a lonely opposer. The poorest knights fought with

desperate ardour and gave only up when they were severely wounded and sure to be killed. These knights would have to make debts with usurers to pay their ransoms – or disappear and forfeit honour forever.

I still wonder now at the general hysteria and at the thrills I experienced while the fights lasted. The Lord of Clisson was my champion of course for he had always been kind to me and he was family. He was one of the four very last men to hack in on each other. He fought at long last with another knight against one adversary, until that one surrendered. The tourney therefore had been won by his side.

The young boy I was, in the madness of the tourney, had no eye for the blood, no eye for the terrible suffering of the wounded. I only saw the vivid colours of the knights in their shining chain-mails and most gaudily plumed helmets, with their vividly coloured surcoats, painted shields, and caparisoned horses displaying their master's badges. The heads of the horses had glistening chanfrons, plates of steel, which protected them from the lances and shone the sun's rays around.

The spectacle was grandest in the beginning, when the riders had charged several times with lances couched. Then the fights were gripping when they became duels on foot in personal strife. I did not see the savagery of the massacre, nor did any of the bystanders. I only saw the glory of the winners. I did not look at the men that were miserably drawn off the field, blood trailing in the grass. I did not look at the disembowelled destriers that lay in the grass. The Lord of Clisson was better at this kind of mingled and desperate fighting than at jousting. He was an excellent sword and mace warrior. His power had prevailed. He was the strongest man of the day, the ultimate champion.

There and then I decided to become a knight and win tourneys. Dionysia had shouted as loudly as the men, wincing not once, despite her apprehensions. I supposed she would support me in becoming a knight.

Tourneys were expensive in men. In times of peace, knights were plentiful in Christendom. Lords and bishops allowed the strong youths to spend their violence against each other. After all, the Frank knights were born and raised for that, and in a great family only one knight could be heir so the other sons had to serve as soldiers and win lands by their own. Tourneys were but rehearsals of true battles. In times of peace, tourneys were being held at all times, for the desire of men bred for war to prove their male supremacy was a very powerful inducement. In times of war, and there was practically always a battle or a skirmish going on in France somewhere, knights were needed to win territories, to assert the authority of the King in sieges of towns and castles. Knights should then not be lost in games. So weapons, lances and swords, were blunted in tournaments. That was not yet so in my times, but the same year I saw my first tourney, Pope Innocent II denounced tournaments at a Council of the Church in Clermont in France. The Council forbade in a Papal Canon Christian burial for knights killed in such battles, and that rule more than anything else dampened enthusiasm for the fights. To me, the harm was done for I had only seen the glory of the winners.

I would be a knight and fight jousts.

One evening, some time after I had returned with my aunt to Le Pallet, I told her my wish. At first, she wouldn't believe me. Then she thought me mad, or possessed by a

devil. She shook me off by telling me to go and see Father Hugh of the chapel. She had assumed all the males of her direct family could only be monks, scholars or merchants, weaklings all. Her brothers were like that. Her father had spent his last days in a monastery and become a monk; her mother also had become a nun. She was thus not a little astonished to hear me speak of wanting to be a warrior and knight, and asking to join her husband in his castle to learn to fight at the side of such an illustrious champion, to fight with the lance, the sword and the mace.

Dionysia refused outright. She did not want me to leave Le Pallet. She did not believe my ardent wish would last. She certainly would not abandon me in the hands of her ferocious husband. I insisted and pleaded, shouted and cried, cajoled and flattered. When I finally said every young boy living in a castle had the duty to serve as a knight to defend the Kingdom, she stayed pensive at last. She looked at me sideways with a scorn, the scepticism still in her eyes. She decided I should stay at Le Pallet. She had no faith in her brute of a husband. She did not want me bruised or wounded during the formal training at Clisson. Still, she yielded to my plight to become a knight. She accepted me to learn with Gormond. Gormond would teach me and when Gormond judged that I was ready, and if I still wanted to be a knight, she would take me herself to Duke Conan. I could show my skills and strength to the Duke and the Duke could knight me. Dionysia was sure Conan owed her that. And thus, Gormond became my teacher in the arts of weapon-handling.

Gormond started to train me the next day. Not only Gormond worked on me. The entire garrison trained me. At first, I was the laughing stock of the men-at-arms. I was the knight-of-the-wooden-sword. I hacked in at the men with a short, wooden stick and Gormond had a small oak shield made for me. I could barely hold it before my chest, because it was too heavy for me. I mock-fought every move the garrison men exercised. The men guffawed at me, made me trip, bumped their shields in my belly to keep me away. But, with time, they also started to believe I was rather serious in what I was doing. They hurt me some, but not too much, just enough to make me want to give up. They tested my determination, but I doggedly held on.

The first months I had enough bruises on arms and legs, large blue patches on my back, to force any desperate, poor boy to abandon. I grunted from the pain, but still faced them, fought them, and got hit again and again by a blunt sword or a willow stick. I winced from the hurt, but faced them the next day anew. Gradually, the laughs stopped. Because of me, the men trained more often than before, which in itself was not a bad thing for the garrison. Each man was eager then to show me a new trick. I learned not only to fight as a knight – we even held mock jousting sessions with Gormond – I mastered also every dirty trick of alley-fighting known in Brittany and beyond. I could swing a sword as it should, approach silently a man, slit a throat at night, and strangle a guard with a rope. I learned to fight with my hands and knuckles, to box and to wrestle. I could kick a groin viciously. I knew how to parry and slash with a sword, to thump a shield into an adversary's stomach. I knew to look for the weak spots in chain armour. I could pierce a horse with a lance while it charged me. A year later I could still not cock a crossbow, hold a knight's lance horizontally on horse or sling a mace around: I was not strong enough for that, but I could do almost all the other moves the garrison exercised. When a crossbow was armed for me I could put a

bolt in the head of a straw doll at fifty paces and somewhere in its body at a hundred. Gormond, really a sword-fighter, could not do better. John, the best crossbow of the garrison, proudly exercised with me and he did not always win.

My body changed. Muscles expanded on me, on arms, chest, back and legs. The men taught me to swim in the pond near the castle. I swam frequently, liking the lightness in the water. I failed to drown. My shoulders broadened, my chest thickened. We ran often. We trained half-mornings or half-afternoons and the men took pleasure in working their new Lord. That was how they looked at me now. I would be the future Lord Daniel du Pallet, they said, the worthy successor of his namesake. They were oddly reassured by what I was doing. They had been asking themselves what Le Pallet and its castle would become after Dionysia. They feared being swamped by Clisson. Now, they surmised, they worked at the continuance of Le Pallet. I would disappoint them, of course, but I also thought in those years I would naturally be the future Lord. My father should have been the true Lord, but he had refused his fief. I was his son, the first and only in his line, so unlike him, and I would one day be Lord.

I would have trained better and more had not a strange fellow arrived when I was about fourteen years old. I had muscles enough to handle any weapon then, also the crossbow. The man was dressed in rags and he dragged a paltry donkey behind him. He was dirty. Brown streaks of mud covered his face, though little of his weather-carved flesh was left without hair. He had a strong, unkempt, black beard, bushy eyebrows, a snub nose, and long, brown, straggly hair. He had not followed any road. He had travelled through the forests, painstakingly, more or less following the paths along the River Loire, always hidden. When he arrived at the castle, the guards had not spotted him until they heard a donkey balking right below the walls. He was at the gate before a guard had run to intercept him and he was already inside the courtyard when a spear at his neck stopped him, Gormond cursing every guard that should have been at the gate.

‘I want to speak to the Lady Dionysia if this is the castle of Le Pallet,’ he said with a funny, singing foreign accent.

The guards did not allow him to enter the keep for he stank worse than his ass and he was as filthy as a pig that had frolicked in muck for an entire day. Dionysia came down the stairs with a nasty look and pinching her nose at him. She met him there, under the hazy sun of a rainy day. She was in a bad mood.

The man looked her up and down, gauging her, then said, ‘My Lady Dionysia, I wish you a good day. I am Jacob of Pézenas. I haven’t been in my home town for the last twenty years though, so you may also call me Jacob of Montpellier or of Perpignan or of Valencia – which is in Spain- , as you please, or whatever. I was sent by your brother the scholar who lives in Paris and elsewhere. I have a letter for you.’

At that, Jacob went to a bag on his donkey, a spear following his back, and he handed Dionysia a much-wrinkled, sealed parchment.

‘Your brother wishes you well. He may visit you soon, or then again, not so soon. He sent me to teach his son two languages, Hebrew and Arabic. I also have a letter for your brother Procaire, who is to teach the boy Latin and Greek. Do not worry about the money. I owe your brother and he paid me, probably from your own money

anyway. The letter stipulates how much you should give to me from the castle's stipend of your brother. Now, I am murky, as you can see. Believe me, that is not my natural state. I need a bath. I have to get rid of these lice-ridden rags too. I am sure you will appreciate my changing into nicer clothes. The rags and the dirt have been useful, however. I saw bandits on the roads, more than around Paris. They even wanted to steal my donkey. The beast is the dumbest and most stubborn animal in the country. Three guys tried to have it walk but it refused to put one foot before the other. It wouldn't listen to me either, then. They even stabbed the beast and threatened to kill it, but I told them ass-meat is foul. It just balked so miserably they said it was no use anyhow to them, it made too much noise for bandits. Bandits hate noise. I gave them some gold coins. So I am here. I have other clothes in the bags. I would love a swim in that pond I saw beyond the castle.'

He left a bewildered Dionysia nodding. He abandoned the donkey and all its bags in the courtyard and disappeared through the gate with a bundle of new clothes under his arm. The spear had been withdrawn by Gormond's hand. Gormond was quite amused with the guy and was sure by then he was harmless. My aunt had the donkey brought to the fold. The animal only wanted to move when the steward held hay before its nose. Then Dionysia had the donkey's bags brought to a little room in the keep.

Jacob was a Jew, of course.

Dionysia knew too little of the world to have apprehensions against any stranger. She did not care much whether someone was a devote Christian or not, but a Jew was nevertheless a problem for her. Father Hugh of the chapel of Saint John, the little church of Le Pallet, preached hell and damnation over the Jews. But Dionysia could outshout Hugh any time she wanted, and many a fine piece of lamb found the chapel's way, so Father Hugh kept quiet. As it was, Father Hugh and Jacob became rather good friends with time and Hugh's vituperations over Jews slackened. Still, Dionysia was not a little angry at my father for sending her yet another problem and one more mouth to fill.

So, I had myself a teacher of languages, and of philosophy too, as it soon proved. Forthwith I spent half a morning or afternoon with Gormond and the garrison, cursing in brute Frank language, sweating my body and tiring my muscles until they hurt, and the other half of the day learning the Hebrew and Arabic alphabet, reading tediously the books that Jacob had brought. How Jacob had arrived at Le Pallet coming from Paris with an ass laden only with books beneath a little cloth, was close to a miracle.

Jacob only stayed a few months that first time, enough to teach me the letters and figures. Then he announced he had to do a bit of work. We never learnt what he meant by 'work'. He was very elusive on that subject when we asked. We heard he had gone to Nantes, and from there to other towns in Brittany. Before he left he gave me exercises in the languages, enough to work twice the time he would stay away. He handed me texts to unravel, mostly texts he had written himself. I protested, telling him I did not know enough words to understand the phrases, not enough grammar to comprehend the structure of the sentences.

'Oh, that is not a problem, you will see,' he suggested. 'Just translate the letters and try to guess the words. Write down the words you think you can guess. Then try to find out why the words change at the end. We'll do more when I come back.'

While Jacob travelled and 'worked,' I studied as best as I could. I made Dionysia despair over the spending of too much parchment. Nevertheless, I liked learning

languages and I learned on my own, quickly. I took a pride in knowing more than anybody of Le Pallet, except Jacob, because the books he brought were interesting. In the beginning I understood few words and no sentences. Then I guessed the words and later the phrases.

Jacob usually stayed away two to three months. He would return with more books and teach me more. Through the books I learned Jewish and Christian tales, philosophy, ancient myths and stories that had happened to the world.

When Jacob was away, I went to Nantes and stayed with my uncle Procaire. I learned Latin and Greek with him. Procaire was not as talented and as exciting a teacher as Jacob was. He was less insistent, less demanding, more severe. He lacked imagination. So I learned more slowly with him. He was not an easy man. He was always sad, almost never laughed. He had fewer stories to tell. It was a good thing he could not read Hebrew or Arabic, for he would have been shocked at what I was reading elsewhere. But I learned also a lot also from Procaire. I read the Bible in Latin and a few books of Plato in Greek, but I did not tell Procaire I had already read those in Arabic. Jacob gave me books in Greek too. I read Homer, Herodotus and Thucydides with him.

Oh, the evenings at Le Pallet with Jacob, Dionysia and Gormond were happy ones indeed. How I miss them now! Is youth not the finest of times for any man of age, times to look fondly back to? Times of magic and wonder they were, those years! We sat in our large hall of the keep around a huge, blazing fireplace, candles lighting dimly around and smelling of wax and grease. Jacob told us stories, entire evenings, tales of his life in Spain and in southern Aquitaine, legends, myths, epics, poems and songs. He had found Dionysia's lute and sang. Dionysia also knew how to play the lute, so she would sing a peasants' song of Brittany. Gormond would tell us his battle-stories. The guards would come into the hall to mount the stairs to the top of the keep, but linger in the hall, hearing the legends, comment, then tell us a story too, until Gormond chased them up. The guards that were to be relieved would come down the stairs, sit down and listen too. There was often no guard on the keep those evenings, until Gormond would suddenly remember his duties, shout a curse and whip his men up the stairs and out. We were happy. The castle keep sounded with our laughter, our songs and our shouts of marvel at Jacob's anecdotes.

Jacob was with us only a few weeks when I had my first vision.

I had escaped from Jacob and Gormond for an afternoon. I needed to be alone and do nothing for a while. Such moments provided me with new energy. I could work better and harder after those precious moments of solitude. Without such moments I became irritable and stressed. I have always been somebody who needed isolation once in a while.

I sat near the Saint John chapel, hidden from views of the castle and the village, behind a tangle of wild rose bushes. From there I could see the wide valley below, the patchwork of meadows, the vine yards, the fields and the beech and oak forests. It was a fine day of spring with brisk winds and a bright sun, with pure, dry, invigorating eastern air and only a few flimsy, white clouds in the sky. I was watching that sky, its

brightness and I saw the few clouds changing their shapes and disappear. I thought of nothing, and was one with the landscape.

When I looked down, the colours before me started to shift. The sky's azure blue transformed the green of the grass meadows. The green hues waved to the heavens. The yellow and brown of the trees and bushes turned into a fiery red. The brown of the tilled fields passed suddenly into purple. Nothing in nature had its usual hues anymore. A bird flew by and I could actually see it flap its wings lazily and it passed so slowly, slowly in front of me. The branches of the trees also moved more slowly than before, as if the wind shuffled them only heavily, yet the leaves sizzled with increased intensity. That was now the only sound I could hear. The birds did not chirp anymore. But for the sizzling, the silence was eerie.

Then I saw images appear against the greeny sky. There were strange lines and transparent forms, the contours of the castle, as if the lines were drawn in smoke. I saw figures in the sky, before the castle, men fighting, swords flicker, and blood running scarlet. I felt suddenly very cold. The blood rushed from my head. I was very scared. I didn't move, but grasped the ground with both hands. I was ready to faint. I wondered whether I was dying. Then, as suddenly as the images had come, they disappeared. They had only lasted a few breaths. The colours returned to normal and the sizzling sound stopped. Birds flew by as normal; I heard the wind blow in gusts now. I stood up and felt my heart beat like the drums of a Celtic feast in Nantes. I could indeed stand up. My knees waggled. I did not faint and my fear had subsided. Still, I was shocked to the bone, unable to comprehend what had happened.

I ran away from my hidden, lonely spot, back to the castle, back to Gormond. I found him in the courtyard. He was dragging baskets to the keep. I grabbed his surcoat like a maniac. I tore at him and shouted, 'the castle is going to be attacked! Where are the guards? Call the men!'

Gormond stayed silent just a few moments to let my shout drag into him, then he ran and cried, 'alarm! Alarm! Everybody on the ramparts! Attack! Attack!'

Gormond thought I had seen bandits or loose mercenaries around the castle. Our men ran out of the stables, the folds, the keep, the barbican tower. There had been farmers in the castle and just outside. These men also ran towards Gormond. In a nick of time, close to fifteen people were either on the lookout or standing around us. Gormond dispatched the men on the walls and had the entrance guarded, men ready to close the gate and bar it.

Only then did he turn to me and asked, 'where have you seen the attackers?'

I looked around, bewildered, put my hand to my forehead. How was I to tell Gormond I had seen a fight in the sky? I stammered, 'I don't know, I don't know, but they are there!'

Gormond had no patience with that. He ran up the stairs to the top of the walls and walked on the battlements all around the castle, looking at the fields and woods. He ran up the stone stairs to the top of the keep, leaving me standing there like a shivering idiot, still panting from the run, in the courtyard. Jacob stood next to me, quizzically watching me. Gormond came back. He took two men-at-arms and walked out of the castle. He stayed away a long time. Then he returned with the two guards, at his leisure, laughing.

‘Everybody relax and get down!’ he cried, ‘continue what you have been doing. There is nobody out there and if there were men indeed, they have gone, disappeared. Nothing is amiss! Go on!’

The guards looked at each other, then at me, then they grinned. One of the men called out, ‘been dreaming, Daniel? Nice day for a nap!’

That relaxed the atmosphere, all laughed, patted my shoulders, and went on to do what they had done before.

Dionysia stood at the door of the keep with a spear in her hands. She too turned and disappeared inside the hall.

‘You were mistaken, boy,’ Gormond said. ‘There are no men around the castle, no farmer saw somebody. It is all right. Next time you see something, make sure before you make us all afraid.’

I was dumbfounded. Had I been dreaming? Then I heard Jacob call to Gormond.

‘Master Gormond,’ he said, ‘this boy is not an idiot and he does not dream in full daylight. If he has seen or heard anything, something might indeed be wrong. A little vigilance cannot be superfluous. Maybe the guards can take somewhat more heed, as they should do anyway to prove their name.’

He asked me, ‘where did you see something, boy?’

I whispered to Jacob alone, for Gormond would not understand, ‘I saw a fight at the gates.’

Jacob was puzzled. At first a grin showed on his face, for there was nothing uncommon at the gates. Then he looked at me again, thinking my words over. Finally, his face changed into a worried look.

‘All right,’ Jacob said. ‘Master Gormond, can we not have a couple of men more at the gates for a time? Just to make sure?’

Gormond hesitated. He did not like to be ordered and Jacob had sounded insistently. He looked at Jacob, then at me. I had never played such jokes on him before. He waited. He did not reply but he called on two men that had sauntered back to the stables. He ordered them in full armour, spears and swords, to stand at the gates. He commanded the same of the men that had been sentinels at the gates before. He had doubled the guard instantly. The men grumbled, but they did as told.

Nothing special happened that day. Nothing happened the following day either. Gormond left four armed men all day at the gates. I tried to explain to Gormond that I only thought I had seen men, but wasn’t sure anymore. I apologised. Jacob, however, insisted the castle continued to be guarded by more men.

The day after the incident, in our room, while we were spelling Hebrew words, Jacob asked me where exactly I had seen the figures. I had been laughing at myself by then, thought that indeed I had stupidly dozed in and dreamt. So I answered in truth, ‘I saw a fight in the sky, a fight at our gates, in strange colours. I guess I must have been dreaming. I truly am an idiot.’

Jacob didn’t laugh. I saw he was worried. He said, ‘I learned that people in their sleep only dream of bad things that have happened to them in the past. Dreams apparently help people cope with dangerous situations they have experienced so that they might better react next time. You have not been in any fight at the gates before?’

‘No,’ I answered truthfully.

‘I have yet to meet somebody who dreams about the future,’ he replied laconically. Jacob stood up and went out. I slipped to the window and saw him argue with Gormond in the courtyard.

The four guards remained at the gate also for the day after. They stayed out of sight of anybody outside the castle, but they were there. Gormond walked around cursing, but he wore his chain-mail and he held his hand on the sword at his side. I saw spears set against the walls of the castle, in the courtyard. There was an additional guard on the walls, walking all day on the tops, wearing a crossbow. There were two other crossbows ready on the table in the guards’ hall. The men-at-arms were nervous. They also wore mail and sword. Dionysia seemed not to have noticed. She made no remarks. She went her ways as usual. The spear she had placed next to the door of the great hall, however, remained there.

Bandits attacked the castle of Le Pallet early in the morning of the fourth day. The bell of the chapel sounded, for Father Hugh had seen the men first, from a small window high up in the chapel where he had been repairing the wooden statue of Saint James. He fell off his ladder from surprise, for he saw a band of armed men running up to the village and the castle, but he drew the bell and then ran screaming like a possessed to the gates of the castle. He got into the courtyard before the bandits, but he was followed by three tall armed men who tried to take the gates by storm.

The outlaws had the nasty surprise to see their way firmly barred by four heavily armed guards who had stood hidden at the inside. Our men-at-arms did not hesitate. One brigand was pierced through and through immediately and dropped to the ground at the gates, blood pouring from his guts. The other bandits fought our guards swords to spears. At least fifteen more ragged, armed men ran towards the castle. When they reached the gates, Gormond was waiting for them, slashing with a broadsword, and half our garrison had joined him. Four farmers had also come, armed with pitchforks and flails. A savage battle ensued at the gates. The garrison of Le Pallet was outnumbered, but not more men could fight than stood in the narrow entrance. In that fight, the bandits had no advantage. There were at least twenty cutthroat men shouting at the gates of the castle, now pushing to throw the defenders in the courtyard where their numbers would outweigh. The guard on the walls, a friend of mine called John, shot a crossbow bolt in the chest of one of the attackers. I had run from my room to the guards’ hall, grabbed a crossbow and a bag of bolts, and ran up the walls. I was good with a crossbow, not good enough yet and not strong enough yet with a sword. I could cock the crossbow, though, pulling on the lever with all the strength I could gather. I stood at the embrasures, next to John.

There was pandemonium at the gates. Gormond slew two men with his broadsword, himself protected by two guards. The fighting was fierce and desperate. Swords slashed, spears thrust. John, the guard on the walls, and I, shot four crossbow bolts in four bandits. Gormond still held the gate. We put new bolts on our weapon and continued to fling our bolts in the frantic mayhem of men at the gate. The bandits also had crossbows and let bolts loose on us, at the walls, but we were protected by the crenellations. The bandits had it difficult to aim straight up. We slammed our bolts into another shoulder, another hip. Only a few of the bandits wore armour. They were

unprotected to our bolts, so the quarrels went very deep. Two of our guards at the gate were wounded, but only slightly for they wore chain mail, so they fought on. The consistent training showed its use now, for our men fought with discipline like true professionals. All of our men-at-arms were engaged directly and fiercely in the fight. They hacked and slashed and gave no pardon. The farmers stood behind but reached an occasional arm or leg with their pitchforks. We shot our bolts again. Eight bandits lay at the gates of Le Pallet already, either dead or severely wounded. Four other men drooped off with wounds.

The bandits hesitated. Our bolts continued to fall on them. They did not advance at the gates. Their determination wavered. Gormond's swords flashed and hacked on. Spears stabbed. The brigands, desperate and hungry former mercenaries, had thought to reach the inside of the castle easily, but their intentions had been thwarted. We read the frustration and hatred from their faces, then the despair. A leader shouted retreat. The bandits walked backwards. A little further they turned and ran, still in a group.

Gormond ordered the men-at-arms of the garrison on horse. He shouted to me to close the gates. While Gormond rode out with his men, I gathered the castle servants and without a hesitation the men obeyed my orders. With the other crossbow guard and the farmers, we shut the gates close and barred them. We shut the strong, wooden panels and then drew up the bridge over the moat. We remained at the lookout with our crossbows, and patrolled along the walls ready to shoot. Dionysia brought us bread and cheese to eat, then stayed with us on the lookout. The farmers had received long spears by now, and waited in the courtyard. Jacob was with them.

It was very late in the afternoon when Gormond and the garrison returned. Three of our men hung limp in the saddle, but lived. Gormond had blood all over his armour and horse. We opened the gates to let them in. Gormond stepped from his destrier. He looked as tired as a bull that had tilled all day.

'They have gone,' he said to Dionysia. 'We followed them along the Sèvre, until far from here. We killed at least five more men, for they were on foot, no horses. One of our men got hit badly by a crossbow bolt; he should be cared for. They ambushed us, too, but it did them little good. I do not think they will return; there is not enough of them left. We caught one of the guys. They are mercenaries who deserted from the army of France. They were not very good mercenaries, though. They heard Le Pallet was the richest castle this side of Nantes, a small castle, thought it little guarded and hoped to find gold with us. We checked the farms. There are no mercenaries left in our territory, but the farms have been ransacked. We have two farmers dead, and two farmers' wives raped. We have six children with us. The other farmers could hide in the forest. They are just behind us, all, and desire protection for the night. We must let them in. They can sleep in the halls. Tomorrow we will ride out again, and if all is clear, as I really believe it will be, they can return to their homes. We will continue to patrol for a while, and warn Clisson.'

Dionysia asked where the man Gormond had caught was. Gormond grinned at her questioning look and did not answer. I never saw him so angry. He truly did not appreciate his castle to be attacked but when he saw our grinning faces, he wiped the sweat of his eyes and laughed too.

The next day indeed, Le Pallet was the peaceful village as before. Father Hugh was called the hero of the day for he had sounded the alarm the first, giving the garrison the time to get ready. We never saw the bandits back. News spread of the skirmish at Le Pallet, the killing of about fifteen men by the garrison, one man lost on our side because the guard hurt by a bolt died a few days later.

We buried all the dead near the chapel, though Gormond and the farmers would have hacked the men to pieces if they had had it their way. Dionysia stopped them and had Father Hugh even say a few words at the burial. Father Hugh would rather have assisted in the hacking up business, but he complied and buried the men in Christian ground.

The farmers never knew about my vision. The men-at-arms thought I had seen a vanguard of the bandits, and since I could not well recall exactly what I had seen, everything turned to normal. Still, the men were pleased that I had given the first alarm. They were more pleased still to hear John and I had killed four men and wounded two more. It was rather the other way round. These were the first men I killed. I was fourteen years old. The men-at-arms said I would be a fine future Lord.

Only Jacob, Dionysia, father Hugh and Gormond knew I had had a premonition of something that would occur in the future. Father Hugh crossed himself and wanted to go on his knees, but Dionysia shouted him up, not to give in to such nonsense. They all, however, looked at me questioningly henceforth, sometimes with a worried and a puzzled glance. Maybe I was not like them after all.

We were still in the bimaristan of Aleppo when I came to this point of my story, sitting on cushions in the fountain-yard. When I talked about my premonition, Jadwa chatted frantically to Usama in a language I did not understand. I finished my tale, then Usama invited Jadwa to speak to me with a slow, elegant gesture of his hand.

She said in Arabic, ‘Bedu nomads who live in the desert have told me they see occasionally, when it is very hot, images that come from very far, from the direction in which they look. The images can be so deceptive that the men may think they are close to home, or to mountains, or trees, whereas in fact they are still far off. I believe however that what you experienced is not that. I hear from our mystic Sufis that sometimes they see other colours than usual. Maybe you had such an experience. What the Jew Jacob told about dreams is true, too. Men and women who have been in very dangerous situations, dream over and over again of similar events, often slightly different, but related to the same event. Maybe our mind works hard over these situations to exercise our reactions and to better cope with such events. It may be a survival instinct for us, a way of our mind to teach us to better handle dangers. Of course, when one dreams thus, the dream is always a nightmare. There are no dreams but nightmares, I would say. You may have had such nightmares too, about the battles you have been in!’

I understood well what she meant. She might have been right. I had nightmares every time I woke.

She continued, ‘you have been rather quiet at night since you started to tell us your story. When you arrived, we had to hold you down at night and you screamed while

staying unconscious. You gesticulated violently. You must have had terrible nightmares. I suppose you do not remember that now. You seemed to be particularly afraid of fire. You cried ‘fire, fire’ often, in Arabic. You also cried two words in a language I did not understand.’

She paused, then said, ‘I am surprised that in your story so far there has been but little place for your mother and father.’ She hesitated. ‘You are not telling us everything that has been important in your life. I understand. If you want to talk about these things, however, we will be happy to listen.’

I replied, ‘oh, there is much more to come.’ But I wondered, ‘how am I going to tell to an Arabian Prince and to a woman Syrian healer and to this boy, that my father was a eunuch and my mother a nun?’

Why was I talking so much anyway? These people were my enemies. They were nothing to me. What did I expect of them by talking? Some form of grace, so that they would let me go? What did I care whether they let me escape or not, let me live or not? I had given up any hope of joy in life since a long time but I discovered at Aleppo I was clinging to life nevertheless! I was not proud of myself, bewildered at my contradicting thoughts. On the other hand, this gallant, intelligent, charming Arabian Prince and the plump, gentle, funny, harmless little woman and the boy who resembled so much the lad I was in my story, these were the first people in the Holy Land that were not merely attentively and patiently listening to me, but also the only ones to seem to be genuinely interested in what I had to say, and would say. They were pleasing people, courtiers by birth. They let me talk and asked few questions. My French friends and the Franks of this country had not heard me out. The bimaristan was such a haven of peace! How could I not talk, how could I not trust? If I would be killed, then I had lived on just a little longer to dump my mind and maybe find peace within myself at long last.

If I would live, what harm could I do to Christendom – or to myself – by talking?

Usama would understand Franks better. This could only make him understand we were no better or no worse than his fellow men. I could tell no secrets about the defence of the Frank fortresses, of the Frankish fortified cities and castles, because I knew none. I had not been long enough in the Levant. I could tell nothing about the Frank tactics or the strategies of war, because the King and his Barons changed their minds all the time, at their whim and according to the situation that developed. I had been only a few months yet in the Holy Land, and already seen how irrational their decisions fell, most of the time. Yes, I could tell Usama that a large Christian army, an army more powerful than any that these regions had ever experienced, was on its way. But they must know about that, too, by now, and they did not seem overly impressed; they continued their daily life with ease and quiet. The woman could do no harm with any information I provided. The boy probably did not comprehend half of what I said. As long as I talked I lived. There was a lot more to tell and maybe in the telling I too could come to grips with my life. It was to recall and to digest and to rework my life, set new paths. If I still had a life.

I did not know at that moment that Jadwa had staged my talking. Later, she told me how important it was for the mind to lay open what troubled it. She told me the bimaristan not only healed the body but also the mind and had the conviction that the body could only be healed through healing the mind too.

The boy Yusuf was with Usama to learn. Usama was his teacher. This meant the boy had some importance. I dared not ask his full name yet. Was he family of Zengi or of Nur al-Din? The boy learned more about the Frankish mind from me than he could have otherwise. Usama was the ever-curious, the ever-interested Arabian intellectual. Usama told me he had the intention of writing a book on the Franks. He liked to talk about philosophy and religion with somebody who also had studied these subjects. He was edgy over the Qur'an though. In Usama's world, scholars with open minds, minds not clogged with undisputable fixed rules that ruled out free thought, were practically absent. So he might esteem it agreeable to hear me talking and to discuss with me.

Usama ibn Munqidh had by then already decided, with Jadwa, to free me, though I did not know that yet. Usama, Jadwa and the boy Yusuf would give me a horse and allow me returning to my destiny. They thought they were realising only Allah's decisions by freeing me, for Allah's hand hung above my head. Their beliefs in fate only, the ancestor-old beliefs of the Arab, was strong in them and continued in their allegiance to the Qur'an. But that, I did not learn until much later.

Four

Le Pallet, Nantes, Paris 1132-1138

My life followed a steady pattern of studies and physical training for six years. I learned the Hebrew and the Arabic languages with Jacob. I read and discussed texts of the Bible and of Greek, Jewish and Arabian philosophers with him. Jacob stayed at Le Pallet for periods of three months, four in winter; then he disappeared for two months on end. During the latter time I studied for a month, sometimes two, with Procaire in Nantes, learning Latin and Greek. Procaire improved on the little Latin I knew already from Dionysia and Father Hugh. Procaire had me read and learn the Evangels by heart so that I was bored to death, but I also read Plato with him, and the great classical Roman writers. It was Jacob however, who explained Plato to me and with whom I discussed Plato's theories. I read Plato's "Timaeus" in Greek with Procaire, but the "Republic" with Jacob – in Arabic. With Jacob, at Le Pallet, I learned half-days and trained with Gormond the rest of the day. In Nantes, we started very early. Procaire taught me grammar, and then forced exercises on me. He went to his occupations, returned only in the afternoon to correct my errors. Dionysia paid for my parchment, ink and quills. She gave money to Procaire for the lessons, but I was seldom the only youth to whom Procaire taught. Often there were three or four other young men present. I was free to roam in Nantes from late afternoon till nightfall. Procaire never asked where I went. I was a rather chaste young man in those years. I rarely entered inns, and certainly not those with tempting redheads at the doors. I had no friends in Nantes and no girl-friends either. My only friends were the men-at-arms of the garrison, Gormond and Jacob. I did not mingle with the farmers and their sons, or with the farmers' daughters.

I asked Jacob once why he was a Jew and not a Christian.

He replied, 'oh, I don't know. I am like Socrates, I guess. When you believe in a God and do not grasp really what God is like, then you might as well believe in the image your forefathers had of that god. Yahweh is of my tradition. The Yahweh of my family, of my fathers.' He laughed suddenly. Jacob too had a mind that jumped rapidly from one subject to the other, which was why I learned so much from him, and so many different things.

He said, 'I do have to admit that there are advantages to be Christian. For instance, the Jews and the Muslims have a very difficult issue at hand. You and I know that the Bible and the Qur'an should be interpreted at places. The Bible was written thousands of years ago, the Qur'an hundreds of years ago. They were written by humans, though heavenly inspired, and though the words of Prophets. Some phrases must have been written in the context of those far-off times, however. So we should interpret the Bible, the Evangels and the Qur'an. But when you start to interpret you know where you start but not where you will end. The Jews have priests, Rabbis, and Rabbis go to Rabbinic schools to study the Bible. After very lengthy studies, Rabbis can say what to interpret in the Bible and how. What the Rabbis say is written down, by necessity, and consulted by other Rabbis. Our Rabbis generally come to a consensus on the interpretations. One Rabbi rarely contradicts another Rabbi. The fact that we are one people helps, too. But there is quite a debate, always, over many points. Some Jews say that since consensus is in dispute, one should simply not interpret the Bible, since it is the Word of God. Refusing interpretation is indeed a simple and safe solution. In my opinion it leads to unacceptable excesses, however. We learn as we go, so we interpret. The Muslims have the same problem, but worse so. Muslims priests do not

necessarily have to go to schools to become Mullah. In truth, if you go to a Muslim village that has no Mullah and you say, ‘I am a teacher; I will teach you the Qur’an,’ nobody will stop you. Of course, the Muslims are no fools either. If you say nonsense, people will reject you as a Mullah. But if you explain the Book decently, you can be a Mullah. Also, the Muslims are all over the world, as are the Jews. Yet, they are different peoples: Arabs, Iberians, Syrians, Persians, Egyptians, Turks, and many more. All the Mullahs of these people can interpret the Qur’an differently. Moreover, many of these people have made it no custom to write. They have oral traditions. They have no tradition of writing things down and stick to what is written. So, the consensus in Islam is not to interpret God’s Word, for otherwise one would have chaos. Many even tell that the Qur’an was not really written but existed as part of Allah since always. In that, most Muslims are like some Jews. What I told you is not exactly true, but almost. The Muslims for instance also have the authority of the Caliphs in Islam, but that is another matter!’

I asked, and the Christians?’

He said, ‘aha! The Christians are a practical lot! Christians solved the issue in a very simple and splendid way. They said, ‘let’s invent an institution that states in which points one can interpret the Evangels and in which not.’ The Christians found that an excellent idea, and they also concluded that this institution should have the highest authority possible. The best authority emanates from God. So the Christians decided that this institution should be called infallible because divinely inspired. That institution, Daniel, is of course the Pope. The Pope and the Papal function were even readily available because Jesus Christ gave the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven to the Apostle Peter, and Peter had become the first Bishop of Rome! But, for sure, it is an invention of the lands, here, of the clerics of France, Germany, Italy and England. In early Christendom there were several Patriarchs who shared authority on the interpretations: the Patriarchs of Rome, of Alexandria, of Constantinople and a few more. You Christians of these lands are such practical people, always wanting to organise things! You installed the papacy, and it was a masterstroke. You have an issue of interpretation? No problem: the Pope will decide about it and he is infallible in that. If something needs to be interpreted, the Pope will decide on the issue and that is that! What the Pope declares is inspired by God himself! The evolution of culture is guaranteed and safeguarded. I have to admit it was an invention that would make any genius of the Orient leer with envy! Still, the Popes move so little in interpretation that the result quite resembles what happens with the Jews and with Islam. And radical Christians are really not unlike radical Jews and radical Muslims.’

Jacob laughed. ‘The Pope is still a man however. He cannot fail, is inspired by God, but he is a man. Some form of humanity will therefore inevitably sneak into his interpretations of the Evangels, be it slowly!’

Jacob thought me about the papacy and about the Caliphs of Islam in detail.

Meanwhile, Gormond trained me physically tougher and tougher. He taught me to ride horses, palfreys and destriers. We flattened a large field outside the castle and I jousting with Gormond. He taught me how to hold a lance horizontally and gallop at full speed the length of the field. He placed a few wooden barrels one on top of the other and he had me charge the barrels to hit them with my lance. When I could do that well, he hung rings from poles and I had to push through the rings. Then he let a long, narrow flag – just a piece of cloth – fly in the wind and had me pierce the cloth on the gallop, though its shape changed with every wind gust.

When Dionysia was in Nantes, we jousting for real. Gormond and I impetuously rode in on each other, fully armoured with heavy chain-mail, heavy shield, lance couched, and we tried to throw each other from our horses. The lances were blunted and they always had a blob of dried clay at the end, but we jousting. I fell and fell and fell, until I could dodge Gormond's lance or divert it with my shield or unsaddle him first. I fell no more. Gormond also would be unsaddled occasionally. I broke my right arm twice and twice Gormond and I – and the garrison and Jacob, who watched – had to lie to Dionysia about what had happened. Gormond and Jacob set my arm. Jacob brought sweet balms for my numerous bruises, which I had almost constantly somewhere on my body.

I begged Dionysia to let me take part in the jousting games of the Duke, at Nantes, but however much I insisted she always resolutely refused. She threatened to ban me out of the castle if I jousting. It was the one thing she was most adamant about. For the rest, she let me do as I pleased and I was not a difficult youth – I believe.

Jacob and Procaire introduced me through Plato's "Timaeus" and the "Republic" to the concepts of Plato's "ideas". I eagerly adopted this theory because it appealed to my imagination of and aspirations for a perfect world. Because of Plato I henceforth looked at everyday reality from a distance, as if the true me were only experiencing events alien to the real me, which was my mind's me.

Plato also believed in two levels of reality. The world, as we experience it, was a world of change and of appearances only, as our senses perceived it in everyday life, and as our senses were constantly deceived. Plato wrote that there existed a realm above our experiences. This second world was unchanging, constituted of patterns, forms or ideas, which did not just exist in our mind but which also had a real existence outside our mind, in this world. The objects we saw in daily life were but the reflections of these forms or ideas. The unchanging forms were real, beyond humans, and should truly be the subject of the philosopher's study.

For instance: we see and touch a bed. We can see and touch many different beds. The bed was an object of our daily life and this bed was real. But there existed also the idea of a bed. All beds resemble each other more or less in their physical forms, in their features and in their use. In our mind we do not just handle one image of a bed, but the general idea or category of a bed. Plato argued that the idea "bed" also truly existed.

The concept of the "idea" existed not only for objects of our real life, but also for emotions and for concepts such as "beauty". Plato seemed to write that we could have knowledge of these universal concepts, forms, ideas, in our minds and that these universal concepts, forms, ideas, prevailed in a realm different from our own. With the concept of "ideas," which we use in our mind, we obtained a scanty glimpse of the wonderful second world.

I liked this theory very much. It opened a magical, mystical world of thoughts to me, a world that fascinated and attracted me. I had been desperately trying to understand the essence of my own me, of my mind, which had to be so different from nature and from man-made objects. I had tried to understand what God was. I thought I came

closer to understanding God as part, or being this superior realm of “ideas”. The second world was the world of God, of which we could understand something by the knowledge of the “ideas” in our mind. I could understand somewhat more what God truly could be through Plato’s theory, and God therefore became familiar and nearer to me.

The “ideas” might not be real however, argued Jacob. Plato might be wrong! There was another school of thought, which he preferred, and which said that there was no such a thing as ‘ideas’ in another realm. What are called “ideas” were only the names or labels we gave to generalisations, to abstractions, even if those were universal. Our mind actually could not know “ideas” from a second world, outside our daily experience. This theory denied the existence of Plato’s concept of the “ideas”. And, Jacob argued, there were still other theories on this subject. A third theory accepted the existence in our mind of the universal concepts, but we could not know and did not know whether these universals had any foundation outside our mind. There was also no link between the ideas in our mind and the real objects of our daily life.

I liked Plato’s theory most among these, because it was easy and it appealed to my then rather lonely, introvert personality, for which study was one of its most important occupations. I was extremely eager to learn in those times! We, humans, could make abstract representations of species such as men or cows, of man-made things such as beds, and so on, and these abstractions had a corresponding form or “idea” in a world we could not perceive, but could be perceived by God. I was never alone and lonely; the second world was always around me.

The world we saw and touched, I wondered, would only be the shadow of the world of “ideas”. I looked at the world, and I looked at what I did, with entirely different eyes, now. I found I was very different from the people around me who did not know the existence of the “ideas”.

From then on I surmised I was not like other people, and this separation between me and my fellow-men determined my life. Henceforth I always looked at what happened to me as if it was happening to another me, allowing me – sometimes dangerously – to be more reckless and single-minded in decisions and acts.

I suppose I became conscious of my own personal self then, as all youths at that age; but I got only caught of myself by reflecting on Plato’s ideas. The attraction of becoming a scholar and not a knight was also strong in me at that moment. But I was trained by Gormond to stay with my feet firmly on the ground, and Dionysia taught me to touch and love the earth and the produce of nature. But the ‘ideas’ whirled in my mind.

‘No, no, no, three times no!’ Jacob cried angrily. ‘That cannot be! Only what we see, touch or perceive otherwise with our senses, is real. The abstract universal is only the result of our deceiving thoughts. It does not exist somewhere. The universal concepts are the product merely of our considerations. The universal concept does not belong to the thing in itself, it is nothing more than the outcome of our speculation. It does not exist somewhere also as such a thing as an “idea”! It is dangerous for the mind to live in the mind only. It is dangerous to build an imaginative world whereas reality beckons. It is dangerous to construct a marvellous mind’s world and invent reasons

for the things that happen to you, where only chance rules. Take the world as it is, boy!’

So, we read a book called the “Isagogê,” the Introduction into these concepts, of a Greek philosopher of the early centuries called Porphyry. I learned logic out of this book and of course we discussed how qualities were attributed to objects. We read Porphyry’s “Introduction to the Categories”. It was a good thing that Dionysia and Procaire did not know we read Porphyry, for Porphyry was an opposer of Christianity. Jacob told me he could not find the book or books in which Porphyry had attacked Christianity, a statement I only believed half for Jacob seemed to be able to find any book of any ancient writer. I suppose he did not want to confuse me in my faith.

At the end of my studies in Latin, Procaire had me read Boethius in Latin. I had to suppress my smiles then, for Jacob had me read Boethius in Arabic years before. Boethius’ book had seemed to comfort me in my feelings about the “ideas,” much to the distress of Jacob. Boethius was a Christian philosopher, who had lived probably a few centuries after Porphyry. Boethius commented on Porphyry. Porphyry asked whether the ideas, named “categories” or “species,” existed in reality or were merely products of our thinking. This was the very subject I had been studying with Jacob. Then Boethius asked whether the ideas, as things separate from the mind, were corporeal things or incorporeal things (which existed only in our mind), and finally whether the ‘ideas’ existed outside personal experience or whether they were realised by this experience. The interesting matter was that neither Porphyry nor Boethius gave an adequate answer, so Jacob and I could hotly debate. Nevertheless, Boethius seemed to say that the generalisations both existed as real and in our mind, that they were abstractions and thus incorporeal and that they existed outside our personal experiences. That was also my opinion. But it was not the opinion of Jacob.

At the end of our discussions, Jacob told me my father was one of the very principal scholars of Christendom who tackled these theories and their consequences. My father had been studying this theme in Paris and elsewhere ardently. In his opinion, the universal concepts, the “ideas,” did not exist in real nature and that they were merely abstractions of our mind, invented or discovered by us, by the reasoning of our mind. My father tried to understand how people abstracted ideas out of perceived things, how we came to find common elements in things so different as different sorts of beds, whereas in plain reality only the individual bed exists. My father had joined in this opinion his master with whom he had studied, Roscelin de Compiègne. Jacob agreed with my father and admired him very much.

I was angry with Jacob for a while. He had deceived me! He had told me about the theories on the “ideas”, got me interested, made me read about them, had let me become enthusiastic about them, only to lead me to my father. Jacob had manipulated me! He claimed the contrary, of course, but I was nevertheless disappointed. I felt cheated being led into my father’s world in this devious way. I forgave Jacob rapidly, especially after he told me over and over again he had only started to talk about these theories because they were indeed the most discussed themes of the moment in religion and philosophy. I had another link to Jacob however, from that moment on. I approached Gormond more, again. I developed a tense comradeship with Gormond,

the simple warrior, who was always straight. I never had to wonder of Gormond what might be hidden behind his words.

Jacob explained to me that philosophy was a dangerous practice. Philosophy should have been the quest for wisdom, but discussing philosophical items could make people very angry, as all discussions could. When a philosopher had an opinion that differed from someone else's opinion, though discussions were only words and conjectures and talks, minds could get over-excited and people could become aggressive. When these people were the great of the earth, the situation could become very dangerous indeed.

Jacob told me to be very careful when I professed openly my opinions on "ideas". Jacob, the Jew, had listened to my father and he had been convinced that my father was right. But he asked me not to tell anywhere, to nobody, what we had argued about. I laughed at Jacob then, asking him how in the world talk of something so innocent as "ideas" could make people angry.

Jacob gave me an example and by that example I understood fully why he had led me surreptitiously into the theory of universals. He indeed wanted me to know what my father represented in the world.

Jacob told me that Roscelin of Compiègne had been attacked in his beliefs by Anselm of Canterbury, and my father by William of Champeaux. My father had been severely criticised by Christian theologians because he had consistently applied his view of the "ideas" to the concept of the Trinity.

My father had argued that concepts such as the Trinity were either only abstractions of our minds, or that as real things they existed only as individual things. In this last case the Trinity should in reality be three separate, individual entities – which meant three Gods. I was suspicious about what Jacob said then, for Jacob was a Jew, recognising only one God in only one nature of God. My father had said that there was either one God, and the Trinity then was only three characteristics, qualities, added to the Godhead, or there were three separate Gods.

What my father had argued was heresy to Catholic Faith, of course. He had been forced by a Synod of the Pope and his Bishops to withdraw his arguments on punishment of excommunication, which would have ended his career as a scholar. The book he had written on this subject had been burned publicly.

This was the first time I heard of something my father had done. I lived at Le Pallet, a small and unimportant castle of Brittany, whereas my father talked to Bishops and to the Pope! As Jacob told me more about the work of my father, I began to consider my father a formidable, extremely intelligent man whose awesome intellect I would never be able to equal, and thus a man to be admired.

Yet, I thought I hated my father. I hated him already because he had abandoned me at Le Pallet. He came to see me so few times – not anymore those last years – and now I hated him more because he was so much more intelligent than I could ever aspire to be. Or did I admire and love him? Procaire had droned enough of the Christian dogmas endlessly into my head for me to realize how dangerous it was to put these into question. Who was my father to have done just that? Was my father silly or powerful enough to challenge the Catholic Church? Who was my father really?

I would soon have my questions answered.

While I told the story of my youth, Usama and Jadwa exchanged astonished glances. They chatted energetically and even Yusuf asked more questions to them than usual, still in the language I did not understand. The atmosphere relaxed, but tensed when I told about my vision. Yusuf opened large eyes and stayed quiet then. He asked particularly many questions when I spoke about the theory of “ideas”. My father had been right, Usama said, and Jadwa nodded, for the Prophet had written in the Qur’an time and time again that Allah was one and there was only Allah. There were no three Gods, only Allah, so my father had found the right solution for the “ideas”. How wise my father was, exclaimed both Usama and Jadwa.

‘God is one,’ Jadwa continued to say. ‘God has all powers, which you Christians call the Father, Son and Spirit, in himself. He is absolutely one. God has no attributes.’ I answered, ‘that is in contradiction however to some passages of the Qur’an, those that speak of God’s power and knowledge.’

‘Yes,’ Jadwa said, reddening. ‘We should understand the Qur’an also metaphorically in those passages, however.’

‘That also is Mu’tazilah thought,’ I interjected. ‘It is a problem of attributes. If we assign attributes to God such as power, life and reason and call these Father, Christ and Spirit, then God has some form of plurality. I believe, like the Mu’tazilah, that God is so much unknowable, that when we speak of attributes we only speak of human notions which do not apply to God. An attribute such as power or justice is only thus called because we perceive the power and the justice. God is the source of these human experiences, but that does not mean that God has those same attributes or qualities. We cannot know God.’

‘Yes, that too is close to Mu’tazilah thought,’ Jadwa said, ‘but new to me. Yet, you deny God attributes, telling he is One, and so does the Qur’an’.

‘Not really,’ I answered. ‘God can have power, reason and life, but in a form we cannot know.’

‘How do you know about the Mu’tazilah?’ Usama wondered.

I answered, ‘later! Later. I will explain. I met Arabian thinkers in France.’

‘That cannot be,’ Usama exclaimed.

‘Oh, but I did,’ I said. ‘I will explain later.’

‘I bet your father brought you to Arabian thinkers. You had a wise father, a true believer!’ Usama repeated.

My father could be a real believer, a follower of Islam, though a Christian. Maybe, they argued, my father had read the Qur’an and found the solution to the issue of the Trinity through the Qur’an.

I laughed inwardly when they found my father such a wise man. I was rather of the contrary opinion. My father was certainly extremely intelligent, but when I learned to know him better I found him a true bastard, an arrogant man who proceeded by vanity and who refused to comprehend that not everybody was abjectly kneeling before him in admiration. Of course, he had learned to be more careful with age, but the calamities that had happened to him were only what he had deserved. I might have let Usama and Jadwa in their illusions about my father and about me. The old bitterness that craved inside me about my father made me tell them who my father really was, with the little good and the grave bad.

Before that however, I also wanted to hear something from Usama. I did not know who ruled east of the Frankish counties and how the rulers behaved towards each other.

I asked Usama, ‘Lord, could you please tell me who rules these lands and why? I am very much confused by the Saracens. I know that many peoples live here, but I do not know exactly who lives where. How have they come here? Who is master of these lands? To me, a Frank who has not been long in these lands, I know only of Saracens, but I am sure there are many more peoples here than Saracens.’

Usama stroke at the folds of his white burnous and glanced at Jadwa and Yusuf. He hesitated, and then replied, ‘we might talk about these matters later, Daniel. We would like to hear about your father and what happened to you still in France, and how you arrived here.’

The occasion to hear from Usama about the lands of Syria and its neighbours came soon. I was a host then in Usama’s house in Aleppo for some time. One day, Usama called me to his main room. He showed me a bundle of clothes lying on a low table. He said, ‘here you have Arabian clothes. There is a burnous and boots, armour and helmet, a sword and dagger. Put that on. We are riding out. There is a horse for you waiting at the stables.’

I did not question Usama’s wisdom to give me weapons. So I put on the burnous as an undercoat, the short chain-mail over it and a light surcoat of tanned leather on which a citation in Arabic letters from the Qur’an were forced into the grey-brown leather. I found a belt from which hung a curved sword with a bejewelled hilt and a fine, long dagger. I had a round, pointed helmet with silver Arabic letters gracefully intertwined and hammered into the steel on the sides. The boots were soft and light, and fitted me well. I had grown a small black beard in the bimaristan, which Jadwa had clipped but left on my face, so I could easily pass for a Saracen. When I was dressed I looked like an Amir and followed Usama. We went out of the house to the adjacent stables and we mounted Arabian mottled palfreys, nervous but magnificent animals. Two guards followed us and they drew a pack-horse with them, loaded with bags. We rode out to the Nosairi Mountains. We stayed away for five days on that ride, our first in the environs of Aleppo. There was enough food in the bags for the four of us, so we did not stop at any village, though Usama bought fruit from farmers we occasionally met. In the evening of the first day already, Usama spoke to me about his land, Syria, as I had asked. What he said astonished me very much.

We squatted at a campfire in the evening, hidden behind boulders, above a deserted wadi. The guards camped at quite a distance further, one already sleeping, the other awake and looking down at the wide valley, scrutinising for intruders. We were tired. We had let our horses walk slowly, but steadily, and had thus covered much ground. Usama never allowed us to follow the valleys below, where the going was easy. He avoided caravans and any armed man he could spot. We always advanced on the high ground, on sometimes perilous paths, where our horses slid on pebbles and sand, where we had to seek our way among rocks and rare trees and bushes, in the howling wind. Usama travelled like a scouting party in enemy territory. I would do the same, later, as he taught me: never follow the low ground.

‘We are better on our own,’ he said, seemingly owing an explanation. ‘We do not have to tell that way at each encounter who we are and where we came from or what we are doing here.’

I wondered whether he had led us in the hills to kill me cool-headedly somewhere, so that no fuss would be made about me in Aleppo, the weapons he had given me merely an appeasing lure. The guards had bows and rode behind us. I expected a barbed arrow in my spine any moment, but our ride had been pleasant enough. The lands were beautiful and wild.

There were four Frankish Counties in these lands, Usama began. These were independent lands with a ruler each, yet all answering in feudal allegiance to the King of Jerusalem in times of war. The Frankish territories stretched along the Sea, close to the ports they needed for subsistence. In the north lay the Principality of Antioch, the city of Antioch its capital and Saint Simeon its harbour, a County ruled by Raymond de Poitiers. There had been a County of Edessa to the north-east of Antioch, but practically all the cities there, including the capital Edessa, had been captured recently by a Turkish army led by Nur al-Din Mahmud. The County of Edessa, which was the only Frankish County to reach far inland in Syria, did not exist anymore but for a few isolated fortresses. Its ruler was Count Jocelin II de Courtenay, who was now only Count in name. South of Antioch lay the County of Tripoli, with the cities of Tripoli and Beirut as its most important harbours. These were the lands west of the Orontes River. Their ruler was Count Raymond II of Tripoli.

South of this County of Tripoli stretched the Kingdom of Jerusalem and the port towns of Tyre, Acre, and even Jaffa. Jaffa was not as an important town as Tyre and Acre were, but many pilgrims from Christendom arrived there and went on pilgrimage from Jaffa to Jerusalem. Baudouin III was King of Jerusalem. These four lands, now three since Edessa had been captured by Muslims, were ruled by Franks.

North of Antioch lay other Christian lands, but no Frankish territories. Along the coast, way up to Constantinople, were lands still controlled by the Byzantine Emperor Manuel Comnenus. But the southernmost of those lands, just north of Antioch, and mostly the mountainous areas of the eastern Taurus Mountain Range, a land called Cilicia, was Armenian territory. The Armenians were a people who had suffered much from invasions in their own land, east of Persia. A part of the Armenians had migrated to the Sea and settled in these western territories. They had established a precarious Kingdom there. Their current Prince of Armenia was called Thoros II.

The Christians thus held the Four Frank Counties, New Armenia in Cilicia, and the vast lands along the Sea of the Emperor of Constantinople.

Facing the East-Roman Emperor’s territories in Asia, to the north of Aleppo, inland, lay the Seljuk Sultan’s lands of Qoniya, a vast territory from Ancyra to below the city of Qoniya itself, almost up to Mamistra and Marash. The Seljuks were Turkish rulers and they had won their fief over Constantinople.

To their east, towards the Euxine, ruled the Turkish Danishmendit Amirs, who owed liege to the Seljuk Sultans of Persia and were Seljuks themselves. Persia was the large territory that stretched as far as India and the Caspian Sea.

Between Persia and the Danishmendit Amirates spread the smaller lands of the Ortoqid Amirs. The most important Ortoqid Amir was Qara Arslan, the Amir of Kharput and Hisn Kaifa.

Facing Antioch and Tripoli, inland, lay Syria, the Land of Syr. Syria was part of the territories belonging to the Seljuk Sultan of Persia, but ruled by Turkish Atabegs or governors, currently Nur al-Din, and before him his father Zengi. Syria had been divided in two parts. Zengi had ruled vast territories from Aleppo to Mosul. At Zengi's death, his two sons had each taken half: Nur al-Din Mahmud had received the western lands around Aleppo; his brother Saif al-Din Ghazi ruled the eastern region around Mosul.

South of them, facing the Kingdom of Jerusalem, was the land of the Burid Sultan of Damascus. East of that, but beyond the Euphrates River, laid a domain ruled by the Abbasid Caliphs of Baghdad.

The Caliph was the successor of the Prophet, the upper leader of all Muslim lands, but his rule was only in name and by ancient law, more religious than worldly.

'The current Caliph of Baghdad,' told Usama, 'is the Arab Abbasid Moqtafi. It is always unsure who the real master of Persia is, the Caliph of Baghdad or the Seljuk Sultan, who is currently Mas'ud ibn Muhammed. I suppose it is now more the Sultan than the Caliph, but in the times of one of the predecessors of Moqtafi, in the times of the Caliph Mustarshid, it was the Caliph who held more power. Mustarshid was assassinated by the Isma'ilis after he had been defeated by Sultan Mas'ud. So now the Sultan is more powerful than the Caliph in Persia.

Finally, south of Jerusalem started the Fatimid Caliphate of Egypt. There were two Caliphs of Islam because at the Prophet's death two factions arose, of which the Caliph of Baghdad and the Caliph of Cairo were the successors.

When the Prophet died, he appointed Abu Bakr as his successor at the head of the armies. The successor of Abu Bakr was Uthman, but Uthman ruled not as a wise leader but as a Malik, as a king. So Uthman got killed and Ali took control. Ali ibn Abi Talib was the Prophet's closest male relative, his cousin, but too young to take command when the Prophet died. Ali was not recognised by everybody as Caliph. One of Ali's challengers was Mu'awiyya. Mu'awiyya managed to establish the Umayyad dynasty that conquered the world. The Shi'at Ali, the party of Ali, were disappointed when after the Umayyad dynasty the Abbasids took power. The Abbasids, which still ruled Baghdad as Caliph, descended from Abbas ibn Abd al-Mutallib, not from Ali. Therefore, the Shi'at Ali split from the other Muslims, the Sunni Muslims, and they continued for instance in the Fatimid dynasty of Egypt. The Syrians therefore were Sunnites, who followed the ancient Arabian tradition of appointing the best rulers. But Egypt was Shi'ite as its rulers claimed descentance from Ali.

The puzzling thing about this situation, said Usama, was that everybody disliked everybody. All these rulers fought each other at one time, only to revert to frail, temporary alliances at other times.

The Greek Christian Byzantines of the Emperor fought the Armenians because the Armenians had occupied the southern territories of the Empire, Cilicia, north-west of the Principality of Antioch. The Armenians fought Antioch because they would have liked to expand south, out of Byzantine territory. Yet, when the Byzantines wanted to recuperate Cilicia and Antioch, Armenians and Franks allied against the Byzantines because also the Franks feared Byzantine intrusion.

The Byzantines had owned all of Anatolia once, the vast lands of Qoniya, as well as the Frank territories, before the Arabs and later the Turks grabbed the lands from them. The Byzantine Emperors therefore still believed the Frank lords should be their vassals and they would miss no occasion to have them swear allegiance to him. A Byzantine army in the Holy Lands therefore was always a boon and a terror for the Franks for the Byzantines might help the Franks fight the Turks, as well as try to wring the Frank Counties back under Byzantine yoke. A Frank lord who swore allegiance to the Byzantines might continue to rule his land, as well as see his land taken away and given to a Byzantine courtier. So the Franks feared such oaths as much as a terrible sickness.

Raymond of Poitiers in Antioch detested Jocelin, Count of Edessa. Tripoli had refused to help the King of Jerusalem in the past. The King of Jerusalem was at war with the Fatimid Muslims of Egypt mainly because the Egyptians pillaged the pilgrims that travelled from Jaffa to Jerusalem out of their closest fortified city, Ascalon. But the Franks of Jerusalem liked nothing better than occasionally to pillage the pilgrims themselves.

The Seljuk Sultans of Qoniya, of the interior of the vast lands east of the Byzantine Empire along the coasts of the Sea in Anatolia, fought from out of their capital Qoniya against the Turkish Danishmendit Amirs of Cappadocia based at their capital of Siwas.

An Arabian Sultan ruled over Damascus, but power was in the hands of a chief of war, a Mamluk Turk called Mu'in al-Din Unur. Mamluk meant "slave" and Unur indeed had come to Damascus as a slave child-warrior.

The Turkish leaders, which the Arabs had used to win their wars, were not the mercenary slaves anymore of the Arabs, but rather their masters. Persia and Anatolia and Syria were thus ruled by Turks. The Seljuks of Qoniya and Persia were Turks. The Turkish tribes originally lived beyond the Caspian Sea in the vast open countries there, to the east and north, very far away, but they had gradually entered Persia and conquered it. These were the Seljuk Turks. The Seljuks attacked Persia from out of Khurasan. Western Persia was now ruled by Sultan Mas'ud ibn Muhammed and southern Persia by Mehmed. Mas'ud even controlled the Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad. Damascus was also Turkish, seized by the Burid Turk Toghtekin, but now ruled by the war leader Mu'in al-Din Unur.

Zengi, the Turkish war leader who ruled Syria with Aleppo and Mosul as governor of the Seljuks, wanted to expand and conquer weaker Damascus, and so did his son Nur al-Din. So Damascus fought Aleppo. Aleppo of course also fought the Ortoqid Amirs at its south-east border, and the Seljuks of Qoniya occasionally fought the Seljuk Danishmendit Amirs. And of course, the Shi'ite Fatimids of Egypt fought the Sunni Turkish Muslims of Damascus and Syria together.

Indeed, everybody fought everybody, said Usama: Christians against Christians, Sunni Muslims against Sunni Muslims, Shi'ite Muslims against Sunni Muslims, Christian Franks against Christian Armenians, Christian Franks and Christian Armenians distrusted Greek Orthodox Byzantines, and Christians fought Muslims.

Turkish Muslims fought Arabian Muslims, and so on and on. What the Franks called Saracens were in fact mostly Turkish leaders and very few Arabs.

I was amazed. I had thought to arrive in a pretty simple confrontation of Christian Franks to Muslim Saracens. Instead of that, the situation was so complex and mind-dazzling here that I had the feeling of having stuck my head in a hornets' nest of perpetual battles.

There were not just skirmishes, battles and wars between the peoples, told Usama. Alliances were forged and undone, according to the dire politics of the moment. When Damascus was attacked by the Syrian Turks such as by Nur al-Din or by Zengi before him, Damascus even allied with the Kingdom of Jerusalem and armies of Muslim Damascus and Christian Jerusalem combined. When the Franks attacked Damascus, at times, Damascus allied with the Syrian Turks. And when Constantinople was afraid of the Frank Christians, the Emperor secretly sided with the Muslim Sultan of Qoniya.

It was a diplomat's paradise, in which a skilful Arabian nobleman could make a fortune, grinned Usama. The leader Usama liked most – I guessed because he was the most generous – was Mu'in al-Din Unur of Damascus. Usama considered Unur his master and served him. Unur disliked Nur al-Din of Aleppo and feared him, for the Zengid was the greatest danger for Damascus. If Nur al-Din took Damascus, an enormous territory with unlimited resources of men would face the divided Frankish Counties, as well as Shi'ite Egypt.

'When you go back to the Franks, tell them that,' whispered Usama. 'Tell that especially to Raymond de Poitiers at Antioch: he is the wisest man among the Franks, for Baudouin III, King of Jerusalem, is still young and impetuous.'

I was utterly surprised by Usama's mission for me. He wanted me alive to tell Raymond of Poitiers that the Franks should never attack Damascus but side with Unur against the common danger, Nur al-Din. Unur desperately needed the Franks as allies and Usama was his instrument; I would be Usama's instrument. Usama could not bring that message himself, for he was an Arab and Frankish territory was dangerous for Arabs. Moreover, the message had to remain secret for Aleppo. I had nothing to fear from Usama. Usama would use me as his messenger. The Arab of Shaizar had waited to tell me this until we were alone. Jadwa was a Syrian Turk of Aleppo, maybe connected to Nur al-Din's family, hence not trustworthy. Who was Yusuf?

I asked Usama, softly enough so that the guards could not hear us.

'Yusuf is the son of a Kurdish chief, a war leader of Zengi, an Amir called Najm al-Din Aiyub, governor of the town of Tekrit,' Usama explained, and he whispered even more than before as if the rocks had ears. 'Yusuf's father; Najm al-Din Aiyub, won ever-lasting gratitude from Zengi and hence from Zengi's son Nur al-Din. Zengi mixed in the succession wars for the throne of Seljuk Persia after the death of the Seljuk Sultan Mahmud ibn Muhammed. Zengi sided with Mas'ud, the deceased Mahmud's brother. He attacked the Caliph of Baghdad, Mustarshid, who had sided with Seljuk-Shah, another brother of Mahmud. Zengi was totally defeated near Tekrit. He had to flee for his life. Najm al-Din Aiyub brought Zengi safely to the other side of the River Tigris, out of Mustarshid's hands. Aiyub thus saved Zengi's life and honour. Leaders like Zengi trust nobody and betray everybody, so a generous deed

like the one of Aiyub surprised him and touched him profoundly. Neither Zengi nor Nur al-Din ever forgot that generous act. They trusted Aiyub's family ever since. Yusuf will have Nur al-Din's ear at any moment.'

Usama paused. 'That was the past. For now, Yusuf's father is not so important, though. His uncle is. Yusuf is the nephew of Asad al-Din Shirkuh. Shirkuh is the main war leader of Nur al-Din. Yusuf's full name is Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Aiyub. He is the preferred nephew of Shirkuh and may one day follow up on him as leader of Nur al-Din's army.

Yusuf's family comes from Armenia, from Dovin, west of the lake of Van. Shadi, the father of Aiyub and Shirkuh came from there to offer his services to Zengi. He was therefore not a Turk but a Kurd, and possibly even more a savage warrior than the Turks. So, he sided and served Zengi.

Yusuf's father asked me to teach his son the ways of the Franks, because I have travelled with Unur in the Frankish lands. I visited many towns of the Franks with Mu'in al-Din Unur: Jerusalem and Nablus, Caïffa, Saint-Jean-d'Acre, Tibériade, and other. I know the Franks. I even liked the Franks that were born in these lands, even though they are so different from us. Especially the Templar Knights were helpful. But I disliked the Franks that had only just arrived in these lands. Those Franks I found arrogant, filled with undifferentiated hatred towards all Muslims. You are the first exception to them. I thought you could tell us much about those Franks, for what the Franks are here is what they are in the country you came from. I thought you could tell us who the Franks really were, and how they felt and reacted, what drove them to come here. Aiyub and Shirkuh are wise men, intelligent, sly, great warriors, and very courageous. So, I believe will be Salah al-Din Yusuf. Aiyub and Shirkuh will attack whatever ruler is weak and expand the territory of Nur al-Din. They know men; they discern the valour of a man at first sight. Both have seen a possible successor in Yusuf, not in their other sons and nephews. But they serve Aleppo and I serve Damascus. Tell that too to Raymond of Poitiers and to Baudouin!'

I finally understood why Usama wanted to reconnoitre the territories between Aleppo and Antioch and the territories of the River Orontes, the lands and passes between Aleppo and Damascus. These lands were battle fields. Knowledge of the wadis, the mountain passes, the water points, the desert regions, the villages, the high grounds with difficult paths, the hill ranges, all these were useful knowledge in war. Usama had brought me to learn these lands too, to help Damascus.

I laughed at myself now, for my comrades-in-arms had tried to explain to me who we fought and where. They thought we fought the Saracens, Christians against Muslims. Yet, the situation in the Holy Land and in Syria was infinitely more complex than simply good Christians fighting bad Muslims. Religion was even not the most important factor in these wars; power over land was.

We discussed these matters the following days, bringing our knowledge, information and thoughts together. An astonishing picture emerged to me, and also to Usama as well, for he had never reflected so profoundly and so clearly as with me on these subjects.

The people that lived in these regions of the Holy Land, Syria and the Arabian territories, were mostly farmers and nomads. The farmers were poor Jews, poor

Syrians and poor Arabs, who had lived here forever. The nomads were Jewish tribes and Bedu tribes. The Bedu were Muslims but Usama granted that many of these peoples still favoured their old Gods and Fate. But they were Muslims when anybody asked for their religion. So the Bedu, Syrians and Arabs were Muslims. In the cities Jews, Muslims and Syriac Christians lived peacefully together, maybe with a few Venetian, Pisan and Genoese traders. The Syriac Christians were the people of Syria and beyond that had been converted in the first centuries by the Apostles and their Bishops. There were Armenian Christians, Jacobites and Nestorian Christians. Not only the Christians had sects. There was a sect of Muslims called the Isma'ilis. The Isma'ilis had bought and captured eagle-nest fortresses in the mountains of the Orontes River. They were fiercely independent and would side as well with Christian as with Muslim warriors, depending who fought them.

These all were the indigenous peoples. None of these ruled the land. Rulers were the men that had intruded on these lands. Rulers were the Christian Franks, the Turkish war leaders such as the Seljuks and their governors, and a few Arabian rulers of long. Yet, of all the once powerful Arabs of Medina and Mecca only the Fatimids of Egypt and the Abbasid Caliphs of Baghdad remained and Usama told me the true rulers of those lands were not the Sultans but their powerful Vizirs, leaders of the army, mostly Turks.

Franks and Turks ruled the Holy Land, Syria, Damascus, Persia and Egypt. None of these had any legitimate claim on the land, except the legitimacy of the force of power. The Christian Franks and the Turks therefore ruled out of fortified cities and out of strings of castles, some terribly formidable. Franks, Turks, Kurds and even the remaining Arabian rulers, were all conquerors and dominators. The wars that were being fought were wars for power and domination over land. The wars had nothing to do with religion, religion being only the subterfuge needed for a war. The wars were being fought out of castles. Outside their fortresses, all might have their throats slit in the night by local Jews, Christians or Bedu.

There was one difference though between the Franks and the Turks.

The Turkish rulers could muster the local people in great numbers because most of them were Muslims – if only in name. The Franks could not really count on the Armenian Christians, on the Jacobite and Nestorian Christians and not on the Greek Christians of Constantinople, who all very much distrusted the Catholic Franks and their authoritarian Pope of Rome. The Venetians, Pisans and Genoese hated each other's guts and would like nothing better than to eliminate each other from the lucrative trade with the Orient. The Franks therefore would be weak in the end unless much more Franks arrived and unless these people also became farmers and merchants to settle in the country. There was little chance that this would happen. Usama had heard of a large approaching Christian army, but he was fairly certain that this army would not be numerous when it came to Syria, would only consist of knights, and would be much diminished from crossing the Sultan of Qoniya's lands. We speculated on who would win in the end, and Usama was certain the Franks could at best maintain themselves in the coastal cities, and he thought that even these cities would ever fall. The key to victory was the multitude, who could gather the largest army, so the Franks would always be weaker. The only possible way for the Christian Franks to hold out was to have smaller, independent, divided inland kingdoms facing

them and not to engage all together in one decisive battle. Divided Muslims were also the only way for Damascus to survive, as well as the small independent enclaves as the Shaizar. Usama and I had the same interests.

We digested the information and continued our journey pleasantly. We noted the particularities of the terrain together then, whispering like conspirators. Usama relaxed and when an Arabian Prince is relaxed, he hunts.

I soon learned that it was impossible to imagine an Arabian nobleman without hunting. I knew how to set snares and traps the French way. Gormond had taught me that when I was a boy. I knew how to use an arrow against a roe and a spear against a boar. Arabian hunting was entirely different, of course. I had heard of falcon hunting in France but I had never seen one. When Usama heard what I knew of hunting, he exploded in laughter. He was surprised at how little I knew. Then he taught me proudly and patiently how a true Arab hunted. Usama taught me to hunt the Arabian way, not only on this first trip but also afterwards.

When he explained me about the hunting birds of all kinds and ages, I was lost. Usama passionately expounded on all the joys and pitfalls of hunting in Syria. Usama had goshawks, sparrow hawks, sakers and peregrines. He used passagers, haggards, tiercels and eventually kestrels and luzzayqs. When we were back at Aleppo, we hunted partridges, francolin, waterfowl, quails, arqala, salamander-geese, cranes and storks. Usama taught me to hunt with blow-pipes, with which one could blow small but hard balls to stun birds. He had austringers in his service for he had no time to raise and train the birds himself, but he cherished his preferred hawks and fed those by his own hands. He bathed his birds lovingly in a large basin of water and combed their feathers.

We also hunted on horseback with bow and arrow. Usama always had a few zaghariya hounds following us. The dogs ran happily next to our horses but never left us. We hunted gazelles in the desert and in the mountains, wild boars in the marshes and roe deer and onagers. The first time Usama used cheetahs on a hunt I rather kept my hand nervously on my dagger, for I had little confidence in the otherwise dangerous animals. Yet, the lean cheetahs proved to be as loyal hunters as the dogs. I also learned to ride not only horses but the Mahri camels, preferred by Usama. Camels are interesting animals, but I will exchange any number of camels for a horse!

Usama showed me my first lion and my first leopard. He pointed at caracals, the desert lynxes, which resembled the cheetahs a little. We saw wild cheetahs. We hunted rams, goats and fawns. The nicest hunt was on gazelles though, the hunting of the white rim gazelles of the Syrian deserts and the hunting of Idmi gazelles, brown-coated animals with black lines on their flanks and which had sad, black eyes.

It was remarkable how full of animals the deserts and the apparently barren mountains of Syria were, once one knew how to spot and feel the presence of animals. Usama could feel the presence of a lion or a leopard before we saw one. With time I too learned to sense a quiver in the air, the low sound of a distant roar vibrating, and the silence of other animals that marked the presence of these powerful beasts nearby.

The trees were full of skittish squirrels; in the mountain passes hid brown foxes, agile mountain-goats and the occasional wolf. Often, when we hunted alone and slept in the open, rode without a pack-horse, we ate what we found. We had delicious melons and pomegranates. We fried eggs on a brazier. We spiced our fowl with orach leaves, a kind of mountain spinach that was to be found everywhere. Usama always had with him a cornet of dry sweets.

When we ran out of food, and were unwilling to buy food in the villages, but tired of the mountain-food we found and hunted, Usama led us back to Aleppo. We would make several more of such journeys. We did not take armed guards with us on these trips. We stayed away for five to ten days. We even entered cities and saw Hama, south of Shaizar, the Damascene town of Homs and even Labwe, which was also not far from Damascus. I saw enormously long caravans move lazily towards Damascus and we advanced until we could see the wonderful gardens of the town. Between such journeys in, we stayed in Usama's house and ate and talked with Jadwa and Yusuf. As promised, I told them about my parents.

My father was called Pierre. He was the eldest son of the Lord of Le Pallet and would inherit the castle and the fief. Of his early years I know little, the little that he himself told me and the little that Dionysia would allow me to hear. He was an extremely intelligent boy. He was handsome. He was also very headstrong. He did not agree with his parents, who wanted to make a knight out of him. He refused that outright, with the brusqueness and arrogance of a spoilt child that knew already then he was far smarter than his parents. He left Le Pallet on his own when he was still very young, at fourteen years old. He had some money but not much. He sought schools in Brittany. He learned better Latin, and Greek. He spent some time in Nantes, and then heard of a teacher called Roscelin de Compiègne, also called in Latin Roscellinus, who taught at Loches, not so far from Tours. Roscellinus was a great scholar, who had contacts to Lanfranc and Anselm, both Archbishops of Canterbury in England. My father remained several years with Roscelin and Roscelin helped him also with money. He was much influenced by Roscelin's views on Plato's and Boethius' ideas. Roscelin must have considered my father as one of his most promising students, and he used him later as an assistant. When my father was twenty he first used his name in Latin, calling himself Petrus Palatinus. Not a few of his fellow-scholars thought he originated from the Palatine Hill in Rome. My father surpassed Roscelin in the end and developed theories of his own. He learned much by himself, having access to the books of Roscelin and of other schools.

My father left Roscelin for nearby Paris. He studied at the cathedral school of the Notre-Dame. He studied more Greek and had easy access to a myriad of ancient books. He studied philosophy and theology. In Paris he was a pupil of William de Champeaux, equally a formidable man, who had studied under Roscellinus and also under Anselm of Laon, himself a pupil of Anselm of Canterbury. William had already founded the second famous scholarly monastery of Paris, the Abbey of Saint Victor and its school. William was a fervent proponent of Boethius' views, which were the opposite of what Roscellinus had taught my father, and my father extended Roscelin's analysis. My father criticised William's theories publicly. William challenged my father's views, but he was not up to the superior rhetoric of my father. My father

crucified William's arguments and ridiculed the Canon. William was vindictive and made it hard for my father to proclaim his views, to study in Paris, to teach at any school there, to live in Paris. Of course, my father had it coming to him and received what he deserved. He could have stayed silent or shown more respect.

At that time my father changed his name to Abaelardus, Abelard in French. He would never really want to tell me what he meant by that name, but I suppose it came from a close word in Latin for 'teacher'. Because of William of Champeaux my father could not earn his living in Paris, so he left for Melun and Corbeil and succeeded in having a few students there. He met little success. The years of privation he had known in his youth caught up with him. He had little or no money in the beginning. He even begged in the streets of Nantes. He earned his living by helping in inns, and in farms. He had suffered from starvation and from sickness caused by weakness. He became gravely ill. He had to return for several years to Le Pallet to get better.

After four years he returned to Paris with a little more money in his pockets, because Le Pallet had grown wealthier. He gave up his rights of primogeniture to the castle. In Paris, he once more studied hard under William de Champeaux. Three years later, William retired to the Abbey of Saint Victor and taught there, with fewer students. My father had been a time at Melun, so he returned to Paris and applied for a teacher's position in the cathedral school. He failed; William's influence continued on in Paris and William had neither forgotten nor forgiven. My father therefore set up his own school on the Mountain Sainte Geneviève, a site outside the walls of Paris, the place where still many ruins lay of the old Roman town. He also studied theology then with Anselm of Laon, in the town of that name. He did the same as with William and criticised openly Anselm. He made enemies in Laon. His reputation had grown however, probably from attacking these most famous scholars of Christendom. My father simply had always to prove he was the better, the more intelligent, the best schooled in the ancient writings.

Finally, my father received a teacher's place at the cathedral school of Notre Dame. He taught theology and philosophy there. He was extremely successful in those years. Thousands of students flocked fervently to his lessons. These were the men that would lead Christendom, be future Abbots of the largest monasteries of France. Counsellors of Kings and of Popes came to hear him. The four years he taught at Paris as the unsurpassed genius of philosophy must have been the happiest of his life. And then disaster struck.

The influential Canon Fulbert of Paris asked my father to give private lessons to his niece, a young woman of eighteen years old called Heloise, an illegitimate daughter of the Canon's brother. My father told me the Canon asked him, but Jacob said once to me that my father had remarked Heloise in the streets of Paris and proposed lodgings for himself to the Canon, and courses to Heloise. Heloise was a very bright young woman. My father said she was his most outstanding student ever. Heloise captured my father by her beauty, sweetness of character and especially by the brilliance of her argumentation in philosophy. My father was almost forty years old, Heloise only eighteen. Who seduced who? Abelard and Heloise fell in love with each other and soon Heloise was pregnant. My father sent Heloise to Le Pallet to give birth.

I was born and my father gave me the Latin name of Astralabius. Astralabius may mean several things such as star seeker, or star talker.

Heloise at first refused outright to marry my father. She admired my father so much that she did not want to draw him away from his brilliant teaching with a wife and a child. She conceded in the end in a marriage that was kept secret so that my father could continue his teaching in Paris. My father was neither a monk nor an ecclesiastic, and he had made no vows of chastity, but he could not teach at Notre Dame as a married man. Heloise argued with my father and convinced him to bring her to a nunnery so that he would not be hindered in his career. My father brought her to the Benedictine Monastery of Argenteuil near Paris. He left me with Dionysia at Le Pallet.

My mother's uncle Fulbert was very angry at what my father had done. He found my father guilty of having seduced his preferred niece. He thought my father had wanted to avoid the scandal by hiding his niece far from Paris, to have tugged her away in a monastery after having abused of her. Fulbert felt insulted. He sought revenge. He hired a gang of cutthroats of Paris to attack my father and give him a thrashing. Did these men, who erupted one evening in my father's room, got carried too far away, or was it Fulbert who had ordered my father to be castrated, one would never know. My father lost his manhood however. He was mutilated, humiliated, a broken man and his career terminated, for a castrated man would not be allowed teaching in a cathedral school. He could also not hold the function of an ecclesiastic at the school of Paris.

My father asked to take on the monk's habit in the Benedictine Monastery of Saint Denis near Paris. Saint Denis was a Royal Abbey, one of the most famous of France. At the Abbey of Saint Denis was kept the Oriflamme, the red and golden standard of Saint Denis and of the Kings of France. When a King went to war to defend France, accompanied with all the Dukes and Counts of France, the King had to receive the Oriflamme from the hands of the Abbot of Saint Denis. The Abbots of Saint Denis were prime Counsellors of the Kings. Adam, the then Abbot, accepted my father and even allowed him to teach in a discreet place, the Celia of the abbey. But my father had again to demonstrate haughtily that he was the most intelligent man on earth and knew better the truth of things than any other man or institution. His calamities continued.

My father found out that the famous ancient author Dionysius, Saint Denis, the Patron Saint of the abbey, the Patron Saint of France, the same Saint Denis to whom every Frank warrior cries 'Montjoie Saint Denis' in battle, was not really who the monks thought he was. The Areopagite Saint of whom writings were conserved in the abbey was not the Athenian convert of Saint Paul, called Dionysius, mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. This Dionysius had however indeed travelled to France and been martyred there. My father discovered that the famous books of Dionysius the Areopagite had been composed by a philosopher and theologian of many later centuries, probably also called Dionysius, not by the Athenian Dionysius who had been a judge of the Areopagus, the Athenian rock on which judged the court in ancient times. The real Saint Denis had been a Bishop of Paris centuries later. There were three figures, not one in Saint Denis. It may well have been that the Abbots of Saint Denis Monastery knew of this, but the monks and the converts and all the other people of influence that worked around the abbey did not. My father could not keep

the truth quiet, though it would have been a lot less harmful to do so. So, inevitably, the monks of Saint Denis, first of all its Abbot Adam, drove him out of the abbey.

Pierre Abelard was then at the extreme low point of his life. Everything he had tried to accomplish had ended in disaster. He had lost his love, his honour, his notoriety as a teacher, his career. He could not teach anymore, anywhere. His book on the Trinity had been condemned and burnt by a Papal Legate at the Synod of Soissons, just a little time before. He had had to recall his theories on threat of being excommunicated. He was deeply ashamed of being alive. He was ashamed of every failure. The monks of Saint Denis had him even imprisoned for a while in the Monastery of Saint Médard. He did what probably every other man would have done and what John the Baptist and Jesus Christ had given him as example. He fled people. He fled into the wilderness.

Had there been ancient ruins near Paris and had he found a column, Abelard would have become a stylite. He decided to become a hermit. He set out on foot and followed the River Seine valley eastwards, until he saw what he thought to be vast forests. In the midst of the woods he built a shelter of reeds and woven willow hurdles. He called his site the Paracletus, the word for Jesus Christ as the intercessor to God. Did he think of himself as the intercessor to God?

The Paraclete did not stay an isolated hovel for long. My father was not that far from Paris after all, just four days' walk, near Nogent-sur-Seine and very near the Champagne region, one of the most populated and rich regions of France. In the Champagne people flocked to the vast and rich markets of the wealthiest grain and cloth merchants east of Paris. I guess he was the old hypocrite in this choice too. He knew he would gather people easily enough, there, even though in the wilderness. And indeed, his former students found out where he was. They came to him one by one, then in pairs, then in tens, then in their hundreds. They asked him to teach philosophy and theology, in the mid of the wild forest – but with good roads nearby. The students at first lived in reed and thatched hovels; then they built a stone oratory and the oratory grew to a small monastery.

For another three years, my father taught at the Paraclete. After that time the Abbot of Saint Denis, Adam, died and another monk, Suger, who had heard my father teach, became the new Abbot. Suger, equally a formidable man, and a man intelligent enough to have no illusions on the three Saints that were called Saint Denis, restored Abelard as a monk in his abbey.

It was however still difficult to teach in Paris for a monk who had almost been excommunicated. My father decided to return to Brittany then. I had the illusion to think he also wanted to see me. He accepted an offer of Abbot at a small monastery near Vannes, the Abbey of Saint Gildas de Rhuys. My mother's monastery had been closed, so my father installed Heloise as the Abbess of the Paraclete and left for Brittany. He arrived in a hornets' nest. The monks of Saint Gildas would not accept his ascetic rule. They refused his rigorous discipline. The monks tried to poison him and to strangle him in his sleep. He held out for three years, and then fled the abbey. He returned to the Paraclete, well aware that he could not stay there long, for his love was still the Abbess of the thriving monastery. He returned to Saint Gildas, fled again, and in 1136, when I was eighteen years old, was allowed to teach again in Paris, at the

Mont Sainte Geneviève. His reputation as the most famous philosopher of France was re-established. He had many students, among them famous men. The Abbots of Saint Denis, Suger, and of Cluny, Peter the Venerable, were his friends. He worked hard and wrote books. He had learned some humility, to dampen his arrogance and to quench his vanity.

It was then that my father asked Jacob to bring me to Paris.

I had been sword-fighting with Gormond and he had worn me down for a long time until I sweated like a white-washed linen cloth. I entered the keep to fresh me up when Dionysia's yelling startled me. I stopped in my track and lingered in the opening of the door. She was screaming at Jacob.

Dionysia was shouting, 'who does he think he is? Summoning the boy! My boy! That whoring, heretic, arrogant bastard of a no-good brother of mine wants to claim my boy for what? To make an ecclesiastic of him, a monk, a bloodless scholar, a creature without balls like himself, to sing in the cathedral choir? I will not let it be, you hear! Never!'

Dionysia added a score of curses and brought all hell down on Jacob's poor head, so that he sunk lower with every word. I had never heard Dionysia shout so loudly, with such venom. Sweet and gentle Dionysia raged like a vixen.

I witnessed Jacob trembling before her, assuring, 'my Lady, please, I beg you, be calm. Abelard only wants to show his son a piece of his world. I do not think he wants to make of his son a person like he is himself. He regrets the calamities that he was the victim of. He would not call such tragedy on Daniel!'

'Oh yes, he would!' Dionysia interrupted. 'He surely would! The calamities that happened to my brother were of his own doing. You know that as well as I! What will he do next? He will not have the boy!'

'The boy is a man,' Jacob tried. 'You have brought him up to be a fine young man with a mind of his own. The boy is not a dreamer. I am sure he would want to find out who his father is. That would be healthy. It will be up to Daniel to decide what he wants to do with his life. The boy is extremely intelligent, as swift in mind as his father and mother. Sometimes I even believe he might surpass them in knowledge. I will go with him and do all I can to ensure that any choice is his and only his, entirely.'

Jacob soothed and pleaded on.

There was silence after a while. Dionysia calmed down. She had come to a decision and I saw malice twitch in her eyes. She continued to speak in a lower voice, but still in an angry tone. 'All right,' she said. 'Daniel and you go to see his father if Daniel wishes so,' she hissed wickedly, 'but he will go with a sword at his side, clad in mail and helmet and in a surcoat with the badge of Le Pallet. He is ready to be a knight. I am going to make a knight out of him. It will be a knight that will stand before Abelard, not a dumb-ass ball-less scholar!'

I stepped into the hall, confessed of having overheard the conversation, and convinced Dionysia that it was indeed time and no harm for me to see my father now. I assured her I would return soon. And I wanted to be a knight, not a scholar.

Dionysia took me on my word.

I don't know how she did it. She saddled horses and rode with guards in a closed cart. She rode south, not north, not to Nantes. She stayed away for two weeks. She returned to Le Pallet accompanied by her husband, the Lord of Clisson, and more guards. Her husband did not want to stay. He rode back south, to Clisson – so I guessed Dionysia has asked her husband to help. She strode into the castle like a queen. She said triumphantly to an astonished Jacob and to me, 'you are to be a knight. In a fortnight, Duke Conan will make a knight out of you. No need to be a page and a squire first, no need to be taught more than you know already. You will have to cleanse and prepare yourself with Father Hugh and with Procaire at the cathedral of Nantes. The next day you will kneel to Duke Conan, at his castle. There will be a few Barons. The Lord of Clisson will present you. The Duke himself will make you a knight! Let my brother break that vow! No need to wait for the next ceremony of knights. You will be knighted now, alone.'

And so was done. Gormond was proud, for he had assumed the role of a knight-master who had taught a page and a squire, even though he was not a knight himself. He would accompany me and assist. I did not know how Dionysia persuaded the Duke to perform the ceremony for me alone, even when the Lord of Clisson could have done so. How much money had she thrown at the Duke's feet? What promises had she made to Clisson? I bet she had given all the money she had stacked away and promised more; but she had got what she wanted. She kept me out of the grips of my father.

I rode to Nantes with Father Hugh and Gormond, with my armour and weapons and shield stacked on a pack-horse. It had taken me and Gormond two days to clean the rust of the old armour. It was the only one I had. Dionysia gave me a full hauberk of chain-mail that fell as low as my claves. She found a helmet with a pig-snouted visor, which she made to shine brilliantly with fine sand and oil, scraping off the old rust. The helmet belonged to my grandfather and I was much honoured that Dionysia granted it to me.

In fact, I hated hauberks and pig-snouted helmets. I still do. Hauberks are too heavy and hinder movements in battle. Helmets with closed visor limit vision too much. I was not used to wear, even less to fight in hauberk and helmet. With Gormond I only wore a leather jerkin and a haubergeon, a mail that did not protect my legs, but which was a lot lighter and a lot easier to wear than a hauberk. I also preferred the cervellière, a helmet with no visor. Haubergeon and cervellière offer a little less protection, but far more agility. When I fought Gormond, unable to match his force, I needed swiftness of movements. For the knighthood ceremony, however, I had to bring full armour, the entire panoply. One of the peasant boys could paint well, so I also received a new shield of iron, lined with leather and with a bright red cross on a white field of the badge of Le Pallet.

We stayed at Procaire's house in Nantes. Procaire and Father Hugh made me pray in the cathedral for an entire day to the honour and pleasure of all the saints they remembered. In the evening, I washed in a tub, cleaned my body and slept like an angel. In fact, I was as nervous as a weasel. The following morning, I dressed in a long, white linen shirt that covered me entirely and rode on horse to Duke Canon's

castle. I caught quite an astonished look as we rode through the streets of Nantes and arrived at the massive fortress. We had formed a small procession, for not only I was on horse there, but also Father Hugh and Procaire, Gormond, two guards, Dionysia and the Lord of Clisson. We stepped from our horses and the Duke's guards escorted us to the great hall.

Duke Conan had honoured Dionysia. He had summoned some of his Barons, the Archbishop of Nantes, and many priests of the town. His feudal hall had been decorated with flags and standards so that the colours of a festive mood welcomed me. I advanced in my white robe, between two rows of Barons and knights, to the seat at the other end of the hall, where Duke Conan sat, visibly amused, with a smirk on his face. The Duke was clad in mail and in the surcoat of Brittany, sword at his belt. He stood up when I was almost at his feet. On my left side walked Procaire and Father Hugh with the seriousness of tight lips and head held proudly. I had to force myself not to smile. On my right stepped Gormond, with my sword and helmet. Behind me came Dionysia and Clisson, then the two guards with my chain-mail and shield.

Duke Conan was a bulky man, not for nothing called 'the fat'. He looked formidable in armour. He had proven in battles that he was as agile as he was fat. He had a broad face lined with a heavy black beard. His face now drew open with a very amused smile, a benign grin, and also his piggish eyes laughed mockingly. Yet, he seemed to like what he saw.

Duke Conan thundered in a deep, commanding voice, 'stop, young Daniel. Kneel before your Duke!' I knelt, and so did Gormond and Procaire and Father Hugh. The Duke asked Procaire, 'Canon and Priest, has this youth been prepared by prayers and cleansing for this ceremony, according to our traditions?'

Procaire and Father Hugh both answered, 'he has, my Lord Duke!'

'Good,' Conan continued. 'My Lord of Clisson, is this man prepared in the arms, as beseems?'

The Lord of Clisson looked at Dionysia, then replied, 'he is, my Lord Duke, and I so witness, together with his sergeant and the men-at-arms present.'

Gormond spoke, unsolicited, 'so do we, indeed Lord Duke. He is a fine warrior! He can gallop and hit with the lance as no one in Brittany, and he fights like a devil.'

That caught laughter in the hall.

'Well,' the Duke said, relaxed, 'I hope he fights like the angels, too!' The Duke suppressed further smiles and addressed me. 'Daniel du Pallet, also called Astralabius, methinks, do you promise by the Christ our Lord to defend always the Duchy of Brittany, the fief of Le Pallet, to obey your Duke and to assist your Duke in upholding the honour of our lands?'

I said in a loud voice, 'Yes, Lord Duke!'

'Do you promise, by the Christ our Lord to respect and defend the Holy Church, its priests and Bishops, to help the poor and the defenceless, so help you God?'

'I do, Lord Duke.'

'Fine,' Duke Conan replied. 'Arm this man!'

Gormond and the guards drew the hauberk over my shirt, put on me the surcoat with the badge of Le Pallet, and held the shield at my side.

'Lord Clisson, come forward,' the Duke continued. He drew his sword. 'As the Barons of Brittany witness, I, Duke Conan of Brittany, make of this man a knight!' Thereby the Duke touched my shoulder with his sword.

'Give this knight his weapons!'

Gormond gave me the helmet, which I held in my right arm. He put the leather belt with the sword around my waist and I rested my left hand on the hilt. At that moment, I was a knight, rightfully adoubed by the Duke of Brittany.

‘The ceremony of knighthood is over. Young Daniel, I give you my best wishes and I hope that if the need arises you will support our cause with our other Barons and stand at our side.’

There were cheers in the hall then, and the rows of Barons broke so that the hall was a cheerful place of congratulations, laughter and so much shoulder-clapping that I was glad to leave.

We had a banquet after we left Nantes castle, in a huge room near the city hall. Even the Duke came there to drink and eat with us.

The following day we returned to Le Pallet.

Jacob and I immediately prepared to leave for Paris.

‘No,’ Jacob said. ‘No, we will not go to Paris. We are to go to Provins first. I have business in Provins. We will meet your father not in Paris but in Provins. Provins is a town of the County of Champagne, not far from Paris. From there we may visit your mother at the Paraclete. We will go to Paris later, for your father wants to show you the cathedral and also the Abbey of Saint Denis. We will then travel with Abbot Suger to Cluny in Burgundy, for a very special meeting. I will not tell you now about that meeting. Your father will explain.’

We left five days later for Provins. When I walked away from my aunt Dionysia, who had called me her son, I was convinced I would return soon, to Le Pallet as the new Lord of the place. But I went back to Le Pallet only once later, and stayed only a few days then. My destiny was also not to be with my father, however.

‘Well,’ Usama commented, ‘now we finally know your real name. You are Astralabius al-Din Daniel ibn Abelard de Le Pallet. And your father was Pierre al-Din Abelard ibn Berengar de Le Pallet. Those are fine names! You must tell us what happened to you when you saw your father.’

Five

Provins 1139

We arrived at Provins in the beginning of the month of May. When one travelled from Paris into the direction of the Champagne, Provins was one of the first towns of the rich Champagne region one rode into. The town was entirely fortified and the imposing walls and towers would astonish the traveller and inspire in him or her a sense of dignity and awe, which made one enter humbly and unsettled. Later, I found out that parts of the fortifications were only a thin high wall with battlements, but that was not on the side by which we approached and these walls were being strengthened and enhanced with commanding, strong round towers. The town sat on the flank of a valley so that to one side the streets descended rather sharply. We entered from the west, through the Saint Jean Gate, the main gate.

The entry to the town of Provins was very heavily guarded. No less than six guards stood there, dressed in leather jerkins and armed with swords and spears. They knew their business, too. They scrutinised each visitor, looked at what weapons entered, inspected the carts thoroughly, and directed the merchants into the tax house. The gates of Provins were an impressive complex of architecture. Saint-Jean Gate was a massive structure of two round towers, which stood menacing at either side. The visitors had to pass a long, covered corridor before the wooden gate, between the towers. I looked up and saw guards standing there too, high above the passing people. From above also the gates could be defended and I imagined caskets of oil there, which could be thrown in boiling oil-falls of horror on assailers. The stones on this side were thick and high. Garrison troops walked on the ramparts. Two men could easily walk next to each other there, and the men were protected from the outside by crenellated upper walls. Every hundred feet or so the walls were fortified by towers, which extended outwards, so that the area beneath could be covered by crossbowmen. The stout towers were the barbicans of the city, and there were many of them. On each tower flew flags, as if to notify that they were all occupied by men-at-arms. The banners wore the badge of the Counts of Champagne: a blue field with a white band across from upper left to lower right and two golden lines on each side of the white. These colours contrasted nicely with the white and grey bevelled stones of the walls. The defences seemed relatively new. They were made not of bricks but of large stones, which may have bleached in the sun and were devoid of green foliage or moss. Below the walls was a moat, filled with bracken water. The moat also ran around the entire town, at least as far as I could see. The impression I had was one of orderly cleanliness, for all this was well maintained and kept free of bushes. Provins was not only a town but also a formidable fortress.

I was surprised at how many people and carts arrived at the gates, but Jacob told me there would be soon a fair in Provins, so many merchants gathered here. We stood in a queue at the Saint Jean Gate, so many people tried to get in, and there was a grumbling and shouts of people complaining that more guards had to be foreseen to serve the men and women that entered for the fair. We passed through the gates at last, walked our horses along a wide street of stone houses, passed a market square and stopped at a long, high house in a street that went down to the valley on the other side of the town, but still inside the walls.

‘We stay here,’ said Jacob. ‘We put our horses in the stables, there. This is my house in Provins.’ He showed me the stables, in which stood several barrows and from where two elderly servants were looking at us.

I was not a little astonished. ‘You have a house of your own in Provins?’ I asked admiringly, for the house was long, had a fine stone façade and well-carved door styles and windows and a stone roof. It looked like the city manor of a knight. It was not at all situated in the Jewish quarter.

‘Oh,’ Jacob answered casually, ‘yes, actually the house is owned by me and a partner of mine. He is not a Jew. We occupy the house only during fairs and whenever we are pleased to be here. It will be the fair of May soon, so it is my turn to stay here. My partner will come at the next fair, and so on. We can make ourselves comfortable. The servants know me, of course.’

Only much later Jacob confessed the “partner” was merely a non-Jewish herald of his.

A scraggy man and his woman welcomed us, took our horses at the reins and Jacob showed me in. He first assigned me a room on the first floor, then we sat in the hall and rested. Later, after we had eaten some bread and cheese and drank a cup of sweet wine, Jacob showed me around. The house had numerous rooms, nice furniture of carved wood, a large kitchen, a beautiful staircase in stone that lead to the upper floors. Impressive beams held the ceilings and the roof. The most remarkable feature of the house were the vaulted cellars. The main cellar was huge, built on almost the entire length of the house. It was stacked full with goods, with large bales of cloth, bales of silk, packs of unspun wool, barrels of wine, barrels of oil, sacks of grains, all sorts of pots and pans and even several panoplies of armour. At the end of the main cellar was a door in the stone wall. Jacob told me that behind that door were corridors and along the corridors more rooms, hewn out of the rock. The corridors extended under the town. They held more goods than one could dream. Provins hid a treasure underground.

‘We will not go in there now,’ Jacob said. ‘One can walk a long time in those corridors and the corridors of many houses are connected together. Not all goods can be stored there, for most of the places are very humid. The entire town has corridors like that, deep under the earth, under the town.’

He laughed, ‘the people of Provins have been busy moles. It is a real treasure grove here, hidden away from sights from above, and only the people that have houses in Provins have access and know the way.’

Provins was one of the main towns of fairs in the Champagne. It was situated at the crossing of about twenty roads. Goods arrived here from the four wind directions. Carts showed up from Flanders and Picardy and from the German lands, laden with huge bales of wool and linen, with hides, wood, glassware, earthenware, pots and jewels. These would be sent south and west, towards Paris, Caen, Nantes, and to Aquitaine, to Bordeaux and Montpellier. From the south came spices, honey, silk, armour and weapons, copper pots, and tanned leather and many more goods. These would be taken north and east. And what I had suspected but never imagined to what extent, was that Jacob was one of the main traders of Provins, the teacher a richer merchant than most of the castle lords of Brittany. Yet, there were many such men in Provins.

We settled, waiting for my father. ‘It may be some weeks before he comes,’ Jacob explained, ‘we are early. I guess he will only come after the fair. You may as well

look around, but stay out of trouble. I try to be discreet here. The guards of the Count dislike brawls and they even more dislike brawls among foreigners. I am a Jew and should not own a house here. I should not trade. But Provins and the Champagne tolerate me here, as long as I do not catch too many angry eyes and provoke jealousy.'

I strolled around Provins the next days, until I knew the outlay of the town by heart, every street corner, every inn, every square, every church of the town, and I had even ventured close to the palace of the Count. Provins was not as large as Nantes and it had no harbour, but the palace with its keep and chapel was grander and more massive than the castle of the Duke of Brittany. Provins also had a wonderful large barn, entirely made of stone, so that it resembled a manor, with two floors and a vast cellar. The barn was used as a covered market. There were two entrances a that building, one to the ground floor with just two stairs, and one at the right side leading to the first floor with many stone stairs. It was a huge hall, the liveliest place of the town, with many people standing and chatting outside. Merchants and farmers came here to propose their produce. They displayed their cloth, silk and lace, linen and woollen cloths on wooden tables or simply placed on the floors. The sellers haggled with buyers over the prices.

Jacob had asked me to come to the hall, where he also sold his goods, to come over at noon to eat with him. I stepped into the hall, and went up the few stairs. I looked to the skies, to a few birds that whistled above the door. I was distracted. Somebody violently bumped into me from the inside, somebody who ran out of the hall. I lost my balance and felt myself falling down the couple of stairs. I grasped out wildly to catch something stable, found no support and dragged down the person that had crashed into me. I found myself lying on the stones of the street, on a sore back. When I looked up I had red curls in front of my face, a pair of angelic green hazel eyes, a pert little nose, the prettiest rosy mottled cheeks on alabaster skin and a nicely carved small mouth lined by broad and full red-blooded lips. A girl had bumped into me and that girl now was lying on top of me, thrashing with legs and arms and trying to get up. As she jerked her head aside I saw her tiny ears, where white pearls hung. I wanted to touch the pearls, and I sure had an urge to caress her cheeks, but the girl sprang up like a little devil, her first surprise over, and stood over me with spread legs, hands in her side. I could see she was angry. Very angry.

'You stupid clumsy freak,' she cried, slapping the dust out of her dress,' couldn't you look out? Or did you want to assault me? Shall I call the guards?'

She was just lovely. I could not stand up for I was too amazed at such loveliness and I kept lying on the ground, studying her. She was no servant-girl. Her bonnet was a flimsy affair of white, Flemish lace. Her dress was of heavy green-hued brocaded silk and her bodice the purest white linen. A leather purse dangled from her belt, so she had money too. She was more beautiful than the Virgin Mary in Father Hugh's chapel, far more delicate than the coarse country girls I had chased at Le Pallet, finer of traits than the prettiest but broad-faced women of Nantes. She was more elegant than the few noble young women I had seen in Nantes. She was about my age, maybe a few years younger. Her eyes flicked with anger and she made a wrist at me.

She must have found it strange that I did not rise, so she asked with a little worry in her voice, 'are you hurt? Why don't you stand up? Did you break something? That would suit you right!'

I would have lain there longer, at her feet, admiring the green shine in her eyes. Those eyes were as limpid and opalescent as the water of the pond of Le Pallet in spring. I loved the crown of wealthy red curls around her face, but there were lads outside the inn of the other side of the street, laughing and mocking me, so I too stood up.

‘I’m not hurt,’ I said. ‘I’m sorry I was in your way. I didn’t want to hurt you. You bumped into me.’

‘No, I didn’t,’ she shouted, ‘you got in my way and didn’t move! Now get out of my way! I’m in a hurry!’

She strode over me and ran in the street, leaving me standing like a fool. I could have punched some of the boys at the inn, but I remembered that Jacob had told me to lie low, so I only watched the girl turning her well-shaped little bottom into a corner street on the right. She was gone. She had the body of a Venus, a Diana, a Daphne, an Ariadne, a nymph or a muse, but she was gone.

I stepped into the market hall. While I sought Jacob, I lingered at several stalls where scarves, cloth and jewels were sold. I went up to a jewellery stall. I saw a fine brooch on the table. The green stones in the jewel shone at me like the eyes of the girl. I remarked the greedy look of the merchant when I took up the brooch and turned it but I ignored the man at first. It was a golden piece, about the size of my hand. It had intricate patterns burned into it and a few gems worked onto its lines. The curving lines formed an Arabic letter, the first syllable of the word for God, Allah, so it was a luck piece, though no one in Provins would have known that. It was marvellous craftsmanship, made by a master artisan and it intrigued me.

The jeweller took the brooch out of my hand and held it temptingly before my eyes. He said, ‘take it, young master. You have to be quick. The price is low and a noble lady just wanted to buy it from me. Take the chance! See how nice work it is, how the golden lines twist finely together!’ And he turned and turned the flickering jewel before me. I asked for the price, but the amount was far too high for me.

I heard a voice say, ‘are you interested in trinkets, boy?’ I turned and saw Jacob next to me. His own stall was just opposite the jeweller’s.

I replied, ‘oh, well, yes, Jacob. Not for me I mean. I wanted to give it as a present to somebody, but it is way too expensive for me!’

Jacob came from behind his table, looked at the piece, and then said, ‘I never gave you any present except books, boy. It was about time I gave you something of me, even if it is for giving away. I sold well, today. You brought me luck. So let’s hear, seller, how much it costs.’

The jeweller repeated the price and Jacob laughed out hard. ‘Oh Joseph, you know me and I know you! This is a trinket from Toledo. A fine one, I grant, made by a Moor blacksmith, but not worth a fourth of that price!’

The seller was insulted at the word blacksmith. He protested and called the jewel the finest work of a true Spanish jeweller. Jacob and Joseph haggled quite a time over the price. Jacob got the brooch for half the original amount. So I stood a little later with the brooch in my hand, still admiring it, thanking Jacob, telling him I could not afford the piece and thanking him profusely, saying he should not have bought it after all. Jacob waved me off.

I heard a dispute behind my back at the jeweller’s stall. I turned and saw the girl that had stumbled into me, bickering with the jeweller.

The girl said, ‘you promised me to hold the jewel for me! Why did you sell it then? Am I a liar? I told you I would get the money!’

The merchant was embarrassed and threw me painful eyes. The girl saw the looks of the man past her, to her back, and turned. She saw the brooch in my hands. She brought her tiny wrists once more in her sides and shouted, ‘oh no! Not you again! Must you be in my way always? That is my brooch! Don’ tell me you of all people bought it! Do you have to spoil my day twice?’ She had not seen me because I had my back to the entrance when she came in. I still stood there with the jewel in my clumsy hands, face redder than a fallen apple. A smirking Jacob was looking past me at the girl and at Joseph.

I held out the brooch towards her and said, ‘I’m sorry, miss. I truly am. I liked this work very much, so fine it was. I apologise for having made you fall. In fact, I bought the jewel for you. Will you accept it from me?’

‘I cannot accept that,’ she answered. ‘I do not know you. I can pay it. Will you sell it to me?’

She did not look at me then, only at the brooch, her lips nervously drawn together, but I saw she really liked the piece very much, for she turned and turned and even took the jewel in her fingers.

‘No,’ I said. ‘I can only give it to you. I received it as a gift myself from a dear friend. Gifts cannot be sold. I wouldn’t know anyone more lovely to wear it!’

Now, that was bold, but I was not a knight trained in courtly manners, only in country manners of coarse fighting of Brittany. I had only been with men-at-arms and merchants. I was not trained in finding fine phrases. The girl didn’t seem to mind. She laughed suddenly, which transformed her whole face. She brought her hand to her smile and looked straight into my eyes. That look stabbed at my heart and I was utterly lost. I knew I was in love, knew it finally, there and then, and the new feeling took possession of my being. I might have staggered and felt my legs trembling. I wanted to be out of those looks nevermore! She had put a spell on me with those green eyes.

The girl hesitated, shook her curls, looked aside, looked again at me, scrutinised my face for a while, and then decided, ‘well. I guess it cannot do any harm. I thank you. I do found it an exceptional thing. Thank you.’

We faced each other awkwardly.

I asked, to break the exquisite silence, ‘were you looking at other things in the market?’

‘Oh yes,’ she sighed. ‘There are so many nice things here. I have seen it all. The silks, laces and scarves are the finest I have seen. But I really have to go now. I ran out a moment ago, when I banged into you, because I had not enough money with me. My father gave me more, but he asked to return soon.’

‘Can I accompany you then?’ I asked.

‘Sure,’ she replied, ‘why not? Come along! You can tell me who you are.’

Then, both of us strolled outside, the girl holding my arm immediately. Out of the corners of my eyes I saw Jacob and Joseph standing with open mouths, watching us walk off side by side out of the market.

We strolled slowly through the busy streets of Provins. Once every while the girl looked at me and I at her. She held her face obliquely then, and her eyes flashed. I had never been so proud before as in those moments when we went along the streets of Provins until we arrived at the palace of the Count of Champagne. I would have killed for her then. She asked me who I was.

‘My name is Daniel du Pallet and I am a knight of Brittany,’ I said, biting my tongue as soon as the words were out, for I had not wanted to boast to her.

‘Oh,’ she said mockingly, ‘from what palace are you then?’

She played on the words, for “du Pallet” in French sounded like “from the palace”.

‘No, no,’ I said, not from a palace. I have no palace. But I will be Lord of a castle and a village called that way, Le Pallet’. I spelled the letters. ‘It is a domain on the River Sèvre, near Nantes.’

She laughed and took more daring now to look straight into my eyes and holding her gaze there. She flirted with me.

‘My name is Marie,’ she said. ‘My father is called Pierre and he is the Prévôt of Count Thibaud de Blois, second of the name, Count of Champagne. My father is a knight too. He manages the town and domain of Vitry for the Count, and also other vast regions around Vitry in the Champagne. We may call ourselves ‘of Vitry’ by the Count, so I am Marie de Vitry.’

I had no idea where Vitry was, so I asked her, and she explained and talked, and I listened venerating her little face, studying and sucking in all the small movements of her eyes, cheeks, and lips. I would have stepped through fire for her. I also told what Le Pallet was. We laughed and smiled like good friends when we arrived at the gates of the palace.

‘The Count and my father are in here,’ she said.

‘I will leave you here then before those fearsome guards pierce me through and through. You have arrived.’

I took her hand in mine and bowed, then wanted to step back but still holding her hand, which was so light in mine.

I asked, hesitating, ‘can I see you again? Tomorrow maybe?’

Her answer came quickly. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Of course. I would like that. Tomorrow afternoon. I like walking through Provins. I like the town. We come here often. Why don’t you join me at the church of Saint Ayoul, after mass, at noon? I promise I will try to come. If not tomorrow, then try the day after.’

The few weeks I spent with Marie in Provins were the finest of my life. The joyful experiences of first love brought the most exquisite sentiments that ever welled up in me; I never felt such emotions before, and they were never repeated to me. We were only friends in the beginning, then, very rapidly, young people in love.

The day after I had first met her I stood near a tree at Saint Ayoul, wondering anxiously whether she would come at all – or leave me like a darn fool lingering for day after day, waiting for her and hoping. I was looking expectantly at the gates of the church when she tapped on my shoulder, prim like a spring rose of Provins and she took my breath away once more. She had not deceived me; she was there. I could not but love her at once.

We walked together through Provins, chatting and looking at the butchers, pewterers, coopers, farriers, coppersmiths, jewellers, blacksmiths, and all the other artisans and merchants that filled the town with their stalls. Game, fowl, vegetables and fish were being sold on stalls. All the streets had been meticulously cleaned and the Count’s Controllers passed from table to table to ask for taxes and to check the weights and balances. Marie was curious of everything and she enlightened me about where the men came from, for she knew many. People saluted her. She was proud to walk with a young knight. She lived with her father at the Court of Champagne. Her mother had

died in childbirth. She was an only child. Her father was an austere man, more a bookkeeper and a manager than a warrior. He lived mostly in the castle of Vitry, but Marie accompanied him also frequently to the Count's palace, here at Provins, and she had visited Troyes, Reims and Paris. Her father successfully managed the Count's domains around Vitry and Vitry thrived. Marie loved and admired her father and I could hear she was her father's darling. Count Thibaud also knew her and was gentle with her, and so was the Count's family.

We strolled along the houses, which had fine façades of half-timbering, and Marie explained who lived in which house. She showed me the churches of Saint Ayoul, of Saint Quiriace, and of the Holy Cross. She led me in the Count's palace courtyard and in the market hall where we had met and which, she said, was called the Forcadas. She drew me on in the squares, the alleys, the Jewish quarter, the street with the bakers' shops, the keep and along the fortified walls. There were quite some fierce-looking Templar knights in the town, so Marie reminded me that the Crusader Order had been founded about twenty years earlier by a knight of Provins, Hugues de Payen, as well as by Godefroi de Saint Omer. The Templars owned two houses in Provins, one near the Gate of Jouy, the other being the Hospital, the Commanderie du Val, situated in a lower part of the town, in a green park. Hundreds of busy craftsmen crowded the town for the fair so that often we had to fray ourselves a way through the bustle in the streets. There were open, green spaces inside the walls, but so many tents had been erected there that we had to escape to outside the walls to find some quietness. We passed through the Saint Jean Gate to walk in the woods and along the moat. Many young people strolled there, flirted and talked.

The third day, when we passed the Saint Jean Gate to return inside the town, there was such a throng of people there that Marie got squeezed against me. I had to protect her with my arm around her, drawing her on and pushing through. Our faces almost touched and our eyes locked. She quickly kissed me then, and a mocking laugh and interrogating eyes changed her face. I was so surprised I forgot to move. She pushed me on without a blush.

Marie was an intelligent girl. She knew to read and write in French, Latin and a bit of Greek. We exchanged quite some knowledge of ancient Roman writers. We had a good time. Marie was quick in changing moods, however. She could be light-hearted and happy one day, mocking and answering with biting irony the other, carelessly laughing and smiling a little later, teasing and bickering the following day. She was nervous and curious beyond belief. She had it difficult to make up her mind. She would turn over a piece of cloth twenty times, throw it down, feel many other cloths, come back to the first one, hesitating and hesitating, then abandoning them all, to the despair of the merchant. She was always gentle however.

After the first kiss, when Marie saw I was taken aback by a bad temper she would swing her arms around my neck and kiss me more. The first kiss had been quick, a mere brushing of lips to a cheek. Afterwards, we kissed long and passionately, bodies wrapped together as if we were one. My fingers learned every curve of her face and of her body, though I kept my hands away from certain places. She did not shy away from me and sought the embraces as hard as I. After a few days we never let go of each other. We walked Provins hand in hand. I did not really understand why, because I was only a coarse Breton country boy, a clumsy idiot compared with the elegant

courtiers of the Champagne, and so I was proud like a watering-can. A few times Marie gasped and drew me into a side street or in the corner of an open courtyard. That was when her father or a courtier or woman she knew from the Count's palace appeared suddenly in her sight. But that was the only worry she had. At least, until the Châtillon boys crossed our path.

We had sauntered to a corner of the Place of Saint Ayoul and Marie had flung herself surreptitiously in my arms in the dark of the recess of a house.

We went out carefully, looking anxiously around, when somebody cried, 'hey, Marie, is that your new lover boy? Couldn't you catch anything better than that fool of a peasant?'

I turned to the side where the voice had come from but Marie drew me on, whispering, 'that is just one of the Châtillon boys. They are always bragging and annoying people. Ignore him!'

But another wealthily dressed young man stood suddenly before me and thumped chest to chest, obstructing my way. 'Haven't you heard, boy? Don't mess with ladies. Bow to your betters!'

He pushed me with both hands backwards, and I fell because someone had crouched behind me so that I fell over him. It was a stupid coup and I was angry to have stumbled into such an obvious trap – I should have known better. I was quite helpless on the ground and three boys of about my age were at Marie, tugging at her dress.

Two of the lads tried to draw up her robe and they groped beneath. They teased, 'Marie, Marie, show us what you use with your lover boy. Come on, let's see it!'

I got up and shouted, 'leave that, you scoundrels!' and I ran to Marie.

'What was that, lover boy? Are you telling us what to do? Who do you think you are?' another sneered at me.

The three were not interested anymore in Marie, at least not for the moment, not until they had given me an absolute thrashing. I had no weapons, except for a small dagger sheathed at my belt, whereas the boasters had long swords. They reckoned they would not need a sword, however. They came at me with their fists. I looked which one to reach best with my left foot and that was the one running on the left, so that one caught his crotch and doubled over from the pain where I had hit him. I ducked under a punch delivered by the guy that had faced me and kicked out at the same time with my right foot to the one on my right, breaking a knee-cap. The last braggart still standing was mad as a bull and tried to grab me, but he was now lower than me so my left fist slung onto his neck so that he stumbled and fell thereby conveniently on my right fist and knuckles, which had come up at thunderous speed from below. I hit him with all the force I had so that I had to withdraw to let him fall. The people around us were looking astonished for the fight had taken only a few breaths. Three youths were lying on the ground, groaning and moaning, and they made no attempts to get up again. A fourth was coming at me, brandishing a sword, and that was a far greater danger. Before he could reach me however, a young boy, scarcely older than ten years, kicked against a wheelbarrow that stood near us. The barrow turned and the beams caught the swordsman unawares. The ruffian stumbled over the first beams, which caught him in the legs, and he fell on the hard stones of the street; then he bumped his head on the second beams.

I said a compassionate 'ouch, that hurt, didn't it?' to him, but he didn't really appreciate my sympathy. He tried to get up, but I had my foot on his neck by then and wrung the sword out of his hands.

‘Stop there, in the name of the Count!,’ somebody cried. Three armed guards wearing the badge of Champagne on their surcoats advanced on me and two of them ran with their spears levelled at me.

‘Throw down that sword!’

I let the sword clatter on the stones, then looked at Marie. She was safe, stood watching aside with the young boy who had helped me. She waited with open mouth and a somewhat unbelieving, reproaching expression on her face.

‘Well,’ a sergeant said, ‘a troublemaker! Do you know what we do with troublemakers, son? We throw them in a dark, humid dungeon for a few days and beat him up nicely so that he learns a lesson or two, to respect the orders of our Count and not start a new fight thereby giving work to us, guards. And for using a sword in the streets, this time of year, we might put the lash on your back a few times. Take him!’ he commanded to the other guards.

I was not sure I would let the guards have me, so I did not move. The spears were brought at my belly again.

The boy that stood with Marie sprang forward and shouted, ‘no, Sergeant Gauthier, no! Stop! That boy has done nothing but defend himself. The Châtillons were attacking him and Marie de Vitry. I saw it all. Stop, I tell you!’

The guards were surprised, so I had a few moments of respite. The boy and Marie explained how the Châtillons had harassed us and pointed to them, laying all four on the ground. I still had my foot on the neck of one of them, by the way. The guards were perplexed. They did not really know what to think because I was standing and the others down. But the guards withdrew their spears. Sergeant Gauthier scratched his back hair.

‘All right, Count Henri,’ he said. ‘If you witnessed so. So this young man did you a favour then, Lady Marie. All right. He can go. We’ll bring these to the physician and see what the Bailiff holds against them. They have been a nuisance before.’

I was free. I thanked the boy, apparently a friend of Marie’s. The guards made the Châtillons stand as best as they could, then walk, and dragged after them the one with a broken knee. Henri strolled off the other way and Marie and I were alone. The people around us turned, for the show was over, and they went back to their occupations. Marie still looked at me with open mouth.

She said, ‘I thought you were a nice, harmless young man. You were fast! Where have you learnt to fight like that? You knocked out four of the Châtillons on your own!’

I replied, ‘I don’t know about the Châtillons, but if anyone touches you it will be his last time. Are you all right?’

‘Of course I’m all right, silly!’ she laughed. ‘You sure took care of that. I might have liked to see how you would have done against the swordsman, alone, without the help of Henri. I’m sure that Renaud de Châtillon would have regretted it even more than the others. Henri helped nicely, didn’t he? He is Count Thibaud’s son, you know, and his heir, a very smart boy. You have made a friend! Henri admired you. And so did I. Well done!’

I grinned, for all was right, and we sauntered off.

‘The Châtillons are a bunch of brothers and cousins. They come here once in a while with their family. They are thieves, whoremongers, braggarts and lazy, arrogant bastards of knights. They have pestered me before. They are always looking for trouble. They knock people down, turn over the tables of innocent merchants they

don't seem to like, and are all the time a damn nuisance. The guards know that. I hope they have been taught a lesson.'

It was true we heard nothing thereafter of the Châtillons. We supposed they had been told to leave the town.

But Jacob and Marie's father heard about the incident. And that was quite another challenge than beating up scum.

I first had to confront Jacob.

Jacob delivered a decent preach the same evening. He was as much afraid as angry. He lived well in Provins and he did well there only because he was discreet. The discretion had been blown away. Not all Christians liked Jews to live and trade amongst them. Everybody in town knew that the boy who had terraced four knights and walked with a red-headed noblewoman lived in a certain house and lived there with a Jew.

'Could you really do nothing else than dance around with the prettiest and wealthiest girl in town? Why not try the daughter of the Count?' he asked. 'You knock down four youths of noble and powerful families and then have the illusion you wouldn't be noticed? You even had help from the Count's son! You might as well have stood on the corner of this street with a professional herald and shout out who you were, where you lived, with whom, and what you were doing here. We must get out of here. Soon. Make people forget we were ever here.'

I did not have much to answer to that. Yes, Marie de Vitry was a friend – I avoided the word 'girl-friend,' though Jacob had no illusion on that subject – and by chance young Count Henri had been near. I had been attacked, had only defended myself; Marie had been harassed. Should I have left the hoodlums do their nasty work with Marie? I could not say more. I was sorry.

Things being what they were, Jacob had to live with the situation. There was no turning back time.

Jacob had one consolation: my father could arrive at Provins any time now. Then we would leave and I would not be in everybody's eye anymore, so people would forget. By next fair nobody would remember a Daniel du Pallet.

My heart shrank when Jacob told about leaving Provins. What would happen with Marie and me?

The day after the incident I walked out in the streets. Heads turned when I passed. People whispered, pointed at me, made way for me. People I had never noticed before saluted me. I guess I had the sympathy of the town. How could Marie and I now blend in with the crowds? Where would we go to be alone? We could disappear in the multitudes not anymore.

At noon I was again at the Church of Saint Ayoul, hiding behind a tree and being as inconspicuous as possible. I did not expect Marie. But she came. We took hands. It started to rain. There is always a dry period in spring; that time too had come to an end. A few raindrops fell when we brushed our lips rapidly together. Soon, the rain pelted heavily. We ducked under an overhanging floor of a half-timbered house. The merchant-sellers of the Place Saint Ayoul threw canvases over their stalls and hurried with the buyers towards all the places around the square that were just like ours. Inns filled. We stood surrounded by people, with men and women at our sides and even in

front of us. We looked at each other. This wasn't going well. I felt depressed. There was so much to ask and to tell to Marie!

I pointed to a house in a side street, whispering, 'the second house in that street is the house where I live. The man to whom the house belongs, Jacob, and his two servants are not in. They are in the market-hall until this evening. I know where the key is to enter from the barn.'

Marie looked at me, then at the pelting rain. 'Let's go,' she said.

I was a fool. 'No,' I answered. 'Forget it, Marie. It was a very bad idea. I cannot take you there.'

Marie suddenly stepped forward into the rain and drew me out of the dry.

'Hurry up,' she cried impatiently. We ran towards Jacob's house.

We got in the house. It had rained so hard we were wet even before we reached the barn. I found the key, opened the side door and pushed Marie in. I took her to the hall, threw logs in the hearth and made a fire, for Marie was shivering. I gathered the cushions of the hall in front of the fire. We sat down. I had found a towel and dried Marie's face. Then I passed my fingers through her red curls to dry her hair in the warmth of the fire. My hand went to the nape of her neck. We kissed. When we stopped, I continued to caress her face. I could not keep my gaze off Marie. I needed to imbibe my mind with every curve of her because when I would have to leave her I would want to recall every line, every surface, every curve, the smoothness and every shade of that face. She kissed me again, so hard and passionately, that I fell backwards on the cushions, and she was on me. She writhed between my legs, pressed and moved her loins against me. She aroused me. I had one hand on her leg. I drew up her robe, feeling her naked leg. My hand went higher up until I could press her harder against me.

I wonder still how sense crawled back in me. I guess my guardian angel gained control over me, finally. I moved my mouth aside to stop the kissing of teeth against teeth. I withdrew my hand from her buttocks and I pushed Marie away.

I said with a coarse throat, 'no Marie, no, we can't do that. Stop!'

Anger flared in her eyes and she came back at me, frantically, sought my mouth again with her lips. But then she halted also and threw herself on her back, on the cushions, next to me. We were both panting. We could have been lovers then, in Jacob's hall, and maybe that would have been the right thing to do. But we stopped. We were not friends anymore, not a boy and a girl anymore, not even a young man and a young woman anymore. In that instant we were man and woman. A new life had started for us. In that moment, in that hall, our youth had come to an end.

I was the first to talk. 'What are we going to do? I'm not just in love with you. I love you. I want to be the rest of my life with you. But my father will come soon and then I will have to leave Provins with him. I cannot refuse to leave. I cannot stay. You are the daughter of one of the most important men of the Champagne, of a friend and a confident of the Count. I am the son of a man who lost his manhood and of a nun and I live with a Jew, as you know. How could we ever be together?'

Marie hesitated to reply. She was quite decided, however. 'My father knows,' she said. 'He will call you in to talk. He is deeply puzzled. He must be brooding over the situation in silence, as he usually does. I thought he would not let me go out, or have

me accompanied by somebody, but he hasn't. He doesn't know yet what to do. He has also not yet asked me how I felt about you, but he cannot but know. Many knights have been asking for my hand since I was fifteen years old. I refused them all. My father agreed. He is not using me to win more power or more money. He genuinely cares for me and would only marry me to someone I prefer. Still, he has been complaining these last months that I would never marry, live my life as a spinster, and never have children. He wants to see me happy. Do you want to marry me?'

I laughed. I thought it was boys who asked girls to marry them. Marie had jumped over barriers I had dreaded. 'Of course I want to marry you. I venerate you. I don't know how you feel about us, but for me this is not a whim and not an adventure. I have never been so close to any other person, man or woman, as to you. I feel fine with you, just fine. I have the feeling I can tell you all the things that fill my mind as if I were talking to myself. I don't believe I could be like that with any other woman, ever. At what time we make love, now or later, is not important.'

'The same with me,' Marie answered. 'I know there will not be someone else I could blend with.'

She crooked two fingers of her right hand, put them around my nose, squeezed, and said, 'so, from now on, my husband, you are going to be led by the nose by me and me alone and you will not stop me from making love to you ever again! Still, I am satisfied, my dear lover, that you stopped us for now.'

She left my nose alone, sighed, and continued, 'my father will be an issue. I suppose we can make a deal with your aunt at Le Pallet. If what you have told me is true, we might live off the land in Brittany, maybe build a new manor so that your aunt can stay in the hall and rooms she is used to. But my father will worry about Abelard and Jacob, about their reputation and what that would do to me. He will call you. I wonder just how wise my father is, just how much he loves me the way I would want him to love me, and just what he will have on his mind for us. If necessary we will have to elope. You will have to come for me. We will need a messenger. Your Jacob, or Henri, can be our go-between. My father's power ends at the borders of the Champagne. We could live in Brittany. But I do not wish to lose my father.'

I was not so sure Marie's father's power ended at the frontiers of the Champagne. His Count might appeal to Duke Conan and then what would happen? Yet, it was strange, we feared no more. Our minds were made up. We might be separated for a while, maybe even for years, but we would remain united forever and we would not live with another. We would laugh at what people might do to us to keep us apart, for whoever tried to do that would loose and whatever came between us would be but a minor obstacle. We might be separated in space and in time but could not be separated in mind. Two was heaven and three meant hell, but Marie and I would be together in hell. Only God could separate us.

In the end, that is what He did with us, with a power that was ultimate. But that was in the future. In Provins, we stood up from the cushions and we did not even had to kiss anymore to feel as one. There was not a Marie and a Daniel anymore, but one loving hermaphrodite of the mind created from two.

We re-arranged the cushions, away from the hearth. We dried at the fire. I sought bread, cheese, fruit, a little wine, and we waited patiently at two sides of a table until

Jacob arrived. He had told me he would not stay out until late in the evening. Indeed, he entered the house rather early.

Jacob almost choked when he saw us sitting at the table, eating and chatting. We explained. Jacob was very ill at ease with Marie at first, but then he mellowed to her beauty, her charm and her determination. Marie did most of the talking. Jacob accepted half-heartedly to be our messenger if something separated us. He said of course that we could only end in tragedy, but he promised to help.

This left us with only Marie's father to confront.

The message arrived soon. The same evening, a guard summoned me to present myself at the Count's place and to ask for Pierre de Vitry in the morning of the next day.

So I dressed like a knight, even put on a haubergeon, hung a sword at my belt over the surcoat with the badge of Le Pallet, and went cocksure to the palace. Well, cocksure ...

At the gates of the palace I asked a sergeant for Pierre de Vitry. A guard took me over the yard to a side wing. He had to ask two times where de Vitry was. We found him in his working room. De Vitry stood behind a table, and waved me in. A clerk was writing, standing behind a desk. Pierre de Vitry ordered the man out and to call Marie in.

De Vitry remained silent. He just stood behind his table, waiting for Marie. He scrutinised me from top to toe in silence. My last self-confidence ebbed away from me under his scornful eyes. I avoided his gaze by looking around. The table was covered with scrolls, tens of scrolls, and a few parchments. I was surprised, for de Vitry was not the Prévôt of Provins – he was the Prévôt of Vitry. Yet, he followed the Count, and had to work. So I supposed he took his documents with him. I looked back at him from the corners of my eyes. He was not a tall man, but he was imposing. He was greying but his hair was close-cropped and he had no beard. His long, hard, wrinkled face was sunburnt, which was surprising for it was still early in the year. De Vitry was a travelling man.

He had Marie's eyes, a thin mouth, tight lips, a long aquiline nose and his cheekbones formed his face. He was not a fleshy man, not a great eater. He was dressed entirely in grey. A small Champagne badge was embroidered on his leather jacket and he wore a long dagger at his belt.

The silence was awkward for me in the room. I looked aside. There were two windows on either wall, with glass in the windows, large window-sills. The walls were bare but for two crossed lances on the right side, cupboards all around and in the cupboards lay more scrolls and sheets of parchment.

At first, de Vitry had looked me up and down but after a while he seemed to have lost interest in me. He took to his scrolls, opening them, reading, closing them. He wrote down a note. This was rather humiliating for me. But I just stood and waited, trying not to look arrogant and defiant.

The door opened with a creak and Marie stepped in. Her father stopped being interested in his notes and told us to sit on the chairs in front of his desk. He remained standing, somewhat towering above us.

'We have to talk,' he said in a clear, sharp voice. He addressed me more than Marie. 'I think I know what is going on. Marie is not a girl who disappears for days with a

young man without doing something more than joking and running in the fields. I heard about the fight in the Place Saint Ayoul, of course. I talked to young Count Henri.’

He pointed at me with a finger. ‘I know who you are. I know who your parents are. I know you live with a certain Jacob, whose activities are also known by me. I know Jacob does not live in the Jewish quarter of Provins, which I would not have tolerated in Vitry. Anyhow. You know who I am, so we can quit the introductions. What are your intentions with Marie?’

I gasped. De Vitry was a very direct man. I could be direct too, though. I answered, ‘I have only honourable intentions, Monsieur de Vitry. I want to marry Marie.’

Marie smiled. Pierre de Vitry looked me straight in the eyes. He was rather taken aback by such insolence. He sat down. I guessed he would have thought I would have replied that Marie and I had just been friendly, that nothing serious was going on, so that he could have scorned us for some time, gravely, maybe shouted some insults at me, then have us dismissed and have Marie remain hidden inside the castle or shipped surreptitiously to Vitry, and that was that. He was shocked by my answer. How dared a Breton bumpkin of no-good parents dare tell him he desired his daughter for wife?

De Vitry kept examining me with his eyes, which seemed to penetrate me. He looked at me for a long time. Then he looked at Marie, who sat with her hands writhing in her lap, but also eyes directed at him. He sighed. The surprise was also for me however, when he said, ‘I feared as much. You are not the young man I expected. This palace is filled with insignificant, foolish, stupid young men. When I saw you come in, I guess I knew. I have learned to appreciate men at first sight. I have to admit I was awed by what I saw. And I know Marie. I think I do, though she surprises me every day. Marie is a serious girl despite her red hair.’ He grinned. ‘What do you want with this boy, Marie?’

She replied, ‘I also want to marry Daniel. We know each other only since a couple of weeks and you will tell that is too little, but I met many people before, father, and nobody ever pleased me as well as Daniel.’

‘You are certainly right about knowing this man so little, my daughter,’ Pierre de Vitry spit out suddenly, interrupting her. ‘How can you judge a man in such a short time? How are you so sure he is not an impostor who only wants to take advantage of you?’

Marie smiled, ‘father, you just said you liked what you saw! You have always had confidence in me, father. Remember you told me once I had a better intuition than you for seeking me a husband? I am not a woman to flirt with men for more than a day. You know people at first sight. So do I! Daniel is not only my love. He is much more. When does a woman, a free woman, a woman who has been brought up by you, knows she wants a man? There is a simple criterion, father, which you men cannot well understand. I checked all the young men you pointed out for me. My criterion was: would I want to lie with this man and have children by him? My children. Your grandchildren! Will my children be worthy of the name of Vitry? I want children from Daniel.’

It was my turn, again, to be surprised, and I suppose I reddened like a pumpkin and my mouth fell open. But I was proud. So proud! De Vitry, too, was touched. He sat down and sunk in his broad chair. He brought his hand to his forehead and he stayed silent, thinking. His mouth twisted. I could see he was deeply moved by what Marie

had said. He pushed scrolls aside, fingered his quills, turned over a weight, felt to his dagger, and shifted in his seat.

Then he continued, ‘this is then far more serious than I feared,’ he said. ‘If you want this man, Marie, how could that be? We live at the Count of Champagne’s court. We live and live well by the Count’s grace. We live in a world of courtiers, of power, of status, of wealth, and of the highest nobility of Christendom. This man is the son of a nun and of a monk. He is the son of a monk who is a troublemaker and was almost excommunicated at a Papal Synod. He is the friend of a Jew, raised in a castle of nothing, in a forgotten countryside of backward Brittany. Even if he is a brave man and a good-looking man, intelligent, and pervaded with the best of intentions, what would become of you and me when you married him? You would have no friends anymore here, be the laughing stock at the court, and I would lose all authority. You would have to abandon everything here, your world and your friends. What would that do to you? Do you think this man could fill your days sufficiently and be enough to compensate for all you would lose?’

‘The court is not my world,’ Marie declared. ‘How many intimate friends do I have here? Very few! My friends are the people in Vitry, people who wouldn’t care who I marry, as long they see me happy. I don’t care about this world here, a world of intriguers, of thieves and rogues, of murderers and thugs like the Châtillons, even if they are called knights. It is a world you and I can work in, father, but don’t ask me to have respect for that world! You taught me better!’

‘I cannot agree,’ Marie’s father insisted. ‘You are too young. You may still be wrong in the intentions of this man. A few weeks is not enough. I cannot accept you marrying him. Two conditions should be fulfilled. First, time must pass to put your feelings to the test. If in due time you still feel the same about him, then I might allow you to marry.’

Marie’s face had been wrung in anger; now she opened to a smile and grasped my hand. ‘And the second condition, father?’ she asked.

‘The second condition could only be that this young man proves himself. If he is courageous and smart, then he should be able to prove his valour easily. I can only agree you to marry someone who has shown honour, not an outcast or the son of outcasts.’ Pierre de Vitry held up his hand to silence Marie. ‘You will say that value of character and of disposition is enough. But it is not enough! It might be enough for you, for me, but we live in a certain world in which I would not suffer for you to be an outcast, too.’

Pierre de Vitry temporized. He said in a calmer tone, ‘so the second condition is that this young man serves a master well, as counsellor or as warrior, as manager of domains, as courtier or whatever. I want him to have honour and dignity when he comes for you, with a name that has proven to be noble, so that it can be more easily forgotten who his parents were, even at a court.’

De Vitry seemed to think aloud. ‘He cannot do that at the court of the Count of Champagne. I want him not to be too close to you for a time. If he fails here we would be dirtied. He might serve Duke Conan, but there is not much going on in Brittany. Brittany is a backward land at the end of the world and it is defying us, defying France even. He might try the Aquitaine. I knew the Duke there, but there is no Duke anymore. Guillaume died last year on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. His only heir is his daughter Aliénor. What will become of the Aquitaine? There are other courts around. Why doesn’t he go and serve the King of France? The King would

have skirmishes and wars enough, and lands to manage. If he serves well he might win another title, lands, and the honour I need – and that you need, Marie. You mentioned children. Your children should be proud of their father, walk in halls with head up.’

Marie sighed. ‘Father, you want merely to separate us and have Daniel be killed by a crossbow bolt somewhere in the nasty siege of a fortress. Is that what you want? Is that how you love your daughter?’

‘No, Marie,’ Pierre de Vitry replied. ‘This is a tough world we live in, child. Either we are up to this world or we disappear. Your husband should be strong enough to protect you and save you and prove so. He is a knight, after all! Yes, I know that too. He has not proven anything, however! In battle, only the cowards die, the men lacking bravery, audacity and luck, the foolish ones. If Daniel here is lucky, brave, smart and courageous, he will return laden with honours. Otherwise he will not have been worthy of you anyhow!’

I had to intervene before the conversation became a bitter confrontation between father and daughter. I said, ‘I understand what you mean, Sir Pierre. I believe you are right. Marie and I have grown up quickly in these few weeks. Our love has done that. I will give her due to Marie. We can wait for some time. We are married in mind anyhow, so what could happen to us? Oh, I know, Marie that we will not see each other much, but then even married, that might happen. You would be miserable without your own. I have been knighted and I want to be a knight. I have to do my duty. I will not be a scholar. I want to be a true knight and I will be. So I better get to work at it.’

I then addressed Pierre de Vitry, saying, ‘my father will come to meet me soon, here, at Provins, Sir Pierre. Jacob and I will accompany him to Paris and to the Abbey of Saint Denis. My father knows Abbott Suger. Please don’t tell this anywhere, but there is going to be an important meeting afterwards at Cluny and my father and I will travel with Abbot Suger. I can ask Suger to help me serve King Louis.’

De Vitry brightened up. ‘Have you access to Abbot Suger? That is good! That is very good! Abbot Suger is indeed the prime counsellor of King Louis. With Suger’s help you might advance rapidly at the King’s court! Well, young man, please Abbot Suger and serve the King! Serve them well and then come back for Marie.’

Marie was not yet satisfied. She asked, still suspicious, ‘for how long should we be separated, father? What exactly should Daniel do for you to accept him? Capture a castle, kill a Duke, ransom a Count?’

‘No, no,’ Pierre de Vitry laughed. ‘No, daughter! I only want him to serve honourably the King. He doesn’t need to be a hero, your Daniel. He only needs to be a respected knight who can say “I have been with the King of France here and there; I have fought with the King; the King confided in me” or something like that. I do not ask the impossible. As for the time, I think two or better, three years will do.’

I was quick to answer before Marie could protest. ‘Three years is long, Sir Pierre. But three we can hold, if you allow me to see Marie every once and a while.’

‘Agreed,’ de Vitry acquiesced rapidly. ‘But I want your promise, of you both, that you will not elope in those three years, not be married without my knowledge, nor that you will have children out of wedlock.’ He turned once more to Marie, ‘Marie, I do have confidence in you. I genuinely do! Very much! Promise me that, and I will even

not have you accompanied by ladies-in-waiting or guards when you want to be with Daniel.’

I nodded encouragingly at Marie. She was still weighing the possibility to elope with me anyway. I squeezed her hand.

Finally, she said, ‘all right, father. Daniel serves the King or a Count decently and we will wait. I am just eighteen years old. At my twenty-first birthday we will stand before you and you will grant Daniel his bride. Then we will arrange for a wedding date and for the feast, for the feast will be grand and you will pay for it. Then we will be married in the church of Vitry!’

‘I promise,’ Pierre de Vitry said. ‘I promise,’ I repeated.

Pierre de Vitry embraced us both ardently and we left the room together. Marie remained in the palace, but we would see each other the following days. Pierre de Vitry walked with me to the gates of the palace. He even told the guards to let me in unhindered whenever I came, and he held my shoulder all the way. I was very proud and touched, for I was indeed only the son of Abelard and Heloise.

God was still throwing his dice for me or had not written yet everything about my life in his Book. Would I have luck and success or would I be ruined? But then, I reflected, God does not play dice. He would know the outcome of the throws before having thrown the chance-cubes. A God with knowledge of everything that happens and will happen would not be aware of himself and never be an active agent. Such a being would exist but be static, never induce change. Our world is in perpetual change, however. God would not have created the universe, for it to be determined in past, present and future by Him. Such a creation would have no sense, be futile, and be unnecessary to the God-being. God must have created the world in order for it to have a degree of freedom, of choice, so that the God might observe and maybe even intervene. So, I thought, I can decide on my own life. God can act on my freedom, but the choice of doing something with my life is mine, good or bad. Besides, why would the Bible and the Evangels talk of punishment if men would have no free choice? God would have established the bad himself if he led us to bad deeds, which is impossible for he is goodness. So, yes, we have free choice over our own life, I thought, even if God knows what our future is. Foreknowledge is not a detriment to freedom for His creatures.

God had only sent decent people to me so far in my life, and at that time at Provins I believed the entire world was filled with such people. I learned otherwise later, and it would be a few years more before God showed me how the dice had fallen for me – through my own choice.

Six Paris and Cluny 1139

I had a few last, wonderful days with Marie at Provins. We behaved as if we were married but did not make love. Only we knew we were married. Pierre de Vitry had shown us enormous confidence, which proved how much he loved Marie and how much he trusted his daughter. He must have feared the worse, but he never showed his fear. Marie stayed often with me in Jacob's house. She returned ever late afternoon to the palace. Her departure was always a torture for us both. Though Jacob left us alone most of the time, we also often ate and talked with him. He entered at various moments of the day, I suppose to check on us. He never caught us doing something other than innocent display of sweet and chaste emotions. Jacob was much impressed by Marie's intelligence, though she had not his erudition. Marie was happy. She added the feminine influence to the house and to my relations with Jacob, the warmth and elegance and dignity that only women can inspire – and enforce by their presence and mindset. We dreaded the inevitable separation and after those few days, indeed, my father arrived.

Abelard was an old, disillusioned and taciturn man when he turned up at Provins. He was fifty-eight years old, yet he had travelled on foot from Paris. At that time he was teaching again on the Mount Sainte Geneviève near Paris, but he was of course a monk. He pushed open the door of Jacob's house while I sat in the hall with Marie. I was at odds with a dirty monk entering and looked for my sword. My heart sank when I recognised him, for I knew he had come to steal my happiness. He was tall, wearing a bag and a staff, dressed in the grey, unwashed linen robe of monks. His face was pale and haggard. His dark eyes burned deep among the bones of his head, which were barely covered with flesh. Food was not important to him, yet he ate ravenously what we proposed. He had not eaten much if at all on his long journey.

I had seen my father the last time seven years ago, when he had come to Le Pallet to abandon definitely his primogeniture rights on the castle. We had scarcely spoken then and I was too small to make any lasting impression on him. He was a stranger to me. Four years before, he had suddenly turned up at Nantes. He visited Duke Conan, who was ill at that time. He lodged with Procaire. He got involved in a brawl, I heard, and escaped nearly being killed. But he had had no time to walk to Le Pallet and visit me.

The monk looked with some surprise at Marie, but he was not overly interested in her, nor especially moved by seeing her sitting close to me. When I told him who she was and that she would be my future bride, his eyes lifted a little from under his bushy eyebrows, but he did not embrace us and asked nothing. Our reality, maybe all reality, did not touch his mind. I did not care much. I had never known what fatherly affection was, so I expected nothing of him. He was just another person.

Marie left and Jacob entered a little later, seeing my father still eating at the table in the hall and me listening to him. My father babbled about sin, maybe in reference to Marie and me, which made me smile, but he understood of course nothing of our relation. He said that thinking about sinning was not a sin in itself. The greatest merit, he declared, was in resisting the temptation to disobey God's will. I listened and nodded politely, but I did not believe one word of what he said. Jesus Christ taught

with force that even to have sinful thoughts was a form of rejecting God's will. I considered that such chastity was a task above the powers of any normal human being, and I was no saint, but I accepted and admired Jesus' messages as a kind of unattainable ideal. I withheld from contradicting my father and starting a debate with him. Jacob embraced my father warmly. They were very good friends. I could see that there were old confidences between them. My father manifested more affection for Jacob than for me. They spoke about what they had done since their last meeting. I was not necessary in that conversation and my father talked as if I was not present. I left and went to my room.

The following day in the morning, I found Jacob and my father sitting and talking once more in the hall. They had come to a decision. We would return to Paris immediately, but travel east first to pass by Nogent and the Paraclete to pay a visit to my mother. We would not stay for the night there however, but head due west the same day for Paris, and for the Abbey of Saint Denis. Abbot Suger would be leaving for Cluny but had pledged to wait for my father. So we had to set out of Provins immediately. My father dared not to have the Abbott waiting too long. Jacob prepared the voyage, and provided for horses and a cart. We would leave the following day. It was all right for Jacob to be leaving surreptitiously, for the Champagne fair at Provins had ended. I had merely one afternoon to say goodbye to Marie.

Giving my farewell to my love was heart-tearing. We could not let go of each other. We kept holding and caressing most of that afternoon and evening.

I also took my leave of Pierre de Vitry. He said a few comforting words, promised to look well after Marie.

De Vitry had to hold back Marie that evening, for she would have ran out of the palace and eloped with me. But de Vitry did the right thing, held her tight when I left, and my last view of her was as she cried in his arms and broke down listless at his shoulder. I left the palace of Provins in the darkness, depressed as I had never been.

In the morning, two horses stood ready in the barn, as well as a canvas-covered cart drawn by a mule. My father would ride in the cart. I stood before him dressed in the chain-mail haubergeon and mail coif, a helmet at my side, dressed in the surcoat with the arms of Le Pallet, a sword and dagger at my leather belt. My father's eyes flashed at me again. It must have dawned on him instantly that I was a knight. He noticed surely my proud, defying stance. He said nothing. There was a twitch of pain on his face when I threw my shield in the cart, but not a single word passed his thin lips.

We left Provins, but my heart stuck to the walls. With every step of my horse I wanted to return and seek Marie. I should have done that, of course, but I sulked on, on the road to Nogent. The voyage was uneventful. In the evening, my father talked to me about philosophy and the virtue of learning. He said learned men were wise men. Only through knowledge could one become a virtuous man. He emphasised the reading of the Bible. He talked about the power of God. He urged me to honour God in everything and to seek honour by doing God's work. He wanted me to be wise, to know, to study. I listened to him and I agreed to most of what he said, but I did not tell him over and over again that I would not be a scholar but a knight. I would be a warrior. I should seek humility, he said, not arrogance and vanity. Do not seek wealth, he argued, but justice. He lauded friendship and told me I should never betray a friend. He also talked about women. I should have a pious wife, a virtuous wife and

be good to her. I should sleep with my wife, for a woman too chaste was of no use in a marriage and would not remain with me, but an adulterous wife would be abomination. He warned me for whores and for sodomites. My wife should not slander, not say stupid things on other people's backs, for such talk would put my house on fire. Finally, I asked him to stop. I told him rather sharply Father Hugh and Procaire had already hammered the Christian virtues in me. He acknowledged he had been preaching. He told me he would write a text with everything he would have wanted to tell me as a father.

The Paraclete was a small abbey with a modest chapel and a few houses in the middle of a large wood. Smoke curled from the buildings. The abbey seemed to be thriving. It was growing, and therefore still a construction site. The site was not clean. Trees were being felled, leaving small wood in many places. Fires burned here and there. The smoke included water damp, for the branches that burned were green and humid. The fires stank of rot. The roads were muddy. The vegetable gardens were not yet fenced in. The sheepfolds and pigsties looked pitiful, and the areas around the houses were not yet overgrown with grass. Larger halls and more houses were being added. There were many people around: nuns and monks, many novices, and artisans. Thatchers were working on the roofs of the houses. Meadows and fields were being tilled. Ground was being gained on the forest. We asked to see the Abbess.

A nun took us to a new house. My mother had us waited for some time, and then the nun led us into a small hall, where my mother stood near the fireplace. She was a small woman. I could only see her face for she was covered with the white robes and the veils of the Abbess. She had still a youthful, beautiful face, untouched by hardships, a lively face. Her eyes sparkled blue when she saw us. Jacob had stayed outside, out of the abbey. She embraced me and then my father, but while she embraced my father she kept staring at me. She realised at once I was not dressed as a scholar. We exchanged polite phrases. My father talked a long time about what he had done the last months. My mother explained her plans she had with the abbey. While my mother talked she never kept her eyes off me. We did not want to lodge at the abbey and had to depart the same day. When my father said goodbye, my mother asked to speak to me alone.

Heloise said, 'your father is a most remarkable man. He is the most intelligent master in Christendom, and therefore so important for our cause that I could not remain living with him. Your father had to live his destiny alone despite our love. The love between us remains undiminished.'

She paused as if to search for words, and then continued. 'Whatever can be more important in the universe, in all the things we do, than try to understand the true nature of God, the nature of our own being, to explain correctly why Jesus Christ was born, why we exist, why the world is good and what love is. It is the holy duty of people intelligent enough to understand these subjects, to dedicate their lives to seeking these truths and to explain them to others. Can you imagine what a triumph it would be to prove through reasoning that God exists, and to prove by reason what God is? For the first time in all the centuries that have passed until Christ resurrected, there is now someone, one man, who can answer these questions, and prove the greater glory of God. That man is your father! If your father succeeds, and he is close to the answers, imagine the result! The unfaithful will have to acknowledge that God

exists. There would be no more doubting; faith would be proven decisively and not anymore be an intuition or a gift. That is the work of your father!’
She said, ‘when you were born, your father and I gave you the name of Astralabius. We hoped you would grasp the stars of knowledge. Astralabius, you have your father’s intelligence. Honour it and honour your father!’

I answered, unmoved, ‘I will honour my father and my mother. I understand what my father is trying to prove. But I am a knight, and that is my destiny. I will be a man in the ways of God. But I will be me. My way is entirely different from your way, even if I might seek the same truths as you two. I will be in the world, not out of the world. I will not be the same as you. I will use what you both gave me to the best of my abilities. But I cannot promise to be a scholar only and be like my father. I will study, always, but I am a knight. I will serve our Duke and the King.’

I explained her about Marie and my promise to Pierre de Vitry. She was shocked. I was not what she had imagined, not what she had hoped for. She said she had sinned with my father and she told me mere remorse and regrets were not enough to expiate her sins. Some form of punishment was necessary to make amends to God, so that her sin would not fall on my head too. She did not want me hurt by her sin. She noted that the sins of the fathers and of the mothers often destroyed the life of the sons. That was why she was a nun, and also because she had not wanted to be an obstacle to my father’s work.

Her words saddened me, for I was the fruit of her sin. Was I nothing else but that? Did she regard me as a sin? She answered she loved me more than my father. She might have sheltered me in her arms and protected me from the result of any sin. Yet, she had abandoned me. I did not reproach her for having forsaken me, but I made her understand she could have no claims on my life. She had no right to force me into doing what I did not want to do. She had lost that right when she left me alone at Le Pallet. She nodded then. Her head sank and she started to cry. I wanted to touch her shoulders and try to explain with nicer, better and more words, give her my love, but she stretched her arm and pushed me back so that I could not come nearer. She told me to go.

When we rode from the Paraclete to Paris I was distraught, sad, depressed and taciturn. If my father had asked me what my mother had wanted of me, he would have had a nasty sneer as answer. He did not seem to be interested.

We arrived at Paris late one afternoon, when the reddish sunset burned on the walls. The fortifications of the town of King Louis’s town were all but formidable. They were old and derelict, ruined in places, not high at all. Parts of walls to the left and right filled the view, but the walls were not defended by impressive towers and barbicans. This town could not be defended against a siege army; its fortifications were practically non-existent. And the town was bursting out of its walls. There were entire streets outside the city and new streets were being drawn. Still, it was an enormous agglomeration of buildings that I saw. What impressed me by Paris was its large number of houses and of people.

Paris was a town of more than a hundred thousand people, I guessed. It was the largest town I had seen so far and it bustled with activity. Not only were there very many fields and pastures around, with many people working on the land, but endless rows of carts drove in and out of the city to provide the burghers with all the produce they needed. We had to slow down our pace near the city and be part of the long queues of merchants, pedlars, artisans and peasants entering the city through the main gates along the few roads that led to the inner town. Abelard rode first for he knew the way best and he led us through the lanes, past the massive double gates that were heavily guarded with men wearing the badges with the stylised golden lilies of France.

The heart of Paris was on the Isle de la Cité, the island of the city, an island in the River Seine. The town had grown from that fortified island all around, on both banks of the Seine. There was good water and sources on the right bank, so that territory expanded quickest.

I hated Paris at once. Its small, crowded alleys were extremely dirty and smelled foully. Grimy water filled with excrements ran in the middle of almost all streets. The Parisians emptied their basins there of kitchen water and worse, of night soil. The city stank to the heavens. Nantes was a cleaner city, had larger streets and the fresh sea air swept through the town, blowing away the bad odours. Paris choked in its filth.

Abelard advanced slowly, barely able to direct his cart through the throngs of people in the streets, before and near the Isle. He stopped only when we arrived in front of the Palace of the Cité and the Notre Dame cathedral. We could sleep in a house of the cathedral school. Then we would ride on, the next day, to the Abbey of Saint Denis, to the north of Paris. We left our horses and cart in the stables of the cathedral school. My father entered the hostel to make arrangements for our stay. He knew the canons of the school. He found two rooms for us to sleep in that night. Then he took me by the shoulders and though I was exhausted, he guided me to the Notre Dame cathedral. Jacob wandered off to the Cité.

There was nothing spectacular about the basilica. It was not a very large church, dirty, lacking paint in many places, and in dire need of repair. If this was the main church of the King of France, then the Kingdom of France did not amount to much. My father told me there had been talk of constructing a new cathedral, but no bishop had had the courage and energy to undertake any works. In the meantime, repairs and particular embellishments were not being made. Still, the dilapidated old basilica continued to be the heart of the city. Many people were standing, kneeling, walking or praying in the dark church. A few masses were being sung. There were many chapels inside the building so that we had to fray ourselves a way in there too. The smoke of the candles and of the torches was thick. The noise of the prayers was like the humming of a beehive. The main altar was unimpressive. I was glad to leave.

My father wanted to talk to monks and teachers of the cathedral school. So I was left on my own and wandered through the streets of the Cité and along the quays, where at least there was some air. Many flags flew on the houses here, all red flags with a white boat under a band of blue with the golden lilies of France. Paris was a town that lived by its river. Many small, flat-bottomed boats loaded and unloaded goods here. I was put off by the horde of people along the water. Men called angrily at me when I strolled in their way. I realised with pain how much used I had been to the wide views

and solitude of the countryside of Le Pallet. I despised large towns. My heart sank when I reflected that I might have to live here, maybe somewhere in the palace of King Louis.

The following day we started very early and rode north, to Saint Denis. We left the city behind us, rode slightly west and arrived at the abbey before noon. The abbey lay in a very large clearing of the woods north of Paris. Meadows and fields surrounded the abbey. Here too, very many people cultivated grain crops and sheep and cows grazed peacefully in the landscape. We saw a few houses to the north of the abbey, houses that formed one street so that it was clear that a village was in the making near the abbey. We arrived slightly from the west, so passed the main façade of the abbey church. I was again amazed, as much as I had been at seeing the cathedral of Paris, for the abbey church seemed as old and neglected as the Notre Dame. The building was barely larger than a main chapel. I feared some of the walls might collapse, for so many cracks had developed in the old stones.

When we rode nearer, I saw that much repair work had already been done, however. The cracks were filled with new mortar. The façade was finely coloured, much gold paint having been used. At least here, works were on-going. A structure before the entrance had been demolished recently; heaps of stones lay before the church and old foundations were still visible. The doors were being enlarged. A new, larger building was being added in front and I could see the beginning of massive towers to the sides. Saint Denis Church was a construction site. The noise of stonecutters hammering on the white French stone was happy, but a nasty cloud of dust rose above the works. We rode on to the abbey, along the nave of the church. The monastery was composed of a series of large halls and houses around an wide cloister, which we could not see but imagined in the middle. We left our horses and cart in one of the stables and turned back west to enter the abbey. Jacob sought a place to sleep in one of the houses of the village. My father asked one of the monks for Abbot Suger and told we were expected. The monk brought us to the Abbot's room, which was in a large hall to the right of the cloister.

Suger stood behind a very large oak table in a great hall. The space was splendidly decorated with flags and banners, shields and tapestries. A multitude of candles burned in large chandeliers even though it was full daylight. I noticed two large striking golden crucifixes studded with gems, desks of finely carved wood and large chairs. I had at last some sense of grandeur in this part of France. Two walls were covered with wooden cupboards, filled with scrolls and vellums and also with silver chalices and golden plates. Against the other walls stood heavy chests, some of which with opened lids to show more scrolls. There were many sheets with drawings on the table, thrown one over the other. Suger was not a tidy man.

Abbot Suger was tall, as lean as my father but much more nervous. He moved continuously. He had very large, bushy black eyebrows and a long nose with wide nostrils, rosy cheeks and a whimsy beard that was merely short, badly shaven facial hair. The hair around his tonsure was unkempt or had been kempt in the morning but as he had the habit of running his fingers through it while he thought, it stood up in thistles on his head. He might have been a baker or a butcher, but he wore the grey robe of the monk, with a hood on his back and a plain brown leather belt around his

waist. When he darted from behind the table I noticed he had sturdy, heavy shoes on his feet. Suger was about the age of my father, nearing sixty years. He was the son of a minor knight and he had been raised in this abbey since the age of ten.

Suger embraced my father with much warmth and shook my hands. He said immediately he was very much occupied. He had so much to do! He did not ask us how our voyage had been. He showed us his drawings.

‘Look,’ he said, ‘I have very, very much work just now! I have been Abbot of Saint Denis for fifteen years. The old church is falling down on me. I was so occupied by the matters of the Kingdom and by my friend, King Louis the Fat – the father of our current King – that I had no time left to think of my church. Also, I worked for the abbey. Its affairs were in bad shape when I took over. You must have seen how many new fields we tilled here these last years! We won much land on the forest to feed more mouths. Have you seen the village being formed? We are at last thriving!’ He nudged my father as if he had said a naughty thing. ‘I finally scraped together enough money to repair the church. Well, oh, yes, the King has contributed well; after all, we keep his Oriflamme here and Saint Denis is his own church! At first I thought that a little mortar in the old stones, a little gold paint on the walls and on the façade would do. But it won’t do! It won’t do! The King needs more. France needs more. How can Louis be King and not have one of the finest churches in the Kingdom as his own? I am going to give that to him. Saint Denis must have a church worthy of its martyr. Have a look at my drawings! I have seen the new church of Saint Etienne at Sens. What splendour of new ideas have been realised in that building! I can do a lot more with the architectural concepts of Saint Etienne, though! I can form an entirely new kind of church, one that will embody the very writings of our Saint Dionysius! I have not enough money to build a new church and I am not patient enough to wait until I can build a new one. So. I will keep the old walls of the basilica. After all, these walls are from our very first Kings, so they deserve some respect and the Royal tradition will have to continue in my church. So I will strengthen the walls, then build upon them and around them and rise higher, much higher, into the skies! ‘

Abbot Suger stretched his arms upwards and my father and I innocently followed his movement with our eyes and looked to the ceiling of the hall.

‘I will build up, from the crypt to the summit of the vaults, with numerous pointed arches and columns. I will raise the transepts and build towers upon them. I will work in the nave and raise the ceiling high in the air with the ribbed vaults I have seen at Saint Etienne’s. We will have to support the walls on the outside with massive buttresses, for they might not be able to hold the added weight. I will first start on the west side, however, on the entrance. I will change the entire structure there, and construct a completely new block in front, to have splendidly decorated, magnificent doors, three entrances, three arches like the ancient Roman triumphal arches. I want to go up high, very high, and have two towers on the front. The portal will be adorned with statues and representations of Biblical stories. But I want finer statues and finer scenes than those of the church of Vézelay! Then I will add to the other end, to the east, and replace the old apse. I want the finest choir of France! It will be tricky to join these new parts with the old ones, with the existing hall in a new vault, but it can be done. I am sure of it! I will do away with all the chapels that obstruct the view in the nave, just keep one, long hall. We will bring radiating chapels in the ambulatory. And then I will build a new main altar of gold and gems, a huge altar! We will have a golden altar in the upper choir, and then a large cross studded with gems. I will bring

to Saint Denis more ornaments than the Hagia Sophia of Constantinople has treasures! I will fill my church with vessels of gold, dishes of silver, chandeliers and chancels with precious stones, with hyacinths, emeralds, rubies, topazes!’

Suger gesticulated with wide open arms while he told us about his project. He was inspiring. It was difficult not to be as enthusiastic as him. Here was somebody who had dreams, a vision of grandeur, a man who sought change and glory. He talked as if it was all so easy to do, so possible. I did not doubt he could accomplish his dreams. I saw finally somebody who impersonalised the energy I had remarked in the people of France, in the people of the countryside and the cities, where so much work was being done on houses, farms, fields, vineyards, rivers, marshes, and forests. I had a new hero. Suger epitomised the new France!

‘We will have large gilded doors in my new west block,’ he continued. ‘Above the doors there will be a large round opening in the walls, a huge opening, with fine stonework to hold it all together. I will put stained glass in that opening so that there will be a huge rose of light above the people that enter my church. When the sun will set in the afternoon, the rays will flood the nave with colours, and the people will see the light of God! It must be perfectly round, for Dionysius wrote that the soul has a circular movement. The rose will be the soul of the church. It will be harmonious and beautiful, in honour of the Beauty of God. Dionysius also wrote that art should tend to be supernatural. Supernatural! So we will have to build splendidly. With colours and light! We have to build high so that the devotees have a sense of heaven when they look upwards. Light must pervade the building. Dionysius told that the Light will lead us to the Beautiful and the Good. In the new choir, I will therefore pierce long, slender, high windows. The ribbed vaulting allows for that, you know. Then I will put stained glass in those windows too, so that God’s light, our spiritual light, will bring its rays of colours on the altar. As God fills our minds with spiritual light to drive out ignorance and errors, so the light of God will shine overwhelmingly here. Saint Dionysius showed us the way! And Saint John in his Revelation saw the new Jerusalem descend from the heavens! He saw it built of diamond and pure gold. The city walls were faced with precious stones: diamonds, turquoise, crystal, agates and rubies and sapphires, lapis lazuli, gold quartz, with malachite stones, topazes, emeralds, sapphires and amethysts and pearls over the gates. And the Lamb was a lighted torch in that city! So there must be light! And let nobody tell me we should not have precious stones in our church! God revealed to John that image of precious stones! God!’

While he talked, Suger jumped from one side of the table to the other, picking up and throwing down the vellums. He spoke excitedly and we could not but be enthralled by his plans. Who would not have been roused by his vision? We asked many questions. I wondered who Suger’s architects and master masons were. I was sure he had worked as much as these men at his new church. I thought at first that he was merely a visionary with grand views he would never be able to realise, but he had answers to all questions. He knew it could be done, and how. He would need ten years, maybe more. He cited us the amounts in pounds of the works. He knew how many limestones were needed, how many wooden beams would have to be used. Later, I heard that his masons and carpenters argued wooden beams large enough to span his nave simply did not exist. A carpenter told me Abbot Suger then took the

men to the woods, strode with upheld monk's robes through the dead branches, deep into the abbey's forest, and showed them the oaks that would do.

While we asked our questions he sometimes stood still, tugged his fingers through his hair and exclaimed, 'I should have thought of that, too! We will add columns here to create more space. More columns, otherwise that vault will not hold.' And so on.

It was difficult to imagine what church Abbot Suger would ultimately build, for plans do not represent well what would actually be constructed in length, breadth and height. Suger had a fine picture of the church in his mind. He asked his architects to draw plans accordingly. I wondered whether the architects could imagine from the plans what the new church would be. I guessed they could, though. I admire architects. I had learned geometry with Jacob, mathematics and grammar, but I was a man of the ground, of flat space. I had it difficult to imagine what an architectural structure could be in the three measures of space, based only on the plans of its foundations. Suger danced with space. By his words and explanations and by his gestures, which drew towers and walls in the air before our astonished eyes, we also caught a glimpse of what he desired so ardently to realise in stone and wooden beams. But I doubted we had exactly the same thing in mind as he, his vision undeniably far grander than ours.

Abbot Suger eventually calmed down and walked with us around the intimate cloister. The sun warmed even the colonnaded corridors around the green yard. Suger strode with large steps so that we walked several times round the yard. He stopped, walked on, explained, always with his two arms crossed on his back, and with us in tow. He chatted generously with my father. Abelard asked him whether he would come with us to Cluny after all, wondering about that since the Abbot was so occupied with his works.

'Oh, yes, of course,' Suger assured. 'I will leave my architects and masons and carpenters alone for a while. They have been grumbling behind my back that I exert too much power on them, that I do their work for them, that I am too authoritative. It will do them good to be on their own for a while. And it will be good for me, too. I need a vacation!'

Suger laughed out loud and I liked him the more, seeing he did not take himself too seriously. He was a man who could suddenly burst into a decent portion of self-derision.

Abbot Suger stopped and pushed a finger at my father's breast, saying, 'I know more or less what we are going to do at Cluny. I am the Counsellor of the King. I must know what happens in the Kingdom and elsewhere, for instance in Iberia, so I have a purpose by going to Cluny. Besides, I will love to pay a visit to my good friend, Peter the Venerable, the Abbot of Cluny. No harm can come to me from visiting a friend and hearing what happens in the world. But for you, my friend, this meeting can be dangerous. Do you realise that?'

My father was genuinely surprised. 'No,' he replied. 'Why would it be dangerous for me to talk with other men who seek God?'

'Aha,' Suger answered, never withdrawing his finger. 'But what God do these men seek? You are going to meet Jewish and Saracen men, the scorn of Christendom. They will talk to you about a God that is not ours, not of Jesus Christ. They will deploy their proofs of the existence of God and you will tackle a lot of subjects purely from the angle of reason, and reason alone. I do not fear the arguments. I fear the

results. Now, I do not fear much for I am fairly certain of your innocence and honesty, and I am rather certain that you will not reach far in understanding the immense mystery of God. Peter the Venerable is a very just, honest, honourable man and most understanding and forgiving. So I fear not Peter. You also invited Bernard de Clairvaux and Hildegard von Bermersheim, however. Hildegard is a true mystic person. She will react by emotions alone. The Lord only knows how she will react! Bernard of Clairvaux is an exalted man as much. He is intelligent and he has a practical mind, but he is neither patient enough nor provided with the power of abstraction and imagination to follow your arguments for long. He may be unable to grasp all your subtleties. He too may react emotionally and reject you for obscurity of thoughts. He is a holy man who breathes by faith and faith alone. He travels, but he is no man of the world. He is a zealot. He may refuse your theories and proofs, merely because he does not understand them and does not need them. Yet, he is a very powerful man in the church. He has the ear of the Pope and of the Pope's Legates, who are men like himself more than like me or like Peter the Venerable. Bernard cannot touch me, the Counsellor of the King, and he cannot touch Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, and the head of hundreds of abbeys. But he can touch you and break you. He can do you a lot of harm. Have you given that any thought?'

'Yes,' my father answered, frowning. 'I have given no thought on all that Bernard could do to me but I have reflected on his reactions. I believe you are right. But I could not possibly exclude Hildegard and Bernard, the greatest Christians of France and Germany. I could not exclude them from the unique chance of meeting the greatest thinkers of our time. We could not refuse to see these men and, of course, I insisted as much to meet them. I was ready to travel to Iberia. But they, too, wanted to learn, so they proposed to come to Cluny. Cluny's fame has reached them. The Saracens and Jews are theologians, philosophers but not zealous radicals. They are men of reason. They approach God from the side of reason. They are diplomats, physicians, judges in their country. They will not be offensive. They will not insult Christendom and we will not provoke them.'

My father paused, and then continued, 'I have given this in God's hands, Abbot Suger. I pray God every day that something good might come out of our talks. Imagine: the best of knowledge of our own lands and the best of knowledge of the South and East will come together to discuss the old texts of the Greek philosophers, of the Arabian Mutakallimun, their schools of theology, and of Jewish and Christian thinkers, with the sole aim to understand the nature of God and the nature of His creation. By putting together all our knowledge, our books, our ideas, our hypotheses, and by seeking solutions together, we cannot but get a lot closer to a true comprehension of God.'

'My friend,' Suger sighed. He put his hand on my father's shoulder, 'I have a cathedral of stone and light in my mind. You have another kind of cathedral in your mind. You have not a very clear image, I surmise, of what my cathedral could be like. And I, I have no image of your ultimate construction either. But the construction of new cathedrals is our destiny, it seems. I will make sure that my cathedral does not collapse. If it does nevertheless collapse, I will take my stones and build differently, until the cathedral rises anyway. Take care! See to it that your cathedral does not cave in, for you may not get the opportunity to gather your arguments, adapt them, and build another image of God. Peter the Venerable and I will do what we can to protect

you. But I repeat: take care! You are impetuous. You are a proud man. Do not force Bernard de Clairvaux and Hildegard in direct confrontation. You may not win! And if you win, against their feelings, their reaction might be terrible. They might seek to annihilate you, to drive you out of the Church.'

My father nodded. His temper and the obsessive belief in his own arguments would lose him in the end. At a certain point, pushed by Bernard or by his own vanity to reveal his wildest ideas, my father might state and write things that could be considered as heresy against the church, even if true, even if not heresy in reality. I was certainly not the man able to stop my father from fulfilling his destiny. I was nothing more than a wasp to my father's attention and respect, and not a scholar but a dumb knight. We walked on in an awkward silence, every man caught in his own thoughts. To break the silence I asked, 'what subjects, then father, will be discussed at Cluny?'

Abelard drew a piece of parchment from a hidden pocket in his monk's robe and read, more to Abbot Suger than to me, 'I have here a preliminary list. I would like to talk about: the proof of the existence of God; the relation of the attributes of God to his essence; the nature of matter and form or substance and accident of objects and thoughts; the createdness or uncreatedness of the scriptures; and the justice of God versus the freedom of man. We will see whether we will get to additional points for we have only two weeks at Cluny.'

Abbot Suger sighed again and shook his head, 'my friend, I admire you so much. Yet, often I wonder what God's aim was with bringing you to us. You might as well show us glimpses of heaven as of hell with that list!'

We stopped marching in the cloister of the Abbey of Saint Denis. Abbot Suger said he had to return to his duties. He had arranged for us to leave on the third day. We would not go by boat, though that way was fastest. Suger said he had no fine relays when we would have to march from one watercourse to the other. We would travel by land. He would ride in a cart and my father could ride with him. We would be accompanied by five men-at-arms and two monks. We would thus form a small company of over just ten men, well enough to fend off stray bandits. We would travel fast, riding in long stretches from one monastery to the other and journey in the straightest possible line to Cluny.

We had a fine stay at Saint Denis. I looked around at the works of the cathedral and spoke with the masons. They lived with their families in small houses, mere hovels, to the north of the monastery. They were a cheerful lot. They had experienced many hardships, though. They wandered from construction site to construction site in search of work. All were very happy to be at Saint Denis. Abbot Suger treated them decently and Suger knew their work. The works here would last long, giving them time to finally settle down with their families. They laughed when they told me how often Suger meddled with their masonry, told them to put stones otherwise. Sometimes walls tumbled down because Suger had not been experienced enough. Suger listened to them however, increasingly so. They said Abbot Suger had much money, enough to work for twenty years at the church and the monastery, so they were satisfied of having found work that lasted.

Our little expedition set off indeed three days later. We travelled rapidly at first and even slept and ate in the forests. After four days, our party entered Burgundy. Our pace slackened then because Abbot Suger wanted to visit abbeys and churches. It started at Sens. Bishop Henri Sanglier had started a few years earlier to build a new cathedral there. He had demolished the old church of Saint Etienne and built new on the same site. Suger had already seen the works briefly in the past and had much been surprised at the new concepts of constructing very high and light walls. He wanted to see more, and how the works had advanced. We lingered on three days at Sens alone. Bishop Henri showed us the plans of the cathedral and Suger interrogated the architects, spoke to the masons and climbed the rickety wooden stairs of the works to the top of the walls. He looked in detail at how the pointed arches of the vaults were assembled. I went up with Suger, as curious as the Abbot. It was quite a spectacle to see the Abbot scoop up his monk's robe as high as his knees to climb like a rat, so high, and to such perilous places, that I feared for his life. I am not very scared of heights, but when I saw the ground, so far below, through a few bending and thin wooden planks only, quite far spaced one from the other, barely strong enough to hold our weight, I had to swallow my spit multiple times and I descended backwards, with a very dry mouth.

From Sens, Suger wanted to go by the town of Auxerre, to the Cluniac priory of Saint Germain. We stayed a day. From there we travelled slowly to La Charité-sur-Loire, where an enormous church was in the making. Then we went to Paray-le-Monial. The men-at-arms rode on horses and so did I, as well as Jacob. We did not know the way. All the time Suger shouted from his cart to take to the right or to the left. He had no chart. He knew the roads of France by heart. Suger followed the line of Cluniac daughter houses, I remarked. He avoided Citeaux monasteries. I concluded he was not such a good friend of Bernard de Clairvaux, the main Cistercian monk, after all.

At Paray-le-Monial I walked with Suger among the works and the buildings. Here too, the monastery was being rebuild and enlarged. It seemed to me the whole of France was a construction site! There, at Paray, Abbot Suger asked me what I wanted to do in life. I should have waited, but since he asked me so candidly I reddened and answered him in the like. I told him about Marie. I explained I had always wanted to be a knight and would like to serve King Louis. Suger looked at me, surprised. He said, 'I thought you wanted to be a theologian like your father!'

He smiled, 'I believe your father would want you to be a theologian, and your mother too. Abelard thinks you are quite capable for it. Your old Jewish friend thinks so too. A remarkable man that Jacob is! Almost a Christian!'

Suger stepped along, then stopped, turned to me and said, 'my son, stick to me! You might serve Louis as well as me or vice versa. Walk with me on this journey and stick by me! I need to know you better, but I am pleased with you. I promise I will help you.'

Abbot Suger saw the relieve on my face and the sudden happiness in my eyes. He continued, 'aha! What power love has! That is good, my son. The Christ is love! Do not think that because I am a monk I deny people love. I am a monk, because I have never known being otherwise, but the true love between a woman and a man is God-given too. Love, my son, but respect your Marie, like the church ordains! And what a beautiful name she has, hasn't she? Could that be a sign of God? Come with me!'

And Abbot Suger made me happy in a way he would not have understood, for he had called me ‘son,’ which nobody had done before, and when we walked his hand did not leave my shoulder. Which astonished my father when he saw us thus entering the abbey.

We arrived at Cluny from the North, from over the low hills, and saw the vast complex of the abbey and the town below us. It was a fine, fresh, sunny day. The air was cool with a slight breeze on the top of the hills. We could even distinguish the crowds around the abbey and on the roads leading to the town, as the sunlight revealed them to us clearly. I was on foot then, holding my horse at the reins, and walking with Abbot Suger. He explained to me what Cluny represented.

‘The abbey of Cluny has been founded about two hundred years earlier, here, in Burgundy, not far from the town of Macon.’
Suger laughed, because he said the monks had chosen the site because Burgundy wine was the best of France. I grinned at that, for I did not believe him, of course.
‘The Abbots of Cluny reformed monastic life, somewhat to rules laid down by Saint Benedict of Aniane. Young men of important families were drawn towards the innovation of spirituality, the promise of energetic work and the fame of the abbey. Cluny was an extraordinary well organised abbey, which had had outstanding Abbots. They attracted the finest young sons of noble families. When the abbey had too many monks, monks were sent out to build other abbeys.’ In our time, Cluny had thus founded over three hundred priories.

Cluny’s power and influence were created by the new abbeys. With each new abbey the power grew. The Abbots of Cluny jealously guarded the allegiance of the new monasteries and priories. All daughter houses of Cluny accepted as their head the Abbot of Cluny. Cluny’s daughter houses were abbeys and priories, said Suger.
‘Abbeys have an Abbot who is lord and master in his monastery. All monks of the abbey must obey the Abbot. But Cluny only had Abbots in its daughters in the beginning. After a while, Cluny only founded priories, daughters without an Abbot, and the lord and master of the priories was the Abbot of Cluny! About thirty years ago Pope Paschal II – a Pope from Cluny of course – even decreed that the priories that had not yet an Abbot would never have one, which applied also to the newer houses founded since that decree. Cluny is thus a formidable power in the church. Also, the Abbot of Cluny depends from no Bishop! He depends only from the Pope, directly. That was decreed by Pope Gregory V and again by John XIX. The Abbots of Cluny have been diplomats and solved disputes between Emperors and Popes. Cluny has given Catholicism three Popes: the formidable Saint Gregory VII, who had fought Emperors and King for supremacy of the church, Urban II and Paschal II.’

More importantly still, the relics of Cluny were the most powerful in Christendom!
‘Look at the badges of Cluny on those large flags,’ indicated Suger. We saw monstrously large flags above the town. ‘The badge of Cluny is two keys in saltire with the wards upwards and outwards and with within the keys a sword in pale argent, on a red background! That is because Cluny owns relics of Saint Peter and Saint Paul! The keys are for Peter, the sword for Paul. Now, I ask you, Daniel, who would dare to

have such two keys in its banner, except for the Pope? Only Cluny! Yet, the Abbots of Cluny have mostly been very wise men.’

The current Abbot of Cluny was Peter the Venerable, who had been Abbot for about as long as Abbot Suger at Saint Denis, for over fifteen years. The two men knew each other well.

Cluny’s authority had been challenged, however. About forty years ago, a number of monks of the Abbey of Molesmes, their Prior Aubry with Robert de Molesmes and Etienne Harding, an English ecclesiastic, left their monastery and founded a new one at the site of Citeaux, also in Burgundy, in a wilderness of forests and swamps, somewhat to the north of Cluny, defying the powerful order of Cluny. They wrote new charters and preferred more ascetic rules of spirituality, austere devotion, more dedication to God, hard work, to live in abbeys and churches devoid of decorum. The supremacy of the Abbot of Cluny was rejected in favour of an expansion of monasteries that had their own Abbots each, each Abbot lord and master in his monastery. The monks of Cluny wore black robes. The monks of Citeaux dressed in coarse linen, which was almost white, to indicate purity of the mind. About fifteen years after the foundation of Citeaux, now twenty-five years ago, a young knight, Bernard, arrived there with thirty companions. The knights became monks but left Citeaux some time later to found a new abbey in the Champagne region, closer to Paris than either Citeaux or Cluny: at Clairvaux. Soon, Bernard, now called Bernard de Clairvaux, proved to be a formidable man, the true leader of the Cistercian order, especially as Etienne Harding, Abbot of Citeaux, had died a few years ago and was not followed up by as great a leader as he had been. Under Bernard’s impulse Citeaux and Clairvaux founded tens, then hundreds of daughter houses, but each monastery had its Abbot and only loosely owed allegiance to Citeaux. This fact was of course a major cause of its success. Bernard de Clairvaux alone had already founded over a hundred daughter abbeys.

About fifteen years ago, Bernard de Clairvaux had written a letter to his friend Guillaume, Abbot of Saint Thierry near Reims, in which he had attacked severely the order of Cluny, and also, indirectly, Abbot Suger of Saint Denis. So I understood finally where there was no love lost between Suger and Peter the Venerable on the one side and Bernard on the other. Bernard de Clairvaux wrote what he himself called an apologia in defence of his ideas about the Order of Cluny. Guillaume had asked Bernard to refute the rumours that Bernard opposed the Cluniac monks. In the first and longest part of his letter therefore, the leader of Clairvaux noted nothing but praise over the existence of the Order of Cluny.

Suger told, ‘He could not have been a better politician and flatterer. Bernard’s second part was quite different however. The Cluniac monks ate and drank too much. They used fat on their vegetables, ate too much meat and drank too much wine, even of the strongest brand. The Cluniacs wore not robes of coarse linen but of coloured silk, and furs. Bernard reproached the monks for decorating their churches with paintings, which diverted the pious from spiritual devotion. He did not like the golden and silver chandeliers used in the abbey churches. He chastised the Abbots for travelling with magnificent horses and fine gear and with many servants wearing their hair long. He wrote he saw an Abbot with a suite of sixty horses, an Abbot who resembled a lord of a castle or the governor of a province, not a shepherd of Christ.’

Suger grinned to me, ‘that last remark was on me. Bernard did see me with sixty horses. That was in Paris. Now, try you to impress the Counts and Dukes of France while walking humbly on foot behind the King’s suite, dressed only in a grey monk’s robe! You would have no authority at all over those bloodthirsty thieves and murderers! I would have been called an ignorant, foolish wizard! When I travel alone, I have not a large suite of horse riders, such as on our voyage. But when I have to show me off in Paris at the side of the King, in a formal procession, then I have to dress and ride like a Royal Counsellor would!’

Suger paused, and then continued, ‘moreover, Bernard’s apologia was written just before Peter the Venerable’s accession as Abbot. Peter’s predecessor indeed slackened Benedict’s rules. Peter organised immediately for more austerity. Peter called together all the main monks of Cluny. Over twelve hundred monks answered his call. They decided to live by stricter rules than before. But Bernard’s critics came public and stuck. Finally, Bernard induced in 1132 Pope Innocent II to declare Citeaux’ entire independence from Cluny, the last open insult, although Peter the Venerable never claimed supremacy over the Order of Citeaux.’

Nevertheless, despite its decline in sending out monks and founding new abbeys, Cluny formed still the largest order of abbeys in Christendom. Due to its centralised organisation it exerted far more direct power than Citeaux. So I expected to see the largest monastery of Christendom vast and splendid. The many buildings in the immense compound and town that lay majestically below us in the wide valley proved it to be so.

We entered Cluny Abbey from the north. We had to ride all along a high, long, well-maintained, interminable wall to the south side, where the main entrance of the monastery was. Jacob left us there. He was a Jew and somewhat reticent to enter the abbey. He would find quarters in a hostel in the adjacent town.

We entered the complex via the Porta Meridiana, the massive main gates, where we announced ourselves to the monks and the guards that checked on people that wanted to enter the compound. We were allowed to ride through the gates into a vast paved courtyard. A monk of Cluny accompanied us. He made us leave our horses and cart to the stables, which stood immediately at our left side. There, novices took care of them and led the horses to clean places. The arched, stone stables were longer and larger here than Duke Conan’s stables. I had not eyes enough to take in all the outlay of the place.

The monk then took us on foot straight on, through a mass of people that walked in the courtyard. We went on directly to the end of the square, where the hostel was. While we walked I saw to my right the steps of the dais and above the dais huge, high, enormous, the church of Saint Peter and Paul of Cluny. I was looking sideward all the time, completely subdued by the sensation of the immensity of the church. My father pushed me through the door of the hostel so that I nearly stumbled over the steps of the entrance. Another monk assigned us rooms. I was to live with my father in a small monk’s cell on the first floor. From a small window I had a view over the crowded courtyard, where monks and pilgrims, knights and common men walked to and from the Abbey Church. My father wished to rest, but I was anxious to explore the abbey, so I descended the stairs, to meet Abbot Suger who had had the same idea as I. Abbot Suger accompanied me. We went out of the hostel and turned left.

We stopped at the foot of the dais and looked at the gigantic building. Cluny's church was the largest of Christendom. It could easily hold the church of Saint Denis plus the Notre Dame cathedral of Paris inside. It was a basilica, originally, but large transepts had been added. The enormous gates were flanked by two massive square towers. We stood some distance from the church, so I counted six more towers in my view. All these towers were high, elegant but massive, built in stone, with grey and blue stone roofs. I saw tens of arched windows. The gates were arched. Carved statues adorned the thick, heavy curves and also above the oak doors was a carved scene of many figures. God the Father and the Virgin Mary throned there, but I could not quite make out the other scenes of intertwined plants, animals and figures. The statues were coloured, too, so that the entire entrance was a marvel of hues to welcome the people that entered the nave.

We walked slowly in the church. I had expected to see a vast space immersed in diffused light, to enter a vast and silent hall where devotees would be impressed by the spirituality of the place, like I had seen when I had entered churches of Brittany. Instead we walked into a hall that was over-crowded with people. We had at times to push our way through, to the other end. Hundreds of voices sang Gregorian hymns so that the church was filled with an overwhelming but indistinct atmosphere of chants. While we advanced we heard psalms sung every few steps. There were tens of chapels in the church, and people prayed each chapel. Several masses were being held at the same time. The chapels obstructed the view and hid for the largest part the vastness of the basilica. I had to look upwards to see the enormous round-arched vault and so obtain an idea of how immense the inner space was. There was much light in the church, but most of the light came not from the sun but from hundreds of wax candles and torches flaming in the chapels. A dense, grey haze, hung in the space, probably from the many candles smoking greasy grey fumes, and from the numerous incense burners used in the chapels. The walls were covered with mural paintings, with scenes from the Evangelists and the Bible. The square and round columns were tinted too, many with spiralling motives, not one column decorated with the same pattern. Banners stood and hung on all sides. The church was an explosion of colours. Beneath our feet, the entire floor was paved with finely decorated tiles, also of different colours, though mostly in brown earthenware.

There were but few benches in the church. People stood and walked, prayed, knelt, participated in the masses in the side chapels, or simply walked, trying to understand the scenes of the paintings. We passed the main transept. This alone, its wings on either side of the nave, could hold Saint Denis Church entirely. Outside, I had seen three colossal towers above this transept: one in the middle and two towers on either side. The middle tower was square, and so were the two other towers, but these had octagonal second towers above them, finely lined with rows of arched windows. The middle tower was so high that I looked into the sky and felt dizzy when I looked with my head in my neck, up and up and up. At the end of the transepts yet more towers threw upwards their vertical lines, but these structures were smaller so that I had not seen them from the outside, a square tower and a round one at either side. These too were filled with chapels. We walked on, past the first transept, to discover a second, smaller transept. Thus the church had the pattern of a cross but a cross with two arms. The second transept proved to be another prodigious space, with one more tower in the middle and high edifices on either side. Beyond this transept stood the main altar. Above this altar a half-dome had been built, entirely decorated with an enormous

painting of God the Father as the Pantokrator, the Creator of the Universe, flanked by Saint Peter and Saint Paul. We walked around the altar to find six round chapels beyond, all domed like the main altar.

I walked back with Abbot Suger to the first transept. We did not speak, just looked, awed and abashed by the atmosphere and the vastness of the place. Suger walked in the south transept and went through a door to the cloister. Hooded monks passed silently in the colonnaded cloister corridors around a green yard. We went to the left, past the chapter hall where Suger told me the meetings would probably take place, past a parlour. Beyond the chapter hall was an oratory, chapel or oratory of Saint Mary and beyond that, Suger explained, were the infirmaries. We did not enter these but Suger lingered in the arched chapter hall, probably thinking of how the discussions would be held in here. Suger then stepped into a low door and showed me the Camera where the monks worked, and we went upstairs to the scriptorium. About twenty monks sat at wooden benches, writing in books. A little further was a room which kept hundreds of these manuscripts, the abbey's library. The names of the books were written on wooden tablets which hung to one side. We left the Camera building and pursued our walk in the cloister. On the side opposite the doors we had come through lay a vast refectory, all along one side of the cloister. Suger told me beyond the refectory lay another courtyard, a secondary cloister, the baths, latrines, the sleeping quarters, and the bakery. On the west side of the cloister we entered the kitchen and the storeroom cellars. Suger had until now entered the rooms far, without being embarrassed; here a monk protested against our intrusion on these working rooms where many people already ran in each other's way, so we receded back into the cloister. Suger told me about many more buildings inside the walls of Cluny, of the vast cemeteries, the courtyards with barns for straw and hay, the many folds for cattle, the granaries, even a house where cheese and butter was made. I was genuinely awed by the grandeur of the site.

We walked back on our steps through the south transept, along the chapels, and left the church. When we passed through the doors, to the outside, the light of the sun fell on me like a hammer and blinded me. I staggered down the stairs of the dais. When we were almost at courtyard level, back in the central yard, aside our hostel, I got suddenly dizzy. The colours shifted around me and all the forms went to a haze. I stumbled and fell with one knee on the ground, supporting myself only with one arm on the cold stones of the stairs. I drew my sword from its scabbard, stuck it with might between two stones of the yard's pavement and leaned my head against the cross of the hilt. I grabbed the sword with both hands, cutting my palms on the edges so that rivulets of blood dripped along the blade. I don't remember how long I stayed that way. I lost for a while all sense of time and space.

I came to myself only when Abbot Suger tugged at my shoulder and shook me to sense.

I heard him say, 'are you all right, Daniel? What happened?'

I hesitated, let go of the sword, looked waveringly at Suger and answered, 'yes, Father, I am fine now.' I wanted to stand up, but had to stay knelt, the heaviness in my limbs still paralysed me.

'What happened?' Suger insisted.

I had to wait to let the dizziness withdraw. I could see the yard clearly now. I waited some time, then replied, looking at the Abbot, 'I saw a terrible scene, Father. First, I

saw a finely dressed, elegant, friendly, handsome young man arrive to me. The man told me to follow him, always, but I was reticent. He said that if I followed him I would receive wealth, honour and fame. He beckoned me with his hand and showed me myself as a knight dressed in a splendid white surcoat with the big red cross of the Templars. I wore a long sword in one hand and a turreted helmet in the other. Still I was reticent. He beckoned me, showing me treasures of gold and precious stones, and people applauding. I still did not move. Then he showed me Marie, almost naked. I swear, father, that I never saw Marie naked. We have been chaste at Provins. The man beckoned and beckoned, but I refused to go forward to him. I had it cold, so very cold! Then the man stepped forward to me, and suddenly I saw Marie holding her arms up, high, but she was enveloped in flames. She burnt and I saw her flesh melting and bursting into bubbles, then turning to black as charcoals. It was horrible! The man stepped through the flames, and through Marie, and still he advanced on me until I could smell his breath. His breath was sulphur and dung. Then I felt you pulling at my shoulder and all disappeared.'

Abbot Suger looked at me in horror and pain. He was transfixed. Then he said, 'who are you, Daniel? What are you? Do you realise what you have seen? You saw the devil Satan, my son. Christ would have shown as the Man of Sorrows, crowned with thorns and suffering. How dare he, the devil, appear in this sacred precinct, this Holy Abbey, within the walls of the very centre of our spiritual world?'

Suger's lips thinned in a line of anger. He knelt beside me in the yard and despite the people that looked at us in curiosity, he shouted out loud, 'Vade retro Satanas! Vade retro Satanas! Pater noster qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum, adveniat regnum tuum, fiat voluntas tuo sicut in caelo et in terra. Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie et dimmite nobis debita nostra, sicut et nos dimmittimus debitoribus nostris. Et ne nos inducas in tentationem sed libera nos a malo.'

Abbot Suger recited with a loud voice the 'Our Father' prayer in Latin with outstretched hands. Halfway, a second voice joined in with him. The people around us and I finished with a loud 'Amen.'

When Suger had finished the prayer, he stood up, drew me on my feet and looked at the stairs of the church, to the man who had recited with him. A monk stood there, above us, dressed in a grey-white coarse linen robe, cowl drawn over his head. I only saw burning eyes in a very pale face, a hooked nose, and a thin mouth. The monk pushed his hood back on his shoulders with one hand; the other hand held a large, wooden crucifix. He was tall and imposing, a man of authority, used to command and to be listened to with reverence.

He said, 'well, Abbot Suger! We meet in the strangest of places! What happened here? I was inside the church but felt I had to go out. I grabbed a crucifix, why I don't recall. I felt coldness in my bones despite the warmth of the sun and I was suddenly very much afraid. Afraid! I! I felt the presence of the Great Seducer. And what do I see here at the dais? Abbot Suger crying out loud against the devil! Why is there blood on that young man's sword? What happened?'

Abbot Suger did not answer, turned to me and his eyes told me to remain silent. Then he turned again, to the monk and addressed him as well as me, 'my son, meet Bernard, the Abbot of Clairvaux.'

He spoke only to Bernard then, ‘greetings, Bernard. How are you? My young friend here had a spell of dizziness. He was suddenly afraid and fell. All is right now, however.’

Bernard looked suspiciously at us and he remained quizzical. He watched with some sarcasm as I painfully withdrew my sword from between the stones of the yard. He looked at my wounded hands. He didn’t believe a word of what Suger had told him. He knew more had been going on, strange things.

Yet, he didn’t probe further and let it go. He smiled, descended the stairs and hid the crucifix in the folds of his robe. ‘Yes,’ he said and grinned, ‘I wonder what they burn for incense inside that church! One is easily overwhelmed by the fumes and the thick atmosphere in there. I must forbid the use of excessive incense in my churches, too.’ He clapped his hands together, looked around as if he was relieved of seeing calm people around, and still looked inquisitively at us, especially at me, knowing that a lot more had been going on than Suger would acknowledge. A sarcastic twitch appeared on his lips but stopped almost instantly - not rapidly enough for me not to have noticed, though.

‘Well,’ he said, seeing how many people had now gathered around us, ‘if nothing serious happened here we should go to our quarters.’ He took us both by the shoulders and drew us along. We needed to hold our shoulders, all three together, for none of us was too good on his legs. Suger and I accompanied Bernard to the hostel, where apparently he also had a room. Inside the hostel we did not say a word, and split.

The meetings of scholars in the abbey of Cluny did not take place for another two weeks. Only then did all the hosts arrive from outside France. I finally heard from my father and from Jacob who all the people were, the theologians and philosophers, who would engage in discussions at Cluny.

Among the Christians were the Abbots Suger of Saint Denis and Counsellor of the King of France, Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux and Abbot Peter the Venerable of Cluny. These were theologians and Princes of the Christian church. Bernard had insisted that also the only woman present would be allowed, Hildegard von Bermersheim vor der Höhe. Hildegard was the former companion of Jutta of Sponheim (Jutta had died a few years earlier), sister of the Count of Sponheim. She was a scholar and magistra, teacher and leader of the female community of the Benedictine abbey of Disibodenberg near Odernheim and Mainz in Germany, not so far also from Koblenz. My father and Abbot Suger were near sixty years old, Bernard was about fifty and Hildegard around forty.

Also invited was a German Bishop called Otto von Freisingen. Otto was a Cistercian monk and a man with a remarkable past. He was the son of the Austrian Viscount Leopold II of Babenberg. His mother, Agnes, was an Imperial Princess, daughter of Emperor Henry IV. His uncle, Henry V, had been Emperor and his younger half-brother Conrad III was King of Germany. Otto had been educated at the Abbey of Klosterneuburg near Vienna but in 1126 – merely aged thirteen years – he travelled to Paris to study there. He studied with Hugues de Saint Victor, a friend of Bernard de Clairvaux. My father had met Otto in Paris, and knew him quite well. About six or seven years ago, Otto declared his studies in Paris finished. He had the intention to return to Klosterneuburg and set on his way with fifteen clerics. He stayed at the

Cistercian abbey of Morimond in Burgundy while under way, and Otto was so impressed by the spirituality of the site that he decided to remain in the monastery. All of his fifteen companions became Cistercian monks. A year and a half ago, Otto, belonging to the highest nobility of Germany, had been the evident choice as Abbot of Morimond. He had been Abbot of Morimond only a few months now. A year ago he had been called to the Bishopric of Freisingen in Bavaria. Bernard of Clairvaux had asked for Otto to be present at Cluny, probably because Otto was a convinced Cistercian and a useful, powerful ally. My father knew Otto to be intelligent, brilliant, handsome, honest, and to be one of the most promising Bishops, theologians and scholars of Germany.

Peter the Venerable had foreseen to have several translators. He brought with him Robert of Ketton, an English monk, and Hermann of Carinthia, a German scholar, who had been together on travels to Byzantium, the Holy Land and even Damascus. They knew the Arabic language. Robert had studied at the cathedral school of Paris and knew my father. From Italy had come Gerard of Cremona, known to Abbot Suger, an eminent Lombardian scholar and a man who knew Arabic also. Gerard of Cremona was somewhat older than twenty-five; Robert of Ketton was around thirty years old, Hermann about forty.

From the Jewish community in Iberia arrived the philosopher Joseph ben Jacob ibn Zaddik, Dayyan or Judge of the Jewish community of the town of Cordoba, who was about fifty years old. He was accompanied by Judah Halevi, a great physician, a poet, a man who lived mainly in Toledo but who had also been to Cordoba and knew Joseph ibn Zaddik. Another Jew of Toledo was Abraham ibn Ezra, who had travelled much, had not done much work in philosophy. He was a friend a Judah Halevi, however, and had asked to join more by curiosity than by interest. Lastly, Abraham ibn Daud was still a young man of about thirty years old, also from Toledo, and also a friend of Judah Halevi though he had totally different philosophical opinions than his friend.

Two men represented the Saracen Muslims. Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Tufail was the full name of the only true Saracen philosopher that came to Cluny. He was a physician in Granada and he had contacts with the Jewish doctor Judah Halevi, who proved therefore to be somewhat the central person that everybody knew. Ibn Tufail was about thirty years old. With him came a Saracen boy of thirteen years old. He was from Cordoba and a student of ibn Tufail. He was studying to become a physician like his master, and the latter had convinced the parents of the boy - which much difficulty – to let his pupil accompany him. There were disorders in Cordoba at that time, and the boy’s father was Chief Judge of the town, so the parents had let the boy go with ibn Tufail for a few months. The lad’s full name was Abu al-Walid Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Rushd. Ibn Rushd, despite his young age, had already mastered particular subjects of philosophy.

The men arrived together one evening and received lodgings in the town. Bernard of Clairvaux had insisted they should not sleep in the abbey, but there were hostels as fine as the abbey’s in the houses around the Christian compound, so this point was not so difficult to solve. Peter the Venerable also had the Christian translators sleep outside the abbey.

The arrival of the Jews and Saracens caused quite a sensation in the town of Cluny, for they wore other clothes than the people of Cluny were used to. Yet, they were as dirty from the road as we had been. They had come by boat to Marseille; from there they had travelled northwards along the Rhône valley to Cluny. They were not poor men, but wealthy physicians and judges who were regularly called in to serve the courts of their princes. So they were well dressed and had fine horses. They were armed too, and arrived with armed servants on elegant horses. More importantly, they drew along five mules laden with books!

Otto von Freisingen added his own surprise to the Cluny talks. He had not travelled from Bavaria immediately to Cluny. He had visited Paris first and conferred at the Abbey of Saint Victor. With him, from that abbey, he brought the monk and scholar Hugues de Saint Victor, his former teacher. Hugues now headed the abbey school. Hugues was a German too, born in Halberstadt. His real name was Hugh of Blankenburg. Like my father he should have been a Lord, Lord of Blankenburg, but his parents had sent him as a young boy to the Abbey of Saint Pancras in Hamersleben, an Augustinian House, and he had stayed there. Contemplative life at Saint Pancras pleased Hugues so much that he became a monk. Hugues's uncle Reinhard, the Bishop of Halberstadt, proposed him to travel to Paris when he was eighteen years old to study at Saint Victor. Hugues quickly promoted to be the Master of the school. Hugues was a very agreeable monk and a true philosopher, a scholar in bone and marrow, like my father. The name of Saint Victor made my father bounce, because that monastery and school had been founded by his erstwhile scholarly enemy Guillaume de Champeaux. Yet, Hugues and Abelard came along well.

The meetings were to take place in the chapter hall. There were several entries to the cloister and from the cloister one entered the hall. One came into the cloister normally from the church, but Peter the Venerable allowed everybody exceptionally to pass the kitchens, which the Jews, Saracens and I liked particularly for we could snatch a plum, a piece of bread, grapes, or cookies on our way through. We made a sport of the grabbing, laughing our way amongst the brother-cooks. We were not very popular in Cluny's kitchens.

There were benches and tables for us in the chapter hall but we often walked around and talked while moving. I had wondered whether I would really participate since neither my father nor Jacob told me what to do. From the first day on, however, Abbot Suger took me with him and told me to stay close.

Suger talked often and fervently with me alone about the discussions of the day. We would stroll together in the gardens of the abbey or between the barns, looking at the workmen. Suger liked that. We also walked outside the gates and explored the town. Suger could not sit and talk; he moved around, his eager eyes darting from one point to the other, always astonished at a finding a new wonder of nature or of man, however meek. He had a rare talent to discover an object in which he noted a strangeness that other people would lack to notice totally, ever. He was surprised at the little things of the world, as if he discovered them for the first time like a newborn child. He taught me to have a keen eye for details. Much later, when something

particularly striking in a town or landscape caught my attention, although nobody else cared, I would think ‘Suger would have noticed this too!’

Suger asked my opinion on one or other point or we just chatted. I became counsellor to the counsellor, but understood that Suger was delighted at having me by his side mostly so that he could think aloud. I was pretty sure he talked to himself aloud in his study at Saint Denis.

I cannot recall everything that was argued about at the meetings. I would need as many days to present an account of the proceedings as they lasted at Cluny, for the new ideas were presented at a tantalising pace. I remember snatches of discussions, the flow of proofs and inferences to come to proofs. I remember best of course the subjects that interested me most or that surprised me most. The meetings advanced our views on philosophy and theology in various ways. Proofs and reasoning were openly exchanged.

There were two clans at work. Bernard de Clairvaux sided with Hildegard and with Judah Halevi to emphasise the supremacy of faith above all reason. It was strange to see these three move closer, also physically, already at the first day. They were an odd group. I would not have thought it possible to have two Christians side with a Jew and a French monk side with a German nun as well as with an Iberian Jew. Later, they seemed not to leave each other’s side. When they had an urge to throw in an argument in favour of faith, they would look at each other to decide in a muted yet instantaneous understanding who would express himself.

The rest of us moved around; groups formed, broke up and formed anew. The most courteous without doubt was the Saracen, ibn Tufail. He would always emphasize, pray that arguments should remain positive and polite. He broke aggressive talk when my father did not react rapidly enough to smooth passions.

The Christians spoke Latin among each other and Hebrew with the Jews, though they had quite some difficulty in formulating their arguments exactly in those languages. The translators then entered the discussions to find the best word and phrase to render the argument. Ibn Tufail and the young ibn Rushd spoke Arabic, which was translated by Robert Ketton or Gerard of Cremona into Hebrew and Latin. I helped in that and drew amazement at that in the beginning. The men respected me then and I entered the conversation too, at times, without being told to stop. The advance was often slow, but steady.

The Saracens and Jews surprised us the second day by throwing about thirty books and heavy scrolls in Hebrew and Arabic on the table. They offered them to us, Christians, and asked no money for them. The eyes of my father and of Peter the Venerable, both very keen on texts, opened wide. Ibn Tufail presented books that were not known in France, books written by the best Muslim Persian philosophers of the previous age, books written by Abu Hamed Mohammad ibn Mohammad al-Ghazzali and Abu ‘Ali al-Husayn ibn ‘Abd Allah ibn Sina. They offered volumes not only on philosophy but also on medicine and the other sciences. They had brought manuscripts in Arabic and in Hebrew on the old Greek philosophers, such as the very original works of Aristotle. Peter the Venerable laid his hands on the papers and parchments immediately and took possession of them. He shoved them off to his library. He was truly moved by the gesture. He said he would take the Jews and Saracens to that library and he promised to copy any text they were interested in and

ship the copies to Cordoba and Toledo. Gerard of Cremona was to go with the men to the library, translate the titles and take note of what should be copied.

My father introduced the first meeting. He said, ‘dear and distinguished friends. Welcome in this fine chapter hall of the Abbey of Cluny. I thank Abbot Peter the Venerable for allowing us to use his sacred monastery. This is the first of our meetings. Why are we here in these holy premises? Man must aim to become like God as much as possible. So, man must imitate God and try to know what things are, what they are made off, how they behave and why they do so. We must learn in order to distinguish between Good and Evil, so as to do what is right in the eyes of God. This is our duty. If we do this duty and try ever to know our environment better, so will we receive our reward from God. Learning and philosophy are the ways to God. So let us work together in the following days and lay our knowledge open so that we might all benefit of the last advances in our learning. We will discuss our points of theory. In order to do this, we must remain courteous. I propose therefore that one scholar introduces a subject, whereupon the others – each on their turn – present their objections or agreements, so that we avoid discussions dominated by emotions, vituperate polemics, and that we ban insults.

I propose we start from a few simple concepts of our observation of the world. First, matter consists of substance and of form. This table is of wood, its substance, and it has the form of a table. All objects have substance and form. Secondly, form changes. One day the fathers of this monastery may cut up this table and make two tables of it, transforming the form of the object. Thirdly, forms change and everything is in transformation, in motion. This table may burn one day and thus be transformed. But every transformation and every motion needs a mover. Fourthly, man can have abstract thoughts about objects and generalise. Of differently shaped tables, large and small, we talk about the concept or idea “table,” as a generalisation. Whether this idea is merely an abstract generalisation in our mind or whether the universal ideas really exist is something we can debate about.’

I remember Joseph ben Jacob ibn Zaddik pleading, ‘there are many proofs of the existence of God! Hear my humble version. We know that substance and accident, or matter and form, exist. Either they have brought themselves into being or they were created by something. The former is impossible, for what brings something to exist must already be there at the moment of its creation, or not. If it exists it is already there. If it does not exist then it is nothing and nothing cannot do anything. So there must be something that brought the universe to be. That something we call God.’

The men started the discussions and proofs on the existence of God. I heard as many proofs as men were present.

Ibn Daud, the Jew, explained that God created matter, but immediately with form. Form, in his Aristotelian analysis, was the different phases into which matter transformed. For instance, when water was boiled its matter remained but its form changed. For ibn Daud only the combinations of matter and form existed, not one without the other, independently, contrary to what Plato thought. He repeated what my father had briefly touched on in his introduction. The change of matter and form ibn Daud called motion, any gradual change. The cause of the motions must be the forms, for the same matter could have different motions. Now, all motion – or change

– had a cause. A thing could not be the cause of its own movement, because a thing had to have the potential to change into another thing - whereas a thing that caused motion was actual in respect to the relation between the thing that was moved or transformed into another thing. So if a thing moved itself it would both be actual and potential, which was a contradiction. Every motion must have a mover. Ibn Daud also provided proofs that the universe could not be infinite, which others disagreed with.

The proof of the existence of God Ibn Daud provided was Aristotle's. A thing cannot move itself, he repeated. Everything that moves was moved by something else. An infinite chain of moving actions and causes is impossible. Something must exist that was not moved by something else. Also, a finite body cannot have infinite power. So God must be infinite, but infinite matter was impossible. So God could not be matter. Ibn Daud thus repeated some of my father's arguments. Ibn Daud said that God had created matter, but he gave no proof of that assertion. He tried. All things that exist have been created from something else. There can be no infinite chain in this. So there must be something that exists and existed and was not brought into existence by something else. That was God, God as the Creator. This God could be only one, not composite, for else its parts should have been created.

The men then debated in detail about his proof of the existence of God, based on the notion of motion. They arrived at the following.

Motion is readily observable, ibn Daud told. Motion of objects exists. Every motion had to have a mover, something that set the motion in action. This mover had to have another mover to set it going, and so ever on, which would lead to an infinite chain of movers, which would be impossible. All the motion on earth ends with the motion of heaven. The heavenly sphere must have a mover too. This mover could be outside the heavenly sphere or inside it.

If it was outside, it was either a body like the heavens, or an incorporeal thing, a separate intelligence.

If the mover was inside the heavens, the power might be a corporeal force or an incorporeal power.

So there were four possibilities.

It was impossible for the mover of the heavens to be a body external to the sphere, for then it would also be in motion and have another body to move it, which would again lead to an infinite chain, which was impossible.

An internal corporeal power inside the heavens was also impossible, for the heavenly sphere was finite and hence its power finite. So it could not move infinitely.

An incorporeal power inside the heavens was not possible either, for an incorporeal power – like a soul – would be in motion and that motion would stop and then the thing that set itself in motion would stop too.

So only one alternative remained, namely that an incorporeal power existed outside the heavens, which was not itself subject to motion. That power would be one, indivisible and unchangeable. That power would be God. Hence also, God would be one, incorporeal and unchangeable.

So God was unique and one, and for Ibn Daud God had no different forms or accidents. He was One. God had therefore no attributes. The attributes of God men spoke about merely indicated how the things we perceived and thought of were

derived from God but were human concepts. The attributes in the Bible must be understood metaphorically.

I also remember a further discussion on the nature of God.

My father said, ‘we can discuss for days on about God’s attributes. There are many schools and views on that subject. Let us however talk only, first, about the most important qualities of God, the ones we can deduce immediately and purely from his existence, proved for instance by Joseph ibn Zaddik, and of course also Aristotle.’

He paused, stood up and walked, saying, ‘God exists. We know He must be eternal, for otherwise He would have been created and thus could not be God. So, His first undeniable quality must be that He is eternal. Then, we know He created the universe of matter. So He must have great force and be omnipotent. He is the Creator, a second attribute of His. Creation is an act, so God is not a passive element but one that acts, and acts with aim, which is an attribute we can call “life”. So “life” is a third attribute of God, denoting the active. God created the universe, created matter, which we proved before not to be eternal, so He cannot be matter himself but must be form or accident, whatever word or name one might give to something that is not matter. Another word would be ‘spirit’. So, we have accepted that God must be eternal, a powerful creator, have life and be spirit. In Christendom, that is called the Trinity, but we did not need any Revelation to signify these attributes to us, only reason! In the Trinity the Father is the omnipotent creator, Christ is God brought to life and the Spirit is the fact that God is not matter.’

Bernard de Clairvaux grinded his teeth, thinned his mouth and was clearly extremely angry.

Judah Halevi stated that the issue of the attributes of God, used in the Holy Books, such as the eyes and feet of God, and many others, must be above the comprehension of human reason. These attributes, he said, must be names and notions devised by humans, for humans could not comprehend them. Humans could not comprehend the nature of God.

My father quite agreed with that point but he rather disagreed when Judah Halevi continued to tell that Revelation alone could and should guide any knowledge of the qualities of God.

I saw how angry Bernard was with my father. My father had made here one more enemy for life, I guessed, for wanting to apprehend God only by reason, whereas Bernard looked at the Jew, Judah Halevi, with grateful eyes.

Abraham ibn Ezra emphasised that the attributes of God, mentioned in the Bible, should be understood as metaphors. The Bible is written in human words and for humans. How could the writers of the Bible bring over their ideas, even if inspired by God, but by speaking in human terms? The Bible writers, he told, personified God and they hence gave human attributes to God. Several of the men present agreed to this, but not all.

The discussions on the proofs of existence of God and on the nature of God in His attributes took very many days. Afterwards, somewhat lighter subjects came to the table.

I heard Hugues de Saint Victor state that philosophy was the discipline which investigated into the ideas or patterns of all things both human and divine. Philosophy was the pursuit of wisdom and wisdom was the moderator over all of our actions. He said there was good and evil in man. The good was our nature, but the good had suffered corruption. Thus, evil was a corruption, a lacking of good. Corruption, not being man's nature, should be removed. Man could attain its state of integrity by two means: by knowledge and by virtue. Hence it was important to investigate on what knowledge meant, on which the disciplines of knowledge were and how one should study. Hugues had written a book, the *Didascalicon*, which enumerated the Arts and which provided some indication on how to study. He told philosophy could be subdivided in four disciplines: the Theoretical, the Practical, the Mechanical and the Logical.

The Theoretical sciences could be subdivided in the Trivium: Theology, Physics and Mathematics. Mathematics held the Quadrivium of Arithmetic, Music, Geometry and Astronomy. The Trivium and the Quadrivium formed the seven Liberal Arts. They were the Liberal Arts because they required open minds, minds that were liberated. The Practical sciences contained the Solitary, the Private and the Public. The Solitary art was the ethic or the moral; the Private art was the economic or the managerial and the Public art was the political or civil art.

The Logical Arts were two: Grammar and the Argumentation art, the latter in its turn could be subdivided in Dialectic and Rethoric.

Finally, Hugues de Saint Victor recognised seven Mechanical Arts, so-called because they concerned the end-product: commerce, hunting, fabric making, armament, theatrics, agriculture and the medicinal art.

According to Hugues human knowledge was philosophy and his enumeration of the arts could be used to define the studies at abbey and cathedral schools.

Of all the men present, the Jew Abraham ibn Daud resembled most my father. Ibn Daud was a true philosopher, very clear and concise in his explanations, using few but pertinent words, rarely citing the Bible. Many times he spoke of the texts written by Aristotle, which were not all known by the Christians. Ibn Daud had brought with him excellent, complete translations of Aristotle in Arabic. He ensured that Aristotle's philosophy outclassed Plato's learning and also Plato's concepts of God. He offered the writings of Aristotle and proposed that the Christians and Jewish and Saracen philosophers and theologians studied more Aristotle's arguments, if only to criticise them with an open mind.

Ibn Daud said that, like the Muslim Mu'tazilah, he believed in the freedom of human will. He thought that the freedom of will could not be proven without a thorough understanding of the attributes of God, but to understand these one had to develop knowledge of physics and metaphysics, which had been so well studied by Aristotle. The aim of Philosophy had to be, therefore, the knowledge of God.

Ibn Daud defined the soul as the form of man's matter. It was inseparable of the body. The soul ceased to be when man died. Many disagreed with these views. But the soul had the capacity to think, it was a rational soul, he emphasised. The soul learned or

grew through the senses; it developed from a potential to an actual state. The soul was not matter; hence it had to be some substance, an agent that realised the potential, which ibn Daud then called the 'Active Intellect'. The body existed for the sake of the soul.

Ibn Daud proved that the soul was not eternal. The soul did not exist before the body, as proved. He believed thus in the individual soul.

The human soul and its rationalising potential grew from childhood, he asserted. The human soul had three powers, said ibn Daud: vegetative, animal and rational. The vegetative power was things like reproduction and nourishment, so related to appetite. Ibn Daud called this the Appetitive Soul. The animal soul had to do with sensations and motions, so he called this the Spirited Soul. Indeed, many qualities depended upon the strength or weakness of that soul. The rational power was directed to learning and to the arts, and also used to control the Appetitive and Spiritual Souls. Virtue was the medium place between the extremes of the result of that control. Ibn Daud spoke in detail of the Rational Soul.

He also talked about prophecy. He said that the first kind of prophecy was a dream, when all the senses were still but for the imagination. The Active Intellect had knowledge of the past, present and future, so the rational intellect, the Rational Soul, might receive knowledge of hidden things, even of the future, from the Active Intellect. There might exist prophetic dreams. True prophets however, perceived the hidden information while awake.

God might induce man to do the right things by the Active Intellect. The Holy books were written in that way. Ibn Daud agreed then with Judah Halevi that only the Jews had the prophetic vision, because of the special relation of the Jews with God. There was no philosophical proof of this statement, so the Christians pointed to the saints and the Saracen did not agree either – of course.

Ibn Daud also proved that God could do no evil, do bad things. For that would mean there were evil and good in God, so God would have a composite nature. And that could not be, as he proved before. Evil, he said, is the absence of good. In human terms this meant that when a man was deprived of good he was evil. Evil was the absence of good, evil was a negative quality. A man might do evil things because of ignorance; that is why God gave the Ten Commandments, so that even the simplest of men would know good. Still, man had the freedom to choose between evil and good. Since this freedom of choice was given by God, not be able to determine the outcome of human choices was not the same as ignorance, so not an imperfection of God. Judah Halevi already told before that God knew the outcome of a choice beforehand. Ibn Daud was not so convincing with his arguments that lack of foreknowledge was not ignorance on the part of God.

The Saracen philosopher, ibn Tufail, did not speak much. He only asserted that although Abu Yusuf Ya'qub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi, a Saracen philosopher who lived long ago, had written that both religion and reason were necessary to reach the ultimate knowledge, he, ibn Tufail, thought that man had not enough rational capacity to find the Truth of things and to know of the existence of God. Religion and the Qur'an were necessary for the simpler men not to be misguided. Ibn Tufail thought that there were ways to reveal the Active Intellect of which ibn Daud had spoken. He pointed to the states of ecstasy. Hildegard of Bermersheim was suddenly very awake and she

seemed to agree. Ibn Tufail emphasised nevertheless the fact that understanding God was sheer impossible. For instance, if God created the world, what made Him to bring about this creation? There could not be an active agent for that, for then God could not be one, a unity, anymore and God could not be God for something moved Him. So why the creation, he asked, and at that question all the heads of the philosophers went down, eyes looking at the tables.

Ibn Tufail only acknowledged such contradictions. God is not matter, he said, so how could we, humans, learn of God by our senses or by rational thinking and imagination? He rather thought reason not to be enough to understand the creation of the world. So he turned to ecstasy as a means of perceiving the reality of God. Ibn Tufail was thus the first to talk of reason on one side and intuition on the other, the perception of the Active Intellect by means like ecstasy.

Ibn Tufail seemed to say that even if God had not been revealed in the Holy Writings, man would have anyway discovered him through reason, as well as some of his attributes. In other words, philosophers could reach some Truths by themselves, the philosopher can discover religion, but he cannot know the essence of God.

While the sessions lasted, Bernard of Clairvaux suggested an afternoon I took a walk with him in the botanical garden of the monastery. I wondered why he insisted and wanted to talk to me. The weather was drawn over, heavy clouds darkened the heavens, and I expected rain showers, yet I went. I strolled along the rosemary shrubs, the laurel and angelica, the basil and chamomile, the coriander and cowslip, dill and dragon, foxglove and garlic, nettles and mints, oregano and parsley, to find a nun standing aside after the turn of a hedge, sniffing at a branch of broken thyme.

It was the Lady Hildegard that Bernard had sent me to.

She seemed to be as surprised as I, but she nodded a greeting with a smile and beckoned me to come up to her. She looked at me but I was not too sure she really addressed me. I had the impression she talked to herself much more than to me. Still, she spoke for a long time, like many women like to do.

She said, ‘good afternoon, Daniel. How are you? You are a fine young man. Bernard de Clairvaux told me you experienced visions. I have visions too. I came to perceive God mainly through meditation and my mind frequently elevates to the heavens. I was very afraid the first time that happened to me, when by meditating I reached a higher state and saw the things of the world very clearly. I was not sure where my visions originated from. I was very afraid of being marked as a heretic and as a sorceress. Bernard, in whom I confided, was very reserved. He did not help me much. So I had to form my own opinion about what happened to me.

I am not afraid anymore, now. I learned here that my soul merely becomes aware, hears, and feels the larger world-soul. The meetings here, at Cluny, have taught me to understand my uncommon experiences better. So I will continue to enter the states of the grand soul and I hope I will in that way find new routes to God. Yet, I am a practical woman and, God forgive me, I am oh so curious!

I started learning what I could of the sciences and arts that Hugues de Saint Victor talked about. Hugues de Saint Victor taught me much here. And also the philosophers

of the other countries taught me. I have a scheme now, to classify the knowledge. I will teach the ladies and young girls in our school by that scheme. I am a Magistra, you know. There is so much to learn! I will have to write down all I learn and all I know already. That will be my aim, my life's work.

One needs an aim in life, Daniel, something one wants to do or seek during one's life, a grand work or path to honour God. Of course, I will take care: the sciences do not admit visions. I must make sure that what I tell is truth and not opinion, conviction or fantastic beliefs and personal invention.

I have not learned with philosophers. I have not attended the lectures at cathedral schools like Otto von Freisingen. I am a woman! I will have to learn everything by myself. We received many texts at our monastery from Bishop Siward of Uppsala who stayed a long time with us. He gave me wonderfully illustrated manuscripts about herbs. I am often sick, you know.

Siward showed me how to cut off the hay in our pastures and seek out the good plants in the hay. We found over fifty different plants in the hay. I drink concoctions of those plants and our abbey mixes them with distillations. The plants ease my pains. How grand is God's work!

Yes, we have many texts at Disibodenberg and God will show me what to learn and what to write. I will talk about the elements. The four elements out of which God created man are fire, earth, water and air. From fire we have sight; by the air we hear; from water we have mobility and from earth our stable gait. These are for study! I must start to write about the creation, yes, and then about the fall of the angels, the advent of man and the coming of Christ. There is so much to do!

Suddenly, Hildegard grabbed my sleeve and almost dug her long nails in the flesh of my arm. She looked straight in my eyes and said, 'and when all that is finished, Daniel, I will write about love. About the love of God, and the love for God. For God is love. My hymn to love will then be a hymn of joy. God is the joy in the wilderness. Joy is the meaning of life, the greatest gift of God. Let the joy never leave you, Daniel! I will pray for that.'

Hildegard addressed me directly once more, 'Abbot Suger told me you love a girl called Marie. It is good to love your Marie, Daniel. God has brought together what is weak and what is strong in woman and man. If you love Marie and make love to her, you are working at a wonderful building, in which lust will come like the fire that consumes the fields on mountains in autumn. In your relation you will hang together, you and Marie, warm onto each other, long for each other like a fawn for a fresh source of water in a hot summer. Marie will be your mirror and you will be so united that one will be the work of the other.

What a fine name your love has! Mary, the finest among women, the loveliest name! God had so much his delight in Mary that he sent into her the fire of his love. His son fed at her breast. In her sang the musical harmony of the heavens. She is the blooming in the red glow of morning, the glory of bright green of the pastures on snow-capped mountains. She is the Church, the young mother of all Christians.'

The nun actually made me blush, but talking about making love in such a casual way did not disturb her in the least. She was right of course, what would be more natural between man and woman?

She remained silent for a while, picking still at the herbs, and then expressed more of her thoughts. 'Before everything, however, I would like to write about the justice of

God, a theme that so far has not been treated much at the discussions in the monastery hall. Everybody seems to make his or her own laws nowadays. Everybody talks about justice without reading what God told about it in the Scriptures. Men have gone blind and dumb for God's ways. They do not sing God's praise anymore, nor do they judge by God's justice. I see vanity, greed, egoism and cruelty in people, and also in the Church.

You are still young, Daniel, and untouched by vanity and greed. I see that in you. You are still innocent. Would you stay that way! Yet, the order in the world and in the Church is darkened! The Church of God, of the Lord Jesus Christ, is being stolen, faulted, and vilified! Why is our Church so lame, flaxen, tired, unable to show how people should live in joy and in the love of God? People have grown wealthier these years and therefore they believe they do not need God anymore. The walls of their cities do not just protect them from enemies. They believe the bastions also protect them from the devil and from God. They believe they have to obey nobody anymore! That is the wrong way to live. What will they do when God sends his fire, his sickness like he sent his abomination to Sodom and Gomorrah?

The Church wears its name but it does not do the work of God anymore. And therefore the joy has left people, the joy that is so dear to me, the joy that fills a person completely when he or she does the work of God. So I want to write about the creation and its relation to God. Maybe that will bring back the joy in people. Your father told me he wanted to write a book called "Scito te ipsum," know thyself. I will write a book 'Sci vias Domine' however, know the way of the Lord! '

Hildegard walked on and I followed her through the beds of aromatic herbs. The scents enveloped us as they did sometimes after hot weather and just before a rain storm. Hildegard still prattled, 'we should be like the fawns and hinds in the woods, gorgeous, joyous, innocent, finding always what God provides for them, oblivious of the vile things in the world. The dialectic of the French philosophers is cold and dry. Love is life. If you have not love, you have nothing. God is also light. Abbot Suger is right about that. God is the light that gives life. The true Trinity in a true Unity. I bless you, Daniel. May God make of you the temple of life. God is a trinity. Through his Word, his son, Christ, God realises his work, the world and mankind. But he could exist only through the power of life, the "viridites" of the Holy Spirit. God gave man freedom of spirit. Never lie, Daniel, for when you lie, you leave the domain of humanity; you will lose joy and love.'

She let her hand touch gently the herbs in the garden, feeling the sensual caress of greasy leaves.

She said, 'I love this green wealth of nature. Green must be the colour of our life forces. Green must be the composition of the four elements together in harmonious proportions. Green is in the flame of fire and green paints the shades of the plants. The soul must be green, the powers of life must be green and the powers of eternity are green! The symbol of healthy being is green. No wonder the hue of Islam is green!'

Bernard de Clairvaux had sent Hildegard to me so that I would meet somebody who could talk to me about visions and ecstasy. Did he want to make a French Hildegard out of me? I respected Hildegard, but we were not quite made of the same clay.

It was remarkable how, like Hildegard, the holy men and scholars regularly escaped the white but cold wall-stones of the massive monastery and of the city to walk and meditate outside, in the gardens and parks around.

On one of the last days of the meeting at Cluny we were having a long pause and walked in the vast vegetable gardens of the abbey. For once I happened to be in the midst of the group of monks.

Suddenly, Bernard of Clairvaux turned his piercing and clever eyes to me and asked, ‘well, young Astralabius, what have the stars told you about reason and faith? Can we prove by reason everything that god revealed?’

I hesitated to answer. Bernard forced me to take sides, for or against my father. Still, I answered, ‘Reverend Father, I am not a philosopher but a knight. I am not a scholar. I cannot measure up with the people that have met here at Cluny. Yet, I can give you a humble opinion.’

The group stopped walking and I saw all eager eyes turned to me. I continued, ‘I believe that men have two intelligences. One is our intelligence of inference, our intelligence of logic. When we have a problem, we think about it and reason and look for a solution. Our reasoning proceeds in steps, which we can explain and define. We can explain why we do this rather than that, what we did first and why we did a second thing. That intelligence we call Reason, and Reason works by the rules of logic. I heard it be called the Rational Soul. You know that.’

I paused a while, and then said, ‘I believe there is a second intelligence however, an intelligence that is immediate and does not work by inference. A sculptor sees a statue in a rough block of stone without reasoning. A warrior sees his arm move and swing his sword in battle without being able to explain why he came to that action then. People call this intuition. This kind of intelligence has no inference rules. Its mechanisms are not at all understood by us. Yet it would be foolish to state it does not exist or to deny it as a kind of lesser value intelligence. It is through this intelligence that we say we believe in God. Reason and Faith are of course different things. Reasoning, Reason, is the process of one intelligence. Faith is one of the outcomes of another kind of intelligence, of the second intelligence. Maybe we can arrive at a proof of God by Reason. That would be marvellous. But what if we don’t? What if better philosophers prove our arguments to be flawed? Will we condemn the people that arrive to Faith through their intuition, by denying the existence of that intelligence? I believe that would be foolish and single-minded, the product of a closed mind. Reason does not exclude faith.

Maybe I am a strange person, but when I use Reason alone then I doubt the existence of Christ and of God and I should be called an agnostic: my reasoning is not powerful enough to assert that a God exists, and especially a God that is there for me. I can also not prove that God does not exist by Reason, however. I have to admit by Reason that I don’t know. But by my second intelligence, my emotions, my intuition, I know that God exists and talks to me. I have Faith.’

I added, ‘I do not accept that somebody denies me my second intelligence, which I believe to be so valuable. By intuition, by emotion, not by study and Reason, I believe that God exists. I am an agnostic believer. I am agnostic by Reason, a believer by intuition.’

The Abbots remained silent and looked at me. Bernard smiled triumphantly at my father.

I continued, ‘does not Dionysius the Areopagite explain that intuition is the faculty of the angels and Saints, whereas Reason is the faculty of natural man? I believe that also natural man have a sparkle of the intelligence of the angels, a form of intuition. With reason, says Dionysius, we only turn round about the truth of things. On the other hand, God is called Word or even Reason by the Holy Scriptures. Since He is the Bestower of Reason on man, why not use it? Even if we turn around the truth, maybe the circles narrow down to the centre, to God. Ultimately, Reason cannot but centre on God. But only by the very intelligent men focuses this spiral onto the Truth. Would God not have provided a faculty to know Him, intuition, and Faith, in the simplest of minds? If you call that the influence of the Active Intellect, then that is fine with me.’

Abbot Suger was evidently pleased for me having cited Dionysius, his Saint Denis. The smile was on his face now, but also Bernard was still pleased. I turned then to the philosophers and to my father.

I said, ‘you, all wise and believing men, have been trying to explain by Reason the puzzles that have been written by simple, humble men in the Bible, the Qur’an and the Evangels. I am sure you have given proof after proof of the existence of God, explained his attributes, and so on. But can you prove everything by Reason? Can one of you prove by reasoning that Reason can prove all the truths in the universe? Suppose there are more truths in the universe than you can prove with logic. Indeed, has any one of you a proof that with logic one can cover all the truths? If not, would it not be a good thing to start looking for such a proof? For, if there are more truths in the universe than one can prove by reasoning, then there is more in the universe than you will ever be able to reach with Reason.’

My father replied immediately, and I knew of course what he would say. ‘Daniel, what good would such a proof do to us? Either logic can prove all truths or there are more truths in the universe than logic can prove true. Both don’t really matter to us. We only have to find proofs for what we believe is important, for the issues we had at hand here, at Cluny.’

‘Yes, father,’ I replied. ‘You are so right, father. But such a proof, as I ask, would mean – if there are more truths in the universe than logic can prove – that there is more in the universe than mere Reason. Could man not function then also by something else but Reason? Do you deny that a common man could have a grasp of the Truths? Why were the Books written for simple men, above all, and why were the Holy Messages so simple?’

I continued, ‘I agree that all what is proven as being totally true by the propositions of logic is true. Of course. But I have found nothing in the Bible or the Evangels or the Qur’an that has been proven false by Reason.’

‘I agree with that,’ Judah Halevi fell in with me. ‘Reason does not solve all problems. There are matters of theory, of philosophy, which are outside the domain of Reason. Philosophers cannot reach by logic these Truths. We must look to the Revelations in the Holy Texts for these Truths!’

Judah Halevi only had stated an opinion, just as I had done. This was no proof. It had also been an evident evolution in the discussions of the chapter hall. The first days, everybody had delivered proofs based on absolute and simple basic truths, which nobody contested. Afterwards, the philosophers only proposed opinions on the

universe, God and the soul. What was the value of opinions? I found Judah Halevi's assertions rather inadequate and what he said was not what I had intended to ascertain. But nobody objected; all remained silent as we walked among the thyme and the basil and the other odorous herbs of the garden.

Later, Joseph ibn Zaddik took me aside and exclaimed, 'do you know, Daniel, that much of what you said is Arabian Mu'tazilah theory? The Mu'tazilites too say that we can perceive something of God only through our mind's eye and know Him only through the heart?'

So I asked him who the Mu'tazilites were and he called ibn Tufail to us to explain.

Ibn Tufail said, 'the first Mu'tazilites were Arabian thinkers who lived under the Umayyad dynasty of Arabian Caliphs, not long after the Prophet Mohammed's age. They were people who were dissatisfied with apparent contradictions in the Qur'an and they tried therefore to explain the Qur'an's issues by reasoning. The name of the Mu'tazilah came to be given as follows. An early Arabian master theologian was al-Hasan al-Basri. He had two students, Wasil ibn Ata and 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd. These two disagreed with their master until Hasan said, "i'tazala' anna," meaning not only that his pupils disagreed with him but also that they had seceded from the rest of the school, which meant more or less that they were heretics. So the two students left their master and went to another part of the mosque to discuss. They created thus their own school, the Mu'tazilah.

The very first principle laid down by the Mu'tazilah was that man is essentially free to choose. Man is accountable for what he does and this should not be ascribed to God. God knows beforehand what decisions man takes because God knows everything, present and future, but he does not determine man's acts. This became known as the doctrine of Qadar, so the early Mu'tazilah were also called the Qadarites. The Mu'tazilah lasted through the centuries as a movement that applied reason to the Qur'an. Christians would call them Muslim philosophers. They believed in divine unity, divine justice, freedom of will and hence in God's reward and punishment, in the differences between belief and unbelief, the obligation to do right and the prohibition of doing wrong. They also believed that Mohammed created the Qur'an, whereas the mystic Sufis for instance believed the Qur'an had always existed, was in fact God's Word, had been un-created.'

I was very much surprised to hear of Arabian philosophers and of Jewish philosophers, and also of hearing from Joseph ibn Zaddik how the Jewish philosophers had been influenced by Mu'tazilah theories. It seemed the men of the three religions had been handling the same issues these last decades and all used as starting points the writings of the old Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle.

While the meetings drew to a close, tangible results and resolutions were announced. The last day, as a result of the exchange of precious texts, Peter The Venerable decided to have the Qur'an, of which fine copies had been brought to Cluny, translated at Cluny abbey. He ordered immediately Robert of Ketton and Hermann of Carinthia to be the translators. The complete translation was indeed finished a few years later, I heard. Thus was realised the first translation of the Qur'an in Christendom. Bernard de Clairvaux was not too happy with that resolution, but did not object openly.

Gerard of Cremona was so impressed from what he heard about the many texts of ancient and new knowledge that existed in the Hebrew and Arabic languages in Cordoba and Toledo, that he decided to travel back with ibn Tufail to Toledo, to find more books and to translate the most interesting ones in Latin.

The last day ibn Tufail offered me a fine decorated Qur'an in Arabic, and a copy of the "Metaphysics" of Aristotle. These were the manuscripts I took with me to the Holy Land as memories of happier times. The 'Metaphysics' was a text unknown in Christendom, so I had it translated at Cluny and copied, but I kept the original. It was with parts of this text that I was caught in the wadi between Antioch and Aleppo, the scrolls that saved my life and that Usama ibn Munqidh had marvelled about.

Abbot Suger also talked to ibn Tufail to learn about the situation of the wars between the Christians and the Saracens. The Saracen had some hesitations, but while I was at Suger's side he explained that a new religious movement had commenced in Iberia, a movement of Puritanism when it came to the beliefs in God, such as God's unity. In this movement, philosophy was held in high regard but not for the masses of people. Philosophy had to be reserved for the enlightened few. Ibn Tufail said this movement refused corruption and debauchery and claimed to transform Saracen society in Iberia for the better. The movement had been founded by a leader called ibn Tumart. Ibn Tumart had died about ten years ago, but his ideas had been taken up by a potter's son called 'Abd al-Mu'min al-Qumi and the movement was well under way to overthrow the current Murabit rulers of Saracen Iberia. Suger told me separately that this was not good news for the Christians: the Christian Kings would have it harder to push back the Saracens in Iberia.

Ibn Tufail and Abraham ibn Ezra warned Suger, Peter the Venerable and Bernard de Clairvaux also for a heresy of Christianity that was becoming very successful in the region of the Pyrenees, mostly in Occitania, France's side of the mountains. The members of this sect called themselves the Good Men and Good Women, sometimes the Pure. They proclaimed that Christ was not human, for God would not send his own son to crucifixion. They did not recognise the Christian sacraments, such as marriage and the Eucharist. They did not celebrate masses. They only acted a kind of imposition of hands in consolation. The sect believed that matter, the human world, had been created by Lucifer, by Satan. Man could apprehend God by a series of spiritual elevations. The sect attacked the spiritual and moral corruption in the Christian Church. They rejected the Bible and only acknowledged the Gospel of Saint John.

The Jews and the Saracens warned the Abbots of the Christians because they too saw the new religion quite as a danger. Ibn Ezra was abhorred by the rejection of the Bible. The people of this new religion were organising in the cities, even setting up their own Bishoprics, though still in secret. They had a kind of priests, which they called the Perfects. They also seemed to be rather advocating to free love since they refused the ceremony of marriage. Ibn Ezra told that such ideas found fertile ground in regions that were already known for their love poets and love singers. The men were peaceful; it seemed they disliked war and violence. Yet, the danger was imminent. Suger's and particularly Bernard's reaction was one first of keen interest, then of horror.

The discussions of Cluny drew to a close without great ceremony. Not much new was said the last day, though the themes handled were still many. The men would leave soon. Peter the Venerable insisted to provide armed escorts for the Jews and Saracens who would return by Marseille. Otto von Freisingen, Hildegard von Bermersheim and Bernard stayed for a few days more at Cluny, but I saw that especially Otto and Hildegard desired to leave quickly to return to their duties in their abbey and Bishopric. The mood was sad that last day. We had supper together the last evening, but everybody was already home in mind. We said goodbye.

We did not see the Jews and Saracens leave. I attended Suger's mass in the Peter and Paul church. Afterwards, we walked in the abbey's garden. We met Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard accompanied us for a while, and that was an error. He asked me what I thought about the meetings and I answered that I had found them rather interesting. I mentioned that the exchange of ancient texts alone made this event already worth its while. He grumbled something with averted eyes, but did not reply. I noticed the contempt on his face. Suger remarked Bernard's condescension too and he was irritated by it. Suger was in a foul mood, and so was I, and probably Bernard too, as people often are when something that promised high hopes was over and finished.

Bernard said, 'so Abbot Suger, you will return to the pomp of the Royal Court of Paris, I presume, to your valets and horses and carriages and to your gold and jewels. I will return to my wilderness in the Champagne, though we are building well and extending Clairvaux!'

Suger interrupted, 'I am extending Saint Denis too, and rebuilding my church. Gold I have not much and what I have is spent serving the King and Christ. I will carry on and decorate my church despite of what you, Cistercians, might think of it. You, Cistercians, refuse embellishments in churches and you refuse everything that is not obsessively pious and dedicated totally to spiritual contemplation. You forget that people come to God by joy and love and compassion and sympathy. You will drive people away from the churches in the end because you take away all the joy from them. I will paint with colours in my churches and I will show in pictures and in sculptures what Christ and Mary and the Apostles were like. You make sad churches, Bernard! You destroy art, the most beautiful objects people make in exaltation of God, and you subdue art to one sole purpose, spiritual contemplation. I grant you that for monks that is the most important task, but the common people need something else. I will not be so egoistic as to build my church only for myself. People do not live only by spiritual contemplation.'

Bernard replied icily, 'I will not spend money won by broken monks' backs on gems and glazed windows, Abbot Suger. Yes, I will give people what they can only find in churches: glimpses of the Holy Spirit, glimpses of the realm of Christ, glimpses of how wonderful and necessary the spiritual things are to people. The Spirit will console people in our Cistercian churches. I assure you that also the Christ and the Holy Virgin Mary, to which I have a great devotion, will be found present in our churches, but then in simple statues that represent their essence and in the space formed by bare stones. The money of our abbeys we will spend on the poor, on extending our lands and on providing more food, not on golden chandeliers.'

'And I repeat,' cried Abbot Suger angrily, 'the joy will leave your churches and you will do harm to the arts of mankind for generations to come. I will fight that! You are

a monk with one-sided, limited, obsessive vision, Bernard. The Cistercians are successful because indeed the Order of Cluny had relaxed its rituals and discipline too much and people that are hungry seek something else in your churches. Cluny did not think enough about the poor, indeed, but your actions will do more harm, much more harm! All one-sided vision is harmful in the end. I will fight that vision until I die!’

Abbot Suger had shouted out these words, pointing his finger at Bernard’s breast. I was shocked and Bernard was shocked as much. But he did not recede and withstood Suger’s pressure. I guess few if any people had dared to challenge him so openly, so vehemently, and told him to his face he was wrong in his convictions.

Bernard answered slowly and calmly, ‘I will be highly successful, Suger, because I will give to people what Cluny has denied them: spiritual aid and comfort. The Cistercian monks will help the people find God. Our churches will be devoid of images so that people can concentrate on the image in their mind and think, think. Cluny is but one stage in our advance to God’s spirit. One cannot ascend to Christ by worldly decorum. It is you who errs in your convictions! Nevertheless, we are both monks and servants of God. We should not quarrel but laud the greatness of God and lead our people. I am a worm and a useless servant; I recognise that. I will take my leave at that!’

Bernard bowed to Suger, which enraged Suger all the more. The monk of Clairvaux drew his hood over his head, and left surreptitiously. Suger looked in amazement after the hooded monk. I thought for an instant he would run after Bernard, but he waited and turned to me.

‘A perfidious liar,’ shouted Suger to me. ‘He is led by vanity and arrogance. That man is so obsessed by what he believes is his duty that he will spell the lesson of piety to the whole world. Useless servant he calls himself! Nobody in France thinks of him as a humble servant. He orders the Pope what to do! God beware us of such men, who are so blinded by their zeal that they forget what people are really like. You don’t tell people what to do; you charm them in! Daniel, my son, love people! Only through love and compassion can you grow! That is the message of Christ!’

Suger was still angry and excited by his violent altercation. He strode on with long steps, in silence, so that I almost had to run at the start to follow him. Suger mumbled while he stepped and I doubt he looked at where he went.

I followed Abbot Suger out of the abbey and out of town. He paced on with energetic, wide steps. We went up a path into the hills. With a forceful swing Suger tore off a dry branch of a small tree and used it as a walking stick. He did not stop nor say anything until we stood before a large forest at the top of the hill to the south-west of Cluny. Then, the fatigue entering his limbs, his angry energy spent, his rage subsided, Suger stopped. He turned and looked beyond me, down, into the valley of Cluny, to the grand view of the monastery and church and town. He leaned on his wood.

‘How I missed this!’ he exclaimed. ‘I have been living these last years between stones. I travelled fast, sleeping in tents among Louis’s knights, always thinking and always toiling! How I love this green and these pastures and fertile fields, Daniel! Love the land, Daniel, for the land is God’s given, and love the people. Do good only! Do not concern yourself with vanity and arrogance and hatred and envy! I was born and formed into the realm of those powers and I fought them, much more than any Cistercian monk. But you, you can avoid them completely! Bernard is sunk into those

powers! Not in wealth, for I am sure he keeps no money for his own. But he is lost in all the other powers, which is worse! That is the fate, I suppose, that tempts all of us, Abbots. I seek peace and tranquillity, Daniel, like there is here, far from the town, but where I am I will never find it. Are you sure you want to accompany me back to Paris? Are you sure you do not prefer to return to Le Pallet, find a nice girl there, and live a life of humble happiness?’

I thought a while, a long while, looked at the valley where the sun had begun to set behind us and threw its blood-red rays over the landscape. I saw God in that landscape too.

‘No,’ I answered. ‘No! I too, Reverend Abbot, have my destiny. My fate is with Marie. To be with her, to be ever united again is what I want and cannot but seek. I have to choose Paris now, like you had to do.’

Suger threw his piece of wood in the earth. It stuck and he let go of it. It stuck and stayed upright. ‘Well then,’ he said after a pause, ‘the dice are thrown, aren’t they?’ He put a hand on my shoulder. ‘I will build my finely decorated churches despite what the Cistercians might say. My churches will be so grand to the honour of Christ, that people will marvel and all will contribute to the homage to God. Then they will come into my churches to see what the Kingdom of Heaven is about. We must laud God with our art and please God with the best we can offer so that God can see what we, humans, can do with the things he offered us. Did not Moses sacrifice to God? The Cistercians take away everything from God and from the people. I believe I am right. I believe people will understand what I am doing. Oh, many will follow Bernard and feel themselves like worms in his depleted churches. But we are not worms, Daniel! We can stand with uplifted head and thank God!’

Abbot Suger laughed out loud and said, ‘do you know it is in the strictest monasteries that the monks brew the best and the strongest beer? People remain people. It is no good to see one side of people only. Bernard will give one side to people; I will give all sides! I will show him who the people will follow in the end!’

We descended the hill along the same path and reached our quarters just before darkness.

That same evening my father sought me. He asked what I wanted to do next. I told him I would journey with Suger, back to Paris. Suger had told me on the road he needed a knight to command his ever growing group of guards. Saint Denis was becoming a town. Suger would also propose me to the King to be a member of the Royal Guard of France, the group of knights that defended King Louis. I could become that while remaining at Saint Denis because I would be the knight protecting the Oriflamme, France’s banner, kept at Saint Denis. I liked that, for Marie’s sake, but also because I liked Suger. My father nodded. He knew already I would not walk with him, not be a scholar. Our ways would depart. He asked me then what I thought of the discussions in the chapter hall.

I answered, ‘father, I heard many fine opinions given. I believe it would be very interesting to study Aristotle more and better. The texts we have now complete the bribes of second hand we had so far. But as I see it, even Aristotle proposed many

opinions concerning the universe and not many proofs. I was disappointed to hear these philosophers provide so many different views. Some aspects seemed plausible to me, but only possible explanations, not really fundamental Truths proven by Reason. Jacob taught me the supremacy of Reason. Yet, after a few proofs the philosophers rapidly turned to merely stating opinions. That is a lot easier than find proofs, of course, but what is the value of so many different opinion systems? What is even the value of Aristotle's opinions on the revolving spheres that contain the stars and our souls? There is no proof for those systems! You have all successfully proved that God exists and I listened carefully, with admiration, to the proofs of the qualities of God. That was excellent work. But Aristotle and Plato reached almost as much! How many centuries ago? After that, I heard nothing but opinions. Opinions! The scholars built magnificent systems of reason, but only when they formulated opinions, and only when they built on opinions did they reach conclusions as to how we should live! There is a God. That can be proven by reason. But since Aristotle and Plato and maybe a very few more, among which you, Pierre Abelard, philosophers have proven nothing of God's involvement with each of us in particular. And yet, this last point is by far the most important, for what are people with a God that exists as a kind of primary power, but a power that does not intervene or proves itself in the life of each of us? The proof of the existence of a God does not bring us far.'

'You are right, of course,' Abelard answered. 'I did not expect to prove everything there is to prove in the universe, here, to unveil every Truth. I also realise how much work there is still to do. We have centuries of time to work! But only to know that all philosophers of the world, whether Christians, Jews or Saracens, consistently believe in the same proofs of the existence of God and of his attributes, was a great revelation and a great comfort to me. I thought everybody was concerned with something else, with other views. Everybody has the same questions, Daniel, everybody works at the same questions! That strengthens our resolution to continue to study and look for more answers.'

'That is fine, father,' I said. 'But I have only my one life. I cannot wait for another genius philosopher to be born every few hundred years to hear a very few Truths proven. Yet, I have to live according to Truths in order not to be a monster, a murderer, a thief, a bad man. I find my roads only in the Revelation of the Holy Books, not yet enough in Reason! So please, understand, Faith is what I have for what I need to live by. Reason is not enough for me. Yet, Faith does not answer all my questions for the moment. I have to find out more, see more of the world, let the world teach me, find out how the world really works. I have to interrogate the world. For that, I cannot sit in a room or stay in one place only. I need to live and by living I hope I will find my answers. That is another way than your way, but it will be my own and the only one possible for me. Do not doubt however, that I will seek answers.'

I left Cluny two days later and rode besides Abbot Suger. I never saw my father again.

Seven Paris and Vitry 1140-1142

Abbot Suger kept me busy in the disciplines of the mind, but in the practical disciplines, as much as Jacob had taught me the theoretical sciences and Gormond the sciences of war and fighting. Suger made me head of the guards of Saint Denis, a troop of about twenty men. I was also his personal, armed escort. I entered at his side the Court of the King of France. I stepped at his right hand, slightly behind him, but always at his side, ready to hear him whisper a command or a comment. I was his protection, his confidant, his private counsellor in all worldly affairs, and his errand-boy. I knew about as much about his texts, accounts and plans as he did.

Abbot Suger was a formidable man. He bullied his architects, foremen and masons. He tore down single-handedly new walls of still wet mortar when the place or the pattern didn't please him. He was stubborn as a donkey and sly as a fox. When he wanted a wall here, where he stamped his foot, no architect dared build a wall elsewhere. When Suger wanted stones placed like this, no mason risked to put one stone on top of the other in another pattern. If they did, the wall came down. Yet, Suger marvelled at the talent of the sculptors, so much so that he would gladly have goaled a fine artist lest the man escape Saint Denis for another construction site. When Suger said a wooden beam should span here, it was no use telling the Abbot that no oak could be found long enough to span the width. Suger took the carpenters by the ears and dragged them to the forests of Paris and found for them the oaks that matched.

Suger was a generous man to the poor. He employed many a poor soul that had ventured to ask him for his support, pushing humbly forward their poorly clad, hungry wife and children. He built houses for the poor. He quoted to me each time the words of Christ told by Matthew, 'I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger and you bade me welcome; I lacked clothes and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; when I was in prison you comforted me.' He lived by those words.

Yet, Abbot Suger loved precious stones. The gem merchants of Paris and around flattered him and called frequently on him at the Abbey to present to Suger their rubies, emeralds, amethysts and diamonds. Knights and courtiers brought him their gems in sacrifice. The Counts and Barons knew what to offer when they wanted to see the Counsellor of the King! He had never enough money to buy all the gems he needed.

Two months after our return from Cluny, Abbot Suger called me in on an evening to have supper with him. Suppers were frugal and Suger usually ate alone. He ate little, some bread and cheese, a single goblet of weak wine. When I greeted him, he threw a surcoat in my hands. I opened it. It was the blue surcoat with the golden, stylized lilies of France.

Suger said with a grin of satisfaction on his face, 'you are hereby a member of the Royal Guards of France. You are assigned to the Counsellor of the King, which is me, to protect him at all times of peace. When the King marches to war, you march with his guards.'

My head spun. Pierre de Vitry would be satisfied when I showed myself dressed in this surcoat with the royal badge.

‘The surcoat comes with mail, haubergeon, helmet and shield and so on, of course,’ Suger continued. ‘The full panoply of armour, sword and lance is with Brother René. You can fetch the rest there.’

We ate and talked. Suger had me wear the surcoat and kept glancing at it. Something didn’t please him.

A month later, Suger called me in again. He once more threw a surcoat to me. It was the same patterned surcoat as the former, but this one was red with golden-yellow flames; a golden sun covered the back.

‘I was not too pleased with the other surcoat,’ he explained. ‘Saint Denis holds the Oriflamme, the standard of France, the standard of Saint Denis, which is red because, according to tradition, the flag was baptised in the blood of Saint Dionysius. There is a Royal Standard and a Royal Standard-Bearer, of course, for the own standard of the King, the blue flag with the white lilies, but you are the Protector of the Oriflamme of Saint Denis. So your colour should be better than that common, pale blue. The Oriflamme is red. It is red because according to tradition the flag was dipped in the red blood of the martyred Saint Dionysius. The golden sun and the flames are gaudy; yet these are the colours of Saint Denis. You can wear both colours, surely, but when you walk with me and are in arms, wear the red one.’ He grinned, ‘like with the Spartans your blood will not show on the red of the surcoat!’

I grinned back a ‘yes, I see what you mean’ to him but I was as proud as a heron. Only the Lord knew how many blue surcoats the Kings of France had distributed. There was only one red surcoat with golden flames in the world!

Suger added, ‘the King gave me money for ten more guards. You may hire them. When the King calls, the guards will be part of his army and you will have to lead them.’

I asked, ‘can I have five normal guards and five special guards?’

‘What do you mean by special guards?’ Suger grumbled. ‘I suppose you are going to ask for more money.’

‘The young boys of Paris that we had at Saint Denis will be fine guards in time,’ I answered. ‘I have been retraining the lot. The sergeant is a fine man, but he is no Gormond. The lads needed pressing. So I have done some of the training myself.’ ‘I know,’ he replied dryly. ‘I have seen you and I have also seen the horse you crippled and the broken bones on two lads.’

I did not emphasise the horse or the bones. ‘I want five such same boys,’ I said. ‘They are good enough. We can pay them less at first, full pay when they are trained later. But I want five men I pick myself among thieves, road robbers, and maybe murderers. We pay these more. Yet, you will almost never see them. They will wear no mail or surcoat, not train here, not come to the abbey, and only you and I will know we pay them.’

Suger crossed his arms and was amazed. ‘You actually want spies,’ he said with awe and surprise in his voice.

‘You may call them whatever you want,’ I replied. ‘They will do nothing but roam the roads, know every house and farm in the environs. They will look out for any movement around and beyond the Abbey and warn us before anything happens, from a house-brawl to an armed group hiding in the woods and preparing an attack on the abbey. These special guards will be expensive, for they also will be on horseback. I will meet them at secret places in the woods. I don’t want to be surprised by an attack or by sudden violent brawls near Saint Denis. I want to know beforehand who might

be a problem around here. It is good to defend ourselves, far better to foresee and avoid fights.'

'Yes,' Suger agreed, no doubt thinking of his gems. 'They will have a special sign, a ring or a crucifix, so that when they can show that to the guards of the Abbey they are allowed immediately in, to you or to me.'

'I can have our blacksmith make a special patterned crucifix. They will have to hang it around their necks, under their shirts. That is a good idea.'

'I may have need of one or other of these men,' Suger added, 'to look what happens at other places but Saint Denis. Maybe even at the Ile de la Cité. And I may have to use them for special messages.'

'Fine,' I answered. I hesitated. 'They will cost you.'

We haggled over a salary, but Suger was generous indeed.

I hired my five cutthroats. I did not find them all at once. It took me months. I convinced one after the other. Two were convicted thieves, one a murderer who had had the good wits to escape from his goal before he was hung and hid in the woods of Saint Denis. I got him a letter that said he had received the special grace of the Abbot of Saint Denis. I guess Suger sweated a few nights before he wrote the letter, and I had to tell him twice the man had only killed in a moment of sudden anger after finding his woman in the hay with another thief. The other two were mercenaries from Picardy, men of over fifty, who had fought in too many battles in Italy and were on their way home to retire. I persuaded them to stay for added money. I did not allow all of these five men to live at the village of Saint Denis. I told them to find hovels in other villages or in the woods, every one of them in another sector around the abbey. We met every two weeks at an abandoned, ruined tower, at noon, to share information. Soon Suger and I knew which farmer beat his wife, which villager did violence to his children, which hostel-keeper cheated on his clients and how much, which woman slept where and with whom, which group of bandits was circling the monastery in view of some wrong-doing. And Suger ordered me sometimes to have one of the men bring a secret letter to a place only known by the Abbot and his messenger.

With passing time, I longed for Marie with a yearning that was nagging at me and tore my nerves to pieces. I imagined the worse. Had Marie forgotten me? Had Pierre de Vitry sent her to meet young men that were far richer and handsomer than I? Had Marie been seduced? How steadfast was her determination? Were not all women fickle? I had not seen Marie for more than six months. I was easily irritated and angry. I answered nice people harshly and sarcastically. Even Abbot Suger noticed my change of mood. One day, when we were talking in his study, he suddenly pushed his plans away over the vast table and shouted, 'good God, Daniel, go and see her then! You are no use to me like that, anyway! You can stay away for two weeks but not a day more!'

It was full winter. There was harsh weather outdoors, snow in the fields and tearing winds blew over Saint Denis. Yet, I would have travelled in worse weather to see Marie again. I leapt out of the door, but Suger called me to a halt.

'Wait,' he said. 'Take the money you need from the Treasurer, with my compliments. Take one of those fur coats I don't wear anymore.' He hesitated. 'One last word. Do you remember that vision of yours on the steps of Saint Peter and Paul of Cluny? You said then you saw a knight with a white surcoat and red cross on it. That was a

Templar knight. I don't like Templar knights. I don't know why I don't like them, but I don't like them. Maybe they are too proud, too zealous, too arrogant, too rich, too noble, and too Cistercian!' The last word Suger hissed through his teeth. 'Daniel, you have seen them accompanied and shown by the Devil! I don't know why, Daniel, but stay away from them!'

I was puzzled, but I answered with the half-opened door in my hand, eager to leave, 'I will, Father. Thank you for the warning.'

I rode from Saint Denis in the middle of an icy blizzard. My horse groaned though it had blankets over its body, and the cold cut through my furs. I almost killed my horse on the way, but three days later, in the late afternoon, I saw the towers of Vitry in the distance. The town hugged against a hill and the hill was topped by a castle and a keep. I arrived from the village of Couvrot, where a farmer had pointed at the last stretch of road. I saw no gate in the dark walls before me, so I rode north.

Vitry was well fortified. It had mighty stone walls as far as I could see, but only a few towers to defend the walls. In front of the defences lay water-filled and now frozen moats, all along. The River Saulx I perceived to the south, flowing languidly and disappearing behind the hill, to the east. The town looked almost impregnable from here, for the moats were directly under the walls. No scaling ladders could be set against the walls, not unless the moats were filled – or frozen, I remarked, but who would be foolish enough to put ladders on slippery ice?

While I rode north I stopped a while and put on my mail and surcoat of blue and gold. I guessed I would be better recognised for what I was in the colours of the King of France than in the new red of Saint Denis.

I reached the northern gate of the town, which I heard from people around was called the Gate of Sabbath, a Jewish name. The guards at the gate were too surprised to see my colours to have me stopped. I told them I wanted to see Pierre de Vitry. The guards silently pointed to the castle. A road straight ahead led to the keep, so I ascended the hill. The fortress was an ugly building, old, overgrown with trees in places, but formidable enough. When I rode closer, I remarked that the castle was merely a thick, stone wall surrounding a compound. The walls were not very high, but they were thick and would withstand any assault. Since the walls were built on a hill with steep slopes, any attacking party would have a very difficult time trying to take this monster. Stone houses stood inside the walls, a square keep and a little chapel.

The ascent was steep. My horse was breaking down. I let the animal advance very slowly and I watched at the town beneath and the castle above. There were very many people in the streets I could see below, and close by lived a large Jewish community because for a long while I almost only saw Jews. A few people entered the castle, and others went down the road, away from it. One of the guards of the gate, a young boy, raced past me on foot, glancing obliquely at me. He ran towards the castle. Pierre de Vitry would be warned of the arrival of a Royal Guard.

Two massive round bastions defended the castle gate. The doors were open, the bridge down, but two guards barred my way. I told them I wanted to speak to Pierre de Vitry. It was extremely cold on that hill, the wind blew in my mail and iced me, and ice had settled on my shoulder furs. I was eager for a warm fire and for something

warm to drink. I had not too much patience. The guards understood. They made me step down from my horse and led the animal to the stables. One of the guards took me to the keep.

When I approached the large tower-like building, the doors of the keep opened and three youths walked out, laughing. They were dressed in heavy cloaks and furs. One was Marie. The other was a somewhat taller Count Henri I had met at Provins, and he was with a handsome young knight I didn't know, but who looked with sheepish eyes of admiration at Marie. Marie flirted obviously with the young men.

I was ready to commit murder, but my heart sank in my boots. Marie was more beautiful than I remembered. She bloomed of joy and health. I felt powerless. My knees trembled. I could not go further. I stood, and a boy of ten could have knocked me down. Then, Marie saw me. She slighted her face; then her eyes widened. The previous day I had imagined her in the arms of rich lovers, smiling to them, welcoming me with a sneer and a grin of disgust, cold and distant. I went to milk for fear and apprehension. Now, Marie let out a raw cry of pain and surprise as she recognised me. In front of the mesmerized guard and of the two young men, she ran into my arms and squeezed and squeezed. I buried my head in the white furs that covered her shoulders, and wept. Marie was still my Marie. Then, in the middle of the castle, she kissed me, long, passionately and deep.

Over Marie's shoulders I saw Pierre de Vitry stepping out of the keep, followed by the young guard I had seen running towards the castle. I withdrew Marie, held her a little aside, so that Pierre could see my surcoat. His face brightened. He walked towards us, then stopped quickly and shook my hand, drawing us to the keep. He was genuinely pleased to see me. I opened my arms wide to show him my coat.

'You see,' I said triumphantly, 'I kept my promises! I am a member of the Royal Guards of the King of France and the Protector of Saint Denis, of the Royal Abbey, and Protector of the Oriflamme!'

'That is fine, my boy,' Pierre laughed, drawing us along. 'We heard! Still I did not expect you when a Royal messenger was announced, just now. Our Count and his Barons are at Reims. I am master of the castle and of the town. Come in, be welcome!'

A little later, inside the keep's splendidly decorated hall, where – o heaven – a large fire blazed flames high and orange in a very large hearth, Pierre de Vitry said, 'I am glad you came to visit us. Marie has been tearing down the castle with her weeps and cries and bad mood. That woman hurts my ears when she shouts, and she shouts at almost anything these days. She is killing me with her wailing. Calm her down, will you? And yes, we kept our promises too! Except for young Henri and his friend, Marie refused any male company.'

I did not refuse a place near the fire, nor the hot drink of spiced wine, nor the talking afterwards.

I passed ten wonderful days with Marie at Vitry. We walked a lot. She showed me every corner of the town and of the castle.

Vitry lay on the River Saulx. Many boats moored on either side of a set of watermills built across the water, blocking the river, just in front of the castle. The block of mills had created a small lake south of Vitry, which was full of fish. The river ran to the south and east of the castle hill, so that there were no walls around the city on those sides. The main defences, the ones I had seen while arriving, were situated at the west. There were almost no walls on the north, only the moat, which ran to the river, protected the houses around the hill, but there was also an earthen dike of some sort and the hill was very steep at that side. There were only high walls on the west side. The vicus, the town of Vitry, lay at the foot of the castle hill, hidden behind the western defences and many built against those walls. The northernmost gate was the one I had arrived by. It was called the “Porte du Sabbat” because the Jewish quarter was near, between the walls and the main road of Vitry, which was also called appropriately the “Rue de la Juiverie”. That cobbled street led to the church of Saint Memmie and further south, near the River Saulx, to the second gate of the town, the Porte Abbé.

Vitry had developed at the foot of the castle. The castle was ancient, but well maintained. It consisted of a rough circle, a quite large circle, surrounded by thick walls on the top of the hill, within which there was a paved yard, a square keep and a few fine houses. Pierre de Vitry lived in one of those dwellings, which was built against the fortified wall, in an elegant and large manor built of stone and with a stone roof. A small chapel stood in the middle of the castle yard. The hill of Vitry was elongated along the north-south axe. The castle stood close to the river, though high above the water. At the northern point of the hill, almost touching the northern moat, rose the remnants of a still older and much smaller fortress. I would have built a keep there to protect the northern flank.

Outside the town, near the Porte Abbé, a large house and chapel held my attention. This was the Maison-Dieu, used by pilgrims on the road to Santiago de Compostela. Like so many towns, Vitry was expanding rapidly. New houses were being built on either side of the river. Soon, wider fortifications would have to be built to protect the new town. Many Jews lived in Vitry, about forty to fifty families. They formed about a fifth of the entire population of the town. Vitry was a clean place, a fine town, thriving from commerce and agriculture. It was held at peace by Pierre de Vitry. He managed the town well, helped by his Town Councillors. Pierre allotted the lands, discussed crops with the farmers, levied low taxes on cloth and he organised regular markets. Vitry was indeed a market town, like Provins. It was also one of the towns and castles in which the Count of Champagne liked to stay.

Marie showed me around. Did she show me the town or did she show me to the town? She refused to let go of my hand, even when we had to fray our way through the crowd in the Rue de la Juiverie. She was proud to show off with her betrothed, and she insisted I wore my blue and golden-lilied surcoat. She introduced me to several Jewish merchants that passed us, to every townsman and townswoman she knew – which was sheer everybody. We went down that main road of Vitry every day for ten days and Marie had a feast every one of them. We would walk to the Porte Abbé, leave the town from there and walk along the lovely River Saulx, strolling towards the fields and the forest. We were cold, for that winter was harsh, but we were happy.

My only worry was that I was not rich and I told so to Marie. Abbot Suger had given me some money, but not much. I received money from the Treasurer of the King, but also not much. I had not been involved in any action with the King that might have brought me riches from the spoils of war. France was very much at peace, so I could not gain lands and booty in battles or sieges. We could go and live at Le Pallet after our marriage, of course.

‘Don’t fret about it,’ Marie assured. ‘I am the only child of my father and he refused many times to marry again. He has been telling me he is getting old. It is true that I was a late child; several children died before I was born, and none came after me. You are a scholar. My father has been asking me questions about just how much you know about arithmetic and about managing estates. I think he likes you. He might take you on as an assistant, maybe make his successor out of you.’

‘I would indeed like that,’ I said. Our future seemed to be laid out on roses.

‘Now,’ I whispered with a deep voice, putting my fingers below her chin. ‘How many lips has this nice mouth kissed in my absence, dear lady?’

She almost knocked me to the ground, not with her hand but with her fist. I saw a few stars blinking in front of my eyes.

‘Master Daniel,’ she cried, ‘do not ever dare to doubt the virtue of Marie de Vitry! Who do you think you are? I have definitely not been whoring behind your back. And how many lips have you kissed, he?’ She stood defiantly before me. I had to swear I only saluted monks and knights. Then I took her up from her feet, wore her to the river while she kicked me with fists and feet, and proposed to throw her in the river to cool off. I might have done just that in summer, but not in the freezing water of winter. Still, she cried as if I was at it. So I sat her down on a rock and quenched her cries with kisses.

In the three years we had to wait to get married, I returned to Vitry three or four times each year. We lived those days the purest love and we were content. Pierre de Vitry opened to me. He asked me many questions about the Abbey of Saint Denis, about how its books were kept, how the income of the Abbey was counted. I showed him I knew a lot about the management of an estate, as Abbot Suger had taught me.

Abbot Suger and I went through the accounts together and we used my spies also to determine the best time to sell our goods or to buy. We could tell the prices in Paris and indeed of the entire region of the centre of France, at any time. We devised schemes of manipulating prices, without harming or starving the people, and Suger’s coffers filled with more coins. He was able to buy new gemstones.

Abbot Suger asked me at Easter of the year 1140 to accompany him to the palace of King Louis the Young. I met the King and Queen of France thus, and with them my fate was spun with a new thread.

Suger had admired and loved his former King and friend, Louis the Fat, Louis VI. He called Louis VII by no other name than Louis the Young. He was the only to do so. Suger had taken me several times to the palace, but I always remained outside, waiting, while Suger discussed with the King. This time, Louis had invited many knights to feast the Resurrection of our Lord and Suger would celebrate a mass for

him in the palace's chapel. It was the first time I actually entered the palace of the Court of France.

Suger walked with assurance through the corridors to the reception hall, with me in tow. No guard stopped us: they knew who Suger was and feared him. The hall was filled with people, with the knights, Barons, and Counts of France and their spouses. Also many Bishops moved in the hall. The room was finely decorated with banners and tapestries. Mural paintings adorned the walls so that while we stepped in I looked around amazed, dizzied by the wealth and the contrast between the austere outside walls of the palace and this splendid, wealthy decorum. The men and women stood talking around the double wooden gilded throne of the King and Queen.

Louis and Aliénor were both still very young. King Louis VII was a pale-faced youth, a little overweight, slightly sagging in his wide throne. He had a puffy, unremarkable face even though his brown eyes darted constantly from one courtier to the other. His dress was splendid, decorated with the lilies of France, all dark blue silk. The King was a mere nineteen years old but the looks in his eyes were contemptuous and commanding. Louis was used to being served and not used to being withstood. He held his head high and arrogantly. He seldom spoke. Suger had told me Louis had been destined for the Church, so the King had been educated in the first years of his life in the monastery of Notre Dame. When he was nine years old, his elder brother Philippe – who was destined to be the future King – was killed. So, in 1130, Louis was crowned King of France, King together with his father, by Pope Innocent II. Seven years later, now about three years ago, his father had died and Louis took office as the only and real King. I observed Louis the Young for a while. He almost never moved his limbs on the throne and he addressed people scarcely turning his head, as if he feared his crown would topple from his head.

Beside Louis sat his Queen, who was younger still. She was sixteen years old and very pretty. Aliénor d'Aquitaine was the daughter of Duke Guillaume X of the Aquitaine, the ruler of vast, lush territories far larger than the Royal Domains, in the middle and the South of France. Guillaume's son had died early in life and he had only two daughters: Aliénor the elder and Pétronille. Guillaume succumbed on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela but he proposed just before his death to King Louis VI the Fat to marry Aliénor to the future King of France and thus to add the Duchy of Aquitaine to the crown domains. Aliénor and Louis the Young were married in a hurry at Bordeaux in 1137. On their return to Paris, at Poitiers, the newly wed heard of the death of Louis the Fat. In a time of a few months, Louis the Young was married, heard of the deaths of his father and of his father's wife and was anointed King of France.

Aliénor was all that Louis the Young was not. She had not been educated at a strict monastery to a life of piety and meditation. Her father had kept her near him and she was used to a courtly life of music, poetry and dancing. She was a lively girl, and a striking beauty. Ample auburn hair enclosed her face and fell to her shoulders, and large, strong eyebrows the colour of her hair cupped her dark grey eyes. Her face was long and fine. One instantly surmised the distinguished lady in her, though her demeanour was animated with a constant nervousness. She wore a heavy silk brocaded dress with very long arm sleeves. She was a lively as Louis was stiff. She held her own conversations from the throne, invited people to near her. Her mouth was full, with thick lips. Her cheeks were rosy, her eyes flirtatious and warm. She

greeted everybody with long, elegant, well-chosen phrases despite her youth. She was used to the buzz of court, used to have people admiringly around her. She even stood nonchalantly up from the throne and moved among the guests. Aliénor was tall, graceful, well aware of her dignity and of being the centre of attention, and seeking always someone new to meet. She had a generous figure: a tiny waist, ample breast, long legs hidden in her long dress at which she stroked all the time as if it annoyed her on her body.

Abbot Suger and I mingled in the crowd. Suger greeted, blessed even, and spoke to the nobles present, introducing me to some of them. His eyes floated above the crowd, to the few people that were important and from which he had to know to whom they talked and how they talked: were they friendly or irritated? Suger addressed Count Thierry of Flanders, a sly and not so sympathetic, haughty man dressed in fabulously rich clothes and jewels. He greeted Count Robert, the brother of the King, who whispered at Suger's ear and frowned at my red and yellow surcoat until Suger explained. We met many others: Enguerrand de Coucy, Evrard de Breteuil, Geoffroy de Rancogne, and a very handsome and charming Hugues de Lusignan.

Suddenly, people made way and Aliénor shifted towards us. I remarked that Suger did not quite approve of her, for his eyes drew to a slit and he stopped smiling. He stretched his back to appear taller and introduced me. I was taller than the Queen but not by much. Her eyes went straight to mine; a tempting smile appeared on her face and transformed it into a ray of warmth. Her eyes did not smile however. She was still so very young, but already an expert diplomat in these surroundings, her world. 'So, Abbot Suger, I hope you are well,' she said in a husky voice, 'is this your new protégé?'

'May I present you Daniel du Pallet, Milady, Protector of Saint Denis and of the Oriflamme, at your service!'

'Oh,' she replied, 'at my service! I may need your services, Sir Daniel. Du Pallet, du Pallet... Are you a Breton?'

I guessed she knew already quite well who I was, so I answered in truth, 'yes, indeed, my Lady Queen, I was born near Nantes.'

'I have not yet been to Nantes. But I was told it is a fine city, a harbour, isn't it? Are you married, Sir Daniel?'

I reddened instantly, which amused her very much for she grinned, opened her mouth and showed a fine set of unblemished white teeth.

'No, Your Highness,' I replied. 'But I am betrothed.'

'And to who are you betrothed, my dear knight?'

'To a woman called Marie de Vitry, the daughter of the Prévôt of the Count of Champagne for that region.'

'Oh, you are betrothed to a girl of the Champagne,' she continued, flashing irritation in her eyes. 'My King has quite some issues with the Champagne.'

Without further ado she turned her back on us and walked to another group.

In the hall many people flocked around a man of fifty or more years, a greying man, very stocky, radiating power, dressed entirely in black. I asked Suger who that man was. Suger moved inconspicuously and glanced briefly at the ceiling, as if he were admiring the banners that hung there. In doing so his eyes brushed over the man. 'That is Count Raoul de Vermandois,' Suger whispered. 'He is the cousin of the King. I am surprised to see him at the Court again. He intrigued with the Queen Mother

Adelaïde to impair my influence on young Louis. Vermandois urged Adelaïde to have me barred from Court. Luckily, Aliénor did not like Raoul much either, and even less Adelaïde, so we sided together, Aliénor and I. She told Louis to be King instead of the doggy of his mother and her lover. We ousted Adelaïde away from the Court, to be married, and we sent the Count back to his own lands. Raoul is married to a niece of Count Thibaud of Blois and Champagne, names Éléonore. Vermandois is an intrepid intriguer, a cynical constant schemer. Vermandois here means trouble ahead.’

I saw another man dressed in rich grey in the group of Raoul de Vermandois. I asked Suger also who that man was.

‘You pick out all my friends,’ Suger grinned. ‘They flock to me like bad birds. That man is the ecclesiastic Cadurc. I call him so, but that man is dangerous. He schemes as enthusiastically as Vermandois. He arrived at the Court, nobody knows how, as an ecclesiastical of lower rang. He was in favour with Aliénor. Cadurc arrived with the Queen’s men, from the town of Bourges. Bourges is a town of the Royal Domains of Louis, but its status is not so clear and Bourges could as well be considered as part of Aquitaine. The Bishop of Bourges is Archbishop of Aquitaine. Cadurc got appointed by the King to be the Chancellor of France, the Guardian of the Seal of France responsible for officialising the documents of the King, despite my proposing someone else. Queen Aliénor, Chancellor Cadurc and now apparently also Raoul de Vermandois, are the informal but major Counsellors of the King. They undermine my influence on the King. They are intriguers. Their advice to the King, directed by greed, vanity and insatiable hunger for power may well prove disastrous in the future. If Louis the Young has half the wits of his illustrious father, will realise his errors and creep back to seek my assistance, but it may be too late by then. Behold the ruin of France here! But come on; let us not be too bitter and too pessimistic. Enjoy yourself!’

I did not speak to the King that day, but Suger did. I saw Suger whisper to the King, argue with him, but the King frowned and was obviously irritated.

The assembly for Easter in the hall drew to an end. The King and Queen went on foot to the chapel of the palace, where Suger would lead a mass with the Bishop of Paris.

After the mass Abbot Suger and I rode back on horses to Saint Denis. On the road I asked him what the issues were with the Champagne.

‘It is a long and stupid story,’ Suger replied. ‘Two years ago the town of Poitiers revolted against Louis the Young. Poitiers drew other towns of the Poitou region into the revolt. Poitiers is a town in the Aquitaine, but by his marriage Louis is also Lord of Aquitaine even though the lands really belong to the Queen, the Duchess of Aquitaine, and only she wears the title. Louis raised an army. He called to help all his feudal lords. Count Thibaud de Champagne refused categorically to help Louis with money and knights. Thibaud is a vassal of Louis, but he argued first that he had no money, which was a lie, and secondly that he had to help the King of France only when France was attacked from the outside, and not to let Louis enforce his power over his personal domains. The Count of Champagne is as rich as Croesus once was, but Thibaud is a stubborn fool and a miser. I rode to the Champagne myself, telling him it was in his interest to be friends with Louis the Young, but he continued to refuse outright, in my face. Since then, Louis does not like the Champagne much.’

Suger hesitated, and then hissed, ‘that woman Aliénor finds out what she needs to know from stones! Did she know already, before she questioned you, that you were betrothed to Marie de Vitry? I do not doubt it! That question was only to spite me, to weaken me, however little, by connecting me to the Champagne. That young girl of sixteen now holds the King by the nose with her little finger, Daniel. The King has only eyes for her. He is besotted. He was educated to be a monk, so he was lost completely when he set eyes upon her beautiful face at Bordeaux. She indeed strikes a fine figure and Louis the Young follows her like a puppet. I arranged that marriage. I still believe it was a masterstroke. I should be glad the King is in love with his wife. Why do I fear something is amiss?’

I reflected that if Marie were a hawk, a darling sparrow hawk, then Aliénor would be an eagle. The men around Aliénor were the sparrows. Eagles ate sparrows.

In that same year 1140 Bernard de Clairvaux’ resentments against my father erupted openly. Exacerbated by the meeting at Cluny of the philosophers, Bernard had been fretting on the right moment to strike swiftly and efficiently. Bernard denounced Abelard to the Bishops of France. He accused my father of heresy. My father prepared his defence, asked to meet with the Bishops and explain his views on the points of dispute. The Bishops reacted by calling for a Council at Sens. The Council was to start on an appointed day. But the evening before the Council started, Bernard de Clairvaux urged for a special session of the Bishops, without informing my father. Bernard presented a series of accusations, propositions of the heresy of my father, and urged the Bishops to condemn these there and then. The Bishops, aroused by Bernard’s vehemence and his passionate arguments, agreed to condemn my father on Bernard’s grounds instantly. My father was tried over nineteen capitulae or arguments for heresy, carefully prepared by Bernard and his assistant-monks. The next day, supposedly the first day of the Council, when the session began in earnest, in the presence of my father, the Bishops simply read the judgement to him. There was to be no debate. The Council ordered my father not to write anymore and his books were burned in the hearth of the hall, before his eyes. Bernard had led my father into a trap. Abelard was not even allowed to defend himself, and he disdained also from claiming defence, for all was finished. He realised that Bernard would not let him speak out, for he might persuade the Bishops with charming and pleading words. Bernard was no match for my father’s wit and quick intelligence, so he had taken no chances.

My father saw the futility of defence after a judgement. He only said so and announced the Bishops he would go to Rome to appeal to the Pope. Bernard had also foreseen my father’s appeal to Rome, however. The evening before already, Bernard had dispensed fast riders to Rome with copies of the verdict of the French Bishops. My father prepared at ease for the long journey and he lingered, getting on his way to Rome late. He arrived no further than at Cluny to confer with Peter the Venerable, when a decree of the Pope confirming the sentence of Sens arrived at the abbey.

Peter the Venerable was as shocked as my father, not so much by the judgement as by the means employed by Bernard. Peter knew that in open discussion Bernard de Clairvaux could never have defeated my father, being not clever enough in the theories and argumentation. My father, chastised by Bernard and desperate, remained

at Cluny. Peter the Venerable protected him and Abelard became a Cluniac monk. Peter the Venerable allowed my father to teach at the monastery school of Cluny and my father lived peacefully in a small priory close to the town. Abelard was then an old man of over sixty years of age, and broken in his aspirations.

In the meantime, my life passed agreeably at Saint Denis. I lived in a comfortable small house of the village. We caught thieves and robbers at Saint Denis, but not many. We had no jail or cellar for those men so we gave them a serious thrashing and left them bleeding somewhere in the forest with the message not to come back to Saint Denis. We caught a murderer once, a man who had intruded into a farm and killed the farmer. The farmer's wife complained to me in tears, so our guards tracked the murderer in the woods. My spies caught him but Abbot Suger refused to have the man hung in his territory. He wanted some form of trial for him. So I took the murderer to the Bailiff of the King in Paris. The Bailiff looked at the criminal, grinned for there was not much left of the man after he had gotten through our hands. He called his guards and said simply, 'Hang him'. And so was done. The trial was swift and efficient.

'Thank you,' the Bailiff said. 'We know that scum. He violated the daughter of one of my guards. I know what you are doing at Saint Denis and how. I approve. If you have other men such as this one, we will gladly take care of them!'

In the spring of 1141 the tide changed. Louis the Young went to war and Abbot Suger ordered me with the King. Suger, who had accompanied Louis the Fat on every campaign, seemed tired now, so he remained at his abbey and supervised his construction works. King Louis would march on Toulouse. He had once more an issue to the profit or detriment of his wife Aliénor.

Aliénor was the granddaughter of Duke Guillaume IX of Aquitaine. Guillaume had at first married Ermengard, daughter of Foulques le Rechin, Count of Anjou. After a dull time with the unimaginative Ermengard, he had that marriage annulled for reasons of consanguinity. The Church forbade consanguinity but that had not stopped Guillaume from marrying Ermengard. He had become bored to death with his wife. As soon as he was free, Guillaume married the young widow of the King of Aragon, Sanchez Ramirez. He married this Philippa not because she was particularly pretty, but because she was the only heir of Count Guillaume IV of Toulouse, who had died on a crusade in the Holy Land. The County of Toulouse was a vast territory, though smaller than Aquitaine, but it included wealthy port towns on the shores of Sea. Toulouse had been managed by the brother of Guillaume IV, Raymond de Saint-Gilles. This Raymond left Toulouse on his turn for a crusade, but he gave to his son Bertrand de Saint-Gilles his lands of the Provence and of Gascoigne, including Toulouse.

Guillaume IX of Aquitaine, enraged, for Philippa was the rightful heir of Toulouse, raised an army and captured the capital of Toulouse. Later still, Guillaume IX also vowed to go on a crusade. To finance his expedition he sold Toulouse to Bertrand de Saint-Gilles. The crusade was a fiasco and Guillaume IX rapidly returned to France. Philippa, who had diligently managed his affairs in his absence, retired to the

monastery of Fontevraud. Guillaume lacked the services of a wife and had taken a mistress. The Duke assembled his knights and captured Toulouse once more by force, as well as the Quercy region, and handed them over to pious Philippa, the rightful heir of the lands, that is to himself.

Guillaume's mistress was a Vicomtesse de Chatelleraut. Guillaume IX forced his son, the future Guillaume X of Aquitaine, to marry Aénor, the daughter of his mistress by her husband. From this marriage of Guillaume X and Aénor resulted Aliénor and her sister Pétronille. Later still, Guillaume IX lost Toulouse again, this time to Alphonse Jourdain. Alphonse Jourdain was the son of the crusader Count Raymond of Toulouse. Count Raymond had succeeded as Count of Toulouse on his brother Bertrand de Saint-Gilles, who had become Count of Tripoli in the Holy Land. Alphonse Jourdain was so called because he had been born in the Holy Land, near the River Jordan.

So, Aliénor was the rightful heir to the County of Toulouse by Philippa, but Alphonse Jourdain held the town and the lands around it and considered them his.

Louis felt it necessary to please his wife and to recuperate the County, and show once more that he was King of France. He owned not as much land as some of his Counts, but he was still the King, and also Abbot Suger agreed that the County of Toulouse was a rich and large region that should by right be added to the Royal Domains. The last time Louis the Young had had to ride out of Paris with his army was three years ago, at the revolt of Poitiers. It was time he wielded his power again.

Suger ordered me to join the King's army with the token contingent of Saint Denis. I had ten men-at-arms, of which five men on palfreys, armed as hobelars. The rest of the guards and my spies remained around the abbey. We had two pack-horses and enough tents to sleep comfortably. I had the Abbot's money to survive for three months. The Royal Army of five hundred knights and twenty times as many footmen gathered outside Paris. I had waited until the very last moment to travel, informed by my spies, until the gross of the army had assembled.

We still waited two weeks at Paris before Louis marched. With my men I joined the select group of knights dressed in the colours of the King. We marched and rode for close to a month to reach Toulouse. We should have arrived there in half the time, but Louis's Barons were not used to long, tiresome marches; they had trouble getting enough to eat for the men, to find fodder for the horses; the mules and carts with tents and crossbow bolts and lances could not advance faster; and there were many more excuses. Finally, we passed the last hill and saw Toulouse in the far.

The more we rode up to the town the less we talked. King Louis's army stood below the walls of the city. It did little else but stand. I had whistled in awe when we were close enough to see the fortifications. Had King Louis expected Toulouse to be like Paris, a town scarcely defended, with crumbling defences? Had he expected to meet Alphonse Jourdain's men in the open and launch a chevauchée against his enemy?

He had been wrong. The town of Toulouse was huge, as huge as Paris, but its defences were as good as those of Provins, even thicker and with more towers along them, and the walls ran all around the town. It had a broad moat filled with murky, unhealthy water everywhere. The walls were new, the stones bevelled and laid without holes between them.

The gates stood between four massive towers and the corridors between the towers were long, too long. The gates were a killing ground. The walls were crenellated and at every opening we saw militiamen and guards, at least as many as we had men. The men of Toulouse were armed with swords and lances and crossbows. Probably not half of those men were trained warriors, but they were enough to stop any direct attack. Their flags waved by the hundreds defiantly in the wind.

I rode around the town, which took me almost an entire day, and I perceived not one weak point in the defences. A sudden assault of the entire Royal Army using scaling ladders might work, but I doubted it. Alphonse Jourdain had had experienced counsellors. He had not confronted King Louis in the open. He had brought all his men inside Toulouse and he had fortified the town as much as possible. Alphonse had turned Toulouse into an impregnable fortress.

I had heard of siege towers, made of wood and leather. To get into the town we would have needed five to ten of such towers attacking at the same time, plus scaling ladders, to force any mass effect. We had no siege towers. We even had no siege engines. We would have to fill the moat first. So, Louis's army stood and waited.

We erected our little tents not far from the King's luxurious complex. Each day we saw Louis's Counts discuss frantically the situation with him, with his Sénéchal and his Connétable, and all the other Barons. They discussed and discussed and discussed.

We were getting low on food. Day after day, less food entered our camp. We could not tell what was happening to the foraging parties, but every day we had a little less to eat. The parties brought in wounded and sick men. One of the wounded lads told me the foraging groups were being attacked slyly and constantly. Alphonse Jourdain had left troops disguised as bandits in the countryside to harass the King's scavenging knights. Our troops had to circle wider and wider around Toulouse to find food. The nearby larger towns such as Narbonne and even Montpellier only surrendered reluctantly the minimum ordered, and that very slowly. Prices soared. To the south lay rough mountain country and though some sheep were found there, each herd of sheep cost men. Entire French plundering parties of ten or twenty armed men simply disappeared in the forested hills. The south of Aquitaine and of the Toulouse County did not appreciate Toulouse being under siege. King Louis could starve out the city but he risked starving his army first.

I saw Queen Aliénor several times in that period. She had come in Louis's caravan with several ladies-in-waiting, among which her young sister Pétronille. At first she rode sideways. Then she dressed like a man and rode like a knight. She even wore a light lance. She passed our tents frequently and often demanded an escort of our armed men.

Once, I rode quite alone to Toulouse and scrutinised the walls, imagining how an army could breach the defences. I heard a group of cavalry behind me and when I looked around I saw Aliénor galloping towards me, about twenty armed horse riders in tow.

'Sir Daniel,' she said. 'Greetings. The Protector of Saint Denis and of the Oriflamme! What were you looking at?'

'I was wondering how to get inside the city, my Lady.'

She asked mockingly, 'why, Daniel, would you take Toulouse single-handed?'

I laughed grimly. ‘No, Milady. I might get in alone, in some disguise, but what good would that do? Also, I might get in but I’m not sure I might get out.’

The gates of Toulouse had stayed open and a few people, probably merchants, entered the city. No carts passed through the gates. Occasionally a man or woman would come out, but much fewer than went in.

‘So, where would you assault the city, and how?’ she asked.

‘We are too few to assault that town in the front, my Lady. We risk being defeated when we attack. We might call in many more men to plan a massive assault, but that would take months. Have you noticed our food is short? Time is running out. We might lay a siege to the town, starve it out, but that also will take months.’

‘If the army were anyway to assault, where would you concentrate our forces?’

I was amazed to hear a woman that young ask such questions. I answered without showing surprise. Yet, I was irritated. Had she not understood?

‘That is what I have been looking for. Pick any point, anywhere, your Highness, any point not too far from a gate. The army should attack there, by surprise, maybe late in an afternoon, try to get in by scaling ladders at one point, and open a gate from the inside.’

‘Why not attack a gate, or several gates at the same time?’

‘The gates are the best defended places. They are not weak points! In between the double gate towers, stones or planks will have been lifted and boiling oils readied. Any group that reaches the area between the towers will be killed, boiled, massacred.’

‘Can a surprise attack, at evening, near a gate, using scaling ladders, be successful?’

‘I don’t believe so, my Lady. Look, see how knights are standing at the top of the walls, not just men-at-arms or townsmen. Imagine your Barons climbing up rickety scaling ladders, clad in mail and helmets and shields. Why, with five knights on the rungs, the ladder will break. The knights will mount so slowly they could easily be killed before they got halfway up. So our knights should climb without mails, without protection, climb swiftly and then be massacred on top of the walls by truly armoured veteran knights. I doubt the Barons will risk that! No, there is no weak point in those defences. We are stuck. Alphonse Jourdain was a wise man. He did not confront our army in the open, where he might have lost. Here, we are stuck.’

She showed no anger. ‘So, what should we do? We cannot just stay here!’

‘I guess not. Turning back would mean much loss of face for the King of France and his army. So there are only two alternatives. We get many more men and launch a frontal attack anyhow, losing many men, and risk being fended off. Or we go, anyhow, anyway.’

‘Go now, after we came all this way? That would be cowardly, sir knight!’

‘Yes, cowardly,’ I said, ‘but also wise. Too many men will die here, on both sides, but on our side many more. And when there are not so many men left, Toulouse will sally and crush us between their warriors and the walls. Still, be assured, your Highness, I and my men will fight to the end to protect you!’

‘You are insolent,’ she said, but there was no venom in her voice. ‘There must be another way!’

We stayed silent for a while and both looked at the behemoth of stone and banners before us.

‘Talk,’ I whispered.

‘What?’

‘Talk. Yes, talk,’ I repeated. ‘We fear losing men in an attack but Alphonse may have a few fears of his own. What if we started to burn down the city? We could build a few mangonels and trebuchets and burn the city down, even if only the parts near the walls. Alphonse Jourdain will not like that and neither will the good, wealthy citizens of Toulouse, fat and rich, and with their warehouses filled with food and goods. Talk to them and maybe he will open the gates to the King without a fight. But the King will have to make concessions.’

‘Sir Daniel,’ Aliénor said, ‘you have a nasty mind.’ Upon which she drew her horse around and galloped off.

One day, after about a month of camping in a now sultry heat – summer had started early that year – a delegation of knights from Toulouse rode out to the King’s tents. After that, we saw delegations come and go for a fortnight. Then we sensed that hostages were being exchanged. A set of fine tents were erected in the space between Louis’s camp and the town. A group of richly clad knights rode from the town to the tents. We supposed Alphonse Jourdain and King Louis were negotiating the siege after all. It took more than a week of parLOURING. Then very suddenly, orders were shouted to withdraw and King Louis’s army marched back to Paris. We asked ourselves, ‘what was all that about?’

It was simple. We heard that no Baron of Louis had come up with a feasible plan to assault the city. Toulouse had been too well prepared. Surprise attacks could not have been successful. We had not enough men for massive attacks. King Louis feared a sally while his army would be stuck at the walls. Building siege towers would take too long. We had no siege engine to smash the walls, and the walls could withstand for a long time, time enough for the townsmen of Toulouse to build a second wall behind the first. So, Louis and Alphonse talked. Alphonse promised to consider the County of Toulouse a vassal land of the Duchy of Aquitaine and hence of the King of France. In return, Alphonse Jourdain and his offspring could remain Counts of Toulouse and keep the region to themselves. The mutual oaths had been written on parchment and signed with the seals of France and Toulouse. Since Alphonse recognised to be a vassal of the King, he would bring warriors and knights in support when the kingdom of France was in danger. With that satisfaction, King Louis returned to Paris. He did not even enter Toulouse to be acclaimed there as King.

I had hoped to distinguish myself heroically with my men in the service of the King, but we had done nothing else but march and wait and spend our money. There had been no siege, no battle. That was a good thing, of course, for nobody was killed, but many in the army were disappointed. The knights would have liked some action and rich booty from the wealthy town. The knights of France were poorer after this campaign than before. They were young and courageous and boisterous and very angry.

Somebody who was angry with King Louis too, was his wife. I saw how she rode a black palfrey on a side saddle, refusing to speak to him. Her face was longer than usual, her mouth thinner, her firm lips drawn inward, and she tore at the reins of her horse. When we rode close to the King, being his Royal Guard, she even threw fretting looks at me. After a few days, Louis ordered the guards to follow him and the pace of the Royal Caravan augmented. We left the rest of the army behind, to look

after itself. When we saw Paris in the distance, I galloped on with my men and broke away from the King.

I returned to Saint Denis, to what I thought would be a settled life. The three years of waiting promised to Pierre de Vitry would end the next year. I was thinking of bringing over Marie to Saint Denis after our marriage.

But then, in the beginning of the year 1142, the relations between King Louis the Young and Count Thibaud de Champagne – of all men – worsened. There were two reasons for that.

Cadurc, the minor ecclesiastic become Royal Chancellor, responsible for the proper seals of the King and for the King's official correspondence, coveted the Bishopric of his home town Bourges. The Bishop of Bourges had died and Cadurc desired not only to be Chancellor but also to be Archbishop of Aquitaine, which the Bishop of Bourges was. His position at court would be strengthened, and his grip on Aliénor especially would be stronger. Aliénor was in favour of Cadurc. So King Louis appointed him Bishop of Bourges, indeed. Abbot Suger protested strongly to the King, stating that the King should not assume ecclesiastical appointments. Suger's influence on the King was now almost extinct. His arguments were to no avail. The Council of Bishops of France however, called together to appoint a successor to the Bishop of Bourges, refused to follow the proposal of the King. They appointed one Pierre de la Châtre and had this decision agreed upon by the Pope.

When Pierre de la Châtre entered Bourges, the King's knights and men-at-arms refused to let him pass beyond the city's perimeter. Pierre had to flee for his life. He sought refuge within the only County that dared to challenge Louis. He galloped to the Court of the Champagne and from near Count Thibaud he appealed to the Pope. The Pope wrote a condescending letter to King Louis, in which he regarded Louis as a child that needed to be taught a few lessons in ecclesiastical affairs. King Louis the Young flew into a rage. The Pope had touched his weak point. Louis desperately wanted to be taken serious, to prove his authority. He swore an oath on the relics of all the Saints in his chapel never to let Pierre de la Châtre enter Bourges. The Pope heard of the oath and excommunicated the King. Louis raged all the more against Count Thibaud.

There was a second issue. Raoul de Vermandois, the Sénéchal of France, the Head of the Royal House and of the army, had seduced Aliénor's sister Pétronille. Pétronille, a girl of only fifteen years old, was completely besotted by the flattering words of the much elder and much more experienced courtier. Raoul was over fifty. He wanted to marry Pétronille and Pétronille ran to her sister, the Queen, to beg for the marriage to be allowed. Aliénor at first told her sister she was mad and still a child, but Pétronille cried and wept long, salty tears and shouted she would kill herself. Aliénor gradually gave in to the constant, nagging cries of her sister.

The problem was that Raoul was a married man. And he was married to Éléonore, a niece of Count Thibaud of Champagne. Aliénor convinced the King to help Raoul. Louis could refuse nothing to Aliénor and he was eager to smite Count Thibaud. So the King assembled a group of Bishops that were loyal to him, Bishops that waited for

their rewards, to annul the marriage of Raoul on grounds of consanguinity. The consanguinity was known before the marriage but had not proved an obstacle by the Church then; nevertheless, consanguinity was forbidden by the Church. His earlier marriage annulled, Raoul wedded Pétronille in the beginning of that same year of 1142. Count Thibaud of Champagne was offended in the honour of his family and of his niece. He appealed to the Pope. Innocent II condemned Raoul and Pétronille, annulled the second marriage, and excommunicated both of them.

King Louis the Young, exasperated by the insults to his dignity, exceeded by the fact that he found no solutions to break out of the corner he was in and by the wry remarks of ‘I told you so’ of Abbot Suger, and hearing in both cases only one same name mentioned, that of Count Thibaud of Champagne, raised an army to teach his vassal a lesson.

I had wanted to marry Marie in the autumn of 1142. I had seen her for the last time in the spring of that year. We feared the growing dispute between the King and Thibaud de Champagne. It was an event we had really not expected at all. I could not leave for the Champagne on my own, for Abbot Suger ordered me to join the King’s army. I protested to Suger. I wanted no part in a campaign against the Champagne of Pierre de Vitry. I did not want to march against Troyes or Provins. I did not want any part in hostilities against Pierre de Vitry’s territories. Suger listened patiently as I raged, which I had never done before in his presence. Suger was as enraged as a hungry rat, though not with me. He had advised King Louis against the ascent in power of Cadurc. He had been secretly in favour of Pierre de la Châtre as Bishop of Bourges. He had strongly advised against the marriage of Vermandois to Pétronille. With three prominent figures of the Court, including the King, excommunicated by Innocent II, Suger blamed himself bitterly. He could not grasp how it was possible for a King to neglect, even refuse his advice. Suger had been the lifelong advisor of Louis the Young’s father, Louis the Fat. Louis the Fat had always, always listened to him. Suger could not understand how the intriguers had supplanted him. But they had. The King even blamed Suger for the excommunication.

For me, Suger had no satisfactory solution either.

Suger said, ‘You can do one of two things. First: you can refuse the King’s command. The King will not miss you among his knights, but do not doubt that someone mal-intentioned will tell him you have not joined. Refusing the King’s command is an offence to the King. You will be disgraced for the rest of your life. I cannot argue that you are needed at Saint Denis, since I let you go for Toulouse. Worse: you have sworn to serve and protect the King when you accepted to be a member of the Royal Guard. Remember, I took your oath! Refusing to honour your oath is a mortal sin for the Church. You might as well drown yourself in a well, for your spiritual and temporal life would be terminated. You could hide somewhere in Germany or England, a renegade knight. No marriage then for you!’

Suger saw my horrified face. He let the dismay sink in. Then he continued, ‘or, second case, you might obey the King and march with him. Blend with the lot, make yourself inconspicuous. If he is a reasonable man, Pierre de Vitry cannot but understand your dilemma. Who knows, if Louis attacks Provins or Troyes, where Count Thibaud is now, it may be Toulouse all over again. No battle, no siege, and talks. Louis the Young is, exactly like the Pope wrote, a spoilt and therefore arrogant

child. I wonder whether he will ever dare to give battle to forces that equal his. There is this chance for you to hope for.'

So I did the only thing that was sensible, though I hated it: I marched with the King in the Royal Guards, dressed in the blue surcoat with the golden lilies. But the King did not march against Provins or Troyes. Rumours were that Pierre de la Châtre had found refuge with the Count and that both were in the Count's favourite castle, where the Count's son Henri had been born. King Louis the Young marched for Vitry!

So, in the months that I was supposed to be married, I was readying my men for a campaign against Vitry, against the city and castle in which lived my only love, and she and her father were unaware of the terrible danger that was on the move against them. I was in agony.

The banners of France once more assembled outside Paris. The King had never before gathered so many multi-coloured tents in the pastures around his city. The flags that flew above the camp were those of Aquitaine, of Anjou and Maine, of Flanders, of Vermandois and Nevers, of Burgundy, of Bourbon and Forez and even of the County of Toulouse among many more. Champagne, Reims, Noyon and Chalons were not with the army. The Oriflamme had not left Saint Denis, for France was not attacked by a foreign country. And Abbot Suger did not approve of the King's order to march. Suger had pleaded to talk, to negotiate, to beg, and he had proposed to intercede, but the King refused to listen to him. So, Suger stayed at Saint Denis and sulked but could not refuse to send a token force, which was me.

The County of Champagne was rich and fat. The flags of France assembled more because there was a hope to grab rich booty than because the King had appealed to his Barons. The Champagne region prided on the finest markets of France. Its storehouses were filled to the roofs with goods on transfer between south and north, east and west. Its countryside was littered by opulent manor houses, castles and villages and small towns, most of which were poorly fortified and thus open to pillaging. Knights captured could be ransomed for high amounts of gold. And the women of Champagne were the prettiest of France. A ravaging army rampaging through the Champagne would make many knights rich. Barons who did not need the money but were always greedy flocked closest to the King. His army was made of men calling themselves knights but avid for anything of value that could be stolen. King Louis VII led the best and the worst of men into the lands that owed him respect but that had offended him. Or so his vanity made him to believe. He had to teach a lesson to a vassal, as his father had had to teach lessons before him.

I had one more surprise at Paris before we marched on Vitry. Gormond, my former teacher-at-arms and sergeant of Le Pallet suddenly appeared out of nowhere in front of my tent on the last day of the camp. He brought me more bad news beyond the joy of seeing a friend. The Lord of Clisson had more or less taken official possession of Le Pallet. My aunt and her husband had reconciled. Dionysia must have given up hope of ever seeing me back at the castle of Brittany.

I couldn't blame her. Whenever I had time free from Abbot Suger I had travelled to Vitry, to Marie. I had hardly given any sign of life to my aunt. Had she felt abandoned and hurt? I had asked Jacob to give her my greetings, but Gormond told me Jacob had only been to Le Pallet twice since I left and the last time was more than a year ago.

My aunt aged and had to secure protection for Le Pallet. She had found those with an also aging and thus gentler, mellowing Lord of Clisson. Clisson had always wanted Le Pallet, which added nicely to his lands. Gormond told Clisson had stayed often and for longer times at Le Pallet since I left.

I might have expected such a development. My father had given up his primogeniture to Dionysia. So it was to my aunt to give Le Pallet to whom she favoured. I had been a fool. I had left her love, her house, her village, and I had scarcely shown any interest in her these last years. So I had lost Le Pallet. I was marching against Marie and I had nothing to offer to her anymore.

I asked Gormond why he was at Paris. He looked surprised by that question, a little hurt too. He answered, 'Clisson is at Le Pallet with his own men and sergeants. Le Pallet is crowded. I am getting old. Clisson doesn't need me and he doesn't respect me. He was nice enough to ignore me. I have no place at Le Pallet. So I left.' He hesitated. 'Actually, I wanted to see you. I thought we were friends. What can we do?'

There was bitterness in his voice. He wanted me to do something about Le Pallet and he had sought the only friend he thought he had. What was there to do? I knew for sure that thinking Le Pallet would once be mine had been an illusion. I was a knight without a fief and I doubted Abbot Suger could come up with an idea to revert the situation.

I had no friends however, and I craved for one. So I smiled at Gormond and shook his hand. I asked him whether he needed money. He said no; he had enough. I explained him at length that it would be sheer impossible to recuperate Le Pallet now. He said he understood. I told him with a low, almost begging voice that I needed a friend desperately. He nodded and smiled back. Gormond remained with me. We shared a tent and talked in the evenings of the past, of the better days.

Finally, the trumpets sounded and the drums rolled and France's Royal Army set on its way.

We marched south-east, following much the same roads I had taken with Abbot Suger when we travelled to Cluny. We moved slowly to Sens, which was still in the Royal Domains, then entered the Champagne in the direction of Troyes. The King and the Royal Guards rode deep in the mass of the army, not in the vanguard. The men most eager for plunder formed the foremost part. Where the army passed in the Champagne, Gormond and I only saw a ravaged countryside, burning farms, devastated villages, corpses rotting on the ground, small castles with smashed gates, fortresses that had either surrendered or had been captured. In both cases bodies were strung at trees or left unburied in ditches. The violated women wailed in these lands whenever we passed. The King ordered all dead to be buried, but that was only done when the centre of the army rode by.

We arrived at Vitry near Christmas of the year 1142.

King Louis immediately set siege to the city. The houses outside the walls were quickly pillaged, partly destroyed, and then occupied by the army. Count Thibaud II

of Champagne was in the castle of Vitry, with Pierre de la Châtre and with part of his court. And with Pierre de Vitry. The town was well defended. The walls crowded with warriors, knights and armed townsmen. Vitry refused to surrender.

The Royal Guard in which I served raised its tents in the camp of King Louis. We took no part in the action that winter. We saw from the far several assaults on the city. I was sick with worry. The army started by filling up parts of the moat with stones and sand. That work took many days. The water of the moat flowed wide, transforming the entire terrain before the walls with soaked mud.

Vermandois attacked the west walls head on with scaling ladders. The army had brought a few trebuchets, but no mangonels. The old but sturdy walls of Vitry could not be breached.

Vermandois' men ran to the walls shouting cries of victory but were welcomed by a rain of arrows, crossbow bolts and stones. Ladders were dressed against the walls despite the dead and wounded. Knights in long mails and wearing heavy shields on their backs tried to climb the rungs first, eager for honour and with thirst of blood in their eyes. They were followed by their men-at-arms. The defenders threw heavy stones down the ladders and the knights hesitated, and then fell. Most knights broke a few limbs, some died. The wounded were at first ignored on the ground beneath the defences, groaning or howling from pain, hardly ever helped back to camp. The men-at-arms that had not been drawn from the ladders by the falling knights continued to ascend. The defenders of Vitry used long spears, often makeshift lances, to strike the attackers while they were still climbing up. Crossbows felled the men that did not get a javelin squarely in their breasts. More bulky stones were thrown down. The ladders broke. Not one of Louis's men reached the battlements at the top of the walls.

I followed such an attack on the Sabbath Gates. This assault had the same success. Or rather, the lack of it. Many a proud knight of France died there ignominiously. The scaling ladders had no more effect than elsewhere. The thick, oak doors did not yield to the axes or to the beams thrown against them. Big stones were flung down with force on the attackers from the small, round towers that shielded the doors. Crossbows concentrated there. Javelins felled many men. The battle lasted for half a day at the gates, and then Vermandois sounded the retreat. The French knights were outraged, insulted, frustrated and madly furious. The same kind of assault was repeated two more times in an interval of two weeks, without success. Vitry did not yield.

The army tried other attacks. There were smaller scale onslaughts on points that looked like weaker defences. The forceful attacks, launched with increasingly more men were each time thrown back. A large party of knights and men-at-arms passed the bridge over the River Saulx near the Maison-Dieu of Saint James in front of the Abbé gates, passed a small watercourse and attacked the mills that lay over the river to the south-east of the town. The idea was to burst through the walls of the mills with hammers and axes and pass the Saulx to enter the town from the south. Our warriors carried ladders and beams to the mills to try to pass the places where the wheels would obstruct the way. Unfortunately, the mills were heavily defended. Walls were breached indeed, beams stuck in the water wheels, planks led across open spaces, but the passages were too narrow. Only two or three men could pass simultaneously and those were easy target for crossbows. The passages were easily defended, too. Two or three men of Louis's army were always confronted with as many men of Vitry. It was

impossible for the King's men-at-arms to force their numbers upon the townsmen at that point. Crossbows worked from both sides. Burning bushels were thrown on the attackers. The skirmish lasted for an entire day and then the French army had only advanced a few paces into the mills. Breaking the defences proved impossible at the mills too.

France's army waited and endured the harsh first winter months well into January of 1143. Luckily there were forests near, so we could light fires of logs of oak and warmed as best as we could. We feared the coming of the snows.

I had been observing Vitry and the attacks on the town with Gormond. We were convinced that the kinds of attacks that had been waged so far would never bring us inside the town. We talked and found only three practical ways of getting in. The first would have needed mangonels to crush the walls. Constructing mangonels would have taken a month or two more and the French knights were already howling with frustration and anger. They would have no patience to wait that long in the midst of winter.

Another way in was to use boats, many boats. Men could row the boats up the River Saulx and set many men afoot on the shore of the River in the town on the south side. I knew there were no stone walls on that stretch of the bank of the river. A surprise attack might succeed. A massive diversion with a new all-out frontal attack on the walls and on the Sabbath Gate might draw away the attention of the defenders and then the boats could attack. Only: the French had no boats. Bringing in boats would take time too. The larger boats would have to be dragged past the bridge over land, to the other part of the river nearer Vitry, or the bridge would have to be dismantled. This also would take time and draw the attention of the defenders. The view was very open so near the city, over the plains of the Saulx, and the castle loomed very high; guards could see far. The army could bring very many small boats, but always without the effect of surprise. Lack of surprise meant the shores would be crowded with defenders and wooden walls, erected in haste, might await the attackers.

The last possibility was even riskier, but surprise might work in that event. On the north-east side of the town there were no walls, only moats and low ramparts. Of course, the flanks of the hill on which stood the castle were very steep there. But if a party of men-at-arms could pass the moat, a line of men clinging to the rocks and trees could advance very slowly, and might penetrate into the town. One party could try this at the most western point, where the walls ended against the hill, and one could try at the same time at the far eastern point near the east curve of the River Saulx. A strong enough group could enter the town, fight its way through and open the gates from the inside, or attack the mills from the inside and let in more men through the walls of the mills. A few small boats could bring in more men simultaneously. How were so many men-at-arms to be brought over the moat? One idea was to wait until the moats were frozen. The only other practical solution we could think off was rafts. The rafts did not have to be particularly sophisticated or even stable. They could be assembled rapidly. We only needed to tie some logs of light wood together and carry them to the moats. Not too many rafts would be necessary either, for once on the other side they could be drawn back by ropes and then too drawn rapidly by ropes to the other side again. Gormond and I thought that was the best scheme. But it could be used only once. There would be no second chance.

I did not present our plans to the King's Barons. I was quite pleased to stay outside the town, knowing Marie snugly inside. I would have gladly passed winter in the open countryside, freezing stiff in the cold and snow. I hoped King Louis would soon abandon the siege of Vitry and ravage the countryside some more, maybe attack another city of the Champagne. I reckoned that would induce Count Thibaud to ask for negotiations with Louis after all.

The army of France was stuck at Vitry. The army waited and got cold. The Barons discussed. They hit with their fists on the King's tables but they were powerless to find a solution. Like previously at Toulouse, the army did not advance a foot. But negotiations did not start either. Thibaud sat in his castle and did not move. He waited for Louis to get tired of the game of war. The King stubbornly abided before Vitry.

Near the end of January a page insolently pushed open the curtain at the entrance of my small tent and told me I was to report to the King. I had nothing to do with the King and I wondered what Louis could possibly want of me, but I went. I had to pass three guards and explain three times why I needed to be at the Royal camp before I was at Louis's official tent-room. I was then only in the official part of a conglomerate of several spacious, luxurious tents. I was told to wait at a heavy oak table around which stood six chairs, in a vast open space without any further furniture – I supposed the place where Louis's advisors stood while he and his Counts sat in council. I was alone in the tent and asked myself how long I would wait before I would leave on my own. A curtain opened however at the rear end and King Louis the Young stepped in. With him came Aliénor, followed by Raoul de Vermandois. There were still no guards inside the tent, but then: I was a Royal Guard too and could be trusted.

Louis looked me over rather disdainfully. I bowed and greeted the King and Queen. Without further await, without greeting me, Louis said, 'Daniel du Pallet. You are Suger's man, aren't you. There is no need for protocol. I was told you knew Vitry by heart. How do we get in?'

Louis spat the words out and obviously wanted the conversation over in the shortest of times.

I tried to accommodate the King by answering, 'Sire, I have been at Vitry a few times but I do not pretend to know the town better than anybody else here in the army. We have been here for over a month. We have all been looking at Vitry for days and days, we know its defences by heart, the landscape, the walls. I cannot tell you more than can be seen.'

'I thought so, too,' the King replied, relieved and satisfied. He glanced at Aliénor and then at Vermandois. 'Well,' he decided, 'this does not seem to lead to much either, Raoul!'

Aliénor quickly fell in. 'Sir Daniel, you have not just seen Vitry like us all, haven't you?'

I reddened and cursed myself for it but answered, 'I beg your pardon, your Highness.' 'You have seen Vitry more than all of us, haven't you? Far more importantly, you have seen Vitry from the inside. We have only been watching at the city from the outside, and been staring at its defences in front of us. How is the city overall, from the inside?'

‘I do not believe that makes much difference, my Lady,’ I tried. ‘We are standing on this side of the town. I am only a humble knight. I cannot pretend to know better than others how to enter the city.’

Aliénor insisted, ‘you have walked the on the battlements, I am sure. You have been inside the castle. You have seen the mills from the inside. You have walked by the river banks on the town’s side. You know every street. You know the hill. You know the accesses to the castle and to the gates. I bet you know every path in and out of the town, every path on the hill, every tree and rock on the fortifications.’

Aliénor stepped forward, closer to me, so close that I smelled her perfume and saw the swelling of her breast. She almost touched me with her robe. Louis still had a disgusted look on his face; Raoul seemed to be amused; they spoke no more, just watched Aliénor move on to me.

Aliénor spoke very softly, whispering only to me. ‘Sir Daniel, you know more about this town than any man in this army. Do you realise how much is at stake here? The Royalty is at stake. The French Kingdom is being abjectly humiliated by one Count. This Count has made no overtures to negotiation. He sits in his castle, spits at us and watches our men die. At Toulouse, negotiations started almost at once though they dragged on. At Toulouse there was honour. Here, we are humiliated. If we leave without taking the town, Count Thibaud laughing in our faces, other Barons will deny the King respect and revolt, and barricade themselves inside towns or castles. Order will cease to reign in this country, much less than it is today. Do you want that? How many more people do you think will be killed? Do you want that?’

Aliénor waited, let her anger subside, regained control of herself, and then continued, ‘I know so well what you fear! You fear that harm might be done to Marie de Vitry. Yet, no harm will be done to Marie de Vitry. I guarantee that to you, I, Queen of France. Marie sleeps safely in the castle. We don’t intend to take the castle. We cannot take the castle for it is impregnable and we will not starve Count Thibaud out of his keep. The Barons, the Bishops and the Pope would never forgive us. I promise you that the King will order the castle not to be entered, even if its gates would be wide open! It would be unthinkable to do harm to the Count and his family and that includes his Prévôt. We just take the town, sit beneath the castle and isolate Count Thibaud. He will have to come to terms with us!’

She let the politics sink into me, and then said, ‘Do not forget your oaths to the King of France and to Saint Denis, Sir Daniel!’

She continued to plead and almost touched my face now with hers. ‘You are not like the other men in the army. I know you! You are far more intelligent. You have more cunning, buried deep inside you. You are more sensible. You feel things. Remember Toulouse? You gave me the one advice that was direct, crude, insulting but correct enough to work upon. So, Sir Daniel, how do we get in? What is your opinion here?’

I hesitated. This woman, Aliénor, the Queen, this young woman was a very powerful figure to influence a person. It was hard to refuse her, to lie to her, to put aside the oaths she appealed to. Maybe also she flattered me; maybe she played on my vanity. Maybe she simply begged to help with a crucial event for the Kingdom. Maybe she used every register of charm, seduction, coercion, power and force she could muster. The power in the room that day was not with the King and not with his Sénéchal Raoul de Vermandois. Both the men stood still, trying to listen what Aliénor was saying, fascinated by the unusual scene, surely catching only a word here and there.

I yielded. She saw the change in my eyes before I knew it would happen. I said softly enough to Aliénor so that only she could hear, ‘there is a way, my Lady. Maybe. Just one way, to use once. Not twice. Maybe. Promise me the castle will not be taken. Promise me Marie and Pierre de Vitry will be left in peace. They are to retain their freedom, always, and be honoured.’

Aliénor replied, ‘I promise. Now, how do we get in, Daniel?’

And so I told her the plan. Have a massive diversion staged with the entire army at the walls. Attack late an afternoon. Just before dusk, throw rafts over the moats at the north-west and especially at the north-east and have lightly armed, swift men, many armed with crossbows, the others with spears, pass the moats along the hill. Follow the hills along the west side, clinging all around the hill’s rocks, to the east. If possible find small boats, many boats, and use rafts too if necessary, to attack the southern river banks between the walls and the mills. Disembark men there, if only merely a diversion. Then, once inside, take a gate and open it.

I added, ‘even before the gates are captured, seeing our men inside the town, there will be panic, doubt and fear in the town and these will dispirit the defenders, and stop their eagerness to fight. There will be chaos inside, from which the attacking group can profit to open the gates.’

‘I knew it,’ Aliénor said. ‘I knew you had a way. You will be rewarded, Sir Daniel, if not by the King then by me. And I promise once more the castle will not be entered, the people inside the castle will not be hurt. The Prévôt will be honoured.’

Queen Aliénor turned to King Louis and to Vermandois.

She said, ‘we must attack in four days. Sir Daniel will explain how to capture Vitry. But no one is to enter the castle! The keep must be left alone, inviolate!’

King Louis and Vermandois looked at each other, surprised, still sceptic, but they said nothing.

Aliénor continued, ‘there will be a general attack in four days. That will only be a diversion. There will be one attack over the moats to the north. I promised Sir Daniel he could lead that attack. There will be another attack over the moat on the east. Vermandois could lead there, with a larger force. I suggest you listen carefully to Sir Daniel.’

Those were her final words. She strode out of the room and disappeared behind the curtain into what must have been the private rooms of the King. I was left with the King and his Sénéchal and I explained the details. They listened in silence, but heard enough without interrupting to find the scheme plausible.

Four days later, well into the afternoon, the entire French army assembled ostentatiously, all banners loose, armed and armoured at the utmost, in front of the western walls of Vitry. This was to be the fourth massive assault on the city with scaling ladders. The townsmen waited on the battlements, well protected by the crenellations, and bared their bottoms, mocking the French army, the largest and gaudiest army of Christendom.

‘Come on,’ they shouted, ‘get killed here! We will serve you!’

And so the trumpeters called their highest tones and the drums rolled ominously over the plains and the knights and the men-at-arms ran to the walls with flying banners and shouts of ‘Montjoie Saint Denis!’

I was at first with that army and ran with them, but hidden in the mass me and my men ran with rafts between us. We moved away from the rest of the army and ran to the moat just beneath the northernmost, highest peak of the hill of Vitry castle. There, we threw the rafts in the water. We had only two rafts and we rowed these with five men on each raft, ten men in all, to the other side.

To my left, hidden to me by a curve in the hill, Vermandois would do the same. There were woods near the hill on his side, so he benefited from the surprise and the hill was less steep than on my side. Vermandois might be sooner inside the city than I, but he had to contour the entire hill to reach the south side of the town. He had twice as many men as I.

Ten little boats, rickety crafts, each carrying five French warriors, would be rowing towards the bridge by now, hidden at first by a bend in the River Saulx. These would later reach the right banks of the river, south of Vitry, to the left of the rowing men.

The noise of the main battle was overwhelming. I stood on the first raft and reached the other side of the moat in no time. Of course we were seen and of course we were shot at with crossbows from the end of the walls, but the defenders looked at the attacking main army and I believe they did not think we would be able to climb the hill. Three of my first ten men got wounded by the time we reached the other side. We had to grasp the rocks of the hill with both hands. Our small shields dangling on our backs, we advanced cautiously foot by foot, in one thin line along the hill, one man behind the other. Gormond was the first in the line and I followed. He was old, but he had the strength of an ox and if I had not seen him cling to the hill, work his muscles and advance, I think I might have faltered. I slipped once but Gormond drew me up. It took us a very long time to climb. Too long. We had to climb upwards to find a small path along the hill above the walls. It was a path Marie and I had discovered once when we tried to hide from the people of the city. Nobody of Vitry gave this side any interest. We reached the path but one of my men tumbled down and broke his neck. Another man received a crossbow bolt in his back. We had to push him down the hill.

We reached the path and waited until enough men were with us. With about twenty men-at-arms, we continued. The others were still coming one by one along the hill. I had had about fifty men. I reckoned only forty men would follow us in the end. We walked forward slowly to let more men join us, and we walked carefully, our shields in front. We were stopped by a large group of townsmen running at us from below, from the city. We had no surprise anymore, but the defenders were unwilling to throw more men at us; their main worry was still the defence of the walls. So we started to fight.

Only two men could confront two other men on the slippery, muddy path. The fighting was weird. Gormond and I faced the townsmen who came at us with spears and swords, no shields. Our men pushed us in the back and so were the warriors who faced us. Our bodies touched, then crushed into each other. There was no space to wield a sword; we could only thrust and cut. I avoided a first spear. Its pointed steel edge passed me, into the men behind me, where it was tugged at so that he townsman was crushed into me. I threw my shield upwards into his face and my sword cut his side in a long slice, which made the man drop the spear and fall aside, blood sprouting. It taught me that these men wore no mail. I advanced, and so did Gormond, two severely wounded men lying beneath us.

The kind of fighting, the man-at-arms fighting I had learned from Gormond came fully to its right now. I was not in honourable duels between knights in open space.

This was a ferocious struggle for survival and we wounded and killed without mercy. We were much better at this kind of struggle than the men before us, who could only have been militia men of the town, merchants and artisans, who had never felt like Gormond the energy and frenzy of a killing party. Gormond had taught me well. I thrust at the neck of my second victim. A spear entered my mail but stuck there, drew only a trickle of blood, and I broke the spear in two with one powerful stroke of my cleaving sword. That view brought dismay and doubt in the eyes of the men before me. Gormond and I advanced still, but we did so foot by foot, slowly, very slowly. We lost much time on the hill. The sky darkened and it would soon be evening. More men from the town arrived.

We reached the end of the path. My small group rallied together, stood shield to shield and fought on with more space to hack and fling swords. Many men fought at the same time now. Resistance was very tenacious. We advanced step by step, though. I could already see the western walls of the town, at which tens of warriors were still fending off Louis's army. Like previously, I discerned no French men-at-arms or knights stride over the walls. A slaughter was going on at the other side of these defences, Louis losing men, and as long as we did not reach the gates, that slaughter would go on. Yet we did not advance much.

Finally, we were off the hill and stood on lower ground. Some of the men on the parapets of the walls turned and quite a crossbow quarrel slung into our group from above. Still we advanced. I could see we were not far from the Porte du Sabbat.

I wondered what had happened to our two other attacking parties, to Vermandois and to the men in the boats. We had been so much delayed on our side. These men could have been inside the town and near the houses by now. Or had they met as much resistance as we? I heard trumpets call inside the town and I looked up.

Knights on horseback rode out of the castle, down into the lower city. More men of King Louis might be inside the town. I could not advance anymore. Too many townsmen were resisting us. I was tired. My few tens of men were surrounded and several of my men had fallen. Yet, we continued to fight and the wounded and killed filled the place. While I parried swords and forced the hilt of my sword in a face, I reflected I had forgotten one thing in our plan. We were in the city, but there was no way back. If we turned and fled back we would all be killed. We had to fight on and die here or be killed surely in an impossible retreat.

So we had the energy of despair and we fought steadfastly. The men in front of us gave in. We pushed towards the Gates of Sabbath. Suddenly, there was chaos. The enemy yielded. Men fled back to the houses, behind them. Others hesitated, still confronted us but merely defended themselves.

I heard the reason for the faltering of the resistance. Beyond the shouts at the walls, there was fighting going on also at the southern end of the town. I heard the shouting and the clings of arms. Vermandois had succeeded, turned around the hill and now he too was fighting inside the town.

Could we hold? Could we advance? We continued to fight. We stepped forward still. We were almost at the Sabbath Gates and I shouted victory. We reached the gates, but the knights on horseback that had come from the castle had come for us. The clash was fiercer still, now. The destriers pranced into our group and the knights hacked

with their largest swords from above, from on their horses. They were clad in long mails and had broad shields. They were knights from the Champagne and knew their business. We were stopped a few paces from the gates and could not reach the beams that secured the large wooden panels. We stood and forgot time, the darkening sky, held on a time that seemed an eternity. We stood among corpses and groaning, wounded men and fought on the backs of the fallen. We had all grabbed spears and stabbed with these at the ring-mailed knights. My men fell one after the other. Few horsemen were unsaddled. We were loosing.

Then there were shouts of ‘at the gates, at the gates’ and most of the townsmen fled south along the Rue de la Juiverie, the long street that ran below the hill. Part of the knights rode off. Only some of the knights on horseback fought on, but we had our hands full with them. We must have had more than twenty men-at-arms wounded or killed before we could equal the power of the Champagne knights. The last few of these knights retreated, exhausted as much as we were.

We were at the Sabbath Gates then and only few guards seemed to have remained to defend the doors. We attacked these and after a long while of fighting we opened the large doors. I half expected the French army to have retreated, half expected a mass of French warriors waiting at the doors. But there was almost no one outside the gates! Yes, there were still groups of men using the scaling ladders there, and even reaching the top of the walls now, but most of the large French army had gone! Had they indeed retreated?

We shouted that the gates were open and slowly the men on the ladders realised there was an easier way in. I stepped back into the town and saw heavy black smoke arise from burning thatch roofs to the south. Darkness fell, but the red glow of many fires coloured the south. I guessed that Vermandois had reached the Abbé Gates and had opened them, letting the French army in a long time before we had succeeded in opening the Sabbath Gates.

I walked on, down the Rue de la Juiverie. The townsmen still attacked us, called upon by one or other Champagne knight. The townsmen were being slaughtered however, as more and more of King Louis’s men ran through the gates, past me. The French army was in the town, both gates opened. I just stepped forward. Men-at-arms with the lilies of France on their surcoats kicked in doors of the Jews’ houses to my right. There was no sparing.

I took no part in the looting. Men attacked me. Gormond and I continued to fight. I stepped forward. Tears of blood drooped from my sword on the ground. I looked up, at the castle, and remarked to my relief that the double gates there had closed again. The people inside the castle and keep would be safe.

There was no safety for the people of Vitry. The townsmen were slaughtered without mercy. Women were drawn out of the houses and raped before my eyes, in the street. Men-at-arms appeared in the doors of the houses, arms laden with silver and gold. Men wore even bales of cloth and wooden utensils, anything that had value. Vitry was being pillaged. We walked further south. We were still being challenged by townsmen, by Champagne men-at-arms and even by knights, but the men fought without hope in an indescribable chaos, in mayhem of friend and enemy battling on. Gormond and I dispensed our adversaries rapidly, efficiently, each time sure our opposers had no chance against us. We were invincible.

More and more houses burned. It was now late in the evening. We arrived at the streets where the fires provided enough light. The heavens darkened fully with black smoke and the stink of burned flesh reached our nostrils. Gormond walked by my side. We came near the church of Saint Memmie, the church in which Marie had taken me each time I had visited Vitry. The church was on fire. It was very much on fire. Large flames spouted out of the windows. We heard chanting in the church, but also shouting and cries of panic, and wailing from pain. French knights blocked the doors from the outside. They had wine flasks at their mouths and they were half drunk.

There was still fighting here, in the alleys. Out of a corner of my eye I saw a young knight, clad entirely in mail, in duel with a man-at-arms of Louis's army. They stood both in darkness, under an overhanging balcony of a house on fire. Something drew me close, towards the young man, and with a thrill I recognised the youth. It was Henri; of all men it was Henri, the young Count of Champagne who had once helped me at Provins and who I had met often here, at Vitry.

I reacted immediately and threw my body against the French man-at-arms who fought Henri, so that the man banged into the wall of the house. I struck his head against the stones so that he fell down unconsciously. Henri trust his sword at his new opponent, me, but I parried and let him bump into me so that I could grab his arm. I twisted the sword off him. He was near exhaustion, waited to be killed now, and stood panting and bowing in two before me.

I cried, 'stop, Henri! It is me, Daniel! The fight is over! What the hell were you doing here? Why are you not at the castle?'

Henri looked at me with wild eyes. His breast heaved and he almost fell to the ground, but I kept him on his legs. I kicked the French warrior aside and drew the surcoat with the lilies off the man. I went to Henri, tore his blood-soaked Champagne surcoat away and pushed the French surcoat on him.

I said, 'Henri, for heavens sake, what were you doing here? Why are you not at the castle? Keep on that surcoat and come with me!'

Henri did not reply. He looked at my bloodied sword, at the blood-spattered Gormond. There was pure hatred in his eyes. The hatred subsided however, when the awareness that I was his one-time friend, Daniel sank in. I saw the change come over him, and with that the utter tiredness and sadness.

Then I asked him, 'where is Marie?'

Henri did not answer. So I grabbed him at the shoulders and shook him out of his numbness. 'Where is Marie?'

Henri never answered. He only brought up his right arm and pointed at the burning church.

Just then the large roof of the church, all in flames, fell down with a great noise of cracking beams, falling inside the walls of the building, sending sparks of fire all over the neighbourhood.

Eight

Vitry, Paris and Vézelay 1143-1146

I shouted at Henri, calling him a liar. I insulted him. Marie was in the castle, not in the church. I slapped him in the face so that he reeled back. Henri merely shook his head and pointed to the church, always to the church. The smell of human flesh burning overwhelmed the smell of burning wood. Henri wept.

I cried at him, ‘talk! What happened here? Where is Marie?’ I continued to shake him and hit him until he explained.

He said with a faltering, whispering voice, head down, ‘Marie and I and some of our friends did not want to stay in the castle while the battle was raging below. We felt we were cowards. We had to help. I was dressed in mail and ready to pass the gates of the castle when my father found out. He locked me up in a cellar but my friends opened the door and I escaped. Marie’s father was in charge of the defence of the Porte Abbé. We thought to go there and help. We were about eight, five women and three knights. Our youngest friend was barely fifteen. When we came to the main street there was a fight going on inside, to the north. We continued to the Porte Abbé.

Marie saw panicked, abandoned children in the street. She gathered them. We didn’t ask whether they were Jews or Christians. Many women of the town recognised her and joined her, seeking comfort and believing Marie would save them. Marie gathered everybody in the church of Saint Memmie, confident that the church was strong enough against trebuchets and mangonels and would provide refuge. The priests helped, too. Old men arrived at the church. Later, some other men came, men that could not fight because they were sick or disabled. We arranged the space. We called in more people. Marie’s friends sought food in the town. Merchants brought food. Marie and her friends were organising things well, so I promised to search for Pierre de Vitry, Marie’s father. I was not far in the street, however, when suddenly men of the French army attacked us from behind. I got separated from my friends. I retreated into the alleys, then thought to go back to the church and find safety. Our men were being massacred. They had lost all hope on serious resistance. We were being attacked from two sides. Many men were in panic. I saw our knights giving up. They threw away their weapons. The French were crazy. They killed and killed and killed, without looking whether the killed had weapons or not. They just killed everybody, man, woman or child, armed or not. Our men fled to the church. They were mostly townsmen, not real men-at-arms.

I hid in the alley but stood with my sword in hand. I could not get into the church. The French had already reached it. They pillaged and burned the houses. The French knights closed the church doors. Maybe that was to protect the people inside the building at first, several hundreds of them, but I doubt that. Other warriors arrived. These men-at-arms and French knights were in a mad frenzy. They threw torches through the windows of the church. They were laughing while they did that! The roof of the church caught fire almost instantly. It was horrible and it happened all so fast! I heard the crying of the people inside, the banging on the doors, but the French just kept laughing and let the church burn.

I attacked the men that stood before the church. I fought. They pushed me back into the alley, here. I fought one man after the other. I wounded two of them, killed one. Then you came.

You bastard! You burned Marie alive! Why don't you kill me too? Oh yes, I see. You want me for ransoming. I will bring a nice prize. Well, go ahead. I am so glad your King Louis and his lands have been interdicted. He is a damn murderer. Look at what goes on behind you!'

Behind us, the army of the King was pillaging, stealing, raping, torturing, burning and killing. Nobody shouted orders to stop the destruction of what had once been a joyful and peaceful town. People were being massacred in the open in the streets, men, women, young men and girls, old men, and artisans. There were no men-at-arms of Vitry with Champagne badges around anymore.

I told Gormond to stay with Henri. I ran to the church, to the men that laughed. I tore at the French and told them to stop, but none would hear me. They had orders to take Vitry, to chastise it, and to burn the town. They pushed me off. I ran in the streets, shouting to stop the killing. At one moment I stood with three swords at my throat. The men and also the knights wanted to hear nothing about stopping to steal and destroy. The madness continued. I could accomplish nothing.

So I turned to Henri and Gormond again. I was still unable to grasp the truth about Marie. I simply did not believe it.

I had a duty to Henri. I drew him on his feet. Gormond and I dragged him to the Porte Abbé. Men of King Louis' army still ran into the town, ever more men, shouting hate and death. I pushed Henri against a wall behind a corner and told him and Gormond to stay there. I needed to look for Pierre de Vitry. I did not find him near the gates, so I climbed the stairs which were now littered with corpses of defenders and attackers. The battle had raged bloodily here.

I found Pierre de Vitry on the walls. He lay there, sword in hand, with four of his men. His face was turned upwards. He had a crossbow bolt in his shoulder. There was much blood on his right leg, where a sword had bitten him. He had been killed by a spear thrust in his chest though, a spear that had gone with great force through his chain mail. He lay there with one arm open, on top of his men. His face was not distorted in pain. He seemed content. He had done his duty to the last. I could not move him. He was clad in mail, too heavy for me. I went back down to the gates, to Gormond.

We left the town and made for the camp of the army. Henri was in shock. He did everything we told him to do without a word, without a glance to us. He kept his head bowed. He had sunk in apathy. I had come to a decision about Henri. I told him he would have to leave. If a French lord knew Henri was with me, Henri would be claimed and either killed or imprisoned, maybe tortured, used to force Count Thibaud to surrender, and ransomed. I could not allow that. I could not leave the army either. I asked Gormond whether he could accompany Henri to Reims, to the Bishop there. Gormond had no idea where Reims was, except that it was to the north, but Henri knew. Henri would be safe at Reims, and free. Yes, answered Gormond. Yes, he would take Henri to Reims. But he looked at me quizzically. Was he to ask a ransom for Henri? No, I replied, no ransom. I told Gormond just to find the Bishop and hand over Henri, or even simply bring Henri to the outskirts of Reims and let him enter on his own. Gormond did not comment. We pushed Henri on a horse and Gormond and Henri rode off instantly.

With Gormond gone, left alone, suddenly the full meaning of the tragedy dawned on me. I walked to a hill in front of Vitry and fell on my knees. I plunged my sword in the soft earth and looked at Vitry along the cross that was formed by the blade and the hilt. I brought my head to the hilt, leaned there and wept.

I wept and recognised that I had killed Marie. I should have been in the church with her. I should not have survived the capture of Vitry. I should have lied to the King. I should never have told the Queen what plans I had devised for the taking of the town. Vitry had welcomed me. The people had been friendly with me and I had betrayed them. The one that should have been killed was I. Why had I not been in the church? Why had God allowed me to live? Why had God allowed so many innocent people to be killed? What was a God that allowed such atrocities to happen? What was the sense in the killing? Why should all this have happened?

I asked Marie for forgiveness. I asked Pierre de Vitry for forgiveness. I spoke to God and asked him, begged him, conjured him, ordered him to reveal himself. I demanded explanations. Then I stood, took my sword, turned it and wanted to impale my body on the pointed blade. In that moment however I remembered the priests and Abbot Suger who had preached so many times against suicide. I could not kill myself. I had to find out about God. I had to find where God was and ask for a justification, for a meaning of the massacre.

I returned and remained at the camp also the following days, with the Royal Guard. I saw Vitry burning to rubble. Heavy black smokes darkened the sky above the houses, then, everything consumed, the fires quenched and the smoke diminished. I returned to the town and buried Pierre de Vitry. The army destroyed part of the walls, leaving long breaches. Not a living soul was left in the city. The day after the capture of the town, a few hundred people, but only women, children and old men, left the town through the Sabbath Gates in a long queue of misery. Nobody hurt them. The frenzy of the previous days was spent. Besides, these people had nothing left to be stolen. They just walked, their clothes their only possessions. The army did nothing to help them. The Champagne, other villages and towns might take care of these people, or they would die.

Of the dead in the burnt church, rumours made of a few hundreds of people a thousand, then a thousand three hundred, then a thousand five hundred. Nobody would ever know how many died there, but I knew a thousand people could not have found a place in the church. The church of Saint Memmie could not have held so many, I told myself. Few men had entered the church, had said Henri. The French pushed over the last, smouldering walls. The church became the cemetery of the burned.

The next days the camp of King Louis remained in an awkward silence. Nobody entered Vitry to look for rests of loot. The army of Louis the Younger seemed ashamed of the massacre, ashamed of the dead. With time, excuses were sought and found. The people of Vitry had only had to open the gates the first day when the army arrived, to have been safe. If Vitry was destroyed and so many people killed, it was their own fault. The men of Vitry had deserved to die.

I did not see King Louis or his Queen thereafter. They stayed in their tents for several days without showing. I guessed they prayed God for forgiveness. The King did not ride out to look at Vitry, to look at the burned town. Rumours went that King Louis was consumed by guilt over the dead in the church. Louis was depressed. His advisors were around him, telling him the townsmen deserved to be punished. Yet, it seemed Louis knew better after all. Neither Louis nor Aliénor called me to acknowledge the success of my plan. There was to be no reward for my role in the capture of Vitry, although my men had held the grunt of the counter-attack at the Sabbath Gate. It was a good thing that the King and Queen did not call me in, for I might have spit in their faces – and of course be convicted for it. It was orders from Louis or from his immediate entourage that had set Vitry on fire. It was on his orders that the innocent townspeople had been killed. Louis had issued no order to stop the pillage and the killing. He had been on horse, on a hill, looking passively at the massacre. He must have known what happened inside. His remorse was hypocrisy. He understood long before Raoul de Vermandois what the world would think of him. Raoul de Vermandois of course claimed victory by his act of bravery in passing the moat, running around the castle hill and attacking in total surprise the townsmen at the Porte Abbé. Raoul had opened the doors himself and let in Cadurc and the knights. He forgot conveniently how we had stopped the knights of Champagne at the Sabbath Gate.

King Louis kept his army at Vitry for a while. From there, he sent out groups to devastate the Champagne region. His troops avoided the towns but no village or small castle was safe from the Royal Army. The gates of Vitry castle remained closed. Louis did not attack the fortress. I stayed two more months, until the beginning of spring, at Vitry. King Louis sent more sections of his army to savage the Champagne. Then he sent part of his army home. The Counts that had enough booty urged to leave and ride home. The King and the Queen returned to Paris in the spring. The siege of the castle of Vitry was abandoned.

I returned to Saint Denis. Abbot Suger talked a lot to me. I told him what had happened. I gave account to him about the orders to kill and burn. I told him over a thousand people had been burnt alive in the church of Saint Memmie. Suger was shocked. He was angry.

‘Do you remember that time you had a vision at Cluny?’ Suger asked.

I did.

‘That was Satan you saw,’ the Abbot continued. ‘It was him that drew Marie in the fire. Your love was too perfect. The devil always confuses when there is a great love. I am sure God took Marie at his side, if that can be a consolation to you.’

‘If the devil is so powerful that he can force events, then why doesn’t God?’ I asked.

Suger did not answer. He bowed his head and stuck both his hands in his large monk’s sleeves.

‘You should not stay the way you are,’ he said after a while. ‘You should marry. You live like a monk. That is not normal for a young, strong man like you. If you want I can find you a fine young woman who would be happy to marry you.’

‘No, thanks,’ I replied. ‘If I live like a monk, you are a monk too. You seem not to be living so badly. You are quite happy most of the time. You have something, however, that I have lost: peace of mind. Give me peace of mind first, and then, with time, I

might forget Marie. I think that to be impossible. Marie walks by me day after day, you know. I am not alone.'

'Peace of mind!' Suger exclaimed. 'Who needs peace of mind? Who can have peace of mind? Do you think I have peace of mind? Two masons were crippled for life because of my vanity of wanting to build high towers to the new church. At every counsel I give to the King I have sleepless nights. Monks do not have peace of mind more than you do, Daniel,' he answered.

Suger sighed and waited, sank in his chair, put his head in his hands, and then continued, 'you are not a monk, Daniel. You are a knight. You truly are. You are a knight that thinks too much, too. It would be much simpler if you thought less. I would love you less, of course, but it would be simpler. As you are, knight and thinker, you are ripe to become one of those monk-knights, the Templars or the Hospitallers of Saint John. The devil showed you that way too, didn't he? You had no inclination for that road. Don't become a monk-warrior. Be a knight, a real one. Live! Do not hide in a monastery or a hospital!'

Suger started praying in silence, hands folded, and our conversation ended.

As soon as the King was in Paris, Abbot Suger announced himself at the Court. I escorted him but I did not enter the palace. Abbot Suger later related me how he had called hell-fire on the head of King Louis the Younger and his Queen. The King seemed distressed by the disaster at the church of Vitry. By then, of course, entire Christendom condemned their actions at Vitry. Suger told the King was now wrecked by guilt. Not so were Cadurc and Raoul de Vermandois, and not so too, was Aliénor. The King wanted to make amends. He donated money and precious stones to Saint Denis. But Louis refused obstinately to negotiate with Count Thibaud of Champagne. The Royal Army continued to sack the Champagne even though there was heavy fighting in places, as Thibaud organised resistance.

Gormond soon returned to Saint Denis. He had brought Henri to the Bishop of Reims. Henri was safe.

The influence of Abbot Suger on King Louis seemed to grow, as Suger's reproaches reached home. King Louis's political situation was awful. France was under an interdict. Raoul de Vermandois and Pétronille were excommunicated. The death of the innocents of Vitry in the burnt church was universally regarded as a shame and a perpetual stain on the badge of France. Louis was rightfully blamed.

Louis continued to have the Champagne ravaged by his armed bands but Count Thibaud did not yield to negotiations. After seven years the King's marriage had not yielded children. Aliénor had miscarried. Suger attributed the woes to the errors inspired by the King's vanity and to his bad counsellors, Cadurc and Raoul de Vermandois.

Suger had an unexpected ally in Bernard de Clairvaux. Bernard wrote a letter to King Louis the Younger, in which he severely lectured the King. Bernard had tried to obtain from Pope Innocent II that the excommunication of Raoul de Vermandois and Pétronille be lifted, without allowing them to be married, but without success. The Pope had been hardened in the political battle against his erstwhile Antipope Anacletus II; he had a new war on his hands when he refused to recognise the Treaty of Mignano which he had been forced to sign while in capture by troops of King

Roger II of Sicily. Robert of Selby, Roger's warlord attacked Benevento, a papal town. The Papal States were in danger.

Bernard warned the King against his bad counsellors, Cadurc and Raoul. He reproached the King for preferring the company of thieves and murderers and of excommunicated persons. Louis, however, persisted stubbornly in his attitude against the Champagne. He replied to Bernard in a letter, accusing Count Thibaud of plotting against his King. Thibaud seeks to undermine my authority, he wrote. Thibaud was forming alliances by political marriages, directed squarely against the authority of the King of France. The Count's son, Henri, was to be wed to Lorette, the daughter of Thierry of the Alsace, Count of Flanders. One of Thibaud's daughters was to marry Yves de Nesles, Count of Soissons. King Louis accused these marriages to be unions of consanguinity, forbidden by the Church. Bernard de Clairvaux was angered as much as Suger. He wrote another letter, not addressed to Louis but to Etienne de Préneste, a French Bishop of the Papal Court of Rome. Bernard mentioned the consanguinity of Louis the Younger and Aliénor, who were parents in the third degree. He declared he did not know of any consanguinity in the marriages that Louis denounced and therefore he saw no obstacles for the Church to accept these weddings.

In the late summer, Pope Innocent II died. Guido di Castello succeeded on him under the name of Celestine II. This Pope had studied with my father and he knew Bernard de Clairvaux very well. Pope Celestine II listened to Bernard, and Bernard conferred with Abbot Suger. A compromise was found late in the winter of the following year. The King accepted the election of Pierre de la Châtre as Bishop of Bourges. Yet, Cadurc remained the King's Chancellor. The Pope withdrew the interdict on France and he reconciled officially with the King. The withdrawal of the interdict was timely, because Pope Celestine died a little later, in March of 1144. His successor was Celestine's Chancellor, Gherardo Caccianemici dal Orso, named Lucius II. Celestine had only been Pope for five months and a half.

Meanwhile, Abbot Suger worked at the first part of the renewal of his church. His new western front neared completion. During that period the hammering in my head responded to the hammering at the stones of Suger's glorious gift of adoration to God. I felt worse, day after day. The guilt wrecked my body and soul. I had terrible nightmares. I felt I should have died at Vitry.

One day, I sauntered off into the forest with my horse. At a clearing among the oaks I dismounted and let my horse wander. I walked and saw a fine bed of bluebells. The blue colour of the flowers attracted me like a man wanting to drown in a river. I sat against a tree and drew my dagger, pointed it to my breast.

I heard a loud rustle to my right. Out stepped Gormond, holding his and my horse at the reins.

'Well, well,' Gormond said. 'Look who I find here. I say to myself, Gormond, this is a fine day for a walk in the woods. So I rode out at my leisure and see, in the middle of the trees I find this horse that I recognised as yours. You should take care and tie the animal better. It undid the knot in its reins and wandered off. It took me some time to find you. What is that dagger for? Did you intend to cut bluebells? One doesn't cut

bluebells. Look, you just draw at their stems and out comes the flower! Shall we walk together?’

I had to smile. ‘Cut the crap, Gormond,’ I said. ‘Why are you here? Why did you follow me?’

Gormond had to admit he had stalked me.

I shouted, ‘get lost, Gormond. Leave me.’

‘I cannot,’ he replied.

‘Why not?’ I cried.

‘I promised to look after you,’ he answered. ‘The man who asked me to watch out for you is higher than you in all authority. So stand up, now and come back with me.’

‘I suppose you mean Abbot Suger?’

‘You know it all,’ he answered.

Suger had ordered Gormond to stick to me and see what I would do. It made sense. So I sighed and we walked on.

‘Look,’ Gormond said. ‘I know it was hard on you. I honestly believe you do not have to blame yourself. In all normal turn of events, the nobles should have been at the castle. Life is like that, made up of unexpected events that bring us suffering. All men suffer. Some men long for the death that brings an end to suffering. It is more courageous, however, to live on and do good in the world.’

He blabbered on, not always finding the right, soothing words. His efforts at consolation did not convince me in the least. Yet, I was touched by his concern, as well as by Suger’s concern. So, I put my arm around his shoulders and we walked on. I needed to hold somebody. I wept and broke down again. Gormond patted my back. This was the second time I had wanted to leave and had been retained. Maybe that also was my fate. I sighed and Gormond and I rode out of the woods, back to Saint Denis. Later, when I haunted the forest and the countryside like a sad madman, I was aware that I always had a shadow, even when it was raining. Dear Gormond.

It was also during that time that I received two packages which brought me my financial independence from any lord. The King sent me a purse with thirty golden coins. There was no letter, no explanation added to the coins. It was a small fortune, however, more money than I had ever possessed. I surmised it was my reward for the capture of Vitry. I had wanted a fief of my own, but the coins were all that Louis would give. I supposed a fief would have been too public a reward for the burning of the people of Vitry. Thirty coins were appropriate, exactly as many coins as the silver ones for which Judas had betrayed Christ. Had Aliénor counted them? I threw the purse in a corner of my bedroom, disgusted and angry once more.

A little later a Champagne messenger brought a sealed heavy wooden box to my house. This messenger equally left without a word. The box contained many more gold coins and very many precious stones. The note in the box was written by the hand of Count Thibaud de Champagne. The note said the Count would always be in my debt. He thanked me for having saved his son. I would be welcome, always, at the Court of Champagne. That note struck me as particularly cynical, but of course, Count Thibaud did not know of my involvement in the capture of Vitry. Neither did Henri. The box contained a real fortune. The treasure was not a ransom for a Count’s son, but it guaranteed me a life of ease. I took about half of the stones to Abbot Suger, who thanked me profusely, not asking where the stones came from. I bet he knew already. I made his day. Suger said he would use the stones on new chandeliers for his altar. At least I too had offered something to God and Suger did not refuse the stones even

though he knew what reward they represented. The severe, austere, formidable Abbot Suger never blamed me.

In June of 1144, Abbot Suger's Abbey Church had a new western front at last, after more than two years of work. It was a grand view, Suger's new church. The front was not radically different from what I had seen on other churches, and yet the façade had an entirely different feel. It was built horizontally in three parts, in which there were triple portals. The two portals that flanked the middle portal were slightly smaller than the central one. The sides to the left and right wore twin towers. Along the three portals stood carved figures with elongated silhouettes, quite unlike in style any sculpture I knew. The sculptured decorations of the tympanum and the voussoirs of the portals combined with the carved guardians of the gate. An aura of silent dignity, of spirituality, of peace, maybe even of grave mourning, hung over them so that they seemed to long for the heavens. Suger's architects had built arcades over the portals, like many other churches had. Rounded arches crowned the windows. Above the central portal were triple windows, which responded to the three portals, but the window above the middle portal was very large and round, inlaid with delicately sculptured, slender ribs which held coloured glass. From a distance, one could see above that round window the triangular façade of the elder part of the church, the part against which the front had been built. It was a fine effect.

The middle portal was large. Its arch had to be supported in the middle by a column, a trumeau. The column supported a horizontal stone lintel, as well as the tympanum above. The tympanum was filled with carved figures too. The voussoirs, all around the upper part of the arch, held many small carved sculptures. The tympanum formed a scene of God in glory, accompanied by the Apostles. There were no hideous figures to scare the devotees when they entered the church, no strange and deranging animals in the sculptures of the tympanum. Suger had invented a new generation of church decoration in stone, and he was proud of the result.

Suger decided we needed to organise a great feast in honour of the end of the first part of the works on the Abbey Church of Saint Denis. Suger was an authoritative organiser. He summoned all the monks and guards and all the people of the village to work at the feast. There was to be no grudging about Suger's orders. We all knew the Abbot well and could tell that there was no going against his orders. He accepted suggestions at best. We talked and organised the inauguration of the church from Christmas of the preceding year on. It kept my mind busy and Suger gave me much to exercise and rack my brain.

For the great day, Abbot Suger invited many Archbishops and Bishops from France and Germany and Flanders. Bernard de Clairvaux accepted to attend and for once Suger did not grunt at the name. I believe he wanted to show off to Bernard with what he, Suger could accomplish. His church would probably hit Bernard straight in the face with its splendour and luxury of sculptures, its myriad of colours thrown by the sun through the glazed windows. Abbot Suger and Bernard de Clairvaux had grown towards each other a great deal since their dispute at Cluny, though both would hardly recognise that. They had had the same opinion of the King and Queen lately, and they conspired for a solution of the conflict between France and Champagne.

King Louis the Younger would come, and his wife Aliénor, and his mother Adelaïde, and many of his Barons.

I was present in the procession that entered the finished Abbey Church on the opening day. Abbot Suger led the procession, walking solemnly with his mitre and staff, and I walked at his side, before even the many other Bishops and priests who accompanied him. Behind us stepped the King and Queen.

Before the procession formed I had met them. The King took no notice of me; I was a non-entity. Aliénor expressly avoided my eyes, but later, in the church, I caught her watching me, scrutinising me. She was merely twenty years old then, a beauty as great and as coolly dignified as Suger's carved figures in the middle portal through which we had walked. The mass lasted a long time and I had to endure the feasting dinner for the rest of the day.

During the stay of so many noblemen, Bernard de Clairvaux and Abbot Suger and other men too talked to the King about the war with the Champagne. Louis's troops had stopped pillaging the country, but the war had not ended.

I heard later from Suger that Aliénor had met Bernard de Clairvaux alone and in secret. She had complained to Bernard that she had not given birth to children so far in her marriage with the King. Bernard had grasped the occasion to reproof of her rebellious attitude against the church and about her wrong influence on the King. He saw in this a reason for her barrenness. Bernard sought peace with the Champagne, peace between King and Church, and he wanted her to provide better counsel to the King. Bernard admonished Aliénor and told her that if she did as he asked, she would have children yet.

In the following weeks, King Louis the Younger seemed to have changed attitude indeed to the Champagne and to the Church. Pierre de la Châtre was Bishop of Bourges and would remain so, fully acknowledged by the King, despite the King's oath taken to the contrary. Raoul de Vermandois and Pétronille continued to live as lovers, unmarried and excommunicated, but the King and Queen took some distance from the couple and posed to the Church no longer overtly conditions as to the divorce of Raoul and to their marriage. Count Thibaud de Champagne renounced to the political weddings of his children. More importantly, only a little later, it became apparent that the Queen was pregnant. Her pregnancy lasted; she did not miscarry. At the end of the same year she gave birth to her first child after seven years of marriage. The child was a daughter. Aliénor gave her daughter, her first child, the name of Marie.

By that time, the King started to talk of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He had much to ask God's forgiveness for. He had deliberately broken his oath to never allow Pierre de la Châtre become Bishop of Bourges. The thousand five hundred victims of the burned church of Saint Vitry nagged at his conscience. Louis had also much to thank the Church for, such as for his first child. Louis the Younger had succeeded as king because his brother Philip had died, and Philip had promised to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem just before he died. Louis felt bound to that promise. Louis thought more and more about his brother's vow and desired to fulfil it.

For me, the following year passed rapidly. It was an uneventful year. Gormond and I protected the rapidly growing Saint Denis. I saw Jacob occasionally. I travelled once to Le Pallet and to Nantes, to visit my family. I told Dionysia immediately that matters as they were stood right for me at Le Pallet. I did not contest Clisson's authority over the fief. I asked to continue to wear the name and the blazon. That was all.

I lived in a daze. How much was I really aware of the everyday things I did? I wonder. I tried not to think. Marie was still beside me. It was an obsession I could not escape from. I saw her in a woman that bought vegetables at the market. I saw her in a woman that prayed at church, in a girl that danced, in a woman that washed linen in the River Seine. I was sure I had lost my mind. I lived and worked doing the usual movements, practically without thinking.

At Christmas of that year, in the city of Bourges, assisted by the Archbishop of Bourges, King Louis the Younger proclaimed publicly his wish to travel to Jerusalem to go on a pilgrimage. Louis proposed a meeting of all the Barons and Bishops of his lands to gather at Vézelay in Burgundy at Easter of the next year, to take on the cross of the pilgrimage. The time was well chosen – or chosen too late. The Saracens had captured the city of Edessa in the Holy Land, and that entire Frank County with it, reducing the Frankish fief to a few lesser castles. The Saracens, so it seemed, threatened also the other Frank territories in Palestine.

Louis might have wanted to go on a pilgrimage but the Church wanted him to go to war on a full-scale Crusade. King Louis proudly situated himself in history, for it had been at Vézelay that Pope Urban II had preached the first Crusade to the Holy Land. The Church of course was enchanted with the revival of glorious pious traditions.

Before Easter of 1146, the King and Queen departed for Vézelay. If the King of France went to Vézelay with his Barons and Bishops for something as solemn as the announcement of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, then the King's main counsellor, Abbot Suger, had to ride with him. So we left Saint Denis, Suger and I, accompanied by Gormond and five monks of Saint Denis and five guards. We rode in bad weather and arrived only a few days before Easter in Burgundy, in the valleys near Vézelay. I had not expected to find lodgings in the hostels of the abbey even though Suger probably would stay there. So we had packhorses with us, laden with food and tents. We also had enough coins to buy us more food, though Gormond would have to ride far, accompanied by a monk and a guard, to find adequate bread, fruit, vegetables and some fowl. We set up our tents some distance from Vézelay, in a valley, and let Suger with three of his monks ride on to Vézelay itself.

I did not know what Vézelay was; nor did I understand why the meeting had to be at this town. Suger knew all things ecclesiastic and liked to show his erudition, so he told us all.

Vézelay had been at first a convent for nuns, he said, built in the valley of the site called Vézelay. The convent was founded in the middle of the ninth century. At the

end of that century two important events happened that changed the destiny of the abbey.

First, the convent was destroyed by Normans who had sailed upstream on the rivers. The nuns' convent was then transformed into a monastery for monks, and the monks transferred the abbey to the top of the hill for better protection. They built a strong wall around the monastery.

The second event was that one of the monks of the abbey, a man called Baudillon, brought to Vézelay relics of Saint Mary Magdalene from the village of Saint-Maximin in the Provence region. Mary Magdalene was the preferred of Christ. She was the converted adulteress, the one who anointed Christ's feet at the supper in the house of the Pharisee Simon. She was the sister of Martha and of the Lazarus that Christ had risen from the dead. She had been the first to whom Christ appeared after his Resurrection, and Christ had loved her so much that he had said, 'Noli me Tangere,' do not touch me lest I should be retained on earth. So great was the power of love that Christ had feared the bonds with Mary Magdalene would keep him in the world of men.

How had Mary Magdalene arrived in the Provence? Unbelievers of the Holy Land had sent off Maximin, Lazarus, Martha and Mary and the others in a boat without oars, sail or rudder, told Sugar. The travel was fraught with miracles. When the boat set off, Sarah, the black servant of the two Maries, had been retained on the shore and she despaired to get into the boat. Mary, mother of James and John threw her cloak in the sea, which served as a raft for Sarah to reach the other companions. An angel guided the boat miraculously to a site that was now the small town of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer in the delta of the Rhône River. Mary and her companions Christianised the Provence from there. Martha left for Tarascon; Lazarus became the apostle of Marseilles. Maximin and Cedonius evangelised Aix-en-Provence, where Maximin became the first bishop of Aix.

Mary Magdalene's place was the village of Sainte Baume, called after Magdalene's balms, and that place was currently still her pilgrimage site. The village was now called Saint-Maximin-de-la-Sainte-Baume and the cave of Mary was pilgrimage ground. The two other Maries and Sarah stayed in the Camargue, the estuary of the Rhône River and when they died their relics remained in Saintes-Maries. This site became also a most famous pilgrimage aim. The Patron Saint of the town was the black Sarah. The pilgrims wore the relics and the boat of the Maries in procession each year. The Magdalene lived alone in her cave, a life of penitence. She had died there and Saint Maximin had gathered her bones at the village named after him. Some of these bones were transferred to Vézelay and Vézelay became equally a famous site of pilgrimage.

Vézelay was the starting point for Burgundy and regions to the north-east of France for pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela, to the so powerful relics of Saint James Major. The scallop shells, symbols of that pilgrimage, symbols also for hostels of pilgrims, were to be found at various places of Vézelay. The pilgrimages passed through many mythical sites after Vézelay: Le Puy-en-Velay, Aubrac, Conques, and Moissac. A side tour was the saintly Rocamadour, a Holy Place too. Lastly, it was from Vézelay that the First Crusade had been preached by the Pope.

The Abbey Church of Vézelay was built at the highest point of the hill. It had been burned down in the summer of 1120 while thousands of pilgrims were at the site. It

had taken twenty years to rebuild the church and Suger told that the narthex on its façade had only been finished the year before we arrived. The Abbots of Vézelay could dress like Bishops and the monastery had been brought into the family of Cluny abbeys. For Suger, we were on familiar and friendly ground.

I asked Abbot Suger whether he had been to Vézelay before and he said yes, three years ago, just before I arrived. He had wanted to see the construction of the new church, the plans and to hear the ideas of the masons.

I still did not understand what was so special about the place. Every church had famous relics. Saint Denis had a greater history. Abbot Suger looked at me with amusement in his eyes. He said that Vézelay was a Holy Place, a special place, but I would have to find out for myself why that was so.

I travelled to Vézelay with mixed feelings. Here, once more, was a new church built on the rests of a burned one. I feared the place. Fire and destruction seemed to pursue me. The coincidences disturbed me. What would I find at Vézelay?

I rode to the famous Vézelay on one of the following days, right before the feast of Easter. I left my horse at a stable in the valley and walked on foot to the monastery. The place offered a spectacular view on all sides. Several high hills enclosed the hill of Vézelay, all softly rounded and covered with forests. Spring had painted young green hues on the trees of the woods. The leaves rustled slowly in the wind. The hillocks were high enough to give the impression the site of Vézelay huddled snugly among friends. The village itself was built on top of one of those hills. Vézelay was a place of ancient worship and a place of light. I was used to the rains of Brittany and to the dark, low clouds of Saint Denis. The sun shone often at Le Pallet and Paris, but the light was always subdued, tinted in silvery grey. Here, at Vézelay, the sky was as bright and pure blue as the very rarest blue diamonds. The air felt briskly dry. It was fresh in the morning. The leaves of the trees reflected the rays of the sun in various other colours: olive green, young green, copper green, and silvery, flickering shades. Walls enveloped the town, and these defences were rather high, but not strengthened by towers. I passed by the main gates, where only low bastions guarded the entrance. The walls were not crenellated; the guards only patrolled on a pathway protected by parapets. Who would attack a place of pilgrimage I had asked Suger when he had mentioned the walls and drawn my surprise. Oh, he answered, the Counts of Nevers for one coveted the wealth of the town and begrudged the Abbey its privileges. But these days, the fame of the pilgrimage site was so great that the Pope and King Louis would intervene immediately in any conflict, with threats of excommunication and armed troops.

I walked up the hill through the main street of Vézelay. The street was not paved, but well flattened. The houses were mostly built of stone; most of the dwellings had thatched roofs, but some of them took pride in grey roofs of flat stones. Almost every house was a shop, waiting eagerly for the ascending pilgrims to spend their last precious coins. The town was a joyful place because the so many and various colours of these shops. Candles were sold here, pilgrim staffs, vegetables and fruit, furniture and clothes, and many other items. Artisans worked at every corner. The flags of Vézelay hung out of many windows: blue flags with the golden lilies of France and at

the top showing a band in which was depicted the silver relics shrine of Saint Mary Magdalene.

The street was long and climbed quite steeply. I advanced slowly, took my time, and so did the long line of devote pilgrims that sought Saint Mary Magdalene's, high up. On the other side of the street, pilgrims walked down. It was strange to find in this forsaken place, in the midst of such vast forests so many people. The contrast between the tranquil surroundings of the town and the bustle inside the walls was striking. A few pilgrims wore the staffs with the scallop shells bound at the end: the sign of pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela. The road was long. I walked with bent back. I was not exhausted when I reached the church at the top, but quite tired.

The church's façade resembled somewhat the façade of Suger's new church at Saint Denis. This church also had triple portals and twin towers, though the two side portals and the towers also were smaller than at Saint Denis. There was a large, flat space before the central portal, filled with pilgrims, monks, knights, artisans, women, all chatting and praying.

I stood under the tympanum of the main portal. The doors to the interiors of the church were open, but revealed, contrasting with the dazzling brilliance of the sun, only darkness inside. I looked up. The church was high from this viewpoint. It was a basilica in form, larger than Saint Denis – at least, so it seemed to me – and entirely built in the traditional Frankish style with rounded arches. The tympanum sculptures showed Christ placed in an almond-shaped mandorla, throning in glory, rays of light emanating from His body. Christ's Apostles were sculptured beside him, in four groups of three. I discovered fine reliefs of the signs of the Zodiac and of works of the fields, carved figures that showed Christ as the Lord of the Heavens and of the Earth. The carved figures had an angular, brute feeling however, quite unlike Suger's statues. I entered the church.

I was amazed. This church was huge. It was neither as long nor as wide as Cluny, but Saint Mary Magdalene's certainly was one of the largest churches I had ever seen. Its structure was very simple: a long rounded, vaulted hall. Rounded arches supported the vaults, but the arches were very high, as high as I would not have held possible. The basilica was long. The columns were painted in bright tones, but the ribs of the arches above me had needed no paint, for the masons had used alternatively dark and bright stones so that the view of the many arches, one after the other, was simply majestic in its symmetry. The repetition of the dark and bright patterned ribs formed a long, stunning view that was breathtaking. Moreover, once my eyes accustomed to the contrast in intensity of light from the outside, I had to admit that the basilica bathed in the very bright, almost eerie light of Vézelay. The church seemed to concentrate the light and enhance it to the whiteness of spirits. This also was very different from the sombreness of for instance the dull Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. Fumes rose from incense burners and masses were being sung. The soft hymns mounted onto the arches, filling the space with a strange atmosphere of unearthly, sublime transcendence. One entered another world in this church.

I was subdued by the surprise, by the contrast of the white church with the green isolation and the wilderness of the forests below, by the contrast of the bustling town on the flank of the hill and the heavenly spirituality of the interior of this church. A peculiar mood took possession of me, then. I had been very lonely since the siege of Vitry, and turned into myself, for over a year. Here, however, the heavenly world of

the soul, the divine world of the Apostles and Saints, the spiritual realm of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene touched the human world. Vézelay was a place where the heavens reached out to earth. The atmosphere uplifted the soul of the pilgrim. Was this the power of Saint Mary Magdalene, who had lived so long as a recluse in her grotto, predominating here supreme? Was it the long climb upwards to this church in the enchanting light that brought on the effect, or was it the strange qualities of that light and of the repeating lines of the bright and dark transverse ribs of the architecture of this building that created the special atmosphere?

This was the unexpected magic, the secret of Vézelay that Abbot Suger had told me about without revealing it. Were my feelings shared by the pilgrims that came here to pray? Once one had experienced it, was one capable of explaining it to another person? I acknowledged the uniqueness of the place. I had rarely experienced something of the gleam of the heavens; at Vézelay I had come nearest to it. Hildegard of Bermersheim had tried to explain me how she experienced ecstasy and oneness with God. I had not been able to imagine what her state could have been like. Now I understood, and realised I too had reached for a while such a state by the effect of this church in this environment.

I knelt then and talked to God. I talked to Him about Marie. An utter sense of peace of mind came over me. I had the feeling that finally, here at Vézelay, God had reconciled with me, and I with God. God had forgiven me, I thought, and I hated God less than before, even though I still did not understand why Marie was no more and why it was allowed to be so. I humbly submitted to the presence of God and more strongly, to God's pity and sadness. Was God a God of sadness and suffering after all?

I awoke from these thoughts when pilgrims pushed me on. I stood and was driven to the crypt, down to the display of the golden vessels with the relics of Saint Mary Magdalene. I remained a while in the crypt. I was pushed straight back in the real world, among the sweating and thronging crowd. My dream had ended. I ascended the stairs of the crypt and returned to the doors of the portal. As I walked in the nave I looked at the columns. Each column bore a sculptured scene. The statues that emerged from the stone pediments were wonderful, less stylized than in Suger's new figures aside the portal of Saint Denis. The sculptures here were rougher, less delicate, more terrible, some scenes gruesome. They represented the earthy life of suffering, not the spiritual life of heaven. I stepped outside. I was dazed by the sudden brightness and warmth outside the church. I stayed a long while standing in front of the church, looking up at the towers, at the sculptures and the rounded windows above the portal, at the azure blue sky. Then I looked down at the town and the valleys beyond. I saw the long row of men climbing up the road to the church, another line warily leading downwards.

I walked along the walls of the abbey and of the old castle of Vézelay, passed through a gate and stood in the courtyard beside the church, before the castle and the abbey. I saw on my left the impressive length of the basilica. A few monks walked in the courtyard, which was a large green field between the church and the monastery's buildings. There was a wall around Vézelay and another one around the abbey. But from here, a terrace at the very top of Vézelay's hill, one had an extraordinary fine view of the landscape, which was simply grand.

One distinguished clearly in the dry air all the hills around Vézelay and the valleys below, between the hills and the abbey. A sea of green foliage unfolded before one's

eyes. One made out almost no fields or pastures, and only a thin path here and there, on which no man walked at that moment. The village of Asquins lay to the north, hidden by the basilica. The most spiritual place of France was also in its surroundings untouched by man, encircled by green wilderness. Vézelay was in the midst of forests, yet the site buildings dominated the wide landscape. Here, I experienced the unity of man and nature, as much as I had experienced inside the church the unity of mankind and the spiritual. Vézelay was a point where the spiritual world and the world of humans, and nature, converged to harmony and where the three worlds touched in peace. Despite the warmth of noon I shivered. I went to a wooden bench and sat, staring and staring and staring at the landscape, taking in the light, the contours of the forests, all the details, absorbing the light, warming in the sun's rays, communicating with the worlds. I sat there a long time, unable to draw myself away from the view. The sun lowered.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, looked up and saw Abbot Suger winking in the sun's light.

He said, 'you have been here for a long time, now, Daniel. The abbey will close the gates soon. You have to go. It will be dark; you may not find your camp in the night. We meet tomorrow at the proclamation of the King's pilgrimage.'

So I stood up from the bench, asked whether Suger was all right, to which he said yes, he had found lodgings in the abbey and all was well. I walked out of the monastery by the Porte Sainte Croix, almost ran down to the lower gate of the Porte d'Asquins of Vézelay, found my horse and rode back to my small camp.

On Easter day of that year of the Lord 1146, a large crowd gathered after mass on the north flank of the hill of Vézelay in Burgundy. This was a large open space situated to the left of the basilica of the front of Saint Mary Magdalene. The place lay outside the walls of Vézelay. At the highest point stood a large wooden platform, erected there so that the crowd could see the throne of King Louis the Younger of France and of his fair Queen Aliénor, Duchess of Aquitaine. The King and Queen already sat there now, protected from the sun by a large multi-coloured canvas hung from stout poles. Their counsellor, the formidable Abbot Suger of Saint Denis waited at their side, at the side of the large crimson banner of France, the Oriflamme, which flew bravely in the wind. Somewhat lower than the platform a dais had been built by the carpenters, a place from which Bernard de Clairvaux, the acknowledged spiritual master of France, would preach.

A large crowd had already gathered when I arrived with my companions. The crowd, mostly the King's Barons and knights, Bishops and priests, and many pilgrims, waited patiently in silence. The Barons gathered at Vézelay were of the finest names of France, men I had seen at Paris and Saint Denis. Standing around the King, lower on the hill were Pons, the venerable Abbot of Vézelay, Simon Bishop of Noyon, Godefroy Bishop of Langres, Arnould Bishop of Lisieux, Herbert Abbot of Saint-Pierre-de-Sens, Thibaut Abbot of Sainte-Colombe, Alphonse Count of Saint-Gilles, Thierry d'Alsace Count of Flanders, Henri son of Thibaut the Count of Blois, Guillaume Count of Nevers, Renaud Count of Tonnerre and brother to Guillaume of Nevers, Count Robert de Perche and brother of King Louis, Yves Count of Soissons, Guy Count of Ponthieu, Guillaume Count of Varennes, Archambaud de Bourbon,

Enguerrand de Couci, Geoffroi de Rancon, Hugues de Lusignan, Guillaume de Courtenay, Renaud de Montargis, Itier de Touzy, Gaucher de Montjay, Evrard de Breteuil, Dreux de Monchi-le-Chatel, Manassé de Beuil, Anselme de Trénacel and his brother Guérin, Guillaume le Bouteiller, and Guillaume-Agilon de Trie and many, many more, all loyal vassals of France. Hardly another event had seen so many valiant lords of France near the King and Queen.

When the crowd was large enough, Bernard de Clairvaux descended the hill from the space before the church, accompanied by tens of monks. He walked slowly up to the dais in front of the king, saluted the Monarch, then turned his back to the King, and addressed the people. He looked solemnly over the crowd, brought his gaze to the heavens as if to ask for a sign of approbation, and then stepped to the side so that the crowd could see the King and Queen. He stood there, a long figure, heightened by the white multiple robes of the Abbots of the Order of Citeaux.

First, Bernard slowly opened a scroll and read the letter of Pope Eugene III. This Pope had very recently succeeded on Lucius II. The Pope had written a letter inciting the men of Christendom to go on an armed pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The Pope wanted a second Crusade.

It was a short letter. Bernard read with a clear voice. He articulated every word and emphasised the phrases. Pope Eugene reminded of how many of his predecessors to the Papal Throne had worked for the deliverance of the Church in the Orient. He wrote of how the bravest among the warriors of France and Italy had answered to the call of Pope Urban II, fifty years ago, to free Jerusalem – the town where the Saviour suffered – from the hands of the pagans. The city of Edessa, called Rohais by the Franks, and other cities of the County of that name had fallen to the pagans. Many ecclesiastics such as the Archbishop of Edessa and his clergy, and many other Christians had been slain. The relics of the Saints were trampled upon or had been dispersed.

Thereby, wrote Pope Eugene, a danger threatened the Church of God and Christianity. He called it the greatest proof of our nobility to defend the territories acquired by the bravery of our fathers. He hoped, God forbid, that the value of the fathers had not diminished in the sons. Rohais had fallen because of our sins.

Eugene therefore exhorted us, asked and commanded for the remission of our sins, to gird ourselves – in the first place the greater men and the nobles – to go and defend the Church in the Orient. He wanted us to free the captives and to triumph over our enemies.

Pope Eugene promised remission of sins to all those who would travel to the Holy Land. The goods, wives and sons of such men would be put under the protection of the Archbishops, Bishops and other prelates of the Church. Their possessions would not be touched until most certain news had been obtained of their return or their death. The Pope asked to depart without riches, only armed with zeal and diligence and a pure heart. Pope Eugene absolved the men that would depart, by his apostolic authority. He also allowed those who needed money for the journey, and saw their lord unwilling to lend them money, to pledge their lands to the Church in return for funds.

Finally, Bernard de Clairvaux read and repeated that the Pope granted remission of sins, and absolution of sins confessed, to whom would begin the sacred journey or to whom would die during it.

Bernard de Clairvaux then laid down the letter of the Pope, straightened his monk's robes, and started his own sermon.

Bernard did not say that we were to go to war with the Saracens because King Louis the Younger had sworn an oath and had been unwilling for personal profit to keep the oath. He did not say that the King wanted to go on a pilgrimage to obtain absolution from having ordered so many killed at Vitry. He did not say that the King had promised to go because his marriage had not yielded children. He did not say that Louis had enough with a pilgrimage and had not thought of a Crusade. So I grinned at first at what the venerable monk really said.

Bernard repeated that Christendom and the most holy places were in danger. He talked about death, the death that might come from battles with the Saracens, but that would then be a death like the death of Christ. The pilgrimage to Jerusalem would glorify the pure of heart and chastise the bad. To defend the Christians would be to revenge Christ from those that hurt the Lord. The deeds of the Crusaders would be to the profit of Christ. The death of a pagan who killed Christians would be to the glory of God. Nevertheless, said Bernard, one should not kill pagans if one found another way to stop them from harassing Christians.

Until then, Bernard had spoken in a rather soft voice, though we could hear him well. He repeated his arguments several times in other phrasings. Now, he almost cried his preaching, emphasised them with wide gestures and spoke more distinctly still. He conjured the pagans who stole the unearthly richness of Jerusalem, who desecrated the Holy Places and who appropriated for themselves the Christian sanctuaries, to be thrown back from the sites where Christ had lived and had spoken and had died and had resurrected. The pagans should feel the swords of the Christians over their heads so that they would not be able to think that the God of the Christians was weak. Bernard continued to speak with such passionate phrases that the crowd started to shout, and was excited. Bernard did not use anymore words that appealed to the mind and to reason. He used words that enflamed the passions. Even before he stopped speaking, the shouts in the crowd grew to an overwhelming groan, to a thunder of voices that clamoured, 'yes, God wills it! Dieu le veut, Dieu le veut! Crosses, give us crosses!'

The Bishops had prepared a heap of crosses, white pieces of cloth with a red cross roughly sewn on them. Bernard handed these out to the men that came to his platform. There was suddenly such a massing forward of the knights, anxious to get at one of the crosses, that the planks of wood on which Bernard and the Bishops stood collapsed. Luckily, the higher platform on which the King and Queen throned, held. Bernard had gone down on his knees but he was unhurt, and so were the Bishops. Bernard jumped on the Royal platform, recuperated the crosses and continued to hand them out. Abbot Suger stood perplexed. There were so many people thronging to Bernard that the crosses were all gone. Bernard then tore away his white ceremonious monk's habits and sliced pieces from it with a dagger, which he gave to the last knights and pilgrims.

I had been transfixed by the sermon of Bernard de Clairvaux. Neither I nor Gormond had gone forward to fetch a cross. We stood empty-handed when the ceremony on the

flank of Vézelay's hill had finished. The people descended the hill and dispersed. I was still thinking and torn by contradictory feelings.

I was still angry enough and cynical and bitter to want to mock Bernard's speech. Pope Eugene and Bernard had promised absolution and remission of sins, however, and there was indeed one sin that weighed so very heavily on my mind. I had killed Marie. She had had confidence in me and I had killed her. I had helped to kill so many innocent people at Vitry, Christians and Jews alike. I had experienced visions, but seen nothing of my salvation. I was worn out by guilt and that guilt gnawed every day at my conscience. Maybe I too would find peace in the Holy Land. And maybe, yes maybe, I might find answers on how to live with God, in his place, in Jerusalem.

There was one question especially that had remained unanswered all that time, despite the meeting of the theologians at Cluny and despite my talks with Suger: how could so much cruelty and pain and hypocrisy as I had seen at Vitry and after, afflicted by human beings, be allowed to happen by a God that was a God of love? Why was such evil created and allowed? A God that had created the world and then left humans to do themselves much harm without intervening, caring no more, was not a God worth caring for either. Such a God was a monster! A God of love either allowed the cruelty in our world and then it was not of God of love anymore, or such a God could not intervene and change the cruelty – in which case he was an impotent creature, not a God.

Maybe I would find the answer in the Holy Land. Anyhow, if there was a place where I could find answers - and I had not found the answer in France -, then Jerusalem seemed the only place on earth to discover them. I already had a cross on my surcoat: the red cross of the blazon of Le Pallet on a light grey field. I could go to the Holy Land.

I turned to Gormond and said, 'I will go to the Holy Land, too! I must!'

Gormond answered, 'yes. I thought so. I saw you doubt and weigh the options. I will go with you. If you allow me, that is. I feel death nearing. I am an old man. I have no family here. I have nobody in this land to care for but you, that is, if you allow me to be your friend. I might as well die near Jerusalem. When do we leave?'

We both smiled then, and embraced amongst the leaving people on the hill of Vézelay. Vézelay had worked its magic on us, too.

From the far I saw Abbot Suger watching us, still standing in full attire, a frown on his face and apprehension drawn on his face. Suger already knew what I would do.

And so it was, I told Usama ibn Munqidh and Salah al-Din Yusuf and to Jadwa, that I decided to travel to these lands and ended up in Aleppo. The Crusaders of Vézelay promised to leave but only a year later, for much had to be prepared for a large army to travel such a long way. Gormond and I left almost immediately.

We returned with Abbot Suger to Saint Denis, of course. Suger repeated to me often he did not like the idea. He did not like the idea that the King of France would leave his lands. He said France needed a King. He thought a King had already too much to do in his own land than go warring in other lands. He told me of how many centuries, a thousand years, the Holy Land had existed without Frankish rule. Why bring war

and destruction to those far lands, where anyhow pilgrims had been travelling for as many years.

Suger even liked less the idea that I, of all men, would go. He said Christ was everywhere, not just in Jerusalem, and everywhere as near as in Jerusalem. Had not Christ said that His Kingdom was not of this world?

What Abbot Suger said made sense. Maybe I would find no answers on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea. Maybe the best people to give answers were here, in France. If I did not find answers, I would either die there or come back the same man, but a man without sins. If I found answers, I would know what kind of man I was and how the world and God worked. I esteemed my quest worth the effort. I had to go and find out for myself whether there were answers. I could do no better. I had to seek peace from what I had done to Marie. Otherwise I would try and try again to kill myself and one day I would succeed. What kind of a life was that?

Abbot Suger sighed and sighed. He shook his head, but gave up. He confided in me he should have been a happy man and a proud man because King Louis the Younger had told him that when the army would depart, Abbot Suger would rule the country in his place. But Suger said he was sad.

So we returned to Saint Denis and prepared to travel. Suger had maps. He threw the parchments on the table and called me and Gormond to copy them, at least in crude drawings. He did not want us to travel by land. That road was long and dangerous for only two men. It was a decent road for an army, perhaps, not for lonely travellers. He proposed we descend the River Rhône by boat and sail to Marseilles. At that harbour we were to find a ship bound for Sicily, for Messina. We might find a ship at Marseilles to Genoa or Naples, and from there reach either Messina or directly one of the ports of the Holy Land. Messina was safer because there were Saracens there, so we might use a Saracen ship to sail to Tyre or Sidon or Acre or Jaffa. It was almost summer now. That was good, said Suger, for he had read in ancient books that sailing in summer in the Mediterranean was far better than sailing in winter. The winter storms were terrible at sea. So we should travel fast to Marseilles, on horse and by boat. If we could not arrive at Messina before the end of summer, we should wait for the next spring. Finally, the Abbot handed us a box of coins. I refused to take the money, saying I had enough and that he needed that for his church, but he stopped our protests with an uplifted hand.

‘You are my gems more than the precious stones I have in my church,’ he said. ‘I hope you will shine brighter. Send me news and let me know whether you found what you are looking for. I might need those answers too. I bless you both. May God preserve you from harm, pain, desolation and despair.’

We left on horse a week later. I took all the coins and stones I had and Gormond sewed them in the seams of our clothes. We wore light armour, put our shields on our horses, left our spears at Saint Denis but sharpened our swords, took each a crossbow and a few quarrels, and rode out of the abbey on a rainy afternoon, to the sun, towards a new life.

We followed Abbot Suger’s itinerary. We found boats on the Rhône that sailed day and night on the river, but we had to change boats several times. We had to ride by horse on some stretches along the river. We arrived at Marseilles a month later. At

Marseilles, after two weeks of waiting, we found a Norman ship bound for Messina. We arrived at the Sicilian harbour a few days only later.

There were few ships sailing to the Holy Land and we sought and sought for a captain that could take us in the right direction. I spoke Arabic and that eased a Saracen captain who said he would sail straight to Egypt, and then around the Mediterranean to the port of Suwaidiya in the Frank territories of Outremer. Although he would sail to many ports along the coasts of the Sea, he refused to halt in any other port of Palestine. It would be a long journey, but a safe one. He would hop from port to port and stay most of the time near the coasts, ready to dodge into a harbour or a bay when storms threatened. Any place of the coast of the Holy Land was fine for me, if only we could depart soon for I was eager to arrive at Jerusalem. So I did not hesitate and agreed on the price. Only much later, on board of the ship, did I hear that Suwaidiya was called Saint-Siméon by the Franks and that it was the port of Antioch, far from Jerusalem.

We paid the captain and embarked. It took us nearly two months and a half of sailing, for the ship was slow and we stopped indeed at many harbours. Yet, we reached Saint Simeon, the city of Antioch and the Holy Land many, many months before the French Crusaders - and, as we learned later, also the German Crusaders – had even left Christendom.

At Antioch, we proposed to help the Prince for a while, to become acquainted with the land and the people before we would travel south to Jerusalem. Our proposal was eagerly accepted. We were welcome but could only be additional men-at-arms, without experience of the Holy Land, used by the guards of Antioch as auxiliary warriors. The Prince of Antioch sent us as guards to the castle of Chastel Rouge, a fortified place of the Franks near the River Orontes.

And so it came, honourable Usama, I said, that on one of my first patrols, when we had ridden out of Chastel Rouge over the Orontes River to the Tell al-Karth close by, north along the Orontes, in the direction of Aleppo, I had been caught in a trap in an obscure wadi without a name and had been wounded and captured.

In this way I ended my story told in its last events in Usama ibn Munqidh's house in the medina of Aleppo.

Nine

Aleppo and the Hauran 1147

I continued to travel through the country of Syria with Usama. We visited many places between Aleppo and Damascus, especially the mountains and their passes, but also the plains with villages. We did not avoid the settlements anymore when they were quite inland, away from hillier terrain. Yusuf accompanied us on some of these trips. When not on travels, we passed fine evenings in Usama's house. We ate then in the patio, listened to music, and told stories.

The four of us, Jadwa often invited, had read Herodotus. We recalled the ancient Greek's narrations with relish. Yusuf liked to tell us the stories with large gestures and change of intonations of voice, and we laughed with him, saying he was a good actor.

Usama told me much about the Arabian ways of thinking and I explained how people lived in France. We hardly ever mentioned religion or philosophy anymore. I wondered when these happy days would end, and how. I was sure by now I could leave Aleppo any day, but how was I to announce that I could not forever be a guest to Usama and that at least one other friend was waiting for my return.

There was a period of more than ten days at the end of the month of May, into the month of June, at the beginning of a hot and very dry summer, that we did not ride out anymore. I hardly perceived a shadow of Usama during the day. I sometimes did not even see him in the evening. He seemed to avoid me. The mood of Jadwa and Yusuf was rather tense. I walked often alone in the streets and the souks of Aleppo, dressed as an Arab, but I grew bored of wandering alone. Something had changed in the town too, lately. It was quieter everywhere. There were still as many merchants and buyers as before in the market streets, but there were definitely less people around. There were less warriors in the town. I remarked that few Saracen guards ever left the castle, whereas otherwise there were always men riding out of and into the fortified place. The guards at the gates of the castle were always the same men. I was wondering what had happened to Aleppo. Then, I thought I knew.

That evening we were sitting on cushions in the patio, all gathered once more, listening to the plaintive tones of a lyre and the rhythm of a lonely drum. We had finished eating. We did not have much of a conversation. The mood was morose. Jadwa wished us a good evening and left. We remained silent and listened to the music.

I said, 'where is the battle going on?'

If I had said the house was on fire I could not have startled Usama and Yusuf more. They looked at each other in panic at the same instant. They shifted on their cushions. They looked at their hands. Usama was the first to regain his normal demeanour. He asked, 'what battle? There is no battle going on.'

'Oh yes, there is,' I said. 'I don't know where, I don't know exactly when, but a major battle is being waged between the Syrian troops and the Franks. I don't know why. What is happening? Who won?'

Usama sighed. Yusuf looked at me intently. Usama answered, 'what makes you think that there is a battle somewhere?'

I replied, ‘there are almost no warriors left in Aleppo. There are less people than usual in town. There are a lot less men around. The town is quiet and the merchants are nervous. We do not ride out anymore. You seem tense. Where is the battle?’

Yusuf was the one to speak openly, ‘is it only because there are less people in Aleppo that you think there is a battle somewhere? There can be a lot of reasons for that! I think you have still other reasons to speak of a battle.’

Yusuf was smart for his age, very smart, and a lot more intuitive about people than Usama, despite Usama’s experience as a servant of rulers.

So I smiled, and answered. ‘You are right, Yusuf. I have seen the battle. Where is it?’ Usama did not let Yusuf answer. He said, ‘Jerusalem has attacked the Hauran. That is where the battle is. Well, we don’t know whether a battle is going on. I doubt a full battle will be fought at all. I suspect there will be a lot of skirmishes, though.’

‘Where is the Hauran?’ I asked.

‘The Hauran is the region south of Damascus,’ Usama replied. ‘It is quite to the south. You have Damascus, the region called Lega to the south until the town of Ezra’a. Then, more to the south still, you have the Hauran. It is a rich territory; many grain grasses are cultivated there and grapes, although it has no rivers. It rains in the Hauran but the ground sucks up the water, and there are many wells. Some parts are dry, though, very dry. The Franks entered the Hauran beneath the Sea of Galilee. They aim for the cities of Bosra and Salkhad.’

‘That is Damascene territory. Why would the Franks attack lands of Damascus? Had the Franks and the Damascenes not stopped fighting each other?’

‘It is a long and complicated story,’ Usama answered. ‘The ruler of Bosra and Salkhad is an Armenian Amir called Altuntash. He is not a Christian however. He converted to Islam. He has become a traitor. He deceived my master and friend, Mu’in al-Din Unur, ruler of Damascus, and ran to Jerusalem to offer the Hauran to the Franks. Mu’in al-Din would certainly have punished him for his behaviour, for he cheated on Damascus, stole from the caravans, killed believers and insulted the Sultan. He must have thought that he could remain Amir of the Hauran under the Franks and continue to grow richer, and be paid by the Franks for the lands. He left his wife to rule Bosra and he rode to Jerusalem. The Franks have not attacked Damascus for a long time, but their greed must have been greater than their interest in being friendly to Damascus. So, the Franks invaded the Hauran. Those lands would be a nice extension of their own lands, for the Hauran is rich.’

‘What has that to do with Aleppo?’ I asked. ‘I thought Mu’in al-Din Unur feared and even fought the Atabeg of Aleppo, Nur al-Din Mahmud.’

Usama looked at Yusuf. We were on dangerous ground. ‘Not really,’ he replied after some hesitation. ‘We are all Muslims. We must defend the Faith. Sometimes we have differences of opinion, but differences are solved and discarded, when the infidels threaten our lands.’

‘So, the army of Nur al-Din has joined with the army of Damascus,’ I concluded.

‘Well, they left Aleppo, indeed,’ Usama said. ‘I don’t know how much the two armies fight together, but they will surely confront both the Franks.’

‘What have you seen?’ Yusuf asked.

‘I saw a battle. I saw a young, Frankish boy on horseback fight with a sword against Turkish warriors. He was splendidly dressed, but also in heavy mail. I saw warriors closing in on him. I saw very many dead around him and his horse pranced on Frankish and Turkish corpses. I saw blood in a dry desert. I saw fire blazing.’

I always saw fire. I shivered from the memory of the vision. It had happened two days ago. It was in the afternoon. I had been walking around the castle of Aleppo. It was very hot outside and very dry. There was almost no wind. I thought the sun had struck me fiercely, for I lost balance and wavered between the houses. Then, once more, the colours of the sky changed. The blue turned into red of fire. The sky rippled with the flames. I saw the boy fighting in the crimson sky, and he was losing. I saw the flames recede, but the sky remained red as blood. I looked at the ground and many Frankish knights and Saracen warriors lay dead around me. I almost fainted with the horror, for the men were mutilated and blood oozed from their open wounds. I fell on the ground. I threw myself against the white wall of a house, but the vision continued. The flames were there again and I saw a knight ride on a white horse through the flames, in the middle of the battle. But rapidly then, the battle ended and the figures dazed away and the sky was blue again.

I needed a long time to gather my wits. People were staring at me but dared not come near. They could not have known I was a Frank, for I was dressed like them, and I had a beard and was sunburnt, but they probably feared some ugly sickness. I forced myself to my feet and staggered on. The knight that had ridden through the flames had been me.

I had no idea what I had seen at that moment. Had I seen the past or the future? Had I only been dreaming or imagining things on a hot day? I was scared and disturbed to the point of vomiting. I did not want these visions. They frightened me to the guts. I wanted to be a normal human being. I did not want to have a mind that was in touch with things I did not understand. What powers were clashing in my mind? How long could I stand this? Was I getting mad? I could still recall the panic that had risen in me and the sadness and loneliness I felt.

‘The boy,’ Yusuf said. ‘The boy. The King of Jerusalem, Baudouin III, is with the Frank army. He is only sixteen years old. You saw Jerusalem give battle.’

‘Yes,’ I replied. I remembered having seen the boy wearing a golden crown. I had not at first given attention to that detail. I knew Baudouin was still a boy. Yes, I had seen the King of Jerusalem fighting. I had arrived at the same conclusion. I did not tell Usama and Yusuf that I had seen myself in the battle. Had there already been a battle? No, I had seen a battle to come. Nevertheless I asked in hope, ‘what was the outcome of the battle?’

‘There has been no battle,’ Usama replied, ‘at least not that we have heard of. As I told you, I don’t believe even there will be a great battle. There is much to lose in a battle. Our forces had to be gathered in a hurry. If Aleppo loses, Mosul will attack the lands of Nur al-Din. If Damascus loses, Damascus will be taken by Nur al-Din and the reign of Damascus will be over. Aleppo and Damascus united cannot lose. The Franks are powerful warriors but they are far from their cities and castles; if they lose, they lose their kingdoms. There will be skirmishes, large movements of troops, but if no one is silly there will be no battle. We have not heard of a battle yet and I don’t expect one to happen.’

I was not so sure.

‘I have to go,’ I said.

There was a silence.

Then Usama sighed and asked the question that sounded like a statement, 'you have seen yourself in that battle, haven't you?'

'Yes,' I acknowledged. 'Yes, I was at the battle. Or at a skirmish. I have to go.'

'It is a long way to the Hauran,' Usama tried.

I was in doubt about what to do. I might not go, or leave for Antioch. I could say bust to my destiny. Could I?

'Let him go,' Yusuf said. His voice was commanding for a youth. 'Give him a horse and give him 'Aqil as a guide. They will have to ride fast. 'Aqil must bring him to the Franks.'

'Why would we do that,' Usama asked to Yusuf. 'When he arrives, it may well be already too late. His life will surely be in danger if he goes to the Hauran now. Was that why we saved him? If he reaches the Franks, how many Muslims will he kill? I say he stays, for his own best. Then he can go back to Antioch, later, when this stupid campaign is finished.'

'No,' Yusuf whispered. 'You don't understand. Allah wills it. Only Allah can let somebody see in the far. Even the Sufis cannot do that. He had visions before, always of the future. He is an exceptional man. He is close to Allah. We cannot act against the will of Allah. He must go. Allah is great, Allah wills it, Usama my friend.'

Yusuf's last words eased and pleased Usama. He looked at me with apprehension. He remained thoughtful for a long while and I also saw affection in his eyes when he looked me over, gauging me, probing my sadness. He sensed my acceptance of what had to be God's will.

Then he yielded, 'if Allah wills it we cannot act against what Allah has written in his book for Daniel. I will give him a horse, then, and a guide. He can ride to the Hauran.' 'He will have to ride rapidly,' Yusuf continued, 'the skirmishes in the Hauran cannot last for long. He has to ride at dawn.'

And so it was decided. We did not speak much more that evening. We went to sleep. The next morning I woke early, ate in a hurry and went to seek Usama. Usama had been waiting for me, took me by the arm and drew me on.

He said, 'you cannot ride into a battle like this. Come with me.'

We passed several doors until we stopped at a small room. There was linen and arms and armour in the place, in Usama's personal arsenal. There were splendid chain mails here, fine curved swords with silver decorated hilts, Arabian shields and lances, robes and leather chest protection.

'We knew you would have to ride out one day,' Usama explained. 'So we replicated your clothes. The robe and surcoat you had were bloodstained and torn. We threw them away but made almost exactly the same. You will find the cloth and silk we used far better, lighter and cooler than what you had. We stitched the red cross on a surcoat, just like you wore. You had a short ring-mail, but that one was rusted and pierced and slashed through. We made you a new one. I believe, like you, that half a mail is enough protection in our lands, and certainly best to travel fast. Heavy mail, full mail, would slow you down. You cannot travel in our lands dressed as a Frank. So we thought it best, Yusuf and I, that you dress as an Arab while riding in our countries. Later, you can dress as a Frank entirely, but wear the white robe of a Muslim under your mail and above your surcoat still another Muslim robe. You have to look like a Muslim warrior as long as you are in our territories. We have a Turkish pointed helmet for you. We found you a fine Frank helmet to wear when you reach the Frank army and you can drop the Muslim long, white robe from above your surcoat when you reach the Franks. I found you a good sword, a curved sword, but

heavier than the swords we use, yet curved as our own swords. It has a silver hilt and is a present of mine. Your shield too is new. Look, it has a thin leather hide on it inscribed with Arabic characters. Tear off the hide like this, and you will have your own banner, the red cross, on the metal. Lastly, we gave you a lance. The hold of the lance, in the middle, is also of silver. The banner on the lance is red. In fact it is the banner of the Shaizar. It could be a Frankish banner too. Our army and our people will recognise it between Aleppo and Damascus. The banner will protect you on the trip. South of Damascus, the banner is less well known. If anyone says there was a banner of the Shaizar in the Frankish army, both me and Yusuf will tell this to be impossible and deny it. Tell the Franks you stole or won the lance. But wear it with honour: it is dear to me.'

I was moved. It was one thing to let me go, another to actually help me get to the Franks. I wanted to thank Usama but he waved me away with his hands.

'No thanks, my friend,' he said. 'My duty is to do what Allah wants. The horse is Yusuf's. Go to the stables.'

And so I dressed, took sword, lance and shield and looked for my horse and guide. Yusuf waited for me at the stables. He held a magnificent white stallion at the reins. A heavily bearded man dressed entirely in black robes was with him.

'This is 'Aqil,' Yusuf said. 'He is a servant of Usama. You can trust him. He will lead you to the Hauran, to the armies. He speaks Arabic. He is a Bedu. He knows the way. He knows who you are but he will die rather than betray you or us. Here is your horse.'

He showed me the stallion. I almost fainted, for I recognised that in white robes, riding a white horse, I was exactly as the knight I had seen in my vision. I took the reins of the horse, looked it over and knew it was a priceless animal. It was the horse of an Amir, a horse bred in the desert from generations of racehorses, animals that could gallop for long periods and last.

'It is yours,' Yusuf said. 'The food and water is with 'Aqil. There is enough for ten days. There are coins in the sack on your horse. Do not thank me. I have to do this, I am certain.'

I said to Yusuf, 'the stallion is a splendid animal. It is even far more valuable than the coins. I will never be able to repay you.'

Yusuf smiled. He answered, 'there are only three ways to obtain an Arabian horse like this. Either you capture it in war and steal it; you can inherit it or receive it in graceful gift. Please accept it as a gift.'

Usama appeared behind us and had heard our exchange. He added, 'in the legends of my people, Isma'il son of Abraham possessed a superb stallion called Awaj. He left it to his son and told him always to cherish the offspring of the animal. After five generations, Suleiman, the descendant of Isma'il, had so many horses descended from Awaj that he could not nourish them all. He brought his horses to the desert and left them there until the animals nearly got crazy from thirst. Then he drove them to a river. The horses galloped to drink but at that moment Suleiman had the trumpets of war sounded. One stallion and four mares turned and rallied the trumpets rather than hurry to the river. Suleiman kept only those animals and let the others wander off. Our Arabian horses all descend from those five.'

'Then I will have to call this stallion Awaj,' I replied and so my horse got its name.

I held Awaj at its reins as we walked to the front gates of Usama's house. Usama stood at a window, and Jadwa was there too. I waved at them a last farewell and they waved back. I wanted to get on the horse. Yusuf stopped me. He touched my arm. He said, 'you have a quest. You are in search of answers to questions that are fundamental in my life too. When you know, when you found the answers, or think you found them, even if inadequate and incomplete, I would like to learn the answers too. Maybe you already found the answer anyway, and will find nothing new, nothing further. I also want to know why people, also people that believe in Allah, hurt each other to cruelty and horror.'

I took the time to tell Yusuf what I thought. 'I have no full answer yet,' I said. 'I have still to search. Maybe everyone has to search and never finds. Maybe Allah's way is in the searching. I believe that much has to do with Allah granting us freedom of will. Allah's creation was with freedom of will for humans. To let us loose, to grant us freedom, was Allah's act of love. Is it not always an act of love not to bind people to us like slaves, but to grant them freedom? Allah created the world like that. The issue of whether he can or cannot change that, interfere or not interfere, is not because Allah would not be capable to do so and not because he would not want to, but because the freedom is his will, baked in the creation. Allah is eternal, so the world is as it is and will not be changed because it is like that. There can be no question of changing it, because it is so. If Allah interferes there would be another creation. We have freedom. With that freedom, we can do harm as well as good. Otherwise we would not be free. Of course, it is our duty to do good, but many people will choose the harm. We must fight the harm. It means anyhow, whatever many people tell, that Allah is love and that Allah is great, as Mohammed and Jesus told.'

'Yes, I understand that,' Yusuf replied, 'but if I grow up to be a leader in war, as my father and uncle want, I may have to kill many people.'

'You probably will,' I answered. 'Still you can have a pure heart and not kill by greed or wrong or vanity or ambition or because you are bad. You can kill when you must, when you feel you must defend your people and when you believe with great certainty that you are doing the right thing for freedom's sake and for love's sake. Then you will be a great man. Have pity and don't slaughter innocents.'

'I will remember that, Daniel. Allah is great. Allah be with you, my friend. Maybe one day we will meet again.'

I swung in the saddle. The servants opened the doors. I waved a last time at Usama and thought, 'goodbye, my friends, may God be with you too'. We rode out of Usama's house at the gallop. I looked at Aleppo for the last time. I was in everything, in clothes and demeanour, and maybe even in mind, an Arabian Amir and warrior of the Shaizar, with a servant and guide at my side.

We rode from Aleppo to the Shaizar, to Hama and Homs, and from there to Lebwe and Ba'albek. We passed all those towns but avoided them. We rode through open terrain east of Damascus, and passed the River Barada. We rode on to Kiswe and used a bridge over the River Nahr-el-Awaj. Then we passed through the country called the Lega, to the town of Ezra'a. From there we wanted to reach Der'a and Bosra, as Usama had told me.

My guide 'Aqil never spoke to me more than those place-names. He would merely stop his horse, point to right or left and mention 'Damascus' or 'Ezra'a'. There was no need to talk more. We suffered in heavy rains near Aleppo, and later painstakingly advanced through very hot and arid territories between Homs and Lebwé.

I saw splendid orchards near Damascus, but we rode also in rocky hills where scarcely any grass grew for our horses to chew on.

It took us fifteen days to reach the Hauran because we had no spare horses and did not want to change horses. We ate what we had. We only stopped for an entire day near Lebwé because we had to eat fruit and vegetables and we bought those also in the occasional village we passed beyond Lebwé. We always slept in the open. I learned to live, eat and sleep like the Bedu. I memorized the country, its roads, paths and terrain.

Near Ezra'a, south of that town, we spotted our first real Muslim troops. We did not encounter any large army, only groups of up to a hundred or so warriors, all horse riders. We avoided them, though some saw us. We continued riding south. I was not sure advancing further south was the right thing to do, so I asked my Bedu guide whether he or I could ask the warriors where the Frank army was. The Bedu looked at me, seemed to come out of his daze of riding always in the same direction that day, made me a sign to stop and stay there, and rode off. He rode down into a valley where small groups of Muslim warriors camped. He returned near evening and pointed east, to the side opposite of the dying sun.

The next morning we moved east. Usama had told me the Hauran was a rich land, but we rode through dried-out territory. Only low shrubs and high grass grew here and any grain grasses were only straw. The rains of spring must have missed these grounds and there were few wells to be found. We rode until the early afternoon. Then I saw black smoke rise beyond the horizon. We rode on until we were close to the huge smoke clouds and saw the first fires. The ground was on fire! Maybe campfires had spread through the dried grass and shrubs, maybe the armies had set the fires. I remarked that the inferno blazed and advanced, driven by the wind, along an extensive line of flames.

Saracen troops, hundreds of them, followed the burning at a respectable distance. I understood that the Saracens must have set the ground on fire to smoke out the Franks. The flames were driven forward by a strong wind to the north east. We were behind the troops of Saracen warriors, consisting of Turkish cavalry and of many Syrian men-at-arms and archers on foot.

Far beyond the smoke I thought I could see the Frank army. The smoke and fires moved in their direction. I could not see the men of the Frankish army that were closest to the fires, for the smoke built a thick screen that blocked my view. But I did see the farthest groups of Franks still arriving towards the blaze; other men ran in their direction. That could only mean that the Franks had been advancing to the west, no longer moving to Bosra but heading back to the Jordan, to the coastal lands. The Franks were in retreat but had been stopped by the fire. They were trapped between hostile country to the east and the new Saracen army that followed the fires.

My Bedu guide had seen the armies too. He made me a sign of greeting and turned his horse. I nodded. His mission had been to take me to the Frank army, and I had my eyes on it. The Bedu could leave. I let 'Aqil go his own way. I had found what I

sought. While he rode north-west at the gallop, I looked at what was happening in the far.

I could not ride into the blazes. I considered following the ridges of the low hills and ride slowly way around the fires in a long arch, to the Franks. I decided to just wait and see what happened. I brought my horse to graze on lower ground, and stretched out on a soft hill to observe. I remained lying until late in the afternoon. By that time, the wind dropped. Then, suddenly, the wind took force again, but blew from east to west. Now it was the Saracens who had smoke in their eyes! There was a flutter of panic as their foremost troops hurled themselves westwards with shouts and thunder of hooves. The horsemen rode out the flames on the low ground but the Saracens on foot spread out obliquely, to avoid the fire sideways. As the red-hot sparks advanced to this side it came to the places where it had already consumed everything there was to burn, so gradually, as the sun sank, the fires ceased in intensity. The flames quenched and the smoke lifted. I saw a strange scene, then.

I could distinguish the vanguard of the Frankish army. Just before the burnt soil rode Frankish Bishops with mitre and heavy robes, wearing huge staffs with crosses. Among the crosses, in the middle, was a cross that shone with multiple rays of various colours. The cross shone from its precious stones right in the last sunrays. The stones flickered their rays into my eyes. I guessed this was the True Cross, the most famous relic of Jerusalem, the relic that always accompanied the King of Jerusalem on a campaign. I had heard from that cross by Abbot Suger. This cross contained the rests of the cross on which Christ had died. I had to laugh some too, for the robes of the Bishops were black from the soot and the smoke and the men there, at the front, all looked like black men.

The army of the Franks stopped although the fires had almost ceased. The vanguard plied into the main body of the army and the rearguard joined the rest. The Franks halted to set up camp. They had no stomach to drive their horses through the rests of burning shrubs and a heated soil. It was late for me to join them there and I too had no urge to take my horse through the dying embers now glowing red in the darkening evening. I would not risk having to meet Frank night guards, riding in from the Muslim side. So I walked down the hill, fetched my horse, looked for a mass of boulders large enough to hide us, and tried to sleep.

I woke very early in the morning, drank the last water I had, and rode prudently over the closest hill. The fires of the previous day had entirely stopped. Plumes of bluish smoke still rose here and there from the ground, from isolated bushes, but there were no red glows anymore on the soil. The Frank army had awoken before me, for they were already on their way, though many men were still only mounting their horses. A vanguard of heavily chain-mailed knights, all wearing helmets and lances, advanced slowly through the blackened soil. I let them pass. I also saw a group of knights in splendid clothes. In their midst rode men wearing not spears but crosses, as well as the most dazzling cross, the True Cross, the emblem of Jerusalem. I supposed this was a group of knights and Barons of the King of Jerusalem, moving right behind the heavy vanguard.

I would have expected the Franks to have sent isolated groups of horse riders left and right and in front to search for Muslims and to look for the best and safest way to push

forward, but I saw none. The Frankish army was just one huge block moving. It was true that the Turkish cavalry was not far.

Hundreds of Saracen riders swarmed all around the Franks, at quite a distance however of the marching column. They harassed the Franks. A group of up to ten men, rarely more, would ride towards the Franks, let loose a few arrows from their bows and then retreat, only to start anew a little later. Troops of many more Saracens, hundreds of them, gathered afar. The scheme of the troops of Damascus was easy to guess. They would harass their enemy with a few fast horse riders and hope that the Franks would be tempted to leave the main column, to be attacked and annihilated. Any Frankish group that rode out of the block would be isolated a little further, find its way back cut off by larger groups of Saracen warriors and have to give battle against overwhelming odds. Yet, the discipline in the Frankish army was very strong. Franks were wounded by arrows, but for that the Muslim warriors had to come very close to the marching column, so that they too lost men. The Franks helped their wounded. No Frank left the army, which pushed forward very slowly in the increasingly sultry heat of the day, doggedly, at the same pace, straight ahead, in one block. I decided to ride towards them.

To reach the Frankish army, however, I had to ride through the Saracen raiders. I chose a spot where less Saracens rode and drove my horse on in a frantic gallop. If there were Saracen warriors in my way, I wanted to be on them before they were on me. I had almost reached the Frankish ranks when I was stopped by a group of four Turkish riders, who had harassed their enemy's columns. They shouted insults in Arabic, calling the infidels cowards and cross-lovers. They made obscene gestures. They were richly dressed; their robes were of white silk and their leather armour highly worked; the swords they brandished had silver hilts studded with stones. One of the riders had a lance with a green flag and white Arabic characters. I was almost at this group, closing on them from behind and they hadn't seen me, when a Saracen horse rider left the block of Franks. I supposed this was one of the men of the Hauran, one of the men of Amir Altuntash, whose clients were now – probably reluctantly - allied to the Franks. The man shouted something in Arabic and charged on the Damascene riders. I charged on the group too, but would be too late for the first impact.

The Turks were completely surprised, hesitated on the arriving Saracen, and in that time the Haurani Amir was on them. He had no lance, but he rode with astonishing speed on his Arabian mare, curved sword held at the height of his eyes. He thrust his sword right through the breast of the foremost Turkish Amir. He stopped his horse in a cloud of dust right there, withdrew his sword as he swirled, blood spurting out of the Turk's chest. While the man slumped in his saddle and then slowly toppled from the animal, he turned his horse and rode back to the Franks.

I changed the direction of my horse and rode slightly behind the man. All eyes were on that man, not on me, so I would reach the Franks without drawing all attention on me. The Haurani became aware of me, looked back at me with surprise, looked at my banner and then at my white Muslim robe, but he rode on. He rode straight into the ranks of the column, which opened to let him pass to safety, with me in tow. I stopped my horse two steps from the Franks, and took off the white burnous, revealing my surcoat with the red cross. I tore off the hide from my shield to show the cross there also, then forced my stallion ahead. I had expected any moment a

crossbow bolt or an arrow to pierce my mail, but the Franks here were so surprised by the sudden feat of the Haurani and by my transformation that they forgot to aim. I rode into the midst of the Frankish ranks too, where the Haurani Amir was glowing in his easy victory.

I cried in Arabic to him, 'that was well done! Allah is great! You are a brave warrior!' The man's eyes looked me rapidly over, surprised to hear Arabic from a Crusader.

He answered, 'where do you come from? Are you a Turkish spy?'

'No spy,' I laughed. 'I come from far but I am a Frankish knight.'

'That is the flag of the Shaizar you are wearing,' he replied.

'Yes,' I said. 'I won that lance. I left the flag on. It is an honourable Arabian flag. And it is a good lance, too.'

The Haurani laughed. He was not laughing at me. He pointed past me, to his Turkish enemies. The three Turks were standing around their fallen companion. They lamented over his fate. They tore at their beards, broke out in tears, cut at their hair with daggers, and also cut the tails of their horses, in sign of mourning. There was great joy and cheering in the ranks of the Franks however, for the duel was won honourably. Neither the Haurani Amir nor I shouted with them.

The ranks of warriors opened and about ten horse riders clad in heavy chain mail and multicoloured surcoats that showed as much the Templar knights as the Hospitaller knights, rode up to us.

Among them was a youth who shouted over his grey-speckled horse with an angry and commanding voice, 'who dared to leave the body of the army? I forbade leaving the columns! The punishment to disobey the King's order is death!'

Seeing that the Haurani Muslim did not understand the Frankish language, I answered, 'the Amir of the Hauran, here, broke the ranks. He did a feat of great courage and skill and he returned to the army immediately.'

There was a Bishop near the King, who was – as I later heard – Archbishop Robert of Nazareth. The Bishop said in a soothing voice, 'we had the command cried out in French only, Lord King. The Saracen does not know our language. We have to forgive him. He has won a fine battle.'

The King hesitated, and then he yielded. 'That is true. The Haurani may not have known of my command. So we honour him.' He grinned, 'it was indeed a fine victory.' The men cheered.

The King turned to me. 'Who are you? Are you a Saracen in a Frankish surcoat or a Frank in a Saracen's robe? I saw you change clothes!'

I replied, smiling, 'I am a Frank, Lord King. My name is Daniel du Pallet. I am French. Not so long ago I was a Royal Guard and the Protector of the Abbey of Saint Denis and the Oriflamme. I come from far, from Antioch, to join the army of Jerusalem. I am new in these lands. I was at Vézelay when Bernard de Clairvaux called for a crusade.'

There were actually of few men around on horseback who signed themselves with the cross, and so did the Bishops around the King. The Franks whispered my name to each other and the whispers rippled through the ranks. I was the first knight of a French crusade! The King started to speak, but stopped before a word came from his lips. He stared at me incredulously, turned and turned in his saddle, turned his horse, looked over his army, then said, 'what were you saying to the man of Bosra?'

I answered in truth, 'I merely congratulated him with his feat, Lord King.'

'You are new here but you speak Arabic?'

‘Yes, I do. I learned Arabic with scholars in France.’

‘Do you know the roads to the River Jordan?’

‘I came from the north, Lord, from inland. I have never been to these regions before.’

The King concluded with disappointment, ‘then you will not be able to help us find the best and safest road to return.’ He sighed.

The King turned his horse to ride back to the vanguard, but I addressed him anyway. I cried, ‘I do not know the roads here, but the Haurani know them!’

The King stopped his horse and looked at me quizzically. ‘Do you speak Arabic well enough to lead us? Are you smart enough to know when they lie and when they speak the truth? They might lead us into a trap.’

‘I think I can,’ I replied.

The King gauged us, me and the Haurani, who was wondering what we were still talking about.

‘All right,’ the King answered. ‘Try and let me know.’ He was a youth of few words and he must have been quite desperate to give me his confidence. The King rode away at the gallop, along the army, and his courtiers rode with him.

I stood alone with the knights and the men-at-arms around me, all looking expectantly, the hope and the despair clearly showing in their eyes. I raised my head and stood up in my stirrups so that my face could be seen over the throng of warriors. I shouted in Arabic, ‘all the glorious men of the Hauran, come to me, come to me!’ and I brought the red banner of the Shaizar high in the air. I rode out of the ranks, only a few horse steps, and waited. The courageous Amir was the first to join me and he repeated my shout. The shouting continued from man to man in the army. From everywhere groups of Saracen riders flocked to us. The Hauranis were all horse-riders. The Franks were a little nervous seeing so many Hauranis gathered around me, for over a hundred Muslims soon stood with agitated, turning horses in a cloud of dust gathered about me.

I shouted, ‘the army needs to retreat to the Jordan. Who knows these regions, who can lead us to the safest route?’

Immediately an animated discussion started among the Hauranis. It was a loud dispute. Some men were shouting what they believed was the safest route, others downshouted them. They told we were now in the Wadi al-Rahub, near the Wadi Shellaha. Some said it was better to ride down into the valley of the River Yarmuk and follow the river until the conjunction of the Yarmuk and the Jordan at Jisr al-Mujami. Other argued it was safer to ride straight on, go right over the plateau to Samar and Ildar to Gadara.

I let them dispute. I believed we could take either way. The most important matter was to have a guide, preferably even several guides so that I could cross-check what they proposed. I held my red banner up and cried to them to stop arguing. I did not like much moving through a valley, even a wide valley as the valley of the Yarmuk must be. I preferred the high ground. It would be more difficult for the Turks to hide and attack us on the high ground. I had always preferred the crest of the hill, in any situation. The advance would be more difficult on the plateau and we would have to pass torrents, but I supposed most of those would have dried up by now.

So I shouted for everybody to hear, ‘all right! I have heard enough! We will advance with the army over the plateau to Gadara. Are there water holes and wells and rivers there on our way? Do you know the water places?’

I saw some doubtful faces, but many other faces nodded at me confidently of yes. So I called, ‘men of the Hauran, with me, with me! Follow me! Allah is great. He will lead the way!’ I turned my horse back at the marching army and rode forward without much ado. The Muslims seemed to hesitate. They had never heard of a Christian calling out to Allah. But then they turned their horses too and followed me in a whirlwind of wildly galloping horses and cloud dusts. When they heard me call out to a despised god, the Franks raised their eyebrows but they left me alone. The Bishops that heard me opened their mouths but shut them immediately without speaking. They wisely more desired to flee from the Turks than to dispute.

We rode, over a hundred Muslims and me, in full gallop along the columns of the Frank army. We were proud riders and we did not hesitate. We resolutely rode past the astonished King and Barons and Bishops and I placed myself at the head of the army. My Muslims now formed the vanguard. Four Amirs of the Hauran rode at my side on Arabian thorough-breds and they showed me the way and when they doubted they asked the guides that followed us. The Amirs showed the hidden paths and we led the Franks. We spoke Arabic exclusively. Each day we led thus, for three days. The Hauranis made me remark in the far the high hill of Gadara, which was close to Jisr al-Mujami and the River Jordan. We aimed for that hill. There were springs galore in the mountains. Each day we had enough to drink for the entire army. The Turks did not harm us anymore and thus we reached the Jordan.

The Frankish army of Jerusalem then advanced at leisure, still led by Saracens. I was a Frankish knight but I had covered my surcoat once more with my white silk Arabian robe; my horse was white and Arabian; my sword was curved; my shield was white and only the red cross proved me a Frank. I kept my lance with the red banner of the Shaizar, of which no Frank knew what it meant.

Later, much later, the clerics that wrote the chronicles of King Baudouin and Jerusalem, heard the stories told by the warriors of the Holy Land. The men told them that a mysterious white knight wearing a red banner miraculously came from the desert to save the Frankish army, and so they noted in their books. Nobody knew who the white knight was, but he led the army to food and water and to safe places to pass the night.

When our troops reached Gadara, the Turkish command of Damascus decided to attack the Franks a last time. They attacked the rearguard savagely, in force. But our men were strongly armoured there and the knights fought courageously, never breaking. They fought in one block. They fended off the cavalry of Mu’in al-Din Unur of Damascus and of Nur al-Din of Aleppo, so that after half a day of fighting, in which the main body and the vanguard of the Frankish army did not need to intervene, the Saracen army did not insist and left. I saw in this a sign that Mu’in al-Din Unur still needed the alliance of the Franks and of the Hauranis, and told so to anybody who wanted to hear.

When the army reached Jisr al-Mujami, Frankish knights took over as guides. The Muslims and I disappeared inside the main body of the army. The army crossed the River Jordan and the warriors marched southwards to Nazareth.

I left the army there, for I wanted to reach the coast and then ride north, back to Antioch. My ultimate aim had to be Jerusalem, but I had to return to Gormond first.

I rode slowly, very slowly. I saw and entered almost all the cities along the coast. I looked around and studied the cities and their fortifications, much as Usama had taught me to look. It took me three months to reach Saint Siméon and then Antioch. I was at Acre first, then at Tyre and Sidon, at Beirut, at Tripoli and Tortose, at Baniyas and Lattaquie. It was winter when I reached Antioch, and the weather was foul. I rode to Chastel Rouge first, to hear that Gormond had returned to Antioch. I refused to stay at Chastel Rouge and rode on to the citadel of Antioch to find Gormond. He was there indeed, instructing young knights in the arts of combat and self-defence in the courtyard, before the keep. He reacted to me as if he had seen a ghost, for he had thought me killed. All the men of the patrol on which I served had been found dead in the lonesome wadi, their corpses mutilated. We embraced. He wept like a child.

I remained with Gormond in Antioch. I told him I had been left wounded and dying, then saved by Arabian raiders of the Shaizar and treated well. I told nobody of where I had really been, not even Gormond. I had a message to deliver to the Prince of Antioch, to Raymond de Poitiers, the message that Usama ibn-Munqidh had confided to me. Then I would have to seek my fate in Jerusalem.

Historical Notes

‘Star Seeker’ is a historical novel, with emphasis on the word ‘novel’. Yet, I tried as much as possible not to do violence to history. Most of the personages of the novel are historical figures. I wanted very much to write a novel about the twelfth century, because this period marked Western Europe’s first renaissance. This rebirth of modern Europe was quenched at the end of the thirteenth century, as well as in the fourteenth century, by the Hundred Year War between France and England and by the great epidemics of the plague that terribly decimated the population. Still, the twelfth century created a great hope in Europe for better times, as the climate softened, promising more return on agriculture. With much better harvests and more trade, wealth increased. The wealth brought surplus for a flourishing of the arts and sciences. Many brilliant scholars taught philosophy and theology, a clear sign that there were new riches to live on and that such teachers could be paid from the growing wealth.

This book contains many Arabic names. I have not retained the diacritical marks on the letters a, i and u that are necessary to indicate the Arabic sounds in our alphabet. I thought these would unnecessarily complicate the text. I did keep signs for the Arabic letter ‘ayn and for the hamza, using our opening and closing quotation marks.

Daniel’s story plays in France and in Frankish territories of the Near-East; I therefore let the French names as they are and have not translated for instance Guillaume de Tyr into William of Tyre; I also continued to use the French characters such as â and é and è.

I used our normal way of starting the year at the month of January. This was not so in the Middle Ages, but this other manner would have rendered the text unnecessarily complex.

Most of the places mentioned in the book still exist and bear witness to the twelfth century.

Book I

Abelard and Heloise indeed had one child, which they named Astralabius. Little to nothing is known of Astralabius’ life, so I could fill in his biography at will. Astralabius was probably a scholar however, not a knight or a crusader and I doubt he would have had such an adventurous life as I depicted.

One can still visit the village of Le Pallet in Brittany, near Nantes. The village on the River Sèvre has retained the same name throughout the ages. A few ruins of the old keep of the castle can be visited. The Chapel of Saint John stands. The remains of the castle of Clisson, in the fine little town of the same name, are much more imposing. This castle is now called the Castle of Olivier de Clisson (1336-1407), a famous French Connétable. The basis of that castle dates from the eleventh

and twelfth centuries, but much that can be seen today dates only from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries.

The castle of the Dukes of Brittany is in Nantes. The current castle was not Duke Conan's castle however, for a new castle was built on the same site not so long after Daniel's time.

The Sénéchal in the French Kingdom occupied the highest office of the Royal Administration. He was the commander of the army and of the Royal Household. The office was abolished in 1191 in France, to be partly taken over by the Connétable, a function that meant at first the head of the Royal Stables, later the Commander of the Army.

Aleppo is currently a marvellous Syrian city. Its bimaristan, its Muslim medieval hospital, still exists, practically intact. The souks of Aleppo lead to the castle perched on its artificial cone hill. In Daniel's times the castle was more humble, though already perched on its peculiar, cone-shaped hill. The castle of Aleppo was rebuilt by Sultan Saladin in the second half of the twelfth century.

The Christians of Europe used the word 'Saracens' for all people who professed the religion of the Islam. The word may have been derived from the Greek word 'Sarakinos,' which may have meant 'Easterners' though that etymology has not been proved right. The word was also applied to the Muslims of Europe. I preferred to use the word 'Saracens,' which is of the century of the novel, more often than the word 'Muslim,' which means an adherent of the religion of Islam.

The Mutakallimun were the early theologians of Islam, people that discussed the themes of the Qur'an. They emerged during the Umayyad dynasty of successors to the Prophet. Mutakallimun means, 'those who practice Kalam, or debate', because their scholars debated over the Qur'an. The Mutakallimun separated in several groups or schools. Mu'tazilah or Mu'tazilism is a theological school in Sunni Islam. Mu'tazilites believe in free will, in promoting justice, and in prohibiting evil. The name Mu'tazilite is thought to originate from the Arabic "i'tazala", meaning "to leave" or "to withdraw". The Mu'tazilite school originated in the 8th century in Basra (Iraq) when Wasil ibn Ata (d. 748 AD) left the school sessions of al-Hasan al-Basri after a dispute. Therefore he and his followers, including Amr ibn Ubayd (d. 761 AD), were labelled 'leavers' or Mu'tazili.

Mu'tazilah was a theology, but based very much on Greek and Islamic philosophy and on the application of logic to religious thought. Mu'tazilah sought a synthesis between reason and revelation. They thought that speculative reasoning would lead to better and more knowledge of God, much as the Christian European philosopher-theologians of the twelfth century. The Mu'tazilites held on to the principles of divine justice, of the Unity of God, of seeking Good and forbidding Evil, and free will. God promises recompense for those who obey Him and threatens with punishment those who disobey Him. Muslims who commit sins and die without repentance were not considered as believers, nor were they considered non-believers, but they were in an intermediate position between the two. The Mu'tazilah lives on to this day.

Usama ibn Munqidh was a historical figure. He was indeed a Prince of the Shaizar, now extinct because totally destroyed by an earthquake, as told in the book. The

earthquake killed indeed most of Usama's relatives. Usama travelled to Jerusalem with his master al-Din Unur of Damascus to forge an alliance between Damascus and Jerusalem against Zengi, the Atabeg of Aleppo. He wrote a book on what he experienced, his autobiography, the "Kitab al-I'tibar". When Usama helped Daniel he was in the service of the Sultan of Egypt. But he surely held contact with the Atabegs of Aleppo and Mosul, and with Damascus. The Shaizar was near Aleppo too, so Usama's presence in Aleppo is plausible.

There is no historical Jadwa, but there existed well-known female physicians in the Muslim world, such as the female physicians from the Banu Zuhr family who served the Almohad ruler Abu Yusuf Ya'qub al-Mansur in the Spain of the 12th century.

France's town of Provins has stayed much the medieval town it was in the twelfth century. Its fortified walls are intact. It is a wonderful place to visit, a town in which the past is present. It is still much as I described it in this book. Actors even stage tournaments and flights of falcons to divert the young. The house in which Daniel met Marie for the first time is extant and it is a wonderful remnant of the ages, later and now called the 'Tithe Barn' of Provins. Jacob's house could be one of the houses near the market place of Provins.

When I started writing the novel, I had little information on Vitry. There are several towns called Vitry in France. The Vitry of the book is currently called Vitry-en-Perthois. It is a village near the larger town of Vitry-le-François in the Champagne region south of Châlons-en-Champagne. Vitry-en-Perthois was in the twelfth century as I described it and the terrain, as well as the layout of roads, remains as it was in the twelfth century. I owe many and warm thanks to M. Arnaud Baudin, Head of the 'Centre of Information and Documentation of the Regional Directorate of Cultural Affairs of the Region of Champagne-Ardenne,' Member of the Society for Sciences and Arts of Vitry-le-François, for maps and documentation on Vitry in the Middle Ages.

M. Baudin wrote a splendid booklet entitled 'Vitry-en-Perthois au Moyen Age ou la mutation inachevée d'un bourg castral Champenois,' which is a masterwork of French historical analysis and writing at its very best. Vitry-en-Perthois was not only destroyed by King Louis VII in the winter of 1142 to 1143. It was ruined almost totally at the end of the fifteenth century during the wars between the French King Louis XI and Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy. The town was burned down again on the 24th of July of 1544 by the troops of Emperor Charles V, led against Vitry by Charles de Cossé, Lord of Brissac. A year later, French King Francis I decided to build a new town near Vitry-en-Perthois, which would be called after him Vitry-le-François. The King demanded that Vitry-en-Perthois be completely demolished and all its inhabitants transferred to the new town. Yet, the villagers stubbornly returned to what was then appropriately called Vitry-le-Brulé, Vitry-the-Burned, in memory of the two times the site had been burned down. Vitry-en-Perthois resurrected. Vitry-le-François grew more, however. The landscape remained as told in the book.

Of the church of Saint Peter and Paul of Cluny only meagre parts remain. The once largest church of Christendom was blown up by dynamite in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Many great sites in Western Europe were symbols of the Christian Faith, symbols to be destroyed by a revolution dedicated to reason. The battle between Reason and Faith lasted many centuries after the twelfth, and it will probably

never end! Thus not only Cluny but also such marvellous cathedrals as Saint Martin of Tours in France and the cathedrals of Bruges and Liège in Belgium disappeared forever.

Only a tower and part of the narthex of the church of Cluny remain intact. It needs much effort to imagine the church as it once was, but the French guides of the town do their best. Ironically maybe, Cluny owes much to an American. The young Professor Kenneth John Conant (1894-1984) of Harvard University excavated and did research at Cluny from 1927 to 1950, funded by Guggenheim Fellowships, and thus revived interest in the church. He drew the plans of the church anew. The descriptions in this book are based on his plans.

Conant wrote in one of his articles, 'If the church were still standing it would be a superb representative of one of the most pervasive monastic institutions of the early Middle Ages – an important cultural monument, an unsurpassed masterpiece of Romanesque architecture, and one of the outstanding churches of all Christendom.' We must agree with this praise. Cluny is still a wonderful and mysteriously spiritual site. A few buildings of the old abbey remain, as well as a few Romanesque-style houses. With a little imagination one might reconstruct the Cluny that Daniel saw.

The Abbey of Cîteaux suffered the same fate as Cluny at the French Revolution; even fewer ruins remain. The Abbey of Clairvaux still exists, though its current buildings are the ones of many centuries after Saint Bernard's times. Sadly, Clairvaux is a French State Prison now, but the site can be visited and it still lies amidst the forests.

The Paraclete abbey near Nogent-sur-Seine also still exists at the same site. The current abbey buildings are of much later date than the reed hovels suggested in this book, but the site can be visited.

There was never a meeting of Christian, Arabian and Jewish philosophers and theologians as described in the book, but all the philosophers and theologians mentioned are historical figures and they wrote much of what I made them tell in the book. I regretted that Abdul Walid Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Ibn Rusd, also called Averroes, was only a boy of thirteen years at the date of the meeting. Yet, I made him accompany his true teacher.

The themes discussed in this book were indeed the themes of the philosophers and theologians of the time. The philosophical results of the meeting at Cluny may seem disappointing. The reader should reflect however on the intelligence and the achievements in rational thinking of the scholars of the twelfth century, which were considerable and not in the least less than that of present scholars.

So many centuries after the twelfth, it is remarkable how few advances have really been made in philosophy: by rational thought only and without applying convictions of the different schools, few fundamental answers on our lives have been provided. Rational thought does not prove the existence or non-existence of God, for instance. Some philosophers, the pessimists then, even believe it is impossible to prove by rational thought alone whether all that we perceive is real or not. Modern philosophy has become a science of questions in which, much as in the 12th century, without schemes of hypotheses and without opinions and convictions no definite answers can be formulated. Any scheme of hypotheses seems to me to be not much better than the scheme of Faith.

Some respect is therefore deserved for the scholars and theologians of the twelfth century who pointed at this lack of power of proof provided by rational thought. At the beginning of the twelfth century the scholars of the cathedral schools – as the scholars of other Faiths - had the illusion to think they could provide proofs of the fundamentals of their religion by rational thought; at the end of that century the illusion had proven to be elusive. The passage of Cluny in this book is therefore not so much on the systems of philosophy devised in the century, as on the question of philosophy itself.

Daniel's remark on whether reason could prove all the truths in the universe is a far reference to Kurt Gödel's theorem (Gödel: 1906-1978), to, of course, his problem of completeness: are the axioms of a formal system sufficient to derive every statement that is true in all models of the system? The reader will forgive me the anachronism.

The 'Didascalicon' was indeed written by Hugh of Saint Victor. I found it interesting enough to take up in this book the subdivision of philosophy in the different sciences and arts as was common in the Middle Ages. The medieval scholars indeed found it necessary to seek wisdom through knowledge at their abbey and cathedral schools, from which evolved our universities. Medieval mind thought it logical to assume that studies should be aimed at acquiring wisdom. We would do good to keep that same thought in mind with our education. The title of PhD, for the Latin 'Philosophiæ Doctor' or Doctor in Philosophy is a remnant of the medieval classification.

Saint Denis is currently one of the most multi-cultural suburbs of Paris. The church and abbey can be visited and if you can, visit it during a market day. The market is just in front of the church and abbey; the contrast with centuries of France's history and the current bustle of the market is striking.

Saint Denis was the royal abbey and royal church, the place where the Kings and Queens of France were buried. It was indeed the work of Abbot Suger to have the Romanesque church transformed in one of the very first Gothic churches of Western Europe.

The French Revolution luckily did not destroy the church, but the royal tombs were smashed – some were preserved and can be seen in the church - and the bones of the French Kings and Queens scattered, to be brought together later in the ossuary of the crypt.

The cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, as one admires it today on the Ile-de-la-Cité, is not the cathedral Daniel saw. The current Notre Dame was rebuilt in the second half of the twelfth century, not so long after Daniel left for the Holy Land. In Daniel's times Paris was practically undefended by walls. King Philippe Auguste, son of Louis VII, built the most formidable defences only much later.

Hildegard von Bermersheim was still at the abbey of Disibodenberg at the moment of the supposed meeting of Cluny. Later of course, she would establish her own convent at Bingen so that history knows her better as Hildegard von Bingen. She was an extraordinary woman, indeed.

In her monologue I make her talk about cutting hay and using the plants in the hay. It may seem strange but something like that is indeed (still) done today. In the abbey of Ettal in Bavaria of Germany, a village close to Oberammergau, in the monastery called Kloster Ettal, the monks ask the 'Wiesmahd' pastures, pastures above a thousand meters in the Bavarian Alps which do not receive fertilizers, to be cut and

the hay dried. From the hay the Brother Distiller chooses fifty to sixty plants – of which he only knows all the names and properties – and from these he distils a brandy called ‘Heu Likör’. Kloster Ettal in the Ammergau region is a wonderful place to visit.

Vézelay in Burgundy is a magic place. Not much is left of the Benedictine monastery, but the church of Saint Mary Magdalene has been preserved. The church was sold at the Revolution of 1790 and was in ruins in the nineteenth century when the well-known French writer Prosper Mérimée, Inspector of Historical Monuments from 1834 to 1852, asked for its restoration. The restoration was accomplished by the French State from 1840 on and lasted until about 1876, under the direction of the equally famous architect Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879).

One is not the same man or woman after having experienced Vézelay, after having seen and heard the masses sung by the Monastic Fraternities of Jerusalem, having warmed to the blazing light in the cathedral, seen the splendid choir, and experienced the view from the terrace behind the church.

The church is much the same now as it was in Daniel’s time, except for the Gothic choir which was added later, but which is nevertheless medieval. Many of the Romanesque houses in the village along the main street of Vézelay remind of Daniel’s time.

The Frank army invaded the Hauran in 1147. The episode of the burning of the high grasses before the advancing Frank army by the Turkish troops, the killing of a Muslim Amir by a Haurani who rode out of the ranks of the Christian army despite the orders of the King of Jerusalem, and also the rescue of the Frank army by a white knight with a red banner, is told by William of Tyre (ca. 1130-1185). William of Tyre (Guillaume de Tyr) was the Archbishop of Tyre and the most famous French chronicler of the Crusades.

I sincerely hope you have enjoyed the book and wish that you can ever visit some of the sites mentioned above. In Book II, Daniel will find his answers.