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Phree Massen  
Enlightened

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The crowd was screaming with intense excitement.

Eight knights of the Royal guard pushed Khristhian and other five inmates on the scaffolding where they would have been condemned to death. The guards were armed with swords, they wore chainmails and a light blue surcoat with the golden fleur-de-lis of the French Crown.

He couldn't see. Like his inmates, he had been blindfolded, but he could hear the enthusiastic screams of the people, he could even smell them, their stink was acrid. For a moment he felt like he could feel the warmth of their breath and even that of their bodies, pressed one against the other. The people moved and jumped, almost as if they would have liked to step on the scaffolding and kill the prisoners themselves.

The heavy steps of the guards' boots around them produced a strong sound, completely different from the inmates' weak and fatigue stride. Their feet were bruised and dirty, their ankles swollen. Two hands landed on Khristhian's shoulders, pushing and forcing him to kneel down.

It was only then that they took their blindfolds away.

The sky above them was as blackish and gloomy as the earth below the scaffolding, but it had been so long since the last time he saw an open space that light blinded him anyway. It took him a few seconds, and when he finally got used to the light, the first thing he noticed was the people's faces, distorted masks placed on ill-clad, dirty bodies. They were looking at the scene with morbid interest, bloodthirsty. His friends were lined up by his side, kneeling down. He saw his brother Zack, then Helena and an old friar of the Temple. Finally, at his left, there was Bertrand. Khristhian would have been the second knight to be beheaded.

How long was it? He couldn't remember. Tortures and darkness, that's all he remembered. The floor, cold and hard rock. The blood, and the smell of death and infected wounds.

Two years, two years passed since they were imprisoned.

And now he was there, kneeling like a disgraced criminal, waiting for his death to come.

Near the man at his left was the executioner, a massive two-legged ox with arms like logs. His skin was hairy and moist, his chest wide. He wore a black long shirt, his face was covered and wielded a big labrys.

The man lifted the axe upon his head and then forcefully went down on Bertrand's neck. Right after that, they heard the sound of his head rolling down the scaffolding, followed by the roar of the crowd. Khristhian couldn't feel pity for him, he deserved that death and, if he didn't die on this day, sooner or later he would have had to kill him himself.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath when he heard the executioner's steps behind him. He looked up at him for a second, then looked down again. He visualized his hands moving and grasping the axe's handle, trying to find the perfect grip. He thought of his brothers. He thought of Scotland, Cyprus and the Holy Land. Paris and the Grand Master. Then he thought of Mary.

He wasn't scared.

While the executioner lifted the axe upon his head, the blade sprayed his face with some fresh blood drops. It was Bertrand's blood. The axe went down for a second time and he thought he could hear it cutting through the air, but in that moment what they heard was a hiss: an arrow passed straight through the executioner's huge neck and everything now felt slowed down, surreal.

The man that just a second before was about to behead him fell on the scaffolding's wood with a dull thud, and a puddle of blood crowned his big head.

The crowd below them was panicking, they were trying to run away, jostling and walking over other people's bodies and screaming. A group of hooded men popped up from the crowd, they were wearing black tunics and were armed with swords. They attacked the guards almost by surprise, killing them in a matter of seconds.

Four of the assailants went to release the inmates.

Khristhian was astonished. Although the man was wearing a hood, he recognized him.

-Sir Khristhian, we have come to rescue you.- He said.

*Years before...*

*August 1293, Cyprus*

-Dear and beloved brothers, the majority of the Chapter has established that the applicant, Khristhian Murray, is allowed to be part of the House. If anyone here has any reasons as to why he should not be admitted, let him speak now.- The Grand Master looked at everyone of his men, all of them were knights of the Order. They were wearing chainmails and the white cloaks with the blood red cross on it.

Nobody answered, so he went on.

-Brother Bernard, brother Hugues and brother Guillaume, go into the applicant's room.-

The three men were back in about twenty minutes, forming a triangle around the Gran Master. The man at the top was Guillaume, a tall and massive brother with eyes as black as his hair and a bushy beard, and he was the one to talk first.

-Master, the applicant is ready to be admitted.-

-Let him enter.-

The three men turned around and started walking while the rhythmic sound of their boots touching the rocky floor spreaded across the entire room. They were carrying their swords on the their left side.

-Foreigner, the Master has granted you access to the Temple.-

Khristhian stood up and followed them while they escorted him before Jacques de Molay. He was so tense that the warmth under that old, worn-out tunic they made him wear was unbearable. Sweat beaded his forehead and made his hands wet, and his legs felt weak and stiff, unreliable.

-Get on your knees.- Said someone's voice at some point. He couldn't tell if it was the Grand Master or one of the other knights, but it wasn't important. He did as he was told and kneeled down.

-My lord, I have come here, in front of you and the whole Chapter, to implore you in the name of God's Majesty and our Lady to accept me in the House, giving me all the benefits and rules.-

De Molay stood up from his throne and looked him in the eyes. He was tall, and he had a long dark beard marked with the shades of some new grey hair. His eyes were black and deep. He had spent years looking at that face, yet today it seemed younger to him.

-Brother, you are asking much because you only see the exterior side of our beloved Templar Order, like the bark of an oak tree. This bark is our horses, our armors, our cloaks and our meals, and that is why you believe everything is good and you will be fine. But you don't even imagine the strict rules hidden underneath the bark that are effective in our beloved Order. You as a lord will have to be servant for the others, because from now on you won't be able to have things your way: if you want to sleep, they will wake you up; if you want to eat, you will have to stand up and they will send you elsewhere; if you want to stay awake, they will order you to sleep; if you want to fast, they will order you to eat; if you want to be somewhere, they will send you somewhere else. You won't be able to ask why and in the name of God you must

tolerate all the harsh words of reproach you'll get. If that is what you want, then stand up and step forward.-

Khristian stood up and expressed his will stepping forward and looking straight at the face of the Grand Master, who was taller than him only by a few inches.

-Do you swear to believe in Our Lord Jesus Christ, who sacrificed for our sins?-

-I swear.-

-Do you swear to believe in the Virgin Our Lady, mother and Savior of all men?

-I swear.-

-Do you swear to obey the Holy Father always and without hesitations, as he is the only worldly authority superior to out our glorious Order?-

-I swear.-

The ritual went on that way for some minutes, and with every question the young squire felt the heat rise. He wet his lips, suddenly feeling tired and thirsty. For a moment his mind wandered, but the Grand Master raised his voice and brought him back to reality: he was asking a question for the second time in a row.

-Khristian Murray, have you got a wife or a fiancée?-

A shiver run down his spine, and he felt deeply embarrassed and uncomfortable. He could sense the reproach of the knights around him, or at least he thought he could. He waited some seconds before answered, still taken by surprise. Could a love from the past be considered the same as an emotional – or even matrimonial – commitment, since it never ended, nor was forgotten? And can a man of God's heart, devoted to discipline and obedience, still be beating for a worldly creature and a physical love, as long as it remains far away and unattainable?

-No. I don't.- Was all he said in the end. He didn't have time for those thoughts, and he had put too many years worth of work and energy in becoming a knight, so a small lie would not determine if he was worthy or not. If God found him guilty of something, he would atone for those through obedience. He just hoped they didn't notice his hesitation, or at least that they didn't consider it too important.

After all, a little anxiety must have been common among applicants.

His thoughts were once again interrupted by the ritual, and once again he was caught off guard. He listened to the brother that was telling him his oaths, and the more he listened, the more he felt uncomfortable:

-From this moment on you will not be allowed to approach women, nor to have any kind of interaction with them. Should the circumstances make this impossible for you, or should your instincts prevail and force you to seek a woman's companionship, make sure not to be discovered.-

-I swear.- His voice trembling, and there was chaos in his mind as he tried to come to terms with the fact that the ritual really included those words.

-You will not be arrogant, you will not show off by taking part in tournaments, nor will you tarnish your name or the Order's by hunting or by taking part in any kind of shallow activities.-

-I swear

-Before you are admitted in our glorious Order...- The Grand Master brought a wooden crucifix to his face, it was long as a dagger and the Christ that hung from it was made from ivory.-

-You will spit on this crucifix.-

Khristian's eyes were opened wide, just like his mouth, and he felt that his legs were going to fail him. It seemed to him that his heart had stopped suddenly, and that blood had disappeared from his body.

-Spit on this cross, Khristian Murray.- Insisted de Molay, looking firmly in the his eyes, but the young man didn't move. There was complete silence around them. The applicant felt a strong pounding inside his head, he wanted to say something but what came out of his mouth was nothing but a shocked silence.

His lips were dry and he licked them, still trying to overcome the hesitation.

-You swore total obedience, and now you refuse a direct order? How should we interpret this behavior? Are you a weak man or a traitor? This is perjury!-

For an eternal few seconds he remained there, motionless, with his blue eyes wide open and staring at Jesus Christ on that crucifix. Once again he opened his mouth but couldn't say anything. He was shaking, drops of sweat were running down his face and he looked at the other knights, trying to ask for someone's help, but they were unmoved, as if that sacrilege was the most common of all actions.

Then he spat, feeling like he was about to faint. His legs failed him eventually, they gave up and Khristian heard one of the knights sniggering behind his back.

He barely heard de Molay, who was talking again.

The Grand Master put the crucifix away. -In the name of God and our Lady we grant you to all the benefits of our House, along with our brotherhood and help, but also many fights, pain and more work.-

Then a knight approached him, bringing a sword. He was as short as he was wide, with a round, spotty face and a threatening look on his face. His cloak was a little too long for him, and several inches of it brushed the floor as he walked. In another situation Khristian would have found that situation funny, but now his heart was beating so strong that he felt like he could hear his own blood running inside his body.

De Molay took the sword and said:

-Receive this sword, as a symbol of your strength in defense of your faith, the oppressed and the defenseless, our sacred militia and our virtues. Never will you wield this weapon against another christian. You will be the shield of the pilgrims and the plagues of Our Lord's enemies, the Pope's armed wing and the guardian of the sacred places of our faith.-

Khristian looked in his eyes while he was talking, moved by those words. The tension he felt moments before, but he still felt weak and confused. He almost lost grip on the sword while he took it, but when he managed to hold it firmly he admired it. He had waited years for that moment and now it was there, he was holding it in his hand.

They gave him also sheath, belt and shield, and they laid a chainmail next to him, folded and oiled. On top of it, a great helm.

Then he felt movement behind his back, a knight took the cloak from one of the chapel's benches and laid it on Khristian's shoulders at the same time as the Grand Master started to talk again.

-Receive and wear this cloak that brings our Order's cross, so that it protects you from all evil.-

The bells started to ring.

-Now rise as a Knight Templar, Sir Khristhian Murray.- De Molay kissed him on the cheek, and the other knights did the same while stopping between the kisses to whisper "You are my brother". Khristhian answered by bowing his head as they instructed him to do as sign of gratitude.

When the ritual ended the knights started to exit the chapel, leaving Khristhian there. He looked around, noticing the chapel's two rows of wooden benches, the white columns and floor, and the colored glass windows inside the lancet arches that allowed the noon light to enter the chapel.

He closed his eyes and took a deep, deep breath.

Then he put the sword on his left side and wrapped his hand around the hilt repeatedly, enjoying the cold metal's feeling under his touch. He found himself smiling, he hadn't felt happy in years, not in that strong and authentic way... and for once, he managed to remember without sadness the day he was forced to leave Scotland when he was fifteen years old. Second-born, his family sent him to France so that he joined the Temple Order.

The separation was hard.

Leaving his family was hard, leaving his friends was hard, but the worst part was having to leave his brother... and Mary.

Then Paris. The first years there were awful: alone and isolated, he didn't know the language and was always on the sidelines, holding on to the memories of what had been. He envied Zack, he kept wishing to be him, the firstborn, or at least he would have loved to have him in Paris, so they could face that new life together. Zack used to know what to do in every situation, he would have found a way to get by in that place... but he wasn't there, and Khristhian had had to handle himself and deal with homesickness. He didn't know if others felt the same way, but he was homesick and that stuck with him until today, the day of his initiation, six years away from his departure from Scotland.

Once again, it was the Grand Master the one that brought him back from his minds. He was smiling, as he always was. -Khris, come with me. I have an assignment for you. Now that you're finally a Templar, there's no time to waste.-

He nodded and followed de Molay. -What is this about, Master?-

-I told you. An assignment. But we'll talk about it in private, brother.- Answered he while walking several steps ahead. His every movement was confident, determined, and the white cloak hung from his wide shoulders down to his ankles, fluttering.

They crossed diagonally the courtyard's fresh, verdant gardens, and after that they were walking again on stone corridors. Cyprus' Templar commandery wasn't as big as the Temple of Paris, but its dimensions were way ahead those of most of Europe's other outposts.

It took them a few minutes to reach the Grand Master's accommodations. The older man entered first, opening the huge metal-reinforced wooden door and stepping aside in order to let Khristhian enter.

The newly knighted Scot bowed his head and thanked him. De Molay then closed the door, locked it and sat down behind his large desk full of parchments, scrolls, and other objects. The wine-colored rug under their feet absorbed the boots' sound, and precious tapestry hung from the walls. Light made his way into the room from a window, and it was enough to make the environment pleasant.

-I know what I told you to do was hard, but you don't have to consider it as heresy. The spitting tradition is a custom the Order adopted long time ago. It has been handed over us from the sect of the Assassins, they use it as proof of courage, it symbolizes the arduous deals the faith was exposed to during hard times, and it is also proof of ultimate obedience. It is your last sin, and symbolizes the hardships and obstacles you'll find in your path, those moments in which faith seems to leave your soul... It also symbolizes your departure from worldly life, as you will have to commit yourself completely to serving God and His cause if you want to atone for it...- De Molay's tone was relaxed, he was sitting with crossed legs and hands joint on his lap, and his black eyes were studying his pupil with a look that was both calm and some sort of amusement underlined by the little smile under his beard.

For his part, Khristhian was confused. -Master, the Sect of the Assassins? What do they have to do with us? As far as I know, the Sect doesn't exist anymore and, even if it still existed, I don't see how the Assassins could be our allies.-

He had heard rumors and legends about old times when Templars and Assassins worked together and had trade and diplomatic relations, exchanging favors and joining forces in order to attain several goals, but he never thought those rumors could be real. But why should de Molay lie about something like this? It wouldn't make sense.

So it must have been real.

-Young Khristhian, you're wrong. You can suppress an institution, and you can hunt down its members, but it will never die as long as there's at least one man alive to carry its ideals.-

-So you're telling me that the Sect does still exist? And why should our Order have had the need to take inspiration from infidels for our own ritual?-

The Grand Master smiled, sighing while changing position on his chair. He closed his eyes for a second, as if to tell himself to be patient, and then talked again. - It still exists, and it never stopped existing. There was a time when our two Orders were enemies, but there were contacts already during the first campaigns launched for the regaining of the Holy Land... little symbolic actions. Then there were truces, and then gifts... After the gifts there were peaceful meetings, and eventually the Orders managed to collaborate.-

-But why? Helping the infidel enemy is a sin, Master. Everything you're saying is unacceptable...- He was starting to feel anger, his voice was trembling and there was fire in his eyes, but he stopped as soon as he saw de Molay standing up and punching the table.

-*Khristhian!*- His voice echoed in the whole room, and the young knight shivered. -Talk to me again in that tone of yours and I'll be sending you back to the

stables, and you'll clean them until the end of your days! You became a knight today, but it only makes you a humbler servant than you were as a sergeant. You *swore* to obey your superiors, and if you want to obey you have to *listen*. So now you will listen to me. Don't insult your own intelligence by closing your mind to what I'm saying, by hiding behind dogma. What I'm telling you isn't easier to comprehend for me as much as it is for you, but it is the truth, so you must listen to it and make it yours.-

-Forgive me, Master. I won't interrupt you again.- He lowered his gaze. De Molay nodded and sat down again.

-The nine knights that founded our Order excavated underneath Al-Aqsa. And they dug up things, important things. Some of them held revelations that our Grand Masters found out only later in time, when they connected with the Assassins: there's wealth in diversity, Khriis, and in diversity there's also equality, there's unity.-

-What do you mean?-

-Born amidst two cultures so different they are enemies that wage war against each other, the Order and the Sect found out not only that they had something in common, but also that they were so similar they could be allies. So the goals changed, the Masters that followed our founder welcomed his legacy and understood that the Temple's final goal is to bring light into this world. The goal is to discover and reveal truth, and to help the progress of human thought. It was the birth of a new idea: peaceful coexistence of Christ's and Muhammad's people, and in order to attain this goal our brothers had to fight and win wars, as much as act behind the scenes in order to change things, in order to not have to fight anymore. This was the only way to grant the christian presence in the Holy Land, and at the same time avoid being destroyed by an enemy way more organized and cohesive than us.-

-But we couldn't, Master. Acre fell in front of your eyes two years ago.-

De Molay sighed. -That's the point, Khriis. We failed, for now, but our commitment is the same it was before the fall of Acre, and so is the Assassins'. God's timing is perfect, and when the time will come for us to actively fight for our cause once again, we'll do it.-

The knight remained silent for several moments, thinking about what he had just heard. It was difficult for him to understand why they would have to lower themselves to a collaboration with the infidels, a part of him kept screaming that the Church's values had been betrayed, but there was also something that just felt right in the Grand Master's speech. The infidels turned out to be way too strong for the Christian armies, that were heterogeneous, badly organized, and that suffered from the constant political plots. And so, the only viable solution was to live side by side with these infidels and, maybe, also learn from them. After all, if the Saladin was remembered as a great example of knighthood, maybe it really made sense to think that there was something to be learned from that culture they fought against for centuries.

-Khriis? - De Molay was serious, and Khriis jumped. He must have remained silent for too long. -I understand that this is difficult to comprehend. Take some time to think about it, and you'll see that there's truth in what I just told you. And it is exactly the complexity of these thoughts the reason why so few people know about this.-

-Then why are you telling me, Master?-

-In your novitiate years you have been a trustworthy sergeant with pure ideals, and a great warrior. You served, you obeyed, you worked and you set everything else aside. So you were studied and, eventually, you were chosen. From now on you will get to find out things that will seem odd, some of them even blasphemous, but you will understand them. And you will obey. Because we are Templars, and service is our life. *This* is what we committed to.-

-But... if we go against what the Church says, who are we serving?-

The Grand Master, his mentor since he first arrived to Paris, smiled. It was an enigmatic, mysterious smile. -Discovering it is up to you. I've held your hand until now, but now the moment came for you to walk with your own legs.-

Khristhian nodded. He felt confused and his head was aching. He closed his eyes for a second and caressed his temples. Suddenly he realized he was exhausted.

He needed some rest.

-You mentioned an assignment.- He said, running a hand through his long, black hair and looking at the man in front of him. He was nodding.

-Yes, and it's about the Assassins themselves. The Sect dissolved long ago, at least that's what people think, so you can't risk drawing attention on you. As you know, after Acre things changed, and the Holy Land has never been more dangerous for us, so you'll have to be careful.- He paused. -Your mission consists in going to Tartus where you'll find a man waiting for you, or better, *he* will be the one who finds you. His name is Yusuf, he's a merchant of camels and speaks our language very well, and will escort you to Qala'at Marqab, the Assassins' headquarters.-

The young man nodded. -And what should I do once I'm there, Master?-

De Molay took a scroll from the table and showed it to him. There was a sealing wax stamp on it, but it wasn't the Grand Master's seal. Khristhian took the scroll and examined it, noticing there wasn't a cross nor the two knights on one horse... in their place there was the depiction of a man with a strange piece of headgear and a bow in his right hand. Around it Khristhian could read "*Secretum Templi*".

-What's this?

-Not now.- Was de Molay's answer, then he took the scroll, put it inside a leather bag, and gave it to his pupil. -Protect it with your own life if needed, don't ever separate from it for any reason and do not read it. You will give it to Hasan V, the head of the Sect, who will give you another scroll, even more important, and a precious shipment you have to bring here. Once you're back I will explain everything to you. I'm putting this extremely important assignment in your hands, for I completely entrust your abilities.-

-I am honored, Master. I will carry this out and you won't be disappointed.-

-You will leave tomorrow at dawn by an anonymous merchant ship, you won't carry armors nor weapons, you will wear white clothes and always wear the hood. You must be unidentifiable.-

-I won't let you down, Master.- He said, turning around and walking towards the door. He felt confused and wanted some rest, but de Molay stopped him.

-If I thought you could fail, I wouldn't even have told you all of this. I know you'll make it. You will find everything you need in your accommodations... now you may go.-

Khristhian nodded, bowed and went out and exited the room, dazed and tired as he never had been. De Molay watched him walk away and smiled. The boy he always considered almost a son was now a man, and as a man he would have to face many difficulties. This was his first one and, if he pulled it off successfully, de Molay himself would have made sure his pupil climbed the Order's rankings up to the top. The fall of Acre brought difficult times, and in the near future the Temple would need a reliable leadership.

-Did you talk to Sir Khristhian, Master?-

Everard's voice pulled him out of his thoughts. He was one of the eldest and most important members of the Order, one of the few chosen ones who got to pull the strings from behind the scenes, together with Jacques de Molay and thirty two other men. The brotherhood inside the brotherhood.

-Everything as expected, brother. Khristhian will leave for Tartus tomorrow morning at dawn, and will be back with the thing we've been waiting for for so long.-

-Are you really comfortable with your choice, Master? He's so young... should he fail, everything would be lost forever. And you know how much, how badly we need what the Assassins are sending us. Our Order's destiny, our mission's, our own destiny depends on this.- The old man grasped the chair's armrests and sat down, his arms were trembling from the effort. When he finally managed to sit, he panted. -Years go by... and no matter how much I ask our Lord for a little youth, he won't give me a chance!-

The Grand Master laughed in delight.

-At least he grants you health, brother! And a sharp mind.- He smiled. -I understand your doubts about the young man, Everard, but we've been testing him for years. You took care of it yourself. We trained him, we gave him culture and taught him our ideals... and, among those ideals, we instilled in him unconditional obedience.-

-And it seems he doesn't lack courage. I just hope young age doesn't make him reckless and imprudent.-

-He won't disappoint us. We are all praying that everything goes as it should and that our Orders go back to their past glory, because I know we are in the clear.-

-So mote it be, then.- Everard scrubbed his face with one of his blotchy hands, then he scratched the point of his high-bridged nose. -But I'm not here to talk about the boy, Jacques, there's another reason for my visit...-

-Which is...- For a moment the Grand Master felt tense and anxious.

-Do you have some wine?-

 Was the elder's sudden answer, and he started laughing and covering his face with his hand. De Molay laughed along with him, shaking his head and standing up.

Still laughing, he went to one of the shelves and took a bottle of wine and two iron cups.

-You're an old drunkard, my brother. And you never change!-

-Why? Do you really think one's going to change after almost a century on this earth?- The old man laughed again. -Come on, enough of this childish nonsense, just pour me some wine.-

-I bet that's the secret for a long life.- Said Jacques while he filled both their cups.

-Sure as hell, Grand Master.- He paused, rising with difficulty and locking his light blue eyes with his brother.

-To our Orders.-

-To our Orders, I like it.- Answered the old man, smiling.

*August-September 1293*

Cyprus Temple's port was a lively combination of a few docks, but in that moment, just before dawn, it was peaceful. Night's darkness dissolved slowly from East, there where the lines of horizon and sea came together in a reddish line.

A gentle breeze messed with his hair and filled his lungs with the salty scent of the Mediterranean Sea's pleasant water.

Many ships were docked, waiting to sail, and they were all Templar vessels: the *Temple's Rose*, the *Templar*, the *Bernard of Clairvaux*, the *Templar Eagle* and other ships awaited the new day to rise so they could resume their activities. Il porto del Tempio a Cipro di giorno era un insieme di pochi moli brulicante di vita, ma in quel momento, poco prima dell'alba, era estremamente pacifico.

Among those white sails marked with large red crosses, just one ship stood out for its grey sail and for the unknown flag it flew. The *Acacia* was a large, stocky vessel that rolled with the morning's low waves, and when he tried to get near the ship someone behind him caught his attention.

-Sir Khristhian Murray, may you have a safe trip and be back soon.- His voice was strong, deep, and he was almost screaming. When Khristhian turned around, he found out the voice's owner was Sir Guillaume de Floryan, a man about fifteen years older than him who was there during his initiation. He was powerfully built, tall and vigorous, with green eyes, brownish beard and hair, and thin lips that showed off an amused smirk. De Molay and the old Everard d'Avignon walked by his side, together with Sir Michel de Carcassonne, a gloomy red-headed man.

-Thank you, brother. Sir Everard, Sir Michel, how nice to see you both before my departure.- He paused and made a brief bow to de Molay. -Grand Master, thank you for being here.-

-How could we not be, Khristhian!- He put a man around his shoulders and pointed at the ship with the other hand. -This is an Ismaili vessel we use to employ for these kind of tasks.-

Everard nodded. -It is not wise to disembark in a port like Tartus sailing under the Templar banner. This ship flies the city's flag, the people there know it for its constant trades with the West and with the other ports in the Holy Land. This should make your assignment easier.-

-So I hope.-

Sir Michel's face was now annoyed. -You hope so? No room for hope, young knight. The only choices you have are to succeed or to pass this duty to someone else, maybe a more experienced man.-

Khristhian grimaced. -Brother, you are entitled to every single one of your doubts.- Said he, without even turning around to face him. De Molay and the other two knights watched that scene with slight surprise.

-What is that supposed to mean?-

Now he turned and looked him in the eyes. -Exactly what you heard. Your doubts will be put to rest as soon as I come back.-

The man looked at de Molay. -Quite cocky, this pupil of ours.-

-That's not cockiness, it's confidence. Brother Michel, if our Grand Master decided to entrust Sir Khristhian with this assignment, it's because he considers him able to pull it off. I myself am doubtful because of his young age, and nonetheless I am nobody to question our Grand Master's decision. And neither are you.-

He remained silent, muttered and went away while his white cloak fluttered in the wind.

-Sir Guillaume, go and calm down brother Michel.-

-As you command, my lord.- The man tried to step up the pace and reach Michel, and while they observed him the Grand Master talked to Khristhian.

-Don't take it too hard, Michel has always been a hothead... he would have liked to get the assignment. And I appreciate his courage, but I can't rely on an impulsive man for a task of this kind.-

-And I can't argue about that, Jacques... you're right.- Everard's voice was low and crackly, tarnished by the years. -Where's the ship's captain?-

-Everard, my brother, how I wish that age didn't ruin your eyes! I am right here!- The man came out of the *Acacia's* cabin and appeared on the ship's deck. He screamed some orders at his men and some boys rushed and placed a boardwalk between the ship and the port. He was a massive sailor, not that tall, with dark skin and bright eyes. His hair and beard were short, and with a lot of grey shades amidst the black.

-Not that you're so young, seaman!- The old man was sniggering.

-Compared to yours, brother, my skin is still tender and fresh.-

De Molay laughed. -Khristhian, the one you see on the ship is captain Mikha'il, an Ismaili brother. He's been sailing for us and for the Assassins for years.-

-I was born sailing these water, and sailing these waters I will die, if that is Allah's will.- He paused, walking down the boardwalk and approaching them. -I guess this young lad is my fellow traveler. Come on, knight, there's no time to waste! Say bye to these elderly men and let's have some real fun!-

Khris smiled and nodded. -Master, may God protect you and keep you healthy. I will see you soon.-

-And may he guide you in your mission and may he enlighten your every step.- He hugged him. Then Everard touched his shoulder slightly.-

-Have a safe journey, Sir Khristhian. May the Lord be with you.-

The knight bowed, smiled and reched the captain. They walked together towards the round ship, and as soon as they were on the other side of the boardwalk, the other man started screaming orders, and in a few minutes the ship was moving out of the

harbor. Khristhian stood there, hands on the wooden bulwark, watching the Grand Master and the old brother become tinier and tinier as the *Acacia* sailed away.

When he lost sight of Cyprus' port, he turned around and looked at the sea, smiling. By that time the sun had risen and the wind was warm and fair, while in front of him there was only an infinite stretch of quiet, shiny water.

He moved across the ship's deck and reached prow, where he admired the ocean while the vessel rolled underneath him, almost cradling the crew on those relaxed waves. The only sounds he heard were those of the wind and the waves, together with the crew's pitter-patter while they worked, obeying their commander's orders or carrying objects from one side of the ship to the other.

-I hope my humble ship is to your liking, knight.- The voice behind his back was the ship's captain's, he was approaching him with a loaf of bread in his hand. He broke it and offered him a half. Khristhian nodded and took it.

-Thank you, Mikha'il. The ship's very nice, and the sea is calm. I couldn't ask for more.-

-Even with rough seas, this ship doesn't flinch. Not even a little bit. May I hear your name once again? I can't remember it.-

Khristhian had some doubts about his seaman boasting, and wished he never had to find out if the *Acacia* navigated calmly through storms, or if it jumped and rolled like any other ship. So he just smiled. -Khristhian Murray.-

The man tried to say it a couple times, then a third and a fourth time.

-But you can call me Khriss.-

-Khris.- He said, scratching his dark cheek while bringing a crumb to his mouth. Then he smiled. -Easier. Better. Why are those crazy old men sending you to Tartus, Khris?-

-I have a job to do on the Grand Master's behalf.- Even if Mikha'il was an Assassin and he should have considered him a brother, Khristhian wasn't able to trust him completely. He had to be prudent.

-If you meet my brothers, give my regards. It has been over a year since the last time I saw Hasan V's ugly face, and I miss it.-

Khristhian smiled and shook his head, and the captain laughed out loud. -You're silent, Khris. Do I not speak your language well enough?-

-At all. You're fluent.-

-Thank you. After years of trade with Western Assassins, you get to learn something.-

He frowned and looked at the captain, confused. He didn't understand. -Do the Assassins really operate in the West?-

-Sure! You are the Assassins!- He laughed again. -Young knight, you have so much to learn!-

The Templar felt embarrassed for a while, and he looked away while looking at a pretty big chunk of bread. He still didn't know if he should really trust the Assassins, but he did indeed like the captain.

-How difficult is it to command a ship?- Asked he, smiling, and Mikha'il eyes seem to light up.

-How difficult is it to move an arm, Khris?- He paused, smiling at him. -A ship isn't a thing, it is part of the captain. It goes there the captain wants it to go.-

-And what about the sea? What if it resists?-

The man answered with a puzzling smile. -The sea is no male, brother. The sea is female. Respect the sea, move with her motions, with her moments. Worship the sea, and the sea will let you sail. The ship is the hand that caresses a woman's body, and water is her skin. Touch it with respect, revere its beauty, and the sea will let you navigate. Do it, and the sea will share her marvelous existence with you.-

Khristhian watched him for a long time, astonished. -Magnificent.-

-Magnificent? Knight, forgive me. What does a Templar know about women? I wonder if you will ever change!- The captain bursted out laughing and walked away, shaking his head and patting his shoulder. Then he went back to work, finishing his bread. Khristhian watched him and cracked an amused smile.

Not every Templar was inexperienced when it comes to women.

When the ship landed, Khristhian was resting. The captain allowed him to use his accommodations, and now he had just come in to tell him they arrived, and the knight followed him on the deck. He looked out the bulwark and beheld Tartus' port, a set of stalls and white and reddish building with eastern architecture, exotic to him.

He smile. He had never been in Outremer, and after the fall of Acre he tried to forget about his wish to do it. Nevertheless he was there, looking out from a ship the big port of Tartus, teeming with people and boats. The faces were darker, the architecture was unusual, but the sea's scent was the same, and so were the fishi smeel coming out of the market and the sound of hundreds of overlapping voices. He said goodbye to Mikha'il, thaking him and wishing him good luck for his next travels. Then he walked down the boardwalk and reched dry land, where he started looking for camels. He moved through people and realized – in astonishment – that there wasn't any unpleasant smell coming out of them, as opposed to the people in western cites and their ports. Some ignored him, others were simply too busy to pay attention to a Christian in that place and ignored him.

He jostled inside the crowd, then found some men with camels and tried to make eye contact with them, but they didn't react, so he walked for several more minutes, until he saw another man surrounded by camls, but when he was about to approach him somebody laid a massive hand on his left shoulder, forcing him to turn around.

-Sir Khristhian Murray?-

His voice was deep and the arab accent strong. His tone was rude. The Templar flinched and instinctively reached for his sword's hilt, but found nothing. He left it in Cyprus by order of de Molay. Then he tried to wiggle out of that man's grip, but he grabbed his wrist and bended his harm behind his back, immobilizing the knight.

-Stop moving. Answer. Are you Sir Khristhian?-

Now he sounded annoyed, and the Templar realized it was way better for him not to fight back. He was taller and bigger than him.

-Yes, it's me.-

The other man nodded and let him go. -I follow you, but you move too much. You run away. Be more careful, if you look people that way... problems.-

Khristhian nodded, feeling more relaxed. -Yusuf, I guess.-

-Yes. Follow me. We leave now.-

He was about ten years older than Khristhian, black hair and eyes, a big nose and dark skin. His body size and the stern look on his face made him come off as a mean man. They walked across the city's streets calmly, both dressed in white, and when they reached the gate Yusuf approached a young boy and told him something. The young man gave him two camels of the seven he was guarding; Yusuf took them and made a signal to Khristhian to follow him. They got out of the city.

-Never seen so young knight with us. Jacques wrote a letter, says you are good with sword. Says we must trust you. Me and him, we know for long time, and he never says compliments. To no one. You must be good Templar, brother.-

Yusuf's parlance wasn't that great, and his accent didn't help him, but he spoke very slowly and tried to articulate well, so understanding him wasn't that difficult. -I am honored, but also very surprised. I knew the Master had respect for me, but I never would have thought he could even go as far as praising me in a letter.-

Yusuf gave him a dazed look. -Praising? What is *praising*?-

-Compliments. It means giving compliments, saying nice things.-

The man nodded and licked his dark, full lips. He then repeated that word a couple of times and then nodded again, as if he like the sound of it.

-When did you meet the Grand Master?-

-Long time ago. The Sect was weak, and our castle was conquered... a sultan conquered. Too many enemies, all my brothers dead, and I was very wounded. I spent long time inside, dying. Jacques was near with some knights, and he saw smoke from the castle. He decides he sees what happens. I heard voiced, and I screamed "help!", and Jacques enters where I am. Lots of dead people on my body, he helped me and bring me to his horse, in his arms. I go with him to Tartus, and we were friends when I heal my wounds. I have great debt to you Master, great debt I can not repay.-

Khristhian was surprised and pleased. De Molay was a man with pure ideals.

-You know, I like remembering thing of past, here. Desert is best place to listen to hear. For living memories.- There was sadness in the Ismaili's eyes.

-I can relate. I've never been in the desert before, but during the last years I learnt that sometimes solitude is the best company and silence the best interlocutor....-

Now he hung to his memories. At sea, he managed not to think about it, he was focused on his mission. But now, in the middle of nowhere with only that man by his side, everything came back to his mind. He tried to get rid of those thoughts.

-Something makes you suffer, Sir Khristhian? Speak. Speaking is good thing.-

-What makes a man suffer, if not love? But I hope you may forgive me if I don't want to talk about it, Yusuf. There's too much sadness in some memories. But... what makes you sad?-

-Same thing.-

Khristhian nodded, understanding they shared both the cause of their sorrow and the fact they neither of them wanted to talk about it. From that moment on, they

remained silent for several hours of their trip, and the sun was now setting in the sky. Around them there were just rocks, sand, and a barely visible dirt track.

-Jacques said you are disarmed. That man and his obstinacy.- Said Yusuf, suddenly stopping their march. Khristhian did the same and casted an alarmed look in his direction, while the man was patiently taking something from underneath his robe. -Take this. Brought for you, maybe it was useful. Now it's useful.-

The Ismaili threw a dagger at him. The Templar took it mid-air and nodded, thanking him. The handle was very elaborate, with Arabic engravings he couldn't understand, and just under the blade's jagged part there was a lion-shaped calligram.

They dismounted their camels and started moving on foot, steadily and alert. They perceived movement between some rocks at their right. Yusuf was right: a weapon came in handy in the desert. They locked eyes, but before they could say anything four individuals popped up from behind the rocks, armed with sabers. Two of them assailed Yusuf and the other two Khristhian. Yusuf took his scimitar and his dagger, nimbly dodged two blows, blocked a third one with his scimitar and used his adversary's momentum to slide his blade downwards. The man, off balance, stumbled forward and the Ismaili welcomed him by stabbing his throat with the shorter weapon. When he pulled it out, he tried to turn around and face the other man, but he kicked his hand, making his scimitar fly away and then rammed into his chest with his shoulder. Yusuf fell down, still holding his dagger in the other hem. The bandit tried attempted a lunge while the Assassin was down, but Yusuf managed to roll around, stand up fastly and broke the man's nose with a punch. Blinded, the aggressor reached his arm with his blade, but it was just a glancing blow but instead of backing up the camel merchant jumped forwards a plunged the dagger into the man's chest.

Khristhian was sweating. Even tough he had spent his entire life training, he had never really fought and that was his first real encounter with an enemy that wanted to kill him. He adopted a sideways stance, showing his adversary only a side of his body and pointing the dagger in his direction. One of them jumped on him, trying to catch him off-guard with a lunge of his curved blade, but the knight moved his weapon left while simultaneously twitching left and half a step forward; he moved his dagger oblique and rightward, bottom-up, opening a gash in the bandit's throat. The man fell backwards, the blood gushing from his neck stained Khristhian's white robe, and the remaining aggressor attacked him from behind yelling something in Arabic. Khristhian bent down, stepped back, and heard the blade cutting through the air right over his head, missing its target. While still moving he dug the bandit in his stomach, and the man bent over, holding his sternum while the knight turned and jabbed the dagger in his face. Bloody spurts spread on the sand, and they soon turned into a puddle when the man's body hit the floor.

He remained there, motionless, panting, with sweat pouring down his face. He felt the fabric of the white robe sticking to his skin, he smelled the blood of the men he just killed. He stood there and observed them for several seconds, wondering how did he manage to kill them.

His body was trembling, spasming.

-You fight like an Assassin.- Yusuf went back to him after plundering the crops. By now it was almost dark and he didn't notice the young man's state. And it was better that way, thought Khristhian. He didn't want to come across as a beginner to a man like him.

-I don't. Actually, you are the one who fights like a Templar.- He said when they were near enough to look at each other. They exchanged an empathic look.

-Let's go again.- He said, taking his scimitar and retrieving his camel.

-Take it. Thank you.- Khristhian handed out the dagger, but the man shook his head.

-No. Yours, as my gift. You deserve it. You fight good, now I know why you important for Jacques.-

Khristhian nodded, hid the dagger and went back on his camel. In the meantime, Yusuf was already a few steps away. He looked one last time at the corpses on the ground, then he turned the animal around and follow his fellow traveler.

*Settembre 1293, Qala'at Marqab*

From the trail Qala'at Marqab, built on a hill, still looked imposing and fearsome, even if it must have been just the corpse of what it was.

Dawn was breaking when they arrived.

The trail that led to the stronghold was almost invisible, but Yusuf knew the path so well he could have gotten there with eyes closed.

-How do you make sure no one attacks you? And why has nobody discovered you by now?-

-We not stupid, Sir Khristhian. Your naive eyes don't see the brothers watching us, for miles. They hide and watch from far away the paths that lead here. Castle already knows we are coming.-

The Templar remained silent and looked around, trying to find watch people he couldn't see. On the other hand, it was very likely he wouldn't be able to see them... the stories say that the Assassins were uncontested masters in the art of deceit and stealth. Not that he admired them for this lack of honor and sense of respect for their enemies, but their methods did work and still worked, as he still wasn't able to spot any man watching them, except for the ones around the ruined stronghold. They stood still like statues, and didn't move at all when they saw the two men coming.

They walked the path towards the castle's tight entrance, and only in that moment Khristhian heard some noise coming from inside those dark, high stone walls. The guards at the gate stepped aside to let them inside, and they walked into the life of that concentric castle. White-dressed men walked around, some of them were cleaning, some carried books, and others were carrying on their shoulders big sacks full of wooden training weapons. In the distance he could hear the blacksmith pounding on the iron, while from the courtyard came the clanging of blunt swords hitting each other.

Seeing them, some brothers nodded, some ignored them, and others greeting Yusuf in Arabic and then walked away quickly.

He followed Yusuf to a nicely decorated room, that of the sect's leader. Ancient tapestry hung from the high walls, and there were a big stone table full of scrolls and maps, and some chairs. Hasan V arrived after about 10 minutes, chief of the Assassins' Sect, a short, stocky man with very dark skin, black beard and short hair. There were some wrinkles around his expressionless eyes.

-It's a pleasure to have you here, Sir Khristhian. Yusuf. Sit down.- While still standing on the doorway, he greeted them with a brief bow, then walked across the room quickly, sat behind the table and used his index finger to point at the chairs.

-Master.- The man who escorted the Templar took his seat and told the young man to do the same.

-It's an honour for me to be in your presence, my lord.- Answered Khristhian while sitting down, then he started to observe the face of the man in front of him, but wasn't able to take anything away from it. It was like staring at an engraved piece of stone.

-I've been told that you have something to deliver me from your Master.-

"Straight to the point" thought Khristhian while taking out of his bag the scroll and looking him in the eyes while he gave him the scroll. "I like it" he decided suddenly. The man took the scroll and read it carefully, then placed it on the table and sighed. He leaned sideways with his head and studied for several seconds the Christian knight in front of him.

-I'm surprised Jacques relied on a brother so young for an extremely important task. I don't know who you are, Sir Khristhian, but if that man trusts you, so will I.- The Templar tried to answer, but the Assassins' Grand Master rised his hand and shut him up. -No need to thank me, nor to be honored. I hate small talk. Just take what I told you and keep it for yourself. Far too many meaningless pleasentries fill your conversations, as well as every other speech in the West.-

The knight frowned for a second, once again struck by Hasan's frankness. He liked it and decided to keep quiet and observe him while he turned to Yusuf. He wondered how that man could speak so well a language so different from his own.

-Yusuf, take the wagons and bring them to the castle's entrance, with thirty of our men as guards. You will be leaving at midnight.-

-Thirty men, my lord? Don't you thinks it's too much? They could be useful in defending our stronghold.-

-The load is too valuable and I don't want any kind of problem this time. Now go and do as you were told. Khristhian, you're coming with me.-

They stood up. Yusuf said goodbye, and Hasan looked at the young man. -I'm sorry I can't allow you to rest, brother, but we got not time to waste.-

-A Templar lives to serve, my lord. If I want to rest, I'll be told to stay awake, and if I want to leave I will be ordered to sleep. This I swore.-

Meanwhile, the man started walking and he was following him. He took him to le different areas of the stronghold, from the dining hall to the big, central open space, which they used for training purposes

-Great answer, young man.- He stopped just before entering the open space, and pointed at the men who were training. -As you can see, we don't lack discipline either. Two hours of training twice a day are the bread and butter for me and for these men. In the morning we teach traditional fighting like our Christian brothers do. But in the evening the dedicate ourselves to the Arts that made our Order famous, and we polish them more and more.-

-You mean... murder?-

-Obviously. Hidden knives, poisoned blades, manufacturing poison, bails and ambush.-

-With all due respect, my lord, in the West they would say there's no honor in this.-

Hasan V looked at him like you would stare a child asking idiotic questions. - It's new to me that now Western wars are fought by following codes of honor. Wasn't very much like it when they killed children and raped women in Jerusalem.- He grumbled with a sneer of disgust. -Khristhian, war is war. It has always been like it is and will always be. There's no place for honor or loyalty when there's an enemy who

just wants to find out what your blood tastes like. Neutralizing the enemy is priority, everything else comes second. Learn this, and you'll get to live longer.-

-Yes, my lord.- The young Templar remained silent for a while, thinking about what the man said.

-Come here again, in the future, and we'll teach you ways that you won't find elsewhere.- He walked again, hands folded together behind his back.

-I hope I'll have the chance to.-

-Oh, you'll have it.-

-Why?-

Hasan V said nothing and kept walking, and Khristhian decided to stop asking things. They walked across other spaces, the brothers in white tunics were everywhere and greeted them and bowed when they walked but, honoring their Master, who just nodded every time.

-Do these brothers all sleep inside the castle?

-They don't. There's a village at the foot of the castle. Most of them live there with their families. It's a safe place, and it assures the Sect's survival in time.- He opened a wooden door and stepped aside. -You can't rest by night, but I grant you some hours of sleep now. You'll find food and water inside. Nonetheless, before the sun sets you will go outside and help with the wagons.-

-Thank you, my lord.-

The Grand Master nodded and walked away, closing the door behind him. Now alone, Khristhian sat on the straw mattress and looked around. It was a bare stone room with a few mattresses and a couple bedside wooden tables. On the one next to his mattress he found water and boiled vegetables, together with some bread.

He ate quickly and then laid down, but still couldn't sleep. His mind kept dwelling on the place he was in at that moment of his life.

Assassins and Templars working together sounded like a terrible paradox to him, but it was true and right out of that door there were hundreds of men he was supposed to call "brothers", even though they were the same men his Order was created to fight in the name of God.

Then why did the Temple exist for if its end goal wasn't the protection of faith? Was the Order betraying its own religion, or was there something else behind it?

The idea of betrayal was unbearable, but he had to keep himself from thinking about it, so he stood up and walked out of that door ready to help loading the wagons. In Cyprus he would have had enough time to rest.

When he went outside, he found Yusuf and Hasan V, who were busy trying to coordinate the other Assassins. Their horse-pulled wooden wagons were filled with crates of different sizes, and there was still plenty of space to fill.

-Weren't you resting, Khristhian?- Hasan's face was stone-cold. Not a single facial expression.

-Wasn't able to. I'd like to help.-

The Grand Master looked at Yusuf and Hasan V and nodded, then told both of them to start walking.

-I like you, Khristhian. Helping is a good thing. Helping is brotherhood. Follow.- Without even waiting for an answer, the man that helped him cross the desert to reach that fortress went inside, and the Templar followed without saying a word.

After a few hours, the six wagons were ready. Lightweight, not too big and quite discreet, they had no flags nor symbols on them, and all of the thirty men around them were wearing black clothes and were heavily equipped for battle. Nobody would've risked attacking that kind of convoy.

It was night when they finally reached Tartus, and the soldiers didn't go unnoticed – even if just a few people saw them at that time of the night.

The guards at the city's gates didn't ask questions, some of them were even members of the Sect, and those who weren't were happy to keep their mouths shut in front of some coins.

Among the few ships docked in that lonely harbor there were the *Saladin* e *l'Acacia*, and Khristhian couldn't help but smiling. He liked the thought of seeing captian Mikha'il once again.

-I guess it's time to say goodbye, Yusuf?-

The other man laughed. -You don't get rid of me easy. Hasan says I come to Cyprus.-

The Templar was amazed. -It will be a pleasure to have you by my side during this travel... brother. But why are you coming?-

-Don't be offended, young knight. Grand Master trust you, but not too much. He says it is good if I bring message to your master.-

-I understand. I wouldn't trust a stranger too, if I was him. In particular with a load so important.-

Yusuf's face changed, and now he looked apprehensively at the brothers that were loading up the ship and yelled a few orders in Arabic. Then he sighed and turned to Khristhian again.

-I don't know what's inside too. But if we lose load, we lose life, brother. But Hasan says message for your master is about load.-

-We'll find out when we get there. I'm going on the *Acacia*, you can keep an eye on the *Saladin's* content.-

Yusuf nodded, they said goodbye and sailed on their ships.

