

THE CUP OF CHRIST and the FORGOTTEN DISCIPLE

By

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CHAPTER I

Northern Burgundy

Early Autumn

Anno Domini 1190

The instant I saw the holly bush shake, my anxious steed reared, and it took all my strength to steady him. Fearing a large wild beast, I cautiously dismounted with my sword drawn. Using my free hand, I tied my horse's reins to the lower branch of a chestnut tree and crept toward the still rustling sound of leaves. Suddenly, from out of the dark forest came a hissing sound and I felt a rush of air as a crossbow quarrel struck a limb next to my head.

"*Mère de Dieu!*" I shouted, as three human-shaped shadows sprang from the bushes and ran into a tangled grove of high thorn shrubs. I cautiously took a step toward where they disappeared when unexpectedly three horses carrying the men galloped out of the woods and down a trail.

Did these men try to warn or kill me and why leave in such a hurry? Indeed, my one sword didn't outnumber them.

Creeping through the holly bushes to investigate, I stumbled over something and fell forward catching myself with some branches. There below me, in the underbrush, a man lay face down in the dirt. His back had numerous bloody puncture wounds seeping with fluid. I turned him over to see if he was still alive. He wasn't, but fresh pools of oozing blood made one thing

clear: he died just before I arrived. Maybe those men were robbers? But why didn't they strike me down?

I surveyed the man more closely. His black-colored surcoat had a large red-splayed cross embroidered on the fabric. His frame resembled that of a large bear, muscular and stocky. He belonged to one of the warrior-monastic orders. This ruled out robbery as a motive; most of them took vows of poverty.

I stood to search around the body for an explanation and sensed a shiver shoot down my spine. Just on the other side of the thicket lay an arm, a bodiless arm, with blood still oozing out of the clean-cut stump. With reluctance, I crept around the thicket for a closer examination. I noticed one of the swollen fingers. The third finger from the thumb held a gold signet ring. The setting revealed a black onyx stone inlaid with a golden-colored eagle and a crescent moon. This forearm and hand didn't belong to the murdered monk; he still had both his arms.

What had happened here? To whom did the signet-ringed hand belong? Did the ring's symbols indicate the owner's rank or station?

A sudden tree-rustling breeze caused me to flinch and interrupted my thoughts. This man's body and another man's bodiless arm had left me edgy, and any sudden noise meant danger.

The sun began its descent behind the forest, leaving me little daylight to bury the body. Whoever murdered the monk, might revisit under the cover of darkness. Whatever their motives, I didn't want to delay and suffer the warrior-monk's same fate.

I dug the shallow grave with my helmet. The dry sandy soil gave way fast to a finished burial pit just as the sun fell behind the trees. Before placing the monk's body into the shallow pit, I examined it for any further identity clues. His right forearm bulged with muscles, indicating

a swordsman, yet, so far, I hadn't found a sword. The murderers must have grabbed it when they left, along with his missing belt dagger.

As I pulled the monk's body into the grave, one of his boots slid off, dropping a folded parchment note onto the ground. My fingers reached for the note, hoping it might answer some of my unsolved questions about this man. The paper bore a red wax seal embossed with two men riding the same horse. How odd, I thought, as I broke the wax seal with my fingers. I read the note's contents, then I let it fall in disbelief.

The missive mentioned my name and said,

Lord Robert de Borron meet my sergeant at the Abbaye-Église of Sainte-Marie-Magdalene. He will escort you to our fortress at Montpellier after Sunday worship. Your family is at risk don't hesitate or refuse him. The Holy Mother Church is in danger, too. I am a commander of the Poor Fellow Soldiers of Christ. Lord Robert, I know your facial features even though you don't know mine. You have auburn-colored hair and a small scar above your eyebrow. I will seek you out at the fortress—come at once.

Non nobis Domine non nobis sed nomini tuo da gloriam

With trembling hands, I reached down once more and grasped the missive.

Why were my *épouse* and *fils* at risk? Whatever the answers, it didn't bode well for me and my family.

CHAPTER II

The sun sliced into the horizon as my horse galloped the final hill road into the village of Vézelay. The trail in front of me revealed the *Abbaye-Église* of Sainte-Marie-Magdalene which appeared as a nesting bird perched on a hillock.

My *soeur*, Marguerite, born two years after me, requested my appearance after making her annual pilgrimage to Sainte-Marie-Magdalene, which I now regretted. She stayed with some of our cousins a short distance from the village and enjoyed coming on the saint's feast day. After visiting for a month, she'd written to me complaining about not visiting her more often.

A sudden warning of quacking ducks caused my horse to whinny as he trotted too close to some waddling ducklings. He appeared just as edgy as I did, yet our angst didn't subside. From a dense stand of trees, I saw movement, causing my hand to reach for my sword. For a brief moment, I thought the killers had followed me, but, to my relief, out of the forest ambled several spotted cows. A short distance away, somebody called my name.

"Baron *Seigneur* de Borron," shouted a familiar voice from the entranceway of the local stone-built inn. "It is me, François. Your *soeur* has been expecting you."

“*Bonjour, mon ami.* I think the last time we spoke, we observed the feast day of Saint John the Baptizer,” I said, while sliding out of my saddle.

“*Oui,* that’s correct,” François replied.

My *soeur* used François as her overseer, chamberlain, and groom. He had many other responsibilities too, though I didn't recall all of them. François shuffled toward me with his crooked foot and embraced me.

“It is *bon* to see you once more, Robert.” He released his grip and peered into my face. His cow-sized brown eyes seldom missed anything, and his physical infirmity wasn’t a hindrance. He fought and leaped with the best of men.

“Robert, have you finished writing any of your tales? Or, are you a troubadour for the count?”

“No, to both questions. Yet, I am almost finished with the tales of Merlin, the prophet for *Roi Arthur.*”

He nodded. “Did you have to use any of your excellent sword skills on the road to Vézelay?”

I hesitated to answer him at this moment, waiting to tell him my misfortune later.

“So sorry for the many questions. Your horse looks tired and your face looks drawn after your journey.” He pointed to the white lather coming from its withers. “Let me lead him to the local stable for some rest. Your *soeur* is upstairs, the last door on the right, and eager to see you.”

“*Bon,* and when you return, we’ll speak some more. However, ask the local authorities what this symbol might mean.” I drew my dagger and marked the image in the sandy dirt.

“Remember it and duplicate it to authorities, then afterward meet me in the tavern.”

At once, François reached for my reins and led my tired steed toward the village

blacksmith.

The large inn had many windows, reflecting its spacious accommodations for the throngs visiting the *Abbaye-Église* of Sainte-Marie-Magdalene. After opening the door and stepping into the tavern foyer, several patrons stopped drinking their *vin* and glared, seeing me as a stranger. The waffling odor of sweet wine combined with body sweat left me queasy. I half ignored their stares, yet my eyes still glanced at their faces. Did any number of these men murder the poor monk?

I proceeded toward the wooden stairs, which the large *vin* casks somewhat concealed. At once, I trudged up the wooden treads to a large landing where a long faded lit hallway appeared as a gloomy, narrow cave, except it had numerous doors on each side. Remembering François's directions, I walked the entire length of the inn and knocked on the last door.

"Marguerite, it is your *frère*, Robert. Please let me in." There came the *clanking* sounds of latch bolts against metal, and the door flung open.

"Robert, *mon frère*, it is so *bon* to see you once again." Marguerite stood there on the tips of her toes. We hugged and then she kissed me on both of my cheeks.

"Come in and sit near the warm fire. I know you're tired after your long trip. Please come and tell me about my *belle-soeur*, Marie, and my two little nephews," she said before I had a chance to sit.

I removed my chainmail and sat close to the fire. Then I turned to gaze fondly at Marguerite. *Mon mère* had a difficult delivery with *mon soeur*. She never recovered after her birth but stayed in a weakened state for ten years. She died on my thirtieth birthday.

"*Mon frère*," she said, interrupting my thoughts. "Please tell me about my nephew, young Brian. Is he big enough to hold a sword?"

“*Oui*, but when he raises it overhead, he falls backward.”

We both laughed, with my *soeur* revealing her dimples, upturned nose, and full lips reminiscent of our *mère*.

“Did your journey go well?”

I dreaded her question.

“Robert, did you hear me?” She questioningly tilted her head.

“*Oui*, I am just tired from riding all day and need some rest. Besides, nothing unusual occurred . . . even the weather behaved itself.” I hesitated in my lie to her.

“It’s quite uncaring of me to keep you from your rest. Please, accept my apology. I had the proprietor of the inn prepare some bread, cheese, and white *vin* for your comfort. It’s in your room next to mine. In addition, your bed is ready too. However, the inn is full of pilgrims, so you must share your bed with François. I hope you don’t mind?”

“*Non*,” I replied. “It doesn’t matter. My tired body won’t know the difference. After our reunion, I must meet François downstairs in the tavern. There’s an important matter concerning our vineyards in need of discussion before we retire.”

“Is it anything to which I might contribute?”

“*Non, mon chér*, we’ll speak some more tomorrow. Right now, he is waiting for me.”

We both rose from our chairs, with Marguerite handing me the key to my room. Once again she kissed me on my cheek.

“*Bonsoir*, Robert. Sleep well.” I opened her door to leave, then stepped into the hallway and closed it.

Lying to my *soeur* made me feel guilty, because of our close relationship. We didn't keep secrets from each other. Yet, fearing for her distress, I thought it prudent not to tell her the truth.

The faded lit hallway caused my palms to sweat as I passed each of the numerous closed doors. Along the floor, I spied a long black cloth similar to my attackers' head scarves. Might the murderers at once appear from behind one of these many doors? To my right one door edged open. I reached for the pommel of my sword. After which, I pulled my sword out of its scabbard as a meager-clad woman appeared.

"*Bonjour* pilgrim, fear not," said the sultry-sounding woman. "I see you just arrived, and I know you're tired, *oui*?"

"*Oui*, it's true, but who are you?"

"Have no fear, stranger, my body is here to help you relax. You look lonesome and in need of companionship. Please come into my quarters, and for a few pieces of silver my pleasures will lift your spirit." The woman's numerous ringed fingers gestured for me to come into her room as her other hand held out a large-nippled bare breast.

"I have no need of a prostitute for I am happy with my marriage." She came closer and rubbed both her bare breasts against me, still trying to lure me into her room.

"You know, stranger, Sainte Marie Magdalene prostituted herself," she whispered into my ear as my hand pushed her aside.

I detected my lips curl with anger. "Can you read?" I inquired still trying to avoid her advances.

"*Non*," came her weak reply.

"Then spend some of your silver to have a priest teach you and leave this life of sin."

"You are a damn fool, *mon ami*." Then a slight laugh came from deep down in her throat and she further spoke, "There aren't any other women of pleasure for leagues around."

She retreated into her dark room and closed the door, locking it. I proceeded down the

stairs and met François in a well-lit corner of the tavern.

“Was Lady Marguerite pleased to see you?” François shoved a cup of *vin* in front of me. “Of course, she missed you; silly of me to ask such a question. Let us now talk.” His eyes searched my face.

“Have you seen any unusual strangers here in the tavern or on the road?”

“*Oui*, but *non*,” François oddly replied. “This village is on a pilgrimage route both to the *Abbaye-Église* of Sainte-Marie-Magdalene and Santiago de Compostela. Most are strangers seeking to view holy relics of our apostles. Their dress will look different just as the kingdoms they come from are different. Why do you ask?”

“Follow me outside so we can speak in private, for what I am about to say is disturbing.” We both guzzled our *vin* and then strolled toward the door. Once outside, the breezy late-night autumn air cleared my mind.

“Promise me, François, you won't speak of our conversation to Lady Marguerite.”

“*Oui*, I promise, *Seigneur* Robert. Anything you tell me stops right here.” His brown eyes grew bigger in anticipation of my forthcoming words.

“*Très bien, mon ami*, you are a loyal member of our family, and you will keep this a secret.”

He nodded in agreement, and I told him every gruesome detail, including the note and the harm it proclaimed toward our family. After I had finished my recount of the terrible event, François's forehead broke out in small beads of sweat. He stood there looking at the dark ground in silence as if preparing himself for questions.

“What does this warrior-monk at Montpellier want of you? Why did they murder the man?”

“I don’t know. His note has forced me to leave earlier than planned. Tomorrow, after Sunday mass, I will tell Marguerite about leaving early. As soon as you wake, ride to the local warrior-monk commandery, show them this note and tell them what has happened.”

He took the note from my hands and with trembling fingers shoved it behind his surcoat belt.

“However, after you visit the commandery, prepare to leave at once. Convince my *soeur* to leave without alarming her. She can’t know the truth. Tell her any manner of a lie, whatever it requires.”

“But *Seigneur* Robert, I can’t lie to her.” He shuffled one of his boots in the dirt.

“Telling her a lie will act as a shield to protect us from evil. Besides, I command you to do this, *mon ami*. Both you and Marguerite are to travel directly to my brother-in-law’s *château* at Montbéliard. Soon a letter will arrive from me for my *épouse*, Baroness Marie, also instructing her and my children to do the same. I will send another dispatch upon my arrival at Montpellier. Hopefully, this letter will contain details of why I am there.”

“Damn these men who threaten us. Do you want me to try a less traveled road to *Château* Montbéliard?”

“*Oui*, but better yet, search for any navigable river and barge that will transport you there faster. I plan to do the same when leaving here tomorrow. Now let’s catch some sleep.” My right arm slipped around his broad taut shoulders and gave him a tight hug.

“God and His Son will protect us until we reach our rightful destination,” I said. We then proceeded back inside to our room for some much-needed rest. At once, I wrote a quick note to my *épouse*, Baroness Marie, telling her to take our *fils* to her *frère’s* *château* at Montbéliard. The next day, I would entrust my dispatch to one of the *abbaye* monks to deliver to my *épouse*.

Even though my tiredness pressed on my chest as a triple set of chain mail and François's heavy snoring didn't help me in falling asleep. Also, my thoughts bounced and raced similar to a herd of deer. The unknown day ahead, made my stomach stiffen as a twisted rope. Lying there, the morning seemed far distant to me. All of a sudden, my body flinched from a light rapping sound coming from our door, followed by the familiar whispering voice of my *soeur*.

"Robert, are you ready to leave for the *église*?" Marguerite asked.

"*Non*, not yet," I replied. "Let me dress first."

"All right, but hurry, mass starts soon. Don't you hear the bells?"

"*Oui!*" I murmured through the wooden door. Even my dressing commotion didn't disturb François from his steady snoring. "Wait for me in front of the inn. It won't take long for me to don my clothes." At last, she left as her soft clicking heels diminished on the wooden floor.

I glanced out the open window and witnessed the early morning sun's rays bathing the *abbaye-église* in shades of gold, yellow, and orange colors. Its honey amber-colored brilliance enchanted me and then beckoned me to come at once.

In haste, I fumbled with my clothes, yet cautious to hide my dagger in the sleeve of my aketon. I left François and his snoring and tiptoed down the corridor. Once I reached the stairway, my feet scrambled down the steps, after which I trotted toward the front entrance, grabbed the door, and hurried outside.

To my right paced Marguerite. "Robert, let's leave now, there are just a few bell rings left before the service starts." She grabbed my arm as we ran the uphill road toward the *église*.

"Oh, Robert, François forgot to give you this message yesterday. Instead, he gave it to me."

I quickly opened the note and read its contents.

Seigneur Robert, I talked to numerous people in the village and commandery. None of them were familiar with the ring's symbols. Though, one peasant said he saw three dark-dressed riders go by his hut yesterday.

Your obedient servant,

François

“What did François say?” my sister asked.

“Nothing, just about our vineyard production.” Quickly, I stuck the note into my sword belt.

The urgency of the constant *gonging* bells made me scurry even faster. My longer running strides caused me to yank Marguerite behind me.

“Slow down, Robert, you will cause me to fall,” she said, while huffing as we approached the *église* entrance.

“You said we needed to hurry, and here we are just in time. Listen, the *église* bells have stopped ringing.”

The front of the *église* had three downward pointing half-moon-shaped tympanum entrances, with each funneling people into its interior. “See, we aren’t the last arrivals,” I said, experiencing a slight grin. While we waited to gain entrance, I looked up toward the face of the *église*. The archivolt, over the larger central doorway, held a bas-relief of Christ with his outstretched arms passing judgment over our final days. Once we entered, I knew why we had gained entrance with such ease. The narthex itself appeared the size of a large *église*. As we stood there waiting to enter the nave, my *soeur* pointed to an archivolt over the inside doors.

“Look, Robert, this carved stone scene represents Christ and the Pentecost.” I turned to

see. “He and his apostles are preaching to the heathens. Notice the heathens’ heads are akin to animals or monsters on the lintel.”

However, I saw something more. The mandorla surrounding Christ started radiating a snow-colored light. His form seemed to move out of His shell-enclosed surrounding, and one of His hands pointed toward me. At the same time, several stone-carved apostles did the same. With sweating palms, I rubbed my eyes in disbelief and staggered forward. At once, the archivolt now appeared stone still, and the bright lights disappeared. What had I just imaged?

“Where is the chancel?” I asked my *soeur*.

“Robert, don’t you see it?”

I turned toward a central interior entrance, which opened to a long narrow Romanesque arched nave. The long crucifer-built *église* extended with unbelievable length, making the altar table a stone speck in the distance.

We proceeded into the nave while hoping to sit as close to the chancel as possible. I counted more than a hundred stone columns supporting the long narrow nave. Each column had an elaborately designed capital with stone-chiseled biblical scenes. One column capital, in particular, caught my eye as we searched for a suitable spot to observe the mass. Two stone-carved men milled grain, one of them poured his contents into a hopper while the other held a sack with one hand and turned a grinding wheel with the other.

“Robert, I see you’re looking at those two stone-carved men.” Her smile indicated she wanted to explain.

“One is Moses pouring the grain into the hopper, which symbolizes the Old Testament. The other man is Saint Paul holding the finished product, the New Testament.”

Her explanation of the two holy men looked plausible, but I didn’t care. It left me

wondering if she had spent too much time at the *église* imagining such things.

We found an excellent location to observe the mass near the presbytery. This gave us an unobstructed view of the altar. The sudden jingling sound of bells, which came from a swinging sandalwood-smelling incense burner, announced the beginning procession of religious officials. After reaching the altar, they seated themselves in their choir seats, and the service began.

We knelt to pray, and, to my disbelief, an unseen female voice started speaking to me, which forced me to sway forward. I looked around for that person, but all I observed were many bowed heads and clasped hands. The voice kept saying my name. I seemed to hear it above the droning sounds of the priest's liturgy. The words emanated from under the altar or so I thought. However, many other hidden places made it possible for the voice to come forth. All of a sudden, my vision turned black. That caused me to whisper. "Oh, *mon Dieu*, I am losing my mind." Marguerite punched my ribs. "Robert, hush. You are disturbing the others."

Swirling red and blue lights replaced my sight. Then a blurry image formed of a fortress *château* followed with a door carving of a splayed-shaped cross. The tender, feminine voice gave me instructions. "Seek out the city of Montpellier and the commandery of the Poor Fellow Soldiers of Christ," in her soft, distinctive tone. "Robert, there is a book about our Lord's cup, which is kept at the fortress *château*. Pursue a battle-scarred *chevalier* of Christ. He's the holy keeper of the book. Beware, an evil man aims to use it for his own gain. Afterward, he will destroy it and now its future is in your hands."