



PART ONE

Death Lingers

Kingdom of Aragon

Winter

Anno Domini 1190

CHAPTER I

I placed my steaming clay bowl of *café* on a protruding stone block while sitting down and focused my eyes on Sulieman's departure. He disappeared from my sight down the steep hilltop as fast as a male hare chasing a female in springtime. Quickly, I dashed to the portcullis just as it was lowered, thwarting my attempt from further pursuit. A sudden cold wind heightened my thinking as I observed him abandon his cart, and then gallop his horse down the treacherous fortress path. He wore the same distinctive clothing that I now remembered from both Vézelay and Huesca.

I grabbed my bowl of brew, gulped it down, and raced off in search of Grand Master Gilbert to tell him who I just observed. I noticed *Abad* Miguel coming my way.

"*Pax vobiscum* Lord Robert," he stated. "Are you upset about something?"

"*Oui*, and I urgently need to see Grand Master Gilbert. Have you seen him this morning?" I hoped he would say *oui*.

"*Si*, he is at the training grounds practicing with his big Damascus sword. Just follow the metallic sound of striking swords, you will find him there."

"*Merçi*, for the information," I nodded to him and ran toward the *clanking* sound of swords. On the far side of the large keep was a fenced practice area, which to my surprise held both Gilbert and Chaplain Jeremiah. Each man wore full chain mail that covered a bulky aketon

coat while fighting each other as if it were a matter of life or death. Chaplain Jeremiah was quick as a cat as he sidestepped his *père's* thrust, yet Grand Master Gilbert instinctively backstepped his thrust as the blade tip found empty air. A steaming exhale of breath came from each man in the cold December morning. Each had beads of sweat dripping from the tips of their noses. Their focus was on the fighting arena, and they didn't see me approach until I started waving my hands back and forth. Grand Master Gilbert glanced in my direction but didn't stop his slashing movements. His *fil's* continued fighting, not noticing my signal as he struck his *père* across his shoulder with the flat blade of his sword.

"*Halte*," shouted Grand Master Gilbert, as he dropped his sword on the frosty ground. "What's wrong? You appear distressed Lord Robert, and you have black circles under your eyes." He wiped his face with a cloth a young squire just handed him.

"*Oui*, you are correct on both counts, but it's not the lack of sleep that concerns me. We need to speak in private as soon as possible."

"*Abbé* Jeremiah please take my sword," he said, "then meet us in the parlor right before Terce." He reached down, grasped his sword, and threw it toward his *fil's*, who caught it with the quickness of an eagle.

"What's troubling you *mon ami*?" Gilbert asked, as we moved toward a stone alcove.

"I think the *Qahwa* Moor vendor has been following us since we left Huesca. Possibly even before I met you," I added.

"What makes you think that?" Grand Master Gilbert inquired.

"Do you remember me describing the strangely, dressed Moor I glimpsed one night back at Huesca?"

"*Oui*."

“Remember, Commander Sancho gave him a sack of coins there at the old mosque, while hidden I observed his strange clothing. I viewed the same, red-colored boots and red sash covered today by a brown tunic and black mantle. He was the same height and weight as the man at Huesca. However, what caught my observation was his diminutive size. Back in the woods at Vézelay, one of the three men who murdered your sergeant fits his small height. I never ascertained their faces, and the vendor had a black cloth around his head, which only exposed his eyes.”

“Are you positive it’s the same man?” asked Gilbert as he rubbed his beard.

“Absolutely, I recognized his voice from Huesca, and he became suspicious when I stared at his attire. After I paid him, he mounted his horse, left the fortress, and seemed to vanish from the rocky hilltop. This showed me at once he was excellent equestrian just like the ones at Vézelay.

Is this one of de Tournay’s scouts who is trailing us?”

Grand Master Gilbert gazed down at his boots in deep thought.

“*Non, mon ami*, this smells of the cardinal. Your description of his clothes and riding abilities sounds familiar to me, but I don’t think he is entirely a scout. Did he have a *Jambiya* style dagger similar to Muhammad’s?”

“*Oui*,” I quickly answered, “but the handle was plainer.”

“We must speak to *Abbé* Jeremiah about his attire. He’ll give us his scholarly opinion on this man’s clothes. Follow me to the parlor and we can further discuss this new incident.”

Hurriedly, we both bound up the tower steps and reached the parlor room breathless. Grand Master Gilbert entered first and sat next to the fireplace.

“Was the *Qahwa bon*?” he asked as I sat down in front of him.

“*Oui*, it was excellent. The drink is amazing, the cloudiness of my still sleepy mind vanished. What do the Christians of Iberia call the drink?”

“They call it *café* and others say *coffeé*,” he replied with a slight smile. “Do you think this Moor is trying to poison me and my men?”

It was an unexpected question I hadn’t anticipated, which sent fear through my body. “I think he is shadowing us to see if we will find the next *Sangraal* parchments. He or whoever is aiding him needs me alive and won’t kill me or the rest of us until our quest is completed. Though I fear the cardinal may kill others who aren’t essential to our trip to Toledo.”

“Your good reasoning makes sense and I agree with you, but we must be aware of the cardinal’s ruthless ever-changing tactics.”

“What kind of ruthless tactics is the cardinal using now?” came *Abbé* Jeremiah’s question as he entered the room.

“Barón Robert and I were discussing a strangely dressed Moor posing as *Qahwa* vendor who is spying on us. What do you know about the local dress, customs, and daggers of the Moors?”

“I know some of their clothing styles and weapons. Please explain more, Lord Robert.”

I repeated the description to Chaplain Jeremiah, not leaving out the slightest detail. He sat at the end of the table with his hands clasped under his chin, listening to every word, mirroring his *père*’s contemplating mannerisms.

“I’ll leave for the scriptorium and discuss this with my armarius, Carlos. He may have some answers or books that could help us.”

He sprung up from his seat, quickly rounded the table, and exited the parlor.

“I know my chaplain will find an answer. He hasn’t failed me yet.” We then both moved

closer to the roaring fire.

It was just a short period of time before he returned holding a dust-covered book and placed it on the table. Meticulously, he unstrapped the small leather belts holding the book's contents together and slowly opened it.

"Where did this book originate?" I asked, curiosity pulling on my mind.

"Carlos told me it came from a great Muslim library at Cordoba. It says here on the first page, *Ahl al-bayt* or the 'People of the House' authored this book. It's referring to the great prophet, Muhammad's bloodline. It states on the second page that this book helps those who seek the *haqiqa* or inner truth."

What specific members is it referring too?" I asked.

"Muhammad had a daughter by the name of Fatima, and she later married Muhammad's cousin, Ali. Thus, Muhammad's bloodline continued through this marriage. Ali became the first Imam of the Muslim faith. The Shiite sect of Islam started with Ali and his wife, Fatima. The scholars have told us that before Muhammad died, he passed on secret knowledge to Ali. The Saracen's call this secret knowledge *Nass*.

"What does the word Imam mean?"

"It means 'supreme guide or leader of the Muslim faith that originated with Allah's authority. The Shia Imams are said to interpret the hidden meanings of the *Qur'an*, which is called the *Batin*."

Abbé Jeremiah paused for a moment, turned one of the red and green-colored designed Moorish pages, and perused it, before speaking.

"What I am seeking is a section of epistles called the *Rasail Ikwan al-Safa*. It's a collection of fifty-two epistles divided into four parts that discusses all the known sciences,

including astronomy, geometry, and music. In addition, there are treatises on philosophy, religion, the cosmos, and eschatology. Ah! Here it is. I will read this opening line for you, Lord Robert. 'He who knows himself best knows his creator best.' It's at the heading of an epistle, which speaks of the Brethren of Purity. It further states this group has learned the way to enlightenment. The goal of the student is to purify his soul and achieve salvation, which he accomplishes by studying a combination of Greek philosophy, Christian ethics, Sufi mysticism, which is another sect of Islam, and Muslim law. The book tells of nine degrees of wisdom administered by *dais*. The *dais* are the direct representatives of the Imam."

"What does all this esoteric information have to do with the Moor who has been tracking me and my companions?"

"Lord Robert let me continue. We may understand what motivates him and how many more are like him. Please bear with me."

I nodded my agreement and Chaplain Jeremiah continued.

"The word *Dais* means 'summoners.' They summon their pupils to teach them the nine secret degrees."

Suddenly, he stopped speaking with his eyes widening.

"How can this be?" he asked while turning several pages forward. "The pages explaining the nine degrees are expunged, they aren't here. Please forgive my lapse, however, there's an *ulama* or Muslim scholar in Toledo who knows about the nine degrees. We will speak to him when we arrive there."

His momentary pause to gather his thoughts gave me a brief opportunity to ask about an update on the *Sangraal* parchments. "Chaplain Jeremiah, when you were in the scriptorium, did you ask *Frère* Carlos how the book was progressing?" I prayed to myself its completion might

be earlier than we thought.

“He said he’s ahead of schedule and you’ll have the bound parchments tomorrow.”

“I am sorry to interrupt you ... you were saying something about a scholar you know in Toledo who could tell us more about the ‘Brethren of Purity.’” I hoped the scholarly *abbé* wasn’t offended at my numerous interruptions.

“*Si*, there are two scholars there who could be of service to our quest. One is a *Judio* and the other is a Moor I just mentioned. The *Judio*’s name is Isaac the Blind or Rabbi Yitzhak Saggi Nehor, which means of much light. The Muslim’s name is Averroes or Ibn Rushd. After we return the *Marquésa* Helena to Zaragoza, we’ll plan our trip in more detail. In the meantime, I will contact *Hermano* Enriqu  at our commandery at San Servando. Chaplain Enriqu  knows both men and we can use the *castillo*’s good library.

“Where is Muhammad Nur Adin?” I asked, wondering why he wasn’t here to help us.”

“Before we came here, I sent him a note to track the *Qahwa* vendor you saw. I hope he’ll have some useful information. He should be back by Vespers, and we can defer any discussion until he returns. Let’s proceed to the *chappelle*, we have already missed Terce and now it’s time for Nones.”

Quickly, we adjourned and proceeded to the *chappelle* with my mind still trying to comprehend all the information from the dusty old tome. The “Brethren of Purity” was the name Commander Armand de Polignac mentioned at Carcassonne to beware. So far, I had concluded the “Brethren of Purity” was a violent and secret organization, yet I feared to hear more.

Ringling bells suddenly distracted my thoughts as they announced the daily office of Nones. Helena jumped up from a kneeling bench in the *chappelle* and her dark brown eyes met mine as she hurried out a side door holding her chaplet beads.

After the service, I returned to my cell and found a note on my writing table. Upon examining it, the folded paper had a red wax seal embedded with the royal crest of Aragón. Quickly, I broke it, and my nose caught the fragrant rose-vanilla scent of Helena. My fingers carefully unfolded the note, and I began to read its contents. She requested my presence in her room as soon as I returned from Nones. Hurriedly, I washed my face, then combed my hair, after which I put on a clean Templar surcoat, and exited my quarters. I bound up the spiral stairway with my rapid heartbeat anticipating our meeting. What new illuminations would she reveal today to surprise me? My hand forcefully pounded on the door and then I announced my name.

“Roberto, please come in,” came her silky sounding voice. Upon entering, I observed she was by herself.

“Where is Esperanza?” I inquired, surprised to see her alone.

“Lord Robert, at least you could say hello and give me a proper greeting,” she said in a mild rebuke. “My subjects are better mannered than you.”

“I am sorry Helena for my poor manners. I wasn’t expecting you to be alone. Again, please forgive me for my thoughtlessness.”

“You’re forgiven,” she said with a sly smile. “Just for your information, Esperanza is mending some of my riding dresses; otherwise, she would have been here. Now sit down and tell me about the mysterious parchments you’re having *Frère* Carlos make into a book.”

I was surprised. How did she know this? Had he disclosed to her our secret?

“You can remove that silly surprise expression on your face,” she stated this time with a crooked smile. “You should know me by now to realize I have many sources who will divulge information to me, and *non*, *Frère* Carlos didn’t betray your secrecy.”

“I must admit Helena, you have better information than the evil Cardinal.” I shook my

head in disbelief.

“As I mentioned earlier, the royal family members of the *Royaume de Aragón*’s survival depends on punctual accurate information about our enemies as well as our financial interests. It’s a live chess game we can’t lose. Now tell me more about this holy book?”

I was in a dilemma; how much should I divulge? Yet, I had sworn to secrecy not to speak of the book or its contents. Did she know everything or was bluffing to gain further information?

“For expediency’s sake, do you have any idea what the book contains?” I asked.

“*Non*, only it’s a copy of something written by a man at the time of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ, she answered, while crossing herself.

“*Oui*, that’s true, but what do you know about the saint, Joseph de Arimathea?” She thought a moment then replied.

“He was the man who dressed our Lord in a burial shroud after taking Him off the cross. In addition, he placed Jesus in his own sepulcher, from which our Lord resurrected himself from his human death.”

“*Oui*, you are correct again Helena, but there’s more to this man’s life than in the twelve verses of the four Gospels of Saint Jerome’s translated bible.”

Her eyes widened “I think you have found something about Saint Joseph de Arimathea that nobody else knows.” She gave a sly grin.

“You’re right, but I can’t say anymore. I’ve been sworn to secrecy and my mortal soul may be at stake if I reveal any further information.” I hoped my statement would deter her demanding curiosity.

“What did he say in his parchments, Robert?” Once again, she didn’t give up but pressed on for more answers. Her weak smile now turned into a frown of frustration.

“One last piece of information; there may be additional parchments written by Joseph de Arimathea. However, let’s discuss your vineyards that you want to show me.” I hoped to change the subject and stave off any more questions. Helena had a way of making me say things I knew I would later regret.

“One final thought, Robert. It’s apparent Cardinal Folquet won’t stop until you and Grand Master Gilbert lead him to the additional parchments, if they still exist. What is written on these parchments, and the importance of its worth; the cardinal must greatly value in pursuing you here and losing his numerous *chevaliers*. His evil and greedy heart is his fuel to follow you to the ends of the earth. Beware, Robert, he is a Godless man and a cardinal in title only.

“So, you want to know more about my vineyards, *oui*?” Helena suddenly changed our topic of conversation. I have many large oaken casks at *Château Maluenda* holding my *vino*. There are fifty workers tending the fields and fermenting the grapes, which the *moines* at the nearby priory supervise. The *moines*’ expertise and assistance have made the vineyards quite profitable for everybody in *Roi Alfonso’s royaume*.

“Now, I have a question for you, Robert. When will *Frère Carlos* have your codex completed?” She still was not giving up.

“Soon,” I replied.

“I need to depart in several days,” she stated. “Both the prior and I are to meet and plan for a large shipment of *vino* sailing to England. It’s urgent the shipment arrives... before our Christ’s mass.”

“*Frère Carlos* will have the tome completed tomorrow and we could leave any time after the holy book is returned to me.” She gave a quiet sigh of relief.

My *château* is a retreat away from the obfuscation of court life and at Maluenda I feel

like a normal woman. Overseeing my vineyard is always a good excuse to flee from the burdensome responsibility of royal duties.”

“Tell me, Robert, how did you meet your *épouse*? Was it an arranged marriage?

“*Non*, it was the *comte* who introduced us, while I was entertaining at his court. Her graceful young countenance and lovely shape captured my eyes and heart. It wasn’t because she was a *mademoiselle* of high degree, but her kind demeanor. She didn’t dominate our conversation yet wasn’t shy. Marie had the patience to examine with care and comment with pertinent thoughts. She would speak her mind, just like her *frère*, in a convincing fashion, which wasn’t emotional in nature. It’s quite uncannily similar to you, for I feel you and I have known each other far longer than a week.”

“You’re too kind to a lonely woman,” she replied, reaching for my hands, and grasping them in a tight warm grip. Both our eyes met, and we each smiled, while Helena still maintained her grip. It felt good to have a woman touch me once more, yet I could see in her eyes the sadness of losing a soul mate. I concluded we both longed for something we couldn’t have, just as she released her hands from mine.

“Robert, I have enjoyed speaking to you this afternoon; let’s meet here tomorrow. I suspect we’ll be departing the day after tomorrow for my *château*. For now, *au revoir* Roberto,” she said, translating my name into her native language.

We both rose for me to leave while her closeness filled my nose with her wafting vanilla-rose scent, which permeated the entire room. Her full breasts brushed up against my surcoat with each step she made toward her door. Quickly, we reached her room door, she turned to face me with our eyes staring at each other. There was a moment of hesitation before she released my arm. After the *clanking* of the released lock, she turned once again toward me, gave me a kiss on

my cheek, and then disappeared behind her door. My giddiness overcame me, and my heart raced with excitement as I started back to my room. Was our loneliness capturing us in its snare? Yet, I knew her beauty and our common interests were propelling me closer to her, too, yet still reflecting on the faces of Marie and my two *fil*s.