



*The symbol of medicine*

# ***NOSTRADAMUS: The Serpent's Child***

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## **Chapters 14-17**

**Alet-les-Bains, Alchemy, Qabalah and Jean de Bernuy**



Planets at dusk in Water Sign February 1524CE



Symbols on Nostradamus(?) house in Alet-Les-Bains

## 14. The Stranger's Plight-March 1523

The building was old, the crumbling walls scarred with the traffic of the years. The cobbler's sign creaked as the wind gusted along the narrow alleyway. Glimpses of the rising sun burst through the thickening, darkening clouds that scudded high above. A thin scar-faced woman sitting on the step outside looked up as she heard footsteps drawing near. "At last," she said looking at him with that disconcerting directness Michel had experienced before. He'd been given similar looks by St Remy's working class women who outsiders also considered bold. He was therefore used to feminine assessment of his youth and masculinity but here, in Alet le Bains, the women of Languedoc still startled him. "I think she's about to die," the woman said, rising to lead him inside.

"Of course she is," thought Michel, "Gerard wouldn't have sent me otherwise. He would've come himself if there was a profit or a future in it."

The scattered boots and lasts on the floor, the straps and goods hanging from the ceiling timbers, meant care had to be taken in reaching the stairs. Already a young boy was at work, bringing in leather from the storeroom at the back and setting it out on the bench. A feminine illness, even a daughter's death, wouldn't hamper trade and business would open as usual. Samuel the cobbler looked down from the door at the top of the stairs, the anxiety on his face dissipating once he saw Michel. He clambered down the steep steps, the noise of his boots against the wood dampened by the numerous objects in the room. "So he sent you. I hope you do a better job than your master," was all he said before brushing past Michel in order to get on with the work of the day.

The maid led him upstairs to a room where the glow of dawn hadn't penetrated. Wisps of smoke hung heavily in the air, dimming the flickering light of the single candle next to the bed. The soft whistle of the wind through the cracks in the wall hardly masked the moans and sobs that filled the room. A woman knelt, wiping away the sweat and blood from the young woman on the bed. Michel knew the girl from previous visits. The first time was when Lisette's pregnancy was confirmed. It was unexpected and the child's father was unknown to all but her. Despite the pressure from all around she wouldn't divulge his name or how the relationship had come about. This obstinacy went even deeper and she'd been reluctant to abort the child even though this was her father's wish.

Michel remembered the occasion well. The strength of her arguments and opposition had impressed him deeply. She embodied the spirit of an Occitan woman as much as any he'd encountered. Fiery, earthy in her choice of words, she countered reasons of morality with reasons of humanity. She'd answered her father defiantly when he'd berated her. "If I'm called a wanton woman because of this, then so be it. But whatever they call me I'll be the person I've always been. I'll still work the last for you and mend men's shoes just as before. Even the nature of my thoughts will be the same." Lisette had refused to take the easy course her father demanded. "The child is created because a man took me at God's will, not mine. Despite this, I'm not going to name him. Doing so would achieve no good, only self-destruction. And as for his child, I won't let it go. Death comes too easily in this world. At least one good will come of this. A life will start from my ill-fortune."

The cobbler however was adamant the child shouldn't be born. Samuel and Gerard had a serious falling out over the matter because Gerard wasn't prepared to go outside the ethics of either his faith or his profession. Eventually Samuel sought the aid of one of the craft-wise women of the village who was much more willing to supply a medication suited to the cobbler's needs. Reluctantly Gerard was made complicit in the act, agreeing to support

Lisette in the after-care even though he counseled Samuel that it wasn't a wise course to pursue. Samuel's grudge against Gerard stemmed from the apothecary's reluctance to serve his demands.

The medicine from alternate sources was found and taken but failed in its purpose. The pregnancy ran its full course but then went horribly wrong. Michel had been there when the baby died. The agonizing duration of that birth, with the baby wrongly turned, had taken its toll on child and mother. She'd seemed to recover but then the bleeding started once again. Last night Gerard received the inevitable call. Medication was needed that would ease her suffering. He'd prepared a potion from ingredients kept within his locked cabinet and instructed Michel as to how much to use of each as he made up the dosage for Lisette. It had been late in the night before the concoction was fully brewed and Michel could leave to answer the desperate family's needs.

Now he was here the mother, Olyna, spoke in a whisper, "Michel, I'm glad it's you. She trusts you. Please help end her pain." Michel was somewhat surprised to learn of their trust. Conversation with Lisette had been limited to the times he'd brought her medications after the failed attempts to abort the birth. They'd talked of very little of significance. The Cathars, their castles and martyrdom were raised but only in the way of a villager with an outsider. Talk full of drama and facts, but little about the beliefs that led to her ancestors' demise. Nothing was said about life and death even though it so intensely affected her life through this unborn child. It highlighted the problem which confounded Michel's quest. He was a stranger from Provence, lacking all the social ties of a native of Alet les Bains. After three months living in this historic village of Roman thermal baths he knew too well how little depth there was in any of his relationships. There was a barrier around the real history of its people. They had learned to conceal while in the business of revealing their past.

Michel knelt down beside the bed next to Olyna. He undid the tie on his pouch and took out the small jar inside. Lisette stirred, her eyes opening, aware of his presence at her side. She tried to speak but nothing issued from her throat. Michel turned to Olyna and said, "I need some water and a larger mug." Olyna stood up and went over to the door to recall the maid from her duties downstairs. On the maid's return Michel mixed the potion, making sure that every part of the medication was tipped from his jar. He carefully sealed the container once more, taking great care to avoid contact with the residue that clung around its rim. Once the brew had matured he lifted Lisette's head so she could drink it without spilling. "This won't taste nice at all, but it will relieve your pain and put you to sleep. When you wake up the world will seem very different to what it is now," he told her.

Lisette began to drink, ignoring the pungent taste. She looked up at Michel before she'd finished and determinedly whispered "This is the only end, there is no other world." She finished her drink and then whispered "Mama, get papa." Olyna rose once more and went downstairs leaving Michel and Lisette alone. Lisette whispered hoarsely, "The ring on the chain around my neck. Find Guillaume's dream, return the lady's ring."

Michel stopped her struggles to raise her arm by seeking the chain as she wished. He lifted it over her head and asked "Who's Guillaume? How do I find his dream?"

Samuel and Olyna could be heard on the steps, giving no chance for Lisette to reply. Olyna was weeping. Samuel, unwilling to look at his dying daughter, looked anxiously at Michel.

"Papa, mama. Stay with me." Lisette pleaded.

Michel looked up at the parents. “She’s taken the potion. Soon she’ll sleep and this would normally help, but your daughter knows she’s beyond recovery. I won’t lie to you or her. This may be the last chance you’ll have. I’ll go downstairs and wait until you’ve finished.” Michel waited near the door to the street while the boy continued his preparation, cutting strips of leather on the bench. He was too engaged with his tasks to talk so Michel contemplated the things he’d heard in the room above. The priest would be coming soon then Michel would be free to go.

Michel knew that for once he’d shared personal and family secrets. The walls that closed out strangers had lowered at the realization of pending death. “But why tell me?” Michel mused, “What did she think I could do? I’m a stranger still and will get little help from her kin or anyone else.” He knew they were a devout Catholic family so Lisette’s words troubled him. “There is no other world,” she’d said, knowing she was about to die. This wasn’t a Catholic view of hell and heaven, more like that of the Cathars. Her unguarded words confirmed what he’d begun to suspect. The Cathar heresy of Languedoc wasn’t gone from amongst the ordinary folk. It remained in a hidden form kept apart from strangers. Its supposed disappearance under the heel of crusades and inquisition was an illusion, only the people’s approach to the world had changed. It explained so much of the way he was treated and why he felt more a stranger here than in Marseille or Avignon.

“To these people the stranger is the enemy,” he thought. “They trust no-one from outside the walls around them. Each family has its walls to protect it from the villagers. Each village seeks protection from its rival towns. Yet, the physical walls are low. They trade and invite the stranger into their realm but not their private lives. The suspicion I experience is surely a form of protection.”

Despite his growing understanding Michel remained bewildered by the religious attitudes of the local people. They seemed inconsistent. Hidden under what seemed a solid core there were elements of other faiths, old and new. Little clues would often surface but he wasn’t close enough to anyone for them to reveal what these contradictions really meant. “The oddest part of this,” mused Michel, “is it makes sense of why she chose me. She crossed some barrier that if known would damage people’s memory of her. She had to find a stranger she could trust. For some reason that’s me.”

The priest bustled through the door, wet from the sudden downpour that had struck him on this foul and blustery morning. He didn’t hide his displeasure at being called out for this routine task. “Some people don’t deserve salvation,” he said confidently to Michel. “Not only do they sin, but even in their dying they make us poor clergy suffer.”

“I pray that one day God will sort out who’s the messenger and who’s the sinner, “he said with mischievous impiety, “but that prayer hasn’t been heard today.”

Samuel came downstairs, paid Michel the money due for the medication and ushered the priest upstairs. Michel counted the money, checking to see whether any of the coins had been trimmed. They seemed intact although the imprint on them was almost gone due to the wear of many years. Michel nodded to the boy working at the bench before he left. However he either didn’t notice or didn’t care to acknowledge Michel’s presence and departure.

The wind was still gusting down the alley but in the sky the signs were good for the day ahead. Already small patches of blue could be seen. People were about, despite the earliness of the hour. Many, mainly women, were moving towards the town centre and the town’s famous thermal baths. Later in the day it would be the turn of those who were ill to

enjoy the benefits offered by the waters of the town. Late in the afternoon the men's bath session would begin. The rhythms of the town were set by its bathing schedules.

His journey was slowed by several merchants restoring stalls that had been thrown into disarray by the winds and rain. He could see young boys gathering the best of the produce, wiping it slyly to remove traces of the debris into which it had fallen. But some of the stalls' contents were unrecoverable and could be seen scudding along in the gutter stream, together with feces and other detritus from the alleyways. The paths were cleaner after the rain and some of the stench was gone. Michel was pleased for he knew it meant less work in the days ahead. Every apothecary knew that fewer sales were made immediately after a solid rain. Even the plague was unlikely to recur. For a moment he dwelt on the connection of ideas, puzzled by why this should be. However other thoughts soon intruded leaving the nexus of rain and absence of disease unresolved.

Michel avoided the direct route to Gerard's apothecary shop as many of the alleys were blocked. A by-product of Languedoc's increasing prosperity was the disruption caused by renewal and upgrading of properties throughout the towns and their surrounds. The extra distance gave Michel a chance to think about the task of finding Guillaume. He'd already resolved he would pursue Lisette's request as it provided an entry point for the task set by Bernardin.

He felt a surge of anticipation as his thoughts switched from Lisette to another young woman. Gerard's daughter should be at the apothecary shop, for her husband Marcus would be away today, working on a new building project at a local farm. On such days she helped her father, using her expert herbalist skills learnt over many years. Michel was eager to get back and talk with her about the morning's events. If anyone in this town could help him it was Myriam.

Myriam, like her mother before her, was transforming her world. Trapped within the collar of marriage, her struggle to rise above the male-held leash, helped shape and nourish their old traditions. Unlike her mother however, Myriam's evolution was based in rebellion, not change. Michel knew he was part of her strategy. To her he was a troubadour offering release from an insufferable prison. In noble love outside marriage lay her salvation from a relationship made sour by conformity. Thoughts such as these, and things he'd recently learnt, offered Michel comfort as he walked.

She was petite with long dark hair, the prettiness held within the smallness of her face giving an impression that she was still an innocent girl. This appearance belied her nature. She was prone to speak out of turn and argue angrily over what seemed to others to be trivial ideas. She was younger than Michel by several years but had experienced much more of life than he. She'd already born two children and yet according to her mother, who kept a record of such things, Myriam would only celebrate her eighteenth birthday in the coming spring. Michel was aware of Myriam's status but still allowed the sensuality in her seldom smiling lips to hold him enthralled.

Her parents welcomed the return of spirit to their daughter that Michel's presence had fostered. It lifted the burden of their guilt for a well-intended marriage that had gone wrong. A union that they'd blessed had surrendered the life and soul of their daughter into her husband's hands. As the eldest of two daughters, Myriam held pride of place, assuming the benefits and entitlement normally granted to an eldest son. She'd grown up free of the inequalities of her sex but marriage to Marcus had changed all that. Marcus was a perfect husband for someone else but not this maid imbued with the spirit of Languedoc.

To all outward appearances the mason was a good choice and none of his attributes had changed after their marriage. There was no deceit for he was as presented, an amiable, gentle fellow, capable of great affection. His pride in the birth of their two boys was obvious to all that knew him. These things were not the cause of Myriam's discontent. It was the closed nature of his mind in relation to a woman's role. And Marcus' unalterable views denied Myriam the redeeming qualities of her heritage, trapping her in a sterile, mindless world. The richness of her family's Jewish past blended with the unique spirit of Languedoc had given the women of her family a source of power within marriage. Her ancestors were wise women, who over countless generations had gently invoked the surrender of male-held powers to themselves. Each generation of men held their power at birth but these women crafted a temporary niche with the arts passed to them by their forbears. In a successful marriage it involved seduction into partial equality, an enrichment of the woman's lot. Such seduction had borne no fruits with Marcus. His mind was closed to any other view of Myriam's role but his.

To Myriam it seemed that her merit to Marcus lay solely in the act of possession. She was his and he would treat her well. She felt her worth was equal to that of a prize cow to a farmer. Well-fed, well-serviced, well-loved she was valued as deliverer of his stock. And like the farmer's passion for his cow, Marcus' stopped there, in ownership of her. Interaction, sharing and equality were not part of his style and it aggrieved him when she stepped beyond his perceptions of her role. This absence of sharing resulted in increasing resentment within Myriam that only abated when Michel arrived in town.

"I'm delighted she's her old self again. She always loved to debate but even more so since you came," her mother had passed on to Michel. He'd been pleased to hear this and that, despite Marcus' wish, she'd once again, begun to read.

Michel knew that, surprisingly, none of this displeased her father. Gerard had even gone so far as to say, "She needs to be with someone like you. You two have common interests. You're of similar age to her and understand our past." Although Gerard was a distant cousin, he'd been very generous to Michel. He was many years older than Michel and he ran a long established business in the village where Michel's ancestors had lived. Knowing this, Michel had sought his help when he came to Languedoc. Gerard had promptly offered Michel a position as his assistant. He'd also given him lodgings and helped both Michel and Jacques in pursuing Bernardin's quest. It gratified Michel that he was able to repay some of Gerard's generosity, and it seemed a double pleasure that it came through his relationship with Myriam.

Michels' reverie suddenly ended in turmoil. Darkness and struggle became his world as a sinister intrusion collapsed across his head. Strong arms grasped him, preventing escape. An alien hand stilled the involuntary cry starting in his throat. A dark cloth blocked his vision of the world around him. There was more than one of them and they had him in their keeping. He heard a feminine voice utter in an urgent whisper "Quiet Michel. Don't struggle. We're not out to harm you but you must come with us."

The hood over his head robbed him of the will to fight. His captors held all the advantages. He couldn't see them, nor could he call to rescuers. Had any passer-by seen this attack? Would they act to rescue him? It seemed not, for he and his captors had stood there in a group for a minute or so before his submission was complete. Once they were sure of his unwilling compliance his arms were loosely bound and he was urged to move. Shoving him before them, they whispered instructions about the footings in front of him, how many steps to take or which way to turn. Nobody acted to stop them and yet Michel knew there must be

people about. He'd seen them, even in the narrowest alleys. Whoever his captors were they obviously held sway over passers-by. It was evident the villagers had no intention of interfering in the capture of a stranger like Michel.

The clatter of the cobbles beneath his stumbling feet gave way to a duller sound of leather on more even wood. He could hear the flow of water, the noise of a small waterfall below. He knew where he was, despite the hood. This was the central bridge and the water below was the rushing River Aude. Knowing this offered no help or comfort. He'd no reason to expect this attack, so he'd no expectation of destination or purpose. Only fear possessed him, intensified by uncertainty. Although it seemed his journey as a captive was long, Michel knew this wasn't really so. It could have been but a matter of minutes between his capture and them reaching the bridge. And no more than another minute before they turned off the paving and entered their destination.

Michel felt the coldness of the place descend. The echo of their steps rang back from distant stony walls and high ceilings. They'd left the alleys with their clay, timber-laced buildings and entered somewhere vast that could only be part of the Abbey Saint Marie. The sound of a pigeon fluttering high above and the far-away sound of a sacred chant confirmed to him that he was in a remote part of the abbey. Little help would come to him in here. He was panting and could feel sweat running into his eyes betraying his fearful state of mind.

"Stop!" he heard the person holding his left arm command. He obeyed and heard the scraping of a key in a lock and the creak of an opening door. "Watch your head. Bend your shoulders or you'll do yourself an injury. That's good. Now stop. Just in front of you about a single pace, is a set of steps. I'll guide you down the first. There are thirty one of them."

Michel felt some assurance from the tone of voice. His captors seemed concerned for his well-being, not solely plotting his destruction. As he edged sideways down the steps he felt the walls on both sides and the well-worn curve of stone beneath his feet. This narrow passage led down beneath the abbey where the sound of dripping water could be heard. At the bottom he was shuffled a little further, turned while the ropes were removed and then told to sit. Tentatively he reached down with his hands and found a ledge at convenient height on which to seat his shaking body.

His captors hadn't left him. They could be heard seating themselves around the room. The sound of their breathing and whispers suggested this room was small. Through the thickness of the cloth around his head he sensed a steadily glowing candle about a large pace away from him and level with his face. Michel dared not speak but waited, fearful of what might happen next.

"You are Michel de Nostredame. Is that correct?" a male voice asked. Michel sensed this wasn't an older man but one about his own age or younger. "You 'd be wise to answer, because although many of us bear you no ill, there are others who think you've been sent to harm us. Silence will confirm to them they're right."

Masking his fear, Michel volunteered quietly, "I am Michel de Nostredame from St Remy. I come to Alet-les Bains with no ill-intent towards any man or woman. This is the town of my ancestors and I am here under the patronage of my second cousin, the apothecary. I am his apprentice."

He heard the young woman's voice confirm his account. "It's as I told you. His grandfather was one of our elders, a leader in his day before he left for Provence at the time of troubles. It's also true he works for Gerard de Nostredame, the apothecary of this village."

His inquisitor now asked, "So what makes you journey so far from home? Your father runs a prosperous business. Why do you leave a certain future to roam foreign parts of France?"

Michel sensed a clue in the woman's words and presence that would help him answer, if he were right, but he wasn't ready to use it. Instead he asked, "Who are you? Are you agents of the Inquisition? If so, know that I am a loyal follower of the faith."

There was a quiet laugh from several in the room, as though Michel had made a joke.

Another male voice ventured, "Fear not. We aren't the Inquisition. That agency's power is over-rated. The fiends of Toulouse are too few, and we so many. You can be assured they are unlikely to single you out of all the heretics in Languedoc."

The leader added, "We're seekers of the mysteries' true source. We keep the Cauldron warm."

Michel knew the origin of these words and he replied in a low chant that he'd learned as a member of his own youth cult.

*"All seekers of the Mysteries must come to Me, for I am the True Source, the Keeper of the Cauldron. All who seek to know Me, know this."* He paused after this fragment of song, aware of its impact on the others in the room only by their silence. Michel, now confident he was right, said, "We're in the cellars of Notre Dame below the bell-tower named after Our Lady of the Underground." He had to be right for these were devotees of the female god, bound like him by oath into her service. Whatever the risk in this approach, Michel was prepared to take it. For many months he'd failed to find a way through the silent wall around these secretive people of Languedoc. Steeped in heresy and treated harshly over many centuries they had good reason to be wary of strangers. These barriers had frustrated Michel's efforts to access their inner thoughts. However as a member of an affiliated cult of the Lady of the Underground he at last stood a chance to further his quest. And he'd one additional element he could add in his defense. "My purpose is set by Lord Bernardin, Governor of Baux, Knight of Rhodes. I travel under the protection of his seal on a quest to uncover where and when the child will be born."

The leader of his captors replied, "Lord Bernardin is well known to us. The Knights have long been honored here. And since the recent loss of the Isle of Rhodes to Suleyman we've expected the Knight's agent to come seeking help, but not someone taking up residence in the village, someone probing into our hidden lives. Yet you are here amongst us and claim to have the blessing of the Knights."

Michel replied "I come only with Bernardin's authority. Rhodes hadn't fallen when I left Marseille, where I received my instructions."

The leader continued, "That isn't all that casts a shadow on your presence. You were with Lisette this morning before she died. It's rumored you poisoned her, forcing her to tell all she knew of her lover. If this is true then, whatever your links, whatever your protection,

you won't leave this place alive. So take care how you answer. We shall weigh its truth against the knowledge we already hold."

At last Michel had some basis to his fear. These people were not ruffians and he'd always known his capture was a motivated act, not a random one. Their motivation was the fear of what Lisette might have said in the time before her death. The problem for Michel was she'd said so little that there was no information he could reveal that would confirm his truthfulness. "It's true I attended Lisette this morning. I took a draught to relieve her pain. It's also true she spoke a few words to me when we were alone but they made no sense."

The young woman asked, "What were her words? Let us judge their sense."

Michel hesitated before answering. "Ring on chain around my neck. Find Guillaume's dream, return the lady's ring."

The enquiry came immediately "And that's all she said? No mention of a name or reason why the ring should be returned?"

"None! There was no time, but I don't think it would have been different even then. She seemed contented once I took the ring and assumed the responsibility for it." Michel heard someone rise and come towards him and heard their breath as they leant over to untie his pouch.

"The ring is here, so that part's true. What's your judgment?" he asked his colleagues.

It was the young woman who spoke first. "You know of Michel de Nostredame through me. Those who sent him believe he's blessed by the stars that attended his birth. They also believe he's destined to be a servant of Our Lady. It's highly likely he speaks the truth that he was sent on a quest by Bernardin to find the child. I believe all that he says is true."

Another member spoke in a very quiet voice. "If you're sure this youth is Michel de Nostredame then I welcome his presence here. I suggest we help his quest."

A third person spoke gruffly, "I'm still wary. The story is so lacking in detail it could be true or false. We can't easily judge on what we've heard. I sense the rest of you are happy to release him but I implore you not to reveal your identity. Don't let him see your face or have a means of knowing who you are. Be careful what you say. You've already seen how astute he is."

The leader spoke again. "I agree with all of this. We really have no better choice than to believe him.

"Michel de Nostredame, we'll keep the ring for safekeeping. It will be returned to you at the proper time. Know this. Lisette was one of us. It was believed she bore the child you seek but we were wrong. The birth had little to do with God or her virginity. She's placed her trust in you and we shall honor it, further than that we can't go. It'll be up to you to solve the riddle. As to the ring, we have reason to think you'll find its relevance at Rennes les Bains, not here in Alet, and we'll arrange for you to meet with those that can help in your quest.

"However, I advise you to be patient and keep alert for the sign of Our Lady that our messenger will reveal. Watch for the Serpent held within the Blood of the Rosy Cross."

He addressed the others. “That’s all we can do for now. We can arrange what has to be done at our next meeting.”

The gruff-voiced one added, “And be aware that if this youth from St Remy proves false, these actions shall be remedied without further debate or chance to lie.”

Michel heard them moving off, one by one, their steps echoing dully as they climbed the steps.

There came a time when there was no sound other than dripping water. He waited to be sure they’d gone, then lifted his hood. The remnants of a candle still shone along the passageway. He made his way to it, took it in his hand and, finding the steps, ascended once more into the village of Alet.

## 15. The Apothecary

Michel's adventures went unnoticed in the turmoil that greeted him on his return. As he entered he saw Gerard crisply issuing instructions to Myriam while rapidly gathering books into a pile on his workbench. He was working with an urgency that suggested something unusual had happened. "Ah, there you are," he commented on seeing Michel. "It's about time you got back. Your friend Jacques is on his way. He and his host, Jean de Bernuy, will be coming here tomorrow. Jacques sent me a letter. It's on the table. You'd better read it."

Michel picked up the letter, skimmed past the greetings and began to read the relevant passage.

"... Monsieur Bernuy fell from his horse just over a week ago. Since that time he has felt weak and swooned on several occasions. He has a fever and many bruises. His doctors want to bleed him but he's fearful for his life having just had a friend die at their hands. He's seeking a more judicial remedy and I advised him you are the best person to provide such services."

There followed more specific details of the injuries and malady which Michel skimmed until he came to a section which gave the reason for the letter.

"Monsieur Bernuy is keen to visit both you and Michel in Alet. He has heard favorable reports of your skills and sees this as an opportunity to assess your services. It's been some time since he sought the benefits of the warm waters of your village and now, with his injury, he believes the baths will aid his recovery.

"His injury will slow us down but I expect us to be there by next Tuesday. We'll be visiting the local baths as part of his treatment and will seek a consultation with you in the afternoon. He prefers the privacy of your apartments to that of the hostel where he usually stays. He has therefore instructed me to inform you to expect him once his baths are finished. I have included notes on his birth as well as his health signs so that you might prepare for our meeting. I look forward to once again meeting you and Michel. "

Michel understood Gerard's agitation. Jean de Bernuy, the richest pastel trader of Toulouse and Languedoc, was on his way to visit them. Not only rich, Bernuy was powerful too. He was a Capitoul, an elected member of the Parliament in Toulouse. His house, the largest and grandest in Toulouse, was a landmark boasting the highest tower in the city.

Of course it wasn't totally unexpected that they should call. Gerard's plan for Jacques had always included this hope. Michel and Jacques had come to Gerard seeking help in their conduct of Bernardin's quest. Gerard provided a good starting base for them as Michel's cousin was easy to find. He still lived in the home Michel's and Gerard's ancestors had occupied. Unlike Michel's grandparents, Gerard's forbears had chosen to relinquish their Jewish faith and stay on, rather than move away from Alet. That the two branches of the family had made different choices was relevant to Michel's quest. Gerard's side of the family retained much of their Jewish heritage as they'd escaped rigid scrutiny by remaining where they were well known. The bonds between them and their old religious community still held firm and they continued with their old allegiances.

By contrast, Michel's family had been forced to convert after they'd moved to Provence, where the demands put on them to reject their past faith were greater. It constantly surprised Michel how much more openly Gerard's family expressed their Jewish heritage than

had his own. Amongst his immediate family, his grandfathers had resisted the change, but they were much more secretive about it than the family members here in Languedoc.

Gerard's Jewish links made possible the furtherance of Bernardin's quest for Jacques. The apothecary had sought help from his friends in Toulouse and they'd recommended Jean de Bernuy, who himself was a converted Jew. From this base Jacques could easily access leaders throughout Southern France. Bernardin was delighted when he heard, as the Toulouse dye merchant had remote links to his own family. With Bernardin's endorsement, Jacques was readily received as the guest of this rich and powerful gentleman of Toulouse.

Gerard was pleased with this outcome. His enthusiasm to help was fostered by the potential gains from links to such a powerful client. This hope was now coming to fruition, but with it came the problems of being ready. Gerard stopped searching amongst his books to ask Michel, "Have you read it all? What would you prescribe?" Michel knew Gerard wouldn't rely on his prescription. The question was that of a master apothecary testing his apprentice's knowledge.

"I assume we'll be using an ointment made from henbane and mandrake."

"Very good. And why these two in particular?"

Michel was happy to be interrogated. He was keen to show his familiarity with the latest medical opinions and acknowledge the enquiries pursued by Gerard. "Because we'll be treating Bernuy's lower body. The shape of the mandrake in particular is most human-like and shaped like the lower part of a man. The Doctrine of Signatures therefore indicates these will work and our own investigations show that to be true."

Gerard smiled with satisfaction. "You're right, but of course there's more to it than just the ingredients. We can't afford to get this wrong so I want you to attend carefully to their preparation. Work with Myriam. I'm glad she's here. I doubt whether we could manage without her special skills. She'll select the best of the plants picked at the prime and proper moment. I've gathered the books that apply to this potion and I expect you to use them if you've any doubts at all. Jean de Bernuy's contacts are important to your own quest as well as Jacques' so make sure you impress him. He's also likely to prove a generous patron to me. He obviously isn't pleased with his physicians and he won't go to the wise women. Both of us need to make the most of this chance."

Michel knew the burden placed on all of them by the merchant's choice. Their reputation for blending the old tradition with the new exciting knowledge of herbal preparation had drawn many people to their town, and now the richest man of Toulouse was on his way

Michel was pleased to work under the tutelage of his cousin. They got on well and Gerard withheld no secrets in relation to his profession. Gerard was a Christian Alchemist, proud to blend the Qabalah and Hermetical science into a practical art. As a modern-thinking apothecary he'd much to offer Michel. Michel took the books Gerard handed to him, noting that those left on the bench were recent publications on the Qabalah. It was evident Gerard wanted to ensure his understanding was perfectly up to date. The interpretation of the ten spheres needed to be just right. The incantations needed to hold exactly the correct letters to produce a sum matched to the patient. The symbols to be drawn needed to be as perfectly attuned to Bernuy's astrological setting as could be achieved with these modern aids. Michel would benefit from Gerard's study. Some new point would arise that both would be keen to

share. Gerard and Michel de Nostredame, master and apprentice, would enjoy this revelation of the world's hidden treasures together.

Myriam was already at work in the preparation room. The warmth coming from the still brought out the pungent aromas of the herbs which had been placed alongside the burner for him to use. She gave him a welcoming smile with a slightly quizzical twist as he entered. “What happened to you? I expected to see you earlier.”

“I was kidnapped, but I'm okay. I'll tell you about it when I get a chance.” He glanced at the herbs on the table. “Which herbs are these? I'm sure you've selected the right ones but Gerard insists I ask and not take anything for granted.”

“They're the hemlock and henbane specimens gathered last Tuesday, just before sunset. They match the day of the client's accident. They are the best we have in stock.” Myriam took pride in her work. Michel was aware there was no one better when it came to the location and storage of herbs. He admired her despite their differences. She too delighted in the modern aspects of her art, eagerly reading publications related to her field. Her favorite reference though was a translated ancient Islamic work by Avicenna. Mild disagreement arose because of this preference. Based on Avicenna's ideas she favored honey as the sweetening agent and argued strongly that sugar was a poison upsetting the balance of the body's humors. This often caused debate between her and Gerard, to Michel's amusement. She showed only passing interest in alchemy, referring to Gerard's distillation apparatus as 'goldseeker's folly'. Michel differed with her, arguing that there was no better way to increase the healing strength of plants than to draw out their essence in a pure form. Theirs was an exact craft requiring a fixed number of sublimations and a proper ordering of the processes.

Michel's immediate task was to take Myriam's herbs and perform the distillations for Bernuy's medication. All he needed to know was already in his head or in the books Gerard provided. Amongst these Michel knew there was a recently published edition of Hieronymus, 'The Art of Distillery', which would prove most useful. It contained more detail than any of its predecessors. Michel delighted in this marriage of the elements with the wisdom of man, for he sensed it made him modern and set him apart from other men. Michel watched Myriam return to the herbarium then set about his task of bruising the leaves before placing them into the copper base of the still. It would take an hour before the preparations were done and the liquids gathered below the condenser. As the still began to bubble he chanted the essential part of the formula drawn from the Hermes Trismegistus' 'Emerald Tablet'.

- *“As all things owe their existence to the will of the only one, so all things owe their origin to the one only thing, the most hidden by the arrangement of the only God*
- *The Father of that one only thing who is the sun, whose Mother is the Moon, who is carried in its belly by the wind and nursed by the spirituous earth*
- *We implore this one only thing who is the father of all things in the universe, perfect in its threefold power to bless our humble transmutation*
- *After it has been united to a spirituous earth, we now separate that spirituous earth from the dense or crude by means of a gentle heat, with much attention*
- *In great measure it will ascend from the earth up to the heaven, and imbued with your grace descend again newborn on the earth ,*
- *So by this act we will increase both the superior and the inferior power.”*

Myriam often laughed at him as he, locked in pursuit of his elixir, watched intensely for each drop to form. Aware of the impact of her presence on him, she taunted him with, “I believe Magus Nostredame has come and gone.” In return Michel would reply enigmatically,

“Perhaps he seeks his enchantress of the woods.” Any reference to her being an enchantress always delighted her. There was however more to her skills than the craft of plants for she shared his delight in the Qabalah. The Tree of Life particularly drew them together. This tree, with its ten sefiroth or symbols representing man, bonded the ancient world to their modern craft. Its esoteric content, hidden within its symbolism, could only be revealed to those who knew the art of its recovery. This arcane mystery of words, images and numbers made them feel that the secrets of the world were coming to light and they were the vehicles for its revelation. A shared exhilaration of youthful discovery bound them more closely than either dared acknowledge.

There came a time, while plants dried and distillation produced its steady drops, that Michel could tell Myriam of his adventures. Little of his tale surprised her. She seemed more interested in the illness of Lisette than of the clandestine activities in the Abbey. What aroused her most was Michel's distress that he understood so little of the local people's beliefs. “You try too hard. That's why you fail to understand,” she said.

“How so?” he asked, intrigued as to how effort itself could hinder success.

“Your quest is so earnest you think that by asking, all will be revealed. But this eagerness of yours makes people draw back and then they won't tell you their true beliefs. There are ways however, to achieve your goal.”

Her words encouraged Michel to venture, “I know my failings but what I need is help to understand these people. I was hoping you might guide me.”

Myriam hesitated, giving thought to her answer, before replying, “This is not the place for that. I need to show you things and have your complete attention. Not have you glancing at your precious still.”

This reminded Michel his potions were nearing completion and he left before she could say any more. On the completion of the distillations, Gerard instructed Michel to make up the lotions needed by other, less important clients. There was no chance to talk with Myriam, whose duties kept her away from the preparation rooms. It was late afternoon before they'd a chance to speak again and then it was brief. Myriam spoke to him quietly while they were clearing up the benches, “There are some books I'd like you to see. When you get the chance stop by the house, I keep them hidden there. Don't come too early. Leave it until the children are asleep so they won't be interrupting us all the time.”

Michel felt her words beat within his chest. That strange twist of emotion rising out of nowhere, when desires lie dormant and a gate of opportunity lies ahead. He made no audible reply, merely lowering his head to hide the reddening of his cheeks. He quickly moved to another bench, stripping it bare of remnant leaves and pithy scraps of wood.

## 16. The Sisterhood

Guilt. How could it be otherwise? Waiting until the family was asleep. Climbing through the window shutters. Carefully edging down uneven bricks that formed the wall. And worse, this was Gerard's daughter he sought to meet in the quiet solitude of the night. A married woman he'd no right to be with. He was innocent except in his deepest thoughts. They'd planned nothing wrong. There was no plan other than the sharing of wisdom. And he'd no choice, he had to go, the quest demanded it. This was their only chance, taken late at night while Marcus was away. Even so, his desires dulled the purity of their purpose. Surely others knew. The infidelity games played out in the church at St Remy told him they had to know. People noticed the little things and drew their own conclusions.

The house of Marcus Geron lay only five hundred paces from that of Gerard de Nostredame, across the square and up the alley, directly opposite the Street of Jews.

Guilt gave a piquant edge to the feelings in his throat and chest. Anticipation. Unknown paths. All this outweighed the mischief others might believe of them. And what if they did? They would say nothing to anyone that mattered. Gossip, only gossip and innuendo were all that usually followed. And it was in no-one's interest to interfere. Not Gerard nor even Marcus. Neither would want to really know. And if Marcus did and thought ill of them, it would serve him best to keep quiet, taking revenge in other ways. That's how it had always been in St Remy and it surely would be the same in Alet. It had seemed a universal truth and still applied today. Infidelity and silent revenge were deeply entwined threads of married life.

Marcus' residence was modest, with two floors to house both the family and their servants, but it was well divided, with servants' quarters isolated at the back. Michel stood in the narrow alley, the moon disclosing his presence to all that might chance to glance below. He was later than intended. The excitement of the coming visitor meant the family had taken much longer to settle than usual. He'd no idea how he should proceed. They'd made no plan other than that he should come. The door was locked and he couldn't afford to knock and wake the neighbors.

His anxious wait wasn't in vain. The shutters showed a glimpse of light then dulled. Moments later he saw her silhouette framed within the open door. He couldn't help but be aware of her effect on him. The sound of her breathing, the movement of her body couldn't go unnoticed. She closed and locked the door. "Follow me, but keep quiet. The children and the servants are asleep."

She didn't take him upstairs as he'd expected, but down the passage to the storage room at the side of the house. It was small, with a little bench and two rough stools. Flour and other provisions were stacked against one wall. On the bench newly dusted books and papers were piled neatly. She looked at him as he sat opposite her, and saw what she needed to know. She was sure of him, sure enough to accept the risk.

On Michel's arrival in Alet, Myriam had sensed his priest-like zeal and the inherent pressures affecting Michel. There seemed a belief in a unique destiny which conflicted with his manhood. He seemed in constant torment, torn between destiny and nature. But this tension in his soul appealed to her. Here was the troubadour she desired. "I thought you weren't coming," she said. "But now you're here I'm glad." She reached across the bench placing her slim hand lightly on his wrist. "Secrecy is paramount," she said. "Swear to me the primal oath that binds you in your quest."

The surprise at the directness of her command gave little chance for thought and Michel whispered willingly, *“Whosoever would know Secrets, let him know how to keep secret things secret; and to reveal those things that are to be revealed, and to seal those things which are to be sealed: and not to give holy things to dogs, nor cast pearls before swine.*

*Observe this Law, and the eyes of thy understanding shall be opened, so that you will understand secret things; and you shall have what you seek divinely revealed to you alone.”*

“No. Not the one of the sect of your early youth. The one that came later,” she said. He should have been alarmed that she knew so much but his thoughts were elsewhere. The oath rang through his mind as it so often did, the oath taken in the bowels of Baux.

*“Firstly, this is my most powerful oath and no other oath I have sworn or shall ever swear will outweigh the compact herewith undertaken.*

*Secondly: The secrets revealed to me this day shall remain forever secret.*

*Thirdly: I shall bear the guilt burden of those here in my presence if by any act of mine I cause them to sin in order to protect the secret nature of our meeting.”*

“I can't,” he whispered. “It's forbidden.”

She was satisfied. It was enough for her to know it existed and for Michel to understand how far her wisdom spread. “Secrecy is paramount,” she repeated. “It's at the heart of what I promised. Languedoc is a land of secrets, a legacy of its unusual history and those who sought to quash it. There is no resident in this land who doesn't live a secret life. So many secrets concealed by a simple trick. You have seen the trick and fallen for its wiles. The people all seem to be heretics. That is the trick that protects us no matter how deep our faith. For none of us knows what change in rulers or church will place any one at risk. But universal heresy makes it hard for them to pick out individuals.”

Michel was intrigued, “So Jews, witches and Christians alike all express words and ideas that would normally only be used by another?”

“Yes. And it's this that impedes your quest's success. You're far too one-dimensional to gain the people's trust.”

Michel knew it made sense. His rigid Catholic upbringing meant he hid his Jewish past. And there were other involvements that were too dark to share, those with the Goddess and the doyens of Baux. His method could offer him protection in Provence but not in Languedoc, as Myriam had shown. There were two ways to keep a secret, one that allowed no slip or hint of that which lay beneath and another which through its erratic universal boldness meant you could never be sure of what belief a person truly held. Unless of course, you were one of them.

Myriam continued, “It's much more difficult for you. The way we talk is part of our tradition. We're brought up in it, so we know what to expect and what to disregard, it all comes naturally to us. However, you'll need more than just an understanding if you're to get anywhere in your quest. You need to use the gifts that you have more than you do, especially the strengths others see in you. But even with these guides you'll need more. You need

knowledge of our local sects and those in them that can get you past the barriers. These papers of mine will provide your keys.”

She took her hand from his and spread a selection of the papers on the bench in front of him. She understood him well enough to be unsurprised at the change in him. No longer was his soul in contest. There was only one source of interest. He knew why he was here. “And there is a further one,” she said, and placed in front of him a recent copy of *The Romance of the Rose* by *Guillaume de Lorris*. “Many call this book *Guillaume's Dream*. I can assure you it contains what you seek even though I don't know what its secret is.”

“What makes you certain? How is it you have all these?” Michel asked.

Myriam, continued, ignoring Michel's question so as not to disturb her flow. “Firstly, understand that in this land there are many secret groups, most of which you would never penetrate on your own. However, you are fortunate. Your past is known to me. You are one of us, different in many ways, but you share the same ideals about the Goddess and her role. Lisette was also one of us, a member of the group to which I belong. Much of this material came through her. She was a gatherer of the stories of our land.

“You needn't know, you aren't allowed to know much more about my connections or my reasons for helping you. It's enough for you to be aware that we gather the evidence of Our Lady's presence in this land. We pass it on from generation to generation. What you see is only a part of the trove that holds the story of our past. It's just a few documents of those I hold in trust and there are more that others hold. This book, *Guillaume's Dream*, Lisette passed on to me, saying it was valuable. She said it was destined for a particular person, but until you told me of her death and her message I didn't know who she meant.

Michel had quickly read the opening passage and already felt its relevance to him.

*“Many men say that there is nothing in dreams but fables and lies, but one may have dreams which are not deceitful, whose import becomes quite clear afterward. We may take as witness an author named Macrobius, who did not take dreams as trifles, for he wrote of the Vision which came to King Scipio. Whoever thinks or says that to believe in a dream's coming true is folly and stupidity may, if he wishes, think me a fool; but, for my part, I am convinced that a dream signifies the good and evil that come to men, for most men at night dream many things in a hidden way which may afterward be seen openly.”*

It almost seemed intended for him to read tonight. The second passage commenced,

*“In the twentieth year of my life, at the time when Love exacts his tribute from young people, I lay down one night, as usual, and slept very soundly.”*

“So what is this book about?” Michel asked, excited by the little that he'd read.

This time Myriam responded to his question. “It has many aspects that may interest you but how you use them I don't know. Its main theme relates to a lover's dream which takes him to an enclosed garden. The garden has a high wall which seems to have no door. Guillaume seeks, and finally finds, an entryway that leads him to the beautiful Rose.”

Michel, intrigued by the story, looked at Myriam. “The search for Our Lady. This story of the enclosed garden of the rose goes back to the Babylonians.”

“Yes,” she answered, delighted by his interest. “The rose emblem the Persians linked to conception of the sacred child. The same emblem our ancestors used for Virgin Mary,”

Michel became thoughtful, “It's strange that this theme should be at its core. I can't help noting its ideas are also the same as those you've told me tonight. The high wall is the secrecy of Languedoc. The small entry way the techniques you unfold. And the Rose, surely that's my quest, the search for our Lady who bears the child.”

“That much is easy,” Myriam agreed, “but hidden in it there must be a clue telling you a place, a time, a situation where the ring you were given is to be returned. That's what isn't obvious, no matter how well you read Latin. I said there were many aspects to this tale. This book wasn't written by one man, but two. The second part, by Jean de Meung, conceals ideas that will delight you. They are allegories with more meaning to an alchemist like you than others who might read it. However, our time together is precious. You can take this book with you. Return it when it's served its purpose. Before you go you need to look at other papers and they must stay with me.”

Michel took them from her. Scanning them he noted that their nature was familiar. He'd seen many similar documents in his work in Bernardin's secret library. They were letters and documents written in Latin and Hebrew. They seemed to be lineages, almanacs and lists of members, as well as narrative accounts.

Myriam produced a document from the bottom of the pile. “This you must memorize before you go. As you'll see it's important you retain it all.” Michel looked at the single sheet placed before him, totally absorbed by two names that stood out from the page.

- Gerard de Nostredame, Alet, Cabbalist/ alchemist, Society of the Hermetic Rose.

Michel wasn't surprised to find his tutor, Myriam's father, amongst this list. He'd suspected it. Alet was renowned as a centre of Hermetic and Cabbalistic arts and Gerard was a logical candidate for such a society.

The most significant of the other names was simply:

- Jean de Bernuy, Toulouse/ Languedoc, Grand Master of the Rosy Cross.

It took a little time before Myriam was convinced he'd learned the names and their details. Michel had been confident after a minute or two's study of the page. It seemed too short for Myriam and it was considerably longer before she agreed his confidence was well placed.

“You must go now,” she said. “Tomorrow's meeting is too important for you to stay.” He knew she was right but would have stayed all night to gain his end. The pages called him, enticed him, as each turn yielded more intimate details of Languedoc's secrets.

She watched him go, waiting until he turned to catch one more glimpse of her. He would be back, she was certain of that. His arrival had re-awakened her, brought her back into the intrigues of the world. And now he was hers, would be hers; the metaphysical lover.

## 17. The Pastel Merchant

Their morning had quickly disappeared in the haste to make ready for their special guest. Myriam hadn't come in to work. Gerard was most annoyed at her inconvenient absence. A mood not lightened by one of Marcus's servants who arrived early in the day. He brought the news that Marcus had returned unexpectedly and demanded Myriam stay home to deal with minor injuries he'd incurred while working on a farm building. This added to the concerns unsettling Alicia. As time wore on, and the arrival of their guest drew near, her irritation grew. Late in the morning Michel could hear her arguing with Gerard, with an ill-feeling that had begun between the two of them the night before.

It had started in the simplest way with Gerard's enthusiasm. "Jean de Bernuy. What luck. If I do this right we'll be set up for life. No more seeking patrons. No more making up potions for those who can't afford them."

Alicia had asked, "Where will we be based?"

He'd expected this and had his answer ready, "He'll probably want us to move to Toulouse so that I'm nearby. He owns all of the Rue Lakanal, so I expect we'll have a house beside his grand chateau."

"But Gerard! What about Myriam, our friends and your clients who've been loyal to you all these years?"

Gerard was confident he could quell her doubts. "We'll start afresh. I can get Marcus work in Toulouse. There's so much going on there. Bernuy and the other merchants have made the town rich. It won't be hard for him or us. There are opportunities in Toulouse that will never occur in Alet."

Alicia wasn't impressed. "Rich, but at what cost? You see the beautiful fields of yellow pastel, but the stench of woad and urine, fermenting in the sheds, is overpowering. And the fields they used for previous crops are barren, infertile wastelands, stripped of any goodness. Two generations it's taken, and soon it'll all be like that. This wealth's not going to last forever, certainly not long enough for us to have a certain future. "

"There's more than enough time," Gerard replied, un-fazed by Alicia's comments. "Bernuy made his money over the last thirty years and he was considered wealthy after five."

"Bernuy's wealth is blinding you to the truth. His wealth was opportunistic and came from exploiting the difficulties of others, his previous clients and his friends."

"No, that's not fair," Gerard retorted. "He and his brother Diego were just smarter than the others. And what they did was sensible. Besides, they took the parts of an industry that had little future, took control of all its elements and made it work. They weren't alone in this and they weren't the first but they've certainly been successful."

Alicia had fallen silent knowing that Gerard's mind was set and in this mood they had both retired. After they'd left Michel had sat alone for some time reviewing their arguments and their import for the coming day. It had continued to perturb him this morning and he'd continued to dwell on the issues they'd raised while he went about his work. What they'd each said had made sense, but had left him with dilemmas of his own. Michel, like Gerard and Alicia, had a personal interest in Jean Bernuy's past, for he, like Gerard, was looking to

the future. Jacques' tales of Toulouse had excited Michel. And Bernardins' quest could more easily be pursued there, than in Alet. Bernuy offered the means by which he could get to Toulouse. But what were the risks? He tried to recall what he knew of the pastel merchant and make his own assessment.

He knew much about the man's history from Jacques' letters. There were also the stories he'd heard when arrangements were made for Jacques to join the merchant. And then there were things that were widely known in the south of France. From these sources Michel knew the merchant had a colorful history. Jean de Bernuy's origins were in the Castilian town of Burgos. He was a member of a rich family and he'd only left because he and most of his family were forced to, like all the other Jews in Spain, in 1492.

That year had been an important turning point in the Bernuy fortunes. It hadn't seemed to hold much promise for any of them at the time. The family's long history in Castille was rendered worthless by their being Jews. Their hard-earned wealth as traders had been put at risk by Isobel, Queen of Spain. Simply because of their faith, they, and all other Jews, had been ordered to leave the country within three months. Wealth offered no shield, no chance to buy one's right to stay. Their last hope had come and gone. The offer, by the group representing them, had been turned down just when they thought they stood a chance.

The Queen's words had delivered the final cut. *"The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as are the rivers of water. God turns it whatsoever way He will. Do you believe that this comes upon you from us? The Lord hath put this thing into the heart of the king."*

"These words must still rankle with the pastel merchant even though they were from thirty years in the past," Michel concluded, knowing that similar cruelty towards his own family caused him continuing anger. Prejudice towards Jews, and those whose ancestors were Jews, still occurred, while those responsible denied that it was personally inspired. The will of God remained their convenient cover

Michel's recollections increased his empathy for Bernuy, but this didn't mean he'd be a good benefactor, as Gerard had implied. Bernuy was part of the massive Spanish expulsion of the Jews, but was he a victim of circumstance in that which followed in France?" He recalled the scanty facts he knew, seeking to balance the ambition and caution pulling him in opposite directions.

Diego, Jean's brother, had conceived a plan that he'd rightly hoped would retain the family's fortune. His foresight had stood them in good stead. Earlier he'd converted to Christianity, even while others fumed at the prospect of such unjust demands. Then, unlike others that had to sell at whatever price, his family had an option. Diego had proposed that he would take his brother's and other close family members' lands and estates and, in return, they would take the merchandise and flee. He also offered them the chance to trade with Spain through him. For so many Spanish Jews time had become too short. They'd sold their houses, their landed estates, and their cattle at any price to obtain cash before their property was forfeit. Their fortune was then further reduced. By law, silver and gold couldn't be taken out of Spain, so most of those to be expelled were forced to exchange any real money for low quality merchandise of cloths and skins and other things. But not the Bernuy.

Michel felt a sense of release. It was valid to argue, as Gerard did, that the Bernuys weren't just victims or exploiters. They'd made a choice founded on Diego's right to remain. This option gave each family member the base from which to start afresh. Unlike others less prepared or less fortunate, the Bernuys had taken with them their own quality goods they

knew would sell. They hadn't taken advantage of the misfortune of others since it was their own resources that they used. Many of the family left for Mexico, taking valuable agricultural stock that had an eager market. However Jean and Diego resolved Jean would go to Toulouse, in whose markets they already traded.

Michel was aware he'd suppressed the criticisms Alicia had raised. Perhaps he favored Gerard's view too much? Like Gerard, Michel felt that Bernuy's coming offered him an opportunity, but did the power of the man hold a serious threat? His sense of caution urged him not to discount Alicia's view without weighing it more carefully.

It was out of the turmoil of the Spanish expulsion that Jean de Bernuy's fortunes had sprung and it was in those early years in Toulouse that Alicia's claims of Bernuy's exploitation had a sounder foundation. But had it been exploitative or was it a just reward for risks taken? Michel pondered. For many years the Bernuys would have seen the prosperity of Toulouse grow. They'd been amongst the first to trade cloth for dye. Their astuteness was well known, they'd offered a much finer cloth than that found in Southern France, in exchange for pastel. It had been such an elegant idea to barter rather than buy or sell.

Michel felt a clarification of his own dilemma as he thought about the brothers' actions. The Bernuys had held a distinct advantage. They were Spanish. "It isn't unpatriotic to acknowledge this," Michel thought, for he'd often heard Frenchmen bemoan the fact that the French, unlike the Spanish, didn't take business risks. Michel's thoughts returned to his purpose. "It wasn't exploitation but a difference between those who bemoaned fate and those who seized its opportunities", Michel murmured to himself. The Bernuys had seen the shortcomings of the dye makers of Toulouse and had a plan, but saw no reason to implement it. Then the events of 1492 had forced them to act. Don Juan Bernuy became Jean de Bernuy, the Toulousian arm of the family business.

"It wasn't as though the brothers set out to take advantage of others," Michel muttered. "There was turmoil everywhere and Jean was part of it." It fitted to what Michel knew. The brothers had loaded Jean's mules with every roll of cloth held in the family's warehouses and he'd set out for Toulouse. This first load he'd sold to eager buyers in the town at higher prices than normal. Disruptions to Spanish suppliers and buyers had driven cloth prices up and temporarily lowered the price of pastel dye. With the wealth from the sales of cloth he'd set himself up, buying pastel at bargain prices. He'd sold its dye to his brother Diego in return for more cloth, a neat exchange that had avoided the need to transfer money. Michel saw the justice in this. It was the means that they'd introduced to the pastel growers of Toulouse, that allowed the brothers to bypass the strictures of war and prejudice. From this beginning Jean had transformed the pastel industry.

A pang of conflict affected Michel as he contrasted the Bernuy's relationship with that he had with his own family. He was alone, reliant on his cousin's help, whereas the Bernuy's had remained united throughout adversity. Jean Bernuy, and his brother Diego, had been particularly close and used it to their commercial advantage. The exclusive bond between the brothers had made them rich beyond their youthful dreams. Their commercial ties had lasted twenty years, until Diego's death.

At last Michel felt he could relax, with a greater certainty to guide him though the coming meeting. Monsieur Bernuy wasn't as villainous as Alicia painted, even though he mightn't be as virtuous as Gerard hoped.

Michel's attention was drawn back to Gerard and Alicia. When he'd seen Alicia at breakfast, it was apparent to Michel that she hadn't slept well. Gerard too had shown evidence of a restless night. It wasn't surprising. Their argument, the adventure and risks ahead were enough to keep them both awake. The worst of this was they both seemed more irritable, and it had shown as the morning wore on. Myriam's absence hadn't helped either of them. Gerard shared Alicia's concerns for her well-being but was made even more anxious by his need of her skills.

It was late morning before matters had come to a head. Michel was in the preparation room when they'd begun to argue once more. He could hear Alicia, even though they were in a different room and the door was closed. "It's too risky. You don't know what he's like. If you commit yourself and us to him we're at his mercy. If by some chance you offended him where would we be then? Everything we've worked for would be gone, your clients and our business. I tell you Gerard, I don't want to go to Toulouse. I'm happy here."

Gerard responded in a much more subdued tone. "You're right of course. I thought about it all night and there are risks involved. But I ask you to hold back a little. We don't know what the outcome of today will be. However, I know your opinion, and will keep it in mind. As to Myriam, I'll leave that up to you to deal with. I really do have to make an effort this afternoon." They emerged from the room, seemingly in a much better state of mind, and together set about the final preparations.

Despite Myriam's absence, they were ready by the time the sun cast its shortest shadows in the street. Then time dragged slowly, each member nervously attending to tasks already done, checking items already scrutinized by others. The slowly increasing hum alerted Gerard. He moved outside to stand by the doorway where Michel joined him. People were beginning to fill the square. Curious villagers emerging from their shops and houses, pushed back by an advancing mob spilling out into the open spaces of the plaza. Neighbor's greetings, enquiries as to the visitor's identity and commentary on the approaching parade helped create the noise.

More and more people gathered in the tiny square until it seemed full, yet still they came. At last the first of the visitors could be seen. They advanced in disciplined order, walking side by side; three rows of men four abreast, forging a way through the compressed throng. Behind them a sedan-chair, covered in gold, emerged from the crowded street. The two men bearing the chair, the men alongside, and those behind, were dressed in the same blue livery as those at the fore. The dazzling color of the pastel contrasted with the common black and brown garments of the villagers. The wealth of Toulouse was on display, a brash parade those of Alet could only admire and envy.

They made their way through the congested square, the people parting as they drew near. The man in the middle of the first row walked with steady gait until he stood before Gerard and Michel. The other men peeled off, moving to the sides compressing the crowd further back. The chair was set down alongside Jacques Fabre, friend of Michel, guest of Jean de Bernuy. Behind the chair the other men formed a wall that all but stopped the gathered crowd from seeing anything of Gerard de Nostredame's wealthy client from Toulouse.

Jean de Bernuy sat waiting for his moment, looking straight ahead, allowing his gaze to take in the edifice of the house of Nostredame, apothecary of Alet. At last he eased himself off the seat and stepped stiffly forward until he stood just in front of Jacques, free of the impediments of the sedan's poles. Dressed in an elegant black doublet, soft black cap and white linen shirt, the hint of wealth was much more subtle than in the uniform of his men.

He seemed much smaller than Michel had expected. He was of the same height and build as Michel. Even his features weren't dissimilar. "He's much older of course," Michel thought. "A stranger might well think he's my father, however unlikely." He dismissed the thought, aware that such aberrations had become common since he'd heard the Countess say Jaumes wasn't his true father.

Bernuy's gaze was deliberately provocative. He looked straight at each of the two men before him, assessing their identity and their personal traits. Gerard lowered his eyes but Michel couldn't, fascinated by the direct glare and scrutiny of the wealthiest merchant in Toulouse. "Why are they there?" asked the merchant, pointing above their heads.

Both Gerard and Michel turned briefly to see what he was looking at. They were a little surprised at the nature of the question. It was usual to be asked "What are those symbols? What do they mean? Is that a Star of David? Or is it an alchemical sefiroth? Do the inversed triangles represent male and female elements? Why is the Jewish Star of David included? Why are they arranged in three columns?" The merchant had ignored these aspects as though he knew or had little interest in their answers. Michel suspected that a ghost from the merchant's past had inspired the question. Abner of Burgos' reputation was probably tugging at the converted Jew.

Michel knew about Abner's outdated work on Jewish symbols. The pastel merchant also had reason to know, for they were directly linked to his past. Abner was a citizen of Burgos, Jean de Bernuy's own home village. Two centuries earlier Abner of Burgos had, at the age of sixty, converted from Judaism to Christianity. Many thought it was an act of financial convenience but once converted, he strongly attacked the beliefs he'd once held. He'd also denounced the people who were his friends and allies. He'd even changed his name to Alfonso de Valladolid to unlink himself from his past. Treachery and symbols were synonymous with this former citizen of Burgos.

Although Jean de Bernuy had left Spain still a Jew, he too had found it necessary to convert in order to prosper. Here were similarities that would make anyone sensitive. Bernuy saw the symbols on Gerard's house and was simply asking "Are you friend or foe?" Gerard was unperturbed. "It's a beam from my ancestor's house that we put in when the house was rebuilt. The symbols indicate the history and future of my family. Our Jewish heritage is there on show as well as my hermetic interests. I am proud of both, so I left it there for all to see."

Jean de Bernuy seemed satisfied. People of Alet and Toulouse were used to ambiguity in matters of faith and far more tolerant than people of Burgos. Bernuy signaled to a man in the ranks who stepped forward. "This is my son Jean. He and Jacques will join us. Shall we go in?"

The consulting room had been made more elegant for the occasion. The rough seating had been removed and replaced with the best the family had. The storage cabinets had also been taken out to create more space. A bench covered with their finest cloth was installed and stood laden with bottles of a sparkling wine from St Hilaire, together with the finest local produce. Olives, cheese and pastry bought in the market stood ready for their guest. Bernuy seated himself opposite the door where he could see who came and went. It was he who spoke first. "You've been led to believe my injuries bring me to you. That's not so. It's true I fell from my horse but that provides a useful cover for my being here."

It was obvious to Gerard and Michel from his tone that this wasn't an invitation to ask about the true purpose of the visit. There still remained something very Spanish in the manners of the pastel merchant. He was direct in his approach, speaking almost with disdain to those under his command. To Michel it seemed exaggerated, as though the loss of family esteem in Spain hadn't been completely restored by massive wealth.

“I believe you're Michel de Nostredame?” Bernuy enquired, looking directly at Michel, who merely nodded in acknowledgement. I hear such tales about you, I can hardly believe them. Jacques has told me of episodes that he knows and the Countess d'Anjou has told me more. I wanted to meet you and it was partly curiosity that drew me here.”

Michel concealed his annoyance with his friends' indiscretions. He believed he'd successfully kept some things about himself from the people of Alet but now he would have to explain this stranger's interest in his esoteric past. In his own mind there lay doubts as to their significance but Jacques and the Countess had ignored his qualms. He'd frequently pleaded with Jacques not to present stories like the snake encounter on the road to Marseille as prophetic. Even his plea that his words had taken on a meaning in other minds that were not of his creation had no impact on Jacques. The Countess believed what she said, but Jacques merely used the stories as leverage to gain his ends.

Bernuy continued, “You're not the major reason I'm here. There are more pressing matters. However, before I go I'll arrange for you to visit us in Toulouse.”

He paused, gathering his thoughts in order to choose his words with care. There was tiredness about the man, as though oppressed by a heavy burden. His face showed his age. He was wrinkled heavily around the eyes and neck which betrayed what was otherwise a more youthful figure. He seemed fit enough, being neither overweight nor gaunt. The only apparent impediment was a limp, noticeable as he entered the room, the legacy of his recent fall. His tiredness wasn't physical but showed in his expressions and tones. There was no smile or grimace, no excitement or despair that he would allow escape from inside. “I speak knowing that each of you is already bound to secrecy in the pursuit of Lord Bernardin's quest. “Years ago, when I was your age, I would have leapt at the chance to be part of such a project. The thrill of adventure and the unknown would have been all I needed.

“When you are young, old age is something foreign, so far off it seems it couldn't happen. But something changes. Time slips by at an increasing pace and you find yourself older than you ever imagined. Old age comes twenty years before you think it should. And over time, despite any success that comes your way, you accumulate failures deep within your heart. It changes you. The measures of success are sapped by time and age. Disappointments, nature, illness, betrayals and the increasing certainty of death erode the roots that gave you strength. I've known all these things and felt the weight of them increase in the last few years. The death of my brother and my recent fall bring home to me the growing burdens I've still to bear. Yet this quest of Bernardin's! I sense the folly at its core but it stirs something in me that I can't resist.”

He knew he had their attention. They'd no real empathy with his feelings but were drawn by the surprise that he, Jean de Bernuy, was opening up his soul. “The two of you, Michel, Gerard, draw strength from the Qabalah and Alchemy. I find the Qabalah fascinating. It unites my heritage with the realities of the world. And Alchemy of the sort you practice here in Alet intrigues me. There is a mission underway in the world today, and you are part of it.

“But will there be an apocalypse in 1524 that will destroy mankind and make your efforts worthless? Many religious writers and Qabalists point to it, including Abner of Burgos and Martin Luther, but I'm not convinced they're right. What I do know is that the common herd is uncertain. Chaos threatens and the people seek men of action.

“I agree with Bernardin that in 1524, nine months from now when the stars come into their unique union, the time will be right to place a claim upon the realm of France. I want to be part of that. I owe it to my brother Diego. I want my son Jean, his brothers and all my heirs to enjoy the fruits of this unique opportunity, as I myself benefited from my brother's acts. The uncertainty will be no less in 1524 than it was in 1492, when Diego set the groundwork for my family's pact. The same opportunities that opened up for us will be there for you in nine months time.

“What can I offer to this quest? I have the contacts that Jacques needs. I have the money to make Bernardin's plan happen. This meeting is part of what I'm already doing. I'm here to invite you to join with the rest of us in the preparations for 1524.” Bernuy didn't expect to be denied. He was confident of success or he wouldn't have made bold with his plan. His confidence wasn't misplaced. They were eager to move forward with their individual quests and all that was needed was assurance of the alliance's terms.

Gerard broke into Bernuy's monologue. “Sir, what do you have in mind for me?”

Bernuy replied, “The plan involves a society of like-minded people, each with different skills or assets. You would work to bring the alchemists of Alet into our network.”

Gerard was relieved. The offer didn't involve his serving Bernuy as apothecary. There was no need to refuse to serve in Toulouse, thereby creating a powerful enemy. Alicia would be pleased.

Bernuy turned to Michel. “You already have your part allotted by Bernardin. However, given the difficulties he's caught up in I can make it easier for you. I will act as patron to both of you, enabling Monsieur Gerard to use itinerant apothecaries in your place while you go about your quest.”

“Do both of you accept my offer? If so, then I need to spend time alone with Monsieur Gerard. There is much more detail to discuss in regard to his task. In your case, Michel, there is little I can add. However we have gifts for you from the Abbot of La Durade in Toulouse. Jean, give him the gifts. Hopefully they'll mean something to you. They mean nothing to me. The contents of the jars are most strange.”

Jean, the younger, took two small ornate red jars from the pouch around his waist. They were both embossed with a gold cross that Michel recognized as being the symbol of Toulouse and Languedoc. One jar displayed a rose within the cross. The other showed a snake entwined around the cross's shaft.

Michel took the first jar offered, the one with the snake entwined around the twelve points on the arms of the cross. He didn't need to remove the jar's perforated lid to know its contents. The scent of the rose already revealed what lay inside. The second jar, Jean instructed him to open with caution. Michel slightly lifted the lid using the light through the perforations to peer into its depths. The flicker of a tongue, large glistening lidless eyes and a scale-lined mouth confirmed what he already knew to be inside. Michel recognized the young

reptile. He knew it wasn't deadly but he closed the lid saying, "It wouldn't create harmony in the house if I let it escape. Did you swap the contents, Jean?"

Jean replied "No. That's the way they were. The rat snake was in the jar with the rose and the rose in the one meant for the snake."

Michel carefully sealed the jars, placing them in his own pouch. He took leave of Bernuy and the others. Alicia was waiting anxiously in the next room, prevented from hearing what was happening by the presence of Bernuy's men at the entry way. Michel said quietly to her, "It's all right. There's no talk of Gerard going to Toulouse."

She looked only slightly relieved. "I'm pleased about that. But there's another matter which is much more urgent. The young man who brought the message from Marcus' house quoted Myriam as saying 'Tell mama everything's absolutely all right. She's not to worry.'

"When Myriam married Marcus I passed on to her the code my mother gave to me when I married Gerard. She said if I ever needed help, because of threats from Gerard, to use the words 'absolutely all right'. Now Myriam has used them and I'm worried. When I asked Marcus' man what was happening he said Marcus was returning to work this afternoon, and his sister, Angelina, would be looking after Marcus' affairs while he was away. Apparently she's already there and has things under her control. Normally Gerard would go to make sure Myriam's all right but he can't because of this meeting."

Michel volunteered, "I'll go. I'm happy to. I'm not really needed here. I'm sure everything's all right but you have enough stress from Bernuy's visit without an extra burden. I'll leave straight away. I'll get back with news as soon as I can."

The street in front of Gerard's house was still full of Bernuy's men, although the crowd had thinned to a few curious passers-by. Michel wasn't eager to meet Marcus' sister. He'd met her before. To him she seemed a little simple, interested only in crudity and smutty comments. She was infatuated with her own looks, and much too eager for a good time, to have any appeal to Michel. Outside Marcus' house dogs lay basking in the sun. Several rats scurried around the corner as he approached, but the dogs weren't interested in either him or the rats at this time of day. He knocked loudly on the door and waited. No one responded. So he knocked louder and called through a crack. "Is anyone there?" He used a trick from his boyhood and placed his ear against the crack. He could hear someone moving around inside. "I know someone's there. I've been sent by Gerard de Nostredame to find out if anything's wrong," he shouted.

Neighbors were coming to their windows but Michel didn't care. He was determined to get an answer. However after several minutes it was apparent no one intended answering his calls. He retreated under the glare of the watching neighbors. Alicia was waiting for him when he returned and became agitated when he told her what had happened. It was obvious she didn't know what to do. Gerard was busy and couldn't be interrupted for what might turn out to be over-anxiety on the part of Michel and Alicia. Michel calmed her. "I'll go back to the house. The neighbors will have gone. I'll find a way of getting in somehow. Leave it to me."

She replied "We have an emergency spare key for the side door that you may be able to use. The door often warps and at this time of year it can only be opened with great effort. It makes a lot of noise so it's fallen into disuse. Fortunately, Marcus thinks this key is useless, so Myriam took it and brought it here. You'll be noticed if you try to enter that way, but if

there's something wrong you might have to use it.” She wished him well as he left. He noted the anxiety in her face. It had increased as time had passed without any word.

The street was quiet and the dogs were once more dozing. Michel looked for and found the door entering off the alley at the side of the house. He studied it and realized he would need all his effort to open it with his light frame. He used the key and it turned easily but the door wouldn't move. Alicia was right it wouldn't be a way of quiet entry. The walls offered no help. They were smoother than those in Gerard's house. “Made so by Marcus,” Michel mused. The shutters were all closed which in itself was odd, especially on the shady side of the house.

Michel, annoyed at his lack of progress, mulled over his dilemma, eventually formulating a plan. It was unlikely to work but it was worth a try. He went up to the dogs nearest the front door of Marcus' house and prodded each with his foot. He had their attention. They sat watching as he reached into his pouch. He took the jar with the rose within the cross and eased open its lid, tipping its contents gently to the ground. He moved quickly away as the dogs began to bark and snap at the snake on the ground. The din was ferocious as he disappeared into the shadow of the side alley. The noise of the dogs was joined by that of anxious neighbors, aroused by the commotion. At last he heard what he'd waited for, the voice of Angelina calling out, “What's going on? Why are the dogs barking? What have they got?”

Michel crashed his shoulder into the door and felt it move. Once more he shoved and it burst open, sending him sprawling over the steps to the room inside. He quickly gathered himself and pressed the door hard back into place. Adjusting to the gloom, he saw that the room was next to the one he'd been in the night before. Cats, unsettled by his hasty entry, were returning to guard the sacks of flour that lay stacked on the floor. Piles of unused sacks lay to one side. Michel gathered several of these and covered himself behind the pile. A rat, previously hidden by the sacks, squealed as it sped away. The commotion from outside was dying down and normal sounds from inside the house could now be heard. The front door closed. Distant voices became clearer as the external silence was restored. Angelina was urging someone to go back to her room. A male voice resisted, asking her to tell him what had happened.

“A dog fight over a snake. It got away into the drains. It seems we'll have no peace today, what with the merchant's visit and now this. But go back to my room. I won't be long and I'll make it up to you, my horny one.”

Michel recognized the male voice. He'd heard it recently. It was the priest that came to Lisette, the one that had complained about God's injustice for having to go out in foul weather to bless a promiscuous sinner. “Hypocrite!” Michel said softly to himself. He could hear Angelina in the next room, muttering to herself. It was only a minute until she was gone but already Michel was cramped and wanting to move. He rose and stretched before making his way quietly into the room alongside. Soft moans and sobs came from a room to his left, also leading off this main chamber. Its door was locked and the sounds muffled but he was certain he knew who was inside. “Myriam!” he whispered. “It's me, Michel.”

The sobbing stopped. A second later he heard her up against the door. Relief masking despair, sounded as she spoke, “The door is locked and Angelina's got the key. Marcus insisted I stay in here while Bernuy's men are in town. How did you get in?”

“Alicia gave me the side key. I started the noise outside to cover my entry. How can I get you out of here?”

“You already have the means. The locks aren't good and the side door key will open them. But it's not as simple as just getting me out. If you're caught in here, or I flee with you, it'll make matters worse. Marcus will think that you and I are lovers.”

Michel recognized the risk but it didn't deter him. “I'm coming in anyway. Angelina's occupied with her lover so we can plan without much risk once I'm inside.” He took the key and felt it turn. The door opened easily with little noise. He slid inside and closed the door locking it from inside.

He heard her sobs and saw her standing, leaning against the wall, shaking with emotion. He reached for her and felt her yield to him, the softness of her body pressed in relief against his own. It was some time before her sob-driven trembling ceased. Her arms entwined with his while they stood, allowing her emotions to escape. “You are truly my knight,” she said at last, stroking his chest. “I hoped you'd come. I wanted you to come.”

With gentleness he turned her head and kissed her on her neck. “I had to come.” was all he said. She drew back from him but took his hand and led him to the bed in the corner. She turned and drew him down, knowing that after this their friendship would be different. “There is no greater alchemical formula than this, where body, mind and soul are one,” she whispered.

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“You're right of course,” Michel whispered as they lay together, their ardor spent. “Why now and not last night? The element of risk must add to the formula,” he mused.

She whispered back “You think too much. And now isn't the time for that. What are we going to do?”

“You mean immediately of course. Not later?” Michel asked.

“Yes. It seems hopeless. If I escape with you, then they'll wonder how and make it all the harder for me. If you leave, there'll be the difficulty of coming back. You can't use the same trick more than once.”

“I know, but a plan is forming. It's risky but I think it'll work. It means I have to leave and lock you in this room. I won't be long, I promise. Once I've gone, make sure there's no evidence I've been in here. Walk all over the room so any of my footprints are masked by yours.”

Her eyes looked deeply into his, bound by his words and the softness of his presence. So much had changed. Gone was the ember of her flirtation which she'd used to good effect. No longer were they drawn, one to the other, by the lure of risk. The yearning, that had seemed to be his alone, had passed to her. “All right,” she replied in wistful anguish. “But hurry”. Michel rose and left the room locking it behind him. He made his way to the entry door, lifted its latch, and left the door ajar.

Standing in the passageway he called out “Hello! It's Michel de Nostredame. I'm back. Is anyone here?” He knew there wouldn't be a reply so he swiftly ascended the steps and

made his way to the guest room. He threw open the door and with a gasp, feigned surprise at what he saw. “Oh. I'm sorry.” he exclaimed. “We've been so concerned about Myriam and the downstairs door had been left ajar, I thought there might have been robbers.”

The embarrassment of the priest was greater than that of Angelina, who smirked at Michel in the triumph of her sexual conquest. “Look. I meant no harm and I won't mention this to anyone providing Myriam and the children are safe.” Michel said.

The priest shifted uneasily. “I can assure you, you'll have whatever you want in order to keep this secret. And that goes for Angelina too. I also hold secrets that she won't want revealed. As to the children, they're asleep in the next room. And Myriam is being held under Marcus's orders in the room below. Fetch her Angelina. Let him see that she's well.” Angelina covered herself and went downstairs. It was several minutes before she returned with Myriam.

“Are you all right?” Michel asked “We've been worried about you.”

Myriam responded, looking relieved, “Yes, but I must see mama and assure her I'm safe.”

Michel took up her cue. “I agree. That's best. In future Angelina, Myriam will be let out of that room once Marcus has gone and she and the children will spend the day at her mother's house. Is that understood?”

As he and Myriam were leaving he looked back at Angelina, “Of course, while Myriam is treated fairly my lips will be sealed about what takes place between you and your priest.”

