



WRONG WAY ROUND THE CHURCH

J. M.
Munro

Mariana de la Mar - prequel

WRONG WAY ROUND THE CHURCH

This is the story of Mariana's early years. It is also the story of Ferchard, Sir Farquhar de Dyngvale, her father's old friend, and the story of the little "lost princess", the "derelicta", whom Mariana was entrusted with the task of restoring to her home and family ...



Botticelli – Derelicta

Other Books in this series:

The Devil's A Woman

(Mariana de la Mar 1)

The Undeparted Dead

(Mariana de la Mar 2)

J. M. Munro

**WRONG WAY
ROUND THE
CHURCH**

**Prequel
to the
Mariana de la Mar
series of historical novels**

*Go as the sun goes, wise daughter, go clockwise;
wrong way round the church is another kingdom, the price
of walking alone is a sword-blade slashing the instep.*

Dorothy Nimmo

Published by the author

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PART I

The Mermaid of the Mar Menor

*Al Cazar, Los Alcazares,
a village in the south east of Spain, during the 1360s*

1

*Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat:
for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.*

(Gen 2:17)

*And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:
For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes
shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.*

(Gen 3:4-5)

Battles and bloodshed between Moors and Christians have racked Andalucía for as long as anyone can remember; armies of butchers sweeping back and forth, north and south, east and west.

All they ever brought the ordinary people was misery.

But al Cazar, the village where I was born, is tucked away beside the Mar Menor, the Little Sea. There are boats. There are donkeys (more donkeys than people) but donkeys, being neither Christians nor Moors, persecute no one. And the people? Well, people who live by the sea are more charitable than those who live in anonymity in great cities, and more tolerant than those who grow up in inland villages enclosed by hills.

We were happy still. And open-minded.

My mama, who died when I was a toddler, was Doña María de la Manga, the daughter of Don Joaquín de la Manga and of Sebah of Cordoba. Sebah herself, my grandmama, was the daughter of a Muslim father and a Jewish mother, Rebekkah of Salé in Morocco, so I have both Spanish and Moorish blood; but also, in

a sense, I am Jewish, for among Jews descent is always reckoned through the mother.

And that's just on my mother's side.

My papa was Sir Andrew MacElpin of the Black Isle, a Scot in exile.

Papa was a tall, handsome man, far taller than any other man in the village, and kind and tender, too, in his way.

I worshipped him; but he was not cut out to be mama to a little girl.

A slave, Khadija, who had looked after my mama when she was a child, now cared for me. But it was from my grandmama, Sebah, that I learnt how to be a dancer: how to be a woman.

'When you dance,' she said, 'you become one with all women, one with all life.'

I understood later, dancing for strangers in another world, that the movements of belly-dancing are more even than that: they are one with the movements of the universe, the dance of the stars.

Rabbi Yacoub ben Amar (Uncle Yacoub) would not have agreed. He considered belly-dancing "erotic" – which of course it is, when performed before a man. To him, the Song of the Stars is what is heard by the pure in heart as they sit or kneel in silent contemplation. And by heart he meant soul *and* body

Yacoub was a cousin of Sebah's (the Jewish strand) and had a place in Don Joaquín's commodious, but now mostly empty, home. I am not quite sure what that place was, but I do know that when my papa came to Los Alcazares and found time heavy on his hands, he took full advantage of Yacoub's presence. They had conversations that went on for months, years even, on philosophy and theology, history and alchemy, and they both revelled in the chance to speak other tongues – other than Spanish, that is – for both spoke French, and my papa taught

Yacoub English (he would not teach him the Gaelic; that was just for Papa and me) while Yacoub taught him literary Arabic.

I sat at their feet and lapped it all up.

On our own, Papa and I read stories from the Bible. I was interested because he and Grandpapa used to take me to the local church at Easter and sometimes on Saints' Days, and I liked it, the darkness, the mysteriousness, the silence, the chanting in Latin. At home, Papa would read the stories aloud (he was proud of his Latin), then, together, we would put them into Gaelic, interpreting, embroidering, sometimes amusing ourselves, as when we decided that Jesus was being sarcastic when he said "Not one jot or tittle of the Law shall pass away" (jot and tittle meaning such things as accents and commas), for was not this same Jesus the one who broke the Sabbath by plucking grains of corn and healing people of their infirmities, and who forgave the adulteress when the Law said she should be stoned? 'Ah, my little thinker!' Papa murmured, cupping my chin in his hand, turning my face up to his, pushing my long hair back out of my eyes and gazing at me as though he wanted this moment never to end.

'My little lady', Papa had always called me – he would never let me forget I was the daughter of "a landed knight" – and occasionally 'my little dancer'. Now he stroked my head as I knelt there by his left leg – always his left leg, for he drank with his right hand – and smiled and murmured, 'My little thinker', and I loved that.

I must have been eight, maybe nine.

Or (back to the Bible) we would get upset, as when David usurps the throne of Saul – for that, of course, was how Papa saw it. After all, hadn't he had to flee Scotland with his friend Ferchard, badly injured, when David Bruce usurped the throne of Edward Balliol, rightful King of Scotland and actual King from 1332 to 1338?

He would tell me old tales from his homeland in the far north, tales of the hill and the forest, of hunting the wild deer – usually with his friend Ferchard – and fishing the streams. 'A fish from the pool and a deer from the mountain are thefts no man need be ashamed of,' he would say. And he was there.

Other times, it would be tales of the sea and the islands. It was he who first told me of mermaids. Of their good deeds and their bad deeds. One called Lin –

'Lin?' I cried. 'Like Linda?' For Linda in Spanish means pretty.

'Like Linda, yes. Lin, who died trying to get back the skin of a seal from the fishermen who had stripped it off the poor creature.' Or the one – he didn't remember her name – who loaded a fisherboy from Durness with gold and jewels. But when she discovered that he gave them away to human girls, she enticed him down to her cave beneath the sea with promises of untold wealth, and there she lulled him to sleep and while he slept she bound him with golden chains, and there he lies, her captive, until this day.

'Was that so bad?' I asked.

He gazed at me.

He was on the side of the fisherboy.

Me, I identified with the mermaid, for in the mornings, early, when everyone was busy with other things, I too went down to the sea and swam.

I had discovered swimming all by myself.

The Mar Menor is sheltered and calm compared to the open sea, and the back of our house was almost on the beach. It was inevitable that I should play at the water's edge, and that one day (a very hot day? I don't remember) I should get right into the sea and start swimming.

All I remember is that I swam. I no longer played on the beach at all, I simply took off my clothes, ran straight in, and

swam away from the land, under water.

No one knew. Not that I thought about it, then. I didn't realise I was doing anything wrong.

Except the old fisherman. He knew, of course. How could he not know? He caught me one day.

I could have avoided his net – I had before, and believed he hadn't seen me – but later, looking down into the sea from his boat, I understood that he could see everything when the sea was flat and calm, had probably seen me every time I had seen the hull of his boat pass overhead.

The day he caught me, I was tired. I had swum too long perhaps, swum out too far for one so young, and was resting on the surface. It was a dazzlingly bright, hot morning. I heard nothing. Perhaps I was sleeping. Suddenly, this net was all over me and I was screaming and struggling – then was in the boat and fighting as he fought to disentangle me. And as soon as he had freed me, I slipped out of his hands – he was reluctant to touch me, hold me – he was shy, but I didn't realise that then – and over the side and was gone.

Another day, I crept up on him, curious. He had lines out all round the boat. All was silent. The sea was like glass. No sight or sound of him. He's sleeping, I thought. Suddenly, he looked over the side, straight at me. No wonder he was such a good fisherman!

We gazed at each other, me ready to dive at the first hint of a move from the man, him ... wondering about me, of course. But I knew nothing about men then, good men like Pedro, for that was his name, or bad men, like so many I have known since.

'You're disturbing the fish,' he said.

What did he mean? That the fish wouldn't come near while I was near? *Nonsense*. (A word I had learnt from my grandmama.) 'The fish follow me,' I said. 'At least, some of them do.'

He smiled. He knew that, really.

'Why did you catch me?'

'I'd never seen you resting on the surface that way before, sirenika. I thought you might be tired.'

Sirenika? Little mermaid? I loved that. And he'd been trying to help? But then why the net?

'I thought if I spoke – or touched you – you would slip down into the water and be gone.'

A fisherman. A natural hunter.

I smiled back up at him.

But I didn't get into his boat. Not then. That happened for the first time more than a year later – and it happened in the dark. For by then, they had begun to succeed in making me ashamed to be seen.

It was my grandmama who found out first about my swimming. Khadija was always busy in the early part of the day, and I knew I was safe from her, but when Sebah came looking for me on the beach one morning and found only my smock, she guessed where I must be. She sat by it and waited. Although she didn't swim herself, it wasn't the water that worried her. She remembered her brothers, who had swum in the Oued el Kebir when they were all small children, and this Mar Menor seemed very safe compared to the Great River as it swirled through Córdoba. She waited. And watched as I swam right to the very edge of the sea and stood up, glistening in the sunlight as the water dripped off me.

'Come here.'

Oh dear.

I hastened to put on the smock, but she said, 'No, leave that till you are dry. Anyone who is going to see you has already done so ... Sit down.'

I sat beside her on the sand, clasping my knees to my chin.

I grinned up at her.

'When I was a little girl in Córdoba, my brothers used to go swimming in the river. I did not. Can you imagine why?'

I had no idea. 'You didn't *like* swimming?' I asked, incredulous. 'No, it can't have been that. You preferred dancing. But swimming's *like* dancing! It's dancing in the water. You can –'

'No. Not for any of those reasons. Because I was a little *girl*.'

What difference could that make? Oh! 'You mean you had to help in the house? Do housework? That's not fair!'

'No, not because I had to do chores in the house. I was very spoilt. I still am – and so is a certain young lady sitting not a hundred miles from me.'

'Then *why*?'

'Because I was a girl.'

'You said that, but –'

'*Girls* do not interrupt when their elders and betters are speaking. Nor do they take their clothes off in public.'

Ah. That.

'*In public*?' I gazed up at her.

'In front of ... strangers.'

'There is no one here but us.'

'There might be. There could be.'

Like a fisherman.

'Then let us say, instead, *out in the open air*.' She met my eyes. and added: 'Not in daylight, anyway.'

So I have to go to the beach early, while it is still dark, and come up out of the sea as dawn breaks [I wrote in what I called mi diario, my diary]. Or risk what? Some terrible enchantment? Like being turned into a fish? No, not with that grandmother. With my other, my Scottish, grandmother, anything might have happened! My father hadn't told me about her yet, though.

Nobody knows what time I come out of the sea. Nobody cares. What Sebah said is nonsense really. No one ever sees me. And I am far away from where the boats come ashore, even old Pedro's, and from where the village people ever walk.

The village was actually quite a long way from the sea, and my grandfather, Don Joaquín, owned most of the land in between. It was all ragged groves of ancient olive-trees, sun-baked and loud with the chatter and shriek of crickets in summer and, in winter, occasionally the temporary home of flocks of sheep and goats brought down from the hills by itinerant shepherds. I love – still love – those olive groves more than anything anywhere I have ever been apart from the sea itself. It was among those gnarled silver-and-black trees that I used to hide when I wanted to be alone and there were people from the village about on the beach.

No one cared for them any longer, the olive groves. In fact, not much real farming at all went on when I was a child, though it had, they told me, when the world was young and my mother and brothers were alive. Perhaps if my mother had married a farmer ...

If my mother had married a farmer, this story would have been very different!

Don Joaquín still got up early, as did Khadija, but they were busy.

Papa got up even later than Sebah, and by the time he came down to the beach to sit and stare out at the sea, as he so frequently did, I was always dressed and ready. And though he sometimes observed that my hair was wet, I didn't think he realised I'd been swimming.

Until the day he almost "rescued" me.

I knew the weather, the way the sea began to move, the way the wind began to flick spray off the waves before a storm. Oh yes, our little sea was not so calm and flat, it could turn on you in sudden fury. Even fishermen who had failed to heed the signs and dallied at their nets or their cane enclosures had drowned.

But dawn was a good time, and I was careful.

That day, bad weather was coming, the surface was choppy and winds were gusting, but I wanted to see what it was like

below the surface during a storm. Surely I would be out of harm's way?

I was, to a certain extent.

It wasn't that the sea was too shallow. I could not have gone deeper, stayed down longer, even had I been out in the Great Sea itself. I swam down, and out, as far as I could. I noticed some panicking up near the surface among the smaller fish – even among the sea-horses, our own little *hippocampus*. The jelly-fish, though, were sinking slowly down into the depths, aware obviously, but unconcerned. I followed them – and a couple of larger fish that seemed equally unconcerned – but *I* had to keep coming up for air! And each time I came up the weather was worse, the storm made it harder to breathe, it was harder to dive down again. I thought I heard a voice calling me, then realised it was my father's voice: realised he must be far-calling me, unconsciously, as for some reason he searched for me in the house. I would have to get out. I tried to swim right up to the beach as I usually did but was caught up and twisted sideways in a great roller – great by my standards then. It literally threw me onto the beach and dropped me at my father's feet.

He had not been far-calling me – or not *only* far-calling me – he had been shouting at me and I had heard his voice through the wind and the waves and the water. And he was half-undressed! He had been about to plunge in and rescue me!

'Oh, Papa,' I said, and fetched my smock and we went and sat behind a dune, out of the wind, and watched the wind blowing sand into the foam, and in the distance the sands of La Manga swirling out over the open sea. *La Manga is the arm of land that almost closes off the Mar Menor. [I wrote] It is not land, I don't think, but sand, a great sandbank, where birds wheel and soar in the wind when it is windy and, when it is not, go walking at dawn along the water's edge searching for worms, and when the sun shines millions of lizards and beetles scurry around and tiny crabs hide in the drifts of seaweed. I have been there on*

horseback with Papa, and with Grandpapa. One day I mean to swim there.

'My little mermaid. I knew you went swimming, of course I did. I've always known. And whenever the weather turns stormy, I always come down to make sure you're safe.'

So. And I thought he came just for a walk!

2

Uncle Yacoub also introduced me to far-calling – and far-hearing. We practised it in separate rooms, waiting alone until we heard the other one call. Call with the mind, that is, for we did not actually utter a sound. And we could do it. It worked. And now we were practising other, more difficult things like arranging to meet in a third place (such as the beach, though when Yacoub visualised a fish he visualised it dead and I went to the kitchen!) or asking what we were having for dinner and receiving in answer from Yacoub the image of a fish (but the *same dead fish*?!)

It was then I started keeping seriously what I can only ever think of as *mi diario*. I wrote on any leaf, any fragment, of paper I could obtain, and stored them all in a box my grandfather made for me. I have it still. Khadija guarded it while I was away. On my return I re-read all the scraps (I am reading them again now) and it all came back to me and I knew I was truly home. Home is the place quite as much as the people, and though my whole family were dead and gone and only Khadija left alive, yet that was my home. It still is, though I do not live there, shall never live there again.

Uncle Yacoub and I now usually speak Djudezmo together. [I

wrote] *It is the language that the Jews of Spain speak among themselves, a sort of mixture of Castellano and Hebrew and Aramaic. Aramaic, Uncle Yacoub says, is the language they used to speak in Palestine when Jesus was alive, the actual language He used to speak! I like to think that Jesus was a Jew, and a rabbi, like Uncle Yacoub, and that I know and use some of the actual words He must have used. [I still like to think that, even now, today.] But to read the Bible together, Yacoub has started teaching me real Hebrew. It is very difficult, perhaps because it is the first language I've ever tried to learn. The others I just sort of picked up as I went along.*

We began at the beginning, literally. The opening chapter of Genesis. I had read this with my father, and liked it – though I liked better the stories of Adam and Eve and the Serpent, and of Cain and Abel, but now, going over it word by word with Yacoub, I began to consider it critically. 'Why does it say that right at the beginning, on the First Day, God made light and there was light?'

'Because that *was* the First Day. Without light, there was no Day. All was night.'

'All was *night*? And had been, for ever, until God made the light?'

He nodded. 'Yes. Except that God exists outside of time – as indeed he exists outside of the whole cosmos.'

'And sort of ... *looks in*?'

He smiled. 'Yes. So when He created Light and brought into being the First Day, He simultaneously created the cosmos, the universe.'

'And looked at it and said: "It is good." Yes, I see that. But why then does it say here that God made the Sun and the Moon and the Stars on the Fourth Day? How could there have been light – ?'

'Now that *is* a good question. And from that question springs, or at least *can* spring, the whole of Kabbalah.'

'Kabbalah?'

'For Kabbalah, we shall have to wait another year or two.'

'A year? But I'm nearly nine.'

'Then let's say when you are ten.'

'On my tenth birthday!'

'All right. I promise.'

Now that I had begun to question, I didn't stop. Next time my father opened his Bible with me at his knee, I took him back to Adam and Eve, and to Cain, and the *other* people. 'After Cain killed Abel, his brother, God didn't kill Cain – and he didn't let other people kill him. He said "Whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." This must mean it's wrong to kill people, even if they've committed a terrible murder themselves.'

He gazed down at me, put his hand over mine – it was on his knee – and held it there.

At last, he said: 'You may well be right, lass. And perhaps one day the world will come to think as you do.'

'Not as I do. As God does.'

He smiled. 'That may be asking too much ... Have you any other *wee* questions?'

Sometimes "wee" meant "wee", as in "the wee lass" (me); other times it was more than a little ironic.

'No. Only: the *other* people. Who were these *other people*, the ones who would have wanted to kill Cain? And it says he went into the Land of Nod, where there must have been people, for he found himself a woman there and made her his wife.'

'Oh, aye. Well, I do know something of that, for I had it from *my* mother – who incidentally was very like you, as I believe I have mentioned before.'

He had, on many occasions. Old Lady Marian MacElpin who lived in the far, far north and was something of a (*whisper it ...*) a *witch*.

'She told me, when I once asked the very same question, that Eve was Adam's *second* wife.'

'What? Then where did – ?'

'Listen, lass. His first wife, the woman who had been created with Adam, alongside him and equal to him, on the Sixth Day, was Lilith. But she left him, and went with demons, and gave birth to children who were the children of demons. *Then* God planted a garden, a paradise, in Eden, because He loved Adam and was sorry for him. And because Adam was alone now, and the Week of Creation over and finished, He made Eve out of Adam's own flesh to be a fit companion for him.'

Wait till I tell Yacoub this! I wrote in my diary that night.

'However, when Eve later listened to the Serpent and plucked the apple from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and of Evil, and gave it to Adam to eat – when she, too, failed – they were cursed and cast out of Paradise. They lost everything.'

'God *cursed* them?'

'No, the Fruit of that Tree carried, and still carries, a curse with it. God had warned them. They brought the curse upon themselves. They lost everything. But Lilith didn't come under that curse. Unlike Adam, she still had – still has! – her immortality. She doesn't suffer, she doesn't labour, she doesn't feel shame. She is naked and beautiful and immortal. She is a goddess. She was made, like Adam, in the image of God, but she didn't lose it.'

'Perfect.'

He raised one eyebrow. 'She is evil.'

'And she still exists? *Now?*'

'Oh aye. She still exists. She comes to men in the night, in their dreams, and – but that's quite enough for you for the moment, lass. You're over young to –'

'Till I'm ten.'

'Aye. Till you're ten.'

'But I'm not over young to learn to fight. Give me another

lesson with the dirk.'

'Dirk? You call that nasty little stiletto thing you carry around with you a *dirk*?'

I stared at him. "That nasty little stiletto thing" was the stabbing knife Sebah had given me, to use only if absolutely necessary: by which she meant, she explained, if my life was in danger.

'And even then I should try not to kill?' I had asked her, awed, and remembering what I had been taught about the sanctity of human life.

'Oh no. Then you should make quite sure you do kill.'

And I had shown it to Papa and he had weighed it in his hand and begun to show me how to use it and promised me more lessons. But now ...?

He looked down at me, realised he had hurt me. 'I'm sorry, lass. It's just not a weapon a Scot would use.'

'Then give me a weapon a Scot *would* use!'

He grinned. 'Aye, I will, when you're older. I'll even teach you how to wield a sword, if you grow big enough and strong enough and we are still together then.'

'When I am ten?'

'Oh, no. When you are thirteen, fourteen – if you have the build for it. You're over skinny.'

'You don't like my knife, you don't like my body. There's no pleasing you.'

'You please me, little firebrand. Oh, I cannot tell you how much you please me. Now run and fetch your "dirk" and I'll show you how to use it on a big man who does *this* to you.' And he grabbed me and lifted me up over his head, laughing.

Then set me down again. 'Now run and fetch it.'

I pulled it out from under my smock where I carried it always.

His eyes opened. 'Good ... But you didn't have time to draw it.'

'I did. It just never occurred to me to do so. You're my papa.'

'Hmm. Well, let's try it again, shall we? But be careful with that thing. I'm your papa, as you say.'

I hid the knife again – and had it out in a flash as he made to grab me – but he had knocked it from my hand, sent it flying across the courtyard, before I realised what was happening.

'You were only pretending to grab me!'

'Aye, it was a feint.'

'But you *knew* I had the dirk. It's not fair.'

'Everything's fair in a fight, lass. I learnt that from one who had been a Templar Knight, and they the most gracious and chivalrous of warriors.'

'Templar Knight?'

'Another time.' He gazed at me. 'Though you should perhaps know that the Templars supported the Bruce –'

'Supported *the Bruce*? Then they –'

'Aye, lass, but that was because a pope had excommunicated the Bruce for the cold-blooded murder of Red John Comyn, one of the many he slaughtered, usually treacherously (this particular murder took place during a meeting in a church!) on his way to the throne. So, naturally, when another pope suppressed the Order of the Knights of the Temple, Scotland, which was still under a cloud, its so-called king excommunicated, was the one place in the whole world almost that welcomed them. A case of my enemy's enemy.'

'My enemy's enemy?'

'Is my friend. Remember that, it may come in useful. Now, where were we? Oh aye. The dirk. You must make sure no one *ever* knows you carry a dirk under there, lass. Lesson number one.'

Two lessons I never forgot, and each has served me well on more than one occasion.

But he never did get round to teaching me how to use a sword. Or to telling me what he knew of the Templars.

Today I learnt what men do to women so the woman has a baby. I suppose it's the same thing Lilith did when she "went with" those demons. I didn't learn this as a lesson from Papa though, or from Uncle Yacoub. I learnt it from Sebah. Better. They do the same thing animals do. Obvious, really. I just never thought of it. And I'm never going to let anyone do that to me.

Yes, I remember that. Sebah and I were discussing *cojones* – testicles. I had noticed that my grandfather's horse, which was a male, I knew, and not a female, didn't have any *cojones*. The other male animals, like Pancho, the donkey, and Suelo, the dog, did – big ones, hanging in a bag of skin between their legs. I asked grandfather, and he said, 'Because it's a gelding.'

'What's a gelding?'

'A horse without *cojones*. We just said that, *querida*.'

'Yes, but why doesn't it have *cojones*? All the other male animals have.'

'Listen. I'm in a hurry now. You ask your father.'

I did so.

He blushed – *blushed!* – and said, 'Ask your grandmother.'

So I did. 'What's a gelding?'

'It's a horse that's had its balls lopped off.'

'But why? Why would they do that? Isn't it cruel?'

'They do it to make the horse calm, make it behave. And no, of course it's not cruel. It's necessary.'

'If they're better without them, why do they have the stupid things in the first place?'

'Because without them they would have no babies.'

'Don't tease me! I'm serious!'

'I'm not teasing you.'

'You are! *They* don't have babies! The females have babies! *Gallinas* – *conejas* – *perras* – *lobas* – *vacas* – *yeguas* – *burras* (hens, does, bitches, she-wolves, cows, mares, she-asses) –'

'They wouldn't have babies unless a male put his thing –'

'His *thing*?'

'His *polla* – you know – '

'Yes, I know, but – you mean *like an animal* – ?'

'We're talking about animals.'

But I wasn't. Not any longer. 'You mean a *man* puts his *thing* in a woman, and – '

'Yes, that's exactly what I mean. He puts his seed into her, and within her womb it grows and develops into a baby. Why do you think you are so like your father? Much more like him than your poor mother.'

I thought about that. It made sense. But ... 'But what's that got to do with balls?'

'The seed is made in the balls, silly. It just comes out through the thing. Look, you see there? Suelo's *cojones* and *pene*? No, you can't see properly from here.'

She was already holding my hand, and now she pulled me towards the big guard-dog, which was chained to a fig-tree.

I dragged back. I was terrified of Suelo.

'What's wrong? Does he frighten you? I never noticed. I thought you weren't scared of anything.'

'I'm not. Except him.'

'Well, all right, let's go and – you're not afraid of rabbits, are you?'

The buck rabbit had tiny balls in a little fur pouch. When she had shown me them and I'd felt them and admired them, I cried 'But they're sweet! And this little pouch is perfect! Not like that ugly skin bag Suelo keeps his in!'

She laughed. Then showed me how the balls were connected to the tiny *pene*.

'And they cut *that* off, too?'

'No. Well – '

'Grandpapa's gelding hasn't got one.'

'Oh, it has, I'm sure. But when they don't have *cojones*, the *pene* shrinks and shrivels and hardly shows.'

'Ah. But you said "Well ...".'

'I was thinking of eunuchs.'

'*Eunuchs?*'

'Men who have had their balls removed.'

'*Men?*'

'Yes. You don't want a male servant – or slave – with balls. Of course not.'

'No?'

'No!'

'But – why not?'

'Why not? They might fuck someone. Oh, no, no, no, no.'

'Fuck?'

'Put their *polla* in and – you know – like animals.'

'Ah. Yes.' Too many things to grasp and think about. 'And – and when they geld men, they cut the *polla* off as well? Is that what you mean? So they can't possibly – '

'Oh. No. But sometimes. It depends. In some places – some harems ... Listen. When they still have a *pene*, they're still men, really – '

'Men without balls.'

'Yes. And placid, and well-behaved – at least in theory.'

She looked down at me.

I looked back up at her, expectantly, the rabbit still on my lap. I was scratching its head gently now, and caressing its long ears.

She sighed, did a little dance with her hands, and went on. 'There was one when I was a girl at home, made our lives a misery.'

'One without balls. A – what did you say? A eunuch?'

'Yes.'

'But with his *polla*.'

'Yes!' The movements of her hands and feet had changed. She was running out of patience. She did, easily. Not like Uncle Yacoub. I shut my mouth, and she tried again. 'But my father liked him, believed he was what we women needed, so there was

little my mother or anyone else could do about him. Then one day he died.'

'What do you mean, he died? How did he die?'

'Who knows? There were rumours ... A harem is a strange place, a place where everyone lives together, does everything together. One can be happy there. There is no loneliness. But there is no privacy, either. No solitude. It is not a place where an outsider will survive for long.'

It sounded awful to me, even then. And that was before I grew used to being on my own most of the time, and doing everything on my own. How could I have guessed that one day I would be sold on the block in Granada, the great capital city of Moorish Andalucía, and end up as a slave-girl, the lowest of the low, in just such a harem?

'But,' she went on, 'if they have their *pene*, too, removed while they are still young, they are no longer really men – boys – at all, and are often treated as girls, and reared – if that is what their owners wish – not as eunuchs, but as women.'

I remember it was all too much. I couldn't cope with it. I put the *conejo* back in the pen with the *conejos*, said I needed to have a *pipí*, and slipped away – Suelo snarling and lunging at me as I passed. I gave him the Hand of Fatima (the flat hand, full palm, gesture which Uncle Yacoub told me was really the Hand of Miriam, Moses' sister), trying to look nonchalant in front of Sebah, but I knew that if the chain snapped or came undone he would rip me apart with his great teeth and wolf me down before anyone could do anything to save me.

Sebah wasn't fooled, though. When we sat down to eat, Grandpapa announced, after the usual discussion about the weather – when it wasn't too hot and dry it was damp and cold – and the troubles of the day, that he'd decided to geld the guard-dog.

What? Well, at least I knew what he was talking about.

Sebah winked at me, and I understood. It had been her idea.

And she had done it for me!

Then I heard Papa protesting, saying he shouldn't, and I didn't know what to think. I agreed with him really. It was unkind.

But then I heard Sebah saying he should, of course. 'As it is, the dog might go for the child – she is quite right to be scared of it – but not if it is gelded. And anyway – ' knowing everyone always gave in to her when she claimed to be missing Moorish ways – 'we need a eunuch about the place.'

'But a dog's not a eunuch,' protested my father, to whom the whole idea of emasculation was always somehow horrifying, I'm still not sure why. Did he really want young bulls charging around the place attacking people and horses and each other, and scrawny, almost uneatable, young cocks tearing each other's eyes out in place of the delicious capons my grandfather reared for the table? Now, I'll never have the chance to ask him ...

Still, he lost the argument and poor Suelo lost his balls and – I never knew why he was called Suelo, perhaps because he was the colour of mud – from then on he was known as Suelita. And instead of snarling he started whimpering excitedly and wetting himself whenever he saw me and I would go and pat the poor thing's head instead of giving him the usual wide berth, and he would lick my hands and my legs – whatever he could get at. He was completely useless as a watch-dog, but I actually started liking him.

As I wrote in my diary at the time, *Papa was wrong. Whatever it takes, being licked is better than being bitten.*

3

Alone with Uncle Yacoub, I questioned everything. And he

began to teach me. I realise now that as Papa became more withdrawn and melancholy, Yacoub took me under his wing. He taught me palm-reading, languages, theology, Kabbalah, astrology and, especially in those dreadful days and months following the death of Lalla Sebah, *mi abuela*, anything else that crossed his, or my, mind, such as dream-worlds and planned-and-shared dreaming

Ten today! Grandpapa gave me a copy of the Four Gospels, I don't know where he got it from (or where he's been hiding it!) but it's beautiful! On every page a little illustration in the brightest colours you can imagine, and at the beginning of each Gospel a picture which covers the whole page! I sat and read it by myself – my Latin is very good now and I have no trouble at all with it – until Sebah woke up and came through with a shawl all covered with sequins which was for me, and which she insisted I tie round my hips "now, at once". Suddenly there was music coming from outside the window! I ran over and leaned out. Two boys were there, one playing the drums, the other a clarinet.

Khadija hauled me back in. I was too big now to go leaning out of windows talking to boys (even if those boys are just Matteo and Miguel from the village!) so I did as Sebah said: started dancing.

At first, despite the music, my mind was still on what I had been reading. Why is there no dancing in the Gospels? Then I remembered the Wedding where Jesus changed the water into wine. There must have been dancing at a wedding. Did Mary Magdalene dance for Jesus? Would she have done so? I must ask Yacoub. He knows more about Jewish customs at the time, and he is less afraid to think of Jesus as a man. Then I remembered Salome, dancing for her father – or not her real father, her step-father, king Herod. How beautifully she must have danced that he should offer her anything she desired, anything at all, even

the half of his kingdom. And her awful mother, her stupid, awful mother, made her ask for a man's head, the head of John the Baptist, instead.

How she must have danced, though!

I imagined I was Salome, and that I would ask for half of Spain. Which half? they would ask me. You can have Andalucía, you can have Castilla, you can have Aragón, only dance for us some more! That's not half, I would cry, as I whirled, I want Aragón and Andalucía! You can keep Castille.

I danced and I danced, while Sebah and Khadija clapped and ululated, and Grandpapa and eventually even Papa himself, crept in and watched ...

Was it that day I became a woman?

'So,' I said, later, when I had hunted down Yacoub, the missing man. 'Will you teach me the Kabbalah *now*, Uncle Yacoub?'

He studied me. 'Yes,' he said. 'I did promise. But I should like you to think of Kabbalah not as a simple subject that can be learnt, as a language can be learnt, or history, something finite, but as something infinitely complex, ultimately incomprehensible, and also deadly dangerous. It must be approached with caution, be crept up on. We can catch glimpses of it as we read the Bible, as we study ourselves and our minds and our dreams, and as we familiarise ourselves with other systems of thought and fields of knowledge – like chiromancy.'

'Chiromancy?'

'Would you like to learn to read people hands?'

'*Palm-reading*? Oh, yes!'

'That will lead us at least a little way round the outskirts of Kabbalah and one step closer to it.'

'It will?'

'Oh yes. Give me your hand – your right hand.'

He held it gently on top of his own left hand, studying it, as he

had so often in the past, but now for the first time he touched it with the index finger of his right hand, pointing at the various parts and explaining.

'This first finger here is the finger of Jupiter.'

'Jupiter? The planet? You mean – ?'

'As above, so below. As in the heavens among the stars, so on earth. There is the macrocosm, things on a large scale, and there is the microcosm –'

'Things on a small scale.'

'All is one.'

'But which is which? I mean, for instance, *me*. I am on a small scale, compared with the sky, of course, but in other ways I seem ... I don't know.'

He smiled at me.

'You, your body and your soul, child, are precisely in the centre. Your life is written in the stars above; your soul is a small part of the Divine, and yet the whole of the Divine is present therein. You are the microcosm. In the same way, everything about you is contained in every part of you, your whole self is present in each hand and each foot, in each individual hair and in the iris of each eye, in each drop of blood and in each tiny scrap of ... dry skin.'

I gazed at him. Not *up* at him, for I was getting bigger, and though I still had to look up at everyone else, Yacoub was tiny.

'And you, too, are divine – are *God*?' I whispered.

His eyes goggled. Yacoub, who never showed any reaction to anything: his eyes actually goggled! Then his smile returned, and widened into a grin.

'And I thought you were dreaming! That you were no longer listening!' He became serious again, looked me straight in the eye – his black eyes, my dark sea-green ones he found so strange and beautiful (I knew, though he had never told me) and said: 'Yes, I too, the same as you, for that is what you mean, is it not? I too am God, in a sense. For everything that is divine, that is God,

exists in me in small, as it does in you and every man, unless he negate it and destroy it, allow that which is evil to enter his heart and take its place. God cannot co-exist with evil.' His smile returned. 'There. You had your first lesson in Kabbalah, after all. Now, back to the hands – on which, and in which, as you now understand, everything, *everything*, is echoed; and is not simply echoed but *is there* in small as it is in large for those with eyes to see and minds to understand.

'This, then, is the Finger of Jupiter – and this, at its base, the Mount of Jupiter. It is the Finger of Power, and the size and form of the mount beneath it indicate the degree of ambition, optimism and leadership.'

'And mine? Look, it –'

But he had no intention of reading my palm today.

'This, the middle finger, is the Finger of Saturn –'

'And this is the Mount of Saturn?'

'Right. It is the Finger of Destiny. The middle finger and the mount beneath it indicate interest in mysticism and magic, in the wild and unknown rather than the known and the civilised.'

'But what about the lines? What about this long line here that goes straight up the middle of my hand to the Mount of Saturn?'

'That is the Line of Fate. Saturn, remember, symbolises time and fate. All right, yes, look, it is long and strong. For good or for evil, you will follow your own fate more or less regardless either of good sense or of other people, right through to the end.'

'For good or for *evil*?'

'Oh yes. *That* is not indicated on your palm. That choice is up to you. As it is to every man.'

Every man, I thought. As in the story Papa was telling me. *Everyman*: a mystery play he had once seen in Edinburgh, performed by strolling players.

Everywoman.

I studied the line again. On the right hand, but not on the left, there was a small break in it.

I showed it to Yacoub.

'That? Oh – oh, that's nothing.'

I looked at him. It was the first time he had ever lied to me.

'Uncle Yacoub?'

'Child ... I don't know what it means, exactly, but – yes, all right, it worries me. It worries me because it wasn't there last time I looked at your hand. Now, that is enough for today.'

'And this break?'

'I'll keep my eye on it. We'll *both* keep our eyes on it. For you too, now, are a palm-reader.'

The break is still there. It is nearly an inch from the wrist line, where my Line of Fate starts, and it indicates the break in my life that occurred the following year.

There was nothing I or Yacoub could do about it. And when there is nothing to be done, there is no point in fretting.

I, of course, went looking for hands to read, and as the lessons went on, kept going back to study the same ones again. Apart from my grandmama – oh, and Papa – everyone let me, smiling indulgently, and no one took it seriously. Except Khadija. She took it very seriously, and got extremely upset when I predicted a long life, travel, and living in foreign countries for her. She didn't *want* to travel, let alone live in foreign parts.

We had been dancing, and were with Sebah, when I told her this and she started arguing. Sebah told her not to be silly, one had to accept one's fate, it was the Will of Allah.

'I notice you don't let her read your palm!'

Sebah glared at her, and I thought for a moment she was going to have her beaten for insolence, but instead she turned to me and held out her hands.

Nervously, I cupped them in my own and gazed down at them. They seemed healthy enough. The Mount of Venus was full and well-formed, all three triangles in the Plain of Mars were beautifully clear, but I saw no such long life. The Sun Line and the Fate Line both stopped at the Line of Heart. Stopped *dead*.

Sobbing, I went back to Yacoub.

'Don't worry,' he said, holding my hands (the one form of physical contact he allowed himself with me, and that only because palm-reading had given him a reason for doing so). Now, though, his touch was to comfort me. 'These things are all relative,' he went on. 'It may mean that her particular life span was to have been a hundred or a hundred-and-twenty years, and that it will be cut short at – who knows? – eighty, or ninety.'

'Really? Then –'

'And you, young lady, are not supposed to be telling anyone anything. You are meant to be simply examining different hands, learning to see the various lines and signs and markings, *not* making comments about people's characters, and *certainly not* attempting to foretell the future.'

'I didn't!'

'And I cannot imagine how you thought you foresaw Khadija living abroad. It is not in anything I have taught you. The Travel Lines –'

'She doesn't have any real Travel Lines.'

He waited.

'It was while I was studying her Life Line and her Line of Fate, trying to see how they related to each other, and searching for any corresponding markings on them ... Suddenly, I *knew* that she would travel, travel, travel, and grow old in the north, far away from Andalucía. I could hear her grumbling on and on about the coldness and the lack of sunshine ...'

'Then you were there with her.'

'You mean –?'

'That you too will travel, travel, travel,' he smiled.

'Oh! Well, yes, I think I must have been.'

'Hmm. I think I am going to have to introduce you to magic mirrors soon.'

'*Magic mirrors?*'

'Yes. If you are seeing things, you might as well see them

clearly.'

But summer was coming, and soon after that Uncle Yacoub set out on his annual peregrination to Murcia, Valencia and Toledo. While he was away, I spent the hot middle of the day among the olive trees after I had come up out of the sea – the village boys were never around then to tease and torment me - and in the afternoon I slept. Sebah insisted. Then in the evening I danced with her and Khadija or sat and talked with Papa if he was home while he drank his wine, and sometimes read to him, and when the sun had gone down, danced for him. He wouldn't let me read, either to myself or to him, by candle-light; he said it was bad for the eyes.

Sebah disapproved of me reading at all (such things were not for women) and whenever she saw me sitting reading to myself she would say, 'Put that silly book away and come and dance for me. You're a woman now.' This last was because I had just started my monthly flux, which she seemed to think was something awful. On those days I should just lie around moaning and being waited on. It never bothered me, though, as it seems to have bothered her and, from what she said, my mother. And it never has bothered me. Looking back on it now, I think perhaps it was the swimming. Inactive women – queens and ladies – always have much more trouble with their monthly flux than their servants do. Of course, they say that is because the servants are like animals. Nonsense, but they really seem to believe it!

Still, I loved dancing, so I didn't mind and there was always something new, some new detail to learn, some other gesture to perfect.

It was at about this time, during the winter before that fateful trip to Córdoba, my last winter with her, that she began to focus on my hands. I had learnt while still tiny to hold my hands always like shells when I was dancing, forefinger raised slightly and the other three dropping away, relaxed, so that all the tension

was in the forefinger and thumb, and to keep them like that even when I was whirling or the back of my hand was pressed to my forehead or touching my lips, but now she wanted a continuous folding and unfolding of the hands, the forefinger still raised slightly, but giving and taking, giving and taking ... And I noticed for the first time that she did this even while standing seemingly still, her hands at hip level, opening and closing, giving and taking, while her hips swung almost imperceptibly to the rhythm of the music in her heart.

Dancing was for women, then. Swimming and reading were not. And neither was thinking, she informed me when I tried to discuss religion with her, to get the Muslim perspective. Not thinking about things like that, anyway. 'Why tire your pretty head? It won't help you. It won't get you into Paradise. Allah, may his name be praised, is not interested in women. Paradise is for men.'

'Women don't go to Heaven?' I was shocked. For the first time in my life I was glad I was a Christian – and said so.

She fluttered her fingers. 'The Christian heaven is boring. I couldn't stand ten minutes of it, let alone all eternity.'

The same thought had crossed my mind more than once.

'Listen, child. Do you think real men would consider any place to be heaven – *paradise* – that held no beautiful women? I'll tell you a secret. Women like us go to the men's paradise as hours.'

'Houris?'

'Beautiful dancers, and – you know.'

I didn't. But I do now.

'And in Paradise they never grow old and ugly and stiff.'

'They are young for ever?'

'Young and beautiful, yes, for ever and ever. Well ... as long as they please the Holy Men. If they do not, they are cast out, of course, and replaced.'

'Cast out where? To join the evil men in Hell?'

'Oh, no. Hell contains no houris. No women at all. That's what makes it Hell.'

'Then where?'

'Into limbo,' she whispered.

'You mean they cease to exist?' I was awed.

'Well ... no. At least, I'm not sure. Some say they become demons of a – of a special sort – like, like vampires – ' (succubi, she meant, I know now,) 'preying on men in this world.'

'Yes? Really? Sounds fair to me.'

'Maryam! You mustn't say things like that, not even in jest!'

Later, I asked Papa, and then Uncle Yacoub, about it. Houris in heaven, I mean, not vampires. Both of them said she was talking nonsense, but I noticed that though neither of them was a Muslim their eyes sparkled at the thought of it.

It may not be theologically sound, but Muslims certainly know what men mean by heaven.

4

El primero de Mayo, 1369. Today we set out for Córdoba, which is on the Great River, the Oued el Kebir. I decided to write it all down in my diary so I can read it again and again and never forget it. Grandmama is with us, of course. Her home is in Córdoba. (Sebah al-Qurtubiyya is her real name.) We are going to visit her relatives. And to introduce me to them. I have a feeling that's what it's really all about. For them to see me and inspect me. So someone later will marry me. I get that butterfly feeling in my tummy just thinking about it. Papa says Of course not, I am a lady, but Grandmama smiles and says We'll see. Well, we will see. But much later, in sha'Allah! Grandpapa too is

with us. And Papa. He insisted. He is worried something might happen to me. What could happen? He loves me so much, especially now I'm all he has. Khadija is with us, and two other slaves. Oh, and two soldiers in smart uniforms to protect us from robbers. Grandpapa says being the Alcalde does have some compensations. Most of our journey will be in the mountains, and that is dangerous, especially when you're going through a forest. More butterflies – I mean in my tummy! But also lots of beautiful ones up here among the bushes and trees that you never see down on the coast. I'm so excited!

Later. [This on the reverse side of the same piece of paper.] We haven't come far, but we can't see the Mar Menor now when we look back, only the Great Sea in the distance. We are staying at an inn. There are fleas in the beds and bloodspots all over the walls where someone has been killing the mosquitoes that swarm around us now it's dark. I don't mind; nothing likes the taste of me, they all like the taste of Papa. He laughs and says it's because he makes a change, but he's not happy, not even on this journey. Can he still miss Mama so much? Or is it his country he misses? Even more perhaps up here in the hills. He has told me so often about the hills of his home (our home, he says) that I can almost see them. They are smaller, it is all smaller, and the light is different, bluer, not so yellow ...

Perhaps if I'd argued with him about his self-imposed exile, pointed out that it had gone on far too long, he would have taken me with him and we would have left Spain, and everything would have been different. But I didn't want to leave Spain and my home, my grandparents, all I knew and loved, I didn't want to be Scottish, go "back" to Scotland with him, live there. So he continued to go on his "wee trips" that lasted a week or ten days usually – he never would tell me where he went, and I have to admit I wasn't really interested, I was too immersed in my own little life – and when, later, I did want to go, urgently, desperately, he was too sick to travel ...

In Córdoba, I was feted and flattered for a couple of days. I was a skinny little thing with eyes that everyone found rather unsettling (to say the least) but they clearly thought me very pretty in my new green and silver kaftan from Fès in Morocco chosen by Sebah to match my eyes, and a pair of silver earrings that had belonged to Mama. They gave me another kaftan as a present, pink and blue and gold, and a pair of dangly gold earrings, and I danced for them (this was in the harem, of course), the snake arms I loved, the hair dance, my hair so long and loose, and the shoulder shimmy, showing off (I knew from Sebah that I did this best of all), and sure enough they all oohed and aahed and said they'd never seen anything like it and gave me more presents: tiny rings for my toes, a gold chain for my ankle with gold coins hanging from it, and had me dance it all again.

Then the kindness was over, and the debate about who I should marry, who should get me, began. It was done quite openly, in front of me (though my opinion was never sought) and often quite heatedly. My grandmama's family on the whole were of the opinion that I should return to my Moorish roots, marry a rich Fassi (a gentleman from Fès) and settle down in the security of a well-appointed harem.

Dance and gossip my life away, I thought, sarcastically, like these women do. Then Sebah wiped the smile off my face with the observation that I was unaccustomed to the rod and might not be entirely happy if the eunuchs responsible for me had authority to administer the rod at their discretion; Fassi gentlemen such as the one they had in mind are notoriously authoritarian, and he was ten years older than me, grown up already, and rich enough to buy me a whole team of eunuchs. But the other women poo-poo'd that: a strict regime was exactly what a beautiful, motherless, spoilt, self-opinionated *mocosa* (brat) like me needed.

Sebah looked me up and down – and agreed!

Five years later, I remembered that look when I found myself naked on the block in the central slave-market in Granada, and being very much looked up and down. Then found myself in just such a harem. And later still, when I was with ibn Khaldoun, no longer simply a lowly harem-slave but his chosen concubine.

Grandpapa favoured a Catholic marriage to a young Don from a good Spanish family. There were several such – and interested, apparently – in Córdoba (the only city where Moor and Christian still lived side by side in comparative tranquillity). There was also at least one, to my knowledge back home by the sea. And unless Papa vetoed it, my grandpapa's wish was my command, his word the Law.

Papa asked me what I felt about it one morning when we were out alone together exploring Córdoba. He, I knew, was not in favour of my entering a Muslim household. I was a lady – a Lady with a capital L, he meant – and should marry a young Don of equivalent rank. Judging by the one young Don I knew at home, Fernán Rodríguez de Cartagena, there was a lot to be said for the harem, the eunuchs and the rod, but I didn't tell Papa that. I didn't want to upset him, and I knew no final decision would be made during the course of this visit. I was still – not *too* young, no, but young enough for Papa to put the whole thing off for another couple of years.

During those days, Papa and I escaped whenever we could and went riding through Córdoba on a beautiful white mare – their best, and they thrust her on him, though they would not consider letting me up on her, or any horse, by myself. I had to ride side-saddle behind him. I didn't mind. I loved having him all to myself for a change. At home, I was always out, swimming, or doing things with Grandmama or Uncle Yacoub, while Papa was often away for days on end.

And I loved Córdoba.

We went to see La Gran Mezquita (the Great Mosque) which

was still used by Muslims on Fridays, Jews on Saturdays and Christians on Sundays, as it had been under the Caliphs. I thought that was wonderful, and wanted to go each holy day, wearing the right clothes and speaking the right language, but Papa wouldn't hear of it. Instead, we went on a Tuesday, early. We heard the muezzin calling the faithful to morning prayer, then waited till everyone came out before going in ourselves. I was a little shy about being there only to *look*, but I needn't have been. There were visitors from all over Spain, indeed all over the world to judge by the variety of costumes and of languages. But then it is so famous, and so beautiful. I couldn't believe that the rows and rows of towering columns had been built by men. I swear there is no other building in the world to compare with it, unless it is the Palace of Al Zahra, which is an hour's ride from Córdoba, and which we visited a few days later. But it is hard to compare them, for the palace, which was built by the great Caliph Abdelrahman III more than three hundred years ago and named for his favourite Zahra (The Flower) – how beautiful she must have been! – was destroyed in battle a hundred years later. It was built all of marble and precious stones, and we could still see enough of it to know what it must have been like in its glory. We had food with us, and sat together among the old stones, Papa in the shade of an oleander tree and me in the sunshine (I liked it, I always have) and breathed in the scent of the thyme and other herbs growing all around us and Papa talked of other great buildings like the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris – he had fallen in love with Paris! – and we listened to *los grillos* (the crickets) growing more and more frantic as the day wore on.

At night, I lay on my mat in the harem – my first experience of a real harem – and thought about home. About the people I missed: Uncle Yacoub, and Pedro the fisherman. And the people I did not miss, like Fernán and his family.

I was becoming seriously worried about Fernán. Papa had several times hinted that Fernán, with whose father Papa had

some kind of secret business dealings, would be the most suitable choice for me – if we were to stay in Spain.

Papa says the Three Sisters weave our destiny, there is little or nothing we can do about it. Sounds like the will of Allah to me. And very un-Christian.

What happened next I still find difficult to put into words. I wrote it all down then, on my scraps of paper.

El tercero junio. Somewhere between Alcolea and Andújar. I can't sleep. I can't stop crying. Papa has been holding me, comforting me, but now he has fallen asleep at last and I have no one else to talk to about what happened. Khadija is looking after Grandpapa, who was wounded by an arrow. I'll start from the beginning. We left Alcolea this morning on the fifth day of our journey home. The sky was so clear, and a different blue from the sky over the sea that I am used to. A great bird came soaring towards us, but high, high up, with wings outstretched, unmoving, resting on the wind. I asked Papa what it was, was it an eagle – it was much bigger, had a much bigger head, than the kites I was used to seeing gliding over the hills. 'Sí, un águila,' said Grandpapa – and an arrow went thwack through his shoulder! He tumbled off his horse! I screamed! Then suddenly everyone was fighting – even me! I pulled out the stiletto I always carry! Papa was fighting with his sword, he was all right, but one of our men was down with a robber on top of him. I stabbed the man through the back, to the left of the spine, just where Papa had shown me, then ran over to where Grandmama was on her back beneath another of the robbers and stabbed him. Twice. Then kicked him off, for he wouldn't fall. And I saw that she was dead. As I had known she was going to die. I don't know what else happened. Papa is a wonderful swordsman, and with the help of the two soldiers we had with us he must have driven them off. The next thing I knew, we were riding along the

mountain path again, only this time I was riding with Papa, on his lap, and was crying, crying, crying. And then we made camp here under these trees, and I must have slept, for now it is morning and Grandmama is lying on the ground with a cloth over her face and they are discussing what to do with her. Grandpapa says to bury her here, we can't carry her with us. Papa has woken up now and agrees, but says they must dig the grave deep or wolves will get at her. 'Wolves or something worse,' mutters Khadija. What does she mean?

I know now what she meant, but I don't believe any such thing happened, for they dug the grave very deep, and prayers were said in Castellano and in Arabic, and flowers strewn on her, and the hole filled in and a cairn (Papa's idea – and his word, of course) built over her. It took us all day, and we slept beside her grave that night.

Sebah.

No more dancing.

I vowed I too would never dance again. And managed to keep the vow for a year.

Back to my diary:

El veinte-ocho de octubre, 1369. Today, Grandpapa died. Papa says it was better, he had suffered so much, not just from the wound, which refused to heal, but from sorrow and loneliness. His heart was broken. He didn't want to get better, live on without her. Will I ever love anyone, will anyone ever love me, as much as that?

The twenty-eighth of October is the Day of Saint Simon and Saint Jude. It is my twelfth birthday. And I know what I'm going to do when I'm bigger. I talked about it with Uncle Yacoub. I'm going to be a student in Paris! Only, there's a difficulty. They don't accept girls. Neither do they accept Jews. Uncle Yacoub studied here in Spain, in Toledo, but in Toledo, at the school

where he studied, they don't accept girls or Christians, he said, and I am more Christian than Jew. And then he laughed and said, 'And more Muslim than Christian or Jew!' I'm not sure whether that is good or bad, so I just looked a question at him, and he said 'I used to see you down on the floor saying your prayers with your grandmother, or with Khadija now – 'I just join in if I happen to be there and I've got nothing else to do.' I know that, child. I'm teasing you. The thing is that you could pass for any one of the three, Jew or Christian or Muslim, but in order to be a student you will also need to pass as a boy.' A boy!!

The winter went by slowly. When he was at home – and he spent more and more time away – Papa sat alone with his flask of wine and the only difference it made when summer came on once again was that now he sat outside under the vine trellis, but still steadily drinking his wine.

Very occasionally, we had a visitor who interested him. A couple from Scotland passed through, a tall young man called James Breklay and his almost equally tall young woman, Jonet Murray. Jonet was magically beautiful, with long red hair (I'd never seen hair like it, but Papa said it was common in Scotland) and emerald eyes, and a dancing way when she walked that had even Papa on his toes, itching to serve her, to fetch and carry for her.

She and James Breklay had been on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella, and spent the afternoon talking about it. Or rather Jonet did, with Papa, who had made the pilgrimage when he first came to Spain in 1339. It was as though he had done it yesterday. He remembered everything, was full of enthusiasm. I understood suddenly how much he missed female company of his own kind. Since Mama died, he had not been close to any woman in Spain. (Or at least that was what I believed then!) In the evening, the talk changed to Scotland, and I listened entranced to tales of what life was like there now. Even

James Breklay woke up and took part. He'd shown little interest in their pilgrimage and I realised that he hadn't been right along the famous *camino*. Jonet had met him after she'd become separated from her companions. It was all rather confusing.

They stayed one night and then rode on into Cartagena, where James had business with Don Lope Rodriguez, Fernán's father. What business I only found out much later.

After they'd gone, I asked Papa about Jonet, but he was morose and unforthcoming. So I asked him if he would like to return to Scotland and told him that I would accompany him, willingly, happily, if he did. He gazed at me from bleary eyes and said we would see, we would see; one day perhaps. And I knew then that I'd left it too late. He knew, too. He was the one person who never let me read his hand.

Meanwhile, Yacoub took me under his wing completely.

I soon knew all there was to know, or at least all Yacoub knew, about reading the hand. And knew the hands of some of the people in the village – the kinder ones, those who would let me read them – as well as I knew my own. Especially the hand shapes, which was easy and you could do without the person even knowing.

Me, I have Water Hands. Yacoub has Wood Hands – the Philosopher's Hand – that's why we get on well together. Papa had Fire Hands. One phrase sticks in my mind from what Yacoub told me then about people with Fire Hands: they burn themselves out like shooting stars unless they are continually refuelled and replenished by those with stores of love to give and energy to spare. But what could I, a child, do?

Then I forgot all that, for we moved on to magic mirrors, as Yacoub had promised before he went away.

5

The mirrors themselves turned out to be nothing more than a thick infusion of certain herbs (including, for our purposes, cypress leaves, laurel leaves, rose leaves and petals, and nettle leaves) to which was added a few drops of almond oil, a few drops of tincture of gold, and, yes, a few drops of blood. And it had to be virgin's blood. The only virgin around was me, so my finger was duly pricked, the drops squeezed out and stirred in, and we had our mirror. But that was only the beginning. The mirror, in its silver bowl, had to be charged.

Yacoub and I had already done some exercises in concentration and visualisation, working with a flower or a candle: we focused on the flower (or the lit candle – I preferred the lit candle in a dark room, Yacoub a flower in a faintly sunlit room), then closed our eyes and continued to see it in every detail. Now, though, we had no candle or flower. We had to start by imagining one, then when the flower was blooming or the candle burning brightly, we had to make the flower droop and die or the candle gutter and go out – and not forget to make the candle cold to the touch. Only when I could do this, and see it before me, out there, rather than in my head, did Yacoub consider me ready for the magic mirror.

All this is quick to write, but each step took days, weeks, months. Finally, though, the great moment came. We sat cross-legged on the floor facing each other with the mirror in its silver bowl between us. Yacoub had already explained that the akashic fluid would appear as a darkness above our heads and now he told me that while he would be drawing the fluid through his whole body, I must not attempt this.

'Why?'

'Maryam, the peril is great. You will obey me in every detail

or we will abandon this whole field of studies.'

I promised.

He spoke some words (words I think better not to record here) and the ceiling darkened, the whole upper half of the room became full of black light. He said, 'Hold out your hands. The palms a little apart. That's it.'

'What's that light between them?' It was around each hand and linked them together even when I held them apart. I had seen the same thing when I raised my legs up in the air and stood on my shoulders and looked up at my feet, a radiance all around my legs and feet that connected them until I held them wide apart.

'That's your aura, child. Don't worry about that now. Open your hands and let the darkness stream down into the space between them, then direct it into the mirror.'

I tried. At first, nothing seemed to be happening.

'You're trying too hard to make it happen. Relax and *let* it happen.'

And it began.

It streamed down between my hands, where the aura now shone out in contrast to the flowing darkness, and into the mirror.

Soon it was all gone. The room, the ceiling, were clear and light again, and the mirror was black, black like the pupil of an eye with a silver iris staring up at us.

'Maryam, that was astonishing. I did nothing. You charged it all by yourself.'

'I did?'

The feeling of power as the akashic fluid flowed through my hands was indescribable. It was like swimming under the sea, like dancing; one of the most wonderful sensations I'd ever experienced.

But ... 'Now? What can we see? It looks as though the mirror is looking at us.'

He smiled. 'In a sense it is. And later we will make two mirrors, and communicate through them, seeing each other and

hearing each other, but for now, well, the simplest thing is to see someone else, as he or she is now, at this moment. But be cautious. It is spying. People *mind*.'

'Can I see Papa? He won't mind.'

'All right. But don't be so sure he won't mind. And please, under no circumstances mention to him or to anyone that we used drops of your blood.'

I looked at him. Deceive Papa? But then Papa knew nothing of the dreams Yacoub and I planned and shared at night – and would no doubt be shocked if he did.

I nodded.

'So. Picture him, then. But in the mirror, not in your mind. Let the mirror do it. All you are doing, remember, is telling the mirror who you want to see.'

Again, at first nothing happened. I shook my head, cleared my mind, relaxed. Tried once more. And there he was. But not drinking his wine at the table as I had imagined he would be. He was outside, talking to James Breklay. James had not got down off his horse. Papa seemed angry. I could only see them, I couldn't hear what they were saying.

I broke it off and ran outside.

Papa was shouting: 'I cannot believe that a countryman of mine would sell a lady into – into –'

'"Lady"?' mocked James, from up on his horse. 'That "lady" was a whore, sir. Do you think a *lady* would be travelling around the world with a man, unchaperoned? That she would have been making her way along the pilgrim trail in the company of two other similar "ladies", one from London, one from Paris, all intent on having a very good time and making a lot of money cheering up the pilgrims?'

'I – I didn't ...' Papa believed that beauty and goodness walked hand in hand.

'She came with me of her own free will. I'd not yet got to Compostela and had lost all interest in doing so. She was on her

way back, and open to suggestions as to what to do, where to go, next. When I proposed heading on south, exploring Aragon and Andalucía, she jumped at the idea.'

'All right, so she's a whore. But to *sell* her! *Here!* She'll be sold on to a *Moor*, to a life in a harem!'

'As I understood it, sir, your family is part Moorish – *and part Jewish, too.*' He gave poor Yacoub, who had followed me out, a look full of loathing. 'And the lass not Scots at all, despite having the Gaelic, but a – well, I won't say what.'

What? I wanted to know!

'*And you yourself are a business partner of Don Lopé's,*' he went on, '*or so I understand.* I think we have a case here of the fox calling the red dog thief. I'll bid ye farewell.'

And off he rode.

Papa was like a man struck down. He had been morose and bleary-eyed before. Now, he was suddenly *old*. He stumbled into the house, shaking me and Yacoub off when we tried to help him, and sat back down at his flagon of wine.

He waved us away.

I waved Yacoub away. Same gesture exactly, I realised as I did it.

Yacoub went.

I stayed.

I sat at the table with him and insisted on some answers.

I didn't get many. But I did get what James Breckley had been too polite to call me: *a mongrel*.

Nice.

And I did get a definition of the word "whore". *Putá*, in Spanish. And I understood at last exactly what it was some of the village people called me. *Una puta*. Mariana la Puta.

But what I did *not* get was an explanation of the business relationship between my father and Fernán's father.

And when I pressed him on the question of our leaving Spain, going to live in Scotland, or at least in Paris, I got no response at

all, only, 'Leave me be, lass. Leave me be, for the love of Jesus.'
I left him be.

After that, I spent most of my time swimming.

Now though, during the long, silent winter and as the short southern spring gave way to the long, hot summer, I went out with Pedro in his boat, sitting up on the prow with my knees tucked up under my chin. And when I was ready to go, I stood up, balancing there before diving in. Pedro, the poor man, kept his eyes averted, for I was quite naked, of course. At least I think he did. He always had his eyes cast politely down when I turned round to wave and laugh before plunging into the sea and leaving him for that day. I never went back to him. He sometimes came back for me if he had dropped me off on the other side, near La Manga, and thought I might be waiting there for him. As sometimes I was. Because his head was full of me, it was easy for me to far-call him if I needed him and wanted him to carry me back over to Los Alcazares.

Once I was caught on La Manga in a sudden storm and foolishly risked swimming back. It was either that or a long, long walk to the fishing village of Cabo de Pallas, and arriving there naked and half-skinned by the wind and the sand – which would surely have driven even my very tolerant papa to take his belt or his riding-crop to me: a thing often threatened (usually by Sebah or Khadija on his behalf rather than by Papa himself) but never actually carried out. So, anxious to get back to my clothes, I waded in and started swimming.

It was like that other time. Underwater, I was fine, but I couldn't stay under water. In desperation, I far-called Pedro.

Later, he told me that he had been entering the little harbour when he suddenly realised I was still out there. 'I swung the boat round and came straight to you, though how I knew where you were in all that *tumulto* of wind and waves I'll never understand.'

But then, with the boat being thrown about, I couldn't get in,

even when he threw me a rope, and he had to net me again then leave me dangling while he saw to the sail and finally haul me up out of the water dripping through the net just as he had that very first day. Oh, the indignity of it! And he emptied me out into the filthy fishy water in the bottom with a bump and a splash as the boat reared up again and nearly capsized. 'Sit up on the prow, *chica*! Up in your usual place!' he cried. 'You bring us *suerte*!' Luck. And perhaps he was right. By the time he dropped me off where I'd left my clothes on the beach, the wind was no more than a stiff breeze. 'With you up there on the prow, little mermaid (*sirenika*, he said, of course), with you up there on the prow, everything always goes well.'

From the water, I blew him a kiss – then duck-dived and came up on the sand.

Papa was not there waiting for me.

Oh, that he had been! [I wrote that night] *That he had hauled me home by my hair and beaten me as Catalina's horrid papa beats her! At least it would show that he still loves me! That he cares!*

But he was away again, and neither knew nor cared. Or so I believed.

Khadija washed me in fresh water, dried me and oiled me, all the time telling me what she would do to me if it were up to her. I almost wished it were. At least she cared.

I ate with Yacoub. He was not his usual self, so I gulped down my food in silence.

Then Yacoub said: 'I was watching you out there. In the mirror.'

He had seen it all. It had never occurred to me that he might watch me, spy on me –

'No, no!' he smiled, disarming me. 'I wasn't spying on you. I have never turned the mirror on you before, except when we have both been doing it, communicating. No. I had a

premonition. You were in danger. I heard you far-calling. I had to know.'

He was right. The fault was mine, not his.

I smiled back. Then blushed. 'You must have been very shocked.'

'Oh, no. Like your father, I too walk along the beach sometimes and have seen a certain little mermaid bobbing about among the waves, and running in and out of the water quite unself-consciously.'

I waited.

'No well-brought-up Jewish maiden would do such a thing. A Muslim maiden might, if she and her attendant eunuchs believed her unobserved. Christian maidens I have little experience of. The señora with the red hair swam naked at dawn –'

'She *did*?' Oh no! I had missed that! Such an opportunity! It had probably never occurred to her that I might go swimming, and I had been tired that day, had stayed in bed.

'Yes. And she was quite alone. Her pig of a man, if you'll excuse me, was still snoring in his bed. When she saw me, she looked a little nervous, though she did not attempt to cover herself. When I smiled and she saw I did not disapprove, she too smiled and waved, and walked (danced, I should say) up the beach to where she had left her clothes. Just like you.'

I gazed at him.

'Really? You did not disapprove?'

'Who am I to disapprove of Eve before the Serpent tempted her and she fell from grace. Perhaps this land of yours, this Scotland, is Paradise, and its women daughters of Eve as she was always meant to be.'

Yacoub, so far as I know, never went to Scotland. I, on the other hand, have now spent quite a lot of time up in the far, far north, and yes, it is a little like Paradise and its women are more than a little like Eve must have been. I have seen a stained glass window in a cathedral in France depicting Eve and the Serpent.

Eve has long red hair and looks exactly like Jonet.

Perhaps Jonet modelled for it. After all, only a *puta*, a whore, takes off her clothes for an artist.

Then Yacoub really surprised me. He said, 'And as for her being a whore ... it ill behoves us to judge a man, or a woman, for what he or she is, the life he or she lives, but only for how he or she lives that life. There are good rabbis and bad rabbis ... If a man is good and kind as a thief, can you imagine him being bad and unkind as a rabbi?'

I shook my head, wondering at what he was saying.

'Have I ever told you,' he went on, 'how Wisdom was imprisoned in a female body by the Seven Archons and forced to become a prostitute in a brothel?'

I stared at him. 'No, you certainly have not.'

He smiled. 'Why so shocked?'

'Oh, not at the story, at – at *you* saying things like that, using words like that.'

His smile grew broader. 'You're getting older. You must begin to *think* about things.'

'I thought I was thinking about things.'

'Not always about the things that matter – that are going to matter to you. In Paris, for instance. Things like that.'

Like all little girls, I was as curious by nature as any cat and had always wondered where Papa spent those days and nights when he was not at home and the house was even lonelier and quieter than usual. At first, I had supposed it must be Cartagena, our nearest city. I had been there with him once and I knew how enormous and exciting it was compared to our little village. Was it for *that* he went, for the company, some pleasure? Or was it to "do business" with Fernán's father? I couldn't ask him about it, not directly, but one evening I happened to be walking home along the lane from the village when he returned after three days and nights away. He came riding up behind me, reached down

and lifted me up onto his lap, and asked me how I was and where I'd been.

'*Me?*' I squawked. 'Where have *I* been? *I*'ve been at home. Where have *you* been?' Then when he didn't immediately answer: 'You've been in Cartagena! I want to go, too!'

'Cartagena? I never go near Cartagena these days, lass.'

'You don't?' Would he lie to me? No, of course he wouldn't.

'But if ever I do go to Cartagena again, I will take you with me, I promise.'

To Fernán's family? No, thanks.

There was another long pause while we turned into the yard. He set me down, then dismounted tiredly himself, and sighed. 'I simply can't take you with me when – well, when I go where I go those days when I'm not here.'

I stared up into his face, reading his eyes.

'Listen, lass. Sometimes a secret is not ours to share. It is someone else's secret. Do you understand?'

Oh, I understood. And, knowing I shouldn't but unable to help myself, the very next time he rode away I took out the magic mirror I'd been using that day with Yacoub and sat down on the floor with it between my crossed legs. Silently, I asked it to show me Papa – *and saw myself!* With Papa! But how could that be? I was here, at home, I wasn't there, wherever *there* was, with him!

Then I realised that it wasn't me as I was now, but smaller, me as I used to be two or three years ago. Was the mirror taking me back in time? Or was this another girl? Another girl with *my* Papa? Another girl who also seemed to be his daughter ...

I didn't recognise the room they were in. I'd never been *there* with him.

I tried to make out what they were saying. You can't hear anything with a magic mirror, of course, but I could lip-read enough to tell it was Spanish, not the Gaelic he and I usually spoke together or the French or the English he sometimes liked me to practise with him. Then the scene shifted slightly and I

saw there was a woman in the room with them. The girl's mother? Perhaps that was why they were speaking Spanish, not because the girl didn't understand Gaelic?

No! I told myself. No! There was no reason to think she was anything other than the daughter of someone he happened to be visiting! Some *woman*. And yet, and yet, it was the girl, not the woman, that his attention was fixed upon, her that he was listening to with a smile I rarely saw any more. And she looked so like me ...

The mirror clouded over. I had lost my focus. I emptied the basin, worried that somehow Yacoub might stumble upon what I had seen, and went to bed, determined that as soon as Papa returned I would have it out with him.

But of course I couldn't, and I never did.

Yacoub had been showing me how to ask questions of a pendulum. I had a silver fish on a chain. I let the fish dangle. If I asked it "Is my name Maryam?" it swung backwards and forwards from down on my left to up on my right. If I asked it "Do I live in Italy?" it swung in a circle, *tuaithiuil*. (That's the Gaelic word for widdershins, the opposite of *deiseil*, sunwise.) I asked it all kind of questions: Shall I always live in Spain? No. Shall I marry Fernán? No. (Oh, I loved that little silver fish!) Will Papa and I ever return to Scotland? No. Will *I* ever go to Scotland? Yes! And so on.

Then Yacoub showed me how to use it for finding things I had lost. First we did it with a little of whatever-was-lost tied to the silver fish. So, for instance, he hid my pillow – but gave me one feather from it which I fixed to the fish. I asked the pendulum where the pillow was and it started swinging towards the door, then right out of the house: the pillow was on the bench under the vine trellis. Then we did it with my black mantilla; I had a single thread from it, and found it easily.

I was entranced.

And that's how it was I made my great discovery. I was with Pedro on the boat and we had gone right out of the Mar Menor onto the open sea. I had been there with him before. I liked it, it was exciting, something different, even though he never let me swim there. Now, I had my little silver fish with me and was playing with it, letting it dangle, watching what it did. Suddenly, it started going round and round *deiseil*, sunwise. I stopped it, held it, let it hang free again – and again it started going round and round. After a moment, it slowed down and stopped. It had been trying to tell me something – but what?

'Pedro? Can you go back where we just were?'

He muttered, '*Loca*,' but he tried, and sure enough, the pendulum started whirling round. He brought the boat round and passed over the spot again, and again the pendulum responded.

'Mark it! Mark the place!' I cried.

He threw over one of the rocks with cords and corks attached to them that he always carried.

'Now what? Don't think you're going – '

'Oh yes I am.'

'Oh no you're – '

I didn't hear the "not" because I had slipped out of the smock that was all I was wearing and jumped over the side as he lunged towards me, nearly upsetting the boat.

I went down and down and down. The Mar Menor was deep, too, in places, but it wasn't cold. Here it was cold. I saw what looked like an old wreck. I swam over to it and grabbed hold of a wooden railing to anchor myself, then looked up at the distant sunlit surface. The railing broke off in my hands and I shot back up into the sunlight.

I wanted to tie two of Pedro's rocks to my ankles, but here he drew the line. What if I couldn't untie them for some reason? He was right. He let me carry one rock down with me, but it didn't help, I couldn't swim with it.

The third time, after a rest, I swam down fast and pulled open

a rotten hatch and slipped inside the ship. It was dark and cold and silent, but I wasn't frightened, except for one moment when a big octopus, bigger than I had ever seen in the Mar Menor, put out a tentacle: What *are* you, and what are you *doing*? Well, it was his home. I backed away and bumped against a box, hurting my bottom. It was an old chest. It wouldn't open. I needed air. I slid out through the hatch and swam back up as fast as I could.

Pedro would not let me go back down that day. The side of my bottom was bleeding, quite badly. I had to agree. I was cold and I was tired. I made him drop another marker – and he showed me how to mark it by distant points: 'Look, from here, and only from here, the Watch Tower is exactly in front of that shoulder on the hill there, and over this way, that big tree is pointing straight up at the peak of that mountain.'

He let the boat move a little, and it was true: both the Watch Tower and the tree had moved too. I laughed, then grimaced. My bottom was hurting.

'Here, put some of this on it, señorita.' He passed me a flask and turned his head away. The flask contained alcohol, a cheap kind of coñac that he drank when he was cold and tired.

'Really?'

'Sí, señorita.'

"*Señorita*". I smiled to myself. The more indecorously I behaved, the more formal he became.

I poured some into my hand and slapped it on – and screamed. He laughed.

I blushed. And put on some more, determinedly.

Next day, we were back out there again. I had a heavy knife with me to force open the chest. First time down, I failed – and nearly stayed down too long, trying.

Pedro gave me a hook on a long handle to try with. And this time I did it. Inside were bars of dirty black metal. I took two up. Did Pedro want them?

He examined them, scratched at them with the knife. Then looked at me, and smiled. '*Eres rica*. You are rich.'

'Huh?'

'These are silver ingots, sirenika. Bars of solid silver.'

When it sank in, I insisted they were his. Then that one was his, one mine.

'And how many more are down there?' he asked.

'Lots.'

I brought up eight more that day. Then when we reached shore, I didn't know what to do with them. I decided to hide them till I knew how many there were. Or that was what I told myself. In fact, looking back on it now, I know that I didn't trust Don Lope and his wife – and his son – and I didn't trust my own father when he was with them and he was drinking. I wanted something that was *mine*. It turned out I was right.

We buried those ten in a place I chose, half way between my house and the sea. It didn't have to be carefully marked because I knew I could find it any time with my little silver fish pendulum.

Next day, we buried another sixteen in a separate hole not far from the first.

The next, we couldn't go.

The next, another twelve, separately again.

And so on. In the end, there were fifty-six silver ingots and a bag of gold coins that I had found in another chest along with something that looked as though it might once have been clothes.

Then we had to stop. The weather was getting worse, and people at Las Amoladeras were becoming curious.

Pedro took his one ingot and buried it inside his house.

And we forgot about it.

It was about the time of the silver ingots that I danced again. Some *gitanos*, gypsies, made camp among the dunes near our house. Khadija grumbled that Don Joaquín would never have let them, but now with only Papa left, and him away ...

I met them, talked to them, made friends with two of them, Vedel and Mirella. They were brother and sister. Vedel the eldest, was nearly a man, while Mirella was fifteen, not much older than me.

They were both very taken with my eyes, though, and asked did they mean I was a witch? 'No!' I protested, 'they're because my father's not Spanish, he's from Escotia ... '

They took me to meet their grandmother.

It was very hot and she was sitting in the shade of what I thought of as *my* tree, a solitary pine that had somehow managed to grow on the sand near where I went in and out of the water.

They said nothing, just pushed me towards her and hung back.

Her black eyes gazed up sleepily into the sea-green depths of my own. She didn't blink – but neither did I. I stared right back at her, stared into those bright black eyes under drooping lids and bushy white eyebrows, ran my gaze over all the wrinkles and the hairs on her chin – Sebah, my grandmother, had never looked like this ... but Sebah had never been as old as this. (And Sebah, I realise now, had lived a sheltered, pampered life compared to the rigours of life on the open road, the life this old woman had known all her days – and, too, the life that lay hidden in the future for me.)

I was admiring the thick white plaits that emerged from her red head cloth and hung down either side of her face and over the front of her shoulders when she reached up and took my left hand in hers. She held it close to her face and studied it.

I was about to tell her that I could read hands, too, but she dropped it and gestured that I should get down in front of her – I chose to kneel rather than squat – then, out of nowhere, she

produced a set of little picture cards.

I know now they were Tarrochi cards but then I had no idea.

She shuffled them again and again and again while gazing still at me, at my eyes, then suddenly made a fan of them and held them out.

I had to choose one.

I took one, turned it over and looked at it.

A vagabond.

I turned and showed it to Mirella and Vedel. '*Un vagabundo.*'

'Shh!' They looked shocked, and waved my attention back to the old woman.

'*No es vagabundo,*' she said, '*o no solo.*' It's not just a vagabond. Her eyes were down on the card in my hand. '*Es un loco ... un bufón.*' Now she raised her eyes once more to mine. 'Soon you, too, *chica*, will be on the road to nowhere, *una loca, una bufona.*'

I heard a giggle. Mirella? I glanced round.

It wasn't her, of course not. Another snort of laughter. The muttered words *la loca* and *la puta*. It was some of the village boys who had crept up and heard what the old woman said.

I ignored them. I didn't care. I knew what they called me, though before it had never been in my presence: after all, I was the *alcalde*'s granddaughter.

But now Don Joaquín was dead. There was a new *alcalde* I had never even met.

I heard a scuffle, turned round, saw Vedel chasing them off.

I turned back to the old woman. '*Una bufona?*' I said. A buffoon? A laughing-stock? That was too much.

She gazed back at me.

'The girl who gets whipped out of town after town.'

And with that she closed her eyes. I had been dismissed.

Who gets whipped out of town after town? Seriously? Oh, who cared? I laid the card on the ground in front of her, stood up, and turned to Vedel and Mirella.

'I have to go home now.' A big I-don't-care grin. Mariana la Loca. And walked away.

Was Vedel watching me? Sebah had made me walk like that. My dancer's walk.

Mariana la Puta.

And the swimming.

I'd been lucky that day. I'd woken up late, and when I went down to the beach the gypsies were there and the gypsy boys were in the water – *only* the boys, like Sebah and her brothers! But if I'd gone swimming at dawn, I'd have been caught – or trapped out at sea!

But of course everyone in the village must have seen me on the beach at one time or another, going into the sea or coming up out of the sea. And no doubt Pedro had gossiped about me. No, he wouldn't. He would never ...

I ate, then went to my room and lay down, determined not to cry.

Hours later, I woke. I was in bed. The shutters were open and it was a beautiful evening. An almost full moon was rising in the sky.

The house was silent. Papa was away. Khadija would be sleeping. Uncle Yacoub didn't like bright sunshine but often disappeared for hours without a word when the sun went down behind the house. My room was at the front, facing the sea. I got up and leant out, breathing in the cool air. Suddenly, from the beach, I heard guitars and drums, and singing. In two minutes I was there on the beach with them – and in two seconds I was dancing along with Mirella and the other women and girls.

We danced till the moon went down, then ate chicken cooked on their open fire between the dunes.

It was one of the happiest nights of my life.

Next day, they had gone, and Khadija, who had no idea that I had been out most of the night, was busily accusing them of stealing our chickens.

That spring, before he left, Uncle Yacoub told us he would not be coming back.

I was desperate.

Papa drank all the time now, and the only thing he would say was 'Fernán. Fernán is the lad for you.' Then one day, he added: 'I've arranged for you to have lessons with Father Benedict, learn your catechism, become a proper Christian. Don Lope and Doña Leonor are not entirely happy about you marrying their son.'

'They're not entirely happy!'

'You have to do it, lass. I don't want you ending up in some harem.'

I glared at him. Then relented. I loved him. 'Can't we go to Scotland, now?' I begged. 'Just you and me.'

'Just you and me ... If Ferchard came – my friend Sir Farquhar de Dyngvale, who cared for me when I was wounded, then perhaps ... but it's too late, it's been too long. Anyway, there's nothing in Scotland for us. Dun Edin's in the hands of the Steward, or so I hear. And up on the Black Isle and in Dyngvale and in Tain there are none of our ilk left.'

'Perhaps Grandmama is still alive!'

'She's not.'

'The pendulum says she is!'

'She's not, I told you, lass. Last I heard – I sent messages as you know – last I heard there was no sign of her at all. And that can only mean some lonely grave out on the coast, and no son, no family, there to mourn her.' The tears that had become so easy during the last year began to flow. 'Or perhaps she's in the great North Sea itself. Swept away from out on the rocks in the gloaming when she couldn't see well – or slipped off, and that was that. I could have saved her.'

'I could have saved her.'

He gazed at me. His mind wandered again.

'She would have favoured young Fernán.'

'She would not! Any more than Grandmama did. Sebah hated the whole pack of them!'

But I had gone too far now.

He sipped.

There was a moment's silence.

'Leave me be, lass. Please, just leave me be.'

Padre Benedict was old and fat and smelt as if he'd never washed in his life. I argued with him about the reason we had been put in the world – was that the same reason Sebah and Yacoub and Khadija had been put in the world? – and he put his hand on my knee and said I was only a girl, a pretty one, yes, but not clever. I couldn't understand difficult things, things like that. I shouldn't try. But because I was such a pretty one – his hand slid up inside my smock, caressed my thigh – he wouldn't tell my papa I had been rude and silly and needed beating.

I held my breath – and realised I *had* been holding it. He really did stink. But I couldn't believe what was happening.

'So now, tell me again, my sweet. What have we been put in this world for?'

His hand slid further up.

'I – I ... ' I couldn't speak.

Now his thumb was in my groin, his fingers pushing under my bottom.

'Oh, you little darling,' he groaned

Suddenly, I pulled away from him, and stood up, and immediately my tongue and brain started working again. 'Padre, he *knows* I need beating. Everyone tells him. But you tell him too, if you like. Meanwhile, I'm going to ask him what it means when a man puts his hand up – *right up* – a maiden's skirt. Now.'

I went to the doorway.

'Wait! Mariana!'

I didn't turn back.

I never saw him again.

I never did learn the catechism or receive confirmation. And Papa forgot all about it.

When Yacoub left, I announced that I was going with him. To Paris.

'Ridiculous!' said Papa and Khadija.

Even Pedro shook his head; Pedro, who always agreed with everything I said as I chattered away in his boat or from the water where he was anchored. Now he liked me there. I attracted the fish, he said.

'Like bait,' I laughed.

'Sí. And one day a *big* fish will come and *take* the bait, the *sirenika*. And then what shall I do?'

'You'll take the fish, of course.'

'And you?'

'You'll cut him open and let me out and – and we'll sail away together across the Great Sea. I will owe you my life. I will be yours.'

He said nothing to that. What could he say? But his old, lined face was grinning and his eyes were dreamy. We both knew he had already saved my life on at least one occasion.

Now, though, even Pedro shook his head at me and said, '*No, señorita*.' For the first time ever.

And Yacoub himself? For a moment, he had that same dreamy look in his eyes. Then he said, 'We would never get as far as Paris. They would come after us –'

'I would say I am Jewish.'

'They would find us. I would be burnt. And you, you would be brought back here and ...Fernán's mother –'

The witch.

'You mustn't say that.'

'I didn't say it.'

There was a moment's silence while we both thought about that. Would we be able to keep *in touch* ...?

'Fernán's mother, Doña Leonor, would reject you, call you a whore. No one would marry you. Your father would have no choice but to lock you in a convent, not as a novice, with honour, but to live your life out as a penitent, under the rod ... Mariana la Puta.'

There. He, too, had said it.

Yacoub went at dawn.

Sulking, and wanting to worry them, I spent all day in the sea.
And all night.

But when I came home next day, no one cared where I'd been, only that I was back. For Papa was dying and had been calling for me.

What was it he wanted to tell me? I shall never know. He tried desperately to speak and I tried as desperately to help him, to say it for him, but this produced no response except that it obviously was not that and I was wasting his strength, wasting the precious moments.

And then he was dead.

I didn't start screaming and wailing.

Should I have done?

I sat there with him for an hour, two hours, three, holding his hand still as I had been holding it when he died, when he was still trying to speak.

The afternoon went by.

Khadija came and went, reluctant for once to disturb me, but when it began to grow dark, she took me by the shoulders, turned me towards her.

'You must leave him now, Maryam. You must come with me, have something to eat, something to drink.'

'Why?'

'If you do not, you too will get ill, will die.'

I could have spent so much more time with him [I wrote that

night], *I could have made him happier both from day to day and from year to year. He was so lonely, so sad. And watching me all the time, knowing that I preferred the company of Yacoub, of Pedro even.*

And there the paper is smudged, splashed with tears. I remember it happening. I cried all night.

Next morning, it was terribly hot, one of those days you get in Spain when the hot weather gets hotter, hotter than hot. The sky is like white-hot metal and the sun molten gold polishing it. Yet, despite the heat, Don Lope came, with two of his men. He had not come for me, he said – that could wait. He had come to rifle through Papa's papers and effects.

When he had the papers he wanted, though, and was ready to leave, he suddenly said 'Are you ready?' Then to Khadija, 'Get the *muchacha* ready.'

He *had* come for me! He meant to take me with him, *now*!

Khadija started wailing.

He gave up on her, said it didn't matter, he would take me as I was.

Unprotesting – I had been in a daze all day – I was hustled out of the door.

Khadija's wailing turned to screaming.

Don Lope signalled to one of his men, a big brute with sloping shoulders, who stepped over and hit her hard on the face to silence her.

That woke me up.

I broke free and ran towards her, intending only to comfort her, to see how badly she'd been hurt, but the man raised his fist again and instantly my dagger was out, the handle smooth and tempting in my hand, the stiletto point poised at his back. 'You hit her again, you die!' I screamed.

Laughing, and without even bothering to turn round, he hit her again, full in the face as she looked up, looked at me in

horror.

The stiletto slid between the ribs exactly as it had that other time on the road back from Córdoba.

It took him minutes to die.

He tried at first to shout, to threaten, then lay there bubbling and gurgling, and neither of them went to help him.

All through the long minutes, I held Khadija protectively, glaring around like a lynx from the high sierras cornered in a farmyard, and she sobbed in my arms.

They kept back, Don Lope and the other man, a younger man I was going to come to know much better in the next few days. Well, they would: I was still holding the blood-smeared knife in my right hand. Mariana la Loca.

But when the man was dead, and Don Lope had promised, 'No one will lay another finger on your slave, Mariana – only she cannot come with us,' all the fight went out of me. We left her there, protesting from the doorway that I needed a duenna with me, a chaperone, that I could not travel alone with two strange men.

'I'm *not* a strange man!' roared Don Lope. 'I'm her father's business partner, and now I'm responsible for her!' He waved the sheaf of papers at her then put them away in his saddle-bag. 'And get that body buried before anyone else sees it – unless you want the *muchacha* accused of murder.'

'She's right, you know,' I said, as we rode away from the house.

'Who? That ugly old monkey?'

'I shouldn't be here alone with you and him.'

'Is there anyone who might object? If there were, then ...'

He was right too, of course. I had no one – no brother, no uncle, no cousin – and no *prometido*, no betrothed, thanks to my own obstinacy. They could do what they liked to me here on the silent, dusty road to Cartagena. And even more so, once we were inside their house.

When I realised this, I should have turned and ridden away from them, up into the hills, or jumped off and fled down to the sea. But I didn't know that it would be four long years before I saw Los Alcazares and my home again. Nor was I yet become wild enough – *loca* enough – to do something like that, despite killing a man. Killing *another* man.

But then it was only when we reached Cartagena that the full horror of my situation dawned on me.

I was hustled in through the front door (as I'd been hustled out of my own home hours earlier) and straight up the stairs. A maid opened a door, and I was pushed in. I was alone with Doña Leonor.

The one Yacoub called a witch.

7

Doña Leonor was tall. She was beautiful. She looked like Lilith as I had sometimes seen her in my dreams – vivid dreams, live dreams, but not dreams I would ever have shared with Yacoub.

And she could see straight through me.

Under her gaze, my mind opened. *I couldn't stop it.* It simply opened, like a book.

Finally, she spoke. 'You know enough to understand.' Her voice was soft, but not sweet.

'Sit down.'

I sat down, suddenly, on the floor where I was, quite unable to resist.

'But not enough to fight me ... So, Mariana. We meet again.'

Again?

'Oh yes. I knew you when you were simply a pretty little foreign doll. A play-thing. When my husband bought you for my

son.'

Bought me?

'But you are no longer the little plaything you were, all bubbly and full of fun.'

"Bubbly" was a word I could do without today. Would I end up on the floor at *her* feet bubbling blood as that man had at mine?

'You are cold, now. A sea creature ...'

And if I do? God is just, Yacoub the Rabbi would say. A life for a life. For three lives. Oh, Yacoub ... Now I could go with you. No one would come after us. No one would care. No one would know. Why did you not wait?

'The Jew?' She laughed. 'You belong to *us* now. *We* would come after you. He would be burnt, to the great delight of the populace, who always like a Jew-burning, while you ...? We might have to kill you, even now. For though you cannot fight me – cold and hard as you seem you would melt like ice in the fire – you are too dangerous for my son, even as a slave. He is weak.'

I managed to hold her gaze for a moment.

'You just signed your own death warrant.'

She rang a bell.

I was taken back down the stairs by the young man who had been with us all day, then down another flight of stairs to a cellar, to a tiny cell. He gestured for me to go in. I did so, and he closed the door behind me. I heard him bolt it.

I was a prisoner.

There was some light from a grating set high in the wall.

There was a wide wooden bench against one wall, obviously intended to serve as a bed. And a metal ring set in the wall three feet above the bed and about half way down the length of the bed. What was that for?

There was a mug of water, which I determined not to drink.

And nothing else. Not even straw for sleeping.

Who did they usually keep here?

And what was this about "bought" me? And what had that been with James Breklay about the fox calling the red dog thief – about Don Lope and Papa being business associates?

I was beginning to understand. I couldn't believe it! Still, I saw at once that, for me personally, it offered a way out. A hope. "We might have to kill you" she'd said; and then "You just signed your own death warrant". But anything was better than dying. At least it is when you're young, and you have your whole life before you.

Oh, Papa. The tears began to flow at last. Tears of recrimination. Tears of self-pity.

Time went by. An hour. Two.

I heard sounds outside. I wiped my eyes and cheeks on my sleeves. Papa was dead. My childhood was over. But he had given me something. I was a fighter. Today again I had killed a man, defending a helpless old woman. Rabbi Yacoub had also given me something. I was becoming "one who knows", a wise woman. Today, then, I would also try to act wisely, to use what I knew. I would let the past bury itself – let the dead bury the dead, as it says in the Bible. Papa hadn't even been buried. I wiped away the last tear I would ever shed and prepared myself to face the future.

The sounds died away. No one.

Then suddenly the bolt shot back and the door opened. It was Don Lope.

'Come, *guapa*.'

"Little one" I could cope with, but why "*guapa*" – "pretty one"?

I followed him upstairs without a word, and up the other stairs to the salon I now thought of as Doña Leonor's room.

I stood before her again.

Don Lope sat down to one side, staring at me. It was a soft face, the face of a lecher, not the face of a friend.

'Well, my love?' he said.

I assumed that though he was looking at me so intently, he wasn't talking to me. The thought of it, that it had become a possibility, made me smile.

'I want her dead,' Doña Leonor announced, and watched my smile fade.

'And Fernán? What does he say?' Don Lope still hadn't taken his eyes off me.

'He wants her sold. Poof. He is a child.'

'Perhaps he is a wise child. Me, I would put her in a convent.'

'Wiser than his father then. A convent is easy to flee.'

'Not the convent I have in mind.'

'Mariana? What do you say? Would you rather be a live dog or a dead lion?' In Spanish, of course, it came out in the feminine form: a live bitch.

'I would rather be alive.'

She turned back to Don Lope, a sneer on her face. 'You see? A little bitch. *No tiene vergüenza* – she has no shame.'

I leapt at her, and bit her. Dog-like, almost shape-shifting into the bitch she called me, I sank my teeth in her wrist and would *not* let go. She rained down curses on me and tried frantically to shake me off, yet it was Don Lope who stopped me. My skirt was pulled up from behind and a lash with a riding-whip across the backs of my legs made me scream out in agony. An instant later Doña Leonor's hand slammed across my face.

I stepped back, panting and grinning.

Don Lope, too, was grinning – then wiped the grin off his face as his wife showed him her wrist, with blood welling out where my sharp little maiden's teeth had punctured the skin.

'When a bitch starts biting,' she spat, 'you hang the thing. Sell it, even give it away, and it'll keep coming back, its tail between its legs. You'll never be rid of it.'

She clicked her fingers and gestured to him to take me away.

He did so.

Was he taking me out to kill me? I shook his hand off, but went with him. I'd fight for my life outside, when we were away from her.

We didn't go outside. We went straight back down to the cell. Was he going to kill me in there?

He didn't come into the cell with me. He bolted the door and left me alone again.

He would come back with some others to do it. He didn't dare try it alone.

When I woke, it was dark. But still hot. I could hear music in the distance, and dancing, no doubt. Was someone celebrating? Or were *los gitanos* camped nearby?

I let my mind go to them. It was gypsies, the same ones. I saw Vedel playing the guitar, Mirella dancing. Yacoub had said that would happen, that I would be able to far-see, sometimes, without any magic mirror. Could I see *him*? I tried. Nothing. Neither could I see the old woman, their grandmother, though she must be somewhere with them ... She hadn't foreseen death. Was there a card for Death? I wondered. She had predicted life as a wanderer for me, the life of an outsider, a crazy girl. I could cope with that.

The door opened. I looked up, saw Fernán with a torch.

With the torchlight on his face, Fernán was a man now, not a boy. How old was he? Seventeen? Eighteen? He was about three years older than me.

He came towards me.

I stood up.

He stopped, held the torch out towards me. To see me, I realised, not for me to take it. For a second, I was dazzled as he studied my face, then he moved it away, down slowly, and back up, examining me.

'You're tall for your age.'

'Is that intended as a compliment?'

'Sí, señorita.'

'Pues, gracias, señor.'

'And surprisingly fair.'

Another intended compliment, I knew. 'Why "surprisingly", señor?'

'Considering that you have both Moorish and Hebrew blood in your veins ...'

'I also have Scottish blood, señor.'

'Yes, but Mama says that dark blood is stronger. She despises Moors and Jews, of course. But you were different, we would not have held your mongrel blood against you.'

Insufferable. And that word "mongrel" again.

'At least, we *thought* you were different. Papa adored you.' He came closer. Stroked my cheek. 'Which meant he was hardly objective. Mama always thinks clearly, but even she was willing to accept you as a daughter – I have no sister, she has no one to teach – but now she says there is no affinity between you, that you could never become like her.'

Well, *that* I would take as a compliment.

'And as you are no longer an heiress ... Has Papa explained all that?'

His hand had strayed down from my cheek to my neck. Now it slid down to my shoulder. It felt nice, but ... dangerous.

And the way he was looking at me. He was trying to guess what I was like under my clothes. Or perhaps what I would be like under them when I was his age. What I would have been like as a wife.

He pushed the bodice down off my shoulder.

'Don't!' I struggled. The bodice ripped.

He laughed.

'Don't!! I'm warning you!'

'Warning" me?' He stood back a little, but still kept the grip on my arms. 'Ah. You still have the dagger. Papa told me about

that. That must be why Mama told me not to come down here alone.'

I doubted it. I doubted if she even knew I had the dagger. There were strange inconsistencies in her powers. Was that true of all witches? Or was she not a real witch? I had always thought witches were ugly and old till Yacoub told me the most dangerous were the ones like her, the beautiful ones. He had spoken to me not only of Lilith but of the *lamiae*. She might be a *lamia*, a female vampire, for they were beautiful. But surely it would show? No, Jean de Meung, in *Le Roman de la Rose*, says that fully a third of the female population are *lamiae*, vampire-witches, flying around under cover of darkness committing all manner of atrocities. He is exaggerating, of course, but even so, even if it were only a quarter, only a tenth, what beautiful woman could one trust?

He wanted to rape me. His hesitation was fear of – who? Me? Or his mother?

Did he think *I* was a witch? A *lamia*? Or just handy with a dagger?

'Dagger?' I mocked. 'I don't need a dagger with you.'

'You so much as scratch me with it and you'll die.'

'You'll die first.' I laughed in his face. 'I don't "scratch".'

'No?' Suddenly, he pulled the bodice aside, exposing my left breast, then tried to force me down onto the bed.

I hit him with my knee, full in his *cojones*, as hard as I could.

He collapsed, moaning and gasping and clutching himself.

I left him to it. The door was unbolted.

I slipped silently up the stairs; and came face to face once more with Don Lope.

'What? You – ?' His eyes widened – my bosom was completely bare. I watched his mouth fall open.

He lunged at me.

I helped him past me by his elbow and tripped him with my foot. He went flying down the stairs and landed at the bottom

with a crash and a groan. Then there was silence.

I was free.

I ran towards the street door. As I was putting my hand out to open it, a voice called: 'Stop!'

I stopped.

'Stand absolutely still.'

I could do nothing else. My hand was within reach of the door-knob, but I couldn't, *I could not* ...

I heard her go down the stairs. Heard her say something softly to Don Lope, heard him groan. He was still alive, then. Heard Fernán's voice, raised and wailing. Heard her say something angry to him.

Then they all came slowly back up.

Two servants were sent for, both big, strong men, one of them the same young man who had taken me down the first time. This time, they tied my hands to the ring set in the wall above the middle of the bed.

Now I *knew* what it was for.

They then pulled off what clothes I had left on. They were going to rape me. And judging by the position I was in – kneeling on the floor, bent forward over the bed, wrists tied tightly to the ring in the wall – and from what little I knew about these things, it could be that they had been told they could rape me as long as they left me still *virgo intacta*.

But nothing of the sort happened. The young one gave my bare bottom a playful slap, they both laughed, and they went, taking the torch with them and bolting the door behind them.

Hours went by.

I pissed on the floor. I had no choice. It ran hot and wet around my legs and toes.

I sent my mind after Yacoub, but still couldn't contact him. Again and again I tried.

What had happened? Had Yacoub too closed himself off, rejected me?

Was he dead?

I let my mind drift. Found myself with Pedro, but looking down at him this time, out of the air instead of out of the water. He glanced up at me, looked away again.

I alighted on the prow, sat there as I always had – teasing him in my innocence, I realised suddenly, now that my childhood world had vanished like flames over a fire when the fire goes out. The fire had been Sebah and Grandpapa, and Papa.

Now, all at once, I was a woman.

He looked at me. Looked away again.

He couldn't see me, but he knew I was there.

His eyes filled with tears.

I went to him and kissed him on the cheek, then drew back, watched him put his fingers to his cheek in wonder.

I stretched backwards, raising my knees out of the pool of piss, resting only on my toes and ribs and taking most of my weight on my wrists.

How long would they leave me like that? And what would they do to me when they came?

I was frightened. Frightened of being raped. Frightened of dying.

But if I lived, I must remember the insight my visit to Pedro had given me. I was no longer a flame, dancing, free, irresponsible. *From now on, I had to be the fire.*

8

I fell back down onto my knees, and I slept.

And sometime during the night they came. But I wasn't raped. I wasn't killed. I was beaten, by Fernán. The first few strokes,

across my bottom, I hardly felt. I think I must have been only half-conscious. And what I did feel when I realised what was happening was sheer humiliation. That that horrible boy should be able to do this to me ...

I thrashed about, threw myself up and down, quite unable to simply accept it, to be humble. Eventually I twisted right round so my front was exposed, thinking that would stop him, but it didn't. He just laughed delightedly, raised the cane over his shoulder and brought it down on my stomach. I screamed. Another stroke on my stomach, two – three, I don't know – across the fronts of my thighs, and I was leaping and squirming and twisting back over and *offering* him my bottom. Then the strokes began to fall relentlessly, each one harder than the one before. The pain built up and up and up. I had never imagined there could be such pain. I heard myself screaming, screaming, screaming ...

I had wanted Papa to do *this* to me? Was *this* what Catalina's papa did? No, never, he would never, never have – Papa would have killed anyone who ... Though he wanted me to be Fernán's. Surely he must have known, must have guessed, at least, that Fernán would do this to me.

And he sold girls into slavery.

Perhaps he would say: Go on, Fernán, give it to her. Lay it on. *Harder*, lad. She's been asking for it, the spoilt minx. The hussy. The little bitch – no, that wasn't him, that was ...

It had stopped.

It was dark. The light had gone.

I closed my mouth. The screaming stopped.

It was silent. No one was there.

Fernán had gone.

And I was still tied up across the bed, unable even to put my hands to my bottom.

I screamed again for a couple of minutes, in protest, but no one heard me. Or no one cared.

And I realised, with pride, that he wouldn't have dared untie me.

My howls turned to crying, weeping the tears of pain and bitterness away, and the weeping gave way to a kind of convulsive sobbing that went on for the rest of the night.

Next day, the young man brought another sobbing girl down to the cell. When he saw me, he seemed surprised, as though he hadn't realised I was still there, or at least not still tied to the wall ring. Perhaps it was just that he didn't know about Fernán's visit to me in the night, and was surprised at the state of my bottom.

He left the girl, whose name was Anita, and hurried back up the stairs, obviously to seek instructions about me. When he returned, he was carrying a bowl of soup, an old white smock and another length of cord. He tied my ankles together with the cord, then untied my wrists and gave me the smock to put on.

When I was ready, he grinned, and gave me the soup.

I smiled back. I couldn't help it.

Then he locked us in together and left us.

I managed to drink the soup, though my hands were trembling and it hurt me to sit down, while Anita watched me sympathetically.

'What did they thrash you for?' she said, at last.

I shrugged. 'I don't know.'

'You don't *know*?'

I saw her sudden fear. Maybe they just thrash the girls for fun, she was thinking.

'Maybe because I bit Doña Leonor.' Or because I kicked Fernán in the balls, I thought. Or because I threw Don Lope down the stairs. It had been worth it.

'You *bit* Doña Leonor?!' She stared at me. 'Oh, you shouldn't ... You *shouldn't* have ...'

'No, that was a mistake.' I grinned. 'She tasted horrible.'

And suddenly she laughed. She had a lovely laugh, and the

world seemed a better place immediately.

After that, I found I *could* sit down and we sat together and got to know each other.

She was there because her father had sold her.

I was shocked. *Fathers*, I thought, realising how much I had turned against mine.

'Oh, it wasn't his fault, poor man.' She hastened to defend him.

They'd had no money, no food for the little ones, no hope of marrying off the older girls – *five* girls and three boys they were altogether. It had been decided to sell two.

But how could they choose? I wondered. Which two? Not boys, obviously. And while the prettier girls would be worth more, would bring in more desperately needed money, they would also be easier to marry off without much of a dowry than their plainer sisters.

'In the end, Papa asked Don Lope to come and make the decision. You know, to choose one or two of us. He very kindly agreed to take me now and my little sister Carmencita later.'

I looked at her. If she wasn't the most beautiful, then her sisters must be exquisite. 'And is Carmencita as pretty as you are?'

'Oh, she's prettier! But the others aren't *not* pretty. It wasn't ...'

It was. 'How old are you?' I asked.

'Sixteen.'

'Me too.' Well, I was taller than she was.

I wanted to be her equal, become her friend.

I looked at her eyes to see if she believed me. She obviously did.

I would stick with that story, I decided. Sixteen. Where we were going, it would probably be an advantage anyway to be grown up.

That night, the same two men came back with another length of cord and two strange bags. The older man tied Anita's ankles so

that she could only shuffle while the young one loosened the cord on mine so that I *could* shuffle. They then put the bags over our heads and tied them there. I started to struggle, but he whispered that he'd been told to give me another thrashing if I fought at all, and he didn't want to, he liked me even if I was completely *loca*, so *please* ... I could see nothing and could hardly breathe. 'Am I going to die?'

I heard him laugh. 'No, silly.' He patted my bottom, gently. 'You're going to be sold. And whoever buys you will adore you, so don't worry.'

Don't worry?

They led us up the stairs and out of the house. We waited a moment, then a mule-cart stopped alongside us. I was lifted up, swung to and fro, and thrown into it.

We were taken to the sea. I could hear it, and smell it! They put us in boats, and rowed us out to a ship that was collecting cargo all along the coast. It would then head for Oran, in Algeria, or such was the rumour. For a few more days we stood off the coast each day while the sun was up then went in at night to pick up another captive.

One night, when we were off-shore somewhere near Almería, everyone began saying that next day we would be crossing over to Africa. I could see the outline of hills against the sky, a fire burning. Were people cooking? Were they dancing? Would I ever – would I *ever* even *see* Spain again? How would I – ? Suddenly, there was shouting, then a great bang as the ship hit something. We all fell over. There were sounds of fighting outside. Our ship was being attacked! We were saved, we thought – but then we heard Arabic. The attackers were Moors, Barbary Pirates. Worse than the Spanish slave-traders we were with!

'Let's jump!' I screamed.

'Our feet!' cried another girl. Our ankles were still tied. 'I can't swim!'

'I can,' cried Anita, 'but not that far!'

'A harem won't be so bad,' cried another. 'And I'm not going in that cold black water.'

'I am!'

'And me!'

These last two were me and a strong-looking girl with amazing yellow hair and long legs like mine. But like mine, her legs were tied! Our chance would be gone in a moment.

I saw a dead man not far from the hatch and slid out and over to him. He had a knife, a big one. He was one of ours, one I didn't like. But he suddenly opened his eyes and grabbed my wrist! The wrong wrist, for him. My left wrist. My right hand closed on the knife. I cut his throat – I had to! I just slashed it straight across as I had so often seen them do with sheep and goats. The blood spurted up into my face – my arm was clear, but I'd been lying on the deck, my head close to his, when he grabbed me. Retching, I sliced through the rope between my ankles, felt someone snatch the knife from my hand – it must have been the blonde girl, but I never saw her again. Sick with the blood on me, I leapt overboard. A man grabbed me as I leapt, got hold of my leg – I felt his hand slip as I hung over the sea, head down, screaming – then slip again, and then I was plunging into the water, rubbing madly at my face and eyes and throat.

Clean, and free at last, I stayed underwater, swam as far as I could from the ship, swimming, swimming, swimming, until I had to surface in order to breathe. I saw the boats in the distance. One was on fire. Ours, no doubt. The dark line of the coast was over to my right.

I heard something behind me. A dolphin? No. Dolphins are good. This was a man. Even as I turned, an arm came round my neck, forcing up my chin, squeezing my throat! I struggled and fought, but I couldn't scream, couldn't breathe! I was only fourteen, and he was a man, big and strong.

Then wisdom prevailed. I recalled the words of the Kabbalah

and of my master, Yacoub. And more to the point, I heard again the words of my grandmother, Sebah: 'A man is a man, remember, and a fool in the hands of a beautiful woman – or pretty young girl. Remember that. It may save your skin one day. Never fight a man. Appeal to him – and when you have his sympathy, his support and protection, then kill him, or whatever else it may be that needs doing to him.'

I stopped struggling, and when he released his hold on my throat a little, appealed to him for help, sobbing that I didn't want to die, that I'd panicked, how glad I was to see him, how I needed him to hold me up, get me back to the boat.

'The boat?' he muttered. 'The boat's gone. We're heading for dry land.'

But he let me turn in his arms and gaze at him with big, wide eyes and cling to him till he relaxed.

'It's not that far to the shore. Trust me, my beauty. I'll get you there.'

What could I do? I couldn't fight him. I relaxed in his arms. Let him support me.

'Trust me,' he had said, 'I'll get you there.' Halfway, he got cramp, let go of me, and began to drown. 'Help me!' he pleaded, 'Help me, as I have helped you!' and went under again.

What could I do? Before he spoke, I would happily have killed him. But afterwards? And Sebah said *men* are fools! I pulled him up to the surface and towed him the rest of the way to the beach I could now see in the distance. I held him by his long dark hair and whispered 'Now *you* relax!' Fortunately, he did. I could not have managed him if he had struggled. If he'd fought me, he would have drowned. Even *I* might have.

And how did he thank me, this Pedro, after we had lain on the beach for several hours and the sun had come up and warmed us? This Pedro, one of the sailors from the Christian slave ship? Just when I was looking at him and thinking he'd make a fine

protector for me if he would give up his evil ways? What did he do? He took me to a monastery – *Las Hermanas de la Reconquista*, in the mountains above Mojacar, right on the border between Christian Spain and the Emirate of Granada – and left me there! An act of contrition, he said. And a vow: he had promised the Holy Virgin that he would when he had been drowning. And an act of gratitude to me.

I didn't understand, didn't realise what he was doing, until it was too late.

'I would rather have gone to a harem!' I screamed at him as the door swung closed behind me, shutting me off from the world.

Perhaps God or Santa María Magdalena heard me.

PART II

El Camino de Santiago

9

Avignon, 1375

Sir Farquhar de Dyngvale gazed around him, awed. Avignon had grown out of all recognition. Even the papal palace was twice its original size. Only the great river remained the same.

Thirty-seven years earlier, Sir Farquhar (known to his friends – but only his friends – as Ferchard) had passed through Avignon on his way east. His companion then had been Anndra MacElpin.

His companion now, on the journey back home after a lifetime of fighting in the Holy Land and Egypt, was a tall, fair-haired soldier known simply as "English".

Home for Ferchard was still the north of Scotland, even if after all this time that had become more a dream than a memory.

Home for English *was* a dream, for he had been born in *outramer*, as had his father before him; it was his grandfather who had been English born and bred.

From Avignon, they would turn north up the Rhone Valley if they were making for the Channel Ports and the crossing to England.

But Ferchard, much as he longed to go home, knew that here in Avignon he would have to turn south, not north, and cross the Pyrenees into Spain in search of his old friend.

'You'll never find him, Ferchard. Spain's a big country, and after nigh on forty years – he'll be an old man now.' English didn't want to lose the companion he had travelled all the way from Damascus with. 'How will you locate him? Who will remember? Who, in forty years, will remember *our* journey west, the journey that brought us here?'

Ferchard grinned. 'There are one or two who will,' he said,

thinking of fights they had had – some *he* would certainly never forget, like the one on the road from Piraeus.

'Listen, English. I know something of where Anndra was headed. Anndra – Sir Andrew MacElpin – was my brother, more than any natural brother could ever be. When he and I were forced to flee, and that was only after our king himself had fled, and Robert the Steward – he who is now King in Scotland – was approaching Dun Edin, Anndra was grievously wounded. I nursed him across to Flanders in a great storm, then down to Paris, where we stayed awhile. But in that storm, in our fear, and all unbeknownst to each other, we each made a vow: he that he would follow the Pilgrim Way to Compostela if we were saved; I that I would go to Jerusalem.

'We stuck to that. We had no choice, for they were solemn vows. The truth is, though, that Andrew had no interest in going east, in crusading, whereas it had always been my dream.' His voice dropped to a whisper. 'I would have been a Templar Knight had I been setting out forty years earlier.'

English glanced about fearfully. This was Avignon, seat of the papacy in its French captivity: no place to be uttering words like that.

He looked back at his Scottish friend, whom he had always suspected of harbouring some knowledge of the hidden Templars, and waited for him to continue.

'But Anndra considered what happened to them the great betrayal. Nothing would have induced him to go to Jerusalem. Or even to ride as far as Rome with me. Here in Avignon, when the time came for us to go our separate ways, we made arrangements in case I should ever come looking for him. As we, too, must, my friend.'

Now English grinned. 'There'll be a good many English people in London, I warrant.'

'Aye, there will for sure.'

'But how many *called* English?'

'So I'm to come to London and ask for "English"?''

English's face fell.

Like his father before him, whom Ferchard had also known, years earlier, before an unlucky arrow struck him during a naval battle off the coast of Crete, English had always been a dreamer – and easily disappointed.

'Go on with you, lad. I'll find you. You're not just any English, you're the big, blond English with the blue eyes and the muscles who's always getting into fights, usually over the lasses. I'll find you all right – if they let you live that long.'

He left English and rode across Provence, the land of the Langue d'Oc, ancient Templar lands, he knew, and so into Gascony.

The snow-capped peaks of the Pyrenees now formed a never-ending vista on his left. At some point soon he was going to have to turn and cross them. But where for the best?

Waiting for inspiration, he rode on till he came to the town of Oléron-Ste Marie, and there he fell to talking with an old man at an inn.

The man showed some surprise when he heard that Ferchard needed to get to a village, or at least a bridge, called Puente de la Reina.

'All I know,' said Ferchard, 'is that it is between Pamplona and Logrono, on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela.'

'And why should you want to go there?'

'I expect to find there a message from my friend, another knight, also from Scotland, who made the pilgrimage once years ago, when I set out for the east.'

'Were you ever in Jerusalem?'

'Aye, I was. Several times. And I was stationed at Jaffa for five years with the pilgrim guard.'

'So they do still let pilgrims through, and it is men like you who do the job *the knights* used to do. Men from Scotland.'

Ferchard gazed a moment at the old face, the old far-seeing shepherd's eyes, and looked away again.

'Not only from Scotland. We were from all over Christendom:

soldiers whom the tides of war had washed up in the Holy Land, and in many cases left stranded there.'

'I see. They do say, though, that the King of Scotland gave refuge to *the knights*, those of them that got away, when no one else would.'

'Aye, they do say that.' Again Ferchard gazed. 'But those are tales best left untold.'

There was a long silence while they supped their wine.

Then the old man said, 'There are knights on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela now who protect the pilgrims, as there were in the days of *the knights themselves*. Who knows what loyalties these knights may have, and to whom, but one of them may be able to help you. If your comrade-in-arms was a knight himself and from Scotland ... You can go through St Jean pied-de-port and Roncesvalles and down to Pamplona. Or – and from here it is easier – you can go through Urdos to Canfranc, crossing the Col du Somport. That route, which will take you down to Jaca, where you turn west, joins the other route at Obanos. There you will find the River Arga, and over the river a beautiful bridge with six stone arches. That bridge, my friend, is the Puente de la Reina.'

He was one of the last to cross at the Col du Somport before winter set in. As it was, his horse couldn't make it. He had to leave the poor beast at Urdos and purchase a mule, which he led rather than rode for the next month, till he came down out of the mountains finally at Soria, in Castille.

At Jaca, he fell in with a group of pilgrims who were happy to have a knight – if an elderly one – in their company. He stayed with them the rest of the way to Obanos. It took another nine days.

On the outskirts of Obanos a stone cross marked the junction of the two routes. There he said his farewells and set off by himself to explore. He had no clear idea what he was looking for, but, fortunately, one of the pilgrims he had accompanied along the road from Jaca came hurrying after him.

'Sir Farquhar?'

'Yes?'

It was a woman from Hainault, no longer young, dressed in the black gown and wimple of the open Order – if Order it was – of religious *beguines*.

He remembered her name. 'Dame Felisia? How can I serve you?'

'Sir Farquhar. May we sit somewhere? Here – on this bench?'

They sat on a bench outside an inn, and Ferchard ordered water and *comida*, a lunch of chickpeas with bits of sausage in it.

'I love the water up in these hills,' he told the woman. 'I shall miss it.'

'Oh, yes. It's impossible to get clean water now down in the cities of the plain. That's true everywhere.'

'You have travelled much, Dame Felisia?'

He could see she had. She was a long-term pilgrim. A professional. He smiled to himself.

'Oh yes. Indeed. I have been to Jerusalem. It is of that I wish to speak.'

Was she aware that he had been there? That he had done knightly service at Jaffa? He said nothing.

She went on: 'Did you know that knights who protect pilgrims along the sacred ways and at the sacred sites form a special – if now unofficial – company? Any knight who performs this duty, at any time ...'

'That is true, Dame Felisia, in a sense. I have spent years in the Holy Land on official duty – no, no! Get up!'

For she had thrown herself down at his feet, was kissing the ring on his finger.

'Oh, but, sir, to meet one such as you here!'

'Please! I insist!'

He lifted her up bodily, set her down on the bench.

There was a moment of silence while she sipped at her water, gazing at him in awe over the rim of the beaker.

Then Ferchard said, 'This company of which you speak is indeed *unofficial*. *Very* unofficial.'

'Oh, I know, sir. Forgive me. I simply wanted to tell you how much we pilgrims appreciate what you do. And that – perhaps you already know – there's an *unofficial* meeting place for knights like you, here, by the bridge.'

'There is?'

'You didn't know? Then St André was right to urge me to speak to you.'

'You have been here before?'

'This was my first time over the Somport Pass, but I've covered the route twice from St Jean pied-de-port and then taken ship from La Coruña back up to Brugge.'

'I see ... Will you show me where they are, Dame Felisia? This might be what I am seeking.'

'Has your quest anything to do with St André? I've never been approached by him before.'

'It has. It is my good friend and brother from Scotland, Sir Andrew MacElpin, that I am in search of.'

'Then let us thank Le Bon Dieu and St André together before we eat.'

He bowed his head while she did just that in simple homely words, then they both crossed themselves and ate their meal, which turned out to be delicious.

The house she took him to was indeed the one. She didn't come in, she merely introduced him as Sir Farquhar de *Dyngvaille*, 'the knight who has protected us along the way,' and took her leave.

'Come in, Sir Farquhar, come in.' Ferchard's host was a middle-aged cleric in a nondescript black gown. 'You must be hungry.'

'No, no, padre, we ate at the inn. It was while we were eating that Dame Felisia told me about you and offered to bring me here.'

'I see. Sit down, sit down. So. Tell me about yourself, Sir Farquhar.'

'Why?'

The priest smiled. 'Or shall I tell you first a little about us? This house has been in the hands of such as me for the receipt of such as

you since the days of the Templars. It is rumoured that Father Geoffrey's predecessor here, one Père Amaury, was in fact a Templar priest before the fall of the Order.'

That would not surprise Ferchard at all. 'I too have met men who once were, or were rumoured to have been, associated with the Order.'

'I am sure.'

'And Father Geoffrey? Would he have been in residence here thirty-seven years ago?'

'He would, yes. Though that would have been after Père Amaury's time, and before mine.'

'Is he – is he still ...?'

'He is. But he is old, and unwell.'

'I should like to speak with Father Geoffrey, if that is at all possible.'

'Could you not tell me something of your quest?'

So Ferchard told the priest, who turned out to be from over the mountains, in Toulouse, as much of his story as he deemed necessary.

'And you believe your friend, Sir Andrew, may have known Father Geoffrey, may even have come here specially and left a message for you?'

'I do. Though it would not be true to say he came here specially. *I* come here specially. *He* was a genuine pilgrim, on his way to Compostela.'

'You too are a genuine pilgrim, Sir Farquhar. All your life, it seems to me, has been a pilgrimage. Well, on this one night, let it not be said that you have "nowhere to lay your head": you are our guest.'

He went to see if Father Geoffrey was awake.

When he returned, he told Ferchard the old man would receive him in his chamber in ten or fifteen minutes. Then he smiled and said, 'A strange story. Two Scottish knights, one on the road to Jerusalem, the other on the road to Santiago de Compostela. Both doing their duty before God and man; neither, probably, receiving

much credit for it – at least from man. The Knights themselves, the Order, received much blame for what little ill they had done and little credit for all the good.'

Ferchard thought it better not to respond. He waited patiently.

'Do you know the story of our local saint? St William?'

Ferchard shook his head.

'The story begins with Felicia of Aquitaine, a great lady, sister of the Duke of Aquitaine. Felicia set out on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela and, having completed it and undergone the spiritual rebirth that successful completion of the Camino brings with it, took vows of poverty and chastity and remained here on the route as an anchorite. Her brother, Duke William, incensed and humiliated by this fanaticism, sought her out and, when she refused to abandon her folly and return to the court with him, lost his temper, drew his knife and stabbed her. Later, he repented and travelled to Rome in quest of absolution for the murder of his sister. The Pope instructed him to do exactly as his sister had done: give up the world, make the pilgrimage, and settle down on the Camino as an anchorite. He did so – and he is our St William.'

'And his sister?'

'Nothing. She is forgotten except for her part in the story of her saintly brother.'

Ferchard laughed out loud. 'That does seem a little unjust.'

'It is the way of the world. I suspect, though, that it is not the way of heaven.'

'Let us pray not.'

'Come. Father Geoffrey should be ready for you now.'

Father Geoffrey was sitting propped up in bed, bright-eyed and seemingly wide-awake. The woman who had propped him there bobbed a curtsy to Ferchard and slipped out of the room.

'Come in, my son. Come close, where I can see you. So you are Andrew's comrade-in-arms, come finally. And none too soon. I am not long for this world.'

The man was English, as the title Father had implied. How had he come to know Anndra? And how had he come to be the priest in charge here in the mountains of northern Spain?

'Thank you for agreeing to see me, Father. May I ask how you came to know my friend?'

'Yes. He had some contact with the Templars. In Edinburgh. More I think than you did. No, don't tell me. The walls have ears. I am old, too old for it to matter, but you still have some part – an important part – of your life to live. I was in touch with the Templars, what was left of them – I was in fact the English king's secret emissary to the Templar leadership in Scotland. Neither Edward of England nor the Bruces or Balliols in Scotland had any time for Philip's machinations, but there was little they could do about it. The Order of Knights Templar was proscribed in England by Papal edict, and would have been proscribed in Scotland if Balliol and the Steward had not maintained the Bruce's protection of them. I received a message saying that it was unsafe for me to return to England, the king would be unable to protect me. So, when I heard of the old Templar priest here, Père Amaury, and that he needed an assistant and eventual replacement, I volunteered and was sent here. Andrew was a friend of mine in Edinburgh. In earlier days, he would I am sure have served the Templars as a knight and spent his days where, ironically, you have spent yours. He told me when he came here that he didn't want to go to a Holy Land where there were no Templars. He would be too sad.'

'He told me the same, Father.'

'Those days were past and gone even then. And now? Who knows or cares about the Knights of the Temple of Solomon now?'

'Some do, Father. In the Holy Land, and throughout the east, many still speak of the Knights with awe.'

'They do? Then God is good. Unlike man. Pass me that box. No, that flat one. Yes. Thank you.'

He opened it. Sifted through some papers with his poor eyes in the failing autumn-afternoon light.

'Can you ...?'

Ferchard smiled. 'My eyes are not much better. I see well enough in the distance, but close up ...'

'Call Père Thomas.'

Ferchard went in search of the other priest and brought him back. He soon found the letter, addressed, in faded ink, to "Sir Farquhar de Dyngvale, should he ever pass this way ..."

He held it out.

Ferchard took it, opened it, then handed it back. 'No, no, you read it.'

Père Thomas scanned it. 'I'm afraid I can't. It is written in a tongue I do not –'

The old priest in bed laughed. 'That will be the Gaelic they speak up there. You'll have to read it yourself, Sir Farquhar. No one else can.' He waved the young priest out of the room.

Ferchard went over to the window, squinted hard, and managed to make out the words.

St Mary Magdalene's Day, 1338

Ferchard, old friend,

I miss you already. I missed you almost before the sun set the day we parted in Italy. I would have turned to follow you, but could not because of the oath I had taken.

Ferchard, I shall complete El Camino de Santiago de Compostela. I shall then continue west to Vigo. From Vigo, I shall make my way to Guadalajara. Unless you come as a pilgrim, turn south now, head straight for Guadalajara. I shall leave the next message there, at the Sign of the Two Fish.

May God be with you.

Farewell.

Ferchard read it again, aloud, in English, for the priest. Then looked up. Father Geoffrey's eyes were closed.

He read it again to himself, savouring the original Gaelic, but with tears in his eyes now. It was, he was sure – he could *feel* it, and he trusted his feelings still, as Anndra's mother herself had told him he always should – a voice from beyond the grave.

He gave it another glance, folded it and put it away in his pouch, then crept towards the door.

'I know. The Sign of the Two Fish at Gaudalajara.'

Ferchard turned back. Smiled.

The blue eyes were open again.

'Aye, Father.'

'You'll stay the night with us, and bid me farewell in the morning before you leave.'

'Aye, I will.'

10

Ferchard rode south through Logrono, and Soria, where he exchanged his mule, of which he had become surprisingly fond, for a horse, and regretted it before the day was out.

Seven more days, and he was in Guadalajara; but here he was not so lucky. He could find no trace of the Sign of the Two Fish. He searched and asked as much as he could (his Spanish was almost non-existent still) or dared (he knew that the two fish were Pisces, the star sign that symbolised the Templars) and was almost ready to give up when he was accosted by a young woman flaunting her attractions in what could only be described as a professional manner.

Ferchard was no puritan, and certainly no celibate knight either, but nor was he in the habit of letting himself be hooked in a strange city by one so obviously fishing for fools among the foreign and innocent. He turned aside, courteously, at first, then as she persisted, snapped something rude at her in Arabic. Well, she was dark, and it was that or French.

She answered in equally fluent Arabic. 'If you would learn more of the Sign of the Two Fish, come with me, sidi.'

She led him through the narrow streets that seemed crushed against the high Moorish walls on either side of the Toledo Gate.

With shame, he realised it was an area he had not explored at all, yet had been ready to abandon his quest.

'Shall I hold your arm?' she had asked him.

'No, no, walk ahead, I'll follow you,' he had replied, embarrassed by the glances, some of disapproval, more of amusement, that they were attracting.

But she would attract attention wherever she went, he thought, as he followed her, with or without an old fool like him on her arm – the morning's catch.

Did she really know the Sign of the Two Fish? Or had she simply heard him enquiring, and used that knowledge to pick him up? How much would it cost him to get free of her? Should he slip away now, in the crowded market through which she was at present leading him?

And yet if she did know something ...?

Just then, he realised he had almost lost her by accident. He hurried, drew closer, pulled her arm through his.

She smiled up at him.

How long – oh, how long! – it had been since a woman had looked at him like that!

She took him into a quiet side-street, then through an arched entrance. In a dusty courtyard, under a vine in a shady corner (in Guadalajara the sun was still hot at midday) sat a majestic woman of – what? – about his own age? Certainly no less than sixty. Yet regal. Queen of all she surveyed. And what she surveyed at this moment was him.

'You seek the House of the Two Fish, señor.'

He understood that much. '*Sí, señora.*'

'Why?'

Unable to tell her in Spanish, he did so in Arabic, while the girl who had brought him translated.

When he had finished, the woman clapped her hands together and laughed out loud. 'Thirty-seven years! Such fidelity! Yet after all this time, what do you expect to find? An old man turned Spaniard? A grave? A story of a man who came and went – as men

do, don't they, Fatima? – came and went, back to his native land. Scotland, you say. *Escotia*. I have never heard of it. And, I am sorry to say, I have never heard of him. Well, but now you are here, will you eat with us? Sleep with Fatima?"

He was about to say 'No, no, I must get on,' thinking only that he had lost two hours, when something made him hesitate, turn, look into the girl's eyes.

There *was* something here.

He turned back to the woman, grinned. '*Esta es Fatima?*' Fatima is *this* one?

She grinned back, nodded. 'Show him where he can wash, Fatima.' Then, to Ferchard: 'We shall eat in half an hour.'

Outside the room, the girl, Fatima, took his hand and asked: 'The pump in the courtyard, sidi? Or would you prefer to come straight up to my room? There's a basin, I can bring a jug of water.'

'The courtyard, I think, first. If you don't mind me stripping off there. I'm filthy.'

'Not at all. Anyway, there's no one much about at this time. It's still early.'

She helped him undress, then left him at the pump while she fetched soap and a towel. In a moment, she was back. She helped him wash the dust and sweat off himself, then dried him, and when they were finished, took him up to her room to comb out his long salt-and-pepper hair and brush his little white beard.

Then they were ready.

He pulled her down onto the bed beside him.

'No! No!' she cried, laughing. 'Not now! We must not keep the *madre* waiting.'

True, he thought. It would not do to offend the old whore if she did know something. And they had all night.

Then wondered if he was getting old at last. Would a young man have stopped at that point, for *any* reason? Would he himself have done so even a year ago? He would, aye, he would, if it had been a matter of duty, of honour; and his present quest was nothing if not that.

Ferchard and the *madre* dined together, while Fatima waited on them.

This was going to cost him dear, he knew. He hoped it was worth it.

Then smiled to himself as Fatima's hip brushed against him. That part was going to be worth it, whatever else happened.

While they ate, he told her about the Holy Land. 'It is all in the hands of ...' He realised this was going to be difficult in Arabic, for "the Infidel" came out as "the True Believers" and he didn't want Fatima to say that in Spanish. Moros – Moors – didn't sound right, either. Too local.

Then Fatima prompted him with 'The Saracens'.

'In the hands of the Saracens, yes. Yet they let pilgrims land at Jaffa, Christians en route for the Holy Sepulchre and Bethlehem and the Cave of the Manger. Why? Because the Christians pay, and pay exorbitantly, for the privilege. They even provide a special guard to protect the Holy Places and to escort pilgrims from Jaffa to Jerusalem.'

'Did you not say you were one of the guard?'

'I did. I was. But only in Jaffa. Only there do they allow Christian soldiers to be posted – in order, I believe, to give the pilgrims confidence to disembark. But once ashore, they are whisked away from us. We like to believe that if anything *did* happen to any pilgrims, we would move into action. Nothing ever does. The fact is, they're a lot safer now than they were when there was continual skirmishing all round Jerusalem.'

'I see.'

They ate for a while in silence.

'And the – ah – men of the Sign of the Two Fish?'

He peered at her. 'They no longer exist.'

'At least, officially.'

'As you say, *madre*.'

After another pause for eating and drinking, she said: 'There is no longer a House of the Two Fish in Guadalajara. We do not have

magic enough. We have no magic at all, apart from a few charms and filtros. In Cuenca, however, there is still such a house; or at least a house which still bears that name and those with magic enough to protect it.'

'Cuenca?'

'Cuenca. Now, Fatima, dance for us.'

And dance she did, such dancing as he had not seen since Greece, since Albania, since he crossed over to Italy and thought he had left the east and all such wonders behind.

When he woke in the morning, his head was on Fatima's lap. He was lying on the bed still, where he had finally fallen asleep, and she was kneeling there naked, his head on her thighs, huge brown eyes gazing down into his.

His money! His – ! He jumped up, grabbing at his pouch. Everything was there.

He turned to face her. Ashamed.

She chose not to answer the unspoken words. Instead, she said, 'You will find what you seek in Cuenca, *in sha'Allah*. And my mistress says I may accompany you ... You would like some water, sidi? Some wine, perhaps? Some food?'

They dressed, then she took him out into the courtyard, led him to the bench and table in the shade of the vine.

There was no sign of the older woman.

It took them eight days to cross La Alcarría and come to the mountain citadel of Cuenca. No great adventure befell them – other than the one which befell them every night – for there were few travellers on this mountain road so late in the season, and rooms to spare, and landlords put them together, alone, assuming, reasonably enough, that as they were travelling alone together but were so ill-matched in race and age, they must be master and concubine.

At Cuenca, as they passed in through the West Gate, they had to pull their heads down from gazing at the sun-lit peaks soaring up

behind the walls and, once inside, to stand a while to let their eyes and ears and noses adjust to the noise and smells and darkness of the city.

'Shall we spend one more night together, master, before I deliver you up to them?' Fatima asked.

Was it the ominous-sounding "deliver you up" or simply his long loneliness and the love in her eyes? The latter, probably.

They booked in at a *bodega* among the "hanging houses" – houses hanging out over a precipice that frightened Ferchard simply to look at, but Fatima laughed at him and said they had been there for years, why should they fall tonight? Then, after eating in silence, they went up to their room. Unlike the previous nights, this time she lay quiet in his arms. Waiting, he thought, for the questions.

'Fatima, who are these people to whom you must *deliver me up*? What do you know of them?'

'I know they have the answer to your question, sidi.'

'That is not an answer to my question.'

She smiled, but sadly. Not like the smiles he had known for the last eight days.

'My mistress – the *madre* –'

'The one who runs the bordel where you work, yes ...'

'She is not ... she is not a witch. Not really.'

'No. But these others are.'

'Oh yes, sidi. You knew.' She propped herself up on one elbow. 'And they are not all *good*.'

So, there are good witches and there are bad witches. That he would go along with – as would any honest Scot. In the eyes of the Church, of course, there were only bad witches and worse ones, but he had known some – and known of other – good witches in his youth.

He gazed up into her face, and waited.

'Sidi, there are *lamiae* here in Cuenca.'

Lamiae? Vampires? 'You mean – blood-suckers?'

She nodded. Smiled suddenly, a real smile. Rose up over him

on her hands and knees. 'I am *not* one.'

'Fortunately for me.' He grinned back up at her, glanced down past her chin at her perfect breasts.

'I am to take you to Madre Inés, that is all I know.' She sat down on top of him.

'And Madre Inés is a *lamia*?'

'Oh, no. No.'

'Then ... Well. I will see, won't I. Tell me about *lamiae*.'

Her hands were on his shoulders now, and her face leaning forward over his. 'It is said that they suck the life out of men – their lovers – while they sleep, and that this makes them immortal, almost. The *lamiae*.'

'I didn't think you meant the men. I imagine it leaves *them* with their mortality writ large before their eyes.' He continued to gaze up at her. 'How can I know one? What should I do if I find myself with one?'

'Nothing. Don't. Sleep only with me until you leave Cuenca.'

It was true. He was coming to trust her completely. 'And you cannot journey on with me? There is no question of your doing so?'

'No, sidi.'

No. If she did, she would be a runaway, and he would be a thief.

'She gave me leave to accompany you here, no further – and that only because I know the road and have met Madre Inés.'

'And if I were to travel back with you to Gaudalajara, purchase you from her before I travel on?'

Once again they gazed into each other's eyes. For a moment she too allowed herself to dream.

Both knew there was no going back.

Then she lowered herself gently down onto him, and made love to him, quietly, with nothing of the passion of the previous nights but with more sorrow, more real love, and more awareness that this week had been special for both of them.

In the morning, Fatima took him along a system of dark and

insalubrious alleyways to a large house that had once been grand. Above the gate, which hung open, was the Sign of the Two Fish carved in relief at the top of the stone arch. They passed beneath it into a courtyard that seemed to have been used as a tavern the night before (perhaps it always doubled as one) then into the dark silence of the house itself. They saw no one.

The girls work late nights, Ferchard thought – then whispered, 'Does anyone ever visit a brothel in the morning?'

Fatima, leading the way, grinned back at him. 'Oh, yes. Market-traders, porters, labourers, and so on.'

'So where are they?'

'The other side. This side is – shh, we're here.'

Madre Inés was old and ugly, and gave the impression that she had never been anything else. She was also powerful. She dismissed Fatima with the words 'Leave us, girl,' then when Ferchard looked as though he might follow her, held him with her eye till he forgot the girl he had come to love and might never see again. It was she who called the girl back and said, 'No, stay, we may need you to translate for us.'

They did. She and Ferchard sat. Fatima stood behind Ferchard, her hand on his shoulder.

'Now tell me.'

'I am trying to trace a friend of mine who passed this way thirty-seven years ago. I have been told he may have left a message for me in Cuenca; and more specifically with you, Madre Inés.'

'Thirty-seven years is a long time. Where have you, and he, been all these years?'

He told her where he had been. 'As for my friend, Andrew MacElpin, I do not know. It is on this that I wish to consult you.'

'You have gold.'

He nodded, though it was not a question.

'Then you will pay for the cock.'

The *cock*?

She clapped her hands, gave orders to a girl who came running

in, then turned back to Ferchard.

'Wait in the courtyard. Someone will bring you water and wine.'

They went down the stairs, took a seat in the sunshine, for it was cold in Cuenca, and waited.

Another girl brought flagons of water and wine, as promised.

Fatima poured some of each into a cup for him, drank only water herself.

Soon, Madre Inés came down, a white cock swinging by its feet from her hand.

In her other hand was a sharp knife.

'Hold its head,' she said. 'With both hands. Cup its head in your hands. Think of this man, this Don Andrés, for whom you search.'

As Fatima translated, Ferchard looked down at its head, which was not dangling but held up indignantly. He took it in his hands, covering its eyes, and thought of Andrew – Anndra – as he had been, as he might be now ... Felt again that Anndra was no more, that he was wasting his time.

Suddenly, the knife struck. There was a jerk and a squawk, a flapping of wings, blood gushed out onto the ground, and he found himself holding the severed head. He threw it down in disgust, staring at the blood on his hands.

The witch ignored him. She was gazing at the spreading pool of blood on the ground.

'Ah,' she said. 'Ah ...' And after a long pause, 'Who would have thought it?'

Then, quite casually, she dropped the dead bird, called one of the girls – presumably to clean it up, take it to the kitchen – and this done, led Ferchard and Fatima back upstairs.

Again they sat facing each other.

'There is no message,' she said.

'No message? But then why have I – have we – ?'

'Listen, señor. There never was any message. But now I have seen, and I remember.'

He waited impatiently.

'Not many like your friend Andrés pass through this house, this

courtyard. Thirty-seven years ago was it? I was young then, as was he; and I was beautiful.'

'Señora, we were all young once, but time waits for no man – or woman. What do you remember?'

'Oh, time waits for some. But not for you or me, or poor Andrés ... He was not alone when he came here.'

'Not alone?'

'He had with him one from Aragón or those parts – the plains and the mountains there – of whom I remember little save that he would not, or could not, abide the Sign of the Cross.'

Ferchard was shocked. Then realised: some fanatical Saracen or Jew.

'No, no,' she said, though he had not spoken. 'This was a Christian, at least by race. Raymond, his name was, yes. Raymond. I remember it now ... I loved him for that.'

She meant, Ferchard knew, for his abhorrence of the Cross.

'Do you remember anything else? Where they were off to when they left here, perhaps?'

She chuckled. 'That is the difficulty. Your man Andrés was for going straight on to Valencia.'

Valencia, then.

'Raymond, the heretic, was on his way south to Albacete, where there were people he knew. People of his own persuasion, I suspected.'

Albacete? He had never heard of it.

'They had three choices. To travel east together to Valencia. To travel south together to Albacete. Or to go their separate ways.'

'And what did they do?'

'I don't know. They still had not decided when they left.'

Valencia. It had to be.

'And you never saw either of them again.'

'No.'

Valencia. Andrew would never have had any truck with heresy, anyway. Just some chance-met fellow-traveller. You meet them and stay with them till the parting of the ways.

He jumped up, ready to leave, then turned back. 'What was all that with the cock and the blood?'

She rubbed her finger and thumb together.

He sat.

'Were you always such an impatient man? Andrés was not like you.'

'No. You are right. He was always calmer, more gentle ...'

He found tears in his eyes. Why did they speak of him as if he were dead?

She was right.

But he was right, too. 'For the love of Allah, tell me what you learnt from the cock.'

Fatima would have translated this as "*por favor*" but the old woman needed no translation.

'I saw in the blood a certain *muchacha* – one I know: a Moorish girl named Maryam. But what are you to her, or she to you? No, it is not some girl you will meet in the night, grow to love, and leave one morning.' His eyes and Fatima's met as she translated this and he saw tears flowing down *her* cheeks now. 'This is someone whose life is already bound up with yours ...'

'Can you tell me no more?'

'No. Perhaps Doña Carmen can.'

'Doña Carmen?'

'But I would not advise you to visit her.'

'Why not?'

He saw fear in Fatima's eyes as she translated the question, and guessed the answer.

'Let's simply say she is a great deal older than I am, yet looks a great deal younger.'

'What kind of answer is that?' he persisted, pretending ignorance.

'You are not a young man. A visit to Carmen could kill you. And then what will become of your quest? And of Maryam?'

She studied him with suddenly sympathetic eyes.

'Open that box on the table, Fatima. Tell me what you find.'

The girl did so. Took out and held up a small red egg.

'What is it?' the witch asked.

'It is ... it looks like an egg of dragon's blood, but I don't think it is.'

'No, you are right. It's a fake. Replace it. Now try that smaller box, the one inlaid with ivory.'

Fatima took out a seemingly identical egg and held it up. 'This is real,' she breathed. 'Isn't it?'

'Oh, yes. Give it to the gentleman.'

She gave it to Ferchard.

He held it in his palm, felt the power of it.

'Keep it with you,' Madre Inés told him. 'With Doña Carmen, it may well save your life. She will take power from it, unwittingly – don't worry, it is inexhaustible – and not drain you completely.'

'We shall not need you, girl.'

'But *he* needs me!' Fatima protested. 'I translate for him!'

'From what? From Arabic? I speak Arabic.'

Fatima was shut out, and Ferchard was led into a small but luxurious chamber dominated by a four-poster bed draped in scarlet.

'Lie down.'

'But I –'

'Lie down, or leave.'

He stared at her. He had never been one to retreat, to back away from danger. He sat on the edge of the bed, undid his boots, removed them. Lifted his feet up onto the bed and lay back.

She was slender, with long black hair and great black eyes. He didn't think she was Spanish, though; or even Moorish. She looked like a woman of Hind. What was the name of their goddess? Durga? Lakshmi had told him that her name too was the name of a goddess. And then of course, there was Kali, the black goddess. This one, although she was golden, not black, should be called Kali. Perhaps she was, in India.

Ferchard waited, while Carmen/Kali seemed to consider the

situation, consider him.

At length, she said 'Take off your jerkin. That will suffice.'

He did so. Lay back again.

She sat beside him on the bed, ran cold finger-tips along his eyebrows, the long dark nails brushing against his forehead.

'Tell me.'

He told again of his quest for his friend Andrew, of this Maryam who had arisen out of nowhere. 'Can you help me?'

'A little, yes. I know nothing of your Andrew, but Maryam ... she is in Granada.'

'Granada? I cannot go to Granada! Why should I go to Granada? I know no one there. What is this Maryam to me, or I to her?'

'I know not. I know only that she was here and now she is there.'

'I cannot go to Granada. I must take the road to Valencia, follow Andrew.' Or the road to Albacete. Why did Albacete keep niggling in the back of his mind? He wondered suddenly whether Albacete was on the route to Granada. It probably was.

'Must, must, cannot, must. You are an old man but young still in the ways of the world, and you will do as you will, not as you must. It is I who do as I must ... Lie still now. Sleep ...'

'But is she – is she – one of *you*?'

'One of *us*? Oh, no. Though she could have been, *should* have been, and very nearly was ... Now sleep.'

He slept.

11

Fatima knew that sometimes, very early, while it was still dark, Doña Carmen's men-servants would dump what was left of a man on the corner between the horse-trough and the hot-sausage stall.

She went there and waited in the shadows all night.

Before dawn they brought him, dropped him, and left.

She ran over to him. He was dead, despite the dragon's blood! Or no – no, perhaps ... the hollow cheeks, the black rings under his beautiful eyes, closed now – he felt dead, floppy and cold, but there was some slight pulse!

On the ground there, Fatima lay down alongside him and held him close, warming his body with her own, feeding him her strength, breathing life in through his lips.

When at last he could get to his feet, stumble along, his arm over her shoulders, she took him back to the House of the Two Fish, and there she cared for him till he was fit and well enough to continue with his quest.

It was during those days of recovery that it occurred to Ferchard that Fatima may be able to help him with the mysterious Maryam. 'She was here,' he said. 'Some of the girls must remember her.'

So she asked around and found one who remembered Maryam when most had forgotten her. Why? Because this girl, too, could read and write.

Fatima took her to Ferchard. 'This is Sidi Farquhar. Sidi, this is Isabel. She seems to remember Maryam better than any of the others. She understands Arabic, and she knows how to read and write.'

Ferchard smiled. 'If she speaks Arabic, leave her with me. I don't need her to read or write.'

'You'll see what I mean.' Fatima went, leaving them alone.

Ferchard studied the girl. She was younger than Fatima, no more than eighteen, perhaps less, and surprisingly fair for an Arabic speaker.

'How do you come to know Arabic, Isabel?'

'I grew up among *Mudejars*, sidi.'

Mudejars: Muslims who had elected to remain in what was now Christian territory.

'You are not of Moorish blood yourself?'

'Oh, no.'

Well, if she did not want to talk about it ...

'Tell me all you remember of this Maryam. Everything. Spare no detail, however trivial.'

'Yes, sidi. My people brought me to Madre Inés three years ago. At first, they didn't want me here, said I was too quiet, too virginal –'

'*Too virginal?*'

'Yes, even for a virgin. But then Madre Inés said if they bought me I could be *kept* a virgin –'

'*Kept* a virgin?'

'Oh, not a real virgin, sidi. I wasn't a real virgin even then. They had ... my people ... What mattered was that I *seemed* like a virgin, so if Madre Inés kept repairing me ... you know?'

Oh yes, he knew.

'Then they mentioned that I knew my letters, in Arabic as well as in Latin and Castellano, so if Madre Inés was not really interested they would take me elsewhere. Finally, pretending she was not interested in my reading and writing, Madre Inés paid them a fair price for me, and I was hers.'

'Isabel, I understand that she would make lots of money out of selling you as a virgin time after time, but what is all this about reading and writing? And what does it have to do with Maryam?'

'Madre Inés has a scriptorium here where girls like me are employed during the day copying texts – whole books sometimes. And Maryam was especially valuable to Madre Inés because she could copy without making errors, and even translate between different tongues.'

'And you could not?'

'Oh, no. Most of us can only copy what we see, hardly understanding – very often not understanding the difficult texts at all. And when you don't understand what you're writing you make mistakes. But Maryam understood everything. Castellano, Arabic, Latin. She even knew Hebrew!'

'Hebrew? Then she must have been Jewish.'

'Oh no, sidi. We asked her. Maryam al Qartayanni, she was.'

'Qartayanni?'

'Of Qartayanná, sidi. Cartagena, in Spanish.'

'Ah.'

'I worked alongside her for a year or so. We talked, we were about the same age, sixteen, seventeen ... Then she ran away, sidi.'

'*Ran away?* But why? And where?'

'I don't know where. No one does.'

'I know one person who does.'

'Sidi?'

'Nothing. But did her running way have anything to do with Doña Carmen?'

Eyes wide, terrified, Isabel nodded and put her finger to her lips.

'Well. So tell me, what kind of texts were you copying, was she translating?'

'We copy all kinds of books, sidi. The Sign of the Two Fish is a well-known editorial mark, like the House of the Two Fish is a well-known tavern.'

Cover for other activities, Ferchard smiled to himself.

'But the books Maryam worked on were usually difficult texts on magic and – and, you know ... The Seal of Solomon, stuff like that. She had to copy them in Castellano, and check them against the original Hebrew or Arabic. And she could, you see, because she understood it, knew what it was all about, what it all *meant*.'

'I see, yes. But I don't see what it has to do with me ... Tell me about *her*. What does she look like? What is she like as a person? Is she shy, like you? Or more like Fatima?'

'More like Fatima, sidi. She dances like – like a *houri*.' She blushed.

'And she *looks* like Fatima?'

'Oh, no. Well, she is tall and her hair is dark, and she has the big, full lips and nipples we all develop here, but her eyes are not black like Fatima's and mine, they are greenish and –'

'Her hair is not red?'

'No, though sometimes it does seem *castaño*, chestnut, with red tints in it.'

'And what else?'

'What else? She walks like a dancer and all the men adore her, but during the day Madre kept her busy in the scriptorium and didn't let her out among the men except in the evenings and on feast-days.'

'And is she ... is she *nice*? Is she kind?'

'Oh, yes. She's such a good dancer, you'd think we'd all be jealous of her. Well, some were, but I never was. She was my friend. We used to laugh together. When she had to flee because of that – that awful woman, I was heart-broken. I miss her still ... Sidi?'

'Yes?'

'If you ever catch up with her, ever see her – and I think you will – tell her Isabel loves her and misses her.'

'I will, child. I will.'

He gave her a gold coin and told her to tuck it away somewhere secret.

He spent that night with Fatima, and in the morning took his leave of her. What could he give *her*? He owed his life to her. In the end, as they walked across Cuenca to the stable by the West Gate where he had left his horse, he took her into a goldsmith's and bought her a gold armlet in the form of a slender serpent circling round and round her upper arm. Then she rode with him slowly through the milling crowds to the Valencia Gate, and there they parted.

He didn't go to Valencia. He had ridden little more than a mile, and, glancing back at this other, different, view of the beautiful city of Cuenca, it occurred to him that Andrew had no pressing reason, no reason that Ferchard knew of, anyway, for going to Valencia, and might well have decided to accompany his new-found friend to his destination. It would be like him. He also remembered the old witch saying that the friend, Raymond, had acquaintances in Albacete. They might still be there.

He turned south to Albacete.

But as the days went by, and his tired old horse plodded on and on, ever further south across the barren hills, the forests all the time below him in the seemingly inaccessible river valleys, he again began to think he was making a mistake.

He had no idea what he was looking for. It wasn't a Templar connection – though if these heretics were what he suspected, then there had been Templars, he knew, who had sympathised with them, and risked the wrath of the Pope when they refused to take part in the so-called crusade against them, the Albigensian Crusade, which over a period of twenty years had devastated the Midi and all but wiped out the heretics.

All but.

There were always some who got away. Especially when they had such powerful, if covert, protectors as the Knights Templar, who at that time had been thick on the ground in the Midi, the Occitan, the land of the *langue d'oc*, the land through which he himself had so recently ridden after separating from English in Avignon.

How could they call that a crusade? A crusade was a Crusade, part of the long war whose sole aim was to wrest the Holy Land back out of the hands of the Saracens and then hold on to it. Perhaps even now the Holy Land *would* be in Christian hands if all that time and money and effort had been spent on a *real* crusade. And perhaps the Knights Templar themselves would still be patrolling the sacred sites.

Sir Farquhar had spent his life fighting ultimately losing battles in the middle-east while Christian popes and emperors and kings fought internecine wars for their own aggrandisement here in the west, and it was on this thought that he rode through the old Moorish gate of Albacete – and found himself back in the east. The smells, the sudden smell of cooking, the cumin, the coriander; the bougainvillea over the old walls; the people – here, suddenly, *most* of the people were Moorish; a muezzin calling the people to prayer from a mosque that was still a mosque. Right inside the gate was an inn with a stable where he was able to find a bed and leave the

horse.

He was not looking for Moors.

Christians? There was no way he could mention heresy, a group of heretics, to a Christian.

In the Calle Zapateros, he found a Moorish eating place called the Zitouna, went in and sat down. The stares were not hostile exactly, but nor were they welcoming. It was clearly a place Christians avoided.

When he spoke though, everyone relaxed, became more friendly. His Arabic was perfect (far better than theirs) which led to some jokes, and then some arguments about the supposed cultural superiority of Morocco over Andalucía (at the time, the Emirs of Granada considered the Merenid Sultans of Morocco to be quite as dangerous an enemy as the Catholic kings of Castilla), and then that of the east (Arabia, Syria, Egypt) over the west (the Maghreb and Al Andalus).

Ferchard laughed. Asked them what life was really like now for them, Mudejars under the *Reconquista*. They were amused by him, inclined to be open – the more so as he spoke no Spanish, was quite unlike any other *Nasrani* they had ever met. Was almost one of them.

'I notice that there are far more of you in Albacete than there are further north – in Cuenca, for instance. I suppose that's because we are near the border here.'

'No, no, you are still a long way from what is now the border,' Hassan told him. 'The Emir, may the All-Powerful preserve him and lend him strength, holds most of the south coast, but his sway does not extend far inland. Between fifty and one hundred miles.'

'It extends from Jebel Tarik in the west to Almería in the east,' another man, Fjr, explained, 'but there is always fighting and skirmishing at key points along the border ...'

'But for you here?'

Hassan replied. 'At the moment, things are not too bad, *al hamdu-lillah*. We are not prevented from worshipping in our own way in Albacete –'

Fjr took over. 'In some places, the muezzins are not allowed to call the faithful –'

'Mosques have been turned into Christian churches –'

'The people have nowhere to go.'

'The boys nowhere to learn the Holy Quran.'

'There has been talk of forced conversions.'

'Forced conversions. As if we were Jews.'

'I see. As if you were Jews. Yes, I see.' There might indeed be something here, an opening. Shared hatred of the Catholic Church can produce strange bed-fellows. But first: 'I expect you wonder why I am here.' Of course they did, they were simply too polite to ask.

'Thirty-seven years ago,' he began ... And told them the whole thing.

When he finished, they were all staring at him.

Hassan spoke first, as always, while all the others listened avidly. 'So we are to understand that your friend, Sidi Andrés, *may* have come here thirty-seven years ago. And that if he did, he would have been, at least initially, in the company of a man from the borderland between Spain and France; one who, though Christian in a sense, was not a Catholic. Was indeed one of those the Catholics like to burn.'

'I did not say that. But yes.'

'And,' said Fjr, 'there were others of that man's – ah – persuasion, his community, here in Al Basit at the time.'

'That does seem to have been the case.'

There was a long silence.

Then: 'We will make enquiries,' smiled Hassan.

'Discreet enquiries,' smiled Fjr.

And suddenly among the black beards and brown beards and sparse white beards, a toothless grin appeared, a set of gleaming white teeth, a gap-toothed smile ...

Could they really pull one over the Church?

Then, business finished, Ferchard was asked what he would like to eat. Would a *tajine* of chicken and olives do?

It would indeed.

12

Next day, in the Zitouna, Ferchard was met, after the ritual greetings, with a respectful silence.

Then Hassan said, 'You are Sir Farquhar?'

'I am.'

'Of what place, Sidi Farquhar?'

'Of – why of Dyngvale, in Scotland.'

The man looked at the sealed letter he was holding, spelt out 'Dyn-g-val-e ...' to himself. 'That seems to be right.' He passed the letter to Ferchard.

'But – but the people? The people who kept this all these years?' He wanted to meet them, thank them.

'They do not wish to make themselves known. They are not known even to me. I sent out word of your enquiry. This came back to me.'

'I see. Will you excuse me?'

'Of course.'

Ferchard went outside, where there was still some daylight. He sat down on a bench, studied the letter for a moment, then broke the seal. Anndra MacElpin's seal, no doubt of that: the sunwheel, or Pictish Cross – Ferchard remembered that even old Sir Magnus himself, Anndra's father, had never been sure quite which it was.

The letter was in Gaelic, of course.

St Jude's Day, 1338

Ferchard, old friend,

If you have followed me thus far, you are doing an excellent job of tracking me, and I will expect to see you soon.

No. No, no, no. Why is it that when I write to you I lose all

sense of time? For who knows how many years will have passed between my penning this and your reading it?

And that again is illogical, for you do, now, of course.

Ferchard, I have been drinking wine (too much wine, it seems) with some good friends here, and wish to leave this for you before I move on tomorrow at dawn.

I can tell you little or nothing about them. But if you ever chance upon Christians whose priests are called Goodmen or Perfects and whose enemy is (as indeed ours turned out to be) "the Prince of this World" (I could tell you more, much more, but do not dare) then, believe me, they are good men and worthy of your friendship and support, those that survived the onslaught.

My particular friend, one Raymond Issaurat, I first met in Avignon, then parted from in Narbonne, where he had places to go and things to do. We met again, quite by chance, in Cuenca. From there I had been intending to go to Valencia, but enjoying his company and not wishing to miss this opportunity to learn more of his faith, I decided to come with him to Albacete.

From here I go to Alicante.

Farewell.

Alicante, then.

Ferchard went to take leave of his new-found friends. He would set out at dawn.

In Alicante, after a week of searching in vain – and dreaming that Fatima might catch his arm – he decided to move on. But north or south? Up the coast, towards Valencia (and France) or down the coast, towards the land still held by the Moors?

If, finding himself back on the coast once more, his pilgrimage completed and his vow fulfilled, Andrew had decided to follow Ferchard to Jerusalem (or so Ferchard reasoned) then he would have arrived in the east no more than a year or so later, and surely at some point in all the following years their paths would have crossed, or they would at least have heard tell of each other.

Presumably he did not so decide. On the contrary, he pushed on down ever further into Spain.

The next question was, should he head on down the coast to Cartagena or veer south-west, inland, to Murcia, and thence to the great cities of the south, starting with Sevilla, perhaps. Three things made him choose to start with Cartagena. First, given a free choice, Andrew was likely to stay by the sea. Second, it was easier to turn inland to Murcia from Cartagena than it would be to come back to the east coast again later. Third – and he wasn't sure why this mattered, but it seemed to – Maryam, the girl they had spoken of in Cuenca, had been Maryam al Qartayanni. Maryam of Cartagena.

Along the coast, he began to stop and ask questions in every village. He could imagine his friend there, sitting outside the *bodega*, drinking his wine and staring out over the sea, and he knew that fishermen have long memories and that nothing much would have changed in villages like these.

All he got, though, at first, was one 'maybe ... yes, yes, I do think so', but whether Andrew had been heading south or north the man had no idea.

Ferchard pressed on, asking now at every stopping place, every tiny hamlet. And after a while he began to hear rumours – rumours of a foreigner, a knight, who had settled somewhere down the coast on the Mar Menor, had married a local woman ...

Married? Andrew? No, that was not possible. He was too close to the Templars for that. Ferchard didn't think Andrew had ever taken a vow of chastity any more than he had taken a vow of poverty, but ...

Then at San Pedro came the name. *Don Andrés, sí, sí*. Down the coast a way. Married to Don Joaquín's daughter.

It was him. It had to be.

Then more news. Don Andrés? Yes, but he died. They all died. The Great Death had taken some of them. The others? Who knows? But there was no one of that family left there now in Los Alcazares. Hadn't been for three years or more.

When his informant left him, Ferchard sat outside the bar

looking east across the sea.

The man could be mistaken.

Of course he wasn't mistaken. Who could make a mistake like that? The whole family ...

Tears coursed down his cheeks.

Three years.

So little time. So much time wasted.

He went to his bed, determined to give up, ride north, catch English perhaps and go with him to London, then home, to Scotland, to Dyngvale.

But when he rose, the sun was already up and shining straight across the sea, and for some reason he thought of Maryam. He would complete the journey to Cartagena. And on his way there, for the road passed through Los Alcazares, he would see where Andrew had lived and died, and shed a tear at his grave if any could point it out to him.

The house was larger than most along the coast. It was set back from the beach and the sand-dunes, and surrounded by olive groves shimmering grey-green in the afternoon sun. The sound of grasshoppers rose and fell, reached a crescendo, faded to silence.

The road ran along by a stone wall past an iron gate where he dismounted. An iron gate, he thought, examining it: another rarity in these parts. They must have had money, the family, whoever they were and whatever Andrew's relationship to them had been, but now, apart from the grasshoppers, the only sign of life was a lizard running up the wall, stopping to stare at him, then disappearing over the top into the garden.

He smiled, tried the gate. It opened.

Wary of dogs, he entered cautiously, riding crop in hand, but there were none.

He walked round the side of the house.

'Hello! Anyone here?' he called, in Arabic and Spanish. His Spanish had been improving fast, especially during these last few weeks with all the stops along the road.

Nothing.

He knocked on the door.

Knocked again, harder – was turning away when the door opened and an old woman peered out, obviously a Moor.

'*Salaam aleykum*,' he greeted her.

'*Wa alaikum assalaam, sidi*. There is no one here.'

'You are here, *lalla*.'

She smiled. 'Sit down – here, under the vine – and I will bring you water. We have good water, fresh and cold. Or would you prefer wine? There is still wine ...'

'A lot of water, a little wine.'

She hurried to fetch it.

Why "There is still wine"? Because no one remained to drink the wine, though all else was running out?

She served him the water and wine in two flagons, a real glass to drink it from. Watched as he poured a glass of water, drank it off with a 'Thanks be to Allah', and filled the glass with wine.

This he sipped, and savoured, then smiled at her. Saw there were tears running down her face. Took another sip, put down the glass, and waited.

Then it came to him. The last person she had seen sitting there doing that – doing it just as he was doing it, no doubt, same gestures, same expression – had been Andrew. And Andrew, to judge by the tears, was indeed dead.

He took another sip, put down the glass and said, gently, 'Sidi Andrés was my friend.'

With a cry, she fell to her knees before him, took his hand and pressed it to her lips, kissing it, weeping over it.

His first impulse was to pick her up bodily, set her on her feet, as he had that woman, the beguine, on the Camino. But this was not in public, and, too, he knew that she needed somehow, suddenly, to release the emotions pent up over the years.

He let her be, on her knees, her face now on his hand.

At last, she peered up at him through her tears. 'I'm sorry, sidi. May I fetch you bread, olives?'

He nodded. Now she needed to wash her face, pull herself together. But oh, he was glad he had not turned back at San Pedro or San Javier.

Later, the old woman told him all the story. How Don Andrés had married Doña María, daughter of Lalla Sebah and Don Joaquín, whose house this had been. How they had had two sons who both died in the Great Death. How years later, Doña María had given birth again, this time to twins, Maryam and her brother Magnus, but while they were still hardly more than babies the Death had struck once more and Doña María had died and Magnus had disappeared – died too, presumably – leaving only little Maryam and her father. And of course her grandparents. But when Maryam was eight or nine, Lalla Sebah had died, then Don Joaquín. And finally, when Maryam was fourteen, her father, Don Andrés had died.

'When was that?' asked Ferchard.

'Three years ago. Four.'

'What happened to the girl?'

'They took her away, sidi. People from Cartagena came and took her away.'

'You mean they *took* her? She didn't want to go?'

'Oh no, sidi. She fought, she ...'

'What do you know of these people?'

'It was Don Lope and Doña Leonor. They have a son, Fernán, who wished to marry my little Maryam, but she did not want this.'

'Her Arabic was – is – perfect?'

'Oh, yes. She even reads and writes Arabic, though I told her – and so did her grandmother, Lalla Sebah – that this is not for a woman.'

'I see. Who did she learn it from?'

'From Lalla Sebah, from me –'

'No, reading and writing.'

'Ah. From the Jew, the Rabbi, who lived here. Sidi Yacoub.'

'And he would have taught her Hebrew, as well?'

'He taught her everything he knew, sidi.'

'And – let me get this straight – her name was Marian,' he guessed, 'but you called her Maryam.'

'We all did. Except her father, he called her Marian. In the village, though, she liked to be Spanish, to be called Mariana. Mariana la Loca she became known as. She didn't like *that*.'

It certainly seemed the girl Maryam was Andrew's daughter – named, of course, after her Scottish grandmother, Lady Marian. But he had to be certain. What had they told him in Cuenca? Dark hair, pale skin, sea-green eyes – and walked like a dancer – *was* a dancer.

'Tell me more about her. I think I may have come across her trail while on my travels, without realising, of course, that she was Sidi Andrés' daughter.'

'She ... '

'How old would she be now? Ah yes, seventeen, eighteen. Is that right? And her hair? Her eyes? Her skin? Her height?'

'She was tall, sidi. By the time she was eleven she was taller than me. Her skin was fair except when she played in the sun on the beach. Her hair was dark and thick, and her eyes – her eyes are the colour of the sea.'

'Does she know dancing?'

'Lalla Sebah taught her, sidi, and Lalla Sebah was to other dancers what a pure-bred horse is to a donkey. Lalla Sebah dances now in Paradise for the Prophet, blessed be his name.'

That was that. All that remained to discover was how she had come to be working in a whore-house in Cuenca. And to go to Granada in search of her.

And the search and rescue must come first.

In the morning, she served him bread and eggs and goat's milk under the same vine and lemon tree, while around him chickens clucked and olive trees sheltered him for the moment from whatever the world might have in store when he took his leave.

The house and garden were a paradise. Overgrown now, but

Ferchard didn't mind that. He imagined himself living there. At least Anndra had had somewhere quiet and peaceful to sit.

The woman was standing beside him, waiting for him to notice her.

He smiled. 'A wonderful breakfast, thanks be to Allah.' But she had something on her mind. 'What is it?' he asked.

'Sidi ...? What is your name?'

He laughed. 'Ah yes, we have not introduced ourselves. I am Sir Farquhar. Sidi Farquhar. And you?'

'I am Khadija.'

'Khadija. A lovely name.' He waited.

From beneath her kaftan she drew out a letter. Held it out to him.

He took it, looked at it. It was another – the last, he now knew – from Anndra.

'Sidi, what does it say? There – the words.'

She was pointing at his name.

'It says, "Sir Farquhar de Dyngvale".'

'You?'

She had forgotten the name she had been told, could not read, had no way of checking if it was indeed for him.

'Yes, Khadija. Me.'

'Allah is merciful.'

He wanted to be alone. He stood up and walked away, among the olive trees, thinking, deeply moved, until he came to a well with a low wall round it. He sat on the wall and broke the familiar seal – noting that it had been broken before, and resealed.

St Anne's Day, 1349

Ferchard, my old friend,

Will you ever find this coast, this house, sit with me beneath this vine and talk of old times?

But if you are reading this, you are here, and I am not, for this is only intended to be read by you should something happen to me.

Ferchard, let us be quite clear about this. If you are here,

reading this letter, then I am dead and it is in the nature of an apologia.

Dead. It used to seem such a dire word, so resounding and full of import, but it is not. Death is all around. Yes, everywhere, all the time, but especially here, now. Everyone is dying. Most are dead.

I have been meaning to write a letter for years in case something happened to me before you sought us out, but you know how it is: we never really believe it will.

Now I look Death in the face. Half the people in the villages along the coast are dead. My two children, my beloved sons, Edward and James, are dead. Soon their mother, Maria, my wife, whom I adore, will be dead. And her mother and father who welcomed me here and made me their son. Perhaps I shall be the last to die. I am strong still. Not that that makes any difference. Perhaps it was I who died and poor Maria who survived, and you have her and her parents there with you watching you as you read.

Perhaps, perhaps. Only God knows. And God is not interested.

No, I should not say that. One thing I learnt from my travelling companion Raymond Issaurat is that all that goes wrong in this world, all the evil, is the work of the Prince of this World, the Spirit of Darkness, or of people doing his will. It is not the work of God or of those who do His will, the Children of Light. Raymond, as you may have guessed, was a Cathar, one of those against whom the Albigensian Crusade was waged, or rather one of their few descendants, the children and grandchildren of those who survived.

I was sceptical, Ferchard, as I know you will be, until he told me of the Church's desperation to rid itself and the world of the Cathars and the Templars, and of the close links that existed between them. Many of the Templars were Cathars, especially in the Occitan, around Toulouse and Narbonne, and when the Church turned on the Templars, torturing, burning and confiscating, they simultaneously launched a new campaign of terror against the surviving Cathars. The Perfects, their priests, were burnt, and the

believers imprisoned, forced to recant, and, when released, to wear a yellow cross back and front. Many fled across the Pyrenees to the relative safety of Aragon, where they were unknown. Raymond did this, discarding his yellow crosses on a mountain pass as he came (he draped them on a bramble bush, he told me), and helped set up small colonies of Cathars further south, which was how he came to be travelling to Albacete. He was intending the following year to bring a group to the open sheep and goat country of Murcia. I do not know whether he ever did so. I lost touch with him, as I did with everything, even the Knights, when I met María and settled here.

*Yet I was happy, have been happy, until this.
Ferchard, María is calling me.*

St Columba's Day, 1361

Ferchard, I only write to you, it seems, when I am face to face with Death.

The plague has struck again, this time taking with it María, my wife.

I search out this old letter and continue as though twelve years had not gone by since I wrote "Ferchard, María is calling me".

Oh, that she could call me now!

Last week, she died. She survived, we all did, apart from poor Edward and James; she lived another twelve years, then died last week among the first victims of the new outbreak. And no sooner had we buried her than I realised that my other son, wee Magnus, had disappeared. For yes, eight years after the death of my first two, María bore me another son, and a daughter, Marian. Twins, named, as you will realise, after my parents.

We have searched everywhere. He has gone. Logic suggests that he died, crawled away into a corner somewhere and died of the plague all by himself while we were concerned only with María. Yet we cannot find a body! So perhaps in the chaos and confusion that an outbreak of the Death always brings in its wake, the poor lad was carried off. So many pass through, fleeing the

pestilence, and only succeed in spreading it.

Ferchard, I cannot go on now. I want to go down to Cartagena, make more enquiries. I will find him if he is still alive.

Beltane, 1372

Ferchard, old friend,

It has been so many years (another ten, now, no eleven, I see) and yet, surprisingly, my story goes straight on from the last lines I wrote. Not the reference to poor Magnus, for him we never saw nor heard tell of again; but my trip to Cartagena.

And here begins indeed the apologia pro vita sua that I see I promised you when I first put pen to paper twenty-three years ago.

In desperation, and knowing that if my poor mother had been here she would have been able to help, to establish at least whether wee Magnus was alive or dead, if not his actual whereabouts, I sought out a witch.

I do not know whether Doña Leonor is, strictly speaking, a witch. I do know that she has strange powers. And I soon learnt, to my cost, that she has no wish to use those powers to benefit other people. On the contrary.

As I poured out my story I became aware that, despite her intent gaze, she was not interested in what I was saying. She was studying me, reading me, peering deep into my mind, into my very soul! I had no defence against her!

When I had finished, she held me with her eye and smiled and sighed (sighed and smiled, I remember as if it was yesterday) and said: 'Señor, I am a Catholic. I do not do business with heretics. I report them to the proper authorities.'

'Heretics?' I stammered.

'You sympathise with the Albigenian heretics and your loyalties lie with the Templar Knights. Both are anathema to our Holy Mother the Church.'

Once more she sighed and smiled; like, I thought suddenly, a sweet and patient nun seconds before she boxes your ears so hard it makes your head ring.

'Are you really so ingenuo, such a simpleton, so untouched by the world? But there, the priests will disabuse you of your innocence, and then they will burn you, what is left of you, as a relapsa. It seems almost a shame. Your simplicity becomes you.'

She leaned forward, took my cheek between her finger and thumb, squeezed it, pulled it, squeezed harder, said, 'As does your body, now I notice it.'

She let go, sat back again, gazed at me.

Ferchard, I was like a rabbit faced by one of the snakes as long as a man that they have here. She is tall but so was my poor María, and like her, she has straight black hair. But Doña Leonor is slender and pale and evil, whereas María was buxom and golden and good. And their eyes: they both have black eyes, but María's sparkled with joy, while this one's gleam like a snake's. Stay away from her!

'So,' she went on. 'Shall I summon my men, send for the priests? Or will you turn your back on this folly and listen to me?'

'L-listen to you?' I stammered.

'Oh, we could come to some arrangement, I feel sure.'

Ferchard, I listened to her. I listened to her and I sold my soul. But there is worse. I find now that I have sold my daughter.

What? Ferchard laid the letter down on his lap, trying to fit the horror of what he had read into what he already knew of the situation.

He couldn't.

Reluctantly now, he raised the letter back up to his eyes and read on.

They are in the business of slave-trading. At least her husband is: Don Lope, a runt who has grown fat and arrogant on his wife's wiles. They ship white slaves, mostly women, and some boys (don't say it, don't even think it), across the strait to north Africa. They wanted my capital, all of it. I agreed, provided I became a partner. She sighed, and smiled. 'You will be more than a partner,' she said.

'You will be el patrón, el responsable. All certificates will be in your name.'

'Why?'

'Because it is illegal to export Spanish Christian slaves, or even to sell them to mudejars in Spain.'

'So if you are caught, I will take the blame.'

'Of course. But you are not Spanish, perhaps this purely local law does not apply to you. And if it does ... it is a far less serious matter than heresy.'

I agreed. I had no choice. You do see that, don't you, Ferchard? I had Marian to consider.

We arranged to meet again in the autumn when the plague had passed on, assuming we were still alive.

'Oh, you will be,' she said. 'We will be. All of us who are left now.'

In the autumn (Ferchard, I am tired, I cannot write much more) they came out here to Los Alcazares, she and Don Lope, and I handed over my gold and silver and signed some papers. And Marian walked in.

She was four years old.

Suffice it to say that in their eyes they were doing the girl a favour, agreeing to take her from a mixed-blood (part-Moorish) background (they are very proud of their pure blood) into a respectable Catholic family.

I had no choice but to agree. I still have no choice, though Marian, who is now fourteen, loathes both them and their son.

Ferchard, I must stop now. I shall write more soon, very soon, before it is too late.

There was no more.

PART III

Mermaid out of Water

*Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.
For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;
The flowers appear on the earth; the time of
the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle
is heard in our land.*

(Song of Solomon 2:10-12)

13

Granada, 1374

It was from my grandmother, Sebah, that I learnt what little I knew about being a woman before I was torn from my home and sold as a slave at the age of fourteen. It was from her, too, that I learnt all I know about dancing.

To Sebah, being a woman meant being a dancer. Even sitting motionless, Sebah was dancing. And I copied her – had done so, they said, since first I sat up in my cradle and took notice. By the time I was four I could follow the drum-beat with my hips and my tummy (when there was no drum-beat, I imagined one) and my arms and hands and my whole upper body flowed with the flow of the music, the melody.

Sebah taught me dances for the sad moments and for the happy moments, for dawn and for dusk, the Cooling Dance for the heat of summer and the Heating Dance for the cold days of winter. She taught me the Dance of the New Moon and the Dance of the Full Moon, the Dance of Spring and the Dance of Autumn, the Dance of Birth and of Becoming a Woman and of Being a Woman and of Becoming a Mother, the Dance of Loss, the Dance of Sickness, the Dance of Death. My grandmother knew them all. And Khadija, who never danced on her own, as Sebah did, even Khadija turned out to *know* all the dances and joined in with us. The only time she ever smiled, I think. Perhaps the only time she was ever happy.

Most men disapprove of belly-dancing (except of course when it is done for *their* entertainment and pleasure, and done by slave-girls or professional dancers, *not* by their wives or daughters) but my grandfather, Don Joaquín had other ideas. Adoring his Sebah, he wanted me to grow up just like her. He gave me presents – gold anklets and bracelets (for I was the only one left to give such things

to, and he had so many) – and told her to teach me, to 'bring out the dancer in me'. And Sebah would smile. To her that meant simply to bring out the woman in me: 'When you dance,' she said, 'you become one with all women, one with all life.'

But the dances done in front of men are different. They are highly charged, highly erotic.

Among the Moors, such dances are never performed by the wives or daughters. In fact, the women of the family never even make an appearance in front of men who are strangers. Or of men who are not strangers unless everything but their eyes is concealed: in effect, they may look but not speak or express themselves in any way, not even by a shrug or a sigh or a gesture of the hand, let alone by dancing. Actually, they may not even *look*, only glance briefly, a glance that no one must catch. Apart from that they keep their eyes averted.

The erotic dances are performed by slave-girls. One trained as a dancer will be required to dance not only for her master and his brothers and uncles and cousins and sons and their friends, but for any man who may be a guest in their house.

And so it was that that afternoon I was dancing for Sidi Abdelrahman ibn Khaldoun. He was seated before me with my master Sidi Mustafa reclining beside him. Sidi Mustafa's eyes were wide and he seemed in a trance, his mouth hanging open, his hand limp and a cup of wine dangling, spilling on the carpet.

Ibn Khaldoun's eyes were even wider – they were bigger, brighter, younger eyes – and though his mouth was closed and his wine set down beside him where it could not spill, he too seemed entranced. But now was the only chance I would get.

I leaned forward and whispered in his ear. 'Your wine is laced with poison.'

He blinked, astonished. Then glanced at my master, to see whether he had noticed.

He hadn't. In fact I think he was sleeping.

Ibn Khaldoun grinned at me.

I smiled back.

He made signs asking me whether he should switch his cup with my master's.

I shook my head and carried on dancing. It was my mistress, Lalla Latifa, who wished ibn Khaldoun dead, not my master.

He beckoned me closer.

I shimmied towards him and went down on my knees at his side, still dancing from the hips up.

'What should I do?' he whispered.

'Either buy me and leave, now, straightaway,' I whispered back – Lalla Latifa would be happy to sell me, get her hands on the gold her husband had wasted when he first saw me on the auction block – 'or, if you do not want me, simply leave.'

He bought me, of course, and took me to his home. And to his bedroom.

And when I had told him what little I knew of the plot to murder him – that I had overheard a woman from Fes (you could tell by the Fassi accent) giving my mistress detailed instructions along with the phial containing the poison and a bag of gold with the promise of another, heavier bag to come when the deed was done – one of the most difficult days of my life led to the most wonderful night. I, who had been used so often by men – as a whore (for that is what I was) in Cuenca, and even by Sidi Mustafa (I grew fond of him, but only as a horse may grow fond of its master) – I, Mariana de la Manga, known here in Granada as Maryam al Qartayanni, finally discovered love. And desire. For the first time, I desired a man as much as he desired me.

I was lucky. Ibn Khaldoun was a man who adored beauty: beautiful views, beautiful buildings, beautiful books, beautiful horses – and beautiful women. I am not so beautiful, but Lalla Latifa and her maids had, just for that evening, made me perfect, irresistible.

He fell in love, and so did I.

The first three or four days (or was it three or four weeks?) we did nothing else. He taught me – not how to pleasure a man, I

knew that already – but how to *love* a man. And he did that by *loving* me. Not simply fucking me, as mostly had happened in my life, or even adoring me all over, which I had of course also known (how could I not? Not all men are pigs, some are poets) but by making me literally the centre of his universe, at least for a few months. And it could have been for ever. It nearly was.

He discovered quite early what Sidi Mustafa had never realised: that I was not simply the Muslim slave-girl, Maryam al Qartayanni, that I appeared to be. And this came about because, for the first time in my life since Uncle Yacoub, someone talked to me, listened to me, instead of having me dance before him and his friends while they talked, or worse, having me get down on my hands and knees and using me as a table or footstool while he talked to his friends. I hated that.

First, he thought he had discovered I was Jewish. Well, he would. One day he gave me a pair of golden sandals – took my feet in his hands and put the sandals upon them himself and gazed upon me and quoted suddenly from the Song of Songs which is Solomon's: *'How beautiful are thy feet in shoes, O prince's daughter! The joints of thy thighs are like jewels, thy navel is like a round goblet, thy belly like a heap of wheat set about with lilies. Thy breasts are like two young roes that are twins.'*

'I am the rose of Sharon,' I responded, also in the original Hebrew.

'You are the lily of the valleys. As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.'

'As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste. He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.'

He was staring at me. What was he thinking?

Quoting beautiful poetry is like dancing: it is hard to stop. *'Stay me with flagons,'* I went on, *'comfort me with apples: for I am sick with love. His left hand is under my head.'* I lay down so that it was.

His right hand caressed me.

'His right hand doth embrace me,' I finished.

He was speechless.

Ibn Khaldoun was a man full of words, but I saw him speechless three times. The first was when I danced for him that final night at Sidi Mustafa's house. The second was now, when I answered him in Hebrew.

Then, 'The rose of Sharon,' he said – in Arabic now. 'A flower of the field. A wildflower.'

A wildflower. I liked that.

So now he thought I was a Jewess by birth, and I let him go on thinking that, let him start calling me Mariamne sometimes, after King Herod's beautiful, tragic daughter, which amused him.

He knew almost as much about the history of the Hebrews as Uncle Yacoub had – and a great deal more about the history of everyone else. He knew so much about what had happened in the past that he could even predict what would happen in the future.

'Ah!' I laughed, 'I can do that!'

'How?' He smiled indulgently. He was forty-three, a politician, a man of affairs, I was eighteen, a dancer, a slave-girl. I might as well have been eight.

'Well, for a start,' I said, 'I know how to read palms.'

'Ah ha! So that is why you study my hands so closely. And I thought it was pure adoration, as it is when I study parts of you. Though I can tell your future when I gaze upon your breasts – and I know just what is about to happen to you when I study your legs!'

My legs – and breasts – were both very much on show at the time, and he proved to be right, at least about my immediate future, so it was an hour or two before we were able to resume our conversation.

'And I suppose you know how to read omens,' he murmured, finally, one finger still running lightly, tantalisingly, around my mons veneris, 'and cast lots, and make magic mirrors?'

I did, actually – and a great deal more – but I thought it wiser not to say so. A witch's life expectancy amongst the Moors would

be about as short as it would in the south of France, and her death at least as painful.

'No, master. Just read hands.'

He gave me his left hand. The right was otherwise engaged – indeed had slipped down between my legs. This was going to have to be a very short palm-reading.

His hands – I already knew them both – were not large, nor did they look particularly strong. But they were strong, and they were sensitive. The hands, I imagined, of a poet. He used a quill a great deal himself, not simply dictating to scribes, and the thumb and first two fingers of his right hand were always stained with ink. His left hand though was clean and soft.

'The fingers are straight – '

'Straight? As opposed to?'

'As opposed to bent in at the end, claw-like, or bent up and out, or sideways towards each other.'

'I see, And them being straight indicates something?'

'Oh yes. A straightforward nature.'

He laughed.

'Shh,' I said (cheekily, but he didn't seem to mind – seemed to like it, in fact). 'The space between the fingers is important, when you hold them stretched out like that. In your case, the greatest space falls naturally between the index and middle fingers, which indicates a capacity for independent thought.'

'We know that. But what about the lines? This is the Life Line, isn't it?'

'Yes – sometimes known as the Venus Line, because it circles the Mount of Venus.'

'Ah ha! So does it indicate – ?'

'See how it sweeps out and round, enclosing a large, well-formed Mount of Venus?'

'So?'

'So you will be a great lover.'

Which finished that.

When we recovered our sanity, I found myself remembering Linda, a girl at the bordel in Cuenca even crazier than me, who read – or claimed to read – not palms, but penises. On character, she had often proved surprisingly accurate, though I doubted whether her predictions of the future were anything more than sometimes wild, occasionally inspired, guesses.

'And my right hand?' He interrupted my train of thought.

'The fingers are not quite the same, my lord. The gap between the index and middle fingers is less pronounced, meaning that adverse circumstances have rendered sensitive the capacity for independent thought I told you about, but have in no way curtailed it.'

'And the lines? Are they the same?'

'Yes. More or less. Notice that the Life Line is not joined to the Line of Head at its origin. If it were, that would indicate caution. Yours, on the contrary, indicates daring. The Head Line itself is long and deep and clear.'

'Yes, all right, but what about the Heart Line?'

'Yours is like mine.'

'Like *yours*?'

'Yes. It starts from the Mount of Saturn. You don't idealise the beloved, you don't place her (or him) on a pedestal, as tends to happen if the heart Line starts from the Mount of Jupiter.'

'Hmm. And the Line of Apollo? The Sun Line?'

He knows more about this than he is letting on, I thought.

'It is long and strong – it starts early and grows stronger. This is unusual, and means that you lead a privileged life, both mentally and socially, and that you grow in prestige and honour as the years go by.'

'Maryam, all this you could have deduced.'

'Deduced?'

'All these conclusions you could have arrived at by means of logical analysis. As I do when I predict the future from my knowledge of the past.'

'Tell me about it.'

'Really? You would be interested?'

'Really. Not all women have no brain.'

He laughed. 'I know that. But beautiful women are not normally interested in anything apart from their own beauty.'

'That generalisation is the fruit, I assume, of wide experience and scrupulous logic?'

'I do believe you are mocking me, Maryam. I should have you beaten. But I am enjoying our conversation too much to want to interrupt it. Also – unlike my father – I do not enjoy making love to a woman who has been recently beaten.'

'Perhaps later then, master, when you have finished talking to me and making love to me.'

He grinned. 'Perhaps. Have you noticed the size of my eunuch, Yahia, by the way?'

I had indeed. And noticed the strength of his right arm. And the length of the cane he carried at all times.

We were both getting excited again.

One afternoon, after we'd eaten together, Abdelrahman ibn Khaldoun, the famous historian as I now knew him to be, told me about the time he offended the Sultan in Fès, and had been lucky to escape with his life. 'I was two years in prison, Maryam.'

'But how? Why?'

'It was this – ah – ability to predict the future, or at any rate foretell certain events, that I was telling you about.'

'You mean you were imprisoned for using *magic*?' I tried to sound all shocked and fearful and wide-eyed.

'Not magic, but logic: logical analysis. I said that dynasties were ripe for change by the third or fourth generation. In the Maghreb – Morocco – for instance, it happened, quite regularly, that a chieftain led his warriors in out of the desert, overthrew the soft, city-dwelling sultan and his entourage and set himself up as sultan in his stead. He would without exception be a hard, ruthless reformer, a cruel puritan. His son would be like his father, a product of the desert, only – unlike his father – at home, also, in

the city and among beautiful artifacts. However, that one's son would know nothing of the desert. He would be soft, spoilt and self-indulgent. Cruel, yes, probably, but not hard – cruel not like a wolf or a lynx but like a kitten with a butterfly. An easy victim. I told him his dynasty would last a hundred and twenty years at the most. The sultan did *not* like this. And his son, the heir, likes it even less. I have made enquiries and it was certainly he who engineered the attempt on my life the night I watched you dance for the first time.'

'The sultan was no fool. There are such things as self-fulfilling prophecies.'

He looked at me wonderingly ... then laughed and made one.

'Ah, but imagine I could not have you. That you were somehow unavailable to me. Then what would I do?'

'You would find someone else.' *Buy* someone else, I meant.

'Not if I truly loved you. If I walked the streets you had walked, breathed the air you had breathed –'

I laughed. 'Then you would have to do what you have even now begun to do: compose poetry.'

'Ah, like Majnun – I kiss the walls of the house wherein you dwell. It could so easily have happened. Imagine that Sidi Mustafa had not wanted to sell you – that, on the contrary, I had seen you dance once, then never been permitted to see you again.'

'Would you then have made public your passion, as Majnun did?'

'Ah, you know the story. No. No, I think not. I am rather a private man, at least as far as my personal life is concerned. But I am not sure how – how *cathartic* – the writing of poetry may be if it is not published.'

'Probably not at all. My grandmother, Sebah of Cordoba, told me the story. She told me that it was Majnun's making public his passion for her that so upset and shamed Layla and her family. She thought they were right, that he was a fool. But then she thought all men were fools – at least all men in love.'

*'I turn to the hills: sunset glows
round hills like your breasts,' he intoned,
'peaks made in the image of your chin and nose,
the stars your eyes ...'*

He was studying my chin and nose. I wanted to laugh. Now he gazed into my eyes. 'And you?' he asked.

'And me what?'

'Do you – did you – think Layla was right?'

This was not the moment for laughter. 'No, lord. I thought – and still think – she was very foolish.'

The only other young female in ibn Khaldoun's household was an eleven-year-old girl. She had dark hair and dark eyes and, though her skin was pale, like me she could have been a Moor. Yet, like me, she wasn't. She had been in captivity among the Moors for three years, the last one with ibn Khaldoun, and she spoke Arabic, but she was from the north. Or so she said.

At first, I supposed she meant the north of Spain, but though she understood Castellano (Spanish) she spoke it only haltingly. I tried her in French. She seemed to understand, but the language she answered in was like Catalán. I knew the sound of Catalán from my time in Cuenca, there had been both girls and clients there from Aragon and Catalonia.

'Malika, what language did you speak at home?'

'This! Roman.'

'Roman?'

She nodded.

It was Provençal, I decided, it must be, the language Dante had nicknamed the *langue d'oc*.

A strange child with a mysterious background. But – so what? There was nothing I could do for her.

Another time, I was sitting with her in the *hamam*, soaking in warm water. We were waiting for Saïda, the old woman who looked after ibn Khaldoun. She was going to start teaching Malika how to massage me. I think she had decided that Malika, who

seemed to have no particular function, could be my attendant, my maid.

I said, 'What do you remember about your home?'

'Not much, Maryam. I didn't really have one place that was home.'

'What kind of country was it? Like Granada?'

'Oh, no. At least, I don't think so. Though there were mountains covered with snow. There were sheep. And the sea! I saw the sea!'

'What about when you were taken captive? You *were* taken captive? Not sold by someone – your father, or brother, or – ?'

'No!' She looked shocked. 'I was with my Uncle Bera – we were escaping over the mountains into Aragon. They speak a kind of Roman there, too, most people. They call it Catalán.'

So I was right. But Bera was a Jewish name. 'Were you Jews?'

'Oh, no. No. Not really ...'

Not *really*? What kind of answer was that? Were they converts? Forced converts, perhaps?

She didn't think so.

'Well. Tell me what happened then, to you and Bera.'

'We were attacked by robbers. Bera was killed.' Tears began to roll down her cheeks. 'I was taken to a city and sold. It was all so strange. Those men brought me to Granada and sold me again.'

'When was this?'

'Three years ago. I was eight.'

'Show me your hands.' I took them in my own, held them palm up and gazed at them. 'When were you born exactly? Do you know?'

'Yes, soon after dawn on Midsummer Day.'

'The twenty-first of June. That's the last day of Gemini, so you were almost, but not quite, born under the sign of Cancer. But you definitely seem like a Gemini to me. Do you know about these things?'

She shook her head.

From what I remembered – for I had no books of my own there in Granada, and ibn Khaldoun had no interest in astrology – this

would place her under the planet Mercury, indicating detachment, non-involvement, the philosopher, the magician. And it is an air sign, representing reason and communication, and humane feeling. She would be clever, and good at languages. She might also be unreliable.

But being born on Midsummer Day must mean something. I just didn't know what.

I focused on her hand. It was the hand of a healer.

'These three little lines are the healing striata; and these lines crossing the Mount of Jupiter mean that you feel the pain of others and are a natural healer. Look at the well-formed Venus Mount, showing your vitality and your love, your kindness.'

But there were problems, too. Things were not going to be easy for her. Well, we knew that already.

It would help to know more about her past.

'You have no idea where this Bera was bringing you from, or to? Or why?'

'Not really, but ...we were running from something called the – the Inquisition.'

'The Inquisition?' Uncle Yacoub had mentioned it, but ...

'It's the worst thing there is. When it comes, all you can do is run. And even then they come after you, and ...'

'And?'

But she wouldn't go on.

She knows what the Inquisition is now, all right, and so do I. They hounded her all her life. They are still hounding me.

In my innocence then, though – in my folly – Mariana la Loca – I laughed. 'Sounds like the big bad bogeyman.'

I wanted to ask ibn Khaldoun about Malika, but the opportunity never seemed to arise. Then one afternoon he suddenly said, 'These are the ankles of a dancer. Pass me that box.'

It was an inlaid wooden box, surprisingly heavy. He balanced it on my left thigh and opened it. It was full of gold: rings, chains, bangles. He selected a chain, lifted my right leg in the proprietorial

manner he had developed with the various parts of my body, and fastened the chain round the ankle.

'That's beautiful,' he said.

It was.

'But it draws attention to the fact that your toes and toenails need care and the henna on your feet needs renewing. I gave Yahia strict instructions –'

'Yahia? But, my lord, Yahia –'

'Fetch him for me.'

'My lord!'

'Fetch him!'

I ran.

It soon transpired that far from being the brute he seemed, Yahia was shy; fearful rather than fearsome. In a word: sweet.

'Why,' demanded Ibn Khaldoun, 'of all the eunuchs in the two sultanates, did Allah the Omnipotent, the All-powerful, impose you on me? Was it for my sins?'

'Oh, no, lord! For mine!'

There was a silence while we thought about this. Then I giggled.

Ibn Khaldoun glared at me – trying not to laugh, I'm sure – then ranted on: 'Should I not have guessed when I saw that of the thousand eunuchs nine hundred and ninety-nine had been sold and only you remained? Should I not have left you there – abandoned you to your miserable fate? What fate was that? you ask, and well you might. For if ever I find Maryam less than *perfectly* presented, you will learn. Is that understood?'

'I – I –'

'Say "Yes",' I murmured. 'I'll explain it to you later.'

He turned to me with such a look of love and relief and adoration in his eyes and on his face that I knew then what he had suffered in his life, at least till he came into the household of ibn Khaldoun, and that he was mine, heart and soul for ever.

I glanced at our master. He was amused.

'Say "Yes"! I repeated, in a loud whisper.

'Yes! Yes, master. Yes, lord.'

'Good. Then go and prepare yourself. Maryam will be with you shortly. She and I have some unfinished business.'

He clapped his hands.

Yahia rose, bowed and fled.

We gazed at each other. Suddenly, he grinned. 'No, it was for *his* sins!' Then he hooted, and I threw myself on him and we rolled around on the bed in tears of laughter.

Later, I said: 'I will show him how.'

'Show who how what? Oh, Yahia. You don't need to show Yahia anything. He knows all there is to know about the care of women. All you need do is put yourself in his hands. He is shy. He will not approach you. My uncle's harem in Tetouan, where Yahia was trained, contains women so cruel that even my uncle will not enter the place. They send women out to him. And they are not kind to eunuchs. On the contrary. Indeed, they are reputed to dine on young eunuchs.'

'But I thought eunuchs ruled the harem.'

'In some harems, they do. Did they rule the harem of Sidi Mustafa?'

'No. Lalla Latifa ruled. But they ruled girls like me.'

'Only at her bidding.'

'It's my fault. I understood that Malika was being trained to wait on me and care for me, and that apart from her I was free to see to my own needs.'

'That's simply a matter of finding a use for the child, something for her to do.'

My chance had come.

'Do you mind my asking why you bought her? What you bought her *for*?'

He smiled. No, he didn't mind. At that moment of post-coital oneness, he wouldn't have minded anything. 'To tell you the truth, I'm simply doing a friend a favour. He was most insistent that she be taken south across the strait to Africa. Apparently, he bought

her for a song on that condition. At the time, he was intending to move to Marrakech, but his plans changed, as plans have a habit of doing. When he heard I was leaving for North Africa –'

'You? But – oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. It's just that I had no idea.'

'I've been meaning to talk to you about it. The date of my departure has been brought forward. And not only that: my plans too have changed. I'd intended to return to Fes. The Sultan has asked me to. But I need peace, and I do not trust him. I certainly do not trust his son.'

'You mean peace to write your book?'

He nodded.

It was the *Muqaddimah*, his great *Introduction to History*, which he had been planning for years and now was ready to commit to paper.

'I shall go to Tunis.'

'You will be safe there?'

'*In sha'Allah*. God willing. And if I am not, I'll move on to Cairo.'

'I see.'

'The question is, Maryam: what shall we do with you?'

That was indeed the question. If I crossed the Strait of Jebel-Attar with him, I should never return, never go home. Never be *me* again.

'I am yours, my master.' I bowed my head. 'But ...'

'There is no "but". You are mine.'

'Yes, lord.'

He ran one finger round the nipple of my left breast, then the four fingers down my left side, over my hip, along my thigh, round my knee and under it, over my calf, caressing, possessing, every inch, until he came to the anklet. The chain. He would never let me go.

'On the other hand, in a sense I am yours.' His eyes remained on my leg.

'I do not understand, lord.'

'If it had not been for you, I should be dead.'

'I only did what any servant, any slave-girl, would have done.'

'On the contrary.' He raised his eyes to mine. 'You were not my slave. Not then. Nor would you ever have been. You did what any *free* woman would have – any woman free to make her own decisions about what is right and what is wrong.'

I held my breath. Could it be?

'Maryam, I wish to do what is right by you. There are three possibilities. One is for you to remain as you are, my beautiful concubine and dancing girl, and come with me to Africa. Another is for me to set you free. But would that be kind? Do you have anywhere to go? You would be far better off with me than out on the street, a beautiful girl on her own. You would be picked up again, sold again ...'

'Of course, I would much, much rather stay with you, master –'

'You would? Are you sure, quite sure?'

'Oh yes, *if that were the case*. But it is not the case. I do have a home to go to. I was kidnapped, stolen. And master, I'm not who you take me for.'

'I know, you are a daughter of Israel.'

'No, master, listen to me, please. My father was Sir Andrew MacElpin, a Scottish knight.'

This was the third time I saw him speechless.

Then he burst out, 'You're a *Christian*? And a *Lady* – a *Scottish Lady*?'

A *Lady*, I thought, faced suddenly with the question? No. No, not a Lady, not a Scottish Lady, not now, and now not ever. Sorry, Papa. A Spanish whore is what I am now, a graduate of *la Casa de los Dos Peces*, the House of the Two Fish, in Cuenca.

Then, *gracias a Dios*, I knew just what to say: 'I want to go to Paris to take up again the studies I began with the rabbi before I was abducted from my home. It is my dream ...'

Now he had caught up and was with me once more. 'From what I hear, they, like our own schools in Fes and Cairo, accept only boys as students.'

'I know. I shall dress as a boy, pass as a boy.'

This set him off laughing again, and touching his finger to his temple.

'I know. At home, the people in the village used to call me Mariana la Loca.'

More howls of laughter. But when he had calmed down, we talked through the night and by the end of it he had given me my freedom, along with clothes, a horse, a bag of gold, and two slaves: Malika, to be my maid, and Yahia to be my bodyguard.

The gift of Yahia was outright and unconditional.

The gift of Malika was conditional upon my trying to unravel the mystery surrounding her origins, and this strange need to get her out of the country; and if possible I was to restore her to her family.

The bag of gold was to pay for my studies in Paris.

Abdelrahman ibn Khaldoun was a good man.

(I never did find out what the third possibility was. Did he intend to make me his wife? I shall never know.)

14

I did not need to be rescued.

On the contrary. As I keep telling Khadija, I'm a woman now, and quite capable of rescuing myself. But she keeps fussing over me, her lost baby, her little girl that she thought she would never see again – but 'Allah is merciful, he sent Sidi Fuckahar –'

'Not Fuckahar. Farquhar.'

' – and as soon as I saw him I knew he would save you, he is a man, a real man,' on and on and on. Five minutes after I arrive, it is as though I have never been away.

Farquhar was Sir Farquhar, my father's old friend and fellow-knight, though he had always referred to him as Ferchard, and I

shall do the same. After learning that my father was dead and had left a daughter who was now apparently a dancer and to all intents and purposes a whore, Ferchard had scoured Spain intent on finding and rescuing me, but by the time he'd finished searching Granada and had followed a false trail – or a different trail altogether – to Algeciras and Tangiers, then returned to Andalucía, ibn Khaldoun had given me my freedom and I was making ready, along with Malika and Yahia, to travel east to Murcia and home.

'I heard of you in Cuenca,' he told me now, 'was advised there to seek you in Granada. But I still didn't know who you were! Some Moorish lass called Maryam was all I knew, whose destiny was for some strange reason linked to my own ... But first, I had to follow your father's trail to its end. And there I was told by your faithful, your wonderful, Khadija – look at her now, how she mothers us all! – that Moorish Maryam, the linguist and belly-dancer, was really Scottish Marian, Anndra's daughter, and, tragically, all that was left of his family! I set out on the quest at once.

'In Granada, after days of pleading for help and information – can you imagine how secretive these people are about the inmates of their harems? – I discovered that you had previously belonged to Sidi Mustafa and Lalla Latifa. But they had left Granada – left the Emirate and headed north into Catholic Spain to escape their creditors. And no one knew what had happened to you – only that you hadn't been with them when they left, that you must already have been sold.

'Anyway, I met a man in Granada I wanted to help, and on a mission for him went on down to Tangiers. I was also thinking that, you never know, I might pick up your trail again, but I ended up following a false lead to Tetouan. From there, I journeyed into the Rif Mountains to consult a witch – the Witch of Chaouen – who they all said had the Sight, and after a lot of hocus-pocus she told me you *were* in Granada but would be leaving soon ... "And?" I roared. And if I hurried I might meet you on the road, how could she tell ... Marian, how is it she can be so right about the situation

as a whole and so uncertain about certain important details?'

I gazed at him. He was a completely practical man – and completely reliable, I was sure – but magic and the occult were not his sphere at all. 'I was already on my way home,' I explained. 'That was a fact. However, your "details" meant predicting a future which was not yet fact. That is far more difficult. Situations change. Obviously she *saw* me in Granada preparing to leave, and probably *saw* me on the road; but she did *not* see us meeting, *or* see me at home before you and without you.'

'You're good at this stuff, aren't you, lass. Like your Scottish grandmother – another Marian.'

'Aye, Papa told me about her.'

'He did? Good. So I came hurrying back, crossing between the hills known as the Pillars of Hercules, from Sebta to Jebel Attar – and there I met, quite by chance, the man who saved you from the sea when the slavers' boat sank –'

'*Saved* me?'

'Aye, lass. Wasn't it you? I was sure it was you when he described you and told me you'd been picked up near Cartagena and the date ... It wasn't you?'

'Oh, it was me, all right. But *I* saved *him*!'

He looked at me sceptically – a skinny lass and a big strong man like Pedro.

'Pedro, his name was,' I added.

'Aye. So it was you. I thought it was.'

'And to show his gratitude he incarcerated me in a convent.'

'Aye, he told me, and I went there. It didn't fit – didn't fit at all with what I'd heard about you in Cuenca – and from the Witch of Chaouen, who described you as a belly-dancer – but I had to ask. I went all the way to the convent of *Las Hermanas de la Reconquista* at Cabo de Gatas, and guess what they told me.'

'That I was a sweet child, a saint in the making?'

He stared at me, saw I was joking. 'Oh, aye. A little devil, who after a year or so ran away, *gracias a Dios*, and was a Magdalen in the making if ever they saw one.'

'What's a Magdalen?' asked Malika, who had been listening when I thought she was asleep, and must have got the jist somehow.

Ferchard answered her, in Arabic. 'It's a polite word for – for a – och, you don't need to trouble your pretty little head about –'

'For a whore,' I said.

There was a long silence. Then: 'And will *I* be one?'

That was *not* the question either of us had been expecting.

'You?' Ferchard expostulated. 'Of course not! How can you think such a thing?'

'You probably will if you spend much more time travelling around in my company,' I laughed.

'Marian!' Ferchard was pink with shock.

'Cuenca,' I said.

He turned scarlet, and held his tongue.

'Why? Are *you* one?' she asked, busy with her own thoughts and missing the by-play.

'You didn't think I was *married* to ibn Khaldoun, did you ...? But don't take it too seriously. There are good nuns and bad nuns, good whores and bad whores. I only ever met one really good nun when I lived in a convent –'

'You lived in a convent?'

'Yes. Did you sleep through that part?'

'No! Was that where you were a little devil?'

'Mm, in their view. *I* thought they were all big devils – except that one I mentioned, Sor Maria Teresa. But when I worked in a whore-house ...' I waited, but she didn't say it. Suddenly, we both laughed, and even Ferchard grinned. 'When I worked in a whore-house, the House of the Two Fish in Cuenca, I met whores who for good hearts and charitable thoughts would put most nuns and respectable housewives to shame.'

Another long silence, then Ferchard sighed and said, 'Lass, you're a terrible influence on a child.'

'Every word I've said was true – and as Rabbi Yacoub, my teacher of religion and philosophy and ethics, used to say, not just

true in one particular case which may be exceptional, but universally true. How can that be bad?

'No, lass. What you say *is* true, and I am put to shame. *You* were there. And Fatima was there. But all that is past now.'

'Fatima?'

'I'll tell you about her another time.' He had such a sad look on his face that suddenly I knew he had fallen in love in Cuenca! But I remembered no Fatima. Then he sighed. 'I still think you should try not to be such a terrible influence on a wee lass like Malika.'

Oh, that phrase "wee lass"! It was the first time I'd heard anyone use it since my father ...

And the actual "rescue" that Khadija kept going on about? Well, on the way home from Granada, as we were coming up from Cabo de Gatas, Ferchard somehow got ahead of me. All I knew as I rode, happy, along the mountain track in the early summer sunshine, was that everywhere we stopped I heard of a man, a knight, a foreigner, old, with a white beard, asking for news of either Lady Marian MacElpin or Lalla Maryam al Qartayanni.

Who could this be?

Yahia wanted to stop, or at least go slowly, let the man disappear into the distance. A foreign knight, especially one who spoke Arabic, spelt trouble.

But I was curious. And I was now in charge.

We hurried, and a few days later, somewhere in the foothills of the Sierra de Espuña, in the valley of the Oued al Adin, we caught up with him.

He was camping under a tree.

It was evening, and we were hurrying towards the next village or wayside inn.

Because I was making them hurry we were trying to cover too much ground in one day, and Malika was cross with me. She was tired. It would be dark soon. It was dangerous in the dark. She didn't want to sleep out, there were mosquitoes. Why did the mosquitoes always bite her, never me or Yahia?

'Malika,' I said, 'I am covered from head to toe, while you are half naked. And as for Yahia, even a mosquito would hesitate to attack a huge thick-skinned lump like him, especially when there's a tasty morsel like yourself on offer.'

She looked down at herself. She rather liked "tasty morsel" I noticed, and "on offer" didn't offend her, either.

I glanced back at Yahia, who was bringing up the rear, on foot. Huge, yes. But thick-skinned? I smiled to myself. He was the most sensitive man – though man he was not, it is true – that I've ever known. Still is. Oh, I still have him with me all these years later.

'I'm not half naked! My arms are bare, my feet, my face ...'

Feet? The smock she was wearing hardly reached her knees.

'I just saw two or three fly up your skirt,' I laughed.

'What?! Oh! Ow!' She jumped – half fell – off her horse, and we all stopped while she ran round in circles, her skirt up, flapping and slapping.

Then I saw him.

Probably, if we hadn't stopped, if Malika hadn't made such a noise that the man sprang up, ready to run to her defence, we should have ridden straight on by.

Now, not in haste, but determined, old but still formidable, he strode towards us. Glared at the grinning Yahia, who wiped the grin off his face even as he drew his long curved sword, ignored me, the veiled woman on the horse, a nobody, and shouted to Malika, 'What is it, child? What's wrong?'

In Arabic.

She pulled her smock down, stood there blushing. 'Nothing, sir,' she answered, in the same language.

'Then for the love of Allah ...' He looked at the three of us again, realised Yahia was a eunuch, Malika just a maid. I watched him wonder about us. Was the eunuch in charge, Malika and I simply merchandise in transit from one master to another – from the market in Granada perhaps? He studied me. I was a little too grand. And if the eunuch *had* been in charge, *he* would have been on horseback.

'Forgive me, *lalla*. I feared the girl was in distress. It seems, however, that –'

'She was in distress, *sidi*. She had not one but two mosquitoes up her skirt.' I watched him trying to keep a straight face as he glanced at her, looked back up at me. 'They pick on her,' I added.

He studied her.

Now her blushes receded and she glared at me, then stared back at him insolently as he looked her up and down.

'I'm not surprised,' he said. And grinned.

We studied each other. Was this, I was wondering, the man who was searching for me? It could be. A knight, foreign, Arabic-speaking ... And he, though he could see little of me, for my veil was still up, was (he told me later) wondering if I could possibly be Maryam, Marian. Unlike me, he had no particular reason to think so – but my veil did not cover my eyes, and he was staring at them now with an intensity which in other circumstances would cause offence.

I glanced at Yahia, saw that he was beginning to fidget.

Malika was simply watching, curiously.

Finally, he said, 'I am searching for a certain Lalla Maryam al Qartayanni.'

I let him go on staring at my eyes – all he could see of me.

Then he said, this time in Gaelic, 'In fact, I seek Lady Marian MacElpin. You have the eyes of a Scotswoman ...'

A Scotswoman – *ban Albannach*. That was what I was – and it was so long since I had heard the Gaelic.

'*An tus' a th'ann?*' he went on. 'Is it you?'

'*Sè*.' Yes. So long since I had spoken it. '*C'ainm a th'ort?*' What is your name? Though I knew, oh, I knew ...

We travelled together – I with a second father, I realised, and he with the daughter he had never had – through Murcia and on down to Los Alcazares, the village by the Mar Menor where I had grown up, and lived till I was fourteen.

We cannot stay in my home by the Mar Menor, peaceful haven though it may seem after all our adventures. We have to do something about Malika; I gave my word. Anyway, the peace is illusory, for there is another problem: the militant Catholicism spreading across Spain, the growing atmosphere of *reconquista* and intolerance.

Ferchard, who is homesick, wants us to head north, make our way to France, then up through France to Paris, and on to Scotland.

'It will be easier there than here for you to put all this – this horror – behind you.' (He means my working in a bordel.) 'You will be once again the Lady Marian you were born to be, the Lady Marian your father would wish you to be.'

'You think I can simply forget? I am what I am now. And as for what may father may have wished for me ...'

The look he gave me was strange. He was not as shocked by my words as he should have been. What did he know?

But, 'No, lass,' he said, gently. 'All that will fade into the past and be forgotten once you are safe at home in Scotland –'

'*This* is my home. And this that you see before you is who – and what – I am. But ... Very well, I will leave here and go north with you. I will even attempt to behave like a lady while in your presence. Malika, Khadija and Yahia will of course come with me and I will attempt to restore Malika to her family. Then I will travel to Paris, still with you, *in sha'* Allah.' (I had noticed that although his own Arabic was perfect, my use of Arabic irritated him. It wasn't *ladylike*?) 'You will then go to Scotland, but I shall stay in Paris.'

'And what will you do there, alone, and with no one to protect you? Work in a – in a ...'

'Say it, Ferchard.'

He blushed. 'I'm sorry, lass. I just want what's best for you.'

'I will have Yahia to protect me.'

'What does *he* know of Paris?'

'What do *you* know of Paris?'

'You will need to speak French.'

'Je parle français. French was one of the languages I used to speak with Papa. I've always wanted to live in Paris, to be a student. It was my dream, even as –'

'They don't take lasses. You'd have to find a private tutor. Like that Heloise and Peter Abelard.' Another blush, as he realised what an unfortunate example he had chosen.

I began to feel sorry for the poor man. 'I know they don't, but Uncle Yacoub told me there are always a few girls at every university, dressed as boys and mixed up with the men.'

'You can't do that.'

'I can.'

Another thing I "can't" do according to him is go swimming.

I tell him to stay well away from the beach in the mornings as Malika and I – yes, she insists on coming with me – are going swimming and we will not be taking our clothes into the water with us.

'But – but what if – ?'

'No one will see us.'

'And if you get into difficulties? You might drown!'

'Me? Drown? You haven't seen me swim!'

'You just told me I mustn't.'

'No.'

'But what about the lass? Can *you* swim?' he asked her.

She shook her head, big-eyed.

'I'll look after her,' I promise.

As we are speaking Arabic – I tend to without thinking – Khadija and Yahia are following the conversation. Yahia is horrified – open water is worse than the open desert! – but Khadija, who knew me of old, takes my part for a change.

'Easier drown a fish than Maryam. When she was a child, she lived in the sea. Only came out when she was hungry or to have a lesson with her rabbi. Then straight back in. And not *on* the water. *Under* the water!'

'You've watched?' I never spotted her.

'Many a time. When you were little I used to worry, especially when the weather was bad. But I learnt not to worry.'

'You let her swim even in bad weather?' protests Ferchard.

'Let her?' Khadija cackles, as well she might. 'She swam all through the winter. Of course the weather was bad sometimes.'

He gives up.

The first morning we go out, the sun is shining, the day is already hot, and Malika loves it, especially when she finds she can float, like me, and doesn't sink and drown as she had expected to, not being a witch.

'A witch?'

'Yes! Where I come from, that's the test. I remember it. If the poor woman floated, she was a witch, but if she sank and drowned, she was innocent.'

'So what did they do if she floated?'

'They burnt her.'

Of course.

So as soon as she is ready, I teach her how to sink *and swim away. Right away, under the water, out of sight.* She loves that.

But she quickly grows tired, and most days, after an hour or two, returns to the house while I swim on alone. Which I prefer, to be honest.

I keep right away from boats. For some reason, I don't want to meet Pedro.

I have grown up. Grown shy.

Grown shy, working in a whore-house.

I had no difficulty establishing my right to my inheritance from Don Joaquín, my grandfather – everyone knew me, and it consisted of little apart from our home and Khadija (whom no one else would ever want!) for everything of value had been stolen from the house by those same people who had bled my father white and sold me into slavery: the question was whether anything could be done about that now – and if so, what?

'I have money of my own,' I say.

'Money of your own?' echoes Ferchard, sceptically. Then remembers. 'Aye, I know; the gold your master gave you when he set you free.'

'Apart from that.'

All that buried silver worries me.

Finally, I decide to leave most of it where it is and not tell anyone about it, not even Ferchard.

I go out alone one dark night and dig up the sixteen ingots in the first hole. These I do tell Ferchard about, and he advises me to deposit them with the *cambistas*, money-changers, in the cathedral square in Murcia and arrange to withdraw moneys in France. He says Avignon will be no problem, though Paris might be.

I like this idea. I ask him to accompany me to Murcia. As we shall be away three or four nights, I tell Malika I will leave Yahia to protect her and Khadija.

Malika will not agree to that.

I give in. I'm in no great hurry, and I am swimming again, spending most of every day in the sea.

Also, my mind is set on revenge.

Ferchard insists that Doña Leonor and her son, the brutal oaf Fernán, are not something I am ready for. Not something I will ever be ready for, in his opinion. Reluctantly, I agree.

The Weird Sisters, though, have other plans. They often do.

Fernán arrives one morning on horseback. He comes swaggering in, looks around, dismisses Ferchard as some ancient foreign thing of skin and bone, Yahia as a waddling perfumed jelly, Khadija with the gracious words 'We thought you'd died,' and me ... ah yes, dismisses me as "the mongrel" ...

But I had not wasted all those years. In Cuenca, when Carmen, the lamia, wanted me to join her, become immortal, it was because she'd seen that I'd learnt from what I had witnessed, what I had read *and what I had written*. They say, for instance, that *The Key of Solomon* must be copied out by the practitioner, she who would perform the spell. But they made *me* copy it out on their behalf and

the power came to me along with the knowledge. Carmen saw, so did Madre Inés, but for their own reasons, they did not mind. I was – at least potentially – one of them.

I smile, and wave to Ferchard, who is rearing up angrily, to keep his seat, and to Yahia to stand back. Then focus my gaze on Fernán's crotch. I am recalling certain thoughts I used to direct at men in Cuenca whom I particularly did *not* want groping and fucking me – but did not dare use in Granada on Lalla Latifa's brother, perhaps the most repulsive creature I ever had to pretend to enjoy.

Gazing into my eyes, he takes one more step towards me, two ... raises his hand to hit me ... manages a third step (to my surprise), then stops and peers down at himself. He looks back up at me, questioning – nervous suddenly.

I mumble a few words in Hebrew, a few in Latin. Watch the terror dawn in his eyes. Turn away from him casually, leaving him standing there.

Still casually, as though it is nothing to me, I pick up a quill, dip it in the jar of ink, and write Doña Leonor a note on a scrap of parchment.

Then I turn back to him. And smile. 'Fernán, go, and never return. Oh, and take this to your mother.' I give him the scrap of parchment. 'She will explain.'

'But – but – what did you do to me?'

'Rendered you impotent.'

'You – !' He raises his hand again.

'Fernán, before you do anything silly, ask your dear mother, see whether she would advise it.'

I turn my back on him again. Hear Ferchard say 'Go, lad,' and out of the corner of my eye see Yahia shunt him out through the door.

'What was *that*?' demands Ferchard. But Yahia, I notice, is grinning – as is Malika, who watched it all from the kitchen doorway.

'A girl on her own in the world must know how to defend

herself. Last time he and I met, I'd been tied me to a wall and – well, let's just say he assaulted me brutally. I was not much older than Malika is now.'

'You'd been *tied*'?

'Aye. Or I'd have killed him.'

'If you can kill a man, you *don't* need to use witchcraft.'

'If I'd known what you call witchcraft then, they would never have been able to tie me.'

'Lass, I'm going to teach you to defend yourself so well with a knife or with your bare hands that you will never need to have recourse to witchcraft.'

'Please do. But I'd rather have Fernán impotent and terrified than castrated – or dead.'

'Aye, well, there's something in that – and less mess on the floor. What did you say to that mother of his?'

'I told Doña Leonor that his virility will return the day we leave Los Alcazares, but that if ever she or her son attempt to cause us any trouble or inconvenience at all, the impotency curse will return with a vengeance: it will shrivel and fall off.'

Ferchard laughs.

'What will?' asks Malika.

Ferchard chokes back his laughter.

'His *thing*,' I say.

'Oh, that.'

'Marian!' Ferchard protests, still trying not to laugh.

'The word "thing"?' I protest, eyes wide.

'And is it *true*'? he asks, going back to Fernán again.

'He'll believe it.'

'But she's a witch! She won't! She knows!'

I let Ferchard think he was right about that. Perhaps he was. Anyway, he began my lessons in unarmed combat the very next morning.

Apart from revenge, the other thing preying on my mind was the girl I had seen with my father in the magic mirror. The girl who

looked like me. But how to find her? Without Uncle Yacoub I couldn't make a mirror. No one in Cuenca had used magic mirrors, and I still had no idea how to create that black light.

Then it occurred to me, sitting in the kitchen one morning watching Khadija skin a rabbit, that there was no way my father could have kept his other life hidden from the grumpy old slave-woman who had been, since my grandmother's death, the only woman in the house and *de facto* ruler of the household. She was not one for proffering information, and I had to press her, but finally she admitted: 'He had a concubine.' Then immediately went on the defensive. "Why not? He was a Nazrani, a Christian, so he could only have one wife, poor man. A concubine, though – even priests keep concubines. Father Benedict –'

I did *not* want to hear about Father Benedict. I could still feel his hand on my thigh, even after all those other hands in Cuenca.

'We're not talking about Father Benedict, we're talking about *my* father.'

'He had a woman in a village somewhere.'

'What village?'

'Torre Pacheco.'

I'd heard of it, but never been there. It wasn't on one of the roads I knew, the roads that led to Cartagena and Murcia and Alicante.

She was chopping the rabbit into portions now, but her mind was not on the rabbit. She was casting her memory back to those days when my father ... 'They had a daughter,' she muttered.

Ah ha! How did she know, though? Papa would never have told her.

'They came here, the two of them. After you were taken away. Wanted to know why he'd stopped visiting. I told them: he's dead. Showed them his grave ... She's just like you.'

I left the following morning without telling anyone.

I asked in the village for the way to Torre Pacheco, ignored the sniggers that meant they all knew about Mariana la Loca's father's

other family, then set off along the track they'd pointed out with the morning sun hot on my back. 'Go west,' they'd said, 'an hour's ride, an hour and a half. You'll come to a rocky hill sticking up out of the plain. That's el Cabezito Gordo. Torre Pacheco is there.'

On the outskirts of the village I passed a group of women gathered around a well. They all turned their heads to watch as I rode by.

Not them.

I rode on, and saw a couple of old men sitting on a bench outside a bodega.

They would do.

I always preferred to talk to men, to be with men. I do even now, so many years later. I know what men are thinking. I am never sure what a woman is thinking.

'*Buenos días, señores.*'

They nodded and mumbled and looked me over as I slid off my horse and stood before them.

'I am looking for someone. A woman. She has a daughter.'

'Many women have daughters.'

'You are right, señor. But the father of this particular woman's daughter was a stranger, a foreigner, *un caballero*, very tall and with green-grey eyes.'

Tall like you and with eyes like yours they were both thinking, but neither spoke the thought out loud.

'Is there such a woman here, with such a daughter?'

One simply shook his head. The other said 'There was Madalena. She had a girl – the *muchacha*, what was her name, Paco?'

Paco didn't remember.

'What sort of woman was she, this Madalena?'

They both looked at me as if I was *loca*. Well, I was used to that.

'*Una puta,*' Paco said

'Just an ordinary village *puta,*' the other one murmured. Then added, 'Not someone like yourself.'

What did he mean? Not a lady like myself? Or not a city whore like myself?

'This foreigner,' Paco went on, 'he found her with nothing, and when he died he left her with nothing. Except another mouth to feed.'

By then some women had gathered round, curious, and suddenly one young woman cried, 'Andrika?'

I looked round at her.

'Andrika! It's me! Ana!'

Instantly I understood: this Madalena had named the girl Andría after my father, she became known as Andrika, and of course she looked exactly like me.

'No,' I said, 'no,' holding Ana off when she came to embrace me. 'No. My name is Mariana. Andrika's father is – was – my father, too. He is dead.'

'So she is your sister! But – where is she? How is she?'

'I don't know. I came here looking for her. For them.'

'But they left here years ago, after Don Andrés died.'

'Where to? Where were they heading?'

She shrugged. 'They didn't say.'

An older woman spat and said, 'Stupid whore didn't know where she was going.'

'Yes, she did! She wanted to find a good bordel for Andrika to get started, learn the job.'

'Learn the job,' the older woman snorted. Some of the others laughed, but the two men didn't laugh. They were busy watching me, waiting for my reaction.

'You have to, don't you,' Ana went on, 'if you want to work in a city, make money?'

She was asking me.

'Well, yes.'

'Where did *you* train?' asked that same older woman with the big mouth. Actually, her mouth was small and her lips were thin and mean, but her eyes were big and black and beautiful and they were studying my mouth, my lips.

'Cuenca,' I said.

She was going to say something nasty, but the young one got in first. 'They went north, along the Alicante road, Doña Mariana. Is that the way to Cuenca?'

'No, you would pass through Murcia. But she wasn't in Cuenca. Perhaps they went to Valencia. Or Barcelona. Or to France.'

'France! Oh! Oh, Doña Mariana, come and rest and tell me and María about those places. We've never been anywhere. Are you hungry?'

'Very. And please, call me Mariana.'

So I went with Ana and her sister to their house and shared a chickpea *comida* with them, and they told me all they knew of Andrika and Madelena. Which amounted to very little. And as María said, it must have been much the same as my story, really. A girl takes after her mother, does what her mother does, learns her mother's trade if she has one, the same as a boy takes after his father and learns his father's trade.

I nodded, yes, of course – then realised what she meant. 'No! My mother was a respectable woman, her father, my grandfather, was *alcalde* of Los Alcazares. My father was married to *her*.'

They both stared at me.

'Then how did you become a prostitute? How did you come to be in Cuenca?' Ana asked.

'My father ... He ...' But why should I defend his honour with a string of white lies? These girls knew him only as one who fathered a baby on a village whore then left the poor woman to fend for herself. 'My father sold me to a slave-trader when I was fourteen.'

They weren't shocked. They weren't even surprised. It was more or less what they'd imagined, what they'd expected. A slave-trader had come through their village the previous year, they said, had bought a couple of girls. 'He wanted María,' Ana laughed, 'but Papa wouldn't agree to it.'

'He would have agreed,' retorted María. 'He just wanted more money than that fat slave-trader thought I was worth. When he

comes again – if he comes this summer – I believe Papa will – '

'No!'

'He doesn't talk to me any more the way he used to, the way he talks to you. He just looks at me sort of speculatively, wondering how much he could get for me. He owes money to Don Fernando, he needs money for your dowry, he – '

'No! I'll tell him, I'll refuse, I don't want – '

'You can't refuse, you know you can't, any more than I can refuse to go with that fat *pelotudo* if Papa does sell me to him. Can she, Mariana?'

I shook my head. No, she couldn't.

'Mariana, tell me about your life in Cuenca.'

'They might sell you to a Moor!' cried Ana. 'Take you to Granada, or across the sea to Africa! Mightn't they, Mariana?'

'They might, yes, a beautiful girl like María.'

'Do you know anything about how Moors treat their slave-girls, Mariana?'

Oh, yes. I knew all about that. So I spent the next hour telling them about life at the House of the Two Fish in Cuenca and something of my experiences in Granada. I told them the funny parts, the better parts, the happier parts, because it really did seem that their father had little choice but to sell María at soon as possible and for whatever he could get for her.

Then I took my leave and rode back home, cursing my father all over again, this time for not letting me know I had a sister, for not letting me get to know and love her as Ana and María loved each other.

15

The day we've kept putting off cannot be put off any longer.

Like a little family, Khadija, Yahia, Malika, Ferchard and I travel back up the dusty road to Murcia, deposit my silver without

any trouble, cross back to the coast at Alicante, then up the east coast of Spain to Valencia just as we so recently travelled across Andalucía, the only difference being that now we have Khadija with us, mumbling and complaining all the time.

I'd forgotten in my delight at seeing her again what a moaner she is. Her attitude doesn't affect anyone else, except perhaps Malika. As the long hot road stretches endlessly on and on, with open sea always somewhere to our right and open land that is little more than desert to our left, Malika becomes more and more withdrawn.

Sometimes, when the road comes right down to the beach, we make camp, and I take to the sea, ignoring Khadija's clucking, Ferchard's warnings and Yahia's fears. I leave Malika in the shallows and swim out till I am so far from the shore that when I turn it is another world, that darker blue line there in the distance. Not my world. Only in the sea am I truly at home.

As we near Tortosa, Ferchard and I discuss whether to travel on up the coast road and enter France that way, the easy way, or to veer west and head inland, then make our way into France over the Pyrenees. Ferchard himself, who crossed the mountains when he came into Spain, says it's too difficult, at any rate for Khadija.

It seems to me that only by heading inland can we hope to find any trace of Malika's origins, but we decide to continue on up the coast for the time being.

Then suddenly, when we arrive at Vinaros, and a crossroads with a sign pointing to the left that bears the legend *San Mateu, Morella*, Malika comes to life again.

'I know that place,' she tells me.

'Which place?'

'Morella. Yes, I remember now.'

She is speaking Provençal. When she doesn't want the others to understand, Malika always speaks Provençal, knowing I will get the gist. Khadija and Yahia don't mind. Why should they? But it annoys Ferchard intensely.

'Tell the lass to speak Arabic so we can all understand.'

'Whisht.'

'Don't you whisht me!'

I ignore him, as I have learnt to do in the months since we met. Who else understands when he speaks to me in the Gaelic that he spoke at home before he went on his travels, and that I learnt at my father's knee?

So: 'Whisht,' I repeat, and leave him seething.

I turn back to Malika, ask in Arabic: 'Are you sure?'

She nods.

'Malika, you didn't even tell me you can read.'

'You didn't ask me.'

True. 'So what is it you remember? Was Morella where they brought you after Bera died?'

'Oh no. No, it's a place where some of my people live, I think.'

'Some of your "people"?''

Again, she simply nods.

It sounds promising, though. 'All right, Malika. We'll turn off, go to Morella, see what we see... But it's time you told me everything.'

We were on separate horses. Each of us had one, except Yahia, who walked beside mine, stout staff in hand. Malika's pony was smaller than the white gelding I was riding, so she had to look up at me. That didn't help. I waited until we came to a *pueblo*, a village, just past San Mateu (which we had skirted – it is small, but securely walled, with gates and burly gate-wardens) then ordered a halt. I left the other three eating and drinking on a bench outside a small *bodega* and took Malika round the outside into a sheltered garden.

'Now. Tell me.'

It was obvious she didn't remember everything. It was equally obvious that she remembered a great deal more than she had been admitting.

'They killed poor Bera and the two guards, then ... they couldn't kill me.'

'You said that, yes. But why not? You mean they were too soft-hearted to kill a little girl?'

'No.'

'No. It can't have been that. Was your Uncle Bera something special? Or was it you they wanted to kill? And if so, why?'

It was her who was special. That's why they wanted her out of the country. They had told their masters (the Inquisition?) that she was dead.

'So why did they want to kill you? Don't say you don't know.'

'I do know, but ...'

'You can't say. All right. For the moment. Tell me one thing, though. Your real name, it can't be Malika.'

Malika, the Queen. In Kabbalah, Malkah. The Sephiroth Malkuth. It could be very appropriate, but Malika was the Arabic form.

I watched her hesitate. It was going to be another half-truth.

'They call me Alazais.'

They call me. I had to smile. It was one of her names. Perhaps even the name she was known by. But it wasn't her *name* – the name of power. It wasn't who she was.

'Alazais. I like that. I'm a little nervous though of what we shall discover in Morella. I think for the time being you had better remain Malika. In fact, you had better start wearing your Moorish costume again.'

'No! I like wearing these clothes!'

"These" were clothes I'd given her, old clothes of mine that I'd worn when I was her age, and that Khadija had found for her as soon as she realised the child was a Christian.

'Alazais, do as I say. I do not want to draw attention to you where there might be someone who remembers you as you were before. Any of "your people". Not until we *know* we can trust them. If your uncle and two guards couldn't defend you, do you think Yahia and Ferchard and I could?'

'Yahia could! He's bigger and stronger than both those guards put together.'

'Yes, but he's only one man, not an army. You will put your djellaba on – '

'I haven't got it.'

'I brought it, and your kaftan. In case.'

She pouted.

'Alazais, I insist. From now on, until I give you permission, you will speak only Arabic, wear only the djellaba, and answer only to the name of Malika. And you will either address me simply as *lalla*, the same as Yahia does, or as Doña Mariana, but *not* Maryam.'

'Khadija doesn't.'

'Khadija is like my mother. *You* are like my daughter. Now, do you want me to tell Yahia to use his cane on your bottom?'

'No!' She stared at me. 'You wouldn't!'

Back in Granada, at ibn Khaldoun's house, she'd been caned a couple of times by Yahia – as gently as he could get away with I'm sure, but hard enough to satisfy Saïda, who had ordered the beating – and she had no wish to repeat the experience.

'I will if I have to. Any silliness now will endanger not only you but all of us.'

She gave in.

Approaching Morella, the first thing you see is the castle – the kasbah – up on its hill, visible far out over the plain. The town has spread all around the base of the hill and is itself enclosed by a great wall.

We enter with no difficulty by the San Mateo Gate, and quickly find an inn that suits us, small but comfortable.

By the following evening, after spending all day walking around the narrow streets, we have seen everything, and everyone has seen us. All we have established is that many of the people speak Catalan as either their first or second language.

What, though, are we looking for, exactly?

Suddenly, Alazais remembers something. 'Look for people wearing a yellow cross.'

'A yellow star, you mean?' Are they Jews, after all?

'No! A cross.'

Surely we would have noticed.

We go out again, search, peering at people.

Nothing.

Perhaps they no longer wear them. No longer have to wear them. But anyone who once did, who had once had to, would be aware of it, marked by it, for life.

I close my eyes, focus on the yellow cross these people are not wearing in reality but one or two might still be wearing branded on their etheric body. Slowly I turn round and round, then open my eyes again. I try to see the yellow cross on the people in front of me. There is nothing, it doesn't fit any of them.

Time for witchcraft. A little trick I learnt in Cuenca with Madre Isabel when I didn't have my silver pendulum. Will Yahia's cane work as a baton, a wand? I borrow it from him. Alazais backs away, but only a step or two, then waits. I hold it out, still visualising the yellow cross, and point it at various people.

'What are you doing?' she hisses. And I remember her laughter and teasing when she discovered the village people at home called me Mariana la Loca.

At least she hissed in Arabic.

'Shh.'

She looks round nervously.

Am I drawing too much attention to us? I look round, too. No. 'It is you who are drawing attention, child.'

There is nothing. Then – yes! It pulls towards that old man, pulls back towards him when I move it on.

'Malika, listen. That man there with the white beard, yes. Go to him. Speak to him in your "Roman". If he understands, go on from there. If he does not, if he is offended, I will come running up, grab you by the ear and haul you away, saying that you are *loca*. All right?'

The look she gives me means it is far from all right. She doesn't trust Yahia's cane as a means of identifying "her people", she

doesn't want me pulling her around by her ear, and she certainly doesn't think *she* is the *loca* one, but ... she gives me a small smile, almost a smile of sympathy, and crosses over to the man.

She speaks to him – excusing herself for disturbing him, no doubt. He shows little or no reaction, merely looks up at her and waits. She speaks again. This time, he looks incredulous. He stands up, draws her away from the shop, away from other people. He asks her a question. She answers. He is overawed. She speaks some more. Now he is terrified. He tells her something – shows her where, judging by the turning head, pointing arm – then leaves her, scampering off down the street without a backward glance.

Alazais returns to me. She smiles. 'You were right.' Then she says, and the smile is still on her face, but there is doubt, fear even, in her eyes. 'You *are* a witch, aren't you.'

Oh, no. Perhaps she also remembers that little trick I played on Fernán. 'No, I'm not. And don't ever use that word again in my company.'

'I'm sorry.'

'That was just another little trick I once learnt.' I take her hand, lead her away up the busy street. 'Now, tell me what happened. What you said, what he said. What you arranged.'

'I asked if there were any of our people here. I told him I'd been taken captive, been a slave in Granada for three years. I told him you were looking after me.'

'Did you tell him you were now my slave?'

'Yes, but ... I said you're a good person, although you're not one of us, and that you want to restore me to my family.'

'I see. And you arranged to meet somewhere?'

'Yes.'

This story doesn't quite match the series of facial expressions. Again, I'm getting only half the truth.

'Malika, you must be open with me, or I will simply leave you here.'

'I can't! I can't, Maryam!'

'Mariana. Doña Mariana. People are listening, trying to

understand.'

She looks round. 'I can't, Doña Mariana. But if you will come with me this evening, I will ask them to explain to you.'

Malika – Alazais – had told the man where we were lodging. When they were ready, they sent a boy for us. Alazais and me. No one else.

I knew that Ferchard, probably accompanied by Yahia, would attempt to follow us, but didn't think he'd succeed. In fact, he followed on his own (Yahia being a mite too distinctive to make a good spy) but lost our trail when we suddenly entered a building and the door closed smartly behind us. Were we in that building? Had we simply gone through it? He had no idea, and no way of checking. It was one of a row of houses each propping the other up, and to get to the back he would have to go all the way round. He watched the front door.

Meanwhile, we passed through the house, the boy disappeared, we were given shawls to put over our heads, and we emerged again at the back, now in the company of a middle-aged woman in an identical shawl. She escorted us to a rather more imposing house where, in a large room at the back giving onto a courtyard with a fountain playing, we found the old man to whom Alazais had spoken along with ten other people, five of them women.

The woman who had escorted us took back the shawls and gave us chairs to sit on, then joined the other eleven, who were all gazing straight at us.

I glanced at Alazais. She was returning their gaze, unintimidated. Not bad for a twelve-year-old slave-girl.

I smiled to myself and joined in.

They ranged in age from young adult (a fair-haired woman who might have been the same age as me) to very old (another woman, a gum-sucking ancient with a bird-like skull and bright bird-eyes). I ran my gaze over the others, glanced back at the old crone; she had not taken to me at all.

No one spoke. Was it that no one knew what to say? Was it that *we* had approached *them*, we should speak first, state our business? I decided to take the bull by the *cojones* (as the girls used to say in Cuenca).

'I realise it may not be acceptable to you for a woman to speak out of turn. I ask your indulgence. Nor do I intend any offence by my question, but I am at a loss here.' I switched into Djudezmo. 'Are you by any chance Jewish converts to Christianity who still, clandestinely, practise your own religion?'

It was obvious at once that most of them did not understand the question. However, the old lady did – she grinned – and so did a couple of the men. But still no one spoke.

'I ask that,' I continued, in Spanish now, 'because this child's last companion and guardian before she was kidnapped and sold into slavery, was a man called Bera, and Bera is a Jewish name. Bera was killed by the kidnappers.'

One of the men was busy translating my question into Catalan for the others, and explaining its implications. Then the old lady said, 'Bera, eh?' She turned to the others, waited till they quieted down, then spoke to them, still in fast Catalan.

They all stared at me.

'What did she say?' I asked Alazais.

Alazais told me (in Arabic, to their consternation): 'She said "Whoever the child is, she's not safe here. And neither are we safe with this woman here."'

I turned back to them and said, in Spanish: 'Where we go next, and whether or not you trust me – or I trust you – will be decided later. For now, I wish to know who you are, and who Alazais is.'

They took this in, then the man who had done the translating spoke to Alazais.

I interrupted. 'Excuse me, but I insist on you speaking to Alazais in a language I have no trouble understanding: Arabic or Spanish.'

'Excuse me, señorita, but as you have stipulated that this discussion should go forward without previously establishing any

basis of mutual trust between you and ourselves, it is essential that we should speak to the child in private.'

Hm. But this was not the moment to back down. 'The child trusts me. That should be enough. If it is not, we will leave.'

'Are you sure the child trusts you, more than she trusts us, her own people?'

'The fact that you speak the same language does not make you "her people". Her kidnappers – Bera's murderers – no doubt spoke it too. Did they, Alazais?'

She nodded.

'And as for my being sure ... Alazais, we are leaving. If you trust these people more than you trust me, you may stay. You are free, you know that.'

I rose.

Alazais put out a restraining hand, caught my arm. 'Of course I trust you, Mariana,' she said, in Spanish. 'Trust you and love you. If you go now, I shall come with you. But please, can we not stay a little longer? I am sure there is some kind person here among this group who will speak to us – both of us – in Spanish.' She looked back at them.

The young woman, the one with fair hair, said: 'I will, yes. Of course I will. Alazais, we welcome you here among us, you *and* your kind protectress, Doña Mariana.'

Some of the older ones mumbled, others looked relieved.

'But first,' she went on, 'we should like you to name some of the places you remember from before you were taken south, and some of the people in your life ... especially your own family. This will help us to identify you – if you are indeed one of us.'

Alazais looked at me.

I nodded.

'Places ...' she said. 'Well, I remember the name Morella, which is why we came here. But I don't think we'd been through here. I think we were on our way here. And then we were to go on to somewhere else – I remember! It was a place called Albacete! We

would be safe there, they said.' She turned to me and said in Arabic, 'That must be Al Basit, Maryam.'

I nodded. 'Yes, to the north of Murcia.'

'Safe from whom?' prompted *la rubia*, the fair-haired one.

Again Alazais looked to me for confirmation. Again I nodded. And this time I said, 'Tell them everything you remember, *querida*. Don't keep anything back.'

I knew she would keep some things back – such as *her real name* – but at least it would be her own decision from now on. She would stop glancing at me.

The old one was grinning again.

'From the – what was the word, Mariana? Inquisition?'

I nodded yet again.

Some of the group nodded too. It was what they had been expecting.

'And where had you come from?' asked *la rubia*.

There was a long pause. Then Alazais answered: 'We lived in a village in the mountains. I was born there. Before that, my family lived in Tolosa – Toulouse.'

'And the name of this "valley in the mountains"?' asked the old crone. She had stopped cackling.

'Guerol.'

That was it. That was the word that made all the difference. Suddenly, Alazais was *in*, and not just in, but *up*, on a pedestal. And I was in, with her.

But the crone had one more question to ask. 'Do you know what happened to the people of that village – of Guerol?'

'What *happened* to them,' Alazais repeated, not really understanding. 'No, I – I was sent away, with Bera and some other men, because ... What *did* happen to them?'

The *rubia* glared at the crone, who subsided, and went back to sucking her gums.

'What did happen to them?' Alazais demanded, again.

But now one of the men took over. 'Alazais, child, we cannot answer your questions. And nor, now we know something of who you are, can we offer you refuge.'

I opened my mouth to protest, but he raised a hand to silence me.

'I shall arrange for you and Doña Mariana to be escorted to a village where you will, I believe, be safe, temporarily, and where they will be better able to assist you.'

'What village?' I demanded.

'That you will discover when you arrive. No one – and I mean no one – but me will know where you have gone.'

Impressive. But I am not one to give in without an argument. 'And the guides?'

He smiled, for the first time. 'They will remain in the village with you for as long as you are there. And travel on with you, until you leave Spain. Nor will you inform them of your ultimate destination when you do leave Spain.'

I smiled back at him. 'Then thank you. My own people, of course, will have to accompany us.'

'The eunuch is rather distinctive.'

We had been watched. 'I'm not going anywhere without him. And neither is Alazais.'

'Then so be it. You leave Morella at dawn.'

The journey to Monroyo – for such was the name of the village – was uneventful. We arrived as night fell over the mountains, and were taken by our guides to a house where an elderly couple made Alazais and Khadija and myself welcome, while the others, Ferchard and Yahia and our two guides, were given hospitality in other houses nearby.

Here, for the first time, I came across the term *Parfait* (Perfect, or Good Man). And here the next day, when I mentioned it to Ferchard, he told me what little he knew about the Cathars and their relationship with the Templar Knights: then he showed me the letters from my father.

'You – you had these all this time, and you never told me!' I protested.

'Read them, lass. You will see why. I was waiting for the right moment to come.'

He gave me them one at a time, and as he did so, told me a little more of his journey.

[You can follow Ferchard's journey in THE KNIGHT'S QUEST, here, in this book. Read it now, and come back – or read it later. Either will work.]

I loved the story of him and Fatima, but when he came to Cuenca, and I learnt how he had fared with Doña Inés, and with Doña Carmen, the lamia, and how Fatima had brought him back to life, our eyes met and I blushed. I couldn't help it. I was blushing because I'd come so close to joining her, being one of them. Did he know that? Had she told him?

'Oh,' he added. 'Isabel sends her love.'

'Oh, Ferchard!' I threw myself into his arms.

Tears flowed – not all of them mine – then he continued with his tale. But what was this about a friend – a heretic?

'Read on, lass. Read it through to the end, now.'

I can tell you little or nothing about them. But if you ever chance upon Christians whose priests are called Goodmen or Perfects and whose enemy is (as indeed ours turned out to be) "the Prince of this World" (I could tell you more, much more, but do not dare) then, believe me, they are good men and worthy of your friendship and support, those who survived the onslaught.

My particular friend, one Raymond Issaurat, I first met in Avignon, then parted from in Narbonne, where he had places to go and things to do. We met again, quite by chance, in Cuenca. From there I had been intending to go to Valencia, but enjoying his company and not wishing to miss this opportunity to learn more of his faith, I decided to come with him to Albacete.

From here I go to Alicante.

'You were in Al Basit – Albacete?'

He nodded, gave me more letters, told me to read on.

I read straight through to the end, tears pouring down my cheeks.

And when I'd finished, I said, 'How you must look down on him.'

'Look down on him, lass? *Look down on him?* He had a child to worry about! Do you not think that on his own he would have told that witch, that Doña Leonor, to go to the Devil? I do, and in a sense I know him better than you.'

'Ferchard, you cannot imagine how much that means to me. For four years now, I've had a hole in my heart. The man I most loved, most admired, in all the world, proved to be not only a failure and a hypocrite, but a treacherous coward.'

'You can put him back up on that pedestal now, where he belongs. There is no possible set of circumstances in which Anndra would not have done what he considered best, regardless of his own welfare.'

'But –'

'Listen to me. You have a choice between killing *me* – yes, me – and being condemned and burnt as a witch. Kill me, and save yourself. What will you do?'

'There is nothing that could happen to me that would make me kill you.'

'That is the right answer. But now add a little girl – your daughter – to the equation.'

I thought about it. He was right.

'You will do anything – *anything* – to prevent harm from coming to her, at least while she is small ... Later, you – and even she – may have to pay for that.'

I wept again.

And when I had finished and dried my eyes and laughed at myself, Ferchard said, 'Now let's get back to the Albigenians – for that's what these people your father calls Cathars, are. The

descendants of the survivors of the iniquitous Albigensian Crusade.'

'The old man remembers the Perfects,' I said. He and I had been talking. He would have nothing to do with Ferchard. 'But he says there are others who remember them better, like Pierre Maury, who knew Guillaume Bélibaste, the last Perfect – knew him well. Pierre is still alive, in Lleida.'

'Lleida?'

'A week's journey from here, he says, up towards Andorra and France.'

'So if we go that way, we *will* cross the Pyrenees.'

'It sounds like it. And I want to go there. I must. They say Pierre Maury will tell Alazais about herself.'

16

It took us ten days to get to Lleida.

I didn't mind. The weather and the country were both perfect. Yahia, though, could only walk so far in one day – that was a lot of weight to carry even in open country, let alone up and down mountains – and Khadija could (or *would*) sit on her mule for no more than two or three hours at a time.

We crossed the Río Segre, and there, close to the bridge, in the Calle Cugutz, was the small house where Pierre Maury lived. It had, he told us later, been "in the family" for seventy years or more. And he meant Alazais' family. Yes, they were related – though how closely we never really established.

Pierre was an old man, tall, rangy, and sun-tanned like old, fine leather, with thin but still long white hair tied back in a pig-tail – not as tall as Ferchard, but otherwise very similar. His eyes, greyer, lighter than Ferchard's rather icy blue ones, were eyes accustomed to gazing into the distance, across hot plains and deserts not so different from those Ferchard had known in the east, but also out

across the peaks and valleys of the Pyrenees. For Pierre Maury was a shepherd and still had sheep on the plains to the west of Lleida – vast open spaces around the Río Ebre that in summer turn into a desert. Then, he told us, the sheep are taken north up into the mountains. This is the famous "transhumance", and it had been his job all his life. He had kept sheep in the Sabartès, in the mountains on the northern, French, side of the Pyrenees; every autumn he had led them across the mountains to winter on the plains of Aragon, where we were now, and every spring he had taken them back up over the Pyrenees. It would have been a simple life had he not been what he was and things not turned out as they had.

We waited.

But he wasn't going to say, not until he had learnt what we knew already and who exactly we were. An introduction from the people of Morella and Monroyo was all very well. Now he wanted more.

We told him all we knew about Alazais, while she sat there in unaccustomed silence, listening and watching, obviously in awe of the old man. And he, too, began to gaze at her while I told the story; but still he did not utter a word.

Finally, and to sum up, I said: 'So we have come to believe that her family must have been followers of the Albigensian heresy – Cathars, in fact – and we know little of Cathars. Save that ...'

He looked at me with those *light-filled* eyes. 'Yes? Save that ...?'

'Save that my father had a Cathar for a friend when he first came to Spain.'

'Your father was not a Spaniard?'

'Oh, no. He was a Scot.'

'A *Scot*? From Escotia?'

I nodded.

'A knight?'

I nodded again. 'They met in Avignon, apparently, before my father came to Spain in fulfillment of a vow to follow the pilgrim trail of Santiago de Compostela. Then, when he had been there and

to Vigo, he wandered back across Castille and they met again in – Guadalajara, was it, Ferchard? Or Cuenca? – and travelled down to Albacete together.'

'If I were to tell you the first name of that Cathar, would you tell me his family name? Yes? His first name was Raymond.'

'His family name was – what was it, Ferchard? – Issaurat?'

'Aye, lass.'

'Issaurat. Yes,' said Pierre. 'Raymond Issaurat. Raymond became the chief *passeur* of the *entendensa del be* in succession to me, and he led the way further, to Albacete, as you say, and into Murcia.'

'*Passeur? Entendensa del be?*'

He smiled, sadly: happy memories, but, sadly, now only memories. 'The *passeur* was the messenger and the guide. In my case, taking messages across the mountains from the Sabartès into Catalonia – and people, too, as the persecutions began again. But Raymond ranged further than I did. Only he would ever have ventured right into the home of the children of darkness, and placed himself directly under the eye of the Prince of this World, the Father of lies: Avignon, the accursed city ... And the *entendensa del be*? That is – or was, for I'm afraid there is not much left of it now – the community of the children of light. Sharing things, having things in common, and led by the *Parfaits* and *Parfaites*.'

'*Parfaites*?' I asked, astonished. 'You mean there were *women* priests?'

'Oh, yes. Though the Bons Hommes and Bonnes Femmes were not *priests* exactly.'

'That is – unbelievable.'

'Not unbelievable; unacceptable. It was for this that Catharism was classed by the Church of Rome as witchcraft, and our Good Women as Wise Women, or witches. Wise they were, but never witches.' He gazed at Alazais again. 'And talking of women – good women who once were labelled "witches" – your great-grandmother was Raymonde Marty.'

'My great-grandmother? I don't know. I remember my grandmother, Guillemette Maury. My grandfather – I never met him, I don't think.' She stared at Pierre Maury. '*Pierre Maury ...?*' Tears started running down her face.

The old man took her hand, held it, comforting her, but did not take her into his arms, though that was clearly what she – and I also – was expecting him to do.

'Listen,' he said, gently. 'I will tell you the story. Your great-grandmother was one of two sisters, Blanche and Raymonde. Their father was Pierre Marty of Junac, a blacksmith with a forge on the Arriège. Both he and their mother, Fabrisse – your great-great-grandmother – were Cathars. Another daughter, the eldest, was actually the last Bonne Femme, the last Parfaite, but she died, along with her mother, Fabrisse, in the winter of 1304.

'There were brothers, as well. Arnaud, who was also a Perfect, died at the stake in 1309. Blanche, too, was in great danger. She was close to becoming a Perfect, but certain – ah – considerations – prevented her. And when she was questioned by Geoffrey d'Ablis, she made out she was simple-minded.' He smiled ruefully. 'Which would never have worked with that devil Jacques Fournier, who became Bishop of Pamiers in 1316, and later Pope Benedict XII. Anyway, she was released pending further investigation, and she fled with another of her brothers, Guillaume. Raymonde – your great-grandmother – who had a weak heart, preferred to stay and look after their father. I took her to Perpignan the following year to join Blanche, and they lived there till 1312, when Raymond Issaurat, your father's friend – ' he smiled at me, 'escorted them on down into Catalonia. They lived with Guillaume Bélibaste in San Mateu – on the road from Morella to the coast. You passed through there? Of course.

'Now, for you to understand the next part of the story, I must tell you about Guillaume – Bélibaste, that is – he who is now known as the Last Perfect of Septimania. And in order to be able to listen attentively, you must refresh yourselves. When we have eaten, I will continue.'

'No! Please!' Alazais protested. But the old man, though grinning, was adamant.

It was not until evening that Pierre Maury was ready to pick up the tale again.

'So. Where were we?'

'Guillaume Bélibaste,' answered Alazais promptly.

'I think I need some of it gone over again first,' said Ferchard who, like Pierre himself, had imbibed of the local *vino rancio*, the barrels of red wine left outside in the sun to grow stronger and, in so doing, develop a lovely tawny colour.

'So do I.' My head was clear, but I was confused. 'This family – Alazais' family – the brothers and sisters. Why were some arrested, others not?'

'Oh, they were *all* summoned to Carcassonne – a four or five-day journey – for interrogation by Geoffrey d'Ablis. That was in 1309, soon after Arnaud was put to the question then burnt. After the preliminary hearings, Blanche and Guillaume – Blanche played simple, remember – were ordered to return the following month for further questioning. They fled to Castelnaudry. They had to. They knew everyone, their house in Junac had been a meeting-point for Perfects, and Blanche in particular had to avoid a real interrogation at all costs. Raymonde and their father, on the other hand, were freed after a few questions: he was a bad-tempered old man and a drinker, and she was sweet and innocent and frail. Though D'Ablis was never the monster that Fournier was, he would of course always burn Perfects and imprison confessed *credens* – believers.

'Then a year later, old Marty was murdered, very mysteriously – found strangled – and I escorted Raymonde to Saint-Cyprien, south-east of Perpignan, where Blanche was now living.' He looked long at Alazais. Then at me. 'Listen,' he said. 'I loved Raymonde.'

Alazais smiled, sure now that this was her great-grandfather.

'Her husband, Arnaud Piquier –'

'Husband?' I echoed. 'She was married then?'

'Oh, yes. But he was in prison in Carcassonne. His house and all his possessions had been confiscated. She was homeless. She had returned to her father's house and now her father had been murdered – it was her, poor soul, who found him – one brother had been burnt at the stake, her other brothers and her sister had fled. She was very sweet, very pretty, and she wasn't strong – and she needed help.'

'And on the journey ...?' I prompted.

'Yes, on the journey, it was cold, and we were alone and we slept together and ... we made love. Not once but many times.'

'Then you are my great-grandfather!' murmured Alazais.

I studied him. He seemed a very straight man, and yet here he was avoiding the issue.

'I am coming to that. Bear with me, child.'

For once, she did not protest at the use of the word "child". And she bore with him, though she clearly realised that she was going to have trouble with this new "great-grandfather".

'That was in 1310. Your grandmother was born in 1314.'

'Then – ?'

'Shh, child. Listen,' I said.

'I am not a child and stop shushing me.'

I smiled at Pierre. He was older than Ferchard, eighty to Ferchard's seventy, I guessed, and I had already learnt how hard it was to speed Ferchard up when he was thinking or speaking. In fact, now I came to think of it, well over eighty if he was twenty-something in 1310. That was sixty-six years ago.

'Your great-grandmother also loved Guillaume Bélibaste.'

Oh, no. I could see what was coming.

'Many people seem to think that Cathars do not believe in marriage,' he said, apparently changing the subject. 'That is not true. What we do not believe in is the sacraments of the Roman Church – one of which is their form of marriage. We have our own form of marriage. It has even been said that we are against bringing children into this world. That also is untrue: it is something other people say in order to discredit us. Only Perfects abstain from

marriage and remain celibate. However, Guillaume Bélibaste was,' he smiled ruefully, 'less than perfect, at least in this respect. He was living with the two sisters, Blanche and Raymonde.'

'With *both* of them?' Alazais' eyes were wide.

Pierre's boyish grin reappeared. 'I mean sharing a home with them, child. He was only sharing a bed with Raymonde. And not that in front of Blanche. Blanche was *like* a Perfect. She was easily shocked. But I didn't know this at the time. All I knew was that whenever I visited San Mateu, and later Morella, I was welcome not only in their home but in Raymonde's bed. I mean, me Blanche knew about, and didn't seem to mind. But Bélibaste? A Perfect? Of course, finally she walked in unexpectedly and caught them in bed together – and walked straight out again! They didn't see her for eight years! I knew where she was – she was here, in Lleida, in this very house! – but they did not.'

'You mean,' I said, 'that no one knows who Alazais great-grandfather was. It could have been either of you.'

'It could. But I was an infrequent visitor. Guillaume was with her all the time.'

'My grandmother was Guillemette *Maury*,' Alazais insisted. She wanted *this* man. I didn't blame her.

'Because I am officially your great-grandfather. It happened like this. Later, when Raymonde was pregnant again with the boy, Guillaume persuaded us to get married. And though subsequently he divorced us and moved back in with Raymonde as easily as he had married us and moved out, from then on she was known not as Raymonde Piquier or Raymonde Marty, but as Raymonde Maury. And your grandmother was, as you say, Guillemette Maury.'

'After Guillaume's arrest, when Guillemette was seven, I took responsibility for the little family until my own arrest two years later, in 1323. I was in prison in Pamiers for ten years, and by the time I saw Guillemette again she was a married woman, and your mother, also Raymonde, was born in Toulouse. They moved there when the new Archbishop of Narbonne began organising searches in this area; they felt they were too well known around here.'

'And what had happened to Guillaume Bélibaste? You said you were in prison ten years ...'

'Guillaume was a perfect. He was burnt at the stake.'

'Oh, no!' I clutched Alazais' hand, but she was simply listening avidly, and seemed to consider being burnt at the stake quite normal.

'I warned him. And so did your father's friend, Raymond Issaurat. There was money for him to travel to Sicily, and live in Palermo where life was much easier, but he wouldn't go. Mind you, Raymond said the same to me, and I didn't go either. Yes. He was burnt in Villerouge-Termenès by the Archbishop of Narbonne. The Archbishop then was Bernard de Farges, a nephew of Pope Clement V.'

'Wasn't that the pope who outlawed the Knights Templar?'

'You know about that? Ah, yes, your father. And you, Sir Farquhar, you too are a knight ...'

'That's twice you've mentioned the Archbishop of Narbonne,' Alazais said suddenly, 'and I think it was him who – who was ... but he must have been very old by then.'

'As old as me!' laughed Pierre. He seemed always ready with that grin. 'No, the one who instigated enquiries in Toulouse, then finally found you in Guerol, was another Archbishop of Narbonne, Cardinal Pierre de la Jugie.'

'You know about Guerol?' I asked. 'About what happened there?'

'I have heard.' The grin disappeared. 'They came there, and they killed all the women and the girls, and the men who resisted. The other men they took captive. No one knows what happened to them.'

'The women and girls? Why? Don't tell me they were looking for Alazais?'

'They were. Yes, of course they were. And we can only hope that they believe she died there.'

'But they don't! They followed her and Bera across the mountains into Aragon, and somewhere not far from here ...'

'You tell me,' he said to Alazais. So she told him what little she could remember, and when she had finished, he said, 'Then perhaps they believe she died there, when poor Bera died.'

'But *why*? Who *is* she?'

'Oh ... being a perfect tends to run in the family, and she is descended from ... on both sides,' he said vaguely.

Too vaguely, I thought. And why had these men – hired killers – been so reluctant to kill her? Soft hearts? I didn't think so.

Ferchard, however, had accepted the story, and was interested in what the Cathars actually believed – and the relationship, if any, between them and the Knights Templar.

The very old man gazed at the old man, clear grey eyes meeting pale blue ones. 'Your sympathy,' he said, finally, 'is with the Templars?'

'Aye. It always has been. But then I do not believe they were heretics. I cannot condone heresy.'

'What do you know of "heresy"?' asked Pierre.

Ferchard shifted uncomfortably on his seat. 'Not much. I leave that kind of thinking to –'

'Can I answer the question for you, Ferchard?'

He looked at me gratefully. 'Aye, lass. You go ahead. I'll listen.'

'I know from my teacher, Rabbi Yacoub ben Amar, that heresy is a word used by the priests of the prevalent religion, whatever that may be, to condemn those who disagree with them on any theological point or who prefer to worship God in a slightly different way. To the priests in Jerusalem, Jesus was a heretic, and it was for heresy with respect to the Jewish religion that he was condemned. Saint Paul, too, became a heretic, when he was converted from being the orthodox pharisaic Jew known as Saul to the follower of the Way known as Paul. It was as a heretic that he was condemned by the priests in Jerusalem and had to appeal to the Emperor in Rome.' I took a deep breath. 'And to the Early Church, the Roman Church of today would certainly seem heretical.'

'In what way?' asked Ferchard and Pierre simultaneously – then looked at each other and smiled.

'I'm not an expert. I wish I were. My education was rudely interrupted and I've spent the last few years working on my back.'

Ferchard looked shocked at my bluntness – well, he would – but Pierre, I noticed, did not seem at all surprised.

'I do know, for instance, that according to Paul, not only Peter but all the Apostles were married men. And I do know that there was no pope, no cardinals. I do know that there was no "purgatory" and no indulgences. I do know that baptism was something you underwent when you decided you believed in Jesus, no matter what your nationality, and not something that happened to babies because they happened to be born into "Christian" families in "Christian" countries. I mean, you weren't *born* a Christian or an infidel.'

'And heresy now?' asked Pierre, gently.

'Believing the same as Paul, for a start. And probably believing the same as Jesus. But Uncle Yacoub – my teacher, the rabbi – said it was all a matter of politics and power, had been in Jesus' time and was now. The Albigenian Crusade –'

'*Crusade*,' sneered Ferchard.

'You have the makings of a fine heretic, Ferchard,' I said. Pierre grinned, but Ferchard managed to look shocked again. 'The Albigenian *campaign*, then, if you prefer, was simply an excuse for the nobles of France to seize land in Provence – a god-send for younger sons especially.'

'It was more than that, *ma fille*,' said Pierre. 'Oh, that was why the French nobles thronged to join it, but it was not why the Church proclaimed it in the first place. That was because they wished to eradicate us, the Cathars, and the secret we guarded and, indeed, everything we stood for.'

'What secret?' I had seen him glance at Alazais as he said that. 'And what do you stand for, exactly?'

'Now? I don't know that we stand for anything any longer. You will have to ask when you get to France. And I suggest you start in

Avignon. But we did stand for freedom, and for simplicity, and above all for love. We were the Church of AMOR of the troubadours, as opposed to the rich, corrupt and oppressive Church of ROMA.'

'Ah, yes, I've heard of that. I like that.' He hadn't answered my question about the secret. No doubt because it was a secret. Silly me. But *Avignon*? 'Why Avignon?'

'Did you not say you were making for Paris?'

'Yes. Perhaps in Paris I shall be able to continue my studies!' I laughed. 'But surely Avignon ...'

'We *could* pass through Avignon, lass.'

'Yes, you could,' Pierre agreed. 'And that is where you may begin to find answers to your questions. It is also, I believe, where Alazais needs to go in order to be – recognised, be back among her own. And if nothing should happen – if no one contacts you, makes him or herself known to you – then you should try to contact a certain Blanche d'Evreux. From what I hear, she will help you should all else fail.'

'Blanche d'Evreux. All right. But you said only Raymond Issaurat ever ventured there, right into the home of the children of darkness. Avignon, the home of the Prince of this World, the accursed city, you called it.'

'It is that – now. But before, and during the so-called crusade, Avignon was a Cathar stronghold. They refused to open their gates to King Louis and the Cardinals. It took the French army three months to defeat those unarmed citizens behind their walls. Later, the city was sold to the popes – sold, literally – for 80,000 florins, or so they say. But still, underground, there are credents and supporters, and even at the top, among the hierarchy and the nobility, clandestine credents and sympathisers.'

'Credents? You mean, believers?'

'Yes. That was what we followers of the Cathar way were known as. We believed, but we were not Perfects, were not called Good Men.'

'Or Good Women,' chirped Alazais.

'Oh, yes, or Good Women,' laughed Pierre. 'Well, granddaughter, you seem wide awake still, but the rest of us – certainly Ferchard and I – are falling asleep.'

'Oh, me too!' I said, but my words were lost as Alazais, who hadn't missed that "granddaughter", screamed out in delight, 'You are my grandfather! I knew you were!' And perched herself on his lap!

He let her stay there a moment, put his arm round her. 'I told you, we cannot be sure, but for now it seems I shall have to play the part.'

'Have to?'

'Sorry. It will be my inestimable privilege to assume the role of your *grand-père*. Better?'

'Yes.' She snuggled up to him.

It's nice to have some real family when you're a kid. She'd had it tougher than I had – or at any rate it had started earlier. I at least had had some kind of family around me until I was fourteen and old enough to understand what was happening when things went wrong. She'd been just a child.

Pierre raises his eyebrows at me over Alazais' head. He wants me to leave them alone together for a while.

I smile and take Ferchard's arm and lead him outside to where Khadija and Yahia are sitting quietly together under a vine. We sit down on a bench facing the other way.

A crescent moon is hanging low in the evening sky.

Ferchard sighs and grunts. 'The old fellow is right.'

Old fellow? I look at Ferchard and grin. 'About what, particularly?'

'I met a knight in *outremer* who said the same thing. Oh, many of us thought it, and some of us said it when no one was listening, but this particular English knight said it loud and clear. Wrote it, too.'

'Said what, Ferchard?'

'That they – we – will never repossess the Holy Places while our pride and covetousness are far greater than that of the Saracen.'

And that we are anyway more concerned with fighting – "crusading" against – each other for reasons of personal ambition and territorial gain than with fighting the followers of Mohammed.'

'Wrote it, you say? Who was this knight? Not Sir John Mandeville?'

'Yes! But how on earth could you ...?' He was looking at me suspiciously again.

'No, it's not witchcraft. They used me as a translator at the house in Cuenca –'

'That's right, they did. I heard that.'

'And one of the books that came in while I was there was *Le Livre de Jehan de Mandeville*. I translated it into Castellano and two other girls made copies of it. Much of it seemed like nonsense to me, entertaining stories about places he'd never been to, but some was not nonsense at all. A lot of what the Sultan says about so-called Christians seems to me exactly what such a man would have said. You never met the Sultan? No? But you met de Mandeville himself! How? Where?'

'We met one evening at Beersheba. Sir John was off to the Sinai with a group of pilgrims in search of Saint Katherine's Monastery, and the knights guarding the poor souls in that group were friends of mine. We ate and we drank wine around our fire as the shooting stars sped by overhead – we were on the edge of the desert, where you always see more – and we fell to discussing the Saracens and Mohammed. He told me a story I'd never heard before, that when he was a young man Mohammed was quite a toper, but then one night in his cups he killed a man –'

'That's in the book! I remember it. Sir John says "*Et in uerticem ipsius iniquitas eius descendit*" – his iniquity should fall on his own head, not everyone else's!'

'Yes, now none of his followers is allowed to drink.'

'I've met some who do.'

'Oh, so have I. But how many Christians keep the laws of *their* religion? Which is where we began this conversation.'

'You haven't read the book?'

'No. I've never even seen a copy, though I did hear he had written one after he returned to England.'

'I remember a lot of things from it. Just reading it made me want to travel everywhere! Like – oh, I don't know. That well in Samaria where Jesus sat and drank –'

'I've been to that well.'

'And the faery-lady in the Castle of the Sparrow-hawk who gave the Templar riches when that was all he asked for – he could have asked for anything, but he asked for money! And because of that she forecast their doom!'

'Aye. I heard the tale. A legend, no more.'

'And one of my favourite stories. How the naked Indians – philosophers, I suppose – gymnosophs – shamed Alexander the Great into turning round and riding away and leaving them in peace. I'd love to visit India ...'

'And perhaps you will, lass, one day. But that's a lot farther than I've ever been – or am like to go, now.'

I gazed at him. He was old, but he was fit and strong. 'Give me your hand.'

'You read hands. Aye, I remember.' He held his right hand out and I took it and held it in both of mine. 'But I don't want any bad news. And I don't want to be informed that when we finish here we shall be travelling to India, not Scotland after all.'

'Poof, don't worry. I'm not that good.'

'You are if you take after your grandmother, the other Lady Marian. Which you certainly seem to.'

'Give me your other hand – I need both. Right.' He was of course holding them with the palms up, waiting for the lines to be read. I turned them over. They were hairy, but not too hairy, and the hairs were fine, not thick and course. The skin was firm, indeed somewhat leathery. 'You're a tough man who probably prefers to be outdoors, but you're not a brutal man.' The fingers were shorter than the palm and were surprisingly smooth and unknotted – like a Fire Hand, only not exactly. 'You're intuitive, you go by first

impressions. You're impulsive, you get things done, but because you're impatient with details you can be a wee bit gullible.'

'Tell me about the lines, lass. What's the difference really between the Life Line and the Fate Line?'

'The Life Line shows what happens. Look here, how long and sweeping it is, and all the Travel Lines coming off it. But the Fate Line – it only starts here in the middle of the hand, on the Plain of Mars – your early years were difficult and insecure, you didn't know what you were doing or where you were going – but then, look, it is a strong line terminating on the Mount of Saturn.'

'And what does that mean? That now I do know what I'm doing and where I'm going?'

We both laughed – and were interrupted by Malika – Alazais, I should say – who was off to bed.

PART IV

Town Without Pity

*"Avignon ... a town without pity, charity,
faith, respect, fear of God.
Here you search in vain for saints, for justice,
reason, holiness, in short for humanity."*

Francesco Petrarch (died 1374)

Avignon, 1376

We approached Avignon by river from Arles. It was quiet and slow, and should have been the most comfortable part of our journey, but the horse-drawn barges weren't built for comfort and I frequently found myself wishing I was walking along the tow-path with the horses.

The long voyage from Tarragona to Marseille had been spoilt not so much by the stormy weather, which I rather enjoyed, as by the continuous wailing of Khadija and the surprisingly stoical vomiting of Yahia. All right, they had never been on a ship before, but neither had Malika (yes, she was Malika again now) and nor in fact had I – apart from that once off the coast of Almeria when I ended up swimming ashore. The best part of the whole journey had been the ship from Marseilles across the great bay to Port St-Louis and up to Arles. She had been new and relatively luxurious and the weather had been perfect, though I do seem to remember clouds of mosquitoes in the evening and all through the night as we came through the Camargue.

We passed Avignon's commercial dock at Périers and as we did so the mud-flats on the right bank gave way to buildings and we got our first good look at the city. My father had told me about it. Ferchard had told me more during our long journey. Now, at last, I was seeing it for myself.

From an unimportant town at the beginning of the century – what was left of a the small walled city that had dared to thumb its nose at the brave warriors of the Albigensian "Crusade" – yes, Pierre Maury had told us about that, too – it had grown in a few

short years to be one of the great cities of France, and indeed of the world. The Popes, in self-imposed exile from Rome, had made it their own, built not one but two huge papal palaces and constructed great new walls and ramparts; and everywhere there were the mansions of cardinals and bishops, the great houses of abbeys and convents, the houses of the bankers and merchants and traders who supplied their endless needs, and the thronging servants and slaves who attended them all. I'd never seen so many people, not even in Granada. Not that I'd ever been free to wander around Granada and look.

As we moored beneath the cliffs of the Rocher des Doms and came ashore at the municipal port, I remarked on this to Ferchard, who'd seen more of the great Moorish city during his few days there than I had in a year shut up in a harem.

'Ah, Granada is different. Did you never see even the Alhambra?'

'Yes, ibn Khaldoun took me there sometimes in the evening. We walked together in the Court of Lions, which he loved. But I was never allowed out into the city.'

'No, of course not.'

I looked at him. He sounded as if he approved.

Then there was all the fuss and trouble of porters and agents competing to carry our things and arrange lodgings for us. But when Ferchard, who for the moment was nominally in charge, with me playing the part of his veiled and retiring young relative (the relationship unspecified, but I could imagine what people thought) made it clear that money was no object, we were shown a two-storey house just off the rue de la Balance and I nodded to him to go ahead and take it. It was so perfect that I immediately began rethinking my plans to travel straight on to Paris once we had sorted out the question of what we were going to do with Malika-Alazais.

She, of course, wanted to hurry back out just as soon as we had begun to settle in. Ferchard and I were intending to go and explore later, but as Malika was playing the part of a Moor, one of the

servant-slaves, along with Khadija and Yahia, taking her with us seemed out of the question.

'But why? I'll follow behind you like a servant! I'll be quiet! I'll be good!'

I was persuaded, though Ferchard didn't like it one bit. 'We have to keep the lass out of sight till we find who to hand her over to.'

'No one will suspect an Arabic-speaking slave with hennaed hands of being ...'

'No, but –'

'Malika, promise me you will speak only Arabic, no matter who speaks to you.'

'*Oh, là!* I promise!'

But just then our landlord, Jehan de Ribiers, returned, this time with his wife, Madame Hélias, and a maid bearing a tray of food. The food was an excuse, of course. She wished to find out more about us – especially me. However, when it comes to gossip, I've always been able to give as good as I get – or rather to get as much as I give.

'Marian MacElpin, madame,' I answer. 'We are Scottish, and yes, Sir Farquhar is my guardian. My poor dear father used to speak to me of Avignon, but it seems to be much changed.'

'Oh, it just keeps growing. More people coming in, more buildings going up, more and more students at the university. Pope Gregory, God bless him, encourages them – one might almost say indulges them. Free books. Benefices handed to them on a plate when they complete their studies.'

She emits a strange chortle, like a crow unearthing some carrion the seagulls missed. 'Not that many of them spend their time studying anything other than where to find the best beer and – if you'll excuse my saying so – *putains*.'

Whores. And of course she is looking at me. Is it still so obvious?

'None of that need worry you, though, if you're only passing through. You told my husband you were not sure how long you would be staying ... '

'Maybe only a week or two, maybe several months. However, I understand that we are leasing this house for a month at a time ... '

'Oh, month by month will be fine, *dem'selle*. You have some business with the Church, perhaps?'

'A matter of titles and inheritances, madame. So – from all this building and growing it seems that the Popes plan to remain here in Avignon indefinitely. That they have no thought of returning to Rome.'

'Oh, there are always some misguided souls who would have the Pope in Rome, but no one takes them seriously. Even now, there is a nun – *une Italienne*, of course – who claims to speak for *Le Bon Dieu* Himself when she demands – *demande*, I ask you – that Pope Gregory move his court to Rome.'

'Move back to Rome? Really?'

She nods. 'Caterina da Siena, she calls herself. A young nun – though not so young – perhaps thirty years – with a reputation as a seer of visions. A saint, they say, her supporters from Rome and Siena. A madwoman, others say. Most here see her simply as a trouble-maker.'

That chortle again. 'Fortunately, the good fathers of the Inquisition agree.'

I hear Malika gasp, see the woman peer at her, suddenly suspicious.

'The Inquisition?' I murmur. 'They had a reputation for cruelty where we lived in Spain. Just the word terrifies little ones like my maid.'

'As well it might. But cruelty is called for on occasion. We have had many a good burning here in La Place.'

'I have heard. But don't tell me that Sor Caterina da Siena ... ?'

'No, no. She has powerful supporters, unfortunately. But they *have* put her to the question. The last thing *they* want – the last

thing *any* of us want – is a general exodus to Rome. Avignon would be left – bereft!"

'I see. Yes. Well, I'm quite sure that won't happen, not in our lifetimes.'

In fact it happened that very year, while I, at least, was still in Avignon.

Finally the appalling woman – "many a good burning" chortle, chortle – took her leave, satisfied at least of my gentility (or so I fondly believed).

I turned back to Malika, ready to go.

She no longer wished to accompany us.

'The Inquisition!' she whimpered, terrified.

'What did you think? Avignon is the very headquarters of your enemies. You remember what your grand-père said – '

'He wasn't my grand-père – '

'I think he probably was. And he said it was astonishing how Raymond Issaurat actually came to Avignon, moved among them. Which is exactly what we have done – are doing – at his suggestion. All right, you stay here – I think that's better, anyway – and let Ferchard and me go in search of this woman Pierre told us to try to contact.'

'Blanche d'Evreux? She is not in Avignon. She lives in the north, in Normandy,' we were told. 'Blanche d'Evreux? La Reine? Ah, no, not here in Avignon. At Gisors, in Normandy.' *La Reine*? Who was this woman? Then someone told us La Reine Blanche – the white queen? – had been in Italy, was known to Caterina da Siena.

Had been in Italy; but was she back in Avignon?

'What do we do now?' Ferchard demanded, as we sat ourselves down in a bar full of students all talking at once (why is it students never listen to each other?) and, at the table next to us, a group of muttering monks. 'Try to contact this nun? This Caterina da Siena?'

I had no idea. It is not often that I find myself completely at a loss, but this ... I never trusted nuns.

'Lass? Did you hear me? Do you think perhaps we should take the child on with us? To Paris? Scotland, even? She'd be safe there.'

I shrugged. Safe in Scotland? Noticed a student notice the shrug. He pointed me out to his friends. They all stared.

Ignoring them, and thinking vaguely about what Ferchard had said – should we travel on north and take Malika with us? – (I should have listened to Ferchard then, taken her straight to Scotland!) – and thinking of Paris and that my French was surprisingly good considering it had never been one of the main languages we used at home, just one that Papa and I used sometimes for a change and because he thought I should speak it – the phrase "cette maudite Catherine" from the next table caught my attention. I realised at once that the "muttering monks" must be talking about Caterina of Siena, and began to eavesdrop.

Apparently, she now spent hours every day in the company of Pope Gregory.

'Gregorius is not a simple man,' muttered one. 'Why does he let himself be led by the nose like this?'

'An old man, a young woman,' muttered another with a high-pitched, almost girlish, voice.

'Hush!'

Did they all look round? If they did, they did not catch my eye on them. Both my eyes were on the students who were discussing me.

'If Visconti were here ... ' The monks again.

'Who?'

'Roberto Visconti of Geneva.' The girlish voice. 'He would have had her tongue torn out and thrown to the dogs before he allowed her to fill the Holy Father's head with nonsense.'

Visconti of Geneva. I'd never heard of him. Obviously a man to watch out for. And even as I thought that, an ice-cold finger ran up my spine. Our paths would cross one day.

'She has the gift. She could talk a cat into water.' Girlish voice.

'You've heard her?'

'When she first came to Avignon and began prating of her "dream", her "vision". I was accompanying two nuns who had also recently arrived, from Burgundy. They were persuaded immediately.'

'You *unpersuaded* them?'

'No. It was like talking to two cows, all big eyes and bovine placidity. However, on delivering them to their convent I requested their Mother Superior to have a little word with them.'

The others laughed.

'Words are wasted on cows,' one said – deep voice. 'The only thing they understand is the switch.'

'It was Madre María de las Dolores. You know her? From Toledo. *She* will not have wasted words.'

'She visited Saint-Juste on his death-bed, poor man.'

'Who? La Madre de las Dolores?'

Deep voice laughed, but girlish voice continued: 'No, Caterina of Siena. He *was* against a move to Rome, but apparently *now* he is for it.'

'Another old man. It seems she specialises in them.'

I couldn't resist a smirk, it sounded so like a remark I had once heard made about one of the girls in Cuenca – whose name, coincidentally, was Dolores. And it is a fact that old men are far less critical, far more inclined to adore and indulge.

'*Et la Reine Blanche*? She is not an old man! *Au contraire*! And if she now joins the nun in persuading his Holiness ...'

Blanche, whoever she was, was here in Avignon?

My attention jumped to the other table where my admirers were pouring yet another carafe. It was because outside the lecture hall they all wanted to be, all thought of themselves as, teachers. Like little girls imitating Mama, little boys copying Papa.

But now they had stopped talking, and were looking at me. One of them was getting up, ready to approach me, egged on by his companions.

They thought this smirking was for them. And they thought Ferchard was an old dodderer. Two mistakes. The second potentially fatal.

Time to go. I stood up.

Ferchard, surprised but polite, also stood up.

I heard the monks getting to their feet behind me. Perfect. I could sneak a look at them, but as I had stood up first it would never occur to them I might be interested.

I let them pass. Guessed that girlish voice was the little one with the large ripe nose.

Ripe nose spoke. Deep, manly voice.

Another answered. Again, not him.

So girlish voice must be the porcine one with the round pink cheeks and glassy eyes devouring everything they focussed on. Which, happily, did not include me.

'You want to follow them?' Ferchard asked as we emerged into the sunlight.

'No, but the big one with the girlish voice interests me.'

'Girlish voice?' He smiled. 'A eunuch?'

I shrugged. He looked like a castrated pig, but I doubted it. I thought he was probably a priest, and priests have to be whole. 'What interests me is that he referred to la Reine Blanche as being here in Avignon. *Now*, so far as I could tell. Or at least on her way here.'

'Then let's go and find out whether he is right.'

After a few more false leads, we found ourselves outside a small palace at the far end of the Place du Palais near what seemed to be a seminary. A uniformed guard stood at the entrance.

We were politely informed that la Reine Blanche was not seeing anyone.

Ferchard asked if the man was a native of Avignon – he was not, he was from Bordeaux – if he was married, had children – he was and did – and saying he knew how expensive it was to bring up a family, gave him a gold franc to buy them something.

We got past the first hurdle.

Gaining access to the mistress herself proved altogether more difficult.

'She has Père Benoît with her,' we were told. 'Also the physician.'

'I see. And will you take in a simple message?'

He didn't even bother to shake his head.

Another franc changed hands.

'Tell her we have with us here in Avignon a twelve-year-old girl from the village of Guerol.'

The servant returned. 'Madame wishes for more details. In writing.'

He led us to an escritoire, where I sat down and wrote: *Her name is Alazais. She apparently fled with a certain Bera across the mountains into Aragon, where Bera was killed. That was three or four years ago. Since then she has been in Andalucía.*

We waited.

The same servant returned, closing the door silently behind him, and handed me a letter.

I cannot see you this morning. I am not alone. However, I will be able to receive you between None and Vespers. In the meantime, speak of this to no one else at all. Que le Bon Dieu soit avec elle et avec vous deux. Blanche.

Vespers was not till sunset, so we had time in which to learn more of this "white queen".

It turned out that she really was a queen! Had actually been the Queen of France for a year or so, the second wife of Philip VI, who died in 1350 when his wife was still only eighteen. Since then she had lived at the Chateau de Neuphle near Gisors in Normandy, and, it was rumoured, spent her time studying the forbidden arts and getting away with it because she was who she was.

I was fascinated.

So she was now about forty-four years old.

I would never have guessed that when we met her. She seemed much younger. Tall – as tall as me – fair-haired, and elegant, yes, but not regal, not imposing; a clever woman and used to being respected for just that, for her intelligence rather than for her beauty or because she came of the old nobility and had once been married to the king.

She sat us down, waved away all attendants – they left through another, smaller door, on the right – and waited for us to speak.

There was a long silence.

Suddenly, she smiled at me. 'You don't know where to begin. And you are not sure whether to trust me.'

I liked her. 'We were told to trust you by – ah – an old man in Spain.'

She saw me glance round. 'But walls have ears? Not these walls.' And suddenly she screamed! 'Help! Murder! Come quick!'

In the total silence that followed the scream, we waited, heads cocked, ears pricked. Nothing. No response at all.

Ferchard, who had leapt to his feet, simply stood there, looking stunned and foolish. 'But how?' he said, at last. 'I mean, why? You're not safe ...'

'Oh, I'm safe.'

She was indeed. That was no natural, physical sound barrier.

'That old man you mentioned? His name?'

'Pierre Maury.'

'Ah. As for where to begin ... Why not tell me about the child? Everything you know, from the beginning.'

'I was a slave in the house of ibn Khaldoun in Granada.'

That did make her open her eyes. But she said nothing.

'Already in his house when I arrived was a girl known as Malika. She was eleven years old. She was quite dark, could have been Spanish, Moorish, anything. As it turned out, when I got to know her better, she was from the north, from across the Pyrenees, and had been kidnapped and sold into slavery.'

'Have you more details?'

'When she was eight, she and a man – a servant, guardian? – named Bera, fled their village – a small place called Guerol, up in the mountains somewhere – and headed south into Spain. I learnt subsequently from Pierre Maury that everyone in that village was afterwards massacred. He implied that the perpetrators of this mass-murder were actually after Malika. It is a fact that she and Bera were tracked and set upon somewhere in Aragon. Bera was killed. Malika too should have been killed, but for some reason even those ruffians were reluctant to shed her blood. They took her south and sold her to a Moor who was leaving for the Maghreb – Oran, I believe – on the understanding that he would take her with him and that she would never be seen or heard of again. However, after a brief stay in a large harem she was resold and ended up in the house of ibn Khaldoun.'

I paused, studied her.

'You know who she is, your highness?'

""Madame". But "Blanche" will be fine when we are alone together. Yes, I think I know who she is. You called her Alazais in your note. The name Malika – though ironically appropriate – must have been given to her while she was among the Moors.'

Appropriate? Malika – the queen? 'Yes. It was only later, after she came to trust me, that she told me her real name was Alazais. I believe, however, that there is another, secret, name I have not been told.'

'There is, yes. There has to be. But Alazais is the name we should use, rather than Malika – except, of course, if you are passing her off as a Moor.'

I laughed. She was very quick. 'Alazais,' I agreed. Then, as she seemed to be waiting, went on: 'For services rendered, which we do not need to go into here, ibn Khaldoun gave me my freedom, a purse of gold, his eunuch Yahia, and, as my personal maid, Malika – Alazais.'

'I'm afraid we shall need to go into the services rendered. I must know more about *you*. All that – so much – cannot have been simply for services rendered in the bedroom.'

She didn't smile. But did I? Or did I look shocked? I don't remember.

'Forgive me, but you have the unmistakeable aura of a courtesan. Perhaps you could tell me a little more about yourself – and your companion – at this point, so that I know what I am up against.'

'Up against?'

'Courtesans work for money. How much do you require for the child – and your silence?'

Now I *was* shocked.

But it was Ferchard who reacted. He stood and turned to me and said, in Gaelic, 'Marian, we'll be on our way. This so-called queen has the manners of a bawd.'

I, too, stood up. 'I am sorry, your highness, but Sir Farquhar insists we leave. He does not like your tone.'

'That language. Was it Gaelic?'

'It was.'

'How do you come to speak Gaelic?'

Ferchard answered. 'We are Scottish aristocrats. We are not accustomed to being addressed in that manner. And now we are leaving. Marian?'

But I hesitated. What would I do with the child if we walked out?

She saw my hesitation. 'Please – Marian – tell me *exactly* what it was Sir Farquhar said to you.'

I told her. "Bawd" came out as "*maquerelle*" in French.

She laughed delightedly.

'He is a knight,' I went on. 'He doesn't work for money. I, on the other hand, through no fault of my own, have been a whore in Cuenca as well as an – an odalisque – in two harems in Granada. I would work for money if I needed to. I do not. No, it is not that purse of gold. When I returned home – to the home from which I had been abducted as a fourteen-year-old – yes, I too was kidnapped – I found that I was now alone in the world. And rich. Very rich.'

'I see. And if I respected you the more for that you would respect me the less. You would be right. Forgive me. And you, too, Sir Knight, please forgive a foolish, spoilt woman, and sit down again. For the child's sake.'

Ferchard looked at me. I sat. He followed suit.

'Nevertheless, you have admitted I was right. You do have the aura of a courtesan – and the air of an adventuress.'

She was asking for it. '*You* have the aura of a witch.'

That, coming from *me*! Ferchard looked ready to grab me and run. You don't call the Queen of France, even an ex-queen, a witch with impunity.

But again she laughed with delight.

'A witch and a *maquerelle*! You two don't mince words, do you.'

'Neither do you – Blanche.'

'I am notorious for speaking my mind, but only when in company I find sympathetic. In the company of those with whom I do not feel at ease I am as unforthcoming as a mole – though, like the mole, I rarely entertain the world with my taciturnity. I prefer to bury myself at Gisors, my family home in Normandy. Hm. A bawd I am not – except in the sense that, like all great ladies, I am constantly trying to arrange matches for girls of my acquaintance, which frequently comes to little more than selling them off to the highest bidder. And a witch I am not, either, strictly speaking. A wise woman, yes. But I am not a member of a coven and have never attended a sabbath in my life, and that to me is the definition of a witch, at least in this day and age. Agnès!'

Instantly a woman appeared in the small doorway, one of the ladies-in-waiting who had been in the room when we arrived.

'Agnès, have them bring us refreshments, will you.'

'*Oui, madame.*'

Agnès backed out again, and the door closed silently behind her.

Ferchard looked at me, then at the queen. This was altogether too much for him. 'So that with the "Help! Murder!" was simply a ruse, madame.'

She looked surprised. 'No. Why should it be? I would not wish anyone – least of all a gossip like Agnès – to overhear what we are about to discuss.'

'But –'

'Don't ask, Ferchard.'

He glared at me. He *hated* being told what to do by "a slip of a girl". Especially if he felt there was something going on that he didn't quite understand – some *woman's* thing. Like magic.

He was about to get up again, and this time I would not have been able to stop him. Blanche must have noticed, for she said, quickly, 'I had a friend here, a Scottish aristocrat like yourselves. She died the year before last. Queen Margaret – Lady Margaret Logie.'

Ferchard was unimpressed. 'The wife of King David – a Bruce.'

'From the way you say "a Bruce", I assume you favoured the other party, the Balliols. It is all one to me. She was living here in exile. I found her friendly, and we had – ah – things in common.'

'Like being queens,' I said, cheekily.

'True. The only queens in Avignon, so far as we knew.'

'Blanche, who – what – exactly is Alazais?'

She regarded me in a not unfriendly manner. Deciding what she had no choice but to tell us and what would be better left unsaid. Then sighed, and set her hand to the plough. 'You have your suspicions, I can tell. And Pierre Maury cannot have left you completely in the dark. But humour me. Tell me what you know of our religion – I mean of Christianity. Of its beginnings. And of the heresy known as Catharism. Then I will fill in the blanks. I suppose that, like most girls, you never really thought much about it. You learnt your catechism at the hands of a priest, were confirmed a Catholic, and that was that.'

I laughed. 'It wasn't my catechism I learnt at his hands. And I never was confirmed.'

'Then you know little of the Church, of Christianity?'

'I wouldn't say that, exactly. I read and studied the Bible with my father, who, unlike most knights, was an educated man.'

'Aye, he was that, lass,' murmured Ferchard, the mention of my father improving his mood immediately.

'You know Latin?' Blanche asked.

I nodded. 'And I studied parts of the Old Testament in Hebrew with my teacher, a rabbi.'

'Well. I am impressed.'

'As for the beginnings of Christianity, I think I can say I heard both sides of the story. Rabbi Yacoub claimed that the earliest Christianity was Jewish, that it was the Church in Jerusalem under Jesus' brother James (he called him Yacoub, of course, identified with him, admired him), and that this was the Church that remained true to the teachings of Jesus. He said this non-Pauline Church spread east under Thomas and became known later as the Nazarene Church or the Church of the Ebionites. It also spread west into Iberia and Gaul under Joseph of Arimathea and Lazarus and his sisters and others, and so you get the reverence for Santiago, Santiago being this Saint Yacoub, James, Jesus' brother, and the pilgrimage through the Pyrenees to Compostela.'

Why, every time I thought of the pilgrimage to Compostela did I think of the beautiful Jonet Murray and ache that I had missed that early morning swim with her? And picture Uncle Yacoub on the beach with her?

'Uncle Yacoub – I always called him Uncle – saw Saint Paul, unlike Saint James, as a traitor to his upbringing, to the Law, and to his people, the Jews. He preached to the Gentiles, and not only that but preached equality between rich and poor, master and slave, man and woman, preached the priority of Faith and Love over the Law of Moses, with the main emphasis on Love – without Love you are as sounding brass or a clashing cymbal.'

'How can one small pretty head remember all this?' murmured Ferchard.

'That was nothing,' Blanche said, and winked at me. 'I'll wager

she can go on for hours.'

'Aye, she can. She does.'

'Ferchard! Anyway, as you may imagine, I was on Paul's side. So was Uncle Yacoub, at heart, but he was a rabbi and believed the Law was the Law and the Jewish people were the Chosen people, and this could never change. Paul, he said, was an idealist with a good heart who got it all wrong and led the people astray. He was very, very dangerous. He preached freedom, and in religion there is no room for freedom. Uncle Yacoub meant *any* religion, of course, but I don't believe that is true.'

'Dangerous. A heretic, in fact.'

I smiled. 'That's what *I* said, and he was horrified, but actually Jesus and Paul were both condemned as heretics. In truth, Uncle Yacoub was a heretic himself – a kabbalist and student of the Zohar. He even allowed himself to wonder about "Matronit". You know?'

'Oh, I know. The feminine aspect of God, your uncle would probably say. The Mother Goddess, others would say. But we are not concerned with Her now, we are concerned with the Domina, or Dompna as they say in the *langue d'oc*. The Lady.'

I gazed at her.

'We'll come back to that. You said *both* sides of the story. The other side?'

'My father's view, yes. Well, as a Christian, he believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead, which of course Yacoub did not.'

'But listen, Marian. Where do you imagine the Cathars fit into all this?'

I thought about it. I didn't really know. I didn't know enough about the Cathars. I told her this. 'All I know is that they were –'

'Are. There are still a few credents about, here and in Spain, and more in Lombardy and Sicily. Credents, as opposed to the Perfects. Even the credents keep their heads down and their beliefs to themselves, so you can imagine how secretive Perfects are, any

that still survive. I will tell you frankly, none have been seen this side of the Alps for years now.'

'Not since Guillaume Bélibaste.'

'Ah. Pierre told you about him.'

'Yes. I understood from Pierre that they claimed – claim – to be the true descendants of the earliest Church – presumably the Church of Lazarus and his sisters that was established in this area? But in that case you would expect them to agree with Rabbi Yacoub, and reject Saint Paul. But Pierre said that what they reject is the Old Testament, in its entirety – something the Church in Jerusalem would surely *never* have done. And that their Scriptures, read and studied by all, men and women alike, in their own language, consists solely of the four Gospels and the Epistles of Saint Paul. Strange, is it not?'

'No. Listen, do you mind if I assume the role of teacher for a moment? You obviously know much more about it than I anticipated, but *I* have thought more and discussed it more. *You* still have a lifetime of thinking and talking ahead of you.'

'Oh, I want to think – and to learn and discuss. From here I propose to go to Paris, to study at the university.'

'Wonderful! Oh, how I wish I'd been free to do that! But I was busy being Queen, and – and afterwards, when I *was* free, I still wasn't *really* free. No noblewoman ever is, ever can be. Though for a while I did have the best teacher in the world, my cousin Jeanne de Bar. I was thirteen when she took me under her wing – when she was called back from England to be the regent of the *comté de Bar*. She spent the next eight years here, then in 1353, when I was twenty-one, she returned to England. It was always her preferred country – she was the granddaughter of Edward I, niece of Edward II. She died there, what, fifteen years ago? I still mourn her.'

It all sounded – not incredible, exactly, but definitely very unexpected and hard to swallow, these "wise women", these educated "heretics" right at the top of the hierarchy of nobles in France and in England.

I glanced at Ferchard and grinned to myself. He was gazing at her, hooked, finally, I realised.

'Listen,' she said. 'What did your father, what did your rabbi, imagine the brothers of Jesus were *preaching*? They and his disciples, Peter and Andrew and the rest ...'

She let me think about that for a moment.

'What *message* were they preaching, what were they *saying*, what were they *claiming*? They must have been saying *something*. Stephen, and James the Apostle – and no doubt others – were executed for *something*. And not just for saying Jesus was a good man. Or even just for saying he rose from the dead. Were they preaching Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, the Son of David?'

I wanted to say Yes, Yes. But even as I opened my mouth to do so I realised they could not have been.

She said the words for me: 'The Messiah was to be a spiritual and political leader – a *successful* leader. If he was indeed the Messiah there was no way he could fail. Yet Jesus had failed. So they cannot have been preaching that Jesus was the Messiah – not, that is, in any but a radically new sense.'

'When you say "failed", you mean as a political and military leader,' mumbled Ferchard, totally blown by the concept of Jesus as a failure.

'Yes, as the son of David, as the King that the Jews were looking for, and seem to have believed for a while that Jesus might be – and as Pilate ironically labelled Jesus on the cross, rubbing salt in ... No, I haven't finished. Nowhere near. When Jesus, the Lord, the Dominus, died, his wife, Mary, known then as Mary Magdalene and since as the Domina, the Dompna, was pregnant. Until that baby was born, all might have been well. Perhaps it was Jesus' destiny to be another forerunner, a spiritual master but not the actual, triumphant Messiah. That would be his son. So for a little while, perhaps, the dream continued. Then Mary gave birth to a girl. A *girl*. The dream was over. The word flew back from Alexandria to Jerusalem – for tradition has it that Mary gave birth

to the child in Egypt, where Joseph of Arimathea had taken her for her protection: the priests would certainly not have wanted the son to succeed the father. At that point, many – perhaps most – of those who had believed in Jesus gave up. *So that was all it was*, they said. *Another one who believed he was the Messiah, and persuaded others to believe it. The priests were right. The man was clearly an imposter.* Those who still believed, however, those who still wished to believe, had to rethink their beliefs. If Jesus of Nazareth had not been the expected victorious Messiah, then *who – what – had he been?*

"They began to piece together all his remembered sayings – the beginnings of the gospels? – and to try, finally, to see it from *his, Jesus'*, point of view. "They will look and look, but not see," he had said. Their eyes had been blinkered by their expectations, but now they saw. Jesus had come to reveal to mankind the truth about God. In him, if they looked, really looked, they would see God. And *by definition*, whatever he had done, and whatever had happened to him, was *right*, was what had been *supposed to* happen. They, these believers, Jesus' brothers, his original disciples, the new disciples, people like Barnabas and Paul – yes, Paul – would have agreed on the virgin birth – *it didn't happen, he was the Son of David* – on the Resurrection – *it did happen, they were witnesses, it was what kept them going* – and on the rewriting of the role of the Messiah in the light of history and in terms of the Suffering Servant prophecies in Isaiah. The only thing Paul and James would not have agreed about was the extent to which it was necessary for Christians to observe the Jewish Law: James was a legalist, Paul was not. But this sprang from the fact that Paul was preaching mainly to Gentiles. When Thomas and the others left Jewish circles behind, they would have had to make the same decision as Paul: it is the heart that must be circumcised. Paul was not different, in the sense of unique, no, he was simply the first: the first to stand for equality between Jew and Gentile, between man and woman, between master and slave – and who can doubt that Jesus would have concurred? And when Paul places Love above

Faith, who can doubt that Jesus (and his brother James) would have agreed? We – yes, and I include the Cathars in that "we" – no, no one can hear us – have a faith that remains unchanged from the time of Paul and Peter, James and Lazarus and Thomas. And Mary.'

I sat there, stunned.

It didn't all make sense, but yes, I have to admit I'd always wondered about those two, Jesus and Mary. Wondered, and thought I was being silly, naughty – blasphemous, even. That part made sense. Why "*Noli me tangere!*", "Touch me not!", at the graveside, unless under normal circumstances – normal meaning before Jesus' death – Mary would naturally have touched him? A woman does not touch a Jewish man, especially not a revered rabbi. (There was no way Uncle Yacoub would ever have let me touch him – though he did hold my hand when he was teaching me palm-reading.) And why was she there at his grave, anyway? To see to his body? No young follower, unrelated to him, would have dreamt of taking that on herself. But Jesus as the Son of David? Oh, no. Blanche was wrong there.

But I was given no chance to argue then.

'It is the daughter who concerns us,' Blanche went on. 'Her name was Sarah ... I think you should fetch Alazais. She may not know, may never have heard, what I am going to tell you next. No, it is late now. Bring her to me in the morning.'

'Yes, all right. But ... she knows who she is?' *Who people think she is.*

'Oh, yes.'

18

When we explained the situation to Alazais, I expected her to be nervous, reluctant to be recognised, but to my relief she was eager to meet "the Queen".

Next morning, we returned to Blanche's villa both very much on our guard, with Alazais stationed carefully between us. However, no one paid us any undue attention.

But then they wouldn't, not that day. Everything was prepared for the arrival in Avignon of the Cardinal-Archbishop of somewhere or other – there would be a great procession, we were told – there were even naked girls standing in one of the fountains that the great man would pass –

'What are they doing there dressed like that?' asked Alazais, gaping.

'*Dressed?*' I laughed.

'You know what I mean!'

'Oh, do come on!' said Ferchard.

'They're goddesses – the three graces? No, they're not, they're Juno, Venus and Diana. Look, Venus is holding an apple.'

'Who are Juno, Venus and Diana?'

'Three goddesses.'

'You said that. How do you know which one is Venus?'

'She's holding the apple.'

'You said that, too!'

'She's the most beautiful.'

'Venus is supposed to be the most beautiful? *She's* not the most beautiful!'

'She is.'

'Poof. But is it a story?'

'Come on!' pleaded Ferchard.

'Will you tell me the story this evening?'

Then something distracted her. Someone. A woman, staring at her – and on Malika's face was a look of absolute horror.

'Quick!' said Ferchard. 'You take her other arm!'

We carried her away from the fountain and over to the queen's villa.

Blanche jumped to her feet and hurried over to Alazais. She took both her hands in her own and held them there. Alazais gazed up at

her, wide-eyed. Was it Blanche herself, or was it the awesome knowledge that this was the Queen – or at least *a* Queen – of France?

Then I heard Alazais say, 'I saw a lamia outside.'

Not what Blanche had been expecting. 'A lamia ...? Tell me, child.'

'Out in the street. While I was looking at those girls in the fountain. She was staring at me, her tongue flickering in and out. Lalla Maryam didn't see her. '

'Lalla Maryam?'

'Sorry. Doña Mariana.'

What was this? A lamia? Not Doña Carmen, surely? Here in France? And Alazais had been able to see her in her true form?

'Have you seen others?' Blanche asked.

Alazais nodded.

Still holding Alazais' hands, Blanche turned to Ferchard and me. My face obviously gave nothing away, for her gaze settled on Ferchard. 'And you, too, have known one, Sir Farquhar ...?'

'A lamia? Like a vampire? Yes. In Spain. A thing of evil.'

'Evil? So far as I am aware, no one has ever accused a lamia of rape, or even of soliciting. They do not attack. They don't even approach. A man must approach them. Neither should they be confused with vampires – or even succubi ... But you are a good man and know little or nothing of evil, which is no doubt why you are alive to tell the tale.'

'I think not, madame. I owe my continued existence to two good *women*. Marian, here – the lamia knew I was her friend – and a certain – ah – um – '

I laughed. I remembered the story (and I did *not* want Blanche questioning me about how I came to know a lamia). 'Don't be shy, Ferchard. I doubt if someone as pure in heart as you could shock Blanche, and Alazais is no longer a child. He means a certain whore he met on his travels, a whore with a golden body and a heart of gold. It was the golden body that attracted him to her in the first place, of course – '

'Really, Marian!'

'But the heart of gold that saved him when the lamia had finished with him and he was thrown out into the gutter, unconscious.'

Blanche laughed that beautiful laugh. It was the light-hearted laugh of a young girl, uninhibited, and easily amused. It made it hard to remember that more than a quarter of a century before, she had been wife to the King of France.

Agnès slipped in. Had Blanche summoned her somehow? '*Oui, madame?*'

More refreshments were ordered. Alazais was asked if there was anything special she would like. There was – dates, which had been a great favourite when we were in Granada. Agnès promised to find some. I wanted to say something to Alazais about being polite and to tell Blanche not to spoil her, but found I no longer dared. Things had changed.

Then Blanche had Alazais tell her story, most of which I already knew, and when we had eaten and drunk and Alazais had finished, Blanche said, 'Now I think it is time for me to fill in some of the background.'

'There is a male – Salic – line of descent from the royal House of David – the Tree of Jesse – through which my family for one trace our ancestry. And so do the Dukes of Lorraine, which is what gave Godfroi and his brother Baudouin their legitimate claim to the Kingdom of Jerusalem – a claim universally recognised.'

'Except by the Saracens,' muttered Ferchard.

Blanche laughed. 'As you say. But note that, while not accepting them as kings, even they recognised the line of descent.'

'That's true. Salahad-din treated Baudouin IV – the Leper – with great respect.'

'Indeed. But what has this to do with Alazais? Well, that was the male line of descent – one of them. And as we know, all male lines become muddled and indirect in time. What we are concerned with here is *the unsullied female line*. Alazais, whose real name

unless I am much mistaken is either Sarah or Miriam or Magdala or Elizabeth ...'

She raised her eyebrows at Alazais, who looked surprised, then frightened, then finally, realising she was amongst friends, smiled and nodded. 'Sarah.'

'Sarah, yes. So. Now, listen. It is a fact that Jesus was married, his wife was Mary Magdalene, and descendants of theirs have always flourished, more or less openly, in France. The Church tried to cover this up, suppress it, but has never been able to do so entirely, not while, on the one hand, there are intelligent people about with enquiring, open minds, and on the other, the tradition is passed down in the villages by word of mouth.'

'But why?' protested Ferchard. 'Why would they do that, the Church? That is what I don't understand.'

We both looked at him. Even Alazais looked at him.

'Tell him, Marian,' said Blanche.

'Because women are dirty, Ferchard. Women are evil. Women degrade and corrupt. Do you know the story of the angels, the sons of God, who found women – human women – beautiful, and lay with them? It's in the Torah, you'll see it in the Christian Bible. The women gave birth to great men, the heroes of old, but the angels, the sons of God? Do you know what happened to them?'

'I don't remember that it says anything happened to them, lass. But you know better.'

'Rabbi Yacoub told me they are the angels mentioned in the Epistle of St Jude –'

'Jesus' other brother,' put in Blanche.

'Yes, Jesus' other brother. He says those angels are kept in everlasting chains and darkness until the great Day of Judgement. And compares them with the men of Sodom and Gomorrah, in that they "went after strange flesh".'

'That's right,' said Blanche – and I found myself basking in the admiring look she gave me. 'And there's much more about it in the Book of Enoch,' she went on, 'and about God's refusal to pardon them and accept them back into Heaven.'

'I've never heard of the Book of Enoch,' Ferchard muttered.

'No. It's one of the secret books.'

'Uncle Yacoub had seen a copy,' I piped up. 'In Toledo, I think he said.'

'What it all comes to is this. Copulation with a woman is incompatible with divinity – even the lesser divinity of the sons of God, his representatives, the angels. How much more so then in the Son of God Himself, "the Word", "who was with God and is God"?''

'There you are, then. It can't have happened.'

We all stared at him again. For a moment no one spoke.

Then Blanche said, 'No, Sir Knight, you are right. By the tenets of orthodox Christianity, all inherited from Judaism, it can't have happened. But it seems it did. It always has. Thousands of years ago, Abraham took Sarah, his half-sister, as his wife. Then they journeyed from their home in the land of Aram to the land of Canaan, and settled there.'

She was speaking to Alazais now. 'Many millions of people claim them as their ancestors, and no doubt rightly so, but she was *your* ancestor in a very special way.'

'Sarah had a son, Isaac. And when it came time for him to marry, she insisted that he marry a woman from Aram, someone like herself, not a local Canaanite girl. And so Rebekkah came to them from Aram. She was the granddaughter of Sarah and Abraham's brother, Nahor. Rebekkah had two sons by Isaac, the twins, Esau and Jacob. Esau did marry a local girl, but Rebekkah sent Jacob, her favourite, to Aram, to her brother Laban, to find a wife.'

'He returned to Canaan years later with two wives, his cousins Leah and Rachel.'

'These were *the Women of Aram*: Sarah, Rebekkah, Leah and Rachel. From them, through Leah's daughter, Dinah, flows a long line of very special women that culminates in – you.'

We waited for Alazais to speak, but when she said nothing, Ferchard started arguing again. 'How can you be sure of this, over

so many generations, so many hundreds of years, and with no written records?"

'We cannot be. However, that is the tradition. Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her cousin Elizabeth, were both of that line. And in Mary, when she married Joseph of Nazareth of the line of David, the lines came together. So Jesus was the heir they had all been awaiting and been planning for: the expected Messiah.'

This time it was me who interrupted. 'But surely, in that case, Jesus' brothers, James and Jude and so on, would equally have been heirs of both King David and the Daughters of Israel.'

'No, they were not Mary's sons – which is probably why, in contrast to them, Jesus is referred to in the Gospel so particularly – and probably pejoratively – as "the son of Mary". Jesus was her only son. When Joseph married her, he was already middle-aged and the father of grown sons.'

'Ah yes, I remember Uncle Yacoub telling me that. And that they were all older than Jesus. But that reminds me of another argument between him and my father which seems to be relevant.' And will upset the apple-cart! 'May I go on?'

'Of course, please do.'

'Yacoub insisted that there was no ground whatsoever for thinking Jesus was of Davidic descent. My father disagreed strongly. They argued for days. At first I agreed with my father. Slowly, though, I came to see that Yacoub was right.'

Ferchard glared at me. 'But surely, it says everywhere that –'

'No, it doesn't. Please, Ferchard, let me finish. Yacoub and I worked out that when you have disagreements between Mark and Matthew, it is always Mark who is more likely to be right. A good example is the story in Mark where Jesus' family say "He is mad!" and the exact equivalent story in Matthew where they say no such thing, and instead Jesus is called the Son of David. They can't both be true, so which was the original and got changed by the bishops, do you think? Matthew does this with lots of stories: inserts the phrase "the Son of David" which is absent from Mark's version.

Anyway, Matthew is completely illogical, because at the same time he insists on a virgin birth!"

'Aye, that's true. I always wondered about that. And so does Saint Luke, doesn't he?'

'He does, yes. Virgin birth *and* the descent from David. But it is a different line of descent. Yacoub said Luke's version is more likely to be Joseph's true ancestry because Matthew just copies the line of kings from the Old Testament. Either way, Luke is quite as illogical as Matthew.'

'And this about him being called "the son of Mary". Is that in Saint Mark, too?' asked Alazais.

'Of course. If I remember rightly – this was a long time ago, but we talked about it for ages! – in Mark the question reads "Is not this the son of Mary?", in Matthew "Is not his mother called Mary?" and in Luke "Is not this the son of Joseph?". No, Uncle Yacoub was quite right. Jesus was *either* illegitimate *or* born of a virgin. I remember Yacoub insisting that "son of Mary" was tantamount to calling him a bastard. It would only ever be used of someone whose mother was a harlot or whose "father" had not acknowledged him as his own because he knew he could not possibly be the father.'

They all three gazed at me. Then Blanche said, with a sigh, 'Exactly. And you forgot to mention old Joseph's dream. When he learnt that the beautiful girl to whom he was betrothed was pregnant, he of course changed his mind about marrying her, and only did so because an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him he must.'

'Aye, but that was because the babe was the son of God,' Ferchard spluttered, 'and –'

'That won't have been how the neighbours saw it. Or Joseph's older sons and daughters, who would have been against the marriage – and poor Mary – anyway. But ...' She gazed at me. 'But if you plan to go around saying things like that, Marian, then you'll be much safer working in a whore-house when you get to Paris

than at the university. They only beat whores who say silly things. They burn scholars who do.'

Ferchard bristled. 'You know, lass, I think we'll give Paris a miss and go straight to Scotland.'

'She'll have the same two choices.'

'No, my lady. She has money now, so in fact she has a third choice. She can be a great lady, and keep her mouth shut.'

'If she can keep her mouth shut, she'll be all right in Paris.'

'Not much chance of that,' said Ferchard, and I heard Alazais laugh.

'My point exactly,' said Blanche.

I blushed – they'd be telling Blanche I was the village *loca* next! 'Please, Blanche, Alazais would like you to go on with your story.'

'Ah, yes. Well, the line – whatever the line was! – continues from Sarah, who was born in Egypt, all the way down to *la petite* Sarah, here. However, unlike the more or less overt Merovingian line of descent, it was always covert, hidden. The girls were born into lowly families, the surname changing with each generation, though they were always called, secretly, Sarah or Magdala or Miriam or Elizabeth, and their names for public use were Blanche or Alazais or Raymonde or Guillemette, such common names in the region that they meant nothing.'

'But – excuse me –'

'Yes, Sarah. Please. Ask.'

'You didn't mention Mary Magdalene. Was she, too, one of the Daughters of Israel, descended from the Women of Aram?'

'Of course. And this is the line of the True Queen – the Queen celebrated in the Song of Songs. You are a wildflower, a lily of the valleys, a lily among thorns. Among thorns, oh yes. Always remember the verse, "The watchmen that went about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me ..."'

I took her hand. She was trembling.

Blanche realised it was time to stop. The poor girl had heard enough. After a moment, she said, gently, 'The question is, what are we going to do with you? You cannot stay here.'

There was a long pause. Alazais gripped my hand and gazed at me with pleading eyes.

'I'll keep her with me,' I said. 'Take her north, away from all this.'

'But she cannot be taken away from "all this". Do you not see? That is why she has been sent back to us. This is where she belongs.'

'But you said she cannot stay here.'

'Not in Avignon. Or with me in Normandy. Questions would be asked immediately. No, she must live with her own people now. She must go to Italy. Lombardy and Palermo are where the *other* Church, the Church of Amor, is strongest and safest now.'

That was what Pierre had said.

'Amor. Roma – reversed. As in "God is Love" not cruelty and corruption. The alternative Church sung of by the troubadours. The Church whose symbol is the Cross of Light, not the crucifix, which they regard as the epitome of evil. The Church in which Mary Magdalene is revered, and the Pope of Rome and his Inquisition are seen as devils incarnate.'

Even I glanced round nervously at that. Ferchard, I noticed, looked shocked and incredulous: this was French royalty speaking? But he had the sense this time to keep his mouth closed.

'So, Sarah, *chérie*, we must think how to get you to Italy. To friends. For now, however, you should remain with Marian. Maintain your image as a Moorish slave-girl, it is a good disguise. Besides, being a maid-servant is very much part of the story of the lost princess! It is an essential aspect of her character and training ... Hm. Perhaps you *are* the one – I mean *the* one in whom it all culminates.'

'But I thought you just said – '

'Marian, *they* believe that she or one of her successors will spell the end of the Church of Rome.'

I began, suddenly, to see the enormity of what I had taken on. *I?* I could walk away from it. The enormity of what poor Alazais had been born to!

'And now I think you should go. Come back at the same time tomorrow. By then, I may have news for you.'

'News?'

'I need to speak to Caterina Benincasa. It may be that the whole show will be moving back to Italy very soon.'

'The whole *show*'? I was beginning to sound like an idiot.

'The Pope and all his cardinals and courtiers. Back to Rome.'

'Ah, yes. Caterina of Siena. I've heard about that.'

'Come back tomorrow. We will talk more then. Goodbye, my sweet.' She gave Alazais a kiss. 'God bless you. God bless you all.'

'Shall I bring her with me? Or will she be safer in our house, do you think?'

'Bring her with you. Don't let her out of your sight, ever, day or night. The Pope may leave Avignon with his cardinals and courtiers. The Inquisition never will. It was founded for us – for us here – by Pope Lucius III at the end of the twelfth century. *Us*, Marian, the heretics of the south of France. And *they* will never give up, never tire and go away.'

Needless to say, Alazais did not want to hear about going to Italy. She wanted to stay with us, with Yahia and me, whom she had known since Granada, and Khadija, whom she treated as a mother – I was a kind of elder sister – and of course Ferchard, who had become the *pater familias*.

I said we would see.

We stayed in the house that evening, and I told Alazais the story of Prince Paris of Troy, how he had chosen Venus as the most beautiful of the goddesses, and how Venus, to show her gratitude, had made the most beautiful woman in the world fall in love with him.

'Who was that? The most beautiful woman? Mary Magdalene?'

'No! No. Wrong time – and wrong story! The most beautiful woman then was Queen Helen of Sparta, who is known to history as Helen of Troy.'

'Why?'

'She left her husband and ran off with Paris to Troy.'

'And what did her husband the King say about that?'

'He said "Good riddance".'

She stared at me. 'I don't believe you. You said she was the most beautiful woman in the world! Her husband would ... you're teasing me! What really happened? I know! A war!'

'Yes. One of the most famous wars of history.'

'And who won? Prince Paris?'

'No.'

'Her *husband*?'

And the way she said "*husband*"! Oh, dear. Perhaps Ferchard was right about my bad influence – though I'd never said anything against husbands, had I?

'He had the other two goddesses on his side, Juno and Diana. They were very powerful, and Paris had given great offence.'

She thought about that, then nodded. 'Now tell me the whole story, properly.'

'I just did!'

'Not the story of the war, you didn't!'

We were late getting to bed that night.

Next morning, Ferchard and Yahia went shopping, then while Khadija prepared a meal for us all, we discussed various possible ways we might get Alazais to Italy without anyone knowing she had ever been in Avignon.

We could travel with me in charge, but this time as a great Scottish lady. Or we could travel with Ferchard in charge, with his harem of three and his eunuch. Each had its advantages.

'The best approach, if you want to confuse a pursuer,' Ferchard told us, 'is to keep ringing the changes. My friend English was an adept at that. The Christian knight would disappear and all anyone could see would be a beggar in rags with one leg dragging behind him, then when they looked again a Byzantian merchant who was there to purchase spices. No one could follow *him* through the streets of Alexandria or Antioch.'

'English?'

'Perhaps you'll meet him one day if we pass through London. That's where he was heading.'

'London? I don't think I want to go there.'

'You never know, lass.'

He was right about that. London was to become our home.

'We could go as far as Nîmes with you as the Scottish lady,' Ferchard continued, 'then from there to Arles with me in charge, as you said, and the Scottish lady and her little French maid completely vanished. Then –'

'Yes, but Yahia won't vanish. He can't. At Arles, you should take ship upriver, ostensibly still with your harem, and make for Paris, while Alazais and I slip away and travel to Genoa as a Spanish pilgrim and her maid. Then I will come back alone and join you in Paris.'

At the word "alone", Alazais started wailing again – she was getting as bad as Khadija! – so we changed the subject and planned what we would get when *we* went shopping. Me, I wanted a new cloak. Alazais wanted new everything. For a holy child she was remarkably interested in clothes and her appearance. Perhaps that was Mary Magdalene's good influence.

In the afternoon, we set out again for Queen Blanche's villa with Alazais between us as before, each of us holding one of her hands, but this time I noticed Ferchard had his other on his sword hilt. I assumed Ferchard was on the lookout for Doña Carmen, the lamia from Cuenca, and as we made our way across the square I murmured to Alazais that if she should see a lamia – any lamia! – she was to tell me immediately. However, she saw nothing, and when Ferchard spoke it was simply to mention, casually, that he had come upon "the monk with the girlish voice" again while in the square earlier with Yahia. They had followed discreetly, trying to hear what he was saying.

How could you follow anyone discretely with Yahia in tow, I wanted to ask, but realised that here in Avignon there were enormous black slaves wherever you turned, many of them

eunuchs. Did each cardinal, each bishop, each church dignitary of whatever rank, have one?

'Your man was talking about the Pope leaving Avignon. It seems this nun, this Caterina, is getting her way.'

'Really?'

'Aye, and they are all desperate to put a stop to it.'

'And put an end to her, no doubt.'

'Aye, they would be.'

'Blanche will know what is happening, I imagine.'

Blanche did indeed know what was happening. The nun herself, Caterina of Siena, was there with her. She was small, no taller than Alazais, skeletally thin, and dressed in the black habit of her order, but Blanche introduced her – Soeur Catherine – we were speaking French – as if she too were royalty.

Immediately, trouble started.

Alazais was staring at Catherine's hands, which were folded in front of her on her lap, and the nun responded by glancing sharply at the girl, then staring at her in return.

'Your hands,' whispered Alazais. 'What happened to them?'

Catherine glanced at me and Ferchard to see if we had noticed anything strange about her hands. We hadn't. Nor, obviously, had Blanche.

'These wounds are called the Blessed Stigmata, my child.'

'Like Jesus' hands?'

The nun nodded gravely. 'Only those with eyes to see can see them ... This child is very precious. Who is she?'

And Blanche told her. *Told her*. Just like that.

I don't know what reaction I expected from the nun. Total outrage? The summoning of the Inquisitors?

Not at all. 'Ah, yes. Who would have eyes to see if not her? Oh, don't worry, we know that story in Siena. The painters paint it – have you seen Simone Martini's painting of the Magdalene following Jesus to Calvary? *No*? But it is here in Avignon. He even manages to make the Cross itself into a Cross of Light on her

breast. The painters paint it, the poets sing of it, but the Church – ah, the Church will not hear of it. Perhaps rightly so. I do not know. I am but a simple nun. I trust my superiors. Obedient people never place their trust in themselves. Come to me, child. Your name?"

"Alazais" I was going to say, but Alazais got in first with 'Sarah'.

'Sarah. Come here. Give me your hands.'

I glared at Blanche.

She ignored me, said to Catherine, 'We are trying to arrange for her to go to Italy.'

'To Italy? Then she must come with me. You must come with me, little Sarah. I shall be leaving for Siena very soon. The Holy Father has agreed to move to Rome.'

And that was it. It was out of my hands.

Blanche pressed Catherine for more information. She was vague. The Pope had agreed that such a move was God's will. The details did not concern her.

'Pope Gregory is notoriously easy for the person nearest to him to influence,' murmured Blanche.

Catherine looked up sharply, as though she suspected the remark had been aimed at her, but Agnès came in at that moment with Catherine's secretary, a young priest named – I learnt later – Stephen Manconi. He gazed at Catherine with huge doggy eyes and stammered that Frère Raimondo was waiting for her.

She sighed. 'Then I must go to him.'

Blanche, however, decided otherwise. Ignoring the nun, she said, 'Wait outside, Agnès. And you,' to the secretary.

'But Frère Raimondo – ' protested the young man.

'Frère Raimondo can wait, too.' She didn't bother to add "we haven't finished yet". She was accustomed to being obeyed without question.

They left the room, and we waited.

Nobody spoke.

The nun's cheeks and eye-sockets were hollow. She looked ill.

Blanche said, 'Marian?'

Me? Why me? I couldn't talk about Catherine's health. It was probably starvation – self-imposed. Some other subject, then. 'Tell me about that painting, Blanche. The one by – what was his name? Simone Martini.'

'The one which hangs in the Papal Palace despite being blatantly heretical. Well, not only are Mary Magdalene and Jesus manifestly a pair – their red garments, their hair, the identical haloes, and being united by the cross, Jesus at one end, the Magdalene at the other, the Cross of Light picking her out, making her the centrepiece of the painting while Mary the Mother is down in one corner in the dark. Not only that, but she – the Magdalene – has a bloody gash on her cheek, she has been wounded, she is quite literally sharing the passion – the prophesied passion: "They shall smite the judge of Israel with a rod upon the cheek". And in the Song of Songs it says – I quoted it yesterday – "they struck me and wounded me".'

'But why is it hanging there?' I demanded. 'Why has it not been consigned to the flames? It's not just the painting, though ...' There was more to all this than met the eye, and I needed to know where Alazais and I stood. 'At first, it seems quite simple. On the one hand there are the Cathars, the credents, various groups of so-called heretics, all those who believe, for example, that Jesus was married, or that the crucifix is a symbol not of good but of evil. Then on the other hand, there is the Church, the orthodox, those who do not, cannot, will not, believe such nonsense. But when we look more closely, we see that this is not how it is at all! That the hierarchy of the Church know perfectly well the heretics are right, they just won't admit it. Why else would they be hunting so desperately for Jesus and Mary's descendant?'

'But, Marian,' Blanche responded, 'I told you yesterday. It is not a matter of what is right, what is true, or even of what the hierarchy of the Church "know". It is a matter of what people believe.'

Catherine agreed. 'The child is a person, not a heresy. If people hold some kind of heretical belief regarding her, they are the

heretics, not she – just as the Templars and the Albigensians were heretics.'

The Albigensians: the Cathars, like old Pierre Maury.

Catherine was looking down her prominent nose at me. 'It is not for such as – us – to discuss what may or may not constitute heresy.'

She'd been going to say "such as *you*". Bitch.

'Speaking to the Apostles,' she went on, 'the hierarchy of the earliest Church, the Blessed Lord Jesus Christ himself said, "It is given unto you to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but unto them it is not given."'

And she looked at me so smugly, so sure of her own superiority, that I could not help responding, 'Yes, but he also says "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes."'

'Such as yourself,' she sneered.

'Just so. Yes. After all, it was I who drew the attention of Queen Blanche – and thus of you – to this child, not the other way round. And we can be quite certain that if you, Soeur Catherine, had known of her and I had not, you would have left me in my ignorance, one of the vast majority unto whom it is not given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven.'

'Marian –'

'I'm sorry, Blanche, but, like you, I'm on the side of Truth, and as an old Cathar in Spain who shall remain nameless observed, *this* is the city of the Father of lies. And the Blessed Lord Jesus Christ also said "The time will come when whoever killeth you will think he doth God a service".'

At that, the nun rose to her feet and crossed herself. 'I really must go now. It has been a pleasure to see you again, Blanche. And to meet you, Sarah, my child. God bless you, and bring it to pass that you accompany me to Italy, where you will be safe amongst those who understand. And you, what is your name, Marian – I don't think so – Mariana? – is that your real name? Or Maryam? I

can tell that you are part Spanish, part Moor. I can also tell that you have at any rate one thing in common with Santa Maria Magdalena, and that you should not be in the same room or even the same building as a noblewoman or a knight or a nun or this precious child here, but I pray for you, and pray to her for you, that you may be washed in the blood of the Lamb and saved from your life of sin. You are young, and – how old *are* you?

'She's eighteen,' Ferchard announced.

'Nearly nineteen,' I said, then snapped my mouth shut, furious with myself.

'Eighteen,' went on Catherine, almost dreamily. 'I was eighteen when the Eternal Father said to me, "You are she who is not, and I AM HE WHO IS."'

Alazais giggled.

Blanche looked at her feet. I think she, too, was having trouble keeping a straight face.

But the nun – "she who was not" – sailed blithely on. 'You, Sir Knight, have said nothing, but you have listened well. Take her in hand, before she falls foul of those black friars whom I myself so nearly fell foul of and would not wish on any woman. Now I depend on Fra Raimondo to keep me on the straight and narrow path. Mariana, who is not a religious, Maryam the whore, needs must depend on you.'

I bit my tongue.

When she had finally gone, and the door had closed behind her, Ferchard turned on me. 'How could you speak like that to *her* – to *Catherine of Siena*?'

I stared at him in astonishment. 'Catherine of Siena? Three days ago you'd never heard of Catherine of Siena. What you should be asking is, how could *she* speak like that to *me*?'

'What did she say that was not true?'

That I was "part Moor", that I was a whore – oh, yes, all true enough. But Blanche was waiting and seemed interested, so I answered him. 'She's a nun! She's not interested in Truth, she's interested in scoring points ... You are less familiar with nuns than

I am. And you forget that Alazais, too, was a slave in Moorish harem and is a virgin now only because she was too young for a good man – and ibn Khaldoun *is* a good man – to use. Another year or so, and she would have been, like me, a true "magdalene", a whore.'

But as always, he wanted the last word. 'Marian, there are times when, and there are people in the presence of whom, you must learn to hold your tongue.'

I looked at the queen. Did she agree? 'Blanche?'

'Well, yes, Sir Farquhar does have a point.'

I looked at Alazais, rapidly judged where her sympathies lay. No problem there. 'Come, Alazais,' I said. 'We are leaving.'

Alazais stood up.

'Sit down, Sarah,' ordered Blanche.

Alazais ignored her, and joined me as I headed towards the door.

'You heard the Queen!' roared Ferchard. 'Sit down at once, child!'

This time, she hesitated.

I said, 'It's up to you. You can come with me, or you can stay here with these two, who obviously have much more in common with each other than they have with a big-mouthed mongrel whore like me.'

'I want to stay with you, Maryam.'

'You're sure?'

'Of course I'm sure! I've told you and told you!'

'Then let's go.'

And we went.

Blanche, though she could have had us stopped, made no attempt to do so.

And Ferchard of course followed us. Walked behind us. Watching our backs, I knew. Protecting us.

It would be a long time before I forgave him, though. If ever.

19

That evening, he did half apologise.

So I half apologised, too.

But something had broken. We'd been friends. From now on, we might be companions still, linked by our love for my father; we might – would – maintain some kind of relationship, but we would never be friends again. Some things are irreparable.

Then, trying to make conversation – for that night everyone was silent, even Alazais – even Khadija, and Yahia, who sensed our mood – Ferchard said, 'I was thinking, lass. After – after Alazais saw that lamia. What exactly happened between you and the one in Cuenca? You never told me. Was she really the reason you ran away from the – you know – ?'

'Bordel.'

'Aye, that. Became a runaway. That's not a good thing to have hanging over you.'

He waited.

I waited longer.

'If you'd still been there when I arrived, I could have bought you, freed you. You would not be – '

'I prefer it this way.'

'Aye, lass. I can see perhaps you might. So – ' he forced a grin – 'what did happen?'

'Yes, it was because of her. She wanted me to become – like her.'

'But you didn't – '

'I didn't know what I wanted! Mostly it horrified me – and she terrified me. But other times, when she talked to me about her past, it all seemed, you know, magical. To have lived so long, known so many people – and to be so powerful! So indestructible! But then, in the morning, when I was working at my desk, I would think it

was all nonsense, all lies. And if it wasn't, then it was too horrible to bear thinking about. Of course, it would depend what I was working on. I remember when I was working with the Picatrix – a grimoire, it was in Arabic – she helped me understand it. She knew all about the sigils and so on.'

'Sigils?'

'Magical signs, symbols. Talismans. Like the Seal of Solomon.'

'And Picatrix? That must be a translation.'

'Yes, of course, but they preferred me to copy out the passages they wanted from the original, the *Ghâyat al-Hakîm fî'l-sihr*. The spells lose much of their power when they are translated.'

'Aye, the power oft lies in the words themselves.'

'When I ran away, it was because I was afraid I'd say "Yes" to her one night and then regret it – I knew I would regret it – when it was too late. My opportunity came when a man who had sought me out on several occasions asked me to run away with him. He wanted to travel on further south – he was from Asturias and had come south seeking his fortune – and he liked me and was interested in the fact that I spoke Arabic, which he of course didn't. He was known as El Lindos –'

'The pretty boy,' Alazais laughed.

'Exactly. He was tall and slender, and had astonishingly blond hair – astonishing to me, then. I found him perfect.

'He turned out to be far from perfect.

'I wanted to go east, to the sea, and back to my home on the Mar Menor. No one would be there, except Khadija. And would she still be? Was she even still alive? But the Mar Menor was all I knew. He, on the other hand, wanted to go south into Andalucía. "Why" I asked him. "What can you do there? You will stand out! Don't be a fool!" But a fool can't help himself.

'At Al Basit, we had to decide. He wanted to take the road south-west to Jaén and Granada, I wanted to take the road south-east to Murcia and Cartagena.

'We didn't fight. He didn't kidnap me, or anything like that. He couldn't have, anyway. Nor did he accept my offer of a fortune in

silver if he took me home. I don't think he believed me. *I* wouldn't have believed me. No, he simply gave me the choice. And being a fool, too, I joined him in his folly.'

'But why?' asked Ferchard.

'*Es la Loca*,' laughed Alazais.

What could I say? She was right, so I ignored her teasing and answered Ferchard. 'It was long, long road. A girl on her own ... Then somewhere outside Jaén – I remember it was by a river, and we had eaten – we were set upon and taken captive, and that was that.'

'And you ended up on the block in Granada.'

'Aye, Ferchard, I did. Stark naked, in front of all those men, all those staring eyes – not all hungry, many merely calculating.'

'I've been there, lass. I've seen it. And when the bidding starts, the bidders allowed to touch you ... '

'Feel you, examine you. Yes. After that, nothing seems to matter any more. Nothing can shock you.'

'Alazais!' he suddenly said, looking round. 'You shouldn't be hearing this! Isn't it time you were in bed?'

'You forget, Ferchard. She's been bought and sold, too.'

There were tears in her eyes now, as well as mine. We fell into each other's arms and clung for a while, thinking, and remembering.

Suddenly, I laughed. 'I seem always to be captured on the bank of a river.'

'It's this bad habit you've got of slipping away into the water at the first opportunity. And when you come back out ... '

'Aye, that's *exactly* how it was the first time.'

'When you ran away from the nuns?'

'Yes, then. I don't know what river it was. It was quite wide and I suppose in winter a lot of water flows through it, but then it was early summer ... I'd been walking all day, heading north towards Murcia. Or so I hoped. I had no idea, really. I was hungry, and I was hot. There were fish in the river. Could I catch one? I had played at catching them in the sea, then let them go again – or if I

was with Pedro, had passed the occasional one up to him. But here it was easy! River fish are much slower, much stupider, than sea fish. More solitary, too. In the sea, they nearly always swim in shoals. One spots you, they all shy away instantly, and are gone. In the river, there are fish that move so slowly you'd think they were sun-bathing. Really!

'I know, lass. I used to fish in Scotland, with your father. But from the bank or the shallows. Not going in after them.'

I laughed. 'Like a big white frog.'

'In your case, like a mermaid. Or should I say water nymph or water elf, in freshwater lochs and rivers?'

'I like that, yes. So I swam around and refreshed myself, and after an hour or so, as the sun set, came out clutching a big fish by its tail in both my hands. It was still jerking and flailing about, so I threw it down on the dry grass and picked up a stone to hit it on the head – and instead a big net fell over me, just like that. I hadn't heard a thing! Oh, they were hunters! So now it was me writhing and jerking and flailing about, while they laughed and, slowly but surely, got me trussed up. And there I had to sit, still naked, ankles and knees tied together, hands tied behind me, neck tied to a tree, and watch while they built a fire and cooked my fish. "Hey, that's mine!" I cried. They laughed.'

So did Alazais. 'Mariana la Loca,' she giggled.

What could I say?

'It's easy for you to laugh. Like it was for them. Pepe, who was about twenty, laughed loud, a great shout of laughter, when anything amused him, but his eyes were always watching me, calculating – and lusting, yes, I know that now, knew it even then. Paco, whose beard was greying, used to laugh quietly, a chuckle, like an animal, a happy animal – which I suppose is what he was, really. His eyes were softer, kinder, though. Not that his eyes didn't run over my body thoughtfully, too.'

'But didn't they let you dress?'

'Not till next morning. I said, "Can I put my clothes on?" They shook their heads. And when the fish was ready, fed me a little of it, putting it in my mouth. I'm hungry.'

That made Ferchard laugh, as well as Alazais.

Later, when we'd eaten, he wanted the rest of the story and started plying me with questions. I knew him now. I'd get no peace till I told him what happened next. He was like a little boy sometimes, worse than Alazais.

'Yes, I was still a virgin when they sold me to Madre Inés. They gave me no chance to escape, but they took great care of me, keeping me clean and well-fed, and protecting me – from each other.

'Even to me, naive as I was, it was obvious why.

'What I didn't understand was why they were taking me north. I asked Paco – the elder and kinder one. "If you're going to sell me, why aren't you taking me south, to the coast, or to Granada?"

""Why? You think you'd enjoy being a slave in a harem?"

""I don't know. I speak Arabic."

""Even so. You'd never be free again. That would be it. There you'd remain for the rest of your life, the plaything of whatever Moor happened to buy you – him and his sons. No, that's not the life for a girl like you."

'He was right. "Let me go, then."

""Can't do that. What would Madre Inés say?"

""Madre Inés? Who's she? You mean, what would Pepe say."

""There's that, too, yes. Pepe would kill me if I released you."

""And Inés?"

""Inés is a cousin of mine. In Cuenca. You'll be all right with her."

""And she'll pay you for me?"

""*Sí, guapa*. A healthy virgin with a face and body – and eyes – like yours? She'll pay handsomely."

""And why will I be better off with her?"

""Because with her, one day – you never know – you might be free again, might even be married, and to a Christian man ..."

'And though that wasn't how it worked out, he was telling the truth. It might have gone like that if the Weird Sisters hadn't had other plans for me.'

'The Weird Sisters? You really believe all that?'

I shrugged. I didn't, not really, not then, though I knew of them, of course, from my father. But I believe in them now.

Next morning, I was full of forebodings. Ferchard, who was beginning to trust my feelings – and, anyway, did not want to get into another quarrel with me – told Yahia to accompany us, to watch our backs as he, Ferchard, had done on the way home the previous day.

'What will *he* be able to do?' I demanded.

'He won't be any use if it comes to a fight, lass, no, but he looks the part.'

In the end, we decided to take a roundabout route. By always going the same way we might be drawing attention to ourselves. Ferchard told Yahia to stay ten, fifteen paces behind, far enough back that people would not realise he was with us, yet near enough to come charging forward and, hopefully, frighten them off, if we did chance to be attacked.

The houses in the narrow streets we found ourselves walking along this time were squalid – more so than anything I had yet seen in my life (Paris and London were ahead of me!) – and I was just remarking to Ferchard that the papal prosperity did not reach far beyond the central squares and the main streets, when the attack came.

There were four men, two who had slipped in front of Yahia at the corner, and two ahead of us who had obviously predicted correctly which alley we would turn into.

The pair ahead came running at us.

I had my dagger, Ferchard his sword, and the two of them went down – one dead, my blade between his ribs, and one dying, blood pumping from a wound in his thigh – so quickly and so quietly that

a white cat sitting on a doorstep washing itself paused and peered at us then carried on with its toilette.

We turned to face the other two.

They came more carefully.

Above the cat, a face peered out at us. A girl with red hair, a prostitute, breasts bared.

One of the men said, in Spanish, 'We're to take her alive, remember.'

Spanish?

I pushed the shocked Alazais at the red-haired girl – 'Hide her!' – heard Yahia come screaming up the narrow alley-way towards us, turned just as one of the men grabbed at me and saw Yahia pick him up bodily and hurl him at the wall, which he hit with a horrible thud and slid down to the ground, motionless. Then there was a yelp from Ferchard. Our fourth assailant was on the ground with a bleeding stump where his hand had been, but Ferchard was wounded, clutching at his side.

'Ferchard!'

'I can walk, lass. Get me – get me ... '

I glanced back at the doorway. It was empty. Above the door was a sign, a black girl, black hair, black face, bare black breasts, against a green background.

I could leave Alazais for the moment, take Ferchard home.

But the man who had lost a hand? He knew where she was.

I caught Ferchard's eye.

'You're going to have to finish him off, lass.'

'I can't.'

'What difference can it make? You've killed one already.'

Two were dead. The one with the leg wound was unconscious, would be dead in a matter of moments.

All right. But the fourth had found his missing hand and was sitting there holding it, whimpering.

No. 'Come on, Ferchard. Sometimes we have to leave it to the gods to decide.'

'The gods?'

'The Three Sisters.'

'What your grandmother would have said. And done.'

'Come on, then. Let's get you back.'

'Do it.'

I shook my head.

'One thing I learnt in the east. Allah helps those who help themselves. Afterwards, you can say "*mektoub*", it was written", but it sure as hell wouldn't have been written if you hadn't done it.'

I laughed. I couldn't help it. But I insisted. 'No, Ferchard.'

I took his sword from his hand, wiped it clean on one of the dead men and replaced it in its sheath.

'You want *me* to kill him?' asked Yahia.

We both stared at him.

'I can do it quickly, painlessly. I just break his neck.' He held out his enormous hands, and I suddenly remembered ibn Khaldoun telling me something about him being a trained killer.

I shook my head. 'No. It is written that this one shall live.'

Ferchard was unsteady on his feet. He was an old man and he was suffering from shock and loss of blood. Yahia wanted to carry him, but Ferchard wouldn't hear of it and I didn't want people to notice us. We were leaving three bodies behind!

I am tall, and stronger than I look. I managed to keep him upright and even make it seem as though we were walking normally, while Yahia followed. But we exchanged no further word until we were home and his shirt was off and I had seen that it was only a flesh wound – and breathed a great sigh of relief.

'I'll clean it for you,' I said, 'then I'll have to leave you to Khadija. I must go and confront Blanche.'

'*Confront* her?' He looked up at me.

'Don't start lecturing me on my lack of refinement and courtesy again. I never learnt –'

'I saw today what you learnt, lass. And I don't mean the heretical theology.'

I must have looked puzzled, though I knew well enough what he meant, for he went on: 'Anyone who can kill as swiftly and

ruthlessly as you killed that first one that came at us, doesn't need me to guard and guide her. And anyone who allows the wounded to live when the heat of battle is over – even when that may entail putting herself at risk – doesn't need me – or a queen or a nun – to lecture her on doing the right thing.'

I was moved. 'Thank you, Ferchard.'

'But confront her with *what?*'

'Only she and the nun knew.'

'Hm.' He seemed unconvinced. 'We could have asked the survivor who had sent him; let him *earn* his life.'

'I thought of that, but ...'

'Aye. I understand. Go, then. Take Yahia with you.'

'No.'

'No, all right. It's not you they're looking for.'

'Those men. They were in livery, Ferchard. Did you notice? And they spoke Spanish.'

'Aye. What do you make of that?'

'Nothing – yet. But I've seen that livery before.'

'In the street, no doubt.'

'No, not here. *Before*. In Spain.'

They kept me waiting, but at last I was ushered in.

'What is it now, Marian?'

'We were attacked in the street. Four men. Ferchard was wounded.'

'So you lost Sarah. I feared you might. Now I shall have to mount some kind of search to get her back. And that will mean drawing unwanted attention to her.'

'Did I say I'd lost her?'

She stared at me. 'No, but with four men ...'

'Three died. The fourth lost a hand. We let him live.'

'That may have been a mistake.'

'You and Ferchard have a way of seeing eye to eye.'

'Perhaps because we are older and wiser.'

'Perhaps.'

'Three dead, and the fourth *hors de combat*. He must be quite a warrior, your knight. But he was wounded, you say. Can you bring him here?'

'That will not be necessary. The reason I am here is Alazais.'

'She is at your lodgings? With Sir Farquhar?'

Now *I* gazed at *her*. 'No. I have hidden her.'

She digested this. 'I see. Yes. I was the only one who knew of her existence. That she was here in Avignon. And where she was lodging.'

'You and the nun.'

'Ah. The nun. But who might she have told?'

I shrugged. 'Alazais was entrusted to my safe-keeping. What matters now, as I see it, is that she not fall into the hands of the Inquisition.'

'I agree.'

'I know you said she cannot stay with you, cannot go with you to Normandy. But what if I brought her to you there, in a month or so? If we came as travelling people – vagabonds – and made out she was ill, and you took her in as an act of charity? Gave her a place in your house as a maid or whatever?'

'So you do still trust me.'

'More than I trust that nun.'

Hardly were the words "that nun" out of my mouth when Soeur Catherine was announced.

Blanche raised her eyebrows at me, and told Agnès to bring her in.

Caterina was not stupid. She realised as soon as Blanche told her what had happened that we suspected her. 'Then you believe I – no, of course you do not believe I would do something like that, even if I wished to. And why should I wish to? But you believe I may be responsible for divulging the secret.'

'Not *may* be. *Must* be. Only Blanche and you, and I myself, knew about her. We three.'

She looked at me. Turned up her nose. She didn't want to speak to me. She didn't even want to be in the same room with me.

'I have told no one! I have not even told Fra Raimondo yet!'

It was that "yet" which convinced me. She obviously intended to, could hardly make her confession without doing so. And she was, I realised, incapable of subterfuge. She was too self-righteous.

Blanche caught my eye, obviously thinking along the same lines.

Then the nun took us by surprise. 'I leave for Italy in two days. That is what I came to tell you. To make the arrangements for handing over the girl.'

I didn't like that "handing over", but on the other hand, if Caterina hadn't told anyone ... And Alazais was obviously no longer safe with me: they – whoever "they" were – knew about Ferchard and me.

'And the Pope?' Not only did Blanche have the face of a cat-goddess, she had the curiosity to match.

'The Holy Father will return to Roma in September. Isn't that wonderful? God is so good. And San Pietro, to whom I have prayed constantly that his heir, the Keeper of his Keys, should return to the Holy City.'

I was unimpressed. 'You will travel by ship, or overland?'

'Me? By ship as far as Genoa. Then overland to Siena. You need no longer concern yourself. We shall be a party of nuns and priests escorted by soldiers. She will be perfectly safe.'

On board the ship she would be, but ... 'Blanche?'

'This is her destiny, Marian. The path laid out for her. You cannot fight it.'

She was right. Even Pierre Maury had said she should make her home in Italy. But he had meant with other Cathars ... I suddenly realised that where she was going after Siena hadn't been mentioned!

'And *after* Siena?' I said.

'That has all been arranged,' Blanche assured me. 'I have told Caterina where the child is to be taken.'

'Where?'

'You do not need to know.'

'I do not need to know?'

'No. Of the three of us, you are by far the most likely to end up in the hands of those who would do her harm.'

She was right about that, too. 'And what I do not know, I cannot be forced to reveal.' I bowed my head. 'So be it.'

But Caterina could not keep her mouth shut. 'As I say, you need no longer concern yourself. I will go to the house where you have left her. I will take other nuns with me. A group of nuns. We will have with us a nun's habit for her. She will come out with us. One more nun. Who will notice? And she will remain one of a group of nuns, indistinguishable from the rest, until we reach Siena and safety.'

Blanche glanced at me. She obviously had reservations about some part of this plan, but was inviting me to comment first.

I smiled. 'She is concealed in a bordello. I hardly imagine a troupe of nuns could either enter or leave such an establishment unremarked. And then again, all those nuns will learn of her existence, which surely means that her security will be compromised?'

Caterina was unperturbed. 'A strange choice of hiding-place, but perhaps not so strange if it is where you work ... '

I managed to hold my tongue as she stared at me contemptuously. But then she corrected herself: 'Where you will work.'

What was this? Did she have the Sight?

'The nuns will be rescuing a fallen sister,' she went on. 'That will be all they know, all anyone will know.'

Blanche seemed convinced. 'And perfectly normal. Yes, that answers my question, too. I was worried about all those nuns knowing who she is. So where is this bordello, Marian?'

I hesitated.

'I understand your hesitation,' Blanche went on. 'But what about that man you left alive? May he know, or be able to guess, where she is?'

'He knows. Yes, you're right. They may be there ahead of us.'

'Not you, Mariana. Ahead of me and my nuns.'

'They won't hand her over to you.'

'Of course they will. They will know who I am. And that if they refuse, they will face closure. Face the whip.'

'Then I will not tell you the name of the establishment.'

'I could threaten you with the same. Could say you were aiding and abetting an apostate. Could say you *are* an apostate, a runaway nun. You certainly speak like one. A runaway nun turned whore.'

My stomach clenched, turned over.

'No! I must go first, must *tell* her, tell *them*, and say farewell. If I don't, she will certainly refuse to go with you.'

She opened her mouth to speak – no doubt to declare that Alazais too would feel the whip – but closed it again when she saw that Blanche was becoming exasperated with her.

'If I go, then by the time you've got your gaggle of nuns together, she'll be ready for you.'

'You may lead her enemies to her.'

But now Blanche was on my side. 'They probably already know her whereabouts, and they presumably know who she is – Heaven knows how. We must move fast, but with stealth; and threatening the poor girls with the whip will achieve neither. Marian, tell Soeur Catherine the name of the house, then she can go and fetch her nuns, and be there in – what? – an hour?'

'I may need longer than that,' the nun replied.

'Very well. Will you return before you depart for Italy?'

'Yes. Tomorrow, God willing, to inform you that all is well.'

She was ready to go, and I still had not told her where Alazais was.

'She's at the sign of The Black Girl, Soeur Catherine.'

'*Ah, oui, La Negrillonne*,' smiled Blanche. 'I know it.'

I gaped at her, but she didn't appear to notice. She was busy telling Caterina the best way to get there from the convent where she and her confessor and her secretary and her group of nuns were staying.

The nun took her leave of Blanche, and hurried out, not so much ignoring me as escaping from me, as she might escape an evil odour.

Blanche signalled to me to wait ...

When the door had closed, I burst out with 'How do *you* come to know La Negrillonne?' I couldn't help it.

'Ah ha. The abbess – *la macquerelle* – Mère Bertelote, is a friend of mine.'

'You astonish me.'

'I sometimes provide her with girls.'

My mouth must have been hanging open, for she laughed, and said, 'Marian, I live here. Not all the time, but this is my second home. Everyone knows me. And they bring their little problems to me, problems the Church is ill-equipped – or ill-disposed – to deal with. Such as destitute girls. Avignon – like Paris, and Bordeaux – attracts girls from the surrounding country. And the sort of girl who is declared *persona non grata* and expelled from her native village – or simply runs away from her home because she is lazy or because she is bored or because she is no longer *virgo intacta* – is not normally the kind of girl who makes a good domestic servant.'

'No longer a virgin? But that might be because she's been the victim of a rape. That's not her fault.'

'Oh, I know. Raped by a whole gang of youths, very often. Even in Avignon. A gang of students, it would be, here – in other cities maybe a gang of apprentices. No one blames *them*. They say the girl shouldn't have been out on her own –'

'That she must have encouraged them. Oh, yes.'

'Yes. But you're missing the point. Certain girls have that effect on men – excite them, drive them mad – and not only on young men and men who've been drinking.'

'That's not the girl's fault.'

'Of course it's not. Nevertheless, it's something she has to learn to live with. And the kind of girls I have in mind do little or nothing to hide it. You have only to watch the way they walk ...

Take yourself, for instance. If you were brought to me having been found ragged and starving on my doorstep, or that of one of my rich friends, I wouldn't dream of trying to find you a place as a serving-maid in someone's home. If I did, no one would take you. They'd take one look at you and say, "You cannot be serious, Blanche! I have a husband. I have sons. I have silver and gold, and jewels." And I would send you to Mère Bertelote. She would be happy to have you, and you, you would have food and shelter, you would be off the street – and some foolish man might even buy you from her to be his concubine, reserved for him alone. He might even be sufficiently foolish to marry you.' She studied me. 'You disapprove?'

'Au contraire. If ever I find myself destitute, I shall come to you.'

The idea clearly delighted her. 'But I'm talking too much and you must hurry. Please though, before you go, let me offer you a word of advice. It is for this I asked you to stay a moment. What we were discussing earlier – your beauty, your body, your dancer's walk – yes, it is obvious – are not your real problem. I mean in your dealings with men – and not only with men. Your real problem is, and will always be, your mind, your intelligence. You see straight through all the mummery and flummery. *And you say so.* Do you know Ramón Lull?'

'Rabbi Yacoub did mention him, but I forget ...'

'Ramón Lull said, "If thou speakest truth, O fool, thou wilt be beaten by men, tormented, reproved and killed."'

'And was he?'

She smiled, a sad smile. 'Of course he was. Marian, be warned.' She kissed me on both cheeks, and walked me to the door – not something I had ever seen her do for anyone else.

I found The Black Girl again without any trouble, noticed that the blood had all disappeared into the filth that filled the narrow alley from wall to wall, and was admitted, not by the red-haired girl I

had thrust Alazais at that morning but by a dark-haired English girl.

Her French was a *mélange* of English, very Anglo-Norman French and Provençal, the *langue d'oc*. All mixed up. Her name, she told me breathlessly, was Margot, and she had been in Avignon for nearly a year. She was sweet, and later we would become friends. I was unaware of that then, though; all I knew was that I wanted to talk to Alazais immediately.

I didn't see Mère Bertelote, either. Margot took me straight through to the kitchen, where Alazais was sitting, quite at home, talking and laughing with a girl not much older than herself and two women. I let Margot tell me their names, then interrupted her. 'Please, let me speak to Alazais somewhere alone. It's really important and I'm in a terrible hurry.'

'She's not staying with us?' asked one of the women, another northerner, a blonde (from Flanders, I learnt later) named Scarlt.

'No. She has to go – to leave Avignon. They'll be coming for her soon. A group of nuns.'

'*Des corneilles noires*?' She spat, then laughed. '*Ici*? You want us to hide her?'

'*Non! Pas du tout!* She has to go with them.'

'*Damage*.' Pity. She looked me up and down, and grinned. 'And you? Are you staying?'

I grinned back. 'No, me neither. Sorry.'

And now Alazais, who had understood *les corbeilles noires* – carrion crows – started protesting. 'I'm *not* going with them! Especially not that one with the stigma things on her hands!'

I took her arm and yanked her out through the door Margot opened for us. It led into a yard, surprisingly clean considering the state of the street out front.

'She who is not.' She giggled, and the tears started coming.

'Alazais, you have to.' In Arabic now.

'But *why*? You said –'

'We're in big trouble, and there is nothing more I can do for you here.'

'What trouble? You mean those men who – ?'

'They were sent by someone. Someone important. And he will send others. Listen, even your grandfather said the only safe place for you now is Italy.'

'He wasn't my grandfather,' she sobbed.

'Oh, don't let's start that again. You know you and he agreed that he would be, and very likely was.'

'But I won't ever see you again! And what – ?'

'You will. I promise. Somehow – '

Margot thrust her head out. 'They're here! The nuns!'

Oh, no. It wasn't even an hour yet, was it? '*D'accord*. Don't tell her I'm here!'

'No, but Alazais has to come, quick.'

'I'm not going.'

'You are. And I promise you, no matter where I travel on to from here, no matter what happens to me, some day I will come to Italy to find you.'

'Not too long! Not years! Not even a year! Soon!'

'I don't know when. As soon as I can.'

'All right. You've promised, Maryam. I'll be waiting. I'll never stop waiting.'

'Go now.' I kissed her, hugged her. She clung to me. Then I held her away, looked at her, her great eyes full of tears as I would always remember them, and repeated, 'Go. And Allah go with you.'

'Don't forget me!'

'I won't.'

And I didn't. Though years were to pass before we met again, and then, strangely enough it would be not in Italy, but in Avignon once more ...

I waited.

Then peeped in. The kitchen was empty. I crept towards the front of the house. A dozen women and girls were clustered round the open door. I pushed through, and was in time to see the nuns picking their way back down the alley towards the street. One of them was Alazais, but which? I had lost her. No – it was that one.

Another one was holding her by the elbow, but she was quite distinctive. She walked like me, a dancer's walk, black robe swishing. I had never noticed before. Had she got that from me, copied me, unconsciously? Or consciously? Or was it natural?

God, I hoped those bloody nuns wouldn't try and beat it out of her!

But she wasn't staying with them, was she. She was going to travel on to family, friends. Cathars. She would be all right.

'Poor kid.' It was the blonde Fleming, Scarlt.

Poor kid. Yes. Deep inside me there was a nagging doubt ...

I waited till Alazais and the nuns had turned the corner, then thanked the girls for their help, Margot especially, and the red-head, who had now reappeared – again, laughingly, told them I wasn't looking for work – 'not at the moment!' – and followed the nuns, wanting to see that they got wherever they were going all right.

But by the time I reached the corner, they'd disappeared.

I panicked. Then realised I was being stupid. She wasn't my problem any more. It was me who had made the decision and forced it on her. Now she had gone, and that was that.

I needed to go home anyway, to see how Ferchard was.

20

Outside our door were two men in *that* livery.

Well, I was alone now. No reason to think they would bother me. Unless it was to charge me with murder. Ferchard was right. We should not have let that one live.

I felt their eyes on me as I walked towards them, but kept my own averted till the last moment then raised my head and gave them my best smile.

'*Ella,*' one said. Her. Spanish again.

'*Sí, esta.*' Yes, this is her.

I was "her"? What *was* this?

'Maryam al Qartayanni?'

I stared at him.

'Mariana de la Manga, then.' He glanced at his partner. '*Estas mestizas tienen siempre dos nombres.*' These mongrels always have two names. Then back to me. '*Eres fugitiva. El obispo* – '

El obispo, the bishop. And that about two names. And *mestiza*, mongrel. Now I understood.

But there were more of them crossing the road behind me. Many more! I had no time to think, no time even to get my dagger out.

It would have to be the hard way. Ferchard's way.

I picked the one who had called me *mestiza*, lifted my skirts and kicked up and out with all my strength, screaming: '*Three* names, you bastard! This is from Marian MacElpin!'

I caught him under the chin. His head flew back and his neck broke.

There was a split second of shock. Silence.

Then someone else was fighting alongside me – a woman, using her hands and her feet in a blur of motion. Men flew through the air and fell to the ground around us.

I pulled out my dagger and looked round for more. And more were coming! So many?

'Put that thing away and run!'

It was the lamia.

'And you?'

'Don't worry about me. And this time there will be none left to tell the tale.' That grin. Oh, I remembered that grin, too.

And it was all I needed. I leapt over a couple of dead men and raced on up the street, then up a side-street. I had to avoid the square, because now someone was after me, shouting, '*Fugitiva! Asesina!* Stop her! Hold her!' and the crowd in the square would have done just that.

I soon lost them. In the maze of alleys that was easy, but I was lost myself, and trapped in my hiding-place. I couldn't go out into the main streets or the square, let alone attempt to go home.

Then I realised where I was. I had gone full circle. I was at the other end of the alley of The Black Girl.

Scarlt was at the door. I pushed past her and in.

'I changed my mind,' I half laughed, half sobbed.

She laughed, too, then realised I was in trouble. 'What's wrong? What happened? Is someone after you?'

'Yes, they – they,' I panted, 'they attacked me. I killed one of them, and –'

'You *killed* a man? Oh, my God. Then – but – here, take your clothes off. Quick!' She peeped out of the door. 'Margot, hide these!' She handed my clothes to the English girl as I tore them off, then she peered out again.

'Hey, you!'

'*Moi?*'

A man's voice. A young man.

'Come here – quick! You want a free ride?'

A skinny student came in, draped in a threadbare soutane that had been made for someone twice his weight. His eyes swept the hall nervously, then stayed on me. Well, they would. I was stark naked.

'*Moi?*'

'Stop saying "*moi*" like the village idiot, and take this girl upstairs and fuck her. If anyone asks you, you've been with her all afternoon. Got that?'

He nodded, grabbed me by the arm, and we raced upstairs.

'Adèle! Go with them, show them where to ...'

It was ten minutes before we spoke. The way he tore into me you'd think he was a cloistered monk who hadn't seen a girl for months, years. Perhaps he was. And me, I'd missed it, too.

Then we lay there panting, grinning.

'I'm Patrick.'

'Hi.'

He waited. For a name? An explanation?

I gave him a name, the first one that came into my head. 'I'm Sirena.'

'Sirena. I like that. You're Spanish?' He leant over me, studying my face, my eyes. 'You don't look Spanish. Well, yes, I suppose you do. It's just those eyes. Señoritas don't have sea-green eyes, do they?'

'Some do. In the north. In Galicia.'

'You're from Galicia?'

'No.'

He laughed. Studied me some more. 'But your lips are Spanish. Moorish, even.' He kissed them.

Some time later, lying on our backs now, beside each other, Patrick finally got round to asking 'What's all this about?'

'Some men were chasing me.'

'Why?'

'I – I'm a runaway. I work here now, but I ran away from a bordel in Spain.'

'And they chased you all the way here?'

'It seems so. Weird, eh?'

'Very. But I'm not complaining.' He ran his hands over my tummy, caressing, exploring. 'It's not every day my prayers are answered so swiftly and so completely.'

His hands were soft, his fingertips sensitive.

I sighed with pleasure.

Then it started – shouting and banging. They were here.

'Get on top of me,' I whispered.

A moment later the door flew open and a harsh male voice demanded 'Who is this?'

Patrick just grunted.

The man pulled him up by his shoulder, up and half off me, so that my breasts were exposed.

'Piss off!' Patrick snarled.

I made to cover my breasts with my hands, then changed my mind: I was supposed to be a professional. Supposed to be, that's a laugh. More like I was supposed to be a lady.

The grin on my face infuriated the man.

'I said, *who is this?*'

Scarlt chose to misunderstand him. 'How should I know? Just another horny student.'

'The *whore!*'

Patrick was quick, thank God. 'The whore? Her name's Sirena and she works here and I've paid for her. I don't know who the hell you think you are, but you can wait your turn like I had to.'

'You had to *wait?*' asked the man, suspiciously.

'She was busy. She's always busy. But she's the one I like, the one I always have, so –'

'How long have you been here with her?'

'How long? Too long!' snapped Scarlt. "'I've paid" he says, like he bought her or something. You're supposed to be fucking her, not marrying her and setting up home!'

'It wasn't me all that time! I was outside, waiting! It was that fat friar who was with her before me! He –'

'A friar was with her before you?' demanded the poor man.

'I told you! We only just started!'

I giggled. I couldn't help it.

He turned on me. 'How long you been with him? What's your name? Sirena. Funny sort of name. Spanish, though.' And he went into Spanish. 'De donde eres? España?' Are you from Spain?

'*Je ne comprends pas,*' I answered in French

'Are you from Spain?' He returned in French.

'Was that Spanish you were speaking?'

'Yes.'

'Well, if I didn't understand it, I'm not from Spain, am I.'

'Where are you from?'

'England.'

'England?'

'Where's she look as if she's from? Africa?' Everyone seemed to have collected in our doorway, and this was a black girl speaking, one I hadn't seen before.

He ignored her. 'And how long you been with him?' he asked me.

'I don't know. A long time. I lose track ... That's right, I was asleep when the last one went, I must have been, I didn't see him go.'

'The friar?'

'A friar, yes.' I looked at him, wide-eyed. 'How did you know? You've been outside all the time? Peeping?'

'Listen, slut. It's me doing the asking.'

'Yes, but I don't understand why everyone's here peering in at us! I don't understand anything!' I wailed, getting into the spirit of the thing. 'First this son of a nun comes and leaps on top of me and wakes me up, then just as I'm getting back in the mood – he's really good, and Scarlt's nice, she always gives him to me – you come barging in and tell me you've been peeping all the time and –'

'SHUT UP!' He turned to Scarlt. 'Keep this one free for me, this evening. I'll be back soon as I'm off duty, and I'll put something in that mouth of hers that will shut her up.'

He turned and barged out and they all followed him, Scarlt winking at me and the others grinning over their shoulders as they went.

'Thanks,' I murmured, when the door was finally closed again.

'No problem,' he grinned. And we did it again.

Afterwards, he said, 'That about me always having *you* ...'

'Yes?'

'It's a dream.'

'It's not. It's real.'

He leant over me again, looked into my eyes, said patiently, 'Sirena, we were making it up.'

I pushed him over, leant over him for a change, looked down into *his* eyes. 'Patrick, where is your faith? If only one of us believes it, it may be a figment of the imagination. If we both

believe it, well ... who knows? But if Scarlt and all the others believe it, too?' I giggled again. 'Hey, didn't you just love that bit about getting married and setting up home? She's fantastic, isn't she – Scarlt, I mean ... So, when will I see you again?'

'I'm sorry to spoil the dream – my dream, your reality – but I'm as skint as a winter cockroach.'

'And as horny.' Were cockroaches horny? Perhaps they were in winter. 'Details. You saved my life. You're welcome to visit me here, without charge, once a week, for as long as I am in residence.'

'Really? I wonder what your Scarlt will have to say about that?'

I did, too.

And I hadn't even met Mère Bertelote yet.

'''In residence.'''' He mimicked me, and grinned. 'Sometimes you sound more like a queen than a whore.'

'Yes, my king.'

And we did it again.

Then Thilde, the red-haired one, appeared with my clothes in her arms to tell us that Patrick must leave *at once*, and that Mère Bertelote wished to speak to me, also *at once*.

'Mère Bertelote?' I curtsied.

'Ah, the new one. All right, Thilde, you may go. Take over at the door. And keep your breasts covered – at least the nipples. What do you think you are? Some Celtic water-nymph?'

Thilde grinned and went, closing the door behind her.

'She's very pretty,' I said. She was – like a petite version of Jonet Murray. Could she, too, be from Scotland? 'Where's she from?'

'Who knows? She certainly doesn't. She was sold to a family here in Avignon as a child. All she knew was her name, Thilde. Mathilde, we suppose. But she insists on Thilde. Or was it Matilda, and what she was saying was Tilda? Anyway, when she reached puberty, which in her case already meant nubility – you can imagine, you've seen her – the master of the house deflowered her, and the mistress of the house, a fury, dragged the poor child here

by her hair, her face all bruised and swollen from crying and being slapped, and offered her to me. That was four years ago. Her old master comes here sometimes, but she begs not to have to service him, and I decline to force her, so he has to make do with one of the other girls.' She gazed at me. 'Your name?'

'Sirena.'

She laughed. 'Yes, all right. And I like it, so that is what you shall be known as here. Now, your real name?'

Again I hesitated.

'You don't have to tell me. You can leave now, if you prefer, go back and face the trouble you were running from.'

'Perhaps I should.'

She nodded, and waited. Then gave in, and said, 'You are not Alazais' mother. Her sister, perhaps? Her cousin? Her aunt?'

She wanted me to stay.

'Not family at all,' I told her. 'Alazais was entrusted to my care. Now she has been removed from my care.'

'And the trouble you are in resulted from that? From doing your best for Alazais?'

'I'm not sure. But I certainly need sanctuary until it all blows over.'

'This is not a church.'

Our eyes met. Hers were brown, deep chestnut brown, as I was sure her hair had once been. The eyes were still big and beautiful, and the hair, though white now, was long and thick, and plaited out of the way in a single thick rope that hung down over her left shoulder and breast.

'A church is the last place I'd turn to for sanctuary.'

She smiled. 'I share your sentiments. Here, in this nunnery, you have nothing to fear, so stop being silly and tell me your name. Have you ever worked anywhere like this before?'

'Yes. Somewhere very like this. *La Casa de los Dos Peces, en Cuenca. Una casa de lenocinio.*'

'And how did you come to leave the House of the Two Fish in Cuenca? *Lenocinio*? I don't know that word. My Spanish is not

good. There's a Latin word like it, though, isn't there – which is why women like me are sometimes called Lena ... So, *una casa de putas* – Doña Inés, if I am not mistaken.'

'You know her?'

She thought about that. Then, 'We never met.'

She was so indolent. What was the word? Languid. Languid Lena. *I* should cultivate that languidness. Languidity.

'Did you run away?'

I nodded, blushing.

'Why?'

'There was a lamia there who –'

'*A lamia?*' She woke up.

'Yes. At first she just wanted to speak English – she was thinking of going to England, to London – but then she wanted me to – to – you know.'

'And you were frightened.'

'Yes.' No need to tell her the lamia was here in Avignon right now.

'How do you come to know English?'

'My father was – not Spanish.' I must keep a few secrets.

'Ah ha. Then I will put you with Margot. I like my girls to look out for each other ... Yes. Listen. How much did La Reine Blanche tell you about me?'

'How did you know that I – ?'

'I'm asking the questions.'

Right. There was a hard streak here. But then there would be. How could Languid Lena operate a whore-house with only a soft word and her eyes half closed? Alazais must have told her that we'd met Queen Blanche, had long discussions with her. 'She told me only that occasionally she sends you a girl she thinks might fit in here. And she called you a friend.'

'Which you found strange. A queen having a – what's that awful English word? – having a *bawd* for a friend.'

'I don't think anyone would call *you* a bawd.'

'No? Go and fetch Margot. And come straight back. I'm curious about you.'

I found Margot at the door, chatting to Thilde.

'Are you going to stay with us? Be one of us?' they cried. 'And Alazais? No? *You?*'

'Yes, but you must come with me. Now. Mère Bertelote wants to speak to you.'

'And me?' Thilde didn't like being left out.

'No, I think she meant for you to stay here.'

Margot ran, so I ran with her, and we lined up before Mère Bertelote like two naughty children. I wanted to laugh. It must have shown in my eyes.

'What is it you find so funny, Sirena?'

'Nothing, Mère Bertelote.' She waited. This time I had no choice but to go on, explain myself. 'Standing here with Margot like this reminds me of when I was a novice in a *real* nunnery –'

'*You* were a novice?'

I nodded.

'Say some prayers in Latin.'

Prayers? A confession might be more appropriate. '*Confiteor Deo omnipotenti, beatae Mariae semper Virgini, beato Michaëli Archangelo, beato Joanni Baptistae, sanctis Apóstolis Petro et Paulo, omnibus sanctis, et tibi, pater, quia peccávi nimis cogitatione, verbo, et ópere: mea culpa, mea culpa, mea máxima culpa. Ideo precor –*'

'That's quite enough of that. Something else?'

Something else? Perhaps she'd prefer the Creed. '*Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentum, factorem caeli et terrae, visibilium ómnium et invisibilium. Et in unum –*'

'*D'accord, d'accord, ça suffit.* What do you think, Margot? Did she use to be a nun?'

'Absolutely! And I think we ought to send her straight back. It would be a sin to keep her here!'

'*No!!*' I squealed.

Margot laughed.

Mère Bertelote studied me. 'And once again, you ran away.'

'This was before, not after.'

'So. Margot, speak English to Sirena.'

'Oh – yes, of course, you speak English, too!' she said, going straight into English. 'But were you really a nun?'

'Not a nun, a novice. I was only fourteen.'

'Where? In London?'

'London? No, not in England. In Spain. Almería. That's in the south, in Andalucía, not so far from Granada. I've never been to England.'

'But upstairs you said you were from England!'

'The girl he was looking for is from Spain.'

'Oh. Right. Ah, I see. But how do you know English?'

'My father taught me, and sometimes we spoke it together.'

'Your father was English?'

I nodded. Sorry, Papa.

'And your father put you in the convent?'

'No.' Quite the reverse. 'That was a slave-trading pig's-turd whose life I had saved when he was drowning. He put me in the convent instead of on the block to show his gratitude to the Virgin Mary.'

Margot laughed. She was delighted with me, but Mère Bertelote was beginning to feel left out. I told her what I had just said, in French.

'Yes. Looking at you – and listening to you – I'm sure you were much happier in Cuenca in the *casa de putas* than with the good sisters in Almería. Blanche is quite right. There are girls, and there are girls.'

'She means there are good girls and there are bad girls,' Margot explained in English, as if I was stupid. 'We're bad girls.'

'All right, Margot, you can leave us. And tell everyone that Sirena has been a whore before, in Spain, and will fit in here perfectly. Don't tell anyone about her having been a nun.'

'No, of course not, Mère Berte.'

When Margot had gone, I said, 'She's sweet, isn't she. And her hair is lovely.'

'I'm still waiting for your real name.'

I thought she'd forgotten.

'Mariana, madame.'

'Mariana. Good. Well, Mariana – no, Sirena, for you are now one of us – help yourself to grapes, or water – that is clean spring-water. I'll be back in a moment. *Mais non! Ne touche pas les bonbons!*'

I retracted my hand, blushing guiltily.

'I am allowed *les bonbons*, I alone. Consider. I cannot provide a good home for you all unless I make lots of money, and I cannot make lots of money unless my girls are the slenderest and sweetest, the most pleasing, in all of Avignon. Or at any rate the slenderest and sweetest outside the walls of the Palais des Papes.'

'Really? They have girls in the Palace of the Popes?' Why was I surprised?

'A harem. A collection of beautiful women from all over the world. Or so I am told, and I have no reason to doubt it. What on earth will happen to them when the Pope returns to Rome?'

'He *is* returning? It's certain?'

She shrugged. 'Nothing is certain, not in this world. Except that wherever rich and powerful men gather together, there you will find the most beautiful women – and boys, of course. Boys I don't do. I never have, though I worked in a place once alongside boys, when I was young. They were all right – just like us, really, but they need a man to control them.'

'A eunuch?'

'No! A real man. Unless the boys are *castrati* themselves, which some of them were. That takes the *méchanceté* out of them.'

The naughtiness. Yes, well I imagine it would.

'Turns them into little ladies,' she laughed. 'Little bitches, some of them.'

I joined in the laughter. I'd be bitchy, too, in their position. I'm bitchy enough as it is, without anything really to complain of. Except ending up in a whore-house again.

Then I remembered poor Suelo at home, who became Suelita.

'What are you thinking?' Mère Bertelote asked.

I told her.

'And was he spiteful – bitchy – afterwards?'

'No, he was sweet – like you said, not *méchant* at all.'

'By sweet, you mean silly. No use any more, not as a guard-dog. That's usually the way of it with boys, too. They're sweet, but not sweet like a girl. Unless they're kept in girl's clothes. Then they can be really very sweet.'

'Truly? They do that?'

'They don't in Cuenca?'

'There weren't any boys. But there had been, I think. I remember Madre Inés saying they were more trouble than they were worth.'

'They are. But churchmen prefer them. It's so much more convenient. Call a boy a page, and a cardinal can take him with him anywhere – and not just one, ten boys, twenty boys. But how can he justify girls? And why should he bother? The boys will all be beautiful, and in private some if not all will dress up as girls.' She laughed, remembering something. 'There was an archbishop here not long ago who took the opposite approach. His pages were girls who dressed as boys when they appeared in public.'

'No!'

'Next thing we knew, one of the cardinals had sold off all his boys in a job-lot to a Moorish trader and was buying pretty girls from all over the place and dressing them up as boys. It seemed it was to be the new fashion. Fortunately, the Pope put his foot down.'

'Why fortunately? I like the idea. Isn't it better, more natural, for them to have girls, even if the girls do have to dress sometimes as boys?'

'Yes, but bad for business. As it is now, when the ones who really, at heart, prefer women have had enough of boys, they turn to the brothel. And they are big spenders.'

'I thought you said they have lots of beautiful women at the *Palais des Papes*.'

'You don't miss a thing, do you. The papal harem is sealed off from prying eyes and extremely exclusive. Most visiting bishops and abbots do not lodge at the Palace anyway, and they know nothing of the girls kept there except as gossip and rumour. When they want a woman, they come here.'

'All of them?'

'No, some prefer their boys.'

'I meant, do all the ones who want a woman come here? There must be other brothels.'

'Of course, but La Negrillonne has a good reputation, not only for having the best girls but also for being one of the cleanest and most discreet houses in the city.'

'By best, you mean "sweetest and slenderest".' I was beginning to get the idea.

'Exactly. You cannot make a girl beautiful. To be beautiful, she must start beautiful. If a girl does not start beautiful, I don't mind, I forgive her. She can be made sweet and she can be kept slender. You, of course, do start beautiful. Though those lips might I suppose detract from your beauty in the eyes of some. Are they natural or did they do that to them in Cuenca?'

My lips? Ibn Khaldoun had found them perfect. As had poor Sidi Mustafa. 'A little of each,' I told her. 'My mouth has always been rather big and my lips rather full.' My grandmother told me once I should stop swimming, I was turning into a fish. 'Like a mermaid, *una sirena*?' I asked, delighted. 'No, just your mouth, you have a mouth like a fish, horrible.' She had apologised later when she found me crying, said it wasn't true, she'd been in a bad mood, but I knew it was true.

'Then in Cuenca,' I went on, 'they had special unguents, you know, for the lips and nipples.'

'Don't worry, *cherie*. They are no lips for a lady, but on a whore they are fine. However, you could be *un peu plus douce* – somewhat sweeter – you are too pleased with yourself – *et beaucoup plus mince* – a great deal slimmer – *non?* ... Stand up ... *Stand up, I said.*'

I jumped to my feet.

'Be quick when I tell you to do something.'

She was sounding more like Madre Inés by the minute.

'Take off that dress. Don't tell me that is still the fashion in Spain? And take that offended look off your face, as well. You can keep the thing, wear it when you leave here if you wish, but for now Scarlt will find you something suitable ...'

I stood before her in just my shift.

'Let me see you properly. Come here.'

She didn't mean see, she meant touch, feel.

'Hm. Yes. you have a good body, but heavy, no? And this. What is this?'

She had her two hands round my waist, attempting to make them meet.

'It is my waist, madame.'

'It is not. It is where your waist should be, *ma fille*. Men like *les filles à la taille fine*. And so do I.' Girls with narrow waists. Wasp-like waists.

In that at least she succeeded, for she told Scarlt to put me on the strictest diet – no bread, no beans, and just a *little* of whatever was being served. And being strict was what Scarlt was best at. By the time I left Avignon I did have a waist, and I have kept it that way ever since. Easy in the hard times, but hard when life was easy and Khadija was thrusting food at me and complaining – yes, complaining! – that I was too thin. I should have introduced her to Mère Bertelote, let them fight it out.

'And my chemise?' Surely she would let me keep my shift?

'Keep it. And keep it on! Don't copy Thilde. She likes being admired. She thinks she's got perfect breasts – well, she has – but she is young still, and foolish. "If you've got it, flaunt it" does *not*

apply to women like us – not if we wish to keep the skin on our backs. As you must have learnt in Cuenca. Oh, don't worry, it's better here than in Spain, and much better than in the north. Almost as good as Italy, in fact. But every now and then some puritanical priest who can't get it up any longer will lead a crusade against us, and then Lady help you if you're caught with even your head uncovered. No, if you've got it, give glimpses of it and no more until you're tucked away in your little room with his money in your hand. So ... Where was I? Ah, yes. You have to be available at all times, which means keeping yourself always clean and attractive. Apart from that, you have to do your share of the household chores – Scarlt will tell you, and you tell her what you know how to do, what you like doing. Can you cook?"

'No!'

She smiled. 'Then you are likely to spend some time each day on your knees, scrubbing floors. Oh, and scrubbing sheets, that's another big job ... Now, is there anything you want to ask me? No? Yes?'

'Yes. What exactly is my – my *status* here? Am I free to leave whenever I wish? Will I be paid?'

'Of course you will – I'll see how much and on what scale when I know how good you are, how *pleasing*. And as for free to leave, you will be, yes, eventually. Again, I will see. And when I have decided, you will make your mark on a contract. Or can you write? Yes? Then you will sign a contract. Now, help yourself to water. No, not grapes. Not even grapes. I'll be back in a while.'

I poured myself a cup of water and sipped it suspiciously – but it was wonderful! The best I had tasted since Granada. I drank it down and poured a second cup.

And waited. And thought. Sitting in a brothel wearing nothing but my shift and having just been informed by the abbess that I was fat and would have to lose weight and be fashionably slender and keep myself clean, and not only that but be *douce* and pleasing and *available* at all times ... All right, the shift was a silk chemise, and

was fashionably short – yes, fashionably, whatever *she* may say – but even so ... My hand kept reaching out of its own accord towards the grapes and I snatched it back, frightened to take one. The last thing I wanted was to start off here with a beating.

I had to find a way to write a message and get it to Ferchard. *Yes, I can write, you sarcastic old bitch!* Who could I trust with it, though?

She swept back in. Sat down, leaving me standing.

'Earlier, I sent a message to Queen Blanche.'

'About me?'

She nodded. 'And Blanche agrees that you seem to have been both nun and whore. In fact, still are. She says you talk like a nun and behave like a whore.'

'Just because she was once Queen of France does not give her the right to –'

'It does, actually, *ma fille*. And her exact words were that you talk like a student of theology and comport yourself like a courtesan.'

Now that I liked. But nun, no.

'She also said that the man you killed was a soldier, had a sword, and was threatening you, so she will see to it that you are not held responsible.'

Which man? The first or the second? Did they know about the second yet? And all the others? And about Doña Leonor?

'You can sit down. No – there.'

So I sat on the little wooden stool and faced her, still wearing only my short shift. Legs together, eyes lowered now, respectfully, as I had been trained to do in Granada.

'I like the eyes-down – where did you learn that? – but it is not necessary today.'

I raised my eyes, looked at her. 'While I was a slave, madame. I had a very harsh mistress who didn't like me to look her in the eye at all, ever.'

Lalla Latifa. A *real* bitch.

'You have been around, haven't you, *ma fille*. Now listen. Blanche says your attackers didn't want the child after all. They wanted you. And they must have had a reason. Do you have any idea what that reason might be? No? Because she intends to find out. You're sure? Well, she'll let me know, if she finds out before I do. Let's hope it's nothing too serious.'

If killing a man – two men – was not serious, what was?

'From what Thilde told me – and she saw them when you left Alazais here – the livery those men were wearing was that of some visiting bishop – Spanish, perhaps? Did they by any chance speak Spanish?'

She studied me while I thought about it. The Bishop of Cartagena lived in Murcia, but his retainers, wearing just that livery, could be seen in and around Cartagena. And I had heard Doña Leonor say "My friend the Bishop", I remembered it distinctly. 'Yes,' I said aloud.

'Yes,' Mère Bertelote repeated. 'Well, we will lay that bare all in good time. Now you run along and find Scarlt and get yourself organised. There is work to be done, money to be made.'

'Oui, madame.'

'Oh, one thing. Since you are claiming to be English, was Sirena an entirely wise choice of name?'

'No, but there's nothing I can do now, is there?'

She thought about it. 'It's not so bad. If you were a Spanish girl pretending to be English, you would hardly give Sirena as your name, would you. Not unless you were extremely stupid.'

'Men like that tend not have a very high opinion of the intelligence of girls like – girls like –'

'Girls like *you*.'

'Yes.'

'Say it.'

'Of girls like me. So they probably would believe I was that stupid, madame.'

'Yes. Well, you'll just have to hope for the best, won't you. And try to remember you do not speak Spanish. All right, run along.'

'*Oui, madame.*'

I "run along" to the reception area, still wearing only my shift, and find a familiar face, English Margot. She, too, is wearing only a shift, so that's all right. I relax. Margot and the black girl, whose name is Qāsā, are chatting with three men.

Everyone turns and looks at me. The three men look me up and down.

Less blatantly, I study them. They are middle-aged, all well-dressed and prosperous-looking. One is tall and thin, the other two both short and stout with large beer-bellies.

'And who is this?' asks the tall, thin one. Lugubrious voice.

'Sirena,' Margot tells them.

'Sirena. Then we won't need to wait for Thilde. I'll take Sirena.'

'No. you won't. I'll take Sirena,' says one of the short fat ones. 'Where are you from Sirena? Spain?' He runs his hand down my arm, as though he can tell by the feel of me.

'No, England.'

'England, *ma petite*? Ah, so you are a friend of *la belle Margot*? *Ma petite*? He only comes up to my shoulder!'

But now the other fat one feels left out. He is no taller than his friend, but he is immensely strong. He suddenly picks me up bodily – his hands round my waist – Mère Berte should see this! – lifts me high in the air, then when his nose is pressed against my thighs he stands me on the table – and they all proceed to inspect my legs. Six eyes devouring me, six hands caressing me.

The two girls watch, Margot at least hoping and praying I am professional enough not to get upset. I smile at her reassuringly as I smack away the first hand that sidles up under my shift. 'Have you paid yet, messieurs?'

One of the fat ones laughs, delighted with me. The other is not amused. He insists on sliding his hand up onto my bottom. I let him.

Then Scarlt walks in from the kitchen, wiping her lips.

'Ah, Scarlt, chérie! Where have you been hiding this one?'

'Hiding her? I don't hide her. She's always busy. The less often you see a girl hanging around down here, the more popular she is.'

'I've *never* seen her hanging around down here!' roars the other fat one, the laughter.

The first one, the one who put me on the table, is totally absorbed in his explorations under my shift.

'Then today's your lucky day.'

'It's not *his* lucky day. She's coming up with *me*,' growls the first one, slapping my bottom to emphasise the *me*. He seems to think I belong to him. He swings me bodily down off the table again and into his arms and marches off up the stairs with me. No arguing with that.

For such a brutal-seeming and assertive man, he is quite gentle, but we don't have time to get to know each other, not that first day. Very soon, Scarlt is knocking at the door informing us that Maître Baudouin is waiting and is getting *very* impatient.

Maître Baudouin turns out to be the tall, thin one and, though I normally prefer tall men, a gloomy lover. I am quite happy that he, unlike the other two, does not become a regular. Gloom is usually the result of a guilty conscience. Such men should stay at home with their wives, or in the case of gloomy monks and priests, in the cloister with – whoever, or whatever. Strange to say, now I come to think of it, I have never entertained a gloomy friar in bed (though I met some quite appalling Black Friars in other less convivial contexts!)

Next comes the sergeant who arranged to return in the evening. He just wants to get even with me, and he does that all right. He starts by putting me over his lap and spanking me till I'll admit I was lying. He knows I've been lying about something, he can always tell.

'I wasn't!' I squeal. 'I was telling the truth!'

But he has a hard hand and I haven't been beaten since Lalla Latifa's harem and eventually I admit that I did tell one small lie: Serena is just my working name, my real name is Jonet.

'Jonet? Is that English?'

'Yes!' Then remember that Jonet was Scottish. It's hard to think in that position.

'I knew it!' he bellows. 'Serena's a Spanish name and you're not Spanish. Why do you use a Spanish name?'

He pulls my head up by the hair and throws me onto the bed.

I lie there sobbing, my hands underneath me, clutching my bottom. 'I – I thought it was pretty, sir.'

'You thought it was pretty. Like you think your mouth's for talking. I'll show you what your mouth is for!'

And he proceeds to do just that. Not that I don't already know, as he very soon realises.

'Got a spanking off the sergeant, did you?' laughs Scarlt afterwards. 'No more than you deserved. A great deal less, in fact.'

Ça c'est vrai. 'That's true. But keep him away from me in future,' I plead, hands on my bottom.

'Pas de bêtises. You're to be made available to him within ten minutes whenever he happens to wander in.'

'Oh, non! Non, non, non!'

'Oh, oui. Oui, oui, oui. Mère Berte was out here, and she agreed.'

21

I was sceptical at first about Mère Berte's claim to be providing a home for damsels in distress, but there was some truth in it. La Negrillonne was a very relaxed, very *happy*, house. At the time, I had only the house in Cuenca to compare it with, but later I would work in houses in Paris and London that were never – with the exception of Mère Mireille's La Fille d'Or – anything like as homely and friendly.

For a start, no one minded if we slipped out for a while so long as we were properly covered and didn't go looking for trouble;

which meant that next morning I was able to go out and ask about the bishop and perhaps make contact with Ferchard.

First, the bishop. I went up to what looked like a friendly young man in a soutane, and said, 'Excuse me, sir, perhaps you could help me? I –'

'Keep your hands off me, *putana*! I'll have you whipped!'

'Sorry, sir!' I fled, before he called the sergeants.

Was it so obvious? It must have been my hand on his arm. Why had I touched him?

But then two women coming towards me stopped and looked me up and down. Their faces said everything.

I lowered my eyes and stepped off the path, out of their way.

Then I saw two men in *that* livery.

I slipped round behind a market stall selling eels. Live eels. The woman was holding one up, skinning it alive – it just slid out of its skin. 'How do you do that?' I asked, fascinated, forgetting all about the men in the bishop's livery.

She looked at me, grinned a one-tooth grin, and showed me. She held another one up by its head, cut a ring round its neck with her sharp knife while it wriggled and twisted and writhed, then calmly laid down the knife and grasped the body of the eel and pulled and the whole skin slid off, just like that, like sliding silk hose off a leg and foot.

She gave the two that were ready to a woman who was waiting, then turned back to me. 'Here, you have a go. Any one,' she cackled, pointing at the writhing heap of eels.

I rolled up my sleeves and she gave me the knife.

At first, I couldn't get hold of one, they were too slippery. Then, when I gripped harder, one bit me. That made me angry, and I remembered catching fish in the sea with my bare hands: if I could do that, I could certainly do this! I picked the one that bit me, the one that deserved it, and this time I didn't fumble. When the two men in that dreaded livery approached the stall, I was holding it up by the head in my left hand and had the knife ready in my right hand. They watched as I cut right round its neck – circumcision, I

suddenly realised – lay down the knife, clasped the body and slid the skin down and off.

'Wouldn't trust her with my cock!' one said to the other, in Spanish. They both laughed, and turned and walked away.

'What did he say?' asked the old woman.

'*Sais pas*.' I don't know. I shrugged. The gown slid off my shoulder and down over my arm, exposing most of my breast.

It was meant to, but not in the street.

I pulled it back up, hastily.

The old lady cackled and grinned again. Another customer stopped to inspect the eels – and bought the one I had skinned.

She turned back to me. 'You need work?'

'No.' Then, 'Yes. Why?'

'It's quiet here today, but you come back Friday morning, early, there'll be hundreds need skinning.'

'Those two men – the ones who watched me. Where were they from, do you know?'

'That was Castellano, they spoke. Spanish. Not that I understood, only the word *polla*, cock. I know that from the old days when – well, I used to handle other things than eels, once upon a time, love. Reckon that's what he was saying, how he wouldn't fancy letting you handle *his*.' Another great cackle of laughter. Then she shouted across to a man selling flowers. 'Hey, Marcel! Those two walking away over there! Where they from?'

'Don't know. Hold on.'

The question went down the line of stalls, the answer came back up. 'They're the Bishop of Cartagena's men!' shouted Marcel.

Now everyone knew.

'Who's your new assistant??' Marcel again.

'What's your name, love?'

'Er – Pierrette.'

'Her name's Pierrette – and you keep your hands off her!'

'*Me*?' The picture of innocence, surrounded by flowers. 'Don't tell me you wouldn't rather be selling flowers, Pierrette.'

I thanked her, smiled at him, and fled.

'Friday?' she called after me.

'Yes, all right! If I can!'

I headed towards our lodgings. Then changed my mind. They'd known enough about me to say "That's her". They'd even known my names – and I'd told them the Scottish one! They would know me again.

I turned and slowly made my way back to La Negrillonne. I didn't need to ask about the bishop. I knew. And I knew why.

'Where've you been?' demanded Scarlt as soon as she saw me.

'Oh, just out walking.'

'Ask before you go. I mean that – there are jobs to be done. Can you cook? No? Then it's time you learnt. Go and help Qāsā with the chicken she's grilling out in the yard. And no picking! *You're* allowed only one tiny piece – Mère Berte's orders.'

The others all laughed. Was I the only one on a diet?

But then Mère Bertelote sent for me, so I didn't get any chicken at all – or learn how to cook it!

'The livery,' she announced, leaving me standing in front of her, 'is that of the Bishop of Cartagena. It seems that a Doña Leonor, also of Cartagena, being a friend of the good bishop's, asked him to keep an out for you when she heard he was coming here.'

'But why? I –'

'Don't speak! You must be taught to keep that mouth closed ... I will tell you why, this once – as if you didn't already know. Because you belong to Doña Leonor. Apparently you were sold to her by your father – is this not true?'

'Well, yes. But –'

'There are no possible "buts". Nothing on earth could be more legally binding on you than the duly attested signature of your own father, given while you were still a minor. And what did you do, to show your love and respect for your father? You absconded with a fortune in silver belonging to her husband.'

My jaws were aching with the need to pour out my side of the story, but I didn't like the way she'd said "you must be taught to

keep that mouth closed", it reminded me of the eunuchs with their rods in my first harem, Lalla Latifa's harem. I didn't dare.

'Here, read this,' she said, and passed me a folded sheet of paper. It was a letter from Blanche.

Marian.

It came as no surprise to learn from Sir Farquhar that you are a runaway. That I could overlook, given the kind of life you ran away from in Cuenca. As I could overlook your killing of the soldier. He attacked you, not vice-versa. So I concurred when Mère Bertelote decided to take you in and give you a place working under an assumed name among her girls. After all, you were not averse to the idea when we discussed it, and it permits you very conveniently to disappear.

However, I now discover that prior to working in Cuenca and Granada, you belonged to a certain Doña Leonor, in Cartagena. Truly belonged to her, with no possible room for argument or complaint, for you had been sold to her by your own father – just as I was sold to the King of France by mine. And that you ran away from her, taking with you what no doubt constituted the large fortune in silver which you boasted of to me as your "inheritance".

Stealing I cannot condone. Especially stealing from your master, Doña Leonor's husband, who obviously trusted you or he would never have put you in a position where you could rob him of such an enormous sum and get away with it.

If it were up to me, I should probably hand you over to the Bishop. But it is not. You are now Mère Bertelote's problem and I wish her well of you. She is kinder than I am, will treat you more sympathetically than I would. Yet I find I also wish you well of her. I remember our little chats and will always regret that you are not another such as Lady Margaret Logie, sailing under her own colours and with nothing to hide.

I have advised Sir Farquhar to leave Avignon and make his way home to Scotland. He tells me he means to do so, that such has always been his purpose. He is to take ship directly from

Bordeaux. I have also arranged to take the other two slaves off his hands. The eunuch is saleable and the old crone can be got rid of quietly and kindly. Thus there is no reason for you to contact him, poor man. Do not attempt to do so. I repeat: Do not attempt to contact Sir Farquhar. That is a command.

Blanche d'Evreux.

I read it through a second time while Mère Berte waited patiently.

Then raised my eyes from the paper and studied her face. It seemed I was in her hands.

'I think today it would behove you to keep your eyes cast down, girl.'

'Oh. Yes. Sorry.'

I gazed at my bare feet while she gazed at me. I could feel her eyes scouring me.

Finally, she said, 'It amuses me that she thinks me sympathetic. In her position, I would have you whipped, and that before I returned you to the Bishop – whipped for deceiving me as to your rank and status and worming your way into my house ... And what would the Bishop do with a fugitive who committed murder and robbery while living outside the law? You would be fortunate if he simply hanged you.'

There was another long silence during which I did not dare raise my eyes, let alone speak in my own defence. What was there to say? I hardly dared breathe ...

'A fugitive not just from slavery,' she said, breaking the silence, 'but an apostate nun to boot. And you know what happens to apostates. And heretics.'

I did indeed. This was Provence, the worst place in the world to fall into the hands of the Church. I had a sudden picture of She Who Was Not holding aloft a flaming brand to the cheers of the crowd in La Place before plunging it into the faggots around my legs and feet, and of Blanche, the White Queen, sitting up in the

royal enclosure with an enigmatic smile on her beautiful face, a cat watching a mouse in a trap.

La Place du Palais, with its row of stakes standing ready for women like me.

'I wouldn't wish that on anybody, let alone one of my girls.'

She left time for that to sink in, then said gently, 'Look at me.'

I raised my eyes. Found that now I was shy and it was hard to keep my eyes on hers.

I felt as though she'd saved my life. As though I'd actually been there on that stake and, just as Sor Caterina lit the fire, Mère Bertelote leant down from heaven and plucked me off it, set me back down here.

Like God.

Such power these people had.

So now I really was hers.

Yes, but there was still the question of Khadija and Yahia. And of Blanche's "command".

'I can read your face, my sweet. Rebellious thoughts are rising to the surface again.'

'*Non!*'

'*Oui.*' Then briskly, 'I have things to do. *Écoute.* You will need another name, an English name that can be given out as your real name.'

'Jonet, madame.' It was Scottish, but I had already used it.

'Jonet. So be it. Then you will forget you ever knew any Spanish or Arabic, or that your name was ever ... what was it?'

'I don't know, madame. I am Jonet, called Sirena.'

She smiled. 'Then Jonet, called Sirena, there are men out there waiting, so go and get on with your work.'

'*Oui, madame.*'

'One thing. Under no circumstances are you to set foot outside this building until the danger is passed.'

'But – but that may be months!'

'That is my condition. My only condition. You promise?'

'I promise.' What choice did I have? 'And do I have to work all the time?' I tried a grin.

'No, you can have a few minutes off occasionally. Now, go. And tell Scarlt I want to speak to her.'

I curtsied and scuttled out. Scuttled. As I had when I belonged to Lalla Latifa. And hated myself for it.

There is only one way off the Wheel of Fortune, and I wasn't ready for that yet.

I worked. But as I worked, I worried. I couldn't help it.

Ferchard wouldn't permit anything that might hurt or harm Khadija.

Unless he had no choice. If he had no choice?

But he would always have some kind of choice.

Yes, but Blanche was so powerful! And if the Bishop – and the Pope! – became aware of him ...

The Bishop was already aware of him. He had killed one of the Bishop's men – and it was he who had cut the hand off the one we let go! He had to run – had to *flee*! And take the other two with him.

The *other* two slaves.

What had Blanche meant by that? Did she really think I too had been a slave? Well, I had. But *Ferchard's* slave? And why had he told her I was a runaway?

What exactly *had* he told her?

Men came and went. I didn't even notice them.

It wasn't until next morning that I was finally able to *do* something. I found myself once again out in the courtyard with Qāsā,

'Qāsā, is there any chance you might be going for a walk today? This morning, perhaps?'

'I can do, yes ...'

'Because I'm not allowed out. Mère Berte said –'

'I heard about it. Scarlt said no one's to carry messages for you, either.'

'Oh, no!' Suddenly it was all too much.

She put her arms round me, held me while I sobbed.

'Do you speak Arabic?' I wondered, suddenly.

'A little. Why?'

'Because ...' I went into Arabic: 'But don't tell *anybody* I do!'

'No, all right, of course I won't, if you don't want me to.'

'I need to get a message out. Just one.'

She thought about it. 'Yes, that's not fair, not letting you send even one message to your people. They must be worried sick.'

'I'll never ask you again. And nothing will need to be written. He speaks Arabic.'

'Who? Who is it?'

I told her about Ferchard – Sir Farquhar. Then about the soldiers posted outside the house.

For a moment I thought that had made her change her mind. but then she asked, 'How quick is he?'

'Quick?'

'To understand. If I send in a message saying I'm the whore he asked to call on him ...'

'I don't know. You're allowed to do that? To visit clients?'

She nodded. 'Does he go with whores, this Sir Fuckahar?'

I giggled, I couldn't help it. She was as bad as Khadija. Khadija! This must work!

'I don't know. Not in front of me, but ... Yes! There was a whore in Spain called Fatima. He adored her! Say Fatima sent you. Say neither she nor Maryam could come. Maryam asked you to come instead.'

'Maryam. That's your real name?'

'Yes.'

'That should get me in, then. Now what shall I tell him?'

'Tell him to leave Avignon, leave now, as quickly as possible, and go to Paris. Once he's in Paris, he should take a house for himself and the two servants. Don't forget that, it's important. Himself *and the two servants*. Tell him I'll join him there when I

can. Tell him not to believe anything Queen Blanche says. And – and give him my love.'

'I'll save that till after I've given him mine!' she laughed.

I was shocked. 'You don't have to actually –'

'Listen. I have a job to do. No one – not even his servants – will guess I delivered a message while I was doing it.'

'But –'

'Don't worry! I may not be Fatima, but I'm good with old men and I don't think Mère Berte will be getting any complaints afterwards.'

That was for sure.

What could I do but cling to her again, sobbing out my gratitude? Then one called Aysel put her head out and said Scarlt had a man waiting for me, some English priest who wanted a real English whore.

A real English whore?

Ferchard left. I didn't know where for. I didn't know who with.

All I knew was that when Qāsā went back again to the house a few days later (for her own purposes, not mine – he was a good payer, she said!) the place was empty. The tenant, a foreign knight, had left for Bordeaux, they told her, but no one knew what had become of the two slaves – or the other, younger, one, the concubine, who had apparently run away.

It wasn't so bad. And I wasn't there long, only a month or so. Not like the year and a half I had spent in the bordel in Cuenca.

Yet like it in most other respects. There were more priests, of course, and more students. And there were the *factores* from the great Italian banking houses; the best clients, so everyone said. I only ever serviced one, and he didn't tell me his name. But he did give me a gold florin, which made all the difference later.

Priests tend to be mean. *Careful*. Students are not so much mean as broke, which comes to the same thing. They're more fun, though.

And, oh yes, it was while I was there that I first met an artist from Siena. Unfortunately, "met" is overstating the case. When I heard he was coming to La Negrillonne in search of models for Mary the Mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene for a painting one of the Cardinals had commissioned, I was desperate to be chosen. I wanted a chance to talk to him, to ask him about Siena, about the alternative Church there, about Simone Martini. But in no time at all he had chosen Thilde as Mary Magdalene and Scarlt as the Virgin. Scarlt! He hardly glanced at me. I pretended I was simply disappointed I wouldn't be able to talk to him, but it wasn't just that. I couldn't believe it. All right, I wasn't cut out to be the Virgin (and Scarlt was? Scarlt!) but I was perfect for Mary Magdalene.

Or so I fondly believed.

I learnt something about myself that day. Perhaps grew up a little. Despite my intellectual pretensions, I am impervious to either flattery or insult on that score. Criticise my appearance, though, and you really injure my *amour-propre*. Praise my beauty and I purr. (I still do, though I am old now!) There was no difference between me and the other girls, no matter what their background: what mattered to all of us was what people saw when they looked at us.

I also learnt what men – yes, all men – pictured in their minds when they spoke of Mary Magdalene. Thilde's breasts had been the first thing he saw when he arrived at our doorway. Of course, if I'd been out there too, and had mine out on display, he might ...

Anyway, I couldn't have modelled for him, because that afternoon Mère Bertelote sent for me, and everything changed.

'Ah, Sirena. Scarlt tells me she is very pleased with you. How long have you been with us now? A month?'

'Yes, about a month. Thank you, Mère Bertelote. I just wish I could go for a walk ...'

'A walk? That's no problem. I have your contract ready for you. Once you've made your mark on it, there'll be no further reason to keep you enclosed.'

My contract? 'May I – may I read it before I sign it, madame?'

'Ah yes, *sign* it, that's right. I'd forgotten you can read ... It is in Latin.'

'I read Latin.'

'That's right, of course you do. Still, I don't think you need to read this.'

'Then I cannot possible sign it, madame.'

She gazed at me. She didn't seem angry. She was, if anything, amused.

'I must say you make a refreshing change, child. None of the other girls can read their own language, let alone Latin. It would never occur to them to doubt me, question what was in the contract. I say "Make your mark here," they make it, say "*Merci, madame*," curtsy and leave.'

I could imagine.

'Madame, I do not doubt you, but I need to know. Could you not inform me of the main terms of the contract.'

'I myself do not know them. This is not the usual, simple, straightforward contract. This was drawn up by Queen Blanche's lawyers. It has been approved by the Pope himself. The Bishop of Cartagena has two copies, one for his archives, the other for Doña – what was her name?'

'Doña Leonor. But – but *why*? Why all that?'

She waited.

I gave in, closed my mouth, looked at my feet.

'Sirena, have you any idea why that boy Patrick never returned? Never came back to claim the free sessions with you that he'd been promised? Yes, I knew about that.'

It was true, he *had* never come back. I shook my head. Tears fell onto my toes.

'Did you really think the sergeant would not check up on your ridiculous story? Are you so naïve ...? He had the boy found and brought in and questioned.'

'But he wouldn't say anything ...' What was I talking about? Of course he would. Anyone would, faced with torture.

'At first he kept his mouth shut. Then someone punched it for him and knocked out one of his teeth. That made him open it. Specially when they threatened to knock out the rest of his teeth. Boys like him are as vain as any girl.'

'He told the sergeant everything?'

'All that took place that afternoon, yes.'

So the sergeant – all of them – know I killed a man.

'The only thing he didn't mention was that you are Spanish. There was no need. The sergeant already knew.'

'He knew? How? Did someone tell him?'

She nods and smiles. 'Yes.'

'Who?'

'You.'

'Me?'

'At some point during your very first session with him he ordered you to turn over and present your bottom. In Spanish.'

Oh, no. 'And I did?'

'Girls like you are mindless. It's absolutely no use warning you about anything, or telling you to keep something secret. None of you can keep a secret for two minutes. It's not just the Spanish. Qāsā told Aysel, who told one of the others, and it got back to me eventually, that you speak Arabic ... I imagine that also got to the sergeant.'

'How did Qāsā know?'

Mère Bertelote shrugs one bare shoulder elegantly. 'No doubt she – or someone – got it from you. She had certainly been told it was a secret.'

Ah. So Qāsā didn't tell Aysel about the message. That's something.

'But ...' She gives me a smile, the first real smile I have had from her. It lights her whole face up. 'It doesn't matter any more, child. Everything has been forgiven and forgotten. Everything.'

'Everything?'

'The Pope has wiped the slate clean. As from now, you belong to me, and only to me. No one else has any claim whatsoever on you or to you.'

'No one?' Mindless. She is right.

'No one – as from the moment you sign this contract.' She swivels it round so that it faces me. I take up the quill, run my eye over at any rate the final clauses ...

'Madame, it says here that if I run away again – run away from you – I will be declared not simply a runaway slave but a fugitive thief and murderer. *Caput lupinum*, it says: an outlaw, a wolf's-head.'

'Oh, yes. The clean slate will only remain clean as long as you keep your side of the bargain.'

'I see.' Forgiven, but not forgotten.

'Which is perfectly reasonable. And why does it matter? You're here now, for good. Be grateful, child.'

I remember her leaning down from Heaven to pluck me from the stake.

'I *am* grateful.'

'But.'

'Yes. But.'

'Keep your eyes down. Let the tears flow ... The old man, your master, has gone – he and his eunuch. They were heading for Bordeaux. Yes, they were followed and observed. Bordeaux. And Scotland. Gone out of your life. As has the little princess, Demoiselle Alazais. You are alone here in Avignon. The only friends you have are Queen Blanche and me ... and a couple of the girls. They haven't all taken to you.'

I look up. I am surprised. Hurt. In Cuenca, everyone loved me.

'You do rather play the lady.'

Play the lady?

Well, yes, I suppose so. In Cuenca it was different. I was one of them. That was *me*. My life. Nowhere else to go, nothing to look forward to.

Playing the lady.

There is a knock at the door. 'Mère Bertelote?'

'That's Scarlt. Yes! Come in!'

Scarlt bursts in. I've never seen her upset before. 'Mère Bertelote, can you come at once?'

She stands up. It is all in a day's work. 'You wait here.'

The door closes behind them.

What has happened? Nothing to do with me, I hope. I'm in enough trouble already. Although I suppose Mère Berte would say I'm not, now. If I can settle down here, playing the whore.

There's that phrase again. That tell-tale attitude. Those pretensions, when I of all people should know that whether you end up a whore or a lady depends on a throw of the dice, or, as my Scottish grandmother (and my father as well if truth be told!) would have it, a twitch of one minor thread in the great web of life. Thilde, the Magdalene, I know now would have fitted in perfectly among the ladies of the court of the French King Charles or the English King Richard.

Since Sidi Abdelrahman ibn Khaldoun in a moment of folly – for that's what it was, folly brought on by my dancing that evening – gave me my freedom and a bag of gold and Yahia (who was worth more than I was) to be my personal eunuch and body-servant, I've been putting on airs.

The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the Name of the Lord. Yacoub.

I hear her coming back.

Surreptitiously, I steal a glance at my right hand – something I have been too busy to do during the last month! There is no great change for the worse at this stage in my life, only a minor interruption. *Minor?* But then I notice worse interruptions on their way, more prolonged and very unpleasant interludes, before I resume my peaceful progress towards a happy old age. That gap in my Fate Line with a cross in it (a cross!) is new, and there is no sign of any such gap on my left hand.

She is back, sitting down, looking at my hands, looking at me. She is going to ask me if I read hands. I look at hers, prepare

myself. Like Blanche, she has Air Hands. No wonder they and I, with my Water Hands, have such difficulty understanding each other.

But she does not. She simply looks at the contract, sees I have not yet signed it, and waits.

I pick up the quill again, take the lid off the silver ink-well, dip the nib.

'What name shall I put? Sirena? Jonet?'

'Don't try my patience, *Marian*.'

I scrawl "Marian Vass". Vass, my poor dead Scottish grandmother's maiden name. The one they called a witch. Marian Vass. Her name.

'Let me see.' She examines the signature. 'What's this? *Vass*?' She turns back to the first page. 'That's not what it says here. It says Mariana de la Manga, also known as Maryam al Qartayanni. What is this "Vass"?'

'That is my father's *proper* name, his mother's name. Scotland is a matriarchy, inheritance and descent is matrilinear.' Well, it had been once, he'd told me.

She laughs. 'Yes, and the King is a woman.'

'He's not, actually. But the last one, King David, was, from what I hear.'

Another loud laugh, then the grin fades, but her eyes were soft, amused. At least *she* likes me. That is why she is so patient. In her place, I'd have had me beaten to a jelly long ago.

'Now. Shall we try one more time ...?'

'Where – where shall I ...?'

'Leave that – Marian Vass is obviously a name you might one day employ. Write first Mariana de la Manga, then all the others with *alias*.'

'*Oui, madame*.' And so I do. Mariana de la Manga alias Marian Vass alias Maryam al Qartayanni.

'Oh, and it seems you were known in your village as Mariana la Loca.'

She waits.

I blush and nod.
She points at the paper.
I write it, under all the others, in big letters: Mariana la Loca.
She laughs, as well she might. 'Perhaps we'll introduce that name for you here. It might make you a little more popular. Now run along.

'Oui, madame.'

And next morning, I leave for good.

I walk calmly out of the house – wiggle out, actually – Thilde is watching and I want to give the impression I am going outside to tout for clients. She grins, happy for me, happy that I am free to go out at last.

That is the last I ever saw of her. And how I remember her. And how I always now picture Mary Magdalene. That artist was right.

Mère Berte's path and mine did cross again, though, years later.

22

I came out of our alley into the sunshine, and the crowds of people.

It was Friday, a busy day.

A busy day at the market – the only plan I had.

I made my way to the eel stall, my one regret that I had been unable to say goodbye to Margot and Qāsā, and to Scarlt, who had been kind to me.

That artist had probably been right about Scarlt, too. I mean, virgin birth – come on! He was either the son of Joseph ben David or he was not. And if he was not, then kind, clever, beautiful Scarlt, whom I cannot imagine ever saying "No" to a young lover when faced with the imminent prospect of marriage to an old man, was the perfect choice.

'*Pierrette! Tu es jolie comme une fleur!*' It was the flower-man. Three Fridays had come and gone since I was there, but he recognised me at once.

The eel-woman looked up, saw me and grinned. 'Ah! Just the girl I need.'

'Hey, Pierrette! Come and help *me* today!'

'I don't know about flowers!' I yelled back, joining in, becoming part of the scenery. 'I only know about fish!'

In no time at all it was as though I'd been working there among these happy, perfect people all my life.

And it was true. I did know about fish. I'd been a fish myself when I was a child, not a flower.

People thronged the market, pushing and shoving and competing for attention, but I saw no one I knew, no one who might have recognised me. The hours flew by and my arms ached and my hands grew sore despite the gloves she made me wear and the easier – but less flamboyant! – way of doing it that she showed me now, pinning the eel's head down on the chopping-block instead of holding it up in the air.

When the bells finally sounded *Nones* I helped her pack everything up and away. We walked out of the market together, almost the last. She stopped and turned to me, pulled six deniers out of her pouch and held them out. 'You've been a great help, Pierrette.'

'I don't want money. I want somewhere to stay. Just for a couple of nights.'

She gazed into my eyes. I liked Blanche and Mère Berte. I liked this woman better. 'And then?'

'As soon as I can, I'll be gone from Avignon.'

'I see. Shame.'

Her name was Barbara, and during the next few days, we became great friends. She lived in a hut down by the river, to the south of the city. That first day, as we approached the great wall then passed through it by the nearest gate, the one by the bridge, I was

terrified. However, the guards paid us no attention at all. With her I was invisible, one more eel in a heap of writhing eels. Yet each eel, I knew, was distinct, was, in the eyes of God, an individual with its own little life to lead, and joys, and death, to face: God, yes, for whom not one sparrow falls, or one eel, without Him knowing and suffering with them. (Which is heresy by Jewish *or* Christian standards, or so Uncle Yacoub taught me – God is *impassible* – but that was how I felt and how I understood it. The alternative was then, and still is, totally unacceptable.)

To each individual eel and person comes the moment of truth. I had known heaven in the water as a child, and so no doubt had each of these eels as an elver. Now that was all over, though I was not finished, I still had my skin on, I had slipped off the stall and onto the ground when no one was looking, and I was trying desperately to get away, get to water, among all the legs and boots and boxes and dogs ...

Two had slipped off today like that – one without its skin! – and I had retrieved them. Tomorrow, if one did, I would turn a blind eye, let it have its little moment, its little dream of the sea.

Yacoub used to say that when my mind ran away with me like that it was telling me something ...

Barbara's husband, known as Vieux Gaspard, caught the eels his wife sold. His work began as ours came to an end. We passed him on his way to set his traps as we came home. He just nodded at us and went on without a word.

'He doesn't have time to talk now. Eels, the big silver ones on their way down-river to the sea, are best caught at sunset and during the first couple of hours of darkness,' Barbara explained. 'Not that he'd say more than a word or two if he had all day. He'll wait down there by the water till the traps are full, then haul them in.'

'Then come home? We can tell him about me then? Are you sure he won't mind?'

'He'll mind what he's told to mind. And what he has to mind is those traps. When they're full, he hauls them back in, then seals

them so the eels can't get out through the entrance. They're clever little buggers and they'll soon find a way out if they're left in an open trap. Then he has to keep watch over them till dawn. If he just leaves them there in the shallow water, someone will find them and help himself.'

'And at dawn he brings them to you, and you take them to the market.'

'Mm-hm. Now, come on. Let's get some supper.'

'Eels?'

'No! I never eat eels! Vieux Gaspard does. He cooks them on a little fire down by the river during the night.'

That I wanted to see – and share!

The next night, Gaspard stayed at home, but on Sunday morning, while Barbara went into the city to hear Mass, I sat by the water as it swirled past, and watched Gaspard repair his traps, which were made of osier and reminiscent of old Pedro's lobster-pots. He said not a word all morning, but he was a peaceful man.

I watched the river rush by, hour after hour, thinking I should go where the river is going, down to the sea, not north against the current to Paris.

Was that what my mind was telling me? That I should take to the water. But the current was terribly strong, I should make little headway against it, would be exhausted in minutes. Going *downstream*, though ...

'What villages lie downstream? I asked.

He looked up from his work. 'Downstream, there's nothing much till you get to Arles.' There was a long pause. I smiled at him. Even that had been seven or eight words more than I'd expected. But then he went on, opened up. '*Écoute, ma fille.*' Was it the smile? Did no one ever smile at him? 'The Rhône is a lady. The Rose we call her. When she's quiet and content, she provides us with food – look at my eel-traps – I do nothing! – but when she's impassioned, when she's full of fury, she knows no bounds. I've seen Avignon under water many times. And those grand walls now, put up by strangers – that pope – Innocent – to repel invaders.

Ten years have passed since they were built, yet no invaders come near Avignon, nor are like to. It is the Rose the wall serves to keep at bay, the Mother, the river, yet still she sweeps out across both banks and over the fields and meadows till all the land from here to Arles is under water, one great lake.

'My woman and I, we lose our hut time and again, we take refuge in the hills – or now, in the city, behind that wall. Then, when she calms down, the Rose, we build another hut on the site of our old one, and life goes on. But whole villages can't exist like that. So no, there are no villages along the banks, only the crossing between the port at Beaucaire and Tarascon, then Arles, then the open Camargue. There she allows no man to live, only the great herds of wild horses of which she is Queen. Oh, and I almost forgot.' He grinned at me. 'Millions and millions of eels.'

Well, well. A worshipper of the Mother Goddess.

'Eels and crayfish. In the spring I trap crayfish.'

'Using the same traps?'

'Yes, but not in quite the same kind of place. And I use different bait. Chicken-heads for eels, fish-heads for crayfish.'

'Those traps seem very small. Couldn't you make bigger ones and catch more? Or is one all you can catch in one trap at one time?'

'You mean if there is already an eel in the trap will no more enter? No, that's not a problem. On the contrary, they seem to attract others. The problem is otters. You make it much bigger, it becomes an otter-trap.'

'But that's better, isn't it? I mean, otter fur is valuable.'

'Oh, yes. But it's a different trade. I've caught one sometimes, a small one. There's nothing sadder than a drowned otter ... and if it's still alive, I let it go.' He laughed again, suddenly, taking me by surprise. 'It's like catching a cat, or a dog.'

'There's a bridge between Tarascon and Beaucaire?'

He shook his head. 'Only boats. You have a reason to avoid our bridge?' The great bridge that spanned the river on the bend far off to our right.

I nodded.

He studied me. 'You can swim across, *ma fille*. Oh yes, I see your eyes, see how you gaze at the water, not with fear but with longing. A mermaid out of water.'

Mermaid out of water. I loved that. And suddenly I knew what my new name should be, for I could never use Mariana de la Manga again. It would be Mariana de la Mar.

'You can swim straight across, yes – you will end up some way downstream – but don't attempt to swim any distance up or down the middle of the river.'

He was right, I could see. Yet I was worried about tempting the Fates and going back into the city, and out again, past those guards.

'But if you want to cross the river, leave that way, you've no need to swim. I have my little boat.'

He had a little boat?

He pointed it out to me, further along the bank. A tiny, circular boat that he said was called a coracle.

'It's big enough for two?'

'Yes. If you sit very still.'

I had solved the problem of getting away without passing any more guards. The guards on the bridge must be keeping a special eye out for me.

But it was so difficult to disguise myself!

When I'd been with Ferchard and Yahia and had all my clothes and things, I could switch roles, become someone else, so easily – and as a Moorish or Jewish woman, wear a full veil. Here, even *une grande dame* wore only a fine gossamer veil that covered her forehead and ears but left her face for all to see. And in what I was wearing I could not pass as any kind of *dame* at all, and could not therefore wear a veil of any kind. It only needed one person who knew me to focus for a second on my face and eyes rather than on my hands as I skinned the eels or on what they could see of my breasts, and I would be finished.

There was a spell, of course. I had copied it out once or twice in Cuenca. I didn't remember the details, but I did remember that it

was basically a forest spell, it made you invisible amongst the trees and bushes, the hunters would pass you by. Among people though, in a city, or even a village, the only thing is to fit so exactly into your background that you become indistinguishable.

Anyway, witchcraft is the last thing I need to add to the list of charges against me. (Now I come to think of it, it was the only thing missing!)

If I were a man ... It is so easy for a man to pass unnoticed.

And why not, I suddenly thought. I already planned to pass as a man – a boy – in Paris in order to be permitted to enrol at the university. If I was going to dress as a student in Paris, then why not arrive as one? Why not leave Avignon as one?

A student here really was like an eel on the stall. Totally invisible.

But where to get the outfit?

There had been friendly students at the bordel. I didn't know or trust any of them though – except that very first one, Patrick. And if they were serious about catching me, they would be watching him. Anyway, I had no idea how to contact him.

It would have to be Barbara.

'Tell them you have a student with no clothes in your hut.'

'What would I be doing with a student with no clothes in my hut at my age?'

'What's wrong with your age? I can think of lots of things you might be doing with a student with no clothes on.'

'Well, so can I. But they'll believe –'

'Tell them that while he was swimming a rag-picker came and stole all his stuff.'

'Then how come he has money to pay for all this?' she demanded, holding out the gold florin I had given her.

'He hid his purse separately from his clothes, and they didn't find that.'

'You should tell stories in the market place!'

I laughed, and she gave me a kiss and set off. Her parting shot was, 'What if someone wants to come back with me and check up on this student? You may pass as a young man with clothes on. You certainly won't pass as one without!'

Fortunately, no one did. And before dawn next day, Vieux Gaspard paddled me across the river in his coracle.

'Can you swim?' I ask when we are half-way across and being spun hither and thither in the current.

He grins. 'You don't feel safe in my little coracle?'

'I feel safe. I can swim!'

'I can swim, too.'

Of course he can. How else would he have understood my feeling for the water?

'I've been tossed out of her many a time. The currents here are a nightmare when she's in flood. But I've never lost my coracle. Swam to the nearest bank and pulled her with me.'

'That's why you made her so small and light?'

'I didn't make her. But yes, that's so. And so we can carry them on our backs when we're ashore.'

Which we will be very soon. I know I shall feel desperately lonely when Gaspard says "*Au revoir, ma fille*" and sets off back across to Avignon ...

We slither to a halt on the mud-flats that line this side of the river.

I look round. Filthy sludge everywhere. (I hadn't seen the Thames yet!)

Gaspard points. 'There are stepping-stones.'

Sure enough, he has brought us in right alongside a path of large flat stones.

'Bless you,' I say.

'Bless you, *ma fille*. He stands up and steps out to help me. 'Or should I say "*mon fils*"?'

'To you I wish always to be a mermaid. A boy to everyone else from now on, though.'

'Donc, au'voir, ma sirène.' And he kisses me, pushes his funny little boat back out on the water, hops into it, and with a swirl is gone.

Did he turn back to wave? I don't know. I walk up off the mud and into France, then along the path to Villeneuve, tears pouring down my face.

Some boy!

But I was right to be upset! All the time I seemed to make friends and the next day pass on, out of their lives. So many people I could remember, a few I feared and hated, all right, but most of them I loved, and could imagine going on with their lives without me ...

I think that was it, what so upset me suddenly: the fact that I could picture what all of them were doing at that moment, and not one of them could possibly picture me. Or would.

Villeneuve was unvalled, wide open and inviting. I hate those great walls they build round cities! There were huts and hovels at the bottom of the hill, down towards the river – on land that might be flooded? – houses and shops on the slopes above, and high up several palaces, the residences of French cardinals who, I had been told, preferred to have their home in their own country. For yes, this was France. Where I had always dreamed of being.

I dried my eyes. Boys don't cry.

As I walked up the road in my black soutane and open sandals, my hood up over my head and hair and my thumbs tucked into the cord round my waist, the first bell rang out for Lauds and the words came rushing back to me. *Domine labia mea aperies et os meum annuntiabit laudem tuam.* Lord, open thou my lips and my mouth shall show forth thy praise.

How I had hated that nunnery, *Las Hermanas de la Reconquista!* But much of the often beautiful liturgy had stayed with me, and that was going to stand me in good stead now as a student.

Barbara had refused to cut my hair, said it would be perfectly all right tied back in a pony-tail, lots of the students had long hair.

Secretly I was grateful to her. I knew that in Paris I would have to alternate between being a boy and being a lady, have to change quickly backwards and forwards, which would be much easier with my own long hair.

What worried Barbara was my *waist*. No real boy (not many girls either!) had a waist like mine after my month of semi-starvation at La Negrillonne. All Mère Berte's fault, of course. But secretly I was proud of it and doubted if I would take Barbara's advice and "make a pig of myself during the next couple of weeks", which was, she said, the only solution. So I wore the cord tied loose – tied tight it looked ridiculous! – and let it hang down over my hips.

An old man, an early riser, glanced at me, took a second, longer look.

I was dancing along! And the cord made it worse. Worn low like that, it had the same effect as the sash I wore for belly-dancing, emphasising my hips and bottom! *I must walk like a boy*. Like a man. No, a boy. With my face and voice I couldn't possibly pass for anything more than fifteen.

'*Bon jour, mon père*. Could you direct me to the road to Nîmes – Nîmes and Montpellier? And perhaps a *boulangerie* where I might buy some bread. I slept out last night, and am famished.'

'*Bonjour, mon fils*. Nîmes – yes – that way, there. Follow the road. A cart or two will come by soon if you are lucky ... Montpellier, eh?'

He wanted to gossip. I didn't. I thanked him and turned away up the road.

'There's a *boulangerie* on the right will be opening soon,' he called after me.

'*Merci!*'

I bought some hot bread straight from the oven, sat by a kind of fountain where water gushed out of a hole in a tiled wall, fresh spring water, and ate my bread and enjoyed several cupped hands full of the water ... then put the rest of the bread in my satchel and set off for Nîmes.

Nîmes, Montpellier, Narbonne, Toulouse. That would be my route, a route Ferchard and I had discussed when we were planning our escape from Avignon, but that no one else knew I had ever even considered; no one at all.

Then from Toulouse to Paris.

When we talked about it in Avignon, Ferchard estimated that travelling with Khadija and Yahia the journey to Paris by road might take two months.

From Toulouse, I went via Bordeaux and Poitiers. I had no idea, but some other students I had fallen in with assured me that was the best route. It took me five weeks. People help a penniless student!

When we arrived, I went with them to register as a student, using the name I had given my new friends: Magnus (the name of my twin brother who died, or rather disappeared, when we were toddlers). 'Magnus what?' they had asked. I was running out of names. I couldn't use MacElpin or Vass. Then I remembered my father saying that Magnus was an Orkney name. 'Magnus of Orkney,' I told them. 'Orkney?' 'The Orkades. A group of islands off the coast of Scotland.' 'Ah.'

Then I left them, to go in search of "my family".

In fact, it had taken Ferchard two months, so he had only just signed a lease on a house in the rue Alexandre l'Anglois and begun to settle in when I knocked on his door.

It opened. It was him! 'What do you want, boy?'

'Boy? Is that any way to address your favourite foster-daughter?'

And I threw myself into his arms.

END

