

The Knights of the Black & White

Jack Whyte

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Extract

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It has served us well, this myth of Christ.

—Pope Benedict VI

No other problem of our time is rooted so deeply in the past.

—Report of the Royal Palestine
Commission of Inquiry, 1937

It is difficult to distinguish fact from legend ... I have found no consensus on what is fact; it depends on the viewpoint. Interestingly enough, legend—which is by definition distorted—gives a far more acceptable view of events. Everyone agrees on legend, but nobody agrees on facts.

—Michael Coney, *The Celestial Steam Locomotive*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

No other organization in history has captured the attention and curiosity of modern readers as completely and intriguingly as the medieval order of monks known as the Knights Templar. The beginnings of that popular fascination sprang from the 1982 publication of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln. I know that my own interest in the Order of the Temple was kindled by reading that book, because although I had always been fascinated by the mystery and mysticism surrounding the Templars, it was only after reading *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* that I thought, *There has to be a truly great story hidden in there somewhere, if a guy could just strip away all the layers of obfuscation and find a way to really look at who these people were and what made them tick.* I had always believed that the Knights Templar were real, very human people, despite the fact that, back when I was a boy, the only pictures we had of them were stylized stone figures carved on medieval tombs, and the only reports we ever read of them told us they were a villainous and evil breed, condemned and excommunicated by the Church as heretics and apostates.

The grasping Norman knights in *Ivanhoe* were all Templars, as were the lowering, black-visaged villains in several other tales I read in boyhood, and one seldom heard, or read, anything good about the Knights Templar. They were always evil, threatening stereotypes. And yet a quiet, logic-bound area of my awareness recognized other, seldom listed and infrequently mentioned aspects of Templar history: they existed as an order for less than two hundred years, and for most of that time they were the legitimate standing army of

the Catholic Church; they invented and perfected the first sophisticated, credit-and-gold-bullion-based international banking system, and they financed all the kings and kingdoms of Christendom. They also amassed the largest and most impressive portfolio of real estate holdings known to history, and to protect their enormous trading fleet they developed the largest navy in the world. Their black and white naval ensign, a white skull and crossbones on a black field, struck the fear of God into pirates everywhere.

Most impressive of all, however, to a storyteller, was the awareness that their meteoric career effectively came to an end in a single day, on Friday the thirteenth of October 1307, a date, to paraphrase Franklin Roosevelt, that will live forever, if not in infamy, then at least in mystery. And so were born in my mind the elements of my tale of the Templars: *The Beginnings*, designed and brought about, history tells us, by nine penniless men—two of whose names we do not even know today—who spent years digging in the bowels of Jerusalem and unearthed a treasure that made them the most powerful and influential force on earth for two centuries; *The Middle*, when a corps of monks, all of them wearing the equal-armed cross of the Order of the Temple, formed a standing army in the Holy Land and fought to the death, hopelessly outnumbered by the swarming legions of Saladin's Saracens, in a vain attempt to preserve an impossible dream; and *The End*, when the order was overthrown in a single day by the sinister lieutenant of a grasping, ambitious king, and only a few escaped to foster and nurture a legend and a tradition of hope and regeneration.

In writing these novels for modern readers, I have had to deal with the French names of my major characters. All the original Templar knights were French and nobly born, which meant that their names all had a "de" in the middle, as in Geoffroi de Bouillon, André de Montbard, Hugues (Hugh) de Payens, etc. Family names, or surnames, as we know them today, were not in common use that long ago, and most of the identifiable names that existed came from the family's birthplace or region. If a man called Guillaume (William) was born in a certain town or city, such as Chartres in

France, he would be known as William of Chartres ... Guillaume de Chartres. That makes for tough reading in modern English, and so I have made allowances, dropping the "correct" French names in many, although not all, instances, in favor of simplifying things for modern readers. I have given all my characters "modern" sounding names, simply by anglicizing their first names wherever possible and dropping the "de" between their first and second names. Thus Geoffroi de St. Omer becomes simply Godfrey St. Omer, Archambaud de St. Agnan becomes Archibald St. Agnan, and Payen de Montdidier becomes Payn Montdidier, but Hugues de Payens, the founder of the Knights Templar, becomes Hugh, yet remains Hugh de Payens, because that is his historical identity.

I also made a note to myself, back when I first started writing these stories, to be sure to explain a few of the things that were normal eight or nine hundred years ago but would seem utterly alien and incomprehensible to modern readers. For example, no one—neither the clergymen who planned the Crusades nor the warriors who fought in them—ever heard the words *Crusades* or *Crusaders*. Those words came along hundreds of years later, when historians began talking about the exploits of the Christian armies in the Middle East. And the Crusaders' word for the Holy Land was *Outremer*—the land beyond the sea. In addition to that, medieval Europe was not called Europe. It was called Christendom, because all the countries in it were Christian. The name *Europe* would not come along for a few more centuries.

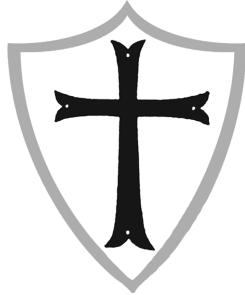
Even more difficult for modern people to grasp is the idea that there was no middle class in medieval Europe, and only one, all-powerful Church. There was no capacity for religious protest and no Protestants. Martin Luther would not be born for hundreds of years. There were only two kinds of people in Christendom: the haves and the have-nots (some things never change), otherwise known as aristocrats and commoners, and both were male, because women had no rights and no identity in the world of medieval Christianity. The commoners, depending on which country they lived in, were known as peasants, serfs, slaves, and mesnes, and

they were uneducated and largely valueless. The aristocrats, on the other hand, were the men who owned and ruled the lands, and they were divided into two halves—knights and clerics. There were no other options. If you were firstborn, you inherited. If you were not first born, you either became a knight or a cleric. From clerics, we get the modern word *clergyman*, because all clerics were priests and monks, but we also get the modern word *clerk*, because all clerics were expected to be both literate and numerate. Knights had no need to be literate. Their job was fighting, and they could hire clerics to keep their records straight. Knights represented the worldly order, whereas clerics represented God and the Church, and there was no love lost between the two orders. On the most basic level, knights existed solely to fight, and clerics existed to stop them from killing. That entailed the most fundamental kind of conflict and led to anarchy and chaos.

The Knights Templar, for a multiplicity of reasons, became the first religious order ever entitled to kill in the name of God. They were the first and the greatest of their kind, and this is their story.

Jack Whyte
Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada
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BEGINNINGS



ONE

“Sir Hugh!”

As the guards on either side of the doors ahead came to attention and saluted him, not even the rattling clatter of their armor penetrated the awareness of the frowning, mop-headed young man who walked towards them. He was deep in thought, head down and moving slowly, a heavy, sheathed broadsword slung across the back of his neck like a yoke, and his arms extended so that his hands hung loosely over both ends of the long weapon, at hilt and point. It was the guards' movements that finally caught his attention as they stepped quickly forward and swung the wide, heavy doors open to admit him. He looked up, blinked, nodded cordially at the guard commander, and dropped one arm from the end of the sword, catching the hilt in his other hand at the same moment, so that the long blade swung upright before he allowed it to slope backward to rest on his shoulder again.

“Practicing, m'lord?” The guard commander's question was rhetorical, but Hugh de Payens stopped walking and glanced down at the sword he held, then flipped it forward, gripping the thick steel hilt with both hands and extending the sheathed blade straight-armed until its weight made the muscles in his enormous arms, neck, and shoulders stand out like ropes. Then he released it with his left hand and twirled it effortlessly with his right until the blade returned to rest on his right shoulder again.

“Practicing, Sergeant? Aye, but not with the sword, not this time. I've been practicing with my memory ... thinking.” He nodded to the other two guards and walked through the open doors, out of the bright afternoon light of the courtyard and into the castle's central

tower, where he paused, momentarily blinded by the sudden darkness. Then, his face growing solemn again, he moved ahead into the immense space of the room, keeping his eyes lowered to the floor ahead of him as his stride lengthened, the sword still angled casually backward, over his shoulder.

Most young men his age would have strutted with such a magnificent sword, using its lethal beauty to enhance themselves, but Hugh de Payens did no such thing. He carried the weapon simply because he had set out with it earlier and thus had to continue carrying it until he could set it down somewhere without danger of its being lost, stolen, or forgotten, and now he headed towards his own quarters, where he could finally lay it down. He was so far removed from awareness of anything else that he walked past a group of brightly dressed, giggling young women huddled in one corner of the vast room without noticing them, despite their admiring glances and the greetings some of them called out to him.

He also failed to notice the tall, broad-shouldered man who came striding towards him as their paths converged almost in the exact center of the room, and it was left to the other to notice that Hugh was making no attempt to slow down or yield as they came together. The man stopped walking and drew himself up to his full height, his eyebrows rising in astonishment, then slowly raised one hand high, fingers spread, and stepped out of Hugh's way. Only as Hugh drew abreast of the taller man, who now reached out to grasp his shoulder, did he become aware of him, and he reared back as though under attack, whipping the sword down from his shoulder and seizing the sheath to pull it off, before looking to see who was accosting him. He grounded the point of his still-sheathed weapon immediately, his face flushing.

"My lord St. Clair! Forgive me, sir. I was ... woolgathering."

The big man's raised hand, even before Hugh's reaction, had been a signal to the single, armed bodyguard behind him to remain where he was, and now as he looked at the young man in front of him, a hint of something that might have been either a smile or a scowl tugged at one corner of his mouth. "I could see that," he

replied, in a great, rumbling bass voice. “But even in the midst of grave concerns, young Hugh, a man should always try to keep one eye at least on his surroundings. What were you dreaming of, so many miles away?”

“Nothing, my lord ... I beg your pardon. I was practicing words in my head, for the Gathering tomorrow night. There is much to learn.”

“Ah, the Responses. Aye, there is, as you say. Particularly for a young man in your position. But you have the best teachers you could have, and I know they are not unhappy with your efforts.” His eyes dropped to the heavy, long-bladed weapon. “But why the sword, godson? Do you remember better with a weapon in your hand?”

Hugh looked down in mild bewilderment at the weapon he was still holding point down on the ground. “No, sir, no, not at all. I went out to walk to the butts, to practice, but I never reached them. I merely kept walking ... thinking about the work and practicing that instead.”

“Aye, well, that sounds like time well used, considering how close you are to the testing. Where are you going now, then?”

“Back to my quarters, my lord, to rid myself of this.” He indicated the sword.

“Here, give it to me and come and walk with me instead.” St. Clair reached out and took Hugh’s sword, then tossed it casually to the armored guard standing several paces behind him, bidding him remain and look after the weapon. As the mail-clad man saluted and stepped back, St. Clair turned back to Hugh. “I was on my way to visit the scene of your trial when you came along, and so I think your arrival might have been a signal that we should visit it together. Seeing the place thus, as sponsor and supplicant, might give us both food for thought, albeit different foods and vastly differing thoughts.”

Listening to the deep voice, Hugh de Payens thought he might have detected a note of humor in those words, but such was his awe of the other man that he could not quite bring himself to believe him

ordinary enough to use humor, and so he merely nodded, his eyes downcast again, although this time in humility. He stepped forward to walk beside and slightly behind St. Clair, too abashed and unsure of himself to make any attempt to speak. Hugh was eighteen years old, big for his years and normally irrepressible, but he was awestruck by the fame and the worldly status of the man with whom he was now walking, a man who was also, beyond doubt, the largest, most physically impressive man Hugh had ever seen.

Without looking back at his godson, St. Clair now reached out a hand until his extended palm found the nape of the younger man's neck, then urged him gently forward until they were walking side by side.

"Your father has high hopes for you, he tells me." The hand fell away from his neck. "Did you know that?"

Hugh shook his head, swallowing the awkward lump in his throat. "No, my lord," he said, his voice emerging as little more than a whisper.

"No, I thought not. Well, take it from me, he does. He is very proud of you. Prouder, I think, than I am of any of my own sons, although I like them all well enough. But like most fathers, yours will probably tell everyone else in the world about his pride and never think to mention it to you. It is a peculiarity common to fathers, I've been told. He will simply assume you know it, since you are his son and therefore so much like him—" He stopped, turned to look at Hugh keenly. "You *have* been down here before, have you not?"

They had paused at the top of the wide marble staircase that spiraled downward from the floor above and continued to the one beneath, and Hugh nodded. "Aye, my lord. Twice."

"Twice, of course. I knew that, had I but thought about it. Your First Summons and your First Advancement. Come you, then, let's make it a third time." The big man started down the stairs, and Hugh followed half a step behind him, still unable to believe that he was actually walking with, and talking with, Sir Stephen St. Clair, and that the great knight had recognized and remembered him. It mattered not

that they were godfather and godson, for St. Clair, one of the most famous knights in all of Christendom, had many godsons, and young Hugh de Payens, although nominally a knight, had done nothing since being knighted, less than two years earlier, to distinguish himself from the ruck of his peers or to make himself memorable in any way. Nor did it matter, Hugh believed, that Sir Stephen had come here to Payens specifically to officiate as Hugh's sponsor at the forthcoming Raising—whatever that might be—for he knew the great knight would have come here anyway, on whatever excuse he could muster. He and Hugh's father, Hugo, the Baron de Payens, had been the closest of friends since boyhood, enjoying one of those rare relationships that make true friendship utterly independent of physical, geographical, or temporal separation. In consequence of that, the two missed no opportunity, ever, to spend time together.

The last time they had met was two years earlier, when Sir Stephen appeared in Payens unexpectedly, accompanied by his patron, who had once been known as William the Bastard but had since become both Duke of Normandy and William I, King of England. The two great men had been on their way home from Normandy, with unencumbered time at their disposal for once, and the King had expressed a wish to see Sir Stephen's family home in Anjou. Their route passed close by Payens, and so Sir Stephen had brought the King of England to call upon his friend the Baron of Payens, knowing that the two had met before, in 1066, when William invaded England.

William had died since then, in a riding accident, and his crown in England had been taken by one of his sons, another William, known as William Rufus because of his red hair and fiery temper. According to reports from England, Rufus was a tyrannical monster, detested by everyone, but somehow the lord of St. Clair, close as he had been to Rufus's father, had also found credibility and acceptance in the eyes of the son, something that few of the old king's favorites had been able to achieve.

Now, descending the stairs at St. Clair's shoulder, Hugh was unsurprised that the new English king should show respect for the

great knight, because Sir Stephen St. Clair's reputation was stainless and his stature reflected his *dignitas*. Even walking one step below Hugh, the older man yet loomed over him, his height greater than Hugh's by almost a full hand's span. At the age of forty-two, he was barely out of his prime, physically towering above most other men but head and shoulders taller in moral stature, too. And he was here in Payens, in the flesh, to honor the son of his best friend and to make the occasion of his Raising a memorable one. This, Hugh had been informed, was a signal honor. It was an honor, however, that he accepted with certain reservations, for he had no idea, even at this late date, less than a day from the Gathering, what a Raising was or what it entailed. Yet he knew, because he had been told so very seriously and very convincingly, that despite its meaning nothing to him now, the Raising would be extremely important to his future.

When he had first heard his father use the term—the Raising—the sound of it, emerging from the Baron's mouth, had been portentous, the emphasis he used setting it apart. That had been nine months ago, and Hugh had immediately asked what it meant, but the Baron's answer had been no answer at all. He had blustered a little, attempting to dismiss it with a wave of his hand, and would say no more than that Hugh would find out all about it when the time came. In the meantime, however, he must begin to prepare for it, since it would be the most important event in Hugh's life. Hearing the Baron say that had silenced his son, who had until then believed that nothing could be more important than his achievement of knighthood, less than a year earlier. He learned otherwise in a very short time, however, for so important was this newly announced ceremonial, this Raising, that both his father the Baron and his mother's father, Lord Baldwin of Montdidier, had become his personal tutors, instructing him patiently and painstakingly on the matter of the Raising every day, and before he had even been permitted to begin working with them, he had had to swear never to reveal what he would learn, or even to mention the Raising itself to anyone.

Since then, for months on end, Hugh had worked harder than he had at anything else in his whole life. His task was to master, by rote

and to perfection, the verbal responses required for the ceremony surrounding the Raising, and the doing of it was far more grievous and exhausting than the harshest weapons training. He had been struggling with the work for months now, achieving something close to fluency in his responses, but he had absolutely no idea of their meaning, at any level of understanding. And now he was within a day of the great occasion, when all the details and the mysteries—the Gathering itself, the importance of the ceremonies, the meaning of the rites and the significance of Sir Stephen’s voyage from England to be present here as Hugh’s sponsor—would be made clear to him.

“I feel feather-light,” the big man said unexpectedly, speaking back over his shoulder as he swept nimbly down the wide, shallow stairway and bringing Hugh’s attention sharply back to where he was. “No armor, and no weapons ...” He stretched his arms out to his sides at shoulder height, and the light material of the decorative cloak he was wearing billowed out behind him almost as though he were floating down the steps, so that Hugh thought, for the second time within minutes, of humor in association with the great man. “And no need of either of them,” St. Clair continued, “although I can scarce believe that.” He stopped suddenly, dropping his arms back to his sides, and when he spoke again all trace of levity had vanished from his voice. “I think I could never grow accustomed to not wearing armor, and I will certainly never be comfortable going weaponless, not even here in your father’s house, where I know it is safe ... That is the difference between your life here today, lad, and ours in England.”

England! There, in a single word, St. Clair had encapsulated all the mystery and legend surrounding himself and his phenomenal prowess. It had been twenty-two years since he had first set foot in England, along with Hugh’s father, Hugo, landing on the south coast of the island as young, untried knights in the invading army of William, Duke of Normandy, in September 1066. Both young men had been Hugh’s age at that time, and they had conducted themselves with distinction during the great battle that had been fought at Hastings two weeks later, in mid-October.

Sir Stephen St. Clair had achieved more than any of his fellows on that occasion—an accomplishment he was to repeat time and again through the decades that followed—for his had been the sword that struck down and killed the English king, Harold Godwinson, that day. He had not known the name or rank of the man he had killed—in the heat of combat he had merely recognized a cluster of enemy officers and attacked them—but his single-handed attack had been witnessed by Duke William himself, and later, when the identity of the dead man had been established beyond doubt, the Duke had known whom to thank, for this single death had cleared the way for William the Bastard to become King of England.

Soldiers' legend had it that Sir Stephen was reluctant to take credit for the victory, and that had it not been for the insistence of the Duke himself as witness, St. Clair would have accepted no reward. The battle that day had been fought between two very different armies. Duke William's was made up mainly of heavy Norman cavalry, generally attributed to be the finest in Christendom, backed up by massed bowmen, whereas the English army was a disciplined infantry force, acknowledged far and wide as the finest in the world. Among the English, however, only the leaders and senior commanders were mounted, which made them easy to recognize, and St. Clair, finding himself close enough to a group of them to attack, had done so. The enemy officers had bunched together defensively at his approach, but after the initial impact of his one-man charge, their much smaller mounts had been scattered by the superior weight of his enormous war horse. Their act of bunching together to forestall St. Clair's attack, however, had attracted the attention of a squadron of Norman archers, who had been trained to watch for sudden grouping of potential targets, and one arrow among the resultant shower of missiles had struck an English knight in the face, leaving him reeling in his saddle, weaponless and shocked, just as St. Clair crashed into their midst. St. Clair had seen the helpless man and struck at him in passing, sending him toppling to his death, but it was unclear later, and generally agreed to be unimportant, whether the fallen man—the English king, Harold—had died by the arrow or

by the sword blow. What was important was that his death had cut the heart out of his army and resulted in the first conquest of Britain in hundreds of years.

Since then, through more than two decades of Norman settlement and occupation of a violently hostile England, Sir Stephen St. Clair had been one of King William's strongest and most loyal supporters and had been consistently and royally rewarded for his services, so that he now owned several vast estates throughout the conquered country. Thanks to the harsh lessons in treachery and duplicity he had learned during his days as William the Bastard, the King would never permit any of his powerful nobles, even the most trusted of them, to grow strong enough to be able to threaten him, and so their lands and holdings were always kept far apart from each other and surrounded by the holdings of their own greatest rivals. That, to St. Clair, made eminent sense. He was more than happy with his lot, and, thanks to that attitude, he had prospered even beyond his own belief.

The two men reached the bottom of the spiral stairs and walked forward several paces to where narrower steps sank straight downward through an opening in the floor, and the sound of their footsteps changed as they passed beyond the polished marble flooring and between the two guards who stood motionless at the top of the smooth sandstone steps. Neither man paid any attention to the table-filled banquet hall surrounding them, their attention tightly focused on the way ahead.

As they reached the bottom of the first stone flight and swung left to continue downward, St. Clair, still slightly ahead of the younger man, spoke again, his words floating back over his shoulder. "Believe me, young Hugh, you have no idea how fortunate you are to be living here, among civilized people you can usually trust not to try to kill you." He glanced back, and this time his teeth flashed in a definite grin before he began to move down the next flight of stairs. "Some of them always will, of course—try to kill you, I mean—but that is only to be expected, men being what they are no matter where one lives. Among the Franks, however, a man

may sleep soundly in his own bed most of the time. In England, on the other hand, a Frank of any station is in constant danger, because to the English, all Franks are Normans. That is not true, of course, but it might as well be, since all the Frankish warriors now in England are in Norman employ. You would be surprised, I believe, to know how seldom I go anywhere without being fully armored. I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times I've gone outside without it since last I was here." They reached the bottom of the last flight of steps and St. Clair raised one eyebrow questioningly. "Right, here we are. Are you ready for this?"

Hugh merely nodded, not trusting his voice, since his throat had swollen up with sudden apprehension halfway down the last flight. The stairs had changed direction three times as they descended, switching back on themselves so that the two men were now deep in the bowels of the castle, five floors below the point from which they had started. The steps of the last flight they had come down were wooden—as broad and sturdy as the stone they had replaced, and still shallow and easy to descend—and they ended in a very narrow, high-ceilinged vestibule that was nothing other than a rectangular pit, lit by half a dozen torches in sconces set at shoulder height into niches along the side walls. The stairs almost completely filled the length and breadth of the space, and the bare, high stone walls on either side were so close that Hugh knew, because he had tried it on a previous occasion, that he could barely have inserted his flattened fingers between the stair risers and the walls. A short walkway, barely three paces in length, stretched from the foot of the stairs to a pair of massive, iron-studded doors that blocked the way ahead as completely as the stairs filled the space at the rear.

Hugh knew enough of what went on down in this most private part of his father's castle to know that preparations were underway for the following night's Gathering. Had it been otherwise, the high, narrow chamber in which they now stood would have been inaccessible, because the wooden flight of stairs would not have been there. It would have been pulled up like the drawbridge it was, to rest flush against the high wall opposite, covering the doors, while a corre-

sponding slab of equal size, cunningly contrived to look like solid, foot-worn flagstones, would have been lowered into place to cover the hole in the floor.

St. Clair stepped forward and used the pommel of his short dagger—the only weapon he carried—to hammer on the oaken doors, and while he awaited a response, he looked at Hugh again. “You have lived here all your life. Did you know this floor existed, before they brought you down the first time, for your initiation?”

“No, sir.”

“That must have been a surprise, eh? To discover that there was a place in your own house you hadn’t known was there?”

“Aye, and such a large place. I do remember the shock of it, my lord.”

“You had no idea of its existence at all? No suspicions? Had you never been down here on the storage floors before? I find that hard to credit.”

“Oh no, my lord. I’d been down here many times, on the floor above this one. We used to play there when I was small and the weather was too wet or stormy for us to be outside, and we enjoyed it because it was always dark and dusty and dangerous looking. But the floor up there was always the *floor* ... the ground. None of us knew there was anything beneath it. How could we?”

“And you know that now because you went looking for an entrance soon after your first visit here, eh?”

Hugh nodded, smiling sheepishly. “Yes, my lord. I did. I came down alone, the next day, and brought torches with me, sufficient to give me ample time to really look around. I could not believe that there was nothing to see. I thought I must have missed something before, some sign that would have shown me where to look. But even when I went back *knowing* there was an entrance, and knowing where to look for it, I could see nothing.”

“Of course you couldn’t. Because there is nothing there to be seen. You either know the secret of access or you do not. This place was built hundreds of years ago by people who knew how to hide the evidence of their work from profane eyes when they so wished. Aha! Someone

is coming. Step away.” He grasped Hugh’s wrist and pulled him backward with him as he stepped away from the doors. There came a muffled sound from the other side of the heavy doors that suggested a solid bar being dragged aside, and then a tiny, windowlike aperture, smaller than a man’s face, opened in the door on the left and someone looked out at them. Hugh had known that would happen, but even knowing and looking for it, he failed to see the outline of the spyhole before it swung open. Sir Stephen stepped forward, cupped his hands around the edges of the tiny window, and leaned forward to whisper. Moments later, the great door swung open on one side, and St. Clair stepped through, motioning to Hugh to go with him.

Hugh remembered this entrance well, for it had unsettled him when he had first used it. The thick, high doors opened outward rather than inward, and the space beyond them unexpectedly contained only a short passageway, less than two paces long, that was built purely for defense and shrank alarmingly on all sides, forcing everyone who passed through—and they could pass only one at a time—to crouch into an awkward, stooping shuffle by the time they reached the end of the passage to exit through yet another door. Beyond that lay another vestibule, this one octagonal, with doors, much smaller than but otherwise identical to the outer pair, set into every facet of the octagon, and even as Hugh emerged from the low entranceway he saw the nearest door to his left close behind the departing figure of the gatekeeper.

“Eight doors,” St. Clair said. “All identical. You have been through two of them ere now. Do you remember which they were?”

Hugh nodded and pointed at two doors, one on his left and the other on his right.

“Good man. Now, which of the two do you remember better?”

“That one, the more recent.” Hugh pointed again at the one on his left.

“Then that is the one we will use today.” St. Clair stepped forward and pushed the door open easily, much to Hugh’s surprise, since he had expected a guard on duty there, too. The knight stepped inside and the younger man followed him along the narrow, curving,

dimly lit passageway that he remembered from his previous visit, until they reached a curtained doorway. Sir Stephen pulled the curtain aside and passed through into the space beyond, and Hugh followed him, knowing that what he was about to see, if he saw anything at all, would probably bear no resemblance to what he had seen on either of his two earlier visits to this place.

Sure enough, the place was shrouded in darkness, the only light being a dim glow from a single hanging lamp that seemed to be a great distance away from where he stood, although he suspected that was probably an illusion. Hugh stopped on the threshold, blinking his eyes and willing them to adjust quickly to the available light, and as they did so, he began to discern vague shapes and patterns in the surrounding darkness, the easiest of which to see was the pattern of the black and white squares of the tessellated floor. Most of what he could see, however, remained an indistinct collection of draped and shrouded shapes, one of which, close by where he stood, might have been a heavy, ornate chair.

“Stay you here now and don’t move around, lest you blunder into things and knock something over. There is much in this room of great value, and your future brethren would not be pleased were anything to be broken through your clumsiness. I have some things to see to, and will return as soon as I am done. But I am not going anywhere. I will be here all the time and you will hear me moving about. You may not be able to see me, or what I am doing, but then you should not even be here, so nothing is lost ... unless, as I say, you knock something over, in which case we will both find ourselves in dire circumstances.”

A short time later, the knight returned and led Hugh by the hand across a broad floor until they came to a row of seats, where he told Hugh to sit down, and then proceeded to catechize him on the questions and answers Hugh had been rehearsing with his father and grandfather for months. Hugh felt strange, sitting there in the darkness and responding by rote to the arcane questions being thrown at him. Many of them—questions and answers both—he did not understand at all, reciting his answers verbatim as he had been taught them and

trusting blindly that their meaning would be revealed to him in due course, as his mentors had promised they would. Now, however, sitting in the darkness and going through his exercises with the massive knight who was to be his sponsor, he felt stranger than he ever had before, excited and apprehensive at the same time, and acutely aware of who and what he was at that moment, because he knew that, as the result of some mysterious process, he would never again be the same man after the events of the following night.

He became aware then that St. Clair had said nothing since he answered the last question, apparently having no more to ask, and the knight confirmed that by clearing his throat softly and quietly saying, "I'm impressed, lad. I don't think I have ever heard a student answer better. I've heard many as good, but none better. I can see why your father is pleased with you. If you perform like that tomorrow night, you will have no difficulty with any part of the ceremonies. Now, ask me a question, anything you like."

"About the Gathering, you mean?"

"About anything you like, I said."

"Well, my lord, there is one thing. What ... what does a Raising mean? What is it?"

"Ha! I should have known you'd ask me the only question I can't answer. I can't tell you, boy. Not that. But come midnight tomorrow, you'll know anyway, and you'll know, too, why I could not tell you tonight. Now ask me something else."

"Well, sir, now that the other brethren know me as a student, some of them have been warning me that the Raising is dangerous, that there are great risks built into it. But I suspect that's only their way of cozening me, and I don't want to waste my question by asking about that ..."

"Then ask me something you do want to ask about."

Hugh nibbled at his upper lip, and then blurted, "Why me, my lord? Why not my brother?"

"Ah, so you know about that. I was wondering if you did." The dimly outlined shape across from Hugh stirred in its seat. "Who told you about it?"

“My father, and my grandfather, too. They warned me not to speak of it to William, because he knows nothing of the reality of the Gatherings and does not belong to the brotherhood. I asked them what brotherhood they were talking about, since William is my brother, but they would tell me nothing more. They said I would understand everything after my own Raising, and that until then they could say no more. But they warned me that if I were to speak a word of this to William I would forfeit my own chance of belonging. I am not sure I want to belong to any brotherhood—and I care not what it does or what it means to others—if it requires me to deny my own brother.”

St. Clair exhaled loudly. “There’s no denial involved, Hugh, but I understand what you mean. I was in your shoes myself once, facing the exact same circumstances and for exactly the same reasons. My elder brother was passed over, just as William was.”

“But for what reason?” There was anguish in the young man’s voice. “There’s nothing wrong with my brother. William is not a bad man, he is simply ... young.”

“Aye, *young*. That he is. And weak, too, whether you care to admit that or not.” The voice coming from the darkness was heavy now, speaking slowly and clearly. “He is your elder by two years, Hugh, and you are already years senior to him in rank and prowess. How long can a boy continue to be a boy before becoming a man? Your William, like my own brother Richard before him, is still attempting, successfully it seems, to avoid achieving manhood. And manhood is what this is mainly about, Hugh.”

“Aye, perhaps it is, but William will one day be Baron de Payens.”

“And you will not. Do you resent that?”

Hugh blinked, surprised that he should be asked. “No, of course not. I have never thought to be Baron. It simply seems to me that if he is judged fit to be the Baron of Payens, he should be deemed good enough to join this brotherhood of yours.”

“Not at all.” St. Clair’s voice was flat. “There is no *judgment* involved in his being your father’s heir. That is sheer chance. As

firstborn, he is *blessed* among your father's sons, but he is not necessarily *best* among them. Should William prove to be a weak baron, or a foolish or even a tyrannical one, any damage that he does may be undone by his successor. On the other hand, should he prove to be a weak member of our brotherhood, the damage he could do might well destroy it.

"The event for which you are training now—your Raising—will grant you entry into the ranks of an amazing comradeship, Hugh, a fraternity dedicated to great ideals and the protection of dire secrets. Its roots are ancient and its history is shrouded in the earliest beginnings of antiquity, and you know nothing about it. Can you guess why you know nothing?"

Hugh shook his head, realizing as he did so that St. Clair probably could not see him. "No."

"Because it *is* secret, lad, and it has been that way since its beginnings. Secrecy is essential to its continued existence, and so we who guard its secrets must be constantly vigilant, particularly among ourselves. I tell you this now only because, having listened to you at your work, I know you will pass tomorrow's test with no difficulty, and that means you will be admitted to our fraternity tomorrow anyway. No one—*no* one, Hugh—who is loose-lipped can ever be admitted to our brotherhood. The danger of his drinking or whoring and then talking indiscreetly is too great. Your brother William drinks too much, and when he drinks even a little, he talks too much. He is a splendid fellow, a good companion with whom to share a flask of wine or a meal and a fit of laughter over amusing and trivial things, but he is weak willed, intemperate, quarrelsome at times, and always too talkative and indiscreet, and thus he was deemed unworthy of belonging."

"He was *deemed*? By whom? Who would be arrogant enough to deem the son of Baron Hugo de Payens unworthy?"

St. Clair sighed. "Your own tutors, lad. His father, the Baron de Payens himself, and his grandfather, the lord Baldwin of Montdidier. One person per family, Hugh, that's all that is permitted. One son from each generation of each of the families involved

may be initiated into the mysteries, and the selection has nothing to do with the laws of primogeniture. The first boy born into a family will inherit, if he lives. That is the law. But the boy chosen from among his siblings to be of our brotherhood is chosen by merit, not by any accident of birth, timing or precedence, and therefore all the sons of all the families are watched closely by *all* the elders. There is no room for error or for carelessness.”

He held up an open palm to forestall Hugh before he could interupt. “I know what you are going to say—how can they judge such things? Well, eighteen is the youngest age at which a new member may join, and by then he has been closely watched and judged for suitability for years. Thus, if a family has seven sons, born even two years apart, and none of them shows distinctive and definitive qualifications for membership, the elders may simply defer making a choice among the seven until sufficient time has passed to form a judgment on the youngest one. The oldest boy will be fourteen when the seventh is born. By the time the youngest is eighteen, the eldest will still be only thirty-two years old, should the final choice revert upon him. But even then, if the elders are unable to decide, they may simply invite no one from that generation to join. Ours is a secret fraternity, so no one who is not of the brotherhood would know what had been done, and therefore no one would be slighted or offended. It would not be the first time that had ever happened. There are sufficient families to generate an intake for every generation, and a passed-over generation may easily provide worthy members the next time around.”

“But—” Hugh bit off his response before it could emerge.

“But what? What were you going to say?”

“What would happen if the elders judged two or more members of the same generation of a family to be worthy of admission?”

Hugh could hear the smile in St. Clair’s voice as the knight responded, “Then the family involved would have produced a fine crop of sons. It happens often, Hugh, far more so than you might think, but nevertheless, only one from each family is admitted in a generation. Therefore, as you can see, the matter of the final

choice is one of delicacy and fine judgment, involving great debate and deliberation.”

“Who are these elders, then?”

St. Clair stretched and stood up, the smile still evident in his voice, even though Hugh could not see his face. “They change from year to year, depending on who dies and who survives, and that, my young friend, must be your tenth and last question, since I permitted you only one.”

“One more then, my lord, a brief one, if it please you. How long is it since you were Raised, and has it truly made a difference to your life?”

Hugh sensed the knight’s shape grow still in the darkness, and when the deep voice spoke again it was quieter than it had been before. “I was eighteen, the age you are now, and that was a long time ago ... twenty-three years and more. As for whether it made a difference to my life, I must say that it has. Not because it generated any major change that I could identify with certainty, but because of all I have learned since, simply through belonging. I can tell you honestly that I believe myself to be a better man because of what the brotherhood has taught me, but more than that I cannot say until you yourself have been admitted to the fraternity.” A sound from somewhere in the surrounding darkness made the knight look around him. “Come now, our brethren here are growing impatient to be gone, for they have been working down here all day, preparing for tomorrow’s ceremonies. Besides, it must be close to dinnertime.”

Together the two men retraced their steps until they passed through the last pair of doors and found themselves in the pit again, at the bottom of the wooden stairs. The torches in the sconces along the wall were beginning to gutter audibly and would soon burn themselves out, but everyone down here on this hidden level would have departed before then, and the stairs would have been removed and the stairwell disguised by the false flooring above. Neither man said another word until they reached the upper floor where they had met, and as Hugh collected his sword from Sir Stephen’s waiting

guard, the knight inclined his head graciously to his godson, bidding him farewell.

Before they could part, however, they were interrupted by the sound of young female voices calling their names, and Lady Louise de Payens, Hugh's younger sister, came gliding towards them with her best and dearest friend, Lady Margaret St. Clair, Sir Stephen's fifteen-year-old daughter, who had arrived with him from England the previous day. Extending a hand to each of the girls, Sir Stephen greeted them with an enthusiasm that might have surprised more than a few of the men who looked up to him as a paragon of stern military virtue. Before the girls could tug him away with them in the direction of the guest quarters, he pulled them to a standstill, gripping their wrists tightly, one in each hand, and using the pressure of his fingers to bid them silently wait until he had finished his dealings with Louise's brother.

"I will see you at the appointed time tomorrow, godson. On the other matter, the one you did not want to waste a question on before, look at it through the eyes of the tutors with whom you have been working, and ask yourself if they would endanger you in any way. The lads are teasing you, as you suspected. It's all a part of learning to belong, and of earning your place. You'll survive." He swung away to face the girls. "And now, young ladies, I am yours to command." The girls called goodbye to Hugh, then led Sir Stephen away, each of them holding one of his hands now, and neither of the two men had noticed the glance that passed between the girls as they listened to what the knight had said to Hugh.