

Behind the funeral cart, Brother Primael walked with a stride as steady as he could contrive, a solitary mourner, incongruous in his isolation. His isolation was not unobserved, however. The cottages that the cart passed remained stubbornly closed; no one came out to watch the vehicle pass by, but in the gloom behind the raggedly-draped windows, there was occasional movement, and the Benedictine, whose sight was still keen in spite of his almost-seventy years, glimpsed brief gleams that must have been the reflection of eyes.

On the hillside, higher up than the burial ground, two black-clad figures were standing in the open, ostentatiously, as if posing. Whereas the inhabitants of the cottages did not want to be seen at any price, they intended their presence to be known, as the threat that it was—naked, albeit premature. One was tall, the other short, but their cowls were raised, and Primael could not make out the detail of their faces. The taller man was holding a wooden cross, which he held up as if he were delivering an anathema, with the shorter one made the sign of the cross with his hand.

Under other circumstances, Primael would have been offended by that, but not alarmed, believing that he had the entire community of the Abbey to shield him against any oppression on the part of the rival order, but his companions were now exceedingly conspicuous by their absence. The Abbot had not forbidden them to attend the funeral, but his decision that Ollivier had to be interred in the public burial-ground of the village and not in the Abbey grounds had spoken volumes. No one but Primael had wanted to accompany the dead man to his final earthly abode, even though, like Primael, he had been a tutor and mentor to most of them.

Primael told himself, sternly, that he had nothing to fear from the two Dominicans, who were probably as frightened as he was, given the context in which they were operating, in what had to be reckoned enemy territory in more ways than one. He did not tell himself that he probably had precious little life left to lose, because *precious* was the operative word; however little time might remain to him, he did not want to lose it, and above all, he did not want to waste it in prison, while the Inquisition prepared charges against him and its secular minions prepared their instruments of torture in order to facilitate his confession to sins he had not committed.

Since the foundation of their Order long ago, in the Midi, the Dominican predators had had little or no purchase in Bretagne, in spite of the aftermath of the scandal at the Château de Tiffauges and the trial of Gilles de Rais, which continued to fester and to fuel rumors of diabolism after more twenty years, even as far afield as Paimpol—but times were changing. It was common knowledge among the peasants and townsmen of the region, let alone in the Abbey, that as soon as Louis the Prudent, the Universal Spider, was dead and buried, and Burgundy no longer a distraction, new political alliances had been redrawn by the Regent and her husband. The Kingdom of France was now in the process of annexing the whole of Bretagne by means of armed might; the Regent had not licensed the black friars to launch a massive heresy-hunt, backed by her invading troops, but it was a card that she would not hesitate to play if she thought it politic.

Anne and Charles had as much Breton blood in their veins as any other kind, but that was not inhibiting them from launching mayhem and murder within the realm, and it would not stop them from attacking the churches and abbeys of the region if any orators elected to preach against the invaders. Heresy charges had long been an important instrument of political propaganda and manipulation, in the deployment of which the Dominicans—who were fighting their own long war for power and influence within the Church while France and Bretagne fought theirs—were expert, making full use of the special privileges granted to the order by Rome.

Ever since returning from his missionary service in Spain and the brief sojourn at Tiffauges thereafter, when he had not yet turned twenty, Primael had led a sheltered life in the Abbey, supposedly isolated from worldly turmoil, but his pastoral duties often took him outside the walls, especially since the Abbey had acquired medical texts from which he and Ollivier, their primary custodians, had learned healing arts. He was aware of all the news that reached the scattered communities within a league of Paimpol, and all the rumors too. He had more than adequate grounds for his anxiety.

Until the last few days, Primael had never had any reason to fear that he might become a scapegoat in the deadly game of heresy-hunting, but Ollivier's illness and death had changed his situation drastically. He had no protection but the Abbey—what remained of his family, the Quemerles, was of no political consequence whatever, even in Quimper—but he had always thought the Abbey a more than adequate shield, especially since the passage of time had left him in a position of seniority there, effectively equal to Ollivier's even though the latter was two and a half year older, and had been the principal tutor to numerous sons of the aristocracy, sent to complete a veneer of

education there from as far away as Rennes. He and Ollivier had been on excellent terms with superior of the Abbey, who had been Herik Berthou before entering Holy Orders and taking the conspicuously un-Bretagnian name of Brother Michael. Primael's position and reputation for scholarship had made him a person of considerable consequence within the monastery—until Ollivier had returned from Tardivel and fallen ill, triggering the rumor that his illness, his disfigurement and his eventual death were a divine punishment visited upon him for a horrible sin: that of practicing necromancy.

The wise thing to have done, in the present circumstances, Primael knew full well, would have been to imitate his brethren, stay in his cell, and not to follow Ollivier's coffin: to hide, as everyone else was doing; but Ollivier had been his friend for forty years—and Ollivier, he felt quite certain in his heart, had been innocent of any sin, unless scholarship were to be reckoned a sin in itself. Ollivier had always taken more interest in the texts of occult science that they had both read than Primael had, but surely only as a scholar, with not the slightest shadow of evil intent. The delirium of his final fevers had been mere delirium, and the obsessive repetition therein of various arcane formulae had been an unconscious trick of the mind, such as the mind often played in delirium, and even in ordinary bad dreams. He had not been remembering or attempting to work magic spells. Primael was sure of that, sure of Ollivier's innocence.

But then, Primael still felt sure in his heart that Gilles de Rais had been innocent as well, and that innocence had not helped Gilles when the conspiratorial web had trapped him. Unlike Jeanne d'Arc, poor Gilles had not been redeemed by a belated intervention by Rome and given the status of a martyr; his demonization continued apace, having only increased its magnitude since his death. There was no justice in politics, within the Church as well as without.

The funeral cart continued to make its slow and painful way up the hill towards the burial ground. The weather was gray and overcast, and a cold wind was blowing from the east. The stout peasant who was guiding the cart and the thickset companion who was sitting beside him wore sullen scowls upon their faces. Even the two old bay mares that were pulling the vehicle were holding their heads very low, as if they had no enthusiasm at all for the work, although they could not have had any notion of why the burden they were carrying was dangerous, and the crude coffin was certainly a good deal lighter than the cargoes of hay, oats and turnips that were their more usual haulage.

The Benedictine could almost feel the pressure of the gazes watching from the cottages physically. While he went about his normal business he had always commanded respect, and had been treated with due deference, but he had a dire sensation of that respect having slipped away mysteriously, replaced by suspicion and hostility. Ollivier—whose surname had once been Abalain, and who had had noteworthy relatives—had been even more respected for the greater part of his life, and thus granted a proportionately greater due deference, but almost overnight, since falling ill, he had become a telling illustration of the fragility of such respect, and the damage that malevolent rumor could do in a time of war, when fear was abroad and hunting for objects on which to seize.

How had the rumors of Ollivier's dabbling with the Devil started? Primael had no idea. Who could possibly have anything to gain by spreading the slander? Rumors of sorcery and necromancy were by no means uncommon in Bretagne, especially in the vicinity of the Forest of Ploermel—greatly reputed as the principal residuum of Broceliande, the legendary lair of all kinds of enchantments—but for most of Primael's life, the Abbey had been regarded as a powerful bastion of defense against sorcerers and phantoms, the Dames Blanches, the Marie-Mortes and all the Devil's imaginary instruments. How had that changed so swiftly?

No one within the Abbey, so far as he knew—although the Abbey was not without its ration of secrets, of the various sorts to which the Church was, by nature, always hospitable—had anything to gain by invention and disseminating such slanders, and no one in the parish of Paimpol either...but the question of where and how the rumor had taken wing was irrelevant now; the fact was that it had, and that it had attracted the attention of the Dominicans, who must have immediately begun to wonder whether it might be useful in their insidious progress to power within the bosom of the Church.

Primael raised his hand to his forehead and brushed the skin mechanically, although he was not sweating. His throat was dry, and his legs ached, even though the September sun was not unduly hot nor the hill excessively steep. He felt guilty for having hoped briefly that Ollivier's death might put an end to the matter, because it smacked of wanting to obtain some personal advantage from his friend's death. He felt guilty, too, for walking awkwardly and a painfully, when he would have liked to hold his head up high and maintain a stern stride, to illustrate his rectitude; but there was nothing he could do about the fact that he was old, and his joints were stiff. He put his hands carefully within the folds of his cloak, because the cold wind was making his gnarled fingers ache, and fingered the tattered pages of the missal nestling in its pocket—a gesture that automatically brought prayers to the tip of his tongue, although he did not pronounce them, even silently. The missal was a copy that he had made himself, long ago, before he had ever seen a printed book.

*Courage*, he said to himself, instead. *You are doing God's work. He will not fail you.*

But he was not reassured.

When the cart finally reached the gates of the burial ground, a small company of small boys who had been hiding behind the low wall suddenly popped their heads above the parapet, and hurled a few handfuls of mud and stones in the direction of the approaching cart, crying: "Necromancer! Filthy necromancer!" before running away as fast as their feet could carry them. The missiles did not hit anything; the boys had acted too precipitately, hastened by fear.

Was it just a childish display of bravado, Primael wondered, or had someone put them up to it? Not the Dominicans surely—but if not them, who?

*Just a display of bravado*, he concluded, uneasily. He contemplated shouting after them, angrily, but they were already out of earshot, and in any case, the cart-driver was already sending a volley of oaths in their direction, not because he wanted to defend Ollivier against the charge, but because he knew that he had been in more danger of being hit by the stones and mud than the dead man, who would not have suffered anyway.

Did the boys even know what the word *necromancer* signified? Primael wondered. Probably not; to them it was just a term of vulgar abuse. Had they known, they would probably have calculated that hurling the insult, even at a dead man—perhaps especially at a dead man—was a little too daring. The Abbey had been in existence for five hundred years, although it had been burned in its early days by the Normans and completely rebuilt for a second time a little more than a hundred years ago, but its presence and influence had never contrived to stamp out local superstition completely; it had certainly contrived to apply Satanic labels where once there had been mere pagan grotesquerie, but sometimes Primael wondered whether the fact that the churches in the region were full on Sundays really signified that the peasantry were less ungodly now than their ancestors had been before their conversion, or whether it merely testified to their awareness of the importance of apparent conformity.

He was a Breton-born commoner himself, but in the eyes of many of his own kind, that only meant that he was now a defector of sorts, currying favor with the authority of the Church. As soon as he had learned to read and write, having crossed the threshold of the seminary, he had ceased in the eyes of the local peasants to be a *true* Breton, and had become a "Norman," in the special meaning that Bretons intended by that term. But Primael still felt Breton, in his blood and bones. He was still Primael Quemerle, and had even retained his given name within the bosom of the Order, just as Ollivier Abalain had become Brother Ollivier. The Church was tolerant of such local usages—but even that, he now suspected, might become something that the Dominicans might seek to use against him, if he were unfortunate enough to fall under their jurisdiction.

There was no one standing by the freshly-dug grave. The cart-driver and his thickset companion had been ordered by the Abbot to lay the coffin in the ditch and cover it over. Primael waited patiently for them to unload the coffin, to manipulate the ropes, and to lower it into the hole. They worked slowly, and awkwardly, as if making a show of the fact that it was not work to which they were accustomed, and not a kind of labor to which they ever wanted to become accustomed. They did not speak to Primael, but when they had finished they assumed a respectful stance, caps in hand, and did not even glance in the direction of the watching Dominicans. They were playing their part carefully.

Primael had no need to consult the missal in order to recite the necessary formula, which he knew by heart, but he did it anyway. He too was putting on a show—but he knew that there was no reason to be ashamed of that, given that the recitation in question was all show itself, a symbolic defiance of death and an affirmation of faith in the Resurrection. This was still holy ground; Ollivier's posthumous banishment from the Abbey had been deliberately incomplete, and it seemed to Primael that the diplomatic compromise in question made the present show of faith all the more necessary. The formula was recited properly, in good Latin. Everything else was in order; Ollivier had been confessed by Brother Michael, and absolved of his sins. He was sure and certain of the Resurrection, if...

*If?* Primael grimaced slightly. How could there be an *if*? How had that syllable arrived in his train of thought, unbidden?

"I was his friend," said Primael, aloud, although he did not look at the cart-driver and his accomplice while they were filling in the grave, with much greater efficiency and rapidity than they had maneuvered the coffin into it. "I have known him since childhood. He was a good man."

Perhaps surprisingly, the driver looked up from his labor and said: "Aye," in a tone very different from the one he had used to curse the children. He said no more, because no more was necessary, and because he was shifting soil, with the hasty regularity of a man concluding a task with which he was anxious to be done.

Primael had never had occasion to preach a sermon against necromancy, but he had heard such sermons preached, and not only in his youth. Old as he was, his memory still retained some of those preached on the subject of Gilles de Rais.

“A man forsakes all claims of friendship and amity when he delves into forbidden lore,” one stern priest had said. “A man who seeks to deal unnaturally with the dead must be shunned absolutely by the living. A man who forsakes the Scriptures in order to delve in proscribed books is delivering his soul to the Devil.”

*And what of the pythorem of Endor who summoned the spirit of Samuel at the request of King Saul?* Primael had thought at the time. *Do the prophets really do the bidding of the Devil’s henchmen? Something is amiss in the legend.* Nowadays, he no longer found any reason for surprise in the suspicion that something might be amiss with Biblical legend. He had read too much, even without delving overmuch into forbidden lore, not to know that legend was a labyrinth, in which there were many wrong turns.

“Ollivier has joined the ranks of the dead himself now,” said Primael, still speaking aloud, in the Breton vernacular that he still thought of his own, because he was talking to himself rather than to the cart-driver. “He is now a memory to the living, and the memories which I have of him are memories of goodness, piety and altruism. I am here in order to bid farewell to a man I have known all my life, and to attest that he is fully deserving of divine resurrection. I will not permit the fact that he has lately been abused by foolish and malicious men to prevent me from doing so, or make me feel the slightest shame.”

Perhaps because he was using the language of the local peasantry, the cart-driver must have assumed that the words were addressed to him. “Aye, Father,” he said, again, like a weak echo of his former remark. Then he wiped his forehead; he really was sweating, in spite of the brisk wind, which carried a suggestion of autumnal chill.

The grave was now filled in.

“You may go,” Primael said, to both the waiting men. “I shall stay a little longer, to complete my farewell.”

Both men seemed surprised. Although he had been behind the coffin, they had observed the difficulty he had in negotiating the hill. They had expected him to ride back to the Abbey on the cart.

“It’s all right, lads,” he said, with the faintest of smiles. “It’s all downhill.”

The driver’s eyes flicked in the direction of the black-clad figures on the hillside. Primael’s smile widened slightly. “Have no fear for me, my son,” he said, a trifle presumptuously. “Crows of that species don’t pluck out the eyes of their victims in broad daylight.”

The driver’s eyes were raised, not piously toward heaven, but to indicate that the daylight was murky, and that even noon, when it came, would not bring a more conspicuous brightness.

“Thank you, lads,” said Primael, sincerely. “I’ll remember you in my prayers.”

The driver and his companion turned away, and took half a stride in the direction on the gate of the burial-ground—but they both stopped with the stride incomplete, with a comical simultaneity. There was a sudden clatter of hooves in the gateway, a huge bay horse, liberally flecked with sweat, was abruptly reined in some twenty paces from the grave. A man leapt down, patting the trembling horse upon the neck to offer thanks for its unusual effort—it was obvious that the mount had been ridden a long way, and urgently.

The newcomer was a young man in his twenties, plainly dressed, without livery or ornament—but he strode toward the graveside with the pride and grace of an aristocrat. He barely glanced at the two men whose departure he had interrupted momentarily, and who had already resumed their hurried retreat. For a split second it seemed that he might dismiss Primael with the same casually scant attention, but then his gaze was arrested and he looked at the Benedictine with respect—and recognition. His own stride was cut short momentarily, and he bowed. Primael recognized him, too: Corentin de Tardivel, at whose manse Ollivier had stayed for three months before falling ill on his return

*I am not entirely alone, then, he thought. There still another man in this benighted land willing to mourn Ollivier Abalain, and to be seen to do so, other than as a matter of compulsory duty.* He was so grateful no longer to be alone that his gratitude overrode the awareness that, of all the company he might have had at present, under the eyes of the Dominican spies, this was undoubtedly the most dangerous.

Having bowed, the young man moved on, to stand before the grave. As he looked down at the freshly-moved earth, there were tears in his eyes.

“Be welcome, Corentin,” Primael said. “I did not know that the Abbot had sent a messenger to Tardivel.”

The other looked up, and smiled—but thinly, as if he did not have the heart for a proper greeting. “You do well to remember me, Brother Primael, even though it’s no more than five years since I was your pupil. I fear that I must have changed a great deal since then.”

“Hardly at all,” said Primael, slightly surprised. “If I seemed to hesitate before greeting you, it’s because old age is eroding my alacrity.”

“No apology is necessary, Master,” Tardivel assured him. “Pupils always remember their teachers far better than teachers remember pupils, who are transient and numerous. It’s a matter of simple arithmetic.”

Primael's memory was working hard, recovering and collating the information it had regarding the young man. Where was Tardivel, exactly? Some way to the north, not far from Trehonteuc, in Herbriant. Wooded country, not the interminable Breton heathland: another fragment of what had once been Broceliande.

"Ollivier was in your manse for nearly three months," Primael remarked. "He must have fallen ill during the return journey. He was seventy years old, and the trek was doubtless arduous on his donkey."

"He had a mule," Tardivel corrected. "Yes, he was my guest for nearly three months, on the most recent occasion. It was kind of Brother Michael to release him for so long: a favor for which I'm still in his debt, and for which I hoped that he does not consider me ingrate, for I was coming to ask him for another. I only learned this morning that he will not be able to grant it, when I paused at the inn in Brehonnec to water my poor horse, and was told that Ollivier had died."

That was obviously not all that the vicomte had been told at the gossip-well, for his eyes shifted in the direction of the two Dominicans, who had altered their stance and were now exchanging remarks, presumably discussing the unexpected arrival of a second person at Ollivier's graveside. Primael knew that it would not take the black friars long to learn the identity of the man in question, given that he was known in the vicinity and that he had paused to ask questions at a wayside inn. They were far enough away not to have been able to see the tears in his eyes, but the young man's attitude had testified clearly enough to the fact that he was no enemy of the man they suspected of having made a pact with the Devil.

"It might not have been entirely wise for you to come here, Sire," said Primael, mildly, "once you had heard what is being said about Ollivier in the vicinity."

The young man's lip curled. "Ollivier was my mentor," he said, "and lately the best friend I have ever had. And this is holy ground, is it not? That sheaf of paper in your hand is a missal, I assume, so I know that he has been buried in accordance with the rites of the Church. And if I can trust my eyes and my heart, you are not here under duress, or even out of duty. He spoke about you a great deal, Brother Primael, as a loyal friend and a true man of God."

"I was proud to be his friend," Primael said, "and I still am. He was a fine scholar, and I never knew a kinder man. I could not desert him, even dead, and even with carrion crows gathering over a reputation slain by delirium."

"Delirium?" Tardivel echoed, the tone of his voice becoming uneasy. "What did he say?"

"Mostly gibberish—but I fear that one of the younger monks who took a turn at sitting by his bedside got it into his head that he was reciting spells—spells intended to raise the dead. That absurdity spread through the convent like wildfire and soon breached the walls."

Tardivel's face was pensive, as his mind doubtless made the connection between what Primael had just told him and the gossip that he had picked up in Brehonnec.

"He was a true man of God," Primael repeated, feeling the need to emphasize the conviction. He was the best man I knew. The others knew that too, but his illness had a terrible effect on his face, and the younger monks were alarmed by his disfiguration. They are men of God too, but not entirely free from superstition. You completed your education in Paimpol, and you doubtless know as well as I do what convictions persist, not merely in the town but even within sacred walls."

Tardivel nodded his head, his expression increasingly anxious. "I fear that I might not be doing you a kindness by being here, Brother Primael," he said. "If the black friars were chattering about you before I arrived, they might chatter more excitedly when they discover that I have come from Tardivel, as they surely will. Had I realized that they would be here, I would have been more discreet, but in my naivety, I thought the Abbey far above foul suspicion."

Primael hesitated, not knowing which of the threads implicit in that speech to take up. In the end, he contented himself with saying, a trifle warily: "We are living in troubled times, and suspicion is sometimes direly indiscriminate." After a slight pause, he added: "We have had no news of Tardivel recently." He left it at that, discreetly.

The scion of Tardivel grimaced, wryly. "The Order of Preachers has a sacred mission, it seems," he said, "to root our heresy everywhere. It has taken them a long time to extirpate it in the Midi, but the task is complete there now—or so they think. If they are to maintain the impetus of their organization, they require new objectives. There is little chance of the present Pope declaring a crusade against Bretagne as his predecessor did against the Cathars centuries ago, but if the Dominicans can only launch a covert war against us, it will be no less ferocious for that. The Bishops in these parts have always opposed them in the past, but an alliance is being forged, with the encouragement of the French crown. If the Dominicans are scouting targets even in Paimpol, they must at least have arrogance, if not confidence. Herbriant is an easier target, and the Château de Tardivel is its heart."

"I have never visited Herbriant," Primael remarked, "and know nothing of its manse. Is it a true castle?"

“Hardly,” said Corentin de Tardivel, dryly. “But citadels are no longer safe refuges, since Tristan L’Hermite’s artillerists became expert at blasting through their walls with the aid of long cannons. Tardivel has the advantage of being of no strategic value in France’s war, but if the Church cared to make it a symbol of heretical opposition, and it became desirable to raze it, the task would not be unduly difficult, I fear, for a company equipped with good arbalests, let alone cannons.”

“I’m sorry to hear that your peace is in danger of being disturbed, Sire,” Paimpol said, and added: “Since you have come here to visit the Abbey, would you care to walk down the hill with me? Or would you prefer to ride ahead?”

The young man sketched a slight smile, evidently understanding the full implication of those questions.

“My horse is worn out,” he said. “He will not be able to walk quickly, but if we will not slow you down too much, Brother Primael, I would be glad to accompany you. First, however...”

He knelt down beside the grave, bowed his head, placed the fingers of his right hand on his forehead, closed his eyes, and remained in that position for a full two minutes. If he was reciting a prayer, his lips did not move. Nor, when he finished, did he make the customary sign of the cross.

In the meantime, Primael said his own prayer, made the sign, and said: “Amen.”

Then Corentin de Tardivel picked up the reins of his horse, which was waiting patiently nearby, and the two of them left the burial ground together, united in grief, and in defiance of the spies intent on thinking evil, whether any existed or not.