

CHAPTER ONE

There are some who would say that my story began when a sculptor of note in the 13th century first looked upon a lump of stone and saw me staring back from within, then set upon himself the task of bringing forth my likeness. 'Twas some of those same who later said that the likeness he brought forth held such lifelike qualities as to bestow upon the stone a likeness of life itself.

The truth, of course, was stranger than the fiction that created the myth in the first place, for I had actually been cursed in the 11th century, the victim of my own youthful exuberance. It all started on the outskirts of a town in the South of France, where I had met the most beautiful of women. My Francisca was the most beguiling raven-haired beauty that any man had ever before or since laid eyes upon. There were two things that were not in my favor here, for I was the eldest son of a French aristocrat, with ties to the royal bloodline and the woman, whom I fell madly in love with, was a tinker. Okay...a gypsy if you will. She was not just any gypsy, however. She was the daughter of the *Chovihano*, the shaman, of the Rom gypsies that were travelling through our area.

His wife, the clan's *Patrinyengri*, cursed me to a life of stone after I had returned from a visit to my father, telling him that I had impregnated the girl and was to marry her. After having me beaten, my father turned me out and then had me tracked as I returned to the only place I had left to belong. Of course the clan thought I had led my father's troops back to them in order to wipe from the earth any trace of the royal family's seed among the Rom gypsies. As my father's men descended upon them, she invoked a curse against me, who she claimed had a heart of stone. While I don't remember all the details,

she said something to the effect that such would be my existence until the day that someone could see the life within the stone and set me free. Even then, she foretold that I would be forever tainted with the curse of living stone, capable of love, but left with only the memory of what it would be like to feel its physical reflection.

Thus is how I came to be and is the prequel to an even stranger tale, for who could compare the mysticism of a Rom Gypsy curse to a tale as strange as the one I am about to tell you...yet you must believe, for it is my objective that others be told the truth lest it be lost to the sands of time and consigned to scientific Darwinism in pitiable attempts to rationalize what would otherwise be very difficult to accept as truth.

Like my own, the story I wish to tell has many starting points and so I will begin with the one with which I have the greatest familiarity and with which begins the story of my life, not long after the first of the curses had been lifted, long after the death of the *Patrinyengri*. In a bizarre twist of irony, I would relate to you that the Rom gypsies fled west through Europe before the advance of Islam and the first human to lay eyes upon me after the sculptor pulled my likeness forth from stone was none other than the grand master of an order dedicated to the eradication of Islam and the reclamation of the holy land of Jerusalem.

Perhaps the *Patrinyengri* had foreseen that my bloodline would one day not only prosecute her people, but would one day set forth to destroy those to whom I would come to owe my loyalty. For until the betrayal of my blood, the Templars were invincible.

I suppose I should start at the beginning. Such an unbelievable tale, to be accepted for the truth that it is, must be made as clear as possible. My name is Jean Claude DeSande and it seems only yesterday that the sculptor Piannini was commissioned in the year 1305

by the Templar Grand Master Jaques de Molay to provide a statue in classical Greek likeness for the gardens of the Templar Headquarters on the island of Cyprus. It was later that year that I was delivered to the Château d'Angers, the fortress home of Charles of Valois, the second Count of Anjou and King of Naples. It was there that I was delivered unto the hands of Jaques de Molay.

He was alone in the gardens when he uncovered his commission, sighed and sat below the statue in the moonlight. "Ah...a marvelous likeness," he said in an unenthusiastic, heavy voice. He turned and sat at the base of the statue amidst the garden's reliquary. "Lord, what shall I do? Please guide me," he prayed aloud, his voice shaking with raw emotion.

I felt the first life infuse my limbs with the first touch of moonlight and was beset by what I can only describe as an almost irrational desire to help this man, suffering emotionally from some unknown burden. This man, who had commissioned the sculpture of my likeness and freed me of a prison of innumerable years of stationary torment, suffering my lost love in silence and solitude. I moved my legs silently from the pedestal, stretched and sat beside the tortured soul. "First, you confess your problems to God and then listen to the guidance he sends. Bear in mind that miracles happen every day."

My voice was dry with the sound of gravel turned to dust with age and my French accent was heavy, the result of a hundred years of cursed silence. While the result was somewhat predictable, you must realize that I had already had some time to ponder my fate. For Jaques de Molay, it came as a bit of a shock.

"You! But you're..."

“Yes, I am living stone. Probably the first you have ever seen, for I doubt many have had the misfortune to be cursed as I was by the Rom gypsies some time ago. You must pay compliment to your artisan, for it was he who released my likeness from the stone and provided you both a conscience and a protector, for if we are in comte Foulques Nerra's stronghold, you shall need my wits about you to survive.

“Demon,” he roared, drawing sword upon me at which point I leapt nimbly back.

I give credit that it took but only the briefest of shocked pauses before he reacted with all the righteous indignation of the holy warrior that he was. “You were praying to God, not Satan, sir. I am your deliverer and your most humble of servants,” I said with a stiff, but florid bow. “Pray restrain thy sword arm gentle sir, for I wouldst talk with thee regarding thy request for guidance.”

He advanced upon me with sword outstretched as I backed against the base of the pedestal upon which I had stood stiffly moments before. “Nay, this is no trick of the light to provide a miracle,” he intoned, pushing against the rough stone of my skin and hearing the click of metal against stone.

Now, I had no idea whether I could be cut with steel, nor had I any intention of trying to find out, so I raised my hands in prayer, knelt carefully at the base of the statue that I suspected I was tied to and raised my voice in thanks to the creator for my release from the evil witchcraft of the Rom gypsies that had imprisoned me within the stone.

It was then that I saw him hesitate, this man of God, to whom all things might be attributed to the wickedness of the devil or the holiness of the religiously prosecuted.

“Who are you?” he asked. “What manner of demon are you?” but I felt the question in his voice lack the conviction that he already knew the answer and I dared to hope.

“I am Jean Claude Desande, fifth cousin removed from his highness King Louis VI, with whom, if you pray in these gardens, you are familiar with.”

“King Louis VI has been dead for well over a century, demon.”

“Pray stop calling me a demon,” I said, placing a finger on the tip of the sword and gently pushing it aside. “I may have flesh of stone, but I am a man within. A man cursed by the *Patrinyengri* of a tribe of Rom gypsies for the crime of loving her daughter.”

This man, this holy warrior to whom I would later attribute the title of Grand Master to the Templar Order, stood in shocked silence before tilting his head back and laughing.

“Demon, I have seen many strange and wondrous things in my travels, some which come near closeness to the strangeness I see standing before me now in the likeness of stone, yet the humor of such a curse is such that I cannot attribute it to the scourges of hell, but rather that of an irate mother.” He sheathed his sword and eyed me critically.

“Perhaps not the scion of hell, but the scourge of the devil nonetheless,” I grumbled. “It’s painfully difficult to stand in one place for that long, stone or no.” My voice was still strained, for I had not spoken, if what he said was true, for well over a hundred years.

I took a moment to grieve, for I knew that over a hundred years had passed and my Francisca was well and truly gone. I wondered briefly with sorrow as to the life she had lived. Was she destroyed by my father’s men or did she survive somehow to have a life with a husband...with children and grandchildren? My family would also have passed on, along with my claims of kinship and inheritance.

The man must have seen my pain, for he quickly knelt and asked my forgiveness and prayed to God for my deliverance from the curse of woman.

Rising, he put forth a question to me that I had only just began to ponder: “Cursed for over a hundred years, what will you do now? I ask this for I have something in mind that I think God has led me to, but I first must hear from your mouth what you intend to do. I cannot allow you to leave these gardens having commissioned your likeness and not knowing whether my faith in God can be extended to you, who bear striking resemblance to something otherworldly.”

I shrugged heavy shoulders and realized with a start that while I felt the sadness within me, I felt nothing physically. I was neither hot, nor cold, nor did the sharpness of his sword prick my finger. It was then that I started to understand the gypsy woman’s curse. “I must find a way to lift the curse,” I said, more to myself, but aloud so that he heard my voice as though a whisper drifting up from a tomb.

“If it has truly been well over a hundred years, you have no inheritance to claim, no bloodline to prove who you are and would be unable to walk among men as anything but a monster,” he said. “Yet here you are, delivered unto my hands by my commission, in answer to a prayer lifted to heaven for guidance.”

“You have no need to convince me of the brutal truths of life, sir. I understand too well my predicament and understand I am in your debt, your service and will serve both you and God in the hopes of finding a manner in which this curse may be lifted.”

Jaques de Molay stroked his beard absently, pacing the garden, his eyes never leaving my visage. “I could not bring you thus into the order for many would believe me to be consorting with demons and would not believe an answer to a prayer would be delivered thus.” He shook his head. “Their faith is weak, not in God, but in men.”

“Moonlight,” I said simply, not knowing how I knew, but knowing the truth of the word even as it was uttered from my mouth. “It is the moonlight which freed the stone in which my soul still dwells to movement. I do not know how I know this. I only know that it is true as instinctual as survival.”

“So you remain cursed to experience freedom only when the moonlight strikes the stone flesh to bring it to life? Is there anything else I should know about you? A man, cursed by heathen magic and suffered to serve God as an inhuman parody of life? Are you also cursed to eat small children and infect others with this curse?”

“I think,” I said, collapsing onto a bench on the other side of the path he was determined to wear down in a single night, “that the curse was somewhat personal in nature and thus I doubt is infectious, though I have no way of knowing for sure. I have been trapped within stone for over a hundred years if what you tell me is true.”

A cloud of anger passed over de Molay’s face, a thunderhead. I knew immediately that none dared question the truth of his words often without grave consequence. “The King’s name is *Phillip Capet le Belle, la Maison capétienne*, son of King *Phillip Capet le Hardi, la Maison capétienne* and *Isabella, Infanta de Aragon*. We are in the gardens of the Château d'Angers, in the home of Charles of Valois, Count of Anjou, in the year of our Lord 1305.” He recited this to me with righteous indignation, his hand quivering upon his sword hilt and I knew that I had come perilously close to shattering the fragile trust I had with this man. Holy warriors were apparently not known for their forbearance any more in this time than they had been in my own.

I raised both hands against his anger and said in a quiet whisper that grated harshly across my vocal cords and came out as more of a pre-emptory command than a request,

“Peace, sir. This news of the time I am in is every bit as difficult and fantastic to believe for me as my likeness is for you to believe sent from God to provide you guidance. Perhaps it must be that my century of imprisonment with naught but my own thoughts has led to a greater wisdom than most men, for it is only with a great deal of consideration that I would impart advice to anyone, cursed as I am.”

This seemed to lessen his indignation and appease his anger. “I shall accept you into my service as there is naught else left for me to do but bow to the inevitable will of God. I shall put forth my first question for your consideration and I shall make visitations in the garden of the Templar Grande Commanderie in Cyprus, near Limmasol. You may accompany me in evening vespers, for it will only be through prayer that a way to lift this curse will be revealed unto you and peace may come to my troubled mind.”

I bowed my head and asked, “What troubles thee so that God would send a man cursed such as I to your aid?”

“There are intrigues as the head of such an order as the Templars, he began, explaining that the Tuetonic Knights had largely left France to carve a Kingdom for themselves in the Baltic, establishing for themselves a base of governance unto themselves under authority of the pope and under the patronage of the emperor, playing one against the other to best suit their own purposes.

“While the Hospitaller Order share with us the island of Cyprus as a headquarters, they are moving against Rhodes and Malta, establishing for themselves a new feudal state. Thus it is that both the Hospitallers and the Tuetonic Orders have been quietly building their own feudal estates, moving their wealth out of France and leaving the French crown to bleed the Templars, begging loans well after their own financial

mismanagement has led to riots among the commoners. With less support for further crusades and without a coastal base from which to launch new raids against Salidar in the east, there is nowhere left for our order and I fear the crown might move against us, having seen the wealth of our temple in Paris when we provided shelter from political upheaval.”

I stood and stopped his pacing as I placed a heavy arm lightly on his shoulder. “Perhaps it is this that I was sent to help you with, but I sense there is more to your prayers than political intrigue.”

De Molay’s hesitancy spoke of a struggle greater than politics. “It is a personal matter for which I asked God’s advice,” he admitted. “My sister is the only family I have left, but upon taking vows with the order, I am supposed to have put these worldly matters behind me.”

“Is it a matter of money then? Inheritance?”

“No,” de Molay waved a hand in dismissal, pulling away from my grasp and continuing his pacing. “We are cousins to Guillemette de Nuefchattel, wife to Reinald de Bourgogne. It is said that Reinald has a bastard son from an affair of the heart before he married. The son has taken a small title from his participation in the crusades and seeks to join the order as the means to advance himself beyond the means otherwise allowed by society and leave the contessa, my cousin, in peace. My sister has asked my influence in the matter.”

“His name?” I asked.

“Thomas de La Rochet.”

I rolled the name around on what I suppose passed for my tongue and experienced nothing of the nature of divine guidance but a slight reverberation of the name in the hollow of my throat. “And why would you need guidance from God in this matter? Should you wish to honor your sister’s request, you would bring him into the order. Of what manner of import is this to you? I’m sure your cousin the contessa would gladly be rid of the reminder of her husband’s youthful indiscretion.”

De Molay looked inconsolable. He is my nephew. My sister confided in me that Thomas is her son. “I had fought battles in proximity to him without even knowing. My sister asks much, for now that I know, I must acknowledge her sin.”

“Still...it is not his sin, but hers that bothers you. Why hold it against the boy. Do you know him?”

“There were many on Crusade not of noble consequence. I did not make it a habit to know such men as friends. The life of a crusader is often short, so to have acquaintances leads to grieving overmuch for personal loss rather than maintaining the ability to see it for what it is...martyrdom for the glory of God. Perhaps if I saw him, I would know him.”

“cum autem perseverarent interrogantes eum erexit se et dixit eis qui sine peccato est vestrum primus in illam lapidem mittat” I said in Latin. “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.” I raised a hand to forestall his shock and anger, for he stopped in his pacing to stare hard at me. “I am merely repeating the words of our Lord,” I said, bowing my head and seating myself once again. “Are there no sins in the Templar order...sins against the vows taken in the presence of God and men? Do not judge your sister for she

has known love and heartbreak. If she wants this for her son, she can start life anew knowing that her son is safe in the hands of the Lord and her brother.”

de Molay’s smile was warm and genuine. He knew that the advice I gave him was both consistent with the scripture and his conscience. “I shall send for him immediately and will ask him to accompany your statue to the Temple in Cyprus. Along the way, will you instruct and advise him as you have me? I am not the young man I once was and would see that my nephew has the same divine guidance I have had.”

I bowed my head and looking up at the stars in concern as I felt the first drops of winter’s last rain and knew though I couldn’t feel it that it would be cold. I also noted the clouds becoming thicker and felt lassitude wash over me. “I will await him in the gardens here and will waken on moonlit nights to instruct your nephew. Tell him to pray in the presence of that which artisans were inspired to create and to expect miracles when one truly seeks admission to your order.” With a last admonition to send for his nephew immediately, I climbed upon the pedestal before the overcast skies once again cursed me to immobility.

When he had at last turned to go, I called his name in a soft grating voice. He stopped to look back on me upon my dais and I said, “know that I will serve you and your family to the best as I am capable as much because I want to as I have to. But you must promise me that you will help me find a release from this wretched curse.”

“I will,” he promised, but I could not hear him. The clouds had obscured the moonlight in the night sky and turned the night into a torrent. That night, there was a room overlooking the gardens at the Château d’Angers and the candles burned brightly well into the late evening from within those apartments. The next day, Jaques de Molay,

the Grand Master of the Templar order, left to check on the state of affairs at the Paris Temple before returning to Cyprus. Quietly, he issued the orders to begin a slow but inexorable removal of the order's wealth from reliquaries throughout France and signed a secret requisition for a dozen ships from England to be delivered to Cyprus by the end of the year. The Templars would embark on a final crusade that would determine their very survival.