

Sholat

The Arcanum of the Umbral Glaive

Fr Ætos



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This is an excerpt from the full-length novel *Shalat*, to be released in August 2020 in limited numbers.

A note on the text

This book is based on an original text unearthed in the 16th century at an undisclosed location in Italy. Sealed within a lead casket, the hand-written manuscript had perhaps once provided a complete account of the chronicles of Alaric of Sarafand. But at some point prior to its internment two hundred years beforehand, the manuscript had been doctored, mutilated and appended with the title *Liber Confessionum*. Over the centuries, considerable effort was spent restoring the damaged text, whereupon it was rechristened *Occulta Umbra Gladium*, or The Arcanum of the Umbral Glaive.

At the same time, Arba's grimoire surfaced amongst certain private sodalities and became highly regarded, where it was given the soubriquet *Liber Damnati*. Considerable research by one Frater D'yavol established the link between the grimoire and Alaric's chronicle, although both remained outside the purview of the uninitiated for centuries and the former remains unattainable to all but the most privileged.

Alaric's chronicle has been translated and embellished on many occasions, but this is the first time the text of The Arcanum of the Umbral Glaive has been publicly available. While some sensitive material has been removed, overall this incarnation is expanded and corrected, drawing on various related sources. It is presented here with updates to language, style and dialogue, for the benefit of modern readers.

Boof I

Discidium

I: Prologue to Book I

Wheel of Fortune

Cowled in rags she leaned upon her staff and, hobbling in her infirmity, proceeded along the narrow and crooked path. Her likeness was that of a stray mendicant. Upon either side of the doleful trackway lay an expanse of foetid marsh, flat and wide, wherein foul creatures did disturb its stagnant mantle. Vapours coiled from that unwholesome sea, thickening the oily air. The hag illumined her way with a lantern, tied to a chain upon the head of her staff. Yet the flame, whence the radiance did come, was enfeebled by the encompassing mists, such that the path ahead was barely lit.

She halted once and observed an eel-like leviathan sliding serpentine through the great bog. Her filmy eyes cast upwards, whereupon they spied a path ascending the dire crag before her. She caressed a black jewel around her neck. Then she recommenced her labours.

At the crag's summit was a bleak plateau. The creature paused for breath and snuffed out her lantern. Here, upon high ground, she was unburdened of the marsh-mists. But behind and below, the mists still shrouded the great expanse of bog where only a leafless tree stood proud.

Before her, beneath a cloudless night sky, stooped a ruined temple. Once noble and vainglorious, it now lay in bondage to thick creepers. A shrouded figure sat upon its crumbling steps. The hag approached and spoke: 'Lowaida.'

'Kowueda my daughter' said the seated figure. 'What compels thee hither?' Her voice possess'd the likeness of cracked bark.

'News for my mother' replied the one called Kowueda. 'It is said that the weapon known as Valluttaia; Mgepogog, the Blade of the Abyss, is found once again.'

The one known as Lowaida tilted her raven-thin head. 'How do you know this?' 'I have scryed it in the Black Pool.'

'Who has found it child?'

'It is said that servants of the one named El Shaddai have discerned its location and taken it.'

'I have heard of this desert-god. Wherefore was it taken?'

'To those servants the weapon is known as Shalat. They desire it in order to smite the Dukes of their realm; a number did rebel against their master.'

'What was their crime?'

'To attend the Realm of Matter unbidden, and teach its denizens many secrets.'

The one known as Lowaida shuddered in her cowl and expelled a sound akin to raven-chatter.

'Thou findest mirth in this?' asked Kowueda, who leaned heavily upon her staff.

'All souls do yearn for that foul realm' crowed Lowaida. 'Yet these Dukes were foolish; their overweening was an error. To consort with flesh invites punishment.'

Gasping, she clawed herself upright. They both stood and surveyed the scene in the valley before them: a blighted forest and, at its edge, an ancient fortress enclosed by great walls. In the clear skies above, baleful constellations prowled the blackness.

'So, once again the wheel of the Kosmos shudders and turns. It hath been prophesied.

The one we speak of will one day claim the Blade for himself - for a time at least. The powers and virtues of that weapon are great.'

Kowueda trembled in her rags and clutched her staff more firmly.

'Thou didst well to bring me this news' replied Lowaida. 'But why dost thou tremble?'

'I fear the wrath of the Ka'gemal' she said.

'I tell thee, do not fear them' said Lowaida. 'They are beyond wrath, beyond all thought and word and feeling. I know this. I have looked upon the thousand dark faces of the god Tu'hin.'

She coughed black spittle and inclined her hooded face towards her daughter. 'I too

have stared into the Black Pool. There is something thou shouldst know. Many aeons hence, my child, thou shalt be called upon. Tu'hin God has bidden that thou shalt descend to the Realm of Decay and become the Crucible Incarnate; the Reddened Cup; the Grail of Ash.'

Lowaida's trembling became spasms. 'No. I will not. Do not ask such things, mother.'
'Thou shalt attend to the will of the Ka' gemal' her mother spat, casting her malignant gaze to the stars. 'Ask no more questions child. Know only that god wills it.'



The Fool

1291AD, the Crusader City of Acre on the Eastern Mediterranean, Syria.

I slept, but did not sleep. In that strange realm between sleep and wakefulness, things became heavy with portent. I saw a wide labyrinth beneath a boiling red sky and a black ring amidst a great expanse of night. I saw a pit, a seal and my doom. I roused, my head pounding. Sleep had not been restful for as long as I could remember. It was a place I visited reluctantly; while there I was fitful and anxious. Only wine and hashish could numb my spirit.

On this day, as on every day, I awoke in tiredness, dragged my body from its cot and prepared for the duties of my office, which I would shirk as best as I could. After pulling on my vestments I examined the two things of value I possessed in the world: one was my sword, a thing of rare workmanship and wide renown; the other, a faded square of vellum upon which was scratched a letter from the mother I had never met:

My dear son.

I am sorry we know so little of each other, but I always understood I would need to give you up. It was impossible for me to raise you as my own child. The Priory's nuns

will look after you and so will the Templars, in time.

Yet I think about you often. One day I am sure our paths will cross and, when they do, I will know who you are. I wonder if you will recognise me as your mother?

When you are older, you will do great things. Unlike your father, who will bring this world to the edge of ruin.

But you, my son, you will rise to meet the Stars, although your fate awaits in the Abyss.

Fare well in your life to come.

Your Mother.

I had read that message a thousand times. It was full of promise and intrigue. It put yearning in my blood - for the future and for this mysterious woman, whom my father had never mentioned in all my years. And it made me sick at heart, because I had already fallen so short of her expectations.

Shortly thereafter I sat in the refectory on a bench, grey-faced, sipping wine. Next to me was a man - no, a boy - just off the ships. He thought himself a brother, but he was not; not yet. All novices were to be partnered with older Templars and that was the rule. I had told the Sergeant I would not play nursemaid to another whelp, but to no avail. What could I ever teach them? God forbid they should use me as an example of Templar virtue. This boy - Kaspar Pelac - was lecturing me on the Rule of St Bernard. I cast a bloodshot eye over him while drinking from my cup. Before he had even opened his mouth I knew what to expect: eager and devout, his would be a noble sacrifice; dying for his faith on the battlefield. I watched him as he listened to the readings from the scriptures during our break of fast. He did not eat. The spoken word appeared to give him all the sustenance he needed. He was probably only a few years younger than me but his habit hung from him like a sack on a pole. Next to him I looked at least ten years older. My youthfulness had been transformed in the crucible of war into weary bones and long scars. 'Where were you born?' I said.

'Bohemia. Karlstein, near Prague.'

'Welcome then. I guarantee after a week in this hell you will pray you could

return. How long have you been in the order?’

‘Close to a month, brother.’

I eyed him carefully. ‘You have kissed the Baphomet?’

The boy looked shocked. ‘No. Not yet. I thought it was not to be discussed.’

‘Indeed.’

Kasper leaned in closer. ‘I have heard some speak of a Secret College, within which the martial secrets of the order are revealed.’

I sniffed. ‘Perhaps the Grand Master knows of such things. I do not.’

The boy looked at me for a time, then he said ‘and I am told you are Alaric of Sarafand. The knight who wields the Sword Magistral...’

I shrugged. It was a common question from neophytes. The sword was renowned. But I ignored him, got up from the trestle table, drained my wine cup and made to leave. ‘You may learn more of these matters, if you survive for long enough. Here’s a piece of advice. There is only one rule in this brotherhood: look out for yourself. No-one else will. Certainly not me.’

He looked offended. ‘Then it is blessing that not all brothers are like you.’

I thought about knocking the insolence out of him, but he continued. ‘Should you not be telling me how Templar knights are chaste and obedient? How they must take a vow of poverty and deliver all worldly goods into the hands of the order? How in the cloister they must be silent and wear the habit of a monk, but on the battlefield be fearless warriors killing for Christ? For as St Bernard the Cistercian preached, malecide is not sinful; rather it glorifies God, for in His eyes, a dead heathen is better than one that lives. Evil should be exterminated at all costs. *God wills it*. And in return for these good deeds, the martyred brethren will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.’

I laughed too loudly and turned a few disapproving heads. How could this milksop believe such lies? I turned to him, staring with red-rimmed eyes.

‘Listen to me. Forget all of this’ – I gestured around the refectory and towards the brother reciting from the Scriptures – ‘forget the liturgy – you will draw no succour from it. In truth, one of us will die soon, and then what? Here’s a lesson: do not form close bonds with your brethren as I have done in the past. You may live to regret it.’

He protested. ‘But... companionship between brothers forges a strong and

loyal bond. Do the Gospels not say that “greater love has no man than this, that a man should lay down his life for a friend?”

‘The Gospels were written before this time of bloodletting began. You will discover the truth of things soon enough.’

The reading had finished and the knights began to make way for the second sitting, when the sergeants would take their meal. A Templar brother approached, nodded and said: ‘take this one to the round church for his Blessing’ - he gestured towards Kasper - ‘then the Marshal wants you at the stables.’

I acknowledged him with a cough and a gobbet of phlegm. ‘The bastard. More toil.’ I looked at Kasper. ‘Raynaud the Marshal hates me, but that is no concern of yours. Come, it is time for your audience with the Baphomet.’

I led Kasper out into the courtyard, where four other Templar novices were waiting. I beckoned them to follow me and we proceeded to a quiet corner of the commandery where the order’s round church was located. It was a squat, heavy building; the oldest part of the compound and one of Acre’s most ancient churches.

One of my regular tasks was to usher new recruits, as part of their first rite of initiation. It was one of the few duties I tolerated. I led the five young knights through the heavy arched doorway and acknowledged the brother chaplain inside, then pushed the oak door closed and secured it.

Within the round church the commandery’s banners hung from the vaulted ceiling. The narrow lancet windows let in little daylight so a circle of candles, perpetually lit, flickered on the stone flags. The heady smell of incense hung in the air. There was a strange and heavy mood in that place; we all felt it. A chaplain, clad in a black cloak, stood in the middle of the circular space. Beside him was a stone font and a wooden table, upon which sat an object covered by an embroidered silk cloth. The five of us stood around him. Kasper looked uneasy. Then the chaplain spoke.

‘Sworn knights of the Temple. You have already, freely and solemnly, taken the oath of obedience, poverty and chastity, fraternity, hospitality and preliation. Yet there are more oaths beyond these - secret and terrible oaths - that must

be sworn before a knight of the Temple can become a True Disciple. They knit us together in concord and love, so that always the one shall help the other to bear the burden of Truth.'

The chaplain lifted the silk cloth. 'The First Revelation is the true nature of the Baphomet' he said and cast the cloth aside. Beneath was a large bowl, fashioned from solid silver save for its base, which incorporated a fragment of skull. Three silver faces were fashioned on the outside of the bowl, interlinked by virtue of each sharing an eye. The faces were inverted so that their top lip met the bowl's rim.

'At the founding of the order the Baphomet, its greatest relic, was granted us' said the chaplain. 'For all who drink from him, the Baphomet imparts wisdom, knowledge, courage and protection. Therefore, after these petitions, signs and precepts, you unworthy servants will do the same.'

He used the bowl to draw water from the font and made a mark on the foreheads of each of us, saying 'with these Lustral Waters I consecrate your bodies and I consecrate the ground', then he poured the remaining water in a circle on the floor.

Thereafter we were made to repeat the words intoned by the chaplain; words I knew by rote:

Great Baphomet, grant unto us the light, the fire, the truth, the judgement, the fortitude. Strengthen our sword-arm so that we may bear our righteous weapons despite our weakness. Help us prevail against our adversaries. Grant us dauntless victory through your powers.

May he who takes up sacred arms against the foe be like a pillar of fire. May he who stands before the Abyss be like a serpent. May he who suffers injury be like the morning star. Make our courage a sharp sword. Inform, instruct, restore, correct, and refine us, so that we may endure all hardship.

Wielding a blade, the chaplain bade each Templar knight cut their hand and deliver three drops of blood into the bowl, to which he added wine from a flask.

By the hours of night and day, by the sun, by the moon, by the seven planets, by all the stars, by the four elements, by the seven heavens and hells, we adore, invoke, worship and glorify thy name, and exalt thee: most terrible Baphomet.

Then the chaplain instructed those present to ‘kiss the Baphomet’, and so they did: they put the bowl to their mouths, their lips meeting the lip of one of the bowl’s three faces. When finally passed to me I drained the dregs of its contents and saw within the bowl, at its base, a sigil carved into the skull-fragment, the purpose of which no Templar understood, save that it was a blessing.

We swear by the Philter of Righteousness that none shall reveal these secrets to another, but they shall be faithful of one mind and concord. All shall truly perform, observe, and keep every article of our oath, lest our throats be cut and our tongues torn out; lest our breasts be cut and our hearts plucked; lest our bodies be severed and our corpses burned; lest our ashes be buried in the darkest pit; lest rocks be piled high upon our remains.

Malsa, Chalma, Zerial, Jabach, Nayath, Arba, Thumot, Xelot, Thazach, Kalalath, Gebeat, Hezeb, Lessem, Ulnal, Gired, Ethath, Sebel, Thimim, Gulqua, Jaanab, Yabalym, Ceagath, Anak.

By these names and by Hermoni may the secrets of our blood be hidden; from the world and from the weapons we use to deliver the retribution of our Masters.

This is the sign of the mystery of the Baphomet, the Master’s Canticle, the first of the Homilies.

Most neophytes would speak those words only once. I had heard and recited them a hundred times. As we chanted, a great peace came upon me, as it always did. I felt strong and light of spirit. But on this occasion my eyes flickered and my vision spun. My heart raced and I saw dimly, for but a brief moment, tall and thin figures lurking in the shadows of the chapel. They were

dark and indistinct, no more than shades, but their presence was tangible and they unsettled me. I had seen such things once before.

The chaplain took the bowl and placed it on the table, and the enchantment was broken. Then he said 'peace be within these walls, and prosperity within the Temple. And for the sake of our brethren, peace be upon thee.'

The rite completed, I opened the door and led the neophytes out into bright sunlight. Kasper still looked fearful. I sent the others on their way and said to him 'get your kit, brother. A second initiation awaits - one that may be more to your liking.'

3

King of Pentacles

Raynaud the sergeant, whom I hated, had attached Kaspar and me to a small contingent of brothers. Our task was to deliver food and supplies to Templars at the outpost of Doc, south of Acre. They had suffered attacks from bands of marauding Mameluk Turks.

There were five of us in total, four on horseback and one manning the cart that carried the provisions. The others included the Temple's new Seneschal – one Durand De Ros - a sergeant and a foot soldier who drove the cart. It was still early and a few clouds were rimmed with pearl. Masts and sails were dense around Acre's long quayside; ships clamoured for land like hungry dogs. As I rode out I looked back at our headquarter. It was a sight to behold. Perched on one corner of the city, surrounded by the turquoise waters of the Mediterranean, it was huge and impregnable. Four towers protected it from our enemies, whether human or elemental. And within its girth lay numerous beautiful buildings, such as the Master's palace, the Nunnery of St Anne and the exceedingly fine and noble chapel of Our Lady. The commandery was both Acre's jewel and its shield. It was the envy of other lesser orders.

We passed through Acre's gates; the twin walls and high towers slowly fell away from us and the orchards and fields outside the city gave way to the wide and flat wasteland that was Outremer. The sun was scorching and a northerly

wind swept sand across our faces. The horses churned up plumes as we made our way deeper into the wilderness. There was no sound save for the rattle of our bridles. A vulture croaked in the distance. The landscape opened up before us, but there was little to see.

We travelled for some time in silence. I tried to remain alert, but soon grew saddle sore. My back ached as it always did and my ankles began to chafe against my chainmail hose. And I was still unnerved by my vision in the Templar round church. Finally, the Seneschal spoke.

‘We can make the round journey in a day if we keep a good pace. If not, we’ll bivouac at the castle tonight and return tomorrow.’

No one replied. He drew his horse across the path and pulled up alongside mine. ‘So, Brother Alaric. We have never spoken. But I know you are the son of Ranulph of York. I have heard talk of you.’ He cast me a disapproving look I had come to recognise from others over the years. ‘If you are a warrior as fine as he, we shall not be afeared of the heathen for years to come.’ I noticed a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

‘Then I pray the infidel are forever kept at bay’ I replied flatly.

‘Indeed. Let us pray for that’ he said, smoothing his grey beard down against the wind. Durand was an old and successful knight, but a relic from another age – one that still esteemed the white habit and red cross of the Templar. In his eyes the Order of the Knights of the Temple of Solomon remained the most feared and renowned confraternity of warriors in Christendom. He reminded me of my father, whom I loved. But brother knights of a certain age were all the same: complacent; resistant to change; ignorant of the truth.

Durand growled from beneath his rampant beard. ‘Besides, you carry a sword of great wonder and reputation. It is charmed I am told. May I see it?’

I expected this. Most brothers I spoke with simply wanted to lay eyes on the sword. Its reputation as an example of rare quality preceded me. Indeed, it proved a subject of some jealousy amongst older knights such as Durand who, by tradition, would attach various small relics to their own weapons. I was reluctant to share the sword with this man. But I knew he would covet it, and his envy would please me. So I withdrew it from its scabbard and revealed the perfect long blade and the curious manner in which it ended in two points, not

one – like a forked tongue.

‘It is a thing of wondrous craft’ he said grudgingly. Clearly, he thought the weapon belonged in the hands of a much older, more pious servant of God. But he also looked uncomfortable in its presence. The weapon had a strange aspect, which I had grown accustomed to over the years. Durand reached out to touch it then withdrew his hand. Despite his wariness, I could see the covetousness in his eyes. He desired it, just as my father did. Many times when cleaning or sharpening the blade I had seen father observing me, his hooded eyes staring.

‘The workmanship is unparalleled’ said Durand. ‘How came you by it?’

‘It was a gift, of sorts’ I said.

‘A most generous endowment’ mused Durand. He was quiet again for some time. Finally he asked, ‘have you named it?’

‘Named it? Of course not. It’s a sword, not a horse.’

‘Then you certainly should!’ he asserted, feathers ruffled. ‘All great swords are named. I christened mine *Laqab Allah*, which means Slave of God, shortly after I hacked the head off my first saracen.’

‘A Moslem name?’

‘Yes’ he laughed. ‘I tell the infidel dogs that story before I finish them off. It’s brought me good fortune so far. If God wills it, that fortune will continue.’

Kaspar rode up then and spoken to me. ‘I have been thinking about the Baphomet’ he said quietly.

‘You should not speak of such things, boy’ said Durand, overhearing.

‘Go on’ I said to Kaspar.

‘When sipping from the chalice I saw a piece of bone - perhaps from a skull - embedded in the silver. From where did it come? Is that the secret of the Baphomet?’

‘Who can say?’ I replied. ‘Each brother has his own opinion I think. Some say it is the skull of Saint Euphemia or Saint Ursula. A few believe it is from the head of The Baptist, St John.’

‘Heresy!’ growled Durand. ‘It is a fragment of the skull of Hugues de Payens - our first Grand Master.’

I shrugged. I had no opinion of my own. Durand ignored me thereafter, but

it did not concern me; the fat old oaf would probably die soon. I kept my eye on Kaspar; he was an annoying little swine, but it would be a waste if he was killed.

We rode until early afternoon. Kaspar was the first to spy the castle of Doc in the distance, nestling amongst scrub and bush on the side of a rocky hillock. It looked smaller than I imagined, and ill-kempt. The order's black and white piebald standard was visible, fluttering gently.

'Let us make haste' said Durand, setting his horse to a gallop.

4

Knight of Swords

I stayed with the cart and brought up the rear, stopping by the main gate. The others took a brief sortie. The castle was set beside a hillock; its rear walls abutted an incline where a dirt slide had raised the level of the surrounding land. Its shape was an irregular pentagon, with two circular towers towards the front and three smaller rectangular towers at the back. A gatehouse was set into the wall facing the main approach. From within, the squawk of poultry could be heard. I could hear Durand calling a greeting. Kaspar reappeared from around the side of the tower. 'All seems well to me, but no-one is answering us. And the main gate is locked.'

'Is there another route in?' I asked.

'Not that I know of' he replied. 'Our best chance may be to scale those far walls next to the dirt slide. They are shallower there.'

'What do you make of it sire?' asked Kaspar once Durand had returned.

Without answering, Durand dismounted and beckoned us over. When he spoke his voice was low. 'The castle is occupied. Through an arrow slit on the rear wall I am sure I saw a figure moving across the courtyard; whether he is saracen or Frankish, I cannot tell. There are one or two horses stabled.'

'We must be sure my Lord, before we proceed' said the sergeant.

'If our brethren are within then they would surely welcome us.' I said. 'So we

must guess that the figure you saw is a Turkish raider.’

Kaspar spoke. ‘In that case, our only choice is via the rear walls. At their shallowest point, we can breach them from horseback.’

‘Agreed’ said Durand. ‘This is my order: we will go over the wall. Once inside, I will open the main gates. You two -’ he gestured to Kaspar and me, ‘make a good search of the buildings. You -’, nodding at the sergeant – ‘stay with the cart and driver. When the gates are open and you see my signal, bring the cart in.’

We all dispersed. Durand’s giant mount was the tallest. We led the horse to the far side of the castle and up onto the edge of the rocky valley. Kaspar held the beast while I clambered on its back. I looked through an arrow slit and saw a squat stone keep and a few small timber outhouses. A tiny stone chapel nestled in the corner of the courtyard. Apart from a few chickens, there was no movement.

‘I see no-one’ I whispered.

‘Over the wall then’ said Durand. ‘And don’t loiter.’

I hauled my mail-clad frame up and over. The drop was further than I had hoped. I landed awkwardly in a mass of bushes and cursed as the chickens scattered. Before Kaspar could land on top of me I broke cover and ran towards an outhouse. Durand followed Kaspar. He emerged from the bushes and made for the gatehouse. Kaspar and I sped from one building to another. Here was a storeroom, there a smith’s workshop. I saw Kaspar look across at me, shrug and begin walking towards the main gates. I approached the door of the remaining building, but was distracted by the small chapel nearby. A sword lay by its thick wooden door. I approached, nudging the door open, and peered inside. I could see very little so moved further into the gloom. The tiny chapel was an empty rectangle of stone flags. At the far end was a simple wooden altar. Approaching, I was assaulted by foul shapes and smells; a lumpen mass on the floor, a rancid odour. I stopped hard as my eyes made sense of the scene before me. Upon the altar-table was an embroidered red and gold cloth. And upon the cloth lay the heads of our four Templar brethren, crowned with a halo of black flies. Their decapitated bodies – all naked – were scattered on the floor, piled atop one another like sacks. This was the scene of an execution. I

cupped one head and lifted it. Surprised by its weight, I examined it. The skin was still warm and waxy; the eyes had no lustre. With a gloved finger I pushed up a lip to reveal black teeth. The lip slid down again slowly. I held the head higher to see the neck wound; it was a clean cut: skin, then purple meat, then the white bone of the spine. A man yes, but no different to a pig carcass on a butcher's slab. My mail-shod foot sucked away from the floor where blood was spread like cooling fat. The air was thick with a ripe odour; the stink of death and putrefaction.

I heard shouts from outside. Venturing a look I saw Kaspar kneeling over more bodies, half-hidden beneath a heap of refuse. Kaspar checked them, then stood up and looked about. He saw me emerge from the chapel and waved. 'Look' he said, pointing at the corpses. 'Dead saracens. There has been a battle here.' I walked over and examined the bodies myself: three Turks, pale and matted with straw and their own dark blood.

'I have found our Templar brothers' I said, nodding towards the chapel. 'Heads removed and placed on the altar. Executed by my reckoning.'

Kaspar looked aghast. 'The Virgin protect us.'

Durand appeared from the gatehouse. We appraised him while he scratched his beard.

'So we have seven bodies' he growled. 'Four Templars and three Turks. No survivors.'

'You must have been deceived when you saw a figure within' I said.

He frowned. 'I was not. Yet, if the heathen murdered our brethren, who killed these Turks?' He kicked one of the corpses at our feet.

'Sometimes in battle there are no survivors' I said.

Durand and Kaspar walked to the gate. 'There's nothing more we can do here, except bury the Christian bodies. The infidel can stay where they are – food for the vultures.'

They unbolted the main gate and swung it open. 'Bring those supplies inside' grunted Durand. 'We'll stay the night and be off before dawn tomorrow.'

As the heavy doors swung open I wondered dumbly how seven dead men had managed to fasten the gates from the inside. Then I noticed an outbuilding we had failed to check.

In a moment the cart was entering, manned by the sergeant and his foot soldier. But all was not well.