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Prologue

The Hanged Man

Anyone who attempts to construe a personal view of God which conflicts with Church dogma must be burned without pity.

~ Pope Innocent III

Toulouse, France, 1209

Guilhelm de Montanhagol, a Knights Templar, knew his death was imminent. Few who entered the halls of torment emerged whole in mind or body. For six years, Bishop Folques had kept him imprisoned in a small cell in Toulouse. Condemned as a heretic, he'd suffered the agony of the rack on several occasions.

He reflected on the last time Folques visited him in the dungeon. He had been splayed on a board, tied down at the wrists and ankles. Rollers at each end of the board slowly turned, pulling his body in opposite directions until every joint dislocated. He could no longer sit or stand. He slept, ate, and wasted away in his own filth. His once fine kirtle and linen shirt were just rags wrapped around his body for warmth.

His thoughts turned to his lover, Esclarmonde. Thinking of her comforted him in his last hours. Esclarmonde's skin was the color of alabaster, her shimmering blonde hair, highlighted with wisps of silver, cascaded down her body. She favored floor-length, loosely fitted gowns, usually of blue. He longed to thread his hands through her hair one last time. Her emerald-green eyes shimmered with love for him. Esclarmonde was strong. She would get the codex, written by Mary Magdalene, safely away.

Guilhelm was at peace in this knowledge. He was ready to accept his impending death. His tormentors had beaten him down mentally and physically. Esclarmonde was gone. His brothers in the