

LET ME BE FRANK

by
Edward Stasheff

*"Sancta Maria, Mater Dei,
ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc,
et in hora mortis nostrae.
Amen."*

Ortho thumbed another prayer bead through his fingers. He said the prayers only in his head, of course—his mouth had been gagged for days, and felt like a hole in a stone wall. He had prayed the rosary near-constantly for about the same period of time. Perhaps if he prayed enough, was pure enough and lucky enough, God might take mercy on his soul.

Ortho had just started the next Hail Mary when he heard the footsteps approaching. He looked up, prayers interrupted, perfectly frozen, listening as hard as he could. The footsteps stopped outside his cell door. A second later he heard the telltale jingle of a key in the lock. His heart jumped in terror—he knew who they were, and why they had come. The rusty hinges groaned open. The jailor and half a dozen guards peeked in with grave faces.

"Time has come," said the Captain of the Guard.

There was a moment of complete stillness and silence as both parties watched each other. Would the prisoner come quietly, or resist? Slowly, Ortho stumbled to his feet and stood, arms still spread and chained to the wall. A moment later, the jailer stepped cautiously forward to chain his legs together, unlock the wrist manacles, and

cuff Ortho's hands behind his back. Thankfully, no one tried to take his rosary away—they had enough respect of God for that, thank heaven.

Ortho let himself be led out of his cell, praying furiously on his rosary. His movements were sluggish, his steps small. Although impatient, the soldiers accepted it grudgingly. As long as the prisoner kept moving, they seemed satisfied. Ortho managed to push his limbs forward, climbing the stairs from the dungeon and down a hall... until they reached the gate from the castle keep out into the courtyard. As the door swung open, Ortho heard the sound of the crowd. He froze.

"Just keep moving," the Captain said, shoving a firm palm against the small of Ortho's back. "Show a little backbone, will you?"

Ortho swallowed heavily, then stepped out into the daylight. The crowd noise surged from a mummer to a roar. Ortho gripped his rosary tighter and began shuffling across the courtyard, leg manacles ringing. He kept his legs moving mechanically, his mind busy with endless Hail Marys... but his soul screamed out for his God.

I know you move in mysterious ways, O Lord... Ortho prayed. And that I'm not worthy to know your Plan... and if this is how you wish me die... well, then I accept it, but... Dear God, take mercy on my soul! Send me a miracle—just this once! Please!

Ortho didn't bother to ask why this was happening to him. He knew why. It was his own fault. When Malingo found him out as a wizard and forced him into sorcery, Ortho should have stood his ground and refused. But doing so meant death—Malingo killed wizards who wouldn't turn sorcerer—and Ortho had been a coward. The first time he went behind the back of his sorcerer partner and warned a priest to flee, it had taken

every ounce of courage he could muster. He knew betraying the Bloodhounds could get him killed... he just never thought it would be at the hands of Church and Crown...

Ortho lost his nerve again at the foot of the stairs leading to the gallows platform. The Captain shoved him forward again with a jolt.

"For God's sake, man, die with some dignity!" he hissed.

Ortho lifted one chained foot after the other, ascending the stairs. His feet were almost too heavy to lift, each movement seeming to take an eternity. Finally, he arrived at the top of the platform where Queen Alisande sat on a small throne... with a hangman at her side.

That's when the riot began in earnest. Ortho only had time to register a blizzard of garbage flying toward him before he cringed and turned away, rotten food, turds, and stones pelting his body. He peered back at the churning mass of furious, hateful faces, searching the crowd for the Lord Wizard, the only man who might be able to get Ortho out of this mess. He didn't see him—but he did catch a glimpse of the bushiest, reddest mustache in all of Merovence smiling at him. Ortho did a double-take and stared. The Abbot of the Monastery of Saint Moncaire nodded slightly and winked—a wink that said God would provide for the faithful, and all would be well. Hope—and courage—surged in Ortho's heart. At least one man here was still on his side.

It gave him the strength he needed to keep going. He shuffled over to the trapdoor in the platform beneath the noose, and stepped cautiously upon it. It held his weight. The roar of the crowd surged yet again.

The prosecutor, a Bishop, climbed up to the gallows platform, clutching a huge leather-bound Bible to his chest. He tried to calm the crowd, but it was a losing battle.

It was only when he began to read the charges against Ortho that the crowd grew quiet and still.

"You, Ortho of Savoie, stand accused of treason against the Crown, murder of the priest Father DuVois of Monteville, and..." the Bishop's face twisted with revulsion. "And of black magic, sorcery, and Satanism!"

The crowd erupted into jeers and cheers; justice was being served at last.

A man of Monteville was called upon as witness to Ortho's crimes, and sworn in on the Bishop's enormous Bible. Ortho listened in heart-pounding silence as the witness recounted the murder of Father DuVois. The mob grew even uglier as the tale unfolded. Ortho chewed his gag in frustration—the *facts* were true, aye... but what everyone thought it all meant was so far from the truth!

When the witness finally finished, the mob roared again, demanding justice be served and Ortho be hanged. The Bishop waited for it to subside, then turned to Ortho.

"Have you anything to say in your defense?"

Two crossbowmen took position beside Ortho, weapons raised, ready to put a bolt through his skull the second he dared attempt a spell. Precautions taken, Ortho's gag was removed for the first time in days. He worked his parched tongue and lips, and managed to croak out, "I am not a traitor to the crown, I swear to God!"

"*Blasphemy!*" the Bishop cried. "Did you not serve the usurper Astaulf and his court?" he demanded.

"Well... aye, but—"

"And were you not an officer—a *Bloodhound sorcerer!*—under the pretender's command?"

"Nay!" Ortho spat vehemently. "I am no sorcerer, and never was!"

The crowd scoffed at that, muttering darkly. The Bishop rolled his eyes and turned to Queen Alisande. "Your Majesty, we have over two score witness who did *see* this man wear the robes of a Bloodhound and cast unholy black magic!"

Alisande regarded Ortho with a cool stare. "What say you to this, master scribe?"
The mob quieted to hear Ortho's answer.

"I cast magic, aye—but not Black! I am a wizard, not a—"

The howl of the angry crowd drowned him out.

"Then *why!*" the Bishop yelled over the crowd. "Why were you in the robes of a sorcerer? *A Bloodhound!?*"

Ortho visibly sagged. In his defense, he could only offer the truth—but he knew how weak it sounded, even to his own ears. "Please," he begged, "I only *pretended* to be a—" A furious roar drowned him out as the mob made their opinion clear, and Ortho flinched against a renewed wave of hurled trash. He knew they would never believe him.

"And what of the sorcerer you slew, then?" the Bishop pushed him. "Your partner in evil?"

"T'was an accident!" Ortho protested. "I never meant—"

"And what of the good Father DuVois?" the Bishop cut him off. "I suppose his murder was an accident too, hmm?" The Bishop's voice dripped with sarcasm, eliciting peals of mocking laughter from the crowd.

"Nay... I killed him, aye, to my shame... but t'was in my own defense!" Ortho protested. The loudest, angriest snarl yet erupted from the crowd, and a blizzard of

hurled garbage pelted him. "I tell the truth, I swear to God!" Ortho yelled. "DuVois was trying to kill m—"

A rock struck Ortho in the side of his head. He staggered, tripped over his leg irons, and toppled to the ground, dazed. His rosary slipped from his fingers. The crowd erupted into cheers.

"Your Majesty," the Bishop began, turning to the Queen's throne and spreading his hands. "The accused has given only the most feeble—and, might I add, the most common—excuses offered by any murderer or sorcerer. They are as unlikely as they are absurd, and..." he waited for the laughter to die down, then turned back to Ortho. "And I ask him now: Can you prove *any* of your claims? Do you have any witnesses to call? Any letters to offer? Any evidence of any kind?"

Ortho knew there was no evidence—he'd destroyed it all. Terrified of Malingo discovering his subversive double-life, Ortho had obsessively covered his tracks—too well, apparently. He realized the irony of the situation, and could only interpret it as God's punishment for his cowardice.

Ortho lay motionless on the wooden floor of the gallows platform in silent despair, his head still spinning. With his feet and hands bound, he couldn't even stand himself up. Finally, the hangman hauled Ortho to his feet.

"Answer the question!" the Bishop demanded.

"No." Ortho shook his head, disheartened. "I can prove nothing."

"As I thought." The Bishop nodded at the soldiers. Ortho was seized and the gag shoved back in his mouth. The Bishop turned to the Queen. "Your Majesty," he began, and the crowd quieted. "The case against Ortho of Savoie is clear. We have

dozens of witnesses to his villainy, and he offers nothing in his defense except his word—his *unreliable* word! I ask the Crown that justice be served."

A jubilant cheer burst from the crowd. Ortho heard them howling for his blood, and the frosty fear flooding his chest threatened to overflow out his mouth in a frightened scream. He squeezed his eyes shut and prayed furiously—for nothing short of a miracle.

When the angry roar began to subside, the Queen looked at the hangman, sighed, and nodded sadly. She stood very slowly, as if she were being dragged from her seat, while the executioner attended to his work.

The Queen pronounced judgment slowly, as if each word had been drawn unwilling from her throat. "The accused has been found guilty on all charges," Queen Alisande said. "The punishment for sorcery is purification by fire. But, as the accused has recanted his sorcery, and confessed his sins unto God, he may be spared the torch." There was some grumbling from the crowd about that... but it wasn't exactly a surprise. The crowd was gathered around a gallows, after all, not a bonfire. "Still," Alisande continued, "the punishment for both treason and murder... is death." The mob cheered again.

Suddenly, Ortho had a black burlap bag shoved roughly over his head from behind. The fear of death hit him with full force.

"Execution shall be by hanging," Alisande continued. "May God have mercy on his soul."

It was a good thing they had chained Ortho's ankles together—when he felt the rough rope of the noose slip over his head and tighten around his throat, he would have bolted in panic for sure.

Please, Lord! Ortho prayed furiously, as tears began to blur his vision. *I don't want to die! Not like this! Not remembered only as a villain!*

The queen finished up. "I thereby rule that the accused, Ortho of Savoie, shall be—"

The air filled with the roar of a blast furnace, and a wave of heat washed over Ortho. The crowd screamed. He couldn't see through the black hood, but he heard the pounding of feet as people ran—then heard a voice cut through the air. Ortho's heart leapt in furious hope. He knew the voice—Sir Matthew, Her Majesty's Wizard, Ortho's lord and master, a man the saints themselves had sent to this world to save Cross and Crown from the rule of Satan. If God were to save Ortho now, he knew it would be through Sir Matthew.

It was Stegoman's blast of fire that got their attention.

As they had approached Bordestang, Matt could tell from the crowded courtyard that the trial and execution were already in progress. Someone stood on the gallows—Matt assumed it was Ortho. *That was* when Matt asked Stegoman to get their attention—which apparently involved a lot of aerial acrobatics and breathing fire. By the time Stegoman touched down, everyone had scurried out of the courtyard and were hugging the walls. The trial had ground to a complete halt.

Half a second before Stegoman landed, Matt swung a leg over a back fin and slid down Stegoman's scaly side to the dirt.

"With Her Majesty's respects," Matt said, falling to one knee, "the Lord Wizard of Merovence humbly requests that we be allowed to present new evidence in this trial."

Queen Alisande waited a full beat before responding. She took a step toward them and nodded once. "The crown will hear this new evidence," she declared.

A swish-thump-ouch! behind Matt signaled Montmartre's dismounting. He, too, instantly fell to his knees, although Matt suspected it had more to do with balance than protocol. "We humbly submit that this man, Ortho of Savoie, is innocent," Montmartre boomed. "He is neither sorcerer nor murderer, but a loyal subject of the crown and a soldier of God!"

For the first time since Matt landed, an angry rumble whispered through the crowd. The wallflowers migrated back into the courtyard, muttering and gesturing indignantly.

Alisande arched a regal eyebrow. "Those are extraordinary claims, Duke Montmartre. I hope you can prove them."

"If Your Majesty will allow it," Matt asked, "I'd like to take the stage—er, pulpit."

Alisande nodded her acquiescence. Matt climbed up the scaffold to the gallows while Montmartre helped Charlotte and little Michelle down from Stegoman's back—and the exhausted dragon collapsed onto the cool earth, panting.

Matt bowed to his Queen. Up close, even despite the urgency and seriousness of the situation, Matt still found himself involuntarily dazzled by Alisande's beauty. Her gold crown competed with the gold of her hair, flowing down her shoulders and over a

regal dress of brilliant blue. Matt caught a faint whiff of her lavender perfume. He suddenly felt self-consciously underdressed next to the Queen; his traveling clothes were rumpled and dusty, he had a charred sickle stuck in his belt for no obvious reason, and he hadn't bathed in two days. He hoped she couldn't get a whiff of *his* aroma.

No matter. He could bathe later. Right now, he had a job to do.

Matt crossed the platform, placing himself next to Ortho and his hangman. Matt wanted to be within arms' reach of Ortho, just in case—the noose around his apprentice's neck made Matt nervous.

"How you holding up, Ortho?" Matt whispered.

The black hood bobbed in a nod. "Mmph!"

"Oh. Still gagged, huh?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Pray tell, Lord Wizard..." Alisande reseated herself in the throne with a graceful, fluid movement. "What is this new evidence you wish to present?"

"Well, uh, that depends, Your Majesty," Matt said, not even sure where to begin—he had uncovered a big, complicated story. "What is Ortho charged with?"

"Treason, sorcery, and murder!" the Bishop supplied.

Matt glanced at the cleric, recognized him, and swallowed hard—it was the Bishop of Toulouse. Father DuVois's parish was within the diocese of Toulouse—the Bishop had probably even known DuVois personally. If *he* was the prosecutor, then proving Ortho's innocence was going to be a tough sell.

Might as well start with the first charge, Matt thought. He cleared his throat. "I submit that Ortho of Savoie is *not* a traitor to the crown," he yelled out to the crowd. "He fought for the Queen at Grelleg Plain—*not* the usurper!"

"I hope you have some proof of this, Wizard," the Bishop said, and sarcasm seeped into his voice again. "Or do you expect us to take it on your word alone?"

"Not my word, Your Grace, but a Holy Man's." Matt turned to the crowd. "I call as my first witness the Abbot of Saint Moncaire Monastery!"

A buzz of surprise ran through the crowd.

The Bishop glared daggers at Matt, knowing he'd just been trumped—an Abbot's legal and moral authority was equal to a Bishop's.

"Make way, make way!" the warrior-monk boomed as he pushed his way through the mob and crossed to the gallows. "'Tis about time, Lord Wizard! I feared you had forgotten me!" The crowd murmured with speculation as the Abbot ran up the stairs to the scaffold and dropped a bow to the Queen. The Bishop held out the huge Bible and the Abbot was quickly sworn in.

"Thank you, Abbot," Matt said. "Now can you tell me—do you know this man?" Matt turned and pointed at the man on the gallows—who was wearing a black hood, of course. "Uh... hey, guys?" Matt pointed to the soldiers with the crossbows. "Would you mind, you know, taking the bag off his head so we can see his face?"

The two soldiers glanced at each other. One shrugged. The other nodded, reached up and yanked the bag off. Ortho blinked into the light for a moment, then saw Matt and the Abbot. He suddenly looked far happier than a man with his head in a noose had any right to be.

"Aye, I know him, and proud to say so." The Abbot nodded. "'Tis Ortho of Savoie."

"And how do you know him?" Matt asked.

"He fought under me with the Order of Saint Moncaire at the Battle of Grelig Plain, on the side of Her Majesty."

A murmur rustled through the crowd.

"I see." The Bishop stepped up. "And how many soldiers did you command at Grelig Plain, Abbot?"

"Five thousand good men and true," the Abbot replied with more than a hint of pride.

"And out of five thousand men, you remember this *one* foot soldier?"

"Aye. He has the heart of a warrior and the soul of a saint—a perfect recruit for our Order. And that, Your Grace, is someone I *never* forget."

The crowd muttered again at the Abbot's unexpectedly glowing reference. The mob was certain of Ortho's guilt... but the word of an Abbot could not be discounted lightly. What did it all mean?

"Yet how can you be sure 'tis the same man?" the Bishop spread his hands.

Matt butted in on the exchange. "For example, did the man you know have any distinguishing characteristics?"

Pretty much the entire court glanced at Matt in puzzlement. He mentally kicked himself for using modern terminology again. "I mean... things like a tattoo, or a birthmark, or a mole."

The Abbot frowned a different sort of puzzlement at Matt; he had no idea where the Lord Wizard was going with all this.

"Or a scar?" Matt prompted.

"Oh! Aye!" the Abbot exclaimed, finally catching on. "This man did arrive freshly wounded at our Abbey, a gash in his side under his right arm. If t'is the same man, he should have such a scar there now."

"Your Majesty." Matt turned to the Queen. "May I request that Ortho's tunic be removed so we can check for this scar?"

Alisande nodded. "I will allow it."

"And, uh, can we get his head out of that noose? At least until the verdict?"

Alisande looked at the hangman and nodded. The executioner sighed, then yanked the noose off Ortho's head. Ortho behaved himself as they unchained his hands and pulled his tunic off. The hangman turned Ortho's right side to the crowd and lifted his arm. There, below his armpit, running diagonally down across his ribs, was an ugly purple scar. The crowd rumbled their opinion of this new development.

The Bishop didn't even wait for them to bind Ortho's hand behind his shirtless back before launching into a counter-argument. "Very well, so this may be the same man the Abbot can vouch for, aye," he conceded. "But that proves nothing! He may still have served the usurper, and been a sorcerer! All *this* proves is that he defected to the Queen and renounced his sorcery when it became obvious to all that the True Crown would win the war!"

Now *that*, Matt knew, was absurd. It was never obvious Alisande would win—quite the contrary, actually. Their resistance had been a last-minute, shoestring

operation the whole way, a desperate attempt to scrape up an army for one last all-or-nothing battle. The fighting was touch-and-go the whole way, and that Alisande's outnumbered forces had carried the day was nothing short of a miracle—literally. Smart money would have bet on the usurper's army. Why would one of Manlingo's sorcerers defect at that moment, when it looked like Astaulf was finally going to crush the last pocket of resistance in Merovence once and for all?

Luckily, Matt didn't need to use that particular argument. He had something better, something that took him right where he wanted to go. "A fair question, Your Grace," Matt conceded. "But we have uncovered evidence that Ortho was *still* loyal to the Queen during his time in both Astaulf's court and with Malingo's Bloodhound sorcerers."

The mob scoffed loudly at this, instantly skeptical.

"Yes, yes, we have all heard his story, that he secretly supported the Queen, etcetera ad nauseum," the Bishop said impatiently. "But every traitor says as much, and he cannot prove his claim!"

"Well, I can," Matt declared.

Another rumble rippled through the crowd, a mixture of surprise, curiosity, and disbelief. Matt turned to the mob. "I call as my next witness Sergeant-Brother Gilbert of the Order of Saint Moncaire!"

The crowd buzzed with conversation, everyone speculating on the new development, while the muscular teenage monk ascended the scaffold and was sworn in on the Bible.

"Your Majesty. Lord Wizard." Gilbert dropped two deep, lightning-quick bows that implied nothing less than phenomenal lower back muscles. "How can this humble servant of God be of service to you?"

"Tell me, good brother," Matt began, "who is the Frank?"

"The Frank?" Gilbert blinked. "Oh, I fear I know not, your Lordship. No one knows who the Frank is."

"Let me rephrase the question," Matt said, with a hint of exasperation. "Who was the man you only knew as 'The Frank'?"

"Oh!" Gilbert nodded. "Well, the Frank was a hidden Good Samaritan—someone who did warn the priests hiding within the Usurper's territory that Malingo's Bloodhounds had found them and were coming. If they valued their lives, they were to flee to the Abbey of Saint Moncaire. Over half a dozen priests did arrive at our gates in this fashion. 'Twas my duty to find lodging for them in the abbey, so I did learn their stories."

"So you know what the Frank *did*... but you don't actually know *who* he was. In fact, you said that no one knew. Why is that?"

"Oh, the Frank had to keep himself hidden, milord, for fear someone would betray him as a traitor to Astaulf's cause. He dared not show himself, not even to the priests he helped escape—he did warn them with letters instead."

"I object to this, Your Majesty," the Bishop interrupted. "What has this to do with the trial at hand?"

"I'm getting to that," Matt said, pulling a parchment from his belt purse. "You see, Father DuVois received such a letter shortly before his death." He held the note up for all to see.

A flutter of surprise rippled through the crowd; this was *their* priest he was talking about, after all, and this was something they had not known—and weren't entirely sure what it meant.

Matt glanced at Ortho. His eyes were locked on the letter, a look of surprised delight on his face. He recognized it, alright—and knew what it could prove.

"And how did *you* find this letter, Lord *Wizard*?" the Bishop asked, his emphasis making the implications of his question clear: could a wizard—a man who could conjure things out of thin air—be trusted? Luckily, Matt had the perfect truth to fall back on to keep this line of questioning (and the mob) from turning ugly.

"Actually, it was given to me," Matt said. "The good Father Heureaux, the new priest of Monteville, found it pressed between the pages of DuVois' Bible."

The Bishop narrowed his eyes at Matt—he knew Matt had him on this one. The Bishop couldn't question the integrity of a priest within his own diocese—not without it reflecting poorly on him, at least. Besides, the mob seemed to believe it, judging by the sound—and why not? They knew and trusted Father Heureaux, after all.

Matt stepped up to the Queen, holding out the letter for her to read. "Your Majesty, I have reason to believe this letter was sent by the Frank. First, he warned DuVois in writing, not in person. Second, it warns DuVois that the Bloodhounds are coming for him. And third, it tells him to run to Moncaire Abbey. Three points of similarity, Your Majesty, are unlikely to be a coincidence."

"So what if it is from the Frank?" the Bishop asked, exasperated. "What of it? I ask again, what relevance has this to the crime?"

"It's relevant," Matt said, "because I know who the Frank is."

An excited buzz arose from the crowd—a sound of surprise, curiosity, and delight. This execution was turning out to be a very good show indeed.

The Bishop turned to the Queen. "Your Majesty, I still fail to see wha—"

The Queen silenced him with a sharply raised hand. "Your pardon, Your Grace... but I am curious to know the answer—as, I think, are many here. Tell us, Lord Wizard... who is this hidden hero of King and Christ?"

"I was able to identify the Frank through his handwriting," Matt explained, drawing out the suspense. As long he had everyone's attention, he was going to use it. "I have here another letter—my weekly schedule, drawn up by one of the royal scribes here in the castle." He handed both letters to the Queen. "If you'll look at the handwriting, Your Majesty, you'll see that it matches." Matt pointed to the various details. "Each letter is drawn exactly the same... the size and spacing of the letters and words match... even the angle of the pen strokes is the same."

The Queen leaned forward over the two letters, examining them closely. For a moment there was almost total silence in the courtyard as everyone waited to hear her verdict. She handed the parchments back to Matt with a nod.

"The handwriting matches," she declared. "The same hand penned both these letters, there is no doubt. Now tell us, Lord Wizard—who is the scribe who did ink your calendar? Who is the Frank?"

Matt turned and pointed at the man on the gallows. "Him. Ortho of Savoie. The accused."

A shocked gasp shot from the crowd... and for an instant, all was still and silent. Then a schizophrenic roar erupted from the mob, part astonishment, part disbelief, part howling denial.

Matt waited for it to peak. The instant it began to ebb, he yelled, "Your Majesty, I have a question for the accused! I ask that his gag be removed so that he may answer!"

Alisande made an exaggerated nod, for the crowd's sake, and bellowed, "The Crown will allow it!"

In the time it took for Matt to cross the platform to Ortho, the roar of the crowd sank to a rumble of anticipation. While Ortho's gag was removed and his hands unchained, Matt turned and stared at the Bishop. "Well?"

The Bishop scowled back at Matt in confusion. "What would you, milord?"

"Aren't you going to swear him in?"

The Bishop hesitated for a moment, indecisive, then grimaced and stepped toward the prisoner. He held out the Bible to Ortho. "Do you—"

Ortho's hand shot forward against the Bible, and his hoarse voice cried, "I do swear to tell the whole honest truth under pain of damnation, so help me God!"

Another round of shocked gasps popped from the crowd amid a general hum of amazement and uncertainty, followed by a rumble of speculation. It was no surprise, of course—everyone knew that even a sorcerer, once shaven, could touch the word of

God. But Matt had forced the issue because he knew the act itself was a powerful symbol in the eyes of the public—and Matt knew the power of symbols in this universe.

Before the crowd could recover, Matt stepped up to the prisoner. "The question!" Matt yelled over the crowd, trying to get their attention. "The question I have for the accused is..."

The mob grew quiet, listening.

"Are you, Ortho, the Frank?"

"Yes," Ortho rasped out, nodding. "I am the Frank."

Matt heard the mob's confused reaction, but pushed ahead. "Then tell me, Ortho the Frank... how many priests did you help escape?"

"Not enough, milord." Ortho looked down. "Not enough."

"But how many *did* you save?" Matt pushed. "Give us a number."

"Seven, milord," Ortho said. "Fathers Lenoir, Bouchard, Hautefort, Delaunay, Candeloro, Fleurieu, and d'Arburg!"

The mob objected before Ortho had even finished. There were many cries of protest—but they were fewer, softer, tinged with doubt. The facts had been laid bare for them, and they were slowly recognizing the truth for what it was—but that didn't mean they had to like it.

"Your Majesty!" The Bishop objected, shouting over the crowd. "This matters not! This man murdered a priest, and—"

"That's a separate charge!" Matt yelled, cutting him off. "And I'll get to that—but first, let's settle the charge of treason!" He turned to the Queen. "Your Majesty, we've *proven* that this man, Ortho the Frank, was *not* a traitor to your cause—he was a spy for

it! He really *did* pretend to follow the Usurper—at great personal risk, I might add—so that he could sabotage Malingo's campaign against church and crown from the inside, rescuing seven priests in the process!"

From the corner of his eye, Matt noticed the soldiers replacing Ortho's manacles and gag—but they were more gentle about this time. That was a good sign. He was getting through to his audience.

Alisande leaned back in her throne and steepled her fingers, brown creased in concentration. The sound of the crowd ebbed as everyone awaited the Queen's verdict.

"Certainly," she said slowly, carefully, "the accusation of treason is no longer quite so clear in the case of Ortho the Frank."

Matt smiled to himself at that. Without blinking an eye, Alisande had followed his lead in tacking 'the Frank' onto Ortho's name, fusing the two figures together in the minds of the crowd. The cleverness of his fiancé never ceased to amaze him.

Still, Matt didn't envy the difficulty of her decision. He knew she *wanted* to acquit Ortho... but he also knew an angry mob could only be pushed so far. As always, Alisande did what any good politician would do: she stalled for time.

"I fear, however," Alisande continued, "that there is more to this story than there appears. Therefore, I shall reserve judgment until I have heard *all* of the evidence in this trial."

Matt knew that was probably the best he was going to be able to get for now. The Bishop also seemed to realize he'd suffered a temporary setback, and moved on without hesitation.

"Even if the accused was, as you say, a spy for Her Majesty, it does not change the fact that he murdered a priest!"

"Ortho the Frank *did* kill DuVois! And he will not deny it!" Matt declared.

The mob was shocked into a momentary near-silence by the unexpected admission.

"But it was *not* murder!" Matt continued. "In our own investigation, we have found evidence that strongly suggests Ortho the Frank killed DuVois in the defense of his own life!"

The mob let out another collective groan, part dismissive and part disappointed. It was not a new idea; Ortho had made the claim before—but he hadn't been able to prove it. But whatever the Lord Wizard had found might just verify it after all—and the peasants of Monteville weren't sure they wanted it confirmed.

"Nonsense!" the Bishop cried. "The good Father DuVois was trying to *flee* the sorcerer, not fight him!"

"If DuVois was trying to escape, why didn't he go out the barn door?" Matt asked.

The Bishop just blinked at him in confusion and uncertainty. Apparently, he wasn't as familiar with the details of the crime as Matt was.

"The Mass was held in a barn, not a church," Matt explained. "When the sorcerers tried to arrest DuVois, they let everyone else run away—through the open barn doors. When the sorcerers fought each other, the barn caught on fire. Then the little sorcerer got knocked through the barn wall. If DuVois wanted to escape, why did he run through that narrow, burning hole in the wall—where the sorcerers were? Why didn't he run out through the big, wide-open barn doors? For that matter, why was he

still in the barn at all by then? Why didn't he run away while the sorcerers were distracted battling each other?"

The Bishop was silent, still absorbing the new details and—for the moment at least—couldn't think of an answer to Matt's question.

"I'll tell you why," Matt answered, pushing ahead before the Bishop could recover and counterattack. "Because DuVois was running *toward* the sorcerers, not away from them! And, while Ortho the Frank was on his knees, distracted by his dying partner, DuVois struck him from behind... with this!" Matt pulled the sickle from his belt.

The mob growled their disagreement. Ortho's eye widened, staring at the scorched sickle in disbelief—then, even through the filthy gag, Matt could see the scribe grin.

"Ridiculous!" the Bishop exploded. "What nonsense is this? That is *not* what the people of Monteville saw!"

"The people of Monteville were three hundred yards away, hiding in the tree line, in the middle of the night, while it was raining!" Matt snapped. "The only light was the burning barn—*behind* Ortho and DuVois! All *anyone* saw were shadows moving in the distance!"

The Bishop opened his mouth, then blinked and closed it. Once again, Matt had struck on details the clergyman apparently hadn't known. The Bishop looked to the crowd for their reaction. There was subdued mutters and grumbling... but no one was really disagreeing with what Matt had said.

"They were close enough to see DuVois come out of the hole in the wall and collide with Ortho, yes," Matt said. "But they were too far away to see what DuVois had in his hand—this sickle!"

The mob buzzed with conversation, debating if it could be true.

"Duke Montmartre found this blade," Matt continued, "just outside the wreckage of the barn fire, in the exact spot where DuVois fought with Ortho the Frank. DuVois must have grabbed this sickle from the barn and used it to attack Ortho. I *know* this to be true, because Ortho the Frank bears the proof on his own body—in the form of a scar! The same one we saw earlier, under his arm—it was made with this!" Matt held up the tool-turned-weapon for all to see.

"A scar proves nothing!" the Bishop snapped. "It could be *years* old!"

"No, actually," Matt countered. "Remember, the Abbot of St. Moncaire swore that it was still a fresh wound when Ortho the Frank arrived at the abbey."

The Bishop spread his hands, exasperated. "All *that* means is that he was attacked by bandits between fleeing Monteville and arriving at the abbey!"

"Possible, but doubtful," Matt said. "And here's why." He walked towards Ortho, sickle raised, then noticed that the scribe was still bound and gagged. He turned back to Alisande. "Uh, Your Majesty? I need Ortho the Frank to act out his attack. Can we unchain his arms and legs?"

Alisande hesitated a moment, then nodded to the soldiers. "You may—but the gag stays," she said sternly.

"Understood, Your Majesty." Matt nodded, then turned back to Ortho. "Now, most men are right-handed," he explained to the crowd as Ortho was unchained. "And,

as you can see..." Matt swung the sickle in slow motion at Ortho. "...that means any blow from a frontal attacker would land on the left side of his body. But Ortho the Frank's scar is on his *right* side."

"Aye, but some men strike with their left," the Bishop argued.

"The odds are against it... but it's but not impossible," Matt conceded. "Even then, though, the scar *still* doesn't match up. You see, if I were left-handed..." Matt switched the sickle to his other hand. "And I attacked Ortho the Frank..." Once again, Matt slowly pantomimed swinging the sickle at Ortho. "...the sickle would hit his arm, not his side. And from this position, it would be *extremely* difficult for someone to land a blow where the scar is—under his arm, on his side, and below the armpit."

"Difficult, aye, but not impossible." The Bishop wasn't going to budge an inch.

"Well, yes... but even then, the problem is that the *angle* of the scar still isn't right." A puzzled murmur ran through the crowd. "Don't worry, I'll explain it." Matt turned to Ortho. "I need you to turn around and keep your arm up so everyone can see the scar." Ortho nodded eagerly, his face hopeful, and did as Matt asked. Still holding the sickle in his left hand, Matt walked around to the other side of Ortho, so that they stood face to face. "You see, if his arm was up—to block another blow or something—and I struck from in front of him, the scar would be straight. But it's not." Matt pantomimed swinging the sickle again, and a buzz arose from the crowd. Everyone could see the difference. The sickle blade struck horizontally—but the scar was clearly a sharp diagonal, running downward across his side from his back to his belly.

"In fact, there's only one direction this blow *could* have come from," Matt explained. "If Ortho the Frank were kneeling..." Matt nodded to Ortho, who dropped to

his knees. "...and he was leaning over, with his arms reaching out to his partner, as he was that night..." Ortho followed the instructions while Matt walked around behind him again. "...and assuming his attacker was standing, and was right-handed—as DuVois was—and he struck Ortho from behind..." Once again, Matt slowly swung the sickle at Ortho. The blade came to rest against the scar, the angle a perfect match. Even the length of sickle and scar were the same.

The crowd buzzed with amazement and incredulity, their assumptions and doubts evaporating before the evidence laid bare for them.

Matt turned to Alisande. "Your Majesty, DuVois attacked Ortho the Frank first. What's more, he ambushed Ortho from behind, while he was on his knees. We have proof of it right here, carved in the victim's flesh by DuVois's own hand.

"And at that point, Your Majesty, Ortho the Frank did what any man in fear of his life would do—he drew his weapon and fought back. But... well, DuVois was an elderly priest, while Ortho the Frank is young, and a former soldier. The fight didn't last long, and Ortho won."

"But... but..." the Bishop sputtered, objecting... but unable to find any grounds.

Alisande silenced him with a raised hand. "I can see with my own eyes that the evidence is plain, Lord Wizard, and your reasoning is sound... yet I fear it still makes little sense," she said. "Why did the good father attack Ortho the Frank in the first place? Wherefore did he not flee the barn when the chance was his? Indeed, why did he not flee *Monteville* when Ortho the Frank did warn him of the coming of the Bloodhounds?"

In other words, Matt thought, she wanted to know DuVois's motive—and by publicly demanding it, she knew Matt would have to explain it to the whole crowd. Smart move. Matt gave her a smile filled with pride and affection. She stiffened in her chair.

"I know the answers to some of those questions, Your Majesty," Matt said, "but not all of them. What happened in Monteville is... complicated, to say the very least. I've figured out most of the story, but... well, only three men *really* know what happened in the barn that night. Two of them are dead. And the third... well, the third is a pious and honorable man, who risked his life to prove his loyalty to Church and Crown. What's more, he's sworn an oath on the Holy Bible to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Matt turned back to Ortho. "If we really want to know what happened, we should simply ask *him*."

"You make a good point, Lord Wizard," the Queen said. She looked at Ortho and nodded to the crossbowmen guarding him. "Let the accused explain himself—if he can."

Matt noticed Ortho was standing now—and was still unchained. The soldiers had either forgotten or not bothered to shackle his arms and legs again. Either way, it was a good sign—it meant people were fearing the accused sorcerer less and less. Ortho was smartly reinforcing that impression by staying on his best behavior. He hadn't even used his newly-freed hands to take off his gag—and Matt knew from experience how uncomfortable a gag could be.

"Tell us, Ortho the Frank," Matt said. "Why was DuVois trying to kill you?"

After a short, silent interlude, one of the soldiers seemed to realize the prisoner was still gagged. He reached out and yanked the rag down.

"Start at the beginning and tell us what happened in Monteville," Matt instructed as Ortho worked his mouth, moistening his parched tongue and lips enough to speak clearly. "Oh, and Ortho?" The prisoner looked up. Matt looked Ortho in the eye. "Tell us everything... *everything*. Don't leave anything out, no matter how disturbing. Look, I know you've got some things to say that may be... well, hard to believe. Stuff we don't *want* to believe. But Duke Montmartre and I have brought some witnesses who will confirm everything you have to say—even the ugly parts."

Ortho cocked his head and furrowed his brow. "My lord?" he asked, puzzled.

Matt couldn't tell if Ortho was really confused, or just playing dumb. He got his answer when Montmartre escorted Charlotte and Michelle up to the platform. Ortho saw them—and blanched.

An indignant exclamation burst from the crowd as they saw her—but neither Charlotte nor Ortho seemed to notice. Their eyes were locked. Something significant but unspoken seemed to pass silently between them. Then Charlotte gave him a small, tight nod. Ortho returned it, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. He glanced down at little Michelle, gripping her mother's hand. She gave Ortho a smile and a little wave of her fingers. Ortho couldn't contain a thin smile of his own—a smile of satisfaction and pride.

"Your Majesty, I must protest!" the Bishop argued, echoing the sentiment of the mob. "This is a woman of low morals and questionable character! Anything she has to say cannot be considered reliable!"

"I disagree, Your Majesty," Matt countered. "DuVois hid from Malingo's men by living in Charlotte's hut right up to his dying day."

Alisande raised an eyebrow at the news and all it implied. The mob grumbled indignantly.

"Oh, come *on!*" Matt turned to the muttering mob, exasperated. "You all know it's true! *You're* the ones that forced Charlotte to let DuVois move in, weren't you?"

That knocked the mob down a peg—the only answer to Matt's question was a guilty, uncomfortable silence. Matt turned back to the Bishop. "Even you, Your Grace—you *did* grant DuVois permission to live in hiding with Charlotte, didn't you?"

Not surprisingly, the Bishop also remained silent, wary of saying anything.

"I see," Alisande said, and her voice was cold and hard as winter iron. "It would appear I must needs discuss this with the Archbishop—and soon."

"My point, Your Majesty," Matt said, trying to drag the trial back on track, "is that if *anyone* knows what happened to DuVois in those last few days of his life, it's Charlotte."

Alisande looked the dirty charcoal burner and her daughter up and down, evaluating. "I... *may* take into consideration what this woman does have to say," the Queen said slowly, not ruling it out but not committing herself either. "But I would hear it from the accused first." She looked back at Ortho.

"You heard the Queen, Ortho," Matt said. "So tell us what happened, and don't hold anything back. Tell us what you found in Monteville—and what you did about it."

"Very well, milord," Ortho nodded, letting out a deep sigh. "Though... forgive me, but... well, this may take some time."

"Don't worry," Matt assured him. "We're not going anywhere."