

Historical Note

Dragonetz and Estela are fictional characters living in real 12th century events. Whenever actual historical figures appear in the story (see list at the back of the book), I have kept within historical evidence and only imagined events and details that could indeed have happened. If I've made mistakes in the research, then I plead 'novelist'.

Within the story, I have used my research and answered some of the questions posed by historians. Everyone agrees that the Second Crusade was a failure from the crusaders' viewpoint but what caused exactly caused the military disasters at Mount Cadmus and in the siege of Damascus? Who had Alphonse Jourdain murdered and why? Dragonetz' adventures include my answers to these questions.

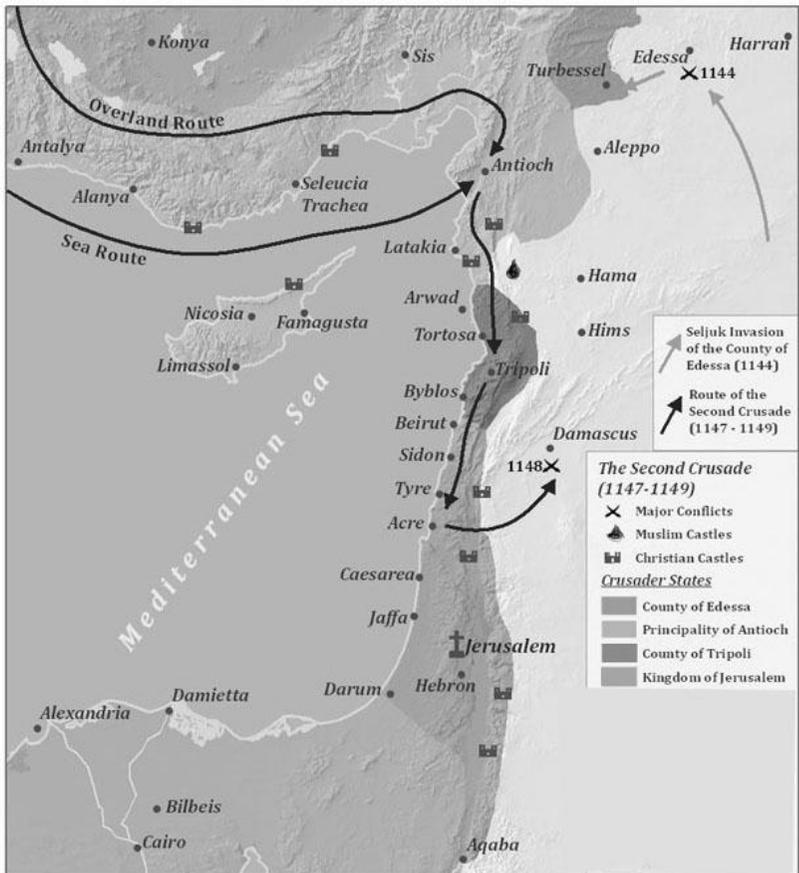
The real historical characters include an amazing woman; Mélisende, the Queen of Jerusalem, queen in her own right and ruler of all the Crusader States. Geoffroi de Rançon really was the Commander of Aliénor's Guard at Mount Cadmus and he was indeed dismissed in disgrace afterwards. He did have a son, although dates are a little contradictory so I have suited my story with regard to Geoffroi Junior.

The rare Torah of the story is the book known today as the Aleppo Codex, and it is perfectly possible that an adventurous spirit took it from the Jewish community in Provence to Maimonides in Egypt.

Much debate has taken place about the Hashashins, who gave rise to the term 'assassins'. Some say their alleged use of hash arises from a linguistic misunderstanding; others cite oral tradition as suggesting otherwise. This is a romantic novel so you can guess which version suited me best.

Working in four languages is confusing enough, let alone adding the random choices of medieval spellings. I've tried to give the flavour of the different languages by my choices so, for instance, I've used the Occitan spellings of French place-names such as Lyon (Lion) and Marseille (Marselha). The name Txamusca should be pronounced 'Sh-a-moose-ka' but you can say it how you like! Welcome to my version of the 12th century...

The Crusader Lands after the Second Crusade



Chapter 1

His world was limited to a small white chamber, dazzling him with light after days in the darkness of a blindfold. Large cushions of rich, silk brocade offered ruby and ochre relief from the whiteness, and rest for his body. An empty pail for his needs in one corner, clean rose-scented water and a towel in another, were the only other furnishings.

Stripes of sun and shade slanted through the arched window, filtered by the vertical iron bars rooted in the stone sill. The room was well protected from invaders. Wrought in the iron were flourishes of spear and ball but the man was in no mood to appreciate the exquisite craftsmanship of his prison, or to care whether someone could attack him from outside.

His enemies would come through the door not through the window. Wearing black robes and swathes of black around their heads and faces, speaking soft Arabic, they would bring some kind of spicy pottage. They would untie his hands so that he could use them to stuff the mash into his mouth and they would give him a cup of water then allow him to wash his hands and face. Then they would bind him again and bow before taking leave of their 'honoured guest'. Strange hospitality.

Escape attempts had failed so far, although it was a compliment to his perseverance and ingenuity that three anonymous attendants always stood outside the door with their curved swords. Rubbing bonds against the rough wall merely fretted his skin to bleeding, as did the shattered fragments of his water-cup after he'd kicked it against the wall. After that, they'd not left the cup with him.

Biting into the cushions and scattering their contents - feathers - advanced him no further than when he'd kicked over his chamber pot. Unless disgust in his jailers' eyes counted as an advance. Fasting for a day while they were absent and lower mortals cleaned his mess, struck him as no advance at all but he added their obsession with cleanliness to his observations on the fine scimitar blades. The filigree patterns on the steel were no ordinary pattern welding and they teased his memory. Who knew what would be useful, nor when.

His hands were tied and his balance was badly affected, but he was starting to adjust. Lying on his back and repeatedly scoring the wall under the window-sill with his big toes, he could mark the passing of nights, a dirty smudge for each, without it being noticed by the guards. The toe-marks tallied twelve already but he couldn't guess at time lost before that count. Time when he also lost his clothes, his precious horse and the book entrusted to him by a wise Jew; the book he was supposed to guard with his life and deliver to Abdon Yerushalmi in the dye-works in Jerusalem; the book on which his own future depended. His ideas about that future were changing rapidly in the white chamber but it was still possible he might have one. If they meant to kill him, they would have done so. Wouldn't they?

He crouched and straightened, exercising his calves and thighs, stretching his ankles, strengthening his riding muscles. His hands bound behind his back, he could do little for his arms but stretch them sideways or lie prone and arch hands towards feet but whatever he could make of a cushion and a wall in keeping active, so he did.

For his restless mind, his usual release was unhampered and he shut his eyes, breathed deeply and sang. He roved through springtime and kisses, goat-girls and fatal sword-thrusts. When memory threw him lines last sung as a duet with the sweetest partner he'd ever known, he accepted the pain and let it flow into the song of morning-after, the aubade and a lovers' farewell. Discipline for the heart as well as the mind.

Another lyric, not his own, floated into his mind; a song born in Occitania and carried into the crusade by its maker.

*Lanqand li jorn son lonc en may,
M'es bels douz chans d'auzelhs de lonh,
E qand me sui partitz de lay
Remembra.m d'un amor de lonh*

Bladesong

*'When days are long in May
I hear
the sweet-tongued birds so far away
And near
Things leave me dreaming
Only of my love so far away'*

Rudel's far-away love had been here, in the Holy Land, fuelled by stories of a matchless beauty, the Comtesse de Tripoli. The captive knight mouthed the plaintive Occitan.

*Iratz e gauzens me.n partray
S'ieu ja la vey l'amor de lonh,*

*'I would leave in joy but also pain
Should I but see my love so far away
Just once, again,'*

He deliberately altered the words, thinking of Estela, no unseen, unknown lady.

*'I know not how nor when,
The lands between so far away,
The roads uncertain to her door -
No more!
I cannot speak! Insha'Allah!'*

He sang the Arabic ironically instead of *'Diau platz.'* It seemed to him that the God of the Muslims held more power over him at this moment than the God of the Christians.

He let the sounds of the street below accompany his first attempts at shaping a new lyric, clashing tin pans for a tambour and a muezzin's call instead of the plaintive flute, to the rhythm of a rolling cart. Everything was a song if you knew how to listen.

Whatever the anonymous guards thought of such music, nothing showed in their lowered eyes as they entered the room, seemingly in the appointed way, at the appointed time. When they'd taken off blindfold and gag, after a head-splitting journey, the first thing he said was, 'If you harm my horse, may God, Allah and Yahweh spit

on your children's future, and on their children's future, to the thousandth generation.'

'He is fed, water and stabled, honoured guest,' was the reply, with a bow.

Then the knight tried questions. 'Where am I?' he asked them in his Arabic accented with Occitan. Like most Franks of his standing, he could read the language and speak it fluently, along with his Occitan mother tongue and Latin.

'In the care of Allah,' was the response, 'may his name be praised.' The Guards' own Arabic was odd, the words difficult to understand but the overall meaning clear enough. Always accompanied by a deferential bow and no expression in those eyes which never met his, all he could see in the swathes of black.

'Who are you?' he asked them.

'The servants of Allah, may His will be done.'

All his questions were answered in this way, politely, a fog of nothings from which he tried to give shape to his enemy. For he was surely in the hands of the enemy, however soft-voiced. It was three years since the humiliating end to the second crusade and nothing was more easily explained than Moors capturing and holding a Christian knight foolish enough to venture alone across their territory. It would certainly explain the respect with which he was treated and which usually preceded lengthy negotiations over a suitable ransom, after which he would be free to continue on his way. As heir to extensive lands in Aquitaine, and until recently Commander of the Guard and troubadour to Aquitaine's infamous Duchesse Aliénor, Lord Dragonetz los Pros was worth several coffers to those who could afford to pay up. Such a sum might attract even someone rich enough to replace the chewed and tattered cushion immediately with three more, larger, and even more sumptuously woven.

However, Dragonetz had not been on Moorish territory. Three days after disembarking in St Jean d'Acre, he'd been ambushed in an alleyway and knocked unconscious, and now here he was in a striped linen robe instead of his armour. Perhaps he should have been more vigilant but, in a city swarming with Templars and Hospitalers, his main concern after a month at sea was to avoid questions and to stock up for the journey to Jerusalem. There was no reason to fear Moorish attack in the heart of Oltra mar Christendom and although bad blood remained from the second crusade, the war had ended two years ago.

As a defeated veteran, Dragonetz was an unlikely military target for such a premeditated attack, however profitable he might be as an opportunist catch on the road.

He had to face the possibility that someone not only knew who he was but what he carried with him. From the moment in Narbonne when he accepted the book from the Jew, he also accepted the danger that came with carrying such a priceless treasure *Oltra mar*, overseas, to the Holy City itself. Jerusalem was under Christian rule but across disputed lands, and the journey there was perilous.

On the long sea voyage, he had time to wonder why the book meant so much, to unwrap the oilskin and study the parchment pages, covered in the even script of the Hebraic letters. Used to reading Arabic, with its curves and loops, Dragonetz could make nothing of this square alphabet, words hanging like washing from a line running across the column. Between the three columns were squiggles, obviously the annotations that Raavad told him were the most precious feature of the Codex. What else had Raavad told him?

At the time, Dragonetz had been too shocked by the death of Arnaut, his aide and friend, and the fire that ended his paper mill, to take in all he was told by the leader of Narbonne's Jewish community. Dragonetz owed money he could not repay and was bound against his will to this strange mission of the book, bound to put thousands of miles between himself and the woman he loved, as well as between himself and his enemies. Or so he'd thought. Maybe the book had brought him new enemies, or maybe old ones were harder to shake off.

The book was a Jewish bible, two hundred years old and precious in itself but the annotations made it a sacred and irreplaceable treasure. Raavad called it the *Keter Aram Sola*, perhaps the oldest Torah in existence.

'These,' he'd pointed with reverence to the squiggles in the margins, 'are the work of Aaron Ben Asher and they represent years of work and study by a brilliant mind. They tell us not only how to read the Torah but how to sing it. This Codex is the sacred guide to the Torah and must be preserved. It has been stolen, ransomed and given into my care. It has fed the learning of my people in Provence and I have great hope that something special has been born here, thanks to this book. But it is no longer safe in Narbonne, or even in Occitania. It is perhaps the only copy after the desecrations of the last decade in the Holy Land and it must go back there, all four hundred

and ninety one pages still in one piece, to somewhere that is safe. *'Blessed be he who preserves it and cursed be he who steals it, and cursed be he who sells it, and cursed be he who pawns it. It may not be sold and it may not be defiled.'*

Then Raavad had given the book and the mission to Dragonetz, along with the name of Abdon Yerushalmi and a way to contact him in Jerusalem. From the moment the book was out of his hands, and in Abdon Yerushalmi's, Dragonetz would be free. His debt of honour paid, he could go home to Estela and to - what? His dreams of making paper were in ashes and the Church would never allow him to start again.

If not in making paper, then in what lay his destiny? He could reclaim Estela from her position in Dia with the Comtessa, and return to his father's lands, where he would await his inheritance and play at estate management. His face screwed up wryly. He could reclaim Estela and they would tour Occitania, singing and juggling at the great courts, Aurenjaa, Barcelone, or north to Champagne and its strange whining language. They could even cross the seas to learn the songs of the barbarians living in the Pais de Gallas. He sighed. If only such a future were possible! But a warrior of his experience could not lay down his sword and stay in the world. He would be challenged wherever he went and if he declared no allegiance, blood would spill to make him choose sides.

He could reclaim Estela and take her to war with him, while he fought once again for Aquitaine and Christianity, fighting with his kind against the Moors and the Jews, fighting against the very civilisation that supported his dream, fighting against all knowledge, against science, mathematicks, medicine, astronomy. If there were another crusade, he might be forced to do just that, but there must be a better choice for him. For when he was free.

Free! He laughed aloud. He couldn't even move his hands! He just hoped that a few of the book's curses would land surely and quickly on whoever was holding him. As he tallied another mark under the window-ledge, he tried not to think of knights held to ransom for years, their beards grown to their knees. At least he would remain beardless if he continued to accept the efficient ministrations of his guards, whose only turn of the knife against him had been to smooth his cheeks and chin, without so much as a nick. If ever he lost hope, he only had to jerk his head violently enough and a Moorish blade would end all. A blade patterned with silver swirls

that ran impossibly deep into the metal.

Swirling steel and stiffened silk, he mused. And then it came to him, the one word to describe both silk and steel - damascene - and suddenly he knew where he was. When the door opened, his guess was confirmed. Accompanied by the usual guards was someone he recognised and had hoped never to see again. He was in the oldest city in the world, Damascus, a city Dragonetz had last seen from outside the walls, where he led besieging Crusader troops.

‘My Lord Dragonetz los Pros.’ If there was a hint of irony in the nickname ‘los Pros’, ‘the Brave’, it was too subtle to be sure of the mockery. A low bow in greeting and then the newcomer turned to the guards. ‘Leave us.’ The men hesitated, hands on their sword hilts. ‘I am in no danger from your guest! Go!’ And, as an afterthought, ‘Bring us tea.’

Although he too wore black robes and a scarf hood, the man who spoke was bare-faced, sun-trenched wrinkles deep in his ageing face. Dark skin and hooked nose suggested his race but not his religion. Damascus was not only the oldest city in the world but the oldest seat of the Christian Church, founded by St Paul himself. In this land where allegiances shifted like the sands it was no surprise to find a Syriac Christian giving orders to Muslim guards.

‘Yohana Bar Philipos.’ Dragonetz returned the greeting with a grimace as the instinctive movement of his hands met only rope. ‘You have me at a disadvantage.’

His eyes steady on Dragonetz, Bar Philipos unsheathed his scimitar and said ‘Turn your back’. A shaft of sunlight caught patterns on the blade. There was no hesitation in Dragonetz as he turned his back, not because he trusted Bar Philipos but because this was the one man who had the right to kill him. If Dragonetz condemned the Archbishop of Narbonne and Toulouse for their crimes, how much more did he blame himself for the torture and death of this man’s daughter, in the crusade that shamed all those involved.

Three years ago, Bar Philipos stumbled into the Crusaders’ camp, demanding to see Aliénor’s Commander in person so he could tell Dragonetz to his face how a beautiful girl had died, never betraying her lover’s name, nor how to find him. It was not the details of torture that unmanned Dragonetz but the knowledge he hid deep in nightmares for the years that followed; he couldn’t even put a face to the girl let alone a name. She was merely a pleasing body come to

him in the dark, along with her giggling friends, who'd sneaked a ladder down over the city walls to pleasure the young soldiers outside, bored with their siege. How could he know that their wild trysts could be used as a way to trap him, a way that failed because of the courage of one young girl who refused to speak. Who, according to her father, loved Dragonetz and had died for him.

So his jaw hardened and he turned his back. A breath of air and one whistling swish upwards was all it took, so sharp was the blade. There was a rush of pain as circulation returned to his wrists and Dragonetz rubbed them hard. 'Thank you.'

'If you give your word not to attack your long-suffering guards, and not to try to escape, I can ask that you be left unbound.' Bar Philipos dragged two cushions from the pile and placed them as seats, gesturing to the other man to take one. The sliced rope on the floor was unravelling from its thick plaits into strands. Dragonetz picked up a section, puzzled at its fabrication.

'Silk,' Bar Philipos confirmed, his hand never straying too far from the steel that had cut the knot. Dragonetz' own sword was solid, well-tempered and proven in battle often enough, but it was no match for Damascus steel. Occitan smiths had forged their versions, relying on descriptions from returned Crusaders.

Dragonetz had seen swords that were pattern welded, clumsy mixes of iron and steel, twisted in the making. He had seen pretty etchings on blades, filigree swirls of copper or silver on the surface of the steel. But no-one outside Damascus had come close to making steel like this, patterned through to the very core, like watermarked silk turned to weapon. It was hard without being brittle, durable without softness and could be sharpened to an edge that cut through flesh as if it were goat cheese. And oh, but it was beautiful. Not since he held a sheet of paper for the first time had Dragonetz felt such a longing, such a need to know how something was made but he knew better than to ask directly.

'The craft in your sword sings of Damascus,' he told Bar Philipos, the Arabic shaping his compliments in the manner a language has of forming thoughts in that culture.

'It is our heritage. Damascus has passed on its skills for centuries and will continue to do so, God willing.' Bar Philipos had switched into a language that was not quite Arabic but its sister, the same spoken by the guards.

'Your sons are blessed.' Dragonetz winced even as he spoke the

tactless formula.

‘My sons are blessed,’ Bar Philipos agreed, then he answered the wince, ‘and I have other daughters. Although you will forgive me if I do not introduce them to you. The world has moved on in three years, Lord Dragonetz, as have I. A child who shames her family no longer has a family. A child raised in virtue, who behaves as a whore, deserves to die as a whore.’ His voice rose and broke, resuming in flat tones. ‘This is an example to others in the family and in the community. It is not something worth speaking of. She did not exist.’

Dragonetz blinked. If he had a sister who’d slipped over Ruffec’s walls at night to play the oldest game with some man, and had died for it, would his own father have spoken like this? A foolish thought. No sister of his would have been so careless of her honour. ‘You are speaking Syriac?’ Dragonetz hazarded. Bar Philipos nodded. ‘Please, continue. I need to learn.’ Until he spoke the words he had no idea that he needed to learn and he was still not sure *what* he needed to learn. Know your friend, perhaps, and, of course, know your enemy. He was unsure which of the two sat on the cushion opposite him but he already knew that this man would not speak of love with anything other than contempt.

‘I was called here to confirm your identity,’ Bar Philipos continued. Dragonetz frowned in concentration and the Syrian spoke more slowly. ‘Please, ask me if there are words unknown to you in my speech. It is said by the Muslims that their prophet Muhammad asked to learn Syrian and it took seventeen days. I think you will be quicker. As to my purpose here, I have permission to answer some of your questions but not others.’ He broke off to admit a guard, who carried a silver tray, on which were a bowl and two brown-glazed cups, themselves decorated in silver trace. Was everything in this city crafted in metal magic?

Bar Philipos placed the tray on the floor between them, politely indicating the cup of hot black liquid nearer to Dragonetz. A blade in the back was one thing, poison quite another. Dragonetz leaned forward and turned the tray, copying the Syrian’s gesture and offering the same cup. Bar Philipos smiled and shook his head, reaching out to the cup. ‘No, my friend, there is no difference between the cups.’

‘Good,’ said Dragonetz, beating Bar Philipos to the cup he’d chosen. ‘Then I’ll change my mind again and take the first one.’ The Syrian showed neither disappointment nor triumph as he reached

across for his own cup and raised it in a toast, saying something that sounded like ‘fisehatak’, ‘to your health’.

‘Santat,’ replied Dragonetz in Occitan and took a sip, scenting an overlay of flowers and feeling a bitter aftertaste on his tongue. ‘What is it?’

‘Herbs and honey.’ Bar Philipos shrugged. ‘Some say it calms the spirits and eases repose. I have no interest in herbal lore.’ Dragonetz thought wistfully of al-Hisba, his Moorish friend, who had been as talented in medicine as in engineering. He would have sniffed out the composition of the drink, known every property of each herb in it. Al-Hisba and Estela would then have argued the merits of each situation in which the drink could be used, from childbirth to amputation. Dragonetz disciplined his rambling thoughts. Such friends were a time and an ocean away. He had other questions to pose this strange intermediary.

‘You said you ‘have permission’. Who gives permission? By whose name am I held here?’

‘That I can’t say but he is of noble birth.’

‘Why me?’

‘Your worth as a warrior is known, my Lord Dragonetz, and the situation here is precarious. Should you accept one of the offers which will surely come to you, like the last grain of salt on the scale you will tip the balance towards whomsoever you choose. It is considered safer that you enjoy your stay here while events unfold.’

‘What and who are in the balance of which you speak?’

‘Now that is something we can speak of at length when I come again but, in short, since the Crusaders failed Damascus -’ Dragonetz winced but could not contradict the statement - ‘we have held our city against our enemies through the strength of our walls, of our skills and of our trade. No-one wants to see Damascus razed and everyone wants to possess it. To the north, the Saracen force grows ever stronger under the Aleppo ruler, Nur ad-Din. To the south, the King and Queen of Jerusalem are increasingly at odds, dividing the Christian kingdom of Jerusalem between them.’ Bar Philipos flushed, stumbled over his words. ‘But we will speak more of this next time.’ He rose abruptly to leave. ‘Before I leave you unbound, do I have your word?’

‘I will not attack the guards. I swear.’

‘That is but half an oath, Dragonetz, but you cannot escape, so don’t try. It will go ill for you and worse for anyone you try to

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subvert to your purpose. There are no serving-wenches here to charm with a song. Nor any other wenches.'

The light retort had to be stifled, each word allowed to cut, and accepted as his due. As if reading his mind, the Syrian said, 'Be assured, my Lord Dragonetz, you will be treated exactly as you merit.' Bar Philipos bowed and left Dragonetz wondering whether it was only his permanently guilty conscience that made the words sound like a threat. He felt a sudden nausea and put it down to the emotions of the encounter. He would feel better if he lay down.

Closing the door behind him, Bar Philipos leaned against the wall, feeling giddy. One of the guards moved quickly to support him and warned, 'Not here - come.' When they were far enough away from the others, in a chamber protected by walls thick enough to hold all secrets, the guard dropped the Syrian onto some cushions and slipped off his black headgear.

'This stifles me. It's bad enough now but I don't know how your people wear it in the summer.' He shook free a mop of curly brown hair and revealed skin that was tanned and weathered brown but with paler origins. 'How long do we have?'

'The agitation has started but I have used the poppy before and will be lucid until sleep takes me.'

'Did he drink it all?'

'Yes. It was as we planned. It might not have worked if only one cup had been doctored.'

'You can control your own intake in the future?'

'Of course. Next time he will be more trusting and I will not need to partake of the poppy.'

'How long before he needs it?'

'That depends on his body and his mind, how strongly they bind to the poppy. With a small dose each day, I think we will quickly make him ours without him noticing. His quick mind will betray him because he is too interested in what I can tell him to realise what his body could tell him. The longer he stays with us, the tighter we bind him, and the more sluggish that quick mind will grow. When we let him escape, he is ours wherever he goes. We neuter him.'

'We are being paid well to keep him out of action but safe.'

'And we are being paid even better to kill him. This way, we

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satisfy both our clients. We let one know he is well and the other know that he will die whenever we choose, without a trace of our involvement. He will need to know where to find what he craves and he will do the rest himself. We will do nothing and he will die.'

'And if it becomes more expedient that he lives?'

'It is possible to arrange. But far more difficult.'

'What happens now?'

'Now, I sleep. And dream. Leave me.'

Chapter 2

Estela knew how much she'd changed and she felt ugly, as if she was a huge impostor, but the guests at table were looking at her as they always had, confident that their songster would complete a pleasant evening in the Great Hall of Dia. She gave an involuntary gasp, then hid it in an emotional rendering of the next verse. If her audience was surprised at the intensity of their troubadour's feeling for a shy maiden being wooed and won, so much the better. After only six months entertaining the Diois lords at the court of Comte Isoard, surprise was already Estela's hallmark.

As her voice soared for '*No m platz plus*', she mentally admonished the source of the gasp, 'Little trouble-maker!' When the next fierce kick came inside her, followed by a punch and ripple as the baby changed position, she was ready for him - or her - and didn't miss a note.

As she sang of Rudel's '*amor d lonh*,' his far away love, she thought of her own and there were tears in her own eyes as well as her listeners' as she finished the tale of doomed love. How wonderful that Rudel had managed to see the lady he'd dreamed of, for whom his song was written, even if it had been to die in her arms. How romantic.

The baby kicked her again, hard. If this was the result of being in a lover's arms, she would never ever again let a man near her unless he was wearing full body armour. She would get herself a chastity belt and let the dog keep the key attached to a spiked collar.

She glanced at the huge white fur-mat half-lying under the trestle table where she'd recently finished eating. Nici's eyes were shut in

the comfortable dreams of a dog who'd scavenged his fill of under-table scraps and was now blissfully unaware that he'd cleared five people away from his end of the table, using a combination of ripe dog smells and sheer physical occupation of space. No-one ever liked to move Nici.

From the moment he'd run away from home and found Estela doing likewise, he'd assumed they were a good team and, somehow, she'd never convinced him otherwise. Nor was she going to convince him that he should be guarding sheep like a good patou, and wearing the spiked collar. A complete failure, he'd liked people too much to stay out in the fields. So the chastity belt plan was doomed too. And yet there was no shortage of wolves in the Vercors mountains, requiring both Nici and Estela to stay on guard.

Estela glanced round the hall as she curtseyed the end of her performance, accepting the tribute she had come to expect. Tonight she had sung others' compositions, but as her confidence and reputation grew, she included her own work in her repertoire more often. She could rely on any of Dragonetz' songs to warm up the audience - and usually the baby! - or to rescue a choice that fell flat. People wanted novelty yet responded to what was familiar so Estela had learned to include only one or two new songs, and repeat those in her regular programme a few times, before adding more.

After the first performance of her 'Song of Arnaut and al-Hisba', she had cried herself breathless in her room; her greatest work, her most personal work, received with disapproving mutters. And she had lain awake, remembering all Dragonetz taught her, all al-Hisba had taught her, remembering Arnaut's love for his friend - and for her.

Then she'd sung it again, the token Arnaut had worn as her knight, a talisman around her neck. This time the murmur had a different note in it. Then, another night, she'd sung it again, and seen people mouthing the words with her, singing along. The evening someone called out, 'Sing us the one about Arnaut and the Moor', she knew she'd won, and not just for herself.

That evening, Estela had looked to where her men were sitting, her self-appointed guardians; Gilles, who'd saved her life and paid for it with his right arm, finding and following her with the same loyalty as Nici; and Raoulf, Arnaut's father, his shaggy black head lowered to hide his face as Estela sang a song of love and courage, brotherhood across the divide of race and creed. It was Gilles who

told her, ‘That was well done, Roxi,’ using the real name of her childhood that she’d abandoned for her troubadour persona. Raoulf couldn’t speak beyond a gruff grunt and nod, but that was more than enough.

If she never composed another song, this one had brought her all the reward she could ever want, easing her own heart in carrying the debt she could never repay. They were all changed, she, Gilles, Raoulf and Dragonetz - wherever he might be. Even al-Hisba, or Malik as she ought to call him now she knew his name, had tangled his life with theirs before he returned to some fabulous inheritance in al-Andalus - or wherever he might be now.

A summer in Narbonne had come and gone with the swallows, leaving Estela in the mountain fortress of Dia, troubadour to its young heiress, Bèatriz, alone but for her serving-men and a large white dog, and about to give birth to Dragonetz’ child. She’d followed his advice at their forced parting, attached herself to Bèatriz’ party and returned with them from Narbonne to Dia, in anticipation of Bèatriz’ marriage.

The serious fourteen- year old whose musical talents Estela had encouraged, had grown into a young woman who spoke only of duty but still sang of love. She had been betrothed at seven, so was perfectly prepared for her highly suitable marriage to a local Comte, Guilhelm de Poitiers. She could explain at length to Estela the importance of joining her future lands to those of the Comte, which fell under the sovereignty of the Holy Roman Emperor, not of France like her own. But for all her political astuteness, Bèatriz was also a fifteen year old who’d tasted the sophistication of Narbonne.

She’d witnessed the court of Ermengarda, not just the intricacies of trade and alliances, but the quality of everyday life, and of the music there. The Court of Love. So they’d called it when they’d staged an elaborate entertainment, part-show and part-debate, dazzling with wit and beauty, attended by the young troubadours whose names were already passed from one stronghold to the next. Whose names had touched lightly on Bèatriz, herself a young troubadour to be reckoned with, apart from one. A spark between like minds, a flame catching between a girl’s serious brown eyes and a man’s, full of laughter. Raimon d’Aurenja. If Bèatriz spoke the name, it was quickly, before it could burn her. Estela had seen the looks, interpreted what wasn’t said, and understood all that went into her young mistress’ songs.

And here they both were in Dia, incarcerated in grey stone, ringed with snow-capped mountains. A city solid in ancient inland values, not dancing with the newest fashions that were rushed by the traders from port to palace, as in Narbonne. There had been thick snow for months in Dia and even though the bluebells could be seen round the woods, this far north was still cold, at a time when Narbonne would be shaking the lavender bags out of silk gowns. Here, the women were still wearing their furs, making it easy for Estela to conceal her growing belly under voluminous winter clothing, even as close to the birth as she was now. A month, she thought, if all went well. And then? As always, her mind hit a wall. Other than there being a baby, she could not imagine her life afterwards.

Some day in the future, she and Dragonetz would be together, arm-in- arm, while a small child played on the grass beside his proud parents, but how she would get from where she was today to this appealing scenario, she had no idea. As things stood, she was married to a vassal of Ermengarda's, a man she'd seen once, on her wedding day, and who would be the nominal father of the baby she carried, despite never having touched her. Dragonetz had no idea she was pregnant.

When she'd first found out, she'd contemplated sending Gilles or Raoulf to find him, with the signet ring he'd given to her 'for protection in need.' He'd said, 'Send it to me and I will come to you no matter where I am or what I do,' and how she had longed to summon him. Then she had thought what it would mean for Dragonetz. His return *Oltra mar*, on some mission from the Jews, was his only chance of paying off the enormous sum he'd borrowed to build the paper mill. His absence from Narbonne was all that was keeping him safe from his enemies, Toulouse, the Archbishop, the Church itself, all conspirators in destroying his dream. Al-Hisba - Malik as she must think of him - had been right, and she would not be the one to drag her lover back from his quest for honour, into danger.

She fingered the chain round her neck, the one Arnaut had been wearing when he died. Once, it had carried the bangle she had given him as token. Now it held Dragonetz' ring. Tokens and reminders, friendship and love.

'My lady?' Raoulf interrupted her endless mill-race of thoughts.

She managed a smile for him. She would always manage a smile

for him. The scowl lines of his bear-like face softened and he spoke for her alone to hear, amidst the hubbub of the Great Hall. ‘Forgive me, my Lady, but I’ve taken the liberty of seeking a woman for you, a wet-nurse, and I’ve found someone I think you’ll like.’ Her smile wavered. Of course those closest to her knew her condition, and perhaps many not so close to her, but in common courtesy no-one drew attention to it. Feminine modesty alone demanded such respect, and her somewhat unusual situation merely added another level of discretion. But Raoulf and Gilles were all the family she had, and took the associated liberties. Of course Raoulf would know all the practicalities associated with childbirth, being many times a father himself.

The familiar ache at losing Arnaut changed to dawning awareness. She was about to become a mother. How would it feel? She met Raoulf’s eyes. How did it feel to have lost your child? How she wished her mother was here! However, her mother was not here and she had no option but to carry on without her, as she had since she was a little girl. Gratefully, she told him, ‘You are right and I need help with this. Perhaps you can tell me what else I need to do.’

Relieved at her reaction, he smiled back, and was about to launch into a detailed account of her practical requirements when she stopped him. ‘Tomorrow,’ she said firmly, as the Comtessa and Bèatriz approached with their entourage. Raoulf took the hint, bowed and left her.

‘The songbird of Dia excelled herself tonight,’ was the extravagant judgment of the Comte de Lans. A more colourful example of Dia’s court, he bent over her hand, his mouth lingering in its imprint.

‘The blackbird sounds sweet when the skylark is silent,’ was Estela’s reply, as, with the ease of practice, she deflected the compliment towards Bèatriz, who had not sung that evening. No, Dia was not short of wolves, even when she was eight months pregnant. The baby kicked her again. Not long to go now, surely.

It took both Raoulf and Gilles to drag Nici away from Estela and lock him in another room so the midwife could get anywhere near her, and it was just as well they were wearing gauntlets, boots and leather jerkins. Estela could still hear Nici’s furious scratching at the

door and outraged yelps at being shut away from his mistress when she clearly needed him.

She had known when she woke in a pool of liquid that it was time to send for the midwife and after a scurry of servants, Bèatriz' women had ushered her to a chamber well away from the daily bustle of castle life. The purpose of the room was clear enough. Apart from the blazing fire, which barely took the chill off the air, there was a bed, a birthing stool, chamber-pot, wash-stand and ewer.

In her own home, the mattress would have been stuffed with our lady's bedstraw and the fire strewn with juniper branches but Estela didn't know what herbs were used here, if any. The only light came from the fire and the pitch torches on the wall, as if the business of birthing should be in darkness, like the act that produced it.

Estela's gloom deepened into panic as her body spasmed. She had a rough idea of what would happen, thanks to visits with her mother, a healer, and thanks to a Moorish physician, who'd held science above prudery and discussed medicine with her. If only her mother or Malik could have been with her now, instead of women whose names she could barely remember. She hadn't felt so alone since she'd woken in a ditch after running away from home.

And then Nici appeared as if by magic, bounding to her side, anxious brown eyes and insistent tongue, her only friend now as then, licking the salt of her tears as she indulged in self-pity. In between the waves that racked her, Estela trailed her hands in the coarse white fur but when the midwife arrived, Nici made it clear that no-one was going to touch his mistress when she was so clearly vulnerable and incapable of making any decision. It was unquestionably his job to take charge.

Usually an easy-going lump of a dog, who was as happy milling around with any of the hunting packs as he was dozing hopefully under a trestle table at meal-time, Nici was unrecognizable. Hackles raised, eyes bright as pebbles in water, he fixed the midwife with an inimical glare.

The midwife made it equally clear that she was leaving unless someone removed the growling monster from the room. Helpless with contractions, Estela's half-hearted attempts to reassure Nici seemed merely to convince him that she was not herself.

At which point, Raoulf and Gilles braved women's territory and took matters into their own gauntlets, ignoring the scandalised squeaks of the attendant women as much as the furious complaints of

the huge dog, whose muffled barking from his solitary confinement accompanied Estela's involuntary shouts of pain.

'Jasmine oil,' she begged the midwife, whose face looked like a child's dough sculpture, lumpy and white, with raisin eyes. Eyes that narrowed, weighing her up. In the birthing chamber, the only queen was the midwife, whatever the rank of the mother-to-be.

'Jasmine oil,' the midwife repeated flatly.

Estela couldn't keep the desperation out of her voice as she felt the beginning of another wave. No longer a baby kicking; more like a herd of horses pounding her into the dust. 'Inhaling oil of jasmine helps with the pain...' she tailed off, biting her lip bloody and doubling over, half-falling onto the bed.

'Well we don't hold with such fancy things here and babies get born just the same. You'll manage,' stated the midwife, moving Estela to the birthing chair to see how wide open she'd become.

Estela felt the screams rising as if they belonged to someone else, except that Nici joined in, so they must be hers. She knew Raouf and Gilles were just outside the door, hers in a way that none of these women were, and she was overwhelmed by longing to call them in, to grab onto a hand of each, to anchor her body in this world to the rock of their loyalty. To have them with her when she brought Dragonetz' baby into the world.

She almost called them but enough thought remained to know she mustn't. This dour woman was her baby's herald, able to doom - or bless - him or her with a word. Let it be said that men had been at the birth and the baby would be cursed, hag-ridden, switched, any of a thousand insinuations that would make themselves into truth. Men would cross themselves and avoid touching such an ill-fated child, and if he sickened from so much as gum-fever, it would be the devil's work and no-one would lift a hand to make him better.

Estela knew the way people's minds worked. When visiting cottages with her mother, with salves and potions, she'd listened to the rhymes and prayers that her mother advocated applying with the medicaments, knowing that the patients' minds played a part in the healing. So Estela gripped the chair arms instead of her friends'. She *would* bring this baby into the world, whatever it cost her.

Hours, days or years later, adrift and dazed in the distinction between more pain and less pain, exhausted beyond obeying the midwife's impossible instructions, Estela nevertheless realised that the purse-mouthed enemy was about to stick some kind of irons into

her most tender parts, irons more suited to turn a pig on a spit than a baby in its mother.

Bursting her lungs, Estela screamed and pushed one last time, Nici no longer barking but howling with her, a wolf-call of solidarity. The irons were dropped on the stone flags as the midwife caught the baby and, astonishingly, smiled up at Estela.

‘A fine boy, my Lady.’ Transformed from enemy to ally, the dumpy woman dug into her bag with her free hand, rubbed parchment across the baby’s head, folded it carefully and showed the parcel to Estela. ‘Born lucky, my Lady, with a helmet on his head for a warrior. The caul will dry in the parchment and do you keep it safe, for his luck is in it.’ She cooed to the baby and shook him, then, thin at first, but building in strength, the cry of a newborn announced the arrival of a human being in the world, as the midwife finished severing the baby from all that still connected him to his mother’s womb and swaddled him loosely.

‘Can I hold him?’ asked Estela, hesitant.

‘For a moment,’ assented the midwife, who was now an angel, the firelight a halo round the kindness of her expression. ‘Chew on this,’ she instructed, responding to the query in Estela’s eyes with, ‘Angelica root, to clear your body of what’s left.’

Relieved that some expertise had reached this far north, Estela obediently chewed, and held her son in the crook of her arm, marvelling at the pulse showing through the thin skin of his head, at the tiny hands, balling into fists and flailing against her. His eyes, screwed up against too much light too suddenly. His skin, traced with blue like the veined goblets brought to Narbonne from *Oltra mar*, Damascus or some such place. Perfection. Somewhere in the distance the midwife announced that all was well, that the nurse could be fetched. Estela just felt pleasantly warm and stupid, like a cow, she thought as she finished chewing.

‘Does he need to be baptised now, good wife?’ The grave tones of the priest jarred on the moment and both Estela and the midwife said, ‘No!’ sharply.

‘No,’ the midwife repeated, more smoothly, ‘I have the right to baptise the baby, as you know, good sire, and neither he nor his mother have need of your services this day.’

‘Praise be to God.’ The priest fingered his crucifix then left the chamber and death, ever present at a birthing, went with him.

‘You need rest, my Lady,’ the midwife told her kindly. ‘You

have done as hard a day's work as a body knows and you have done it well. My Lord will be proud of you when he knows. They tell me he is far away.'

'Yes.' Tears glittered but Estela would not let them fall, not today. 'But I have family here. 'Raoulf! Gilles!' she called and they were beside her in a second, their faces white and strained, as hers was not. She could feel the glow in her own, the warmth of bringing this precious morsel into the world. The midwife let her do as she willed and she let each man in turn hold the baby. Raoulf, many times a father, who could not but remember holding Arnaut once this way. Gilles, a better father to her than her own, but a stranger to babies, holding the infant as if he were a marchpane sculpture.

'Let Nici in!' Estela ordered and despite protesting, Raoulf opened the door barring the dog from his mistress. Three bounds and he was by the bed, sniffing warily at the new being in her arms. Estela stroked the dog's head with one hand as she held the baby relaxed in her arm. 'My darling,' she murmured to him in Occitan, 'this is our baby, to live and to die for.' The dog nudged the infant with his nose, testing its response, smelling who it was, then, satisfied, he started a thorough cleaning of its ears and tail, which made Estela giggle and drew horrified gasps from the midwife. She moved to rescue the baby but Nici had not forgiven her and rumbled a low warning.

'Enough, Nici,' Estela told him and the dog sighed. His mistress was herself again. He could relax. He potted off to a corner and slumped in a heap, as exhausted as the two men.

'Now mistress, the baby must to the nurse and you to sleep. Don't worry - he will be brought to you tomorrow again, and the day after that. Your boy is healthy and strong. Do you have a name for him?'

The room waited, cosy as a womb now, logs sparking and crackling in the stone fireplace. Light-headed with effort and blood loss, Estela watched the flames dance themselves into her lover, bright sword in hand as he leapt and parried, turning to smile the special lop-sided smile that was only for her. What should she call Dragonetz' son? The flames conferred and whispered to her in little puffs of smoke. What else could Dragonetz' son be called?

'Txamusca,' she murmured to the baby, then louder for everyone to hear. 'Txamusca', the Occitan word for 'fire'. What else would his father produce but fire. The silence around her held disapproval.

‘It’s a very ... unusual name, my Lady,’ said the midwife, but now that the birth was over, she was returning to her rank. Anything that did not directly concern the child’s health, or the mother’s, was hardly her business.

Gilles had no such reticence. ‘Are you sure, Roxi? You want him to carry such a name?’ Raoulf put a warning hand on the other man’s arm before he finished ‘*a name that shouts who fathered him, to anyone with half a brain?*’ Secrets spoken in the birthing room found their way quickly to the banquet hall.

‘Yes.’ Estela’s chin jutted stubbornly, with just a hint of wobble, and the men exchanged glances, saying no more. The midwife held her arms out for the baby, and Estela reluctantly gave him up to the rite of baptism in the one situation where a woman had sacerdotal powers. Then, a new soul formally admitted to the world, Estela sank deeply and quickly asleep, even as the entourage tiptoed out of the chamber.

Six weeks later, Txamusca de Villeneuve was christened with due ceremony in church; the young heiress of Dia was his beaming highborn godmother; Raoulf and Gilles beaming even brighter as his lowborn godfathers. Neither the mother’s husband, the Lord Johans de Villeneuve, nor the baby’s father, were able to attend. As neither of them knew of the boy’s existence, this was hardly surprising.

Historical Characters appearing in the series so far:-

Aaron ben Asher - Jewish sage who annotated the sacred Torah known as the Keter Aram Sola/ the Aleppo Codex

Aliénor of Aquitaine/ Eleanor of Aquitaine, Duchess of Aquitaine and Queen of France

Abraham ben Isaac/ Raavad II - Jewish leader in Narbonne

Alphonse, nicknamed 'Jourdain'/ 'Jordan', Comte de Toulouse, father of Raymond, killed by poison in Caesarea in 1148

Alphonso, King of Castile, Emperor of Spain - died in 1144 leaving his estate to the Templars

Amaury - younger son of Mélisende

Archbishop of Narbonne, Pierre d'Anduze - brother of Ermengarda's husband

Archbishop Suger - royal prelate in Paris, adviser to King Louis

Baudouin, King of Jerusalem - Mélisende's son

Bèatriz - the future Comtesssa de Dia/Comtesse de Die and famous troubairitz

Bernard of Clairvaux – advisor to Louis, abbot leading and reforming the Cistercian order

Bernard d'Anduze - Ermengarda's titular husband, brother of the Archbishop of Narbonne

Bernard de Tremelay, Templar Grand Master 1151

Chirkhohu – Nur ad-Din's general, killed Prince Raymond of Antioch

Constance – widow of the Prince of Antioch, Mélisende's niece

Conrad – Holy Roman Emperor, ruler of the Germanic peoples

Ermengarde/Ermengarda - Viscomtesse of Narbonne

Everard des Barres, Grand Master of the Templars during the Second Crusade

Foulques, King of Jerusalem by marriage to Mélisende – died 1146

Geoffroi de Rançon (the father), Commander of Aliénor's Guard 1148

Geoffroi de Rançon (the son)

Guilhelm de Poitiers – married Bèatriz

Hodierne, Comtesse de Tripoli - sister of Mélisende, Queen of Jerusalem,

Isoard, Comte de Die/Dia - Bèatriz' father (very little known about Bèatriz)

Ismat ad-Dhin - Nur ad-Din's wife (then Salah ad-Din's), daughter of Unur

Joscelyn, Comte d'Edessa - deserted and lost the city to Muslim forces, starting the Second Crusade

Jarl Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson - Prince of Orkney

Louis VII - King of France, married to Aliénor de Maurienne, Comte – uncle and adviser to Louis VII

Maimonides – Jewish philosopher

Manuel Komnenos/Comnenus – Emperor of Byzantium

Manassés – Constable of Jerusalem and cousin, rumoured lover, to Mélisende

Mélisende – Queen of Jerusalem

Mujir ad-Din – ruler of Damascus, 1151

Nur ad-Din – Muslim Atabeg (ruler and general), uncle of Saladin

Pope Eugene III

Raimon Trencavel, brother to Roger and Comte de Carcassonne on his brother's death in 1150

Ramon Berenguer, Comte de Barcelone, Prince of Aragan and Overlord of Provence

Raymond V, Comte de Toulouse

Raymond Comte de Tripoli, Hodiérne's husband and relation of Toulouse, killed by Assassins in 1152

Raymon/Raimon/Raymond, Prince of Antioch - Aliénor's uncle and rumoured lover, killed by Saracen troops in 1148

Raymond and Stephanie of les Baux - rulers of Provence

Raymond de Puy - Hospitalers' Grand Master 1151

Roger Trencavel, Comte de Carcassonne - died in 1150

Saint Paul/ Saul of Tarsus - famously converted on the road to Damascus

Salah ad-Din/Saladin – Muslim leader during the Third Crusade

Sicard de Llautrec - ally of Toulouse

Unur – Muslim general, defended Damascus in the Second Crusade

Zengi/Imad ad-Din Zengi - father of Nur ad-Din, murdered in 1146

The Hashashins/Assassins – the Isma'ili Muslim sect

the troubadours - Jaufre Rudel, Marcabru, Cercamon, Peire Rogier from the Auvergne, Raimbaut d'Aurenjaa/Raymon of Orange, Guiraut de Bornelh

Persian poets – Omar Khayyam, Sanai

In charge of the Templar Commandery at Douzens - Peter Radels,
Master; Isarn of Molaria and Bernard of Roquefort, joint commander