

Allan Thomas WEBBER
4C Avonmore Avenue,
Trinity Gardens, South Australia, 5068
08 8364 3776
<http://alynptyltd.tripod.com/nd>
alyn@adam.com.au

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NOSTRADAMUS: The Serpent's Child

By

Allan Webber

These pages cover the Forward in traditional format. Then follow the Prologue plus the first 3 chapters in manuscript format. At the end of this section there is a synopsis of all 24 chapters and a brief statement about the author and his abilities to further contribute to the publication of this novel.

Foreword.

This story is a fiction but considerable research has gone into its writing. My hope is that the mystery of how much is real and how much fantasy will enhance the experience for the reader.

The history of the major characters, except the Countess of Anjou, is based on public records. Real events, histories and locations underpin their stories. Even so, some parts of the tale are so bizarre they would seem to have no basis in fact but if this is assumed it would often be wrong. For example the weird tale told on the 'Isle of If' is based on historical records. Even the seemingly improbable name, the 'Isle of If', is real.

Whenever there is a geographic movement in the story I have tried to build a true physical picture of each place as it would have been in the sixteenth Century. Churches, Nostradamus' homes, the city walls, tunnels, monuments and streets come from records of these places. Some still exist today. The tunnel up the hill to the lake above St Remy can still be climbed. The siege engines at Les Baux are still there. Unfortunately many have suffered the changes of time. The Garden of the King in Marseille, owned by Bernardin and later used for the marriage of Catherine de Medici has ceased to be. Many religious buildings have been destroyed, renovated or modified since the time of Nostradamus.

Even minor characters in the story cannot be assumed to be imaginary. Pierre Faber was the governor of Baux and the Abbot Cibo was in Marseille in 1522 and went on to become more prominent in the church.

The astronomical configurations in the story are also factual as is Andrea Doria's switch of allegiance. The oaths used throughout the story are sourced from sixteenth century documents on magic, the Knights of Rhodes etc.

There is another level of reality absorbed into the tale. Legends, tales and myths play a significant part in the telling of the story. Saint Remy, Clovis, Les Baux, 'Au Hasard Balthasar', Chateau le Rennes, Alet les Bains, Toulouse and Languedoc are given meaning through a more ancient dreaming than my own.

The story's aim is to draw the reader into the developing mind of Nostradamus who became renowned as an apocalyptic style prophet. Michel de Nostredame was born in December 1503. His parents had a Jewish background and his grandparents claimed to be physicians to King Rene d'Anjou, the last king to rule Provence before it became part of France. It is known M. Nostredame wandered in the towns and areas used in my story but accurate accounts of why he should do so are sparse. In this tale I try to give the reader an impression of the places and personages of his time, entwining his world with its apocalyptic viewpoints into a pattern of thinking that is psychologically consistent with Nostradamus.

I trust you will enjoy the mystery of this tale and be inspired to find out more.

Prologue – December 1503CE

Trevalan was late.

His short delay was enough to upset destiny's clocks. The notary's scrip would show twelve noon as the time of birth.

But Michel de Nostredame had allies in St Remy on that Thursday the fourteenth of December, 1503. His grandfather was there, his father too and a stranger who had waited a week for this event. And they had weight of authority to back their testimony.

There were other witnesses but they were women. He was born under his grandmother's care. She'd organized the birth, its stool and pots of water. It was her hands that tugged and pulled as he emerged screaming from the womb. Her assistant also knew the time. She'd lit the candles marking out the passing hours and replaced them as each in turn, wore down to its base. And there was of course his mother.

His birth had begun the night before at four p.m. just as the sky was going dark. It had been a long and hard delivery lasting through the night. It was finally over at ten a.m. but the notary didn't come till noon.

“The breaking of the waters is the critical point, that's four p.m. on the thirteenth”, Pierre, Michel's grandfather had told the notary. Undeterred, Trevalan wrote, ‘Thursday, December 14; 12 noon’, the time he'd arrived.

Jaume, Michel's father, felt Pierre, who had drawn the horoscope of kings, was right, and that the only measurable event in birth was the breaking of the waters. Destiny surely didn't hinge on when the notary arrived.

Pierre had already drawn up Michel's chart, excited by the confluence of the stars. Never before had he attended a birth where Mars, Saturn and Jupiter had been in conjunction at the same time. The story of his grandson's birth would be worth retelling for many years, and casting the right chart was essential. '13th December 1503; 4pm', must be the date and time if the casting was to be accurate.

The conjoined planets brought into play the spheres of religion, war and wealth. But more than that, at four pm on the twenty-third, Gemini was in the ascendant, and Mars, Jupiter and Saturn lay inside its borders. These three planets came together so rarely that it surely meant Michel's was a special birth in the history of man.

As Gemini ascended, Ophiuchus, the Serpent Bearer, was setting. These two signs determined Pierre's analysis. Michel was destined to be receptive to change, intelligent and outspoken but nervous, tense, superficial, inconsistent, cunning and inquisitive. His vocation would be found in the healing arts.

The stranger, a client of Pierre's, left before the notary arrived. Tucked into a fold of his voluminous, fur-lined cloak was Pierre's reading of Michel de Nostredame's birth.

1. Sunday at St Martins - 22nd September 1519

The sound of cicadas rang against the lofty walls of the ancient church, combining with the somber chimes calling St Remy's faithful to morning mass. The bell-tower, rising high above St Martins, cast a welcoming shade across the ground leading to the pillared entry way. The history and elegance in these structures was typical of this town. The church's age was apparent in the weathered limestone that had darkened with the years. This building was centuries old, an enduring symbol of stability. The major legacy of recent times showed in streaks of white left on its walls by doves and pigeons, impermanent stains constantly renewed.

“It will never seem the same,” Michel de Nostredame mused. For the past sixteen years there had been no reason to ponder on the town's immutable nature that he'd always taken for granted. Today, however, marked the start of change.

The olive tree that stood outside Saint Martins was even older than the church. Its ancestry was rooted in the seeds Greek migrants had brought to St Remy, a thousand years before the stones were laid. Men of piety had preceded even these, their story known to man only through myth. The druidic masters of the magic arts had worshipped the hills from which the church's stones were hewn, worshipped trees before olive seeds were sown, revered the springs and caves within the nearby limestone hills.

Michel couldn't deny the beauty of the day and place, yet it only served to make the darkness of his thoughts more intense. Unwelcome news of Marie's future wedding turned the joy of the world into a mockery of his plight. He resisted this chance to throw off his gloom and wallowed in his misery until he sensed an intrusion in his mind trying to divert him from his vilest thoughts. Amon had come to talk, Amon and his entourage. He never

came alone but always with others. The sixteen year old could hear the whisper of his friend but he didn't dare to answer and risk his mother's anger.

Amon, who Michel's mother claimed had never lived except inside Michel's head, was here for purposes of his own. He always came at times of stress or when Michel needed amusement and distraction. He whispered in words that no one else could hear "Come Michel! Come meet my friends, the boys and girls that flirted in these fields before these stones were laid. Speak once more with men of older times about the ending of their ways."

"I can't right now," Michel signaled back. "I'm busy and they're just ghosts. I have other thoughts to deal with." He withdrew from this private world determined to deal with reality.

"Phillipe of Carcassone arrived yesterday. He's staying at the Lord of Baux' estate," his grandpa had said to Michel's father this morning but it had meant nothing to Michel.

It was only when he added, "He's arranging his marriage to Marie Bouquet from there," that the message had hit home.

He was used to small changes creeping up on him, accumulating bit by bit until he finally noticed but this small piece of news cut through him like a sword upon his neck. Michel felt the horror of the dilemma unleashed by this event. Nothing could ever be the same again whether he took action or not. Futile though it might be, Michel's immediate thoughts of murder gave him hurtful pleasure. There must be an alley somewhere where a fatal blow could be struck. Perhaps a way could be found to drop poison into an unwatched cup or plate.

Michel felt the corruption of his soul but did nothing to lessen it. Hostility! Anger! Murder! All felt welcome at this moment. The time of brooding was brought to a halt as his family was already at the steps and with a few more paces he too was entering the familiar place. This ancient church had surely known men more violent than him and let them pass. He shuddered expectantly, waiting for the voice of God, or a least his ministers, to denounce the unrepentant sinner at its door.

The aged stone closed out the warmth that bathed the ground outside. And the inside walls retained the shiver-laden cold from the morning chill of late September. Michel peered into the gloom, his eyes adjusting to the scene, before noting that the church was nearly full. His family always came as late as possible to avoid encounters with those who still considered the Nostredames less worthy than those who had always been Christian. His family took their seats on the bench reserved for them on the northern side. His pulse leapt as the family Bouquet sat down to the left. Marie was there, as was natural. From the elegance of her movements Michel gained no clue as to her state of mind.

The rough benches on which his family sat were less stylish than those on the southern side. These were for the officials of the church, the luminaries of the town and their curious guest. With an almost satanic look bestowed by his beard and his piercing eyes Michel thought he seemed out of place in a church. Short, yet well-built and brown with sun, this man was fearsome. Even without his sword there was a murderous air impressed by the hardness of his lips and haunted darkness around his eyes. The clothes he wore spoke of riches beyond his station and an acquaintance with places far more illustrious than St Remy or any other part of Provence. This was surely the sailor from Carcassone, cousin to Balthazar de Sade, Phillipe, the man betrothed to Marie.

Michel couldn't take his eyes from this figure straight across from him and in return the stranger's gaze locked to his. Michel closed his eyes, leaning forward as though in prayer. The Canon conducting the service intoned the initiatory chants but they failed to register upon Michel. However at some level his body responded to the cues and he sat and kneeled and responded as if in a trance.

Hot red waves of shame swelled within Michel. Embarrassed by his lustful thoughts of her and the gravely sinful wishes for her betrothed, he felt the curse of unwanted change. Shamed by his impotence to deliver he dared not look up. Those dark corners of the town where he might lurk and strike the blow faded from his mind. All bravado was cowed by fear of the instant vengeance his foe might wreak. In Michel's mind as her protector he would save her from this awful union, he would strike the blow and she in her eternal gratitude would bind herself to him. His mind wanted it but his soul knew he couldn't do it. He knew these evil thoughts would take no root but would demand of him a penance.

And worse, not only did he know he wouldn't act but now he knew he couldn't. The awful fear thrust at his heart as sharply as the stranger's imagined sword. He was no match in strength or evil, his mind could never have the brutal morbid set to drive the blade deep enough to end another's life. But the stranger could and often had. Michel had known this before they met but still dreamed he was capable of this one romantic heroism.

The room resounded with the cry of "Repent, you sinners!" and Michel jolted to attention as he heard the Canon's words.

"There is an evil grows in our world. Some of our most worthy members have rightfully brought to my notice pamphlets that tell of Luther's Theses.

“Have I read these works? Yes! Not all of course but enough to know this German, cleric, Martin Luther, is dangerous. These works will mark 1518 as a year of infamy.”

The priest's words didn't help Michel as they only reinforced things he already knew. The Canon's view merely reflected that of the Pope and church's institutions where change was anathema and the people were sinners.

The man would have no understanding of how Michel felt today. The Canon's only interest in change was in its suppression yet it was to him that Michel should be confessing his sinful thoughts.

“The evils of the world are on us. Plague and war come as punishment for the wickedness of man. All these are signs that the second coming is nigh, so heed well your priests, listen to your church and waver not from Jesus, Beloved Son of our Beloved God.”

Michel was unsettled by the mention of plague and war. These were his constant fears, as they were for everyone in that church. Too many plagues, too many wars, too many dreadful deaths had taken place in recent years. This pattern was centuries old according to his grandfather and nothing had changed in that regard. Disease, poverty, drought and storm played constant havoc with their lives and minds.

The Canon's voice intruded once again, “Tear up these pamphlets. Do not read them. They are signs of the illness in our modern ways. These are the toys of Satan offered to you as in olden times and presented to you as gifts of God.”

“...the toys of Satan..” stirred meaning within Michel. He liked to read these modern works. “Am I corrupted?” he pondered. “Probably, but I want to read them anyway.” He was changing but so too were all around him. New ideas and new inventions were slowly entering

people's lives and they didn't recognize it until one day, a sudden irreversible event brought it into focus. A sense of frustration disturbed Michel, this church was at the crux of his agitation, everything in here sounded and looked as it had for centuries. The cicadas, stone, congregation and priest were brought together in an unchanging ritual. Yet in its lack of change this church was still part of the future. The Canon's words resisted all that was new and in resisting ensured all past unity was divided.

Michel's incidental interest in the Canon's words was disrupted by something he noticed from the corner of his eye. An act so small it went unnoticed by all but a few. Monsieur Belaiche's hand brushed his wife's thigh. Michel immediately recorded in his mind the man's actions and the minister's words. "Belaiche. Touch 1. The Seeds of Satan." Despite the turmoil in his mind this old habit was hard to break. A childhood game, played so often in this church, couldn't be denied. Besides, with so much change to embrace, one small respite was welcome. The aim of the game was to count the number of times married couples furtively touched during the service and, as an act of proof, the words said by the Canon at that time had to be noted and remembered. The score only counted if someone else recorded the same event. Michel usually won since he was sharper than his brothers and sisters. Observations in this church had shaped much of Michel's experience of the world. By watching people's interactions he'd learnt a lot about fidelity, love and betrayal. Not that Michel was likely to win the game today as his attention was drawn to other matters. There was another stranger.

She was a newcomer to the town and on a normal Sunday Michel would have noticed her immediately. There was a beauty in her face; but its elegance seemed strained by grief. She must have been twenty-five or more, Michel couldn't really tell. All older people were old or very old to him. He hadn't noticed her when he came in but then there were so many

others dressed in black, mostly widowed by the plague, that this was no real surprise. And the church was dark so it was only when she turned to watch the movements of the service that she was noticeable. The lady turned again and Michel knew he'd seen her before. Suddenly he knew who she was or at least why he knew her. In and around the town and in the church there were statues with a similar look of haunting beauty. The Madonna, so precious to this part of France, seemed to Michel to be here in the Church. Had he imagined her? Was she just a vision that would evaporate when struck by a shaft of light? Was she "Nostre Dame, our Lady, the Virgin Mary? He looked again in her direction yearning to reveal that he too was Nostredame. She was no vision waiting for his soul, she was really there. And so was Marie's betrothed, his eyes looking straight through Michel to the statue on the wall.

"It's as though he feels crucified," mused Michel. He could see it in his mind, Phillippe dead, hung on a cross, his men slaughtered and heaped at his feet. The Crucifixion and the Virgin sat uncomfortably on Michel's mind. These images were too close to those that had occupied him on the short journey from his grandpa's home. The pain still burnt deep within him, the barbaric stranger of whom he knew so little was to be wed to Marie whom he couldn't bear to lose.

He felt a nudge in his side. It was Jehan who, urged by Delphine, passed on that it was time to kneel. Michel slid hastily to his knees, his hands clasped in prayer, but his eyes, not fully closed, watched the kneeling congregation in the opposite aisle. These were the stalwarts of the church, mainly leading merchants who had upheld St Martins for centuries. But some were of newer origin, only entering into the village life at the time Provence was forcibly included into France. The keepers of the Baux estate were new, like his family, but they sat with equal status amongst the elder families of the church. Michel was well aware that to these older adherents the Jews who stayed had earned that right through betrayal of

their faith. Michel resented this ongoing prejudice that made him feel unwelcome. Those opposite Michel were not richer nor were their vocations very different to that of his family but they were established, they had tradition, and here in the church their power was magnificent.

“Aren't I the same?” mused Michel. “Doesn't my faith, and papa's work, give me status in this village?” He was privileged he knew, but there were limits to the benefits he enjoyed, he knew where his friendships lay and where he dare not go. Even so, he still had a certainty of a greater future whilst others who lived near this church feared what basic necessities the next day's rising sun would fail to bring. This shift in his thoughts brought into focus another aspect of his fellow worshippers.

“None of the poor are here. They've never been welcome in this church. Their class harbors bandits, thieves and vagabonds and even murderers. That's why they're kept out.”

He knew these were comfortable lies. He only had to think on the history of lords and kings to realize that. Nonetheless the idea of universal guilt and evil made him feel uneasy. Hadn't he, Michel Nostredame, on this day, within the last hour, planned murder in his mind? This was no crime planned out of need but out of lust that couldn't have fruition. It was an act of revenge for dreamt-of hideous acts that hadn't happened. How could he let her be taken? Marie, so divinely of Provence, was the living heir to an ancient tradition. Marie and the Lady of The Underground were one and the same in Michel's mind.

Against this ideal Michel weighed up Phillipe. “He probably only observes his faith in its outward form,” he thought spitefully. “Surely any esteem he has within this church he's bought with wealth from pillage.” There was a callous delight in recalling this antipathy expressed earlier by his father. Jaume had continued, “You can be sure Phillipe's in St Remy

for some devious reason. He didn't need to come himself. Obviously Bernardin has plans for him." Michel was sure his father was right. Yes, he'd come to claim his betrothed but he'd a higher calling up in the mountains where Bernardin des Baux held court.

The townsfolk opposite had begun to move, rising quietly and passing down the central aisle to take their place before the altar at the eastern end. Michel felt a grim chill of sadistic pleasure as it occurred to him that Philippe was ignorant of what was planned tonight. Stale, stolid, historic St Remy had its darker secrets and many of the highest members in this church shared in their concealment. An older cause was still served through their sons and daughters. And tonight would be the night when much that was hidden took place. "If only Phillippe knew what it meant for him," an unrepentant Michel muttered to himself.

Watching them, Michel knew why this church unsettled him today. It represented what had held true for countless centuries, and it didn't hold a hint of the thinking of the present. The drabness of their clothes brought out all the brightness of the painting on the walls. And above that brightness the statue of Saint Remy beamed piously down. The saint's image crystallized shadowy thoughts that were settling out of Michel's discord.

For many years he'd conversed with Saint Remy through Amon. And also thanks to Amon, Clovis, first king of France, had come to speak. Why? Because they filled in Michel's time, helped him endure this tedious ceremony. The same was true of the games and his observation of the congregation. Each helped get him through the unchanging world of Sunday at St Martins. Today, with unwelcome events thrust on him, he resented being here. "The service is too long. The language is difficult. The priest is boring. And worst of all nothing ever changes."

There was a reason to talk with Clovis today. He needed reassurance. “Amon,” Michel whispered to his mind-locked friend, “You’re welcome now. I need to speak to the king again.”

Amon responded, “I’m glad you found time for me and cleared your mind. Your other thoughts are disturbing my guest, he almost didn’t come.”

Clovis, whose life had linked loyalty and betrayal, demanded calm before he would appear. Michel needed him to come since Clovis was the counterfoil to Michel’s wrongs. Loyalty! Betrayal! Both had intertwined when Saint Remy had helped Clovis, first king of France, resolve his heritage. In this very spot, the saint, like Michel, had spoken to Clovis. The church was here, the town was here and its name was St Remy because of that first vision in this place. Michel found Clovis awesome, a man who could tell a tale that none, on hearing, would disbelieve. Each time the story had its variations but it always rang true.

“I draw my ancestry from a mystic sect with magic arts going back to the mists of time. They say I betrayed this ancient faith to take another in its place. But this was no betrayal. It was recognition of the real source of my family line in Jesus Christ and his heirs.

“So I set the roots of a new land, France, using the stock from an already ancient race. And I remained here hoping, but not knowing, this would become a burgeoning tree.”

Michel remembered this part of the story well for in it was the contrast to his present life, a seed planted to create unprecedented change.

“I was tired when I came to this spot. Weary of war I asked myself, ‘What is the point of this? Where do I go from here?’

“It was then that the miracle occurred. Saint Remy, patron to my beloved wife, appeared and spoke to me.”

Michel felt the recurrent pleasure flitter through his mind; Clovis too saw visions. He wasn't alone. There was a history of visionaries in St Remy.

Clovis always became more dramatic at this point in his story. His eyes looked deep into Michel's and he whispered in a voice of destiny,

“The Kingdom of France is predestined by God for the defense of the only true Church of Christ. This kingdom shall one day be great among the kingdoms of the earth.”

“I knew then that divine right justified my claim to being king.”

With these words Clovis and Amon faded from Michel's mind as they always did. As so often when his friend came and went Michel was unsure whether all this was real or just fantasy based on things he knew. Michel liked Clovis' story, it held elements of the conflicts of today. Both betrayal of faith and loyalty to the king occurred in the tale and each was considered a worthy trait of Clovis. But how these same qualities were viewed in this town depended on who was involved.

The service had ended and his family was amongst the first to emerge from the church into the warming rays of the mid-morning sun. As they were joined by Michel's grandparents they moved to one side, away from others still issuing from the church.

Michel gave a courteous but cursory acknowledgement to both his grandparents while keeping a close eye on the church door. His grandpa Pierre however wasn't so easily dismissed. He too, had obviously dwelt on other things during the service. He asked Michel if he'd read the pages in Cicero as he'd been asked. Michel assured him he had and that he was

ready for the task tomorrow. Michel enjoyed his Latin studies and was keen to show his grandpa that he understood how the philosopher used his art in *De Oratore* to link law, philosophy, and rhetoric. Michel had a special bond with Pierre. He knew both gained benefit from the sharp debates that took place between them and that his grandpa would be especially keen to outwit him after their last encounter. But then he heard his father say, “I’m afraid Michel can't come tomorrow. I’ve quite a lot to do this week with the new visitors in the town and I’ll need Michel to take on the Baux shipments for the next two days.”

This announcement by his father surprised Michel. There had been no hint earlier in the week, but suddenly he was going to Baux. The prospect of the next few days delighted him.

There was no delight in what he saw happening behind his family group. Marie had emerged, pale faced but still beautiful in his eyes. Her dark hair was covered by a veil as though in mourning but this was more for modesty than grief. Michel ached for the pain he felt he saw within her. Beside her was the man she surely loathed. He seemed more animated than was proper but Michel could grasp no part of what he said. The group hurried away, turning northwards behind the church, heading for the de Sade home. Michel reveled in the man’s displeasure. “One day he’ll learn the secrets St Remy holds but it’ll be too late. The burden of it will hurt even more than whatever he just learned.”

The Nostredames were joined by the Guillot family. Simeon was the bookbinder who lived near Pierre in Rue Hoche. He and his wife, like the Nostredames, had converted from Judaism to Christianity many years before and it still formed a bond that drew them together. Michel knew Simeon well. The nature of his father's business and the inter-family ties meant he was the family's preferred bookbinder so Michel often dropped off materials to be bound and picked them up once finished. And Simeon was their contact with the published

works from the outside world. All the books held by Pierre had come via Simeon. The materials that most intrigued Michel were classics in Latin, Greek and Hebrew but increasingly in recent times there were books that had never been in print before. Even his father had acquired a few of these more recent guides to practical aspects of his trade.

Michel glanced back at the church and there in the shadows saw his friend. Amon drew Michel's attention to the gravestones around which his ghostly guests took earthly form. Children with faces animated by excitement were playing games and youths with far more restrained expressions moved past the church in a solemn procession. Amon pointed to a group covered in symbols drawn in black on their ghostly forms. "This ritual gathering goes back to them and far beyond," Amon whispered. "See the images of the sun and moon that link them to this church." Michel knew no one else could see his friend or those that accompanied him and the only evidence for their presence lay in his own demeanor. He stood there as though in a mindless trance waiting for his father and friends to finish their banter.

At last the family began to move, leaving the church grounds and heading south down the narrow street that had housed their family for generations. He knew the route by heart, even though it didn't take him home. It was the family's custom after Sunday at St Martin's to spend the day at Grandpa's house in the shadows of St Remy's ancient walls. Michel would now have little chance to ponder and muse as he had throughout the morning. What time he had to himself could be put to better use. The worst of Sunday was over and tonight's pleasures awaited him.

At last he felt the depression lift. Midnight tonight was worth looking forward to.

2. The Lady of the Underground.

Michel lay awake but the snoring from his parent's room wasn't the cause. The lunar light crept across the floor drawing nearer and nearer to the mark etched into the stone, one of two hundred and thirty-five such marks that to the untrained eye had no pattern. The notch of the window's crest cast a pointer to the time he was to go. And as the shadowed crest rested on tonight's spot Michel got out of bed, gently folding the coarse blanket that had kept him warm.

He took his cherished wool-lined jacket from the stool beside his bed and pulled it on. He felt its warmth fight off the chill of the night, but it wasn't as cold as yesterday and he felt thankful for that. Although the room was small it was his alone, his brothers and sisters slept upstairs. And this room was nearest the door so his exit late at night would go unnoticed. Only his father knew that he was going and the snores upstairs meant he slept the dreams of a contented man. His grandfather knew that Michel would rise but he too was asleep far across the village. But those who knew that he would go had no wish to stop him. They welcomed it with restful sleep.

There were no clouds and an array of stars glistened in the cooling air. Only the cats were on the move in the alley beside the house, everywhere else was dark and still. His passage went unnoticed as he slipped from lane to lane keeping to the shadows. He halted at the eastern gate, ensuring the watchman was nowhere in sight before he went through its covered arch. Once outside he turned towards the south. Keeping to the overhang of the wall he made his way around the village edge until he reached the old Roman road. From here he could see the newly built chapel of Our Lady of Piety standing like a gleaming palace away to his right. And to the south was the mountain range, the whiteness of its crags catching the fullness of the moon. This silver band glowing as bright as late-night fire stretched from

furthest east to distant west. This was surely an eerie land of ghosts where the silent embers of whiteness in the night marked out the hidden Serpent God. And above them all, the distant sacred mountain glowed brightest of all. Tomorrow that would be his destination but not tonight.

The journey gave Michel time to think and to wonder whether Marie would come. He hoped she would and that it wasn't already too late for this one last meeting before she must go. Was this the cause of Phillippe's annoyance, an excuse she gave to stay with her mother for the night? Had she feigned an illness to make this happen? The thought of this made Michel ache so deeply that he could feel the tension burn within his chest. The flame of the mountains, the flame of desire, made Michel yearn for her even more. She would come. She must come.

He muttered to himself "O Lord of heaven and earth, Creator and Maker of all things visible and invisible; I, though unworthy, call upon you, through your solely begotten Son Jesus Christ our Lord, that you will bestow your holy Spirit upon me, to direct me in the right selection of your truth. Amen."

Was this enough to make it happen? Was this a worthy thought? Only time would tell and that time was near. The shadows of the night grew longer as he walked along this time-worn paving where white flecked stones stretched into the distance, like candles marking out his route. Each step he took drew him on towards the mountains, towards the pass, towards the ancient arch. The Prayer was certainly enough to waken Amon from his sleep. Michel could sense that his friend of the mind welcomed the lateness of the hour and the awesome loneliness of the full-moon night. The friends Amon brought sheltered amongst the shadows of the unlit dwellings Michel passed. "Why these?" he queried. "They were surely never of this world?"

Amon responded, “You are right. They are the grotesque dead, unable to find peace in any world. They came with me at your calling. They sensed your fears of dark places and came to howl at the bitterness of their fates.”

Michel became aware of a dark figure up ahead that was real but there was no point in hurrying for both of them were nearly there. The figure turned off the road, disappearing into the olive grove. Michel could see the Chapel of St Jean over to his left, lying in darkness. Only the moon hanging over its silent form gave it life, this somber fortress in a sea of white darkened by the aging of its stone. The crypt below, as he well knew, was part of a much older place of worship, a sacred site, deliberately chosen to be this ancient chapel's base.

Michel too turned off onto the narrow path that passed from the road to his first destination. The shadows in the grove deepened the chill of the night while the olive leaves blocked out the stars. He scurried through the trees, up the dull-white winding path, until he reached the moonlit space on the crest of the first rise. Michel paused, relishing the wonder of the site. Fingers of rock, reaching upwards from deep within the earth, carved by wind and rain to forms and shapes that could only be looked on with unquestioning awe. Here was a valley blessed by the Gods, chosen by them for their earthly residence.

And there they were; the arch, the mausoleum and the group that awaited him. It seemed right that the only man-made structures were themselves so old, the oldest remains of men long gone. These were men who weren't gods yet seemed much more than mortals. They'd left all this behind and only the oldest stories told of who they were, what they did and why they were here. “But we have our own strengths now,” thought Michel. “We're ready to match them and outdo all that they achieved.” The upper point of the mausoleum stood out dark against the higher white-lit cliffs. At its base stood seven youths waiting, watching for Michel's arrival.

Pierre, the leader of the group, came to meet him and whispered as they joined the others, “Marc is dead. Tonight we’ll have the initiation.” Michel was sad to hear of his friend’s death but it came as no surprise since Marc had been ill for some time. It wasn’t plague that struck him but the product of last winter's harshness. Lack of food, wood and warmth had taken its toll amongst the young and very old. Last week when Michel and he had met in St Remy his friend had looked tragically weak. Michel had heard the physician was going to bleed him again. This week he was dead. Michel sensed Pierre held something back, but Pierre could keep a secret well so Michel didn’t pursue it.

The three youths nearest to them were the youngest of the group. They were ten to twelve years old and although he knew their names he knew little else about them. Only that they were of his line. They’d met like this so many times and had passed each other in the village streets, but a code of secrecy kept them as brothers in silence. Behind these youngsters, etched in weather-worn figures, was the cavalry charge of a long forgotten Roman battle. Michel knew more about these figures and pictures than he did about the other boys. Only Pierre de Fos did he know well, Pierre had always been his secret mentor. And Pierre and Michel shared the same ache for the fair Marie, the young lady of their youthful passion.

Pierre and Michel nodded curtly as they passed two other members resting on the stonework picturing the Grecian wars. They were of similar age to Pierre and Michel. The smallness of the village meant that he knew their names, Antoine and Yves, and that their fathers were professional men. Antoine's family had been barristers for generations and Yves’ line controlled the major finance houses of the town. They had non-Jewish backgrounds and this, Michel suspected, was why he knew little else about them. He’d once spoken to Yves and suggested they meet but he’d been rebuffed. Yves claimed he couldn’t do it because of

educational commitments. He said his father kept a tight rein on him because of fears of the plague. Even though Michel suffered similar constraints he sensed this was a pretext concealing other issues. However he was also aware that there really was little opportunity for the sons of the merchant class to meet. Family life was too controlled, too demanding for this to happen. Fear and need meant even in a small town like St Remy, life was very private. Of course he knew other things about the boys' families since the town was too small for it to be otherwise. But it was a view created by the talk of his elders, a crust of prejudice filtered through envy, rivalry and the constant awareness of religious heritage. Michel realized he knew little of their real character and that he held a purely emotional picture of their lives.

However, on occasions the older boys had met at the bullfights where, unnoticed by the adults intently focused on the fight, they'd had the chance to talk of life and meaning in sixteenth Century Provence. They'd talked of death and immortality, of wars with Spain and Columbus' journeys to far off lands. Together they'd pondered the Islamic threat and the coming of the end of days. All things that as eldest sons they must hear from their respective parents' point of view and in deference never challenge. But none of them shared that genuine friendship where in idle hours they could roam at will.

Pierre and Michel moved past the waiting youths and stopped on the southern side where they sat down on rocks at the base of the monument. From here they could see St Jean's chapel and St Remy to the north. The last of the group, Jacob, sat alone, a little to the right. He'd always sat alone. He was the mentor of one of the youngest boys named Mathieu but theirs wasn't the closest of friendships. Jacob was too happy in his isolation and Mathieu seemed far too gregarious to be a member of this group. An odd couple to have been paired together, Michel had often thought.

Here was the perfect time for Amon, a time of waiting in silence, so none would notice his intrusion into Michel's mind. The Roman and Greek ghosts of Glanum, accompanying Amon, gathered round the arch engaged in mock battles with a boar, distracting Michel momentarily. Amon whispered, "The time draws near. I feel the strength of your desire. It wounds the soul and hardens it. You must be strong. Don't allow your lust to grow."

A light twinkled to the north, out of the gloom that was St Jeans. The youngest boy Conon stood up and set off in the direction of the chapel. "It's begun," Michel thought, his body tensed with expectation. "Will she be there?" Regularly the same lamp flashed and another youth got up and left. At last the sign for the scion of Capricorn came so Michel set off down the slope. Once more he passed through the grove and then turned right along a fainter track, leading to the east side of the chapel. Here the covering stone lay on the ground next to the entry steps. It seemed too heavy to be moved by one or even two people of normal build, but it was there, raised upright, causing him to wonder how it was done. The steps slanting down revealed the presence of the candles in the room below. Ten steps down Michel could turn and begin his preparations. No one else was present.

The drip of water marked out the time, seeping down from a straw-like column then splashing onto a mound built up through the ages. And around the stalagmite was a little pool where Michel bathed his feet. To his left was the rock with the mark of Capricorn, chiseled in its upper surface. He placed his clothes on the rock and took up the rough-hewn, brown hooded robe that lay neatly placed along one edge. Its cleanness always surprised Michel. A simple thing locked into all the memories and emotions of this place. He knelt beneath the statue of the Madonna and child, white and glistening with the water seeping from above. This was a statue so ancient that its original clarity had gone, worn away, shaped by the drips

of time into its current bulging rounded form. It had been here forever according to the folklore Michel had heard and was greatly revered. He was aware of his good fortune for not many knew where it was but the stories of its presence abounded in this part of France. It was time for Michel to go, to allow the scion of Sagittarius, who would follow him, his private celebration. He stood up and turning left once more entered the candle-lit tunnel that stretched some way in front of him. The only outside sounds besides the scraping of his feet were those of seeping water and the occasional flutter of a bat.

Amon whispered, "Watch the slaves, they're your ancestors." The passageway was filled with visions that passed through the boy as though he wasn't there. Many carried on their stooped shoulders, rocks, urns and provisions while the rare few drove them on. Cracking whips smacked hard against the firmness of the walls and with menacing whistles beat the already torn flesh of those who stumbled.

"Why do you bring me such horrors?" Michel asked.

"Because it's night and this is the dark spot in their lives," Amon responded. "I don't choose who will come; it's up to you."

Ahead Michel could see lamps flickering in a distant cavern, arousing in him a primeval sense of awe. He recalled his grandfather's words. "The caverns below our town were used long before the arch and mausoleum were built. They were in use before the time when Jews exiled from Palestine settled in St Remy. These Jews weren't your direct forebears but they were related. They chose to settle here while our ancestors chose the mountains of the Pyrenees. And these caves are older than the connecting tunnels built by the Romans. Even that far back you're not close to the time of their first use. Go further back to the time of the Greek settlers and know they also worshipped there. Then go back beyond

that to the times of the most ancient men. Then you are close to understanding their origins and sacredness for before recorded history these places were shrines. As far as I know they've always been there, they've always been special." The perpetual warmth of this buried chamber bathed his face once more. In winter or summer it seemed the same for it held the natural warmth of a deep-seated chamber aided by the many candles glowing in its grottoes. On the roof the black of soot hid the natural whiteness of the rock. As he drew near Michel could hear the stream of water tumbling down the southern wall. It flowed within carved channels directing it across the room to disappear into yet another tunnel. And on its way it filled the circular pool, its vigorous swirls spiraling around the twelve knee-high pedestals built into its basin.

Five figures stood silently on their designated pedestals. Heads covered, the long hoods concealing who they were, what they thought. All desire lay concealed beneath these simple garments. Michel took his place on the broad rock that bore his stellar name, Capricornus. The Latin figures etched deep and worn with time could be felt as familiar ridges biting softly into his bare feet. There were still three others to come before they would begin. As required, Michel's gaze remained constantly focused on the White Madonna and child that stood directly in front of him. This carved and beautiful piece of art had stood for countless centuries on the rim of the wall that checked the water in its fall.

This fixed gaze didn't stop Michel from being aware of Aries taking his place nearby, then of Leo entering into the closing circle. His gaze still fixed, he sensed the next arrival and glimpsed her presence out of the corner of his eye. He knew that dressed in black she had taken her place on the pedestal of Pisces. Marie was here. Not his Marie, but her understudy Marie Dumont, the girl whose lamp had told each one of them when to come. It was she who

tended to the slab and ensured the place was properly prepared. It still surprised him that she performed her tasks alone, she was such a slight girl it was hard to know how it was done.

As she took her place Michel's attention switched to the pedestal of Aries which, being in front of him, was more easily seen. Here Pierre de Fos stood with arms outstretched, his deep voice bouncing round the firmness of the room. "In the Name of the Creator of all things both visible and invisible, who alone can reveal the Mysteries in and beyond that which has been created, I call this assembly to unite in celebration of God's awesome powers."

Michel, like all the others, chanted the response. "We who seek these Treasures do so in the name of God. And in God's name we claim the secrets lawful only to the chosen few."

At this point two figures came into view, one guiding the other, his arm around the shoulder of the younger boy. The older boy said loudly, "I, the scion of Aquarius, pronounce the death of our beloved brother Marc, Scion of Taurus." In respect for the death of Marc nothing else was said for some considerable time.

Then Aquarius broke the silence. "I bring before you the newborn child, Olivier, Scion of Taurus, to swear his oath."

Olivier, a boy of ten or eleven, hesitantly began, "I, Olivier, Scion of Taurus, who seek the Treasures known only to the chosen few, do so in the name of God."

Pierre's voice rang out again, "Whosoever would know Secrets, let him know how to keep secret things secret; and to reveal those things that are to be revealed, and to seal those things which are to be sealed: and not to give holy things to dogs, nor cast pearls before

swine.”

Michel felt himself shudder with the pleasure of being part of this. In St Martins he'd felt the boredom of an observer who'd long tired of the irrelevance of the ceremony's pomp but here, in this place, everything had significance. This was about self-discipline; a training with an end in mind.

“Observe this Law, and the eyes of thy understanding shall be opened, so that you will understand secret things; and you shall have what you seek divinely revealed to you alone.”

Michel craved this hidden knowledge and he reveled in the secrecy and oaths to God. It was here more than any other place on earth that he felt as special as he was said to be.

Every member including the novice joined in the ritual. “O Lord of heaven and earth, Creator and Maker of all things visible and invisible; we, though unworthy, call upon you, through your solely begotten Son Jesus Christ our Lord, that you will bestow your holy Spirit upon us, to direct us in the right selection of your truth. Amen.” This was Michel's favorite prayer. To him this held the highest order of mysticism for, by this special prayer, the greatest powers in the universe could be invoked. Its truth was easily sensed. It began rightfully and properly with an acknowledgement of humility; a necessary key before entry to such treasures could be obtained. The echoes died away and then the voice of the novice could be heard repeating the prayer.

Michel was aware that the ceremony was being slowed by this process of initiation and he wasn't any closer to knowing whether she would appear. And how would the novice

react if she did? Not like him, of that he was sure. Well at least not like him of recent times, more like when he too stood as a novice. It was easy then.

From the corner of his eye he was aware of a robe. Its color wasn't right, black, not the white robe worn by the virgin. It had been placed neatly at the end of one of the many tunnels leading from this room. He hoped it meant she would be here. Just once more. She was the reason for his being here, the motive for self-discipline.

The novice had successfully repeated the oath. The assembled group chanted their communal pledge. "I offer my service to the benefit of men, acknowledging that the gifts bestowed on me demand a special calling. I accept the burden of my gifts and shall seek their enhancement above all other things."

The ache of anticipation, lengthened by the ritual, built steadily within Michel's mind. Could he hold back as of earlier times? Or would this building ache undo him once again? The ache of love and desire was strong, making him want to chant in song, anything to release this uncontrolled response welling inside his limbs. The training of many years served him through this moment, transferring the pain to his mind alone.

Pierre's voice rang out, concealing hidden emotion. "In all things we call upon the Name of God: and undertake no secret path in the absence of his presence." Pierre waited while Olivier went to the pedestal of Taurus and his mentor moved to Aquarius. The ring was near complete, only one place remained unoccupied, that which she would occupy before the fountain of the spring. Pierre's voice rang out with a perceptible haste. "Offer you then affirmation to God that the seven secrets of our covenant, the binding secrets of our continuity, shall bind you all your life."

Even the pride that Michel felt in the oath wasn't enough to make him heed Pierre's words for his attention was on what was to come. Anyway he knew its significance. This was the oath that raised him to the level of the highest members of the town and Provence. By it he joined a fellowship with special gifts and his own special talents were given recognition. It would go beyond these meetings and last throughout their lives. They would seek wealth and high position and in this quest the fellowship would always be there to assist. All that was asked of them was to honor the fellowship's disciplines and goals. Michel knew this was no simple thing. He'd felt its burden, but still hungered for the task. The swearing of the oaths dragged on, making him yearn to pass beyond the toil of this ceremony of commitment to that which lay waiting. Coiled like a snake prepared to strike, the immediate promise of the future both fascinated and repulsed him. The agony of waiting had never been as intense as this. Too long it seemed, on this her last occasion.

Without any signal he, and all the others, stepped back a pace dropping their robes on the edge of the pool. Marie, the understudy, also dropped her robe but unlike them she wasn't naked. Beneath the black she wore the robe of white, signifying her role as keeper of the place was ended. The shock of it wasn't original. He'd seen it once before, when his Marie had ceased her apprenticeship. It shouldn't be a surprise but he hadn't thought beyond the question of whether she would come tonight. The youths set their legs further apart using much more of the broad width of their pedestal. They then raised their arms to the horizontal so that the fingers of those closest to them almost touched.

Pierre's voice stung through the air like the sound of thunder within the confines of the chamber. "Through Jesus, Son of God, the Virgin Mary and Magdalene our order's line is bound. So know you of your heritage and this place that bears their presence. Know then the awesome power of God to be both man and woman, to be Son, and God and Holy Ghost.

Know that he was before, was then, is now, will be for ever after, the Lord Our God in all his many forms.

“You who have reaffirmed this oath hear the words of she, who in ancient times was named Diana, Artemis, Ishtar, Astarte, Aphrodite, Venus, Glynis, Dea Matrona, the White and Gleaming Lady and many other names. Hear the words of Glynis, Our Lady Underground, the Lady of the springs and wells, Threefold Goddess of this sacred land.”

And from the tunnel the sweetest sound. Marie! His Marie!

“Whenever you have need of My aid, assemble in a secret place at least once a month, especially at the Full of the Moon.

“Know that My laws and love shall make you free, for no one can prevent your worship of Me in your mind and heart and spirit. Listen well when you come into My presence, and I shall teach you of deep mysteries, powerful and ancient.”

Her voice sounded different. Michel felt a sadness he hadn't heard before. Was it a tone of powers lost or of grief at what lay ahead? He had no time to ponder as the emotion of her song took hold once more.

“I require no sacrifices or pain of your bodies, for I am mother of all things, the creatrix who made you out of my love, and the one who endures through all time. All seekers of the Mysteries must come to me, for I am the true source, the keeper of the cauldron.

“All who seek to know me, know this. All seeking and yearning will avail you nothing unless you know the mystery: for if what you seek you find not within, you will never find without.”¹

Michel repeats her final verse, as do the youths alongside him. The tension of expectation courses through his body. Once more he feels the voice of fellowship change to howls of souls in crisis. As she emerges into the light, stepping to the pedestal of Virgo, he has no thought but that of Isis. The chanting ends and the pause seems long, stretching time beyond endurance. Her robe slides down, soaking up water as it sinks within the pool to join Pisces' robes.

Michel's eyes are fixed on her alone, chanting the sound of her name as she begins to move. Hers is a dance that holds him entranced, that betrays his ache, the strength of his desire. He cannot look away but must stay taunted by her moving form, feeling the throb that wasn't there rise and fall within him. Unchaste images sear through his mind, revealing the white gleaming lady and the birth-laden secrets of her healing well. Tantalizing arousal, sensual in the way she moves. Her smile seems fixed on him alone, her turning head seems to linger as she swirls. Marie, his Marie, the Virgin Marie once chosen to be bearer of the godly child, the future king of France. But Marie, his Marie is not the chosen one and her next in line, her understudy dances by his side.

Think hard, deny the urge; hold back as time stands still. Don't let it end. Don't let it begin. Feel it, repress it, the agonizing pleasure of lust held in check. The Goddess's words recur. “All your seeking and yearning will avail you nothing unless you know the Mystery, for if what you seek you find not within, you will never find without.”

¹ *Part of the Song of the Goddess adapted from DJ Conway's Moon Magick*

The Virgin's mystery haunts Michel. Here is his Marie, dancing with the fates, inviting God to bestow on her a second Christ. Destiny inspires her. Fate calls him to her aid. The Virgin's immortality needs the mystery of his discipline. Only in his perfect sacrifice will the mystic seed dwell within this unspoiled maid. The agony of the unending ache spears through his body as she moves. Yes, he aches beyond control. It was so easy once, to deny the rise of thoughts of her. Easy too, to not notice the movement of her breasts and hips. But he knows that now he's too aware of her maturing body. Her shapeliness is increasingly in his mind, a part of every dream. And in this cavern, tortured by her presence, he sees her body respond to him. Yet he mustn't watch the impact on this goddess maid, the fire is too intense. He must choose to ignore his own and her arousal. Once he could do that easily, but not now, nor for a long time past. No longer can he ignore this embrace of painful pleasure.

She is aware of him and him alone. Of that he's sure. Watching him with every turn she seeks to end his dance with fate. The groans around him reveal the agonies of others, held bewitched by these sensual nubile women. The soft moans of watching yearning youths aroused yet unable to release by any other means but this suspended waiting. Groans, long sobbing groans, beseech the attention of their God. Their ache echoes Michel's agony; a deliberate torment he doesn't want to end. A greater glory can be his and theirs if in their suffering God's seed is laid. He feels a presence surge within him wanting his release. Held back, prolonged, but undefeated the urge of primal longing lingers on. Changing sounds reveal how many others have sealed their fate, spilling fountains into the pool. Ashamed they stand, sobbing in defeat, yet proud to play their part for God and King. And he's aware of both Maries dancing more wildly, moving from boy to boy, pedestal to pedestal. Their turning bodies, laced with dripping seed, are mirrored in the water. The voices in him scream to rise. Condemned souls rise up in his mind. Broken lands and broken limbs scatter throughout endless time awaiting his release. The agony of the wait, the pulse that builds, the

sensory nature of the untouched flesh has fully gorged his trembling form. And bursting out beyond control that deeper pulse of pleasure; an explosive beat deep within his sacs. The first has gone and more to follow. Agony of pleasure! Three times or more! And now Marie, his Marie, dancing at his side. He feels the nearness of her flesh, sees the look on her rose-flushed face. Her body's twist and leap brushes his swollen tip and all agonies and ecstasies that went before are lost in this. And then she's gone.

Michel closes his eyes. Marie won't be back. She hasn't borne the child. So many generations of virginal Marias, none of whom have been the chosen one. None of whom by immaculate means alone have borne the child of the second coming. And Marie is renewed. The White Lady still exists within this place. His Marie, no longer white, becomes the Black Madonna.

La Lune au plain de nuict sur le haut mont

Le nouveau sophe d'un seul cerveau l'a veu

Par ses disciples estre immortel semond

Yeux au midy en seins mains corps au feu

The Moon in the full of night over the high mountain

The new Sophia alone, in her mind has seen it

By her disciples invited to be immortal,

Eyes to the south. Hands in bosoms, bodies in the fire

Nostradamus' Prophecies-Centuries 4 Quatrein 31

3. Journey to Les Baux. 23rd September 1519

Michel woke with harsh acrid smoke causing him to cough. As he sat up the woolen blanket slid from his bed. He'd slept well in the short time between arriving back home and being disturbed by the smoke from the fire. There was only a dim light showing through the shutters and even though he opened them it remained much duller than it had been for the past few days. The cat sitting on the outside sill miaowed loudly at its rude disturbance, landing lightly on its feet in the alley outside the Nostredame home.

His father Jaume could be heard stirring embers of the fire in the main living area next to Michel's room. It would only be a small fire, suited to the cooking needs of September, but still a welcome heat source first thing in the morning. Rachelle had lit it but now that she was busy about her other chores it was up to those seeking warmth to stir the fire into greater life. It was Rachelle that Michel first encountered as he came out of his room. His sudden emergence caused her to almost drop the bowl she was carrying from upstairs. She scowled at him, her displeasure increased by his apparent lack of concern. The ill-feeling between them hadn't always been there but had arisen as a result of his constant teasing and provoking of her when his mother couldn't see what he was doing. He'd misjudged the young girl's tolerance and turned adulation into resentment.

She was a couple of years younger than Michel and owed her position in the house to him. It was two years ago that she'd followed him home. He'd seen her sitting in bewilderment at the side of the road when he'd first started taking the donkeys out beyond the town. She'd been alone, and her thinness and pallor told of poverty and a desperate past. Against his mother's longstanding advice he'd taken pity on the girl and offered her the last remains of the food meant for his journey. He'd nearly reached home and wasn't hungry so he'd stopped and taken the scraps from his bag and placed them on a rock which she could

see. He'd given her a smile to indicate it was for her and then had continued on his way. She'd taken the food but instead of stopping to eat it she'd followed him, eagerly devouring the small scraps as she walked. He'd soon noticed her but, despite his efforts to drive her away, she'd walked about twenty paces behind him until he'd reached his family's storage area.

Michel, thinking she would be gone when he'd finished stabling the donkeys, was surprised to find her waiting outside. His shouts at her to go back to her friends had been ineffective. She'd stood there, shivering, head down, about to cry and when he'd given up she'd followed him all the way to his home. After going in he'd noticed her seated on a stone outside their door.

His mother seemed extremely annoyed that he'd allowed this to happen. It was only when Michel's father had enquired what the fuss was all about that her annoyance had faded. Jaume saw the girl sitting quietly across the way and said, "That's Rachelle Bizot." He'd gone into the alley, told her who he was and brought her inside.

Rachelle's family had been clients of Michel's father. They had died in a bout of the plague while Rachelle was visiting her grandparents. She'd told the Nostredames that her grandparents had also died, but not of the plague. Brigands had invaded their home seeking their supposed hoards, but finding no hidden wealth the ruffians had exacted their penance. They'd left the pair outside the town with throats cut as an example to the locals of their capacity for villainy when thwarted. Rachelle, who had hidden in the cellar while this took place, had been left without any means of support after her grandparents' deaths. She'd tagged on behind a group of children that drifted through her village and lost them where Michel had found her.

Michel's mother and father had asked her if she wanted to stay, stating that in return they would expect her to perform the chores that needed doing around the place. Jaume had said to Michel after it was decided, "It's right that we should look after ex-Jews. You never know when we too might find ourselves cast adrift by fate." So Rachelle had stayed and lighting the fire first thing in the morning was one of her chores.

Michel joined his father next to the fire and before long Reyniere, Michel's mother, came down the narrow stairs, carrying the latest addition to the family, a newborn boy cradled in her arms. Despite the burden she took up the mug and dipped it into the urn alongside. Having finished her drink she selected a piece of the already sliced wheaten bread and joined Michel and his father near the fire. They stood in silence, their backs to the flames, momentarily enjoying the calm before the day began. The only sounds from above were Delphine tidying up her bedding, and Rachelle collecting the bedpans ready for emptying into the back alley guttering. Jehan wasn't to be seen. Michel knew he would be on his way to fetch the daily urn of water from the spring at the junction of their alley. The smoke hadn't cleared but had gathered as a menacing cloud against the low ceiling since the open door was its only escape.

Michel cut himself a slice of bread and took a few dried apricots from a jar alongside. He dipped the family's only mug into the water urn and placed it on the bench. He retreated to the fire attending carefully to his father's instructions. Reyniere handed the baby to Delphine and began the preparation for Michel's journey. Although he should be in Les Baux by the middle of the day she knew it was a demanding journey where a little nourishment along the way would be welcome. She wrapped some bread, almonds and olives in a cloth for him and prepared another parcel to be delivered on the way. All too soon Michel was ready to leave the bottom-warming comfort of the fire.

There was cloud in the sky so it wasn't as cold outside as it had been the day before. It was high cloud and wouldn't last long, Michel could already see the richness of the blue sky breaking through above the roof lines to the east. It was good to breathe the outside air which was free of the fire's smoke and had little of the stench that would come with the rising sun. The street was silent but this wouldn't last. Michel could see the light of morning fires casting patterns on the shutters of the houses as he passed. In forty paces he was at the northern wall of the village, underneath the arch of the gate. It was another forty paces to the family's warehouse and holding yards. Out in the paddocks the thin mist clung at shoulder-height to the land. To the west Michel could see the distant inns were quiet with only one or two early starters, rounding up their horses and donkeys. And in the paddocks, like ghosts and ghouls, figures bent to scoop up dung. The vagabonds and poor were busy filling old hemp bags with manure to sell for a pittance to local farmers. They would disappear with the mist so their trespass couldn't be challenged.

Michel entered the stone outhouse with its powerful aromas of straw and grain. Three large cats moved out of his way while others looked down from lofty perches. All of them were wild, encouraged to stay by the food left out for them and the ample supply of small birds, mice and rats that came their way. Jean-Michel wasn't there, his straw litter bed empty of all but the sheepskin cover he used for warmth. Michel could hear him out the back dealing with the donkeys. There were four of them waiting to be fed and watered and Jean-Michel grumbled away as they nudged him with their heads, impatient for their turn to eat. Jean-Michel was as old as anyone Michel had met. His history with Michel's family went back to the time of Renee the Good, the last king of Provence. Jean-Michel had served his father since before Michel was born, and he'd been with Michel's maternal grandfather for an even longer time before that. Jean-Michel turned to greet him. The stoop of age had made Jean-Michel fall short of the image portrayed in his grandfather's tales, but even age hadn't

reduced the strength for which this servant was legendary. He looked fit and strong, as he had throughout Michel's life. His craggy, bearded face was partly concealed by an eye-patch covering injuries from long ago. His one good eye was ringed by dark shadows as though he hadn't slept and his usual smile was absent. Whatever the cause Michel knew he'd no right to ask.

Jean-Michel was here early because he slept in the barn to protect the goods of the family business. Without him vagabonds would overrun the place, stealing all that was held in storage. He ran this bulk store and stockyards, receiving produce from local farmers and preparing the donkeys for the frequent journeys to other towns and to the family's more remote clients. The old man didn't usually say much to Michel but this morning he seemed to want to talk. After greeting Michel with his usual gruff, "Mornin' master Michel", he would usually get on with his work, but not today. He stood there shuffling as he overcame his reluctance to speak. "Need a parsill takin." He paused once more before saying uneasily, "No ryt ter arsk of course."

Michel, who had always liked this modest, quiet man, encouraged him to speak. "I'd be happy to help," he said. "Who's it for?"

Jean-Michel opened his pouch, mumbling as he did, "Me dorter." He seemed reluctant to say more and Michel needed no extra detail. The parcel was clearly meant for the Miller's wife at Les Baux.

The old man handed Michel a parchment and a cloth-wrapped bundle. Michel took them with some surprise. It had never occurred to him that this family worker could write. Having started to talk the old man seemed eager to continue. Talking seemed to ease the pain barely concealed within the old man's face. "Take Baltizar and 'gustus," he said pointing to

the donkeys. Michel knew why he had chosen these two. Although he would be difficult for Michel to manage, Balthazar was the strongest of the pack. Augustus, although not the next strongest, was the most suited to Michel's abilities. One difficult donkey would be enough for him to handle.

The old man still seemed to have something on his mind. "Phillip de Sard. Watch out for 'im. Kip out of 'is way." This seemed to be the point of the old man's message and it was easy for Michel to respond for he had no intention of meeting Phillip and his men in a lonely spot on the trail to Les Baux.

Jean-Michel turned and commenced preparing the donkeys, loading them with bags of summer wheat and flour and dried peas. He added two sets of leather pouches that had been brought from the family's store inside the town. One held jars of olive oil, the other several rounds of cheese. All the while the old man muttered to Michel about the people he was to visit on his way. Michel had done this journey before but had never been given any detail before. It was as though Jean-Michel thought Michel wouldn't return unless he knew each client's strength and failings. Lastly, they tied on the leather waterbags that Michel and his animals would need.

Michel thanked Jean-Michel for the advice and information and started on his journey, leading Balthazar by a short hemp rope. Augustus turned and followed as the rope, attaching him to Balthazar's harness, tightened. The donkey's hooves clattered on the uneven paving stones as Michel led them back to the wall and along the straight road which would take them around the northern part of the village. Steam rose from the road as the rays of the early morning sun shone on the remaining dew. In the nearby paddocks a small flock of sheep had begun to graze and further away, behind low rock wall enclosures, Michel could see the cattle that grazed in the surrounds of the bullfight arena. Their journey took them south at the

western wall, down the road past St Martins towards the hills known as the Little Alps. Unlike the night before, the rugged whiteness of their tops was dulled by the purple haze that hung in the warming air. People were on the move, the air was still and travelers at the inns could be heard from two hundred paces away. Donkeys, being led by their owners, could be seen passing through the town's gates and along the roads to Arles and Tarascon.

Once more his route took him onto the Roman road, passing the Chapel of Our Lady of Piety. The hills that had looked so high from far away took on a smaller, truer perspective. The whiteness of the nearest peaks re-emerged from behind the haze. The gray-green cloak of spruce-covered scree shading into greens and olive textured the lower foothills. The Church of Saint Jean lay deserted with no evidence of the entry to the crypt that last night had given him access to the underground caverns. Blackbirds and thrushes darted through the air, settling into the olive groves. The road he followed, laid by Greek settlers and later enhanced by the Romans, passed by the Mausoleum and the Arch but this time he wouldn't go near them. Raised on a slight plateau these monuments had always interested Michel, standing as they did so prominently ancient. These were sentinels, guiding travelers to the old Roman city of Glanum, that lay somewhere behind and which was covered long ago by soil and debris brought down over twelve hundred years. And further up, in that region against the Sacred Mountain, the original sanctuary of the Goddess was supposed to lie. Michel had been to the site and tasted the waters of the nearby holy spring that fed the caverns below.

Amon was awake, stirred by the memories of the ancients now rising within Michel's mind. The boy was aware that Amon's presence had little relevance to either the present or the future but that was part of the pleasure of his attraction. "There on the crest you see our friends," said Amon, pointing to the ridge beyond which lay the buried ruins.

Michel could see ghostly battles, layered one upon the other. Greeks charging in hordes at scattered bands of fearsome Celtic warriors. They weren't the only warriors, Greeks were fighting Roman legions and other Romans were retreating before the ravaging barbarians of the North. "My ancestors are there, but which are yours, Amon?"

Michel didn't quite know the origin of his friend. He'd appeared when Michel was only four and his grandfather had first told him stories of the ancient world. "Mine aren't there at all, Michel. Now there's a mystery for you to ponder."

The donkeys plodded on, setting the pace for Michel. They lumbered slowly through the narrowing gorge where the white and dark of weathered cliffs became ever more detailed. Deep-set caves high up the face sent out coos and sounds of fluttering wings as pigeons and doves took flight. Michel's route followed the turns of the chasm past an outcrop of limestone thrusting up from the valley floor. It was at a point beyond these that he stopped the steady plod of the donkeys, taking them instead down a gentle slope across the stream and along a path, little used but still apparent to those who knew. Through a copse of pines he led his troupe until they came hard up against the wall of debris at the foot of the cliff. There was a clearing and Michel fastened the donkey's rope to a branch and poured some water into a hollow carved into a rock beneath the trees. Michel scrambled along the edge of the debris, his stumbling steps disturbing the silence of the valley. A bird began its call, the frog-like sound rasping out a tune and then changing to the chirpy sound of a newborn pup.

The entrance to the tunnel was quite large, round with water-worn edges marked only by the fall of rock from above. Standing in the entryway, Michel could see the brightness of the sky and, strangely, glimpse the presence of the stars even though it was early morning. The tunnel stretched upwards inside the face of the cliff. It was steeply angled but climbable, since the inside surface, worn by the streams that had carved this natural tube, formed

hollows and lumps that could be used to place one's feet and hands. The tricky bit was at the top, making sure that he'd a secure hold on the surrounding bush before hauling himself over the lip and onto the flatness of the ground.

It was a stunning view, a place of the Goddess. The plateau was filled by a lake, the still waters of which doubled the impact of the hills beyond. Their diverse shades of green glistened in the waters below reflecting truly the world above. Everywhere, trees and shrubs reached to the sky, far taller than the stunted pines below. Dark pines were set against the verdant greens of maple, birch and oak. Michel moved around the eastern rim, along a path that took him to the northern end of the plateau. From here he could see St Remy and its churches' spires settled into the greenness of the foothills. Beyond the town were yellow fields and crops of purple lavender, the geometric plots of olive trees, orchards and vines stretching as far as the haze would allow.

He was standing near the top of the ancient stone wall built by the Romans long ago. Here was the source of the green below, the richness of the crops. Here was the reason why water was so plentiful. The dam explained the fertility of St Remy as did the aqueducts and canals built by those ancient people. With the awareness came Michel's inevitable questions. "Why could they do this when we can't? Why did they build it as a curve rather than straight across and up? How did they find the time to build on such a grand scale?" This place always had its impact on him with its touch of the Gods and the heroic past. However he couldn't stay long so he moved on across the curve of the dam, around the path to overlook a rocky beach and the lake stretching back to the lush growth rising to the hills of the other side.

It was here that he'd first seen her while standing just like this, in awe, hidden by the trunks of the trees that towered above. She'd come down a path and he'd known who she was, Marie Bouquet, oldest daughter of the widow also named Marie. Her dark hair glistened in the

heat of that summer's day. She must have been eleven then and her face, still lean, had shown her coming beauty, the round fullness of lips and the elegance of her cheek bones already in evidence. She'd slipped out of her robe and into the water. This she'd obviously done many times before for she didn't stay in the shallows but like a fish had gone into the deeper waters. Marie had seemed at home here in the hills and in this lake, like the daughter of a Goddess, like a nymph. And she'd been aware of him; a movement of a branch stirred by a slight breeze had removed the shade that hid his presence. She hadn't seemed disturbed but had kept on swimming. He'd seen her nakedness before but here, away from the ceremony, it had seemed improper for him to stare.

These old memories were painful pleasures causing Michel to plead, "Amon where are you when I need you?" Reluctantly Amon showed his face out of the debris of the young boy's mind but refused to come any closer. "Why do you fail me when I ache as deeply as this?" Michel asked. Amon made no reply.

"Surely you can bring me my Marie and let me watch her just once more?"

Amon groaned in a manner Michel had never felt before. "What would you have me do? Your disturbed mind brings out something unbearable. Marie of the past is gone. You can't touch her as you wish. It would serve no purpose if I obeyed because you would see the future not the past."

Michel recoiled at the thought of this. He'd no desire to see the future. There was no wish to see Marie tormented by her lot. He wanted the past to become the present and to stay set forever in that single idyllic memory. What use were Amon and his ghosts if they failed his needs?

“Michel, don't ever call that which you would seek to change. It will tear your soul apart.” With that Amon's head once more submerged deep within Michel's mind.

Michel hurried on as he had on that first occasion, filled with the lasting emotion of that first encounter and the fears for her future. He hurried along the path to the fork that took him into a thicket. The path was narrower here, deeply shaded by the trees, the ground uneven, affected by the gnarled roots and twisted trunks of ancient fallen trees. On this occasion he had no hesitancy, he knew exactly where to go. It was at this point she'd joined him. Despite Grandpa Pierre's careful instruction he hadn't known which way to go. She'd given him a smile as she slipped past and sped nimbly through the undergrowth to the slope beyond. He'd hurried after her then but this time he'd no fear of getting lost. Up the track he strode to where the tree line blended with the cliffs, where the bushes began to end and where the outcropped rocks concealed the entry to the grotto.

This time he entered alone and, as always, he knelt and began the chant of the virgin lineage. The simple act took him back once more to that earlier occasion. It was here that he'd knelt to join her, at the entry of the cave, in front of the statue of the virgin. She'd already begun her chant, reciting the five hundred and three names of the virgin line. Today there was one more to add, much to his regret. He knew the lineage well. This had always been the case for he'd been well trained by his father and his grandfather. They too knew all the names, Marie de Blanchard, Marie Bouchet, a string of Maries broken only by the occasional Delphine or Madeleine. Today Michel added the penultimate name of Marie Bouquet before adding the unchanging end, “and Marie, the Virgin Mary of our Time.”

He stood and went deeper into the cave around a curve into a softly lit chamber, a single candle its only flame. He knelt once more and bowed his head and waited for the welcoming blessing. The parched crackly voice issued, “Welcome Michel, son of the line.

Welcome Michel, child of destiny.” He looked up into her face as he’d done many times before. The tranquility of this ancient wrinkled face calmed the turmoil in his mind. Her thin frame seemed frailer than ever as she sat crouched, emerging from her meditative trance. He knew her frailness was illusory for he’d gone with her into the wilderness of the hills and it was he that came back tired, not her. The familiarity of the face haunted him. The same structure of lips and facial bones of the younger Marie was apparent in the older woman, despite the difference in their ages.

Michel reached into his pouch selecting the items meant for Marie, the prophetess of the lake. He laid them out on the ground. “Marie of the Lake, I bring you gifts, your rightful dues from the family Nostredame.” She didn’t take them or open them in his presence. She knew the contents, candles, cheese, olives, almonds and honey, enough to last her two days.

Her voice rippled through his mind shattering all his calm. “The threads unwind. The times are changing. I have no more to offer you. You won’t come again.” They sat in the silence until Michel gathered the courage to ask, “Why’s Marie marrying this man? It’s because of her marriage that I’m no longer welcome, isn’t it?”

Sadness disturbed her face and Michel wasn’t sure whether it was the manner of his questioning or the nature of the question that caused her to frown. “I’ve always had great hopes for you,” she said, “both you and Marie, but the time has come to move on. What was expected hasn’t come to pass. We’re all disappointed and must seek another way to bring about the child.”

“But why’s Marie marrying this horrid man? What has she done to deserve that? Have I done something wrong? Is she to suffer because of me?”

She hesitated before she replied, “No Michel. Some of those who are in charge say the opposite. The two of you may have been too good, but no one questions the self discipline of either of you. Michel, you are one of us, as is Marie and although both of you will do well because of it you will both find much will be demanded. Marie will inherit her father's estate and bears the blood of her mother's line. That's why she marries Phillippe. He desires her fortune and our leaders need his services.

“As for you, it's your date of birth and your Jewish past that make you of interest to our leaders. You're a member because they believe your destiny is to be there when the child's conceived. It hasn't happened and they've grown impatient. I and the others only do what they command. I'm sorry Michel, but no-one's expectations have been fulfilled.” She stopped talking and Michel could see she would say no more.

At last Michel stood up and turned, stumbling to the entrance of the cave. The brightness of daylight beat on his slowly weeping eyes. He retraced his steps, distressed at the suddenness of his dismissal. The loss of a friend bit deeply, he'd cherished her wisdom for several years and had eagerly sought her teachings. There was more to learn from her and he hadn't sought to leave, that was the worst of it.

There was no Marie to slow his course, she too had gone, as though the two of them had been one and now the shattered bond meant both must go. The charts had said he would be 'The One', the youth whose presence would bring the child, but it hadn't happened and now Marie, the Virgin of his time, had become a black Madonna, the matriarch of the line. He'd obeyed and served as instructed, despite the urge that lay inside. The virgin Marie, without the required child, couldn't prove her immortal claim. Marie as virgin, the white Madonna, had no further use. Marie the black Madonna, the mortal woman, would serve the

furtherance of the line. And he too would serve the sacred order, as did his father and his before him. But how? What had they in store for him?

Balthazar was obstinate, reluctant to leave the sanctuary of the grove, to turn and head once more through the overreaching trees. There was an art to handling this most awkward of animals and although Michel knew the means his impatience to be gone worked against the desired end. Sweet words were needed, perhaps a lick of honey for each beast. Certainly it needed peace of mind, not haste to get them on their way. Michel sat on the rock, talking softly, reasonably, setting out his chain of crazed, erratic thoughts as though to enlighten the bemused animals. The sound of the crickets was clear from the undergrowth, the song of the last cicadas lingering despite the chill of the early autumn mornings.

Amon refused to come, seeming reluctant to bear this burden and pour more mischief into an already troubled mind. Michel must deal with his problem alone, with no childish vision to distort his world.

What had the old woman taught him beside the craft of herbs, potions and poisons to use or avoid? The ancient chants that stuck in his mind would be the legacy of his time with her. They told the stories of the female goddess of the lake and caves, tales from long ago. Sophia, Diane, Glynis, all part of the one, the unity of the Black and White Madonna, the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, somehow fused by time into the one ancient lineage.

Once started on this purgative course Michel rambled on to his disinterested donkeys about the meaning of charts that marked him as 'The One' who would set in place the destiny of all men. Was it true? Did it have more than one possible meaning, like prophecies of old?

At last Balthazar would move, turning slowly as though to prove a point, allowing Michel to lead the way. It was already becoming hot and a heat haze could be seen on the

ridge of every rise. The valley lost all the elements that made St Remy seem so verdant, the trees were shorter, the shrubs sparser, hardier looking, as is common with heat resistant, water conserving plants. Delightful scents filled the air, becoming stronger as the heat of the day increased. Slopes dotted with myriads of lavender, fully flowered spikes of purple scattered on each silvery bush, drew the ever busy bees. The smaller flowered rosemary and thyme flourished on these slopes, clinging to the cliffs in any earth-retentive pocket. The white of their underlying chalk was covered by growth except where deeply scarred pillars rose to the higher ridges. The low dense pines were everywhere along their base, breaking up what was otherwise a sea of brilliant colors.

This was a land where it was dangerous to walk for too long, especially without water, for it soaked and burned away the moistures of the body. The road was straight for a while, steadily climbing before a steep turn that changed the sun beating on the face from left to right. Then once more the path turned, heading deeper into the mountain chain. And the valley changed. The lofty pillars stretched upwards in ever more dramatic shapes, shafts that seemed to thrust themselves out of the bowels of the earth, their white stone etched by beating sun and wind and winter rains. Ravines and cliffs and clustered debris hid caves and springs from those who walked below.

The sound of voices echoed up the valley; a single shout, followed by another, in the tongue of Languedoc. Recalling the warnings of his father and Jean-Michel, his instinct was to hide. Just ahead a passage seemed to open to the east into a deep ravine. He urged the donkeys but their pace didn't change, they plodded on unaware, uninterested in all but the steady climb. High above, Michel could see a magic bird, an eagle soaring suspended by its will. Un-flapped wings stretched out, defying the natural fall to earth without a single move.

At last the passage into the ravine allowed him to turn aside, up a little used track and through a copse of trees. He tethered the donkeys and scrambled up to where, concealed by a bush he could watch the road. Several skinks and lizards, made active by the sun, scampered quickly up the rocky walls as he settled down. The sounds of a large number of animals and men were apparent, far too many for a solitary traveler to welcome. Four horsemen pulled up just outside the entry way, dismounted and relieved themselves against the walls of the gorge. Their muffled, distorted words echoed round the walls. “Nostredame! Nostredame! Nostredame!...”, diminishing into the chaos of, “The boy! The boy! The boy!” They remounted and restarted their journey along the winding slopes. Another group of riders passed the entry to the ravine, chatting and occasionally responding to shouted calls from those ahead, urging them to stay within hearing range. Amongst them Michel could discern Phillipe, dressed in finery unsuited to the road and heat. Behind them came long strings of donkeys laden with sacks and urns, led by men who seemed wary of the land, more used to sea and storms. He heard their grumbles about the heat, the sweat, the harshness of the ground, clearly over the disjoint of the voices of their disappearing overlords. Behind and seeming to form the rear were two more horses with sword-bearing riders, the mounted men grumbling at those ahead for the slowness of the pace.

They were gone, the valley stilled into silence, the eagle gliding patiently, high above the ridge. As Michel scanned the opposite cliffs he saw a man emerge, a man who seemed not to care that he was seen by a lone boy who hid, like himself, amongst the rocks. Michel waved and waited. The man scrambled down a sharp ridge jumping agilely from one rocky level to another. He stopped at one slightly higher than Michel's head, then reached down with open hand. No words were said. Michel reached into a bag hanging at Augustus' side, taking out a loaf of old rye bread and a little cheese. He handed it up to the bedraggled, long bearded, wild haired figure that loomed above him. He knew the hermit couldn't speak for

he'd been a victim of some inquisitor's overzealous act. The hermit, known to locals as Jean of the Grottos, took the food, gave a toothless smile and then turned to scramble his way up the ridges, beyond the reach of passers-by. He stopped a little way up to nibble at the newly won food. Seated on a rock he held out his arms to form a cross, blessing Michel on his way. Michel returned the salute and then urged the reluctant Balthazar to start his journey once again. By the time his willful beast had agreed to move the hermit was gone, leaving just the silence of the heat-soaked rocks, the hum of bees and a burst of occasional cicada song.

The baking road seared his legs, its heat still building this early in the day. It would be hot, very hot, almost like the worst of summer days. Those ahead wouldn't linger, even if they saw him now, eager as they would be to find a shady place to snooze away the hottest part of day. Nor could he afford to dally and hopefully Balthazar agreed. The ravines were widening, the ground more dry and open, while the bushes became lower, more spiky and brown. A shallow descent gave way to flatness and the valley opened up, a heat-hazed blue concealing white. In the distance, the plateau beckoned. The citadel, a lonely remote point, sat like a watchman on a wallowing vessel. The Beams, also called 'Les Baux', lay before him, a massive rocky outcrop bursting from its earth-buried source, like a ship lifting from within a wave with water streaming down its side. "How ironic that such an arid spot should suggest thoughts of endless water! Waterless or not Balthazar will surely welcome it. He's home where he was born."

"Au Hasard Balthasar" rang through his mind. "Balthasar by chance," he repeated, enjoying the whimsy in the motto of the ancient Lords of Baux.

Amon appeared. At last he seemed appeased. Michel was glad he'd come back. With his friend came a host of men Michel already knew. These were the former Lords of Baux. "Where is Raymond de Turenne?" Michel asked. He'd seen him on past visits but couldn't

see him now. “The yellow curse of Provence” was strangely absent. Perhaps the acts were too close to Michel’s fears of Phillipe and Les Baux, for Raymond had taken pleasure in strangling his aunt, queen Jeanne of Sicily. He had also delighted in throwing his prisoners off the walls of the castle. Raymond’s greatest thrill was in watching their terror and hesitations. But Amon had brought the other Lords, even though they too had many nasty ways. They had controlled St Remy and all the towns around. Their family was the mighty power, ruling this land for centuries before their demise.

Amon observed, “They claimed they could trace their ancestry back to the druids and also to the times of the biblical Jesus. This was through one of the three who followed the star to attend his birth, the magus we call Balthasar.” Michel was never sure whether Amon was giving him new facts or drawing on things Michel had once heard or seen, recalling old memories that lay buried deep within his mind. Whichever it was didn't really matter for it was the twist in Amon's point of view that gave it meaning. And in addition Michel could talk aloud, out on this lonely trail. He could answer his friend and probe issues that concerned him.

“Yes I remember some of that. The Lords’ proudest boast was of royal lineage, through the magus Balthasar and his kin. They said this made them the rightful kings of the realm because their claim came through their link to God. They saw it in much the same way as King Clovis had.”

Amon continued, unperturbed by Michel's mildly petulant intrusion. “They also claimed their birthright was a link to magic and the wisdom of the ages, to Sophia, the Virgin Mary, the Black Madonna and her line.”

Michel's emotions sang in awe. The Virgin Mary and Sophia! The Wisdom of the Lady! The Lords had to build their base here. It feels so powerfully right. Its hills, its sky and

the valley itself are surely linked to the Gods and Goddesses, who, able to live anywhere in the world, chose to make this their realm. And man would be silly not to heed the choices of the Gods.

Amon returned to earthly claims. “And the druids, those ancient men of times long before the Lords of Baux, also held that this place was destined to be the place of Kings. Up there in the sky, at Les Baux, was their priestly retreat. Here, where we walk, is the Sacred Valley of their Gods.”

Michel was always excited by the obvious links in history that showed this place was especially royal and sacred. “Clovis helped them. He set the seal upon their claim.”

Michel turned Balthazar off the straighter road, onto a twisting narrow trail that led up the ridges to the eastern end of the plateau of Les Baux. He trod a path so old it seemed as though each step released some ancient spirit, drawing him nearer and nearer to the forbidding cliffs and their menacing slopes. He needed to share his thoughts, to focus on the grandeur of the ascent rather than its hazards. And he was lucky for he had an audience, Amon and two donkeys that cared so little of the world their pace would not falter at the fears his ramblings hid. “Here is where the Gods still lie. How could it be otherwise? The massive pillars twisting downwards must be their temple's ruins. The marks, the twists, the caves and grottoes, bizarre remnants of the wars fought and lost by the gods and goddesses.”

As he reached the ridge he saw the first of his destinations. A windmill stood some two hundred paces in, to the right side of the trail. A house and hut were twenty paces further on.

Chapter Synopsis- Nostradamus: The Serpents Child.

Prologue: December 1503CE: The astronomical import of Michel's birth is briefly presented while gently questioning the validity of birth signs.

1. Sunday at St Martins: The ancient church, its congregation and the morning service are used as devices to contrast the unchanging old world with the events exploding into peoples lives in 1519. St.Remy's place in history is part of the tale that is brought into focus through the device of Amon the imaginary friend of 16 year old Michel de Nostredame (Michel). Michel broods over the impending marriage of Marie, a girl he fancies. A mood of discontent and alienation is shown in Michel.

2. The Lady of the Underground: Secret societies played a key role in the 16th C. For this reason a secret society worshipping the feminine Goddess is the device used to develop the history of St Remy and Provence. It takes Michel into an atmosphere charged with many of the things the ceremony in St Martins lacks. Marie, the young woman of his fancies, is at the center of the goddess rituals which are designed to bring about the second coming via virgin birth. The action takes place late at night and takes Michel through the remnants of the buried roman city of Glanum into St Remy's ancient subterranean passages.

3. Journey to Les Baux: Michel's journey to the nearby, historically rich Les Baux enables his contemplative solitude/disconnection to be explored and builds him a past seeped in mysticism, history and herbal crafts. Michel takes two donkeys laden with local produce to trade on behalf of the family merchandise business. On the way he visits an old lady in a cave above the ancient Roman St Remy weir. The meeting reveals how this woman has tutored Michel and Marie for many years. He becomes aware of people's disappointment in him. Later he traverses the unique terrain of the Alpilles contemplating the remarkable history of the lords Of Baux and their peculiar motto "Perchance Bathazar".

4. Baux Miller: This chapter brings out Nostradamus' merchant upbringing. On the plateau holding Les Baux Michel trades with a miller. The miller's wife is the recipient of a parcel in which is a letter revealing the cruel death of her brother at the hands of Phillippe, the man to whom Marie is betrothed. The letter is used to convey some of the tensions in the world during the early 16th Century. The Mill encounter and two other calling points are used to build awareness of the region, its people, history and its produce.

5. Bernardin des Baux: Nostradamus found support at the highest level of French society. This chapter gives a context for Michel's acceptance based on the nobility in the nearby town of Les Baux. Michel is unexpectedly taken to meet the Countess and her brother Benardin, who is in control of Baux. The Countess establishes that his past development and recent disappointment have been through her agency as she and Bernardin believe his birth to be highly significant. Michel attends a dinner which allows for further insight into the challenges of the 16th C. A feast and a sword-fight provide the setting for Michel's exposure to the wider world. Astronomy is a topic of interest to Nostradamus throughout his life and this is highlighted as the Countess takes him to a promontory to reveal the astronomic significance of Les Baux,

6. The Mysteries of Les Baux: The nearby Les Baux with its bizarre history would have played a prominent part in Nostradamus' childhood. The aim of this chapter is to amplify the unique nature of the town. Michel starts on an early morning walk but is diverted by the

scene of an overnight death from the clifftops. He finds and recovers an object which he later resolves to return for others to rediscover. On his return the Countess leads Michel to the fortress and Bernardin takes him to its depths.

7. Au Hasard Balthazar: The motto of the Lords of Baux and their way of thinking was most unusual and its themes aren't unrelated to the mysticism that are associated with Nostradamus' life. A possible context for this is established in this chapter. The Countess and Bernardin show him secret chambers holding the records of their family. Michel is sworn to secrecy and told he is central to their hopes. They present the concepts of Balthazar and chance which are found in the Baux motto 'Au hazard Balthazar.'" The Countess and Bernardin declare he is their new Balthazar, the magi to attend the birth of the new Christ. They become his patrons

8. Retribution in St Remy: For several years and with no clear reason Nostradamus was a wanderer. In this chapter a motivation is created. It is three years on in St Remy and Michel is in conflict with Rachelle a family servant. Infatuation and inadequacies are central themes. In seeking relief from heat, late at night he discovers Ra has been kidnapped. Michel's efforts and Ra's rescue enable further development of his state of mind. There is a conflict between his father and himself as an aftermath. All the failings of his years with the Countess and Bernardin as well as the burden of his birth signs are used by the father to rationalize and insist on Michel's departure from St Remy. Michel insists on seeing the Countess before accepting this decision.

9. Travails of Travel: Travel took up many of Nostradamus years. This chapter highlights the nature of travel in the 16th C. The journey from St Remy to Marseille is used to introduce Jacques, another person in Bernardin's service. It also highlights the local legends of Saint Martha in respect to serpents, the Goddess myths and Christ's family. The group with whom Michel travels is used to flesh out travelers traits and concerns in the 16th C. One member gets bitten by a snake. The serpent theme is used throughout the story. In this instance it is used to illustrate how simple events can serve to give his generation belief in his ability to see the future.

10. Tales of fate: This chapter aims to bring out the apocalyptic views that form a central theme in Nostradamus work. The group of travelers stops overnight at an inn. They discuss life and fears over a meal with the illness of the snake-bite victim in their minds. The stars conjunctions of 1524 and the views of the 16th C advocates of apocalypse become the main topics. Jacques's attempt to get back goods stolen earlier from a traveler causes Michel to tell a story of a made-up vision involving the snake they had encountered and killed.

11. The Isle of If: Strange new worlds and change defined the limits of Nostradamus' travels. This chapter highlights some of his bounds. At Marseille, Jacques and Michel row out to the mysterious Isle of If. Michel's resentment against ill-use develops from his being kept in the dark about their mission. Bernardin is on the isle. Threats to Bernardin and France are developed in his telling of why he comes to Marseille in secret. The strange but true story of the rhinoceros that lived on the island in 1516 is woven into the tale in order to illustrate the alien world that starts for Michel at Marseille.

12. Andrea Doria in Marseille: In 1524 the naval general Andrea Doria switched sides to join France. This historic event is used to highlight ever prevalent war as another strong aspect in Nostradamus' prophecies.. The Garden of the King, an actual possession of Bernardin, is also used to establish some of the wonders of 16th C France. The new world is

presented as a threatening place with unprecedented opportunities. At the conclusion of this chapter Michel is exposed to cannabis for the first time and experiences his snake vision in a different form.

13. Origins and destinations: Nostradamus became a physician in his later years. This chapter develops the symbolic indicators people of his time would have seen as significant in his choice. Michel from his sick-bed overhears stories of his birth from the Countess's perspective. The crucial elements are her emphasis on Ophiuchus as a relevant symbol of Michel's life and her belief in his central role in the birth of the 2nd coming. She places a question-mark over Michel's birth which disturbs him. Upon Michel's recovery the Countess and Bernardin detail their fears and plans which focus on the planetary conjunction year of 1524 as a year of change and opportunity. Bernardin outlines the quest he wants Jacques and Michel to pursue. Jacques is to build a leadership base while Michel is to search for the truth of the 2nd coming and apocalypse. Bernardin once more sets his seal on Michel and undertakes to settle Michel's promise to his father thus delaying his training as a doctor.

14. The Stranger's Plight: The difficulties Nostradamus would have faced as a constant stranger are addressed in this chapter. Michel as an apprentice apothecary attends a young woman dying from an aborted childbirth. The dying woman gives him a ring to return to its unspecified owner and raises the mystery of Guillaume's Dream. The event is used to show the heretical nature of Languedoc and the difficulty a stranger has in entering into the spirit of a different culture. Michel's relationship with his uncle's daughter, Myriam is also developed. Myriam's ill chosen marriage allows the story to focus on the unusual nature of women's rights and powers in 16th C Languedoc. Michel is kidnapped on his return journey. He is at first threatened but this turns to support when he establishes old links to his kidnapper's sect.

15. The Apothecary: Michel is known to have trained as an apothecary and part of this was in Alet les Bains where his family roots lay. An impending visit from the richest merchant in Toulouse, Jean de Bernuy (Bernuy), is used to develop ideas of Hermeticism, Alchemy and Qabalah that were prominent at the time. Michel's interest in these aspects is highlighted by contrasting them with the herbalist skills of the strong-willed Myriam. Michel's relationship to Myriam is also developed with their intellectual ties creating a growing sensual desire.

16. The Sisterhood: This chapter amplifies the role of secret societies in the 16th C. Michel wracked with guilt meets with Myriam at her house late at night. She has offered to assist him unveil the mysteries that confront him. Myriam establishes she holds a place high in a secret society of women who preserve the history of Languedoc through accumulating its records. Myriam informs Michel that the dying woman he attended was also a member of the same sect and had sent her a copy of 'Romance of the Rose' which was also called 'Guillaume's Dream'. This is amongst many documents she possesses that take Michel's attention away from sensual desire. These incidents allow for the further exploration of the nature of a historically heretical society riddled with secrets.

17. The Pastel merchant: Hermetic symbols and themes of order out of chaos are the rationale for this part of the tale. The impending arrival of the pastel merchant Bernuy creates dissension in Michel's uncle's household. This allows for the history of Bernuy to be told from his Spanish Jewish roots through the Expulsion period and the development of his highly prosperous business in Toulouse. In telling this tale the economics and cultural nature of the region and its ex -Jew population are developed. Bernuy pays particular attention to the hermetic symbols (these can still be seen) engraved into the corbels of the Nostredame house.

Bernuy's interest is in the dissension expected in 1524. More symbols are introduced by Bernuy. His son hands Michel two jars with symbols of rose, cross, snake and blood on them. Later Michel is sent to uncover the reason for Myriam's mysterious absence. Michel gains access to her house, where the pair are thrown together by her misfortune. They then contrive a plan to free her.

18. Conceptions of the Goddess: Michel's internal conflict and self doubt is analyzed as he is en-route to nearby Rennes les Bains. Myriam has revealed she's pregnant and Michel is wrangling with this and the burden of being father to the Christ. On his journey he resolves the mystery behind the emblems on the house in Alet and interprets them as signs he is destined to father the Christ's second coming. His journey enables disclosure of the link between the physical and mythical aspects of the region as well as its heretical history. The legend of Jesus' family is explored as Michel attempts to reject his burden. He is met by masked people who lead him to the ceremony of the Goddess that has been prepared for him. Offended by Myriam's pregnancy Michel is resolved to resist the creation of a Christ child but finds his sexual defenses defeated by the unexpected appearance of Marie. The ritual embodies the secret to 'Guillame's Dream' and the resolution of the snake, rose, blood and cross emblems.

19. Toulouse: As Nostradamus moved around southern France he would have been influenced by many groups. This chapter attempts to show some of the issues he would have encountered. Several months have passed and Michel attends a meeting in Toulouse arranged by Bernuy. The city's position as a regional hub is explored and Jacques side of Bernardin's quest is developed. The Apocalypse theme is developed further and the royal politics of the era brought into focus for Southern France. Henri Navarre's escapades against Spain are told in the context of a guest who befriends Michel. The progressive nature of the city in the 1520s is developed through this guest Robert.

20. Future Plans: This chapter amplifies the prominence of Toulouse as it would have appeared to Nostradamus. Michel meets with Robert on the banks of the Garonne. Robert reveals his plans for rebuilding after the flood devastation of 1522-1523. He tells Michel of a pact between Henri, Bernuy and Bernardin. They plot to take control of S France and to use Michel's story as a basis for their claim. He alerts Michel to their possible intent to have him killed. Robert takes Michel into the Abbey La Daurade and uses the Black Virgin and surrounding snake emblems to explain the source of the jars Michel received. He alerts Michel to the fact Marie is pregnant and no longer able to be located.

21. Search for the Magdalene: Nostradamus' visions are given prominence through devices in this chapter. Michel and Jacques are called to where Marie's husband, Phillipe, has been crucified. The tale brings the turmoil of the times to the fore and begins the transition of Michel into a believer in his own destiny. Michel hides in a cave where he is forced to stay by the presence of guards in the valley below. He eats toadstools before entering and in a drug-induced vision realizes the maturation of his childhood dreams. Astaroth, Amon's master, emerges in a re-enactment of the snake dreams of his past and offers information in return for Michel's homage. Next morning Robert arrives and takes his men away. Although believing Michel to be dead he calls out warning Michel that Jacques has betrayed the pact to the king who has ended their scheme.

22. Chateau les Rennes: . The chapter's aim is to expose the reader to Michel's close proximity to the legend-rich Rennes towns. Michel seeking answers in Rennes recalls memories of the town's graveyard from a previous visit where his host used the term "This is

a terrible place...” to describe her husband’s grave. (Centuries later this phrase will gain a particular fame in Rennes). He is placed in chambers beneath this grave to escape detection. The story uses the days of his incarceration to pre-construct possibilities for the later mysteries of the town. Eventually he is released into the subterranean network thought/known to underlie Chateau les Rennes. His journey takes him deep into the earth to the banks of a subterranean river that has its source under Mt Bugarach. All these geologic features are part of the legends of the area and allow the further development of the sacred import of the land.

23. Bugarach: This is the apocalyptic scene made inevitable by Nostradamus’ life. The context of this chapter is determined by the stories major themes of a 2nd coming and Apocalypse. It is of necessity a dramatic fantasy but the narrative is meant to fulfill the grandiose elements of these 16th C expectations while diminishing their scale to human proportions. It presents the drama of an enclosed universe about to end due to the physical influence of the planetary conjunctions. In this miniature universe Michel is compelled to be the physician in attendance of his illegitimate children’s births. During the deliveries he comes to various realizations about his relations with the two women.

24. The Apocalyptic Visions: The aim of this chapter is to bring out the dilemmas that faced someone who believed they could see the future. The final disaster is used to bring out aspects of his personality and people’s conceptions of his role. The tale ends with his escape from the maelstrom while in a drug-induced state that leads him to reinforce his belief in his own visions.

About the Author.

Allan Webber was born in 1944 in Haslemere, Surrey UK. His family migrated to Western Australia in 1952 and in 1959 they moved to South Australia which has been Allan's base ever since. He attended 22 different schools as a consequence of his father's itinerant nature. In 1960 he worked for a bank at his father's demand, but in 1961 returned to school and then completed a science degree in physics and mathematics at Adelaide University. From 1967 to 1978 he served as a teacher, senior master and student counselor at various governmental secondary schools.

In 1982, Allan set up his own business, servicing the research needs of share-brokers. For several years he published a widely read newsletter and gave lectures on investment in the resources sector. He set up a publicly listed resource investment company in 1985 and was its chief executive officer until 1990.

In 1990 Allan, set up a new business in computing, which allowed him greater time to research one of his life interests, the hidden code in Nostradamus. Since that time he has published material on his website on the internet. His publications include research into anagram analysis, a novel, and various papers to test the nature of prediction. Several of these papers contain predictions that have come to pass. One of these includes quite specific predictions about the development of a mining company, which have, so far, proven correct.

Ways in which the author can help in publicity.

- My website contains material that will rouse the interest and passions of media, public and critics (currently it needs tidying up and a conscious effort to make it appeal).
- Public speaking has always been one of my strengths.
- I can readily go on promotion activities – (I have no commitments that restrict my time, no impediments to prevent travel)
- Much of my work will provoke controversy but I am well able to debate and support my arguments.
- I have lots of material that has not been placed on the website that will help draw public attention.