

The Assassin's Dagger

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Assassins Dagger. The Dagger of Hassan ibn-al-Sabbah. A *_fidayeen_* dagger. Talia pressed her stylus against the screen of her Palm Pilot and squinted at the tiny type. This was no way to do research.

She leaned her head back against the train's plush seat and rubbed the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger. The man across from her was staring at the French countryside as if he had never seen fields filled with cows and centuries-old barns before. Next to him, a petite woman read a book about the Resistance. And on Talia's left, a man concentrated on *_Le Monde_* as if he were going to be tested on its contents.

No one watched her, but she kept her PDA turned toward the window anyway. After the mess in Penzance, where she'd had to close the Cornish Magick Shoppe pending further inquiry, she didn't want any more trouble.

Besides, the wounds on her arm were finally beginning to heal.

She sighed and wished she could call Marc-Alain Chartier from the train. But the questions she had to ask weren't questions mundanes should hear. Chartier had awakened her that morning, and she hadn't thought to ask him then.

"We have trouble," he said after identifying himself as the manager of *_Le Petit Chateau_*. "Someone has returned a dagger."

"You're not supposed to be selling black arts equipment," she'd mumbled into the phone, without lifting her head from the satin-covered pillow the Hotel Intercontinental had provided. The lights were out and she was sprawled sideways on the king-sized bed, enjoying her first eight-hour sleep in nearly three weeks.

"I didn't," he said.

"Then they couldn't've very well returned it, could they?"

She'd been about to hang up, already making a mental note to reem out someone in Corporate Publications for listing both her name and cell phone number under trouble-shooting, when Chartier said, "We've had to close the shop. I'm not sure, but I think we could have an Assassins Dagger."

That woke her up and, ultimately, had gotten her on the next train from Paris. She wheedled part of the story out of him: He'd come in that morning, saw the dagger on his counter with a small hand-written receipt attached. The receipt had the seal the store had used throughout most of its nine-hundred year history, long before Abracadabra Inc folded *_Le Petit Chateau_* into its corporate mantel.

A note left near the door explained that the dagger's purchaser wanted a refund in full -- 545 French francs -- without interest or penalty. The money was to be left in an envelope just inside the door two nights later, and "the entire incident would be forgotten."

Chartier didn't know what incident and he didn't have access to old French francs. He also knew enough about Assassins Daggers to stay away from the one on his counter -- there was no way to tell, without an expert opinion -- whether or not the thing was still lethal.

Talia wasn't sure how she counted as an expert opinion. She knew about Assassins Daggers, of course, and she'd studied them in the Magicks of Antiquities section of the British Museum. But she'd never

disabled one. To her knowledge, no one alive had.

And then there was the problem of the dagger's identification.

She studied the tiny images on her Palm again, wishing for a larger screen. Sometime in the past, she'd downloaded twenty-five books on all aspects of her career as a corporate trouble-shooter for Abracadabra, and fortunately one of those books had been on lethal objects of enchanted world.

But the text was in 17th Century Church Latin, a language whose subtleties had never been one of her strong suits, and she'd managed only to confuse herself more than help herself.

She knew that there were three types of daggers often labeled an Assassins Dagger, and they all had different powers and purposes.

Legend said that the Assassins Dagger had its origins in the Middle East in the 12th century. Named for a Muslim religious sect that specialized in assassination, the daggers could kill on their own.

Unlike the sect, however, the daggers often killed indiscriminately. Their targets were magically assigned -- one specific victim or two, or an entire host of victims who happened to be in the dagger's vicinity. Once the dagger fulfilled its mission, however, it was dormant until some other mage programmed in a new set of victims.

If, indeed, what Chartier had found was an Assassins Dagger, he was right in calling corporate. No telling how many people could have been hurt if he hadn't closed and locked the door to his shop.

He had done the right thing, and now it was up to Talia to do the same. She had to figure out if she was facing an Assassins Dagger, a Dagger of Hassan ibn-al-Sabbah, or a fidayeen dagger. Or a hoax, designed to cut into the profits of the corporation's best performing provincial store.

Talia shut off her PDA and gave her eyes a rest. She couldn't do much more until she got to Le Petit Chateau. Then she'd begin the process that made her the very best magical business troubleshooter in the entire world.

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Le Petit Chateau was about five miles from the train station, far enough that Talia decided to rent a car and check into her hotel room before finding the store. The city, small by American standards, was a major commercial port. Bombed in World War II, most of the architecture was wretched late 20th century steel and glass, but a small segment of the medieval metropolis survived.

A castle -- le grand chateau, Talia supposed -- flanked the large river that brought most of the industry into this part of France. The castle had been built in the 13th century, and three of its four towers were intact. Newer buildings stood off the courtyard -- buildings built in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries respectively -- and dwarfed the ancient walls. But the castle still had an air of magnificence that dominated the entire area.

Talia's hotel room overlooked the castle, the river, and a huge cathedral which had been built in the 4th century, and added onto by each succeeding generation. She loved Europe -- the sense of history here that had not existed in her Michigan hometown. She had been about to quit Abracadabra Inc when they transferred her to Europe, and her discontent fled.

It was almost as if the continent itself enchanted her, romanced her, fed all the lonely places she hardly

admitted existed -- especially to herself. She didn't dare think about it, or she would quit. Her job left her with no time for anything more than casual friendships and short stops between crises -- not to mention the occasional emergency zap to the Corporate Offices in Salem, Massachusetts.

There were a few hours of daylight left, barely enough for her to get started. For a moment, she toyed with crawling into the comfortable double-bed that dominated the high-ceilinged room, but knew she didn't dare. She would never forgive herself if something happened to the dagger that night.

She needed to go down and at least inspect the scene.

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The walk was an easy one, but took longer than she expected. Le Petit Chateau was in the medieval metropolis which hadn't looked large on the map. But she got lost on the windy cobblestone streets, many of which didn't seem to have names at all. Eventually, though, she found the store, recognizable from the photographs she'd seen in the corporate offices, only a block from the castle itself, visible from the drawbridge, although she hadn't seen it the first time she passed.

The high arched windows stole their shape from the cathedral's famous stained glass. The rounded front door mimicked the castle's main entrance. The displays were tasteful and touristy at the same time. Mixed among the mass-market tapestries and books on the castle's history were glass wands and delicate potion jars.

The average tourist would see only an attractive shop with a few odd items, but the magic-born would know this was a place that they could call home.

Police barricades blocked the entrances, though, and made it impossible to press up against the window's glass. Talia couldn't see inside, so she was able to catch a glimpse of the dagger as she had hoped.

She wandered around the building, finally finding the main entrance -- another arched door -- this one recessed against the stone walls, intricate carvings embellishing the arch like they did in so many of France's cathedrals. Only these carvings didn't depict religious scenes. Most of them showed magical instruction -- an elder mage teaching a complicated spell to his apprentice -- although sometimes the carvings showed such a spell going wrong.

"You can't go in," a male voice said behind her.

She turned. A slender man, his hair a light brown, sat on the stone wall that protected the road from the moat. His hands rested at his side and on the thumb of his left hand was a signet ring with the same symbol on it that was on sign above Le Petit Chateau.

"Marc-Alain Chartier?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "If you have come to ask me for advice, you can see that I am dispensing none this day."

French was usually a formal language, but somehow, he made it seem even more so.

"Actually," she said with a smile, "you asked me for advice."

His mouth thinned, and she thought she saw annoyance in his expression. "Talia Miller of Abracadabra Inc?"

She nodded.

"I thought you had stand me up."

Sometimes people expected her to magically transport everywhere. If she did that, she would deplete her magical reserves -- reserves she often needed for the challenges that awaited her at these provincial shops.

"I got here as quickly as I could," she said. "The train from Paris takes two hours all by itself."

He slipped off the wall and walked toward her. He wasn't much taller than she was, although his slenderness lent him extra height. He wore the uniform of the intellectual Frenchman -- black pants, a light shirt, and a black leather jacket.

"Have you experience with an Assassins Dagger?" he asked.

"Some." She hadn't moved from her place beside the barricade. "Have you?"

"Only what I've read."

"What have you read?"

"That it's misnamed. It should be called the Dagger of Massacre."

She nodded. "It can be used that way."

"The Fidayeen would not approve of a dagger used in such destruction." He spoke as if he were personally familiar with the sect that had brought the concept of assassination to the world. "They believed in killing a man face to face."

"With a dagger," she said.

"With a dagger." He nodded once in acknowledgement.

"There is a fidayeen dagger," she said. "It looks much like an Assassins Dagger. And so does the Dagger of Hassan ibn-al-Sabbah. Are you sure you don't have one of them?"

"I haven't heard of these daggers," he said. "What do they do?"

He'd answered her question, and she wasn't sure she wanted to answer his. She crossed her arms and leaned on the wooden barricade. It felt flimsier than the ones she'd leaned on in the U.S., but she didn't move.

"How long did this shop sell dark arts?" she asked.

His eyes narrowed. "What makes you think -- ?"

"You said it was a return," she said. "Only those who practice the dark arts would have an Assassins Dagger. I'm going to help you, but only if you're honest with me."

He crossed his arms, his posture mimicking hers. "What makes you think," he said, pointedly pausing so that she could interrupt him again, "that I know the history of the store?"

"I've read all of your files, Monsieur Chartier. You owned this store until we bought it out. You could have quit then, but you chose to stay on, to manage, so that your customers would have continuity."

He smiled then. It accented his sharp features, made him seem somehow younger, and even more intelligent. "You didn't read closely. I worry about that if you're going to neutralize our dagger."

"The store has been here for nine hundred years. It is said that the store once had so much power, it rivaled the cathedral. Only an influx of clerics prevented this town from being overrun by witches."

"Witches." He sneered as he used the term. "Do you believe in such things?"

"I believe there is evil, yes," she said. "And I believe it takes different forms. Which is why I asked you, and I'll ask again, when did Le Petit Chateau stop trading in the dark arts?"

She was beginning to worry that he hadn't answered that question because the store still trafficked in dark matter.

His smile faded just a bit. "There are many kinds of evil. Not all of them are magic."

He said that as if he expected her to intuit more from the statement than he had actually said.

"So you are still practicing the dark arts then?" she asked.

"My name is Marc-Alain Chartier," he said. "My father was Marc-Albert. You misread your files, Mademoiselle. The person who sold to Abracadabra Inc was Marc-Albert, not Marc-Alain. My father left with the profits. My mother and I coped as best we could, but I was forced to work here so that we could pay our bills."

"Forced?" she asked. "An odd word for economic necessity."

He shrugged.

"I'm sure Abracadabra Inc can find someone else to manage the store if it such a burden for you." She shivered. The sun was setting, and the air was growing chill.

"I merely told you this because you assumed I knew the history of the shop. I do not. My father would have, and he is long gone."

"So you can't tell me when you stopped selling materials for the dark arts," she said.

He shrugged again, a single shoulder, such a small and eloquent gesture. "The receipt is one hundred and fifty years old. So sometime between then and now I would think."

"You got close enough to see the receipt?"

"I have a small magic," he said.

"And what spell would that be?" she snapped. "I would think any spell done in the vicinity of the Dagger might risk setting it off."

"It is a scientific spell," he said, reaching into the pocket of his leather coat. He pulled out a small pair of opera glasses. "Amazing the things you can do with a few pieces of glass and some metal."

"Amazing," she muttered. "Let me borrow them."

She extended her hand. After a moment, he gave them to her. The metal was warm from his fingers.

Talia climbed over the wooden barricade and went to the door of the shop. The interior lights had come

on -- or maybe they had been on all day -- illuminating the narrow shelves. She didn't need the opera glasses to see the magic case, set directly in the center of the store. It had tiny rare items inside -- from a bone thimble (guaranteed to protect a person's good fortune) to a Madagascar reflecting stone (designed to counter evil spells).

On the other shelves, mixed in with the candies from Brittany and the chocolate from a nearby shop were more potion bottles, all empty, their stoppers beside them. If there were potion bottles, then there were herbs somewhere, perhaps up the stone steps that disappeared into darkness at the back of the store.

She peered at that darkness, knowing she would have to investigate it before she left. Most herbs were harmless, but few white spells were cast with them these days. Herbs and potion had become the province of the dark arts, perhaps because few dabblers had the patience to learn something as subtle as spell-mixing.

Talia could see Chartier in reflected in the window. He hadn't moved from his place near the barricade. He watched her, his eyes dark with intensity.

She turned her attention away from him, back on the store itself. The counter, covered with glass displays containing items she couldn't make out, stood against the right wall. The cash register -- an old-fashioned electronic model, the kind that had come a few years before computers -- was not corporate regulation. She remembered seeing the proper computer reports for Le Petit Chateau, and wondered how they were generated.

The center of the counter, where the customers placed their wares, was closer to the other windows than the door she was looking through. Still, she could see a dagger resting on a blotter, and a receipt hanging off the ornate gold hilt.

The receipt had been tied on with a black ribbon. It had been written on parchment and Chartier was right, there was an obvious seal still attached.

The note remained on the floor near her feet, but inside the door. She thought it curious that Chartier hadn't brought that outside with him.

"When you found the dagger, you called the police?" she asked without turning. Her fingers played with the opera glasses. So far she couldn't see enough of the dagger to know whether it was anything out of the ordinary at all.

"I called a man I know," Chartier said.

"A policeman."

Chartier didn't answer her.

"Who knows what type of store this is."

"Everyone in town knows what kind of store it is."

"Really?" This time she did turn. "They all know that you sell real magical items here?"

His lips were pressed together, his eyes even darker. He seemed to resent her presence even though he'd been the one who called her here.

"Of course not," he said after a moment.

"But the policeman does."

"He's bought from me," Chartier said.

She nodded. That was the admission she wanted. So Chartier claimed not to be much of a mage, but he had a policeman in his pocket -- enough in his pocket that he could use his authority to close the sidewalks around the store if need be.

Curious. Most magic shops tried to keep their main purpose hidden from the authorities. This one did not.

She brought the opera glasses up and focused on the receipt. Threads ran through the paper, ragged edges, and proper absorption of ink showed that it was, indeed, parchment. But it didn't look like it had aged. Even the ink seemed fresh -- still black, not brown as ink more than a hundred years old often turned. The seal, done in wax, looked like it was still soft to the touch.

Perhaps the receipt had been protected against the elements, or perhaps the receipt itself had been spelled, either when it was first written or when it was brought to the store. Either way, she didn't like it.

She turned her attention to the dagger. She still couldn't see the blade, but she could make out details on the hilt.

It seemed ornate for a Middle Eastern dagger. The metal -- she still wasn't willing to admit it was gold -- had a handle that curled downward, making it easy to grip. The handle itself seemed to have writing on it, or perhaps some sort of design -- the glasses weren't powerful enough for her to make out the etching.

Perhaps the dagger was nothing at all, just a false alarm sent by an ignorant shopkeeper.

She would have to check her books, though. She'd been led to believe that the alchemy involved in forging an Assassins Dagger had been lost. If it hadn't, then any kind of dagger could be used for anonymous treachery.

She scanned the items on the rest of the store's shelves -- at least the ones she could see up close. Even with the opera glasses, she couldn't penetrate the darkness in the back. She also noted that none of the display windows opened onto that space either.

That was a violation of Abracadabra policy. No hidden rooms, no secret passages, no dark and dingy spaces. Magical shops could not hide their purpose; that led to mundane fears and official closings, sometimes even public recriminations or worse, violence arising out of fear.

Abracadabra Inc's purpose around the globe was to supply magical supplies to magical users while minimizing the fears of the non-magical. It seemed like a simple proposition, but so many of her trouble-shooting assignments came because someone violated that basic principle.

"See anything?" Chartier asked.

Too many things, but she didn't tell him that.

"I can't see it clearly from here."

"That's the best view you'll get from outside," he said.

She nodded. She wasn't ready to go in yet.

"Tell me," she said as she turned toward Chartier, "what would you have done if this return hadn't been

for a lethal item?"

He froze. Just for a second, but she noticed it and wondered about it. Then he shrugged. "We have never had a return."

"Not in all the years of your business?"

"No," he said.

"Not even in the beginning?"

"No," he said.

She nodded, wondering if he knew that he had contradicted himself. He claimed to know nothing about the history of the store, and yet he said there had never been a return.

"You know that Abracadabra Inc. does not allow returns on magical items," she said.

"I know."

"And we certainly wouldn't allow one on something that had been in someone else's possession for 150 years."

"It is not as if I had a choice," he said.

"But you do have a choice. The customer requested a refund, right?"

Chartier nodded once, as if the idea annoyed him.

"Are you going to give it to him?"

"Wouldn't you give a refund to a person who bought an Assassins Dagger?"

"Out of fear?" she asked.

He nodded again.

"I never give in to intimidation," she said, turning back to the store and putting the opera glasses to her eyes again. This time she read the receipt.

It was written in a calligraphed hand, lots of flourishes, but the words were clear: One Assassin Dagger with instructions and a price, written in francs. The date on top of the receipt was 24 Novembre 1851 -- during the reign of Napoleon the Third. She didn't know the history of French money, whether Francs were even in use then or what they would have been worth. She had no way of knowing if the receipt was a hoax or not.

Not yet, anyway. But she would find out. She always did.

"The note said the person would come for his refund tomorrow?" she asked.

"Tomorrow night," Chartier said. "After we close."

Closing was something else the store wasn't supposed to do. Abracadabra's stores were open 24/7, even in remote villages. It was a policy that worked, since so many of the magical refused to buy their supplies in the daylight.

"I think the best thing to do would be wait until tomorrow night, and speak to the person who wants the refund," she said.

"We can't do that." He sounded alarmed.

She brought the glasses down, crossed the barricade, and handed them to him. "Why not? The corporation will cover your expenses. It would be the best way to handle the entire mess."

"Maybe for you," he said. "I have regulars. Customers I've cultivated for years who rely upon me. I don't want them to get into the habit of going somewhere else."

"There's somewhere else to go?" she asked.

"Look," he said. "This is an informal place. Someone might get in, and the dagger -- ."

"You mean like they did last night."

His gaze met hers. Then he nodded, but the nod seemed uncertain.

"Do you have any idea how this person got into your store?"

"It's a simple spell, really, one that opens locks -- ."

"And it's even simpler to guard against."

Color touched his cheeks. "We haven't had to before."

"It's corporate policy."

His lips thinned. "As you can see, the corporations policies don't always work here."

"They would have if you'd implemented them. Then I could have stayed in Paris." Her words were harsher than she had expected. She sighed. "I'm tired. I'm going back to my hotel, freshen up, and do a bit of research."

"You're not going to finish this tonight?" he asked, sounding worried.

"Anyone who goes into a strange magic shop at night is a fool," she said.

"It's not strange," he said, "at least to me. I'll go in with you."

She gave him a small smile. "You're the one who received the dagger, Monsieur."

"So?"

"How many enemies do you have?"

He looked startled. "None, I think."

"Do you feel confident enough about that to step into the shop with the Assassins Dagger on the counter, a dagger that may or may not kill you?"

He squared his shoulders. "It didn't the first time."

She nodded. "So that makes you safe. I thought you told me you didn't go all the way into the store."

"I read the note. I saw the dagger. I left."

"Dropping the note inside," she said. "In your haste."

His lips thinned. It was clear that he didn't like her. He wasn't making much of an effort to hide his feelings. For some reason that bothered her. She wanted him to pretend at politeness, to keep up a sort of fiction that she was more than a solution to a problem he couldn't handle himself.

"Maybe you're not clear on how these daggers work exactly," she said. "They're dipped in the potential victim's blood. When the victim comes close enough for the dagger to sense him, the dagger will attack -- and continue to attack -- until he's dead."

"I know that."

"Then perhaps you didn't realize that you may not have gotten close enough to the dagger for it to sniff you out."

"Or perhaps the dagger has been used up, its power gone until someone dips it into the blood of a new victim."

"Perhaps," she said. "Are you willing to risk that? Because I'm not."

He looked inside the store, as if he could find his answer in there.

"You seemed worried enough when you called me this morning," she said.

"Nothing has happened all day." He continued to stare through the windows at the illuminated interior.

The store did look homey and warm, the kind of place she might like to own some day. She'd had opportunity, but she'd never taken it. She'd always been worried that life as a small town shopkeeper might be too dull for her.

"Nothing has happened because the dagger has been sealed inside. If it is truly an Assassins Dagger, we can place it in a box and that will neutralize its danger."

"And if it is not?"

She shuddered. She couldn't help herself. "If it is the Dagger of Hassan ibn-al-Sabbah, it will quest until it finds its target."

"Then why hasn't it burst out of the store?"

"The Dagger of Hassan ibn-al-Sabbah is more subtle than that. It's almost as if it has a mind of its own. It waits until its victim is alone and relaxed. Then it strikes."

"I've never heard of such a thing," he said.

"These are powerful ancient magicks," she said, "their creation lost to time. And, thank heavens, they are rare. But I would not spend the evening alone if I were you, Monsieur Chartier."

"I waited for you alone on the street this afternoon."

"In a public place, in the daylight," she said. "Some say the Dagger of Hassan ibn-al-Sabbah was designed by Hassan ibn-al-Sabbah himself, the man who founded the *_fidayeen_* in 1090. He had strict codes about assassination: the assassin must be willing to lose his life in service of his cause -- "

"Like the suicide bombers," Chartier said.

"No," Talia said. "Not at all. An assassin never killed himself. Hassan ibn-al-Sabbah believed it against Islamic law. But the assassin could expect to be captured and to die at the hands of his captors. Some say that Hassan ibn-al-Sabbah did not like losing so many good men, so he invented the Dagger."

"Which would have been against Islamic law as well," Chartier said. "Magic."

She nodded. "Which is why we consider these stories legends, not truth. But we must always assume some truth in legends. I prefer to believe that a rogue follower of Hassan ibn-al-Sabbah invented the Dagger and perhaps even the fidayeen dagger -- "

"What's the difference?"

"I'm not sure of all the differences," she said. "I will find that out before I go in. But I know that the Dagger of Hassan ibn-al-Sabbah is the most determined of all of them, and perhaps the most powerful. It and the fidayeen dagger share one other trait in common -- they only target one individual. It is the Assassins Dagger that can be the most lethal, modified to kill anyone in its path -- as many as fill a room. Fortunately, it is the easiest to capture."

"I do not see why you don't try tonight," he said.

She was getting angry. She didn't like to be pushed, particularly by a small town mage who couldn't even follow the rules of shop ownership.

"I already told you," she said. "Besides, I am not careless enough to loose this thing on France."

"But it could be harmless."

"It could be," she said.

"But you don't think so."

"As I said, make certain you have company this evening." She nodded her head toward him. "I will meet you here at nine tomorrow morning. If you know any talented mages, bring them with you. And bring me a list of families who have shopped at Le Petit Chateau for more than a generation."

"I do not have -- "

"Good evening, Monsieur Chartier." She walked away from him while he continued to protest. She had a lot of work to do, and she had let him badger her into giving herself only fifteen hours in which to do it.

Although it wasn't entirely fair to blame him. She did want to be done as quickly as possible. Even if she waited for the note-writer to return, she would have to confront the dagger at some point. She would do the research, and see where it brought her.

Sometimes these magicks were not as simple as they seemed.

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Talia might have gotten her job because of her magical talent, but more and more her tools were technological. She spent the next few hours searching the internet and speaking to other experts on her cell phone.

She paced her stone hotel room, leaving the floor-to-ceiling windows open so that she had a view of the castle and the cathedral -- and, by extension, the shop. If something went wrong, she might see it.

It took her only a few taps of her laptop's keyboard to learn that France did indeed use the franc as currency in 1851. The franc first appeared in the Hundred Years War, but didn't become the standard currency of France until 1795. Somehow it remained through all the upheavals of the 19th century, even though the coins differed.

She wondered if the note-writer wanted to be paid in francs of the period, which would have been worth considerably more than modern francs. And then she realized the oddity. Francs were nearly worthless currency. They still existed, and would for perhaps another year or so, but they were being replaced by the Euro. Just a few months before, France switched over to the Euro and while people could continue to pay for items with francs, they would get their change in euros, something Talia found so confusing that for the first two months of the new system, she only used her credit card.

She had a hunch either the receipt or the note were placed in the store as a diversion. Her hunches were usually right. They'd saved her from the attack of a dark mage in Vienna -- somehow she had known he thought her the threat to his store, not Abracadabra's buy-out -- and they helped her locate the nest of dragons' eggs beneath the shop in Lucerne.

This time, her hunch told her that the dagger wasn't an actual return. It was placed in the store as some sort of threat.

But she wasn't sure what kind of threat it was. Was it a warning or was the dagger armed and lethal? Was it aimed at someone in particular? And was it really an Assassins Dagger, or someone's idea of a hoax?

After seeing the hilt, she was leaning toward hoax. When she returned to the room, she'd looked at photographs of the only known Assassins Dagger, and it did not have an ornate hilt. Neither did the drawings of the Dagger of Hassan ibn-al-Sabbah or the fidayeen dagger. They were plain tools that looked even more innocuous because of their simplicity.

But she kept in mind that legend claimed fifty Assassins Daggers had been created. She had no reason to believe they all looked the same. After all, they'd been charmed somehow -- whether in the forging or afterwards. They might have been made to look different purposefully, perhaps because the daggers were going to different parts of the world.

The hotel did not have room service, so she had to interrupt her research to get some dinner. She went to a nearby bakery for freshly baked bread and some madelines for dessert. Then she went next door to the grocery store, and bought two different kinds of cheeses, and some salami. She returned to her hotel with her purchases, made herself a simple feast of salami and cheese sandwiches, washed down with bottled water, and continued her work.

She used her series of passwords to log into the corporate records. Abracadabra Inc kept files and histories of all of its stores. Le Petit Chateau's records contained sales figures for the past twenty years, broken down by month, but little else. There was a notation that the store had been in the same location for nine hundred years and that its worldwide fame would help Abracadabra Inc's legitimacy. But there was no profile of Marc-Alain Chartier, nor much mention of his father. It was as if whoever had written this expected the reader to already know the history of Le Petit Chateau.

Maybe if she were a European mage, she would. She'd seen records like this in America, mostly for the Massachusetts stores. Many of them had stood on the same ground since the early 17th century and most mages knew their histories as well.

But the history of *_Le Petit Chateau_* bothered her, mostly because of the hints she'd been getting about the dark arts. One of the things she liked about Abracadabra Inc was the way it avoided any contact with the dark arts. She wouldn't have been involved with them if the dark arts were even part of the focus. She abhorred black magic and part of her job as troubleshooter for Abracadabra Inc was to make certain that the dark arts had no influence in the business whatsoever.

She didn't like the fact that she couldn't find simple answers to the questions she had. And the answer she sought the most proved the most illusive. She found out how to trap an Assassins Dagger, but not how to disarm one.

None of her books had that information. Neither did the websites she visited. The way to stop an Assassins Dagger (besides boxing it and hoping it would never get out of that box) was lost, just like the way to make it was.

She put in several calls to experts on the dark arts within Abracadabra Inc. She also left a message with Cedric, the curator of Magical Antiquities at the British Museum. No one called her back. Of course, she was trying to reach them all after hours. They'd probably call her the following day, when she was dealing with that dagger.

At one a.m., she had gone through all the materials she brought and all the internet sites she could think of. She felt no closer to solving this dilemma than she had when she started. In fact, she felt like she had raised even more questions.

She set her travel alarm, then lay back on her bed, her hands tucked beneath her head. Maybe she should just close *_Le Petit Chateau_*. She had the grounds for it -- past history in black magic, possible black magic connections even now, improper cash registers, lying on monthly reports (after all, if they weren't using the proper computerized cash register, then they weren't giving completely accurate reports), and having hidden or closed off rooms.

But this store would be more difficult to close than the werewolf-infested shop in Lockerbie or the shop in Leeds that was selling virgin's blood -- a prime ingredient in black magic spells. It had taken her weeks to get the permissions to close those shops, and they didn't make the kind of money that this shop was making.

Eventually, the Leeds shop reopened under new management, but the shop in Lockerbie never did. The werewolves had destroyed most of the customer base, and Abracadabra Inc decided that the shop was too remote to attempt rebuilding.

All in all, she'd probably closed fifteen stores, many of them in outlying areas of Europe, most of them with long magical histories. The influence of the dark arts seeped into the buildings, and she could sense how horrible the past had been. She was following company orders, but often the locals didn't see it that way. They expected her to resolve problems in their favor, not shut down stores that had no real hope of survival.

Sometimes she did resolve problems in favor of the shopkeeper. She'd done that just last week in Cardiff, when she'd discovered an imported pixie who had gotten trapped under a bookshelf. It didn't speak Welsh and the shopkeeper refused to acknowledge any words spoken in English even, apparently, the word "help."

Once the pixie was freed, all the bad problems affecting the store were resolved, and the shopkeeper swore he wouldn't import living beings for sale again. Talia had sent a recommendation to headquarters, banning the sale of all live creatures from Abracadabra stores, but she had been turned down. It seemed that, as long as the creatures were fundamentally good and not considered human, they could be sold

should a shopkeeper decide to do so.

So many tricks to the job. She thought she had seen them all until that dagger appeared.

And now she was uncertain about her next move, for the first time in her career.

* * * *

Talia awoke to the sound of church bells. For a moment, she thought herself back in Michigan on Christmas morning. She was cold enough and she felt that same scary sense of anticipation.

But all she had done was leave the window open while she slept, and failed to cover up with one of the thin blankets the hotel provided. The church bells came from the Cathedral, probably ringing early mass.

It didn't take her long to shower and change. She checked her e-mail while finishing the last of her bread -- she'd received a lot of responses to her questions, but no one knew how to neutralize an Assassins Dagger.

It apparently had never come up before.

The morning was clear and cold. The sky was a pale blue, and the Cathedral, outlined against it, looked majestic, dominating the scene the way it had for centuries. Even the castle seemed dwarfed by it.

Talia walked quickly, her supplies bag over her shoulder. Inside were her usual tools: a wand, spellbook, and electronic incantation translator. She also carried an iron box big enough to house a dagger. Her research had told her how to capture the dagger, but she would have to keep the box closed at all times, or it would escape.

Usually her box held some of her casting relics, but she put them in a plastic container. She wasn't sure plastic could hold an Assassin's Dagger, but she knew the box could.

Her laptop was over her other shoulder, and her cell phone in her jacket pocket. She felt weighed down by all the equipment she brought, but she didn't dare be without it. She wanted to check out that dagger before nightfall. If the note-writer planned an attack, he might do it then, expecting Chartier to be waiting for him.

Talia would be waiting instead.

This time, she didn't have any trouble finding the shop. The road seemed straighter, more familiar. This part of the city had a particular odor she was beginning to recognize: the rotted scent of the scum covering the castle's moat. She wondered why no one had bothered to clean it up, particularly something this close to the shops.

She would insist on it when she wrote her follow-up memo to Abracadabra Inc. Pond scum, particularly old and lusty varieties, was often used in the most vile spells.

She arrived a half hour early so that she could survey the scene and perhaps take action without anyone there. But as she walked up the last stretch of cobblestone, she saw a crowd of people outside the door.

Most were elderly and some were wearing robes decorated with half moons. One man had a long white beard and thin white hair. If she hadn't known better, she would have thought he was a mundane, a pretend mage trying to look like Dumbledore or Gandalf the Great. Some of the women were pressing their fingertips together, incanting.

A shiver ran up her spine and she ran the last few yards, her equipment jostling, bruising her.

The barricades had been moved aside, blocking the street instead of the store's entrance. Chartier bent over that entrance, an old-fashioned gold keyring in his right hand.

"Stop!" Talia shouted.

He unlocked the door anyway, and reached inside, grabbing the note. She thought she saw a movement deep within, but she didn't stop to analyze it. Instead, she said a quick kinetic spell, forcing Chartier outside and the door closed.

"Hey!" he said in unaccented English.

That stopped her. She hadn't expected him to speak English at all. He hadn't so far, even though he had known she was an American.

"You have no right," she said, pushing her way through the crowd, all of whom were staring at her as if she were the one who had done something wrong. "Especially with all of these people here. Someone could have been killed."

"They were reciting a 'protect' spell," he said.

She snatched the note from his hand, then took the key. "A lot of good that did you. I blew right through it with a spell of my own. Assassins Daggers have even more powerful magic -- "

"I thought you didn't know anything about them."

"I know more than I did," she said. "And the power of magic often comes from age. Or hadn't you been taught anything?"

Color ran up his cheeks. The people around them didn't seem too concerned by the conversation, but perhaps that was because they had continued in English.

"Get them out of here," Talia said.

"They have the right to be here." Chartier crossed his arms and leaned against the door.

"They have no rights," Talia said, "and neither do you. You're just an employee and I have the ability to fire you here and now."

"I wouldn't do that," Chartier said.

Something in his tone caught her attention. She looked up and saw coldness in his eyes. It had been there all along, but it seemed to have grown, to have taken over his entire face.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because they stand with me." And as if proving his words, the people gathered around him.

Inside the shop, the dagger floated upwards.

"Get out of the way," she said.

No one moved.

"The damn dagger's alive," she said. "Get away from the windows."

But they didn't. Instead, Chartier smiled. "Look at the note," he said.

She frowned, not understanding. The dagger floated closer, moving slowly, as if it had all the time in the world.

"The note," Chartier said again.

She stuck the key ring over her wrist and opened the envelope. The paper inside was empty.

"You lied to me," she said.

He smiled.

"Why would you -- ?"

The dagger burst through the window, shattering glass onto the cobblestone. Somehow the glass missed the people in front of it. The dagger floated through them, and straight at Talia.

"Jesus," she said, suddenly understanding. The dagger was meant for her.

It picked up speed as it came forward, heading directly for her heart. At the last moment, she swung her laptop forward, and the knife pierced it. She flung the laptop at the scum-covered moat.

She had only a few moments. The people beside Chartier were reciting a chant in unison, something foul and dark. She uttered a quick protect spell, hoping it would work against them, and knowing it wouldn't do a thing about the dagger.

Then she reached inside her supplies bag, and removed the box. She dropped the bag to the cobblestone as the knife, freed of the laptop, floated over the stone wall.

This time, she ran for the knife, holding the box open. As the knife came toward her, she slammed the box around it. It took a moment for the knife to lose its momentum. She felt it strain toward her even as the iron protected her. Then the struggle ceased.

"What's this all about?" she asked.

"Our shop," Chartier said. "My father had no right to sell you our shop."

"He didn't sell it to me."

"But you're the one who interferes."

The box rolled in her hands. The knife clattered inside. She had been wrong. The receipt had been wrong. Of course it wasn't an Assassin's Dagger. It was more sophisticated than that.

They had put that label on it to lead her astray.

She was facing either the Dagger of Hassan ibn-al-Sabbah or a fidayeen dagger, and she didn't know how to disable either one.

The crowd watched her -- Chartier watched her, his eyes shining with anticipation. He wanted her to die. She had no idea why; she had never met him before. But she could feel the power of his hate.

The box swelled. In a moment it would explode open. She flung it as if she were a quarterback, and it soared, spinning, just like a football, until it dove down and landed in the center of the scummy moat.

She couldn't spell the knife, but she could spell the box, the moat. Hands trembling, she reached for her supplies bag.

"Nothing will help you now," Chartier said.

She ignored him. Her supplies bag grew hot. She removed the relics she needed as the bag scalded her skin. She could smell singed skin, and more than once she had to slap out fires that started on the fine hairs of her arm.

Relics, and her spells book. She didn't dare take out her incantation translator. She couldn't get one word wrong, because she didn't dare let the spell go dark.

Her cell phone started ringing, breaking her concentration. She had an urge to throw the plastic thing into the moat with the box. The scum was bubbling where the box had gone in, huge gas-like bubbles that seemed to come from underground.

She lined up her relics, grabbed the wand, and opened the book to a spell in the center. She started to read, wishing she didn't have to. Her only flaw as a mage -- she never could memorize the hard spells. The book slammed closed.

She opened it again, but it slammed closed again. She glared at the people behind her. They couldn't spell her because of her protection shield, but they could spell the damn book. She grabbed it, pulled it against her and tried a third time.

And, a third time, it slammed closed.

More bubbles erupted from the moat. She was running out of time.

Maybe she had read enough. After all, it wasn't like she'd never done this spell before. She raised her arms, started reciting. The book skittered away from her, sliding up the stone wall, and then over, heading for the moat.

Damn them for distracting her. Like the phone which was still ringing.

She shut it all out, all but the bubbles in the moat, and continued reciting. Inside the green bubbles, she thought she saw a flash of silver and gold. Her heart started hammering.

She was out of time.

Snow burst from her wand, streaming for the moat. The silver thing -- clearly it was the dagger -- sliced up from the bottom, carrying more slime with it. Apparently it had gotten trapped in the scum.

The snow hit the slime, and then a huge cracking sound filled the air. The moat froze over with a deep glacial ice. The spell hadn't quite worked the way she wanted it -- she hadn't planned on the glacial ice -- but she was happy with it. The knife was trapped inside.

The knife still vibrated, sending cracks across the surface. She uttered a continual reinstate, and the cracks receded. Every time it seemed like the knife would break free, the ice trapped it.

The people behind her chanted some more. They could be doing one of a hundred counter spells. Quickly she clapped her hands together, doing a spell she'd done fifteen times in her career.

"To headquarters!" she snapped and everyone -- including Chartier -- disappeared.

For a moment, she stared at the empty storefront. Then she collapsed against the cobblestone,

exhausted, her powers used. She certainly hadn't expected anything like this.

Her cell phone was still ringing.

She pulled it out of her pocket, flipped open the receiver and snapped, "What?"

"Oh, dear, is this a bad time?" Cedric, the curator from the British Museum asked.

"It is -- but I -- how are you, Cedric?" She had a million things to do. She had to explain to Abracadabra Corporate Headquarters why she had just sent them a crowd of people from France. She had to make certain that knife was neutralized. She had to see what else was in Le Petit Chateau.

"Quite fine, quite fine. I can ring you later if need be."

"No," she said, leaning against the stone wall. "Now's good."

"Your message said you're having a problem with an Assassins Dagger?"

"Well, now I'm pretty sure that it's the Dagger of Hassan ibn-al-Sabbah or a fidayeen dagger."

"Truly? I'd love to see one. Where are you?"

She told him.

"Oh, my god," he said. "Describe the dagger."

She did.

"That can't be Middle Eastern," he said.

"That's what I thought, but it's acting like a fidayeen dagger."

"Then the rumors are true."

"Rumors?" Maybe she wasn't having this conversation. Maybe she was dreaming, after all. Maybe she would wake up and walk to the shop and everything would be as it was the night before.

"You know that many believe the Assassin Daggers were created during the Crusades to discredit and perhaps even use against the fidayeen."

"I'd heard that."

"Well, they had to have been created somewhere."

She sat up. "You think they were created here?"

"There is an old magic shop there, goes by the name of Le Jardin Noir. Have you been there? Near the castle?"

"No," she said. "The shop near the castle is called Le Petit Chateau."

"Oh, that's right. They changed it just after the war." He meant World War II. There was no other war in this part of Europe. "Very nasty place. Very nasty. Built on the site of an ancient garden, near an old cathedral. The dark mages took over that cathedral for a time, decided to use magic to save the Christian world."

She rubbed a hand over her face. "This is the center of dark arts in France?"

"Perhaps in Europe."

"How come no one told us that?"

"Abracadabra? Someone probably did, but you Yanks always believe the best of people. The name change probably convinced your hierarchy that everything was all right. After all, it was sixty years ago -- practically an eternity to an American."

She let that slide. "How do I neutralize the dagger, Cedric?"

"Find the spell," he said. "If they did create the daggers, the spell has to be there somewhere. I say, though, where would they have gotten your blood?"

She half-smiled. "From any one of a dozen shopkeepers, all of them dark, all of whom I put out of work."

"Oh, right then. Need me to come out there?"

"Not yet," she said. "But I'll let you know."

She flipped the phone closed and stood. The key ring was still attached to her wrist, and her possessions were still on the ground, but her supplies bag had burned up, and her laptop was gone.

She was on her own -- no props, no technology.

She hoped there weren't any more daggers waiting for her inside.

But there was only one way to find out.

* * * *

vi

The shop had a faint odor of mold, the smell of age. The floor was made of stone, uneven, and tilted slightly toward the center of town.

Talia locked the door behind herself and walked as quietly as she could across the store's carpet. Nothing attacked her from the shelves or growled at her from the cases. Out front, at least, the store seemed completely normal.

Except for the receipt lying on the counter. She picked up the parchment, and it crumbled under her fingertips. Spelled, just like everything else. Done for her benefit and no one else's.

If she had been less cautious, not quite as good at her job as she was, she would have walked into the store yesterday afternoon, picked up the note on the floor and not even noticed the dagger as it sped toward her. She would have been dead before she perceived the threat.

A warning to Abracadabra? Perhaps. A simple operation, taking out one of their most valued employees, and warning them that more would die unless Le Petit Chateau -- and maybe some of the other shops she'd closed -- were set free of their corporate chains.

What had Chartier said? There was more than one kind of evil in the world. He probably saw Abracadabra as an American corporate evil, using money to eliminate his family's past. Which it had. But

Abracadabra hadn't forced his father to sell. The old man had done that all on his own, and left with the profits.

How many times had she heard that in her career?

The walls got smoother the farther back she went. The stone was very old, worn, and the mold smell grew stronger here. She wound her way up the tiny staircase, found a locked, grated door, and used the key ring to open it.

Then she stepped inside a magic den unlike any she'd ever seen.

The stench of moat slime overpowered everything. Potions sat on shelves so old that the stone had blackened with time. A fireplace in the corner looked like it dated to the Romans, and some of the tools on the far wall seemed even older.

Recipes were written on the walls, on parchment yellowed with age, on tablecloths in a substance that looked suspiciously like blood. She found books filled with spells, all of them dark, and she saw vials filled with foul things.

She went through room after tiny room, until she found a more modern work area. And there, she saw a modern test tube, stained but empty, labeled with her name and her blood type. It had been shipped from Penzance.

Talia shuddered. Apparently Chartier and his friends had not just been acting for themselves, but also in revenge for the other dark stores she had closed.

Beside the vial, she found a recipe written in Latin. Fortunately, not Church Latin, but the more arcane version used for spells. This she could read.

It was the spell for creating a _fidayeen_ dagger. She didn't touch the parchment, knowing better this time. She just read, amazed at the simplicity of the spell, and understood.

She finally knew what she had to do.

* * * *

vii

By the time she'd neutralized the dagger and thawed the moat, it was early evening. Her phone had rung incessantly, and she had finally turned it off so that she could focus on the task at hand.

Then she spelled herself to Abracadabra Headquarters. Chartier and his troop were already gone, banned from their magical headquarters, and stripped of their abilities to shop at any of Abracadabra's stores.

That would limit some, but not all, of the group's magical abilities since Abracadabra was close to a complete monopoly on magic shops. But that was the extent of Abracadabra's powers, and there was no magical tribunal to appeal to.

If Chartier and his group wanted to continue fighting Abracadabra with dark magic, they could. Only now Abracadabra was warned.

As was Talia. She had done her job. More than her fair share, in fact, since she actually found the long-lost recipes for the _fidayeen_ dagger, the Dagger of Hassan ibn-al-Sabbah, and the Assassins

Dagger. She also found several other lost spells, and an entire history of dark magic from the Crusades forward that had existed only in legend before.

Abracadabra offered her a reward, and she had only one request.

She was tired of traveling, tired of solving someone else's problems, tired of having no friends and no real life. She wanted to sleep for a week and then she wanted a nice quiet place to call her own.

She asked to take Chartier's place at Le Petit Chateau.

Her request, of course, was granted. Provided that she follow all of Abracadabra's rules. And since no one knew them better than she did, she was happy to oblige.

She mentioned this to Cedric, when she called him about her discoveries. He didn't seem as happy for her as she had expected.

"I worry about you," he said. "Your life has been so exciting up until now, and you're trading all of that for life in a small town in France."

"And a magic store with a hell of a history," she said. "One I'm sure that Chartier and his friends won't let go of so easily."

"You expect fights?" he asked.

"I hope for them," she said. "They'll keep life interesting."

And then, when she finished talking to him, she spelled herself back to the store.

It seemed smaller than it had just a few hours before, and dingier, as if some of the life had gone out of it. She supposed it had -- she had taken all of the old potions, spells, and recipes to corporate headquarters so that they could be destroyed.

She had a lot of rebuilding to do, starting with the displays and the interior. She had to banish the mold smell and open up the ancient back rooms to sunlight. And she had to get a computerized cash register to comply with the corporation's regulations.

Small things, but important ones. Things that would make Le Petit Chateau completely hers.

Like a new name. She was toying with Enchante, but she wasn't certain yet. The name would come as the store changed, grew, developed.

Like she would.

She smiled to herself, her exhaustion gone. She'd finally made a change.

It was about time.

-- END --