



Pagan in Exile



Catherine
JINKS

'Pagan is a real, live boy who leaps off the page and
compels you to listen to his story.'

— Kirsty Murray

THE PAGAN CHRONICLES

‘Full of the richly-textured, high-smelling, highly individualistic atmosphere of the Middle Ages, Catherine Jinks’s Pagan series offers unforgettable characters in an extraordinary setting and time, presented in crisp, pungent prose.’

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‘The Pagan Chronicles are a kind of medieval version of Tin Tin, meticulously researched and told with a delightfully slapstick, cinematographic vigour.’

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‘What a romp! Not since Don Quixote took up with Sancho Panza has a knight had a squire like Pagan Kidrouk.’

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‘Pagan is a real, live boy who leaps off the page and compels you to listen to his story.’

KIRSTY MURRAY

‘Humour? Rage? Agony? Spiritual journeys? Murder? Moral turpitude? Twists both welcome and dismaying? This decidedly unique historical saga has it all.’

Kirkus Reviews (STARRED REVIEW)

‘Brimming with wit and fascinating details of medieval history, with its vividly drawn characters ... this emotionally satisfying epic brings the Middle Ages to life.’

The Horn Book

CATHERINE JINKS is a scholar of medieval history and a prolific author for teenagers, children and adults. Her books have been published to wide acclaim in Australia and overseas and have won numerous awards. She loves reading, history, films, TV and gossip, and says she could write for eight hours straight every day if she had the chance. Catherine lives in the Blue Mountains of NSW with her husband and daughter.

www.catherinejinks.com

THE PAGAN CHRONICLES

Pagan's Crusade

(shortlisted CBCA and Victorian Premier's Literary awards)

Pagan in Exile

Pagan's Vows

(winner CBCA Book of the Year Award for older readers)

Pagan's Scribe

(winner Victorian Premier's Literary Award for children's literature)

Pagan's Daughter

(notable book CBCA Book of the Year Award for older readers)

Pagan in Exile



**Catherine
JINKS**


ALLEN & UNWIN

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Allen & Unwin
83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia
Phone (61 2) 8425 0100
Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
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To Rachael Westwood



‘. . . And so it was that, the Kingdom of Jerusalem having fallen to the enemies of Christ in the year of Our Lord’s incarnation 1187, there was great lamentation across many lands, and the Holy Father Pope Gregory beseeched all his valorous subjects to gird themselves manfully, and liberate from the defilement of the Infidel that city in which our Saviour suffered for us. Alas, however, although many were kindled by love of the divine majesty to shed their blood, others brought down God’s final punishment, making war upon fellow Christians when they should have been united in the bonds of peace. Thus did Richard of England, called Lionheart, and the King of France, Philip Augustus, take up the sign of the cross; and thus did they fall upon each other in discord and dissension before they had assembled their crusading armies. Meanwhile, in the region of Languedoc, there arose certain heretics – sons of Baal and witnesses of the anti-Christ – who seduced many simple and weak-minded Christians with the abominable pestilence of heretical depravity. These vessels of Satan, the ‘Cathari’ called their priests ‘Good Men’, and believed that there were two creators: one of the invisible world whom they called the benign God, and one of the visible world, or the malign God. And by clinging to these monstrous doctrines they infected our holy church, depriving it of divine favour, so that when the crusade was finally fought, the pagan multitudes bore away the glorious palm of victory . . .’

– Simon of Saint Medard, c. 1230



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June, 1188



Chapter 1

What's everybody staring at?

All right, so you've never seen an Arab before. Is that any reason to stare? My hair's not green. My skin's not blue. It might be darker than yours, but dark skin is quite normal in my country. So I'm short. So what? I'm not that short. I'm tall enough to see over my own knees. Anyone would think I had a giant candle-snuffer growing out of my forehead.

Look at that fellow there, gawking away. Face like a gob of spittle, and he's staring at *me*! Why don't you get yourself a mirror, Spitface, if you really want something to stare at.

A one-armed child makes a rude gesture. Runs away as I poke out a viciously threatening tongue. No backbone, the little coward.

'Pagan.' Roland's voice is cold and stern. (Doesn't want his squire eroding the dignity of his arrival.) 'Please behave yourself.'

'It's not my fault. What's wrong with them? They don't seem very pleased to see you.'

'It's been a long time, Pagan. Six years. They may not remember who I am.'

Six years. Imagine what it must be like, coming home after six years. A quick glance at his profile jolting along not two arm-lengths away, as Jennet and Coppertail and poor old Bruno pick a path between the puddles. (Jennet is such a lady, she can't stand getting mud on her fetlocks.) But there's no expression on Roland's chiselled face. His eyes aren't even misty. Not that I was expecting anything different: you'd see a pig become Pope before you'd ever see Lord Roland Roucy de Bram in tears.

He twitches his reins, and it's time to turn right. Another narrow little street lined with pale sandstone houses, all sporting those funny peaked roofs. You don't often see roofs like that, back in Jerusalem. Wooden shutters and wandering chickens. The smell of smoke and sewage. High walls. Flapping laundry. The sharp sounds of a smithy somewhere nearby.

People clustered on doorsteps, staring.

They're staring at Roland too, of course. You have to admit he's worth a look. The golden-haired knight on his glossy black horse, with his blue eyes and wide shoulders and white tunic (well, off-white really, I can't have washed it in weeks), and the distinctive red cross on his chest. You don't often see a vision of Saint George wandering past your scrap bucket on an overcast afternoon in the middle of nowhere. It's like watching a stained-glass window come to life. People push and whisper and cross themselves. A sort of hush seems to follow us down the street.

This is really embarrassing.

'My lord!'

Aha. Someone's coming forward, at last. And there he is: a grey-haired, grey-bearded man with a

wrung-out face like a dishcloth, dressed a little better than most of the people around here (who seem to be wearing tailored feed-sacks) in a tunic the colour of raw kidneys, and a cloak of cheese-mould blue. He looks almost groggy with shock, staggering out from under a carved stone lintel.

‘My lord Roland –’

‘Germain.’ Roland looks around. ‘Germain Bonace.’

‘My lord – God save us – we thought you were dead –’

‘How is it with you, Germain?’

‘I can’t believe it. I can’t believe you’re alive.’

‘Certainly I am alive. And well.’

‘It’s a miracle.’

‘Not at all.’

‘We never thought we’d see you again.’

Roland’s beginning to get just a little impatient. You can tell by the way the muscles twitch in his jaw.

‘And now I have returned,’ he declares. (Subject closed.) ‘Is my father in good health?’

‘Oh – oh yes, my lord. That is, he’s feeling his age, of course –’

‘And my brothers?’

‘Yes, my lord. They’re both well enough . . .’

‘Good.’ Turning to me. ‘Pagan, this is Germain Bonace, my father’s steward. He has served my family all his life. Germain, this is my squire Pagan Kidrouk. He comes from Jerusalem.’

A mutter runs along the street. Jerusalem! The Holy City! All eyes on the skinny little Turcopole who badly needs a haircut. They’re probably wondering what happened to my halo.

Yes, that’s right, have a good stare. Sooner or later someone’s going to come up and poke me with stick. Just to see if I’m real or not.

‘Are you on your way back to the castle?’ Roland inquires. But Germain doesn’t seem to understand.

‘To the –?’

‘We are on our way to the castle. I assume you still live there?’

‘Oh yes.’ The steward looks around in a dithery sort of way, as if his mind is somewhere far off, beyond the rooftops of Bram. ‘I’ve been discussing rents with . . . um . . . with Baimac –’

‘Then we shall not keep you from your duties,’ Roland says, nudging Jennet forward. ‘Perhaps we’ll see you this evening at supper. We must go now. Pagan?’

Yes, yes, I’m coming. The gathering crowd flinches back as we move. Toddlers scatter in all directions. Germain trails after us for a few steps, dragging a stiff knee. ‘Welcome back, my lord! Welcome home!’ he cries, in a wavering voice. Somehow it doesn’t have the desired effect.

What’s the matter with these people? I thought there’d be garlands and cheering. I thought there’d be dancing in the streets. Lord Roland is one of the lords of Bram, isn’t he? Don’t they like their lord in this part of the world? I just don’t understand.

The street opens onto a little round marketplace. There’s a church in the middle of it – your basic country affair – with a tower and a peaked roof and small windows. Cobbles and manure underfoot. A

well. A trough. A sheep pen. A scattering of dogs and chickens and people.

Beyond it, more houses. Built in widening circles around the central square. And beyond that, the castle of Bram. Visible for miles as you approach it along the tedious road from Carcassone to Toulouse, where everything is flat, flat, flat, like the bottom of a pan, and just about as interesting. Not quite what I expected, this castle. Not at all like the castles in Jerusalem. Those castles are big. This one's more like an overgrown road-fort: a four-sided block of beige-coloured stone, with the village spilling from beneath its southern flank like an accident that someone forgot to clean up. But perhaps these people wouldn't call it a village. Perhaps they'd call it a town. Two chandlers sitting on a graveyard fence are quite enough to qualify as a town, in Languedoc.

You can't see the entrance to the bailey from this point (it must be behind all those houses) but you can see the top of the keep, rising above the battlements. There are colours flapping sluggishly on a flagpole, way up high. Not that I'd personally dignify them with the name of colours. They're so worn and ragged, they don't seem to have any colour at all.

I just can't believe that this is Roland's birthplace.

'Perhaps we should stop here for a moment,' he remarks, glancing at the church. 'Pay our respects to the priest, before we go further.'

Oh, what?

'Please, my lord.' (Whine, whine.) 'If I have to sit on this horse much longer I'll never cross my legs again. You'll have to chisel me off. Can't we just get to the castle and rest?'

A long, blue look from the Man of Marble. One whole day on the back of a horse means absolutely nothing to him. He could probably run from Acre to Antioch right now, if he had to. Dragging a dead donkey.

'Very well, I shall visit the priest tomorrow morning.' (Hooray!) 'We'll rest first. Come, it isn't far.'

I'm so sick of riding. Riding, riding, riding. That's all I seem to have done for the last year. How long is it since we stayed in one place for more than two weeks at a time? Probably not since Jerusalem. Oh, and there was the ship, of course. But that didn't really count. We never stayed still on the ship, either. That was worse than riding. Up, down, up, down. God how I hate those floating buckets of vomit.

Speaking of vomit, there's a very nasty smell around here. Where's it coming from? A tannery? A slaughterhouse? Whew! Passing the charred ruins of some unfortunate person's home. Or maybe it wasn't a home. Stables, perhaps. Or a workshop. They're lucky the fire didn't spread.

Castle walls, looming closer and closer. Dark against a pearl-grey sky. The ground rising slightly (very slightly) as the houses thin, giving way to untidy kitchen gardens, and finally to cleared land. Burned off, by the look of it. No cover here for besieging forces. A well-kept ditch (no scrub or boulders), deep enough to bury an army in. Over it, a wooden bridge. Easy to demolish, during an emergency, especially since it doesn't seem to be in the best repair. One well-aimed rock from the ramparts and *whoomp!* No more bridge.

The horses' hooves clatter as we cross.

Someone's stationed under the big, deep arch of the entrance. He's so small that you can hardly see him. Most of his face is obscured by a peculiar, greenish growth which seems to be a beard – unless it's a skin disease. But there must be a mouth hidden behind it somewhere, because he speaks as he

advances towards us.

‘State your business.’ (His voice is a hoarse drone, very grating.) ‘Halt and state your business.’

It’s hard not to laugh. The look on Roland’s face! As if he’d cracked open a nut and found a turd inside.

‘My *business*,’ he says, in his sharpest, chilliest, most patrician tones, ‘is with my family. I am Lord Roland Roucy de Bram.’ And he presses forward, ignoring old Green-beard, who’s got about as much authority as an apple core in a suit of armour.

Through the gates, into the bailey.

It’s a fair-sized plot, but pretty crowded. All kinds of ramshackle buildings propped up against the walls. Smoke and ash drifting about. Goats browsing. And the keep, of course, towering over everything, well built, with stairs in the east wall leading up to the second storey entrance. It’s the only entrance that I can see: just a single hole, punched through thick stone, hardly bigger than the three tiny windows sitting high up under the battlements. No one’s getting in there without an invitation.

Glance at Roland. Expressionless, as usual. He’s scanning the faces of the people nearby: a tall, wiry, grey-haired soldier and a drooping individual built like a beanstalk, with long, pale limbs and cold sores. They’re both staring at us, speechless with astonishment.

A brief pause as Roland dismounts, moving without the slightest trace of stiffness. While his squirm has to peel both buttocks off the saddle. God preserve us! I can’t even straighten my knees! They’ll have to break the bones and reset them. Ow! Owch! God, my back!

‘Foucaud,’ says Roland, carefully. He’s addressing the Beanstalk. ‘It is Foucaud, isn’t it?’

The Beanstalk simply goggles. What a pathetic sight. Looks completely boneless. Lank-haired. Unhealthy. He sniffs, and wipes his nose on the back of a hand that looks exactly like a dead squid.

‘Do you remember me? I’m Lord Roland.’

No reply. The Beanstalk’s eyes flicker uneasily towards the soldier.

‘Lord Galhard’s youngest son,’ Roland continues, patiently. The soldier makes an explosive noise.

‘Sweet Jesus!’ he exclaims. ‘You mean you’re –’

‘I am Lord Roland Roucy de Bram.’ Cold and precise. ‘Who might you be?’

‘Ademar, my lord, I –’

‘Is my father here, Ademar?’

‘No, he’s gone to – I mean, no, my lord, he’s not. He’s at Castelnaudery, with Lord Berengar. But Lord Jordan is here.’ A crooked grin. (The soldier’s teeth remind me of tadpoles: soft and grey and slimy.) ‘He’s in the hall.’

Roland nods. He turns back to Foucaud.

‘Take these horses,’ he says. ‘You may find them a place in the stables, and remove their harness, but don’t feed them or brush them down. We shall attend to them ourselves shortly. Do you understand?’

A listless nod. Roland places Jennet’s reins carefully in the Beanstalk’s limp hand, and jerks his head in my direction. You don’t mean that I have to touch this – this boiled lentil? His fingers feel sticky, like seaweed. Clammy. Dead. He stands there, holding all three horses, as we march towards the keep.

‘My lord –’

‘What?’

‘Are you sure they’ll be looked after?’ Can’t help glancing back at the Beanstalk, who seems to have subsided into a trance. Roland doesn’t even break his stride.

‘Foucaud is my brother’s varlet. I have known him for many years. He can be trusted to carry out orders.’

‘If you say so, my lord.’

He takes the steps slowly, at a dignified pace. One hand on his sword hilt, one swinging loose. No rushing or yelling. Very cool. Very calm. Not a trace of sweat on his forehead, or moisture in his eye. But there’s a vein beating like a hammer in his temple.

And he takes a deep breath as he steps through the door.



Chapter 2

God preserve us, it's dark in here! Can't see a thing except that lamp. And there's another one way over there. On a table? Yes, on a table. You can just make it out.

Something squashy underfoot. Rushes, I suppose. Very old rushes. Probably haven't been swept out in centuries. Full of grease, bones, spittle, dog turds. There's an ominous smell in the air.

Maybe the darkness is a good thing, after all. Maybe I'd rather not see what I'm treading on.

'Jordan?' Roland, beside me, peering into the shadows. 'Jordan? Are you there?'

A rustle. A creak.

'Jordan?'

Something moves beside the table. (It's getting easier to see, now.) A shape seems to unfold. A hand appears in the lamplight. There's a glint of gold, and a shuffle of feet. Heavy breathing from out of the gloom.

A voice.

'I don't believe it.'

God preserve us. That voice!

'I don't believe it. You can't be Roland. You must be a ghost.'

It's incredible. I could have sworn – he sounds exactly like Roland. For a moment I thought it *was* Roland!

'I'm not a ghost, Jordan. I have returned from the Holy Land.'

'So I see.'

'You're in good health, I trust?'

No comment. This is strange, really strange. Roland returns after six long years, and his brother can't even find a few words of welcome.

'Why are you sitting here in the dark?' Roland demands. Not that it's as dark as it first looked. No, that my eyes are adjusting, it's easy to see quite a few things. The trestle tables. The fireplace. The wine jug. Dingy plastered walls, very high, and black iron candlesticks encrusted with tallow.

Roland's brother is slouched beside one of the tables – the one on the raised dais – wearing something long and dark. There's a bird or small animal perched on his wrist.

'I'm unseeling Acantha,' he says. 'She hasn't been trained, and we've only just taken the stitches out of her eyelids.'

'Your hawk?'

'Well she certainly isn't my mistress.'

Ha, ha. Pardon me while I sew up my sides. Roland chooses to ignore this feeble attempt at humour.

‘Where is Lord Galhard?’ he asks. Jordan suddenly rises to his feet, and the bird on his wrist flaps its wings in protest.

‘He’s at Castelnaudery,’ comes the reply. ‘Negotiating a marriage.’

‘A marriage?’

‘For Berengar.’ As Jordan moves into the light, you can see the family resemblance. He has Roland’s long nose; Roland’s blank, blue eyes; Roland’s fair skin and high cheekbones. But Jordan’s hair is brown, and long. He’s taller than Roland, with narrower shoulders and lankier limbs. And he moves quite differently. Roland has a firm tread: his actions are always tight and controlled. Jordan slops about as if his ligaments are loose at the joints.

‘I don’t understand.’ Roland seems bewildered. ‘You mean Fabrissa isn’t –?’

‘Fabrissa died long ago. Berengar’s been through two wives since then. Both dead. Airmenssens and Furneria. So now he’s out looking for number four.’ A cynical smile. ‘Personally, I think he’ll be lucky to find another, since he goes through wives like rope horseshoes. But then I never understood why any of them married him in the first place. Unless they actually *liked* the smell of ripe sewage.’

‘What happened? What happened to them?’

‘Well, now. Let me think.’ (On reflection, his voice isn’t identical to Roland’s. It’s slower, quieter. More of a drawl.) ‘Fabrissa miscarried. Furneria died of a wasting disease. Airmenssens poisoned herself.’

Roland traces a cross on his chest.

‘You couldn’t blame her,’ Jordan continues. ‘I’d have done the same. Of course, the old lord was delighted. Three dowries, and a fourth within grasp! He’s very pleased with Berengar.’ A sigh. ‘I’m afraid that *I* haven’t done so well. My wife is still breathing.’

Roland stiffens.

‘*Your* wife?’ he says, sharply.

‘Oh yes. My wife. You haven’t met Gauzia. That pleasure still awaits you.’ Jordan pauses an instant, as if expecting some kind of comment. But Roland remains mute. ‘God knows, I’ve done my best to get rid of her. I can’t help it if I’m lacking in those repulsive qualities which Berengar finds so useful. It’s my belief that his breath is what ultimately killed them.’

‘Has he – has Berengar chosen –?’

‘One of the Morlans. Ada. Apparently she’s about fifteen years old, so he’ll probably make a nice, quick job of her.’ His expressionless blue eyes drift down to where I’m lurking. Spotted, damn it. ‘And who might this be? Your fancy-boy?’

‘This is my squire.’ (Roland, through clenched teeth.) ‘Pagan Kidrouk.’

‘Your squire?’ Jordan sounds startled. ‘How old is he? Twelve?’

‘I’m seventeen years old, my lord.’ No point letting him think he can wipe his boots all over my face. Look him straight in the eye, speak clearly, don’t fidget. Just keep a civil tongue in your head, Lord Jordan.

‘Seventeen?’ he murmurs. ‘Is that so?’

‘Pagan has been with me for a year now. He came with me from Jerusalem. That’s where he was born.’

‘Yes, I’m not surprised. He’s very dark. Turkish blood, I suppose? Funny to see you with a Turkish

squire.’

‘Pagan is not a Turk. He is a Christian Arab. He is also a good fighter and a loyal servant.’

‘Mmmm.’ Jordan switches his gaze back to Roland. ‘And you, Roland. May I ask if that extraordinary costume of yours is some kind of joke? Because if it isn’t, I suggest you get rid of it right away.’

Whoops! That’s done it. Roland’s rejoinder sounds like a series of crossbow bolts hitting a stone wall. He really spits out the words.

‘This is a Templar garment,’ he says. ‘And I am a knight of the Temple.’

Jordan makes an odd little sound at the back of his nose. He moves right up to Roland, all loose and lazy, as the falcon flutters on his wrist.

By God he’s tall, though. Really tall.

‘So that’s what you call yourself. A knight of the Temple,’ he croons.

‘That’s what I am.’

‘But what does it mean, exactly? What does it involve?’

‘You’ve heard of the Order. You must have.’

‘Well, yes, I suppose so. At least, I’ve heard that you’re a bunch of Infidel-loving usurers who’ve all been castrated –’

‘That is not true!’ Roland’s holding himself steady. He squares his shoulders, like someone preparing for battle. ‘The Order of the Temple is a military order dedicated to protecting Christians and fighting unbelievers,’ he declares. ‘We have taken vows of obedience, chastity and humility. It is our duty to fight to the death, in defence of Christendom. In this we are following the Rule of the Order and the will of God. The blessed Bernard of Clairvaux called us the valiant men of Israel. He called us the chosen troops of God. We are not usurers. We are not castrates. We are a band of men doing our duty, according to God’s will.’

He pauses, to catch his breath. Well done, Roland. Nicely put. Jordan’s expression is hard to read.

‘So you took your vows, did you?’ he finally remarks.

‘Yes, I did.’

‘And do those vows still apply?’

‘Of course.’

Jordan leans forward, thrusting his face so close to Roland that they’ve practically got their heads up each other’s nostrils.

‘In that case,’ he breathes softly, ‘what in the Devil’s name are you doing here, you unspeakable little by-blow?’

Suddenly someone yells outside. A distant, muffled sound, but it makes Jordan jump. He falls back glancing towards the door.

‘They’re home,’ he mutters.

More shouting, closer, this time. Jordan turns away, and flings himself down on the nearest bench. He starts stroking Acantha, whistling a little three-note melody. Roland stands like a statue, his face completely blank.

I wish I knew what was going on here. I seem to have lost the thread of this plot. Are we on friendly

soil, or in an enemy camp? This isn't quite what I expected.

Hurried footsteps: someone's climbing the stairs. And here he is, bursting through the door – big – heavy – shoulders a mile wide. Head like a chewed knuckle of pork, all squashed and battered and misshapen, fringed by a patchy beard that's having a hard time squeezing its way through all the scar tissue on his chin.

But the nose is there. The de Bram nose, slightly pushed to one side, as if by the force of a flying punch. It looks wrong, on that face – like a steeple on a pig sty.

'Well stone the saints!' (A hoarse bellow.) 'It is you! I didn't believe it, when they told me!'

'Hello, Berengar,' says Roland. He doesn't sound overjoyed.

'What's that nun's outfit you're wearing, in God's name? You look like a dead virgin!'

'It's his habit,' Jordan remarks. 'He's a Templar, now.'

'A what?' (Is Berengar deaf? Or does he shout for pleasure?) 'You must be out of your mind, you fool! Templars! Bunch of mincing Ganymedes!'

'That's not true.' Roland speaks in level tones. 'You're mistaken, Berengar.'

'Up your arse, Roland! I know what I know.' Berengar stomps across the floor, smelling of horse-sweat and garlic. Still wearing his cloak and riding boots. Sighing as he lowers himself onto a bench, which creaks under his weight. 'Whoof! I'm flattened. Where's the wine? Give me a drink, someone. You. Boy.' (To me.) 'Who are you, when you're breathing?'

'This is my squire.' Roland answers before I can open my mouth. 'His name is Pagan.'

'Well he can pass me the wine, then. Damn, but those Morlans take it out of you. Do you know the had a notary with them? A notary! I almost told them where they could stuff the bastard!'

Wait a moment. Who's this? Two more people, appearing at the door. One of them short and wiry, with leathery skin and some very impressive scars. Missing an eye, an ear, two fingers and a big lump of forehead, as well as a large number of teeth. The sword at his waist is almost as big as he is.

The other man is built like Berengar: broad, heavy, powerful, tall, but not as tall as Roland. He has big black beard and a bald patch. Shaggy eyebrows. Tombstone teeth, slightly brown at the ends. An inflamed complexion. Wearing a lot of leather and fur.

He stands there, dragging his gloves off. Everyone falls silent.

Could this –? This couldn't –

'My lord,' says Roland. And he bends his knee.

Lord Galhard.

Oh yes, that's him all right. It's got to be. You can tell by the way he's suddenly the centre of attention. He clumps across to the high table, picks up Jordan's cup, and drains it. Pours himself another. Drains that, too. Everyone watches . . . watches and waits.

'Just passing through?' he says at last. His voice is like the sound of gravel crunching under the wheel of an overloaded wagon. Like the sound of bones being ground up in stone pestle. Never in my life have I ever heard such a chilling voice.

'Yes, my lord, in a sense.' Even Roland seems subdued. 'I am here to request your hospitality. For myself and my squire. According to your will.'

Galhard grunts. He lowers himself carefully onto a wooden bench (saddle sores?), and sticks out his

right leg. 'Boots, Joris,' he mutters. The little man with one ear comes scurrying over to haul his boot off.

'So, you're here to request my hospitality.' A pause. 'Wearing what, may I ask?'

God preserve us. Here it comes. Roland straightens his shoulders and sticks out his chest.

'My lord, this is the cross of the holy order of the Knights Templar.' His voice is clear and firm. 'I am a Templar, now.'

'Is that so?' (Ominously.) 'Then let me tell you that as a Templar, you're not welcome on these lands.'

'My lord –'

'Don't interrupt me!'

(Gulp.)

'Your friends the Templars seem to think they have some God-given right to poke their collective noses into my affairs,' Galhard continues. 'They call it 'the Peace of God', or some such rubbish. But I suppose you know all about that.'

'No, my lord, I –'

'Then you can ask your friends about it. Meanwhile, if you want my hospitality, you can take that shroud off and keep it off until you leave. As my son, you're welcome. As a Templar, you're not. Is that clear?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'And if you don't have anything else to wear, you can ask Jordan. He's got enough damn clothes to fill a moat.'

No comment from Jordan. No comment from anyone. Roland lowers his gaze, and studies the dust on his riding boots.

I wish we hadn't come, now. If you ask me, this was a mistake. A big, big mistake.



Chapter 3

‘It’s a monster, I tell you. Enormous. Isarn saw the pellets. Long and fat, with rounded ends. You don’t see a juvenile leaving traces like that.’

‘You don’t see any stags leaving traces like that, so early in the year. They must be old.’

‘Up your arse, Jordan! Do you think Isarn doesn’t know a fresh turd when he sees one? There were flies all over it!’

‘Then it must have been left by something else.’

‘Jordan’s right, son. I never saw a stag’s droppings that weren’t as flat as a cow-pat, before Saint John’s Day.’

This is too much. I mean, I’ve digested my dinner in some pretty rough places, but never during a conversation about excrement. Can’t these people talk about anything else?

‘What colour were the pellets?’

‘Brown, my lord, dark brown.’

‘Should be black, by that stage. Jordan’s right. They must have been left by another animal.’

Unless the whole discussion is some sort of trick. Perhaps it’s designed to put other people off their food. Provided, of course, they’ve actually managed to get any food. You’d have to be built like the Temple of Solomon if you wanted your fair share of salted herring at this table. It’s a fight to the death for every last scrap.

‘What’s the matter, Pagan? Why aren’t you eating?’ Roland, beside me. He looks so strange in that outfit. I don’t think I’ve ever . . . no. It’s true. I’ve never seen him in anything but white: either one of the order’s ankle-length winter robes, or his white campaign tunic with the red cross. And now he’s sitting there in a blood-coloured woollen surcoat trimmed with jade green silk, worn over a tunic of embroidered purple linen that’s just a little too long, and a little too tight across the shoulders. It makes him look different, somehow. It makes him look younger. Less responsible.

‘I’d eat if I had anything *to* eat, my lord.’ Softly, so that no one else can hear. ‘You didn’t tell me I had to come to supper fully armed.’

Roland knits his brow, and casts a look around the table. It’s a pretty disgusting sight. Berengar, muzzle down, gobbling like a pig at a trough. Galhard, with chewed-up bits of food spilling from his mouth as he discusses the unique characteristics of wild boar droppings. Jordan, sucking his greasy fingers. And the other squire – Galhard’s squire. What’s his name? Aimery. Aimery Sais de Saint-Felix-de-Carcassone. (What a mouthful.) Moodily dissecting a dumpling with one hand as he props up his chin with the other. Not much of a prospect, that fellow. Sullen and spotty. Hope no one decides that we ought to be friends. Just because he’s a year or so older than I am doesn’t mean we’re natural allies. It simply means he’ll try to beat me up at the earliest opportunity.

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