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Opening extract from

Blue Flame

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Last night, I thought I saw them again: Raimon, throwing out his arms to the wind; Yolanda, delighting in the clear water running between her toes; and Parsifal, sitting near Yolanda, polishing his father's sword. I'm sure he was humming.

And I did see them, I'm certain of that, for a place never forgets those who have loved it, and I am a place with a longer memory than most. I am the Amouroix – that's pronounced a-more-rwa (the x is silent, which is of no importance except to me) – set deep within the broader lands that roll off the mountains now separating France from Spain. That broader land is still known to some as the Occitan, or Occitania. That cc is pronounced x, making it ox-i-tan-ia. So I am A-more-rwa in Ox-i-tan-ia. A pretty name, don't you think.

A map would be both useful and useless, for no map could show the Amouroix-in-Occitania that Raimon and Yolanda knew, and Parsifal, of course. Maps have no interest in the winter ice and spring torrents, the sun-spangled noons and crisp evening chills, the engulfing cloud and the sharp, new-washed air that were my essence. No map salutes the stone-

masons who, with rope and windlass, muscle and sweat, dotted my high crags with peerless, peering castles. Yet that's the Amouroix that those who loved me carried in their hearts. It's what matters.

And then there is the Blue Flame. What map could tell of that? It is hard even for me to tell. Occitanians knew of it through stories handed down. They heard that it contained the soul of their land within itself and would one day appear. But though Occitanians sang of it and some even longed for it, they also had a certain fear of it, for when it came, if it was not used rightly, so the story went, it would exact a revenge. Who was to say what was right?

I'm drifting, now, back to my town of Castelneuf, perched on a lumpy hill like a crown on the head of a tipsy lady. Raimon and Yolanda are there, and they are running. Raimon has lost Yolanda's hand. Parsifal is there too, though he is very pale. There is a dog and there is smoke. But wait. If I am to tell my tale as it should be told, I must drift further back and further north, out of the Occitan at least for a moment, to show how the Flame came home, and what came with it.



Chalus Chabrol, in the Limousin, 1199

They were never going to give in quietly. Even as the knights fled into the round keep, their last refuge, they were shouting defiance. Even as they should have been praying, they were dragging heavy armour up the stone stairs with a clanking that should have raised the devil. Even as they passed through the chilly, cheerless chapel and crossed themselves in front of the dainty filigree box no bigger than a small candle-holder, they were counting arrows. If Richard the Lionheart, King of England, Duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, would not accept the terms of surrender they had offered, then blast him to hell, even if he was a heroic crusader. Their terms were unconditional, as befitted the terms of Occitanian knights, although, in the end, the terms were of course pointless, for whatever the knights said, whatever they did, it was quite certain that Richard would take the garrison. How could the ramshackle castle at Chalus Chabrol, in which they had taken refuge, withstand siege machinery built to reduce the very walls of

Jerusalem to rubble? But the company, though it consisted only of fifteen knights, two archers and a child, would make certain the Lionheart remembered it to his dying day.

Only one knight, though brave as the rest, was not shouting. Instead, Bernard de Maurand was speaking to his son, and the little boy's cheery responses, even in the face of what he knew was to come, made the other knights smile their doomed smiles. What a knight Parsifal would have made had his mother not died and Bernard given away his lands in a grand gesture to take the Crusader's Cross, leaving his son in the care of a monastery. It showed such spirit that the boy had refused to stay there when he heard rumours of his father's return, and had come instead, kicking on the fat pony which was his special pet, to see if the rumours were true.

'Well I'm *glad* King Richard has refused our surrender,' Parsifal's voice chirruped, echoing up the steps and then suddenly flattening out as he and his father reached the top platform of the tower, open to the skies. 'He'll have to take us now, Father, and I'll be in a real fight.'

His father was torn between shaking his son and kissing him. Perhaps it was as well that the boy had never seen a man hung, never seen the indignity of knights dying not in battle, using the full force of their strength, but lining up like beggars, their possessions reduced to the rope that would choke them. If Richard did spare Parsifal, as Bernard had reason to think he might, for the king's reputation, though bloody, did not include child-killing, he hoped the boy would be sent away before the executions began.

A brother knight, an elderly fellow, had other concerns.

Sending Parsifal to find an archer, he spoke gravely. 'What are we to do, Bernard?'

Bernard knew at once that his comrade-at-arms was not speaking of the child. It was not by chance that King Richard had journeyed at such speed into the Limousin, straight to this insignificant place, even though he had other, greater, battles to fight. Somebody had blabbed. Somebody had told him that the Occitanian treasure was on its way home. The identity of the traitor was of no import now. God would judge him soon enough. The only thing that mattered to Bernard and his companions was whether to destroy the precious thing they had brought all the way from Jerusalem, or give it up. 'Bernard!' said the other knight urgently, even as he clumsily pulled on his armour, for his squire had fled, 'we have so little time. I am resigned to dying, but if we are to give our treasure to Richard, let's do so as men and not have it torn from us like babies.'

Bernard looked through the battlements. Richard's camp was well set up, pennants flapping joyously over the tents as if victory was already theirs. Under thick, arrow-proof canopies, men were oiling the joints of the siege engines ready for the next bombardment, a bombardment they clearly expected to be the last judging by the few stones lying about in careless heaps. They were not replenishing their stock.

The besiegers' warhorses were unsaddled and grazing, Sir Bernard's horses amongst them, for they had been taken by King Richard's men as booty. Only Parsifal's pony was standing loyally at the bottom of the keep. The besiegers had not wanted him. Parsifal had felt very insulted.

On a hillock pushing up through low trees, they could see

Richard mounted on a fine bay stallion and surrounded by a gaggle of starstruck pages. He was personally supervising the erection of a line of gallows and Bernard found his palms growing sticky. Only a fool or a saint can look at gallows meant for himself without his skin prickling and Bernard was neither. He turned back to his friend. 'But if we do hand it over, Arnaud, will the Occitan survive?' Nobody could answer that question.

Parsifal had wandered off, and was now engaged in conversation with the arbalester, who, for want of anything better to do, had handed over his crossbow and was teaching the boy to shoot a bolt. 'Now crank up the ratchet,' he was saying. Bernard could hear Parsifal grunting with effort and found himself praying. 'Dear God, spare my boy. Please spare my boy.' And as he prayed, he suddenly knew what to do. He turned back to Arnaud. 'We'll destroy it,' he said. 'How can we let Richard have it? It would be like handing over not just the soul of the Occitan but our own souls too.'

Arnaud held his helmet more firmly. 'Shall I come with you?'

'No. Wait here. I'll be back before Parsifal notices.'

'What does he know?'

'Nothing.'

Arnaud nodded. 'Good, that's good,' he said. 'What he doesn't know, he can't tell. If the boy's spared, even after our deaths Richard will be left guessing what has happened to the prize he wanted so badly.' He laughed. 'It will drive him mad,' he said. 'What sweet revenge.'

Bernard gave a grim smile, touched his friend's hand, and descended into the keep again. He reached the chapel and

could now clearly hear the rumble of wheels three floors below. Two men were calling to each other. At ground level, on the other side of the door of thick French oak, an iron-capped battering ram was being put in place, ready for tomorrow. No wonder King Richard was so successful. Everything was pre-prepared. Nothing was left to chance, nothing to the last minute.

Bernard turned to the treasure and, as was his habit, knelt before it. He was not a man much affected by beauty but he had to admit that the wood of the filigree box was so finely carved it was difficult to imagine fingers delicate enough to have wielded the chisel. Then he rose and picked it up. The box was not heavy, for the treasure it contained had no substance whatsoever. It was simply a Flame, a perfectly ordinary-looking Flame, except that it burnt the most glorious shades of blue, and in it Bernard could see reflected all the hope of the land of his fathers.

Now that he had hold of the box, he gripped it, wanting to crush it quickly for he could not but feel it was a terrible thing he was doing. However, when the oil tipped in its fragile silver bowl and the Flame drew itself up, thin as a heron's leg, he hesitated and missed the moment. At once, he cupped the box in both hands and carried it out of the chapel, determined to drop it on the steps and stamp on it. He began to mount the steps. This one. Then perhaps this one. But still he held the box, with the Flame now shaped like a question mark. *Better to throw it from the top of the keep,* he told himself by way of an excuse. It would be some consolation if all Richard could gather up was matchwood.

Bernard climbed the steps more carefully now and when

he reached the top, he walked over to the battlements, breathing hard. He held the box between his fingers, poised. But before he had quite let go, he heard a wild roar and, above it, a short, sharp squeal, like a falcon taken by surprise. The box rocked, the Flame wavered and turned turquoise, but Bernard stayed his hand. The arbalester came running. 'Parsifal!' he cried. 'Parsifal!'

Bernard was turned to stone.

'Sir,' the archer was grinning so widely that his face nearly split. 'Sir, Parsifal has shot the king!'

Bernard dropped the box, which was caught by Arnaud, ran to his son and followed Parsifal's eyes downwards. The king, unmistakable in his surcoat of white and red, was still on his horse, but sat decidedly lopsided. Even from up here, it was easy to see the crossbow bolt now lodged between neck and hunching shoulder. Bernard seized his son's arm. 'Did you do that?'

'I didn't mean to, Father,' the boy's lips were trembling. 'I never meant to hit the king. I've missed everything up to now.'

'He has, he has,' nodded the arbalester, 'but that was a sure shot if ever I saw one.'

Parsifal could hardly take it in. 'What will happen, Father?'

Bernard regarded his son as his world shifted on its axis, and then he held him as close as his hauberk would allow. It was a long moment before he let go and looked over the parapet again, leaning right out to get a better view. 'You've not killed him, Parsifal. Look! He's still riding. He's just injured.' Bernard's relief was palpable. To kill a king was a terrible thing indeed for a boy to have on his conscience. He and Parsifal watched together until they saw Richard order

the panicking sentries back to their posts. Then, as he was attempting to pull the crossbolt out, he inadvertently snapped off the shaft.

Only now did Bernard gasp and his knuckles turned white. For knights well versed in injury, that snap of the shaft was like the crack of doom. The snap meant that the bolt-head was still embedded in the flesh, and though nothing in Richard's demeanour had changed, it sent a gangrenous shiver into Bernard's stomach. The bolt-head would work like poison. Short of a miracle, the king would die. When he spoke again, his voice was quite different, almost as if he and his son were strangers. 'Now, you listen to me, Parsifal. Listen and obey. Don't argue, just promise me, on your mother's life, to do exactly as I say.'

'I don't –' Parsifal was still trying to look at the king.

Bernard shook him. 'Never mind the king. Look at me.' There was no warmth at all in Bernard's eyes. The boy was terrified but Bernard did not relax his grip. 'If the king dies, the fate of the man who shot the bolt will be beyond imagining and I won't, under any circumstances, allow that fate to be yours. When you have a son, you will know why.'

'But you said –'

'Never mind what I said.' Bernard peered over the battlements again, more cautiously this time. Richard, swaying slightly, had dismounted and was retreating to his tent. Bernard could see the apothecary hurrying over, and the farrier with pliers, and they could all hear the young pages squawking like chickens. At news of the king's plight, everything else was forgotten. Stacks of spears were unguarded, piles of shields uncovered and tent flaps were open. The grooms had left the

warhorses, who moved uneasily on their tethers. Even the pack animals, sensing calamity, raised their heads from their endless eating. Only Parsifal's pony took no notice. It simply looked up at the tower and whinnied, as it had been doing since daybreak. It was missing Parsifal's treat-filled pouch.

Bernard was still holding his son when Arnaud appeared. Both men were thinking the same thing. 'It might be possible,' Bernard murmured. Arnaud nodded. 'We must try.'

Bernard put one hand on each of Parsifal's shoulders. The boy could feel the weight, as if his father's whole presence was pressing down on him. 'My son,' Bernard said, and his voice was even deeper than usual, 'I'm going to tell you something of very great importance, but before I do, I want you to promise me something.'

'Anything, Father,' the boy whispered. It seemed the right thing to say.

'Very well then. You must promise me that whatever happens, if anybody asks, anybody at all, you will say that it was I who shot Richard, not you. That is what you say. You say that I, Sir Bernard de Maurand, your unfortunate father, fired the crossbolt that hit the king. Do you understand?' His grip was tight as a vulture's. He repeated again, 'I took the crossbow from our archer friend here, and I shot it. Now you repeat that. Repeat it, I order you.'

Parsifal did not want to, but the weight of his father was too much. It came out as a breath.

'Not good enough. Repeat it again, louder.'

Parsifal repeated it again.

Bernard's hands were a vice for a moment longer, then they gentled. 'Dear Parsifal,' he said, 'now for the other thing. It's

very important. It's also dangerous, but the king's injury makes it perhaps possible. I think you could get out of here and there's something you must take with you.'

'But if I can get out, couldn't we all?'

'We couldn't, my son. A small boy might get through Richard's camp in this confusion, but not a knight. So you see this is a mission I can entrust to nobody else but you.' The father knew just how to appeal to the son and even in his fear, Parsifal felt a thrill. A mission! He would be like King Arthur of old. He stood taller under the weight of his father's confidence. 'What is it, sir?'

Bernard let go of his son's shoulders, walked swiftly away and returned with the box. 'This,' he said.

Parsifal looked very disappointed. 'That old box?'

'This old box, as you call it –' he stopped. How could he thrust such a responsibility onto a boy not yet even big enough to carry a sword? He had to collect himself before he carried on. 'This box contains the Blue Flame of the Occitan.'

Parsifal peered at the box from all sides. 'But the Blue Flame is supposed to be big. It can't be inside there.'

'Look,' said Bernard, and he knelt so that his son could see.

Parsifal peered into the box again, and when, at last, he raised his face to his father's again, his voice had almost vanished. 'The Blue Flame of the Occitan! Can it really be?' he whispered.

'It is.' Bernard was patient. This was too important to hurry. 'We were taking it home.'

'But I thought it lived in Jerusalem, in the tomb where Jesus was buried, so that he would remember the Occitan and God would give us his special protection.'

'It has been in the tomb, Parsifal, for many years. When the first Occitanian knights went on crusade, they took it with them and we have been guarding it in Jerusalem ever since. But I was asked to bring it back, for the Occitan has caught the eye of the King of France. Even now, his armies are rolling towards her.' He paused. 'The Flame must go home to save our lands and somebody must take it there.'

Parsifal was quite cheerful again. 'I'll come with you.'

Sir Bernard shook his head gently. 'I shall not be going now. My son, the journey is yours. You must take it.'

Parsifal paled. 'Alone?' The Flame's blue eye seemed to wink at him not warmly, as a friend, but coldly, like his grandmother used to when he forgot to kneel with her serving dish. It was not going to be a comfortable companion. 'Why can't I stay here and somebody at home could light another one?'

'Parsifal, Parsifal,' his father admonished. 'Could your hero King Arthur use just any sword?'

'No.'

'We cannot have just any Flame. This Flame was lit specially for us at the moment of Christ's death, when the veil of the Temple was rent in two. You know how it came to us.'

'Through Christ's mother. She brought it.' He could still hear his mother's voice, telling him the story, though her voice was fainter now. She had been dead for too many years. He looked at the Flame again but it did not seem motherly to him. It seemed to be eyeing him up, assessing him, judging him. It was a relief to turn back to his father.

'Tonight,' Bernard was saying, 'Richard's men will be focussed on his wound so it will be easier to leave and once

we've got you out of this keep, you must ride home as fast as you can.'

'I can't! I can't go by myself!' Parsifal quailed.

Bernard looked at his son, and his heart was filled with foreboding. He looked at Arnaud, who shrugged. 'We have to try,' he said.

Bernard stiffened his voice. 'You must be brave,' he said. 'You must find the right leader to whom to give the Flame, somebody who will keep the Occitan free in the paths of righteousness.' He wanted to say something more, but his voice choked.

Parsifal wanted to help him. 'Couldn't we –' he said.

Bernard shook his head. 'No more. I will join you if I can, otherwise we will meet again in heaven.'

Parsifal cried out, 'Heaven is so far away!'

'Yes,' Bernard said, 'but far away from suffering, too. I shall be happy there. Come now. That fat pony of yours may be useful yet.'

The other knights slowly gathered round, dead men walking. 'God bless you and God keep the Occitan,' said Arnaud sincerely, and kissed the boy, and all the other knights did likewise. Lastly, Parsifal shook hands with the arbalester.

Then he walked with his father back down the steps, right into the fetid damp of the foundations. Counting the steps all the time, for the only light came from the box, Bernard at last stopped and pushed open a trap door just large enough for a badger or a small boy. He held his son again for a moment, but awkwardly, almost overcome.

Parsifal tried to say something, but his father interrupted.

He did not want to prolong this parting. 'God speed,' he said and pushed the box containing the Blue Flame out first and Parsifal after it.

'Father,' he heard the boy whisper, poised on the edge of darkness.

He could not remain silent. 'Yes?'

'When we meet again, can I have a proper sword? I should like to name mine Unbent, after yours.'

'I expect so, if you deserve it.'

It was the traditional response of a father to a son and it made them both smile fleetingly. There was more scrabbling, then Parsifal's voice came again, muffled this time.

'Father?'

'Yes, my son.'

'Nothing. I just wanted to hear your voice again.'

Bernard was glad Parsifal could not see his tears. 'Go now, Parsifal, and may God go with you.'

He waited, sealing his son in his heart, as Parsifal made his final scramble and emerged in the shadow of a buttress. There was no clamour, and Bernard felt his way up the steps to the ground floor. After checking the heavy bars slotted across the main entrance, bars which would be no match for Richard's battering ram, he began to climb again.

At the top of the keep, Arnaud was watching as the pony wound its way into the forest. The guards were not interested in a small boy not even big enough for a wolf's dinner. If they thought about him at all, they thought he must be somebody's page collecting leaves for his bed.

On his way past the camp, Parsifal picked up one of the lanterns that were loosely gathered together in a pile, and

once he was out of sight, he removed the ordinary wick and placed the tiny box inside instead. The flame shone, a pinprick of midnight blue on the end of a pole. Bernard held his breath. The colour was a beacon. Why had he not told Parsifal to cover it? But the boy was not stupid. He saw the danger at once. The light wobbled and then turned an odd shade of yellow. By flattening some leaves against the box's sides, the colour was completely disguised. Bernard gave muttered thanks and only when the light had disappeared entirely did he stop looking.

Eleven days later, Richard the Lionheart, King of England, Duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, died. He had left quite specific instructions that the man who had loosed the deadly crossbow bolt was not to be harmed. His orders were disobeyed.

And Parsifal? He began with such good intentions. He made a proper pocket from thin animal skin so that the Flame's blueness could always be disguised from curious eyes and kicked his fat pony south. But he found what he did not expect: the Occitan was already filled with flames. These flames were red and carried above them the sign of the cross.

How had this happened? Two ways of worshipping God in the Occitan and neither sect willing to countenance the other. On one side, the supremely powerful Catholics, and on the other, the Cathars, whom the Catholics designated 'heretics', fewer in number but just as fanatical, each convinced that God was on their side and their side only. It was the Catholics who lit the funeral pyres and the Cathar heretics who offered themselves as martyrs to the flames, both sides joyfully grasping at these most unholy deaths as a

sign of their own righteousness. And the worst of it? Each side claimed the helpless Occitan for themselves.

What was Parsifal, still so young and with nobody to guide him except his fat pony and a Flame, to do? What would you have done? He did what came naturally. He hid. He wanted to be heroic. He dreamed of being heroic. He dreamed of saving the Occitan. But he had no idea how to go about it. To which faction did the Flame belong? He didn't know and the Flame wasn't saying.

At last, almost starving, he was taken in by an exhausted widow, who sold the pony to pay for his keep and put him to work. Parsifal thought his heart would break as his pet was led away. But the Flame, sympathetic for once, dried his tears and kept him alive when he ran off into the freezing mists of the Pyrenees. It was the Flame who led him to the old Moslem shepherd with whom he found solace.

It was no life for a knight, but then Parsifal, although now of an age for knighthood, with no armour, no squire and not even a pony any more, could hardly count himself as special although, curiously, his hands remained unblemished by wind and weather. The old man was kind and Parsifal made himself useful, helping to guide the flocks over the passes into Catalonia for the winter, and back into the Occitan for the summer. Soon, just like his shepherd master, he could tell, just by sniffing, from which valley the wind was gathering strength. The shepherd had no cause for complaint and asked few questions. His only interest was sheep. He noted Parsifal's curious hands, and the box from which strange colours emanated, sometimes in sparks, sometimes in small tongues. But the boy's hands were quick and deft and the

shepherd respected secrets, and besides, whatever it was that the box contained kept away the bears and wolves better than any guard dog. Its mystery, like most mysteries involving Christians, bothered him as little as the rain or the cold.

Forty years passed. The Cathars and the Catholics bickered and fought. The armies of France rolled to and from the Occitan, never extinguishing it, never leaving it alone, the French kings eyeing it up as a man eyes up a sliver of sugar for his breakfast table. People spoke of the Blue Flame, wondered about it, but it never appeared.

The old Moslem died and Parsifal lost all sense of himself and the boy he had been. He turned vagrant, wandering after flocks of sheep that were not in his charge, stealing food and, occasionally, when a shepherd was idle or asleep, secretly helping a ewe to lamb or saving a cow in a stream. He was quite aimless but still the Flame burned on.

Every now and again he fell in with knights who had turned bandit, dispossessed by stronger forces than their own, or those who had returned from foreign wars and found their castles overrun. He heard them sing the Song of the Flame that Occitanians loved to sing. Sometimes he would sing with them. But though these knights, as their voices rose in chorus, pledged allegiance to the territories they thought of as their own, their conversation was less uplifting. Most wanted to use the Flame as an instrument of revenge against those they felt had wronged them. Parsifal did not linger long with these knights. None of them, it seemed to him, had much interest in the paths of righteousness.

Only once did he show the Blue Flame in public. It was in Foix after he had helped another shepherd drive the flock

down to sell. He had seen some knights taking their ease outside a tavern. These knights were not bandits, they were simply old and battle-wearied. One had lost an eye. Another had a wound that would not heal. Yet they were joking gently together, loyal companions-in-arms who had seen each other at their best and at their worst. Parsifal crept close to them. These men had the kind of companionship for which he himself longed. His throat knotted with shame at his tattered appearance and tattered dreams. He left the knights and ran back into the market place, pulling the Blue Flame right out of its pouch. It seemed annoyed, sinking down until less than a pinprick, but Parsifal shook it until it glittered, even in the sunlight, and then held it up over his head. 'Who loves the Occitan? Who will lead her in the paths of righteousness?' he called out, above the hurly-burly of the market.

What did he expect? That a selfless hero would rush across the street and claim it?

Of course people stared at him. The Flame in the possession of a madman with pale hands and a beard as thick as a blackberry bush was too much to take in. It must be a hoax. Only not everybody thought so. When Parsifal turned, he found himself directly in the path of three Inquisitors. These stern-faced, white-robed Dominican friars were the Catholics' most lethal weapons against the Cathars. It was the Dominicans who claimed to be purifying the Occitan for God and themselves by burning at the stake everybody who disagreed with them. From where do such ideas spring? From some thick, black sediment at the bottom of men's stomachs.

The leading Inquisitor saw the Blue Flame straight away and his eyes almost doubled in size. He gripped his hands

together and came to an abrupt halt, his whole attention glued to the tiny slice of colour. He shook his head. This could not really be *that* Flame, not really the Flame of the Occitan. And yet he catapulted forward, his hand thrust out.

Parsifal was never sure how he escaped. He only knew that he ran faster than he had ever run, and once off the main road, he scrambled and climbed, crept and crawled over hill after rocky hill and through valley after silken valley, until he could no longer feel the Inquisitor's breath on his back. Only then did he sleep, enfolded in a crag that protected him, like a shield.

He remained hidden for weeks, getting up only when forced to by hunger or thirst, whilst the Flame, more agitated now than it had ever been, both comforted and taunted him, for whilst it reminded him of his father, it also reminded him of duty unfulfilled.

It was weeks before he found the strength to emerge, and it was on this day, as the French armies were once again rumbling south, determined in one last, grinding attempt to wear the Occitan down, that a lumpy, shaggy dog appeared, its tail wagging and its mouth full of rabbit. The dog and Parsifal regarded each other, and when the dog dropped the rabbit and licked those pale hands, Parsifal chose to take this as a kind of sign. Men clutch at anything when the map of their life has fragmented. The dog, on the other hand, whose life did not depend on a map, quickly regretted the rabbit and when the pale hands did not give it back, gave Parsifal a very old-fashioned look and yawned.



Near the Town of Castelneuf, Amouroix

Now we are in the spring of 1242, and by the time Brees – for that was the name of the dog – returned and flopped down in his original position, Yolanda and Raimon were lying on their backs in a patch of scrub amid the trees that rose in an uneven, tufty carpet above a small lake into which water from the mountain flowed, sometimes in a trickle, sometimes in a torrent, according to the seasons. The seasons are a comfort when trouble comes, don't you think? They remind us that everything passes, not that Yolanda, at this moment, wanted anything to pass.

April, when the lake swelled with snowmelt, was the time of year she loved best. Her birthday party was just over a month away and as she and Raimon lazily spotted the butterflies beginning to flutter in nervous green and orange clouds above the grass, they were discussing, as they did every year, what the entertainments should be. 'Jugglers and fire-eaters,' Yolanda was saying, 'and perhaps, since I'll be fourteen, we

might have a mock tournament and dancing until after dawn. I'll get to lead the Song of the Flame and then I expect Gui and Guerau will have new romances for us to hear –'

'All about you, naturally,' Raimon glanced sideways at her, his irises encircled by rims so thickly black that there was only a sliver of deep hazel between them and the pupils in which Yolanda's reflection shone. He was going to dig her in the ribs, but didn't. Instead, he raised his arm to pull gently at Brees's long tan fringe. This dog was not a beauty. An unintended mixture of savage alaunt – a burly, broadheaded greyhound type, bred for gripping prey and pulling it down – and a shorter-legged speckled running hound, he was all untidy limbs and matted fur. When he panted, as he was doing now, his tongue flipped sideways as though he was permanently licking something just out of reach. 'We should teach Brees to howl a birthday tune.' Raimon avoided the tongue, leapt to his feet and threw back his head so that his slick of dark hair cascaded down his back. 'Yawooooooool,' he cried, and laughed when Brees threw back his own head and joined in. Raimon's laughter was not just a response to Brees's attempt at a duet. He laughed also because where once Yolanda's presence had been as unremarkable to him as trout in the stream or purple orchids in the meadows, now it made him jumpy as a lynx. Brees was a very useful diversion.

Though they had scarcely spent a day apart since Yolanda had learnt to walk, Raimon had, over this last long winter, during which he had celebrated his fifteenth birthday in rather less grand style than was planned for Yolanda's, become aware of her in quite new ways. He could not pinpoint when this awareness had begun. He only knew that

instead of Yolanda just being a friend, his greatest friend, who happened to be a girl, a person so close to him he could no more describe her than describe his own hand, he now noticed the cleft in her chin, the shape of the freckled arc that bridged her nose, the way she scrunched up her legs when she was listening to a sad story and the sudden creasing of her top lip when her brother Aimery teased her in a way she did not like. This was quite unlike the way it creased when she smiled and the edges of her eyes, brown and slightly speckled, slanted downwards, giving her smile, however happy its genesis, an unexpected wistfulness.

Raimon had not looked for these things. He never even described them to himself. It was just that this year, by the time his father had thrown open the doors of the weaving shed to let out the stale winter air, he knew she had become an astonishment to him, and half longed and half dreaded that she would notice.

'Don't,' she was saying now, rolling over and catching at his legs. 'You'll scare the sheep.' She shook herself like a wild pony, her hair a tawny, billowing mane, as uncombed as her dress was unwashed.

'Too late,' said Raimon, although he did stop howling and Brees, finding himself howling solo, soon lost interest and began to sniff for more rabbits. Raimon and Yolanda climbed onto an outcrop of rock and together looked down over the treetops. There, sure enough, were the sheep, running towards the lake in an uneven snowy tide.

'Peter will be cross with us,' said Yolanda. It was a statement rather than a regret. The shepherd was always cross, particularly if Brees appeared. He disliked Yolanda's dog

intensely, for Brees was not reliable with the flock. It was not that he ever meant to kill the sheep, it was just that sometimes, particularly if out alone and the flock was bleating, a red mist would descend and his pulse would quicken in response. Then he was hunter and the sheep were prey and he heard nothing but roar of the chase in his ears and tasted sweet blood on his tongue.

Twice Yolanda had had to beg for his life when he had appeared, tell-tale bits of fleece still sticking to his teeth. Twice her father, Count Berengar, lord of all my land, had reprieved him. The third time, when Yolanda knew that there would be no more indulgence, Raimon had hidden the sheep's body and, shortly after dusk, had taken Brees out and tied him to a ram. All night long, the dog had been buffeted and butted and Raimon had sat and watched as the lesson was painfully learnt. In the morning, it was a chastened Brees who, after Raimon had tended to his bruises, was returned to his mistress. He had not chased the sheep since although the instinct still lurked. However, Brees also seemed to know that in some odd way Raimon had saved his life, and in the great hall, if Raimon was serving the count, as he sometimes did when Aimery was away, he would often lie at his saviour's feet, staring up at him with ardent eyes. This amused Yolanda very much and she would whisper to Raimon, tickling his ear with herby breath, that it was a good thing the dog could not speak, or he would surely give their secret away. His eyes would crinkle, and hers would crinkle in return. Both pairs of feet would seek Brees under the table. The dog would splay himself out. This was his heaven.

Today, however, the sheep were running of their own

accord, too far away for the dog to give them more than a nostalgic passing thought and anyway, at this moment, there was another smell on the wind.

Raimon, alerted by Brees standing solid and four square, turned to inspect the horizon himself. The weather was clear, so he could see not just the near hills but the far as well. At first he could see nothing unusual, then, below the horizon but at the top of one of the gorges where I, the Amouroix, melt into my neighbour, a small plume of grey rose before thinning out and vanishing. He frowned. It was surely nothing, just farmers burning timbers from winter storm damage. The spring saw many such fires. But as he watched, plumes continued to rise and then it was not their increasing number that bothered him so much as the smell – just tiny snatches of it carried over. Surely it wasn't possible to smell anything at all from here? He shifted and put his hand on the dog's neck. Brees was bristling. He could smell it too. The smell was real and it was foul. Raimon had smelled it before, six years ago, when he and his father had been walking home from his grandmother's funeral. When his father would not tell him what the smell was, Raimon had known that it was not burning wood.

'Come, Yolanda,' he said, rather more abruptly than he meant to. 'It's time we went back.'

But Yolanda was also looking to the west. 'That's a lot of smoke.' Clouds of it were forming. She, too, was sniffing, but without fear. 'It's not in Amouroix, and even if it is, it's a long way from Castelneuf.'

'Quite a long way.'

She nudged him. 'Well, whatever it is, it needn't trouble us,

need it?' That was another thing he had begun to notice about her, the way she often deferred to him, as if he knew better than she did. How long had she been doing that? He didn't know but hoped she would never stop. He gave a grunt, which she took for agreement, just as he meant her to. He didn't want to alarm her and anyway, it was probably nothing to do with the new rebellion against French King Louis, and anyway, even if it was, there was no need for concern. There had been so many rebellions against the greedy French, and none had ever touched the Amouroix. What was more, everybody said that Raymond of Toulouse, who had inherited the mantle of leadership for the whole Occitan, could weather the latest storm.

Yolanda turned her back to the smoke. 'I wonder if we could get that famous fortune-teller from Poitiers to come.' She was still mentally organising her party. A shadow now stippled Raimon's face that was nothing to do with King Louis. He did not like it when Yolanda mentioned Poitiers. To him, Castelneuf was enough. Why did Yolanda even have to mention other towns, miles away? What could they offer which was not better found here?

Yolanda watched him. She could follow his thoughts quite easily even when he didn't speak. It was always funny to her when, afterwards, he felt he must explain himself. She never told him there was no need, and anyway, just lately, she, too, had felt the new jumpiness between them. She knew it alarmed him, and she hugged this knowledge to herself, for it did not alarm her at all, it just made her blood run quicker, her legs run faster and the world seem full of new possibilities.

And anyway, how could Raimon think that she'd really

prefer anything to the excitement of clinging together on the back of one of her father's packhorses, his legs curled round warm flanks, hers curled round his, with the wind whipping their eyes. Under Raimon's light hands and her lark's voice, the animal would lose itself in their makebelieve and become a destrier, tossing its mane and arching its neck, with Brees providing some doggy heavy infantry in its wake. Sometimes they pretended to be the saviours of the Amouroix, beating back a French king, or an ogre – they were interchangeable since neither seemed very real. Sometimes they were the King and Queen of the Occitan. In the summer, they would find a spot where they believed no other humans had ever trodden and, sinking down on a cushion of scented blossom, Raimon would turn the clouds into fantastical animals, or they would lie together on green stones behind the heavy curtain of a waterfall, gloriously deafened by the thunder until they could stand the noise and slime and chill no longer. And they danced. How they danced. When they danced, they never spoke because they didn't need to. If she liked to wonder about Poitiers, or even Paris, it was only because she was naturally curious about other lives, other halls, other music, whole other worlds completely different to mine, worlds of which she sometimes got a glimpse when visiting knights passed through.

She began to run and her belt, which actually belonged to another dress, finally frayed in two and dropped off. She didn't bother to retrieve it. 'Let's swim,' she yelled. She knew that would wash away the shadows and the smoke.

'The water'll still be freezing.' Raimon was grinning again. 'Even Brees'll yelp.'