

THE CATHEDRAL OF THE SEA

By

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Translated from the Spanish by

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PART ONE

CHAINED TO THE LAND

The year 1320

Bernat Estanyol's farm-house

Navarcles, in the principality

of Catalonia

Bernat realised nobody was looking in his direction, and glanced up at the clear blue sky. The weak late September sun played on the faces of his guests. He had put so much time and effort in preparing the feast that only bad weather could have spoilt it. He smiled up at the autumn sky, and when he looked down again, his smile broadened as he listened to the hum of happy voices in the cobbled courtyard that ran alongside the animal pens at the foot of his farm-house.

His thirty or so guests were in high spirits: the grape harvest that year had been magnificent. All of them- men, women, and children, had worked

from dawn to dusk harvesting the grapes, then treading them, without allowing themselves a single day's rest.

It was only when the wine was ready to ferment in its barrels and the grape skins had been stored to distil their liquor during the slack days of winter that the peasant farmers could celebrate their September feast days. And it was then that Bernat Estanyol had chosen to be married.

Bernat surveyed his guests. Many of them had got up at dawn to walk the often great distances separating their properties from the Estanyol farmhouse. They were all enjoying themselves now, talking about the wedding, the harvest, or perhaps both things at once. Some of them, including a group where his Estanyol cousins and the Puig family were sitting, burst out laughing at a ribald comment directed towards him. Bernat felt himself blushing, and pretended to take no notice; he did not even want to think about what they might be laughing at. Scattered around the courtyard he could make out the Fontany family, the Vilas, the Joaniquets, and of course the bride's relatives; the Esteve family.

Bernat looked out of the corner of his eye at his father-in-law. Pere Esteve was promenading his immense belly, smiling at some of those invited, saying a few words to others. Then he turned towards Bernat, who found himself forced to wave acknowledgement for the hundredth time that

day. He looked for his in-laws and saw them at different tables among the throng. They had always been slightly wary of him, despite all his attempts to win them over.

He raised his eyes to the sky once more. The harvest and the weather seemed to be on his side. He glanced over at the farm-house, and then again at the wedding-party, and pursed his lips. All at once, in spite of the merry hubbub, he felt quite alone. It was barely a year since his father had died; his sister Guiamona, who had gone to live in Barcelona after her marriage, had not bothered to reply to the messages he had sent her, even though he longed to see her again. After his father's death, she was the only direct family he had left...

That death had made the Estanyol farm-house the centre of interest for the entire region: matchmakers and parents with unmarried daughters had paid endless visits. Prior to that, no-one had paid them much attention, but with demise of the old man – whose rebellious nature had earned him the nickname of 'madcap Estanyol', had rekindled the hopes of those who were anxious to see their daughter married off to the richest peasant farmer for miles around.

'You're old enough now to get married,' they said, to encourage him.
'Exactly how old are you?'

‘Twenty-seven, I think,’ he replied.

‘That’s almost an age to have grand-children,’ they scolded him.

‘What are you doing all alone in your farm-house? You need a wife.’

Bernat listened to them all patiently. He knew their advice would inevitably be followed by the mention of some candidate or other, a girl stronger than an ox and more beautiful than the most incandescent sunset.

None of this was new to him. Madcap Estanyol, whose wife had died giving birth to Guiamona, had tried to find him a wife, but all the suitable parents had fled the farm-house cursing the demands he made regarding the dowry any future daughter-in-law was supposed to bring. Little by little, interest in Bernat had waned. The older he grew, the more extreme his father became: his rebelliousness bordered on real madness. Bernat concentrated on looking after his lands and his father; now all of a sudden at twenty-seven he found himself alone and besieged on all sides.

Yet the first visit Bernat received when the old man still had to be properly laid to rest was of a different nature: it was from the steward of his feudal lord, the Lord of Navarcles. ‘How right you were, father!’ Bernat said to himself when he saw the steward and several soldiers ride up to his farm.

‘As soon as I die,’ the old man had repeated time and again to him in his brief moments of lucidity, ‘they’ll be here. You must show them my

will.’ With that, he pointed to the stone beneath which, carefully wrapped in leather, he had left the document containing the last will and testament of Madcap Estanyol.

‘Why is that, father?’ Bernat had asked the first time he heard him.

‘As you know,’ the old man replied, ‘we lease these lands from our lord, but I am a widower, and if I had not drawn up my will, he would have the right to claim half of all our goods and livestock. That is known as the intestate right; there are many others that benefit the lords of Catalonia, and you must make sure you are aware of them all. They will be here, Bernat; they will come to take what is rightfully ours. It’s only by showing them my will that you can get rid of them.’

‘What if they take it from me?’ asked Bernat. ‘You know what they are like...’

‘Even if they did, it is registered in the official account books.’

The steward and his lord’s anger soon became common knowledge in the region. It only served to make the only son’s position look all the more attractive, as he had inherited all his father’s possessions.

Bernat could clearly recall the visit the man who was now his father-in-law had paid him before the grape harvest. Five salaries???, a pallet and a

white linen shift: that was the dowry he was offering for his daughter Francesca.

‘Why would I want a white linen shift?’ Bernat asked, not even pausing as he forked the hay on the ground floor of his farm-house.

‘Look,’ was Pere Esteve’s only reply.

Leaning on his pitchfork, Bernat looked in the direction Pere Esteve was pointing: the doorway of the stable. He let the pitchfork fall from his hands. Francesca was silhouetted against the light, dressed in the white linen shift...Her whole body shone through, just waiting for him!

A shudder ran down Bernat’s spine. Pere Esteve smiled.

Bernat accepted his offer. There and then, in the stable, without even going up to the young girl, but never once taking his eyes off her. He realised it was a hasty decision, but so far he had not regretted it: there Francesca was in front of him now, young, beautiful, strong. His breathing quickened. That very night...What might she be thinking? Did she feel as he did? Francesca was not sharing in the other women’s animated chatter: she sat quietly beside her mother, answering their jokes and laughter with forced smiles. Their looks met for a moment. She flushed and looked down, but Bernat could tell from the way her breast heaved that she was nervous too.

Her white linen shift thrust itself once more into Bernat's fantasies and desire.

'I congratulate you!' he heard a voice say behind him, and felt a hand clapping him on the shoulder. It was his father-in-law: 'Look after her for me,' he added, following Bernat's gaze and pointing to the girl, who did not know where to put herself. 'If the life you have in store for her is as magnificent as this feast...this is the most marvellous banquet I have ever seen. Not even the Lord of Navarcles could lay on such a treat.'

In order to please his guests, Bernat had prepared forty-seven loaves of wheat bread: the peasants' usual fare of barley, rye or spelt was not good enough for him. Only the whitest bread, as white as his bride's shift, was good enough for him! He had carried all the loaves to be baked at the Navarcles castle, calculating that, as usual, two loaves would be enough to pay for the privilege. The baker's eyes opened wide when he saw this display of wheaten bread, then narrowed to inscrutable slits. He demanded seven loaves in payment, and Bernat left the castle cursing the laws that prevented peasants like him having their own bread ovens at home, or forges, or bridle and harness workshops...

'You're right there,' he told his father-in-law, banishing the unpleasant memory from his mind.

They both stared down the courtyard. Some of his bread might have been stolen, but there was still the wine his guests were drinking - the best, stored away by his father and left to age for several years- or the salt roasted pig, the vegetable stew seasoned with chickens, and above all the four lambs, split down the middle and roasting slowly on the embers on their spits, oozing fat and giving off an irresistible smell.

All of a sudden the women started bustling about. The stew was ready, and the bowls the guests had brought were soon filled. Pere and Bernat sat at the only table laid in the courtyard. The women rushed to serve them, ignoring the four empty seats. The rest stood or sat on wooden benches and began to eat, still casting glances at the lambs roasting under the watchful eye of some of the cooks. Everyone was drinking wine, conversing, shouting and laughing.

‘Yes, a real feast,’ Pere Esteve concluded, between mouthfuls.

Somebody proposed a toast to the bride and groom. Everybody joined in.

‘Francesca!’ shouted her father, raising his cup to her as she stood next to the roasting lambs.

Bernat stared hard at her, but again she hid her face.

‘She’s feeling nervous,’ Pere said in excuse, winking at him.

‘Francesca, daughter!’ he shouted once more. ‘Come on, drink with us! Make the most of it now, because soon we’ll be leaving- almost all of us, that is.’

The guffaws following this remark only intimidated Francesca still further. She half-raised a cup she had been given, but did not drink from it. Then she turned away from the laughter and went on supervising the cooking lambs.

Pere Esteve clinked his cup against Bernat’s, spilling some of his wine. The other guests followed suit.

‘I’m sure you’ll see to it she forgets her bashfulness,’ Pere Esteve said out loud, for all to hear.

This led to more guffawing, this time accompanied by sly comments that Bernat preferred to ignore.

In this merry way, they set to work on large amounts of wine, pork and chicken stew. Just as the women were withdrawing the lambs from the fire, a group of the guests suddenly fell silent and began to look over to the outskirts of the woods on the edge of Bernat’s land, beyond the ploughed fields and the dip in the land that the Estanyol’s had used to plant the vines that provided them with such excellent wine.

Within a few seconds, the whole wedding party had fallen silent.

Three men on horseback had appeared among the trees. A larger number of men in uniform were walking behind them.

‘What can he want here?’ Pere Esteve muttered to himself.

Bernat followed the newcomers with his gaze as they drew closer across the fields. The guests began to whisper among themselves.

‘I don’t understand,’ Bernat said eventually, also in a low voice. ‘He never comes here: it is not on his way to the castle.’

‘I don’t like the look of this at all,’ said Pere Esteve.

The procession drew slowly closer. As the figures approached, the laughter and remarks the horsemen were making took over from the merriment that had been in evidence in the courtyard; everyone could hear them. Bernat surveyed his guests: some of them could not bear to look, and stood there staring at the ground. He searched for Francesca, who was in the midst of a group of women. The lord of Navarcles’ powerful voice rang out. Bernat could feel anger swelling inside him.

‘Bernat! Bernat!’ Pere Esteve hissed, clutching his arm. ‘What are you doing here? Run and greet him.’

Bernat leapt up and ran to receive his lord.

‘Welcome to this your house,’ he panted when he had reached the men on horseback.

Llorenc* de Bellera, Lord of Navarcles, pulled on his horse’s reins and came to a halt in front of Bernat.

‘Are you Estanyol, son of the madman?’ he asked disdainfully.

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘We were out hunting, and were surprised to hear your feast on the way back to our castle. What are you celebrating?’

Behind the horses, Bernat caught a glimpse of the soldiers, loaded down with their prey: rabbits, hares, some wild cocks. ‘It’s your visit that demands an explanation,’ he would have liked to reply. ‘Or did the castle baker tell you about the white loaves I had baked?’

Even the horses, with their big round eyes focused on him, seemed to be awaiting his response.

‘My marriage, your lordship.’

‘And who are you marrying?’

‘The daughter of Pere Esteve, my lord.’

Llorenc de Bellera sat silently, looking down at Bernat over his horse’s neck. The other mounts snorted impatiently.

‘Well?’ barked Llorenc de Bellera.

‘My bride and I,’ said Bernat, trying to hide his discomfort, ‘would be very honoured if your lordship and his companions would care to join us.’

‘We’re thirsty, Estanyol,’ was all the lord of Navarcles deigned to reply.

The horses moved on without any need of prodding. Head down, Bernat walked alongside his lord’s horse back to the farm-house. All the guests had gathered at the entrance to the court-yard to receive him: the women stared down at the ground, and the men had all removed their caps. A low murmur greeted Llorenç de Bellera when he halted before them.

‘That’s enough,’ he said as he dismounted. ‘Carry on with your banquet.’

The guests complied, turning round without a word. Several of the soldiers came up and took care of the horses. Bernat went with his new guests to the table where Pere and he had been seated. Their bowls and cups had disappeared.

The Lord of Navarcles and his two companions sat at the table. Bernat withdrew several steps as the newcomers began to talk amongst themselves. The serving women brought pitchers of wine, loaves of bread, chicken stew, plates of salt pork, and freshly roasted lamb. Bernat looked for Francesca, but she was nowhere to be seen. His gaze met that of his father-in-law, who

was standing in a group of the guests. Pere Esteve lifted his chin towards the serving women, shook his head almost imperceptibly, and turned on his heel.

‘Go on with your celebration!’ Llorenç de Bellera bawled, waving the leg of lamb he was holding. ‘Come on, enjoy yourselves!’

Silently, the guests began to approach the roasted lambs for their share. Unnoticed by the lord and his friends, one group stood their ground: Pere Esteve and a few others. Bernat caught a glimpse of the white linen shift in the midst of them, and hurried over.

‘Get away from here, you idiot,’ his father-in-law snapped.

Before Bernat could say a word, Francesca’s mother thrust a platter of lamb in his hands and whispered:

‘Wait on the lord, and don’t go anywhere near my daughter.’

The peasants began to devour the lamb, still without saying a word, but from time to time glancing anxiously up at the table where the Lord of Navarçles and his two friends were laughing and shouting. The soldiers were resting some way away.

‘Before we could hear loud laughter from here,’ the lord of Bellera complained. ‘So loud it drove away all our game. Come on, I want to hear you laugh!’

Nobody obeyed.

‘Country bumpkins,’ he told his companions, who burst out laughing again.

The three of them satisfied their appetites with lamb and chunks of white bread. The platters of salted pork and chicken stew were pushed to one side of the table. Bernat ate standing nearby, occasionally glancing anxiously out of the corner of his eye at the gaggle of women surrounding Francesca.

‘More wine!’ the lord of Bellera demanded, raising his cup. ‘Estanyol,’ he shouted, seeking him out among the guests. ‘Next time you pay me the taxes on my land, I want you to bring this wine, not the vinegar your father has been fooling me with until now.’

Bernat was facing the other way. Francesca’s mother thrust a pitcher of wine into his hands. ‘Estanyol, where are you?’

Llorenc de Bellera pounded the table just as a serving woman was about to serve him more wine. A few drops sprinkled his clothes. By now, Bernat was close to him, and his friends were laughing at the accident. Pere Esteve lifted his hands to his face.

‘Stupid old crone! How dare you spill the wine?’ The woman lowered her head in submission, and when the lord made to buffet her with his hand,

she fell to the ground. Llorenc de Bellera turned to his friends, cackling at the way the old woman was crawling away from them. Then he became serious once more, and addressed Bernat. 'So there you are, Estanyol. Look what your clumsy old women have done! Are you trying to insult your lord and master? Are you so ignorant you don't realize that your guests should be served by the lady of the house? Where is the bride?' he asked, looking round at everyone in the court-yard. 'Where is the bride?' he repeated, when there was no response.

Pere Esteve took Francesca by the arm and led her to Bernat at the table. She was trembling from head to foot.

'Your lordship,' said Bernat. 'I present you my wife, Francesca.'

'That's better,' said Llorenc, openly staring her up and down. 'Much better. From now on, you are to serve us the wine.'

The Lord of Navarcles sat down again, and raised his cup. Searching for a pitcher, Francesca ran to serve him. As she poured out the wine, her hand shook. Llorenc de Bellera grasped her wrist and steadied it. When his cup was full, he pushed her to serve his companions. As she did so, her breasts almost brushed against his face.

'That is how wine should be served!' the lord of Navarcles bellowed. Standing next to him, Bernat clenched fists and teeth.

Llorenc de Bellera and his friends went on drinking: they kept calling out for Francesca to come and refill their cups. The soldiers laughed together with their lord and his friends whenever Francesca had to lean over the table to serve them. She tried to choke back her tears, and Bernat could see a trickle of blood on her hands where she had been digging in her nails as hard as she could. Each time she had to pour out the wine in this way, the guests fell silent and looked away.

‘Estanyol,’ Llorenc de Bellera finally shouted, clutching Francesca by the wrist. ‘In accordance with one of my rights as your lord, I have decided to lie with your wife on her first night of marriage.’

His friends raucously applauded the decision. Bernat leapt towards the table but before he could do anything, the lord’s two companions, who had seemed hopelessly drunk, sprang up, hands on the pommels of their swords. Bernat stopped in his tracks. Llorenc stared at him, smiled, then laughed out loud. The girl implored Bernat’s help with her eyes.

Bernat stepped forward, but felt one of the swords pressed against his stomach. As the lord dragged her to the outside staircase of the farmhouse, Francesca still looked at him beseechingly. When he grabbed her round the waist and lifted her over his shoulder, she cried out.

The lord of Navarcles' friends sat down again and took up their drinking again. The soldiers stood guard at the foot of the staircase to prevent Bernat making any move.

The sky was still a deep, dark blue.

After some minutes that to Bernat seemed endless, Llorenc de Bellera appeared at the top of the staircase. He was sweaty, and was trying to fasten his hunting doublet.

'Estanyol,' he shouted in his stentorian tones as he walked past him towards the table, 'now it's your turn. Doña Caterina,' he said, referring to his new young bride for the sake of his companions, 'is weary of bastard children of mine turning up all over the place. And I'm weary of her snivelling. So do your duty as a good Christian husband!' he said, turning and addressing Bernat.

Bernat lowered his head, and then walked slowly and reluctantly up the staircase. Everyone was staring at him. He went into the first floor, a large room that served as kitchen and dining-room, with a big hearth on one wall that was topped by a wrought-iron chimney piece. As he dragged himself over to the ladder that led to the bedroom and granary on the second floor, he could hear his footsteps echoing on the wooden boards. Unsure

what to do, he stuck his head into the gap at the top of the ladder, and peered around him.

His chin was level with the boards, and he could see Francesca's clothing scattered all over the floor. The white linen shift, her family's pride and joy, was torn to shreds. He climbed to the top of the ladder.

He found Francesca curled up in a ball. She lay completely naked on the new pallet, which was spattered with blood. She was staring blankly into space; covered in sweat, her body was scratched and bruised. She did not move.

'Estanyol!' Bernat heard Llorenc de Bellera shout from down below. 'Your lord is waiting.'

Bernat could not stop himself retching, then vomiting onto the stored grain until he felt as if his whole insides had come up. Francesca still did not move. Bernat ran out of the room. When he reached the bottom of the staircase, his head was filled with the most revolting sensations. He ran blindly into the imposing shape of the Lord of Navarcles.

'It would seem that the husband has not consummated his marriage,' Llorenc de Bellera commented to his companions.

Bernat had to raise his head to face him.

'No...your lordship, I could not do it,' he stammered.

Llorenc de Bellera fell silent.

‘Well, if you are not up to the task, I’m sure that one of my friends- or my soldiers, will be more ready for it. I told you, I don’t want any more bastards.’

‘You have no right...!’

The wedding guests looking on shuddered at what the consequences of this outburst might be. With one hand, the lord of Navarcles seized Bernat by the throat. He squeezed, and Bernat was soon gasping for breath.

‘How dare you...? Are you thinking of using your lord’s legitimate right to lie with the bride to later come and make claims for your bastard child?’ Llorenc buffeted Bernat before letting him go. ‘Is that what you’re after? I’m the one who decides what the rights of vassalage are. And nobody else! Are you forgetting that I can punish you how and when I choose?’

He landed another blow on Bernat’s cheek, sending him crashing to the ground.

‘Where’s my whip?’ he shouted angrily.

The whip! Bernat had been only a child when, together with a crowd of others, he had been forced to accompany his parents to watch the public flogging that the Lord of Navarcles had inflicted on a poor wretch, guilty of an offence of which nobody knew for certain. The memory of the sound of

the leather whip on that man's back resounded just as it had on the day and night after night throughout his childhood. No-one who had been there that dare dared as much as make a move; no-one did so now. Bernat got to his knees, and looked up at his feudal lord, standing there like a great boulder, his hand held out for someone to pass him his whip. Bernat recalled the raw flesh of the other man's back: a bleeding mass that not even all the lord's ferocity had succeeded in tearing any more strips from. Bernat crawled back towards the staircase, unseeing. He was trembling like a child caught up in a dreadful nightmare. Still no-one moved or spoke. Still the sun shone in the clear blue sky.

'I'm so sorry, Francesca,' Bernat whispered after he had struggled back up to the top of the ladder, pushed by one of the soldiers.

He undid his hose and knelt beside her. Glancing down at his limp member, he wondered how on earth he was going to fulfill his lord's command. With one finger, he began to caress Francesca's bare ribs.

She did not react.

'I have...we have to do this,' Bernat urged her, gripping her wrist to turn her towards him.

'Don't touch me!' Francesca cried, coming out of her stupor.

'He'll flay me alive!' Bernat protested, staring at her naked body.

‘Leave me alone!’

They struggled, until finally Bernal had seized both her wrists and forced her upright. Francesca was still fighting him.

‘Someone else will come!’ He whispered. ‘Another man will be the one to force you!’

Her eyes opened wide in an accusing glare.

‘He’ll have me flayed!’ Bernat repeated.

Francesca still struggled to beat him off, but he flung himself on top of her. Her tears were not enough to dampen the sudden rush of desire he felt as he rubbed against her naked body. As he penetrated her, she gave a shriek that reached the highest heaven.

Her cries satisfied the soldier who had followed Bernat and was witnessing the whole scene shamelessly, head and shoulders thrust into the room.

Before Bernat had finished, Francesca gradually stopped resisting, and her howls turned to sobs. Bernat reached his climax to the sound of his wife’s tears.

Lorenc de Bellera also heard the screams from the second-floor window. Once his spy had confirmed that the marriage had been

consummated, he called for the horses and he and his sinister troop left the farm-house. Desolate and terrified, most of the wedding guests did the same.

Calm returned to the courtyard. Bernat was still sprawled across his wife. He had no idea what to do next. He realised he was still gripping her shoulders, and lifted his hands away. As he did so, he collapsed again on top of her. He pushed himself up and saw himself staring into Francesca's eyes, which seemed to be staring straight through him. Any movement he made would press his body against hers once more, and he could not bear the thought of doing her more harm. He wished he could levitate then and there so that he could separate his body from hers without even touching it.

Eventually, after what seemed an eternity of hesitation, Bernat pushed himself away and kneeled down beside her. He still did not know what to do for the best: to stand up, lie down beside her, get out of the room, or to try to justify himself...He could not bare to see Francesca's naked body, cruelly exposed on the pallet. He tried to get her to look at him, but her eyes were blank again. He looked down, and the sight of his own naked sex filled him with shame.

'I'm sorr...'

He was interrupted by a sudden movement from Francesca. Now she was staring straight at him. Bernat looked for some slight glimmer of understanding, but there was none.

‘I’m sorry,’ he repeated. Francesca was still staring at him without the slightest sign of reacting. ‘I’m so sorry. He...he was going to flay me alive,’ he stammered.

In his mind’s eye, Bernat saw the Lord of Navarcles standing with his arm outstretched, calling for the whip. He searched Francesca’s face: nothing. What he saw in her eyes frightened him still further: they were shouting in silence, as loudly as the screams she had uttered when he had flung himself on her.

Unwittingly, as though trying to make her understand he knew what she was going through, as if she were a little girl, he stretched out his hand towards her cheek.

‘I...’ he started to say.

His hand never reached her. As it approached, the muscles of her whole body stiffened. Bernat lifted his hand to his own face, and burst into tears.

Francesca lay there, still staring into space.

After a long while, Bernal stopped crying. He got to his feet, put on his hose, and disappeared down the ladder to the floor beneath. As soon as she could no longer hear his footsteps, Francesca got up and went over to the chest that was the only furniture in the room, to find some clothes. When she was dressed, she gently picked up all the things that had been torn from her, including the precious white linen shift. Folding it carefully so that the tears did not show, she stowed it in the chest.

Francesca wandered about the farm-house like a lost soul. She carried out all the domestic chores, but never said a word. The sad atmosphere she created soon spread to the farthest corners of the Estanyol family home.

Bernat had several times tried to excuse himself for what had happened. Once the terror of his wedding day had receded, he had tried to explain what he had felt more clearly: his fear of the lord's cruelty, the consequences for both of them of refusing to obey his orders. Bernat repeated 'I'm sorry' over and over again to Francesca, but she simply stared at him in silence, as though waiting for the moment when, without fail, Bernat's argument led him to the same crux as ever: 'If I hadn't done it, another man would have come...' At that point, he always fell silent; he knew there was no excuse, and his rape of her rose every time like an

insurmountable barrier between them. The apologies, excuses, and silences slowly healed the wound in Bernat, if not in his wife, and his feelings of remorse were tempered by the daily round of work. Eventually, Bernat even resigned himself to Francesca's stubborn refusal to talk.

At daylight every day, when he got up to start a hard day's grind, he would stare out of their bedroom window. He had always done this with his father, even in his last illness, the two of them leaning on the thick stone window-sill and peering up at the heavens to see what the day held in store. They would look out over their lands, clearly defined by the different crops growing in each field and extending right across the huge valley beyond the farm-house. They watched the flight of the birds, and listened closely to the noises the animals were making in their pens. These were moments of communion between father and son, and between the two of them and their land: the only occasions when Bernat's father appeared to recover his sanity. Bernat had dreamt of being able to share similar moments with his wife, to be able to tell her all he had heard from his father, and his father from his own father, and so on for generations past.

He had dreamt of being able to explain that these fertile lands had in the distant past been free of rent or service, and belonged entirely to the Estanyol family, who had worked them with great care and love. The fruits

of their labours were entirely theirs, without them having to pay tithes or taxes or to give homage to any arrogant, unjust lord. He had dreamt of being able to share with her, his wife and the mother of the future inheritors of those lands, the same sadness that his father had shared with him when he told the story of how it was that, three hundred years later, the sons she would give birth to would become serfs bound to someone else. Just as his father had told him, he would have liked to have been able to tell her proudly how three hundred years earlier, the Estanyol family, along with many others in the region, had won the right to keep their own weapons as free men, and how they had used those weapons when they had responded to the call from Count Ramon Borrell and his brother Ermengol d'Urgell and gone to fight the marauding Saracens. How he would have loved to tell her how, under the command of Count Ramon, several Estanyols had been part of the victorious army that had crushed the Saracens at the battle of Albesa, beyond Balaguer, on the plains of Urgel. Whenever he had time to do so, his father would recount him that story, tears of pride in his eyes; tears that turned to ones of sadness when he spoke of the death of Ramon Borrell in the year 1017. This was when, he said, the peasant farmers had become serfs again. The count's fifteen-year old son had succeeded him, and his mother, Ermessenda de Carcassonne, became regent. Now that their external

frontiers were secure, the barons of Catalonia – the ones who had fought side by side with the farmers – used the power vacuum to exact fresh demands from the peasants. They killed those who resisted, and took back ownership of the lands, forcing their former owners to farm them as serfs who paid a part of their produce to the local lord. As others had done, the Estanyol family bowed to the pressure; but many families had been savagely put to death for resisting.

‘As free men,’ his father would tell Bernat, ‘we fought alongside the knights against the Moors. But we could not fight the knights themselves, and when the Counts of Barcelona tried to wrest back control of the principality of Catalonia, they found themselves up against a rich and powerful aristocracy. They were forced to bargain- always at our expense. First it was our lands, those of old Catalonia, then it was our freedom, our very lives...our honour. It was your grandfather’s generation- Bernat’s father would tell him, his voice quavering as he looked out over the fields- who lost their freedom. They were forbidden to leave their land. They were made into serfs, people bound to their properties, as were their children, like me, and their grandchildren, like you. Our life...your life, is in the hands of the lord of the castle. He is the one who imparts justice and has the right to abuse us and offend our honour. We are not even able to defend ourselves! If

anybody harms you, you have to go to your lord so that he can seek redress; if he is successful, he keeps half of the sum paid you.'

After this his father would invariably recite all the lord's rights. These became etched in Bernat's mind, because he never dared interrupt his father once he had started on the list. The lord could call on a serf's aid at all times. He had the right to a part of the serf's possessions if the latter should die without a will, or when his son inherited, if he had no offspring, if his wife committed adultery, if his farm-house were destroyed by fire; if he were forced to mortgage it, if he married another lord's vassal; and of course, if he sought to leave it. The lord had the right to sleep with any bride on her wedding night; he could call on any woman to be wet-nurse for his children, and on their daughters to serve as maids in the castle. The serfs were obliged to work on the lord's lands without pay; to contribute to the castle's defence; to pay part of what they earned from the sale of their produce; to provide the lord and any companions he brought with lodging in their homes, and to provide them with food during their stay; to pay to use the woods or grazing land; to pay also to use the forge, the oven, and the windmill that the lord owned; and to send him gifts at Christmas and other celebrations.

And what of the Church? Whenever Bernat's father asked himself that question, his voice would fill with anger.

‘Monks, friars, priests, deacons, canons, abbots, bishops,’ he would say: ‘every single one of them is just as bad as the feudal lords oppressing us! They have even forbidden us from joining holy orders to prevent us escaping from the land and our enslavement to it!’

‘Bernat,’ his father would warn him whenever the Church was target for his wrath, ‘never trust anyone who says he is serving God. They will use sweet words on you, and sound so educated you will not understand the half of it. They will try to convince you with arguments that only they know how to spin, until they have seduced your reason and your conscience. They will present themselves as well-meaning people whose only thought is to save you from evil and temptation, but in fact their opinion of us is written in the books and as the soldiers of Christ they say they are, they simply follow what is written there. Their words are excuses, and their reasoning is of the sort you might use with a child.’

‘Father,’ Bernat remembered he had once asked him: ‘what do their books say about us peasants?’

His father stared out at the fields, up to the line of the horizon dividing them from the place he did not care to gaze on, the place in whose name all these monks and clergymen spoke.

‘They say we’re animals, brutes, people who cannot understand courtly manners. They say we are horrible, ignoble and an abomination. They say we have no sense of shame, that we are ignorant. They say we are stubborn and cruel, that we deserve no honorable treatment because we are incapable of appreciating it, that we only understand the use of force. They say...’

‘Are we really all that, father?’

‘My son, that is what they wish to make of us.’

‘But you pray every day, and when my mother died...’

‘I pray to the Virgin, my son, to the Virgin. Our Lady has nothing to do with friars or priests. We can still believe in her.’

Yes, Bernat Estanyol would have loved to lean on the windowsill in the morning and talk to his young wife; to tell her all his father had told him, and to stare out over the fields with her.

Throughout the rest of September and all October, Bernat hitched up his oxen and ploughed the fields, turning over the thick crust of earth so that the sun, air and manure could bring fresh life to the soil. After that, with Francesca’s help, he sowed the grain; she scattered the seed from a basket,

while he first ploughed and then flattened the ground with a heavy metal bar once the seed was planted. They worked without talking, in a silence disturbed only by his shouts to the oxen, which echoed round the whole valley. Bernat thought that working together might bring them closer, but it did not: Francesca was still cold and indifferent, picking up her basket and scattering the seed without so much as looking at him.

November arrived, with its yearly tasks: fattening the pig for the kill, gathering wood for the fire and to enrich the soil, preparing the vegetable patch and the fields that were to be sown in Spring, pruning and grafting the vines. By the time Bernat returned to the farm-house each day, Francesca had seen to the domestic work, the vegetables, the hens and the rabbits. Night after night, she served him his meal without a word, then went off to bed. Every morning, she rose before he did, and by the time he came down, breakfast was waiting for him on the table, and his noon-day meal was in his satchel. As he ate, he could hear her tending to the animals in the stable next door.

Christmas came and went, and then in January they finished harvesting the olives. Bernat had only enough trees to cover the needs of his house and what he had to give his lord.

After that, Bernat had to kill the pig. When his father had been alive, the neighbours, who rarely visited, were certain never to miss the day the pig was butchered. Bernat remembered those occasions as real celebrations; the pigs were slaughtered and then everyone had plenty to eat and drink, while the women cut up the carcass.

The Esteve family: father, mother, and two of the brothers, turned up one morning. Bernat went out into the courtyard to greet them; his wife hung back.

‘How are you, daughter?’ her mother asked.

Francesca said nothing, but accepted her embrace. Bernat studied the two women: the mother anxiously hugged her daughter, expecting her to put her arms round her too. But Francesca simply stood there stiffly, without responding. Bernat looked over at his father-in-law.

‘Francesca,’ was all Pere Esteve said, his eyes still looking beyond her shoulder. Her two brothers raised their hand in greeting.

Francesca went down to the pigsty to fetch the pig; the others stayed in the courtyard. No-one said a word; the only sound to break the silence was a stifled sob from Francesca’s mother. Bernat felt an urge to console her, but when he saw that neither her husband nor her sons made any move, he thought better of it.

Francesca appeared with the animal, which was struggling as if it knew the fate awaiting it. She brought it up to her husband in her usual silent way. Bernat and the two brothers upended it and sat on its belly. The pig's squeals could be heard through all the Estanyol valley. Pere Esteve slit its throat with a sure hand, and the men sat while the women collected the spouting blood in their bowls, changing them as they rapidly filled. Nobody looked at each other.

No-one even had a cup of wine while mother and daughter sliced up the meat once the animal had been slaughtered.

Wither their work done and the onset of night, the mother again tried to embrace her daughter. Bernat looked on anxiously, to see if this time there was some kind of reaction from his wife. There was none. Her father and brothers said farewell without raising their eyes from the ground. Her mother came up to Bernat.

'When you think the time for the birth has come,' she said, taking him to one side, 'send for me. I don't think she will.'

The Esteve family set out on the road back to their farm. That night, as Francesca climbed the ladder to bed, Bernat could not help staring at her stomach.

At the end of May, on the first day of harvest, Bernat stood looking over his fields, sickle on shoulder. How was he going to harvest the grain all on his own? For a fortnight now, after she had twice fainted, he had forbidden Francesca to do any hard work. She had listened to him without replying, but obeyed. Why had he done that? Bernat surveyed the vast fields waiting for him. After all, he thought, what if the child were not his? Besides, women were accustomed to giving birth in the fields while they worked, but when he had seen her collapse like that not once, but twice, he could not help but feel concerned.

Bernat grasped the sickle and started to reap the grain with a firm hand. The ears of corn flew through the air. The sun was high in the mid-day sky, but he did not so much as stop to eat. The field seemed endless. He had always harvested it with his father, even when the old man had not been well. Harvesting seemed to revive him. 'Get on with it, son!' his father would encourage him, 'we don't want a storm or hail to flatten it all.' So they reaped row after row. When one of them grew tired, the other came to the fore. They ate in the shade and drank his father's good wine. They chatted and laughed together. Now all Bernat could hear was the whistle of the blade through the air, the swishing noise as it chopped the stems of corn.

Scything, scything, and as it sped through the air, it seemed to be asking:
just who is the father of the child to be?

Over the following days, Bernat harvested until sunset; sometimes he even carried on working by moonlight. When he returned to the farm-house, his meal was on the table waiting for him. He washed in the basin and ate without any great appetite. Until one night, when the wooden cradle he had carved that winter as soon as Francesca's pregnancy became obvious, started to rock. Bernat glanced at it out of the corner of his eye, but went on drinking his soup. Francesca was asleep upstairs. He turned to look directly at the cradle. One spoonful, two, three. It moved again. Bernat stared at it, the soup-spoon hanging in mid-air. He looked all round the room to see if he could see any trace of his mother-in-law, but there was none. Francesca had given birth on her own...and then gone to bed.

He dropped the spoon and stood up. Halfway to the cradle, he turned around and sat down again. The doubts about whose child it was assailed him more strongly than ever. 'Every member of the Estanyol family has a birth mark by their right eye,' he remembered his father telling him. He had one, and so did his father. 'Your grandfather was the same,' the old man had assured him, 'and so was your grandfather's father...'

Bernat was exhausted: he had worked from dawn to dusk for days on end now. He looked again over at the cradle.

He stood up a second time, and walked over to look at the baby. It was sleeping peacefully, hands outstretched, covered in a sheet made of torn pieces of a white linen shift. Bernat turned the child over to see its face.

Francesca never even looked at her baby. She would bring the boy (whom they had called Arnau) up to one of her breasts, then change to the other. But she did not look at him. Bernat had seen peasant women breast-feeding and all of them, from the well-off to the poorest, either smiled, let their eyelids droop, or caressed their baby's head as they fed it. But not Francesca. She cleaned the boy and gave him suck, but not once during his two months of life had Bernat heard her speak softly to him, play with him, take his tiny hands, nibble or kiss him, or even stroke him. 'None of this is his fault, Francesca,' Bernat thought as he held his son in his arms, before taking him as far away as possible so that he could talk to him and caress him free from her icy glare.

The boy was his! 'We Estanyols all have the birthmark,' he re-assured himself whenever he kissed the purple stain close by Arnau's right eyebrow. 'We all have it, father,' he said again, lifting his son high in the air.

But that birthmark soon became something much more than a re-assurance to Bernat. Whenever Francesca went to the castle to bake their bread, the women there lifted the blanket covering Arnau so that they could check the mark. Afterwards, they smiled at each other, not caring that they were seen by the baker or the lord's soldiers. And when Bernat went to work in his lord's fields, the other peasants slapped him on the back and congratulated him, in full view of the steward overseeing their labours.

Llorenc de Bellera had produced many bastard children, but no-one had ever been able to prove his parentage: his word always prevailed over that of some ignorant peasant woman, even if among friends he would frequently boast of his virility. Yet it was obvious that Arnau Estanyol was not his: the lord of Navarcles began to notice sly smiles on the faces of the women who came to the castle. From his apartments, he could see them whispering together, and even talking to the soldiers, whenever Estanyol's wife came to the castle. The rumour spread beyond the circle of peasants, so that Llorenc de Bellera soon found himself the butt of his friends' jokes.

‘Come on, eat, Bellera,’ a visiting baron said to him with a smile:
‘I’ve heard you need to build your strength up.’

Everyone at table that day laughed out loud at the insinuation.

‘In my lands,’ another guest commented, ‘I do not allow any peasant to call my manhood into question.’

‘Does that mean you ban birthmarks?’ responded the first baron, who was the worse for wear from drink. Again, everyone burst out laughing, while Llorenc de Bellera gave a forced smile.

It happened in the first days of August. Arnau was sleeping in his cradle in the shade of a fig tree at the farmhouse entrance. His mother was going to and fro between the vegetable garden and the animal pens, while his father, keeping one eye all the time on the wooden cot, was busy leading the oxen time and again over the ears of corn to crush the precious grain that would feed them through the year.

They did not hear them arrive. Three horsemen galloped into the yard: Llorenc de Bellera’s steward and two others, all three armed and mounted on powerful war horses. Bernat noticed the horses were not wearing battle armour: they had probably not thought this necessary to intimidate a simple

peasant. The steward stayed in the background, while the other two men slowed to a walk, spurring their horses on to where Bernat was standing. Trained for battle, the two horses came straight at him. Bernat backed off, then stumbled and fell to the ground, almost underneath their huge hooves. It was only then that the horsemen reined their mounts in.

‘Your lord Llorenc de Bellera,’ shouted the steward, ‘is calling for your wife to come and breastfeed don Jaume, the son of your lady, doña Caterina.’ Bernat tried to scramble to his feet, but one of the riders urged his horse on again. The steward addressed Francesca in the distance. ‘Get your son and come with us!’ he ordered.

Francesca lifted Arnau from his cradle, and walked, head down, in the direction of the steward’s horse. Bernat shouted and again tried to get to his feet, but before he could do so, he was knocked flat by one of the horses. Each time he attempted to stand up, the same thing happened: the two horsemen were taking turns to knock him down, laughing as they did so. In the end, Bernat lay on the ground beneath the horses’ hooves, panting and dishevelled. The steward rode off. Followed by Francesca and the child. When he was no more than a dot in the distance, the two soldiers wheeled away and galloped after him.

Once quiet had returned to the farm-house, Bernat peered at the cloud of dust trailing off towards the horizon, and then looked over at the two oxen, stolidly chewing on the ears of corn they had been trampling over and over.

From that day on, although Bernat continued working with his animals and on the land, his thoughts returned constantly to his son. At night, he wandered around the farm-house recalling the childish breathing that spoke of life and the future, the creaking of the wooden slats of the cradle whenever Arnau moved, his shrill cry when he was hungry. He tried to discern his son's innocent smell in every corner of the house. Where might he be sleeping now? His cradle, the one Bernat had made with his own hands, was here. When finally Bernat succeeded in getting off to sleep, the silence would wake him with a start. He curled up on his pallet, listening hour after hour to the sounds of the animals down below that now were all the company he had.

Bernat went regularly to Llorenc de Bellera's castle to have his bread baked. He never saw Francesca: she was shut away to attend to doña Caterina and her son's unpredictable appetite. The castle, as his father had explained when the two of them had been obliged to come here together, had

started out as little more than a watchtower on the summit of a small hill. Llorenc de Bellera's forebears had taken advantage of the power vacuum following Count Ramon Borrell's death to build new fortifications, thanks to the forced labour of the serfs who lived on their ever-expanding territories. Around the keep a hodge-podge of buildings soon grew up, including the bakery, the forge, some new, more spacious stables, kitchens, and sleeping quarters.

The castle was more than a league away from the Estanyol farmhouse. On his first visits, Bernat heard no news of his son. Whenever he enquired, he always received the same reply: his wife and boy were in doña Caterina's private apartments. The only difference was that, whilst some of those he asked laughed cynically, others lowered their eyes as though ashamed to look the child's father in the eye. Bernat put up with their evasive answers for more than a month, until one day when he was leaving the bakery with two loaves of bean-flour bread, he ran into one of the scrawny blacksmith apprentices whom he had already questioned several times about his son.

'What do you know about my Arnau?' he asked again.

There was no-one else around. The lad tried to avoid him, as if he had not heard, but Bernat seized him by the arm.

‘I asked you what you know about my son Arnau.’

‘Your wife and son...’ the apprentice started with the usual formula, not lifting his eyes from the ground.

‘I know where he is,’ Bernat interrupted him. ‘I’m asking is if my Arnau is well and healthy.’

Still not looking at him, the lad started shuffling his feet in the sand. Bernat shook him roughly.

‘Is he well?’

When the apprentice still would not look him in the face, Bernat shook him even harder.

‘No!’ the lad finally admitted. Bernat loosened his grip so that he could look him in the face. ‘No,’ he said again.

‘What’s wrong with him?’

‘I can’t...we have orders not to tell you...’ the apprentice’s voice trailed off.

Bernat raised his voice, not caring whether a guard might hear.

‘What’s wrong with my boy? What’s wrong? Tell me!’

‘I can’t. We cannot...’

‘Would this change your mind?’ asked Bernat, offering him one of the loaves.

The lad's eyes opened wide. Without a word, he snatched the bread from Bernat's hands and bit into it as if he had not eaten in days. Bernat pulled him to one side, away from any prying eyes.

'What's the news about my Arnau?' he asked anxiously.

His mouth stuffed with bread, the apprentice looked at Bernat, then signalled for him to follow. They crept stealthily along the castle walls until they reached the forge. They crossed it and headed for the back, where the lad opened a door that led into a shed where equipment and tools were kept. He went in, and Bernat followed. As soon as he was inside, the boy sat on the floor and started to devour more bread. Bernat peered around the squalid room. It was stiflingly hot, but he could not understand why the apprentice had brought him there: all he could see were piles of tools and old bits of iron.

Bernat looked enquiringly at the boy. Chewing on the loaf, he pointed to one of the corners of the room, and waved Bernat to go and look there.

Abandoned and starved, his son lay on a pile of wooden planks in a broken wicker basket. The strips of white linen bound round him were filthy and in tatters. He was on the verge of death. Bernat could not stop himself uttering a strangled cry, that sounded hardly human. He snatched Arnau up

and pressed him against his chest. The infant responded only feebly, but he did respond.

‘The baron ordered your son be kept here,’ Berant heard the apprentice explain. ‘At first, your wife came several times a day, and soothed him by breastfeeding him.’ Bernat clutched the child to him, as if trying to breathe life into his tiny lungs. ‘One day, the steward came in after her,’ the boy went on. ‘Your wife fought him off, she shouted as loud as she could...I saw him, I was in the forge next door.’ He pointed to a crack in the wooden planks of the wall. ‘But the steward is a very strong man...When he was done with her, the lord and some soldiers came in too. Your wife was lying on the floor; the lord began to laugh at her. All of them did. Since that day, whenever your wife came to feed her child, there would be soldiers waiting at the door. She could not fight them all off. In the past few days, I have hardly seen her here. You see, the soldiers catch her as soon as she leaves doña Caterina’s apartments. She cannot even reach the forge. Sometimes the lord sees what they are doing, but all he does is laugh.’

Without a moment’s thought, Bernat lifted his shirt and pushed his son’s tiny body inside. He disguised the bulge by holding the other loaf of bread up against his chest. The infant did not even stir. As he made for the door, the apprentice rose to stop him.

‘The lord has forbidden it! You cannot...’

‘Out of my way, boy!’

The lad stepped in front of Bernat. Once again, he did not hesitate for a second: holding the baby and the loaf of bread in one hand, he snatched an iron bar from the wall and whirled round. Bernat caught the apprentice full on his head. He fell to the ground in the entrance to the store-room before he had time to utter a sound. Bernat did not even look at him; he went out and shut the door behind him.

He had no problem leaving Llorenc de Bellera’s castle. No-one could have suspected that beneath the loaf of bread he was hiding his son’s poor, abused body. It was only after he had emerged through the castle gate that he thought of Francesca and the soldiers. Indignantly, he reproached her for not trying to get in contact with him, to warn him of the danger their son was in, for not fighting for Arnau...Bernat cradled his son’s body, and thought of his wife being raped by the soldiers while his son was left to die on a pile of rotten planks.

How long would it take them to find the lad he had struck? Was he dead?

Had he shut the store-room door properly? As he strode back to his farm,

Bernat's mind was filled with questions. Yes, he dimly remembered he had shut the door.

As soon as he had turned the first bend on the twisting path that rose towards the castle, so that he was now out of sight, Bernat uncovered his son. His eyes were dull and lifeless, and he weighed even less than the loaf of bread! His arms and legs were so tiny! Bernat's stomach churned, and a lump came to his throat. Tears began to trickle down his cheeks. He told himself this was no time to cry. He knew they would set out in search of them, that they would set the dogs on them, but...what was the use of running away if the child did not survive? Bernat left the path and hid in some bushes. He kneeled down, left the loaf of bread on the ground, and lifted Arnau in both hands until he was level with his face. The baby hung there limply, his head lolling on one side. 'Arnau!' whispered Bernat. He shook him gently, over and over again. The baby's eyes seemed finally to be looking straight at him. His face streaked with tears, Bernat realised that the poor thing did not even have the strength to cry. He cradled him in one arm, then tore off a small piece of bread, wet it with his saliva, and brought it close to his son's mouth. Arnau did not react, but Bernat persisted until he managed to force a tiny piece of bread between his lips. Bernat waited. 'Swallow, son, swallow,' he begged him. His lips trembled when he saw

Arnau's throat contract almost imperceptibly. He crumbled some more bread and anxiously repeated the operation. Arnau swallowed seven more fragments.

'We'll get out of this, you'll see,' Bernat told him. 'I promise you.'

He returned to the path. Everything was still calm. That must mean they had not discovered the apprentice's body yet. For several moments, Bernat thought of Llorenc de Bellera: cruel, evil, implacable. How much pleasure he would get from hunting down an Estanyol!

'We'll get out of this, Arnau,' he repeated, setting off at a run towards his farm-house.

Never once did he look back, and when he reached the farm he did not allow himself even a moment's rest. Leaving Arnau in his cradle, Bernat picked up a sack and stuffed some flour and dried vegetables in it. He put in a wineskin filled with water, and another full of milk, then added salt meat, a bowl, a spoon and some clothing. Last came some coins he had kept hidden, a hunting knife and his crossbow. 'How proud father was of this crossbow!' he thought, feeling its weight in his hand. He had fought with it alongside Count Ramon Borrell in the days when the Estanyols were free men, he had always told Bernat when he was teaching him how to use it. Free! Bernat

strapped the child to his chest, and loaded up all the other things. He would always be a serf, unless...

‘As of now we are fugitives,’ he whispered to his son as he headed off towards the woods. ‘Nobody knows these forests like we Estanyols do,’ he told him when he had reached cover. ‘We have always hunted here.’ He pushed through the undergrowth until they came to a stream. He stepped down into the water until it was knee-height, then started walking against the current. Arnau had closed his eyes and was asleep, but Bernat went on talking to him: ‘The lord’s dogs are not very alert, they’ve been badly handled. We’ll go up to the top, where the woods are denser and no-one can hunt us on horseback. That means the lord and his friends have never been up there. They would get their fine clothes torn. As for the soldiers...why would they go up there to hunt? They get all they need by stealing from us. We can hide there, Arnau. I swear no-one will find us.’ He stroked his son’s head as he waded upstream.

In mid-afternoon he came to a halt. The woods had become so thick that their branches overhung the stream and blotted out the sky. He sat on a rock and looked down at his legs: the water had made them look white and wrinkled. It was only then that he realised how much they ached, but he did not care. He put down the sack and the crossbow and untied Arnau. The boy

had opened his eyes once more. Bernat diluted some milk in water, added flour, stirred the mixture and then brought the bowl up to the infant's lips. Arnau wrinkled his face up in disgust. Bernat wiped one of his fingers clean in the stream, dipped it into the mixture, and tried again. After several attempts, Arnau responded, allowing his father to feed him from his finger. Soon afterwards, he closed his eyes and fell fast asleep. All Bernat ate was a chunk of salted meat. He would have liked to rest, but he knew there was still a long way to go.

The Estanyol cave, his father had called it. Night had fallen by the time they reached it, after stopping once more for Arnau to have some food. The cave entrance was a narrow slit in the rocks, which Bernat, his father and grandfather used to close up with branches to protect them from storms or animals on the prowl.

Bernat lit a fire just inside the cave, then took a torch to make sure that no wild animal had chosen it for a lair. He settled Arnau on a pallet he made from his sack and some dry twigs, and fed him again. This time, the infant took the food gladly, and then fell into a deep sleep. Before he could eat more than a mouthful of meat, Bernat did the same. They would be safe from Llorenc de Bellera here, he thought as he closed his eyes and matched his breathing to that of his sleeping son.

No sooner had the master blacksmith told him of the discovery of his apprentice's dead body in a pool of blood, than Llorenc de Bellera galloped out of the castle with his men. Arnau's disappearance and the fact that his father had been seen in the castle pointed directly towards Bernat. Now he sat astride his horse in the Estanyol farm-house yard, and smiled when his soldiers informed him that to judge by the disorder inside, it looked as though Bernat had fled and taken his son with him.

'You were fortunate when your father died,' he growled, 'but now all this will be mine! Go and find him!' he shouted to his men. Then he turned to his steward and commanded: 'Draw up a list of all the goods, chattels and animals on this property. Make sure it's all there, down to the last grain of corn. Then join the search for Estanyol.'

Several days later, the steward appeared before his lord in the castle keep.

'We've searched all the other farm-houses, the woods and the fields. There is no sign of Estanyol. He must have gone to hide in a town, perhaps in Manresa or...'

With a wave of his hand, Llorenc de Bellera silenced him.

‘We will find him. Inform the other barons and our agents in the towns. Tell them one of my serfs has escaped and is to be arrested.’ At that moment, doña Caterina and Francesca appeared. His son Jaume was in Francesca’s arms. When Llorenc de Bellera saw her, his face fell: she was of no use to him any more. ‘My lady,’ he said to his wife, ‘I cannot understand how you permit a strumpet like this to give suck to a son of mine.’ Doña Caterina gave a start. ‘Did you not know that your wet-nurse is the whore of all the soldiers in the castle?’

Doña Caterina seized her son from Francesca.

When Francesca learned that Bernat had fled with Arnau, she wondered what could have become of her son. The Estanyol family lands and properties had all passed into the hands of the lord of Navarcles. She had no-one to turn to for help, and all the while the soldiers continued to take advantage of her. A crust of dry bread, a rotten vegetable or two: that was the price of her body.

None of the many peasant farmers who visited the castle even deigned to look at her. If she tried to draw near them, they chased her away. After her mother had publicly disowned her outside the castle bakery, she did not dare return to her family home. She was forced to remain in the vicinity of the castle, one of the army of beggars fighting over the scraps left by the walls.

It seemed her fate was to be passed from one man to the next, and her only nourishment was whatever leftovers the soldier who had chosen her that day cared to give her.

The month of September arrived. Bernat had already seen his son smile, and crawl around the cave and the ground outside. But their provisions had almost run out, and winter was approaching fast. It was time for them to leave.

4

The city lay spread at his feet.

‘Look, Arnau,’ Bernat said to his son, who was sleeping peacefully strapped to his chest. ‘There’s Barcelona. We’ll be free there.’

Ever since fleeing with Arnau, Bernat had been unable to get the city out of his mind. It was the one great hope all the serfs had. Bernat had heard them talk about it when they were forced to go and work on the lord’s land, to repair his castle walls, or any other of the services he demanded. When he heard them whispering carefully so as not to be overheard by the steward or

soldiers, Bernat had been merely curious. He was happy working on his farm, and would never have abandoned his father, or fled with him. Yet now, after losing his lands, as he watched his son asleep inside the Estanyol cave, what the others had said came back to haunt him.

‘If anyone manages to live in Barcelona for a year and a day without being arrested by the lord,’ he remembered someone saying, ‘they can acquire the status of residents, and become free men.’ All the other serfs had fallen silent. Bernat had looked at them: some had closed their eyes and clenched their teeth; others were shaking their head in disbelief; still others were smiling up at the sky, dreaming of breaking the chains that tied them to the land.

‘So all you have to do is live in the city?’ asked one of the youngsters who had been staring skywards. ‘Why can people become free men by living in Barcelona?’

The eldest serf confirmed what had been said:

‘Yes, you only need to live in Barcelona for a year and a day.’

Eyes shining, the young lad urged him to explain further.

‘Barcelona is a very rich city. For many years now, from the days of Jaime the Conqueror to those of Pedro the Great, all our kings have asked the city for money to wage war, or for their courts. The citizens of Barcelona

granted them the money, but in return won special privileges. One day when he was at war with Sicily, Pedro the Great himself had them all written down in a charter...' the old man hesitated: '*Recognoverunt procures*, I believe it is called. That is where it is laid out how we can become free men.

Barcelona needs workmen, people who are free to work.'

The next day, the youth did not appear for work on the Lord of Navarcles' lands. Nor the day after. His father was there, but he did not say a word. Then, three months later, the youth was dragged back in chains, with the threat of the whip at his back; even so, all the other serfs thought they could see a gleam of pride in his eyes.

From the summit of the Sierra de Collserola, on the old Roman road between Ampurias and Tarragona, Bernat gazed down at freedom...and the sea! He had never even imagined, let alone set eyes on, that huge, seemingly endless expanse. He had heard from traders that Catalonia was the master of lands beyond the waves, but...this was the very first time he had been confronted with something he could not see the far end of. 'Beyond that mountain. After you cross that river...' he had always been able to point to the spot in the distance that a stranger was asking him about. Now he scanned the horizon line, standing silently as he took it all in, gently

caressing the unruly curls that had grown on Arnau's head since they had been in hiding.

Then he turned his attention to the land by the shore. He could see five ships close in, near the island of Maians. This was another novelty: until that day, Bernat had only seen drawings of ships. To his right, he saw the mountain of Montjuic, which also swept down to the sea, and was surrounded by fields and plains; then the city of Barcelona itself. From the low promontory of the *mons* Taber in the centre, hundreds of buildings spread out in all directions: low houses built one on top of another, but also magnificent palaces, churches, and monasteries...Bernat wondered how many people lived there, because all of a sudden, the buildings came to an end: the city was like a beehive crammed inside walls, with open fields beyond. There were forty thousand people living there, Bernat recalled someone telling him.

'How is anyone going to find us amongst forty thousand people?' he mused, looking down at Arnau. 'You'll be a free man, my son.'

Bernat was certain they could hide in the city. He would look for his sister. But first he had to get in through a city gate. What if the Lord of Bellera had sent out a description of him? That birthmark of his...But during the three nights of his walk down from the hills he had been devising a plan.

He sat on the ground and picked up a hare he had shot with his crossbow. He slit its throat and let the blood drip onto the small pile of sand he had cupped in his hand. He stirred blood and sand together, and as the mixture dried, spread it around his right eye. Then he put the hare back in his sack.

As soon as he could feel that the mixture had dried, and he could no longer see out of his eye, he set off down the hill towards the Santa Anna gateway, on the northernmost side of the western wall. Lots of people were lined up to get into the city. Arnau was awake by now, and Bernat carried on stroking his head as he slipped in among the crowd, dragging his feet as he did so. A barefoot peasant bent double under an enormous sack of turnips turned towards him. Bernat smiled at him.

‘A leper!’ shouted the peasant, dropping his sack and jumping out of his way.

To his astonishment, Bernat saw the whole line of people in front of the gate rushing to one side or the other, leaving the track littered with sacks, food, a couple of carts and several mules. Even the blind men clustered around the Santa Anna gateway began to stir.

Arnau started to cry, and Bernat saw some of the soldiers at the gate draw their swords, while others made to close the heavy wooden doors.

‘Go to the lazaretto!’ someone shouted at him.

‘But it’s not leprosy!’ Bernat protested. ‘I simply got a branch in my eye! Look!’ He lifted his arms and waved them about. Then, carefully placing Arnau on the ground, he started to take off his clothes. ‘Look!’ he repeated, showing everybody his strong, healthy body, with no signs of disease or wounds. ‘Look! I’m a peasant farmer, but I need a doctor to cure my eye, or otherwise I won’t be able to work.’

An official pushed one of the soldiers towards him. He came to a halt a few paces from Bernat and surveyed him.

‘Turn round,’ he said, gesturing with his finger.

Bernat did as he was told. The soldier looked him up and down, then shook his head to the official. Another man at the gateway pointed with his sword towards the bundle at Bernat’s feet.

‘What about the boy?’

Bernat bent down to pick Arnau up. He stripped off his clothes with his right side pressed against him, then held him up horizontally, holding him by the side of his head so that no-one would spot the birthmark.

Looking back at the gate, the soldier shook his head once more.

‘Cover that wound,’ he said, ‘if you don’t, you won’t get anywhere in the city.’

The line reformed outside the gate, which swung open. The peasant with the turnips picked up his sack again, avoiding looking at Bernat.

Bernat passed through the gateway with one of Arnau's shirts covering his right eye. The soldiers followed him with their gaze, but made no move to follow him. Leaving the Santa Anna church on his left, he followed the rush of people into the city. He turned right into the plaza Santa Anna, looking down at the ground the whole time. As the peasants spread out through the streets, gradually Bernat saw fewer and fewer bare feet, or rope and leather sandals, until all at once he found himself staring at a pair of legs covered in flame-red stockings, with tight-fitting shoes, made entirely of some fine material, that ended in such long points that at the end of each of them was a tiny golden chain which led back to the ankles.

Bernat raised his eyes, and found himself staring at a man wearing an elaborate hat. He was dressed in a black robe shot through with gold and silver threads, a belt also decorated with gold, and leather straps sparkling with pearls and other precious stones. Bernat stood there open-mouthed, but the man looked past him as if he did not even exist.

Bernat hesitated, lowered his eyes once more, then gave a sigh of relief. The man had not given him so much as a second look, so he continued on his way down towards the cathedral, which was still under construction.

Bit by bit, he plucked up the courage to look around. Nobody seemed to pay him any attention. He stood watching the workmen swarming round the cathedral: some were hewing stone, others were climbing the tall scaffolding that covered the building, still more were hauling on ropes to lift blocks of stone...Arnau began to whimper, demanding his attention.

‘Tell me,’ he said to a passing workman, ‘how can I find the potters’ quarter?’ He knew his sister Guiamona was married to one.

‘Carry on down this street,’ the man said hastily, ‘until you reach the next square, the Plaza Sant Jaume. There’s a fountain in the middle, there you turn right and continue until you come to the new wall, at the Boqueria gate. Don’t go out into the Raval neighborhood. Instead, walk alongside the wall until you reach the next gateway, Trentaclus. That’s where you’ll find the potters.’

Bernat struggled to remember all these different names but just as he was about to ask the man to repeat them, he discovered he had already disappeared.

‘Carry on down this street to the Plaza Sant Jaume,’ he whispered to Arnau. ‘That much I remember. And once we’re in the square, we have to turn right again...that’s it, isn’t it, son?’

Arnau always stopped crying when he heard his father’s voice.

‘Now what do we do?’ Bernat said out loud. They were in a different square, the Plaza Sant Miquel. ‘That man only mentioned one square, but we can’t have made a mistake.’ Bernat tried to ask a couple of passersby, but none of them stopped. ‘Everyone is in such a hurry,’ he complained to his son. At that moment, he caught sight of a man standing by the entrance to...a castle? ‘Ah, there’s someone who doesn’t seem to be rushing anywhere...Begging your pardon,’ he said, touching the man’s black cloak from behind.

Even Arnau, strapped tightly to his father’s chest, seemed to give a start when Bernat jumped back as the man turned round.

The old Jewish man shook his head wearily. He knew that Bernat’s reaction was the result of the Christian priests’ fiery sermons.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

Bernat could not help staring at the red and yellow gorget on the old man’s chest. Then he peered inside what he had at first thought was a fortified castle. Everyone going in and out were Jews! And they all wore this distinguishing mark. Was it forbidden to talk to them?

‘Did you want something?’ the old man repeated.

‘How...how do I find the potters’ quarter?’

‘Carry on straight down this street,’ said the old man, pointing the direction. ‘That will take you to the Boqueria gate. Follow the wall down towards the sea, and at the next gate you’ll find the neighborhood you’re looking for.’

In fact, the Church had only forbidden carnal relations with the Jews; that was why it forced them to wear the gorget, so that nobody could claim not to have realised who they were consorting with. The priests always railed against them, and yet this old man...

‘Thank you, friend,’ said Bernat with a timid smile.

‘Thank you,’ the old Jewish man replied. ‘But in future, take care that no-one sees you talking to one of us...let alone smiling at us.’ His lips twisted in a sad grimace.

At the Boqueria gate, Bernat found himself caught up in a crowd of women who were buying offal and goat’s meat. He watched them examining the wares and bargaining with the stallholders. ‘This is the meat that gives our lord all his problems,’ Bernat muttered to his son, and then laughed at the thought of Llorenc de Bellera. How often had he heard him threatening the shepherds and the cattlemen who supplied Barcelona with meat! But he never dared go any further, because anyone taking livestock to the city had the right to graze them wherever they liked in all Catalonia.

Bernat skirted the market and walked down to the Trentaclaus gate. The streets here were wider, and as he drew closer to the gate, he saw dozens of pots, bowls, jars, and bricks drying in the sun in front of the houses.

‘I’m looking for Grau Puig’s house,’ he told one of the soldiers guarding the gate.

The Puig family had been neighbours of the Estanyols. Bernat well remembered Grau, the fourth of eight starving children who could never get enough to eat from their meagre landholding. His mother had a special affection for them, because their mother had helped give birth to Bernat and his sister. Grau was the brightest and hardest-working of them all; that was why, when Josep Puig received a kinsman’s offer for one of them to become a potter’s apprentice in Barcelona, it was Grau he chose. Grau was ten years old at the time.

But if Josep Puig found it hard to feed his family, it was going to be impossible for him to find the two bushels of white flour and the ten SUELDOS his relative was demanding in return for taking on Grau for his five years’ apprenticeship. Added to which were the two SUELDOS that Llorenc de Bellera demanded in order to free a serf from his obligations, and

the clothes Grau would need for the first two years of his apprenticeship: the master potter had only agreed to supply what was necessary for the last three.

This was what brought Josep Puig to the Estanyol farm-house together with Grau, who was a few years older than Bernat and his sister. Old man Estanyol listened closely to Puig's proposition: if he endowed his daughter with the list of things he outlined and offered them to Grau at once, he promised his son would marry Guiamona as soon as he reached the age of eighteen, and was a qualified craftsman. The old man studied the boy: sometimes, when Grau's family was in dire need, he had come to lend a hand in their fields. The boy had never asked for payment, but Estanyol had always made sure he went home with some vegetables or grain. He trusted him. He accepted the offer.

After five years' hard work as an apprentice, Grau became a qualified craftsman. He was still bound to the master potter, who was sufficiently pleased with him to start paying him a wage. When he reached eighteen, he kept his promise and married Guiamona.

'My son,' his father said to Bernat. 'I've decided to give Guiamona a fresh dowry. There are only two of us, and we have the best and most fertile lands in the region. They might need the money.'

‘Father,’ Bernat interrupted him, ‘why do you think it’s necessary to give me an explanation?’

‘Because your sister has already received her dowry, and you are my heir. The money is yours by right.’

‘Do as you see fit.’

Four years later, when he was twenty-two, Grau sat the public examination which took place in front of four officers of the guild. He made his first pieces for them: a water-jug, two plates and a bowl. The four men looked on closely, and then unanimously granted him the title of master potter. This allowed him to open his own workshop in Barcelona, and of course to use his own stamp, which was to be put on every piece of pottery made in his workshop, in case there were any complaints about his work. To honour the meaning of the word Grau in Catalan, he chose the outline of a mountain as his stamp.

Grau and Guiamona, who by now was pregnant, moved into a small, one-storey house in the potters’ quarter. By royal decree, this was situated on the western edge of the city, in the land between the new wall built by King Jaime I and the ancient Roman fortifications. They used Guiamona’s dowry to buy the property, having saved it for just such an occasion.

It was there, with the pottery workshop and their living quarters sharing the same space as the kiln and the bedrooms, that Grau began his career as a master potter. It was a time when the expansion of Catalan trade was bringing about a revolution among the potters, calling for a specialisation that many of them could not accept.

‘We’re going to make only jugs and storage jars,’ declared Grau, ‘that’s all.’ Guiamona glanced at the four masterful pieces he had made for his examination. ‘I’ve seen lots of traders,’ he went on, ‘begging for jars to sell their oil, honey or wine in. And I’ve seen lots of potters turn them away on the spot because their kilns were full of complicated tiles for a new house, bright crockery for a noble, or an apothecary’s pots.’

Guiamona ran her fingers over the masterpieces he had created. How smooth they were to the touch! When Grau had triumphantly presented them to her after passing his examination, she had imagined that she would be surrounded with similar beautiful pieces. Even the guild officers had congratulated Grau, because he had shown he was a true master of his craft: the decorations of zig-zag lines, palm leaves, rosettes, and fleur-de-lys on the water jug, the two plates and the bowl, displayed a wealth of colour on a white tin glaze background: the coppery green so typical of Barcelona that every master potter had to use, but also violet manganese, black iron, cobalt

blue, and antimony yellow. Each line or design was of a different shade. Guiamona could scarcely wait for the pieces to be fired, in case the clay cracked. As a finishing touch, Grau applied a layer of clear lead glaze which made them entirely waterproof. Guiamona could still feel how smoother they were. But now...all her husband was going to make were storage jars.

Grau went up to her. 'Don't worry,' he said to calm her fears. 'I'll make more pieces like them just for you.'

Grau's calculation had proved correct. He filled the yard in front of his humble workshop with jugs and storage jars, and soon the traders of the city became aware that in Grau Puig's workshop they could find everything they wanted. No longer would they have to beg for favours from arrogant master craftsmen.

As a result of this, the building that Bernat and little Arnau came to a halt outside was very different to that first tiny workshop. What Bernat could see out of his left eye was a big house on three floors. Open to the street at ground level was the workshop; the master potter and his family lived on the upper two floors. Along one side of the house ran a garden for vegetables and flowers; on the other were sheds leading to the kilns and a terrace where hundreds of jugs and storage jars of all shapes, sizes, and colours were displayed. Behind the house, as stipulated in the city regulations, there was

empty ground where the clay and other materials could be loaded and stored. It was here too that the potters threw the ashes and other waste from the kilns, which they were forbidden to throw into the city streets.

Bernat could see from outside that there were ten people working non-stop in the workshop. None of them looked like Grau. Bernat noticed two men saying goodbye next to an ox-cart laden with brand-new storage jars. One of them clambered on board the cart and set off. The other man looked well-dressed, so before he could disappear back into the workshop, Bernat called to him.

‘Wait!’

The other man stared at him approaching. ‘I’m looking for Grau Puig,’ said Bernat.

The man looked him up and down.

‘If it’s work you’re after, we don’t need anyone. Our master has no time to waste,’ he growled, ‘and nor have I,’ he added, turning his back on the newcomer.

‘I’m a relative of Grau’s.’

The man stopped in his tracks, then whirled round to face him.

‘Hasn’t the master paid you enough? Why do you insist on demanding more?’ He snarled, pushing Bernat out into the street. Arnau began to cry.

‘You’ve already been told that if you come here again, we’ll report you to the authorities. Gran Puig is an important man, you know.’

Although he did not understand any of this, Bernat let the man force him backwards.

‘Listen...’ he protested, ‘I...’

By now, Arnau was howling in his arms, but then all of a sudden there was an even louder cry from one of the upper floor windows.

‘Bernat! Bernat!’

Bernat and the man turned round together and saw a woman leaning half out of the window, arms whirling like windmills.

‘Guiamona!’ shouted Bernat, returning her greeting.

The woman pulled her head in. Bernat turned to the man, his eyes narrowed.

‘Does mistress Guiamona know you?’ the man asked.

‘She’s my sister,’ Bernat answered curtly. ‘And by the way, nobody in this house has ever paid me a thing.’

‘I’m sorry,’ the man apologized, hoping he was not in trouble. ‘I was referring to the master’s brothers: first one came, then another, and then still another.’

But Bernat saw his sister coming out of the house, so he cut him short and ran over to embrace her.

‘Where’s Grau?’ he asked his sister once he had cleaned off his eye and handed Arnau over to the Moorish slave who looked after Guiamona’s small children. As he watched the boy wolf down a bowl of milk and cereal, he added: ‘I’d like to greet him too.’

Guiamona looked uncomfortable.

‘Is something wrong?’

‘Grau has changed a lot. He’s a rich and important man now.’

Guiamona pointed to the many chests lining the walls of the room, the sideboard, a piece of furniture Bernat had never seen in his life before, which was filled with books and crockery, the carpets adorning the floor and the tapestries and curtains hanging from windows and walls. ‘He barely attends to the workshop and his potter’s trade these days; it’s Jaume, his chief assistant who sees to everything. He’s the man you met in the street. Grau is busy as a merchant: ships, wine, oil. Now he is a guild official, which in accordance with the *Usatges*, the laws and customs of the city, means he is a prominent citizen, a gentleman. Soon he expects to be made a

member of the Council of a Hundred.’ Guiamona looked around the room.

‘He’s not the same any more, Bernat.’

‘You’ve changed a lot too,’ Bernat said, interrupting her. Guiamona looked down at her matronly body and nodded. ‘That man Jaume,’ Bernat continued, ‘said something about Grau’s relatives. What did he mean?’

Guiamona shook her head, then replied.

‘What he meant was that, as soon as they heard that Grau was rich, all of them- brothers, cousins, nephews, suddenly started turning up at the workshop. They had all fled their lands to come and seek Grau’s help.’

Guiamona could not help noticing her brother’s expression. ‘So you too...?’

Bernat nodded. ‘But you had such a wonderful farm!’

When she heard Bernat’s story, she could not hold back her tears. As he told her what had happened to the lad in the forge, she got up and came to kneel next to his chair.

‘Don’t mention that to anyone here,’ she warned him. Then she laid her head on his thigh, and went on listening. ‘Don’t worry,’ she sobbed when Bernat had finished, ‘we will help you.’

‘Ah, sister,’ said Bernat, stroking her head. ‘How do you intend to help me when Grau would not even help his own brothers?’

‘Because my brother is different!’ shouted Guiamona so loudly that Grau took a step backwards.

It was night by the time her husband returned home. Small, skinny Grau, a bundle of nerves, strode up the staircase, cursing. Guiamona was waiting for him. Jaume had told him what had happened: ‘Your brother-in-law is sleeping in the hayloft with the apprentices, his boy...with your children.’

Grau charged up to his wife.

‘How dare you!’ he shouted at her when she tried to explain. ‘He’s a fugitive serf! Do you know what it would mean if they found a fugitive in our house? My ruin, that’s what! It would mean my ruin!’

Guiamona let him talk. He whirled round her, flinging his arms theatrically into the air. He was a good head taller than she was.

‘You’re mad! I’ve sent my own brothers overseas on ships! I’ve given my sisters dowries so that they would marry outsiders, and all so that nobody could accuse this family of the slightest thing! And now you...why should I act any differently for your brother?’

‘Because he is different!’ She shouted, silencing him.

Grau hesitated:

‘What? What do you mean?’

‘You know very well. I don’t think I need to remind you why.’

Grau avoided meeting her gaze.

‘This very day,’ he muttered, ‘I’ve been meeting one of the five city councillors with a view to being elected to the Council of a Hundred as a guild official. I think I’ve won three of the five over: I still need to convince the bailiff and the magistrate. Can you imagine what my enemies would say if they found out I had given shelter to a fugitive serf?’

Guiamona reminded him softly:

‘We owe him everything.’

‘I’m only an artisan, Guiamona. A rich one, but still an artisan. The nobles look down on me, and the merchants despise me, however much they are willing to do business with me. If they found out I had taken in a fugitive...do you know what the land-owning nobles would say?’

‘We owe him everything,’ Guiamona repeated.

‘Well then, we’ll give him the money and send him on his way.’

‘He needs his freedom. A year and a day.’

Grau paced nervously around the room. Then he buried his head in his hands.

‘We can’t,’ he said. ‘Guiamona, we can’t do it!’ He said, peering through his fingers. ‘Can you imagine...?’

‘Can you imagine! Can you imagine!’ she butted in, raising her voice at him. ‘Can you imagine what would happen if we threw him out and he was arrested by Llorenc de Bellera’s men or one of those enemies of yours? What if they found out that you owe everything to him, a fugitive serf who agreed to give you a dowry that was not yours by right?’

‘Are you threatening me?’

‘No, Grau, no. But that’s how it is. If you won’t do it out of gratitude, do it out of self-interest. It’s better for you to be able to keep an eye on him. Bernat wants his freedom. He won’t leave Barcelona. If you don’t take him in, there will be a fugitive and a little boy, both of them with the same birthmark by their right eye as me, wandering the streets of Barcelona. Think how useful they could be to those enemies you’re so frightened of.’

Grau stared hard at his wife. He was about to respond, then thought better of it and merely waved his hand. He left the room, and Guiamona could hear him climbing the stairs to the loft.

‘Your son will stay in the main house; doña Guiamona will take care of him. As soon as he is old enough, he will become an apprentice in the workshop.’

Bernat paid only scant attention to what Grau’s assistant was saying. Jaume had burst into the dormitory at first light. The slaves and apprentices leapt from their pallets as though he were the devil himself, and rushed pell-mell out of the door. Bernat was satisfied with what he heard: Arnau would

be well looked after, and in time would become an apprentice, a free man with a trade.

‘Did you hear me?’ Jaume asked.

When Bernat did not reply, he cursed: ‘Stupid peasants!’

Bernat almost reacted violently, but the smile on the official’s face made him think twice.

‘Go ahead,’ Jaume taunted him. ‘Hit me and your sister will be the one who loses. I’ll repeat the important things, peasant: you are to work from dawn to dusk, like all the others. In return you will have bed, food and clothing...and doña Guiamona will take care of your son. You are forbidden to enter the main house: on no account may you do so. You are also forbidden to leave the workshop until after the year and a day necessary to win your freedom. Whenever anyone comes into the workshop, you are to hide. You are not to tell a soul of your situation, not even the apprentices in here, although with that birthmark of yours...’ Jaume shook his head. ‘That is the bargain the master has struck with doña Guiamona. Do you agree?’

‘When will I be able to see my son?’ asked Bernat.

‘That’s none of my business.’

Bernat closed his eyes. When they had first set sight on Barcelona, he had promised Arnau he would be a free man. He would not be any lord's vassal.

'What are my tasks?' he said at last.

To carry wood. To carry hundreds, thousands of the heavy branches needed every day for the kilns. To make sure the fires were always lit. To carry clay, and to clean. To clean away the mud, the clay dust, and the ashes from the kilns. Over and over again, hauling the ashes and dust to the back of the house. By the time Bernat returned, covered in dust and ashes, the workshop would once again be filthy, so that he had to start all over again. He also had to carry the pottery out into the open with the other workmen, under the watchful gaze of Jaume, who supervised the life of the workshop at all times. He strode around, shouting, buffeting the apprentices and cursing the slaves, on whom he did not hesitate to use the whip if anything was not to his liking.

On one occasion when a big pot slipped out of their hands and rolled onto the ground, Jaume brandished his whip at them. The pot had not even been broken, but he lashed the three slaves helping Bernat carry the piece out as hard as he could. He was about to turn on Bernat, until the latter calmly warned him:

‘Do that and I’ll kill you.’

Jaume hesitated, then flushed and cracked the whip in the direction of the others, who by now were safely out of range. Jaume charged after them. Bernat took a deep breath.

Bernat worked so hard he gave the assistant little opportunity to threaten him. He ate whatever was put before him. He would have liked to tell the stout woman who served them that on his farm the dogs had been better fed than this, but when he saw how the apprentices and slaves threw themselves on the food, he preferred to say nothing. He slept in the loft with the rest of them on a straw pallet, under which he kept his few belongings and what little money he had managed to rescue. The fact that he had stood up to Jaume seemed to have won him the respect of the others, so that he was able to sleep soundly, despite the fleas, the stink of sweat, and all the snores.

He put up with everything just for the two evenings a week when the Moorish slave girl brought him Arnau, who was generally fast asleep. Bernat would pick him up, sniffing the smell of clean clothes and fragrance that hung about him. Taking care not to wake his son, he would lift his clothing to look at his legs and arms, his full stomach. Arnau was growing and filling out. Bernat rocked the baby in his arms, pleading with his eyes for Habiba,

the young Moorish girl, to let him keep the boy a little longer. Sometimes he tried to stroke him, but the rough skin of his hands chafed the boy's skin, and Habiba snatched him from away. As time went by, he came to a tacit agreement with her (she never said a word to him) so that he could stroke the boy's pink cheeks with the back of his fingers. The mere touch of his son's skin made him quiver. When the slave gestured for him to hand the baby back, Bernat would give him one final kiss on the forehead.

As the months went by, Jaume realised that Bernat could do more useful work in the pottery. The two men had come to respect one another.

'There's nothing to be done with the slaves,' Jaume said one day to Grau Puig, 'they work only because they fear the whip, and don't care what they are doing. But your brother-in-law...'

'Don't call him that!' Grau protested yet again, as this was a frequent liberty his assistant allowed himself.

'The peasant...' Jaume corrected himself, pretending to be embarrassed. 'The peasant is different. He takes care over even the most menial job. He cleans the kilns in a way I've never...'

'So what are you suggesting?' Grau butted in, not raising his eyes from the papers he was studying.

‘We could give him more responsible work, and besides, he costs us hardly anything...’

This observation finally made Grau look up.

‘Don’t you believe it,’ he said. ‘He may not have cost anything to buy, like the slaves do, and he may not have an apprentice’s contract, or have a wage like the potters, but he’s the most expensive workman I have.’

‘I meant...’

‘I know what you meant.’ Grau buried himself in his papers once more. ‘Do as you see fit, but let me warn you: that peasant must never forget what his place is in this workshop. If he does, I’ll throw him and you out, and you’ll never become a master potter. Is that clear?’

Jaume nodded, but from that day on, Bernat helped the potters directly in their work. He was even promoted above the heads of the young apprentices, who were unable to handle the heavy fireproof moulds used to bake the pots in the kilns. From the moulds came big pot-bellied jars with a short neck and a small base that could hold up to two hundred and eighty litres of grain or wine. Previously, Jaume had needed to employ at least two potters to haul the moulds around; with Bernat’s help, only one other person was necessary. They would make the mould, fire it, apply a layer of tin and lead oxides to it, then fire the jar again in a second kiln at a lower

temperature so that the tin and the lead would melt together to form a clear waterproof glaze.

Jaume waiting anxiously to see whether he had made the right decision. After a few weeks, he was satisfied with the result: production had increased noticeably, and Bernat still took the same trouble over his work. 'More than some of the potters themselves!' Jaume was forced to admit when he went to put the workshop's stamp on the neck of one of the storage jars.

Jaume tried to read the thoughts the peasant concealed behind his placid countenance. There was never any glimpse of hatred in his eyes, or any sign of rancour. Jaume wondered what could have happened for him to end up in this situation. He was not the same as the master's other kinsmen who had shown up at the workshop: they had all been bought off. But Bernat...The way he fondled his son whenever the Moorish slave girl brought the baby to him! He wanted his freedom, and worked harder than anyone else to make sure he got it.

The understanding between the two men produced other results apart from an increase in production. One day when Jaume came over to imprint the master's mark on a jar, Bernat narrowed his eyes and stared pointedly at the base of the piece. 'You'll never become a master potter!' Those words of

warning came immediately to Jaume's mind whenever he considered becoming more friendly with Bernat.

Now, he pretended he was having a coughing fit. He moved away from the jar without stamping it, and looked at the place the peasant had been pointing out to him. He saw a tiny crack which would mean the jar broke in the heat of the kiln. Jaume shouted angrily at the potter...and at Bernat.

So the year and the day that Bernat and his son needed to become freemen passed. Grau Puig achieved his longed-for goal of being elected a member of Barcelona's Council of a Hundred. And yet Jaume did not see the peasant react in any way. Anyone else would have demanded their citizenship document and gone off into the streets of the city in search of fun and women, but Bernat did nothing. What was wrong with him?

Bernat could not get the memory of the lad in the forge out of his mind. He did not feel guilty about him: the fool had tried to stop him taking his boy. But if he had died...Bernat might win freedom from his lord, but even after a year and a day he would not be free of the charge of murder. Guiamona had advised him not to tell his story to anyone, and he had followed her advice. He could not take the risk; Llorenc de Bellera had probably not only ordered his arrest as a fugitive, but as a murderer as well.

What would become of Arnau if he were captured? Murder was punishable by death.

His son was growing strong and healthy. He did not yet talk, but he was crawling everywhere, and gurgled joyfully in a way that made the hair on the back of Bernat's neck stand on end. Despite the fact that Jaume still did not speak to him, his new position in the workshop (which Grau was too busy with his trading and other commitments to notice) gained him even more respect among the others. With Guiamona's tacit assent, the Moorish girl brought him Arnau more frequently now. His sister was also much busier as a result of her husband's new responsibilities.

There was no way that Bernat was going to risk his son's future by going out into the streets of Barcelona.