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Company of Liars

a novel of
the
plague



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Company of Liars by
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Penguin Books Ltd

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Prologue

‘So that’s settled then, we bury her alive in the iron bridle. That’ll keep her tongue still.’ The innkeeper folded his arms, relieved that they had finally agreed on that much at least. ‘Iron’ll counter any curses she makes. Stop anything, iron will. One of the most powerful things you can get to work against evil, saving the host and holy water. ’Course, it’d be better if we had some of that and all, but we don’t, not with things being the way they are. But iron’ll do just as well.’

His wife snorted. ‘Tell that to our neighbours. There’s not a door or shutter in the village that’s not covered with iron horseshoes, but we might as well have hung chicken feathers on doors for all the protection they’ve given us.’

Her husband glared at her. ‘But if the bridle gags her then she’ll not be able to utter any curses, will she? So, iron or not, it’ll still work.’

‘But suppose she doesn’t die?’ the potboy wailed. ‘Suppose she claws her way out through the earth and comes for us in the dead of night?’ He stared round nervously at the door as if he could already hear her scratching at it. ‘Couldn’t we drive an elder stake through her heart afore we bury her? Then we’d know for sure she’s dead.’

‘God’s bones, boy! Are you going to volunteer to drive a

stake into her while she sits there watching you? Because I'm certainly not.'

The potboy shook his head vehemently and shrank lower on his stool, as if terrified someone was going to thrust a stake into his hands and make him do it.

With an exasperated sigh, the innkeeper surveyed the dozen or so men and women slumped on the benches of his gloomy ale room. Though it was still daylight outside, the shutters were fastened tight and the door bolted. Not that the bolts were necessary, force of habit really. It just felt safer to draw a bolt. But bolts would not stop her finding out what was being planned, and as for passing strangers bursting in, no one, unless he had a death wish, would approach within ten yards of a building whose doors and shutters were closed, however desperate they were for a drink or a bite to eat.

The innkeeper had every reason to be impatient. If they didn't get the matter settled soon, it would be too late to act before dark. To face her in daylight was bad enough, to try to kill her at night, with only a candle standing between you and her powers, was enough to turn the bravest man's bowels to water, and after twenty-three years of marriage the innkeeper had no illusions that he was a brave man.

The blacksmith's voice boomed out deep and resonant from the alcove where he squatted in his favourite seat, his broad buttocks spilling over the well-worn bench. 'Bridle her and bind her tight, cover her in a foot or so of earth, then once she's smothered to death, I'll drive an iron stake into her through the soil. That ought to do it.' He rubbed an itching flea bite on his back against the rough wall. 'I'll do it just as the moon rises; it'll impale her spirit in the grave. She'll not rise then.'

The tanner took a gulp of ale and wiped his mouth on

the back of his hand. ‘But I’ve heard tell, the only sure way is to slice the head off with a gravedigger’s spade – once she’s good and dead, of course.’

‘That’s the way to kill a vampire, but she’s not one of them, leastways, there’s been no talk of that.’ This from the old woman at the back. Old and frail now, she’d birthed most of the people in the village and seen them buried too.

‘Who knows what she is or what she could turn into once she’s dead? She’s not natural, that’s for sure.’

Several heads nodded in agreement with the tanner. That was about the only thing they were agreed upon. In all the hours of discussion no one had uttered her name, not even the potboy. Even he knew there are some things it is wiser not to name aloud.

‘I’m still of a mind we should burn her,’ the old woman said. ‘There’d be no chance of her rising then.’

‘But she’s not a heretic,’ the innkeeper protested. ‘It would be better for all of us if she was. Heretics’ souls fly straight to hell. God alone knows where her soul would fly, into the nearest living thing, I wouldn’t wonder, be it man or beast, and then we’d be left with a monster ten times worse.’

‘Father Talbot would know the words to send her soul to hell,’ the old woman persisted stubbornly.

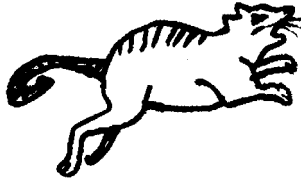
‘Aye, he would, but he’s dead, don’t you remember? As is half the village and we’ll all be joining them if we don’t find a way to kill her first. And since there’s not a single priest left within four days’ ride of here, we must make shift to do it ourselves. We can’t go on arguing how it’s to be done. We must finish her today, before the sun goes down. We daren’t risk leaving her alive another night.’

The blacksmith nodded. ‘He’s right. Every hour she’s alive she grows stronger.’

The innkeeper heaved himself up off the bench in an

attempt to put paid to any further discussion. 'So then, we're all resolved,' he said firmly. 'She's to be buried alive in the bridle. Then once she's dead, William'll fix her in her grave with the iron stake. The only thing left to decide now is who's going to put the bridle on her.'

He looked hopefully around the room, but no one met his eyes.



1. The Midsummer Fair

They say that if you suddenly wake with a shudder, a ghost has walked over your grave. I woke with a shudder on that Midsummer's Day. And although I had no way of foreseeing the evil that day would bring to all of us, it was as if in that waking moment I felt the chill of it, glimpsed the shadow of it, as if something malevolent was hovering just out of sight.

It was dark when I woke, that blackest of hours before dawn when the candles have burnt out and the first rays of sun have not yet pierced the chinks in the shutters. But it wasn't the coldness of the hour that made me shiver. We were packed into the sleeping barn too snugly for anyone to feel a draught.

Every bed and every inch of floor was occupied by those who had poured into Kilmington for the Midsummer Fair. The air was fetid with sweat and the belches, farts and stinks from stomachs made sour by too much ale. Men and women grunted and snored on the creaking boards, groaning as here and there a restless sleeper, in the grip of a bad dream, elbowed his neighbours in the ribs.

I seldom dream, but that night I had dreamt and the dream was still with me when I woke. I had dreamt of the

bleak Lowland hills they call the Cheviots, where England and Scotland crouch, battle-ready, staring each other down. I saw them as plainly as if I had been standing there, the rounded peaks and turbulent streams, the wild goats and the wind-tossed rooks, the Pele towers and the squat Bastle farmhouses. I knew them well. I had known that place from the day I first drew breath; it was the place I had once called home.

I had not dreamt of it for many years. I had never returned to it. I could never return. I knew that much on the day I walked away from it. And through all the years I have tried to put it from my mind and, mostly, I have succeeded. There's no point in hankering for a place where you cannot be. Anyway, what is home? The place where you were born? The place where you are still remembered? The memory of me will have long since rotted away. And even if there were any left alive who still remember, they would never forgive me, could never absolve me for what I have done. And on that Midsummer's Day, when I dreamt of those hills, I was about as far from home as it is possible to be.

I've travelled for many years, so many that I have long since ceased to count them. Besides, it's of no consequence. The sun rises in the east and sinks in the west and we told ourselves it always would. I should have known better than to believe that. I am, after all, a camelot, a peddler, a hawker of hopes and crossed fingers, of piecrust promises and gilded stories. And believe me, there are plenty who will buy such things. I sell faith in a bottle: the water of the Jordan drawn from the very spot where the dove descended, the bones of the innocents slaughtered in Bethlehem and the shards of the lamps carried by the wise virgins. I offer them skeins of Mary Magdalene's hair, redder than a young boy's blushes, and the white milk of the Virgin Mary in tiny ampoules no

bigger than her nipples. I show them blackened fingers of St Joseph, palm leaves from the Promised Land and hair from the very ass that bore our blessed Lord into Jerusalem. And they believe me, they believe it all, for haven't I the scar to prove I've been all the way to the Holy Land to fight the heathen for these scraps?

You can't avoid my scar, purple and puckered as a hag's arsehole, spreading my nose half across my cheek. They sewed up the hole where my eye should have been and over the years the lid has shrunk and shrivelled into the socket, like the skin on a cold milk pudding. But I don't attempt to hide my face, for what better provenance can you want, what greater proof that every bone I sell is genuine, that every drop of blood splashed down upon the very stones of the Holy City itself? And I can tell them such stories – how I severed a Saracen's hand to wrest the strips of our Lord's swaddling clothes from his profaning grasp; how I had to slaughter five, nay a dozen, men, just to dip my flask in the Jordan. I charge extra for the stories, of course. I always charge.

We all have to make a living in this world and there are as many ways of getting by in this life as there are people in it. Compared to some, my trade might be considered respectable and it does no harm. You might say it even does good, for I sell hope and that's the most precious treasure of them all. Hope may be an illusion, but it's what keeps you from jumping in the river or swallowing hemlock. Hope is a beautiful lie and it requires talent to create it for others. And back then on that day when they say it first began, I truly believed that the creation of hope was the greatest of all the arts, the noblest of all the lies. I was wrong.

That day was counted a day of ill fortune by those who believe in such things. They like to have a day to fix it on,

as if death can have an hour of birth or destruction a moment of conception. So they pinned it upon Midsummer's Day 1348; a date that everyone can remember. That was the day on which humans and beasts alike became the wager in a divine game. That was the cusp upon which the scales of heaven and hell swung free.

That particular Midsummer's Day was born shivering and sickly, wrapped in a dense mist of fine rain. Ghosts of cottages, trees and byres hovered in the frail grey light, as if at cockcrow they'd vanish. But the cock did not crow. It did not recognize that dawn. The birds were silent. All who met as they hurried to milking and tending of livestock called out cheerfully that the rain would not last long and then it would be as fine a Midsummer's Day as any yet seen, but you could see they were not convinced. The silence of the birds unnerved them. They knew that silence was a bad omen on this day of all days, though none dared say so.

But, as they predicted, the drizzle did finally dry up. A sliver of sun, wan and weak, shone fitfully between the heavy clouds. It had no warmth in it, but the villagers of Kilmington were not to be downcast by that small matter. Waves of laughter rolled across the Green. Bad omen or not, this was their holiday and even in the teeth of a gale they would have sworn they were enjoying themselves. Outlanders had poured in from neighbouring villages to sell and to buy, barter and haggle, settle old quarrels and start new ones. There were servants looking for masters, girls looking for husbands, widowers looking for good strong wives and thieves looking for any purse they could cut.

Beside the pond, a gutted pig turned on a great spit and the smoke of sweet roasting meat hung in the damp air, making the mouth water. A small boy cranked the spit slowly, kicking at the dogs that jumped and snapped at the

carcass, but the poor brutes were driven to near frenzy by the smell and not even the spitting fire or the blows from a stout staff deterred them. The villagers cut juicy chunks from the sizzling loins, tearing at them with their teeth and licking the fat from greasy fingers. Even those whose teeth were long worn down to blackened stumps sucked greedily at wedges of fat and pork crackling as the juices ran down their chins. Such a rare extravagance of fresh meat was to be savoured down to the last succulent bone.

Small gangs of barefoot boys rushed through the gossiping adults, trying to distract the scarlet-clad jugglers and bring their clubs crashing to the ground. Lads and lasses made free, oblivious of the damp grass and the disapproving frowns of priest and clerk. Peddlers shouted their wares. Minstrels played upon fife and drum, and youngsters shouted loud enough to wake the demons in hell. It was the same every year. They made the most of their fair, for there was precious little else to make merry with for the rest of the year.

But even in the jostling, noisy crowd you could not fail to notice the child. It was her hair, not blonde but pure white, a silk-fine tumble of it like an old man's beard run wild, and beneath this snowcap, a face paler than a nun's thighs, white eyebrows, white lashes framing eyes translucent as a dawn sky. The fragile skin of her bony limbs glowed ice-blue against the nut-brown hides of the other market brats. But it wasn't just the absence of colour in her that drew my attention; it was the beating.

Nothing unusual in a child getting a thrashing; I'd probably seen half a dozen already that day – a switch across bare legs for a carelessly dropped basket of eggs, a tanned backside for running off without leave, a cuff around the ear for no good reason except that the brat was in the way. All

of the young sinners trying to dodge the blows and yell loudly enough to satisfy the chastisers that the punishment had been fully appreciated, all, that is, except her. She didn't yell or struggle, but was as silent as if the blows to her back were inflicted with a feather instead of a belt, and this only seemed to infuriate the beater more. I thought he'd whip her senseless, but finally, defeated, he let her go. She stumbled a few yards away from him, unsteady but with her chin held high, though her legs almost gave way beneath her. Then she turned her head and looked at me as if she sensed me watching. Her pale blue eyes were as dry and clear as a summer's day, and around her mouth was the merest trace of a smile.

The beater was not the only one who'd been enraged by her silence. A fat, beringed merchant was shaking his fist at him, demanding recompense, almost purple in the face with rage. I couldn't hear what passed between them for the shouts and chatter of the small crowd that had gathered around them, but at last some deal seemed to be struck and the merchant allowed himself to be led off in the direction of the tavern, with the onlookers bringing up the rear. The beater doubtless intended to pacify the outraged man with a soporific quantity of strong wine. Clutching him ingratiatingly by the elbow with one hand, he didn't waste the opportunity to cuff the girl with the other as he passed her, a practised blow, delivered without apparently glancing in her direction. It sent her sprawling face down on the ground and wisely, this time, she stayed there until he was safely inside the tavern. Then she crawled into a narrow gap between a tree trunk and the wheels of a wagon and crouched there, arms wrapped around her knees, staring at me with wide, expressionless eyes like a cat watching from the hearth.

She looked about twelve years old, barefoot and dressed in a grubby white woollen shift, with a blood-red band about the neck that intensified the whiteness of her hair. She continued to stare, but not at my scar, at my good eye, with an intensity that was more imperious than curious. I turned away. Whatever had transpired had nothing to do with me. The girl had been punished for some crime, thieving probably, and doubtless deserved what she got, though she was obviously well hardened to it, since it had had so little effect on her. So there was no reason for me to say anything to her.

I pulled a pastry from my scrip, broke it in two and tossed half to her, then hunkered down with my back resting on the tree trunk to eat my share. I was hungry and it was a quiet spot to eat now that the crowd had moved on. And I couldn't have eaten and not offered the child a bite, now could I? I gazed out at the bustle of the fair, chewing slowly. The pastry was as dry as the devil's hoof, but the salt mutton inside was sweet enough and well herbed. The girl was holding her pastry in both fists as if she feared someone might snatch it from her. She said nothing, not even a thank you.

I took a swig of ale to wash the dry mouthful down. 'Do you have a name, girl?'

'Narigorm.'

'Well, Narigorm, if you're going to thieve from his sort you'll need to learn your trade better. You're fortunate he didn't send for the bailiff.'

'Wasn't thieving.' The words came out muffled from a well-stuffed mouth.

I shrugged and glanced sideways at her. She'd finished the pastry already and was licking her fingers with great concentration. I wondered when she'd last eaten. Given the

man's mood, I doubted he was going to feed her again that day. But I half believed her about the stealing. A girl who stood out so vividly from the crowd was not likely to survive long as a pickpocket and it occurred to me that with her looks her father or her master, whichever the man was, might well have found a good living renting her out by the hour to men whose taste runs to young virgins. But she'd clearly upset the customer this time. Maybe she'd refused the merchant, or else he'd tried her and discovered he was not the first to come banging on her door. She'd learn ways to conceal that in time. More experienced women would teach her the trick of it, and she'd doubtless earn a good living when she mastered the art. She'd a fair few years ahead of her in the trade, more than most I reckoned, for even when the bloom of her youth was gone there would still be plenty who'd pay handsomely for a woman who looked so different from the rest.

'You want me to do it for you now, for the pastry?' Her voice was as emotionless as her gaze. 'We'll have to be quick before Master comes back, he'll not be best pleased if you don't pay in coins.'

Her small, cold hand tried to insinuate itself into mine. I put it back in her lap, gently but firmly, sad for her that she had already learned not to expect any gifts from life. Not even a crust comes free. Still, the younger you learn that lesson, the fewer disappointments you'll have.

'I'm past such things now, child. Much too old. Besides, it was only a bite of food. Take it and welcome. You're a pretty girl, Narigorm. You don't need to sell yourself so cheaply. Take a tip from an old camelot, the more people pay for something, the more they think it's worth.'

She frowned slightly and tilted her head, regarding me curiously. 'I know why you don't want me to read the runes

for you. You don't want to know when you're going to die. Old men say they want to know, but they don't.' She rocked back and forth on her bottom like a toddler. 'I told the merchant he was going to lose all his money and his wife was going to run off and leave him. It's the truth, but he didn't like it. Master told him I was teasing and tried to make me give him a better fortune, but I wouldn't. I can't lie; if you lie you lose the gift. Morrigan destroys liars.'

So she was a diviner. A good trick if you can convince others of the truth of it. It's hard to tell with some of them if they believed in their own art or not. Was she convinced she had told the merchant the truth or had she taken a dislike to the fat toad and given him that ill fortune from devilment? If so, she'd paid for it and might well pay again if her master was forced to spend too much in the tavern appeasing him, but she probably thought it worth a hiding for the look on the merchant's face. I might have thought so too at her age. I chuckled.

'I *did* tell him the truth,' she hissed savagely. 'I'll tell yours, then you'll see.'

Startled by the malice in her voice, I glanced down, but her pale blue eyes were as wide and emotionless as before and I realized I was being foolish. Children hate to be laughed at. It was natural enough for her to be indignant if she thought she was doubted.

'I believe you, child, but I've no wish to have my fortune told. It's not that I doubt your skill,' I added quickly, 'but when you reach my age the future rushes towards you with too much haste as it is, without you running to meet it.'

I clambered slowly to my feet. I've no quarrel with any who make a living by divination, medicine or any other magic art they can use to con a few coins from people. Why should I? Don't I practise my art on the superstitious and the

credulous? But I see no reason to part with my hard-earned money for such services. Besides, if you can read the future, you can read the past, for they are but ends of the same thread and I always take great care that no one should know anything of me except my present.

The shadows were lengthening on the ground. The breeze, never warm, now had a sharp edge to it. The pig was bones. Some people were returning home, but others, most none too steady on their feet, were drifting towards the forest to continue the celebrations now that the business of the fair was over. I tidied my old bones away in my pack. There would be no more customers today. I heaved it on to my back and followed the raggle-taggle crowd towards the trees. I guessed there'd be some good sack swilled down in the woods that night and rich meats too for those who still had stomach for them, which I had.

I said nothing more to the girl. I'd done my Christian duty, shared a bite with her, and that was the end of it. And there was something about the way she looked at me that unnerved me. I've got used to being stared at over the years. I hardly notice it now. No, it wasn't that she was staring at my scar that bothered me, it was rather that she was *not* looking at it; she was staring at me as if she were trying to see beyond it.

The men in front of me ambled down the track, stumbling over roots and stones. One sprawled on his hands and knees. I helped his friend haul him to his feet. He slapped me on the back and belched; his breath stank worse than a dragon's fart. There were going to be some sore heads in those parts come morning. As we steadied him until he could work out which foot to move first, I glanced behind me at the Green. Though I could not make out any faces at that distance, I could see a blur of white stark against all the

browns, greens and scarlets around. She was standing on the edge of the grass, still watching me. I could feel her staring, trying to prise me open. I found myself suddenly furious with her. My anger was without cause, I knew that, for the poor child had done nothing to me at all, but I swear that if her master had come out of the tavern at that moment and given her another strapping, I would not have been sorry. Like him, I wanted her to cry. Tears are natural. Tears are human. Tears confine your curiosity to yourself.

So, you may ask, was that it? Was that the beginning? Was that what caused it all, half a pastry offered to a child with eyes of ice? Hardly a day of ill fortune for anyone except the fat merchant. You're right, if that had been all, it would have been nothing, but there was something else that happened on that day, several miles away, in a little town by the sea called Melcombe. Unconnected, you would have thought, yet those two events were to become as tightly woven as the warp and weft in a length of silk. Threads drawn from different directions, yet destined to become one. The warp thread in this cloth? That was the death of one man. We'll call him John, for I never knew his name. Someone must have known it, but they never admitted it and so he was buried without it.

John collapsed in the crowded market place. He was seen to stagger, clutching at the sides of a cart for support. Most thought him drunk, for he had the look of a sailor about him and, as everyone knows, sailors spend what time they have ashore supping liquor until their money runs out and they are forced back to sea again. John bent double, coughing and hacking his lungs out, until frothy spatters of blood sprayed from his mouth on to his hands and the wheels of the cart. Then he sank to his knees and keeled over.

The passers-by who went to his aid at once shrank back, gagging and clapping their hands over their noses. This stench was not the ordinary stink of an unwashed drunk, but so fetid it seemed to come from an opened tomb. Nevertheless, those with stronger stomachs did make shift to take him by the arms and turn him over, but he screamed so loudly with pain that they dropped him again, startled. The men stared at him, unwilling to risk touching him again, yet not knowing what to do to help.

The man who owned the cart prodded John with the toe of his shoe, trying to encourage him to crawl away, since he obviously didn't want to be lifted up. The carter wasn't a callous man, but he had to reach the next village by nightfall. He could smell rain on the wind and was anxious to be off before it fell again, turning the tracks into a quagmire. It was the devil's own job to drive that forest track once it got muddy and if you had to stop to shoulder the cart out of a rut, you were easy prey for any thief who fancied helping himself to your purse and your cart, leaving you as good as dead in a ditch. God knows there was no shortage of such scoundrels in the forest. He prodded John again, trying to make him roll out from under the cart. However anxious he was to leave, the carter could hardly drive over a sick man.

John, feeling the toe against him, seized the carter's leg and tried to hoist himself up on it. He lifted his sweating face, his eyes rolling back in his head as another wave of pain shuddered through his body, and it was then that the carter saw that John's face and arms were covered with livid blue-black spots. It was a sight to make any man flinch away, but the carter didn't comprehend what he was looking at. He didn't recognize the signs. Why should he? They had not been seen here before, not in this place, not in this land.

But someone recognized them; someone who had seen those telltale marks before. He was a merchant, well travelled beyond our shores, and he knew the signs only too well. For a moment he stood stupefied, as if he could not believe it could happen here. Then he grabbed the carter and croaked, '*Morte bleue*'. The small crowd that was gathering about them stared uncomprehendingly from the merchant to the writhing figure on the ground. The merchant pointed, his hand trembling. '*Morte bleue, morte bleue*', he yelled, his voice rising hysterically, then summoning up what few wits he still possessed, he screamed, 'He has the pestilence!'

The carter was right. That night it did rain. Not drizzling as it had done at dawn; that had only been the prologue. No, this time it poured. Hard, heavy drops striking leaves, earth, crops and thatches, turning paths into streams and fields into swamps. It rained as if it was the beginning of the flood and perhaps those who saw the first drops fall back in Noah's day thought, like us, that it signified nothing. Perhaps they too believed that by morning or the following day it would stop.



2. The Company

‘Where have you come from, boy?’

It wasn’t a friendly enquiry. The innkeeper stood in the doorway, bouncing a stout stick rhythmically against the palm of his hand. He was a big man, his muscular arms covered with black hair. He was not in his prime and his belly was too big to suggest he was nimble of foot, but then he didn’t need to be. One crack from that stick and he would not be required to give chase to his opponents.

The lad facing him hesitated, his eyes fixed nervously on the bouncing stick. He took a step backwards and stumbled, hampered by his flamboyant travelling cloak. He was a slim youth, shorter than the innkeeper. He grasped the cloak tightly about him against the rain with a hand the colour of rosewood, long and softly elegant. A lute hung over his shoulder. No farmer’s boy, this one.

‘Answer me, boy, if you know what’s good for you. Are you come from the south?’

The lad took another step back and swallowed, plainly uncertain whether yes or no was the right answer.

‘Y . . . yes,’ he finally ventured.

‘He means he was born in the lands to the south,’ I said, stepping as rapidly as I could between the raised cudgel and

the shrinking boy. ‘But he’s not come from the south these many months. I myself saw him only last week at the Magdalene Fair at Chedzoy, that’s up Bridgwater way. That’s right, isn’t it, boy?’ I slid my foot across his and pressed hard.

The lad nodded vigorously. ‘Yes, from Chedzoy, we came down from there.’ He shivered miserably, the rain dripping from his hood.

The innkeeper looked him up and down suspiciously. ‘You, Camelot, you’ll swear you saw him there?’

‘On the bones of St Peter.’

He looked back at the lad, then finally lowered his stick. ‘Two pence for a room, penny for the barn. Hay’s clean. Mind you keep it that way. Dogs sleep outside.’

There weren’t many men in the inn at Thornfalcon that evening. A few travellers like myself and a handful of locals, but the rain was keeping many by their own hearths. The innkeeper was in as foul a mood as the weather. It was, after all, only the backend of July, and he counted on long, warm summer evenings to fill the benches in his courtyard. He bellowed and raged at his wife, who in turn slammed the ale down on the tables so that it slopped over, glowering at her customers as if they were to blame. Her sour face wasn’t helping trade either. If a man wants bad-tempered company he can usually find it at his own hearth; he doesn’t need to pay someone else for the privilege.

I saw the lad enter with an older man. He looked round and then, spotting me in the corner behind the fire, pointed me out to his companion. They both came across. The older man had to stoop to pass under the beams. He was olive-skinned like the boy, but whereas the lad was a slender, delicate-looking youth, the man had the broad, muscular

frame of maturity, running a little to fat. The lines in the corners of his eyes had set and his dark hair was streaked with grey. He wasn't what you'd call handsome, but striking enough with his Roman nose and full mouth. He'd doubtless turned more than a few heads in his youth, probably still did. He gave a courtly bow and sat down heavily on the bench opposite.

'Buona sera, signore. I am Rodrigo. Your pardon for the intrusion, but I wanted to thank you. Jofre tells me that you spoke for him. We are in your debt, Camelot.'

Jofre?

He inclined his head towards the young man who stood respectfully at his side.

'My pupil.'

The young man gave a half bow in imitation of his master.

I nodded. 'You're welcome. It was just a word and words are freely given. But let me offer you one word more. I don't know where you really come from, and it's no concern of mine, but these days it's safest to say you've travelled from the north. These rumours make people cautious.'

The man laughed, a deep laugh that made his tired eyes dance. 'An innkeeper threatens his customers with a cudgel and that is cautious?'

'You said rumours, what rumours?' Jofre interrupted. He was plainly on easy terms with his master.

'From your lute and your garb, I took you to be minstrels. I'm surprised you've not heard the news on your travels. I thought all England knew by now.'

The master and pupil exchanged glances, but it was Rodrigo who answered, glancing around first to see if others were eavesdropping on the conversation.

'We have not long been on the road. We were both in the employ of a lord. But . . . but he is old and his son has

taken over the running of his estates. He brought with him his own musicians and so now we try to make our fortune on the road. *È buono,*' he added with a forced cheerfulness, 'there is the whole world to see and many pretty girls as yet unbedded. Is that not right, Jofre?'

The lad, who was studying his hands with a miserable intensity, nodded briefly.

Rodrigo clapped him on the shoulder. 'A new start, is it not, *ragazzo?*'

Again the boy nodded and flushed a dull red, but did not raise his eyes.

A new start for which of them, I wondered. I guessed there was more to the story than Rodrigo had told. Perhaps the gaze of one or the other had strayed too close to a pretty girl in the lord's family; it's not unheard of. Bored women left too often alone are not averse to a dalliance with a good-looking minstrel.

'You said there were rumours,' Jofre reminded me, with a note of urgency in his voice.

'The great pestilence has finally reached our shores.'

Jofre's eyes widened in shock. 'But they said it could not reach this island.'

'They say before a battle that their king cannot be defeated, but they are usually wrong. It was brought on a ship from the isle of Guernsey, so they say, but who knows, they may be wrong about that too. But wherever it came from scarcely matters now; the point is it has arrived.'

'And it is spreading?' Rodrigo asked quietly.

'Along the south coast, but it will spread inland. Take my advice, travel north and stay well away from the ports.'

'They will close the ports, surely, as they did in Genoa?'

'To the south, maybe, but the merchants will not suffer

the ports to be closed on the east and west coasts, at least not until they see the dead lying in the streets. Too much money sails on the waves.'

A stifled sob made us both glance up. Jofre was standing, fists clenched, face blanched, his mouth working convulsively. Then he turned and barged blindly out of the inn, ignoring the furious curses of the innkeeper's wife as he rushed past her, knocking a dish out of her hands.

Rodrigo rose. 'Your pardon, Camelot, please excuse him. His mother – she was in Venice when the pestilence came there. There has been no word since.'

'But that doesn't necessarily mean the worst. How could she send a message in these times? True, the rumours say half have perished, but if that is so, then half have survived it. Why should she not be one of them?'

'So I tell him, but his heart tells him otherwise. He adores her. His father sent him away, but he did not want to leave her. Distance has translated a mortal woman into Holy Virgin in his memory. And because he worships her, so he is afraid he has lost her. I must find him. The young are impetuous. Who knows what they will do?'

He hurried out after the boy, pausing to speak to the innkeeper's wife whose temper had grown, if possible, even more savage since Jofre had spilled her dish. I couldn't hear what passed between them for the chatter of the other customers, but I could see her scowl melting to a reluctant smile and then to a deep, rosy blush. And when he bowed, kissed her hand and excused himself, she gazed at his retreating back with the cow eyes of a lovesick maid. Rodrigo had learned the art of courtly love well. I wondered how he dealt with jealous husbands. I guessed he was not quite so skilled at winning their admiration or he would not now find himself on the road.

I settled back to my ale, which was passable, and the pottage, which was not, but it was hot and filling and when you know what an empty belly feels like you learn to be more than grateful for that much. But I was not left to sit in peace for long. An unkempt man, who'd been warming his ample backside at the fire, slid on to the bench vacated by Rodrigo. I'd seen him in these parts before, but had never exchanged more than a gruff 'G'day' with him. He studied his tankard of ale in silence for a long time as if he expected to see something new and startling crawling out of it.

'They foreigners?' he asked suddenly without looking up.

'What makes you think that?'

'Look like foreigners, talk like 'em too.'

'How many foreigners have you heard talk?'

He scowled at me. 'Enough.'

I'd have been surprised if the man had encountered more than half a dozen in his life. He'd not have known an Icelander from a Moor by his looks, never mind his speech. Thornfalcon did not lie on the main merchants' road and the nearby priory contained only the relics of a local saint that few outside those parts would trouble to visit. The man's scowl settled more deeply into the grimy wrinkles of his face.

'You still ain't answered me. They foreigners?'

'English as you or me. Been minstrels in the court of some lord all their lives. You know what it's like, around the gentry all day, they start thinking themselves one of them. They dress in their cast-offs and before you know it they start talking like them too.'

The man gave a non-committal grunt. He'd almost certainly never heard a lord talk either, so that was a safe enough line.

‘So long as they’re not foreigners.’ He hacked and spat on to the floor. ‘Fecking foreigners. I’d have ’em run out of England, every man jack of ’em. And if they won’t go . . .’ He drew a thick stubby finger across his throat. ‘Bringing their filthy diseases here.’

‘The pestilence? I heard it was lads from Bristol who carried it aboard their ship.’

‘Aye, ’cause they were mixing with fecking foreigners in Guernsey, that’s why. If you go travelling to foreign parts, you deserve all you get.’

‘Have you a family?’

He sighed. ‘Five bairns, no, six it is now.’

‘You’ll be worried for them then, if the pestilence spreads.’

‘The wife is, mithering about it morning and night. I keep telling her it won’t spread. Told her I’d crack her one if she keeps going on about it. You have to, don’t you, just to knock some sense into ’em.’

‘Maybe she’s right to be worried. They say it’s already reached Southampton.’

‘Aye, but it’s only spreading along the coast, ’cause that’s where the foreigners are, in the ports. Priest says it’s a judgement on the foreigners, so it stands to reason it won’t come here, ’cause we’ve no foreigners here.’

And that was pretty much what they all believed those first few weeks after the great pestilence crept in. Away from the south coast, life went on much as it had always done. You might have thought that people would panic, but the truth is they didn’t believe it would touch them. They were suspicious of strangers, violent even, but still they assured themselves that pestilence was a foreign thing. Why, it even had a foreign name – *morte bleue*. How could any Englishman die of a sickness so plainly marked for foreigners?

Those towns along the south coast which had already

succumbed and were falling one after the other like wheat before the scythe were, if anything, proof of this, for ports, as everyone knew, were teeming with foreigners and it was those foreigners who were dying, proof positive that God had damned the other nations of the world in perpetuity. And if some Englishmen in those ports also died, well then, that was because they had been mixing with those same foreigners, sleeping with the foreign whores and boys. They deserved it. But England, true England, did not. Just as once they had been convinced it could not cross the Channel, now they convinced themselves it would stop at the ports, provided the foreigners were also stopped there.

The following morning the rain fell steadily as it had done the day before and the day before that. Rain drives men inside their own thoughts. No one looks at anyone else in the rain; they walk, heads bent, gaze fixed on the spinning puddles. I was out of the village, toiling along the track, before I noticed Rodrigo and Jofre; even then I probably would have walked right past them had the boy not been making a noise like a cow in labour as he retched repeatedly into a ditch.

Rodrigo was muttering something to Jofre, which sounded as if he was scolding him, but at the same time was soothingly rubbing his back.

I stayed on the other side of the road and drew my cloak across my nose and mouth. 'Is he sick?'

God's blood! I was the one who'd persuaded the inn-keeper to let them stay. If he had the pestilence . . .

Rodrigo glanced up sharply, then gave a tight-lipped smile. 'No, Camelot, it is not the sickness. His stomach is not used to the wine. It was rougher in the inn than he is accustomed to.'

The boy heaved again and groaned, holding his head, his eyes bloodshot and his face the colour of sour milk.

‘Perhaps it’s not the quality, but the quantity he’s not accustomed to.’

Rodrigo grimaced, but didn’t contradict. The boy continued to bend over the ditch, though his retching was dry now, unlike the rain.

‘You are abroad early, Camelot. You have a long journey ahead of you?’

I hesitated. I don’t like discussing my business with strangers. Start talking about where you are going and people start asking where you’ve come from. They want to know where you were born and where your home is, insisting you must have one somewhere. Some even think that if you have no roots you are to be pitied. That I chose to rip up those roots is something they could never understand.

But it was impossible to be rude to a man as courteous as Rodrigo.

‘I’m making for St John Shorne’s shrine at North Marston. There’s money to be made there and it’s well to the north of here and inland, far away from the ports.’

I knew it of old. It was a good place to sit out the autumn rains, the whole winter if need be. I was not so foolish as to think the pestilence would not creep inland, but it couldn’t reach as far as North Marston, not before the winter frosts came. And, like all summer fevers, it would surely die out then. If you could just survive until the weather changed, by Christmas it would all be over, that’s what they said, and even I was foolish enough to comfort myself with that thought.

‘And you, where are you bound?’ I asked Rodrigo. Like me, he also hesitated, as if reluctant to reveal the whole truth.

‘We go to Maunsel Manor. It is only a few miles from here. We spent time there whenever our master visited the family. The mistress of the house always praised our playing. We will try for a place there.’

‘It’ll be a fruitless journey. I heard the household’s gone to their summer estates. They’ll not be back for weeks.’

Rodrigo looked beaten and helpless. I’d seen that expression before in those who’ve been in service all their lives and suddenly find themselves turned out. They’ve no more idea of how to survive than a lapdog abandoned in a forest.

‘You’d be best making for a fair or better still a shrine. Fairs only run for a few days, a week at most, but a shrine never closes. Find one that’s popular with the pilgrims and make friends with one of the innkeepers. The pilgrims always need entertaining in the evenings. Play a rousing battle song for the men and a love song for the women and you’ll easily earn enough for a dry bed and a hot meal.’

There was a loud groan from Jofre.

‘You may not feel like food now, my lad, but wait till that hangover wears off. You’ll be groaning even harder once you feel the bite of hunger.’

Jofre glanced up long enough to glower at me before leaning against a tree, his eyes tightly closed.

‘But other minstrels will already have found such inns, no?’

‘I dare say they will, but he’s a pretty lad. When he’s washed and sober, that is,’ I added, for he looked anything but pretty just then with his puffy face and tightly clenched jaw. ‘If you can persuade him to flirt with the wealthy matrons instead of their daughters, you’ll get your coins. You’ll both stand out from the common rabble of minstrels. Merchants’ wives fancy themselves as highborn ladies and

they'll pay handsomely anyone who knows how to treat them as such. And who can say, you might be lucky enough to find yourselves another livery. Even the highborn make pilgrimages. They more than most, for they have more money to do it and more sins to atone for.'

'This shrine you are going to, you think we could get work there?'

I had a sinking feeling that I knew where this was leading and I cursed myself for ever having mentioned it.

'It's a good few weeks' walk from here. I'll have to work my way there via the fairs and markets along the way. You'll want to look for something closer.'

'I can't walk. I'm ill,' the boy whined.

'I denti di Dio! Whose fault is that?' Rodrigo snapped and Jofre looked as startled as if he'd been slapped.

Rodrigo also seemed surprised at his own sharpness for his next words were spoken soothingly, like a mother trying to coax a fretful child. 'You will feel better for walking and we cannot stay here. We need to earn money. Without food and shelter you will become ill.' He turned back to me, anxiety etched on his face. 'You know the way to this shrine? You could help us find work on the way?'

What could I do? Though I'd little doubt that Rodrigo was capable of holding his own in the subtle intrigue and politics of a court, to send them out alone into the blood and guts of the market place would have been like sending toddlers into a battlefield.

'You'd have to walk at my pace. I'm not as fast as I once was.'

Rodrigo glanced over at the listless boy. 'I think a slow pace would suit us well, Camelot.'

And so it was that the first members of our little company were drawn together, the first but by no means the last. On

that wet morning, I thought I was doing them a kindness, saving them from learning the hard way how to survive on the roads. I thought I was sparing them the days of hungry bellies and the nights sleeping cold and friendless; I'd been there myself when I first started out and I knew the misery of it. But now I know it would have been kinder to have passed them by on the road than draw them into what was to come.