

Part One:  
The Season of the Beast

Mr Feng,  
Tender and serious little soul,  
Friendly wind,  
This tale from far ago is for you.

*Manoir de Souarcy-en-Perche, Winter 1294*

Agnès de Souarcy stood before the hearth in her chamber calmly contemplating the last dying embers. During the past weeks both man and beast had been beset by a deadly cold that seemed intent on putting an end to all living things. So many had already succumbed that there was barely enough wood to make coffins, and those left alive preferred to use what little there was to warm themselves. The people shivered with cold, their insides ravaged by straw-alcohol, their hunger only briefly kept at bay with pellets of suet and sawdust or the last slices of famine bread made from straw, clay, bark or acorn flour. They crowded into the rooms they shared with the animals, lying down beside them and curling up beneath their thick, steamy breath.

Agnès had given her serfs permission to hunt on her land for seventeen days, or until the next new moon, on condition they distribute half the game they killed among the rest of the community, beginning with widows, expectant mothers, the young and the elderly. A quarter of what remained would go to her and the members of her household and the rest to the hunter and his family. Two men had already flouted Agnès de Souarcy's orders, and at her behest the bailiffs had given them a public beating in the village square. Everybody had praised the lady's leniency, but some expressed private disapproval; surely the perpetrators of such a heinous crime deserved execution or the excision of hands or noses – the customary sentences for poaching. Game was their last chance of survival.

Souarcy-en-Perche had buried a third of its peasants in a communal grave, hastily dug at a distance from the hamlet for

fear that an epidemic of cholera might infect those wraiths still walking. They had been sprinkled with quicklime like animal carcasses or plague victims.

In the icy chapel next to the manor house the survivors prayed day and night for an improbable miracle, blaming their ill luck on the recent death of their master, Hugues, Seigneur de Souarcy, who had been gored by an injured stag the previous autumn, leaving Agnès widowed, and no male offspring to inherit his title and estate.

They had prayed to heaven until one evening a woman collapsed, knocking over the altar she had been clinging to, and taking with her the ornamental hanging. Dead. Finished off by hunger, fever and cold. Since that day the chapel had remained empty.

Agnès studied the cinders in the grate. The charred wood was coated in places with a silvery film. That was all, no red glow that would have enabled her to postpone any longer the ultimatum she had given herself that morning. It was the last of the wood, the last night. She sighed impatiently at the self-pity she felt. Agnès de Souarcy had turned sixteen three days before, on Christmas Day.

It was strange how afraid she had been to visit the mad old crone; so much so that she had all but slapped her lady's maid, Sybille, in an attempt to oblige the girl to go with her. The hovel that served as a lair for this evil spirit reeked of rancid mutton fat. Agnès had reeled at the stench of filth and perspiration emanating from the soothsayer's rags as she approached to snatch the basket of meagre offerings: a loaf of bread, a bottle of fresh cider, a scrap of bacon and a boiling fowl.

'What use is this to me, pretty one?' the woman had hissed.

'Why, the humblest peasant could offer me more. It's silver I want, or jewels – you must surely have some of those. Or why not

that handsome fur-lined cloak of yours?’ she added, reaching out to touch the long cape lined with otter skin, Agnès’s protection.

The young girl had fought against her impulse to draw back, and had held the gaze of this creature they said was a formidable witch.

She had been so afraid up until the woman had reached out and touched her, scrutinised her. A look of spiteful glee had flashed across the soothsayer’s face, and she had spat out her words like poison.

Hugues de Souarcy would have no posthumous heir. Nothing could save her now.

Agnès had stood motionless, incredulous. Incredulous because the terror that had gripped her those past months had suddenly faded into the distance. There was nothing more to do, nothing more to say.

And then, as the young girl pulled the fur-lined hood up over her head, preparing to leave the hovel, something curious happened.

The soothsayer’s mouth froze in a grimace and she turned away, crying out:

‘Leave here! Leave here at once, and take your basket with you. I want nothing of yours. Be off with you, I say!’

The evil crone’s triumphant hatred had been replaced by a bizarre panic which Agnès was at a loss to understand. She had tried reasoning with her:

‘I have walked a long way, witch, and ...’

The woman had wailed like a fury, lifting her apron up over her bonnet to hide her eyes.

‘Be off with you, you have no business here. Out of my sight! Out of my hut! And don’t come back, don’t ever come back, do you hear?’