

PROLOGUE



1330

In the year that King Edward, the third of that name after William called Bastard and Conqueror, overthrew The Mortimer who had ruled as regent and tyrant and that Edward, later known as The Black Prince was born to the king.

She sang to the child for the last time on the night that the priest came, leading his stern-faced men with their staves and their spears.

This is what she sang:

‘Heather is your bed

The stars are your candles

And your blanket is my caress.’

It was a child’s song, and she’d sung it to him when she laid him to sleep under the summer moon since he came to her when he was very small.

‘Don’t!’ Dowzabel turned his dark head away on the wrap of hare’s fur that did for his pillow.

‘Too big now for a hug from your old nan?’ The woman was thin, wrapped in a coarse green shawl but her face was bonny, made plump by her smile.

‘Yes! I’m six!’ The boy was just as thin, starved almost.

‘You don’t know that! You could be just a baby. Give us a cuddle!’ She stretched out her arm to him, teasing.

‘I know! You know it! You told me.’ He pulled away from her, embarrassed, laughing. He wanted to hug her and he wanted not to hug her or, rather, to be the sort of boy who didn’t want a hug. Further up the scraggy turf of the moorland hill sat two men, silent and watching, spears in their hands, bows at their sides. Their names were Beliar and Danjal, both hardened robbers. Dowzabel didn’t want to look soft in front of them.

He sat up. The moor under the evening moon was so beautiful, the sky a hollow lilac, the standing stones watching down in the pale distance like sentries on the castles of the hills.

A kestrel, silver in the dusk, turned the world around its wing. A

beat, a flutter, a sudden and momentary fury. It tumbled, stopped and hovered almost motionless, its wings wide, possessing the land. Now the evening hung beneath the bird's stillness – as if everything stopped for this child of the air.

Nan's arm was around him and he didn't mind anymore, his nose in the peaty smell of her shawl.

'Shall I tell you a story?' He watched the bird, it was impossibly still against the thin moon.

'Tell me about the making of the world,' he said.

'Again?'

'I like the story.'

Nan squeezed him to her.

'In the beginning was the void and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the spirit was borne upon the waters. And the spirit said, "let light be made". And light was made and the spirit's name was the light's name, which was was Lucifer, who is rightly called Son of the Morning.'

'How is he the morning's son if he made the morning? Doesn't that make him the morning's dad?'

'The questions you ask! He's called the son of the morning because he made himself. I suppose he's father and son.'

'How can someone make themselves?'

She rolled her eyes. 'Well I don't know, it's a mystery isn't it? Do you want the rest of the story, or don't you?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Lucifer gave life to everything, to the angels who are made of light, to the clay he called from the waters and moulded into men, women and animals. When Lucifer saw the joy he had created he went out into the world he had made as a sunbeam, delighting in the beauty of his creation. Chief among the angels was Îthekter, who had three faces and a heart of iron. He had not joined Lucifer in his rapture.'

'Did Lucifer make Îthekter evil?'

'No. He made him to choose to be as he wished to be. But Lucifer is so good, he could not imagine anyone would want to be evil. Îthekter had a weakness – he wanted to be worshipped, to set himself over other beings and to see them bend the knee. While Lucifer played in the sunbeams, Îthekter told men and angels he would put them above their fellows as kings in great palaces if

they would pray and sacrifice to him and call him God. He would build a world of his own where he might rule and set it aside from Heaven, the home of Lucifer's angels, or Earth, the realm of men. Worship made him mighty and he tried to build this world of his own. But he could not create any new life. Nothing would grow in the world's desolate plains and gleaming cities of burning brass that he called Hell, meaning the hidden place.

'So in his anger Íthekter took the offcuts of creation, the arms and legs, the heads and the tails that Lucifer had cast aside and stuck them together, and with his breath he kindled the life that was in them and shaped it to make creatures of bile and hate. These creatures he called Devils and they were twisted in mind as well as body. Chief among them Satan, a being of great evil who was made to hate the light. Íthekter put them in Hell while Lucifer and his angels played in the haze of a raincloud or sparkled on a trout's back.'

'If Íthekter made devils and we hate Íthekter, why do they call us the Devil's Men?' said Dow.

'That's because we rob them and torment them and will not stand to take their orders,' said Nan, 'and the priests of Íthekter do not know the truth of creation. They think Íthekter made the world and they call him God. They see no difference between demons and devils.'

'And there is a difference?'

'There is only difference. Our lord Lucifer is a downthrown angel – a demon – not a creature created from spite and envy like a devil.'

'What do devils do? Do they eat people?'

'They are gaolers and magistrates.'

'How so?'

'You know this story well enough.'

'Tell it, though.'

'Íthekter rallied the angels and surprised Lucifer and his angels at play on a cloud, forced them into the imperfect forms he had created. Íthekter watched as his creation Satan cast Lucifer down into Hell, to its inmost lands, locking him within walls within walls, making Hell a prison overseen by devils – who are the dungeon keepers of Hell and battling with them. Take your elbow out of my knee.'

The boy shifted, eyes still on the bird that hovered with the moon on its wingtip.

‘But Lucifer was not beaten. There is a war in Hell between the fallen angels of Lucifer and the dark creatures of Satan and in parts Lucifer is winning. There are cities in Hell where Lucifer rules and, though the land is arid and filled with fire, and the cities are under constant siege, the demons and the souls of the dead who can find their way to them live free and in peace. This is known as Free Hell.

‘But Free Hell is itself a prison because all Hell’s lands are bounded by four great walls which have four great gates where Satan has set his devils to guard. God rewarded his gaoler well for this service, giving him dominion over men. And so evil entered the world. Then men trod each other down, killed and maimed, some rising as lords, others sinking as paupers. When the dispossessed men died, the starved, the murdered, the victims of disease – which had never been seen on earth before – their souls tried to ascend to heaven. Îthechter cannot bear to look at them and will not have them in there. So he locks them in Hell too, to keep their forms or find what forms they can.’

‘Lucifer is clever isn’t he, Nan, he got out!’

‘Who’s telling this story? Yes he did. There are cracks in the walls of Hell and postern gates. If the devils don’t watch it, the crafty demons can sneak through. Lucifer took the form of an ordinary man who spread the word that all men were equal and that violence should not be on the face of the earth. He wanted to reconcile with Îthechter and was even prepared to call him father if it would return the world to peace and set men as equals as he had made them, for Lucifer is not proud. Îthechter sent him a false friend called Judas who tricked him and deceived him and nailed him to a tree to die. The dark god took the bones of the man who had tricked him and made them into keys for new locks for the gates of Hell. And Îthechter so warped men’s minds that they thought Lucifer was his son and called him Jesus which means “God Saves”. So they worshipped Lucifer also, something the Son of the Morning hates and does not want of them.

‘But one day the man of perdition will come and open all those gates and the fallen angels will break free and cast off their twisted

shapes. Lucifer now knows that Íthekter cannot be appeased and he will fight him and beat him and all the earth will be returned to the light. Nothing will be worshipped, not man nor god but all creation will sing songs rejoicing that they are part of that light.'

'How will they know the man of perdition? What's perdition?'

'Perdition is loss. Perhaps it is you.' She smiled and stroked his hair. 'You were lost, weren't you, when we found you?'

'How can we fight Íthekter, Nan? The king and all his men are on his side.'

'Don't be so sure. Here in the west we have many men and further up in Wales too. Wherever there are moors and wild places the true religion spreads, though it spreads quietly. And one day it will spread to the towns and great cities and then all the high men will come tumbling from their thrones, and their priests will see the truth of their crucified god and surrender their high offices for shame.'

'What's crucified?'

She pointed to the kestrel.

'Like him with his arms out, but nailed on to a cross.'

'Who would want to nail a bird to a cross?'

'Anyone, if they take their hens.'

Suddenly the kestrel tumbled from the sky and struck the floor. 'Oh!' Dow gave a little cry and Nan laughed at his surprise. The kestrel rose up, something limp in its claws and cut a lazy, lolloping curve back up to the hill. It was just a bird now, thought Dow, going home with its prey. Its grip on the evening was gone and night was falling.

He snuggled against Nan. He wished they could have a fire but they were too near the edge of the moor and could not risk giving away their position.

'Keep me safe, Nana.'

'I shall, my darling. You were given to me and, though I cursed the day your mother came here with you, I have grown to love you well enough. And you will be a great man. You will carry our hopes forward.'

'I am only a boy.'

'You cured the baby at Belstone. That is a sign of a great soul.'

'I just held him and wished him well. He might have got better anyway.'

‘Babies don’t get better from the King’s Evil. And he was well a summer hour after you’d left him. You cured him, Dow.’

‘I don’t want to be great.’

‘What do you want?’

The light was dim now, the men up on the hill just hunched spectres, only the shine of the moon to see by. Dow felt very young and a little scared. He put his arms around Nan.

‘Just to be here with you.’

‘Well, then you’re lucky, because you are.’

She stroked his hair and sang to him, putting the shawl about him. He began to sleep.

A cry. A scream. He was awake. The light was stark, the ghost moon turning the bare land to iron. Beliar was lying on the ground, not moving. Danjal howled and ran up the hill towards the mass of men who were pouring down it, his spear before him. His body twisted and leapt and he sprouted arrows, still for a second like a pin dolly dangling from a magistrate’s door knocker for the fear it brings. Then he fell.

‘Dow, run! Dow run!’

Nan shoved him on down the hillside, frantic. He got twenty paces before the men overwhelmed them. They had hold of Nan, tugging at her, pushing her but they couldn’t silence her. He saw her face, warped with fear as she tried to get to him. He was lifted from his feet by a hard, strong arm. He struggled, bit and screamed, his heart kicking like a hare in a bag, but the man who had him was strong as the sea.

‘Dow I bless you! In the name of all the fallen angels, in the name of Araziel and Jetriel and Sariel. In the name of dear Sariel who protected you I bless you and I love you!’

They were all around her with their clubs and their staves. He called out to her, tried to go to her, but the priest had hold of him, the big man with the stone face.

‘I know what you did,’ he said, ‘and, in the name of Christ Jesus, I know how you are going to pay.’

He heard Nan’s voice cry out. ‘Dow, my love!’ He caught a glimpse of her face, desperate before she was swamped. He never saw her alive again.

PART I



1337

*In the year that young King Edward defied the
French King Philip's claim to the fief of Aquitaine.
Sometime between Lammas and Michaelmas.
The beginning of the great war against France.*

I

The torchlight flickered against the ruins of the church, like the ghost of the flame that had burned it. The knights sat mounted outside as if they too smouldered, their horses steaming in the cold coastal air. It was a flat, grey, English September of rain and cloud and fogs.

The enemy was gone, but the nobles, far too late to face them, had put on their war gear to reassure the people. The horses stamped and blew, metal clicked against metal where a mailed hand re-adjusted a coat of plates or loosened a helmet strap, but the great body of warriors, two hundred strong, were otherwise silent. Even the young pages behind the knights, looking after the spare horses, said nothing. Not a joke, not a cough. The cooks, armourers, smiths and chandlers who made up the ragged tail of the column caught the mood and were quiet around their wagons and carts.

At the front of the column a man-at-arms, his pig-face visor pulled down, held up a standard – the three sprawling leopards that announced the riders as the personal bodyguard of Edward III – king of England. This standard bearer was flanked by two others who held the red and white banner of St George.

In the church a bareheaded young man knelt before the charred altar. His surcoat bore the same motif as the standard, and the helmet that sat beside him was encircled by a metal crown.

A respectful distance away, across the debris of the floor, were four armoured knights, standing around a brazier. Closer to the altar stood another knight, in a surcoat of red diamonds. This man was much older than the king, in his mid thirties, and his face was as worn as a campaign saddle. An eyepatch hid his right eye, a deep scar emerging above it on the brow and below it on the cheek.

Beside him was a small boy of no more than seven. The child had pattens on his feet – wooden overshoes that raised him above the filth and mud of the floor. He wore a full hooded tunic in the Italian style, its rich red cloth trimmed with gold and pearls, but when he spoke it was in the ragged French of the English court.

‘How shall we repay the French for this, father?’

The king stood up in a jingle of armour. He walked over to the boy and put his hand on his head. Then he turned to the scarred knight.

‘Salisbury. Montagu, cousin. Advise me.’ The king’s voice was low and confidential, and he spoke in English.

The knight shifted from foot to foot. He glanced into the shadows. There were other men in that church, beside the higher nobles – the banker Bardi and the merchant-knight Pole, huge creditors of the king’s, travelling west under his protection. In the church they kept well away from the men of better sort, shunning the torchlight, standing in the darkness by the side of the ruined door. Montagu’s eyes were on them and his voice was a murmur. ‘Our dear Gascony is under attack by the French king. The war in Scotland is as pressing as it ever was, with the French reinforcing the natives. The French send Genoese mercenaries to raid our shores and we can scarcely muster the men to defend them. Buying off the Genoese is out of the question. Our money has been spent in Scotland. I have given the accounts my closest scrutiny. And now this. We are fighting on too many fronts.’

‘So your counsel is?’

‘Continue in Scotland, bide our time here, suffer a little, and, when the crusade takes the French king away, we strike. Our allies in the Low Countries and Germany will support us, the former for want of our wool, the latter because the Holy Roman Emperor suspects the ambition of the French.’

The king snorted and scraped at the ashes with his foot. ‘The Pope has cancelled the crusade; I had word from our spies at his court in Avignon this morning.’

‘Then God help England.’

Edward shot Montagu a questioning look.

‘Will He? Or are the rumours true?’

‘The French have not managed to persuade their angels out of their shrines, sir, I’m sure of that. We would have heard by now.’

‘Philip attacks our ancestral lands in Gascony and the Agenais.’

Angels have been seen outside Bordeaux. Our garrison is terrified.’ The king related the threat as lightly as if discussing the menu for a tournament feast. He was a war commander, experienced against the Scots, long used to the importance of conveying certainty and strength to all those around him. ‘Lights were seen in the sky,’ said Edward.

‘All sorts of things can cause lights. Men’s imaginations first of all. The French have employed sorcerers – it’s well known. The manifestation could be demonic, rather than angelic.’

‘And that’s supposed to reassure me?’ Edward smiled.

‘It would mean we’re on the right side. When I travelled to France on your business in the spring I saw no sign they had coaxed the angels from their raptures.’

‘Though they try. New churches cram the streets of Paris, relics are collected from all over the world. His queen is a woman of rare piety; it’s well known.’

‘They call her a devil.’

‘Because she is lame and because they fear her. She is no devil. She has succeeded in this way before.’

‘Sir, when the angel came to their aid at Cassel it was clearly God’s work. A peasant rebellion is, by definition, unholy. There is no question of that here. And besides, it is not an important point. We can’t invade anyway.’

‘Why not?’

‘The French have no need of angels. The Royal House of Valois can put fifty thousand in the field and their men-at-arms are formidable. Their lances alone will do.’

‘I spit on their fifty thousand. Thirty thousand of them are commoners and of no account, five thousand are mercenaries who will run after one decent charge, and the noblemen are the same ones I’ve been beating the brains out of at tournaments since I was sixteen. My army has razed half of Scotland against those furious men of the north; Philip’s has hardly been in a battle worthy of the name. One of us is worth five of them and they know it, or they would invade properly. They burn our churches. They hamper our prayer. This must be their aim – to weaken us spiritually, for they know they cannot face the teeth of the English lion in fair battle.’

‘There are many churches in England, Edward. We can spare a few.’

‘Does God see it that way?’

‘It may be that we do enough already. Angels have danced on the tips of French spears before, but there have been none in the kingdom since Cassel. Perhaps our prayers, our devotion keep it so.’

‘Perhaps. But God will not favour us if we cannot defend His houses.’

Montagu kicked at the dirt of the floor and said, ‘Well, look at it this way. The cancellation of the crusade increases the physical threat, but diminishes the spiritual one. God must love King Philip less today. He will allow no angels to help him if he backs out of his obligations in the Holy Land. We should hold here, greet him with great force when he attacks us, and fight on our land – well supplied on ground we know.’

‘The cancellation has holy sanction – on the edict of the Pope. God loves Philip as much today as He ever did. But we will make war without God if we have to.’

‘To make war without God is to make war on God.’

‘Not so. I am king because of God. I want different counsel. Sir Richard, come here.’

Another man-at-arms walked forward – a tall, powerfully built man aged around forty, wearing a mail coat, his basinet beneath his arm, his long grey hair bright in the firelight.

‘Richard. You have the wisdom of age. What do you think? Do we repay this? Take on the French in open war?’

‘To face them directly is suicide. It is for you to decide if it is a right and noble suicide.’

‘You don’t think we can defeat them? There is no guarantee they can put angels in the field against us.’

‘Our spies say that the French king asks for the Oriflamme on every saint’s day.’

Edward bowed his head. The Oriflamme – the holy fire banner, dipped in the blood of the French martyr St Denis – was one of the most powerful relics in Christendom. It had been used very rarely by the French in all memory, such was their regard for it but, flown at the head of the army, it meant that the French army could not be defeated and would give no quarter: and that God was with them and would cut down their enemies as he had the first born of Egypt. St Michael the archangel sat sometimes in the abbey of St Denis where the Oriflamme was kept. The French king needed the angel’s blessing to take it. Once he had that, the

French angels would come and England would be in great peril.

‘We’ll face the Oriflamme and all his angels if we have to. My honour will not be trampled into the dirt. It’s possible to beat them even if they have it. Our royal ancestor John fought without angels, without the blessing of saints. He fought against the Oriflamme without flinching from it.’

Montagu spoke. ‘That’s not a particularly propitious example. John lost Normandy, he saw England wracked by civil war and he died, struck down by who knows what. Cousin Edward, your father’s angels ...’

The king’s hand went to his sword. ‘If you say more, though you are my dearest friend, I will strike you down where you stand.’

Montagu shrugged. ‘Not very likely to speak then, am I?’

‘Keep your flippancy and your caution, Montagu! I am king of the English, and a Norman true. When I bid you fight to defend my lands, you will fight and, if necessary, die, along with your sons – with all the sons of England – if that is what God wills! God made me your master, and your life is mine to do with as I see fit! England is me and I am England!’ The king spoke his somewhat mangled French, to emphasise his ruler’s right.

‘I served your father, I will serve you.’

Edward nodded, his anger gone as quickly as it had come.

‘My father was a godly man,’ he said in English.

‘Though we might want to ask ourselves how God allowed him to fall to the usurper Mortimer,’ said Montagu. ‘You know your wife thinks an explanation for the lack of angels might be found there. I could investigate this.’

‘Mortimer never usurped anything. He threw down my father but it was me he put on the throne, remember that. Are you saying I am a usurper?’

‘You were a boy. You were his puppet.’

‘And when I became a man God blessed me to avenge my father and kill him in his turn.’

‘So let me investigate.’

‘You cannot investigate the mind of God. And God guided my hand to send Mortimer to Hell, never forget that. I would not be here if I did not have God’s blessing. Kings are appointed by God and only stay kings as long as it pleases Him.’

‘King Philip of France has been a king for a long time.’

‘Then we’ll face him in the field and see who the Lord favours. I have faith in God that I will prevail.’

‘You have faith in yourself, Edward. That is very different and close to vanity. Wait until tomorrow to decide. We’ve ridden a long way and the fire that burned this church has inflamed your passion too. Slake it on a girl – there is a queue of merchants’ daughters in the town waiting to see you, and I have it on authority that no fewer than eight famous whores have travelled to Southampton hoping to please you. Let your temper cool in your bed for a while; make your decision in the clear light of morning.’

‘No, Montagu. Courtiers talk; kings act. We’ll have them. Angels or no angels, Oriflamme or not, we’ll have them. We’ll take the battle to France and we’ll do it soon.’

‘We should wait until we can summon at least one angel to counter theirs. Let me look into it more fully. I understand you don’t want an investigation because of the damage it would cause if it were known that the angels were more than simply *reluctant* to appear. But I can be discreet.’

Edward held forward the breast of his surcoat. ‘What does that say?’

Montagu rolled his eyes. ‘It’s rather difficult to see in this light.’

‘Don’t joke your way out of this, Montagu. What does it say?’

‘It is as it is.’

‘The motto of my house. “It is as it is.” No point whining about it. We took on the Scots without angels and won.’

‘To be fair, sir, the Scots have never managed to win an angel from God.’

‘I wonder why that is.’

‘I’d always assumed they rather terrify Him,’ said Montagu.

Edward smiled. ‘You can always amuse me, Montagu. Particularly with the victories you bring me.’ The king was quiet for a moment. ‘Can you bring me victory here?’

‘I can try, sir. Your royal wife brought the patronage of eight saints as part of her dowry, the court has another thirty or so between the higher nobles. We can call in the relics and see what divine aid can be summoned.’

‘It has been tried, Montagu. I ...’ The king waved his hand.

‘I wasn’t told.’

‘My wife has tried. If a lady of her royal blood and piety can’t gain insight with eight saints, then we have no hope even with eighty or eight hundred. We must ask for God’s blessing, of course, but we cannot expect it.’

‘And if the French receive it instead?’

‘Then we shall show Him on the field that, by our valour, we deserve His help.’

‘We’ll show plenty of valour to take on fifty thousand men, backed by angels, under a banner that guarantees victory.’

‘Good, then how can He deny us? We are English, like the mastiff who goes grinning into the maw of a bear. We honour God on the battlefield, shedding our blood to defend Him, showing Him that the French cannot defend church, cathedral and monastery from the devastation we can wreak. Then the angels will come to us. Or Philip’s will go from him and we will have our victory. The French do not yet suspect our weakness, our spies report no gossip at court. We may force them to an accommodation that could make us all rich men. Take courage, cousin – Christ once thought God had forsaken Him too. It was not so.’

‘And if we lose?’

Edward glanced at the men in the shadows. ‘Then I am dead and my debts are cleared. To man, if not to God.’

Montagu gave a short laugh. When he had first heard Edward say ‘I am England,’ he had thought it a useful piece of propaganda. Lately, the king was coming to believe it.

‘Well,’ said Montagu, ‘a happy outcome is almost guaranteed. Luckily I had not expected to live to see all my children wed.’

‘Who does? That concludes our business. Send these whores and I’ll see which of them pleases me.’ Edward put his arm on Montagu’s shoulder. ‘Trust to God, William; trust to God. He will not desert us when our hour of need comes.’

Edward walked from the church, his trumpets sounded and the cold air was loud with the rattle of the fighting men sitting up on their horses.

Montagu glanced up into the black sky as he followed his king. ‘This is our hour of need,’ he said to the heavens.