

# Chapter 1

## The Holy Inquisition,

### Pamiers,

**1 January 1355**

Cardinal Amaud Littorale, the ‘Legatus a Latere’, the Pope’s personal appointee for the suppression of the Cathar heresy, sat at the only table in a spacious alcove of ‘La Fabrique d’Argent’, a restaurant in the main street of Pamiers on the northern edge of the Pyrenees.

In this alcove, only the purest white table cloths were used, adorned with silver plates and immaculate silver cutlery. An enormous fireplace in which a log fire roared, occupied the entire inner wall; flames swirled to the base of the chimney, laced with incandescent sparks. The logs hissed, crackled, flared and occasionally split apart producing starbursts of sparks of even greater intensity.

The fire effortlessly heated the enclosed space of the alcove.

A circular candelabrum, blackened with age and smoke from the candles, hung from the beams above the large circular table. An

elaborately carved servery, glowing golden from frequent polishing held, on its upper shelves, a selection of Cognac, Armagnac, and red wine from Bordeaux. On the third side of the alcove, ancient copper buckets rather precariously held a selection of locally produced white wine including the famous sparkling wine from Limoux.

A heavy, velvet curtain insulated the mouth of the alcove from the main dining area. The curtain stopped draughts, ensured privacy and prevented conversations from being overheard. To ensure privacy a bell pull was located within reach of the head of the table. None of the immaculately clad waiters would venture into the alcove until the bell was rung.

Spicy smells—unexpected, unusual but not unpleasant—enveloped those who occupied the alcove, always reserved for the most distinguished of guests.

According to the owner he named the restaurant after this aroma, which he claimed was the smell of money, derived from the alcove's most frequent patrons, the officers of the mint, located almost next door.

On this day the smell of money was most appropriate for the Cardinal wore robes of the finest cloth. A heavy gold chain encircled his neck and an assortment of gold rings almost obscured his fingers. He paused, stretched out both his hands to admire the rings. He adjusted several of them to what he judged to be the correct orientation relative to each other.

Philippe de l'Isle, the Cardinal's young assistant, sat opposite the Cardinal. He held his hands clenched in a neat pile in front of him, his back straight as an iron pole, and his wide eyes firmly fixed on the Cardinal's face. His food remained untouched.

The Cardinal could see that Philippe was desperate to speak but awaited the approval to do so. He looked at Philippe's cooling meal and resolved to break the silence. 'Speak, my son.'

Philippe took a deep breath in preparation 'Am I supposed to

enjoy this, Your Eminence?’

The Cardinal furrowed his brow. ‘Enjoy what, the chicken? I think it is excellent.’

‘No, Your Eminence. I mean the interrogations, the torture.’

Surprised by the question, the Cardinal dropped a forkful of chicken into his lap, and gazed across the table, hardly able to believe his ears. Philippe had been handpicked from the Dominican seminary in Toulouse to be one of the three deputies of the Holy Inquisition in Pamiers.

The Cardinal struggled to remove the chicken from his robes. He drew a deep breath and struggled to make a coherent response.

‘My son, we, you are engaged in a great initiative. You are helping to save the souls of these poor unfortunates.’

‘How exactly does torture do that?’

The Cardinal’s eyebrows rose as his mouth dropped open. ‘My son, I am surprised you have progressed so far without knowing the answer to your own question. If someone has fallen into the trap of reading heretical texts, we may save their soul by putting out their eyes. If we identify someone who preaches heresy, ripping out their tongue might prevent hundreds of others from being led into heresy.’

Philippe dropped his head. ‘If only it was as simple as that, Your Eminence.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I have been here for six weeks, and I have seen no one capable of reading a heretical text, let alone preaching heresy.’

‘And?’

Philippe wriggled in his seat. ‘We torture them all and ... some of my colleagues seem to enjoy it.’

‘What do you mean?’ The Cardinal hesitated. ‘Be specific.’

‘Well, the interrogations I have taken part in have been focussed on very ordinary people.’

The Cardinal narrowed his eyes. ‘Who may well be agents of

the devil.’

‘Is a witch an agent of the devil?’ Philippe asked.

The Cardinal now bristled with indignation.

‘Of course a witch is an agent of the devil. Why do you ask?’

‘Because four out of five of the poor unfortunates I have seen have been women.’

‘That does not really surprise me; the Cathar heresy has long been supported, no, promoted by women.’

Philippe raised his head and looked directly into the cardinal’s eyes. ‘We start by stripping them naked.’

The Cardinal nodded. ‘Philippe, that is standard procedure. Then we stick barbs into every part of their body searching for the areas where they feel no pain. If we find such an area, it proves they are a witch.’

‘Your Eminence, it is not easy to perform that task. He swallowed with great difficulty. ‘It inflicts great suffering. Those under suspicion must be tied down. In the case of women, they are always spreadeagled. My colleagues are visibly excited by this procedure,’ Philippe hesitated, ‘they get erections.’

‘Again I am not surprised. We are fighting the devils work, and the devil tries to deflect our brethren from their true vocation.’

‘But if it is not possible to find an area where they have no pain, we still proceed with further interrogation.’

The Cardinal’s face reddened and his cheeks twitched with the clenching of his jaw. He could not conceal his annoyance. ‘Of course you do, it is not necessary to be a witch to be a heretic. Are the correct procedures then followed?’

‘Oh, yes, Your Eminence, religiously. We demonstrate the various instruments of torture to them and give them every opportunity to recant.’

‘So what are you concerned about? Only committed heretics would face the pain we can inflict.’

‘It is the nature of the torture. For male suspects, the next stage is to tie their hands behind their back and hoist them into the air by a rope wrapped around their wrists. It results in the dislocation of their shoulders and the ripping of tendons. Whatever happens subsequent to that, they will be cripples for the rest of their lives.’

‘For men?’ the Cardinal asked.

‘Yes, Your Eminence. For women, the next stage is an attack on their most sensitive parts, usually with red hot tongs.’

‘So the women are treated more leniently than the men?’

Philippe’s eyes bulged, then narrowed. ‘I doubt if the women would see it that way, Your Eminence.’

‘And what would you suggest as an alternative? We must use every means at our disposal to save these peoples souls.’

‘We could put them in a school where they could be educated, where they could receive further instruction in the Roman faith.’

The Cardinal eyed Philippe very carefully before coming to a decision.

‘Thank you, my son. I will consider carefully what you have said.’

Six days later the Inquisition accused Philippe de l’Isle of sympathising with heretics and two days after that with heresy itself. The same Inquisition, for which he had been appointed deputy, imprisoned and interrogated Philippe. He died eight weeks later.

The Cardinal did not eat ‘chicken with olives’ in the whole of this period.