

Song of the Troubadour

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Introduction

Between the mountains and the sea, where olive groves lean toward the wind and the language softens on the tongue, there was once a country called Occitania. Its courts shimmered in tapestries of saffron and indigo, and its streets carried the mixed perfumes of rosemary, horse sweat, and hot iron. Here the art of song was more than diversion: it was passport, petition, and blade. A well-turned stanza could lift a man from the dust or cast him out beneath the moon, and in this tale it does

both—beginning with an exile that severs a famous troubadour from the hearths that once fed his voice.

Song in these pages is not only melody, but message. The canso woos, the sirventes wounds, the tenso argues until dawn, and each form carries its own cipher. Rhyme schemes conceal routes, acrostics record debts, a refrain repeats on distant nights to mark the hour of a meeting. Sung in a candlelit hall, a verse says one thing to those who applaud and another to the one who has been taught to listen. Carried on a chilly wind through a crusade camp, the same verse becomes a narrow bridge, dangerous to cross yet irresistible to those who prefer secrets to swords.

Patronage binds these songs as surely as meter. Gold changes hands in bright rooms, but so do favors, silences, and safe-conducts. A countess may purchase a praise poem and find she has also bought a spy; a steward may cancel a debt with a cup and a wink, and thereby set a town alight. In the interstices—between cup and word, between word and world—our players bargain with a currency minted from attention. The poet's work is to draw that attention, to make it ring, and to survive its echo.

This is a novel of stages large and small: a courtyard where a falcon bobs on a glove; a roadside fire where a jongleur tests a tune on a borrowed rebec; a scriptorium where a scribe licks a reed and risks a flourish that might condemn him if seen by the wrong eyes. Against this human-scale theater stands the rumble of banners and sermons, the clatter of harness and law. War presses from the north, and faith itself is weighed and measured. The courts answer with processions, with alliances sealed over bread and bitter almonds, and—most dangerously—with songs that travel farther than the men who sing them.

Nor is this only a chronicle of men. Trobairitz—women who shape words as deftly as any blade—speak here with wit and courage. Some are noble, some not; each measures the price of a voice that asks to be heard in a world that prefers to interpret her. Desire is debated rather than assumed, and the politics of attention—who is seen, who is named, who must remain a rumor—drives the choices that make and unmake lives. In their lyrics, affection and allegiance are not opposites; they are tools, gambits, prayers.

The exile at this book's heart is both punishment and aperture. Stripped of the protections that fame once granted, a singer learns what his craft is worth when the audience turns hostile and the road refuses to soften. Along his path gather those who depend on the same thin coin: heralds and heralded, scribes and spies, patrons and petitioners, saints and sinners who trade on performance because steel is too blunt and law too slow. Their pacts are fragile, their codes imperfect, their courage frequently borrowed from the chorus.

Song of the Troubadour is fiction, but it is faithful to the ways performance distorts

and reveals power. It is told in a key that mingles lyric and light, conspiracy and candle smoke. Here, verses are maps and mirrors; they take you where you did not expect to go and show you, sideways, what you hoped not to see. Read as you would listen in a crowded hall: alert to what is sung, keener still to what is not, attentive to the pause that follows a risky rhyme. For in that hush—between breath and applause—alliances are made, loyalties tested, and the future of a country tilts toward a note no one can quite hold.

CHAPTER ONE: Exile at the Gate of Toulouse

The rider came at the hour when the ramparts of Toulouse turned the color of old blood. He sat his horse beneath the Narbonnaise gate with the patience of a man who understood that waiting was itself a kind of performance, and that every audience, even one composed of bored sentries, deserved a proper entrance. His cloak was dust-colored, his horse a tired roan, and his lute case—scarred with the blazon of a silver finch—was strapped behind him like a second heart. His name was Guilhem de Montanhagol, though in the courts of Occitania he had been known by a simpler title: the voice that could coax stone into weeping.

The sentry who leaned from the wooden platform did not recognize him at first. Men who rode toward the gates of Toulouse at dusk came with all manner of purposes—grain merchants from the Lauragais, penitents bound for the shrines, the occasional hedge knight whose lance had failed him elsewhere. A poet arriving on foot or on horseback, with nothing but a lute and a name, was harder to classify. It was the lute case that slowed the sentry's hand on the pike. Only three kinds of men carried lutes into Toulouse: priests who needed music for vespers, fools who mistook audacity for talent, and troubadours whose fame had preceded them into the city long before their horses did.

"State your business," the sentry called down, and Guilhem looked up at him with the calm expression of a man who had been refused entry to better places.

"I have a song for the Count's table and a letter sealed with the mark of Miraval."

The sentry hesitated. The mark of Miraval was old, associated with the first lords of the castle before the Trencavels had tangled themselves into the county's affairs. Whether it still carried weight was a question for those who believed in weight. The sentry opened the gate a hand's width and peered at the rider as though he were a stray dog that might bite.

"You'll find the Count at table," he said. "It is not certain he will see you."

"That has never stopped a song from reaching its listener."

The sentry was not amused. He opened the gate wider, enough for the roan to pass, and waved Guilhem through with the weary gesture of a man who had long since stopped distinguishing between the important and the merely persistent. Guilhem rode into the city with the ease of someone returning to a place he had never left, and for a moment, as the gate groaned shut behind him, he allowed himself to believe that Toulouse would still remember the boy who had once sung beneath the windows of the Comtessa Beatriz de Dia with a voice so clear that the river Garonne had seemed to pause its running.

The city received him as cities do those who arrive without clear invitation: with curiosity, suspicion, and the faint air of dismissal that comes from knowing the petitioner has come to ask for something. Toulouse in that year was a city of two faces, like any court that must smile at the world while counting its enemies by the hearth. Its walls stretched wide along the Garonne, punctuated by towers whose names had been borrowed for troubadour metaphors so often that the stones themselves might have blushed. The bazadais merchants brought wool from England and wine from the hills, and in the counts' great hall the arguments over land, loyalty, and the proper shape of a crusader's cross competed with the music that floated from the minstrels' gallery like smoke from the incense burners below.

Guilhem found a stable for his horse, a meal of bread and salt pork at a tavern near the Daurade, and a bed in a room above a weaver's shop where the sound of the loom provided a rhythm against which he could, if he chose, compose. He did not compose. Instead he sat at the narrow window, watched the lights of the city arrange themselves along the river, and waited. He had waited before—outside the walls of Ventadorn, in the cold courtyards of Béziers, in the rain-lashed approaches of Montpellier—but this waiting was different. This was not the hopeful vigil of a young man seeking patronage. This was a man returning to a court that had once been his home, carrying the news that the court might not want to hear.

The sealed letter in his saddlebag was not addressed to the Count directly but to a man named Pons de Ribérac, the Count's chancellor, who served as the steward of all petitions, favors, and quiet transactions that kept the court running. It was Pons who decided which troubadour sang at the high table and which performed for the scullions; it was Pons who arranged the marriages that secured alliances and who knew, in the curl of a signature, which debts were real and which were convenient fictions. Guilhem had befriended Pons years ago, during a winter in which both men had been stranded in Agen by a flood and had passed the days drinking rough red wine and arguing about whether the trobar leu—the light style—was a lesser art or merely the more honest one.

The letter would remind Pons of that friendship. Whether the reminder would be welcome was another matter entirely.

He woke before dawn to the sound of bells and rode to the count's palace on foot, leaving the roan in the care of the innkeeper's boy. The palace of the Counts of Toulouse occupied a position in the city's heart that was less a fortress than a statement of intent: wide limestone walls, a chapel with windows of deep blue glass, gardens in the Moorish style where orange trees stood in earthen pots and the fountains murmured in a language older than French. Guilhem had been given a room here once, during the years when his songs were requested at every feast and his presence at the court was considered a mark of its sophistication. That room was no longer his. He did not expect it to be.

Pons de Ribérac received him in a chamber whose walls were lined with account books and whose windows faced the garden's eastern wall, so that the morning light arrived in pale sheets across a floor scattered with wax tablets and loose parchments. Pons was a man of perhaps fifty, thin in the way of men who ate well but drank better, with a beard trimmed to a point and hooded eyes that suggested he was always reading something the speaker did not intend. He wore the sober robes of his office, though the silver clasp at his collar hinted at a private taste for ornament that public service demanded he keep restrained.

"Guilhem," he said, and the single word contained enough inflection to suggest that he had been expecting the visit and had spent the previous night deciding how to receive it. "It has been a long absence. Where does the road take you back to us?"

"Roads do not take, Pons. They merely allow passage to those who choose it." Guilhem smiled, and the chancellor returned the smile with the caution of a man who has been smiled at by people who wanted something. "I bring news, and I bring a letter. The letter is for you, the news is for the Count. Whether he wishes to hear it is, as always, his privilege."

Pons broke the seal on the letter with the deliberateness of a surgeon preparing to cut. Guilhem watched the chancellor's eyes move across the page, and he saw the moment at which the words shifted from mere text into consequence. Pons read the letter twice, set it on the table, and folded his hands before him as though in prayer.

"The Count is in council," Pons said carefully. "He will not be available this morning. Perhaps this afternoon. Perhaps tomorrow."

"In which case I have time. Was there anything in the letter that required your immediate attention, or shall I wait in the courtyard like a merchant with bolts of cloth?"

Pons's mouth tightened. "There were matters raised in the letter that are... sensitive. The Count's position regarding the northern lords, the arrangements with the Trencavels, and the question of—" He stopped, and when he resumed his voice had lost its measured quality. "You wrote this not as a friend but as someone who believes he is owed a debt."

"That is a generous interpretation," Guilhem said. "I wrote it as someone who has a debt to name and cannot bear to watch the court stumble toward consequences that a single conversation might avert. I am not here to collect, Pons. I am here because I am the only man at this court who can say these things in verse and survive the saying."

The chancellor studied him for a long moment, then rose and crossed to a cabinet against the far wall. He opened it and produced a flask of wine, two cups, and a wedge of cheese wrapped in linen. "Sit," he said, and for the first time a trace of the old familiarity crossed his features—not warmth exactly, but the acknowledgment that shared history creates a kind of obligation more durable than affection.

They spoke for an hour. Guilhem outlined, in plain language that he would later shape into verse, the intelligence he had gathered during his years away: the shifting loyalties among the northern barons who had pledged support for the crusade against the southern lords, the quiet negotiations between the Count's wife and the Bishop of Toulouse regarding the disposition of certain church lands, and the coded messages that had been passing through the court's musical performances for months—melodies whose refrains, to anyone listening with the right ear, contained references to troop movements, supply routes, and the names of men who had chosen sides in a conflict they did not yet dare name aloud.

"The songs carry what letters cannot," Guilhem said. "A letter may be intercepted, but who intercepts a melody? Who reads a refrain when it is sung by a woman with dark eyes and a lute tuned to the key of longing?"

"You make it sound theatrical."

"It is theatrical. This is a court, Pons. Everything here is theatrical. The difference between a successful statesman and a failed one is that the successful one knows when the audience is watching."

By late afternoon, the Count had agreed to receive him. This was arranged not by Guilhem's insistence but by the chancellor's quiet intervention—the Count, it seemed, had read the letter and been shaken by its implications in ways he did not wish to discuss in the presence of his counselors but could not bring himself to dismiss entirely. Pons escorted Guilhem through a corridor whose walls were hung with tapestries depicting the deeds of earlier counts, and into a chamber whose high ceiling

lost itself in shadow and whose windows admitted the last amber light of the afternoon.

The Count—Raymond, addressed by those who valued their continued residence in Toulouse with the formality of a title and by those who did not simply as "Raymond"—sat at a table covered with maps and correspondence. He was a man in his forties, broad-shouldered but carrying a softness around the midsection that spoke of too many feasts and too little campaigning, with a beard gone grey at the temples and eyes that held the particular weariness of a ruler who understood that every decision he made would offend someone. A hawk sat on a perch behind his chair, hooded but alert, its presence a reminder that the Count had interests beyond the court.

"Guilhem de Montanhagol," Raymond said, and the formality of the address made clear that whatever friendship had once existed between them had been downgraded to a more complicated category. "You have been away three years."

"Three years and some months. I kept count at first, then lost the habit. Time in exile has a different texture than time in a palace."

"So I should imagine. Exile is said to sharpen the mind and sour the temperament. I have been told your recent songs reflect this."

"My recent songs reflect what I have seen. If that sourness you mention is present, it is because the sourness exists in the world, and I have merely held up a mirror to it."

The Count waved a hand in a gesture that might have been dismissal or invitation to continue. Guilhem, who had rehearsed this moment on so many roads and in so many inns that the words had worn smooth as river stones, began to speak. He did not begin with the coded melodies or the troop movements. He began with something simpler: the story of a village near Narbonne whose inhabitants had been accused of heresy, not because they held heretical beliefs but because a neighboring lord coveted their olive groves and understood that an accusation of heresy, in the current climate, was worth more than a company of soldiers.

The Count listened. He said nothing during the telling, and Guilhem, who had learned the art of reading silences, understood this to mean that the story was not new to him but that he had not known how to act upon it without provoking consequences he was not prepared to manage. It was the particular skill of governance, Guilhem reflected, to know the precise distance between knowledge and action—a distance that could be measured in the space between a breath and a word.

When Guilhem finished, the Count turned to the hawk behind his chair and ran a finger along its hood. "You ask me," he said, without looking up, "to endanger a political

arrangement over olives."

"I ask you to consider that the arrangement itself may be more endangered by silence than by speech. If this lord is using heresy accusations to seize land, he is setting a precedent that will outlast any alliance you have with him. Word travels, my lord. It travels in songs, in letters, in the whispers of pilgrims and merchants. The court that is seen to tolerate injustice does not merely commit an injustice—it invites the world to believe that injustice is its custom."

The hawk made a small, irritated sound and shifted on its perch. The Count removed the hood and let the bird stretch its wings briefly before replacing it. "You always did have a way with words, Guilhem. It is, I think, why you are both valuable and dangerous."

"I am only a singer, my lord."

"A singer who has, by his own admission, carried coded messages across the border. Let us not pretend that you have returned here solely out of concern for the olive farmers of Narbonne."

Guilhem met the Count's eyes. "No," he said. "I have returned because I believe the court is in danger and because I am perhaps the only man willing to say so plainly."

The audience ended without resolution. The Count did not dismiss Guilhem outright, nor did he welcome him back into the household. Instead he asked for time—a period of three days, he said, during which he would consider the troubadour's words and determine how best to proceed. Guilhem understood the courtesy for what it was: neither acceptance nor rejection, but the court's habitual method of keeping petitioners in a state of anxious suspension while more pressing matters were attended to. In a court, silence was never empty; it was a container for calculations too complex to be spoken aloud.

Pons walked with him through the palace courtyard as the evening descended and the torches were lit along the colonnade. The air smelled of beeswax and cooking from the kitchens, and somewhere in the distance a servant was playing a small harp, the melody drifting over the stone walls with the aimlessness of a leaf on water.

"Three days," Guilhem said. "Do you think he means it?"

"I think he means to be seen considering it. There are men in that council who would sooner see you thrown into the Garonne than seated at the high table again. The Count must balance their counsel against whatever impulse brought him to agree to this meeting."

"Which impulse?"

Pons stopped walking and looked at him with the expression of a man who has decided to deliver an unpleasant truth. "Fear," he said simply. "You frightened him this afternoon. Not with your words—though they were sharp enough—but with the implication that someone else might say the same things more loudly. The troubadour who sings the truth is bad enough. The troubadour who sings the truth while standing outside the court's protection is worse, because he has nothing to lose."

Guilhem laughed, a short, dry sound. "Then I am exactly where I ought to be."

"Which is not to say you are safe." Pons resumed walking, and they passed beneath an archway where the stone was worn smooth by centuries of hands and the air carried the faintest trace of the river below. "There is a woman who asks after you," Pons added, in a tone that suggested the information had cost him something to offer.

"A troubadour is always asked after by women."

"This is not a troubadour. She is a scholar attached to the Comtessa's household, and she speaks of coded poetry with an understanding that would shame most of your peers." Pons fixed Guilhem with a look. "If you are engaged in any enterprise that requires the transmission of secrets through verse, I would suggest you take care. She is cleverer than she appears, and she has the Comtessa's ear."

Guilhem said nothing. The evening had cooled, and he pulled his cloak tighter against the river wind that found its way through the courtyard like an uninvited guest. Above them, the first stars appeared—pale, indifferent, the same stars that had shone over every court he had visited and every road he had walked, and which promised nothing but continuation.

He found a room at an inn near the Place du Salin, ordered wine and bread, and spent the evening writing. Not the letter he had promised, nor the courtly verses that would smooth his path with the Count's counselors, but the beginning of a sirventes—a song of bitter truth, meant to wound and illuminate in equal measure. He wrote by candlelight, in a hand that did not tremble, and when he finished the first verse he set down the quill and listened to the city outside the window. Toulouse was a city of secrets carried on melody, of alliances sealed in rhyme schemes, of power exercised in the space between one note and the next. And Guilhem de Montanhagol, troubadour in exile, was once again at its center.

Tomorrow he would learn whether the court intended to protect him or silence him. Tonight, the song was his own.

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