

Chapter 1

Usually when El Rey Lobo bared his teeth, everyone in his line of sight wondered whether to do likewise and call it smiling, or to wait and pray for invisibility. Men had been killed for doing either. He had earned his nickname ‘the Wolf King’. The men in front of the king today were not, however, his courtiers but his Christian neighbours of Barcelone: Ramon Berenguer and two of his commanders. They were not currying favour but seeking an alliance.

Ramon was sombre. ‘Without the King of Murcia, we would have the Almohads in our gardens. I hear they make a virtue of killing.’

‘And of dying, too. In order to *purge* this land.’ the king replied. At the mention of the Almohads, El Rey Lobo’s face darkened beneath his turban, and his mouth pursed as if accustomed to spit at the name. His swarthy features, oiled beard and flowing robes gave no sign of his Christian ancestry and it had been many generations since his family had converted to the Muslim faith of their overlords.

‘They will not rest until all our people are dead. All of our faith who have made this country our home for generations. We have ‘sinned’, we are ‘unbelievers’ and the penalty is death for me, for our wives, for our children, for men like your commander Malik. They will make slaves of Jews and Christians but us, they will kill.

They are superstitious barbarians from the hills of Africa! They shave their heads before battle. What pious man would do such a thing? And their black slaves thump on great drums the size of

cartwheels. When you hear the beat of their war-drums, you hear your own death. This is what my men must face! Their own hearts beating in fear!’

Dragonetz listened intently to his Liege and the Wolf King, sifting courtesies from nuggets of information. They were all waiting for the king’s terms.

El Rey Lobo dismissed the Almohads with a defiant gesture and began the bargaining. ‘The Almohads are not causing me a problem today. If you want to solve the problems I have today, go and find me a mintmaster and an expert in siege warfare.’ He paused for thought, then held up a third finger. ‘*And* somebody who will repair a paper mill. *These* are the problems that take up a king’s time! When you take away these headaches, we can talk about protecting boundaries and Almohads!’

He laughed.

Each responded to the flashing teeth in his own manner, until the nervous echo died out.

Then, shocking in the silence, Dragonetz’ laughter rang out, unforced, echoing against the stone walls of the Wolf King’s antechamber.

‘You find my problems entertaining, Dragonetz *los Pros*?’ growled El Rey Lobo. He gave a sarcastic twist to Dragonetz’ nickname *los Pros*, meaning ‘the brave’ in Occitan.

Dragonetz looked to his Liege, received a nod of consent, and responded directly to the king. ‘Forgive me, Sire, but you said we would be hard put to respond to your needs unless we were mintmasters, paper producers and siege specialists. I expected your opening requests to be more difficult.’

‘And I did not expect the Prince’s man to be a braggart.’

‘Show him, Dragonetz.’ Ramon’s voice carried without strain. ‘We offer these skills freely to the kingdom of Murcia, our partner against the invaders, and are confident that we can agree the exact terms to our mutual satisfaction. If you continue to protect our southern boundaries against the Almohads, we can afford to show our gratitude.’

Dragonetz knew how vital this alliance with El Rey Lobo was to Barcelone. The king had taken the kingdom of Murcia as his own, and forged alliances with his Christian neighbours to hold the Spanish marches against the tide of Almohads. His own practice

was supposedly tolerant of both Jews and Christians, meaning that he was equally likely to maim or execute Muslim citizens who defied his law. Such tolerance made him exactly the kind of leader the Almohads intended to eradicate, far more of a threat to 'the true faith' than were Christians.

His hatred of the Almohads made El Rey Lobo a natural ally for all who sought to maintain a Christian foothold in Hispania and his kingdom was already rich from negotiations with Castile and Genoa. Helping with Murcia's 'little problems' would not spare Ramon's purse but it was a good start to the bargaining.

'We will make ourselves comfortable first.' El Rey Lobo switched smoothly from Aragonese to Arabic as he gave orders to the servants hovering at the back of the ante-chamber. He gestured to the cushions arranged in front of the dais, where he was already comfortably seated. Malik and Dragonetz settled with practised ease, and Ramon folded himself more awkwardly into position.

The serving boys returned with goblets, a pitcher of wine and platters of mezze: savoury concoctions of aubergine, olives and rice; sugared almonds and honeyed cakes. Dragonetz took a tray from a bemused boy, set it in front of the King of Murcia and started arranging food.

'Let's begin with the weapons. Why do you need to know more about siege-towers? Nobody in his right mind would build one outside your wall, though they were camped outside for a year!' The king's fortress of Monteagudo was at the peak of a rocky outcrop, dominating the whole northern valley of the Huerta.

El Rey Lobo nodded. 'No. Food and water are the only potential weaknesses and we have grain reserves below the castle, enough to feed even the peasants for months, if not a year. And our water supplies run deep with hidden sources. I think we are safe from poison.'

'Nobody is safe from betrayal. We found that out in Damascus,' Dragonetz pointed out.

'Traitors.' El Rey Lobo shrugged. 'We have made enough examples. There won't be more.'

All present had heard of such examples. One more fortunate antagonist, El Rey Lobo's relative, Yusuf ibn Hilal, had merely been blinded and imprisoned. His wife had been given the option of surrender before the second eye was put out, but she refused. Such

was the kindness of the Wolf King.

‘Our castle’s strength means that my men lack experience of modern weapons and they might need this knowledge to defend – or attack – elsewhere.’

Dragonetz nodded. ‘Each siege is different, according to the terrain, the weaknesses of the stronghold, even the weather. You would only build a siege-tower if quicker methods have failed.’

He frowned in concentration and made a row of sugared almonds. ‘Imagine this is the castle wall, the source of enemy fire. We want to get our men into the castle and one method is to breach the wall while protecting men from arrows.’

The king nodded. This was obvious. ‘So we need a siege-tower. A wooden platform gives the men cover to fire, to put up ladders and swarm the walls.’

Dragonetz put an aubergine parcel in place. ‘This is a traditional siege-tower, clumsy and static. Once it’s in position, the defenders just concentrate their men at the point of attack.’ He put some extra sugared almonds on the part of the wall by the aubergine parcel.

‘But if it’s on wheels, you can take advantage of any place in the wall where there’s weakness.’ He removed one almond further along ‘the wall’, and moved the siege-tower to take advantage of the breach. ‘All siege-towers should be mobile. And with a platform, dropped by ropes.’

Dragonetz ate the rice filling from a second aubergine parcel. ‘Cinnamon,’ he observed appreciatively as he folded the aubergine and placed it on top of his siege-tower. ‘Now, imagine this is the mobile platform.’ He unfolded the aubergine to rest across the almond beside it.

El Rey Lobo’s crumpled forehead cleared. ‘A drawbridge across the wall. That might work.’

Dragonetz made a little pile of cake squares. ‘This is another defence the castle inhabitants might use.’ He tied a strip of aubergine round a date and, holding the other end of his makeshift ‘rope’, swung it along the almond wall, toppling the cakes. There was a polite silence while he ate the debris and licked his fingers.

Once finished, Dragonetz explained, ‘Grappling irons, or any heavy weight can topple a tower. You can swing such a ready-made weapon along the castle wall but you need to beware deflections. You could make a hole in your own wall. The technique will only

work on one siege-tower so if there are several, you have problems.’ A piece of sticky cake had eluded him and he licked his little finger. ‘You have to be inventive, respond to the situation with the material available. And that includes the men you have, not the men you’d like to have.’

‘Ah, the men I’d like to have...’ reflected El Rey Lobo. ‘Talk to my engineer! Teach him what you know.’

Dragonetz glanced to Ramon for consent before giving his own, then spoke. ‘From your words about the Almohads, it seems, my Lord, that *you* have much to teach *us*, and I would learn from your men so that we can prepare ours against this enemy.’ Dragonetz’ courtesy drew a grunt of approval from El Rey Lobo, so he continued. ‘Is the same engineer responsible for the paper mill?’

‘No.’ This time the royal baring of teeth gave every impression of being a genuine smile. ‘Unlike the Prince of Barcelone we have not found one man who does every job under the sun, so we employ several.’

Dragonetz flushed. ‘It is not I who can advise for the paper mill but Malik.’

‘Then Malik of the Banu Hud is also a skilled engineer. Why am I not surprised! And that must make Ramon Berenguer the Mintmaster if you divide these tasks equally?’

Ramon had a glint in his eyes as he denied such talents. ‘Fortunately, I think Dragonetz has someone else in mind.’

Dragonetz did indeed have someone else in mind, and neither he nor Malik hesitated when asked to withdraw, ‘to let your Prince and me agree the details of our alliance’, as El Rey Lobo put it. No doubt Ramon’s coffers would be short of several thousand morabetins when all was agreed.

Dragonetz would have loved to discuss the workings of the paper mill for in truth he did know rather more on the subject than he’d owned up to, but he could not be in two places at once – three if you counted the commission to find a Mintmaster. And, as Malik pointed out, Murcia’s paper mills were the most advanced on the peninsula, so Dragonetz’ contributions would be less useful than with the King’s Engineer.

With a sigh, Dragonetz watched Malik saddle up for the ride towards the river, then turned his attention to the camp on the plain, where Ramon’s troops were still setting up their tents and

cookfires. A few astute guesses from the right men found the Englishman John Halfpenny, curled up in the back of a wagon, asleep on a sack of grain, and grumpy at being roused to work. Once he discovered that he was needed on a question of coinage, not to hump more sacks from one place to another, he cheered up considerably. When Dragonetz left him, he was muttering to himself, 'What can they expect if they work with gold...'

That left only a lesson in siege tactics to deliver. Starting with a raid in the guard room, Dragonetz replaced almonds with new recruits, and aubergines with freshly washed turbans, rashly left within his reach. Once he was satisfied with rehearsals, he sent a man to invite the King's Commander and his Engineer to an entertainment in which each was allowed to swing a giggling 'grappling iron' along a somewhat vociferous 'wall' while the pyramid of five men tottered dangerously.

The Engineer prodded one of the men's buttocks. 'You'd make wooden stairs here,' he pondered.

'Exactly,' Dragonetz confirmed.

The Commander instructed, 'Morge, stretch your arms out to the wall.' The fourth man teetered as he gripped the man below with his knees only, touching one somewhat wobbly stone in the wall with his finger-tips.

'Oi! Stop that!' was Morge's response to whatever the wall did to the finger-tips.

The Commander, the Engineer and Dragonetz ignored the somewhat flippant behaviour of their raw material.

'Top man!' called the Commander. 'Pretend to shoot! You're defending the men, who are crossing on Morge's arms – that's the drawbridge.'

Top Man formed a circle with one hand, stuck his finger through it and made a noise that could charitably have been thought of as the whoosh of an arrow, but which induced lethal giggles in Morge. He pulled in the drawbridge and clung on with both hands.

Then, part of the wall muttered, 'That sounded more like old Becky at the whorehouse than any arrow.' The resulting structural damage was beyond repair and the siege tower collapsed.

The Commander back-handed the nearest man across the head and giggling rippled into suppressed snorts, then the contented silence of men who have had a good training session.

Dragonetz fired questions at them, praised most of the responses, corrected mistakes and then answered questions. By this time, the Commander and Engineer *had* questions and no qualms about appearing ignorant. An afternoon swinging recruits by a living wall has that effect.

Despite all the activity, the January chill was noticeable, so Dragonetz happily joined in a drinking song and the drink that went with it. This gave an opportunity for him to further brief El Rey Lobo's military leaders regarding their own men: those who'd shown intelligence and ingenuity; those who'd worked well together; those who'd protected others; the brave and also the bullies.

'The weakness in a wall is where it will be breached,' Dragonetz told them, and they understood that he wasn't speaking only of stones.



Well satisfied with his day's work, Dragonetz met up with Malik on the battlements and watched the sun-set flushing rose the grey mountains and arid plains; limning with gold the spiked succulents that dotted the route up to the fortress. In daytime, the winter landscape was leached of all colour, except for a dusting of occasional snow on the highest peaks. This moment of grace before evening was a promise of better days. Dragonetz hoped so. He was more than ready to go home.

'Luxury!' he declared. 'Two nights on straw pallets instead of a cloak on the ground with the wind hurling through the tent flaps.'

Beside him, Malik sighed. 'I am ready to go home,' he admitted, speaking Dragonetz' thoughts aloud, as happened so often when they rode together. 'I am getting older, my friend. These campaigns test my luck more every time.'

Dragonetz bit back the instinctive reassurance. Was it true? Was Malik getting too old for this?

'At least we can relax now,' he told his friend.

How wrong he was, he didn't find out until after the evening meal. Until Ramon came to tell them both about the non-negotiable demand in El Rey Lobo's terms.

'It shall be as my Lord wishes,' Malik bowed his head in

submission but could not hide the tightening of his jaw, knuckles whitening in his clasped hands.

‘Your Lord very much does *not* wish!’

Dragonetz stated the obvious. ‘We must agree terms with El Rey Lobo. He holds our boundaries safe against the Almohads and he can’t do that without warriors – experienced fighters. It is a fair demand.’

‘Indeed, I take it as a great compliment to Malik,’ Ramon stated bleakly. ‘If I thought there was another way... I have bartered Aragon and Barcelone to bare bones all afternoon and he has not wavered. He will take the money – *and* Malik to command one of his armies.’ Ramon’s face offered no hope.

‘Did you suggest me instead?’ asked Dragonetz.

Malik’s, ‘No!’ was instinctive.

Ramon at least smiled, however wearily. ‘You were mentioned at the start. El Rey Lobo made it clear that I was welcome to such a... creative general. I believe his words were, ‘How do you control this man without removing one of his hands?’

Dragonetz laughed. ‘I take *that* as a great compliment! Believe me, his men now have a better notion of how siege engines work than do most armies! But there is always another way. He shall not have Malik.’

‘We have no choice in all courtesy. As you say, it is a reasonable demand. I could ask that he return to us in a year.’ Ramon’s tone betrayed his doubts that such a request would be considered.

Dragonetz had some idea how much ‘just one year’ riding with El Lobo would cost Malik’s health, if he survived. El Rey Lobo was young enough to believe he was immortal; Malik knew he wasn’t.

‘Have you signed?’ asked Dragonetz, and the walls held their breath. Ramon Berenguer would never go back on his word.

‘Of course not!’ The Prince’s eyes flashed at the insult. ‘I would not sign without Malik’s consent.’

‘And I give it, my Lord.’ Malik bent to kiss Ramon’s ring, and his Liege laid a hand on the turbaned head.

‘I knew you would.’ Ramon turned to Dragonetz. ‘Unless my most creative commander can think of something?’

The silence spread from the foundations of the stone walls into each man’s core. Dragonetz followed each line of thought to a dead end, blocked by honour, time or resources. Each line of thought

but one.

Finally, no laughter in his voice, he said, 'I have a proposition. El Rey Lobo must want something more than he wants Malik, enough to ask for that instead. He couldn't *see* what you offered, didn't feel the burn of desire. We must make him feel that.'

Ramon frowned. 'We have no women with us that would make such an impact and no time to send for some. El Rey Lobo has no shortage of beauties already. We'd need somebody of unusual talent to make him lose his senses in such a way.' Ramon was not a man who understood the losing of senses but Malik did and he looked in horror at Dragonetz.

'No, my friend.' Dragonetz put a hand on his friend's shoulder. 'No woman will suffer because of you. I love you dearly but we can't be sure a woman would work magic, even if we found one who might. Only one woman would touch me so, and if El Lobo thinks I am too difficult to control, I suspect Estela would not be his choice of woman! No, jesting aside, what else would make El Rey Lobo fall in love at first sight?'

'No!' Malik guessed his intent.

'Yes,' replied Dragonetz, and he outlined his plan. The other two men made objections, found flaws, were rebuffed, and eventually all agreed that the plan might just work. Ramon's shoulders lifted, Malik's drooped, and Dragonetz went to the stables.

Nobody else was in earshot of Sadeek's stall and the destrier snorted as his master spoke soft words of love to him in Arabic. This princely gift of friendship from Malik had been his partner through hell and Holy Land. Their teamwork had won praise from the Saracen leader Nur-ad-Din and brought the skills of Moorish horsemen in Damascus to Provençal warriors in Les Baux.

Tethered on arid winter plains by his master's tent or ruminating in a stall, Sadeek had been Dragonetz' only confidante in affairs of the heart since he'd left Estela and baby Musca in Barcelone. You could lean against a horse's flank, feel the quiver of life, without fear of drawing harm to your companion. Yet here he was, contemplating exactly that.

For months, he and Sadeek had followed Ramon's route, seeking oaths of allegiance; securing the borders against the Saracen invaders; securing Aragon and Barcelone against the enemy within, back-stabbers and wranglers. A knight and his steed. Could a man

even be called a knight without his horse? Unhorsed was another word for dishonoured.

There had been many days' travel between vassals, between the demonstrations of force, and oaths of allegiance. Waking at dawn to the bleached browns of endless Iberian plains, Dragonetz would seek the unholy trinity that freed his restless mind and gave him respite from black thoughts; man, horse and hawk. The rapid ki-ki-ki of his goshawk, Vertat, hunting. Classical Persian poetry ran through his mind.

*Bestow on me a hawk with sweeping wings,
plumes stroked clean by icy winds.*

*No man prouder than I
on our dawn rides
when my hand outflies the wind,
unleashes my dominion on the untamed.*

Death-dealing by hawk was a calming ritual, cleaner by far than his day's work sometimes proved to be and flying Vertat had been a daily release for man, horse and hawk.

When Ramon's army left Barcelone, there had been sideways glances at his new commander, envy of the black destrier and puzzlement at the orange-eyed goshawk, perched on Dragonetz' shoulder. But no man placed under Dragonetz' command objected to rabbits grilled on camp-fires or the Christmas treat of lamb. Especially as the latter came from lands less welcoming to Barcelone than the season warranted.

When his Liege or his Liege's vassals dictated otherwise, the young falconer Bran carried out his duties with love but he was not Dragonetz and his mount was no Sadeek. After a few days apart, Vertat would complain, chitter in pique, play hard to recall, like a jealous lover, and Dragonetz would have to woo her back. He sought her favourite terrain and Sadeek carried the double burden as fast and smooth as flight itself. Dragonetz swore that Sadeek favoured one side when riding without the hawk and that Vertat crooned appreciation of the stallion's gait.

The stable kept its secrets as Dragonetz whispered his apologies to Sadeek, explained what must be done and why, then he went to

wake Bran, the young falconer. Bran also needed to know what was to be done and, as man not beast, he could – and must – make his own choice.