

Preface

Northern France, early autumn 1308

The day was cool and damp, the forests of Brienne wreathed in mist, the ground underfoot soft and wet, which would make the hunt much harder. The County of Brienne was rich in flora and fauna, a fertile land dotted with villages nestling beside rivers and streams, on the edge of vast forests of broadleaf and fir, a veritable paradise of oak, beech, willow, birch, poplar and pine trees. The land was also a giant herb garden overflowing with mint, thyme, lemon grass and juniper. For those who were healers the region provided an abundance of lady's mantle, mallow and deadly nightshade. For over three hundred years French kings had entrusted Brienne to loyal counts who could be relied upon to answer the call to arms when summoned. And when battle with the foe was joined, the coats of arms of the counts of Brienne – a golden lion rampant with red claws and tongue on a blue background – was always in the front rank.

‘We are ready, lord.’

Walter, Count of Brienne, turned away from staring at the subdued green of the mist-shrouded forest to look at his head hunter. Guiscard Odson was the son and grandson of hunters, a man who had served the counts of Brienne for over twenty years. Tall, sinewy and possessed of great stamina like his beloved hounds, he knew every track, trail, nesting site and mating ground in the region. His long, wild locks were tied at the back of his neck by a black ribbon, accentuating his slightly gaunt features. He smelt of hounds, which in the damp early morning air gave him the aroma of mouldy blankets. Behind him twenty-four of his pride and joy strained at their leashes, eager to hunt their quarry.

‘Have you seen it?’ asked Walter.

‘Only its tracks, lord, which are enough to put the fear of God into many.’

Walter cracked a smile. ‘But not you, eh, Giscard.’

He thought he saw a brief look of alarm in the hunter's cold, dark eyes but an evil leer on Odson's face dispelled any doubt.

‘La Bête is a worthy adversary for your hounds, lord.’

La Bête – the Beast – was the nickname given to the giant wild boar that had been terrorising peasants and wildlife alike, a huge slab of wild animal reportedly four or five times bigger than the average wild boar that inhabited the forests of Brienne. At first Walter had dismissed it as a myth perpetuated by inebriated peasants and desperate beggars seeking to profit from a tall story. But when Giscard himself informed him of the nature of the injuries inflicted on cows and indeed on dead peasants, he had to accept there was a giant wild boar at large. La

Bête was a worthy opponent for a man who had fought the enemies of the French king in Sicily during the War of the Sicilian Vespers, who had endured captivity at the hands of the Aragonese, and who still bore the scars of that conflict. It had been a twenty-year-long conflict between Sicilian rebels backed by the soldiers of the King of Aragon, and the French-backed King of Naples. In the end and after thousands of deaths, the rebels won and the brother of King James of Aragon, Frederick, became the King of Sicily.

Giscard turned to his hunters and grooms holding the hounds.

‘Let us kneel.’

Walter sighed with frustration but took a knee anyway. He knew Odson was a godly man, a devout individual who attributed his position of prestige and privilege as the head huntsman of the Count of Brienne to God alone. Walter did nothing to disabuse him of this notion but Giscard’s sharp mind and razor-sharp instincts were also responsible for him achieving his position.

Walter glared at the two crossbowmen and three men-at-arms observing the hunters kneeling in prayer, the soldiers quickly taking the knee in response. The hounds, big, muscular creatures, were impatient to begin the hunt, as was Walter. But man and beast waited for Giscard Odson to open his eyes before moving forward. Giscard rose to his feet, prompting the huntsmen, grooms, foresters, woodsmen and soldiers to do the same.

Walter strode over to his horse held by his squire, who handed him the reins. He placed his left foot in the stirrup and hauled himself into the saddle. He looked at the six grooms holding four hounds each, all fresh-faced youths but all already hugely experienced in conducting hunts. Each harboured hope of becoming the next Giscard Odson but they had a long way to go. They began their training at the age of seven when they entered an apprenticeship to the master of the hunt. They slept with the hounds, cleaned the stalls and changed water bowls daily. At this age they were worth less than the hounds they looked after, changing the straw they and the dogs slept on every three days. Sharing sleeping quarters with beasts was not wholly to denigrate the apprentices; it was designed to allow the boys to learn the traits, strengths and weaknesses of individual hounds.

As an apprentice got older, and if he survived the harsh winters and being savaged by a hound he had misjudged, he would become a groom, at which stage he would learn the finer points of a tracking huntsman. He would serve several years as a groom before becoming an assistant huntsman, who always worked closely with a huntsman to complete his training. But to become a master huntsman was to become a member of a select band of men, renowned and respected throughout the whole of France.

Giscard had a quick word with the two foresters and three woodsmen who had identified the main stomping ground of La Bête, listening to their final words before taking the saddle of his own horse. The mounted men-at-arms were equipped in the same manner as their master: knee-length leather boots, thick leather jerkins and helmets. The studded jerkins provided adequate protection against boar tusks and did not tax the wearer unduly on a hunt that could last all day. Like Walter they were armed with a dagger, sword and a hunting spear, which had a metal cross-guard at the base of the point to prevent a maddened, dying beast progressing further up the shaft and mauling the owner.

Giscard himself wore a padded green jacket and heavy leather leggings to protect his legs from thorns and brambles when it came to dismounting and cornering the animal. At his hip was a long sword and around his neck a horn to call the hounds and communicate with the hunters under his charge, who could become widely separated depending on the stamina and guile of the prey they were pursuing. It was also a vital means of staying in touch on a day of mist that showed no signs of clearing.

Giscard blew on his horn and the hunt began.

The pack of hounds was led by a special tracking dog called a *lymer*, the name stemming from the fact it was always kept on a *lyme*, or line. The dog sprinted forward, heading straight for the trees. The hunters and grooms spread out into a line, the hounds on their leashes barking and pulling on their leads, eager to plunge into the dark, dank forest. They could already smell the boar, the hogs leaving a heavier scent trail than deer or wolves. But boars, especially mature males, are intelligent creatures and know how to evade pursuers. A hunt thus became a battle of wits in which the hunter pitted his skill, cunning, strength and even his life against a dangerous animal.

Progress in the forest was slow, the poor visibility combining with damp conditions underfoot to slow the hunting party. Guiscard and Walter ducked and weaved in the saddle to avoid low branches as the *lymer* led them deeper into the forest, behind them the grooms struggling to hold the hounds on their leads. Walter peered ahead into the mist and trees, his horse slowly threading its way through the trees and seemingly impenetrable thickets of brambles. Giscard was staring intently at the ground, looking up at regular intervals to ensure he did not ride into a low-lying branch. He pointed to the hoof prints of a wild boar.

‘He is leading us deeper into the forest, lord.’

The stillness was regularly pierced by horns being blown on either flank, indicating Giscard’s huntsmen were out of sight but not too far away. He himself answered their call with his own instrument, cocking his ear to the replies to ensure the line was maintained.

Walter clutched his spear and peered ahead. The thickets were becoming thicker, slowing the horses as they manoeuvred around them. The panting and snarling of the dogs heightened the tension as time wore on. His horse and clothes became soaked by wet leaves brushing them as he disturbed the foliage. And still the mist did not clear. His face and hands were chilled after an hour or more of moving through the trees and dense undergrowth, Giscard beside him not saying a word as the hunter studied the ground and the reactions of the *lymer*, which suddenly stopped dead in its tracks.

‘Bring forward the hounds,’ called Giscard.

He and Walter alighted from their horses as the grooms walked forward and the *lymer* was taken to the rear. The hairs on the back of Walter’s neck stood up and he was aware of his heart pounding in his chest. Nothing had changed – the air was still wet and cool, mist still clung to the trees and the ground was slippery underfoot – and yet everything had changed. The two grooms were struggling to keep control of their eight hounds.

‘Release them,’ shouted Giscard, crouching low with his spear gripped with two hands.

The men-at-arms took his own and Walter’s horse to the rear, the crossbowmen walked forward with loaded weapons, and the hounds bounded forward towards a dense thicket of brambles. From where charged a beast straight from hell.

Walter blinked with surprise when he saw it, a huge animal around five times the size of an average male boar, a thousand pounds of snarling aggression running straight at the hounds, head down, black as night, its small red eyes hinting at something not of this earth. Heavy set at the shoulders, its huge black head had a long, narrow snout and small ears, but the sharp tusks were the instruments by which La Bête did real damage and so it was now. The boar flicked its head left and right and sent two hounds flying into the air as if they were chaff.

A boar is fast over short distances, despite its short legs. Its eyesight is poor but its sense of smell is excellent and La Bête could smell fear from a long way off. It ran straight for one of the grooms, the quivering youth turning to flee from the huge beast bearing down on him. It was a fatal mistake.

‘Here, here!’ screamed Giscard in an attempt to divert the boar’s attention. In vain.

The groom tripped on a bramble and fell face-first on the wet ground, desperately trying to get to his feet. But the boar was on him in seconds, trampling him with his hooves, over seventy stone of angry beast stomping on his body. Giscard’s face registered horror when he heard a sharp crack, signalling the breaking of the groom’s spine. The youth emitted a high pitched scream but fell silent when one of the boar’s tusks gouged his neck in a frenzied attack.

Walter raced forward and stabbed his spear into the giant beast's side, a thrust that normally would have skewered an ordinary boar with ease. But La Bête was far from ordinary, the animal grunting in discomfort and then charging the Count of Brienne himself. It attacked Walter head-on, head down, the nobleman gripping the spear shaft with both hands and aiming the point of his weapon at the animal's shoulders. The boar was fast but Walter was faster, darting to the right before thrusting the spear point at the animal's right shoulder. But the hog had unusually thick tissue over its shoulder plates and the metal point made only a small indentation on the animal's thick hide as it passed him.

The crossbowmen aimed their weapons and pulled the triggers, the pair of iron-tipped bolts striking the boar in its left side, which normally would have brought it down. But La Bête swerved left and charged them, reaching them in seconds, flicking its huge head to inflict a deep gash on the inside thigh of one of the men, who collapsed to the ground, screaming in pain. His comrade hauled him away as half a dozen hounds leapt at the boar, two being flung in the air with fatal injuries when the boar's long, sharp tusks disembowelled them.

Walter ran forward and threw his spear at the boar, which emitted a blood-curdling growl when the point pierced its hide. The hounds tried to grab the beast's neck but such was its size and power he was able to literally shake them off, two more yelping in pain and limping away when its tusks gashed their flesh, inflicting deep, debilitating injuries.

Giscard blew his horn several times before running forward, intent on driving the point of his spear through the boar's eye. But La Bête suddenly burst from the pack of hounds surrounding it to run straight at the head huntsman, literally running at the spear, the point of which glanced off the side of its bony head, away from its eyes. Giscard tried to get out of the way but was only partially successful, the boar's tusks slicing through his heavy leather leggings but not cutting the flesh beneath. Then it was gone, back into the thicket from whence it had sprung.

Walter rushed over to Giscard and helped him to his feet.

'Are you hurt?'

'No, lord.'

The duke looked around at the scene of slaughter: one groom dead, a crossbowman fatally injured, four hounds slain and two more injured, probably fatally. Two more packs arrived, another eight hounds, the grooms and the hunters with them staring in disbelief at the scene that greeted their eyes.

'Release them,' Giscard commanded the grooms, who unleashed their dogs.

The animals ran forward towards the thickets of brambles but did not reach the thorny foliage.

They were stopped in their tracks by the reappearance of La Bête, bloodied and salivating from the mouth. His deadly tusks found two more hounds, tossing the big dogs into the air as though they were made of straw. But the rest locked their jaws on the boar's neck and front legs and Walter and Giscard dashed forward, plunging their retrieved spears into the beast. It roared in pain and anger, shaking off two of the hounds before barging into Giscard and knocking him to the ground. The two spears were embedded in its sides but it continued to thrash around in a maddened fury. The hounds did not let go, giving Walter time to draw his sword and slash at one of its back legs. The blow severed a main tendon, meaning the boar would be unable to run.

Another hound was tossed into the air, landing on its back but re-joining the fray to lock its jaws once more on the boar's neck. Walter plunged his sword into the beast's side, again and again. The blows were difficult because the La Bête's skin had the consistency of hard leather armour. But Walter sensed the tide of battle had been turned because the boar's movements were becoming less frenzied, and its breathing was very laboured. Two of the men-at-arms ran forward to assist their lord.

'Stand back,' he shouted, 'he's mine.'

He said nothing to Giscard, who had risen to his feet and proceeded to stab the boar on the opposite side with his own sword. Their blades were turned red as they plunged the sharpened steel into the beast, the hounds ripping at its flesh but making little impression. But they did keep it pinned in position to allow their masters to turn its flanks into slabs of lacerated flesh. Then La Bête emitted a final grunt and collapsed, dead.

Walter, covered in the blood of the boar, panting and sweating, grinned at his head huntsman across from the dead animal. The grooms pulled off the hounds with difficulty, attaching leads to their studded leather collars and hauling them back. The other hunters arrived, staring in awe at the scene of carnage. Walter nodded to one who walked forward, pulled his knife and went to work skinning the boar. Others assisted him, also slicing open the boar's stomach to give the innards to the hounds as a reward for their bravery. One of the men-at-arms handed Walter a flask of wine. He emptied half before tossing the vessel to Giscard.

'I want the head taken to each village in the district,' said Walter, 'so the people may know that the Count of Brienne always has their safety and wellbeing uppermost in his mind.'

'And the skin, lord?' asked Giscard.

Walter grinned at him. 'A gift for your wife, Giscard.'

The head huntsman was delighted.

‘You do me a great honour, lord.’

Walter looked around at the slain crossbowman, dead and injured grooms and slain hounds.

‘It seems scant recompense for the damage done to your pack and hunters.’

The journey back to camp was conducted in silence. The death of a groom and crossbowman had shaken everyone. It was accepted hunts were dangerous; indeed, the risk of death was the reason it was a noble profession. And hounds were almost always injured and killed bringing down dangerous prey. But still, for a wild boar to wreak such havoc was a sobering experience, not least because the count and head huntsman had also been nearly killed.

Spirits were revived somewhat at camp when everyone sat down at long tables to eat food cooked over hot fires. Pigeon pies were warmed on hot metal plates and a side of beef was turning on a spit. Grooms and hunters sat with their lord to toast the Count of Brienne’s victory and admire the massive head of La Bête, which was mounted on a pole directly in front of Walter so he might admire it as he ate. The grooms and hunters were treated to wine, a great honour for individuals used to drinking ale. As the drink flowed and cold bodies were filled with warm food and wine, tongues were loosened and spirits raised.

‘Horsemen approaching.’

Walter stopped his conversation with Giscard to observe a small group of riders approaching the camp, men in mail hauberks, helmets, blue surcoats, and carrying blue shields emblazoned with the golden lion of Brienne. Walter stood in eager anticipation as his friend and deputy, Jean de Carrouges, dismounted and walked over to the count’s table. The hunter on Walter’s left rose to make room for the knight but Jean walked past the severed boar’s head, his eyes widening at its size, stopped at the table in front of the count and grabbed his goblet, toasting his lord.

‘Hail to the new Duke of Athens, may God guide him in his new exalted position.’

Everyone rose and toasted their lord, few knowing where Athens was aside from an assumption it was somewhere in the east. Walter felt himself blushing and cracking an embarrassed smile, his face twisting to show a mischievous leer rather than a beaming visage. There was a time when the strapping Walter of Brienne was considered a handsome man but no longer. Fighting in the War of the Sicilian Vespers had left two permanent facial scars inflicted by enemy blades, one on his left cheek, the other, deeper, scar on the right side of his face running from his hairline to his mouth.

‘Sit down, Jean,’ he told his deputy after everyone had emptied their goblets, ‘and tell me more.’

Jean was shorter than his lord and of a slighter build, which was obvious when he sat beside Walter and accepted a goblet of wine. Another servant planted a wooden plate in front of him, on which was a sizzling slab of beef. Jean used his knife to cut off a slice, shoving it into his mouth and chewing the meat as he explained more to his lord.

‘The decision of the high court of Achaea reached your castle this morning, lord. Its members voted unanimously that you should be the new Duke of Athens. The messenger waits to take your decision back with him as to whether you will accept.’

Walter slapped Jean on the back.

‘I will.’

Jean cut off another slice of meat.

‘Then you will need to go to Athens to guarantee your new dukedom, lord. The high court of Achaea is not composed of fools. They knew if they gave the duchy to a woman, the only other claimant to the title, it would quickly be conquered by Angelus Ducas.’

‘Who?’ sniffed Walter.

Jean drank some wine. ‘The ruler of the Kingdom of Thessaly, which lies due north of the Duchy of Athens. He had been the ward of Duke Guy, your predecessor, but now he has come of age and thrown off the yoke of Athens. Supported by the Roman Empress Irene, it is rumoured he desires to wipe out one of the Catholic kingdoms in Greece and add its lands to his own.’

‘Who is Empress Irene?’ enquired Walter, his deputy frowning at his ignorance.

‘The estranged wife of the Roman Emperor Andronicus, who rules from the city of Thessalonica, which is directly north of the Kingdom of Thessaly. She is by all accounts ambitious and views the Latin kingdoms in Greece with disdain. So you see how circumstances have combined to imperil your new duchy, lord.’

Walter saw no such thing.

‘No one would dare march into my duchy.’

‘Not with you in Athens, lord,’ agreed Jean, ‘which is why you must make plans to depart immediately, with an army.’

Walter nodded thoughtfully. ‘Athens has no army?’

Jean finished his chunk of meat.

‘According to the messenger from Achaea, lord, its army is in a somewhat depleted state.’

‘I will take my own. We will see how brave this Angelus Ducas is in the face of France’s finest soldiers.’

‘A wise decision, lord, though if you take your army it will be months before you step foot in Athens, by which time events might have taken a turn for the worse.’

Walter stared at the severed boar’s head, which appeared even larger mounted on a pole than it had been when attached to its body.

‘I assume you have formulated a plan to prevent that happening, Jean.’

His deputy smiled. He smiled a lot, the outward expression of a man who prided himself on always being one step ahead of others, be they peasants or lords.

‘There are mercenaries to be called upon near to Athens, Catholic mercenaries who strike fear into the Romans, lord. Mercenaries who can serve you.’

Walter’s ears pricked up. ‘Oh?’

Jean took another gulp of wine.

‘The Catalan Company, lord.’

‘Catalans! Is this some kind of jest?’

‘No, lord,’ said Jean hurriedly, ‘please hear me out.’

Walter pointed to the deep, disfiguring scar down the right side of his face.

‘A Catalan gave me this in Sicily and I was a captive of the Catalans on the island, in case you had forgotten.’

Jean had not forgotten. Indeed, it has been his lord’s misfortune that had allowed Jean de Carrouges, an impoverished knight with a poor horse and rusty armour, to rise up in the world, for it had been Jean who had been instrumental in bringing about Walter’s eventual release. His knowledge of Catalan had resulted in Walter’s late father, Hugh of Brienne, selecting him to negotiate with the Catalans on his behalf.

‘I have not forgotten, lord, but the Catalans have established their own kingdom in the east, not far from Constantinople itself. Three years ago they destroyed the Roman army at a place called Apros and now they roam at will throughout the Roman emperor’s lands.’

‘They are thieves and beggars who deserve nothing more than the gallows in this life and hell hereafter,’ insisted Walter.

‘But they might still serve the new Duke of Athens before they are consigned to the fires of damnation, lord.’

Walter was not convinced. ‘How?’

‘If they are tormenting Thessaly, Angelus Ducas will not be thinking of assaulting your new duchy, lord.’

Walter spat out a piece of gristle. ‘Your plan is not entirely imbecilic.’

‘You honour me, lord.’

Walter pointed at him. 'I will concede the Catalans are good fighters, especially the Almogavars, but I do not want them ravaging my own lands after they have dealt with this Angelus Ducas. They are like ravenous wolves and wolves are hard to control.'

'Hiring a small number, say five hundred, will suffice to keep the Romans occupied until you land with your own army, lord,' suggested Jean. 'You know the damage even a small number of Almogavars can do.'

Walter emitted a low chuckle and ran a finger down his scarred face.

'You do not need to remind me. I do not trust them.'

Jean leaned in closer. 'You do not need to trust them, lord, just hire them. You know they always honour their contracts.'

Walter stared at the boar's head dripping blood on the wet grass.

'Five hundred, you say?'

'More than sufficient to keep the Romans occupied until you arrive with your army, lord.'

'You will leave at once,' said Walter. 'Agree a fair price for the hire of five hundred Almogavars for six months, by which time the winter will have passed and I will be in Athens.'

Jean smiled and raised his goblet to Walter.

'It shall be as you desire, lord.'

'Can I assume the High Court in Achaea will support me with soldiers when I arrive in Athens?' said Walter.

'Speaking to their representative, lord, I fear it is the other way round. They and the other Latin kingdoms in Greece will be looking to you to provide the main means of preventing their fall to the Romans, your reputation for battlefield prowess being well known both here and in the east.'

'You mean they intend to sit on their arses and let me do all the fighting.'

Jean shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

'I would not couch it in exactly those terms, lord.'

Walter sneered. 'I was thinking of displaying the boar's head in all the local villages to show the locals they need no longer fear La Bête, but perhaps it would be more useful for you to take it with you to the east where you can show it to all those who are thinking of crossing the new Duke of Athens.'

