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Written by Karen Maitland

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The Raven's Head

Karen Maitland

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1

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The Raven's Head

Karen Maitland

Chapter 1
Under the Astrological House of Libra, the
Scales,
in the year of Our Lord, 1224.
Near Ricey-Bas, France

If you would understand what birds are saying, steal crows' eggs from the nest, boil them, then return them to the nest. The crow will fly to the Red Sea to find a stone, which she will touch to the eggs and they will become raw again and, in time, hatch. If you then place this stone in your mouth you will understand the language of every bird.

‘What foul mischief are up to now, *petit bâtard*?’

I hadn't heard old Gaspard creeping up on me and I was so startled that the arrow in my bow shot out through the slit window and landed with a thwack in the chamomile bank far below, just inches from where Charles was standing. He squawked, like a startled goose, and started to run, falling over his own feet as he twisted round, trying to see where the arrow had been fired from. I flung myself off the wooden box I'd been standing on and crouched on the dusty floorboards of the turret room, hoping he hadn't seen me.

‘Did you hit someone?’ Gaspard demanded.

He dragged himself up onto the wooden box and peered down through the slit window, trying to see what damage I'd done. If I had killed someone, it would certainly have come as no surprise to him, since he was always telling me I'd end my days on the gallows. Satisfied that no one lay bleeding below the tower, he fetched me a hefty blow across my shoulders with his staff. Fortunately, his joints had swollen again in the wet weather, so he couldn't balance long enough without his stick to

hit me again, though I knew he was itching to do it.

Leaning on his staff, he limped heavily over to the small brazier and, perching himself on a stool, swayed back and forth, like a tattered rook in the wind, warming his twisted hands. 'So, what were you doing, *garçon*?'

'Killing crows,' I said.

'In other words idling your time away, when you should have been working.'

Actually, I had not been idling my time away. I had in fact been wondering whether I could murder Charles and get away with it. Not even wondering, really, just fantasising about it, picturing the insipid little slug lying in his coffin and Amée burying her beautiful face in my shoulder as she sobbed her heart out, convinced that only I could comfort her in her grief. The reality was, of course, that if Amée was going to sob on anyone's shoulder it would be one of the *jongleurs* that she was always flirting with, or the languid young men who hung around her father, like ticks on the arse of a sheep, hoping that now Philippe was rising in favour at the new king's court, he'd drag them up with him.

'Have you finished copying that deed? Let me see it.' Gaspard thumped his stick on the wooden floorboards, sending up a small puff of dust. 'If you've time to waste chasing crows ...'

I gathered up the three sheets of parchment from the sloping writing table and thrust them into his misshapen fingers.

'Light, *petit bâtard*, light! You couldn't see a white cat in this gloom.'

He had a point. There were slit windows at intervals all the way round the turret room, but they were so narrow the only thing they let in was the cold. It was a wonder to me that a colony of bats hadn't taken up residence in the chamber long ago. They'd certainly have found it gloomy enough for their

tastes. Even the swineherds who worked for Philippe had better dwellings than we did. I kept reminding Gaspard that the rest of the château was stuffed with fine tapestries, thick hangings and sumptuous cushions, not to mention fine wines and good food. He should ask Philippe to send a few trifles our way.

But Gaspard only wagged his grey beard. 'The master pays our wages and feeds us,' he croaked. 'If he thought we were in need of anything he would send it.'

'But he's never going to know if you don't tell him,' I said. 'He never sets foot up here, much less sees the arse-rags we call blankets, or tastes that vinegar the scullion fetches up as wine.'

'And where would we put these fine things, if he did send them?' Gaspard asked. 'There's barely room enough to work as it is.'

He was right about that, of course. Apart from our two writing desks and a piss pail, every inch of the walls and floor was crammed with teetering piles of books and boxes of documents. If they fell down it would take them a week to dig us out of the drift of parchment and vellum.

Sometimes I feared I'd turn into a bat myself, stuck up there night and day, scratching away. Gaspard rarely left the turret room even for meals for he complained the noise and music of the Great Hall gave him a headache. I'd have been only too glad to leave him to his icy chamber and descend to enjoy the chatter and dancing. Then the raddled old bird could have had all the peace and quiet his withered heart desired. But, no, I was ordered to eat in the tower with him, in case he wanted something fetching. Then he'd send me to my straw pallet in the corner, where I was forced to lie awake half the night listening to him flick through the pages in some old ledger, making that irritating, dry little cough of his and humming tunelessly to himself.

When Gaspard did finally retire to bed, he'd toss and turn,

grunting like a farrowing pig, until he finally fell asleep, and that was when the snoring began. It was a mark of just how saintly I was that I hadn't smothered him to death long ago. Was this how I was going to end my days, withering away in a dusty turret until I was as desiccated as him, finally croaking out my last sour breath without having kissed a girl, never mind bedded one?

Gaspard was running his crooked thumb down the deeds I'd copied. I learned from painful experience to stay well out of range of his stick whenever he read any of my work. After years of scratching away on parchments and peering at documents, his eyes had grown dim, though he'd sooner have gouged them out of his head than admit as much. But he could still manage to spot a mistake at fifty paces, as if the violated words leaped up at him from the page, screeching like ravished maidens.

'Five errors on the first page alone,' he barked, flinging his stick at my head.

I dodged it, which I knew wouldn't improve his temper. He made a grasping motion, like a disgruntled baby, indicating he wanted his stick fetching for him, but I pretended not to notice. If the old bird thought I was going to hand him a weapon—

There was the sound of someone climbing the stairs and, without so much as a knock, the door was flung open. Gaspard didn't look up from the parchment, but his frown deepened. 'Did you drop your manners on the way up? Wait outside till I bid you enter.'

'I trust that remark was not intended for me,' a voice said gravely.

The expression on old Gaspard's face was of a man who'd inadvertently swallowed a live ferret, and little wonder, for none other than our master, Monsieur le Comte, was standing in the doorway.

I'd been apprentice to the old scribe since I was ten and,

throughout those seven interminable years since I'd moved into Gaspard's turret, I'd never once known Philippe to visit it. I'd often suspected he didn't even know the place existed.

Gaspard flapped wildly at me and I handed him his stick. He tottered forward, looking as dazed as if he'd just been whacked on the head with it.

'Monsieur le Comte! What ... what an honour. I trust there is nothing amiss?'

Between bowing repeatedly, like a bird pecking crumbs, the old scribe groped for the roll of parchment and the quills that were always kept ready in case Philippe wanted to dictate a message or letter. The mood had been known to seize our master even at the dead of night and he thought nothing of sending for us to come to his hall in the early hours of the morning, seeming amazed that we'd been sleeping. It was as if we were pieces of parchment ourselves and Philippe imagined we were simply filed away among the books on the shelves, waiting until he wanted to use us.

'A chair for Monsieur le Comte,' Gaspard demanded. 'Quickly, *garçon*,

But there wasn't a chair, only the two high stools we used at our desks. I scrubbed at the top of one of them with my sleeve and pushed it into the tiny space in the centre of the room.

Philippe made no move to sit, but gazed at the stacks of books and wooden cylinders as if he was searching for something. He was a tall, lean man, with a prominent square jaw. His tawny hair had been curled at the nape of his neck to match the curl of his fringe on his brow. He was already clad for dinner in a dark blue tunic. A long, sleeveless white tabard flowed over it, decorated with a rich panel of scarlet and gold embroidery at the neck. He looked what he was, a man ascending rapidly in the service of the new king, Louis VIII,

who even as Crown Prince had been dubbed Le Lion.

Gaspard's trembling hand hovered over the jug of vinegary white wine, but he seemed to realise it was hardly suitable to offer to Philippe.

Philippe appeared to recognise the old man's dilemma. 'Fetch us some wine, *garçon*. And take your time. I would speak with your master alone.'

On any other occasion I would have been as eager to escape from the tower as a hound released from its kennel, but I found myself resentful at being excluded. I'd copied Philippe's documents and contracts, read his letters and written secret love notes for half of the men and women in his service – which, I might add, was the only time any woman in that manor deigned to look at me – and in all that time I'd never once divulged a single confidence, not that I'd had much opportunity. Who did I ever get to talk to except old Gaspard and the birds? But that aside, you would have thought I could have been trusted with whatever message he wanted to dictate to Gaspard. Besides, I'd get to know about it sooner or later, anyway. They were bound to want it copied, and though Gaspard told me repeatedly that a good scribe must learn to copy without reading or remembering, I always ensured I remembered everything.

But I bowed my head respectfully and closed the door behind me. I made sure that I clattered enough on the stairs for them to be satisfied I'd retreated, then tiptoed back up and, sitting on the steps, pressed my ear to the gap beneath the door.

'... disturbing news today from a *friend*.' Philippe stressed the word as if the source of this news mattered. 'There are certain rumours being whispered about me at Court. I had these past weeks suspected something of the sort – odd looks, men who were once affable now growing cold. But I couldn't discover the cause until today.'

‘The king shows you great favour,’ Gaspard said. ‘And there will always be those about him who are jealous of that. The old king’s advisers are always cast off when a new king takes the crown.’

The old crow’s voice had a wary, sycophantic tone. Was he afraid Philippe was accusing him of spreading rumours? Surely not. Even if he hadn’t been the most loyal servant in Philippe’s employ, Gaspard had no more chance of spreading gossip than I did, stuck up there.

‘It was the same when the king’s late father came to the throne,’ Gaspard continued. ‘Out went the old and in came the new. A king always likes to surround himself with his own men. But you needn’t fear the jealousy of others, Monsieur le Comte. It is plain to see from his letters that our lion puts much trust in you.’

‘Not for much longer, if this rumour reaches his ears,’ Philippe said grimly. ‘The king needs strong men around him if he is to consolidate the lands he’s gained from the English Crown. Le Comte de Champagne is bitterly opposed to the banning of Jews from lending money, he makes a good income from taxing them, and the king will find it hard to stand against him. Louis cannot afford to have any weak spot in his armour that his enemies can use to pierce him.’

‘But, Monsieur le Comte, why should you be that weak spot?’ Gaspard said.

I pressed closer to the door – this I did not want to miss. The floorboards creaked and I heard footsteps crossing the room. I hurtled down the spiral steps, as the door opened. Philippe was evidently taking no chances. I stood, pressing myself against the cold stone walls, praying he would not venture onto the staircase, for I dared not retreat any further down for fear he heard me moving.

But he seemed satisfied they were not overheard and the

door closed above me. I knew it was foolish to risk going back, but I couldn't help myself. I had to hear the rest of this tale.

'... but I must have proof,' Philippe was saying. 'If it should be challenged, I would lose not only the king's favour, but my titles and lands too. Even my own villeins would own more than I. My daughter would be fortunate to find any man more favoured than a butcher to wed her. There must be something – a record, a letter – that would banish all doubt. You must have come across some document, Gaspard.'

'I am certain the proof is here, Monsieur le Comte.' Gaspard sounded even more agitated than our master. 'I cannot lay my hands on it immediately, but that is only because I've had no cause to look for such a thing. But I swear nothing, not even an order to buy meat for the hounds, has been thrown away since I came here nigh on fifty years ago, that I can promise you. And the librarian before me was just as diligent. If you can but give me a little time to search ...'

'Search thoroughly, Gaspard. Come to me day or night as soon as you discover anything, anything at all. All our futures depend on you. You must find it!'

Chapter 2

Norfolk, England

Visitabis interiora terra, rectificando, invenies occultum lapidem – VITRIOL.

Visit the interior of the earth and by rectifying, you will find the hidden stone.

Wilky's eyes water in the stinging wind and, though his body is enveloped in the cloak of the white rider, his nose is numb with cold. The boy pulls the edge of the cloak over his face to shield it. His teeth rattle as the horse's hoofs thunder over the stones. He's sure they are flying as fast as a dragon. He keeps glancing up at the man who grips him so tightly, fearing that he might have turned into a demon or the lantern-man, not that Wilky knows what the lantern-man looks like, but he knows he must be monstrous. But in the darkness the boy can see little of the rider's face, except a pair of glittering eyes fixed on the track ahead.

The rhythm of the beast gradually lulls the child into a stupor. He cannot keep his eyes open. Slowly his head droops down into the soft wool of the cloak. This is just a dream. He will wake and find himself back in his bed, curled like a puppy around his heap of brothers and sisters, warm and safe.

The rhythm changes. Wilky jerks awake. He is not in his own cottage, but clattering through an archway into a courtyard that seems, at first, to be on fire. Yellow and orange flames from blazing torches lick across the high walls. All around him, the giant shadows of men and of sweating horses twist across the walls. The heavy wooden door in the archway shudders closed behind the riders and men come running to take the reins.

Wilky is lifted down and set on the cobbles. His thin legs are so cold and numb, he staggers. He gazes longingly at the

brazier by the high gate, desperate to steal a little handful of warmth, but he's afraid to move.

A huge stone building with slit windows towers above him on one side, and a cluster of smaller buildings face him. The other two sides of the courtyard are sealed by walls so high not even his eldest brother could climb them, and he can climb the tallest oak in the forest. The boy is trapped.

He squeals in fear as a heavy hand suddenly grasps his shoulder. 'This way, Regulus.'

He stares up at the man, recognising the frosty chin of the older of the two white riders.

'I'm not Re-lus,' he says stoutly. 'I'm Wilky.'

'You are Regulus now. You will answer to that name, do you understand? There is no boy called Wilky.'

'But *I*'m Wilky. It's me,' the boy says.

Perhaps the man doesn't know who he is. Maybe he took him from the cottage mistaking him for some other boy. If Wilky tells him, if he explains he is not this other boy, then they will take him home. He tries desperately to make them understand, but no one is listening to him.

As Regulus is pushed towards the great building, a low door near the end opens silently and the younger of the two white riders hurries out.

'I've told him we have the boy. You're to take him straight down.'

'The child has just been removed from his home. He's exhausted and confused. He won't understand what's being asked of him. Can't Arthmael use one of the others tonight?'

The young man snorts as if the question surpasses stupid. 'If he could, he would not have waited for this boy. I wouldn't try his patience any longer.'

Regulus jerks as the fingers gripping his shoulder dig sharply into his flesh. 'Have a care how you address me,

Madron. I have flogged boys scarcely younger than you. I know how you ingratiate yourself, but you are not Arthmael's successor yet. Remember, I supply what he needs, not you.'

Regulus, still protesting that he is Wilky, is propelled forward into a small chamber, but all things are relative and to Regulus the room is as big as his whole cottage, bigger even, for it has a vaulted ceiling. On the opposite side of the empty chamber is another door.

When it is opened, the boy expects to see a byre or a forest on the other side. Where else do doors lead? But instead there is a set of stone steps spiralling downwards into the darkness. An eerie red glow flickers across the wall. A rush of damp, stale air carries snatches of an acrid stench, but the smell is not of any animal or herb the child recognises. In a panic he turns, trying to flee back across the chamber, but the grip on his shoulder is too fierce and he is hauled back.

'Your mother instructed you to be a good boy and do exactly as you are told,' the white rider whispers into his ear. 'Your father wanted you to come here. He gave you to us. Your parents would never send you into harm, would they? Go down, Regulus, just a few steps, that's all. One day you will learn there is far more to be afraid of in this world than what lies beneath here. Then you will truly understand fear.'