

## Chapter 1

Like a sad and spellbinding monastic chant, the music flowed from the guitar to impregnate the confined space of the studio: subtle harmonies, a mixture of folk and Occitan tradition with a slow, almost oppressive tempo.

The musician's fingers fluttered over the strings: three minor chords for the refrain, an arpeggio to conclude the melody, and the instrumental section was done. All of the singer's distress surged forth then in his gravelly voice, which interpreted the refrain one last time before dying in a final sigh as the notes faded away.

The magnetic tape continued to turn without any sound coming out of the quadraphonic speakers placed in the four corners of the room. Peire Aicart remained motionless for a few moments, his head tilted back, eyes closed. Finally, he stretched his arms wide, set his electric guitar—a Stratocaster—on its stand and got up to switch off the tape-recorder. His drawn features reflected the numerous sleepless nights he had spent recently.

He remained silent for a few seconds, his gaze wandering over the apparatus crowding the soundproof recording studio installed on the first floor of his house: mixing desk, echo chamber, effects console, sampler, sequencer, digital voice-recorder, sound-recording equipment and various musical instruments. He rewound the tape and pressed the PLAY button. His deep and hoarse voice immediately filled the room: a voice with a southern accent, accompanied solely by the guitar.

“Shit! It's worthless!” he exclaimed, furiously.

Peire went back to the mixing desk, moved several switches, and then turned down the sound with an ill-tempered gesture. The song was flat, affected, and too ordinary. It did not sound right. The chords did not flow...or perhaps it was the words. Something was awry. He could not contrive to transpose the emotion he had in his head. His talent had served him better in the past.

Three days of his life shut up in his studio, incessantly composing and playing his music; he needed to stand back. Otherwise, his next album would never be finished. It had been more than five years since his last.

He took two steps across the room, took an almost empty bottle of Evian from the top of one of the speakers and finished it off in a single gulp. He held it in his hand for a few seconds before tossing it mechanically into the waste-bin, which was already full of crumpled pieces of paper on which embryonic verses were scribbled. The results of today's session were far from satisfactory. Hours of work were accumulated there.

Peire suddenly felt completely exhausted. A breath of air and a little sleep would do him more good than anything else. The song that would not emerge had emptied him out. Neither the words nor the melodies that he had attempted to compose in the last four months had found favor with his ears. He was too demanding, undoubtedly, but that was his nature: perfection or nothing.

Peire left his studio. He went down the old wooden staircase, went along the hallway and opened the front door of his house. Outside, silence reigned. It was total: the calm of the countryside. Thick grey clouds were accumulating in fleecy masses in the sky. It would soon start to snow.

He had chosen to return to live in the village of Montségur, far from the metropolitan bustle of Toulouse. Even there, his residence was isolated on the edge of the village, lost in the wilderness at the foot of the Pic de Saint-Barthélémy. Montségur loomed up in front of him. Perched on a rocky crag, an immense stone ark set to defy the sky's assaults, the ruined citadel dominated the valley. At this early hour the feeble rays of the rising sun were grazing the mountain peaks, barely touching the heights of the keep. The walls were silhouetted like a dark stain on the deserted mountain-sides. The castle defied time, like some strange decadent ship run aground there by chance.

Montségur, sanctuary and sepulcher. A ruin. The remnants of ramparts worn down by time, stones mingled with hectic vegetation, grasses and bushes. Nothing special. An ancient fortress, of which there are hundreds in France.

And yet, this particular ruin exercised a certain influence upon humans, as if the place were inspired. Montségur bore a name that rattled in the wind of History.

Today it was a bare, deserted ruin on the summit of a crag, a skeleton contemplating lands reddened by the blood of martyrs to the Inquisition. But it was also a symbol: the last refuge of the

Cathars; a legendary place set above the plain of Languedoc, to which thousands of tourists flocked every year.

Peire sighed. Seeing this landscape every day made him a little less mindful of the castle, but he always experienced a strange sense of admiration and despair when he looked at it: admiration for the men and women whose faith had been tested to the limit in March 1244, going to the stake rather than renouncing their religion; despair for the martyrs pitilessly pursued by the ambition, cruelty and intolerance of crusaders. Seven centuries after the death of 200 Cathars, nothing had changed.

His thoughts abandoned the castle to return to his music. His album... The idea made him smile. Who was still waiting for a Peire Aicart album? No one any longer—and yet, at 42, he was still considered one of the best guitarists in France to accompany singers or rock bands. He was one of the rare session musicians, always in demand in numerous studios, but no one wanted to give him another chance as a solo performer—no one except Jacques Desplas, his producer and friend.

At the age of 18, Peire had chosen so-called *chanson engagée*—“politically-engaged singing”—proclaiming his rebellious tendencies by singing in Occitan, his mother tongue: that of his ancestors, who had lived in Montségur for more than 700 years.

In the late 70s, he had faith in his music and his struggle, which were, for him, coupled together. His songs were in complete contrast to those that occupied the top spots in hit parades.

He had begun as a simple troubadour, in youth clubs and small venues, singing with no accompaniment but his acoustic guitar. Little by little, his fame had grown, leading to the recording of his first 33rpm record, a mixture of rebel songs and love songs. The album, entitled *Revolum*, had circulated in leftist and anarchist milieux. His political commitment had then led Peire into various local Occitan struggles: a wine-growers' strike in Languedoc and a protest against the establishment of a military base in Larzac. There, for the first time in his life, he had sung in front of 30,000 people—one of the highlights of his career.

Then, as the years went by, his political engagement and militarism had been eroded little by little, giving way to his true passion: the guitar. That had translated itself into eight albums with more and more songs in a popular vein, in French, sometimes even in English—and, most of all, by increasing fame.

Today, he spent the greater part of his time in recording studios or on tour through France, but never as the main attraction, merely as a guitarist.

Peire took several deep breaths of glacial air, gazing at the castle without really seeing it. His nascent beard, peppered with grey, emphasized his attitude of defeat.

He stayed outside for a few minutes, letting fresh air into his lungs, and then went back into the house and into the kitchen, where he made a black coffee. Cup in hand, he went into the dining-room. He sat down in his old leather armchair facing the huge regional stone fireplace.

The cup burned his fingers while he was not really paying attention. His gaze was fixed on a framed image situated on the mantelpiece. His wife Héléne, sitting on top of a mountain, smiled at him mischievously from the photograph. Behind her, the castle of Montségur was visible. Peire's eyes closed.

They had lived together in happy tranquility, sharing one another's passions. He had helped her to discover the world of music; she had initiated him into the skiing circuit, climbing and potholing. It had lasted six short years....

He contemplated the face for several minutes. A few months earlier he would have wept, but time had begun to ameliorate the pain, without suppressing any of the grief that he still felt.

A year ago, almost to the day, Héléne had died. A cave situated a few kilometers from the house, which she knew by heart and was not supposed to be dangerous...a rock had fallen, starting a slide that had crushed the body of the 33-year-old woman as well as her two companions...the search-party had taken more than a week to bring them out: eight long days of anguish, hoping for an impossible miracle.

After the first weeks of despair, he had gone through a period of depression, finding no meaning in life, spending long periods sitting on the doorstep, waiting. Waiting for what? He did not know himself.

The image of Héléne haunted him. Her absence tormented him. He no longer wanted to do anything. His music suffered in consequence, contracts became fewer and further apart. The

occasional royalty payments that still came in enabled him to survive. The house was his; his needs, in respect of food and clothing, were simple.

His producer, who had been with him since the beginning, had extracted him from this slow suicide by confronting him with a true challenge: to go back to his former triumphs, remix them and add three or four new tracks to the album. After his initial refusal, Peire had finally launched himself into the enterprise wholeheartedly. Little by little, he had recovered his self-confidence. His music had not deserted him.

He got up from his armchair and climbed the stairs to return to his recording studio. He took up an acoustic guitar, the one that H  l  ne had given him for his birthday, and started to play. He was in search of inspiration. After ten minutes, during which none came, he decided to abandon the session and resume work later.

He went back to the kitchen, poured himself a glass of Armagnac and drank it in a single draught. For eight months, alcohol had kept him alive, by plunging him into a deceptive sense of wellbeing. Today, the necessity had gone. He put down the glass. After a few moments of reflection he decided that a little sleep would do him good. After 36 hours without sleep, thanks to liters of coffee and his passionate obstinacy, he was exhausted.

Peire went to his bedroom, pausing momentarily at the window to look out at the mountain. The glass returned the image of a pallid face with hollow eyes. He let himself fall on to the bed. The alcohol was beginning to take effect. Sleep immediately overwhelmed him.

A dull sound drew him out of his dreams. Bewildered, he took several seconds to realize that it was coming from the front door. Someone was knocking insistently.

He got up, still half-asleep, passed a hand over his coarse beard, and opened his bedroom window.

“Hey Peire—I need you.”

Peire squinted, dazzled by white light. There had been a heavy snowfall. His childhood friend Michel was standing in front of the house. A short, stocky man, beginning to go bald, he was dressed in an orange ski-suit. He was hopping up and down to keep warm. The coldness of the air materialized his breath as a diaphanous vapor. His footfalls had left tracks in the uniform carpet that covered the garden.

“Shit! I can’t even sleep in peace!” Peire complained, struggling to open his sleepy eyes.

“When I got up at five this morning, I saw the lights on in your house and knew that you weren’t in bed yet...you won’t live to a ripe old age keeping those hours!” Michel reprimanded him gently. “Well, are you going to open up or would you rather I froze to death?”

“I’m coming. Give me a minute.”

Peire closed the window again, crossed the room, went through the dining-room and opened the door.

“Come in!”

They had grown up together, done the same stupid things, and courted the same girls. Michel had even accompanied him on several of his tours, taking care of all the administrative matters. When H  l  ne had died, Michel was still there to support him. Having previously worked as a teacher, for the last two years he had kept an antique and curio shop in the village, open in the summer. He supplemented the earnings of his shop by working as a ski instructor at a nearby resort.

Michel came through the door.

“There’s no time to rest—I need you. It’s urgent. Four youths have gone missing while skiing downhill. There aren’t enough gendarmes and rescue workers to mount a search. They’re afraid that the kids might fall prey to hypothermia because of the cold. Get a move on.” He broke off as he caught sight of Peire’s weary face. “If you’re too tired to come with me, you don’t have to come.”

“On the contrary—this changes things. Just give me time to find my skis and snowshoes.”

“Don’t bother—I’ve got them. You left them at the house last winter. They’re already in my car.” Michel went out again, running towards his vehicle. He had left the motor running. Before climbing in he shouted: “I have to warn Jordanne, so she can make us a snack. Then I’ll go to the gendarmerie to get the rescue equipment and instructions. You dress up warmly and hurry over to her place. I’ll pick you up there. I won’t be long, hopefully.”

Five minutes later Peire closed the door behind him and set out. He headed for the village, which was about 800 meters away, at a rapid pace. The wind had got up, lifting the snow accumulated on the roofs in white clouds.

Out of breath, Peire stopped in front of the *Leg d'Amor*—the Court of Love—a bookshop-restaurant where he sometimes gave concerts, accompanying himself on the guitar like the troubadours of old, one of whose last descendants he was.

He knocked. The door to the shop opened to reveal Jordanne Sutra, a smiling woman as tall as Peire. Another native of Montségur, she had left once to go to university before coming back to help her father run the family restaurant—a restaurant that she had since completely transformed, making it an eccentric place where culture and regional cuisine mingled. Now quite well-known, the place was popular with the tourists who came to visit the castle every year.

Jordanne's smile broadened when she saw Peire. Her delight was reflected in her eyes, sparkling with life. She had grown up with the "two horrors," as she called them, and time had not weakened their old comradeship. She still felt as much pleasure on seeing them, one as much as the other. "Hello, Peire," she said, kissing him on the cheek.

Peire looked her over appreciatively. For once she had left her long black hair loose to dangle over her shoulders in pliant waves. That rejuvenated her. A few wrinkles in the corners of her eyes were all that betrayed her age, which was the same as Peire's and Michel's. "Hello, Jordanne."

"You've finally come out of your lair! I was beginning to get worried. You don't like my cooking any more, then?"

Peire returned the smile, and a little laugh escaped her mouth. "As if! You know perfectly well that I love eating at your place—but I have to finish my album by the end of March, and it's taking up all my time."

"You still have a month and a half."

"I haven't managed to compose anything, unfortunately. I reworked my old material without any problems, but I'm up against it with the new stuff."

Jordanne touched his arm, sliding her hand over his black anorak in an affectionate gesture.

"Go out for a walk sometimes. You work too hard. You need to escape once in a while."

As usual, Jordanne had hit the nail on the head. Peire nodded. "You're right—I'll start today. Has Michel been? We're on our way to search for four youngsters."

"Yes, he called in. If I didn't have to open the restaurant for a bunch of pensioners, I would have come with you."

The blast of a horn made them turn round. Michel's Landrover drew to a halt beside them.

"Have you made us something to eat?" Michel asked.

"Of course! I wouldn't let you die of hunger." She handed a basket to Peire, then turned to Michel. "Have you any news of the young men?"

"They've just found their car at the start of the ski-slopes on the Monts d'Olmes. Several groups are going to search the area today."

Jordanne frowned. "Look after yourselves. The weather forecast predicts significant snowfall this afternoon."

"We're only searching," Michel replied. "In fact, when I get back, remind me that I've got some books for you. I've been clearing an old man's house, and I found some old books that might interest you."

Peire climbed in beside his friend. Jordanne waved to them as the four-by-four got under way. Michel drove carefully until he was out of the village, and then accelerated when he reached the main road.

"Will you make your fortune with that?" Peire asked, using his chin to indicate the rear of the car. As he put the basket in the boot he had noticed four large boxes.

"I haven't had time to make an inventory," Michel replied. "I'll take care of it one of these days. I was called out yesterday by a chap who wanted to dispose of the effects of a friend, an eccentric living like a hermit in the Galamus gorges, near the monastery. There were a few items of no obvious value, mostly books. I'll give them to Jordanne. The lot didn't cost much, anyway."

"I didn't know there were any monks still in the place. I thought only tourists went there."

"There haven't been any for ages. According to my contact the fellow's been living in a cave nearby for years, far away from everything, hardly ever seeing anyone. He's an eccentric."

Peire closed his eyes. The Galamus gorges, 50 kilometers from Montségur, were famous in the region. He had not been there since he had explored them as an adolescent. Perhaps he ought to go out there and wander around, to see what he could find. Jordanne had advised him to get out more. Who could tell? It might make a theme for one of his songs....

By the time the four-by-four reached the highway, he had already begun to cast around for words.

Snowshoes grated on the bed of snow and the black ice that covered the downhill ski-slope. Peire was panting, spirals of white vapor escaping his mouth every time he breathed out. Droplets of sweat formed on his brow in spite of the cold. He had been pressing forward for nearly an hour, preceded by Michel and two gendarmes. Unfortunately, the snow that had fallen during the night had covered any tracks.

The search was continuing intensively. The authorities had had no further news of the young men for 48 hours. The families were beginning to worry, especially with the weather conditions being so difficult.

Peire stopped to get his breath back; fatigue was beginning to stiffen his muscles. The drone of the helicopter that was quartering the area resonated in the muffled calmness of the snowbound mountain. It passed over their heads before vanishing into the clouds that were descending further and further, already covering the neighboring summits. It would soon be impossible to survey the region from the air.

“Group eight, are you receiving me?”

The nasal voice, punctuated by static, emerged from the radio receiver suspended from the neck of one of the gendarmes.

“Receiving you, four five.”

“The other groups haven’t found anything. Continue as far as the shelter. You should get there in an hour.”

Pierre resumed the climb. In spite of a stitch in his side he set the snowshoes one in front of the other unthinkingly. Above all, he did not want to fall behind. If he did, he would become a dead weight for the search party.

Five hundred meters further on the first gendarme crouched down. He was looking intently at something in the middle of the trail. Peire accelerated his pace in order to draw level.

The snow formed hollows and hummocks within an area some two meters in diameter. The gendarme extended his gloved hand to brush aside the fresh layer. After 30 seconds, the clear imprints of skis and shoes appeared. He stood up anxiously.

“They took their shoes off here.”

“Are those their tracks?” his colleague asked.

“There’s a strong probability. We’ll clear the snow higher up to see whether they continued in the same direction or turned back.”

Peire listened to the two men distractedly. His gaze, surveying the surrounding area, was suddenly caught by a point in the track beside the trail, where a gap opened in the mountain-side. He took a dozen steps, bent down and then drew aside some dead branches. A few of them were broken at the base. In front of him was a small cave.

His stomach clenched, for no apparent reason. He frowned. The musician experienced a strange sensation: a dull anguish, curiously tinged with excitement. H el ene’s face appeared in his mind. Although he could not explain it, he knew that the young men had gone this way.

“I’ve found something!” he called, loudly.

One of the gendarmes came to join him, knelt down, brought a torch from his backpack and shone it into the hole.

The light dwindled away in the darkness.

“It’s large enough for a man to go in,” murmured the gendarme. He leaned further forwards. “Hey!” he shouted into the darkness.

His voice echoed from the rocks.

“Do you think they took shelter in there?” Michel asked.

“It’s possible—one never knows,” replied the gendarme.

“Someone will have to go down to make sure,” his colleague added. He put down his backpack, took out a long rope and attached it to a tree-stump. He made several knots, and then tugged it several times to test its solidity.

“That’s not strictly necessary,” Michel said. “The slope’s quite gentle; you could go down there without insurance.”

“I prefer to take every possible precaution,” the gendarme replied. “The rope might be useful if it’s necessary to bring someone out.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” Peire asked. “I did some potholing a few years ago.”

“Wouldn’t you prefer it if I went?” Michel put in.

“No,” Peire replied, dryly. Since H  l  ne’s death he had abandoned spelunking entirely. He knew, however, deep inside himself, that he must one day overcome his reticence in order to move on—and the gulf that yawned in front of him was attracting him like a magnet. His head was spinning; he felt the icy wind on his skin in spite of the thickness of his clothing.

“Hold the rope for us, Paul,” said the gendarme, as he disappeared into the cave.

Peire lowered himself into the hole in his turn. His throat was constricted momentarily. He took a few deep breaths, then crept forwards, closing his eyes.

A bare handful of seconds went by before the tunnel that he had taken broadened out into a larger chamber.

The first thing that struck him was the silence—a silence that he had forgotten. He saw himself with H  l  ne again, exploring caves and feeling as if he was in another world, hidden from the external one. Then the gendarme shone his torch around them, bringing the musician back to reality.

Their eyes fixed themselves on the macabre spectacle that was offered to them. Two tangled bodies braced against a wall of rock. Peire felt nausea mounting within him while the torch-beam displayed two further bodies lying side by side, holding hands, faces to the ground. The sight caused terrible and painful images to surge forth from his memory.

He took a step back, numb with shock. The chamber began to spin around him, faster and faster, obliging him to lean against the wall.

The gendarme turned the first body over and shone the light on it. His hand was trembling.

Peire could not tear his eyes away. His pulse accelerated. The calm features of the dead man reflected serenity, almost happiness. Peire bit his lower lip until it bled, then turned away, bile rising from his stomach and catching in his throat. His wife’s face superimposed itself upon the boy’s. She had displayed the same calmness, as if she had waited for death with pleasure. The torch-beam left the ground to climb the wall again, towards the other two corpses.

Again Peire felt himself shiver under the impact of shock. Directly in front of him, engraved in the rock, there was an immense pentagram. An upright man could have placed himself within it without the slightest difficulty. There had been an identical geometrical design in the cave where his wife had died.

Without thinking, Peire moved forward and found himself facing the wall with his right arm extended. Moved by a will of its own, his hand followed the lines engraved in the rock, then placed itself flat in the middle of the design.

A wave of heat struck Peire all over, as if his body were in the middle of a pyre. He smelled the acrid odor of his burning flesh. His heart began beating as fast as it could. Alarmed, struggling to recover his senses, he tried to draw away from the pentagram. It was impossible. His hand seemed to be held by an invisible force. He began to panic.

*Calm down!*

H  l  ne’s voice. The hairs on the back of his neck bristled.

*Calm down—nothing will happen to you. Pull yourself together, and you’ll be able to take your hand away.*

Peire made his mind go blank and slowly withdrew his hand. The fire vanished. The odor faded. He illuminated his right hand and looked at it for a moment; there was no trace of burning. He directed his torch at the pentagram, which seemed unchanged. The voice had died away.

He remained still for a moment, uncomprehending and somewhat bewildered. Contradictory emotions seethed within him. H  l  ne had spoken to him. It was no illusion; he would have recognized the sound of her voice among 1000. A light, blinding him, dragged him brutally back to reality. The gendarme had shone the beam of his torch in his direction and was speaking to him.

“Go back—this isn’t a pleasant sight. Tell my colleague to call for help.”

Pierre nodded his head as a sign of acquiescence and obeyed. He soon found himself back in the open air, where snowflakes were now falling densely. He remained motionless for a few moments. Someone grabbed his shoulder. He turned round abruptly.

“Have you found them?” Michel demanded.

Peire did not reply for several seconds. “They’re dead.”

The second gendarme took up his radio while Michel put his arms around his friend to comfort him.

“That’s the way it goes,” Peire murmured.

“I should have stopped you going down.”

Michel’s voice was friendly and reassuring. Peire did not reply. Drawing aside, he took a few steps in the snow. He was no longer able to think about H el ene. Her face had been replaced by the image of a pentagram.